

Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens. By Charles Berger. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1985. Pp. xviii, 197. \$22.50.)

On a winter morning at the height of the Cold War, a young Cuban, José Rodríguez Feo, wrote a long letter to his favorite correspondent, the American poet Wallace Stevens. "I see New York is ready for an atomic attack," José wrote from Havana. "From here, my dear friend, everything you read sounds a bit fantastical and absurd. . . . We [Spaniards and Cubans] live by norms of other centuries and will not recognize completely the mechanical urge." To "prove" his point about how one ought to live in the nuclear age the Cuban told Stevens of the name given by advertisers to the latest model of *cafetera* (small coffee machine)—"La Bomba Atomica." "That sense of humour," he added, "has saved us from the madness and nonsense that threatens to end your more 'civilized' histories." Stevens did not respond to the fears of annihilation the Cuban projected onto all Americans. Nor did he respond to the specific suggestion of humor. In his next letter to the Cuban, Stevens wrote that he lived the better part of his life in his private bedroom. "My wife and I were ready to go upstairs at seven o'clock," he wrote, adding that he realized it was wrong to "shut the door" on the world. As for New York, he noted, it was to him the place where one occasionally purchases the hard-to-find book by, say, the French aesthete who lived safely in Argentina during the Nazi occupation. This image tells us a great deal about the poet of early modernism, who lived nine years into the nuclear age: a portly, well-dressed Wallace Stevens, striding obliviously above fall-out shelters, toting his precious copy of Marcel Schwob's *Imaginary Lives*.

Stevens wrote the stunning poem "The Auroras of Autumn" in 1949 (it was the title poem in the book of 1950). The many shapes of the *aurora borealis*, the northern lights not uncommonly viewed from Stevens's Connecticut, suggested to him as many shapes and images as there are sections of the poem. No less important than the natural atmospheric phenomenon, however, is the place from which he views it—his house. "Auroras" is a poem about relative safety. The closest he comes to annihilation is in the famous sixth section, where "the scholar of one candle" opens his front door to bask in the northern lights shining through the frame.

Even in the wild "Auroras," Stevens remained the poet of what he called "the banal suburb." His thoughts about the world—about

war, for example—were always severely qualified by that door that separated him from other people. “The Men That Are Falling,” the poem that seems to sympathize with the anti-Franco republicans of the Spanish Civil War (and won *The Nation* prize in 1936 probably for this reason), is really about a man who feels guilty because he cannot set his poems in Barcelona but limits them to the room in West Hartford: “Yes, desire . . . this leaning on his bed, / This leaning on his elbows on his bed, // Staring, at midnight, at the pillow that is black / In the catastrophic room . . . beyond despair” (Stevens’s ellipses). He did not offer his poems as a testament to the mind’s power to endure the violent realities of war. He was not a *survivor* in any commonly accepted sense of the word. He could easily have enjoyed his safety; that he did not enjoy himself, however, does not qualify him as a survivor. In fact, he fully understood that the objects every man on the earth saw in the night sky—the constellations, the moon, and the auroras were his favorites—were the only things he had in common with victims of the Nazis. In a poem written soon after Pearl Harbor, he looked out the window of that room and lamented, “What had this star to do with the world it lit, / With the blank skies over England, over France / And above the German camps?”

Charles Berger’s small, well-written book about the end of Stevens’s career as a poet (1944–55) offers us a strong, generally sensible thesis, and we are treated to dozens of excellent observations about difficult images and lines in Stevens’s difficult poems. Berger’s reading of the obtuse elegy “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is the best of the many now available to Stevens’s readers. The chapters on “Esthétique du Mal” and “The Rock” poems are only slightly less valuable. Only one chapter fails; at the heart of the book is a daring interpretation of “The Auroras of Autumn” as an expression of Stevens’s fears of nuclear annihilation and the auroras themselves as a “figuration of the atomic bomb.” Most troubling is Berger’s use of the word “survivor.” We find survival in “the shape of *poetic* survival” in Berger’s rich chapter on Stevens’s last lyrics, which, he argues convincingly, work with the subject of their own legacy as literature. But when one speaks specifically of the horrors of World War II and the A-bomb, one must mean by “survivor” a person physically and temperamentally very unlike Wallace Stevens. The *star* over Buchenwald was the only aspect of such a place to which Stevens would respond. For missing all this and for having approx-

imately the same attitude as his Cuban friend about preparations for nuclear war with the Russians, one does not blame Stevens; yet it is simply not helpful to speak of "Auroras" as "written by a survivor." That Berger discovered this interpretation because he "could not quite believe that Stevens was ever casual about the disappearance of the human" does not mean on the other hand that the poet was terrified or even just a little anxious about such a vast disappearance, for after all there have been men much more sympathetic than Stevens who remained "casual" about the annihilation which so rightly concerns Berger.

While Berger's "apocalyptic reading" of his longest chapter does not hold up, his overarching thesis does very nicely. The final phase of Stevens's career may indeed be categorized by three successive elegiac attitudes. Forms of farewell in "Esthétique du Mal" (1944) gave way to a period of temporary peace and satisfaction in which the fear of pain subsided. Following the peaceful period, which offers us the assured "Credences of Summer" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," came the poet's last phase, in which everything was viewed within the context of his own death. But Stevens went very peacefully. The thinker whose years on earth were exactly those of Albert Einstein (1879-1955) had significant regrets about the tendencies of twentieth-century life, but the annihilation that finally terrified the physicist did not specifically concern the poet. His one comment on the subject is quoted by Berger at the heading of his chapter called "Boreal Night": "I cannot say that there is any way to adapt myself to the idea that I am living in the Atomic Age and I think it a lot of nonsense to try to adapt myself to such a thing." Stevens was uncomfortable with the nuclear age but not in the sense of someone who understands modern forms of annihilation. Rather, he feels "odd" (a favorite word) in the manner of an old person living into an age of new and foreign things; we are to understand this statement in the way we understand Mark Twain expressing the oddity of living into the age of automobiles or Theodore Dreiser having trouble watching television.

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