

Stevens and the Interpersonal



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With Wallace Stevens emerging as a father figure for American poetry of the late twentieth century, Mark Halliday argues that it is time for this "poet of ideas" to undergo an ethical critique. In this bold, accessible reconsideration of Stevens' work, he insists on the importance of interpersonal relations in any account of human life in the modern world. Although Stevens outwardly denies aspects of life that center on such relations as those between friends, lovers, family members, and political constituents, Halliday uncovers in his poetry an anxious awareness of the importance of these relations. Here we see the difficulties Stevens made for himself in wanting to offer a thoroughly satisfying version of secular spiritual health in the modern world without facing up to the moral and psychological implications of his own interpersonal needs, problems, and responsibilities. The final chapter reveals, however, an unusually encouraging "avuncular" attitude toward the reader of the poetry, which may be felt to redeem Stevens from the alienation observed earlier. Halliday develops his views by way of comparisons between Stevens and other poets, especially Thomas Hardy, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and John Ashbery.

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