

Wallace Stevens

Edited by
Charles Doyle

The Critical Heritage



WALLACE STEVENS: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES

General Editor: B. C. Southam

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WALLACE STEVENS

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by

CHARLES DOYLE



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General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, thought private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality – perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

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Introduction

Wallace Stevens, as is well known, was a late starter in putting his poetry before the public. That first 'damned serious affair' *Harmonium* did not appear until 1923 when its author was forty-four years old. Fortunately, in Holly Stevens' *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens* we have an exploration of the poet's life and the progress of his literary maturation up to 1915, his thirty-sixth year.¹ Otherwise, probably aided by his wife, Stevens seems to have been at some pains to cover his early tracks.

The first known criticism of his poetry appeared in print in 1916, when the *Minaret* for 16 February (see No. 1 below) included a notice of the 'war number' of *Poetry*,² production of which had been delayed especially to include Stevens' last-minute submission. A little over a month later, George Soule, in the *New Republic* for 25 March 1916, indicated the element of the fantastic and the delicacy of touch in Stevens' 'Peter Quince at the Clavier', printed in William Stanley Braithwaite's *Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1915*.³ After a further eighteen months, a staging of Stevens' 'Carlos Among the Candles' was greeted with some bemusement by the New York drama critics (Nos 2 and 3).

A belated and not particularly auspicious beginning – but by 1919 Stevens had become enough part of the literary scene to figure incidentally in a squabble between Conrad Aiken and Louis Untermeyer, the then influential anthologist. Immediate occasion of the spat was Untermeyer's *The New Era in American Poetry*,⁴ and the book is an episode in the long-continuing debate between indigenous and international, a controversy which was to persist at least to the end of the career of William Carlos Williams in the 1960s. Untermeyer championed what he thought of as 'realism', particularly as represented by Chicago poets such as Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg, and attacked the very recent intrusion of internationalism in the form of French

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influence,⁵ including Stevens incidentally among his targets. In reviewing *The New Era in American Poetry* (No. 6) Aiken scoffed at what he saw as Untermeyer's narrowly-based moralism, citing Stevens as a poet pure and by no means simple. Stevens was not then a major figure in the argument, nor was he especially singled out, but it is noteworthy that both Aiken and Untermeyer readily labelled him an aesthete, Aiken finding that a condition sufficient unto itself while Untermeyer deplored it.⁶

Although Maxwell Bodenheim, poet and fellow member of the Grantwood colony, in 1920 included Stevens among those who were attempting 'to unearth an inner reality which often conflicts with the surface plausibility and visual falseness which men have ever called "reality"',⁷ Untermeyer's judgments set the tone for Stevens' critical reception during what Samuel French Morse categorizes as the *Harmonium* years, 1914-30.⁸ It was Untermeyer who attached the 'hedonist' tag to Stevens, and who dismissively charged him with deliberate obfuscation, preciousness and slightness - in sum, pigeon-holing him as a minor, if amusing, entertainer.⁹ Many reviewers appeared to take their cue from this attitude, overlooking for the moment the incidental remark of the twenty-one-year-old Yvor Winters, in reviewing Edwin Arlington Robinson's poems, that the 'cool master', Stevens, was the 'greatest of living and of American poets' (No. 8).

Reviewers of *Harmonium* took note of its verbal wit, refinement and lushness, gaudiness, exoticism, sensuousness. Matthew Josephson (No. 10) was impressed by the poet's 'personality', as were Harriet Monroe and Llewelyn Powys, though others seemed to feel rather Stevens' detachment or aloofness, his stance of poet as philosopher, and Edmund Wilson, more severely, detected an ironic chilliness and dissociation from life (No. 16). Powys, however, has quite a different kind of philosopher in mind when he gushes that Stevens' poetry is 'beyond good and evil, beyond hope and despair' (No. 17), though he risks the reader's mirth in adding 'beyond thought of any kind'. Yet he touches upon a subliminal element in finding Stevens 'obscure and yet objective' and has a point (mimetically, too), which Stevens

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himself might well have appreciated, when he transforms the poet's 'stately pleasure-dome' into a dagoba. Behind most of the critics, with the likely exception of Stevens' lifelong ally and friend Marianne Moore (No. 13), one half suspects ambivalence of judgment. What Powys considered, happily, 'beyond thought', Untermeyer deplored as 'determined obscurity'.

As Riddel points out, the most influential or trend-setting review of *Harmonium* was Gorham B. Munson's (No. 20). Munson successfully attached the 'dandyist' label to Stevens and, while admiring the poet's adroitness, deplored his escapism. Stevens' speculative or dialectical stance seems to Munson a tactic for evasions, behind which Stevens is able to rest in comfort and security. Enigmatically, Stevens is at once a romantic and a materialist, a contented observer at the circus of life, set in the 'easy posture' of an onlooker. It is not so much an unfavourable assessment as a circumscription.

For the remainder of the 1920s nothing was heard from him – at least there was no new book – a circumstance which might seem to demonstrate the correctness of Wilson and others in judging that Stevens' aesthetic *modo* was limited and self-limiting. Yet Riddel seems to read too much into Tate's comments on 'undoubtedly the most finished poet of the age' (No. 21), when he suggests that Tate discerned the exhaustion of over-refinement in Stevens' work. Writing at the same time (1929) René Taupin also places Stevens in the (Baudelaire–Laforgue) dandyist line, which he associates with colour and music, as well as 'elegance and nuance'.¹⁰ Alfred Kreymborg (No. 22) in his wordy way is more down to earth than most about Stevens, whose work he obviously admires. He provides what at first seems an eminently commonsense reason for the post-*Harmonium* silence: 'Comparatively few copies sold; the rest were remaindered.' Holly Stevens seems to confirm this, noting that 'the book was received rather indifferently by the public and the critics',¹¹ but leaves one with a question. If Kreymborg is correct, why publish a new edition in 1931 (admittedly with fourteen new poems)? For Kreymborg, diffidence and fastidiousness are dominant Stevens characteristics and the years of silence which followed 'The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae' (a

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title the poet proposed to Alfred Knopf for this first book) are partly to be explained by the circumstance that he was settling into the insurance business, but also by his fastidiousness. Just before *Harmonium* was published Stevens had looked upon his works with some disgust and expressed to Harriet Monroe the desire 'to keep on dabbling and to be as obscure as possible until I have perfected an authentic and fluent speech for myself'.¹² Momentarily, at least, the poems seemed to him like 'abortive insects'.

When the new edition of *Harmonium* appeared in 1931, Horace Gregory could say of Stevens: 'Since the publication of his collected poems in 1923 his subterranean reputation has been steadily growing';¹³ but the key critical document in advancing Stevens' reputation is R.P. Blackmur's brilliant and extended 'Examples of Wallace Stevens' in the Winter 1932 number of *Hound and Horn* (No. 28). Blackmur attributes Stevens' strength to his deployment of language, not merely musically but as an instrument of exact communication, even down to the precise management of ambiguities. Blackmur, in fact, greets Stevens as one who can overcome what Eliot termed 'the dissociation of sensibility', or at least one who is aware enough to attempt persistently 'to transform what is felt with the senses and what is thought in the mind – if we can still distinguish the two – into that realm of being, which we call poetry, where what is thought is felt and what is felt has the strict point of poetry'. Thus is refuted Munson's charge of mere dandyism, with the support of Walton, Zabel (Nos 25 and 26) and others. Each sees in Stevens a moral dimension, though on this matter we may turn back to Horace Gregory, who concludes that 'Wallace Stevens is the perfect example of the civilised artist thrust head first into modern society, he is not merely a connoisseur of fine rhythms and the precise nuances of the lyrical line, but a trained observer who gazes with an intelligent eye upon the decadence that follows the rapid acquisition of wealth and power'.

THE 1930s AND THE ORDER OF THINGS

Most often the 1930s are perceived as transitional (in some

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minds, from a great early period to a great late period), a time of revaluation in Stevens' career. Beginning with the augmented edition of *Harmonium* (1931), the decade was also launched on Stevens' part by repeated professions of diffidence or hesitancy, as is clearly demonstrable from his letters. In April 1931, for example, he told Lincoln Kirstein: 'Nothing short of a coup d'etat would make it possible for me to write poetry now'.¹⁴ Over a year later, in August 1932, we find him excusing himself to Harriet Monroe, 'Whatever else I do, I do not write poetry now'¹⁵, though he does enclose one 'scrap' for her editorial consideration. The following March he admitted to some writing, but groused, 'I do not much like the new things that I write'.¹⁶ Meantime he had chosen an old poem, 'The Emperor of Ice Cream', for William Rose Benét's compilation, *Fifty Poets: An American Auto-Anthology*,¹⁷ providing as his own critique the observation that the poem 'wears a commonplace costume, and yet seems to me to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry; that is the reason why I like it'.¹⁸

By late 1934, the situation and Stevens' outlook had begun to change, possibly influenced by the mysterious J. Ronald Lane Latimer, Stevens' major correspondent in the late 1930s, until he disappeared completely from the scene. Latimer, who edited the periodical *Alcestis* and published volumes of poetry under the imprint of the Alcestis Press, was important to both Stevens and William Carlos Williams. 'One of the essential conditions to the writing of poetry', Stevens now told Latimer,¹⁹ 'is impetus. That is a reason for thinking that to be a poet at all one ought to be a poet constantly. It was a great loss to poetry when people began to think that the professional poet was an outlaw or an exile. Writing poetry is a conscious activity. While poems may very well occur, they had very much better be caused.' Stevens' view of the making of poetry was itself orderly, then, and from sending Latimer poems and gatherings of poems he quite quickly proceeded to the possibility of a new book, to be titled *Ideas of Order*.

Both terms of this title are important in clarifying the direction now to be taken by Stevens' work and the development of his reputation. We may refer once more to

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the correspondence with Latimer where Stevens, obviously stung by the suggestion that 'gaudiness', hedonism and aestheticism were what he had to offer, protests: 'Here in Hartford . . . people who speak about the thing at all speak of my verse as aesthetic. But I don't like any labels, because I am not doing one thing all the time; it may look very like one thing, just as it seems to be entirely without ideas, which, from my point of view, is ridiculously wrong'.²⁰ He believes in change, however, and admits that he does not 'have ideas that are permanently fixed'.

One of his dominant and persistent ideas was that poetry is an activity of very high order, essential to a true ordering of the world. In the early 1930s, feeling his way towards a somewhat different quality of poetry, less obviously flamboyant, he was, however (in the course of a review furthering his admiration for Marianne Moore), ready enough to declare: 'It is absurd to wince at being called a romantic poet. Unless one is that, one is not a poet at all. That, of course, does not mean banyans and frangipani; and it cannot for long mean no banyans and no frangipani.'²¹ After *Harmonium* his work was temporarily less energetic, less 'brilliant', though the general nature of his language and images did not change much and what change there was led to no magnanimous recognition of his intentions, as witness Geoffrey Grigson's grumpy catalogue in 'The Stuffed Goldfinch', reviewing *Ideas of Order* – 'less panache, periwinkle, cantilene, fewer melons and peacocks, but still the finicking privateer, prosy Herrick, Klee without rhythm, observing nothing, single artificer of his own world of mannerism'.²² But the most prominent review of the book (it has become part of Stevens' biography) was Stanley Burnshaw's, in *New Masses* in October 1935 (No. 30).

Burnshaw, in effect, treated Stevens as a facile aesthete fiddling away in the midst of a collapsing world, or one who had lost his bearings at the centre of turmoil. Stevens' first recorded reaction is contained in a letter to Latimer written a week or so after the review appeared:

The review in *Masses* was a most interesting review, because it placed me in a new setting. I hope I am headed left, but there are lefts and lefts, and certainly I am not headed for the ghastly left of

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Masses. The rich man and the comfortable man of the imagination of people like Mr. Burnshaw are not nearly so rich nor nearly so comfortable as he believes them to be. And what is more, his poor men are not nearly so poor. These professionals lament in a way that would have given Job a fever.²³

At best, this is a question-begging rejoinder. At a deeper level, Stevens believed that human order must be sought for and found in and through the imagination. As proponent of a then intellectually modish Marxism, Burnshaw believed not so much in the individual as in an ideology. His attack on Stevens' political and social complacency served to awaken in the poet some measure of ideological consciousness. Stevens reacted by writing 'Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue',²⁴ part of the title sequence of *Owl's Clover* (1936). Excluded from *Collected Poems*, but published in the omnium gatherum of *Opus Posthumous*, the sequence is not nicely calculated to clarify the issues raised by Burnshaw, whose conception of art, Stevens seems to imply, is 'a thing from Schwarz's, a thing/of the dank imagination'. Stevens repudiates the notion of

A time in which the poets' politics
Will rule in a poets' world. Yet that will be
A world impossible for poets....

While some critics catch sight only of the old aestheticist Stevens, Harriet Monroe (No. 31) seems inadvertently to confirm Burnshaw's doubts about him when she declares that even 'a revolution, even communism or fascism, will never disturb the firm foundations of his philosophy'. Otherwise, reactions were mixed. Roethke (No. 36) blames Stevens for being out of touch with the world; Howard Baker at somewhat unnecessary length praises his psychological depth (No. 29); John Holmes, in a curiously toned notice (No. 35), says 'recent moods of the real world have affected him, and they show in this book'; a patient ideologue, F. O. Matthiessen, in a nice irony of circumstance, simultaneously reviews Burnshaw's poetry *The Iron Land*, but finds it wanting, and asserts that Stevens' *Ideas of Order* yields 'a mature apprehension of actual society' (No. 34).

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'William Carlos Williams could remark that Stevens "of late has turned definitely to the left"', Joseph N. Riddel informs us;²⁵ but Williams, himself at that period flirting coyly with *New Masses*, was far from thinking so. His actual statement, which shows a capacity for intelligent objectivity, is to quite opposite effect: 'The story is that Stevens has turned of late definitely to the left. I should say not, from anything in this book [*The Man with the Blue Guitar*—see No. 45.] He's merely older and as an artist infinitely more accomplished'. In March 1936, Stevens could follow up his remark 'I hope I am headed left', tossed off to Latimer, with the explanation, or qualifications: 'For my own part, I believe in social reform and not in social revolution. From the point of view of social revolution, *Ideas of Order* is a book of the most otiose prettiness; and it is probably quite inadequate from any social point of view. However, I am not a propagandist'.²⁶

Yet if Matthiessen has a point, and *Ideas of Order* can be claimed as offering a mature apprehension of actual society, this apprehension, as most reviewers seemed to realize, is not deepened in *Owl's Clover*, even though that work is intended directly as a more socially pointed act. Stevens adheres to his conviction that art — poetry — is socially valid and important in its own right, but he does make some attempt to respond to Burnshaw's strictures. The problem is that his characteristic manner is unsuited to a direct polemic or an exchange of social ideas and Stevens, of course, could not (happily, if one looks at the case in a broader perspective) all at once discard the manner so assiduously cultivated over a thirty-year period. Eda Lou Walton (No. 40) and others saw the difficulty for what it was. One effect of the clash between Stevens' manner and the current political demands emanates from the work as some sense of dislocation or a feeling of self-parody. *Owl's Clover* has an air of lame self-consciousness.

As Williams was quick to recognize, matters were soon put right with *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937). More generally, Riddel is to the point in observing that Stevens' 'verse in the thirties was preoccupied mainly with the preservation of poetry as a vital act in an anti-poetic age'.²⁷

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As to his political commitment, it is perhaps fair to allow Stevens himself the final word. 'I am in the long run interested in pure poetry', he told his friend Henry Church in June 1939. 'No doubt from a Marxian point of view this sort of thing is incredible, but pure poetry is rather older and tougher than Marx and will remain so. My own way out towards the future involves a confidence in the spiritual role of the poet'²⁸ This last point chimes in with Ben Belitt's attempt to summarize the purpose of the sequence 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' as 'the search for artistic identity at a time when the poet is compelled to examine that identity critically, in terms of a changing world-spirit'.²⁹

Williams acutely, and in pursuit of his own ideology, attributes the let-down of *Owl's Clover* to employment of a five-beat pseudo-iambic measure, but on the other hand Yvor Winters in *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937) labelled Stevens one of 'the masters of free verse', and Stevens came out of the 1930s with his poetic reputation greatly enhanced. The reviewers of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, with one or two exceptions, generally responded with delight and respect. As one of them, Robert Fitzgerald, put it, he found himself surprised to realize the 'eminence' of Stevens' poetry, and to recognize 'a passionate sharpness of authority which I do not remember having felt before' (No. 46). Yvor Winters, in the above-mentioned book, subtitled 'A Study of American Experimental Poetry', reiterated his claim of fifteen years earlier, dubbing Stevens 'probably the greatest poet of his generation'.

THE 1940s

The beginning of the new decade brought several substantial gestures of recognition for Stevens' poetry, at least one of them of lasting importance.

A special number of the *Harvard Advocate* in December 1940 showed, at least, that his work had become respected in the academies, and its pages included testimonials from Harry Levin, F. O. Matthiessen, Marianne Moore, Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks, among others. Matthiessen notes again, and admires, Stevens' 'deepening preoccupation with

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the problems of social order'.³⁰ He feels this concern has made Stevens as poet less dazzling, though with enhanced literary dignity, more prolific and more resourceful. But, immediately following Matthiessen, Marianne Moore appears to rejoice in the original aesthetic Stevens, who continues 'to live in an unspoiled cosmos of his own'. Following Moore, Allen Tate offers her oblique support, regretting 'somewhat that Stevens' recent books have shown a developing indignation', but making obeisance none the less to 'one of the best poets alive'.

One *Advocate* contributor, Hi Simons, in agreement with the high valuation set upon Stevens' work by Tate, Moore, Winters and others, had embarked on a full-scale study of the poetry, publishing in the *Southern Review* in this same year a seminal explicatory essay on 'The Comedian as the Letter C'.³¹ Simons followed up his review, 'The Humanism of Wallace Stevens' (No. 54), with two other important, more extended pieces. 'The Genre of Wallace Stevens' (*Southern Review*, Autumn 1945) is an elaboration of the present review and a rebuttal of Horace Gregory's opinions (No. 53) and Mary Colum's (No. 56), as well as, by implication, repudiating Winters' charge of mere hedonism (No. 60). Simons, who might possibly have produced the first serious book-length study devoted to Stevens, died in the spring of 1945, and there was only one further contribution from him, an essay on Stevens and Mallarmé, published in 1946.³²

Just before the *Advocate* special number appeared, Julian Symons' 'A Short View of Wallace Stevens' (No. 50) was published in London. Symons is condescending about *Harmonium* and the early work generally, perhaps rather too readily seeing Stevens' gaudiness as flippancy; but he is respectful of 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', valuing it as 'one of the most notable poetic achievements of the past twenty years'. Despite this he returns, in conclusion, to asserting Stevens' flippancy, rejecting as false one of Stevens' major themes, that 'Poetry is the subject of the poem' (which also happens to be, in variants deriving from a broad spectrum of arts, a central motif of Modernism.) At least one British publisher, if we go by Stevens' letters, had shown interest before this date in publishing a volume of his

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poetry,³³ but Symons' conclusions cannot have much helped Stevens' reputation in Britain.

Symons doubted if it were possible for poetry in Stevens' manner to accommodate philosophical reflection. A succession of reviewers of *Parts of a World* (1942), having been able to grasp from the spareness of texture in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* the dialectic of relationship between things-as-they-are and imagination, were disappointed in the later book. Many expressed uncertainty about it, though Hi Simons declared it Stevens' 'most deeply imagined work'. An old adversary, Louis Untermeyer, stated the continuing reservations magnanimously in praising Stevens' poetry of comedy and his comic use of language (No. 57).

Alongside this generally lukewarm public response to his work, and traceable in his 1942 lecture 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', Stevens was meditating upon the role of the poet in modern, demythified society, and was strengthening his conviction that it is the poet who 'gives life to the supreme fictions', which are essential to the full reality of our human life.³⁴ The following year, in 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', he speaks of poetry as 'the unofficial view of being'.³⁵ But to these cool appraisals should be added a remark in a 1943 letter to Henry Church: 'The belief in poetry is a magnificent fury, or it is nothing'.³⁶

At this moment, in *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), Yvor Winters weighed in with a major assessment, 'Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress' (No. 60). Evaluating 'Sunday Morning' (1915) as 'probably the greatest American poem of the twentieth-century', he none the less finds in it the seeds of decadence and suggests that from the early poems onward Stevens' career was a decline rather than a progress. After Stevens' death, Winters, in a postscript to his essay, suggests that a much later poem, 'The Course of a Particular'³⁷ (omitted from the *Collected Poems* in error),³⁸ which he interprets as a belated renunciation of hedonism, is perhaps 'the greatest' in the canon.

Despite an air of positive respect for Stevens' work, Winters through a detailed examination of several poems accuses him of verbal imprecision, irrationalism, triviality and decadent hedonism. Stevens' published letters suggest

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that he refused to become embroiled in any debate and even to read Winters (though half a dozen years later he endorsed Winters' nomination for membership of the National Institute of Arts and Letters).³⁹ Despite a jibe or two at Blackmur's prolixity, Stevens thought his a better mind than Winters', and certainly, in an extended review of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (No. 58), Blackmur comes closer to the 'philosophical' Stevens by considering him positively, as a poet of epistemological process.

The young Robert Lowell, who had just won the Pulitzer Prize for his second book *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), here enters the picture (No. 65), to state a magisterial preference for Blackmur's 'masterpiece of imaginative elucidation' (i.e. No. 28, 'The Examples of Wallace Stevens') over Winters' 'overdone' dismissal of Stevens' later poetry. The latter he felt, however, was a good corrective to Blackmur. Lowell himself found in *Transport to Summer* some of Stevens' best work since *Harmonium*, though he voices a common complaint in a pointed phrase, suggesting that 'one feels that tolerance and serenity are a little too blandly appropriated.' Yet his overall evaluation of Stevens is high and while he finds 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' unsuccessful as a whole, he judges 'Esthétique du Mal' 'about as good and important a poem as T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* or "Ash Wednesday"'.⁴⁰

Blackmur and Winters had both approached Stevens through his language and with the separate publication of *Esthétique du Mal* (1945) another voice, that of Wylie Sypher (No. 62), chimed in to declare that 'Stevens has demonstrated the uses of imprecision'. For this he could perhaps have cited Stevens' own authority, the famous sentence from 'Man Carrying Thing': 'The poem must resist the intelligence/Almost successfully';⁴⁰ or even the question in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' - 'Is there a poem that never reaches words . . . ?'⁴¹ The point is deliberately taken up by Louis Martz in 'Wallace Stevens: The Romance of the Precise' (No. 64), wherein Martz engages Hi Simons, but chiefly Sypher, to say in effect that what Sypher terms 'imprecision' is a more profound and elaborate precision. Several sentences in Martz's essay are incidentally an effective

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answer to Winters' charge of hedonism and support the general position stated by Blackmur in 'An Abstraction Blooded' (No. 58):

Mr. Sypher's main difficulty lies in a central misunderstanding: he does not see the unifying theme which permeates Stevens' poetry. Emptied of its theme, any writing will appear imprecise and fractured. Stevens' central problem has always been the same: the adjustment of man to a universe from which the supernatural and mythical have been drained, and in which the human imagination is consequently starving.

A trickle of complaints continued, as when Louise Bogan greeted *Transport to Summer* with the grumble that the later Stevens has 'elaborated a style and an attitude that almost entirely destroy the possibility of any sustained emotion or idea'.⁴² Yet the book manifests a deepened attention to the nature of poetry and Stevens was widely reviewed as a 'philosophical' poet, even favourably so by a professional in the *Journal of Philosophy* (No. 72). Apart from pursuing his concern for poetry as theme, Stevens continued coaxing the epistemological imagination, or, as Martz expresses it:

The 'transport to summer' consists in seizing with the imagination some pleasurable physical object, and then, by metaphor, clarifying it and relating it to other objects, until one has formed an integrated composition of the 'ideal' and the 'real'. By such man-made 'credences' we dominate and enjoy our environment, though such domination cannot be sustained for long, and must be vigilantly re-established from moment to moment. (No. 70)

The 1940s concluded with two substantial evaluations of Stevens – by J. V. Cunningham and Marius Bewley respectively. A Winters ephebe, Cunningham, in 'The Poetry of Wallace Stevens',⁴³ follows the master in his high regard for 'Sunday Morning' and the early poetry and places Stevens in the Romantic tradition, in effect as a descendant of Wordsworth. Bewley (excerpted, No. 75) in contrast suggests that Stevens' early work has been overvalued at the expense of his later. Attempting to place Stevens in the American Transcendentalist tradition, Bewley finds a coherent development from the first, leading up to the pre-eminent *Transport to*

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Summer, a collection which incorporates that 'great achievement' 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction'.

THE 1950s AND AFTER

Though the career-long plaint about his obscurity of expression and/or superficiality of thought continued as a minor note (best sustained, perhaps, by Louise Bogan in the *New Yorker*), the growth of Stevens' reputation in the 1950s may be traced in a series of well-defined steps.

The Auroras of Autumn (1950) and the first, American edition of *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1951) may be regarded as one major step; *Collected Poems* (1954; English edition 1955) and Stevens' death in 1955 may be taken as another. Reception of the American edition of *Opus Posthumous* (1957) may be seen as a little stutter-step following the second. The third step is the wave of reviews which greeted British editions of *Opus Posthumous* (1959) and *The Necessary Angel* (1960).

To the first of these steps may be added William Van O'Connor's now largely superseded book-length study *The Shaping Spirit* (1950), and a landmark in the academic appraisal of Stevens' development as a poet, Roy Harvey Pearce's 'Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination' (*PMLA*, September 1951), which was inculcated into a major chapter of *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, 1961). A few months after Pearce's essay, Cid Corman's *Origin* (First Series, no. V, Spring 1952) carried an overview of Stevens' career by Samuel French Morse, who was to become a Stevens scholar of some substance, perhaps most notably as editor of *Opus Posthumous*.

An influential counterweight to these was Randall Jarrell's 'Reflections on Wallace Stevens' (No. 81). Just as he sketched what he perceived to be the declining curve of Williams' *Paterson*, Jarrell traces a progressive weakening from *Harmonium* to *The Auroras of Autumn*. Jarrell, of course, had a gift for the incisive or lapidary phrase or aphoristic sentence and not a few of them occur here, including the often-quoted closing statement: 'A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by

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lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great.' Jarrell makes it by no means clear whether he considers Stevens to belong to the latter group. Along the way to his conclusion, he voices some cogent reservations: of *Harmonium*, that 'there was nothing really unusual in what Stevens felt', and that, in effect, Stevens' 'home-truths' were 'acquitted on the grounds that they were incomprehensible'. Jarrell appears to follow Yvor Winters' line in judging 'Sunday Morning' 'as perfect, in its calm transparency, as the best of Wordsworth'; but Stevens seemed to Jarrell to have become increasingly detached from life in a way which eventually produced 'so abstract, so monotonous, so overwhelmingly characteristic a book' as *The Auroras of Autumn*. It's as if he half-consciously felt that the older poet had lapsed into repetitive self-parody.

Seen in this light, Stevens' besetting weakness, one that grew and was particularly disastrous for a poet, was the habit not only of generalizing, but of seeing every particular as illustrating a generalization, so that 'a fossil imprisoned in the rock of himself', Stevens 'needs to be possessed by subjects to be shaken out of himself'. Because he writes so well, one is always tempted to quote Jarrell rather than to summarize him. What he says here is quite finely balanced between indictment and praise, so that his own mastery of style allows him to make exceptionally tough judgments about Stevens and yet pay a due measure of tribute to a master. Stevens, had he paid much attention to such things, might have consoled himself with Conrad's sardonic observation, 'I do not read reviews, I measure them', or he might have taken note of the declaration of his compeer, William Carlos Williams, who wrote of *The Auroras of Autumn* where his stature as a major poet has reached the full' (No. 98).

American reviews of *The Necessary Angel* were, on the whole, undistinguished, with many reviewers resorting to the device of summarizing Stevens' ideas on the interaction between imagination and reality. Several accorded recognition to the fact that the book was comprised of occasional papers written to be spoken. One categorized them as 'a body of notes rather than a systematic *ars poetica*' (No. 86), but this writer and others conceded that *The Necessary Angel*

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is larded with keen practical insights into the nature of modern poetry. In sum, Stevens' first prose book was received respectfully enough, but without undue excitement.

Although not decisive, a spate of British reviews in 1953 began adding a new dimension to Stevens' reputation. Twenty years earlier, Conrad Aiken had attempted to interest the London publisher J. M. Dent in issuing a British edition of *Harmonium*, but the publisher wanted a new book and Stevens did not then have it in him, so the matter was dropped.⁴⁴ It was not raised again until late in 1952 when a small press, the Fortune Press (who, by interesting coincidence, had preceded Dent as publishers of Dylan Thomas), apparently under agreement with Stevens' New York publisher, Alfred Knopf, issued a *Selected Poems*, edited by Dennis Williamson. Shortly thereafter, Fabers published their own version of a *Selected Poems*. Stevens discovered the existence of the Fortune Press printing only through receiving a copy of a review by Austin Clarke run by the *Irish Times*.⁴⁵ As was quickly established, the Knopf-Fortune Press agreement had lapsed and the London press consented to withdraw from circulation all copies except those sent out to reviewers. Stevens himself was soon eagerly seeking a copy of the book which, in the circumstances, became an instant collector's item.

The British reviewers – including such distinguished poets as William Empson, Donald Davie and the young Richard Murphy – welcomed the appearance of Stevens' book in Britain, with Davie, for example, saying: 'He is indeed a poet to be mentioned in the same breath as Eliot and Yeats and Pound' (No. 95); but once again Stevens' poetry was greeted with a mixture of respect and caution. His musical and verbal splendours were heralded, and Davie concluded that Stevens is 'a great poet', though not one altogether to his taste. Bernard Bergonzi (No. 97) speaks of 'a barren magnificence', and the barrenness he alludes to is a certain abstractness of texture imputed to Stevens' work by many reviewers of the *Selected Poems*. The verdict is put most neatly in a sentence of G. S. Fraser's: 'Apples grow on his trees to be looked at, not to be eaten' (No. 93).

The New York edition of Stevens' *Collected Poems* virtually

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coincided with the poet's seventy-fifth birthday, and the tone of the reviews is largely appropriate to such a venerable circumstance. E. E. Cummings' *Poems 1923-1954*⁴⁶ appeared at approximately the same time and a number of reviewers, pairing the books, were respectful to both, tending to find in Cummings' work a greater measure of the concreteness so much sought after in the theory and practice of twentieth-century poetry. Several reviewers might well have taken a cue from Williams' positive reception of *The Auroras of Autumn*, for it now became quite a common assertion that the later poems were a progression from *Harmonium*, or that it was necessary to acquaint oneself with the whole canon to ascertain Stevens' full stature. This is a note struck by Morse (No. 99) and others.

To it, Delmore Schwartz adds the suggestion that 'Stevens converts aestheticism into contemplation in the full philosophical and virtually religious sense of the word. The surface of his poetry is very often verbal, visual and gay; beneath the surface, it is a deadly earnest scrutiny of attitudes towards existence, of "how to live, what to do"' (No. 101). A number of critics had begun to rebut the charge that Stevens is all surface coruscations by discovering a subliminal element, as it were, beneath the verbal glitter, or by finding in the poetry what Hayden Carruth calls 'meaning which transcends its verbal properties' (No. 104). In something of a variation on this theme, the British reviewer John Holloway speaks of 'the euphony of grave and lucid operations of the intellect' (No. 109). Some other British reviewers, notably Donald Davie (No. 108), were less favourably disposed than they had been a year or two earlier. In contrast, there is the complete conversion of the authoritative Randall Jarrell (No. 106), won over partly by the 'unimaginable new ways' of Stevens' late poems in 'The Rock', and most particularly by the managed and yet, paradoxically, liberated grandeurs of 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome'. (It would be a nice touch of irony were one able to establish that Stevens' title for the final section of the *Collected Poems* derived at least partly from Jarrell's remark, quoted above, about his being 'imprisoned in the rock of himself'.)

The initial American reviews of *Opus Posthumous* are

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perhaps more notable for the list of reviewers' names than for any particular fresh insights about Stevens-Williams again, Kenneth Rexroth, Irving Howe, Karl Shapiro, Anthony Hecht – though Howe's nimble-paced overview (No. 113) has been perhaps undeservedly neglected, and Williams alights upon some lines of Stevens which may be applied to both poets, though to singularly contrasting point:

Pass the whole of life hearing the clink of the
Chisels of the stone-cutters cutting the stones.

A substantial article rather than a review, Howard Nemerov's 'The Poetry of Wallace Stevens', which appeared at this time,⁴⁷ is of consequence not only because of the subtlety and elegant independence of Nemerov's mind, but as a sensitive account of Stevens' career by a poet who may in some important respects be rated a disciple. Having mentioned Nemerov's, one may as well note Louis Martz's well-known 'classic' essay, 'Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation', which appeared first in the summer 1958 *Yale Review*.

Stevens' British reputation was consolidated by the London publication of *Opus Posthumous* in 1959 and *The Necessary Angel*. Kermode, too, is a writer one is often tempted to quote, but there is space to succumb once only. Of both the prose and poetry, Kermode demonstrates how Stevens arrives by strange routes, and he says: 'These essays are constructed like meditative poems, circling beautifully around central images, proceeding with a grave gaiety to repetitive but ever-changing statements about the imagination . . .'⁴⁸ All this is a far cry from the pioneering essay of Julian Symons, but even further from those American critics who read *The Necessary Angel* as a gathering of the poet's rather turgid working notes.

Not that the British do not to some extent share this attitude. G. S. Fraser, for example, considered Stevens' critical writing 'very poor and often very pretentious', though he concedes the greatness of the poetry, saying that the best of it is 'a perfection emerging from a new known'.⁴⁹ Comparably, the anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer (No. 118) observes: 'Perhaps his thinking was basically a muddle; but his best poems rear a beautiful order

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on it'. There was also a certain amount of muddle among the reviewers, one or two of whom were philistine enough to express astonishment at the idea that an insurance man should not only write poetry but should do it as well as this. But there is still Kermode's distinguished voice to set against such gushings, reiterating his views briefly in the *Spectator* on New Year's Day 1960: 'it is inconceivable that the year [1959] has seen any other volume of poetry of comparable value'. Despite Kermode's advocacy, perhaps the poet Henry Reed (No. 120) took the truest measure of Stevens' British reception at that moment, in 1960, when he noted that, 'over here we are in a peculiar position as regards Stevens. Most of us don't, quite simply, know him well enough. It is not our fault entirely; but it is possible to feel, with some resentment, that when Stevens was finally published in England a few years ago, it was because the event could no longer be decently delayed'.

'Poet of a steadfast pattern', Williams once estimated Stevens, and the contrast between the two major Americans is instructive. Williams, the self-professed short-breathed poet, who published for a long time and relatively often in a variety of genres but had to wait through nearly thirty years of a career before really breaking into the 'big time'; and Stevens, for whom 'a book of poems is a damned serious affair', who hesitated long before publishing such a book, and as a consequence created the effect of having a small band of readers waiting eagerly for him to publish *something*.

One last dimension should be examined briefly to complete this appraisal of the development of Stevens' literary reputation during his lifetime. A decade after his death his daughter, Holly Stevens, edited his letters for publication, and these, of course, affect Stevens' reputation, and subsequent perceptions of him as a man and as a writer. 'Inevitably the man', Stanley Kunitz tells us, 'is more flawed than his art'. If he was 'not great-hearted' (and we are attending to Kunitz), 'not a magisterial force like Eliot and Pound . . . or an American culture hero like Frost and Williams', Stevens was yet, personality flaws notwithstanding, 'a superior presence'.⁵⁰ The phrase is accurate, not only for the aloof individual with mandarin airs, but for the 'determining

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personality' of the poet. Accurate, yes, but while the letters give full measure of a plodding, pedestrian Stevens, there are also his verve and élan and the fact that he attracted a mixed bag of exotic correspondents, from Carl Van Vechten and Ronald Lane Latimer to Thomas McGreevy, Leonard Van Geyzel and Jose Rodriguez Feo. Once again it is Kermode, in 'Strange Contemporaries: Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane',⁵¹ who rejoices in such gaudy vitality. When Kermode turns from Crane to Stevens, his own style is at once coloured by 'banyans and frangipani', and this is a fine testimonial to Stevens' power over the right reader.

NOTES

- 1 Holly Stevens, *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1977). Some poems from this period are included in Robert Buttel, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton University Press, 1967).
- 2 *Poetry*, vol. V, no. 2, November 1914.
- 3 *An Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1915*, edited by William Stanley Braithwaite (New York: Lawrence S. Gomme).
- 4 *The New Era in American Poetry*, edited by Louis Untermeyer (New York: Henry Holt, 1919).
- 5 An important relevant study is Cyrena N. Pondrom, *The Road from Paris: French Influence on English Poetry 1900-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 1974). 'English' here includes Pound and Eliot. William Carlos Williams is twice mentioned in passing, but the book includes no reference to Stevens.
- 6 Joseph N. Riddle, 'Wallace Stevens' in *Fifteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1969), pp. 389-423, see p. 398. My introduction is indebted to some degree to Riddle's useful comments, though I have not everywhere agreed with him. See Untermeyer's reply to Aiken, *New Republic*, 10 May 1919, p. 59.
- 7 Maxwell Bodenheim, 'Modern Poetry', *Dial*, vol. LXVIII, January 1920, pp. 95-8.
- 8 Samuel French Morse, *Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life* (New York: Pegasus, 1970).
- 9 Louis Untermeyer, *American Poetry Since 1900* (New York: Henry Holt, 1923).

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- 10 René Taupin, *L'influence du symbolisme français sur la poésie américaine* (Paris: H. Champion, 1929). The phrase is quoted from an excerpt translated in *Wallace Stevens: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Irvin Ehrenpreis (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972).
- 11 *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 241. (Hereafter cited as *Letters*.)
- 12 *Letters*, p. 231.
- 13 Horace Gregory, 'Highly Polished Poetry', *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 27 September 1931, p. 28.
- 14 *Letters*, p. 261.
- 15 *Letters*, p. 262.
- 16 *Letters*, p. 265.
- 17 *Fifty Poets: An Auto-Anthology*, edited by William Rose Benét (New York: Duffield & Green, 1933), p. 46.
- 18 *Letters*, p. 263.
- 19 *Letters*, p. 274.
- 20 *Letters*, pp. 288–9.
- 21 *Opus Posthumous*, p. 25.
- 22 Geoffrey Grigson, 'The Stuffed Goldfinch', *New Verse*, no. 19, February–March 1936, pp. 18–19.
- 23 *Letters*, p. 286. Burnshaw's review was later reprinted with a commentary in *Sewanee Review* (vol. LXIX, Summer 1961), wherein he explains that he was confused between his admiration for Stevens' work and his ideologically induced conviction that none the less Stevens was remiss in not directing his work towards responding to social conditions prevailing in the 1930s.
- 24 'Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue', *Opus Posthumous*, pp. 46–52.
- 25 Riddel, 'Wallace Stevens', p. 401.
- 26 *Letters*, p. 309.
- 27 Riddel, 'Wallace Stevens', p. 402.
- 28 *Letters*, p. 340.
- 29 Ben Belitt, 'Lion in the Lute', *Nation*, vol. 145, 6 November 1937, p. 509.
- 30 F. O. Matthiessen, 'Statement', *Harvard Advocate*, vol. 127, December 1940, p. 31.
- 31 Hi Simons, '"The Comedian as the Letter C": Its Sense and Significance', *Southern Review*, vol. V, Winter 1940, pp. 453–68.
- 32 Hi Simons, 'Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé', *Modern Philology*, vol. XLIII, May 1946, pp. 235–59.
- 33 *Letters*, pp. 278–9. Apparently Stevens corresponded on the possibility of a book with Dent's editor Richard Church, but nothing came of it.

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- 34 *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 31.
- 35 *The Necessary Angel*, p. 41.
- 36 *Letters*, p. 446. Letter of 30 March 1943.
- 37 *Opus Posthumous*, p. 96.
- 38 *Letters*, p. 881.
- 39 *Letters*, p. 633.
- 40 *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 350.
- 41 *Collected Poems*, p. 396.
- 42 Louise Bogan, *New Yorker*, 3 May 1947, p. 101.
- 43 J. V. Cunningham, 'The Poetry of Wallace Stevens', *Poetry*, vol. LXXV, December 1949, pp. 149-65. Reprinted in his *Tradition and Poetic Structure* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960).
- 44 *Selected Letters of Conrad Aiken*, edited by Joseph Killorin (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 305.
- 45 Austin Clarke, *Irish Times*, 14 February 1953, p. 6.
- 46 E. E. Cummings, *Poems 1923-1954* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1954).
- 47 Howard Nemerov, 'The Poetry of Wallace Stevens', *Sewanee Review*, vol. LXV, Winter 1957, pp. 1-14.
- 48 Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1960).
- 49 G. S. Fraser, 'Mind All Alone', *New Statesman*, 9 January 1960, pp. 43-4.
- 50 Stanley Kunitz, 'The Hartford Walker', *New Republic*, vol. 155, no. 20, pp. 23-6.
- 51 Frank Kermode, 'Strange Contemporaries: Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane', *Encounter*, vol. 28, no. 5, May 1967, pp. 65-70.

Note on the Text

Original notes are numbered a, b, c, etc. Notes added by the editor are numbered 1, 2, 3, etc.

EARLY REVIEWS

I. Shaemas O Sheel, from 'Chicago Poets and Poetry', *Minaret*

Vol. I, February 1916, 26-7

O Sheel's article is a general review of current numbers of *Poetry* magazine. Herbert Bruncken, editor of the *Minaret*, which was published in Washington, D.C., from 1911 to 1926, came to consider his magazine as a rival to *Poetry*. The first of the two stanzas quoted is the opening stanza from Stevens' 'Phases', a sequence of poems six of which comprise the initial work in *Opus Posthumous*, 'Poems from "Phases"'. The complete sequence has never been published.

In her comment on Stevens' *Harmonium* (see below, No. 15), Harriet Monroe explained how the War Number of *Poetry* (November 1914) had already been paged-up when 'Phases' arrived in the editorial offices (she describes the complete sequence offered as 'six or seven battle-sketches'). Room was at once made for four of these sketches.

Shaemas O Sheel (1886-1954) was an American poet and follower of the Irish renaissance. One of his poems gained renown, 'They Went Forth to Battle, but They Always Fell'. His selected poems, *Antigone and Selected Poems*, were published posthumously in 1960.

In spite of the fact that the subscribers to *Poetry* wished nothing but good neutral verse, Miss Monroe found it necessary to have a War Poem Number, and if anyone could suggest to me a magazine that has had worse poems through

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its whole existence, than this individual War Poem Number had, I would like to see the magazine. Moreover, we read enough about the war in the newspapers, why should we also have ranting poems thrust into our faces, which are untruthful, and nauseating to read. Here are two excellent examples –

There's a little square in Paris,
Waiting until we pass –
They sit idly there.
They sip the glass.

[The second example is four lines by Richard Aldington, which the reviewer characterizes as 'drivel'.]

2. Anonymous, from the *New York Times*

22 October 1917, 13

The occasion of this item was a brief report of the first tour of the Wisconsin Players in the eastern United States, and their appearance at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City for a two-week engagement, with 'a rather unfortunately selected program of one-act plays'.

... The most worthwhile piece on the first program is Zona Gale's 'Neighbors', which although hitherto unproduced in New York, has long been shown hereabouts by reason of the printed page.

'Neighbors' is a well-written and interesting analysis of the neighborly spirit, and is made thoroughly human by innumerable homely flashes. Its character drawing denotes

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keen observation, and even its story lacks all traces of dramatic exaggeration. It also has the advantage of the best acting of the evening, particularly good performances being given by Mrs. Sherry and Mary Wilder.

'On the Pier,' a not uninteresting but quite undramatic dialogue, is the work of Mrs. Sherry, the director. 'The Shadow,' by Howard Mumford Jones, is a play eminently suited to the library, but entirely too delicate a piece to be acted. The fourth piece, 'Carlos Among the Candles,' is a baffling monologue by Wallace Stevens, intended neither for the stage nor the library....

3. Ralph Block, from 'The Wisconsin Players Now at the Neighborhood Playhouse', *New York Tribune*

22 October 1917, 9

'Carlos Among the Candles,' by Wallace Stevens, is another indication of how fine a line may separate the false from the true. It is by itself a not uninteresting experiment in atmospheres, a game of hide and seek among the shadows of thought, a pursuit of elusive visions of unreality that the hand never closes on. In flavor it is not unlike a combination of Gertrude Stein's 'In a Department Store' and Henry James's story, 'The Altar of the Dead,' with a leaning in execution toward the less successful futurist of the two, Miss Stein. Carlos, who is a flunkey, enters a dark room and lights several candles, delivering himself in a passionately dreamy style of his ideas on the subject during the operation. He then blows out what candles have not of themselves given way to an electric fan in the wings, and retires by a window, probably, as he infers, to seek a moonbeam.

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The process of this kind of entertainment, in analysis, appears to be to say something that has no meaning at all with all the bearing of significance, recalling what Alice said to – was it the Duchess? – about the sound and not the sense being most important. And yet there appears just enough method in the entire madness of the piece to make me believe that with real poetry behind it – such successfully mystic poetry, perhaps, as Emerson's 'Brahma' or Swinburne's 'Hertha' – it would yield an entire new crop of sensations for the miniature stage.

4. Conrad Aiken, on Stevens' 'delicate originality' of mind, from *Scepticisms: Notes on Contemporary Poetry*

New York, 1919, 161–2

Aiken (1889–1973), poet, critic, novelist and short-story writer, was a member of the Harvard class of 1911, which included T. S. Eliot, Walter Lippmann, Robert Benchley and Van Wyck Brooks. His numerous publications include *Collected Poems* (revised edition, 1970), *Collected Short Stories* (1960), *A Reviewer's ABC* (1958) and the biographical *Ushant: An Essay* (1962), *Collected Novels* (1964) and *Selected Letters* (1978).

These passages occur in Aiken's review of the second *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse* edited by Alfred Kreymborg (1917).

... it is a variegated band that Mr. Kreymborg has assembled, and if they have in common the one main tenet – that their poetic business is the expression of a sensation or mood as

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briefly and pungently (and oddly?) as possible, with or without the aids of rhyme, metre, syntax, or punctuation – they are by no means the slaves of a formula and present us with a variety that is amazing. There is much here, of course, that is merely trivial, and a measurable quantity of the proudly absurd and naively preposterous; but if there are no such outstandingly good things here as ‘The Portrait of a Lady’ by T. S. Eliot in the earlier issue, or Wallace Stevens’s ‘Peter Quince at the Clavier,’ or John Rodker’s ‘Marianettes,’ we can pass lightly over the studiously cerebral obscurantism of Marianne Moore, the tentacular quiverings of Mina Loy, the prattling iterations of Alfred Kreymborg, the delicate but amorphous self-consciousness of Jeanne d’Orge, Helen Hoyt, and Orrick Johns, and pause with admiration and delight before the ‘Preludes’ and ‘Rhapsody of a Windy Night’ by T. S. Eliot, and ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’ by Wallace Stevens. It is not that one is at all indifferent to the frequent charm and delicious originality (at least as regards sensibility) of the other poets, but that one finds in the two mentioned not only this delicate originality of mind but also a clearer sense of symmetry as regards both form and ideas: their poems are more apparently, and more really, works of art.

5. Carl Sandburg, from a letter to Louis Untermeyer about *The New Era in American Poetry*

10 April 1919

Sandburg (1878–1967) is celebrated as the poet of Chicago and biographer of Lincoln. His works include *Chicago Poems* (1916), *Good Morning, America* (1928), *The*

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People, Yes (1936) and *Complete Poems* (revised edition, 1970), plus his six volumes of Lincoln biography. There are several biographical and critical books on Sandburg, including one by Gay Wilson Allen (1972).

See headnote to No. 6. This letter is included in *The Letters of Carl Sandburg*, edited by Herbert Mitgang (New York, 1968), p. 153.

It was a book [*The New Era in American Poetry*] hard to keep in perspective. The only window you shut down and pass on in too much of a hurry is the *Others* bunch.¹ Wallace Stevens, for instance, holds for me repeated readings. The music of his lines and the dusk of implications in the phrases stays on and delivers its effect for me always in pieces like 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' and one, about the elephant's ear shrivelled and the leaves ran like rats, is autumn in city corners immemorially

NOTE

- 1 *Others* was edited by Alfred Kreymborg (1883–1966) and founded in the spring of 1915 by Kreymborg and Walter Arensberg, and was closely associated with the summer artists' colony at Grantwood, New Jersey. The 'Others bunch' might be said to include the poets Mina Loy, Maxwell Bodenheim, William Carlos Williams, Alanson Hartpence and Orrick Johns, besides Kreymborg, Stevens and others. The art colony included also Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. The final number of *Others*, July 1919, was edited by William Carlos Williams.

6. Conrad Aiken, on Stevens and the
sociological-nationalistic view of poetry,
New Republic

Vol. XIX, no. 236, 10 May 1919, 58-61

Part of a review of Louis Untermeyer's anthology *The New Era in American Poetry* (1919), and part of a running controversy between Untermeyer and Aiken which, incidentally, established the early critical view of Stevens as a hedonist and aestheticist. Replying in the same number of *New Republic*, Untermeyer castigates the 'craftsman, intent on style, polish, finesse' as being free to express merely his own 'disdain . . . inhibitions and disillusion'. Such freedom led to 'the mere verbal legerdemain of the Pound-Stevens-Arensberg-*Others*' variety.

... his [Untermeyer's] chief tenets are Americanism, lustihood, glorification of reality (facing of the world of fact) democracy (a word which few of his pages lack) and, of course, the postponed though not to be omitted, inevitable beauty. These tenets he works hard, particularly those of Americanism, lustihood and democracy. These are, indeed his touchstones. It is 'Americanism' he sees, above all, in Masters, Frost, Robinson, even Amy Lowell; it is 'democracy' he sees above all, in Giovannitti, Wood, Oppenheim, Sandburg, Brody, Lola Ridge; and it is chiefly for their manifestation of these qualities that, apparently, Mr. Untermeyer accords these poets the place of honor in his book, and, ipso facto, the place of honor in contemporary poetry. Poetry, according to Mr. Untermeyer 'is expressing itself once more in the terms of democracy. This democracy is two-fold: a democracy of the spirit and a democracy of speech. This is the unifying quality that connects practically

all of the poets with whom I propose to deal; it intensifies what is their inherent Americanism; and it charges their varied art with a native significance. . . . Art, our critic goes on to say is a community expression: away, therefore, with the pernicious doctrine of 'art for art's sake'; and down with the ivory tower. Art has a human function to perform. It has no right to cloister itself, to preoccupy itself solely with beauty.

Well, these ideas are appealing, they have their precise value. Let us grant in particular the rightness, and indeed the commonplace inevitability, of the fact that periodically a literature will renew itself by a descent into the Bethesda well of demotic speech. We may go even further, and say that from the sociological viewpoint nothing can be more interesting than the reflection of social changes and social hungers in literature. But, here, I think, we must pause. The implications become a trifle ominous. Are we to conclude from these premises that art is any the less art because it fails to satisfy a contemporary hunger for this or that social change? Are we to conclude that art is any the more richly art because it bears conspicuously and consciously the label 'Made in America'? Is Poe to be judged, as an artist, inferior to Whitman because he is less nationalistic or less preoccupied with social consciousness? Or, indeed, —since Mr. Untermeyer really raises the question, —is such an art as Poe's, which as well as any illustrates the virtues and defects of the theory of art for art's sake, a whit the less a form of community expression, a whit the less satisfying to the human hunger for articulation, than such an art as Mr. Untermeyer seems to favor?

These questions, it seems to me, can intelligently be answered only in the negative. It is at this point that the line of cleavage between the tendencies for which Mr. Untermeyer stands and those for which his reviewer stands become most sharply apparent. For Mr. Untermeyer's book answers all these questions, by implication, in the affirmative. I do not mean that he dispenses with the aesthetic approach altogether in his appraisal of contemporary poetry, his aesthetic approach I shall come to later. But I do mean that Mr. Untermeyer allows nationalistic and sociological considerations to play an equal part with the aesthetic. To put it

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curtly, he likes poetry with a message, – poetry which is, politically, from his viewpoint, on the right side. Surely he must perceive the shortsightedness and essential viciousness of this? Social ideas are local and temporary: they change like the fashions, the materials with which they deal are always in flux, and the odds are great that what is a burning issue today will be a familiar fact, and the occasion of a yawn, tomorrow. These are, from the standpoint of the artist, mere superficialities: if they are to be touched they must be touched lightly, tangentially grazed. It is not to the political odes of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Swinburne, that we most joyously turn in rereading those poets. And the social problems of Shelley's 'Revolt of Islam' merely excite our curiosity.

Here, then, lies the greatest fault of Mr. Untermeyer's book. This bias has harmfully deflected it from the very outset, it has cast into undue prominence the work of Oppenheim, Giovannitti, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Alfred Brody; it has put a wrong emphasis on the work of Sandburg; and, per contra, it has thrown into a shadow by no means deserved the work of such poets as do not, in Mr. Untermeyer's opinion, fulfil their social contracts, – such poets as T. S. Eliot, John Gould Fletcher, Wallace Stevens, Maxwell Bodenheim, the Imagists, and the entire strain of poetry for which they inconspicuously stand, the strain which we indicate when we use the phrase 'art for art's sake.' The work of the latter poets is not, as concerns reputation, secure. I think there can be no question that all of them have given us poems which, judged as works of art, are clearly finer and more universal in appeal, than anything as yet given us by Oppenheim, Giovannitti, Wood, or Brody. The latter four are, in fact – with all due allowance made for their vitality, sincerity, and frequent skill – simply, viewed as artists, mediocre. Mere energy will not save them. It is indeed open to question whether they do not deserve the same indictment as thinkers; as deliverers of the 'message'. And to honor them as copiously as Mr. Untermeyer honors them is in a measure to derogate from the true value of those among whom they are placed – Frost, Masters, Amy Lowell, and Robinson.

But this sociological and nationalistic bias, while it is the prime factor in Mr. Untermeyer's error, is not the only one. It will not completely diagnose Mr. Untermeyer's case; it will not alone explain his too enthusiastic preferences, his too acrimonious antipathies. Let us revert for a moment to his love of the art that bears a message. This hunger carries with it in Mr. Untermeyer's mind homologous hungers in the spheres of metaphysics and aesthetics, hungers which reveal themselves as clearly in his poetry as in his criticism. His interests are, in short, — as was indicated earlier, — primitively naive; he is oratorically assertive, a trifle consciously robust; and quite aside, therefore, from questions of social ethics, his predilections in poetry are for the unflinchingly masculine, the explicitly affirmative (what Nietzsche termed the 'yea-saying'), the triumphantly and not too reflectively acceptant; the vigorous, in short, rather than the cerebral or oblique or disillusioned, the enthusiastic and downright or sanely sentimental rather than the interpretative or analytic or psychologically tenuous.

And here we come upon the matter of Mr. Untermeyer's aesthetic equipment and touch at once, flatly, upon his very serious limitations. Within these limitations Mr. Untermeyer has, if we recall his two first volumes of verse, grown remarkably; he has extended his sympathies further than one might have hoped. But, at the critical point, they fail. Beyond the delicately overtone lyrics of de la Mare, unconventionally conventional in form, relatively simply in range or, on the other hand, beyond the matter-of-fact incisive satires of Spoon River, or the slightly too smoothly turned etchings of Robinson, they cannot reach. And, unfortunately for Mr. Untermeyer, it is precisely in these two directions that the fruit-work is being done. In the former directions it gives us the work of H. D., of Pound (at his best), of Fletcher, of Stevens, of Bodenheim; in the latter, that of Eliot, Kreyborg, Masters, (his later vein), and tentatively, that of various contributors to *Others*. What these two groups have in common is the fact that they are both after a kind of absolute poetry — a poetry which delivers no message, is imbued with no doctrine, a poetry which exists only for the sake of magic, — magic of beauty on the one

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hand, magic of reality on the other, but both struck at rather through a play of implication than through matter-of-fact statement. This sort of poetry is of course unmoral and unsociological. It is not idolatrous: the circumstances, the emotions, out of which it springs, are its instruments, merely, the musical strings on which it strikes, not the items in a conscious ritual. It is the be-all and end-all of such poetry that it should be a perfectly formed and felt work of art; and the greater the elaboration and subtlety consistent with such perfection the more inexhaustible will it be, the longer it will endure. Unhappily for us and for Mr. Untermeyer, this type of poetry merely excites his animosity. When it is in the Fletcher-Bodenheim-Stevens vein he grants its skilful use of word-color, but is distressed by its apparent emptiness; when it is in the Eliot-Kreymborg-Williams vein he is annoyed by its tenuousness, baffled by its elusive use of introspection; and he takes refuge in terming it decadent, or effeminate, or morbid. It is not sufficiently affirmative for Mr. Untermeyer; it does not obviously enough encourage him to believe in God, or in the divinity of man, or in the rightness of democracy, or in the beauty and immortality of life. Mr. Untermeyer suspects it of a kind of negativism. It is not frank with him, will not state its text with sufficient candor. Moreover one suspects in Mr. Untermeyer's reiterated denials of anything 'new' in such work, as well as in his use of such phrases as 'self-adulatory radicalism' the survival of some injury to a new hopelessly overborne belief that he is a radical himself. It is, in other words, precisely the finer note in contemporary poetry which Mr. Untermeyer most completely misses.