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0521619408 - Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism

Alan Filreis

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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Do the drummers in black hoods  
Rumble anything out of their drums?

—Wallace Stevens, “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating,” 1934

Chroniclers and critics of the 1930s have argued among themselves so unremittingly about the cultural role of radicalism that the newest and most intellectually flexible among them are often hindered rather than liberated by the debate.<sup>1</sup> The bitterness of this fighting has made me somewhat reluctant to present *Modernism from Right to Left* as a call for similar contentiousness to commence among admirers of modern American poetry. It strikes me nonetheless that the almost total absence of such dispute in discussions of this poetry is one of the reasons why an auspicious direction in the study of modernism’s relation to the “clever hopes” of that allegedly “low, dishonest decade”<sup>2</sup> remains largely untried. Another reason, not easily documented, is that those students rhetorically trained by American doctoral programs in literature during the past forty years to read poets like Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore, and to a somewhat lesser extent William Carlos Williams, have not also been attracted to writing deemed “revolutionary” in the political sense. After the thirties – one decade when literary radicals *were* reading these modernists, as I will show – the exceptions have been only very recent.<sup>3</sup> As a corollary to this unwritten professional rule, it might be further supposed that insofar as critics of depression-era writing have, in Cary Nelson’s words, “treat[ed] the political poetry of the period as a unitary phenomenon and reject[ed] it contemptuously”<sup>4</sup> (for “unitary” read “ideological” or even “Stalinist”), critics of Stevens’s depression-era writing have congenially embraced his modernism, judging it elastic and accommodating (for these terms read “non-ideological” and “anti-Stalinist”). Obviously, the two groups haven’t been talking to each other. Why not? Lively and productive, if often bitter, interaction between noncommunists and communists was a fortunate topic of study as soon as, in the 1960s, histo-

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rians got out from under the proto-Cold War spell of Eugene Lyons's *The Red Decade* of 1941. Frank Warren's *Liberals and Communism* (1966) made its rejoinder to Lyons's thesis of "Stalinist penetration of America" not by claiming to the contrary that communism was "at most a very minor influence" on noncommunist thinking in the thirties, but by carefully describing points of intersection and crossing.<sup>5</sup> In one sense, then, my book presents a similar dialogue between those two positions on the matter of poetry – not for the purpose of finding some safe centrism (perhaps Warren's one flaw) but rather to point up a false distinction that separated modernism and radicalism in the first place.

In this book I, too, find Wallace Stevens's 1930s poetry accommodating and elastic. At the same time I attempt to realize these as having served as anti-ideological terms. In other words, such a reconstructive venture as this deliberately does not entail the usual assumption of intellectual inflexibility on the literary left. It is the main point of this effort to show how noncommunists' talent for what Kenneth Burke in 1937 astutely termed "casuistic stretching"<sup>6</sup> – in Stevens this skill manifested itself in two messily dialogical poems, "Owl's Clover" (1936) and "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937) – was partly intrinsic to the modernist penchant for many-sidedness, and partly learned from a bold new aesthetic left wing that was itself remarkably open and variable. This boldness I find in Burke's relentless emphasis on language, which created for him a critical disposition steeped in modernism and yet having the effect of reestablishing literature's value as social strategy and active power – this from, as Frank Lentricchia has correctly observed, "a charter member of the modernist avant-garde, . . . unswerving champion of Joyce, Williams, and Djuna Barnes."<sup>7</sup> Similarly bold was Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* (1931). In the final words of that book, Wilson admitted that Joyce, Eliot, Proust, and Stein "tended to overemphasize the importance of the individual," were "preoccupied with introspection," and "have endeavored to discourage their readers, not only with politics, but with action of any kind." Yet when I read *Axel's Castle* as a whole, thinking of it as a work of the twenties catching up page by page to the thirties,<sup>8</sup> I am persuaded that Wilson was right to reserve the greatest measure of his ample critical power for modernism as having "revealed to the imagination a new flexibility and freedom." ("And though we are aware in [modernist writing] of things that are dying," Wilson concluded movingly and a touch desperately, ". . . they none the less break down the walls of the present and wake us to the hope and exaltation of the untried.")<sup>9</sup> Readers of Lucia Trent's and Ralph Cheyney's spirited *More Power to Poets!* (1934) will be equally impressed, I think, by the authors' unswerving commitment as thirties radicals to several basic modernist breakthroughs. In "What Is This Modernism?" they assert their indebtedness:

The breaking of "Do not's" is almost the only practice at which modernist poets work shoulder to shoulder. . . . The "Do not" which modern-

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ists break in subject matter is that Pegasus must be kept in a paddock. *Any subject can be made poetic.* For poetry resides in the poet, not in the subject. Electric lights as well as stars, factory workers as well as birds. . . . In diction, modernists believe that no word can be too frank, too earthy, too strong. . . . Many modernists are intent on developing a new mythos. . . . To modernists poetry is not a sugared sedative.<sup>10</sup>

In the chapters to follow, I have brought to the foreground a great deal of new evidence that supports Burke, Wilson, Trent, Cheyney, and others' interactivist positions, especially in considering communist and radical noncommunist poets who made direct contact with famous modernists and their work. Proceeding in this way, I also hope to affirm the conclusions of two otherwise very different recent works, Alan Wald's *The Revolutionary Imagination* (1983) and Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery* (1989), where aesthetic left sectarianism is shown neither to have prevented experimental verse nor repudiated several basic elements of modernism.<sup>11</sup>

But even such recent revisions of the modernism-radicalism debate as Wald, Nelson, Harvey Teres,<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Nekola,<sup>13</sup> James D. Bloom,<sup>14</sup> Judy Kutulas,<sup>15</sup> and others<sup>16</sup> have recently managed has for professional and methodological reasons not been very easily achieved. Finding "the density, the generic ambiguity, and the understanding of . . . their own status as mediated and mediating" – in other words, qualities ascribed to modernist writing – in the work of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman, Bloom has traced the "work[s] of recovery" that made his own possible. For every effort to clear the way made by scholars like Daniel Aaron (*Writers on the Left*) and Marcus Klein (*Foreigners*) during the busy twenty-year period bordered by these two books (1961 to 1981), "chronic obstacles" have been set up by the thirties' many retrospective antagonists. Scholars who get past the interpretations of ex- and anticommunists must still then confront those of "the 'Eliotic-Trotskyist' *Partisan Review* strain" that would reject out of hand Bloom's audacious notion that Gold and Freeman can be read for modernist features.<sup>17</sup> It is because interpretive infighting of this sort has continued among cultural historians of thirties radicalism that such documentary scholars as those named above have been forced not merely to be extrarigorous, sure- and even slow-footed, and at times very plainly descriptive in reorienting the literary history of the period; indeed, they have had to be "decidedly old-fashioned" (as Houston Baker suggested provocatively on the dust-jacket of Nelson's book) even while demonstrating faithfulness to the postmodern sense that "we resemanticize what we do recover."<sup>18</sup> Trying to put modernism and radicalism together again, these revisionists have been compelled to cast about for unusual (some would say digressive) historical approaches and literally to search for new resources that will enable such self-reflectively reconstructive acts to take place without merely contributing to a half-century-old argument another, however subtler and more luxuriously theorized position, predetermined by either the same old outright dis-

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missals or outright acceptances of communism as a home-grown cultural force.

Wallace Stevens serves extraordinarily well, I contend, in the effort to work through and beyond that old familiar pattern. The choice of Stevens to play such a role, I realize, will strike some as incendiary if not just strange. He will be known to many readers as the author of the ubiquitously anthologized “Sunday Morning” (1915) and perhaps, too, for a series of quintessentially modernist poems-about-poetry in which a spectral second- or third-person pronoun behaves like a depersonalized, meditative *I*, quietly confessing to an eerily unimportant American life:

There is a storm much like the crying of the wind,  
Words that come out of us like words within,  
That have rankled for many lives and made no sound.  
(CP 336)

Readers of such lines tend to ask: “Words that come out of *us*,” really, or out of the speaker? And what rankling? And why – and how – so silent? Then, too,

there is a man in black space  
Sits in nothing that we know,  
Brooding sounds of river noises. . . .  
(CP 444)

One cannot keep from wondering, Is it “we” – really all of us – who “know” this “nothing”? The metrical force and rhetorical straightforwardness of “there is a man” is qualified by this apparently unearned “we,” which seems to draw an equation between, on one hand, some estimable singularity sitting remotely nowhere and, on the other, a powerful collectivity brooding on nothing. In *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (1991), largely a work of literary biography, I characterized Stevens as not so much typically remote as in fact involved, even at times preoccupied, with the world of political events and trends. I described, in short, the extent to which Stevens was capable of meaning more than “oneself” in his lofty-seeming “we.” If my choice of the last period of Stevens’s life and work, 1939 to 1955, from the beginning of World War II to the middle of the Cold War, was propitious, it was because my purpose could be served by showing Stevens’s poetry engaging the issues of an era in which the dominant political culture increasingly featured and officially favored ideological disengagement (the postwar “end of ideology”). The story of American modernism’s 1950s – really, its coming of political middle age long after it had come of *aesthetic* middle age – is also the story of the *making* of the aforementioned false distinction, invalidating ways in which radicalism and modernism had interacted in the 1930s in a 1950s-style narrative of the then-outmoded war waged between irreconcilable sides. (And, of course, once the sides were aligned in this way, the winner – “nonpolitical” modernism – could be declared.) There are many reasons why the thirties present a problem very differ-

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ent from the fifties. One of them is precisely that what happened to eminent modernists in the earlier period occurred *before* the fifties' invention of the myth of wholly separate radical and modernist spheres. I have already described how, in his last years, Stevens sensed the revision underway, and how, although his own sense of the thirties could not entirely resist being shaped by the fifties' version, the period was obviously alluring for him.<sup>19</sup> The reaction in the sixties *against* this fifties version of the thirties made it hard to trust deconstructions of the myth of separate spheres, such as Stephen Spender's obviously sincere claim that "my own Thirties' generation . . . never became so politicized as to disagree seriously with an older generation of writers who held views often described as 'reactionary.'"<sup>20</sup>

Any effort to get back to the thirties requires that one spend a good deal of one's resources describing the getting back. Participants have tended to return to the period again and again to present their own (revised) views. Their conflicting recollections make the archive fuller but discernment no easier. The old radical lumberman poet, Joe Kalar, predicted in 1970 that "[t]here will never be an end to books about the thirties," and I think he might be right.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, because the myth of separate modernist and communist spheres seems so important to its creators and adherents, there may be no end of speculation as to why "the modernist" Wallace Stevens reacted with such "strange disproportion"<sup>22</sup> to "the communist" Stanley Burnshaw's October 1, 1935, review of Stevens's *Ideas of Order* (1935) in the communist *New Masses*. Critical debate about the thirties seemed perpetual to Joe Kalar, by 1970 a veteran of many literary wars, because so many of the rhetorical provocations and counterattacks of the period – even the strong and not always fruitless rhetorical tradition of fierce self-criticism – were carrying over into cultural histories dealing with the period.<sup>23</sup> Little or none of this truculence has gotten into Stevens criticism, quite in spite of the fact that a great many full-length studies of Stevens's career, and a number of essays, raise the specter of Burnshaw.<sup>24</sup> Never, for instance, has anyone posed systematically the question of whether "Owl's Clover," the poem written largely in response to Burnshaw, discloses anything specific about Stevens's understanding of the issues that gave rhetorical force to the left. Nor, until very recently, have Stevens's critics felt prepared to begin with anything but the tired, Cold War-era assumption of "Burnshaw's misdirected Marxism."<sup>25</sup> Nor has it been asked whether the young Burnshaw, with his own special concerns about a moment Stevens's admirers readily assume was wholly his moment, was indeed representative of the cultural communism whose journal he used to evaluate *Ideas of Order*. In many ways he was not.<sup>26</sup>

In preparing to write this book, I read extensively in the private papers of communist and noncommunist poets who followed Stevens's efforts, poem by poem, in the thirties. This study disclosed, among other things,

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that the question of Burnshaw's representativeness – his having earned the privilege, as it were, to be the one to confront Stevens most forthrightly from the left – was an issue raised at the time. Willard Maas on the communist left, and Samuel French Morse on the center-right were among those poets who raised such a doubt. Maas once considered writing about Stevens, but soon moved away from modern poetry toward postmodern film and mixed media, and never did publish on Stevens. Yet, that Maas, then a *communist*, could privately assert, “[i]f I wrote one poem, just one, as good as any in *Harmonium* [1923] or *Ideas of Order* [1935], I would be willing to stop writing forever,”<sup>27</sup> speaks to the complexity of the situation. And Morse, who in the early fifties befriended Stevens and hatched plans to be his official biographer, told me that he had lost interest in the Burnshaw episode when poets' politics came to seem a less pressing issue than earlier.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps it is only just now possible – with archives, such as Maas's and Burnshaw's, swelling with incoming letters left and right, papers and materials both literary and “ephemeral” – to examine, in ample literary-political context, the noncommunist poet's declarations of interest in communism or the contemporaneous claim for “Owl's Clover” that it was intended as a “justification of leftism” (*L* 295), and to speculate in studies of this kind on the degree to which such claims are unreliable.

If we dismiss a nonradical poet's assertion of leftward movement as *thoroughly* unreliable, should we not then be prepared to explain why a poet as shrewd as Stevens could thus have had such a poor sense of how his poetry situated itself politically? In exposing a poet like Stevens to such a context, I realize that I risk (quite unintentionally) sustaining Irving Howe's chilly 1947 view that “Owl's Clover” was “rhetoric overrunning thought, a[n] assault upon a subject Stevens was not prepared to confront.”<sup>29</sup> My ambition, on the contrary, is to suggest how similar is the risk of reducing *Burnshaw* to “myopic” and his approach to Stevens as “the coarsest kind of Marxian criticism.”<sup>30</sup> Anyone who has read “Notes on Revolutionary Poetry,” with its affirmative reference to I. A. Richards, its scolding of reductive communist assumptions about poetic form, its quotation of “revolutionary poems which are plainly precious,” would not speak of Burnshaw's unreflective orthodoxy.<sup>31</sup> So, too, those who know of Mary McCarthy's brief grudging praise in 1936 for Burnshaw's grievance against the American Marxist obsession with content – “We have been so much concerned with *what* the author is saying,” Burnshaw had written, “that we have neglected the concomitant question: *how* does he say it?” – would not assume radicals' dissociation from modernism.<sup>32</sup>

Taking both Stevens and Burnshaw a good deal more seriously, my portrait of the Burnshaw-Stevens episode in Chapters 5 and 6 is meant to be a portrait of American poetry at a crossroads. This stimulating brush with literary radicalism suggests that more eminent modernists than one might

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have guessed understood how their poems were going to be read by would-be detractors, and that they understood and even adopted a number of basic contemporaneous contentions about poets' standing in American society. In describing this "extraordinary" contact, to use Stevens's word for it (*L* 292), I aim, moreover, to locate poetic work generally representative of the noncommunist modernist. And I trust that the effort to see thirties poetics through the odd lens of Stevens provides a number of new suggestions about American cultural radicalism itself. One is that the thirties were *not* a period in which literary value necessarily went out of fashion, but rather, to quote Burke looking back from 1952, "a period of stress that forced upon all of us" – he meant the so-called "aesthetes" and communists both – "the need to decide exactly wherein the worth and efficacy of a literary work reside."<sup>33</sup>

Such application of Stevens will seem an annoyance to those who prefer to take their modernism "as if it were written from nowhere" (which is how Marjorie Perloff characterized the common view when commending Peter Brazeau for taking the trouble to interview Stevens's business colleagues). Consider that *Stevens*, not William Carlos Williams, or Kenneth Fearing, or George Oppen, or Charles Reznikoff, offered the following as a description of a poem he was writing:

What I have been trying to do in the thing is to apply my own sort of poetry to such a project.+ [sic] Is poetry that is to have a contemporary significance merely to be a collection of contemporary images, or is it actually to deal with the commonplace of the day? I think the latter, but the result seems rather boring.

+ To What one reads in the papers. (*L* 308)

What specifically led me to write a book that describes the convergence of poetic isms is the postscript here: At the last moment, this American poet remembers that his correspondent might not know that "such a project" could have anything to do with the news. I am similarly compelled by the final misgiving in the quoted passage: that poetry collecting "the commonplace" risks tedium. Had Stevens here eschewed his usual rhetoric of qualified assertions, I dare say the comment could be deemed unremarkable and I would be the first to cast it on a large pile of other comparable statements made by poets in the period, in a bin marked "more easily said than done."

But the modernist whose 1930s Joseph Riddel rightly calls "the most revealing single period in his career"<sup>34</sup> was deadly serious when he spoke of poems responding "To What one reads in the papers." It cannot be denied that his comments in the months following the *New Masses* review suggest his wish to accommodate himself to certain assumptions of the literary left. These comments are too wide-ranging, and extend over too many letters, to be dismissed as whimsical. That he said he very much believed in "left-

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ism,” and hoped he was “headed left” (L 286-7), can perhaps be discounted as ironic or half-hearted, especially since he qualified the point by announcing that *his* left would not be “the ghastly left of MASSES.” But he soon added that such contact as he had just had with the cultural radicals did allow a poet like himself to “circulate” – I use New Historicist pidgin here because Stevens did – and that it was in the last event “an extraordinarily stimulating thing” to find himself moving “in that *milieu*” (L 296). So, too, he deemed nonsense the notion some conservatives held that socialism and communism would “dirty the world” when carrying out their political transformations; although he admitted that the displeasure of dirtying would be the *immediate* effect, he significantly added that this would be true of any upheaval (L 292). At one point in this period he even permitted himself a bit of utopian thinking, speculating on what the world would look like if he were given the task of creating “an actuality” from scratch. He decided that it would look a good deal different from “the world about us” in many ways, though he declined to give the details of this vision; the prospect would merely be described in “personal terms,” and he disliked people who spoke of such longing in personal terms (L 292). The “extraordinary experience” that contact with radicalism gave him led firmly to the conclusion that “one has to live and think in the actual world, and no other will do” (L 292), a signal shift, at least rhetorically, from his attitude of the *Harmonium* years. Internal order proceeded from external order, he said, as well as the other way around; he added that “the orderly relations of society as a whole have a poetic value” (L 305). He began to emphasize references to the “normal” in his poetry. He became obsessed with “how to write of the normal in a normal way” (L 287), a process he knew would create the main difficulty if he were to adapt his verse to any of the new poetic realisms.

Stevens also articulated the terms in which the advantages and disadvantages of “didactic poetry” and “pure poetry” could be argued (L 302–3). While he admitted to his publisher that he clung to a “distinct liking” for pure poetry, his manner of saying so revealed his awareness that this was a position one could put forth only defensively in an era when radicals like Max Eastman were reasonably attacking modernism as “The Tendency toward Pure Poetry” (“In place of a criticism [“of life,” in Arnold’s sense], these poets are offering us in each poem a moment of life, a rare, perfect or intense moment, and nothing more”).<sup>35</sup> So Stevens, in saying now that he stood by pure poetry, insisted “at the same time” that “life is the essential part of literature” (L 288). Acknowledging “the common opinion” of his verse, that it was essentially decorative, he wished to counteract such a criticism by challenging the very terms *decorative* and *formal* (L 288). Asked to look back on his own “Comedian as the Letter C” (1922), he realized that, much as Malcolm Cowley had recently proposed in the last pages of



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*Exile's Return* (1934), there was a distinct cultural construction of the recent aesthetic past, a twenties for the thirties. Stevens judged the obsession with the sound of poetry in "Comedian" explainable by the fact that "subject," by which he meant content, had not been as important in the teens and twenties as it was in the thirties (L 294). With hindsight granted by just six months, he glanced back at "Mozart, 1935," and decided that it took up the issue of "the status of the poet in a disturbed society" (L 292).

In each cultural period – high modern, radical, wartime, postwar – Stevens wielded a stock response in part to fend off further queries from correspondents. Before the thirties his response essentially was, *I write poems to become more myself*. But immediately after the Burnshaw encounter, at the height of the radical moment, this line became: *I write poems in order to formulate my ideas about and to discern my relation to the world*.<sup>36</sup> (When I asked Stanley Burnshaw if he would comment on my suggestion "that Stevens changed his attitude toward his own poetry because of [Burnshaw's] political response to it," he replied: "[Stevens] did want to prove that he was of the world and that he was responding to what I was referring to as reality. I don't think there can be any doubt about it."<sup>37</sup>) Most important – and I will return in the second half of this book to the precise points of impact – Stevens was speaking for the first time of the poet's link to Burnshaw's sense of reality as interactive. A poet saw poetry as helping to create what it sought in the world of events. This incessant change in language's relation to that world was, in itself, a reason why the lyric poet could persist poetically "now," in this historically minded moment, both marking history and being marked by history's traces: a dialogism between foreground and background, between the poem and its sometimes explicitly posited *now*, devised not in spite of but because of contemporary "complexity" (L 300).

My argument takes its first cue from Stevens's own contingent sense of "complexity"; just when it was in the noncommunist writer's special interest to turn toward radicalism, however tentatively and self-servingly, it happened that it was in the special interest of communist writers to involve him or her. Such coincidental shifting, it must first be realized, would have surprised few cultural figures then in the know, much as the convergence might seem astonishing today. One need only confer with any of the many surviving fellow travelers willing to talk about their radicalizations to be reminded, as I was when interviewing the noted ethnic memoirist Jerre Mangione, that "nearly everyone associated with writing and publishing whom one knew and respected was interested in some form of radicalism – and communism was always at least in the background."<sup>38</sup> The interaction, moreover, between noncommunists like Stevens and the literary-political forces of their time – forces set routinely into motion by journal editors, other poets, and especially reviewers – was remarkably dynamic. The new historicists' vaunted problem of seeing the tree *and* the forest (rather than

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one for the other), of circulating notions of background and foreground, could not be more acute than in such an instance.<sup>39</sup>

Though it is not a matter confessed in print by the many otherwise perspicacious readers of Stevens's 1930s volumes, *Ideas of Order* (1935), *Owl's Clover* (1936), and *The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems* (1937), it has always seemed that for the purposes of studying the eminent modernist's defensive rhetoric, and to keep from losing one's own way in the tangle of the thirties' literary left, one had to steadily restrict oneself as a critic to *the modernist's* view of these extrapoetic forces. Such a procedure, while sensible if not unassailable, has given us just half the picture of the noncommunist's thirties. And it has reduced to simplicities the relation between, on one hand, the poet deemed utterly unique or uncommon and, on the other hand, what would seem to be the minor, ephemeral, even grubby, and finally inconsequential, aesthetic tactics used by mostly unremembered men and women. What does it matter, in assessments of figures like Williams, Moore, and Stevens still judged major a half-century later, if that common minority of poetic special interests behaves incorrigibly as a background? I have written *Modernism from Right to Left* believing that it matters a great deal. It is no less significant, I think, to come *at* singular poets like Stevens *from* that incorrigible, messy background, and (to mix and transpose the metaphor in this book's title) advance the analysis from back to front as well as right to left – in short, to find those sundry other poets', editors', and reviewers' arrogations of Stevens and modernism to have served their ends both perceived and unsuspected, even as (or perversely because) these ends seem forgettable in relation to Stevens's achievements or not nearly worth the tremendous effort and time required for documented retrieval. Yet in making literary-political use of him, after all, *they* constructed the setting in which he was read by still others, *and in which he read himself*. This is only most famously the case with the *New Masses* review provoking four-fifths of Stevens's longest poem. The same kind of effects, I will suggest along the way, result from the assaults by Orrick Johns on Moore, Willard Maas on E. E. Cummings, Mike Gold on Archibald MacLeish, Edwin Seaver on Horace Gregory, Eda Lou Walton on Robinson Jeffers, and Burnshaw, Johns, and H. H. Lewis on Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*.

There are many other such convergences of modernism and radicalism to be described, and this book is organized to do so. To imagine Stevens, the recently promoted, three-piece-besuited vice-president of The Hartford Accident & Indemnity Company, reading himself in the *Nation* in the early autumn of 1936 is, after all, an intriguing act of "recovery" best aided by particulars that tend to show that the editors of that fellow-traveling journal certainly knew what they were doing when they awarded their annual poetry prize to a work that Stevens later said expressed sympathy