Review: Wallace Stevens and His Recent Critics

Reviewed Work(s): Wallace Stevens: Opus Posthumous by Milton J. Bates: Sur Plusieurs Beau Sujects: Wallace Stevens Commonplace Book by Milton J. Bates and Wallace Stevens: Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism by Joseph Carroll: Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous by Barbara M. Fisher: The Fluent Mundo: Wallace Stevens and the Structure of Reality by J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton: The Poetry of Wallace Stevens by Robert Rehder:
Wallace Stevens, A Biography: The Later Years 1923—1955
by Joan Richardson

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WALLACE STEVENS AND HIS RECENT CRITICS

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Wallace Stevens's poetry, prose, manuscript variants, notebooks, and life history continue to provide the basis of a considerable publishing activity. The four critical books under discussion, ranging from 1987 to 1990, suggest why the effort to place Stevens, poetically and personally, continues.

Most basic to our evaluation of these four works, all of them consistently and proficiently carried through in respect to their own premises, is the question of the more fruitful modes of approach to a poet already the subject of multiple and various readings. Is Stevens to be approached through influential philosophical or literary works that help explain, or at least resonate within, his major poems? If so, what are they? Shall they be the Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Cassirer urged by J. S. Leonard and C. F. Wharton, or the Dante and Angus Fletcher invoked by Barbara Fisher? Shall the Emerson, Whitman, and Tennyson cited by Joseph Carroll serve better than the Keats and Wordsworth proposed by Robert Rehder? By extension what is Stevens's relation to the romantic legacy? Did he disavow it, internalize it, or re-create it as a new romantic doctrine, a kind of faith, as is argued by Carroll? Finally, is the issue of religious or quasi-religious faith or belief in Stevens's poetry susceptible of definition and fruitful exposition? Carroll's important book suggests that this is so, but the effort is not without inherent limitations and liabilities.

Yet the greatest liability seems to be Leonard's and Wharton's resolution to approach Stevens through philosophies. Though they say that with Stevens the aesthetic is primary, they do not often enough write in a way in which they appreciate and further open Stevens's linguistic grace and tact, acknowledging his power of beauty. Prose expositions of Stevens's mere meanings must be masterly and fresh in order to

Milton J. Bates, editor, *Wallace Stevens: Opus Posthumous.* Knopf, 1989. xiv + 336 pages. $30; Milton J. Bates, editor, *Sur Plusieurs Beau Sujects: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book.* Stanford University Press, 1989. 118 pages. Illustrated. $19.95; Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism.* Louisiana State University Press, 1987. 362 pages. $37.50; Barbara M. Fisher, *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous.* University Press of Virginia, 1990. xxviii + 186 pages. $28.50; J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton, *The Fluent Mundo: Wallace Stevens and the Structure of Reality.* University of Georgia Press, 1988. 208 pages. $25; Robert Rehder, *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens.* St. Martin's Press, 1988. xiv + 320 pages. $32.50, $12.95 pb; Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens, A Biography: The Later Years 1923–1955.* Morrow, 1988. 462 pages. $27.95.

please. Readings such as those by Rehder and Fisher, which incorporate attention to connotative nuance, literary echo, and sound-device, come closer to the text's vital energy, which is always in danger of reduction by the particular author's necessary but limiting conceptual paradigm. Too often Leonard and Wharton divert the reader in wrestling with other readings by other critics, ones informed by other philosophers than their favored Nietzsche and Cassirer. They seem not wholly to realize that the importance of a resemblance between a passage in Stevens's poetry and a bit of prose by Ernst Cassirer would materialize only if our response to the verse were assisted. It is no particular achievement (except perhaps among poetically inclined professional philosophers) to set forth a Cassirerish Stevens, if that Stevens is not more poetically compelling than the one we possess already. Leonard and Wharton are well-informed, clear, and accurate; and they provide a useful survey and analysis of the philosophic issues in Stevens and behind him, for the reader not already jaded by the conflicting multiple claimants to knowledge of Stevens's conceptual arcana. They are best on the apparent male/female opposition, which proves not a hurtful dualism or separation, but a "between space" productive of fertile couplings. Yet, at this point in Stevens criticism, their larger approach can hardly be seen as helpful with the mystery of how and why his language functions as great poetry.

The exquisitely accomplished, literarily oriented readings of Rehder operate in Stevens's own sphere, with means like his own: charm of style, particularity of insight, sensitivity to sound effect, occasion, literary analogue. Rehder's encounters with individual poems persist in one's memory. He is at his best when mediating between Stevens and a romantic precedent, as in his treatment of Stevens's "Autumn Refrain," with its echo of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." Facilitating this and other analyses is Rehder's attunement to a music, or "persisting sound or voice," which he sees as a repetition embodying the refrain of self. Rehder's best insights concern sound-quality as it is associated with Stevens's discovery or definition of self in verse; his insight into the complexity of relation between sound and self is especially compelling, where, as in "Autumn Refrain," the originality of poetic self-sound is shown to arise through deflection against romantic originals. Stevens's "skreaking and skrittering residuum," a memory of the voice of American grackles, is an alteration of Keats's more melodious rendition of the nightingale. Rehder shows how Stevens's own tone incorporates and transforms that of Keats, just as Stevens's grackle (the very name an awkward American noise-music) "grates these evasions of the nightingale." Similar critical encounters with Keats, Wordsworth, and Tennyson illuminate "The Idea of Order at Key West," "The Auroras of Autumn," and other important poems. Rehder uses Wordsworth and

Keats especially well in respect to the idea of origins, showing us, for example, the Wordsworthian link between child, mother, and poetic inspiration in "The Auroras of Autumn."

Rehder's book is sometimes suggestive rather than definite, and slenderer than its page-count would suggest. The biographical information rehearsed is well-known, and it contributes to the sense that this was intended as a kind of graceful, high-quality introduction to Stevens for the nonspecialist. At his best Rehder is much better than introductory, and would have profited by an ambition to exercise his very considerable musical-intellective skills on more of the lesser known poems. The physical aspect of the book is also slender, with inadequate proofreading. Yet it will remain on my shelf, to be consulted with profit and pleasure.

Barbara Fisher's study approaches Stevens's poetry as "a constellation of various forms of desire," her paradigms deriving from a theory of structures of liminality and from Dante's transcendentalized love for Beatrice. Given the mystery of sexuality surrounding the large man Stevens in his apparently failed marriage to a beautiful woman, the reader might reasonably have expected a less exalted and more psychologically probing set of readings, from a book ostensibly concerned with desire. I am especially disappointed with Fisher's treatment of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" which, though she convincingly proposes Villon's "Ballade; pour prier Notre Dame" as a source, nevertheless seems to use that poem and other literary and theological materials as a means of avoiding encounter with the poem's posing the biographical problem of sexuality after romance has died. Fisher's account of a rarified metaphysical desire would have been more acceptable in respect to a poet for whom the question of actual eroticism was not so problematic. In her third chapter, before she has moved so completely toward mythologized space and Dante, Fisher's investigation of the roots of the erotic as they spring from Stevens's "negative way," his apprehension of the nothingness behind or before the plentitude of being, is brilliant—partly because she is here grounded in Freud and Blake, and involved with more explicitly sexual passages in Stevens's poetry.

But the underlying paradigm of her readings conceives the poem as a liminal passage between states of a metaphoric space graphed according to the thought of Angus Fletcher, as supported by Cassirer and Eliade. The earth as perceived and imagined by Stevens is to be seen as a duality of profane and sacred space, wherein the chaotic labyrinth, place of questing passage, is to be contrasted with the ordered temple, locus of gratification and sure repose. The trouble is that while one is made to feel the tension of liminal modes in Stevens, one is reluctant to reduce his rich, particular, changing evocations of the polarities he moves between—summer and winter, Florida and New England, day

and night, imaginative richness and poverty, love and alienation, and many others—to the fixed categories of sacred and profane. A recurring problem in Stevens criticism is the need to find conceptual structures or categories or, more simply, terms, by which to read him, versus his own protean, particular, surprising inventiveness in reoriginating his poetic polarities and the language tensioned between them. One is put in the awkward position of granting to Fisher that the poems she reads do indeed move between states often spatialized as landscapes or architectures, without being quite ready to concede the adequacy of her naming of these countries of being.

Joseph Carroll's is the most deeply flawed and the most important of these four books, in part because he finds an at least partially successful way to get beyond the problem of the limiting paradigm and its tendency to become only a source for alternative terms with which to conduct familiar sorts of readings. Now that Stevens criticism has become largely a contest to assert the primacy of certain sources, influences, and philosophies as "explanations" of his poems, the particular critical voice may be taken as part of a chorus, with *all* the echoes of texts and versions as the proper rich background for Stevens's own music. Even successful readings tend to interest us only dramatically, as they reawaken attention to poems but then disappear into the poems they evoke. Exceptions to this statement from the books under discussion include Rehder's treatment of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in addition to the poems mentioned earlier, and Barbara Fisher's portrayal and analysis of Stevens's female interior presence (culminating in her treatment of the "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour"), which she has delineated more forcefully and effectively than any predecessor, using the model of Dante's internalization of Beatrice. But even so neither the book of Rehder nor of Fisher changes one's concept of the larger shape of Stevens's effort and achievement. Carroll attempts to change that concept and the degree of his success and failure is a matter to be defined.

Carroll is courageous (or foolhardy) enough to address as his central concern the problematics of belief implicit in Stevens's concept of a "supreme fiction." Carroll raises the issue of what Stevens wished to believe, what he was able to believe, and whether it is possible to define the word or concept of belief adequately in respect to his work. Under Carroll's guidance we face the ultimate issue of whether Stevens so fudges the ordinary idea of belief that "supreme fiction" comes to mean the willed adherence to a proposition the poet is conscious of having deliberately created, and which he knows therefore to have no objective basis outside the order-assertive needs of his own intellect. Carroll proposes an alternative meaning for "supreme fiction": the conceptual and metaphoric design that the poet experienced via his human con-

sciousness, as its day-by-day linguistic response to a transhuman "first idea" almost totally inaccessible to the ordinary process of rationality, but not quite beyond the words which came sometimes as mysteriously as the enigmatic reality principle of which they were evidence and partial interpretation. Carroll makes a strong case for this "new romanticism," in the process illuminating poems such as "The Creations of Sound," which turn out to be Stevens's wondering commentary on the seeming autonomy of poetic language-sound as he has experienced it, "in syllables that rise/From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak."

The major proofs of Carroll's pudding are the successes of his thesis in making sense of central later poems that other critics tend to neglect or to read in excessively skeptical terms, such as "Chocorua to its Neighbor," "Credences of Summer," "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," and "A Primitive like an Orb." Having examined the essential poems of Stevens's whole output for evidence of his getting beyond the mind-matter, imagination-reality dualism of his earlier modernist position, Carroll prepares himself to take seriously a range of statements, metaphors, and mythic formulations suggesting a central mind, first idea, or Emersonian oversoul whose impulses toward consciousness it is the poet's privilege to enact or embody in words. Carroll's readings make better sense of poems featuring the image of the giant, major man and central mind, the ideas of collectivity and transparence, and other images of unity and wholeness, such as the circle and the orb, than those of other, more reductive commentators. The problem is that if Stevens's career is to be seen as a quest for a poetic doctrine in lieu of a religious faith, then the more modernist and deconstructive phases, as Carroll handles them, become mere preparation for, or recession from, the high-point of "new romanticism" marked by *Transport to Summer* and works from the several years following. In the earlier section of his book, I am troubled by Carroll's need to insist on doctrinal cogency as the desired condition toward which the poems should progress, and the way this insistence on testing the paraphrasable sense interferes with our pleasure in the abstract harmonics of *Harmonium.* If an Emperor of Ice-Cream is missing his metaphysical garments, it seems mistakenly literal-minded to point this out.

The issue of philosophic and/or religious position is clouded in Stevens partly because of his complex and sophisticated relationship to language. His attitude toward inherited linguistic constructions, from conventional ideas of paradise to romantic pathetic-fallacy atmospherics and animistic landscapes, was incisively critical. There is a large project of deconstructive encounter: poem after poem wherein past formulations are dismantled ("The Snow Man," "Evening Without Angels," "The Latest Freed Man," "Man and Bottle," "Landscape with Boat," much of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "The Auroras of

Autumn," as well as others). Carroll is not so sympathetic as Rehder, for example, in appreciating the adroitness and beauties of Stevens's ground-clearing operations on, and within, poetic language. He prefers to emphasize the issue of what is constructed, once the precedent texts have been dissolved and assimilated.

One's reaction to Carroll's procedure is necessarily complex, since he overemphasizes the neglected term of a dialectic between skepticism and belief. He looks hard and consistently for Stevens's poetic ideas in Stevens's own poetry, as in the problematic but conceptually significant five sections of *Owl's Clover* in *Opus Posthumous*. And even the laborious, overlong reading of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," not in itself very interesting or convincing, provides the basis for a gloss on the idea of whiteness in "The Auroras of Autumn" that flashes with insight. His version of the godlike father in the difficult sections 4 and 5 is extremely helpful. Carroll certainly illuminates a central component of the greatest Stevens, his impulse toward visionary affirmation—often in the mode of Emerson. Carroll's limitation is the partial failure of tact and balance that prevents his perfect formulation of the linguistic and aesthetic difference between Stevens and Emerson. He suggests but does not finally articulate the poignancy of Stevens's human need for certainty, faith, solace, spiritual vision, versus the continued recognition, dramatized moment by moment through syntactical ambiguity, of just how difficult of access and possession such certainty is—especially for so keen a consciousness as Stevens's. Rereading Stevens after reading Carroll, one finds oneself involved in an agon between faith and doubt as powerful as that of Donne in the Holy Sonnets. This is thus a more affecting poetry than that of any static metaphysical assertion.

Implicit but not explicit in Carroll is the analogy with Eliot's movement from the modernist despair of *The Waste Land* to the sense of a still center outside time, felt only in "hints and guesses," that is dramatized in *Four Quartets*. Carroll is at his best when investigating the terms of Stevens's access to this occasionally available principle of origin. He might have emphasized both the differences and similarities between Stevens and Wordsworth and Shelley in this regard. The uniqueness of Stevens's position was perhaps that while distrusting reason's ability to know this "first idea" in reason's own terms, he nevertheless managed to reinstall reason as a component of the creative process, a corrective and even inventive presence alongside the language he sometimes experienced as autonomous. In spite of Carroll's emphasis on Stevens's "new romanticism," he has only begun the needed examination of the relation between Stevens's and the romantics' conceptions of the creative process. Yet *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction* will per-

sist as an essential part of any informed discourse on the poetry of Stevens.

Joan Richardson's continuation of the story of Stevens's life continues to make compelling reading. Picking up her account in 1923, she portrays Stevens's adjustment to the postwar world and the more skeptical, mathematically analytical outlook represented by the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell. Richardson is particularly good at linking Stevens to the intellectual and social backgrounds of the decades he moved through, toward his death in 1953, filling her pages with references to philosophers, scientists, continental writers, to painters and musicians. She is successful in presenting Stevens's intellectual tensions in moving among the earlier thinkers like George Santayana, William James, and Henri Bergson, who had been more akin to his bent toward optimism, and later thinkers (sometimes merely later in terms of their impact on him) such as Freud and Heidegger, who contributed to the demystifying aspect of his intellect. Richardson gives us a Stevens in intimate contact with innovations in the arts, such as the musical explorations of Igor Stravinsky and Erik Satie. She shows us the full ambiguity of Stevens's attitude toward the modern, quoting his appreciation for Braque "in spite of his modern perversions," and showing a recoil against the formerly admired Picasso as an "over-intellectual designer who moves one to thought but not to feeling" (in 1939).

This cosmopolitan, intellectually sophisticated man, subject to all the currents of his age, is also seen as a "naive socialist," under the influence of the *Partisan Review* in the middle thirties. Richardson seems to wish to show us a poet increasingly self-possessed, a "comedian" in the images of his own Crispin and of Dante, surviving the intellectual, political, and personal turmoil of his times to produce such triumphant works as "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and "The Auroras of Autumn." Yet she also admits him to be, as late as 1948, "as uncertain of himself as he had ever been in his youth." As limitation of Richardson's ability to evoke the full paradox of Stevens, one feels only a lack of recognition in respect to the more visionary aspects of his poetry. She associates with the image of the giant in "A Primitive Like an Orb," for example, only Stevens's own physical bulk. In analyzing Stevens's comments on religion in his late essay "Imagination as Value," she fails to distinguish between the historical manifestation that Stevens attacks and the source-principle which he at times felt himself to be serving with his verse.

Part of the difficulty is that the biography of Stevens, especially the latter part, is largely the biography of the poetry, and the poetry is sufficiently obscure that the best of readers may differ radically as to its final implications. The procedure of Carroll, in reading the bulk of

the poetry sequentially, has much to recommend it. Richardson's choice of one poem to highlight over another, as evidence of a particular psychological movement or mood in Stevens, sometimes seems arbitrary or eccentric. The result is that while Richardson gives us her version (or versions) of Stevens, and while that account is vivid and compelling, the reader is often aware of the relatively tenuous basis for her evaluations of his attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Richardson's Wallace Stevens is interesting, profound, paradoxical, much richer and rounder than any image we had before. And at the same time we feel that there will surely be other, competing, perhaps quite different Wallace Stevenses, depending on what new interpretive insights are brought to his poetry, criticism, and letters.

His texts are enabled to speak more clearly and forcefully for themselves by the new edition of *Opus Posthumous*, and by the facsimile and transcription of Stevens's *Commonplace Book*, both edited by Milton Bates. These books are of great interest to the serious reader of Stevens, though they also remind us of the desirability of complete, fully annotated editions of the poetry and of the prose. In his introductory note to the new *Opus Posthumous* Bates uses the argument of Stevens's increased stature among critics to justify the bulk of the new material, which "would once have seemed too slight or ephemeral" to stand beside the greater works reprinted from the original edition (edited in 1957 by Samuel French Morse). But the same argument would be even more persuasive for a variorum poetry and a collected prose—especially with *The Necessary Angel* out of print. Still we must be grateful for this collection, wherein some of the poetry and almost all the prose is of importance. The usefulness of the earlier version of "The Comedian on the Letter C" (printed in this *Opus Posthumous* as "From the Journal of Crispin") would, however, be greater were it in an appendix of a Collected Poems, with notes to the text of "Comedian" indicating where cuts occurred. "'From the Journal of Crispin" is a finished work, though lacking (significantly) the more problematic last two sections of "Comedian." It contains very significant passages expansive of Crispin's encounter with Carolina in all its rudeness and gross actuality (end of 3), and of Crispin's complicated struggles with forebears and a progeny (4) which, in this version, without the "daughters with curls," are more clearly matters of cultural/artistic inheritance and continuation. "The Journal of Crispin" is more obviously a version of Stevens's struggle away from the Europe of the old romanticism, toward a New World to be rediscovered by the questing self as a new mode of expression. Though it like "Comedian" ends ambiguously, the aesthetic issues in it are more available to investigation.

The longer version of *Owl's Clover* is also of considerable utility, as Carroll's treatment makes clear. And poems such as "The Woman That

Had More Babies Than That," "A Discovery of Thought," "Conversation With Three Women of New England," and "Local Objects," ranging in date from 1939 to 1955, seem now essential additions to the canon established by Stevens's choices for his *Collected Poems*. They deserve to reside somehow as a part of that text.

The situation with Stevens's prose is less complicated. Almost all of what *Opus Posthumous*, in its current configuration, adds to the essays of *The Necessary Angel* would belong in an edition of Stevens's critical prose. The briefer notes and speeches could be placed in a miscellaneous conclusion or appendix. The only difficulty might arise in respect to what are grouped as Aphorisms—some of which overlap with the *Commonplace Book* and need not be repeated. This latter work is one (or actually two) of several notebooks, all of which might eventually be printed together. The major interest of this *Commonplace Book* as now edited is the indication it provides of Stevens's habit of quoting, and then sometimes paraphrasing in his essays and poems, materials as diverse as contemporary French journals, reviews of new works from philosophy to psychology, and the *Musical Quarterly*. The passages Stevens chose to record are very close to his own thought, and may be taken as at least tentative expressions or explorations of his own positions. This is therefore an attractive and intriguing small volume, one more piece of the Stevens puzzle.

The more significant prose, however, appears in *Opus Posthumous*. There are three very substantive essays concerned with the theory of poetry: "The Irrational Element in Poetry" (1936), "Two or Three Ideas" (1931), and "A Collect of Philosophy" (1951). Though in the last Stevens loses himself in his endless meditation on the boundaries between poetry and philosophy, image and idea, imagination and reality, the other two remind us of how splendidly Stevens could write on aesthetic issues. His treatment of the irrational helps us to understand how he defended his imaginative integrity in difficult times, and why his posthumous triumph is only partially the result of a fashionable approval of his deconstructive tendencies. We see that, though he quotes Rimbaud, he does not imitate him, that he had no taste for drunken excursions into the unknown via drugs or hypnotic Ariel-rides toward oblivion. Stevens's adherence to abstraction meant in practice an acceptance of the primacy of language. He agreed to new terms of an old compact with its rules, and it turns out that these rules allowed a larger game than that of extremists who wished to get somehow *beyond* poetry. In "Two or Three Ideas" Stevens meditates on having seen "the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds"; as he thinks on the far away Greeks and on subsequent European history, we feel him a very human man, a very American poet, in whom nothing was illicitly imposed or imported. He seems to us an American visionary in American

terms, practical, particular, skeptically inclined to the transcendental. The brief late piece "Connecticut Composed" is worth whole books on Stevens's indebtedness to, and involvement with, those local houses, farms, factories, and landscapes he referred to as reality. As practitioner of an eccentric and homemade sublime, he stands before us in these essays as a man in whom grace was final—who had decided that, for the Greeks, about whom he thought very much, style was the essential attribute of the gods. He set himself to realize their humanly originated, transhuman grandeur, as it still was possible, in the artistic expansion of human emotion. All these books testify, in one way or another, that in this endeavor he succeeded.

VERSIONS OF PASTORAL

MICHAEL L. HALL

Pastoral is a genre whose practitioners have been more or less self-consciously belated (to use the current critical vocabulary) since Theocritus, an Alexandrian poet who was already casting a backward glance toward an earlier golden age, and certainly since Virgil. Students of the genre have long been aware that Virgil assumed his shepherd's role to achieve a certain perspective on contemporary events: his borrowings from an earlier Greek tradition allowed him to accomplish purposes he might not otherwise have been able to attempt. To enumerate briefly: he found a voice by assuming the generic conventions of an established, inherited literary tradition. He thereby accomplished something that many apprentice writers have since accomplished by imitating Virgil. He also gained distance and greater perspective on his own biographical and historical circumstances. Scarcely anyone familiar with Virgil's pastoral poetry would

Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Renaissance Pastoral and Its English Developments.* Oxford University Press, 1989. 504 pages. $84; Lynn Staley Johnson, *The Shepheardes Calender: An Introduction.* Penn State Press, 1991. 228 pages. Illustrated. $29.50; James L. Machor, *Pastoral Cities: Urban Ideals and the Symbolic Landscape of America,* University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. xvi + 272 pages. Illustrated. $45, $12.95 pb; Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry,* University of California Press, 1987. xiv + 344 pages. Illustrated. $45; Celeste Marguerite Schenck, *Mourning and Panegyric: The Poetics of Pastoral Ceremony.* Penn State University Press, 1989. xii + 228 pages. $24.95.