

Idea and the Aristotelian concept of wholeness—precisely the targets of deconstruction.

Shaviro distinguishes his reading of Stevens from J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive approach by echoing these lines from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "It was not a choice / Between, but of"—but of "the whole, / The complicate, the amassing harmony" (232n7). It is this idea of the whole (which is severely problematized in the later poetry) that becomes the basis of Shaviro's theological interpretation of Stevens. From this perspective, Stevens writes a poetry of metamorphosis that functions in complicity with the larger metamorphoses of the complicate whole. The human imagination or desire is identified with the "universal 'will to change'" (222; partly a quotation from Stevens) and ultimately with the idea of fate or necessity, the "will of wills" (230; quotation from Stevens). Thus, the "wholly private movement of desire . . . is already latent in the natural world" (224). The ultimate reach of Stevens's poetry renews the "great affirmations of Nietzsche" that there is "nothing besides the whole" and that humankind is one with the "innocence of becoming" (230; partly a quotation from Nietzsche).

That there is a Nietzschean dimension to Stevens's poetry is not in question. Many critics have discussed this relation. What is in question is whether Shaviro's critical model is adequate to deliver a postmodern Stevens. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Stevens's later poetry is the concept of the poem as a theme. This meditation on the idea of language increasingly dominates these later poems and threatens to eclipse the poet's sense of living wholeness as well as his dichotomy between imagination and reality. Such issues, however, are canceled out by Shaviro's approach, which presents Stevens as an unmeditative writer who produces a "nonsense poetry" (232n10; quotation from Hugh Kenner). Thus, Shaviro valorizes a metamorphic space that "fills the being before the mind can think" (222; quotation from Stevens). Like most other commentators, Shaviro reads Stevens's poetry as if it embodied the idealized picture of poetry that Stevens sometimes endorses.

Stevens's poetry, however, remains steadfastly meditative. It is an important anticipation of the provocative interaction of poetry and philosophy that energizes the current critical scene. Stevens no doubt celebrates the "force of being alive" (227), but this is not the essential "background or context" of his poetry (232n2). His later poetry in particular problematizes this living world. Shaviro admits that the world described by this poetry is "inescapably linguistic" (230) but denies that language is Stevens's "ultimate horizon" (232n10). For Stevens, though, the case is not so simple. His late paradigmatic allegiances remain divided between nature and language models.

In these later poems the logic of difference is not re-

solved in the "amassing harmony" of a "multiple, untotalizable 'unity'" (232n4); it traces instead to this paradigmatic uncertainty. Being "part [of everything] is an exertion that declines," Stevens observes and Shaviro notes (225). But for Shaviro this recognition is not an acknowledgment of separation from the organic whole but rather an affirmation of the "relation of part to whole." For the Stevens of the later poems, however, there are *two* possible wholes, the poem and the world, and although he tries to "mate" them (in "A Primitive like an Orb"), they continue to the end to remain at odds. Perhaps this is why Shaviro's "new kind of unity" lacks unification and why "Stevens's poetry of unlimited affirmation does not assert anything" (229). Indeed, such inflated notions of unity and affirmation remain empty.

The space of Stevens's late poetry is irreducibly double or plural, a scene viewed through the bifurcated optics of the poet-philosopher. But this doubleness is less a cause of impotence than the unlimited affirmation that Shaviro celebrates. Stevens's late meditation on language leads him away from his organic paradigm of earth and toward the human city of history (as in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"), a city that remains alive not as a multiple unity but as an ever-problematic multiplicity rooted in the doubleness of language itself. What matters for the human city is not the innocent "becoming" of unlimited affirmation but rather the limited affirmations and negations of a problematic "world."

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To the Editor:

On first reading Steven Shaviro's essay, I saw it simply as an exercise in oxymorons, but I eventually discerned its non-sense nature in *de-termining* the inability to decide undecidability in reading individual lines from Stevens's poems. I want to question some specific passages and make a general observation.

Shaviro states, "Stevens proposes a radical perspectivism in which the unity of the mind or of the world, the mountain height from which all possible perspectives may be viewed simultaneously, is only another perspective" (221). I do not understand the radicality of this relativism, which grows out of turn-of-the-century pragmatism ("radically" attacked by Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*), which was introduced into American poetry by Gertrude Stein and T. S. Eliot, who elaborated it formally in his thesis on Bradley, and which J. Hillis Miller discusses at length in *Poets of Reality*. Shaviro also states, "This unity of divergent viewpoints is also a unity of different and irreconcilable beginnings. Beginnings cannot be traced to an origin for

the same reason that they cannot be pressed forward to a fully manifested finality" (221). If "beginnings" cannot be traced to an "origin," then how can Shaviro be certain that beginnings that arise from such untraceable origins are "irreconcilable" or even different at the point of origin? Instead of demonstrating this alleged irreconcilability from sufficient evidence, he asserts it by personal definition.

I have similar definition problems when Shaviro declares, by reference to decontextualized lines, "Poetry is an invisible activity without stability or presence, the expression of difference rather than substance. The poem is 'part of the res,' part of the world, but 'the world is a force, not a presence.'" Without meaning to appear obtuse, I must ask how one reads the poem on the printed page if it is not a presence. Stevens repeatedly describes various elements of the world, and if the poem is "part of the res" it can exist simultaneously as both activity and artifact, and its postpartum existence from the poet invalidates the dichotomy Shaviro attempts to establish by resort to Stevens's line "the world is a force, not a presence." It might be more useful to distinguish between the production of a poem, the poet's imagining it before setting it on the page, and poetry that is both process and product, writing and written, expression of creation and substance for interpretation.

Shaviro seems to misread badly "The Idea of Order at Key West." He states, "Bloom ignores, first of all, other instances of clearly inhuman and nonfantastic cries in Stevens's poetry, extending at least as far back as the 'constant cry' of the ocean in 'The Idea of Order at Key West'" (224). Stevens's poem declares, "Then we, / As we beheld her striding there alone, / Knew that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made." The "constant cry," allegedly "Inhuman, of the veritable ocean," arises not from the ocean but from the woman's singing the ocean in her mind, which through her "voicing" comes into being for the narrator-observer. As Stevens recognizes, "If it was only the dark voice of the sea," it would be not a "cry," because "cry" connotes desire and human interpretation, but "sound alone." The woman creates the "cry" of the ocean by interpreting and imagining meaning in the sound. Stevens's repeated use of such personifying words as "cry" and "voice" indicate that the woman's singing creates the impression of the ocean that the narrator-observer records, rather than that his record is an attempt to describe what he observes; such an attempt is exemplified by a quite different kind of poem, "Study of Two Pears." The "constant cry" inside the woman's mind reaches the observer through her singing, as the narrator notes when he says, "But it was she and not the sea we heard"; this cry clearly contrasts with the bird's cry, "a scrawny cry from outside," that is heard in "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself."

Finally, I arrive at a general observation about the method and agenda of Shaviro's essay. The author claims to be "offering a theory of Stevens's poetry that remains within the descriptive field," but this goal is unattainable. The overt presence of the "descriptive field" in Shaviro's writing marks the covert presence of the ideological precedence in the written. The self-proclaimed absence of prescriptive philosophy is necessitated and invalidated by the trace of ideological prewriting authorial posture. The author invokes Stevens's alleged decentering "disjunctive affirmation" in order to *center* the correct ideology of modern poetics on Nietzschean "joy." This guru-fication of Nietzsche attempts to present as dichotomy a philosophical multiplicity. By claiming in the conclusion that the ideological issue at hand is Western logocentrism versus nihilodecenterification (Nietzschean deconstruction), as if the Nietzschean center were the only alternative to Western humanism, Shaviro seems to suggest that "inhumanism" is a unique invention of Wallace Stevens's later poetry, not a philosophy clearly delineated by Robinson Jeffers and practiced by such earth-oriented poets as Gary Snyder. Through ingenious amputations of individual lines, Shaviro attempts to turn Wallace Stevens into an icon of deconstructive metamorphosis, negating through denial Stevens's self-doubt, philosophical vacillation, and dissatisfied searching for a solid stance from which to face death.

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Reply:

The divergence between R. D. Ackerman's and Patrick D. Murphy's criticisms is itself instructive. While Ackerman accuses me of lapsing into Romantic organicism, Murphy blames me for not considering the "earth-oriented" philosophy of Jeffers and Snyder. Murphy is unhappy with my reading Stevens as "an icon of deconstructive metamorphosis," Ackerman with my not reading Stevens deconstructively enough. Although being in a position of moderation, as a mean between opposed extremes, is the last thing of which I would want to be accused, the conjunction of these two letters does give me an opportunity to clarify my own stance.

I will first deal with Murphy's particular points. I certainly agree that Stevens's perspectivism can be related to turn-of-the-century American pragmatism as well as to Nietzsche. But the specific feature that links Stevens to Nietzsche, in opposition to pragmatist liberal pluralism (as well as to post-Paterian theories of the flux of perception) is an insistence on disjunction, conflict, and the affirmative violence of metamorphosis. Stevens's perspectivism is "radical," because, among other rea-