

**Zeitschrift:** Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne  
**Herausgeber:** Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres  
**Band:** - (2001)  
**Heft:** 4

**Buchbesprechung:** The moments when we choose to play : Wallace Stevens' experimental language : The Lion in the Lute, by Beverly Maeder  
**Autor:** Vejdovsky, Boris

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 15.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

THE MOMENTS WHEN WE CHOOSE TO PLAY  
*WALLACE STEVENS' EXPERIMENTAL LANGUAGE :*  
*THE LION IN THE LUTE*, BY BEVERLY MAEDER

Anyone who has approached Wallace Stevens' poetry has been confronted with modes of reading that range from analytical grammar to hunting for etymologies, via the more classic searching in encyclopedias (or dusty memories) for mythical names, geographical places, or Latinate phrases. Stevens seamlessly brings together worlds that one would not expect to coexist. In *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language*, Beverly Maeder also links worlds and modes of reading that readers may not expect to find hosted within one single methodology. The book may be described in the musical register that provides its key set of metaphors and can be seen as consisting of three seemingly divergent movements. The first movement is a rhetorical reading of Stevens' metaphors. The second is linguistic and immerses the reader in the very matter of Stevens' language, syntax, and grammar. The third movement picks up the themes of the first two to constitute the finale and to propose convincingly that "[a] reflection on the aesthetics of music provides the happiest critical metaphor for describing the way Stevens puts his metaphors into syntax".

In a necessarily complex book devoted to one of the most enigmatic poets of American letters, Beverly Maeder manages to convey extremely sophisticated and subtle points of interpretation in a syntax and vocabulary endowed with wonderful fluidity and ease. The book is clearly the result of a tremendous work of reflection and research that renders it indispensable for any serious reader of Stevens. However, Maeder never imposes on her reader the contemplation of her strenuous work and her heroic efforts; she rather allows us to read her and Stevens with a wonderful sense of playfulness and pleasure. While fully revealing the terse complexity and intensity of Stevens' poetry, the book never turns into an esoteric manual intended for an audience of monomaniac exegetes. On the contrary, the dominant feeling after reading the book is one of pleasure: one really feels like picking up a volume

of Stevens. Reading Stevens — even after reading Maeder — will remain hard work, but this book convinces its readers that the poet's language is also music, music that we may choose to listen to or play.

One of the gratifying aspects of reading Beverly Maeder's study is that she often analyzes poems that have received little or no attention in the past. Without adopting an antagonistic attitude, she shows that these poems have often been left aside because they were incompatible with theoretical pronouncements about Stevens' definitions of language and poetry. Through very intense readings she proposes that Stevens "question[s] the very basis of poetic language, not merely with a view to deflating old metaphors, but with a view to inventing new linguistic structures that might free the poet from the old ones". This sharp reading gradually reveals the heuristic ("experimental") character of Stevens' poetry, which allies playfulness to a firm intent and "perform[s] basic research in the area of poetic language".

Maeder conducts this research with surgical precision in the second part of the book where language is examined as a material entity. Her erudite and compelling analysis of Stevens' "compositional possibilities of English grammar" allows her to break free from the boundaries imposed by "the strangling exactness of the ontological version of philosophy or the scientific version of linguistics". She shows how Stevens' work and play with language enable him to move beyond what she describes as the "againstness" of some of his early poetry to "write a new kind of exact but expanded English". This expansion of the "Province of English" is one of the remarkably original aspects of Maeder's book. Stevens is not, unlike some of his contemporaries, a poet who sought to tear down and disarticulate grammatical functions. By taking us "[b]eyond the Province of English", Beverly Maeder paradoxically manages to keep us *within* Stevens' poems, *within* their very matter, instead of projecting us toward yet another horizon of meaning. These are very strong moments of the book in which well-known poems such as "The Snow Man" or "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", which may seem to have exhausted their poetic ore a long time ago, acquire a renewed and formidable density. These are moments when Stevens' "experimental language" becomes a fulfilling experience of reading.

The innovative rhetorical and philosophical methodology that emerges out of the different movements of the book enables

Maeder to take her readers through various layers of meaning and bring them to a metaphorical level that is aesthetically valid and theoretically solid. With all the punning she reveals, all the linguistic work she does, and all the close textual analysis she conducts, Beverly Maeder never turns her reading of Stevens into a solipsistic experience. Stevens' poetry is certainly self-referential but it is not a mere succession of gratuitous effects. Maeder thus adumbrates the political and ethical dimensions of Stevens' poetry. She shows that the poetry may be "an experiment in giving language survival value in the face of the way dead language and propaganda serve the harbingers of totalitarianism and mass destruction".

*Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language* is a trans-historical book that does not seek to extensively reconstitute the poet's career. However, by examining what she calls some of Stevens' most "radical and original experiments", Maeder persuasively demonstrates that there is a movement in Stevens from the early lyrics of *Harmonium* to the "Man with the Blue Guitar" and beyond. It is a movement away from a language of being or presence dominated by ontology to a poetic language defined as a heuristic process ordered by "[t]he incompressible nature of time" characteristic of music. Beverly Maeder is convincing when she proposes that Stevens' patient experimentation with poetry, first informed by the visual arts and a sense of space, gradually led him to a poetics dominated by the sense of time, process, and vanishing. This movement away from ontology and toward heuristics can be read, as Beverly Maeder shrewdly suggests in her subtitle, as the itinerary from the petrified rigidity of "the lion locked in the stone" to the musicality and the flexible playfulness of "the lion in the lute". When interpreted by Beverly Maeder, Stevens' poetry becomes a succession of moments which, when we choose to play, may lead to the realization that play we must.

Boris VEJDOVSKY

Beverly MAEDER, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 257 pp. ISBN 0-312-21334-4.