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"An Interview with Stanley Burnshaw" (with Harvey Teres)

Alan Filreis, University of Pennsylvania
ALAN FILDES: We are interested in what you think about the Albion Collections.

What follows are excerpts from a wide-ranging interview with

ALAN FILDES AND HARVEY TREES

An Interview with Stanley Binnishaw
on the suggestion that Stevens changed his attitude toward his own poetry because of your political response to it?

STANLEY BURNshaw: Denis Donoghue certainly believes that's true. In a letter he sent to the editor at the University of Georgia Press, he wrote "Burnshaw's dispute with Wallace Stevens in the thirties led not only to a poem, 'Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,' but to an entire motif in Stevens' work."

FILREIS: Is that an overstatement?

BURNshaw: No, I think this is a strand in his later work, and I do believe—and the published letters make this clear—that he did want to prove that he was of the world and that he was responding to what I was referring to as reality. I don't think there can be any doubt about it.

HARVEY TERES: When you looked at Ideas of Order, you saw a poet who was already moving North, as it were, from his South—toward the harsh climate of the Depression from balmy, luxurious Florida. How influential was your review? Or, alternatively, was this a development already under way in Stevens which you noted in the review?

BURNshaw: No, I wasn't noting it. I didn't know about "The Old Woman and the Statue" at the time I wrote the piece. If I had seen that, then I would have had a reason for thinking that there was a man who was ready to get "pushed"—which is what you're implying.

FILREIS: Was the review itself an example of a Popular Front strategy at work? The Popular Front had been officially announced in August of 1935, and your review came soon after, at the beginning of October.

BURNshaw: Yes, but I was way ahead of the Popular Front advocates. I used to be called, half kiddingly, the Aesthete with the Golden Scales of judgment. I was writing reviews of poetry books and plays long before the Stevens book came along. I started to review plays in the fall of 1934.

FILREIS: Is it accurate in your view to say that you wrote reviews the way you did not because you sensed a Popular Front strategy coming but because you felt all along it was natural to you?

BURNshaw: I felt that the left-sectarian mode, the idea of simply slamming people was crazy. I thought of a book or a play: if it's good as art and is telling the truth, that's all we should ask. In theory, the slogan was: "The truth itself is revolutionary." In other words, conditions were aweful and people should write about the way things were—that was enough. You walked the streets and you saw. A book that faithfully recorded what was happening was revolutionary.

FILREIS: It seems, then, that the way in which your review works—whether consciously part of the Popular Front mode or not—indeed does stand as a good example of that strategy. Soon after the August announcement here's an October review urging Stevens to come over from right or center-right to left.

BURNshaw: Nevertheless, I had written an article earlier, called "Middle Ground Writers"—a good while before the Popular Front idea was adopted. Incidentally, Malcolm Cowley always objected to the idea of a Popular Front. He wanted to call it the "People's Front," which I felt made sense. I think you ought to guard yourself from making the timing too important. Remember, I received the Stevens book probably three or four weeks before my review appeared.

TERES: Do you remember reading the book?

BURNshaw: [Laughs.] Rather, yes. I was fascinated. The idea that I would review a Stevens book! He hadn't published even one since 1923. As you know, I greatly admired what he had done in Harmonium. And I had heard stories from Alfred Kreymborg. He'd told me that Archie MacLeish wanted to go to see Stevens once and discuss certain problems of prosody in French literature with him, and Stevens was very standoffish.

FILREIS: Letters I've been able to locate, written by Willard Maas, then a communist, to Isidor Schneider at the New MASSES, suggest that Maas and Schneider agreed that Schneider would review Stevens. Since Maas was Ronald Lane Latimer's associate at Alcestis Press, and so associated with Stevens, I've been curious to know if you remember why Schneider didn't finally review Stevens himself.

BURNshaw: The exchange you've found [between Maas and Schneider] seems odd, for one thing, because I was the one reviewing poetry.izzy simply gave Stevens to me. One day I found several books on my desk. There was the Haniel Long book, Pittsburgh Memoranda, and the Stevens book. Izy and I went over my review very carefully together. He was a very good editor, by the way.

FILREIS: Did Isidor Schneider or anyone go over the review for political correctness? What about Joseph North, whom you've described as the New MASSES' "political watchdog"?

BURNshaw: Nobody was a watchdog over me. Joe North was the political watchdog indeed. Incidentally, he knew more about poetry than anybody else in the editorial office.

FILREIS: There was no way that you as a reviewer would ever have explicitly undergone a test for correctness?

BURNshaw: They didn't touch anything I wrote; that is, I never had anything blue-pencilled for political "correctness." Never! Nobody ever suggested that I make any changes, except, of course, that we all copyedited each other's work. As for correctness, would I have been made Managing Editor of the New MASSES when Joe North was away if they didn't trust me politically?
asked Joe, "How come they're giving me this responsibility?" He answered, "You've got a good political nose." Those were his very words.

FILREIS: When Alfred Kreymborg received Stevens' poem written in response to you, how did you find out?

BURNSHAW: Stevens sent the poem to the *New Caravan*. I sent them a poem too, for the same issue. Mine was a very Parnassian—not a class-conscious—poem. As soon as they received the poem from Stevens, Kreymborg telephoned, "You've just been immortalized." I was in the office of the *New Masses* when he called.

FILREIS: What was the reaction of the others in the office?

BURNSHAW: Oh, they didn't know much about Stevens! But I said to Kreymborg, "Gee, that's terrific. But is it a good poem?" He replied, "It's wonderful." I asked, "What does it say?" He laughed, "Search me!"

FILREIS: How did you feel?

BURNSHAW: I was delighted. I was amazed. I said to myself, "Stevens paid attention to what I wrote!" Here I was, just twenty-nine, and Stevens was a man whom I considered one of the very influential, important, gifted poets.

FILREIS: Even though you had read *Ideas of Order*, and written the review you wrote, wasn't there a moment when you thought Stevens had really accepted your invitation to come over, as it were—to be concerned with the actual world?

BURNSHAW: No, no. As soon as I realized the poem was written directly in reply, it was enough to indicate that this was a controversial response.

FILREIS: But you've indicated that you didn't consider your review to have been negative.

BURNSHAW: I thought my review was very forthcoming. Morris Dickstein of Queens College, who studies the literary left, told me recently that he had just re-read it and thought I had been rather generous to Stevens. Compare what I wrote to what appeared in the *New Republic* at the time. I think I was more generous than they were. I have come to conclude that maybe I did Stevens a disservice. And it raises the whole question of the legitimacy of the role of criticism. I happen to believe very much as Jarrell did about Stevens, with all that philosophizing, hemming and hawing in the poetry. Of course, I don't think either of you will agree with me because you greatly admire Stevens' later work. I can't read it myself; my mind wanders away from the verse. Dudley Fitts once referred to him as "the great unreadable." I think maybe I should not have said to Stevens, "Come now, join the human race, people are suffering. You should be reacting to the world about you." I think that may have been wrong. I should have let him go and do things his own way, because I think his greatest gift is to be seen in *Harmonium*, and that gift was to a great extent, at least as I judge it, perverted or warped or in some way injured, or in some other way affected adversely, by the pressure that that review must have exerted upon him to join in talking about—responding to—reality. I know in some of his letters he constantly speaks about reality and in a lot of the poems about the necessity of reality. Reality is all over the place. But what does he mean by reality? His reality is the imagination. Now for me, one trouble with Stevens' later poetry is that it's almost like mercury. That is, he uses a word such as "reality" but it means one thing to him one day and another thing to him another day. I think by all evidence, in *Harmonium*, Stevens was not very interested in actuality. And he didn't respond to actuality except by transfiguring it through his special kind of imaginative abilities. I would like to find something by Stevens, after *Harmonium*, that strikes me as wonderfully good—something I can't put down. I have a lot of trouble with the post-*Harmonium* poems.

FILREIS: Why do you think Stevens reacted to the review as he did?

BURNSHAW: Judging from what I read later—he had already written "The Old Woman and the Statue"—I think he was probably on his way to writing in response to actuality. If I had known about that poem, I probably would have written the review in a different way. But—really—"Marx has ruined nature!" I could have said harsher things about his title "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." I thought I was pretty restrained. But by giving him a stiff push and challenging him by making him feel guilty about not responding to actuality, did I do him a service? I question whether criticism has the right to do this.

FILREIS: You've described the review as a stiff push and you've also described it as restrained.

BURNSHAW: Then a restrained push!

TERES: We've been talking about orthodoxy and independence, and about how one judges poetry when one has allegiances to a politics and when one has at the same time a certain regard for experimental poets. In the review you innovated and did not follow the line, but there are also parts of the review where you seem to be duplicating the Party dogma. Especially with the business about Stevens' "confusion."

BURNSHAW: "Confusion" meant unable to see what was going on. Or unable to make alliance with what we considered the forces that would make things better. You see, by the way, I didn't think in terms of Stalin. I must explain what my attitude was. I came to the leftwing movement as somebody who had been converted to communism after working in the steel mills, shortly after I graduated from college. I could see the ravages of industrialism. I was working in a company town, called Blawnox, Pennsylvania. It was a typical company town. The workers stored coal in their bathtubs and used the toilets as garbage disposals. I could see what a blight there was—what was
TERES: Did you fully accept that emphasis at the time? Were you aware of the fact that there were dimensions of poetry that were lost here—to which you were not responding?

BURNSHAW: One had very limited space for a review. This review was relatively a long one, although I had published a lengthy, two-page essay on Shakespeare. And Shakespeare was a little more important than Wallace Stevens. The review of Stevens was very condensed. You’ll notice it’s very tightly written. In a review of this kind what strikes you in a book called Ideas of Order is the message more than anything else. The message is in terms of its subject matter and its attitude toward its subject matter. That attitude is indicated by “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery.” It’s also indicated by the line about Marx ruining nature. When you have limited space and you’re not so concerned with the formalities of poetry—as you couldn’t be unless you were writing a rather long review—you wrote the review I wrote. I don’t know any review of Stevens of the time, of this book, that dealt with the formalities. Ted Roethke’s certainly didn’t, and I know Ruth Lechtliter’s didn’t.10 I don’t think anyone would have bothered; we were too concerned with what art was doing—the “Art as a Weapon” kind of thing.

FILREIS: But you were a poet and critic already expert in formal matters, and yet your job was obviously to evaluate new poetry coming your way for its content—

BURNSHAW: —not for its “content” but for its general effect—

FILREIS: —well, for its relation to “the actual world,” the phrase Stevens used—

BURNSHAW: —that’s all right.

FILREIS: So it will be helpful to compare your assessment of Stevens’ poetry with your evaluation of poems submitted for publication in the New Masses itself. I’ve located a rejection letter you sent to a young Communist poet who had sent poems in June of 1934. The poet again was Willard Maas, who, as I’ve said, was a member of the Communist Party, and who had published or would publish with the New Masses, and who, with Latimer, was just then publishing Stevens. In saying you did not like the poems Maas had sent—and you asked him if he had any more poems he could send—you wrote, “They seem to us too chockful of startling imagery, and so we can’t use them.” What did you mean by that?

BURNSHAW: I meant simply that they were at fault technically.

FILREIS: But surely you also meant that they were too much the kind of poetry for Poetry. I would think that a rejection stated in such a way—and to a fellow Communist, after all—would be designed to send a signal that “startling imagery” gives too much pure pleasure at a time when the people felt none.

FILREIS: But you know what he meant by that. He’s saying, “They rejected my poetry because”—

BURNSHAW: “—because it was too good as poetry”—

FILREIS: “—because the New Masses is too busy looking for something else and they can’t see good poetry.”

BURNSHAW: Or: “They’re insensitive to poetic innovation.”

TERES: Could you have written a more positive review of Stevens—say, by offering an appreciative reading of his poetic technique—and gotten away with it? You raised the possibility that Stevens could become an ally, that Stevens would have to come in the direction of the Party. Could you have suggested not that Stevens change but that the Party change?
The Wallace Stevens Poem
Phonetic University

something about that

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world of science, and "the new" is an emotive expression. In so 1

so large in size, and "the new" is an emotive expression. In so 1

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