

WALLACE STEVENS IN CONTEXT

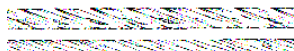
Wallace Stevens is generally considered one of the great twentieth-century American poets. This book aims to provide an in-depth introduction to the multifaceted life and times of Wallace Stevens. In thirty-six short essays, an international team of distinguished scholars have created a comprehensive overview of Stevens's life and the world of his poetry. Individual chapters relate Stevens to such important contexts as the large Western movements of Romanticism and Modernism; particular American and European philosophical traditions; contemporary and later poets; the professional realms of law and insurance; the parallel art forms of painting, music, and theater; his publication history, critical reception, and international reputation. Other chapters address topics of current interest like war, politics, religion, race, and the feminine. Informed by the latest developments in the field, but written in clear, jargon-free prose, *Wallace Stevens in Context* is an indispensable introduction to this great modern poet.

GLEN MACLEOD is Professor of English at the University of Connecticut at Waterbury. He is the author of *Wallace Stevens and Company: The Harmonium Years, 1913–1923* (1983) and *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism* (1993). His work has been supported by fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the J. Paul Getty Foundation, the Huntington Library, the Boston Athenaeum, and other institutions. He is a member of the Editorial Board of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* and Vice President of The Wallace Stevens Society.

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Preface

Wallace Stevens is generally considered one of the great twentieth-century American poets. His poems appear in virtually all anthologies of modern poetry and of American literature. Yet despite this widespread familiarity and acclaim, Stevens can still seem oddly unapproachable to many readers. Well-known poems like “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” and “Anecdote of the Jar” are so idiosyncratic that they can baffle and confuse as much as they surprise and delight. The high degree of abstraction in a poem like “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” presents another challenge to understanding.

Most modernist writing – like James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* – is difficult in some way. But Stevens has a kind of difficulty peculiar to himself. His poems deliberately make the connection to everyday life “a little hard / To see” (275). The multiple voices of *The Waste Land*, however ominous and fragmentary, and even in foreign languages, convey a sense of ordinary reality that is disconcertingly absent in Stevens’s eccentric cigar-roller who “whip[s] / In kitchen cups concupiscent curds” or in such abstract generalizations as “It is the celestial ennui of apartments / That sends us back to the first idea.” Yet the everyday is everywhere in Stevens, as Andrew Epstein demonstrates in his chapter. One key to recognizing this aspect of his poetry is context. What many readers miss in approaching Stevens is a sense of how the poems relate to the ordinary experiences we all share, to concrete biographical facts or historical events, to specific intellectual and cultural traditions, to personal relationships with other people, to the basic reality from which his poems derive their beauty and power.

This book is designed to help the reader develop that sense of relation by providing him or her with multiple contexts helpful for understanding Stevens’s poetry. It is not a detailed guide to the poetry. It does not include extended analyses or paraphrases of particular poems. For that purpose there are already helpful resources like Eleanor Cook’s *A Reader’s Guide to Wallace Stevens* (2007) and Ronald Sukenick’s sturdy classic, *Wallace*

Stevens: Musing the Obscure (1967). Instead, each of these thirty-six short chapters provides a concise overview of a context that is crucial in some way to Stevens's life and work. Each chapter offers a possible means of entry into Stevens's poetic world.

Part I: Places. One particularly fruitful context for Stevens is his unusually strong sense of place. He once confided to his notebook, "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (901). Places, for him, could be charged with the emotional energy normally invested in personal and social relationships. His deep attachment to the places he lived (Reading, Cambridge, New York, Hartford) shaped his personality and his poetry in profound ways. Just as important, in other ways, were certain places foreign to him that, because of their strangeness, fired his imagination: tropical Florida which he visited often and which inspired a significant number of poems; France and the Orient which, although he only read and dreamed about them, came to play important roles in his imaginary life.

Part II: Natural Contexts. Nature was a constant resource for Stevens. The seasonal cycles and the weather served him as natural metaphors for the shifting moods of his temperament and the phases of life in general. He exercised his body and renewed his spirit on long walks – in city parks or in the countryside – that inspired the frequent landscapes in his poems. As in the tradition of landscape painting to which they relate, these depictions of nature can also convey social or political concerns.

Part III: Literary Contexts. Numerous literary contexts illuminate Stevens's poetry. He has complex relations with the large Western movements of Romanticism and Modernism. Comparisons with his poetic contemporaries and with succeeding generations of poets can sharpen our sense of Stevens's distinctiveness as well as illustrate how he can mean very different things to different readers. His characteristic ways of thinking often take on larger significance when considered in the context of the books he read and the periodicals he published in. His own letters and essays sometimes provide the best commentary on his poems. Charting the vicissitudes of Stevens's reputation both here and abroad highlights the ways in which Stevens has been appropriated to serve a remarkably diverse number of positions in critical theory and cultural politics.

Part IV: Other Arts. To consider Stevens's poetry in the context of other arts, or of analogies between the arts, is to think as the poet himself thought. Stevens agreed with Baudelaire that there exists "a fundamental aesthetic" that underlies and unites all the arts. Painting, sculpture, architecture, and music often serve as metaphors for his own poetry. His experimental poetic

Preface

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dramas of 1916–1917 show him participating in the theatrical avant-garde of that time.

Part V: Intellectual Contexts. This section explores the traditions of philosophy and aesthetic theory most important to understanding Stevens: American idealism and pragmatism; Nietzsche and phenomenology; the relations between aesthetic experience and everyday life. Stevens's vital interest in abstraction has its roots in both philosophy and modern painting.

Part VI: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts. This broad category includes a variety of perspectives that have become increasingly prominent since the crucial “turn” in Stevens studies, in the 1980s, toward biographical-historical approaches to the poetry. Critical works like Milton J. Bates's *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (1985), Al Filreis's *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (1991), and James Longenbach's *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (1991) revolutionized Stevens studies by showing that the poet's apparently abstract, purely imaginative poems are closely related not only to his personal life but also to the larger social and political events of his time, most notably the two World Wars, the Depression of the 1930s, and the Cold War. Stevens's deep ambivalence toward religion reflects his central concern with the spiritual anxiety of modern life. He shared with many of his fellow modernists some of the racial prejudices of the time. His experiences as a lawyer and insurance executive have significant parallels in his poetry and poetic theory. The ordinary routines of his daily life were just as important to Stevens's creative process as the exotic flights of his imagination. The more we learn of his personal life, the better we can see the emotional basis of his most abstract utterances. His intense fascination with the feminine in particular lies at the heart of his poetic development.

My sincerest thanks go to John Serio and Bart Eeckhout, former and present editors of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, on whose wise counsel and deep knowledge of all things related to Stevens I have constantly relied in editing this book. Thanks also to all the contributors for the high quality of their essays. For their help, encouragement, and good advice I am grateful to J. Donald Blount, Susanne Churchill, Bonnie Costello, Christopher MacGowan, Beverly Maeder, Liesl Olson, Marjorie Perloff, Phoebe Putnam, Joan Richardson, Zhaoming Qian, Helen Vendler, and Eric White. Special thanks to Brendan Lynch for his expertise with computers. Thanks, too, to Ray Ryan for commissioning this volume, Victoria Parrin for editing it, Deborah Hey for her careful copy-editing, and Alexandra Gatten for her editorial assistance.

GLEN MACLEOD

Abbreviations

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Wallace Stevens are taken from *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997) and cited parenthetically in the text with page numbers only. Other works will be cited with the following abbreviations:

- L* *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1966; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press 1996.
SP Stevens, Holly. *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 1977.