

court visit, penned by one González Lobo. Tongue-in-cheek, an ironic second narrator gives a critical exegesis of the petitioner's document, noting the apparent anachronisms, the endless details and repetitions, and the seeming pointlessness of the journey itself. As the manuscript metastasizes, it assumes "the shapeless growth of a tumor." Fittingly, then, the "center" of this tumorous ex-crescence which is the Spanish court and bureaucracy turns out to be a slobbering, malformed idiot, Carlos II. The narrative ends with these words: "As a token of his favor, His Majesty held out his hand to be kissed. But before I could take it a curious little monkey that had been playing nearby jumped upon it, and distracted His Highness' attention by demanding to be petted. Then I understood that it was time, and in respectful silence I withdrew." In truth, there is no "center," because grotesque irrelevance has taken over. Like Goya, Ayala ironically displaces the question of power versus authority by focusing our attention on its very absence here. Similarly he produces tension by ironically narrating a story in which absolutely nothing happens. Using Cervantine sleight of hand, he teasingly mystifies the reader by positing a mystery in the heart of paralyzing stagnation.

Ayala manages the problem of aesthetic distance not only by sticking to remote events in time, but also by recreating the stylistic inflections of period writing through a modern consciousness. This poses severe difficulties to any translator, but Carolyn Richmond has succeeded admirably well in reflecting the oddly precise subtleties of Ayala's prose. Only in "The Bell of Huesca," a medieval chronicle of a reluctant ruler, does one detect some unevenness in phrasing and sentence lengths. Yet even here the translator ably brings out the astonishing quality of Ayala's images. A royal birth, for example, turns into a "ritual

convulsion of the sacrificial woman, whose enormous, immobile belly caused her legs, arms and head to shake with unflinching regularity. Finally [Ramiro II] saw her innards part like a cleft in the earth and there emerge, laboriously, the great, dank-rooted onion on which would devolve the Crown of Aragon."

At once disquieting and dispassionate, Ayala's art in *Usurpers* works from within the very language of power, that power which flows "through secret streams of blood," precisely in order to critique its abuses. Thus the deliberate manipulation of period language is not mere recreation of setting, but an attempt to disclose through ironic distancing how language itself clothes and thereby legitimizes power. In this way, the holder of power, like the fanatical convert in "The Inquisitor," who in the end condemns his own daughter for heresy, practices self-deception to avoid the burden of guilt and exercises power in the name of religious (or other) purity. The former Grand Rabbi has internalized the power of State and Church so well because he has already secretly admitted his own guilt and abdicated individual responsibility. The servant of power is, in truth, a slave, a symbol of impotence.

Francisco Ayala's *Usurpers*, like Goya's *Prisoner*, makes us see how power needs slippery concealment, invisibility, to perpetuate itself. In showing the deceptive language of power, he also demonstrates the power of language in art itself as a force of moral persuasion.

—Reviewed by Noël Valis

Critical Perspectives

Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage, edited by Charles Doyle,
London: Routledge & Kegan Paul,
1985. xv + 503 pp. \$34.95.

Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self,

by Milton J. Bates, *Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. xiii + 319 pp. \$24.95.*

FROM THE TIME of publication of Wallace Stevens' first volume of poetry, *Harmonium*, in 1923, some of America's finest critics have considered him one of America's finest poets, though general acceptance of this estimation did not come perhaps till after his death in 1955. Professor Charles Doyle's anthology selects from critical comment on Stevens' work from 1917 to 1960, including, most usefully, contemporary reviews in journals and newspapers. After 1960 began the deluge of books and articles on every aspect of Stevens' work and life, Professor Milton Bates's book being one of the latest.

One can certainly quibble with Doyle's selection, but I am sure that any serious student of Stevens would be surprised and delighted to read many of these early reviews. Stevens' poetic surface, his specialized language, is difficult for any first-time reader, and one of the leitmotifs throughout the Stevens literature till 1960 is the obscurity of, the difficulty in comprehending, Stevens' surface. And yet we have in Doyle's anthology critic after critic who, while acknowledging the difficulties, say marvelously apt things about Stevens' style and meaning. Conrad Aiken, Yvor Winters, Marianne Moore, Mark Van Doren, Harriet Monroe, John Gould Fletcher, Paul Rosenfeld, Gorham Munson, Allen Tate, Alfred Kreymborg, Morton Dauwen Zabel, and R. P. Blackmur, all review *Harmonium*, and are remarkably precise and accurate with respect to Stevens (much of the post-1960 criticism has not been as precise or accurate). Critics of the 1930s and 1940s, influenced, of course, by the Great Depression and World War II, wrestled with the issue of the poet's relevance to the age and the question of whether the po-

etry after *Harmonium* was an advance or a decline from the earlier poems. Hi Simons, Robert Fitzgerald, Weldon Kees, Horace Gregory, Frank Jones, Robert Lowell, F. O. Matthiessen, Delmore Schwartz, Louis Martz, and R. P. Blackmur seem to me the finest readers of Stevens in these two decades, at least as here presented. There were a great number of studies of Stevens in the 1950s, some represented here, some not, with Randall Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age* perhaps the most noteworthy, till the end of the decade when Frank Kermode's *Wallace Stevens* finally brought English criticism of Stevens and estimation of his stature equal to that in America.

The better early critics of Stevens, as I have said, usually understood his general positions, though not his specific patterns of imagery:

"The Comedian as the Letter C" . . . a remarkable spiritual autobiography no line of which is transparent . . .

—Mark Van Doren

Behind the veils, there is always a meaning, though the poet employs supersubtlety for veiling the meaning as well.

—Alfred Kreymborg

. . . even when you do not know what he is saying, you know he is saying it well.

—Edmund Wilson

John Holmes, in 1936, calls Stevens "one of the most successful non-communicating poets of his day"; Yvor Winters in 1943 finds much of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" "incomprehensible." Good English readers like Bernard Bergonzi in the 1950s speak of "Le Monocle's" "elegant impenetrability." Frank Kermode says of "Le Monocle" in 1960: "no one is clear about the title, and some other parts too . . . [stanza iii's] last two lines are among the most beautiful in Stevens,

and I do not know what they mean.” Stevens’ very best early reader, R. P. Blackmur, admits that understanding Stevens’ detail is a function of learning a “special vocabulary.” My own study, *Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration* (1965), examined that special vocabulary and tried to show that it is created to allow for constant self-irony, as the poet dramatizes both a skeptic and an idealist within himself.

It was the common failing of early Stevens criticism (not of those listed above) to see Stevens as shallow skeptic, irresponsibly playing the roles of fop, clown, or comedian; it has been the common failing of much Stevens criticism since the 1960s to see him primarily as philosopher, whether skeptic or idealist. Stevens is always the poet-dramatist, rather than philosopher, though I would agree with many of the critics of the 1940s and 1950s (Jarrell, Blackmur, Kees, Gregory, Lowell, Martz) who felt that Stevens failed himself when he slipped into a loose and mechanical operation of his doctrine-antidocline methodology in some of his post-*Harmonium* poems (while quickly adding that there are a great number of beautiful poems and passages in the later works).

Bates’s *A Mythology of Self* reads like the product of two separate studies, an earlier dissertation focusing on analyses of Stevens’ poems from the perspective of Stevens’ self-projecting roles (as burgher, fop, clown, medium and major man), and then a later researching in the biographical materials available on the poet. The first two chapters of the book and the last have a biographical orientation; the chapters in between are largely poetic analysis. His efforts seem to me well done, though one’s sense of reading continuity is disturbed a bit. A larger problem is the feeling that, however well done, much here seems to have already been done.

One must say that Bates’s analyses

are generally fine, pervaded as they are by a consciousness of the contradictory ambivalences, the yearnings, and the self-mockery at the core of Stevens’ mind and spirit: “Clearly the author of ‘Sunday Morning’ wanted to appear more hard-headed than the pensive woman and more sophisticated than the passionate youths and men, even as he invested some of his most private feelings in them.” I would agree and add that in the first appearance of Stevens’ most celebrated poem in *Poetry* in 1915, Stevens cut three of the eight stanzas and rearranged the remaining five purposely to emphasize the ambivalences in his feelings. Bates’s analyses are organized around a thematic study of the various *personae*, or roles, or self-projections of the poet. These are closely examined, but, as I have said, it seems to me that I have read much of it before, in, say, Robert Pack, Daniel Fuchs, and Robert Buttel, if not earlier. It also seems to me that the large roles that Stevens invented to symbolize aspects of himself are all there, at least implicitly, in *Harmonium*. The same can be said for his intellectual ideas and approaches, and for the figurations to dramatize those approaches. Bates’s thesis, that all of these *personae*, all of these ideas, relate somehow to Stevens’ personal biography, seems fairly obvious, constituting perhaps little more than a frame upon which to hang the analyses.

Bates’s chapters in biography are as well done as the analyses, but they also suffer somewhat, though to a lesser extent, from a sense of repeating in places what has already been done in the field by Buttel, by Holly Stevens’ publication of her father’s letters and early notebooks, by Samuel French Morse’s biography, by Peter Brazeau’s interviews with people who knew Stevens (*Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, reviewed in *Modern Age*, vol. 32, no. 2), and by Richard Ellmann’s review-essay in *The New York Review of Books* (November

24, 1983). I find new in Bates a very interesting commentary on Stevens' father and a rather convincing analysis of the relationship between Stevens and his wife ("gremlins but no villains"). But one does not find any contribution to the central biographical question posed by Ellmann as to what caused a conventional poet of 1909 to become the world master of 1915 (what Bates calls Stevens' coming "rapidly to a boil.")

Stevens wrote in his journal at the turn of the century that "Personality must be kept secret before the world." He wrote to Henry Church in the late 1930s: "I am, in the long run, interested in pure poetry. No doubt from the Marxian point of view this sort of thing is incredible, but pure poetry is rather older and tougher than Marx and will remain so. My own way out toward the future involves a confidence in the spiritual role of the poet. . . ." The two statements, nearly forty years apart, are in fact saying much the same thing, though both are quite liable to misinterpretation. Stevens is not driven, as hostile criticism might argue, to write obscure poetry to hide secrets of his personality or in pursuit of a style of effective sound and imagery without meaning. By "pure poetry" Stevens means a poetry that begins in a personal, social, and political context, but which aims to lift itself to meditations on enduring questions beyond the purely personal or topical, to questions of the mind's ability to cope with the reality in which it finds itself. For Stevens in our time the "central problem" has been, in Louis Martz's words, "the adjustment of man to a universe from which the supernatural and mythical have been drained, and in which the human imagination is consequently starving."

Bates is very good on Stevens' lifetime desire for faith in the supernatural, on his ideas of "fictions" which can temporarily nourish the imagination, on the influences of Santayana, William James,

and Nietzsche on his ideas, and on Stevens' deathbed entrance into the Catholic Church. But again we have had all this handled before (see the books of Kermodé, Buttell, and Lentricchia for starters). Bates's book has both grace and tact, but he has entered a crowded field, where it is not easy to avoid stepping on the toes of the many others already there.

—Reviewed by Eugene Paul Nassar

The Quentin Compson Connection

Tell About the South, by Fred Hobson, *Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983. 391 pp. \$12.95.*

IN *TELL ABOUT THE SOUTH* Fred Hobson tells about the compulsion to tell about the South that Southerners have suffered for the past one hundred fifty years. Now a foreigner with a lightning mind and a stranglehold on truth, *i. e.*, a Yankee intellectual—who always politely finishes your sentences for you before telling you you're wrong—may protest at this point that a history of Southern bragging is unneeded, on the twin grounds that everybody knows that Southerners brag and that everybody also knows that Southerners have nothing to brag about. Well! It just so happens that Hobson is talking about another thing entirely, a compulsion, practiced only by Southerners in this resplendent republic, to look back over their shoulders all of the time. Such a wrenching posture, bound after a while to give a body a headache, is by no means a simple subject: by the time each text in the series (each with its antitheses) has been analyzed, a very complex and significant problem in Southern studies has been most admirably advanced.

In his introductory chapter Hobson