

Visionary Modernism: A Witnessing

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How to Live, What to Do: Thirteen Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens, Joan Richardson. University of Iowa Press, 2018.

I have read this book three times. To account for these rereadings is to discern the work's own peculiar aesthetic genius and its (finally) surprising commitment to modern experimentalism as a form of ethical theorizing. The structure that Joan Richardson chose for this study is itself a critical innovation supporting a renewed emphasis on Wallace Stevens's alignment among modernists while it also reminds us of his singularity.

1

I read first to find readings of Stevens. To be sure, I did find them. Richardson is after all a Stevens critic of vast experience, and this work promises numerous "ways" of "looking at" the poet's writing. Indeed, there are some brief, persuasive takes on difficult poems. Her sense of "The Man on the Dump," for instance, here presented through Susan Sontag's notion of "the image-word," comprehends the humanism of Stevens's aversion to the use of words as "rotted names" in a way that is, to me, original (37–46). "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," sprawling and belated, and perhaps critically unreadable, benefits from three lucid pages: we locate "Evening," no longer a time of day, as a connotation of pure experience, just as the ecclesiastical "Ordinary" (time told by the sound of music) is no longer ordinary in the ordinary sense. But these and other sharp interpretations do not go much further into a poem's text. "There is not space here for a full close reading," Richardson at one point warns (64). Why not? Because, as readers are by that

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juncture aware, Richardson composed this book by working through a self-imposed constraint. Such formal inhibition, as we will see upon a third reading, is itself essentially poetic. At moments when we are reminded of the book's constructive limitation, it becomes apparent that readings of poems are just not central to the work. Poem-specific analysis—a particular skill of Richardson, it should be said, a virtue thus consciously forfeited here—has been deployed in the service of expansive critical vision. Upon discovering this priority, I then read the brief volume (just 95 pages of text, graced with wide ledes and generous margins) a second time.

2

On second reading I beheld the volume as made of integrated yet segmented movements through a single but multipart philosophical investigation, nuanced yet plain-spoken, sometimes as disarmingly simple as in the sentences of Ludwig Wittgenstein or (differently: faux naive) Ralph Waldo Emerson. In this iteration, Stevens is present to help articulate multiple perspectives on a merging of several philosophical traditions. Had Richardson consented to write a scholar's monograph more conventionally comprehensive in tracking a history of its ideas, more typically academic in the development of its argument, this working through philosophical matters would have systematically paired Stevens with Emerson and with William James (the book's three main figures), perhaps in a three-part intellectual succession. The book could have been a study of Emerson and James leading to Stevens—in a sense, if you add Whitman to the precursors, as Harold Bloom had tried decades earlier in *The Poems of Our Climate* (1977)—supplemented by certain aspects of pertinent interests: Charles Sanders Peirce (his “theory of signs”-centered pragmatism); Alfred North Whitehead on the modern imagination; Herwig Friedl's ideas about the visionary end of modernism; Wittgenstein's mystical version of language philosophy; the Jonathan Edwards who redefined the ordinary; Sontag on seeing; and John Hollander, through a special deep indebtedness to a young Hollander whose dissertation on the history of allusion is what surely has led Richardson to poetry as a “secular variety of religious experience.” That secular theologizing, by the way, also takes us back to James (Richardson 21). In this second reading I surmised that Hollander, Richardson's teacher and dissertation advisor, is the poetic sensibility that brought her to Stevens. From this last realization—about something like Hollander's James as occupying the book's intellectual autobiographical heart—arose the keen need to read the book yet again.

3

How to Live, What to Do is an intensely personal work of criticism and theory. Richardson's reading reversing assumptions of sound's abstractness—that hearing the sound in the mind is a realism, that “the sound of words extends the revelation of reality into modes and temporalities we ourselves might not have experienced” (35)—leads her to the noises made in an early poem she has long heard in her mind (“the cry of the peacocks” from “Domination of Black” [Stevens 7]) and then to a personal experience in which she felt the “chill of recognition” as she stood in an eleventh-century monastery garden on a Greek island and heard “an eerie piercing shriek,” “the cry of death itself.” The personal shock was not of strangeness but familiarity. The awful scream, which she witnessed and of which she now bears witness, “is actually *remembered*” even when encountered by the ears apart from the mind (Richardson 36; my emphasis). If the argument about sound as “ur-meaning,” a pre-poetic irreducibility, is persuasive—and it is, certainly as a reading of Stevens's special theory of imaginative utterance as reality—then specifying the harrowing existential scene on the Greek island is a sensible narrative choice, and a necessary truthful aural angel, on the critic's part (35). As Stevens contended, in a poem Richardson does not mention in this passage but which nonetheless in a ghostly way pervades those pages, a “new knowledge of reality” derives from a modern theory of the thing-in-itself that affirms rather than repudiates the imagination (Stevens 452). The hyperconstrained composition of this writing, about which more momentarily, sometimes emerges self-referentially as part of the argument. To make her point, Richardson cannot mask or suppress that she is a writer in the ongoing present of her own text, writing somewhere, at some quotidian time, the pages we are reading. Moving from a discussion of the idea of an “irrational element” in poetry to another scholar's investigation of the autistic qualities of rhetorical chiasmus, she frankly notes that the latter article arrived in a scholarly journal in the mail “between the time I set down the first two sentences of the paragraph just above [about Stevens's lecture, ‘The Irrational Element in Poetry’] and what follows” (41). The transition is real—I mean, it is to her a reality—in the way things in writing (even critical writing) occur: another expression of “how to live”; an instance, albeit a seemingly trivial one, of Richardson's large claim that the critic's work, if it is to be commensurate with Stevens's secular theology, must be, paragraph by paragraph, “sensitive to the difficult wonder that thinking is” (xiv).

The “witnessing”—she knows it's a word implying large claims about urgent testimony—is itself an “*actuality*” that

“attend[s] to, and record[s] the process of thinking that this text [not Stevens’s, but her own] represents” (xiv). Thus, we must and do learn of the origin of its author’s personal “infatuation” with Stevens (xi). She confesses that during the many years in which she was researching and writing the first-ever full-scale biography of the poet (*Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879–1923* [1986] and *The Later Years, 1923–1955* [1980]), including her tendency to remake her sensibility so as to inhabit his ran deep, and extended to daily life, even to an imitation of his mode (although not of the quantity) of martini drinking (xi). Through that intimacy Richardson was led again to Emerson and to James (the latter is her “best imaginary friend”), establishing gratefully something of a psycho-emotional new distance from Stevens, even as she “continue[s] to enjoy . . . the relationship . . . with him as interior paramour” (xii). Yet rather than serving as evidence of interpretive partisanship or bias, this full inhabitation of the Stevensian project, this “learn[ing] to speak Stevens” so fluently, frees her from page-consuming close readings, from explicit quotation, and even from page citation (xiv).

These and other liberties taken with the conventions of scholarly writing are connected to a consciously derivative impediment: Richardson sought for this project a structure that would itself speak to the importance of the commensurateness that is the book’s major idea. As she cast about for a form, she recalled her reading among Stevens’s own books (now at the Huntington Library). She knew that one of Stevens’s favorite contemporaries among philosophers, Alain, the pen name for Emile Chartier, had forced himself to write for a nonphilosophical readership in order to keep his philosophical situation alive and well. So Alain wrote regular columns for a provincial French newspaper, each composed without emendation, each amounting to exactly 1,100 words (xiii). The resulting meditations were a significant influence on Stevens, as any reading of his essays and lectures discloses, and, in turn, they have become an influence on Richardson. She combined that influence with another of central importance to her idea of multiperspectivalism as a key to living—the early poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” So *How to Live, What to Do* consists of thirteen 2,000-word sections, a cubistic Alainesque Stevensian theorizing. The 13 sections—each can be read as an independent meditation, a distinct occasion for thought—are to the whole argument about the positive ethical and even political effects of Stevens’s “modernist visionary thinking” as the blackbird is to the varying landscape where it can always eventually be observed (28). There is almost no limit to how readers of this book can dwell on the consequences of this structure. It can even be said that Richardson’s sections map onto Stevens’s, roughly as follows:

How to Live, What to Do

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| 1. “Notations of the Wild”—
momentary existence | “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a
Blackbird”
perceived movement in stillness |
| 2. “Adequate to this Great
Hymn”—secularizing the
visionary | look & the trinity is simply there |
| 3. “Echolocation”—the frisson
charging moments of poetic
address | the maelstrom of part realizing its
whole |
| 4. “The Exquisite Environment
of Fact”—realizing firstness
is unified facticity | subjectivities make a plain yet
complex unity |
| 5. “The Sound of Words”—
sound, abstract yet real, is
heard in silence | the beauty of sound when sound is
heard & not |
| 6. “Man on the Dump”—“the
the” does not preclude
opacity | poetic perception comes from “an
indecipherable cause” |
| 7. “Darken Your Speech”—
insistence on clarity masks
dark inexplicability | the blackbird knows duende, but do
we? |
| 8. “Properties of Light”—pho-
tography counterintuitively
subjective | the blackbird is a subject, “involved
in what I know” |
| 9. “Ordinary Evening”—the
category of what is poetry
(the pretext for a poem)
depends on a radiant sense
of reality around us | only when the poem’s object disap-
pears do we know the boundaries
& categories |
| 10. “Planet on the Table”—
words, like balls in the air,
are kept in play like gibber-
ish notes | blackbirds (plural) fly through na-
ture & cause bawdy yet euphonic
cries |
| 11. “It Can Never Be Satisfied,
the Mind, Never”—the “it”
of thought, requires attention
to it not ourselves | anxiety over poetic privilege cor-
rected by ubiquitous presence of
“it” beyond our things |
| 12. “Imagination as Value”—
cause & effect (that is, polit-
ical) is Western, not univer-
sal, nor natural (a major
thesis of the book) | the irony of assuming parts respond
to wholes, figures to ground
(Richardson’s epigraph) |
| 13. “The Imperfect Is Our
Paradise”—“I” is what hap-
pens when the poet confers
identity on the reader | past & ongoing present together en-
able perception of the self in
nature |

Richardson makes a large and, to this reviewer, very alluring claim for an experiment in critical form. *How to Live, What to Do* argues that “it matters what you pay attention to,” and that the contemporary mind “entrained to ‘the exquisite environment of fact’ will tune its instrument to the temperament of the cosmos, thereby increasing the shadings of meaning exponentially” (82). Thus, the decision to impose a rigorous (and specifically derivative) constraint, with its enforcement of philosophical good health and attention, “turns out to be the ideal corrective to life in our moment” (xiii).

There are two experiments going on here. One is the aforementioned 13-part cubist word-counting constraint, the poetic form of a critical argument made new. The other entails tone, diction, rhetoric, and sentence-by-sentence style. Following Alain too in the latter choice, Richardson chooses to use a “language accessible to a nonprofessional, nonspecialist audience” (xiii). If anything, that prefatory description is an understatement. The language of this book is that of secular theology—an invented or synthetic one to be sure, but it uses a vocabulary of calm concern and at the same time of urgent disquiet. I’ve only encountered just such language in a successful critical book once before, in Terrence Des Pres’s study of Holocaust survivors (*The Survivor* [1976]). Des Pres, too, calmly eschews “a stance of detachment” (itself a paradox) at the level of his sentences, and finds a linguistic middle way between scholarly “descriptions barren of subjective response” that might unintentionally generate a virulent irony on the one hand and, on the other, a writing of personal self-indulgence. “There seemed one language left—a kind of archaic, quasi-religious vocabulary, which I have used not as a reflection of religious sentiment, but in the sense that only a language of ultimate concern can be adequate to facts such as these” (vi). The comparison is apt, my point is, not only as a matter of formal choices both critics have made, but thematically too. Richardson describes this beautifully when accounting for the paradoxical “economy” of her volume in the face of its many “repetitions.” She learned a key element of modernist writing—she first found it in James—in the breakdown of subject-object relations, and this goes for the critic-poet/Richardson-Stevens relationship. There is a radical economy of repetition because the writing that this merge creates “reflect[s] a manner of recursive amplification that characterizes not only Stevens’s style but also *the actuality of my witnessing*” (xiv; emphasis added). The daily *turn* toward witnessing as a fundamental form of critical analysis—“turn” is famously Des Pres’s preferred term for what writing his book did for him personally as a literary critic—makes it possible to see truly, in the phrase of Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways,” “The only moving thing” (Stevens 74).

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