

The background of the entire page is a dark, monochromatic image. It features several birds perched on the bare, intricate branches of a tree. A large, bright, circular moon is visible in the upper left quadrant, partially obscured by the branches. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

postHUMANities

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# Wallace Stevens's Birds

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Birds comprise arguably one of the most storied *topoi* in Anglo-American poetry—and particularly in the Romantic genealogy that runs from Keats's nightingale, Shelley's skylark, and Poe's raven to the birds that appear centrally in Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." In fact, two of Stevens's most important birds appear in the poems that end his two major collections: "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself" (in *The Collected Poems*), and "Of Mere Being" (in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*). Stevens is drawn to the bird *topos* for a number of reasons at different points in his career—their usual associations with transcendence and freedom, their exoticism, his desire for a perceptual freshness and fecundity of which they are often the index. But most of all, I think, Stevens is fascinated by birds because of their intensely inhuman embodiment of a subjectivity, a point of view, at once recognizable and yet utterly foreign—a strangeness for which even the term "animal" would seem a domestication. This talk will attempt to elucidate how in the bird *topos* of Stevens, the lines of animal studies and posthumanism cross in a way that subordinates the problem of the animal other to the more radically inhuman or ahuman otherness of a machinic dynamics of paradoxical observation that is not limited to animal and human bodies, but in fact (if we believe Luhmann and Derrida) "traverses the life/death relation" (to use Derrida's phrase). And this, in tandem with Derrida's *The Beast and the Sovereign*, enables us to understand the peculiar quality of what I will Stevens's "ecological" poetics.

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