Introduction: 'Stevensian' and the question of abstraction 1935–2009

> The idea of life in the abstract is a curious one and deserves some reflection.[1]
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> Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet. For instance, the decision involved in the choice between 'the nostalgia *of* the infinite' and 'the nostalgia *for* the infinite' defines an attitude towards degree of abstraction. The nostalgia *of* the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé). Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry. Personism is to Wallace Stevens what *la poésie pure* was to Béranger. Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art.[2]
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> [R]ecently I have been fitted into too many philosophic frames. As a philosopher one is expected to achieve and express one's center. For my own part, I think that the philosophic *permissible* (to use an insurance term) is a great deal different today than it was a generation or two ago. Yet if I felt the obligation to pursue the philosophy of my poems, I should be writing philosophy, not poetry; and it is poetry that I want to write.[3]

Frank O'Hara's mock-manifesto 'Personism' – and the ironic movement of the same name 'founded' on 27 August 1959 over lunch in New York – testifies as much to O'Hara's poetic relationship with Wallace Stevens as it reveals how Stevens was viewed only four years after his death. 'Personism' also recalls O'Hara's brilliance in constructing a poetic

[1] Wallace Stevens, *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens* ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1977), 90.
[2] Frank O'Hara, 'Personism: A Manifesto' in *Selected Poems* ed. Donald Allen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), xiii–xiv.
[3] See *L*, 753.

'personality' equally as daunting and complex on the page as Stevens', if more beguiling for its surface, 'personal' appeal. O'Hara's allegiance, 'of the American poets', to Whitman, Crane and Williams is clear. But, as 'Personism' demonstrates, O'Hara had absorbed Stevens; just as his range of international influences was as wide as, if not wider than, Stevens'. 'Personism is to Wallace Stevens what *la poésie pure* was to Béranger': O'Hara is saying his 'manifesto' would, apparently, have proved anathema to Stevens, just as 'pure poetry' could hardly have appealed to Pierre Jean de Béranger, the French Republican whose popular ballads initiated the scorn of Baudelaire. O'Hara intends a double-anachronism where Béranger is trumped by the innovations of the later Symbolists and Stevens is trumped by the advent of 'Personism' itself.

Stevens is probably the twentieth-century poet for whom the 'nostalgia *of* the infinite' was most motivational. O'Hara alludes to de Chirico's painting of the same title (dated 1911, but composed a little later) with its distant yet imposing tower flanked by a dominating, shadowy archway. In de Chirico's metaphysical phase, the 'nostalgia' experienced is inspiring and perhaps reprehensible, refracted through Modernism's soul-searching over questions of reality and faith. Similarly, Stevens, despite his many affiliations with French Symbolism, was no Mallarmé. As we shall see, a Mallarméan 'pure poetry' of the 'Idea' was ultimately not something the Modernist Stevens could endorse; and his initial 1930s ambivalence concerning abstraction indicates a Modernist poet confronting the unsettling interim of two world wars and the global economic consequences of the Depression.

As O'Hara knew, Stevens had also absorbed Modernist painting in his own idiosyncratic way, undoubtedly affected by the representational issues the new painting and sculpture confronted; even if, by his last decade, Stevens shunned the 'professional modernism' then quasi-canonical by the 1940s and early 1950s.[4] O'Hara probably read Stevens' 1951 lecture 'The Relations Between Poetry and Painting' delivered at MOMA only a few months before O'Hara would himself begin working there (MOMA producing a pamphlet of Stevens' paper). But it is, perhaps, Stevens' theorizing bent that O'Hara's wit intends to bait. Stevens could never have been a 'Personist poet', if that 'poet' resembles the performance of the intensely personal, yet elusive, 'Frank'. However, Stevens did modify his abstract spirit in his later career, oscillating between what this study calls 'cool' and 'warm' abstraction.[5] Indeed, would not Stevens have been

[4] See *L*, 647.

[5] The distinction is adapted from late 1940s and 1950s French art criticism. 'Cool abstraction' refers to the geometric 'Art Concret', 'warm abstraction' to more expressionist painting or any

intrigued by O'Hara's playful claim that 'Personism' is 'so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry'? To what value can the abstract wheel turn and come full circle? In O'Hara's case, the answer is a pregnant 'zero'. In other words, this ironically original, 'true abstraction' represents the poet pushed to the extreme of the personal *in verse*, thereby becoming an abstract version of the poet: genuinely removed from the work rather than artificially divorced from it.

O'Hara could not have raised this issue in this way without Stevens' prior posing of the question of abstraction. For a poet so affected by the 'death of the gods', the lingering desire to capture the idea of 'the infinite' or transcendent remained a strong feature throughout Stevens' work.[6] Simultaneously, Stevens' poetry reveals a poet equally sensitive as O'Hara to the implicit stances which the varying abstractness of his writing involves. For Stevens, abstraction represented a question of artistic and philosophical proportions; and yet his natural inclinations were those of O'Hara (adamantly in the 'all art' camp), resistant to assimilation into 'too many philosophic frames'. Nevertheless, the philosophical leanings of Stevens' writing and its engagement with 'abstraction' are unmistakable. What Stevens made of philosophy is most noticeable in his expression of an abstract vocabulary, albeit a rhetoric essentially jettisoned in his late career as the poet absorbed the consequences of abstraction.

Without doubt, Stevens remains among the more enigmatic, reclusive, cosmopolitan, oft quoted (but under-read) and seriously playful of the American poets to have emerged during the Modernist era. By turns shy, brash, idiosyncratic, straight-talking, disinclined to read publicly (and fiercely private), Stevens stage-managed his late-blossoming poetic career from the confines of his vice-presidential office at The Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Stevens had written poetry from his youth. But it was only having discovered an initial niche in the new art and literature of international Modernism that he gave voice to the striking performance pieces of *Harmonium* (1923), many of which appeared in the ephemeral pages of the little magazines. It would be some twelve years before Stevens published a second volume: the defensive and defiant *Ideas of Order* (1935). By the mid-1930s Stevens sought a poetic idiom adequate to the task of addressing the role of abstract representation in an increasingly violent and

abstraction championing spontaneous creation or the 'unformed' ('Art Informel'/'Tachisme'). See Anna Moszynka, *Abstract Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), 119–20, 129.

[6] See *CPP*, 329.

pressingly 'real' world. What the poet had learnt from Modernist and also Impressionist painting was, by 1935, in serious need of realignment and refinement if the increasingly abstract tenor of Stevens' poetry was to have any meaningful relationship with a wider world.

Put differently, Stevens' initial embrace of Modernist art and the nominal 'pure poetry' of his first phase led to the desire to justify a modernized 'pure poetry' during the turbulent 1930s, not least following Stanley Burnshaw's criticism of *Ideas of Order*.[7] Stevens became increasingly ambivalent about abstract forms of artistic representation at the very point where his own poetry tended toward an abstract aesthetic: one that would eventually leave 'pure poetry' behind (even though the charge of 'irrelevance' would continue to stick).

This book is principally interested in the turn to abstraction and its influential aftermath that occurred in roughly 1935 in Stevens' work. That the place of abstraction in Stevens remains underappreciated, misunderstood and the subject of considerable debate, makes careful ground-clearing desirable. How did abstraction become a question for Stevens as a poet? How has the issue of abstraction engaged Stevens' critics? Did Stevens' attitudes toward abstraction change and do we find different expressions of abstract writing throughout the corpus?

The book proceeds in broadly chronological fashion to exemplify how Stevens came to discover and absorb abstraction, providing new readings of the poetry and prose which chart the development of Stevensian abstraction in the mainstay of the poet's career from 1935 to 1955. Chapter 1 analyses the abstract impulse in Stevens' writing and its nominal relations with 'pure poetry' as expressed in *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*. Chapter 2 explores Stevens' turn to abstraction in the mid-1930s – as exemplified in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* – focusing on the emergence of a novel textual speaker (addressed in Chapters 4 and 5) with Picasso's influence as a backdrop. Chapter 3 explains the philosophical relations between abstraction, idealism and phenomenology in Stevens' work, illustrating how the poet's embrace of abstraction was conditioned by Romantic and phenomenologist leanings (the British Romantics, Blanchot, Merleau-Ponty and Henri Focillon feature prominently). Chapter 4 then analyses the place of abstract figures in Stevens' mid-career, especially a neglected speaker, Stevens' idealist 'I', suggesting how this figure conditions an aesthetic

[7] Stanley Burnshaw, 'Turmoil in the Middle Ground' *New Masses* 17 (1935), 41–2. For retrospective views, see Alan Filreis and Harvey Teres, 'An Interview with Stanley Burnshaw' *WSJ* 13.2 (1989), 109–21, and Burnshaw's 'Reflections on Wallace Stevens' *WSJ* 13.2 (1989), 122–6.

influenced by Cézanne's notion of abstraction. Chapter 5 capitalizes on this analysis to address the under-explored relations between Stevens' meditations on gastronomy and abstract reflection (with Stevens' idealist 'I' forming an important bridge). Chapter 6 then focuses on Stevens' jettisoning of an overt abstract vocabulary as his writing moved into a more pragmatic mode of abstract inspiration. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses how Stevens' mature abstract work relates to his domestic life, combining art-collecting, gastronomy and poetic meditation. In other words, the various expressions of abstract writing with which Stevens experimented – his 'cool' and 'warm' abstract performances – only found full voice in the 'bourgeois' ruminations of his late career.

What emerges is a Stevens attracted to the mental processes enabling abstract figuration rather than a poet mimicking abstract painting in verbal form. 'The Public Square' (1923) with its 'slash of angular blacks' is, perhaps, an early exception; but the mature Stevens was motivated by *ideas* concerning abstraction rather than the realization of a pared-down poetry of abstract implication.[8] Once he had embraced abstraction as a positive force in his writing – around 1937 – the main aesthetic challenge Stevens faced was exploiting what abstraction offered. This would see him dispatch the overt abstract rhetoric and specialist symbolism of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' (1942) and embrace a more boldly abstract verse reflecting on the 'baldest' concepts: 'metaphor', 'resemblance', 'description', 'analogy', 'the ultimate poem'. However sparse these concepts appear, Stevens crafted from them a verse of humane abstract meditation whose various expressions are intimately pursued throughout.

Opposite 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', some readers may be surprised not to discover a detailed reading of this doctrinal poem.[9] My interest has rather been in those poems of abstraction that surround and chime with 'Notes' throughout Stevens' career; those which are perhaps more a realization of abstract powers than Stevens' more 'theoretical' poem can claim to be. Whilst I believe 'Notes' can be exonerated of the aloofness to 'reality' laid at Stevens' door by Marjorie Perloff, this oft-read text – which has functioned as a vortex in Stevens criticism – only adumbrates what abstraction was coming to mean to Stevens in 1942.[10] Certainly, the poet was able to capitalize on his aesthetic discoveries in other 1942 texts (see Chapter 5's readings of 'Certain Phenomena

[8] *CPP*, 91. [9] *Ibid.*, 329.
[10] See Perloff, 'Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric' in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism* ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 41–64.

of Sound' and 'Montrachet-Le-Jardin'). But Stevens also sensed that the trumpeting of abstraction in 'Notes' erred on too cold an aesthetic front, hence perhaps his later proposition of a final, if unrealized, section for the poem: '*It Must Be Human*'.[11] As Chapter 6 makes clear with respect to 'Paisant Chronicle' (1945), perhaps the 'major man' of 'Notes' was simply too abstracted to come alive for Stevens, even as he modified the figure in this later poem.

Of course, this study does make repeated reference to 'Notes', and contextualizes the concept of a 'supreme fiction' in Chapter 3. However, I have sought elsewhere to distinguish between this poem's nominative power – in contrast with 'Montrachet-Le-Jardin' and 'Description Without Place' (1945) – and the abstract spirit of Stevens' post-'Notes' verse.[12] Whereas 'Notes' persistently *names* and signals its objects of aesthetic interest – even where it ironizes nomination ('But Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named') – the mature Stevens realized he could fashion abstract poetry without recourse to an overt idiom, at least not the abstract terminology of his 1942 work.[13] For the mature Stevens, a robust abstract poetry would never have to declare 'The major abstraction is the commonal'; but rather would demonstrate or imply such an imaginative possibility. What 'Notes' calls an 'abstraction blooded' *other* Stevens poems would have to achieve, as the poet jostled with the innate problems of conveying the '[i]nvisible or visible or both: / A seeing and unseeing in the eye'.[14] From the poet who declared as early as 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' (1922) that 'Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame' to the architect of 'The Pure Good of Theory' – discussed at length in Chapter 6 – it is the evolution of Stevensian abstraction that concerns the present work.[15]

But what picture has Stevens criticism painted of the poet's abstractions? Scholars whose careers have shaped contemporary criticism – Altieri, Bloom, Donoghue, Frye, Hillis Miller, Kermode, Vendler – have all battled with Stevens before themselves becoming subject to the skirmishes of younger scholars.[16] Today, being a 'Stevensian' is not, at

[11] See *L*, 863–4.
[12] See Ragg, 'Good-bye Major Man: Reading Stevens without "Stevensian"' *WSJ* 29.1 (Spring 2005), 98–105; 'Love, Wine, Desire: Stevens' "Montrachet-Le-Jardin" and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*' *WSJ* 30.2 (Fall 2006), 194ff.
[13] *CPP*, 329. [14] *Ibid.*, 336, 333.
[15] *Ibid.*, 47.
[16] Select works include: Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977); Denis Donoghue, *Connoisseurs*

least in North America, a cranky activity; and, as recent conferences reveal, critical interest in Stevens will excite equally vociferous debate in the twenty-first century and no doubt beyond.[17] More even than Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Moore, Pound or Williams, Stevens continues to upset and inspire critics in the extreme. Arguably, he achieves first place among twentieth-century poets for garnering the largest groups of detractors and zealots, ones for whom abstraction often proves a burning issue.

As Lee Jenkins has observed, Stevens' early reputation on both sides of the Atlantic was dogged by charges of dandyism, effeteness, even irresponsibility; charges variously traced to *fin de siècle* Aestheticism and the Symbolist-inspired 'pure poetry' of *Harmonium*.[18] Gradually, more positive accounts of Stevens' relations with Aestheticism, Symbolism and the Romantic poets have emerged.[19] Nevertheless, doubt persists as to whether Stevens has anything to say, irrespective of his undeniable talent for poetic speech; raising suspicion his own work is hopelessly 'abstract' in a pejorative sense.[20] From the late 1980s to the present, following the aftermath of deconstructionist criticism, debate surrounding Stevens' responses to social and political realities – particularly the Depression and the Second World War – has been especially acute.[21] But whilst historicist accounts have yielded vital information about Stevens' quotidian existence – as poet, art-collector and surety bond lawyer – there is obvious disagreement as to how Stevens' times affected his poetry and vice versa;

of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Northrop Frye, 'The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens' in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 161–76; J. Hillis Miller, 'Theoretical and Atheoretical in Stevens' in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 274–85; Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (London: Faber, [1960] 1989); Helen Vendler, 'The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens' in *The Act of Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 163–78.

[17] 'Celebrating Wallace Stevens: The Poet of Poets in Connecticut' (2004), University of Connecticut; 'Wallace Stevens' (2004), University of London; 'Fifty Years On: Wallace Stevens in Europe' (2005), Rothermere American Institute, Oxford. See *WSJ* 28.2, 29.1, 30.1.

[18] Lee M. Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2000), 3–4.

[19] See Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Michel Benamou, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972); George Bornstein, *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[20] See Marjorie Perloff, 'Pound/Stevens: whose era?' in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 2.

[21] See Melita Schaum, *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 100–28, 129–82.

and it has been especially hard for historicist criticism to align contextual politics with poetic practice.

Painted most negatively, Stevens is usually accused of being doomed to a kind of aloof abstraction that disabled him from writing verse adequate to his epoch; despite his avowal that the poet of 'any time' must discover 'what seems to him to be poetry at that time'.[22] He is frequently charged with writing without feeling; and even 'Stevensians', as Bates observes, can find the poet 'emotionally unsympathetic'.[23] Typically, the 'abstract side' of Stevens' writing disappoints readers who want literature to have an overt relationship with everyday life. Halliday, despite his admiration, mounts 'a moral critique of Stevens' as a writer whose work apparently embodies 'an objectionable withdrawal […] from caring about […] individual other persons'.[24] Such didacticism overlooks not only the range of Stevens' work, but the reach of poetry itself. Sadly, the tendency to equate 'the abstract' with 'the inhuman' has triggered the majority of misplaced charges of obliviousness on Stevens' part.

This nominally 'inhuman' side assumes a different complexion, however, once a more imaginative ear is given to abstraction. Vendler suggests Stevens' poetry specializes in 'second-order reflection' – rather than 'first-order personal narrative'. But, as Vendler suggests, this dichotomy masks something subtler: 'the distinction is so crude as to be false, because all good poetry pretending to be first-order poetry […] is in fact implicitly second-order poetry by virtue of its having arranged its first-order narrative in a certain shape'.[25] Thus Stevens cannot be superficially a 'second-order' poet who transmutes 'first-order' concerns for precisely the reason Vendler gives for the distinction's failure to hold. Nevertheless, the idea that an abstract poetic has an abundantly human task is given weight by the calculated poetic interaction of 'second-order' and 'first-order' concerns.

Sympathetic critics, therefore, counter the inhumanity charge by suggesting Stevens, like Yeats, is a high-priest of the imagination, an American

[22] *CPP*, 639.

[23] See Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens*, 3; George Lensing, 'Wallace Stevens in England' in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 130–48; Carolyn Masel, 'Stevens and England: A Difficult Crossing' *WSJ* 25.2 (2001), 122–37; Milton J. Bates, 'Pain is Human: Wallace Stevens at Ground Zero' *The Southern Review* 39.1 (2003), 169.

[24] Mark Halliday, *Stevens and the Interpersonal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 94.

[25] Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 75.

Coleridge without Coleridge's metaphysics, an Emersonian who knew a thing or two about pain; even, paradoxically, because of a superficial indifference to suffering.[26] As Stevens himself remarked: 'Sentimentality is a failure of feeling.'[27] Certainly, Stevens stands to one side of the crowd, scrutinizing how poetry becomes a viable part of life; a writer unlikely to be swept up by political or literary movements even as he was influenced by them.[28] The place of abstraction in that project is undeniable; but the impetus for this study emanates from the misconceptions that very abstract aesthetic has aroused.

One upshot of sympathetic historicist work, however, has been an overemphasis on the role Stevens' poetry plays in responding to political and social issues. Although Cleghorn declares Stevens 'ideologically elusive', he suggests 'Description Without Place' exacts a 'deconstruction' of the 'expansionist rhetoric' of American foreign policy in 1945.[29] Schaum views Stevens as 'centrally political', arguing the poet 'provides startling insights into the fictions of history, the rhetorical "illusions" by which we as social beings live and act'.[30] Similarly, Brogan finds Stevens to be a 'very politically involved poet' who 'dismantle[s] false public rhetorics'.[31] Filreis also claims Stevens' misgivings about the New Critics – especially Allen Tate's ferocious response to the 'Brooks–MacLeish' call for a nationalistic war literature – led the poet to adopt a 'nationalist' stance during the 1940s.[32] Yielding to the pressure to answer Perloff's damning appraisal of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, such responses over-state Stevens' readability as a politically concerned poet, sacrificing the particularities of the poetry to the general argument that poetry challenges commonsensical understandings of the world/'reality'.[33] Whilst Stevens criticism has been enriched by re-examination of the interaction between history, politics and poetry, there is

[26] See Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (London: Faber, 1987), 178–80.
[27] *CPP*, 903.
[28] See *CPP*, 665.
[29] Angus J. Cleghorn, *Wallace Stevens' Poetics: The Neglected Rhetoric* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 24.
[30] Melita Schaum, 'Lyric Resistance: Views of the Political in the Poetics of Wallace Stevens and H.D.' *WSJ* 13.2 (1989), 204, 200.
[31] Jacqueline Brogan, 'Wrestling with those "Rotted Names": Wallace Stevens' and Adrienne Rich's "Revolutionary Poetics"' *WSJ* 25.1 (2001), 19, 23.
[32] Alan Filreis, *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 80.
[33] See Perloff, 'Revolving in Crystal', 41–64. Perloff refers explicitly to the Cummington Press edition. Elsewhere I refer to 'Notes' as a single poem, as it appears, tardily, in *Transport to Summer* (1947).

obviously a danger in implying Stevens was *this* politicized, however 'political' his apolitical gestures appear and however much political readings might engage the prosodic and other poetic features of Stevens' work.[34]

Historicist accounts have also shied from abstraction, unless the concept is linked with the poet's early isolationism or the later political dimension of Abstract Expressionism. But the tendency to defend Stevens excessively derives from the sheer abstract ambiguity of his often enigmatic verse. With critical hindsight, it also appears that Stevens' own abstract terms seemingly resist novel interpretation. 'Major man', a 'new romantic', a 'supreme fiction', 'the first idea', 'the death of the gods', 'the imagination–reality complex', 'the fluent mundo', 'the abstract' itself: the choice terms of Stevens' mid-career furnish the reader with a ready-made vocabulary for reading back into the poetry. It is an idiom which provides the illusion that Stevens' work constitutes a 'harmonious whole', a tendency critics assume the poet encouraged in wanting to title his 1954 *Collected Poems* 'The Whole of Harmonium' (even although Stevens actually spent a lifetime resisting a collected edition of his work).[35]

Several critics complain of the effects abstract, and often binary, terms serve critically. Leggett laments the 'imagination-reality terminology that has plagued Stevens criticism for decades'.[36] Cleghorn observes '[b]inary oppositions function significantly in the Stevens critical legacy'.[37] Proponents of a 'theory' through which readers can navigate Stevens' work often strive in vain to discover the 'metaphysic', as Frye assumes, that informs his 'poetic vision' or the 'theory of knowledge' that informs Stevens' 'metaphysic'.[38] Typically, in the absence of a discernible 'theory', critics harness another vocabulary for support, either beyond or deriving from Stevens. Donoghue's 1980 epiphany where he reports wanting 'to give up [Stevens'] privileged terms, or to go beyond or beneath them' is telling, as is Vendler's contemporaneous move to a vocabulary of 'desire'.[39]

[34] Filreis admits: 'Those of us who have tried to make manifest the political life of an apparently unpolitical poet found the requirements of the project were so daunting […] that we had to make short work of sound in readings of poems where the music of words is obviously central', 'Sound at an Impasse' *WSJ* 31.1 (2009), 21.

[35] See *L*, 834, 829.

[36] B. J. Leggett, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 80.

[37] Cleghorn, *Wallace Stevens' Poetics*, 3.

[38] Frye, 'The Realistic Oriole', 161.

[39] Denis Donoghue, 'Two Notes on Stevens' *WSJ* 4.3/4 (1980), 44; Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).