

*The  
Wallace  
Stevens  
Journal*



A Publication of the Wallace Stevens Society  
Volume 4 Numbers 1 & 2

Spring 1980

# Wallace Stevens

*A Celebration*

*Edited by*

*Frank Doggett and  
Robert Buttel*

"Centennial programs marking the anniversary of Wallace Stevens' birth have proliferated across the United States, but none, perhaps, will have a worthier aftermath than the selection of essays by authorities on this giant among American poets which Princeton University Press has brought out under the intelligent editorship of Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel. . . . Readers of *Wallace Stevens, A Celebration* may well rejoice that for generations, the company of those mindful of 'supreme fiction' will find in its tributes . . . a record, as if in a cornerstone, of what Americans were finding in this magnificent poet one hundred years after his birth."

—*The Wallace Stevens Journal*

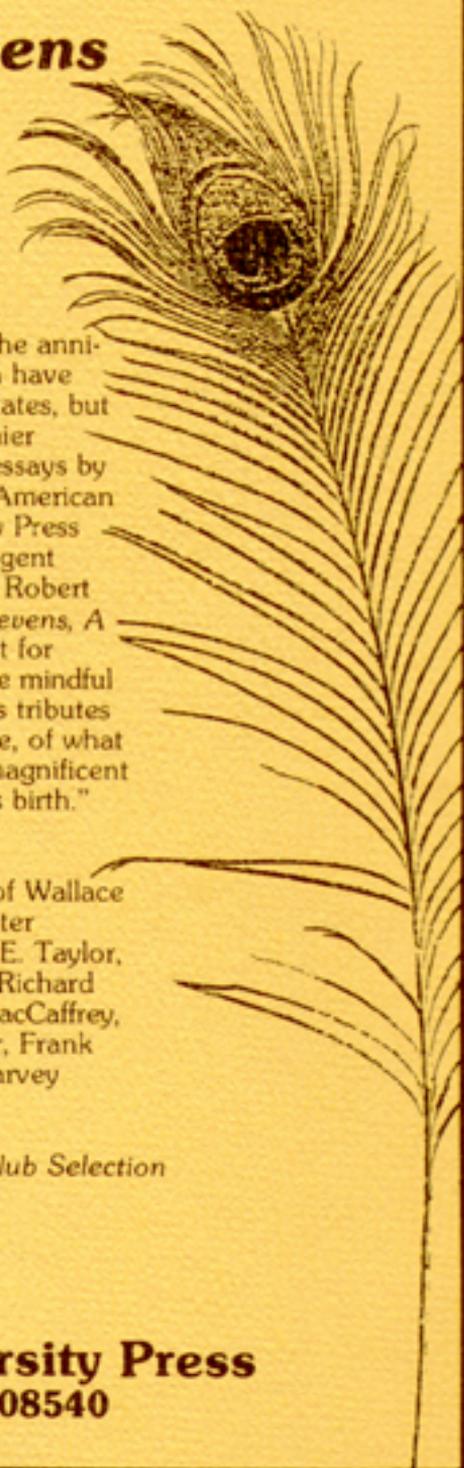
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COVER: by Kathy Jacobi—drawn from a photograph of Wallace Stevens

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## The Wallace Stevens Journal

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## Stevens' "The Good Man Has No Shape": "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in a Minor Key

JOSEPH O. MILNER

When placed in the bold company of Stevens' major poems, "The Good Man Has No Shape" (CP 364) seems thin and insubstantial. Within its fourteen lines, however, Stevens presents the core ideas found in many of his longer, "established" poems: he celebrates the good life of the concrete world and, further proclaims that man can find a kind of transcendence through the world of the imagination which replaces that offered by religion.

"The Good Man Has No Shape" seems to be structured around the contrast of man's finding meaning in established religion and the good man's making meaning through a special view of the secular world. Its fourteen lines which form a kind of bastard sonnet suggest the notion of contrast or thesis-antithesis often carried by that form. Its more obvious form, a brace of seven loose couplets, also points to this intention.

The poem does not commence with a sense of contrast but rather with a view of primitive man uniformly enthralled to the emotional and ritualistic parameters of religion. "He lived in poverty" and felt he could be lifted out of this spiritual and physical deprivation only through the transforming power of God. Stevens uses "only" twice in the second line and through such seeming redundancy and awkwardness calls attention to man's utter dependence on God for "elegance," his lack of self-esteem at this primary level of existence. But from this point the unity formed by man's primitive religious dependence is starting to crack. Stevens begins the second couplet with "then" and proceeds to enunciate the maturing of man. He has a "Stronger" sense of adequacy and is freer from religion's grasp, thus "a little better off." His happiness is not full but qualified, for he is too close to the grip of nature, has too recently learned how to take control. The third couplet takes man's progression further in that man comes to know that life, whether bitter or sweet, is indeed his to direct. He has a notion of the good life and "if it was bad" he could no longer lay it at God's feet, ascribing the woe to divine wrath brought down on willful, evil man. What man makes of life is the result of his own hand, not the realization of God's disfavor or benefaction.

With the middle couplet this simple recounting of man's progress is transformed into the ironic counterbalance which marks the poem's significance. The first half of the couplet brings Stevens' good man's pilgrimage to its zenith: "At last the good life came, good sleep, bright fruit." And with this new autonomy and enlightenment man is left to find satisfaction in the secular world around him. The exact midpoint of the poem turns on the fulcrum "and" which subtly reverses man's progress. For his bright freedom is "betrayed" by Lazarus, the concrete representation of the old God-hold: it is Lazarus' resurrection from the dead which firmly established Jesus' transcendent powers and thus vitally reconstituted the

old notion of God's intimate mastery of man. Thus "the rest" are those for whom rite and emotion still hold sway. But Stevens' pronoun "him" could be referring to Jesus, for his peculiar power was betrayed or fully revealed by this complete subjection of the natural order. Either reading has some credence: taking the good man as the referent for "him" offers less confusion because the pronoun "he" has been used in this way through the first three couplets, and the references to the death, the mocking, the grave, the sour wine, and the jagged sign generally suggest the crucifixion story. As in much good poetry, here the dilemma is not resolved in an either/or fashion but by the tight tension of retaining both. For through the second half of the poem, the entombment of Stevens' good man parallels and ironically reverberates against the account of Jesus' crucifixion. To those who would too quickly take up the more suggestive reading of Jesus as the subject of the poem's second half, Stevens offers enough discrepancies in the account to make that singular understanding questionable. A spear rather than feathers was stuck in his side on the cross; the crown not the spear or feathers were used to mock him; the sour wine or vinegar was given him before the crucifixion rather than placed in the tomb; and, there was no book in the tomb. So though the crucifixion story is close enough to suggest the Biblical account, the discrepancies are sufficient to indicate that Stevens is using that account as a framework and a foil to relate the figurative crucifixion of his own good man. "The rest" with their newly regained religious fervor challenge the good man's sense of self mastery and thus indirectly vanquish his dream. They are the antagonists "sticking feathers in his flesh to mock him." They kill his sense of strength and freedom with the slight touch of a feather to his vulnerable flesh, just as surely as did the Roman soldier when he stuck the spear in Jesus' side.

The use of "feathers" too fits nicely into the body of Stevens' poetry, for he typically uses the feathery bird in flight as his symbol for the imagination. Thus they stick the feathers in him as if to mock his notion that he were like a bird able to take wing. The entombment marks the final suffocation of the good man who is given "sour wine" and "an empty book" to nourish him, poor substitutes for the "bright fruit" and "good sleep" which came to him with the good life. More significantly the "sour wine" and "empty book" both point ironically to what the religious person would see as the tragic flaw in such humanism. The once fresh, bright fruit has soured just as will man's flesh; the book which represents man's best intellectual efforts is from their prospect worthless.

Stevens' most significant use of the contrasting crucifixions is found in the final three lines where he refers to the jagged sign with its "Epitaphium" and adds his final comment. For Jesus the final and most public mockery was the sign placed on the cross. In Latin, Greek and Hebrew it rendered the ironic proclamation; "This is Jesus, King of the Jews." But for the Christian the words of Rome, a power which would accept no coexisting kings, were doubly ironic, since to them Jesus was indeed the king of kings. When, however, we see Stevens' proclamation used as the good man's

epitaph, the words take on an irony which can be seen to complete the ironic parallel of the poem. They are used against the good man just as the phrase ascribed to Jesus was used against him. The good man like Jesus never used these words to describe himself, but in both instances their accusers are intimidated by a vital kind of personhood or being which silently makes these bold, threatening claims for them. Thus like the Romans (who Stevens suggests as Jesus mockers through the [ium] Latin ending in epitaph), "the rest" need to mock their victim to maintain their own dominion. The good man would claim, they say, that he has no shape, no bodily confinement, no sense of being wholly limited by the physical. So they mockingly put the feather to his flesh, his mortal vulnerability, even more severely by giving him this epitaph which claims transcendence. Stevens, though, like the Christians, has the last laugh, "as if they knew," for through the imagination the good man can, in spite of his bodily susceptibility, create his own fictions which fashion for him a kind of impunity. And the irony and the beauty of the counterbalanced structure is that the old Christian myth which is replaced by the new verity has been used as the very scaffold for his new mode of transcendence, the creative imagination.

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The last words in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia*:

"Reader, Carthagenia was of the mind, that unto those Three Things which the Ancients held impossible, there should be added this Fourth, to find a Book printed without Errata's. It seems, the hands of Briareus, and the Eyes of Argus, will not prevent them."

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# Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Reviews of His Works, 1931-1967

RAY LEWIS WHITE

Publication data for Stevens' numerous poems, essays, broadsides, pamphlets and books are admirably presented in J.M. Edelstein, *Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), which expands and refines two earlier works: (1) Samuel French Morse, *Wallace Stevens: A Preliminary Checklist of His Writings, 1898-1954* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954); and (2) Samuel French Morse, Jackson R. Bryer, and Joseph N. Riddel, *Wallace Stevens Checklist and Bibliography of Stevens Criticism* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1963). The 1963 work by Morse, Bryer, and Riddel includes a section of "Book Reviews" (pp. 92-98), valuable because the compilers were given access to the files of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Stevens' chief publisher. This same list is used by Edelstein in his 1973 *Bibliography*, with the addition of a list of reviews of *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (1966). These two unannotated lists of book reviews do not, however, exhaust the public notices of Stevens' work. I have amassed from newspapers and magazines published in the United States (and, occasionally, Canada) from 1931 through 1967 a file of reviews of Stevens' books of poetry and prose, only 70 of which have appeared in the earlier listings. Entries followed by an asterisk (\*) appear in the Stevens bibliographies named above.

For the use of all students of the life and works of Wallace Stevens, I have given to the Wallace Stevens Society my entire file of periodical material which, in addition to the reviews here cited, includes clippings of Stevens' poems and reviews of books about him.

**Harmonium.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931.

Chapin, Katherine Garrison. "Stevens' *Harmonium* Touches Emotion Lightly." *Philadelphia Record*, 26 July 1931, "Society, Books, Drama," p. 4.

*Harmonium* "is not . . . a frail or mystic poetry. It is robust, American; with an interesting scope of background in image, Florida, Georgia, Yucatan, etc.; viewing life with sophistication, tolerance and a satirical humor. That it touches emotion lightly, or with a curious detachment, is its one serious flaw."

Davis, Elrick B. "New Poetry." *Cleveland Press*, 29 August 1931, p. 5.

*Harmonium* "in 1923 prepared the heart for miracles," and the new edition fails to fulfill this "unreasonable and fabulous expectation." Yet "Wallace Stevens is certainly one of the three great contemporary American poets. He is not generally known and his books are not widely bought. This is because his work is to the average run of current verse as Cyril Scott is to Carrie Jacobs Bond."

Unsigned notice. *Bridgeport Post* [CT], 3 June 1931.

"This is Mr. Stevens' only book and yet he is recognized today as one of America's most distinguished poets. He is personally little known,

lives in Connecticut, does not go to literary teas, does not lecture, but he is universally respected by his fellow-craftsmen, as well as by critics and those who read poetry merely because they happen to like it."

Unsigned review. *Dayton Journal*, 30 August 1931, p. 8.

The most important book of poetry for 1923, *Harmonium* "is a sad memorial of a year when American poetry seemed definitely to have outstripped English, when our poets were writing fresh and provocative stuff and when England's were turning to old models, almost happy in their wilful self-emasculatation. Now that England has regained her ascendancy and found a new vitality and American poets are resting on their laurels, *Harmonium* is almost an accusation."

**Ideas of Order.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936.

Case, Elizabeth N. "Collection of Best Poems of 1935 . . ." *Hartford Courant*, 12 January 1936, Sec. D, p. 6.

"... preeminently a poet for intricate and special moods," Stevens, "writes curious, cryptic poems which, by just what quality of elusive magic it is impossible to say, appeal to certain readers to whom much modernistic poetry is anathema." He is "a master-craftsman in the assembling of words like pigments on a palette, a palette of an individual, unfamiliar shape."

Roberts, Mary-Carter. "Ideas of Order." *Washington Evening Star*, 24 October 1936, Sec. B, p. 2.

"... tells one nothing about his poetry, and only indicates that a man who can write verse of exquisite evasiveness may also explain himself like a pedagogue. *Ideas of Order* is a book of thought-pictures, sometimes pointed, sometimes piffling, but always done with finish. In the uncertain sphere of modern poetry, some of this writer's work seems likely to endure."

**The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937.

MacFall, Russell. "Four Volumes of Poetry Find Ready Acclaim." *Chicago Tribune*, 13 November 1937, p. 10.

"Behind the teasing lilt of the sequence of poems which give their name to *The Man with the Blue Guitar* lie half concealed charms which they are coyly reluctant to surrender except to a persevering wooer. But what is playfulness in these becomes obscurity in the longer poems that complete the volume, submerging the poet's fantasy in a haze of symbolism."

Spencer, Martha L. "Blue Guitar Shows Values Mid Chaos." *Hartford Times*, 2 October 1937, p. 7.

Here Stevens is "keenly aware of the present world of constantly changing confusions"; hence, his poetry is "for the reader who can lift himself out of the bog of the contemporary welter of action and thought to the heights of observation, as a detached on-looker, where he can see with the poet that the distortions of a Picasso may be a picture of ourselves; that the millions twanging one string of manners are demonstrating one way of individual expression, en masse . . . With the publication of each successive book of poems, Hartford becomes increasingly aware that this city is the home of an internationally honored poet, Wallace Stevens."

Unsigned review. *San Jose News*, 1 January 1938.

"A lesser known poet, but . . . our finest lyricist . . . These reflective lyrics deal with the incessant conjunctions between reality and imagination and form collectively a sort of notebook made up of connected thoughts on the importance of poetry to the spirit. There has been no poetic work in a long time more deeply felt, courageously inspired and completely realized."

**Parts of a World.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942.

Derleth, August. "Poet as Philosopher." *Madison Capital Times*, 25 October 1942, p. 13.

"Conceding the sensory delights of Mr. Stevens' lines; conceding even the superlative excellence of [several poems], it is difficult to say of Wallace Stevens that he communicates anything like a well-rounded philosophy, but only postulates, sometimes in part, premises for a philosophy of poetry and/or life. The misty obfuscations, the surrealist images, the inappropriate references and symbols, the off-key similes which *Parts of a World* abounds in do not help the problem of communication. This remains despite the arresting quality of this new Stevens collection."

Howden, Benjamin. "Poet Pounds and So Does Critic." *Los Angeles Times*, 12 September 1942.

The acrobat, the Ezrapoundish poet  
Handstanding on one hand, strophe grasped  
In Tseliotly grasping hand, chattering epiglots  
Running wild, world running wild, whirling  
Dervishly. Haloo, halay, pick up the pieces, boys!  
Item: verbal cataclysms gone shuddering  
Downwind, I stay outside, I stay  
Inside looking at the pretty pieces,  
Pretty pieces, veritable eggplants I  
Gathered out of shattered hen shells.

[Parody of *Parts of a World*]

S., M. L. "Wallace Stevens' Recent Poems in New Volume." *Hartford Times*, 12 September 1942, p. 5.

"Ranking among poets of highest quality," Stevens "continues to surprise with the rich and rhythmic flow of his philosophic observations of symbolic reality." *Parts of a World* is "poetry for the thinker and the connoisseur": "One may look on these poems as on pictures by the old masters, who painted in the foreground imagined characters in episodes suggested by familiar reality, against backgrounds of variable landscape of the world in miniature."

Stull, Christopher. "Some New Poetry in Brief Review." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 September 1942, "This World," p. 12.

"... a fat new volume of collected poems by one of America's finest and most original poets. Don't miss it."

Untermeyer, Louis. "A Roundup of Recent American and British Poetry." *Providence Journal*, 1 November 1942, Sec. VI, p. 4.

Stevens "has for years written more than his share of the most perceptive, most artfully contrived, most intellectually moving lyric poetry of our time. He grows apparently more prolific but not less sapient or skillful. He continues to regard art and the world—and war and poli-

tics—and the more subtle responses of the nerves with a fine eye and ear. *Parts of a World* is startling in its freshness, in its self-contained joy of an art functioning through a distinguished, mature artist. Not one to be read on the run, Wallace Stevens may well last to be read a long time.”

Unsigned review. *Augusta Journal* [ME], 4 September 1942.

*Parts of a World*, “is concerned with the relation between the imagination and the world. The various poems are episodes in that relation. Taken together, they are intended to create for the reader a world which, while it is the world of the present time, is also a rejection thereof in the sense of poetry.”

Unsigned review. *Atlantic Monthly*, 170 (November 1942), p. 154.

“... beautifully phrased and cadenced enigmas.”

**Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.** Cummington, MA: Cummington Press, 1942.

S., M. L. “Luminous Words, Symbolism, Satire in Stevens Poems.” *Hartford Times*, 31 October 1942, p. 5.

In *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, “symbolism plays its interpretive part; satire is keen, truth apparent; the words are luminous with color, light and music.”

**Esthétique du Mal.** Cummington, MA: Cummington Press, 1945.

Arm, Hilary. “Three Ripe Items.” *View*, 5 (January 1946), pp. 17-18.

“... may well be the most thoughtful and encyclopaedic of any of Stevens’ poems (and somewhat for this very reason), it emphasizes the peculiar reticence of the exquisitely cultivated bourgeois its author is.”

Meyer, Gerard Previn. “Wallace Stevens: Major Poet.” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 23 March 1946, pp. 7-8. \*

“This latterday ‘Hartford Wit,’ however much he may remain caviare to the general, today stands clearly revealed as a talent that has survived the test of both coterie fame and public neglect and gone on to deepen toward a peculiar perfection.” Here the “flawless execution is peculiarly Stevens: the manipulation of sound and beat, the Rimbaudian utilization of vowel-color, the alliteration-rhyme, the delicate shadings of feeling, the sensitive mirror of nature.”

Unsigned review. “Books: Briefly Noted.” *New Yorker*, 29 December 1945, p. 68.

“... is a good example of Stevens’ later style, in which ideas and language shift from good sense to difficult symbolism, from transparency to opacity, with the wavering effect of things seen under water.”

**Transport to Summer.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947.

Beck, Clyde. “Books of the Day.” *Detroit News*, 13 April 1947, p. 21.

“... transport to nowhere, except for certain gleams and glooms I get in a line here and a stanza there ... Nor do I understand how Mr. Stevens, who is 68 and the vice-president of an insurance company, can write such poetry—but perhaps prolonged meditation on vital statistics impels one to the metaphysical view. Maybe that’s the answer.”

Davidson, Gustav. "Is It Garbage, Cacophony—Or Poetry?" *Hartford Courant*, 1 June 1947, "Magazine," p. 12.

"Wallace Stevens is indisputably a master craftsman when he cares to put himself out. In unguarded moments, he can display imagistic gifts of a high order and stir up the emotions by the most casual indirection." Trying to be less private than usual, Stevens "remains as oblique and elliptical as ever, and he makes little concession to ordinary intelligibility." Yet it is "hard for such a poet, the publicly acknowledged darling of domestic doodlers, to turn back on his tracks."

\_\_\_\_\_. "Poets Reaped an Unusually Rich Harvest in 1947." *Washington Evening Star*, 7 December 1947, "Christmas Book Section," p. 8.

"... an omnium gatherum of finely tuned lyrics, intellectual abstractions and dry wit, in which this first-rate craftsman, for all his hopes of widening his public, continues to attract only 'the exclusive admiration of a small group.'"

Deutsch, Babette. Review. *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, 31 August 1947, p. 4. \*

Almost a treatise on metaphor, *Transport to Summer* shows Stevens "a master of shades and sonorities . . . Sometimes he retires into extreme privacy or, in a more ambitious piece, he may permit the metaphysical problem that it poses to take precedence of the poem itself. This last is his gravest fault. He does not entirely blink at, but neither does he quite frankly confront, what Yeats called the Vision of Evil."

[Herzberg, Max L.] "Briefs." *Newark Evening News*, 27 May 1947, p. 14.

"The thought in these poems is not easy; Stevens himself holds that 'the poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully.' It is his object to make a poem 'an elixir, an excitation, a pure power.' He may not always succeed, but there is adventure in reading his poems. One feels within them a cold, yet profound, belief in man, mingled with despair at his destiny."

Hoagland, Clayton. "Spring Sees the Blooming of New Volumes of Poetry." *New York Sun*, 7 May 1947, p. 25.

"... never likely to catch the public fancy," *Transport to Summer* demonstrates that Stevens "has developed into one of this country's most satisfying masters of the art."

Ingalls, Jeremy. "'Man's Mind Grown Vulnerable.'" *Saturday Review of Literature*, 30 (12 April 1947), p. 48. \*

*Transport to Summer* "reinforces the accuracy of the appraisal—which is now, at last, current—that Stevens is a most deservedly respected poet." In answer to charges that the poet lacks "violent indignation," those "who attend the whole import of Stevens' poems have discovered or will discover a record of the ancient indignities and indignations, but transmuted . . . by a venerable serenity."

McCarthy, John Russell. "For Extremely Literate." *Pasadena Star-News*, 10 August 1947, Sec. II, p. 22.

*Transport to Summer* "deals, as do most of Stevens' poetic works, with ideas, moods, feelings, suggestions, perplexities which, it seems, are not to be set down directly," confirming again that it is "not the fashion to like Wallace Stevens, but it is a good thing to do."

Martz, Louis L. Review. *Yale Review*, N.S. 37 (Winter 1948), pp. 239-41. \*

"... marred by a number of labored and muddy pieces," *Transport to Summer* is not lessened in artistry but in Stevens' change of mode, "impelled by a growing vision and by the cataclysmic events of the last twenty years."

Matthiessen, F. O. "Wallace Stevens at 67." *New York Times Book Review*, 20 April 1947, pp. 4, 26. \*

*Transport to Summer* proves that Stevens "will increasingly be recognized to belong in the company of Henry Adams and Henry James, with that small body of important American artists who have ripened as they matured, and who have been far more productive beyond their middle years than during their green twenties or thirties."

Nims, John Frederick. "Crisp Phrases, Smart Rhymes by Stevens." *Chicago Tribune*, 4 May 1947, Sec. 4, p. 4.

"... valuable for its own poetry, less rich than earlier work but clearer and more candid, and for the explicit statement of ideas implied earlier. No one reading poetry for knowledge or pleasure can disregard it."

Scott, W. T. "Acutest Speech." *Providence Journal*, 20 April 1947, Sec. VI, p. 8.

"With utter authority, Stevens is master of his own language, mingling intellectual abstractions with imageries both strange and household ... I know of no one who has more admirably served American poetry; no living craftsman—only Jeffers, for power—who can surpass the wisdom and maturity of Wallace Stevens' poetry."

Unsigned review. *Cincinnati Guidepost*, June 1947, p. 11.

"The poet's poet is again brilliant, witty, and arresting but frequently obscure."

Unsigned review. *New York Times Book Review*, 7 December 1947, p. 74.

"... interplay between mind and reality."

**Three Academic Pieces.** Cummington, MA: Cummington Press, 1947.

Fitts, Dudley. "Rounded Trio." *Saturday Review of Literature*, 31 (27 March 1948), pp. 23-23.

"... a memorable format," consisting of an essay ("an urbanely illuminating little disquisition") and two poems ("Stevens at his recent and constantly deepening best").

Rosenthal, M. L. "Two Modern Poets on Their Art." *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, 9 May 1948, p. 21. \*

The essay on metaphor justifies calling Stevens "hedonist, pluralist and Platonist"; one of the poems is "an exact poetic equivalent of the essay."

**The Auroras of Autumn.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950.

Barkham, John. "Poetry." *Roanoke Times* [VA], 11 March 1951, p. 19.

Here Stevens "displays his customary elegance, wit and magic with words. His poems are at once lovely lyrics and food for the mind."

Beck, Clyde. "Books of the Day." *Detroit News*, 10 September 1950, p. 22.

The author of *The Auroras of Autumn* is "no more comprehensible to me than he was two years ago, when I tried to understand the poems in *Transport to Summer*."

Bogan, Louise. Review. *New Yorker*, 28 October 1950, pp. 129-30.\*

Weakened of the former magic, Stevens' poetry in *The Auroras of Autumn* "indicates that his powers of language have not declined; here is one of those endlessly provocative, 'inevitable' phrases that seem to have existed forever in some rubied darkness of the human imagination—that imagination with whose authority and importance Stevens has been continually occupied in his later period."

Brooks, Gwendolyn. "Stevens Perfect Laborer in New Volume of Verse." *Chicago Daily News*, 18 October 1950, p. 48.

While "with every page the conviction grows that here is truly a perfect laborer, with his perfect fruit," *The Auroras of Autumn* occasionally bring "regret that we are dealing with poems rather than with old Stevensian magic, deviltry and patterned hysteria."

Deutsch, Babette. "Blue Burning of Fall Time." *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, 29 October 1950, p. 6.\*

Thanks, Wallace Stevens, for what you say,  
And the way you say it and sing it, grave and gay . . .  
They dance against the sky,  
Blue, burning, of your New Haven autumn,  
And we salute them, crying good-bye, good-bye.

Frankenberg, Lloyd. "'Secretions of Insight.'" *New York Times Book Review*, 10 September 1950, p. 20.\*

Here, "as in his earlier books, he develops particular aspects of his grand theory of resemblances in a series of highly inflected musings." Here is "a more reflective book, less given to verbal bravura . . . but as full as ever of what he calls 'the secretions of insight.'"

Garrigue, Jean. "Search for Reality in New Haven." *Saturday Review of Literature*, 10 February 1951, pp. 17-18.\*

Here are "still, quiet poems, so musical in meditation, as ever so removed from the speaker, delivered from so serene and radiant a distance."

Holley, Fred. "Wallace Stevens." *Norfolk Pilot*, 5 November 1950, Sec. 5, pp. 4-5.

*The Auroras of Autumn* shows that, with "the exception of the Anglo-American Mr. Eliot, Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost are probably the greatest American poets writing today."

Humphries, Rolfe. Review. *Nation*, 30 September 1950, p. 293.\*

"... a good deal that is chill, airy, remote, the luminous quality wavering now and then into no more than meditative verse, into prose even."

Johnson, Donald B. "Triumph of A Prize Poet." *Worcester Telegram*, 25 March 1951, Sec. C, p. 9.

*The Auroras of Autumn* is "poetry of the rarified air, absolute poetry. This is the melody the soul retains after the notes are silent. Here, more than with almost any other poet of our time do we have 'Emotion recollected in tranquillity.'"

Knickmeyer, W. L. "Bare, But at Least 'Poetry.'" *Oklahoma City Oklahoman*, 10 December 1950, "Sunday Magazine," p. 15.

Writing "Kantian poetry," Stevens in *The Auroras of Autumn* presents "abstractions. Each in its own way attempts to reach the finality of pure form, unencumbered by accidents of space or time."

O'Connor, Madeleine. "Books on the Table." *San Francisco Argonaut*, 15 September 1950, p. 21.

"Mr. Stevens is far from light in his reasonings, the questions he asks himself have no obvious answer, nor the problems he sees and foresees, any immediate solution. Yet his inquiring and truly free intelligence reaches out fearlessly into the dark of the unknown. He is neither asleep nor blind to what lies ahead. Nor is he afraid. His spirit, like his poetry, is of an incomparable stature."

Parone, Edward. "Choreograph for Rockettes." *Hartford Courant*, 29 October 1950, "Magazine," p. 15.

*The Auroras of Autumn* is "a failure I think. Wallace Stevens, who has always enriched his poems with other poems, does not extend here but merely repeats. And that not well. Everywhere there is evidence of strain, heaviness and echo."

Risen, William. "Verse." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 7 October 1950, p. 5.

"... hardly the 'pure' poetry the critics once said he was striving for; mind has crept in. It hasn't gnawed away the wainscoting; it is kept firmly in the corner, but Bright-eyes is there."

Rosenthal, M. L. "Stevens in a Minor Key." *New Republic*, 7 May 1951, pp. 26-28. \*

This may be "the most nostalgically philosophical of Wallace Stevens' volumes." Hence, "Stevens may not be able to tell us (and we doubt that he ought to try) where to go from here; but what *here* is, and how good and evil and true and untrue it is, he can help us to discover."

S., H. L. "Prize Poems." *Boston Post*, 1 April 1951, Sec. A, p. 2.

"To those who ask that poetry give them melody, rhyme, rhythm and idea—Neat!—Mr. Stevens' volume will be a chilly article. Here and there a phrase, epithet or line breaks through into the sparkle and gleam of poetry, but in general the lines go on like the dictated letter of a steel company executive."

Scott, W. T. "Wallace Stevens' Poetry." *Providence Journal*, 10 September 1950, Sec. VI, p. 8.

Stevens now "writes like a magician—the words, lines, stanzas unfurling in what seems effortless, bright ribbons; many colored and singing." Yet the book has "pages . . . where Mr. Stevens is merely interesting."

Tribble, Edwin. "Poetry Was on the Traditional Side." *Washington Evening Star*, 10 December 1950, "Christmas Book Section," p. 4.

In a year of conventional poetry, Stevens' new book is "neither more nor less obscure than his previous ones. Here we find a collection of provocative images, some innovations in content, if not in form."

Unsigned review. *Virginia Kirkus Bulletin*, 15 July 1950, p. 411. \*

"Modern poems of the first rank . . . These poems, most of them short lyrics, combine the most delicate precision of statement with music, color, wit, and an unsurpassably new and beautiful imagery."

Unsigned review. "Prize Pies." *Time*, 25 September 1950, pp. 106, 108, 110. \*

These poems "begin to fade as soon as they are read. But though they resist the memory as well as the intelligence, their delicate, twangy music—as full of surprises as a zither—sometimes delights the ear. Few living poets can be as vivid and as vague, both at once."

Unsigned review. "Poetry." *Boston Traveler*, 1 November 1950.

Carol Ritchie calls Stevens "poetry's great isolationist," and in *The Auroras of Autumn* "the unparalleled artist is using those connotative words that distinguish poetry from prose . . ."

Unsigned review. "Poetry." *Santa Ana Register*, 17 December 1950, Sec. C, p. 10.

These "are modern poems with the basic interlocking of reality and imagination. Much music and color and imagery is woven into this lyric poetry."

Unsigned review. *Cincinnati Guidepost*, March 1952, p. 9.

"Long on imagery and wit, most of these lyric poems have a basic theme, the interpretation of imagination and reality."

**The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951.

Bollinger, Evangeline. "Value of Imagination." *Hartford Courant*, 27 July 1952, p. 18. \*

*The Necessary Angel* will be welcomed by lovers of Stevens' poetry as a "significant addition to the body of literary criticism produced by distinguished contemporary poets."

Carruth, Hayden. "Stevens as Essayist." *Nation*, 14 June 1952, pp. 584-85. \*

These are "essays, simply constructed yet richly and elegantly written. They contain many references, an anthology full of quotations from the most various and delightful authors, all very much to Stevens' purpose, but all exciting and pleasant to come across for their own sake. I do not mean to be altogether frivolous when I suggest that the best way to read this book is to invest in a bottle of the best sherry one can afford and a twenty-five-cent cigar."

Chapin, Ruth. "Provocative Truisms." *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 December 1951, p. 7. \*

These essays are "fruits of a career of recognized poetic achievement and artistic integrity; and the disagreements they are sure to provoke (as in the discussion of the concept of nobility in poetry) will prove for the thoughtful reader as challenging as the agreements."

Deutsch, Babette. "Pastures of the Imagination." *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 9 December 1951, p. 4. \*

Here Stevens "writes about imagination almost as Coleridge might have done, could that great mind have divorced itself from its religious provincialism. He writes about the significance of poetry as Arnold might have, could he have stepped out from under the shadow of the Victorian schoolroom. He writes, of course, and most happily, like no one but Wallace Stevens, and we can only rejoice to attend."

Dinkens, Paul. "Subtle Essays Ponder Poetry." *Dallas Morning News*, 2 March 1952, Sec. 6, p. 6. \*

Never addressing common people about ordinary, Wordsworthian things, Stevens in *The Necessary Angel* provides satisfactions to lovers of modern poetry: "Perhaps the best advice for those to whom the poetry is a puzzle or a bore would be: Keep away."

Edwards, John H. "A Discussion on the Purposes and the Practices of Modern Poetry." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 January 1952, p. 11. \*

Lessened in value by being incomplete, *The Necessary Angel* shines in Stevens' "sustained excellence." Whoever knows the poetry "will recognize what is here adumbrated; those who dismiss modern verse as being unreal will find in these essays, should they care to accept it, a sufficient challenge in the fuller statement."

F., R. W. Review. *Boston Herald*, 30 December 1951, p. 11. \*

These erudite essays about imagination and reality "make for extremely interesting discussion potentials."

Fjelde, Rolf. "The Nature of Poetry." *New Republic*, 4 February 1952, pp. 19-20. \*

Presided over by "the angel of reality," Stevens in his prose "relies on the tactics of the imagination—quizzical, discursive, forever revolving the subject at hand to release fresh aspects of its truth."

Holden, Theodore L. "Stevens Depicts World of Poet." *Hartford Times*, 17 November 1951, p. 16. \*

Clearly and interestingly stating his aesthetic concerns, Stevens has not written "a book to be read hurriedly. It is the kind of writing that invites cogitation and requires reflection on the reader's part if he would extract its real values for himself."

Mason, Franklin. "A Poet's Prose." *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 28 November 1951, p. 40. \*

A "prose extension, an explanation, of the poetry that has preceded it."

O'Connor, William Van. "He Dared to Speak for the Imagination." *New York Times Book Review*, 2 December 1951, pp. 7, 22. \*

Stevens has here written pages that "invite or require close attention, but they are not addressed solely to the special student of poetry."

Rockwell, Kenneth. Review. *Dallas Times-Herald*, 30 December 1951, Sec. 3, p. 5.

"We only wish that the author's poetry were as understandable as his prose."

Scott, Winfield Townley. "Stevens and the Angel of Earth." *Providence Journal*, 2 December 1951, Sec. 6, p. 8. \*

This is "not . . . the kind of book guaranteed to fetch hordes of readers; but readers interested in any of the contemporary arts will find Stevens' concepts widely applicable and his expression simple."

Wharton, Will. "A Poet's Speeches and Essays." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 3 January 1952, Sec. B, p. 2. \*

These essays are "learned but not provocative," and a minority of potential readers will greet it with "murmurs of restrained approbation."

Unsigned review. *Booklist*, 1 February 1952, p. 183. \*

"Mr. Stevens' work is full of invigorating ideas, and parenthetical remarks, and the latter may very well limit his audience."

Unsigned review. "Books: Briefly Noted." *New Yorker*, 23 February 1952, p. 99 \*

"The importance of the imagination is monotonously a central subject, but Stevens plays over this idea with richness of allusion, cogency of reasoning, and unflinching charm."

Unsigned review. *U.S. Quarterly Book Review*, 8 (June 1952), pp. 134-35. \*

"It cannot really be said that Wallace Stevens' lectures and essays . . . make any significant contribution to poetic theory in their own right. Yet Mr. Stevens elucidates, often with great charm, the many ways in which poetic imagination is related to reality, is disciplined by it, and finally recreates it from the deepest sources of the human will."

**The Man with the Blue Guitar Including Ideas of Order.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952.

Breit, Harvey. "Repeat Performances." *New York Times Book Review*, 9 March 1952, p. 27.

"The miracle in the poetry of Wallace Stevens is . . . the felicitous ordering of a highly complicated metaphysical sense of the world."

Devigne, Remy. "Seer's Triumph." *Saturday Review of Literature*, 21 June 1952, p. 19.

Reissuing together of *The Man with the Blue Guitar* and *Ideas of Order* "is perfectly logical, since the two books taken together represent Wallace Stevens' answer to the challenging questions of those years, and since the issues which were first raised in the Depression decade are still to be resolved . . ."

Humphries, Rolfe. Review. *Nation*, 19 April 1952, p. 390.

"It is a little hard to keep up with all these editions. And is it heretical to remark that when Mr. Stevens is letting himself be full of high sentence he is somewhat boring? He strikes me as much happier when he is capering, or cutting up touches, and no matter if the climate of his exuberance has less sense of moisture than that of Dylan Thomas."

Whicher, George F. "Reprints, New Edition." *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, 13 April 1952, p. 8.

"It is now possible to secure practically the entire body of Mr. Stevens' published poetry in five well printed volumes."

**The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954.

Bogan, Louise. "Verse." *New Yorker*, 11 December 1954, pp. 198-202.

*Collected Poems* shows Stevens as "the contemplative poet *pur sang*," making him "the first modern American . . . to deal with the American scene in imaginative rather than purely topical or regional terms."

Ciardi, John. "Wallace Stevens' 'Absolute Music.'" *Nation*, 16 October 1954, pp. 346-47. \*

Stevens "has produced five of the best books of poetry ever written by an American," but *Collected Poems* shows that the elderly Stevens has become repetitive and verbose.

Deutsch, Babette. "Poet's Harvest: Seventy-five Years of 'Piecing the World Together.'" *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 3 October 1954, p. 3. \*

This is a "collection of earthy anecdotes that, individually and together, give us a new knowledge of reality. To do that, as Wallace Stevens has been insisting for the better part of seventy-five years, is the poet's job. No one has ever done it quite in his fashion, and no man alive does it more refreshingly than he."

Engle, Paul. "Wallace Stevens—A Seventy-Fifth Birthday Volume." *New York Post*, 3 October 1954.

"... one of the great works of poetry by an American, one which pushes our cultural maturity strongly into the light. It is what the fine old word 'work' meant, the height and totality of a man's artistic life."

Ferling [sic], Lawrence. "Two Different Types of Poetry." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 November 1954, "Christmas Book Section," p. 22. \*

*Collected Poems* proves Stevens to be the "most immaculate master of poetics, and it would take a book to do justice to the range of his poetic music, to the rare combination of his eye and ear. As a poet's poet he is perfect."

Harrington, Michael. "Critics' Choice for Christmas." *Commonweal*, 3 December 1954, p. 262.

"Stevens is one of our best poets. Unfortunately his reputation has been burdened with epithets of cuteness, rhetoric, and the like. This volume should remedy the situation."

Holley, Fred S. "Intellect and Imagination Joined in Wallace Stevens." *Norfolk Pilot*, 7 August 1955, Sec. C, p. 8.

*Collected Poems* is "534 pages of magnificently complex poetry, and I do not suppose it can ever be too late to comment on the wonderfully various and fantastic mind of its author."

Jarrell, Randall. Review. *Harper's*, 209 (November 1954), p. 100. \*

"One might as well argue with the Evening Star as find fault with so much wit and grace and intelligence; such knowledge of, feeling for, other times and places, and our own; such an overwhelming and exquisite command both of the words and of the rhythms of our language; such charm and irony, such natural and philosophical breadth of sympathy, such dignity and magnanimity."

Jerome, Judson. "'Things' Are the Lovely Pulp of Life." *Dayton News*, 31 October 1954, Sec. 4, p. 16.

"Mostly and rightly," *Collected Poems* are "composed of things—colors, birds, the sea and sun, guitars and well-turned pears. It is form, control and magnificent diction which generate order and meaning from the tumbling symbols."

Letendre, Donald H. "The Winner and Runner Up of the NBA Poetry Award." *Worcester Telegram*, 20 February 1955, Sec. D, p. 11.

Most impressive is "Stevens' close identification with the Wastelanders, especially in his early volumes. He, too, lives in a world of surfaces which satisfies the senses but leaves the inner man agonizingly empty. Color, shape, and texture are neatly clipped into dazzling images and meticulously assembled into tantalizing and extravagant designs. But, in contrast to this verbal luxuriance is the starkly arid world of modern man."

Meyer, Gerard Previn. "Actuary Among the Spondees." *Saturday Review of Literature*, 4 December 1954, pp. 26-27. \*

Stevens "renews in us over and over again, in seemingly endless and effortless variety, the conviction that, in spite of everything, there are 'sanctions' for our existence. And, both explicitly and by rich exemplification, that poetry"—in *Collected Poems*—"is one of the chief sanctions."

Meyers, Laura Scott. "The Bookshelf." *El Paso Herald-Post*, 7 May 1955, p. 4.

Although Stevens is one of the "significant and enduring poets of the century, one may grant, . . . one wonders whether there might be a newer, fresher talent that merits" a National Book Award.

Morse, Samuel F. "Salute to Greatness." *Hartford Courant*, 10 October 1954, "Magazine," p. 18.

A "comet" in American publishing and literary history, "one of the great ornaments of American literature."

\_\_\_\_\_. "A poet Who Speaks the Poem as It Is." *New York Times Book Review*, 3 October 1954, pp. 3, 21.\*

"... a triumph for the imagination ... proof, as their author has said, that Poetry is one of the sanctions of life."

O'Neill, Lois Decker. Review. *Louisville Courier Journal*, 10 October 1954, Sec. 3, p. 11.\*

"... a volume that should find its way onto many shelves and add new meters to many memories."

Philbrick, Charles H. "The Magician of the Image." *Providence Journal*, 10 October 1954, Sec. 6, p. 8.\*

"... the psychologist of imagery and vision, the poet who has done most in our time to explore—not the dislocations of linguistic or ideational syntax—but the interactions of Reality and Imagination," Stevens in *Collected Poems* is "still our best magician of the image and musician of the dictionary."

Sampley, Arthur M. Review. *Dallas Morning News*, 9 January 1955.

"Rich as these are in texture, they seem coolly detached from the emotions and from the issues of our day. For this reason Stevens has properly been called a poet's poet. Small though his audience may be, it will be a continuing one, for in each generation there will be those who will gladly turn from alarms and excursions into a world of fictive music of glowing imagery, and of razor-like intellect."

Unsigned review. *Virginia Kirkus Bulletin*, 15 August 1954, p. 557.\*

"This large volume of collected poems will commemorate the poet's 75th birthday, and for his following, it is long overdue. Stevens is one of the greatest poets of this century—even if he is certainly less well known than Frost, Pound, Eliot, Auden, Cummings and Marianne Moore. For well over thirty years he has been writing poetry which is inferior to none in its elegance, wit, and understanding of language."

Unsigned review. *Ottawa Citizen*, 11 December 1954, p. 17.

"The collected works, at long last, of one of the best, if more difficult, poets now writing in the English language."

Unsigned review. *Booklist*, 1 January 1955, p. 197.\*

Stevens' theme is "the central importance of the imagination in the poet's universe, stated and restated with a wit, artifice, elegance, and music of language that few poets can equal. The appreciative reader should not resent the demands that these abstract and disembodied poems make upon him."

Unsigned review. *U.S. Quarterly Book Review*, 11 March 1955, p. 69.\*

"The full recognition of Wallace Stevens' stature, partly dependent as it is on the discovery of his great variety and depth, will be much hastened by having all his poems together in one volume."

Unsigned review. "Professional Preference." *Boston Post*, 31 July 1955, Sec. A, p. 6.

"The exciting work of one of the great moderns."

**Opus Posthumous.** Edited by Samuel French Morse. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957.

Colley, Franklin D. "Poems, Plays and Prose." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1 September 1957, Sec. L, p. 5.

"... everything that he wrote is valued by lovers of poetry." Stevens' *Opus Posthumous* maintains the high level of *Collected Poems*.

D[amils], L[ucy]. "Wallace Stevens." *Raleigh News and Observer*, 27 October 1957, Sec. III, p. 5.

The average reader might find this "of little value, since Stevens' best known work would obviously have been printed in the first two collections. However, for the Stevens enthusiast this is a definite must."

D'Avanzo, M. L. "Reality and Imagination, A Major Preoccupation." *Norfolk Pilot*, 1 September 1957, Sec. B, p. 6.

"Taking the prose and the poetry as inter-related," *Opus Posthumous* is "invaluable in understanding what Wallace Stevens is about and, in fact, what superior poetry (including his closet drama) can offer us."

Deen, Rosemary F. "Wonder and Mystery of Art." *Commonweal*, 20 September 1957, pp. 620-21. \*

"The publication of Wallace Stevens' *Opus Posthumous* ought to signal the beginning of comprehensive studies of his work. The general reader and the student of poetry now have available to them an almost complete canon of Stevens' writings—poetry, prose, and plays—from 1914 to his death in 1955."

Deutsch, Babette. "Wallace Stevens: Newly Gathered Work." *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 1 September 1957, p. 8. \*

"Although the poems, plays, and prose collected here are published two years after his death, the better part of this book is charged with life as any blooming garden, any brooding jungle, or the boisterous ritual of a parade."

Griscom, Isobel. "Notes Played On a Blue Guitar." *Chattanooga Times*, 4 November 1957, p. 8.

"... further testimony of Stevens' appeal and significance."

Jacobsen, Josephine. "A poet's Literary Remains." *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 11 February 1958, p. 16.

"... of uneven caliber, but never dull or ineffectual. To say that the prose section is the more valuable, is not to minimize the poems; many, among the fragmentary and unsatisfactory, are admirable, and discarded variations often provide insight into the poems which eventually grew out of them."

Keyser, Janet. "Wallace Stevens Work Is Collected." *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, 26 October 1957, p. 9. \*

"... an excellent place to begin with Wallace Stevens. The order of the poems provides an opportunity to study the development of the poet and his ideas. We would, however, begin in the back of the book with the prose works."

McDonald, Gerald. Review. *Library Journal*, 1 October 1957, p. 2460. \*

"... a book about poetry. In the essays one would expect this, but it is just as true of the poetry, plays and the fascinating pages of epigrams which come from Stevens' notebooks."

Meacham, Harry M. "Wallace Stevens' Poetry Collected." *Richmond News-Leader*, 23 August 1957, p. 13.

Pretentiously titled, *Opus Posthumous* is "a Wallace Stevens Reader."

Nims, John Frederick. "Richness in Poems." *Chicago Tribune*, 25 August 1957, "Magazine of Books," p. 4. \*

A "handsome miscellany, . . . striking testimony to Stevens' remarkable singleness of purpose and to the integrity of his public career."

Peel, Robert. "The Meditative Executive." *Baltimore Sun*, 22 August 1957.

" . . . gathers together intelligently a selection of poems, plays, and prose not to be found in his collected poems or easily available elsewhere. There is much here to delight the admirer of Stevens and to baffle the general reader. I confess to finding the aesthetic philosophy set forth in the prose more flimsy than it once seemed to me."

Poore, Charles. "Books of The Times." *New York Times*, 22 August 1957, p. 25.

" . . . an extraordinarily interesting archaeological collection of his prose and verse . . . All of it illuminates his development and his achievement."

Stowe, George W. "Hartford Poet's Work Reflects Rare Spirit." *Hartford Times*, 17 August 1957, p. 20. \*

"The finest flowering of New England culture in our generation may well be [the] music of Charles Ives and the poetry of Wallace Stevens," a judgment "incontrovertibly strengthened by this collection of Stevens' prose and poetry, the product of a rare and untrammelled spirit."

Walsh, John. "Poet's Work Collected." *Louisville Courier Journal*, 15 September 1957, Sec. 4, p. 6. \*

"Stevens was no mandarin. Most of his poetry is personal and much of it is difficult, it is true." But reading *Opus Posthumous* "provides convincing evidence that Stevens saw poetry not as a kind of intellectual music, but as a way of understanding life."

Unsigned review. *Virginia Kirkus Bulletin*, 1 June 1957, p. 408.\*

" . . . particularly rich material for the future interpreter of Stevens' life and work," *Opus Posthumous* is important to belles-lettres, poetry, and American literary history."

Unsigned review. "Books: Briefly Noted." *New Yorker*, 7 December 1957, pp. 229-30.\*

"A poet's rejections are sometimes as telling as what he allows to be printed, and it is interesting to trace Stevens' development in technique and accuracy of observation; his delicacy of approach is there from the first."

**Poems by Wallace Stevens.** Edited by Samuel French Morse. New York: Vintage Books, 1959.

Unsigned review. "Pick of the Paperbacks." *Saturday Review*, 12 September 1959, p. 27.

"For readers unfamiliar with the cool ironies of Stevens' poetry this collection is well chosen."

**Letters of Wallace Stevens.** Edited by Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.

Anderson, Charles R. "A Poet's Revealing Letters." *Baltimore Sun*, 11 December 1966, Sec. D, p. 5.

Although "the outlines of [a] factual biography are filled in by the present voluminous collection of letters in a limited way . . . their main concern is with something quite different—his inner life, a world of many-colored splendor. In fact, these are not letters at all in the ordinary sense. They are an epistolary of the artist's *journal intime*."

Bogan, Louise. Review. *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 43 (Spring 1973), p. lxx.\*

"These letters are important because Stevens is an important poet: he hunger for any news of his actual life, any facts to prove that he was more than the persona of one of his poems. Sadly, his defenses were never down, and although we welcome his occasional comments on the art of poetry, we are disappointed to find so little warmth and intimacy, so few private gestures."

Booth, Philip. "Decorous letters of a poet." *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 December 1966, p. 11.\*

"Reticent as Stevens still seems, these letters make amply clear that he was sentimentally naive as a suitor, self-indulgent as a mail-order patron of French art and Ceylonese tea, easily delighted as a gourmet, self-affrighting as a *bon vivant*, fastidious in politics and dress, remote as both husband and father."

Borklund, Elmer. "Life insurance." *Book Week*, 12 February 1967, pp. 15-16.\*

The *Letters* "give us an eloquent record of Stevens' imagination at work on the surface of everyday life: the trips to New York for lunch with friends and a look at the galleries, the rose garden at home and the changing seasons, a box of tea from Ceylon—a record, in short, of his attention to the intermediate zones of life, between the office and the poems, of poetry in the making and the daily struggle to arrange the agreement with reality which his best work celebrates."

Casper, Leonard. "Stevens Still Speaks." *Boston Herald*, 19 February 1967, "Show Guide," p. 19.

In his *Letters*, written in a style crisp, "precisely imagistic and candid, Stevens meditates on his lifelong skeptical search for faith in the friendly company of others equally impressed by the inexplicable presence of joy."

Dickey, James. "Wallace Stevens' Fine Letters." *Washington Evening Star*, 13 November 1966, Sec. D, p. 3.

"Wallace Stevens as an identity, a personality, is something we never trouble much about, and it seems likely that he wished this to be the case. . . . The present book is superbly valuable because it adds a great deal to our knowledge of how Stevens thought and how he worked. He is an archetypal example of a writer of letters."

Donoghue, Denis. "Wallace Stevens, Emperor." *New York Review of Books*, 1 December 1966, p. 6.\*

*Letters* "may be read beside the *Collected Poems*, the essays in *The Necessary Angel*, and the residual pieces in *Opus Posthumous*. On the whole, they are consistent with the formal occasions, the kind of correspondence one might have expected from the poet. True, there are a few moments in which the poet who sang of high things in a noble voice is pushed aside and we hear the rasp of spite."

Kirsch, Robert R. "Quest of Wallace Stevens." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 January 1967, Sec. 4, p. 4.

The book of letters is, "in effect, an autobiography written without self-conscious intent, and, therefore, the most revealing kind. . . . Throughout these pages, we see such an unusual sensibility and sentience at work. The private mind expressed in the journal, the intimate communication of the letter, the circumstance of a long life, deeply felt, not only enhance his poetry, but stand by themselves as a work of revelation."

Kramer, Hilton. "A Man in His Thoughts." *New Leader*, 5 December 1966, p. 18.\*

"A poet who once seemed hostage to the beguilements of poetic artifice shows himself, in retrospect, to have dealt with the role of poetry in the economy of consciousness as if the subject were a branch of natural history. In the work of no other modern poet is one made to feel so strongly that poetry itself occupies a place absolutely central to the structure of human intelligence."

Kroll, Jack. "Imagination's Prince." *Newsweek*, 28 November 1966, p. 114.\*

"These letters do not reveal the white-hot, inspired intelligence of Keats, the ineffable vision of Blake, or the saintly sagacity of Hopkins, but a rare American specimen of that usually European creature, the complete modern artist. Stevens is reminiscent of Matisse, Debussy, Klee, in his ability to get the artist's reason and madness to shake hands with each other."

Kunitz, Stanley. "The Hartford Walker." *New Republic*, 12 November 1966, pp. 23-26.\*

"Stevens was not a magisterial force like Eliot and Pound, who put western civilization under their jurisdiction, or an American culture hero like Frost and Williams. He was a voice, different from others. . . . The disembodied voice was what we heard. Holly Stevens must have been aware of the risk she took in letting us see her father plain."

Litz, A. Walton. "Wallace Stevens: Business and a Sonnet." *Nation*, 16 January 1967, pp. 85-87.\*

"Even in the last years of his life, the years of lectures and public honors, Stevens remained a remote figure, but now with the publication of the *Letters* we are at last able to establish tentative connections between the private personality and the personality which informs the poems."

McNeil, Helen. "Double Indemnity." *Partisan Review*, 34 (Fall 1967), pp. 635-38.\*

"Stevens' letters are unique among those of modern poets because they consistently show the mind of the poems at work on everyday life. There are few confidences and no letters that look as if they were taking the place of a poem that should have been written. They have the power of perception, if not the power of feeling, that Keat's letters have. They show a man we would not have known without them, a consciousness profoundly committed to the examination of its own effect on the real."

Minard, Ralph. "Letters Reveal Background of Wallace Stevens' Poetry." *Hartford Times*, 11 March 1967, p. 20.

The *Letters* "reveal Stevens as a man of great directness and integrity, a lover of Chinese tea and gifts from the Orient, a collector of paintings—as long as they were not too expensive. They reveal a man much less concerned with the form of poetry than with the freedom of poetry—the ability to say what he wanted to say without regard to the form in which someone else was saying it."

Moore, Harry T. "A Poet's Artistry Shown in Correspondence." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 18 December 1966, Sec. B, p. 4.

"... the remarkable record of the mind of a poet. They are particularly valuable because for the most part they deal with the poems and with poetry itself. Rarely has a writer been so explicit about his work. . . . Readers unacquainted with Stevens' work will find the letters interesting in themselves, but for those who know the poetry this collection will be invaluable for the light it casts on the imaginative work."

Pearson, Norman Holmes. "Like Rare Tea." *New York Times Book Review*, 6 November 1966, p. 4.\*

"Those who like explications of Stevens' poems will find a harvest as he patiently outlines their meanings to editors, critics and the curious. Those who collect seeds will find page after page in which his poems and his critical articles find their sources. And those who simply enjoy the civilized comments of a poet on the reality with which he comes in contact will find *Letters of Wallace Stevens* a delight."

Ravitz, Abe C. "Stevens: Rhymes With Reasons." *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 27 November 1966, Sec. C, p. 7.

"... something of a major event in contemporary American literature," for the "personal documents reveal this formidable poet, whose life, for the most part, was enigmatic, elusive and distant to both the literary and commercial communities."

Riddel, Joseph N. Review. *American Literature*, 39 (November 1967), p. 421.\*

"The handsome, expensive volume of *Letters* is bound to have an impact on our understanding of modern poetry, not to say Stevens' own. It may even upset some of our clichés about lay scholarship. In a phrase, its publication is a scholarly and literary 'event.'"

Ritchie, George W. "Stevens' Insights on Poetry." *Boston Evening Globe*, 17 November 1966, p. 59.

"... if we are aware of wholeness, we are also aware of narrowness, a kind of compartmentalization of the man and the artist. The demarcation between the highly successful lawyer and business executive, on the one hand, and the poet and man of feeling on the other, is very much in evidence in the letters—more than in the poems, into which the executive rarely intrudes."

Sizer, Alvin V. "An Important Literary Event: The Letters of Wallace Stevens." *New Haven Register*, 11 December 1966, Sec. 4, p. 4.

"It was probably inevitable that Stevens' poems, polished, marvelous, finely-chiseled, should be divorced from the social realities of life contemporary and deal with the permanent verities of beauty eternal. He was that kind of man and poet. Certainly no one will ever explain him or his poetry as well as he himself does here in his own words in what certainly must go down as one of the most important literary books of our times."

Snow, Wilbert. "Extra-Ordinary Perception." *Hartford Courant*, 25 December 1966, "Magazine," p. 13.

"The letters reveal Wallace Stevens better than any other book I have read on the man and his poetry. To those who have missed the fine contribution Stevens has made to American poetry this book is the place to begin. For others who already know and enjoy the poetry this book reveals new insights into the nature of this extraordinary man."

Stafford, William. "A World of the Imagination." *Chicago Tribune*, 27 November 1966, "Books Today," p. 3.

"His letters, edited by his daughter, blend the qualities which permitted him the double career. He writes decisively, with punch and clarity, about the most shimmering and fleeting twinges of the psyche. The result is a book full of spangles, a serene parading of the wildest insights and the most innocently human and unpretentious events."

Tindall, William Y. "The Poet Behind the Desk." *Saturday Review*, 19 November 1966, pp. 42-43. \*

"Brightness, elegance, and a kind of sober gaiety mark these letters, as they mark the poems of Wallace Stevens. Plainly his poems and his letters—or at least the best of them—are from the same fastidious hand. Such agreement between the works and correspondence of great writers is not common."

Tyler, Dorothy. "Man With a Blue Guitar." *Detroit News*, 1 January 1967, Sec. D, p. 11.

"Is there any reading more delightful than someone else's letters, especially when they were written by a distinguished person of one's own time and kind? Echo answers a big No, and Echo is right about this huge volume . . ."

Weber, R. B. "A Rich Inward Life." *Louisville Courier Journal and Times*, 21 May 1967, Sec. E, p. 6.

"... a selection of letters that, like the poetry it complements so well, constantly renews a reader's sense of life's rich multiplicity. The poems come first, of course, for style, rhythms, reverberations. The letters are now necessary, however, for anything like a full understanding of Stevens as person and poet."

Wolff, Geoffrey A. "There Is Pound, Eliot—and Stevens." *Washington Post*, 1 December 1966, Sec. A, p. 22.

"... an old-world tone, with few exceptions extremely correct and formal. It is not that he sounds like a lawyer—he does not—but he was a man of such honesty, who put such a premium on good manners, that his letters often seem cold even when the relationship that motivated them was a cordial one. He seldom addressed a correspondent by a first name."

## Reviews

**Wallace Stevens: The Making of the Poem**, Frank Doggett, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980

Though *Stevens' Poetry of Thought*, Frank Doggett's first study of Stevens, is now fourteen years old, it remains one of the two or three most useful guides to the reading of Stevens. Since then letters and journals by the poet have been published and an enormous bulk of criticism has been appended. Doggett's new study, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of the Poem*, has absorbed the material of the last decade-and-a-half to provide the first comprehensive review of the poet's *modus operandi*, his actual methodology as a poet. Like the first book, this one is not prolix: only 154 pages, it is uncluttered with overstatement, stylistic opacity, or the jargon of modern French criticism. Unlike much of the recent work on Stevens, it never subordinates poet to critic.

The book's seven chapters treat such issues as the relation between the poet's subconscious resources ("involuntary imagination") and his conscious choices ("voluntary imagination"); the role of a "conceptual unity" effecting a poem's "integration" and how "metaphors, images, random lines or phrases" contribute to its progress from inception to draft; the elusive structure of ideas in Stevens' poetry resisting a "given" reading in favor of the heterogeneity of the reader's "possible" ones; the role of continual repetitions of certain scenes, images and tropes in the constitution of schema that overlap from poem to poem; the evolution from the "pure poetry" of *Harmonium* to the meditative discursiveness of the later poems; the influential role of his critics in the formulation of his poems after *Harmonium*; and the identification of many of Stevens' stylistic peculiarities. Most of these habits are not being singled out here for the first time, but neither have they been as comprehensively and precisely documented by the poet's own discourses in the letters, journals and poems themselves.

The most original of the chapters in my opinion is the third, "A Possible for Its Possibleness," and it should be required reading for any critic of Stevens. Doggett reminds us that "as a rule, Stevens' ideas are indeterminate because they are usually only half developed, as well as only half revealed. The tacit part is hidden in the spaces of ellipses, or it hovers over scenes and figures." The poem nevertheless possesses a "given" ("its discourse, its sound and statement") and a "possible" ("a wordless and indeterminate meaning open to conjecture"). The categories seem related to E. D. Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance, or J. A. Ernesti's division between *subtilitas intelligendi* and *subtilitas explicandi*. Though all poems are open to multiple critical implications (Doggett's "possibles"), Stevens' are uniquely so. He once told Bernard Heringman, "I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion." The very inconclusiveness of the poem's conjecture constitutes for Stevens its centrality. Doggett cites illustrations from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," "Infernale" and others to demonstrate how implications, ellipse, truncated discourse, deleted pronouns, and other stylistic devices contribute to a poem's evasiveness. One might choose virtually any poem from the canon to elaborate further; "Domination of Black" is especially suitable, however, not only because of its popularity (Stevens once identified it as his favorite poem), but also because he told a correspondent that "a mind that examines such a poem for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it."

"Domination of Black" casts the speaker upon a world that is terrifyingly unstationary and protean, and in this it is like many poems by Stevens where the speaker confronts a reality in perpetual flux, armed solely by his interior powers to resist or indulge. Only the effect of fear ("I felt afraid") is untypical. The world that is met in the poem is that of autumnal leaves, wind, darkness, hemlocks and peacocks on the outside, while an open fire beside a window separates the speaker within. The iden-

tity of the speaker is confined to the phenomenal world of the poem: he possesses no other predisposition to terror. "Domination of Black" is a domination of images that, by apposition, purport to clarify the scene's description through narrowing its definition, but which ironically only widen and dislocate it:

I heard them cry—the peacocks.  
Was it a cry against the twilight  
Or against the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind,  
Turning as the flames  
Turned in the fire,  
Turning as the tails of the peacocks  
Turned in the loud fire,  
Loud as the hemlocks  
Full of the cry of the peacocks?  
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

The lines literally ask what it is that the cry of peacocks opposes, but the object of *resistance* (twilight, leaves, hemlocks) becomes an extended object of *synthesis* (leaves turning like flames and tails of peacocks). The motion shifts from the aural (cry) to the visible (leaves) to other visibles (flames and tails) to a combination of sound and sight (loud fire) back to the aural (hemlocks and cry). The centripetal motion of wind, leaves and flames is reproduced in the accretion of participial phrases which, themselves, turn. The portentous gathering of exterior forces in the poem is reproduced by the convergence of the poem's own sounds: the repeated participles (turning, turned), the rimes (peacocks/hemlocks, cry/twi, leaves/selves), and the rephrasing of the question ("Was it a cry against . . . ?" "Or was it a cry against . . . ?"). The alternate explanations become subtly but ominously adjunctive (as if the "or" were in fact "and"). The poem's world is provisional, in part because it is inchoate, in part because it is irrational. Stevens readdresses that same world as "Fat girl, terrestrial" at the end of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*—with affection now rather than fear, but consigning her to the inevitable and pleasurable "distortion" that marks all such renderings:

#### YOU

Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational  
Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.  
That's it: the more than rational distortion,  
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.  
They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.

Though Doggett does not explore the sources of Stevens' method of inconclusion, it seems to me to evolve from his earlier imitation of the Symbolists, nurtured by his predilection for uncanny and illogical elements of metaphorical groupings.

Doggett's insight into the tentative nature of Stevens' poetry extends especially to the poet's fondness for short dramatic vignettes inhabited by thinly defined characters—often disembodied names—who perform in a highly descriptive setting. His summary of the technique is worth quoting at length:

The boor of "Infernale" is one of the many persons in Stevens' poetry that seems to embody some indefinite but presumable idea. Such others as Chieftain Iffucan, Belshazzar, Lady Howzen, Ercole, Jaffa, and Canon Aspirin continually invite conjecture by their air of implicit significance. By virtue of seeming to hold some special import, Stevens' exponible terms—for example, middle and Mediterranean; major man; the first idea; and certain otherwise ordinary words like summer and winter, skeleton, night, poverty, holiday,

giant—all enhance the aura of possibility that surrounds these poems. With only a limited capacity for explicit meaning, these figures and terms suggest open perspectives of further reference.

Such a poetry of inconclusiveness leads Doggett to the necessary conclusion that Stevens' poems define each other ("One poem proves another and the whole"), a proposition he examines in chapters four and five. He selects certain schema, the player and his instrument, for example, or a figure on the seashore, as illustrations, but goes on to list many more: "the reader scanning a book, someone lying or tossing on a bed, a person or persons in a boat, people seated at a table, someone looking in a glass, a figure on a stage, someone seeking or longing for another, a hand holding or elevating something, people in a procession or parade, and an interior figure—one in a cavern or crevice or cage." James Baird's study is still the most exhaustive treatment of the images and schema of Stevens' "grand poem," complemented by the works of Eugene Paul Nassar and Edward Kessler. Doggett's first book, especially chapter nine, "Sun, Moon, Day, Night, Music and Rock," is another demonstration of the shared and extended symbolism of major images. The recent study reminds us, however, that this important examination of Stevens' method is still incomplete.

*Wallace Stevens: The Making of the Poem* incorporates throughout the careful assessment of Stevens as self-critic, a role many of his readers have tended to dismiss. Though he is aware of the contradictions in Stevens' remarks, Doggett finds the self-commentaries highly useful, especially in isolating the particular impulse or idea that gave the poem its genesis or in showing the private allusiveness of many of the unconventional tropes.

The greatest value of Doggett's book in my opinion is its reminder of how much work on Stevens remains to be undertaken and its clear signals on the directions it might assume. This is especially the case in his final chapter, "The Style and the Poem Were One." Some of Stevens' techniques defined succinctly but not exhaustively are the following: the organization of poems upon dialectical principles ("Cross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, complements, giving and taking," Stevens explained to Hi Simons); the role of synecdoche in Stevens' images, especially in his dramatic characterizations; the "detached image," an insertion that appears "almost a foreign element in the poem's disclosure . . . yet is linked to the poem by its symbolic function"; the device of echoing certain phrases that appear early in a poem at its conclusion, with their meanings deepened, modified or inverted; his fondness for the predicate nominative creating a metaphor ("It is a child that sings itself to sleep,/The mind, among the creations that it makes."); and the repeated resort to apposition.

A poem's making remains as inscrutable as its maker's total experience. No reader will ever see it all—indeed, the maker himself cannot. But as his poems accrue and can be seen contextually, and as his own expatiations assume their place around them, the mystery of the poems and their making is lessened. No reader will come away from *Wallace Stevens: The Making of the Poem* without sensing a fresh proximity to that unveiling.

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## The Southern Review's Centennial Issue: A Response Part Two

(Part I appeared in the Commemorative Issue of the Wallace Stevens Journal)

A leading assumption in the Centennial Issue papers is that the significance of a Stevens poem is directly correlative to some aspect of the genius-source of the poem, namely, the actual historical figure, Wallace Stevens. I say "genius-source" in order

to stress the romantic basis for this kind of correlation, which is essentially the same one M. H. Abrams saw in the fifties when he characterized the "emotive" theory of poetry as one in which "the primary source and subject matter of a poem" are seen as "the attributes and action of the poet's own mind." It can be generally agreed, I think, that this emotive theory—what I shall call the *poetry of the poet*—dominated the nineteenth century and still wields enormous influence today.

This view makes no strict logical sense because a text is not a person. If I say that *Stevens* says this or that, I am actually using a metonymic short-hand. But this convenience of referring to a poem by way of the poet does not just derive from romantic assumptions: since the language of a poem is still a communicative medium, reading it must inevitably involve the problem of intention; one way or another, I must pretend the text is some aspect of the writer. But the question then emerges: to what degree is such pretending necessary? There is no neat way to draw a line for every critic; but general difficulties do arise when someone continually treats a *Stevens* poem as if it were a kind of emotive soliloquy, and these general problems can be studied.

One of these is that the life of Wallace Stevens can itself turn into an aesthetic object. The true masterpiece is then conceived as the life process we conjure as we read, while the poem itself takes on a subsidiary role akin to that of a servant removing a shade-cloth from a portrait. Biography is an important area of scholarship, but ultimately it ought to bring the focus of concern back to texts. Here is Morse relating writer and word:

That he appeared to be "an every-day man who live[d] a life without the slightest adventure," as he said of Crispin, was certainly true; but because he "lived in the mind" and believed that "there is nothing in life except what one thinks of it," he "put the same degree of intentness into his poetry as . . . the traveler into his adventure." Impossible as it seemed to him to become one of the "proud possessors" or collectors, whether of paintings or books, he could make his poetry "a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death . . . a present perfecting, a satisfaction in the irremediable poverty of life."

The problem is not Morse's use of Crispin to characterize Stevens; the poems can enlighten us about the poet and vice-versa. The difficulty lies rather in the very opposition between the poet's uneventful public life and the intense inner adventure of the private life. Such a contrast is easy enough to make in the case of Stevens, but that is all the more reason for caution. With the Morse passage, however, one could easily be led to infer that there is little in this businessman's life to draw attention from the verse. But what would be the verse here? From what Morse says, it seems that it would constitute not just texts, but the whole opposite side of the contrast, that is, the whole inner life of this mental Ulysses called Wallace Stevens. It is precisely because one half of Stevens' life is so ordinary—so close to the kind most of us live—that we are so prone to turn the other half into a work of art. And yet no matter how extraordinary the inner life of Stevens may have been, it is not a logical equivalent for the extraordinary poems we read, nor is it even anterior to them in every sense. If historically the inner life generated the text, it is still the text that today generates the life, for it is only through texts (poems, letters, spoken anecdotes considered as texts) that we are able to conceive of Stevens' life at all. The latter kind of anteriority is, I shall argue in a moment, crucial in reading Stevens' special kind of self-reflexive verse, but it is also important in understanding Stevens within the wider framework of literature in general.

Literature is not just a body of texts nor just a certain quality or function of a text; it is also a certain kind of social institution, one that selects, preserves, and privileges texts, one that sets up norms and within these norms establishes the terms of education and competence through which texts come to be understood—come, in other words, to have meaning and value. The value of a text is not some intrinsic essence lying within it but rather a function of a complex interaction between that text and an historically evolving community of readers. From the Centennial Issue papers, it is clear that most of us are willing to bury New Criticism's assumption of a text being

a closed system; the meaning of a poem now tends to be seen as a function of not just structure *within* it but also of its extrinsic activity with a complex intertextual universe. And yet we are slow to acknowledge the socio-historical matrix that encompasses even this universe. In fact if we were to use what the Centennial Issue papers do *not* say as a guide, we could assume Stevens' verse existed on some autonomous planet called Literature. But as the poet himself says, "nothing is itself taken alone" (OP 163). As long as a reader presumes that literature is autonomous, he can never recognize that the very concept of literary autonomy occurs itself as a *product* of an industrialized society at a certain historical phase of its development. It is certainly a different kind of product from what we call commodities but that difference would only suggest that modern society has to be conceived as something more than a technological monster that quantifies everything down to economic terms. If the poetry of Stevens moves us profoundly, *why* does it do so? If this poetry is meaningful to members of the American academy and to few others, *why* is this so?

The unspoken fear in the Centennial Issue is that Stevens would be simplified to sawdust if social questions were introduced, for in American literary criticism social theory is most likely to be equated with Marxism or some other deterministic point of view.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this fear is more realistic than I want to admit, but it does seem that it derives in part from something more than a noble reverence for uniqueness and aesthetic complexity. We need to regard our deepest values as "natural,"<sup>5</sup> as if they rested in some rationally purified realm quite exempt from the cultural constraints and determinants evident in the mythologies of, say, ancient peoples, tribes along the Amazon, and even that vernacular ocean surrounding our island academy, mass culture. Under the pressure of such a need one could well feel that literature need not be subjected to any form of sociohistorical inquiry, that it would, like the world of Stevens' rabbit, come of itself and therefore "nothing need be explained" (CP 209). In this light, we can take a second look at the romantic need to conceive of a poem as if it constituted the feelings and thoughts of its originator-genius. It is a need, at least in this aspect, to create some pantheon or hall of fame, some shrine where among timeless giants, the values of literature can seem unquestionable, eternal, and natural.

Observe how Buchsbaum enlists a rhetoric of timelessness in speaking of "what Stevens' poetry most particularly has to give us: namely, a new form of what Paul Tillich has called 'the courage to be' in the face of the eternal contradictions of life. He discovers and rehearses, in his late poems, the power and meaning that lie not in consummation or completion but in being-on-the-edge of *any* completion." The content of this remark is quite defensible, but the *way* Buchsbaum argues makes another kind of point. The late poetry "gives" the courage of the poet-hero who confronts eternal problems on a presumably eternal stage: the poem as timeless monument to its originator, the enshrining artifact that stands still as history flows by it. But just as every eternal flame needs a gas company to do the stoking, every classic requires some kind of social institution to maintain its immortality. My effort here is not to cheapen great literature but to characterize it in a way that forcibly challenges romantic notions of it.

It should be repeated, however, that a poetry of the poet is not always a mistake. In the Centennial Issue, the two problems with this theory are the unquestioning mode of reading it tends to engender and the relative scarcity of alternative theories, which it seems to exclude. One might still argue that my complaint amounts to a highly theoretical concern that fails to touch the really practical matter of interpreting a given Stevens poem. Not true. Admittedly, Stevens is not usually concerned with relating poetry to sociohistorical forces, and when he does—as in "Owl's Clover" or the lecture, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he seems to defend rather than question the autonomy of poetry. On the other hand, his verse reveals an important struggle with romanticism over the very question of identifying the poem with the poet. In "Reply to Papini" we read

You know that the nucleus of a time is not  
the poet but the poem . . . . (CP 446)

From his prose, too, it is clear that he wants to identify poetry with more than just the imagination. "Logically," he admits in a letter, "I ought to believe in essential imagination but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination" (L 370). In part of an aphorism he says quite simply that "poetry is not the same thing as the imagination taken alone" (OP 163).

The first part of "The Creations of Sound" (CP 310) is his most extensive and direct statement about this concept:

If the poetry of X was music,  
So that it came to him of its own,  
Without understanding, out of the wall  
  
Or in the ceiling, in sounds not chosen,  
Or chosen quickly, in a freedom  
That was their element, we should not know  
  
That X is an obstruction, a man  
Too exactly himself, and that there are words  
Better without an author, without a poet,  
  
Or having a separate author, a different poet,  
An accretion from ourselves, intelligent  
Beyond intelligence, an artificial man  
  
At a distance, a secondary expositor,  
A being of sound, whom one does not approach  
Through any exaggeration.

The poem here establishes an opposition:

*The Poem as Its Originator*  
(the historical figure,  
Wallace Stevens)

vs.

*The Poem as Creator*  
(the text here and now  
under your performance)

As you read the poem, the words create Wallace Stevens, who in this strict framework is not a human being (that would be an "exaggeration") but a conception evoked by the words, "an artificial man / At a distance" who is literally a "being of sound." In this very literal sense, the words themselves are the speakers of the poem: they tell you that it is better that they constitute the voice of the text, that it is "better without an author, without a poet." They, the words right in front of you, are the poet for the moment, or if a different poet is to be considered, i.e., Wallace Stevens, he must be conceived as only an "accretion" from these words. The poem is thus the creator whenever it is performed by anyone, be it Wallace Stevens as he writes it or any reader at any subsequent moment of the text's history.<sup>6</sup> In this sense the poet's name is "X" because he is indefinite. Two levels of ambiguity are involved: (1.) the poet X is both the text and the performer, because at the moment of performance the two become one; (2.) the poet X is any performer who enacts the language by either writing or reading it. The key to this riddle poem lies in its title, in the ambiguity of the relational term "of": poems are creations *in* sound, but the things of which they speak—including even the poet—are creations *by* sound.

“The Creations of Sound” is not a fugitive amusement but rather an expression of a self-reflexive concept that is central to Stevens’ thinking about poetry. For example, the same idea can be announced in what at a glance appears to be a relatively unimportant aphorism:

Poetry is a poetic conception, however expressed. A poem is poetry expressed in words. But in a poem there is a poetry of words. Obviously, a poem may consist of several poetries. (OP 163)

“The Creations of Sound” reveals a *poetry of words* because it is not just expressed in words, it is *about* words. As the aphorism stresses however, a poem can consist of several theories or “poetries.” The poetry-of-words concept does not, for instance, exclude the great emphasis of romanticism upon the individual imagination of the poet; it merely re-centers it. Stevens continues romanticism yet refuses to adopt the historicist habit of the nineteenth century, namely, that of idealizing origins: where before the originator of the poem was glorified as a priest of transcendence, the poem itself is now centralized, a move in which the artistic imagination is no less exalted but in which it is now conceived in its relation to language and meaning. Just as the woman in “The Idea of Order at Key West” (CP 128) “sang beyond the genius of the sea” so too the voice of the poem sings beyond the genius of the text, which like the sea at Key West also has a “mimic motion.” The obvious and generally accepted correlation between the singing woman and the poet is still valid; the voice of the text *is* the voice of the poet and not just some purely empirical entity like a page of ink marks considered as a thing in itself (“But it was she and not the sea we heard”). And yet the framework within which poet and poem are to be conceived represent a radical departure from early romantic assumption: the singing of the poet no longer reveals some invisible Elsewhere but the awesome marvel of the language immediately before you, one in which the words of the woman become the “words of the sea.”

To demonstrate conclusively that there is this literal kind of self-reflexiveness in Stevens would require much more space than is allowed here. Even less can I attempt to answer the many questions it raises.<sup>7</sup> But for the purposes of this review, let us suppose that romanticism’s poetry of the poet has been joined by the kind of poetry of words suggested here. The Centennial Issue papers could then be passed through a different prism.

First the primary material. The question of ambiguity and secrecy raised in the newly discovered letter to Blackmur could take on a new kind of relevance. Moreover, certain entries in *From Pieces of Paper* could arrest the eye with a new kind of force:

“All Men In One Man” (#21): any performer of the text synoptically incorporates all its performers. He is “the man of glass, / Who in a million diamonds sums us up” (CP 250) In the verse glass is frequently used to suggest language as a medium.

“Paradise On Paper” (#25): the poem, through the representational power of its language creates paradise on the page.

“The contemporary romantic is a revolutionist” (#47).

“The poet who lived with his words” (#228).

“A Basic Poem In a Basic Tongue” (#251): a poem talking about the marvels of its own language considered literally as language (e.g., the marvels of its representational power) can focus on qualities basic to all forms of language, not just poetic utterance (e.g., the words of a grocery list would have essentially the same representational power as that of a poem).

When it comes to the interpretive essays, the poetry of words can help reveal the Procrustean inclination, on the part of some of the papers, to chop and stretch the verse in ways that disregard context. The more heavily ambiguous and enigmatic a text is, the easier it is for anyone with a scissors to make it say anything. It is true

that the “darkness” of a text helps create its renewable potential for meaning, its interpretability. In speaking of the poem, Stevens insists that “it is possible, possible, possible” (CP 404). But it would be difficult to deny that this same darkness also increases the negative potential for misrepresentation. The essays in the Centennial Issue reveal, however, that the problem is not always one of outright distortion (although I could point to several examples of this too). Often, as in Pearce’s “Chocorua” paper, the critic’s overall argument will be valid, but some quotations used to support that argument will be made to suffer an exorbitant amount of violence. Here is Pearce introducing a quotation from the twenty-first section of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” a part that mentions Chocorua: “Here the mountain represents the poet’s capacity to discover the very potency of ‘reality,’ even though the poem, as vehicle of discovery, is necessarily abstracted out of and accordingly to be distinguished from reality, ‘things as they are.’ This Chocorua thus is an early adumbration of the Supreme Fiction.” Now here is the first part of section twenty-one; the portion that Pearce cites I have placed in italics:

A substitute for all the gods:  
 This self, not *that gold self aloft*,  
 Alone, *one’s shadow magnified*,  
 Lord of the body, looking down,  
 As now and called most high,  
 The shadow of Chocorua  
 In an immenser heaven, aloft,  
 Alone, lord of the land and lord  
 Of the men that live in the land, high lord.

For Pearce, the section refers directly to the poet’s own imagination. The mountain is to be read as the “poet’s capacity” to distinguish between abstract fictions and reality. On one side we have the poem as the abstract fiction, which is therefore called “that gold self aloft” and so forth; and on the other there is “reality,” as the physical world, to which, according to Pearce, the closing section refers:

One’s self and the mountains of *one’s land*,  
 Without shadows, without magnificence,  
 The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone.

Pearce’s emphasis on the poet here makes him contrive a neat separation between subjective poem and the objective world, and it is this separation that forces him to omit a complicating phrase like “one’s self”—which could hardly fit into the pigeon hole marked “objective”—and to mutilate another phrase so that instead of the original “not that gold self aloft” there appears only “that gold self aloft.”

But if the section were read as literally referring to itself as a text and not, in a direct way, to the poet’s imagination, there would be no need to separate the subjective from the objective and no need to resort to textual mayhem. Because a poem is language, it is physical reality and *at the same time* one’s self. Section twenty-one uses grammatical apposition to “play” these subjective and objective aspects together as if they were two guitar strings creating the effect of two sounds at one moment and one sound at another. The language of a poem may have us conjure some make-believe god dwelling aloft in some elsewhere external to the poem. The text can trick us this way because of the representational power of its language. It would be like mistaking one’s shadow for one’s self or the shadow of a great mountain for that mountain. But it does not need to trick us. The poem’s “shadows,” the representations of its language, can be used self-reflexively so that through the projections we find the projector, the text itself. “Poetry,” Stevens says, “is a revelation in words by means of the words” (NA 33).

Still valid are Pearce's general points, namely, that the section is about the imagination and that it anticipates "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" as well as "Chocorua to Its Neighbor." The area of contention is rather the framework within which these points are conceived and articulated. Without question, the concept of a poetry of words challenges the poet-centered assumption more or less present in, not just the Pearce paper, but the eight other interpretive essays. But this confrontation aside, the concept can often corroborate or augment what these papers have to say. For example, Grosvenor Powell and Price Caldwell both stress in different ways Stevens' dissatisfaction with some aspects of romanticism. The poetry of words can be used as a way of showing how profoundly he felt this dissatisfaction.

In considering the Centennial Issue as a whole, one might well wonder what Stevens himself would have thought of it, particularly its memorializing aspect. For that matter, what would he have thought of the Wallace Stevens Society? He would be immensely gratified, of course, but his feelings might be mixed with the uncomfortable sense that he was witnessing an institution called Wallace Stevens, one bearing some resemblance to "the great statue of the General Du Puy" (CP 391) with its flesh of "inhuman bronze." On the other hand, he himself was all his life an enthusiastic member of institutions. For him forces of conservatism and forces of revolution both seemed to be necessary, seemed in fact to depend on one another. The Centennial Issue does serve the institution of Wallace Stevens, and its papers on the poet have an unmistakably conservative flavor. But the verse has still been illuminated, and in the case of some papers illuminated very clearly indeed. And as it turns out, it is verse that is radical to the core.

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#### NOTES

4. For an intelligent and balanced introduction to the problems involved in applying (and not applying) social theory to literature, see Jeffrey L. Sammons' *Literary Sociology and Practical Criticism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1977). The bibliography is exceptionally thorough.

5. See Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972, orig. pub. 1957), for a brilliant discussion of the naturalizing strategies used by modern society.

6. I am tempted to claim that Stevens anticipates the great emphasis on the reader one finds in structuralism and post-structuralism (the second is only a later phase of the first), particularly in the theories of Jacques Derrida. Indeed, there are important affinities that need to be studied. Stevens writes in a letter, for example, that "nowadays it is common-place to speak of the role of the writer in the world of today. But why not speak of the role of the reader in the world of today . . . the role of the reader of my poetry, say . . ." (L 599). On the other hand, the great emphasis in Stevens' poetry of words is no more on the reader than the poet-originator; it is rather on the poem itself. A text, of course, needs a performer, but Stevens conceives of this performer in terms of the text. The poem incorporates this performer as part of itself, for as the title of one piece has it, the text is a "Man Carrying Thing" (CP 350). (The other sense of the title, that of a man carrying a thing, is also suggested but only by way of a feint. For example, this riddle poem mentions "the first hundred flakes of snow": if you read the title according to the first and less conspicuous meaning, i.e., the poem itself as a man-carrying thing, you find the whole poem consisting of exactly one hundred snowflake words.) The performer of the poem must therefore be conceived as an abstraction, "the medium man" (OP 71), of which both poet and reader are only instances.

7. I am writing a book on this entire question *A Poetry of Words: A Study of Self-Reference in Wallace Stevens*. See my "The Semiotic Poetry of Wallace Stevens," *Semiotica*, 23, No. ½ (1978), 78-98, and "Certain Phenomena of Sound: An Illustration of Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Words," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 20, No. 4 (1978), 599-614.