WALLACE STEVENS AND POETIC THEORY: *Conceiving the Supreme Fiction*. By B. J. Leggett. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press. 1987. 218 pp. $22.50.

More than five hundred titles from Wallace Stevens' personal library came to the Huntington Library in the mid-1970s. Another two dozen books, recovered from the hundreds auctioned a few years after Stevens' death, are now housed at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Stevens left most of his books unmarked, and many uncut. He collected volumes of Alain but admitted he didn't read them. He might tell a correspondent that he had "looked at" a book but had not "yet" read it, and proceed to talk about how fine or shoddy the printing and design were. But there are a number of Stevens' books we can be certain he read with attention. B. J. Leggett has now worked with Stevens' pencillings and annotations in four of these and, building his case from parallels between Stevens' markings and a few poems and lectures, convincingly supports a single, fairly radical main point: to revise established views of Stevens' theory of the poetic imagination.

I. A. Richards' *Coleridge on Imagination* and Charles Mauron's *Aesthetics and Psychology* (at the Huntington Library) and H. P. Adams' *The Life and Writings of Giambattista Vico* and Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art* (at Massachusetts) may be used to identify and explain sources for both images and ideas in Stevens' poems and lectures. Yet the strength of Leggett's book derives from his aim "*not* to identify sources . . . but to gauge the extent of their influence and to point out the *implications* of their presence" (p. 16; my emphasis). This is clear enough as a statement designed to extend the claims of an argument beyond mere source-hunting, except that, not long before this, Leggett's reaction against the methods of critical pluralists is centered on the notion that "commentary on Stevens's poetics has given us, in the main, not information on the sources or background of his ideas but readings of poems, readings that have been subsequently challenged by equally rigorous readings" (p. 3). The latter statement does suggest that this book is designed to rectify the situation, and indeed to supply "information" on the identity of sources. As I move, then, from the introduction making both these claims, to the hard work of the chapters on Stevens' reading of the four books, I am just a little confused as to how valuable Leggett believes the concept of "source" in Stevens to be.

My confusion is finally a minor one, however. After all, one may methodologically validate the concept of source for the difficult case of Stevens, convincingly locate such a source for a poem or a lecture, and

still not read the poem or lecture freshly. And Leggett's are mostly fresh readings, quite aside from the identity of sources. Mauron's notion of obscurity, for example, generally endorses Leggett's fine reading of "Man Carrying Thing," but the poem's actual derivation from Stevens' reading of Mauron cannot be said to be certain, as Leggett himself essentially admits; after all, the compared texts have in common a language about *obscurity*. At other times, as with a passage Stevens seems to have borrowed from Richards for a central idea in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (p. 31), Leggett's evidence of sourcework is so particular and well organized that the relation between poem and reading does seem a necessary one. Now that I have Leggett's version of Stevens' Richards, in fact, I will no longer read ignorance in *Notes* the same way. But the interpretation of the poem "about" obscurity, while supporting Leggett's main argument, may be read, even here, surprisingly well without Mauron.

And the main argument is, I think, an important one. That it will have to be taken into account by those who subsequently write about Stevens' theory of the poetic imagination should be clear from these four strong points alone: (1) Decades of definitions of Stevens' use of the term "abstract," to Leggett, provide a history of misreadings. His account of this particular critical history is unique, so far as I know. (2) Stevens' "scrupulous avoidance of influence" upon his poetry did not extend to the critical prose. In making this major distinction, Leggett is at his best in using his sources, and faces down the critical influence of Harold Bloom. (Bloom, of course, has argued that Stevens' "scrupulous avoidance of influence" in the poems is itself a clear sign of influence.) (3) Focillon encourages Leggett to remind us that there was a major shift in the concept of reality from "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" of 1941 to "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" of 1943. While in 1941 Stevens defined the imagination as a resistance to the pressure reality forces on us, two years later the imagination is "an agreement with reality." Leggett's fine interpretation of this shift goes a long way toward discrediting the so-called "Grand Poem" thesis applied to what are really theories (plural) of the imagination. (4) Stevens' late poetry proposes a conception of reality very different from that of the earlier conceptions. Here reality is something outside and independent of the mind. Leggett is especially convincing on this point when using Focillon to read "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" in the last few pages of the book.

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