

Things Merely Are

*Philosophy in the poetry of
Wallace Stevens*

Simon Critchley

 **Routledge**
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Praise for Simon Critchley

‘A remarkable engagement between a philosopher and
a poet . . . written both with a beautiful, poised
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Steven Connor, Birkbeck College, London

‘Critchley writes with brilliant wit, clarity, penetration, and
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J. Hillis Miller, University of California, Irvine

‘Characteristically engaging and stimulating,
clear and succinct.’

Sebastian Gardner, University College London

Things Merely Are

This book is an invitation to read poetry. Simon Critchley argues that poetry enlarges life with a range of observation, power of expression and attention to language that eclipses any other medium. In an extended engagement with the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Critchley reveals that poetry also contains deep and important philosophical insight. Above all, he argues for a 'poetic epistemology' that enables us to recast the philosophical problem of the relation between mind and world, or thought and things, in a way that allows us to cast the problem away.

Drawing on Kant, the German and English Romantics and Heidegger, Critchley argues that, through its descriptions of particular things and their difficult plainness, poetry evokes the 'mereness' of things. Poetry brings us to the realization that things merely are, an experience that provokes a mood of calm, a calm that allows the imagination to press back against the pressure of reality. Critchley also argues that this calm defines the cinematic eye of Terrence Malick, whose work is discussed at the end of the book.

SIMON CRITCHLEY is Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research, New York, and at the University of Essex. He is the author of many books, including *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* (revised edition, 2004) and *On Humour* (2002), both published by Routledge.

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'To say more than human things with human voice,
That cannot be; to say human things with more
Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth
Of human things, that is acutest speech.'

Wallace Stevens, 'Chocorua to its Neighbor'

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Abbreviations of works by Wallace Stevens

PM – *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, edited by Holly Stevens (Vintage, New York, 1967)

NA – *The Necessary Angel. Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (Knopf, New York, 1951/Faber, London, 1960)

CP – *Collected Poems* (Knopf, New York, 1955/Faber, London, 1955)

OP – *Opus Posthumous*, revised, enlarged and corrected edition, edited by Milton J. Bates (Knopf, New York, 1989/Faber, London, 1990)

Advice to the reader

I do not write poetry. T.S. Eliot writes somewhere that the only poets to be taken seriously are those who write after the age of twenty-five. I stopped writing poetry a few months after my twenty-fifth birthday. I used to write delicately crafted little observations of architecture, landscape and other usually inert things, all wrapped up in obscure verse forms, the more obscure the better (I never did finish my sestina, but wrote a few middling villanelles). Like so many of my generation, I had come to the experience of poetry through reading T.S. Eliot, first the early verse like 'The Wasteland' and then increasingly the later work like 'Four Quartets'. Dimly echoing this movement, I had gone from a bad Nietzschean free-versifying doggerel of confessional fragments, to a sub-Eliotesque obsession with form, with metre, rhyme, stanzas and the whole realm of the wrought. Sadly, as my cultivation of form developed, I seemed to have less and less to say. Almost nothing, in fact. Then, when I was around twenty-four, I read W.H. Auden, a poet whom I