



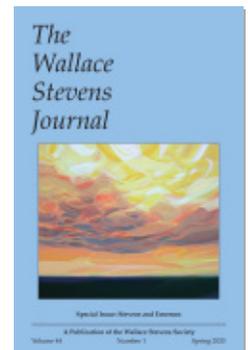
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Wallace Stevens and the Poetics of Modernist Autonomy by
Gül Bilge Han (review)

Andrew Goldstone

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Wallace Stevens and the Poetics of Modernist Autonomy.

By Gül Bilge Han. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

To discuss Wallace Stevens as an advocate of aesthetic autonomy, as Gül Bilge Han does in her monograph, would hardly seem to be doing him any favors at this stage in the history of criticism. The main current of literary scholarship today emphasizes the ways literature bears on history and politics. Defenses of art for art's sake look like outright rejections of the importance of such contexts, and any poet associated with the doctrine of autonomy is in danger of being dismissed as hopelessly hermetic or hopelessly reactionary. This critical climate is not particularly favorable to Stevens, a modernist of the "high" variety, a political non-participant and sometime explicit defender of ivory towers who wrote in a willfully idiosyncratic and highly oblique idiom.

Han directs her attention to Stevens's ivory towers and other images of artistic independence in order to reclaim this aspect of his poetic project for contextualizing scholarship. She argues that Stevens imagines poetry as a relatively separate and self-governing endeavor, but only in order to establish particular kinds of poetic relationships with his social world: he developed a "conception of aesthetic autonomy as a necessary condition for poetic engagement" during the course of the 1930s and early 1940s (4). In the poems of these years, says Han, Stevens worked through the tension between his poetry's aesthetic distance *from*, and its necessary connection *to*, a wider world in crisis.

As Han explains in a lucid and thorough introduction, this more qualified understanding of autonomy, which she calls "relational" (4), has become more prominent in scholarship on modernism over the last decade; she cites and builds on a number of scholars, the present reviewer included, who have sought to historicize modernist autonomy itself as a form of relation to, rather than an evasion of, the social world. Taking "Mozart, 1935" as a first example, Han urges us to recognize Stevens's advocacy of some version of poetry for poetry's sake while understanding that advocacy as responsive to the pressures of his times. And she rightly insists that this understanding would help to overcome any lingering opposition in Stevens scholarship between internal and contextual approaches, from both of which Han draws broadly.

The book is tightly focused on Stevens's career from *Ideas of Order* to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," which for Han marks the central phase in his thinking on autonomy. These writings also encompass the cultural context the book is most concerned with, the high-water mark for American leftist cultural criticism seeking to merge political radicalism and modernist experimentalism. When Han argues that Stevens thinks of his poetry relationally, she has in mind the kinds of relations debated within the Popular Front, above all that of the writer and the (potentially revolutionary) masses. Here she follows the lines laid down by Alan Filreis, whom she cites abundantly, while adding her own insightful and complex readings of the periodical context, especially the *Partisan Review*.

Chapter One characterizes Stevens's work in and around *Ideas of Order* as an exploration of seclusion and collective address, giving extended readings of "Re-Statement of Romance" from that volume and the uncollected 1934

poem "Secret Man." Han attends to the way that moments of privacy and intimacy may open onto wider address; the reading is particularly convincing when it comes to the ambiguous address of "Re-Statement." Chapter Two, on Stevens's "Relational Place-Making" (65), takes up the architectural tropes of his poetry of the 1930s. This chapter, which appeared in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* in article form (Fall 2016), aptly contrasts the secluded spaces of *Harmonium* with the buildings of *Ideas of Order* and *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. Han shows how the latter two volumes construct images of built enclosures that get opened up to a wider world by the forces of historical change; her two most convincing examples are the "shuttered mansion-house" of "A Postcard from the Volcano" and the "old casino" of "Academic Discourse at Havana" (CPP 128, 115).

Chapter Three, the longest, heroically addresses itself to the 1936 edition of "Owl's Clover" section by section. Probably not many readers of Stevens's poetry share Han's judgment that this poem is "perhaps" his "most intricate" (38), but her very thorough commentary on the poem's ekphrasis—its image of a statue variously disdained, transformed, criticized, moved, destroyed, and elevated as the poem goes along—does much to make the case for it as a significant text for Stevens's poetics. Han sees "Owl's Clover" as a poem of "aesthetic renewal" (95) that attempts to work out how the "ideal of aesthetic separation" can allow us to imagine an "aesthetically and politically engaged mode of collective subjectivity" (96). The final full chapter turns to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and a few poems from *Parts of a World* to suggest that despite the philosophical richness readers have long discovered in Stevens, it is just as important to recognize that "his poetry demarcates philosophical and poetic domains of thinking more distinctly than has generally been acknowledged" (142). This commitment was sharpened, Han argues, by the rise of logical positivism in Anglo-American philosophy; Stevens regarded the logical positivists as hostile to poetry and the imagination, prodding him to make rejoinders in prose and poetry in the name of aesthetic autonomy.

Not all the readings of individual poems are equally convincing; Han could have allowed for more indeterminacy and ambivalence in the political sympathies of the poems. Her account of Stevens's view of international or global politics minimizes the manifest limitations of his images of the non-American and the non-white. It is possible to acknowledge these limitations and yet to give the poetry its due, as Harris Feinsod does in his recent treatment of Stevens's language mixtures and his attitudes to inter-American relations in *The Poetry of the Americas: From Good Neighbors to Countercultures* (Oxford UP, 2017). Nonetheless, in aggregate Han builds a strong case that Stevens is committed to aesthetic autonomy as a means of social engagement throughout the period she focuses on. She scrupulously parses the language of Stevens's poems most explicitly concerned with artists' public positions, showing how regularly Stevens returns to relational autonomy as a solution to his poetic problems, with particular sensitivity to the spatial figures (buildings, elevations and depths, etc.) which pervade Stevens's poems on the issue. I imagine many other readers will also share my gratitude for her extensive commentary on the 1936 version of "Owl's Clover," a poem I have found it difficult to appreciate.

The book's limitation to the years 1934–42 would have been more convincing with some attention to the earlier and later parts of Stevens's career. Stevens reflects on autonomy from very early on, as in *Harmonium's* "Metaphors of a Magnifico," with its "old song / That will not declare itself" yet is "certain as meaning" (CPP 15). And his self-reflexive statements of poetics continue in the poems that follow "Notes" too; I would have liked to see Han take on "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," which "Displays the theory of poetry, / As the life of poetry" (CPP 415). The *Ideas of Order*—"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" phase may well be distinctive, but this is largely assumed and not proven in Han's book.

Han's interpretive approach is fundamentally thematic rather than formal. Though she attends closely to the poet's word choices and rhetorical figures, she has much less to say about Stevens's technique and the patterning of his forms. (A short but illuminating discussion of the form of "Notes" is an exception [156–57].) Han gravitates to the longer, more discursive poems, and one wonders whether Stevens's more compressed lyrics might not generically channel different versions of autonomy. More broadly, even though most theories of aesthetic autonomy, from Immanuel Kant to Pierre Bourdieu, give form a central role, Han leaves open the question of whether Stevens's thematic concern with autonomy has particular formal consequences.

The book's use of Jacques Rancière as a theoretical touchstone may be something of a limitation in this respect, since his thesis about the "distribution of the sensible" by the aesthetic (qtd. on 35) entails no obvious claim about form. None of the philosopher's statements provide much guidance in the analysis of particular works here. Han leaves me unconvinced of the value of Rancière's theses for literary scholarship, especially in comparison with the more empirically precise account of autonomy found in Rancière's rival Bourdieu and in the scholarship on modernism influenced by him. Indeed, Han's intermittent but acute attention to Stevens's literary affinities and rivalries nearly add up to an analysis of what Bourdieu would call his position in the literary field of the 1930s. One can nonetheless remain skeptical about Rancière's theories and still be largely persuaded by Han's account of Stevens's works and their relation to the historical context. Indeed, she acknowledges important differences between the poet and the philosopher, treating Stevens as an aesthetic theorist in his own right, a poet whose own thought is more sensitive to local historical context than the grand gestures of the philosopher are. In laying out a nuanced understanding of what the independence of poetic production might mean, Han also opens up new possibilities for contextualizing interpretations of Stevens that take his aesthetic commitments into full account.

Stevens scholarship certainly profits from *Wallace Stevens and the Poetics of Modernist Autonomy*. Single-author monographs are now rare; *first books* on single authors are rarer still. Appreciative readers of Stevens should take pleasure in seeing Cambridge's imprint on Han's book. I also hope, however, that the book will find a wider readership among those concerned with twentieth-century literature. Stevens looked for ways to address the most urgent questions posed by the social world without compromising his poetry's indepen-

dence, and that is one reason why literary history should not treat him as an isolated figure either.

Andrew Goldstone
Rutgers University, New Brunswick

Stand Still in the Light.

By Milton J. Bates. Georgetown, Kentucky: Finishing Line Press, 2019.

I have long admired the diverse talents of Milton J. Bates. After establishing himself as an eminent Stevens scholar in the 1980s with the publication of *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* and editions of Stevens's essays and notebooks, in the 1990s Bates turned to cultural studies and narrative theory in *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* and went on to co-edit a two-volume series for Library of America, *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism 1959–1975*. Then, yet another direction emerged more than a decade later: an ecological/historical/cultural study of the Bark River in Wisconsin that also adds to our understanding of the state, if not America, in *The Bark River Chronicles: Stories from a Wisconsin Watershed*. All the while he produced, seemingly with his left hand, scholarly articles and presentations on Stevens and others. And now this, *Stand Still in the Light*, a book of admirably accomplished poetry.

Like Wallace Stevens, who once observed that he was the same person whether handling law cases or writing poetry, Bates exhibits here the same powers of keen observation and elucidating description that mark his scholarly studies. The very title, *Stand Still in the Light*, invites one to pay attention, to be alert to one's surroundings, to notice that minor details, whether in the natural world, the Vietnam conflict, or an anecdote, can be illuminating. The technique that Bates most often employs, and one used expertly in all his writings, is narration. Bates is a master storyteller, and, although his stories in this volume are personal recollections, they are told with such precision and original expression that the reader shares in the experience.

In one of his poems, "Road Kill Retro-Loop," Bates describes seeing a dead deer beside the road and then rewinds the imagination's film to the moments leading up to the accident. He organizes the entire collection as a similar kind of backward look. He begins the first section with the present, living on the shores of Lake Superior, and then in three other sections reverses the record of his life to earlier times—from his travels to various countries and states, to his Vietnam war experiences, to his teens—before circling back to moments leading up to his retirement and the move north. There is just the slightest hint of the youth making the man, as in "Summer of '63," when, handicapped with a broken hand and begrudgingly staining the siding on the family's cabin, he discovers he is not alone: quail appear in the driveway, a woodchuck lumbers to the meadow, bats and nighthawks skim for insects at dusk, a whippoorwill rehearses its whistle. "Maybe you have to be broken just / enough to mend in ways you didn't know / you needed to mend" (69).