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

Alan Filreis

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Part biography and part literary history, this book is about the experience of the American modernist poet Wallace Stevens in the 1930s. Stevens is generally thought to have antagonized, even enraged, the young literary radicals of the period; his long poem “Owl’s Clover” has been generally understood as a negative, even bitter response to leftist aesthetics. Using the archives of many little-known political poets, Alan Filreis offers a detailed description of various literary-political battles, in which the very texture of the positions taken up in the movement between left and right becomes available to us in the language of the participants. Filreis demonstrates that radicals knew and appreciated modernism more than has been recognized, and that Stevens’s poetry – as well as that of other then-eminent modernists – was significantly influenced by poets and critics on the left. *Modernism from Right to Left* shows that the interactions between eminent modernists – Stevens, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams – and upstart radicals – Stanley Burnshaw, T. C. Wilson, Ruth Lechlitner, Kenneth Fearing, Muriel Rukeyser, Willard Maas, and others – were far more dynamic than has been acknowledged during and beyond the eras of anticommunism. This book is a contribution to the history of the American 1930s as well as a novel approach to an oft-studied figure.

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ALAN FILREIS

University of Pennsylvania



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This book is lovingly dedicated to
Samuel H. and Lois Gainsburg Filreis

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Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality.

—Wallace Stevens

Ideas of Order was offered to the reading public of the thirties by a man not in the least ignorant of the issues or, for that matter, of the controversies and the codes.

—Stanley Burnshaw

A poem . . . is a kind of strategy for coping with a given scene or situation.

—T. C. Wilson, a radical poet, writing about Kenneth Burke

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