

ALA Annual Conference — Wallace Stevens's Essays

Writing in 2003 with Wallace Stevens in mind, John Ashbery observed that “We expect poets to give a first-hand account of what poetry is. But some poets, when they write criticism, produce a kind of prose that is itself on the verge of being poetry.” Stevens’s essays, though a relatively overlooked part of his oeuvre, constitute in this vein a remarkable performance of the role of poet-critic, which had assumed a new importance following the institutionalization of modernism within the university. Departing from the textual hermeticism and technical vocabulary pioneered by his contemporaries the New Critics, the prose collected in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1951), as its subtitle hints, aims at a more expansive understanding of poetry and employs a wide variety of stylistic means to direct us there, incorporating invocatory myth, ekphrasis, invective, anecdotes, and even illustrative poems. In this light, the essays’ magpie willingness to combine genres and cross disciplinary borders places them in a distinctly American tradition of discursive yet poetic writing, running back to Emerson and Thoreau, through to Ashbery, and on to later poet-theorists including Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, and Fred Moten.

Organized by the Wallace Stevens Society, this panel invites 300-to-500-word abstracts for presentations that address Stevens’s essays as a contribution to his “theory of poetry,” as an experiment in criticism, and/or in terms of their subsequent legacy. So-called uncollected prose works that were not included in *The Necessary Angel* (e.g., “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” “Two or Three Ideas”) or composed after its publication (e.g., “A Collect of Philosophy”) are also welcome objects of consideration.

Please direct all inquiries and submissions (including a brief bio) to William Burns at william.burns.15@ucl.ac.uk and Andrew Osborn at aosborn@udallas.edu (subject heading: ALA25 Stevens) by Monday, January 13, 2025.