

“It is the human that is the alien”

Perception, Language, and Nature in Wallace Stevens’s Short Poems

SARAH NOLAN

Although not traditionally read as an environmental poet, Wallace Stevens has recently gained some notoriety for his attention to the natural world. Scholars like Gyorgyi Voros have thoroughly explored the ways in which nature enters into and influences the poet’s work. For Stevens, though, nature is accessed through the problematic tool of human perception, through which material nature or, in Stevens’s terms, the real is altered as it enters into the imagination. Rather than focusing on Stevens’s interest in nature, this article will consider how the act of human perception and its effects on the perceived object shapes Stevens’s poetry. Perception immediately alters the material world by placing it within the confines of human conception, making the human individual not only an observer but also a contributor to everything he or she perceives. This is a troubling realization for Stevens. Throughout his poetry, he works to identify the limitations that shape how humans perceive the non-human world and to discover a way in which they can overcome these limitations in order to comprehend uncontaminated reality. As poems like “The Snow Man,” “Ideas of Order at Key West” and “Study of Two Pears” demonstrate the disconnection between perception and reality, Stevens begins to search for an ecocentric existence in which the human can view material nature accurately – a search he never achieves. In “Less and Less