



# Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things

*James Longenbach*

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## **Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things** James Longenbach

Wallace Stevens the poet and Wallace Stevens the insurance executive: for more than one critical generation it has seemed as if these two men were unacquainted--that Stevens was a poet who existed only in the rarefied world of language. However, the idea that Stevens lived a double life, the author maintains, is misleading. This compelling book uncovers what Stevens liked to think of as his "ordinary" life, a life in which the demands of politics, economics, poetry, and everyday distractions coexisted, sometimes peacefully and sometimes not. Examining the full scope of Stevens's career (from the student-poet of the nineteenth century to the award-winning poet of the Cold War years), Longenbach reveals that Stevens was not only aware of events taking place around him, but often inspired by those events. The major achievements of Stevens's career are shown to coalesce around the major historical events of his lifetime (the Great Depression and two World Wars); but Longenbach also dwells on Stevens's two extended periods of poetic silence, exploring the crucial aspects of Steven's life that were not exclusively poetic. Longenbach demonstrates that through Stevens's work in surety law he was far more intimately acquainted with legal and economic concerns than most poets, and he consequently thought deeply about the strengths--and, equally important, the limitations--of poetry as a social product and force.

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