

Apophatic Auden, Abstract Stevens: From Kierkegaard to Cézanne in The Sea and the Mirror and The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet.

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Edward Ragg

Wallace Stevens Journal

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 37, Number 2, Fall 2013

pp. 199-223

10.1353/wsj.2013.0021

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Apophatic Auden, Abstract Stevens:

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Introduction

A CURSORY SURVEY of the careers of W. H. Auden and Wallace Stevens might lead one to assume these two poets shared little in common—at least by the early 1940s, when the English Auden, transplanted to the States, had embraced Christianity and was occupying an ambitiously professional, if polemical, place in American letters, while the American Stevens was exploring an essentially secular scrutiny of “abstraction” with only the occasional public appearance on his native turf for the odd lecture or two (“The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” also qualifying as an “odd lecture” both in its subject matter and performative qualities).¹

However, on closer inspection, especially considering “The Sea and the Mirror” and Stevens’ similarly “experimental” lecture, we witness two poets seeking novel voices, almost new modes of expression, in that period, influenced by the Second World War, in which modernism reconfigured itself. That is, if early modernism was colored by an avant-garde replete with manifestos and the attempt to “make it new” in just about any medium—an overall cultural phenomenon marked by the disturbing modernity of the Great War—the poets and artists who survived to experience a second global conflict were by the early forties preoccupied by crises of faith (“religious” and “secular”) in which the validity of anything, poetry included, was debatable.

Auden inherited his sense of modernism, at least in English, primarily from T. S. Eliot; and, born in 1907, came to maturity early as *the* leading English poet of the 1930s. Auden quickly investigated poetry’s and the poet’s roles in the public domain in the hilarious “Letter to Lord Byron” (1936), among other socially and politically engaged works (ACP 79–113).² As Aidan Wasley has observed (2), it was significant, therefore, that the

first poem Auden wrote on emigrating to the US in January 1939 was “In [End Page 199] Memory of W. B. Yeats” with its richly ambiguous declaration that “poetry makes nothing happen” (ACP 248)—that is, poetry cannot compete for attention alongside the socially and politically momentous, but its value consists precisely in its differentiation from “popular” media (even representing a resistance to making things “happen”). Poetry “survives,” rather, as “A way of happening, a mouth” (ACP 248), as Yeats’s *oeuvre* by turns public and private attests. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Auden devised new “ways of happening” in the explicit “mouths” of his dramatic 1940s poems, which became themselves representative forms of survival both poetic and Christian.

The older Stevens, needless to say, *contributed* to early modernism: in *Poetry* and other little magazines, stimulated by the 1913 Armory Show and the Arensberg circle in New York. Out of these influences—from Duchamp to *Others*—Stevens fostered the avant-garde, dandy-esque poems of *Harmonium* only to struggle with tailoring his verse to the social pressures of the Great Depression in *Ideas of Order* (1935) and *Owl’s Clover* (1936), before overcoming his wariness of his own increasingly abstract proclivities in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937).

However, as I have argued elsewhere, it would take Stevens until *Parts of a World* (1942) and *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) to have the full courage of his abstract convictions, realizing a poetry that might embrace his “reality-imagination complex” (L 792) rather than suffer from that quandary (although Stevens would jettison his overtly abstract early 1940s vocabulary precisely as he absorbed the aesthetic lessons of abstraction). The Stevens of the early forties is a poet experimenting with a new poetic in poems that feature a novel textual speaker—what I term his “idealist ‘I’”—and in those early parts of *The Necessary Angel* where his prose ruminations stylize various “voices” pitched against the debilitating of modern conflict or “reality” (see [Ragg 3–6](#), 110ff.).

If Stevens, therefore, struggled more than Auden in defending the poet from the charge of escapism vis-à-vis the nominally *real* world, then

both poets, by the early forties, would reassess poetry's cultural value in face of unprecedented global catastrophe...

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