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Beverly Coyle. *A Thought to be Rehearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983. 120 pp. Illus.

Recent Stevens criticism seems to look either to the future or the past. In an essay called "Stevens without Epistemology," Gerald L. Bruns asks how we will read Stevens once the fashion for neo-romantic idealism has faded. "We know what it is like to read Stevens when we no longer believe in God," he says; "[w]hat is it to read him when you no longer believe that there is such a thing as the imagination?"[1] On the other front, digging into the poet's origins, Leonora Woodman challenges our understanding of Stevens's religious attitudes: he is not the atheist we supposed, but a covert theist tinged with Rosicrucianism.[2] Beverly Coyle's modest book, barely a hundred pages long, antedates these trends, stemming as it does from a 1974 thesis, and makes smaller claims. But unlike much repetitive Stevens criticism, it offers a fresh approach, one that might at first seem tangential but quickly steers to the center of Stevens's poetics.

In English literary theory, aphorism is not normally recognized as a genre. Although some of our authors have practiced the sententious style, like Bacon or Emerson, and some have attached aphorisms to larger works, like Blake and Shaw, literature in English has, I think, no important author of books of aphorisms--no Nietzsche, no La Rochefoucauld. As Coyle's study shows, Stevens's love for aphorisms arises from his attachment to European philosophic traditions, and from his insistence that the supreme fiction "must be abstract."

Her book begins with a working definition of aphorism, drawing from Barbara Herrnstein Smith's account of closure and from Josephine Miles's work on poetic style. Three chapters trace Stevens's use of aphorism in his poetry. At first, in a number of uncollected pre-*Harmonium* sequences, aphorism emerges as a viable device. Then in *Harmonium*, aphorism becomes characteristic of Stevens's manner; here Coyle's reading of two wholly aphoristic poems are especially noteworthy--"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and the opaque, riddling "New England Verses." After *Harmonium*, aphorism becomes less a device for closure than for generating Stevens's meditations, which often begin with a teasing generalization. A final chapter briefly examines the three assertions that frame "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction."

Coyle's treatment might have remained dryly descriptive, but instead it relates to Stevens's larger concerns. She shows how Stevens consistently balances illusory claims to absolute truth against the scepticism of his

"supreme fiction" by pairing and opposing contradictory assertions--in the *Adagia*, from poem to poem, and within longer poems. Coyle also considers aphorism as the abstract counterpart to imagist condensation--though here her remarks are more suggestive than definitive. She does not, unfortunately, pursue certain related issues. She does not consider aphorism as counterforce to Stevens's besetting temptation of diffuseness, nor does she consider its relation to classical epigram, nor does she distinguish the classical aphorism of universal truth from the provisional and paradoxical romantic variety. Finally, she does not consider aphorism in the context of Emersonian tradition, where Stevens again emerges as "chichi" companion to the homespun Frost. Coyle's book, then, is more modest than it need have been, but it provides a refreshing perspective on one of America's greatest poets.

Stephen J. Adams
Department of English
University of Western Ontario

Notes

1 Gerald L. Bruns, "Stevens without Epistemology," in Albert Gelpi, ed.,*Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism* (Cambridge, 1985), 24-40.

2 Leonora Woodman, *Stanza My Stone: Wallace Stevens and the Mermetic Tradition* (West Lafayette, 1983).

Frederick F. Siegel. *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness: Tobacco and Society in Danville, Virginia, 1780-1865*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987. 205 pp.

Central to any discussion of the distinctiveness of the American South is the debate over the antebellum Southern economy. Did slavery, an overdependence on cotton, and a lack of urbanization and industrialization create economic stagnation and retard development? Or did the South, as some have argued, possess a thriving economy whose rates of growth matched those of the North? The economic behavior of the Southern planter class is a related issue of controversy. Did planters act in an essentially capitalist manner, making rational economic decisions in order to maximize profit? Or were they primarily pre-bourgeois in character, guided by