NOT LONG AGO, as something of a literary-political thought experiment, I decided to reread books about Stevens published in 1985. I sought to recreate the conditions around the critical reception of Stevens at the time I was myself working on two book-length historical and political readings of the poet’s life and work.1 Had I been bolstered, methodologically at least, by what I read as I plowed through my own efforts? How had I at the time drawn the lines of the debate about the language of modernism, and did I recall sensing that Stevens was being enlisted in that debate—and, if so, to support which argument?

I reread Rajeet Patke’s *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens: An Interpretative Study* (1985), and recall originally perceiving it as an attempt to rewrite Helen Vendler’s *On Extended Wings* of 1969. (On rereading *The Long Poems*, I came to the conclusion that the book was a conscious—or, to be more Bloomian about it, perhaps an unconscious—effort to swerve around Vendler.) I reread Milton Bates’s *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (1985), working hard to recall in detail a time when serious scholarly use of intellectual biography as could be gleaned from the archive—in particular, the unpublished letters then fairly recently available at the Huntington Library—was fresh and perhaps a bit daring, a moment when this approach could be met without knowledgeable preconception. Bates’s fine book is modest but seemed intrepid at the time.

I then reread a collection of essays edited by Albert Gelpi called *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism* (1985), attempting, as I encountered each argument again, to remind myself of what had been at stake in the discussion about the historiography of modernism when it was finally—I recall feeling the relief!—being applied to Stevens by critics who more typically worked with Williams, Pound, Zukofsky, Stein, Oppen, the Steinian side of Ashbery, the paratactic Dickinson, et alia. Although Marjorie Perloff’s contribution was just one of many essays—and it used a then-uncharacteristic historicist method and had a direct ethical/political focus—I originally felt its sensibility expressed the tenor overall of the book. Her essay was positioned at its center.

I reread Albert Gelpi’s own essay on Stevens and Williams, in which the two—whom I had been taught as opposites—share a conception of the
modernist imagination; Alan Golding’s on connections between Stevens and Zukofsky; Perloff’s, just mentioned, on Stevens’ wartime experience (or special form of inexperience); and Michael Davidson’s important attempt to relate, but not ultimately connect, contemporary experimental poetics to Stevens’ quasi-seriality, abstraction, meta-poetry, interest in indeterminacy, and tendency to theorize in verse and to digress. As I finished rereading the final essay in Gelpi—Davidson’s—out of its pages fell some worn photocopies: Helen Vendler’s 1986 review of Bates, Gelpi, and Patke, published in The New England Quarterly.

Vendler, I was reminded, was generally not fond of the essays gathered by Gelpi, nor did she much respect Patke’s work. But she did admire Milton Bates, whose meticulous (“cool and even-handed” (“Books,” 561)) approach produced the first full-length intellectual reading of Stevens based on what we knew the poet read and (through letters especially) what theories of literature and history interested him. Toward the end of her review, Vendler commended Bates in a manner that rewards close reading:

Milton Bates’s learned book is the one to recommend henceforth as the first critical book for the novice reader of Stevens. It sets Stevens firmly, as other books do not, in the personal, literary, political, and philosophic contexts of his era and of his reading. It sees Stevens as a fallible human being, subject to the errors of his sex, his class, his education, and his historical moment, and yet it treats him chiefly as a heroically experimental artist, daring a terrain where few could, then as now, follow him. (563)

The key here, I believe, is to discern whether affirmation of experimentalism is meant as a rejoinder—may even, indeed, a sop—to those who would focus on the “fallible” Stevens committing “errors” of sex, class, and ideology (a belated final jab at Perloff, whose essay recites evidence of Stevens’ anti-Semitism and apparent friendliness toward fascism), or if, on the other hand, heroic commitment to linguistic and formal experiment could or should stand as a poetic value whether one rejects or accepts concerns such as those raised by Davidson, Perloff, and others.

Helen Vendler, the first great reader of Stevens’ particular rhetoric, has of course never been nearly so resolutely formalist as not to welcome a cautious and criticism-savvy biographical reading of Stevens, and this review (and another) helped launch Milton Bates and other projects of similar methodology (among them James Longenbach’s), and actually helped bring about a rapprochement among formalist and historicist modes. That is, at any rate, how I have recalled perceiving the strategy and effect of this review, until it fell into my lap and I reread it. Now I noticed that, alongside the mediation of formalist and historicist modes of approach-

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ing Stevens, there is an energetic foray into the other main schism among Stevens’ readers, critics, scholars, and fellow poets at the time.

Alan Golding’s essay in the Gelpi book brought Zukofsky and Stevens together significantly for the first time, and it was itself an amiable gesture intended partly to entice the Objectivist-leaning, Spring and All-defending, “Revolution of the Word”—focused critics of modernism and postmodernism in Stevens’ direction. Not only wasn’t Helen Vendler having it—saying that “the feeble lines by Zukofsky seem to have nothing in common with Stevens’s brilliant atmospheres (debating content and form)” (“Books” 550). But, moreover, she read Golding’s attempt to create détente in the lyric/post-lyric critical wars as in fact arguing that Zukofsky “condemns by exclusion Stevens’s epistemological meanderings” (Golding 131, qtd. in Vendler, “Books” 550; emphasis added), thus reinforcing rather than lessening the Stevens-Zukofsky split. If Gelpi’s goal, as I recall perceiving it then, was to invite readers of the avant-gardist tendency in Williams to move toward an appreciation of Stevens, by focusing on their shared modern inheritance from romanticism, for Vendler, on the contrary, the comparison only worked “to the disadvantage of Stevens” (“Books” 554), and thus reinforced the prior separation of the two.

Turning then to Davidson, she identified him as someone then writing about the San Francisco Renaissance (true) and put that already standard phrase—“San Francisco poetry renaissance” (“Books” 550)—in distancing or doubtful quotation marks, therewith stressing how much Davidson’s essay indicates his dislike of Stevens. Davidson did not believe that Stevens was a prosodic innovator, and Vendler pointed out his (Davidson’s) preference for Ashbery. Such writing, unlike Stevens’, “reflects the kind of personal insecurity and crisis that one finds in Ashbery” (Davidson 144, qtd. in Vendler, “Books” 551). Vendler then (correctly, I think) identified “Esthétique du Mal” and “The Auroras of Autumn” (she might have added “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”), the later long poems, as indeed reflecting insecurity and crisis—in the writing and the open non-narrative form of the poems. Her tone here in the review was one of exasperation at the essayists Gelpi convened: “Can Davidson have read ‘Esthétique du Mal,’ ‘The Auroras of Autumn,’ or ‘The Rock’ . . . ?” (“Books” 551). To be sure, as she noted, Davidson’s argument affirms the long poems as marking a transition from modern to postmodern—open-ended rather than evincing “modernist closure” (551), self-reflexive and self-critical.

There’s little getting around Vendler’s distaste for variously founded critical distastes for Stevens in the mid-1980s, nor can one misunderstand her sense of the damage being done by what she calls Davidson’s “uniform misunderstanding of Stevens” (“Books” 551). Yet despite the pleasure (is that the word?) of looking back on the world of Stevens’ critics and readers at that moment, it seems that the lines of distinction and disagreement were (and still are) not so clearly drawn—and that even then they crossed and got productively confused.
Vendler's gesture of recommending Bates and thus the historical, biographical, intellectual, and even the political reading—in the same review where she deemed Perloff's "rancorous commentary" equivalent "essentially [to] the stale, old criticism of Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson—that they did not write about the Napoleonic Wars or the Civil War" ("Books" 553) and lambasted Davidson's "Marxist diction" (552) as governing his view that "Stevens' critical function stops . . . at the border of institutions and ideologies" (Davidson 157, qtd. in Vendler 552)—actually, it turns out, did signify something of an opening of the field, as did, too, the carefully worded yet ringing endorsement of experimentalism, so that what we would still have to do, in the second half of the 1980s and in the '90s, was begin to define and then debate what "experiment" in Stevens' complicated case meant, and how experiment stood with or against postmodernity and the ideology of the modernist lyric.

Movement was possible. Helen Vendler, of course, would come to take up a real interest in the verse of John Ashbery, and to write interestingly about him, contending that his rendering of American speech "has surpassed [that of] most of his contemporaries" and at the same time acknowledgment his consistent reach into poetic tradition ("Ashbery").

And movement on the other side, too: Davidson's affirmation of the long poems as instances of nascent postmodern seriality and self-criticism had in the first instance depended on the rhetorical readings of Vendler's On Extended Wings, as was more evident in the essay he prepared for the Gelpi book than perhaps she could consistently acknowledge. In any case, of Davidson's own important 1997 book, Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World—while it even more emphatically sets Stevens' ideas about sound in the postmodern context—it cannot be said that he dislikes Stevens or discounts the relevance of this modernist to post-modernism at that major point in his career as a poet-critic.

And Zukofsky: what we've learned since about his special way of revering and truly depending on Stevens' art—on the role of Stevens in the development of Zukofsky's late-modern long poem "A"—connects the two both aesthetically and literary-historically in a way that takes us beyond Golding's first intervention and Vendler's initial impatience with its implicit claim that the two can be read together. As Davidson had noticed early, although Zukofsky is "usually thought to extend directly from the Poundian tradition," he is "most like Stevens in his concern for the moral worth of poetic language" (144). Understanding Zukofsky's ethics is obviously one way of tracing the crossing of modernist lineages.

Little in the way of such crossing would occur on the various occasions over the years when the critical work of Vendler and Perloff has coincided. They have worked distinctly, and their interests are mostly separate. One can view the conflagration of the mid-1980s as a second phase in the larger argument about Pound and Stevens. (Which modernist lineage is ascen-
Vendler’s response to Perloff’s sense of “the impasse of the modernist lyric” during World War II was pointedly not to disagree about Stevens’ anti-Semitism, but to lament the structure of Perloff’s critical method for its socio-historical contextualizing—a list with dates, for example, of horrendous events taking place in Europe while Stevens obliviously went about his mundane work as insurance executive and poet. Vendler found this structure satirical, and this led her to conclude bitterly that Perloff was acting out of “a prior wish to find prejudice in Stevens” (“Books” 553). What for Marjorie Perloff could have been “prior” to reading or rereading poems like “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”? Her strong career-long preference for a different line of modernism? Her being Jewish, her traumatic statelessness at the time of the Anschluss—a personal motive for disliking insular, business-as-usual Americans? The phrase “prior wish” itself fully implied a critical impasse that might seem not to pertain to modern poetry. But it does pertain. There was needed, right then, a method for historical and political contextualizing of Stevens (and other modernists, of course); indeed, Bates’s work, directly at issue, indicated that such a method was tenable and that more such historicized close readings were coming, a result of the convergence of the recovery of historicist methods and the relatively new availability of the whole Stevens archive.

In my Wallace Stevens and the Actual World, published a few years later, 118 pages mostly consisted of readings of poems indicating Stevens’ wartime engagement, and not merely on the home front. “Esthétique du Mal” could be read, I argued, as an effort to write through the witnessing of a soldier, Fernand Aubrjonois, and responded intelligently to the concentration camp experience of philosopher-poet Jean Wahl, whose unpublished typescript of camp poems could be found tucked away in Stevens’ correspondence at the Huntington (Actual 29–147). If Perloff’s “rancorous commentary” was the equivalent for Vendler of vulgar approaches to the apparent ignorance inscribed in Dickinson’s poems written in the early 1860s, then perhaps rancor was apt. The confusion was immediately generative here, just as it was for studies of Williams following Gelpi, of Zukofsky following Golding, and of Language Poets’ engagement with seriality after Davidson. Susan Howe, whose cyclonic collagist verse and prose-poem histories we might say “extend directly from the Poundian tradition,” would have taken Perloff’s side here (if sides needed to be taken). Yet Howe, one of Stevens’ strongest postmodern champions, has evolved a reading of American responsiveness in Stevens that is aligned with, rather than contradicts, My Emily Dickinson (1985), a work of criticism that is all context.

I continue to reread this moment, and am struck by the importance of Helen Vendler’s conclusion to her carefully—one is tempted to say craftily—constructed review essay: praise for a critical work that, despite its
integration of non-poetic and even political materials, finally discloses a "heroically experimental artist." This has obviously been a consistent value for her from On Extended Wings to Last Looks, Last Books. It puts me in mind of her special manner of affirming the experimental modernist form of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in On Extended Wings (119–43). That modernist work was constructed of experimental writing almost for its own sake, an experiment "daring a terrain" so experimentally that the extreme linguistic constraint chosen for the making of the poem simply could not be kept up for very long. Yet in the attempt there were strong indications, surely, of belief in the moral worth of poetic language. Ultimately, Stevens' modernism there produced a failed poem because its cubism and surrealism—its collagist approach and its Steinian verbal recurrences—and its "new populist style," its extremes of language-centeredness and anti-mimetic repetitions and "theoretical interminable[ness]" (Vendler, "Hypotheses" 106), could not be sustained—and it was that modernist Stevens, I came to realize, that would not accommodate a "cool and even-handed" critical approach. It needed another approach at least in parallel. Yet it's Vendler who has taught us, in readings of the later long poems—poems coming necessarily after such experiment—precisely how that experiment was worth the effort. And the effort strikes me as heroic indeed.

University of Pennsylvania

Notes

1See my Wallace Stevens and the Actual World (1991) and Modernism from Right to Left (1994).
2She wrote a separate review of three biographical books about Stevens, including Bates's again, for the New York Review of Books (20 Nov. 1986).

Works Cited