

Introduction

Committed Solitudes: Imagining Autonomy Otherwise

In the house the house is all
 house and each of its authors
 passing from room to room
 (. . .)

Life in this house-island is
 riddled with light a sense of
 something last to say first
 The tone of an oldest voice
 Still one of great multitude
 —Susan Howe, “118 Westerly Terrace,” *Souls of the Labadie Tract*

Prosaically entitled “118 Westerly Terrace,” Susan Howe’s homage to Wallace Stevens embarks on an intimate journey into the poet’s life and verse. Howe’s entire serial piece revolves around the image of Stevens’ “house,” with a strong spatial dimension. The “house” serves as an imaginative trope for the encounter between the two poets engaged “in the same field of labor” (97). But the poem does more than evoke a sense of lyric lineage between two generations of American poetry by means of an address that is obliquely shared. The poet moves from imagining the “house” as a confined space of solitude and literary activity, where “all doors are closed” (95), to seeing it as a structure that opens in unexpected ways onto the world and history:

Last night the door stood
 open—windows were port-
 holes letters either traced
 or lost—historical fact the
 fire on hearth

(SLT 109)

Howe alternately frames what she calls “the house of [Stevens’] poetry” as an isolated domain unto itself – a hearth with its fire – and as a space peculiarly openable to the outside world, including history (“on Wallace Stevens” 01:23–6). This dual emphasis on the embedded historicity and autotelic character of Stevens’ poetic project brings to the fore questions that have long preoccupied Stevens’ critics. Stevens has been, and continues to be, a central figure both for critics like Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom, who have examined his poetry as an enclosed aesthetic entity, and for historically oriented critics like Alan Filreis and James Longenbach, who have rigorously unraveled its extra-textual engagements. Closing doors shut, or leaving them open, criticism has inhabited the “house of [Stevens’] poetry” on its own capacious terms.

For several decades, literary criticism operated with an image of Stevens as a historically and socially irrelevant poet. His poetry was to be found exemplary of an elusive aesthetic posture, if not a willed detachment from the social and historical currents of his epoch. Stevens’ profoundly dense and enigmatic style, and his persistent abstention from external references made it convenient for most of his prominent critics to bracket off extra-aesthetic concerns and historical sources in favor of the formal, meditative, and self-reflexive dimensions in his work.¹ Vendler’s claim that “solitude” and “not society” is the main subject of Stevens’ poetry was indicative of the critical thrust of her general approach (*Extended Wings* 100). Not only the interpretive strategies employed in these accounts, but also the repeated emphasis on Stevens’ late romantic vision, left little room for situating his poetry within its cultural and historical moment. While providing many valuable insights into his work, critics approaching Stevens on these terms tended to perpetuate the idea of a poet dwelling in the ivory tower of a disinterested aestheticism and autonomy – an accusation that had been made already at the early stages of his poetic career.²

Even scholars like Mark Halliday who approached Stevens with a contextual sensibility found it difficult to offer a full account of the broader social existence of his poetry. In his study on the ethics of “interpersonal” relations, Halliday observed that despite the plea for socialization, Stevens’ poetry rests chiefly upon a contemplative aesthetic of solipsism and reverie (66–94). His arguments run parallel to Milton J. Bates’ judgment that Stevens “embraced his loneliness” and “solitude” (82). Such observations

¹ See for instance Vendler, *On Extended Wings* and *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire*, Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate*, and Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*.

² See especially “The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens” by Gorham Munson.

and remarks, in spite of their partaking in an effort to draw up a larger contextual framework for reading Stevens, undermined any challenge Halliday and Bates may have wished to pose to the well-known charges of escapism expressed by critics well into the 1990s.³

In the past few decades, however, inspired by New Historicist and cultural materialist approaches, a wide range of critical perspectives has forcefully demonstrated the active engagement of Stevens' poetry with its literary-political and cultural surroundings.⁴ A growing number of scholars have posed more effective challenges to long-established views of Stevens as an isolated aesthete. They have documented and explored how, especially Stevens' poetry of the 1930s and 1940s developed in a dialogic relationship to the cultural and political events of his time. These critical works have set a precedent for tracing Stevens' growth as a poet not in isolation but against the backdrop of his larger historical milieu.

One of the common tenets of historicist readings has been the apparent shift in Stevens' poetics from his first collection of verse, *Harmonium* (1923), to his second, *Ideas of Order* (1935). Filreis and Longenbach in particular explore how, in his Depression-era poetry, Stevens infused a more immediate urgency into the question of poetry's function in the actual world, an urgency that emerged in conjunction with cultural transitions that can be registered in the American literary scene. In the face of social and economic turmoil during the Depression, a great number of writers adopted politically committed forms of artistic production in order to respond to the crisis and to express solidarity with the oppressed classes. The most radical political artists and critics of the period effectively pressed for the direct participation of art in collective struggles, which prompted a new phase in the historical development of modernist and avant-garde practices. Taking this mobilization into account, Filreis has described the "modernist-radical convergence" of the period (24), revealing that the dynamic points of contact between Stevens and the period's leftist literary circles furnished Stevens' modernist sensibilities with a new political resonance (2–12). Looking at the whole trajectory of Stevens' development, Longenbach, by contrast, has taken up his

³ See Marjorie Perloff, "Revolving in Crystal," Gerald L. Bruns, "Stevens without Epistemology," and Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts*, 135–6.

⁴ See especially Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left*, Longenbach, *The Plain Sense of Things*, Harvey Terés, *Renewing the Left*, the "Stevens and Politics" issue of *WSJ*, Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police*, and, more recently, Milton A. Cohen, *Beleaguered Poets*.

construction of a “middle-ground” position “from which extremes,” both “aesthetic and political,” were engaged (viii).⁵

Sometimes diverging from, but mainly complementing one another, these critics have provided us with a more detailed and comprehensive picture of Stevens, which, against the charges of escapist dandyism, affirms rather the relevance of his poetry within the wider public sphere. They have also prepared the ground for later scholars who have returned to the topic of “Stevens and the actual world” from expanded angles. More recent criticism in this vein has paid due attention to matters of gender and race (Brogan), the poetics of the everyday (Phillips and Olson), the formations of collective subjectivity (Nickels), and the cultural and political dimensions of his ekphrastic poems (Costello).⁶ The many new (and old) contexts in which Stevens appears in the recent volume, *Wallace Stevens in Context* (2017), reflect the extent to which culturally and historically situated readings have radically altered his critical reputation as a poet solely of the mind’s fictions.

The contribution of the present book to this body of scholarship brings into a new and different focus the issue of autonomy, which has figured only marginally or negatively in those literary debates that set out to explore Stevens’ poetry historically: While previous criticism has highlighted several aspects of Stevens’ development of a socially responsive poetics – especially in the 1930s and 1940s – I will argue that Stevens during this period developed an elaborate conception of aesthetic autonomy as a necessary condition for poetic engagement. Beyond epitomizing a privileged retreat into the protected space of the aesthetic – as it is often understood – autonomy, in Stevens’ poetry, is imagined in distinctly relational terms; and by “relational” I mean specifically the lines of interconnection between his poetry and its wider material conditions. By demonstrating the significance of the concept for Stevens’ multiple responses to the turbulent cultural and political circumstances of his age, this book suggests a rethinking of modernist claims to autonomy as more than an illusory retreat from literature’s worldly entanglements and historical constraints.

⁵ Unlike Filreis, Longenbach pinpoints the continuities between *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order* rather than positing Stevens’ position in the 1930s as a turn away from his earlier aesthetics. However, he discusses at length how, during the Depression, Stevens moved toward a more socially engaged poetry due to the pressures he experienced from the cultural left about the necessary participation of poetry in social and political life. See Longenbach, 135–48.

⁶ See Jacqueline Brogan, *The Violence within/the Violence without*, Siobhan Phillips, *The Poetics of the Everyday*, Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Joel Nickels, *The Poetry of the Possible*, and Bonnie Costello, *Planets on Tables*.

The doctrine of aesthetic autonomy constitutes a significant part of the historical legacy of literary and artistic modernisms. The conception of art as an immanent formation governed by its own internal logic underpins a set of interrelated issues concerning artistic agency, textual meaning, mode of production, reception, and formal innovation that are all central to modernism's self-definition. Within the field of modernist studies, in particular, the claim to autonomy is often understood in terms of art's programmatic withdrawal from external imperatives (socioeconomic, political, cultural, etc.). The idea of the art object as an autonomous entity independent of extraneous pressures and concerns, which had dominated the New Critical paradigm of modernism, has long been critiqued as perpetuating an ideological mystification that obfuscates art's historical origins and determinants.⁷ Instead of seeing literary works as self-regulating and freestanding systems, contemporary scholars of modernism focus on the ways in which different historical currents inform the substance of their production, meaning, and reception.

In general terms, then, reading Stevens today from a literary-critical perspective cannot be done any longer without taking into account the historical situation of the production and cultural location of his poetry. Yet, pursuing his poetics with regard precisely to its historical conditions affords a strong basis for complicating the existing critical paradigms that view modernist notions of autonomy as merely the theoretical pretext for a retreat into a privileged artistic domain, away from social and political responses and responsibilities. As I will demonstrate throughout this book, the claim to autonomy as it emerges in Stevens' poetry implies further rather than fewer social and political implications. But the latter emerge only provided that we investigate the claim in its historical specificity, and examine the cultural conditions under which it was formed.

Stevens' poetry, especially from the 1930s through the 1940s, incorporates positions that imply both its inclusion of, and exclusion from, larger historical forces. His poetics articulates in concert the seemingly antagonistic stances of aesthetic separation and social engagement – the solitude of poetry and its commitment to the general order of the social. It presents these stances not as polarized extremes but as mutually implicated elements for constructing a force field that enables new nodes of social, aesthetic, and political transfers. Stevens' poetics, in other words, operates

⁷ For influential considerations of autonomy as ideology, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, Timothy J. Reiss, *Against Autonomy*, and Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism and Criticism and Social Change*.

with an aesthetic strategy that, by separating and distancing itself from its social reality, brings forth different potential forms of relationality between poetry and collective life. In this strategic enactment of separation, the idea of autonomy is discursively developed as a primary force for negotiating the points of interaction that spin out from the domain of his poetry to its wider historical sphere of engagement.

This study, then, takes as its starting point the multiple ways in which Wallace Stevens' poetics brings about a variety of conceptual, linguistic, and spatial configurations of aesthetic autonomy with a range of contextual underpinnings. Written at the height of the Depression and the onset of World War II, when the commitment of literature to sociopolitical issues was hotly debated among critics and artists, Stevens' poetry offers an understanding of autonomy not as an escape from the immediate world that presses in upon it, but as a necessary condition for imagining new forms of engagement with the historical crisis surrounding it. By positing aesthetic autonomy as a *sine qua non* for poetry's intervention in the social domain, Stevens' poetry destabilizes the commonly asserted notions of modernist routes toward autonomy as figuring the impasse and failure of art's relation to collective life. Once we acknowledge this destabilization, we may return to Stevens in order to address current theoretical attempts to recalibrate autonomy. I will turn to an overview of various theoretical considerations developed around modernist claims to autonomy, and discuss where this concept now stands in the field of literary criticism later in this introduction. This will include a discussion of the theoretical frameworks offered by Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou for rethinking the poetic notion of autonomy in relation to the substantive domains of politics, aesthetics, and philosophy. Before getting into these discussions, however, I would like to offer a brief examination of one of Stevens' Depression-era poems, "Mozart, 1935" from *Ideas of Order* (1935). The poem provides a compelling case for illuminating the particular understanding of autonomy that will animate this book, an understanding that informed the responses of Stevens' poetics to the fluctuating sociopolitical and cultural climate under which it was given shape.

If Howe, in her homage, pictures Stevens in the "room" in the "house" to convey a sense of his place both in her work and in a larger history, in "Mozart, 1935," Stevens imagines his own poet-figure in a room in the house to examine, as he wrote, "the status of the poet in a disturbed society, or, for that matter, in any society" (L 292). The poem begins with an imperative voice, addressing the poet:

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Poet, be seated at the piano.
 Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo,
 Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic,
 Its envious cachinnation.
 (CPP 107)

The confined space in which Stevens imagines his poet-figure making music is situated in proximity to the collective space of a riot taking place outside: “If they throw stones upon the roof / While you practice arpeggios, / It is because they carry down the stairs / A body in rags. / Be seated at the piano” (CPP 107). The pelting of stones on the roof, the clamor of the people carrying a dead body, and the musical notes of the piano played by the poet make up the thematic substance of the poem that is alternately sounded and visualized. The historical background echoing throughout Stevens’ lines captures the generally disruptive effects of the Depression (on “any society,” and thus, both locally and globally). A less audible but equally important context, however, which is often brought into the discussions of the poem, is the state of the cultural spectrum in the United States at the time. The temporal frame in which Stevens sets the scene, and in which the poem was published (1935) was stirred by debates crystallizing around the issue of art’s social and political efficacy. Throughout the 1930s – “the red decade,” “the angry decade” – artists and poets were called upon to engage in conversation with the masses facing the economic hardships caused by the capitalist crisis.

In “Mozart, 1935” the secluded space of artistic activity where poetic expression is identified with Mozartian music is unsettled by the outrage of the masses, whose voices are intruding into the poet’s segregated territory. But the unidentified speaker instructs the poet who is practicing “arpeggios” to remain “seated at the piano” despite the upheaval that has taken over the street. At the same time, he urges the poet to “[p]lay the present,” and later, to transform his “voice” into the collective “voice” of the masses by abandoning the private, personal “you” for the intersubjective and relational inflections of “thou”: “Be thou the voice, / Not you. Be thou, be thou / The voice of angry fear, / The voice of this besieging pain” (CPP 107). The use of “thou” connotes a new sense of intimacy not only between the speaker and the addressee, but also between the poet and the masses: No longer affirming a simple contrast between angry voices outside and artful arpeggios inside, the pianist is recruited to sound the riotous sentiments – that is, the intrusion is only a first moment, the adoption of the outside voice is next.

Previous commentators on the poem have viewed this suspension, or the interruption of the poet’s aesthetic interior, as evidence for Stevens

coming to terms with the awareness that, amidst the actual exigencies of the times, he could no longer speak coherently from the position of a pure aestheticism shut off from the world. “Few Stevens poems,” Filreis writes, “convey as much fear of the personal poetic dead end as ‘Mozart, 1935,’ or present as anxiously the risk of accusations of aestheticism in the face of crisis” (“Three Poems” 253). The poem expresses, according to Longenbach, Stevens’ recognition that “the old music played in the old way will no longer suffice, no matter how much we mourn its passing” (154). Similarly, Cohen argues that Stevens displays a sense of “regret for the lost Mozartian past, a past when art could be ‘pure’ and the artist untroubled by his times” (59). Accordingly, the staging of such anxiety, mourning, and regret, as proposed in these readings, became also the driving force behind Stevens’ renewal of his poetics in order to respond to the cultural demands and pressures of the 1930s. For these critics, the poem contests the aesthetic interiority of a “pure poetry” and acknowledges the need to replace it with a more socially responsive artistic model.

In “Mozart, 1935,” Stevens does indeed respond to the new political demands placed upon poetry under the changed cultural atmosphere of the Depression. Yet, the overall rhetorical direction of the poem goes far beyond lamenting the insufficiency of aesthetic enclosure for a socially engaging poetics. The poem’s tone and imaginary setting provide at once the basis of a separate poetic territory that is epitomized by the poet’s demarcated practicing room, and a claim to relevance to the collective struggle that is taking place outside. Stevens makes the sound, or the musicality of poetry, a central subject of the poem. The relationship between sounds and images points to a latent tension, woven into the poem’s texture, between the people’s “cries” and the poet’s notes, in their competing sounds – a double emergence of the site of autonomy (the carefully delineated space of poetic practice) and that of heteronomy (the street). The aesthetic interior is pointedly conjured up in the poet’s room while the social exterior, the violence of the street, impinges from without.

The speaker’s address to the poet suggests a double-edged poetic ambition. On the one hand, it involves the task of adopting a civic voice to become the collective “voice of angry fear,” and of the “besieging pain,” that is to say, to speak for the masses. On the other hand, it sets up the task of maintaining a model of aesthetic territoriality by preserving the boundaries of artistic space and remaining there, making music: The imperative phrase by which the speaker addresses the poet, “be seated,” is repeated three times in this fairly short poem, including in the very final line. The ambivalent juxtaposition of these tasks – of poetry as a self-legislating

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procedure of mere musical sound, occupying a space of its own, and of poetry as a politicized expression of social flux and communal needs – is paradigmatic. Composing poetry is not a matter of elevating one task over the other but of staging the interplay between these ostensibly differentiated logics of commitment to collective solidarity and commitment to separation and self-determination as the creative nexus of aesthetic production.

Thus, the poem sets out to envision the invention of artistic forms without external function (the poet's music), while deliberately identifying such forms with a site of collective mobilization and an expression of dissent – giving voice to the crowd's anger, fear, and pain. The perspective that emerges from this arrangement suggests a compound of social reciprocity and autonomy of poetic practice. It is not the personal autonomy of the individual poet that the poem holds up, but the autonomy of the poetic process and, crucially, of the space in which this process is carried on. The speaker's invocation of "thou," by which the poet's voice is supposed to take on a collective character, seeks to establish a mode of artistic subjectivity that requires abandoning the personal private "you". The coexistence of these positions (social reciprocity and autonomy) allows for an alternative production of singularity that is predicated on musical/poetic form and activity. The sound of the piano played by the poet does not translate into a song of the street as such, with a merely instrumental political function. But it evolves nevertheless in tandem with the historical matrix of social change that marks the streets of 1935. The potential evolution of the poet's music is marked at the level of a movement between different musical styles: "arpeggios," "divertimento," and "concerto" (*CPP* 107). The trajectory between these forms adds a new dimension to the tension the poem displays between aesthetic autonomy and social engagement.

The first musical style with which the speaker identifies the poet's music is that of the arpeggio, which consists of individual notes played sequentially rather than simultaneously. The restricted scope of this form of musical performance cannot accommodate the multiplicity of cadences and voices of "the present," which the poet is urged to incorporate into his music. "[P]ractic[ing] arpeggios" is presented as a preparatory phase from which the poet is expected to develop and expand. The speaker introduces two different possibilities for the anticipated transformation of the poet's music: the divertimento, described as a "lucid souvenir of the past," and the concerto, seen as an "airy dream of the future" (*CPP* 107). Diverting, or turning away from social crises, was part of the aesthetic function of

the eighteenth-century divertimento, a form of composition primarily composed for entertainment in intimate social settings (aristocratic as a matter of course). This stylistic model stands in stark contrast to the violent context of the 1930s, where the poet is exposed to the outside voices of terror and chaos.

The second form is the concerto, which is linked to the “future” with a utopian drive for reconciliation (*CPP* 107). Stevens’ reference to Mozart acquires an additional topological significance here. Just as Mozart’s piano concertos brought together the singular instrument and the collective orchestra, the poem calls into play the poet’s solo piano and the collective voices of the street simultaneously. Inasmuch as the concerto bears the potential for sustaining both the singularity (the poetic/musical) and the plurality (the collective) in a reciprocal process of competition and harmonization, the poem finds the present an inauspicious time for the kind of harmonious dialogue upon which this form of music was originally founded. The concerto seems like an “airy dream” in dire political trouble. The speaker, nevertheless, presents an instance of this airy fantasy in the fifth stanza. The artistic reconciliation of social conflict within the realm of the aesthetic facilitates a cathartic resolution. Voices of anger and pain are replaced by the abstract, “wintry sound / . . . / By which sorrow is released, / Dismissed, absolved / In a starry placating”. This harmonious resolution of socially inflicted “sorrow” seems excessive and untimely. So it is significant that the speaker ends by pinpointing the persistence of the present turmoil that awaits a response: “The snow is falling / And the streets are full of cries. / Be seated, thou”. The poem does not, however, indicate a wholesale rejection of Mozartian music, but calls for renewing its existing forms for the present: “We *may* return to Mozart. / He was young, and *we, we* are old” (*CPP* 108; emphasis added). The call for a shift away from the personal “you” to a more socially oriented voice is emphasized by the integration of the speaker’s voice into a collective “we”. The mode of aesthetic renewal that is explored in the poem is not a completed event but an ongoing process, which would continue to fuel Stevens’ writing as the decade unfolded.

In “Mozart, 1935,” Stevens sets in motion the process of negotiating a politically inclusionary and responsive poetics, which requires reinventing poetic expression under the new social circumstances brought on by the Depression. In the course of exploring its formal and artistic conditions of possibility, the poem foregrounds a perspective that disallows the total immersion of aesthetic “practice” in the systemic crisis of social reality. It