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

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

BY ALAN FILREIS

Author's note: In writing the book from which the following essay is abstracted, I need have gone no further than the George Arents Research Library. Of course I did go further in researching the literary politics of the American 1930s—to archives, such as Willard Maas's at the University of Texas, swelling with incoming letters left and right, as it were, papers and materials both literary and "ephemeral"—in my effort to study noncommunist modernists' responses to the radicals' challenge. But nowhere does one find, for this topic, so rich and varied an assortment of documents as at Syracuse, among them unpublished letters to and from Granville Hicks, Horace Gregory, Marya Zaturenska, Harry Roskolenko, Harold Rosenberg, Isidor Schneider, Stanley Burnshaw, Max Eastman, Jack Wheelwright, Ruth Lechlitner, Willard Maas, T. C. Wilson, Erskine Caldwell, Weldon Kees, Parker Tyler, Bryher, S. Foster Damon, Raymond Larsson, George Dillon, Robert Hillyer, K. T. Young, and Archibald MacLeish—to name only figures whose letters have advanced my work. Hardly less important are numbers of now-scarce leftist magazines such as Dynamo, Left Front, Cambridge Left, The Left, The Social Frontier, Vanguard, many of them acquired with the Granville Hicks Papers.—A. F.

In 1931, not quite a year into the Great Depression, Wallace Stevens and his publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, agreed that there ought to be a new edition of his first book, Harmonium (1923). Stevens decided to delete three poems and add fourteen. Most of these "new" poems had indeed been written after Stevens brought the manuscript of his first book to Knopf in December 1922, yet none had been written after 1924. But poetry, or rather the status of poetry, had changed a great deal during the seven years since Stevens had ceased to think of himself as a working poet. Imagining the
shock he felt when he realized what transformations had occurred is not difficult. While there is little hard evidence—no archival and slight textual—to support the point, it is reinforced by the very reticence of the poems with which Stevens began again in the early thirties after a long period of silence. I would contend that certain leftist uses of *Harmonium*, presuming he saw them, pushed him along. There were solemn radicalizations of “Sunday Morning”, such as Horace Gregory’s “Sunday Morning: Rotogravure Section”, which was obviously intended to show how far poets had come from wistful lingering over coffee and oranges, to anxious close reading of the Sunday supplements. Gregory’s imagined newspaper depicted one “inheritor of millions”, a scene that caused the speaker to contemplate

Intangibles of power
... written in ticker tape
on private yachts

and other such temporary contemporary defeats.1 Somewhat less harsh but not a bit less ill-tempered was Ettore Rella’s “Sunday Morning”. “[N]o pseudomartyr I”, Rella’s speaker declares, pondering ragged depression-struck charity collectors stationed on his city street, while he, meanwhile, sits aloft

on the edge of the endless space
where an unknown bird with enormous wings
descends in anapests and iambic unto “the dark place of Sunday”.2

Even in the view of conservative poets like the agrarian George Marion O’Donnell, an editor might now justifiably be condemned merely because “Too many of his poets are still *back in the twenties, worrying about matters of technique*”.3 (In this case the editor was Julian

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Symons, who would publish Stevens.) Glancing back from 1936—but recalling the recollection, in turn, in 1942—the German exile Klaus Mann found the American thirties’ sense of the twenties an odd but definitive phenomenon: “The same people who, ten years before, would have discussed the particularities of Picasso’s style or the images of James Joyce, and Proust, now tossed about . . . the names of union leaders, intricate statistics and cryptic abbreviations—CIO, WPA, CCC, SEC, AAA”. (Mann’s was itself, of course, typically a forties view of the thirties—a skepticism much easier to wield in wartime than earlier.)

A youthful but already well-established Malcolm Cowley, eyed by a still younger aspirant, Alfred Kazin, could seem editorially and personally to convey on one hand a “love of good writing” and on the other a tough “faith in revolution”. Cowley embodied the link between “the brilliant Twenties and the militant Thirties”. And for poets like Gregory, Cowley, William Carlos Williams, Archibald MacLeish, Edna Millay, Genevieve Taggard, Eda Lou Walton, Lola Ridge, Alfred Kreymborg, Gorham Munson, Maxwell Bodenheim, George Dillon—even Stevens’s old Harvard classmate Witter Bynner voted for William Z. Foster, the 1932 Communist candidate for president—to name only a few who in the thirties became attracted to the left after having written a very different kind of poetry earlier, October 1929 was a window through which one saw one’s earlier poetic self as narcissistic, over-anxious

4. As editor of Twentieth Century Verse. The works he published included two cantos from The Man with the Blue Guitar (3 [April–May 1937], [3]).
7. In the 1932 election Bynner eventually voted for Roosevelt, because, as he put it, the best way to move America toward socialism was to proceed “undercover” (Bynner to Arthur D. Ficke, 23 August 1932, Ficke Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University). For more on Stevens’s relationship with Bynner, see Glen MacLeod, Wallace Stevens and Company: The ‘Harmonium’ Years, 1913–1923 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 68; and Joan Richardson, Wallace Stevens: The Early Years (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 200–202, 336–40, 456–58. Bynner and Stevens were back in touch in the early thirties as letters at Harvard’s Houghton Library disclose.
about forms both traditional and broken, insufficiently prepared to “find an increased simplicity”, and thus incompletely aware of the extrinsic pressures that had been shaping—and sometimes distorting—poetry all along.

Stevens certainly had good reason for similar retrospection. But the difference between him and these other poets made all the difference, for they had continued writing and publishing through to the bitter end of the twenties. Their movements toward the new “engaged” position, some positively smooth (as with Kreymborg), some self-destructively herky-jerky (as with Bodenheim), might be judged by much younger doubters on the poetic left—poets who themselves had no twenties to look back on—as having given an “inevitable” shape to a modernist career.

Such a hopeful, evolutionist view, if applied to Stevens, seemed then, as now, to misread his career. From the perspective of 1931, he could not say that he came to the thirties either slowly or surely. The immediately preceding phase had been one of almost total poetic silence. Surveying the poems of *Harmonium* to decide which


9. Stevens’s critics have indeed had much to say about his hiatus. As Harold Bloom put the question: “What ended the poetry of a man of forty-five, who had done magnificent work, and what began it again when he was fifty-one?” (The Poems of Our Climate [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976], 68). Bloom argues that the last major effort of the twenties, “The Comedian as the Letter C”, was a crisis poem that failed to suggest a continuity for the “visionary capacity for response” (87). Thus, he argues, Stevens’s career was threatened until “the sun of March 1930 reillumined things for the master of evasions” (87). Refuting Bloom’s “Crossing of Solipsism” (2), Sidney Feshbach is typical of others who cite Holly Stevens’s explanation that the hiatus was caused by distractions in Stevens’s life: the birth of his first and only child, Holly, in 1924; the noise and limited space in the two-family house on Farmington Avenue, where the Stevenses lived until 1932; the fact that “his energy . . . went largely into his work at the insurance company” (Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens [New York: Knopf, 1966], 242; Feshbach, “Communications”, Wallace Stevens Journal 2 [Spring 1978]: 44–45). Of those who side with Holly Stevens’s view, and with Feshbach’s response to Bloom’s poetic thesis, Joan Richardson is most persuasive even as she adds four or five other reasons for the silence (see Wallace Stevens, A Biography: The Later Years, 1923–1955 [New York: William Morrow, 1988], espe-
to remove and which possibly to revise, he must have been pain­fully aware of the distance between the acclaimed modernist past (from “Sunday Morning” of 1915 to the final Harmonium poems of 1921 and 1922) and the poetic dormancy of the present, 1931. What mixed impression would be conveyed by the addition to this new edition of the “new” poems that were nearly as old as the old? Did the fourteen addenda truly “update” Harmonium for the crisis thirties?

The serious risk of a 1931 Harmonium was readers’ perception of abiding anachronism fully realizable before the project got under­way. “New England Verses”, written in early 192210 and first pub­lished in The Measure in 192411 but left uncollected, would have to endure comparison, if mistaken as “new”, with Williams’s “mottled”, low (but stylish) “facts”—

an american papermatch packet
closed . . .
mottled crust of the stained blotter
by an oystershell smudged
with cigarette ash . . .
words printed on the backs of
two telephone directories . . .
the printing out of line: portrait
of all that which we have lost12

10. That summer it was rejected by the New Republic. Letter from Ridgely Tor­rence, 14 July 1922, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.: Wallace Stevens Papers, WAS2324.
—or with one of his proletarian portraits:

A tramp thawing out
on a doorstep
against an east wall[.]

Compare these, Williams’s “Simplex Sigilum Veri: A Catalogue” and “The Sun Bathers”, to the following Stevensian stanza, outmoded from tone to foot—one of the “new” “New England Verses”:

Ballatta dozed in the cool on a straw divan
At home, a bit like the slenderest courtesan.

“Dozed” conveyed comfortable indolence; “At home” an inwardness; “slenderest” not famished but elegant or well-toned; even “a bit like” is diffident of the merest force in simile. These contexts were, of course, controlled by Stevens, but nonetheless set off (six years belatedly) on their own politically incorrect course along a path of reception he could not guide.

Radicalized readers and poet-reviewers, Horace Gregory among them, might comprehend these aphoristic two-liners—“New England Verses” is composed of sixteen titled couplets—as twenties verse taking a deliberate crack at the thirties. And whereas “New England Verses” would neatly anticipate the epigrammatic style of Stevens’s “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” (written at the end of 1934), it is important to understand what the earlier aphoristic condensations do not say. What they do not say largely depended on the literary-political context provided them by publication in 1931. Most readers of the new edition could not have known of the seven-year-old Measure version of “New England Verses”; instead they would naturally assume a recent date of composition. One can read these couplets as having constructed a characteristic high-modern poem incidentally becoming an uncharacteristic depression poem; in so doing, one partially reconstructs how Stevens’s “new” work struck readers who were

themselves just then developing a keen collective sense of good and bad cultural timing.

The poem deliberately avoids the earnest tenor that Stevens at this point associated with social reference, and provides, provocatively, an alternative manner. If to any degree “New England Verses” manifests those conditions of its making about which, by 1931, it was obviously silent, the implication was that it carried on Stevens’s behalf some sign of knowing about conditions ignored. Take as an example couplet iv, the companion piece to another called “Soupe Aux Perles” (couplet iii):

**SOUPE SANS PERLES**

I crossed in ’38 in the *Western Head*
It depends on which way you crossed, the tea-belle said.

The tea-belle is obviously scrutinizing the credentials of an elder who tells her of a journey across the Atlantic many years earlier. Her opening “It” is contingent on whether the speaker, in first person, had crossed to or from the United States. The social standing of the elder will vary from one direction to the other, as the reasons for passage—for instance, immigration on one hand, American’s Old World sight-seeing on the other—might have differed.

To read this poem as, say, Horace Gregory or Eda Lou Walton would have read it in 1931, it helps to assume some vague caste-conscious critique of American life—one Stevens might have wanted to concede, to be sure: the culture was being commanded by a querulous new rich, a position embodied tonally in the sharp, upstart questioner. The title has helped place both the speaker and the tea-belle economically—both, it would seem, on the decline; the scene is set, after all, by soup *without* pearls. Judging only from two lines one cannot know if the elder’s remark is uttered as a matter of fact (to which the tea-belle would be responding pertly), or if his declaration conveys a fumbling attempt to impress her. In the latter case her retort exposes the crucial element of his story that he might hope to hide: he crossed the *wrong* way on the *Western Head* if he wishes now to qualify as impressive.
Looking backward through October 1929 to 1924 at the patriarchic companion to soup without pearls, with an eye to revising the poem, Stevens also would have re-read this:

**SOUPE AUX PERLES**

Health-o, when cheese and guava peels bewitch
The vile antithesis of poor and rich.

What Stevens did not do as he revised this poem for his new but belated edition is for me its only appealing aspect. The change he did make is one of just two slight (and evidently incidental) revisions for Knopf's 1931 *Harmonium*. Certainly the irony of "vile antithesis" raised the new, powerful version of contingent value: if we may judge from contemporaries, especially Gorham Munson and John Gould Fletcher, who had put forward the thesis of Stevens's aestheticism, his verbal acuteness and emotional lassitude—a thesis that stuck—*it is clear that the 1923 readership did not fail to appreciate the dandyist irony. For them the aphorism might have been paraphrased as follows: at the sort of occasion on which diners don pearls, delicacies serve (in a manner of speaking) to bridge that unfortunate gap between haves and have-nots; to such an American crossing, one toasts and salutes, Good health!*

The irony was so strong that a deliberate liberal illogic of cause and effect—*when one culturally pleasant thing appears, another culturally unpleasant thing simply disappears*—is overcome by the extraordinary imperviousness of the statement's maker. The thing made to disappear, moreover, is not a presence but a gap. As the speaker's snobbery deliberately puts off a reader with the couplet's excessive parading of devices—the French title, the archaism of "Health-o", the comic tonal harmony of "bewitch" and "rich"—in order to understand what is not spoken about class difference, the reader must ignore the obvious fact that the "poor" remain unaffected by the consumption of "guava peels" by the "rich". It perhaps needs

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saying at this point that it was possible in the thirties to be thunderously denounced for using French, regardless of context or one’s revolutionary credentials: “Why don’t you speak in the language of the Mexican peasants and workers?” an editor of the Daily Worker shouted at Diego Rivera, who was trying to deliver a speech in French. “Why do you address us in the effete language of the effete European intellectuals?” Given this tense atmosphere, I read Stevens’s poem as a calculated counteroffense. Thus it carried certain risks. The irony could not function unless the reader could feel reasonably assured that most other contemporary readers—or, in other words, both “rich” and “poor”—could not possibly miss the rich irony of “vile”. If by 1931 the poem’s very deliberate act of estrangement, the obvious lack of concern for distinctions between “rich” and “poor”, would cause the reader fully appreciative of “rich” to be more than a little anxious about such a reflection of willful detachment from material conditions, the poem’s irony simply would not function as it once had.

For one thing, the twenties-style irony derived its strength from the totalizing urge of the couplet form. But in the thirties, verse was often said to repudiate such a closed, aphoristic design. Internal evidence surely suggests that as Stevens pondered Harmonium from this somewhat new perspective, he understood the formal outmoding of poetry like “New England Verse”, as such repudiation laid the footing for one of the counterarguments included in his improvised dialogue poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar” six years later. Not incidentally, the later poem is constructed of couplets so flexible and open, and so relentlessly enjambed, as to refute in itself claims of stanzaic limitation.

We do not know what immediate reasons Stevens had for revising “Soupe Aux Perles”. Here is the revised version:

Health-o, when ginger and fromage bewitch
The vile antithesis of poor and rich.

16. The scene was remembered by Albert Halper, and must thus be reckoned with a sense of Halper’s hatred of the communists by the time he wrote his memoir Good-bye, Union Square: A Writer’s Memoir of the Thirties (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 95.
The difference between “ginger and fromage” and “cheese and guava peels” is extraordinarily slight, so slight that one wonders why Stevens bothered at all. Yet the change is telling, for it would be absurd to conclude that Stevens was not aware of the extraordinary insignificance of his alteration when he inked this revision—nearly as absurd as arguing that he did not know what line he was not altering: the only other line in the poem. The revision is so overtly small that it seems to call even greater attention to the idea left unrevised, the vile antithesis sustained. It upholds the sentiment conveyed originally by the speaker once profoundly ironical, once slightly wealthier. This particular utterance, however outmoded, remains silent about the rhetorical conditions that once made it tenable (twenties excess, economic as well as tonal). Insofar as it expresses cultural urges to close the space between poor and rich—one supposes it can be argued that “guava peels” suggests a luncheon more sumptuous than does “ginger”—then the distinction is so slight as to reinforce the poem’s willingness to leave the gap unbridged. In that case, it would have been better left alone. To the extent that all revisions of poems represent attempts to smooth over flaws, later seen as earlier unseen, this particular adjustment thematizes the desire to fill in social and aesthetic breaches exactly as in the poem—for, brought over into a depression edition, the gap remains wide as ever, its continued health toasted.

Perhaps when Stevens put together his new Harmonium the change in the atmosphere between 1924 and 1931 remained imperceptible, although I am arguing that he was well aware of the shift, even while proceeding poetically this little way into the depression as if unaware. In either case, the critical response to the book left no doubt about the changes. It was just then becoming feasible, in fact, to chart with accuracy such responses from left to right. Reviewers in this early-depression period sought incessantly to make clear which side they were on—to use the apt ideological phrase—often at the expense of the book under consideration. Reviewing the emended Harmonium for the New York Herald Tribune books section, under the ambiguous title “Highly Polished Poetry”, Horace Gregory assumed that the added poems were written “during the intervening eight years”, suggesting—how could
he have known otherwise?—continuity and productivity. Yet he found that “The general impression remains the same and the polished surfaces are still unbroken” (emphasis added). This was a powerful implication, and handy. When radical poets subsequently wrote about Stevens—even when, as in the hands of H. R. Hays, the analysis eventually confirmed Stevens as “among the two or three best poets which the 1920’s produced”—they almost always began with Horace Gregory’s assumption that one would always know precisely where to find and place Stevens: “[T]he consistent polish and unchanging viewpoint manifested throughout [Harmonium] indicate that it may be considered a definitive example of his work. Any subsequent writing may add to his output, but it will probably not indicate a change in his personality.”17

To arrive at his view of Stevens’s sameness, Gregory first quoted a revision, the new, shorter version of “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad” (first published 1924), in such a way as to suggest that its author might become “less diffident”, but then again he might just as easily choose diffidence again.18 Gregory then suggested that Wallace Stevens will not allow himself to grow beyond the limitations which he has imposed upon his talents. He remains static. His world, a civilized world in which all voices fall to a whisper and the expression of the face is indicated by a lifting of the eyebrow, is complete.

18. Here are the lines Gregory quotes in the review:
   One might in turn become less diffident,
   Out of such mildew plucking neater mould
   And spouting new orations of the cold.
   One might. One might. But time will not relent.
   (Collected Poems, p. 96)
Since his criticism presupposed the inadequacies of the “civilized world” to which Stevens belonged, Gregory did not by the word “complete” mean to commend the poet. Only a few years earlier this word, applied to verse, might have been high praise indeed. For now a poetic “world” depicted as sufficient unto itself—or as “Highly Polished”, per Gregory’s title—could not possibly be responsive to the broken, depressed, and chaotic world beyond.

But Gregory’s nascent political thesis—that Stevens betrayed his talent by reserving it for a “world” where, in Gregory’s words, “melodies are sweet . . . and modulate to a dying fall and disappear in a rustle of silk” and where one feels “the immaculate top hat and stick are always” present—did not yet yield the fully radicalized criticism of Gregory’s own New Masses essay of 1937, by which time, as poetry editor of that weekly, Gregory seemed to one communist writer to hold “sole dominance in . . . the left-wing poetry movement” (an exaggeration, surely, but a telling one). By then, six years after Stevens’s reemergence, Gregory—restored to good graces at the New Masses despite a drubbing received a few years earlier—recognized that “political poetry as such cannot be divorced from other kinds of poetry” and, in a mood of revealing self-estrangement, quoted his own earlier judgment as having been largely mistaken. Given the abundant, comprehensive Horace Gregory Papers housed and precisely catalogued in the Arents Library at Syracuse University, it is now possible for scholars of the literary left to discern in Gregory’s case, perhaps most suggestively of all, how such self-estrangement conditioned radical standing.

(Deviating from the accepted line in an essay, “One Writer’s Position”, Gregory nonetheless avowed that “the Communist Party has proved to me again and again that it is the only group retaining a hope for the future”, and confessed that he stood “somewhere


20. Reading Gregory ideologically is an important and difficult task for the literary historian; popular-front communists supported him, while Trotskyites called him a “reactionary liberal” as Albert Halper did (Good-bye, Union Square, 136).
outside the circle of all groups”.21 One of several enraged replies, Meridel LeSueur’s “The Fetish of Being Outside” asked, “[W]hy want to be an outsider when you see and admit sight of the Promised Land as Gregory does?”22) Here, then, is part of Gregory’s 1931 judgment revised for 1937: “Wallace Stevens’s sensibilities in writing verse had made it possible for him to view the world about him with singular acuteness”. To Gregory, as editor of the New Masses, Stevens’s vision was “dimmed by the effort to explain his ‘position’ in a medium ill-suited” to the crisis.23 Indeed even the 1931 piece ended with a hopeful view. Precisely because Stevens knows so well the civilized world of whispers and raised eyebrows, because his poems are “impeccable arrangements”, Gregory’s early-thirties Stevens was capable of observing capitalism in crisis. In his poetry one saw the effects of “the civilized artist thrust head first into modern society”, the aptitude of a person with a sharp eye and ear and a compelling interest in small verities. This politically susceptible Stevens was indeed the poet who copied out Desmond McCarthy’s line on Arnold Bennett: “The mere habit of recording experience increases the chance of not having lived in vain”.24 It was a habit surely useful in time of cultural emergency, now that, as Gregory put it, the “trained observer who gazes with an intelligent eye upon the decadence that follows the rapid acquisition of wealth and power” might catch up to the times.25 As Jerre Mangione has noted in his memoir of the period—Mangione was writing of his close friend Kenneth Burke but the point nicely characterizes Gregory’s half-critical, half-hopeful sense of Stevens—it was nearly

enough to use one’s writing to “emphasize the negative aspects of life under capitalism, such as indolence [and] dissipation.”26 To notice this indolence was implicitly a political good. But what of representing it? That question was not yet being systematically asked of lyric poetry.

Other judgments of the 1931 edition bear similar marks of ideological confusion, a puzzlement created, I think, by the difference between general (though sometimes grudging) admiration for Stevens’s virtuosity in the early twenties on the one hand, and, on the other, a still-vague, emergent sense of critical discrimination appropriate to the grimmer times. Eda Lou Walton, a poet motivated by an urban liberalism that soon turned toward radicalism,27 whose companionship with Henry Roth brought her in contact with young proletarian novelists,28 was asked to review the new Stevens for the Nation. She could not keep from slipping into past tense (“here was a poet of the senses”) even as she was appraising a

26. Jerre Mangione, An Ethnic at Large: A Memoir of America in the Thirties and Forties (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983; first published 1978), 266. This supports the judgment of Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, who note that communists in the early thirties, working with the so-called “Third Period” sectarian policy, “strove to create a picture of a capitalist world infinitely worse than it already was”; interestingly, this left noncommunist writers with the opportunity of providing descriptions of social “sickness” to the right of the communist policy, “emphasiz[ing] negative aspects” of American life, and yet able to claim relative neutrality. Despite the communists’ “picture” of capitalism actually “worse than it already was”, Howe and Coser point out, “in 1930 and 1931 there could hardly be any point in exaggerating the sickness of American society” (The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919–1957) [Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1957], 189).

27. In the late twenties Walton’s efforts to put together an anthology of poetry about urban existence—“a kind of symphony of city life”, she told Poetry magazine—gave her an extraordinary opportunity to meet an array of “poverty stricken” urban poets otherwise unknowable. She began urging editors like Harriet Monroe to publish poems by various proletarian protégés, such as one nineteen-year-old “factory girl with almost no training” whose “emotions are fairly clear” because “[s]he is poverty stricken” (letters from Eda Lou Walton to Harriet Monroe, 2 August 1928, 6 January 1932, 16 March 1932, Poetry Papers, Box 26, folder 7, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago).

poet known from a single book in two very similar versions. It was as if the revised edition of his only book signaled a position from which Stevens must have moved—along with so many others including the reviewer herself—despite Stevens’s having produced just the one volume. Saying nothing that would imply a politically unconscious development, then, Walton instinctively projected onto Stevens in 1931 a poetic self that would be judged wholly anew. She noticed that he had “grown slightly more autumnal”, even though in providing her readers such bibliographic information as she had at hand, she also remarked that the exclusions were largely incidental and the additions contributed more of the same old Stevens. Walton did notice that “The Silver Plough Boy” (1915) had been “repudiated” for the new edition, and speculated that this was because it typified the outmoded strain, “meaningless pretty imagistic verse”:

A black figure dances in a black field.  
It seizes a sheet, from the ground, from a bush, as if spread there by some wash-woman for the night  
It wraps the sheet around its body, until the black figure is silver. . . .

The “repudiat[jon]” had not been complete, some “pretty” poems having survived to the thirties intact; Walton felt compelled to repeat the old saw about the poet’s cold exteriors, his self-protections. Still, in updating the Munson-Fletcher thesis to the depression, Walton, like Gregory, vaguely anticipated a criticism she seemed to expect would soon be leveled against Stevens: he ought to inveigh less equivocally against misery. She quoted him (out of context), in expectation of what would be, but was not quite yet, the liberal-left critique: Stevens “will not cry out in bitterness”, she concluded. She was using Stevens to argue against those to her left who insisted that poets “play the ‘flat historic scale’ of memory” and “take momentary delight in ‘doleful heroics’”. After defending Stevens against her own detractors who would have him exter-

nalize his bitterness, Walton then argued against calling Stevens a dandy on the grounds that indeed his poems portended “[h]is sincerity”. He might, after all, play some “historic scale”—one that avoided historical flatness.30

Raymond Larsson, a poet who would soon become closely associated with communist writers,31 was at this point no less confounded about Stevens than Gregory and Walton. Reviewing the 1931 edition for The Commonweal, under the revealing title “The Beau as Poet”, Larsson began with a definition of “objective” verse completely at odds with the growing use of the term for a new poetic -ism answering the altered world of much-depreciated things. If “Mr. Stevens’s poems are objective” and “deal of objects [sic]”, such objects do not quite convey the precise cultural currency of Kenneth Fearing’s “pow, Sears Roebuck”;32 Kenneth Patchen’s “mile of Camel butts”;33 Herman Spector’s

\[
\text{tang of wrigley’s gum:} \\
\text{THE FLAVOR LASTS . . .} \\
\text{an idea of vengeance} \\
\text{THE FLAVOR LASTS}^{34}
\]

30. Eda Lou Walton, “Beyond the Wasteland”, Nation 133 (9 September 1931): 263–64. She was quoting from Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”: “I shall not play the flat historic scale” (Collected Poems, 14).

31. He and Horace Gregory, close friends, frankly discussed politics and poetry in their lively letters, although these discussions finally left Larsson unconvinced in 1933 that Gregory’s “position as a man” cannot be reconciled with Gregory “as a member of the Communist party” (letter, 11 July 1933, Gregory Papers, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University); Larsson nonetheless admired Gregory’s communist poetry, while lamenting the “impurity” of some poems in No Retreat. Later he befriended Richard Wright (undated letter [1938?] to Willard Maas and Marie Menken, Maas Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University).


34. Herman Spector, “Timeclock”, first published in The Left: A Quarterly Review of Radical and Experimental Art 1, no. 2 (Summer & Autumn 1931): 44–46
or Muriel Rukeyser’s “billboard world of Chesterfields” (in a poem aptly called “Citation for Horace Gregory”)—typical poetic borrowings strongly suggesting the new poetic desire to merge American poetry with the contemporary world of (as Stevens would somewhat misleadingly say of Williams) cheap bottles, newspapers, and soda ads. Stevens’s “objects” were rather, to Larsson, a conservative’s acquisitions, his “secure, certain, unchanging” holdings. Larsson’s modernism still found “in the world of things something akin to security”. His rock-solid Stevens, enviable insofar as he invested lyric energies in a world resistant to change, was nonetheless confused with the altogether different Stevens that Larsson clung to, a poet whose taste was no less “personal” in 1931 than before, and no less exotic—hardly “objective” even in Larsson’s very broad sense.

Of several explicitly conservative reviews the new Harmonium received, Morton Zabel’s is the one surely worth noting. This commentary revealed already the defensive antipolitical politics forced upon Poetry magazine in its last years under Harriet Monroe’s editorship, a mainstream modernism defined by the new mode that would itself seek to challenge the aesthetic experiments Monroe had promoted since 1912. Through the end of the thirties Zabel defended modernism against materialist encroachments, such as Bernard Smith’s radical literary history Forces in American Criticism (1939), which Zabel deemed guilty of a “crudity of sympathy that keeps [Smith] in petty fear of admitting . . . sensibility as a critical instrument of infinitely greater importance . . . than popular or political passions”—a view that was not itself, evidently, a popular passion of an earlier day. Zabel’s evaluation of Stevens, published in Poetry in the December 1931 issue, made clear that from this point no praise of Wallace Stevens could be printed without sentences, even whole paragraphs, devoted to anticipating and

(issues of The Left in Horace Gregory Papers at Syracuse).
disarming a dissenter’s voice—a voice, it is important to note, that had not yet been clearly or widely heard. For editor Zabel, defend­ing Stevens against an easily imagined detractor was central to his own surprisingly uncertain situation at Poetry. If he was to maintain the stability Monroe had built for the journal—securing the publi­cation of Stevens’s “Like Decorations”, for instance, shored up his position there in 1934—Zabel would have to imply in his editorial decisions and in his many reviews that the modernist revolution urged on American verse by Poetry was still a revolution and that its refuge remained Chicago.

To a far greater extent than Walton’s, then, Zabel’s language at all points implied a response to the anticipated attack. Unless he was protesting too much, why, in praising Stevens’s “authority of instinctive symbolism and method”, would the editor allow that the poems might seem to some critics “in these calmer days” to be in hindsight merely “the trickery of a topical vaudeville”? What unrest was Poetry ignoring with Zabel’s these calmer days? Moreover, he insisted, such hindsight (whose hindsight?—the detractors are unnamed) only deformed the ten-year-old Florida poems from Harmonium, “Fabliau of Florida”, “Nomad Exquisite”, “O Florida, Venereal Soil”, “Floral Decorations for Bananas”, by cutting them to fit today’s (read passing) lean historicist fashions. In fact, Zabel argued—unnecessarily, it would seem, from his own point of view—that Stevens’s “style was not a conjuror’s garment but an ex­pression for ideas of no given date”.

Zabel’s revision of Munson’s dandyism thesis, from Munson’s apparently definitive essay in the Dial of November 1925,39 merely served to give the indicted aestheticist Stevens yet another hearing, but now in the context of a conservative argument. Zabel did re­serve special praise for Munson’s idea that Stevens’s poems offer the cure to “fear of decrepitude”.40 Going a significant step beyond

40. Zabel notes here that this “is his [Munson’s] important contribution to the elucidation of Mr. Stevens’s quality” (152). Zabel’s citation of Munson would seem, at least to Munson, to be especially ironic since Munson was chief among
Larsson, Zabel had trouble with Munson’s use of “dandy”, though not in the least with the presumption of Stevens’s self-sufficiency. This was unfortunately understood to be a “dubious corollary” to the misplaced invective against American acquisitiveness, the misleading “notion that ‘the American nation drives passionately toward comfort’.”

Zabel’s implication was that Stevens’s cure for the fear of cultural degeneration had nothing whatever to do with defending Americans’ addiction to consumerism before the crash. “Dandyism” unnecessarily suggested style without conviction. Despite the vigorous revision of the Stevens-as-dandy theory of the twenties, Zabel’s updated use of it merely reiterated the general view in terms that would apparently be more palatable to those whose objections to Stevens Zabel could only then imagine. Indeed, he went so far as to name “realism” as Stevens’s greatest strength. This was a shrewd move, since it placed Stevens squarely with others who were calling on poets, no less than novelists, to present themselves as “incarnation[s] of our Zeitgeist” (so one critic described Edna Millay).41 In this view, realism was the poetic -ism that could save Stevens’s images from excess, his wit from parading devices, and “his morality from the illusory intellectual casuistry which betrayed most of his [early modern] colleagues”. Zabel thus staked out for Stevens a middle ground between, on one hand, the poet expecting poems to induce social change and, on the other, the poet using imagination to order conceptual chaos and thus sustain the illusion that things were all right as they are. “Mr. Stevens never urged the idea of obliterating danger by opposing it.”42

Stevens’s response to Zabel, conveyed to Monroe, was courteous, but it was not quite the endorsement Monroe evidently thought it was, in view of her (and Zabel’s) need to please Stevens and, more important, to have Stevens stand by them in hard times. His handwritten note began: “I suppose that one ought to take no more notice of a good review than of a bad one”—not the most direct way of saying Zabel’s was indeed “a good review”:

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42. Zabel, “The Harmonium of Wallace Stevens”, 152.
[A]nd yet to be free to thank you for the fact that there was any review at all, or that the one in Poetry was of that character all round. I am really astonished that reviewers take so much pains, because my concern is not with my soul let alone with the grand soul which is often the field of analysis.

Looking past these elevated equivocations, Monroe scribbled on Stevens’s envelope and passed the letter along to Zabel: “Z read—W. S. likes your review—a great honor”.43

The Wallace Stevens who was partly reinvented for the thirties by a “high” modernism held over from boom to bust is the poetic figure against which the literary left would soon launch attack, to which, in turn, Stevens would react by, in his words, “heading left” himself—a remarkable and somewhat surprising turn of events, as it were, that led Stevens to his longest poem, “Owl’s Clover” (1936). This was by no means a counterproductive circle of reputation and response. Stevens’s radical readers reacted to his poetic claims as endorsed by conservative supporters—such as, aptly, Zabel in Willard Maas’s case and Monroe in Stanley Burnshaw’s, and (erroneously) Marianne Moore in T. C. ("Ted") Wilson’s—no less than they reacted to those poetic claims as we generally read them several poetic epochs later, free now of many particular literary-political tensions long since dissipated (although, of course, bound by others).

My point is that the eminent noncommunist modernist—Stevens, I am arguing, is typical—sought and stood on the ground of political reception being cleared for him. Such a position defined the thinking and feeling aroused in and by poems Stevens wrote after the anachronism of the “new” Harmonium was made critically evident as such: poetry that he then claimed, not surprisingly, was originally responsive to contemporary trends and forms. When he began, at that very point, to take up writing again after a seven-year hiatus in which he wrote almost no verse, the “world” seemed as never before an inextricable combination of compelling

43. Letter (with envelope) from Stevens to Monroe, 4 January 1932, Morton Zabel Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago.
“actual” conditions, as discernible through newspapers and his work as surety and fidelity claims attorney at The Hartford Accident & Indemnity Company (the United States gone economically and perhaps morally bankrupt), and readily accessible critical construction (the new poetic left awaiting noncommunist modernist’s response to that bankruptcy). The productive interaction between Stevens’s poems and even his most reductive reviewers in the thirties was fuller and more complex than at any other period, principally because it served him and them as a precise homologue for the modernist collaboration with political fact.