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Pach Brothers
Photo of Wallace Stevens, New York, c. 1940

Introduction

A “Special Relation”?

Stevens’ French, American English, and the Creolization of Modern Poetry

Juliette UTARD

Reality is a cliché
From which we escape by metaphor
It is only au pays de la métaphore
Qu’ou est poète.

—Wallace Stevens, *Adagia* (CPP, 920)

Avant—Propos. You must help me with this, Bowl.
My knowledge of French is not absolutely penetrating.

—Wallace Stevens, *Bowl, Cat, and Broomstick* (CPP, 633)

17

I

In his 1944 essay “What France Means to You,” which appeared in *La France libre* during France’s Nazi occupation, T. S. Eliot wrote that “For several years before I went there, what France had meant to me was, above all things, *Poetry*.”¹ One way or another, the essays gathered in this volume all seek to address what France meant to Stevens, and how (or to what extent) it shaped his poetry. Scholars have long acknowledged Stevens’ poetic entanglement with France, picking up on his career-long importation of French nouns and “latined phrase[s]” (CPP, 146), from the early titles (the posthumously published “Carnet de Voyage,” or the much-anthologized, tongue-twisting “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”) persistently to the late poems,

¹ T. S. Eliot, “What France Means to You,” p. 94.

where “odd fleurettes” and “queer chapeaux” trickle on as “part of a fraîcheur, inaccessible” (CPP, 456-457). In this first book-length inquiry into what Stevens once called “a special relation” (*Letters*, 699), *Wallace Stevens, Poetry, and France: “Au pays de la métaphore”* offers to gauge a triangular (not binary) relationship between a poet and a country, with poetry at its center.

Readers of the following chapters may find that Lucy Beckett’s statement in the 1970s that Stevens was “throughout his life devoted to the French language and to the idea of France [...] but neither the theory nor the practice of French poetry left any considerable mark on his work”² is now disputed by several, not to say most, of the authors whose essays are gathered here. A birthmark, or a stamp, does in fact continue to throb and glow in the poems, whether we choose to regard it as a defect or a beauty like that other “mark” in Hawthorne’s tale; it has no doubt affected the reception of Stevens’ work more than has perhaps been recognized before, casting an ambivalent aura upon his Americanness.

Interestingly, for many years Stevens’ Francocentrism caused him to be perceived as the most European of American poets, while today, the growing consensus is that Stevens’ Americanness is actually deepened, not diminished, by his exotic loanwords. “The Americanization of Stevens’ literary context,” which Patrick Redding reminds us “was largely the achievement of mid-century critics,”³ springs up again in Roger Gilbert’s recent remark that “Stevens’ vaunted Francophilia often masks a deep Americanness.”⁴ What emerges differently from the chapters that follow is perhaps their common desire to rework these long-standing assumptions, and probe far into their aesthetic and political implications, as when Maureen McLane deftly argues that Stevens repeatedly “adresse[d] the question of being ‘native’ in English partly via French”; or when Tony Sharpe later contends that his “use of French and his recourse to France were a function of his being American, and make most sense within that context.”

Unlike Eliot—and Samuel Beckett for that matter—Stevens never chose to compose entire poems in French, though he did occasionally translate poems by Du Bellay and Jean Le Roy into English. Neither did he ever set foot in France, as has too often been observed for me to dwell on again here. Rather, and most characteristically, Stevens constantly interlaced his American “twang” with snippets of French and to a lesser extent other languages that, I would argue, *creolized* his poetry.

² L. Beckett, *Wallace Stevens*, p. 209.

³ Redding is thinking of William York Tindall, Roy Harvey Pearce, Joseph Riddel, and Harold Bloom. See P. Redding, “Between Surface and Influence: Stevens, Whitman, and the Problem of Mediation,” p. 12.

⁴ R. Gilbert, “Whitman and Stevens: Certain Phenomena of Sound,” p. 70.