WALLACE STEVENS' "THE MAN WITH THE BLUE GUITAR":
A STUDY IN THE CONTINUITY OF IMAGES AND ICONIC FIGURATIONS

BY

ALDEN R. TURNER

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the iconic material in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937) reveals Wallace Stevens' central concern with the tragedy inherent in man's confrontation with the forces of the world. The "man" and the "blue guitar" are icons which are incorporated into the work and deal with what the poet identifies as "the painter's problem of realization...trying to see the world about me both as I see it and as it is" (LWS 316).¹ For Stevens, this "problem" generates a number of questions about the relations between the imagination and reality, mind and matter, subject and object, and art and life. These relations are discussed by J. Hillis Miller, in his article "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," in terms of the paradox of the heraldic mise en abyme:

Without the production of some schema, some "icon", there can be no glimpse of the abyss, no vertigo of the underlying nothingness. Any such schema, however, both opens the chasm, creates it or reveals it, and at the same time fills it up, covers it over by naming it, gives the groundless a ground, the bottomless a bottom. Any such schema almost instantaneously becomes a trivial mechanism, an artifice.²

The process of creating and decreasing icons in an attempt to "realize" some valid illumination of man's relation to the world is represented elsewhere by Miller as a "series of momentary crystallizations or globulations of thought followed by dissolution."³ Miller's approach
to Stevens' later work, such as "The Rock" (1950), is perceptive in terms of its general and specific statements about Stevens' view that one function of the poet is "to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time" (WA viii). Miller suggests here that the significance of Stevens' aphorism, "Progress in any aspect is a movement through changes of terminology" (OP 157) leads to the view that Stevens is "in the end, vulnerable, as Emerson and Whitman are not, to an abyssing or dissolution of the self." In other words, Stevens' sense of the self moves toward disintegration whereas Emerson's and Whitman's sense of the self has led to unity. Miller goes on to say that

For Stevens the self-enclosed sphere of the self is broken. It is thereby engulfed in the chasm of its own bifurcation. This conflict between an attempted self-subsistent enclosure and the doubling, breaking apart, and abyssing of that enclosure may be seen in all the chief scenes of "The Rock".4

This present study suggests, however, that before Stevens reached the less turbulent stage of his career in which he wrote "The Rock," he faced a crisis of values and of poetry itself in the 1930's. Criticized by his fellows for not writing a poetry of social consciousness, Stevens answered in his slender volume Owl's Clover (1935) to the effect that the poet must explore his world in his own way. Dissatisfied with this poetic answer, and still unresolved in his mind over the vagaries of his world, Stevens approached the writing of his great poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar." The movement of the poem reflects
his quarrel with his contemporaries: they have tried to tell him how to speak; he has responded that he must speak as he can, as he sees. He indicates that his concern with man's tragedy emanates from the unconquerable variety of things, the sense of chaos in the environment. Man strays, he suggests, from the images of his own creation, images that have provided continuity to his otherwise chaotic existence. Yet man returns to these same images. He does so because the images are icons, or figures of fixed meaning in a discouragingly relative world. Stevens uses these icons to maintain the vital tension between the two great contraries of his world: progress, the great American shibboleth of becoming; and change, the eternal human recognition of death. Through this sustained tension, Stevens affirms the poetic imagination which attempts to "penetrate to basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry older than the ancient world" (NA 145).

Chapter One deals with "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in terms of Stevens' "man" and "guitar" images as they appear in the earlier work. The contexts of music, painting and poetry allow the poet to incorporate the techniques of improvisation and repetition, and abstraction, with a figurative language that may mediate, as a source of meaning and belief, between the ongoing cycles of destruction and creation in both nature and culture. This early poetry establishes a basis for what were to become Stevens' aesthetic concerns and specific comments about "The Man with the Blue Guitar" at the time of its composition and publication. The second interprets Stevens' materials and techniques in "The Man
with the Blue Guitar" by emphasizing the sense in which the "blue guitar" is the "blues guitar" of the American black cultural tradition. This allusion to the collective dispossession, alienation and suffering of a people facilitates the poet's exploration of man's capacity to express and cope with the world's oppressive realities. Stevens' poetic use of materials adopted from the work of Picasso, specifically the artist's blue period work, "The Old Guitarist" (1903), effectively extends the treatment of the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" as "this 'hoard / Of destructions,' a picture of ourselves" ("MBG" XV: CP 173). The final chapter suggests that iconology is a critically valuable approach to Stevens' work. The poet's use of the accessible and significant iconic material of Picasso's work is a major influence on his own artistic sensibilities and on his attempt to fuse together a bifurcated cultural tradition. Wallace Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar" comes to terms with a creative and destructive cultural tradition that is confronted and accepted but not vindicated:

The extension of the mind beyond the range of the mind, the projection of reality beyond reality, the determination to cover the ground whatever it may be, the determination not to be confined, the recapture of intensity and interest, the enlargement of the spirit at every time, in every way, these are the unities, the relations, to be summarized as paramount now. (NA 171)

Finally Miller's mise en abyme may be said to describe Stevens' treatment of the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" but it must be recognized that these materials are grounded in the bifurcations of a continuity of culture, American and European, within which its
beneficiaries are both confined to and liberated by the poetic illumination of the reality of its artifice.
Footnotes

Introduction


4 Miller, "Stevens' Rock", p. 25.
CHAPTER I

"On an Old Guitar"

In the poetry preceding the composition of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Wallace Stevens works with the images of the man and the guitar in a manner that both prefigures and illuminates their representation in the culminating poem. In this earlier poetry, Stevens establishes the aesthetic concerns that come to prominence in the later poem. Further evidence of Stevens' poetic development emerges from his letters and from a paper, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," written about the same time as "The Man with the Blue Guitar." In assessing the history of the poetic materials, the subject matter and the technique which Stevens brings to his composition of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," we acquire some notion of the imaginative process of Stevens' artistic creation.

This study will propose that Wallace Stevens is one of those artists who believe in the value of "the imagination that seeks to satisfy, say, the universal mind, which, in the case of a poet, would be the imagination that tries to penetrate basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world" (NA 145). Wallace Stevens creates symbolic representational modes to stand for the radical concepts of the culture in which he finds himself. For the purpose of validating an approach to the depth
of the figurations present in "The Man with the Blue Guitar", this thesis will rely on the hypotheses of Erwin Panofsky who, in his descriptions of iconology as a method of art criticism, offers invaluable assistance to the critic of arcane art. The efficacy of a critical approach that deals with the materialized forms, the subject matter, and the content of a work of art depends upon an interpretive apparatus which takes into account both the parts of an iconology and the whole of its system. An iconological representation is viewed by Panofsky

as a symptom of something else which expresses itself in a countless variety of other symptoms, so that we interpret its compositional and iconographical features as more particularized evidence of this "something else." The discovery of these "symbolical values" (which are often unknown to the artist himself and may emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express) is the subject of what we may call "iconology".¹

Panofsky maintains that an iconological approach to works of art "corrects the interpretation of an individual work of art by developing a 'history of style,' which in turn can only be built up by interpreting individual works."² Michel Benamou has specifically suggested the usefulness of an iconological method in dealing with Stevens' work.³ Benamou's suggestion carries with it the force of Panofsky's statement that "the historian of political life, poetry, religion, philosophy, and social situations should make analogous use of works of art. It is in the search for intrinsic meaning that the various humanistic disciplines meet on a common plane instead of serving as handmaidens to
each other."4 It is my hope that I can, through an iconological approach to "The Man with the Blue Guitar," attempt some "corrections to the prevailing critical attitudes to the poem which are reflected in current criticism.

While critics like Harold Bloom may consider that in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "sections I-IV are the poem's opening swerve away from its own origins, which have little to do with Picasso's painting 'The Old Guitarist' and much to do with Romantic poetry."5 I will suggest that the iconological information in Stevens' own writing suggests something quite to the contrary. Poems such as "A Thought Revolved," "Mandolin and Liquors," and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," as well as the aesthetic concerns raised by Stevens in his prose writings and letters in terms of the relation between poetry and the visual arts and specifically the work of Picasso, serve to point out the questionable validity of Bloom's statement. Bloom's perception of Stevens' affinity with Shelley does not take into account Stevens' attempt to come to terms with his own time and place, to deal with the reality of his own world in 1937 and the possibilities for the imaginative man who finds himself in that world:

There is no place
Here, for the lark fixed in the mind,
In the museum of the sky. ("MBG" XXXI: CP 182)

Bloom may well be correct in challenging Helen Vendler's statement that "The Man with the Blue Guitar" "could be rearranged internally without loss."6 But the structural paradigm that Bloom himself
proposes would illuminate Stevens' intentions and values more adequately if he were to deal with Shelley's view of Greek mythology and Christianity in the context of Stevens' own treatment of the hero and the Christ figures in the poem. As Stevens' earlier poetry and some of his prose comments suggest, the poet is preoccupied with the ongoing process of man's creation and destruction of his own fictions. Helen Vendler sees this process of creation and destruction in the musical repetitions and the improvisations associated with folk music in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," but goes on to say that "the whole poem brings us the voice of a dead man using the inhuman skeleton of language." A close and coherent reading of Stevens' earlier poetry reveals that Stevens' technique of repetition and improvisation, consistently associated with the image of the guitar, enables the poet to express his concern with the creation of meaning. The image of the guitar is a resonant figuration that must be considered in the light of what Philip Furia and Martin Roth have impressively demonstrated to be Stevens' use of certain basic vocabularies. The poet's artistic and musical vocabularies are developed in the iconologically significant materials of Stevens' early poetry and the prose comments that accompany it. For instance, if "The Man with the Blue Guitar" describes as Stevens says, "Man in C Major," then one wants to inquire who Crispin is in "The Comedian as the Letter C". The relation between the creative and destructive processes of culture reflected in Stevens' "murderous" and "fusky" alphabets must be refined if we are to understand the nature of Stevens' "ABCs" in "The Man with the Blue Guitar."
The history of Stevens' work with the image of the guitar in the context of music and art serves to illuminate his poetic intentions and achievements in this major work. The iconology reveals that, for Stevens, images such as the guitar are not (as Vendler says) "slender". In the earlier poetry as well as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" the image of the guitar is richly associated with the exploration of the relation between music and poetry, with specific locales and landscapes, with the image as an art object, and with the fundamental nature of man as a tragic figure who is compelled to deal with his world in terms of the "robes and symbols" ("MBG" XXV; CP 178) that may have been made available to him through time.

Music, so frequently associated with ritual in Stevens' work, is like poetry based on a sustained tradition of imaginative expression at least as old in man's collective thought as the passage of time itself. Stevens incorporates music metaphors into his poetry as a means of dealing with man's desire to create meaning. The guitar is an image that assumes meaning within its context of music as a metaphor for the imagination. The instrument appears in the poetry in several stages of its historical development from the ancient Hermes' lyra to the Renaissance lute and cithern to the popular modern folk instrument. Wallace Stevens endows his guitar with its inherent resonant quality, thus allowing the poet to play upon the instrument the repetitions and improvisations of his lyrical hymns and folksongs that explore the whole scale of relationships between reality and the imagination.

"Sunday Morning" (1915) and "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (1915)
are among the early poems in which Stevens uses music metaphors as means of dealing with man's imaginative capacity to create modes of expression. In both of these poems, Stevens establishes his use of the metaphor in terms of the Renaissance lute and clavier, respectively. "Our insipid lutes" are, for Stevens, like "the silken weavings of our afternoons" (CP 69). The lute and clavier have their origins in man's desire, through creating patterned sound, to attribute order to the world. In "The Idea of Order at Key West" (1934) Stevens insists in respect to the singer in the poem that "She sang beyond the genius of the sea. / The water never formed to mind or voice":

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang, And when she sang, the sea
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.
(CP 128-29)

The representation of man as the singer, the artificer who changes his world into being, is crucial in "Sunday Morning" and "Peter Quince at the Clavier." In stanza seven of "Sunday Morning," the capacity of man to create "new" orderings of the world is affirmed as Stevens' predilection for the future. Nevertheless, the poet maintains a sense of the past in that the "ring of men [who] / Shall chant in orgy" (CP 69) are represented as a conflation of Nietzsche's antithetical Dionysian and Apollonian dimensions of human behaviour; the men's orgiastic ecstasy is a "boisterous devotion to the sun" (CP 70). Stevens' sense of an ongoing process of destruction and creation achieves its continuity of meaning through the emphasis on the "chant" as a basic
response to the world in both the past and the future. The "chant" becomes "the heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish" (CP 70) and thus maintains the continuity of human expression through time. It is significant that a chant is associated with both music and poetry. Stevens' return to this indistinguishable relation between music and poetry is significant in "Peter Quince at the Clavier": "Music is feeling, then, not sound" (CP 90). Again, the sounds of the clavier give way to man as the agent who makes possible an ordering of the world:

The red-eyed elders watching, felt  
The basses of their beings throb  
In witching chords, and their thin blood  
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna. (CP 90)

The music, or alternately, the feelings produced in the elders who see Susanna's beauty clash with Susanna's ordered world of "so much melody" in such a way that her created world is destroyed. The fragility of the structure and sound of the clavier emphasizes Stevens' sensitivity to this kind of poetic destruction. The ritual of tambourines displaces the melodies of Susanna, the "witching chords" of the elders, and the sounds of the clavier. Finally, "Susanna's music . . . Left only Death's ironic scraping" (CP 92). The music created in the elders through their perception of Susanna's beauty is the same music that leads to their ironic destruction of that beauty. The human desire for the integration of feelings into an idea of beauty is "immortal." Man's orderings of the world through music and poetry are volatile and "momentary in the mind." They provide,
however, "the fitful tracing of a portal", the creation of a means by which the inaccessible depths of the human imagination may be sounded. Eugene Nassar offers the acute comment that this "portal" is Stevens' figuration for "a vision of an aesthetic order, permanent within flux, a foyer in which he, happy nonetheless, has no permanent place."13

The capacity of man through music (and poetry) to draw, as well as to embellish, "a portal" that may either prevent or facilitate the expression of his feelings becomes what Stevens describes as "a constant sacrament of praise" (CP92). Music and poetry serve man as ritual orderings that mediate between the accessible and inaccessible realms of his imagination in order to provide some sense of resistance against the forces of the world.

It is in a letter to his future wife, Elsie Moll, that Stevens first makes mention of the guitar.14 In December 1908, Stevens wrote:

Tonight after dinner...I thought I should like to play my guitar, so I dug it up from the bottom of my wardrobe, dusted it, strummed a half-dozen chords, and then felt bored by it. I have played those half-dozen chords so often. I wish I were gifted enough to learn a new half-dozen.

Someday I may be like one of the old ladies with whom I lived in Cambridge, who played a hymn on her guitar. The hymn had thousands of verses, all alike. She played about two hundred every night--until the house-dog whined for mercy, and liberty.15

Holly Stevens comments on this letter, that "certainly 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' plays more on repetition than it does on any analogy with Picasso's 'The Old Guitarist', which was painted in 1903."16
This conventional critical attitude toward the poem, taken by Holly Stevens and Harold Bloom among others, is simply not substantiated by Stevens' own comments and concerns expressed at the time he was writing the work. Stevens' substantial treatment of Picasso's artistic subject matter and representations will be dealt with more fully later in this study. It should be noted, however, that the images of the man and the guitar presented in the blue period work, "The Old Guitarist," are significant icons for Stevens' sensitivity to the cultural traditions from which these images are taken. This study maintains that his sensibility is implicit throughout "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and explicit in stanza nine (CP 169-70) of the poem. Nevertheless, Holly Stevens' remarks on Stevens' early association of repetition with the guitar and his use of this technique in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" are certainly appropriate. Improvisation based on the repetition of phrases and themes is also an important characteristic of the poem. This improvisational penchant seems to apply more to folk songs than to hymns, although obviously neither form is exclusive of the other (particularly in black American "spirituals"). The juxtaposition of folk and religious subjects occurs, for instance, in "Peter Quince at the Clavier." The line, "They wondered why Susanna cried," a passing reference to the Stephen Foster popular song, "O Susanna," appears within a poetic context based on the story of "Susanna and the Elders" found in the Apocrypha. Indeed, the letter to Elsie in which the guitar is associated with the playing of hymns may be compared with one of Stevens' first mature published poems which is entitled, "On an Old Guitar" (1914).
It was a simple thing
For her to sit and sing
"Hey nonino!"

This year and that befell
(Time saw and Time can tell),
With a hey and a ho--

Under the peach-tree, play
Such mockery away,
Hey nonino!18

The folk quality of this poem is unmistakable, as is Stevens' use of repetition. In the poem, the song acts as a means to "play such mockery away", that is, the mockery made of man confronted by the necessary passage of time and therefore his own mortality. In a broad sense, this playing "on an old guitar" prefigures "The moments when we choose to play / The imagined pine, the imagined jay" ("MBS" XXXIII; CP 184). The desire and capacity of man to endure the confrontation with time and with the other forces of existence, is Stevens' immediate concern in both of these poems. Stevens' use of the traditional refrain words "hey nonino" in context implies the poetic act of negating the importance of the temporal world. The enduring nature of musical (and poetic) expression is represented by the image of "the old guitar." The guitar mediates between the reality of man's temporal existence (the present) and the imagined transcendence of that existence through music as a sustained tradition (the past).

Stevens' association of the guitar with improvisation based on the repetition of sounds and words within a folk music motif in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is prefigured in "The Ordinary Women" (1922). The "ordinary women" rise from the poverty in a movement "from dry
catarrhs and to guitars." The words "catarrh" and "guitar" are closely associated by their rhyming as almost identical sounds. The two words have unrelated meanings, but the etymology of "guitar" reveals a basis for Stevens' juxtaposition of these two apparently incongruous words. The sixteenth century names given to lute-like instruments include: "citern", "cithern", and "chitarra." The Latin word "cithara" and the Greek word "kithara" are the etymological roots of these words. Stevens' juxtaposition of "catarrh" and "guitar" is both a near repetition of and a skillful improvisation on the sounds of these words, implying a close relation between the reality of the impoverished state from which the women ascend and the imagined world of opulence into which they are ostensibly transported by the medium of the guitar. The final stanza of the poem is a repetition of the first, except that the "ordinary women" move "from dry guitars, and to catarrhs." The sterility of the imagined world in which the women find themselves has resulted from what Furia and Roth view as Stevens' cognition of man's "murderous alphabet": "The swarm of thoughts, the swarm of dreams / Of inaccessible Utopia" ("MBG" XXVI; CP 179). The world of the imagination that is available to the women is characterized by an alphabet and a language of forms ("canting curlicues") which, for them, is devoid of any meaning ("they read right long"). A. Walton Litz points out that Stevens shared with Ezra Pound "a distrust of abstract definitions which are not based on the particulars of experience." The women who "flitted / Through the palace walls" are disembodied beings whose imaginative world consists
of the embellishments of a reality without any substantial meaning. The "catarrhs" of their reality and the "guitars" of their imagination stand in a virtually indistinguishable relation to one another by way of the sounds inherent in language. The repetition of the "c" sound and the improvisation of meaning based on this sound does not fulfill the capacity of the alphabet to be "the source of a vital and flexible poetry, which mediates continually between the earth and the human imagination."22 Instead, the guitars are "dry" and incapable of sustaining the life of the imagination. The guitars have become nothing more than the "windy citherns hankering for hymns" (CP 59) which they historically superseded, through time. The identification of what Puria and Roth described as Stevens' "gamma g" and "c" states is established by Stevens' representation of the "guitars" and the "catarrhs" but the incapacity of this "c" state to mediate between reality and the imagination issues from the women's preoccupation with the "murderous alphabet" "Of heaven and of heavenly script." The quotidian reality of the "ordinary women" and "the gaunt guitarists" who "Rumbled a-day and a-day, a-day" links the image of the guitar with a folk culture. The incessant repetitions and improvisations of the music of the common people as a means of coping with and expressing the nature of their reality bring them to demand, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "A tune beyond us, yet ourselves" ("MBC" I; CP 165).

Wallace Stevens' image of the guitar is always associated with either a southern landscape such as Italy, Spain, or Florida, or with Paris. Most critics maintain that European and southern locales are,
for Stevens, antipathetic to a vital imaginative life. Stevens' "introspective voyageur," Crispin, is often cited as representing the poet's Emersonian distaste for European traditions and forms and his belief in the possibility for a new vital culture being established in America. The most compelling observations along this line have been made recently by Furia and Roth who maintain that "he settles instead in Carolina, where he can create both colony and poem, be creator of 'multitudes' that mediate between the real and the imagined." The sense of Crispin as "co-median" between reality and the imagination is achieved, at best, in a tentative manner. Crispin's "multitude" of offspring, the "daughters with curls," are described by Stevens as being "the vermeil capuchin," "shy to fetch the full-pinioned one himself," "lettered...demurely as became / A pearly poetess, peaked for rhapsody," and "a digit curious" (CP 44-45). Stevens' poetic achievements in this work are deliberately undercut by the questionable capacity of Crispin's progeny to fulfill their promise as sources of mediation. In "The Comedian as the Letter C," as in "The Ordinary Women," Stevens presents the reader with what could be called a "false C" or "Man in C minor." "The Man with the Blue Guitar," who Stevens says is "Man in C major, the complete realization of the idea of man," may be compared with Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Regarding this poem, Stevens comments that

the long and short of it is simply that I deliberately took the sort of life that millions of people live, without embellishing it except by the embellishments in which
I was interested at the moment: words and sounds. (LWS 294)

Stevens' similar repetition and improvisation based on the sounds of the letter C in "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "The Ordinary Women" suggest that Stevens considered neither Europe nor America as being inherently conducive to the imagination. The guitar is associated with specifically southern landscapes such as Italy, Spain, and Florida, and serves as an image which expresses the common variety of human expression and experience in a fertile environment which proves to be unpropitious. Stevens' interest is in man's capacity to create meaning and order within the process of his experience of the forces of the world.

In the poem, "O Florida, Veneral Soil" (1922), the poet confronts the southern landscape of the United States which he perceives to be a threatening environment. The figures who inhabit this landscape are:

The dreadful sundry of this world,  
The Cuban, Polodowsky,  
The Mexican women,  
The negro undertaker  
Killing the time between corpses  
Fishing for crayfish. . .(CF 47)

These figures merge together as a personification of the landscape: the "Virgin of boorish births" (one who counterpoises the poet's demand for purity). The guitar is a part of these people's lives and their environment. Stevens writes:

After the guitar is asleep,  
Lasciviously as the wind,
You come tormenting,
Insatiable. . . . (CP 47-48)

The phrase, "lasciviously as the wind," metaphorically describes a
lustful sexuality which is intermittent in its presence and fluctuates
in its degree of intensity. Sexuality is attributed to the "Virgin"
and the natural force of the wind as well as to the "guitar." Moreover,
the guitar is an instrument upon which lovers' serenades may be played
(as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar") as well as (more in keeping
with the people in this landscape) the often ribald "blues" songs of
the American black people. This "blues" motif is sustained by the fact
that the poet's tormentor is "a scholar of darkness" clothed in an
"indigo gown." Stevens' association of "black" with "blue" serves to
evoke the whole realm of a people's collective dispossession and tragic
experience of existence represented by this woman who comes to haunt
the poet. Stevens criticism is characterized by its frequent unwilling-
ness to penetrate below the surface of the poet's most primary
figurations. For instance, "blue" is indeed the color which is most
frequently associated with the imagination and its expressive capacity
to create meaning and order, but "blue" is also "this dividing and
indifferent blue" (CP 68) perceived by the woman in "Sunday Morning."
"Blue" denotes the limiting and unchanging color of man's imagination
and produces an Aristotelian dimension in Stevens' work where the
imagination is cathartic as well as expressive. The tragedy of the
black people's experience is expressed as well as coped with in their
music. Wilfred Mellers comments that the black person "sings to get
the blues off his mind; the mere statement becomes therapeutic, an
emotiona liberation.26 The image of the guitar in "O Florida,
Venereal Soil" is thus associated with the figure of darkness in a
cultural context as well as through Stevens' specific use of the word
"lasciviously" to describe the nature of both the guitar and the
Virgin. The poet's fear of his tormentor arises after the sound of
the guitar has apparently stopped; that is, after the expressive
orderings of man's desires in musical forms such as a "serenade" or a
"blues" tune are no longer either played or heard. The guitar apparently
serves as a kind of talisman for the poet, much in the same way that
"blues" music is cathartic. It is only "After the guitar is asleep"
that the poet is confronted by the fact that the "Virgin of boorish
births" is a "scholar of darkness." It is from this figure that the
poet demands, and thus maintains the possibility that, despite the
tormenting darkness of the world as a "venereal", or corrupted, land-
scape there may arise "A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit, / A
pungent bloom against your shade" (CP 48). In other words, the
possibilities for the imaginative man issue from the recognition of the
essential darkness of the "Virgin of boorish births" who must become
the "mother of beauty" (CP 68) if the poet is to deal with "things as
they are" ("BG" I CP 165).

Stevens' association of the guitar with "The dreadful sundry of
this world," distilled into a dark seductress who torments the poet,
reveals the cathartic function of the instrument's music in coping
with man's tragedy. The image of man as a tragic figure in "A Thought
Revolved" (1936) suggests, however, that the guitar is inadequate to
cope with his confrontation with the world. Stevens writes:

He that at midnight touches the guitar,
The solitude, the barrier, the Pole
In Paris, celui qui chant et pleure.

(see 186)

Stevens' image of a man who "touches the guitar" is associated through this instrument with isolation ("the solitude"), limitation ("the barrier") and dispossession ("the Pole / In Paris"). The association of the man with Paris and, in a broader sense, with the title of the poem, "A Thought Revolved" may be an allusion to Picasso's revolutions of thought -- his cubist still-life studies of guitars and mandolins drawn from the national cultural heritage of his Spanish homeland. In any case, Stevens' "man" finds himself confronted by the amoral forces of the world: "Summer assaulted, thundering, illumined, / Shelter yet thrower of the summer spear." His alternatives are to become either "man / Of men whose heaven is in themselves" or part of "The race that sings and weeps and knows not why" (see 186). Stevens' sense of "blues" is implicit in his predication of man's collective tragedy. Man must either evade reality and escape into a world of the imagination or else suffer the consequences of a Platonick view of the universe wherein everything revolves upon the spindle of Ananke who Stevens says is the "common god" believed in by man as the disinherited alien of the world. In the "Greenest Continent" (1936) Stevens writes:

Fatal Ananke is the common god. . .
The long recessional at parish eyes wails round
The cuckoo trees and the widow in Madrid
Weeps in Segovia. The beggar in Rome
Is the beggar in Bogota. The kraal
Chants a death that is a medieval death...
Fateful Ananke is the final god.
His hymn, his psalm, his cithern song of praise
Is the exile of the disinherited,
Like's foreigners, pale aliens in the mud,
Those who Jerusalem is Glasgow-frost
Or Paris rain. (OP 59)

This necessary tragedy of man's confrontation with the forces of the
world depends upon the common adherence to the values and culture of a
past that has determined the nature of his existence without any longer
providing a credible sense of meaning to that existence. In "A Thought
Revolved" Stevens writes:

He liked the nobler works of man,
The gold facade round early squares,
The bronzes liquid through gay light.
He hummed to himself at such a plan.

He sat among beggars wet with dew,
Heard the dogs howl at barren bone,
Sat alone, his great toe like a horn,
The central claw in the solar morn.
(CP 187)

A. Walton Litz seems to me accurate when he says that "the 'thought'
revolved through four phrases is in each case an evasion of reality."28
These "phases" of thought nevertheless represent man's common responses
to reality. Through the failure of man's imagination to adequately
cope with his reality, each of these phases become merely "abstractions"
of the idea of man and serve to show the unsatisfactory nature of his
"thoughts" or fictions in approaching some sense of a viable relation
between himself and the forces of the world.

Stevens' use of the process of abstraction in "A Thought Revolved"
in the representation of the "thought" or idea of man from four different perspectives and his overt allusion to this process in the title of the poem as an artistic technique may be approached within the context of the poet's early fascination with cubism and his later adaptation of its aesthetic principles for his own uses in poetry. The title of the poem, "Mandolin and Liqueurs" (1923), for instance, seems to be a reference to the innumerable still-lifes produced by Picasso in which a mandolin or a guitar is at least one of the major figures in the composition. Certainly, in this poem, Stevens deals with the possibilities for freedom of form and color as an imaginative artistic response to the world:

If awnings were celeste and gay,
Iris and orange, crimson and green,
Blue and vermilion, purple and white,
And not this tinsmith's galaxy,
Things would be different. (OP 28)

The colors one chooses in order to paint the things of reality have the power to transform people's perception of the nature of that reality. Perhaps Stevens had this poem in mind when he wrote the first stanza of "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

("MBG" I; OP 165)

In any case, Stevens' treatment of the guitar as an art object and his allusions to Picasso, still-lifes, and cubism in "Mandolin and
Liqueurs," as well as in other early works in which the freedom of form and color denote the process of "abstraction" as an artistic technique, prefigure the poet's demonstrable interest in the relation between poetry and painting in his later work, including "The Man with the Blue Guitar."

In "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (1924), Stevens presents the reader with five transformations of a seascape that exemplify his use of the theme and variations format that appears in much of the poet's other early work. Michel Benamou notes that "the framework of the five sections remains fixed like the outlines of a picture, while the subtle variations within that framework play the role of color changing with the angle of light." The poet's representation of a seascape in a constant process of metamorphosis provides him with both an elaborate metaphor that describes, and a reality apprehended by, an imagination that refuses to be satisfied with an evasion of the revolutions inherent in any ordering of the world. The reality of the chaos of the sea is ascribed the color green, and is represented as a mechanistic force that is alternately "perplexed," "tense," "tranced," "dry," and "obese." These adjectives all fail in their capacity to provide an adequate description of the ocean and yet each betrays a specific attitude toward reality. In each stanza of the poem, the "green" of the sea is transformed by the "blue" of the sky and an abstract reconciliation of their incongruities is offered. In the final stanza, Stevens undertcuts these constructions of the relation between the colors green and blue, between sea and sky, and between
reality and imagination, by placing the responsibility for them with the man of imagination who may be the clown or juggler of "things as they are." Stevens consequently refuses to accept the idea of man as a circus performer to be an adequate representation of the artist because of its dissolution of the value of an imaginative confrontation with the forces of the world. The poet accepts the fact that his reconciliations have no value beyond their nature as abstractions and he deprecates his attempts to obscure the relation between his own figurations for reality and the imagination: "C'était mon esprit bâtard, l'ignominie" (CP 102). The poet is able only then to distinguish himself from an inadequate representation of the idea of man and to present at last the kind of clear and concise statement that does not conceal its necessarily abstract quality, yet provides a poetry that maintains the possibility for the process of creation and destruction that is essential to any attempted formulation of the relation between reality and the imagination:

Then the sea
And heaven rolled as one and from the two
Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue.

(CP 102)

Stevens' representation of the color blue as a figuration for the creative and destructive quality of the imagination serves to mediate between the evasions of reality in "A Thought Revolved" and the desire for the imaginative transformation of the world expressed in "Mandolin and Liqueurs." The opalescence of Stevens' poetry attempts to allow for a pure imaginative response to the forces of the world that will
determine, as well as assault, the capacity of the imagination to deal adequately with these forces.

In general, Stevens' early poetry explores a number of the aesthetic concerns which emerge as the expressed problems that the poet confronts in "The Man with the Blue Guitar." He began to work on the poem sometime during the winter of 1936-37, and makes reference to this composition for the first time in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer:

During the winter I have written something like 30 or 40 short pieces, of which about 25 seem to be coming through. They deal with the relation or balance between imagined things and real things which, as you know, is a constant source of trouble to me. I don't feel that I have as yet nearly got to the end of the subject.

Actually, they are not abstractions, even though what I have just said about them suggests that. Perhaps it would be better to say that what they really deal with is the painter's problem of realization: I have been trying to see the world about me both as I see it and as it is. This means seeing the world as an imaginative man sees it. (LWS 316)\textsuperscript{32}

The two related views of what the poet says he is trying to work with in the composition of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" are the basis for his other comments about this poem, and poetry in general, at this time. In a note commenting on Stevens' contribution of thirteen stanzas of the work to Poetry magazine (May 1937), the poet is quoted as saying that the subject is the individuality of the poet in relation to the world about him, or, to say the same thing in another way, the balance between imagination and reality.\textsuperscript{33}
Similarly, Stevens' commentary on the dust jacket of the Knopf edition (October 1937) restates his essential conception of the poem as dealing with

the incessant conjunctions between things as they are and things imagined. Although the blue guitar is a symbol of the imagination, it is used most often simply as a reference to the individuality of the poet, meaning by the poet any man of imagination. 34

In these three brief statements concerning the subject matter of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens focuses his attention on the relation or balance between the things of reality and the things of the imagination. Relevant to this concern is "the painter's problem of realization", the individuality of the man of imagination and his relation to the world as he perceives it and as it is. Stevens' expression of his subject in the work is concise, but it is useful to examine the other available background material out of which these statements were formulated.

In December 1936, Stevens delivered an address at Harvard which was entitled "The Irrational Element in Poetry." 35 The paper is certainly contemporaneous with his preliminary work on "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and, not surprisingly, it deals with "the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet" (OP 217) as being poetry's "irrational element." This transaction is described by Stevens as the process whereby an objective reality is transformed into a subjective reality. In poetry, there is a characteristic tension that arises between the "true subject" and the "poetry of the subject."
For instance, Stevens comments that

in a poet who makes the true subject paramount and who merely embellishes it, the subject is constant and the development orderly. If the poetry of the subject is paramount, the true subject is not constant nor its development orderly. (OP 21)

In other words, if the poet is to deal with his "true subject" as such, he assumes the fact that this subject is an objective reality which is constant and orderly, qualities which will be mirrored in the poet's work. Stevens' own concern is with the "poetry of the subject." He maintains that reality is a subjective force which is neither constant nor orderly and without value as "truth" except to the extent that its truth is established as a "poetry" of reality. The poet is confronted with "the pressure of the contemporaneous"; with an acute sense of the effects of the Depression and political upheaval on a culture in which, as Stevens says, "it is one thing to talk about the end of civilization and another to feel that the thing is not merely possible but measurably probable." (OP 224) In order for the poet to establish some sense of a relation to this reality, it must be approached through a "poetry of the contemporaneous":

Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance. (OP 225)

Stevens emphasizes the distinction between a poetry of resistance and a poetry of escape. The attempt to establish a relation between the
forces of reality and the imaginative response to that reality expressed in poetry is a very different thing from relinquishing the fundamental relation between reality and the imagination whereby the things of the imagination have nothing or very little to do with the things of reality. For Stevens, "the poetry of the contemporaneous" involves "the painter's problem of realization...trying to see the world about me both as I see it and as it is." He uses a Picasso still-life as an image for the artist's "poetry of resistance" to the forces of the world. The still-life may be described as an abstraction, but it is a contemporaneous abstraction:

The poet who wishes to contemplate the good in the midst of confusion is like the mystic who wishes to contemplate God in the midst of evil. There can be no thought of escape. Both the poet and the mystic may establish themselves on herrings and apples. The painter may establish himself on a guitar, a copy of Figaro and a dish of melons. These are fortifyings, although irrational ones. The only possible resistance to the pressure of the contemporaneous is a matter of herrings and apples or, to be less definitive, the contemporaneous itself. In poetry, to that extent, the subject is not the contemporaneous, because that is only the nominal subject, but the poetry of the contemporaneous. (OP 225)

The reality of the "pressure of the contemporaneous" is confronted by the man of imagination through a "poetry of the contemporaneous."

The attempt to establish some sense of relation or balance between these two things is what Stevens describes as "the painter's problem of realization." The value of poetry, and in more general terms, the relation between life and art, is derived from the poet's sense of
harmony and order. He alludes to the sensibility shared by both poets and painters when he comments with regard to the value of art that one writes poetry... in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. Or, simply, one writes poetry out of a delight in the harmonious and orderly. If it is true that the most abstract painters paint herrings and apples, it is no less true that the poets who most urgently search the world for the sanctions of life, for that which makes life so prodigiously worth living, may find their solutions in a duck in a pond or in the wind or a winter night. It is conceivable that a poet may arise of such scope that he can set the abstraction on which so much depends to music. (OP 222)

It should be pointed out that Stevens' interest in painting is by no means confined to his aesthetic sense of the problems common to the poet and the painter. He maintained a keen interest in the art world, especially in the art being produced in France. He was one of the first people in the United States to see the work being done by the "cubists" (see LNS 185-6). Stevens frequently acquired exhibition catalogues and paintings through his Paris book dealers, the Vidals. Two specific allusions relating to the composition of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" are interesting in this regard. In a notebook, "Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets, I" Stevens makes note of the following:

Cézanne at the Lefèvre

"But these... qualities (of 'varied and inimitable' colour and his handling)... do not account for the look of hard and unrelenting authenticity that distinguishes his work from that of lesser men. It is Cézanne's peculiar determination to pin
down his sensation, and the exactness and intensity of notation resulting from this, that made Cézanne pre-eminent. . . . In a Cézanne there can be no question of juggling with the elements of design, no possibility of glossing over difficulties, no equivocation. With Cézanne integrity was the thing, and integrity never allowed him to become fixed at any one point in his development, but sent him onward toward new discoveries of technique, new realisations of the motive."


I note the above both for itself and because it adds to subject and manner the thing that is incessantly overlooked: the artist, the presence of the determining personality. Without that reality no amount of other things matters much. (OP xxxiv)

This notebook entry, certainly a plausible source for stanzas three and twenty-five of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," reflects Stevens' major concern with the position of the imaginative man in relation to the realities that confront him. The emphasis placed here on "integrity," as opposed to "juggling," has the effect of undercutting the sense of man as a comedian in Stevens' earlier poetry, as well as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar." A second substantial source that should be noted with respect to the composition of this poem also arises from Stevens' reading on the subject of painting. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens writes:

Is this picture of Picasso's, this "hoard Of destructions," a picture of ourselves, Now an image of our society? ("MSG" XV; CP 173)
In the poet's subsequent references to the phrase, "'hoard of destructions,'" in his letters and the essay, "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," he is vague as to the origin of this reference. Ronald Sukenick has established the exact source of the phrase as coming from an interview with Picasso by Christian Zervos in Cahiers d'Art (1935):³⁸

In the old days pictures went forward toward completion by stages. Every day brought something new. A picture used to be a sum of additions. In my case a picture is a sum of destructions. I do a picture -- then I destroy it. In the end, though, nothing is lost: the red I took away from one place turns up somewhere else.³⁹

Stevens' license with respect to his use of the phrase, "une somme de destructions" indicates his profound interpretation of Picasso's works' reflecting the "poetry of the subject," that is, man's confrontation with reality. The substitution of the word "hoard" for the word "sum" suggests that Stevens' fascination with Picasso's paintings is based on a sense of the way in which social realities may be reflected in art, as well as in terms of subject matter and technique.

These preliminary suggestions as to the nature of Stevens' aesthetic concerns are intended to provide a broader background against which "The Man with the Blue Guitar" may be more clearly seen. Stevens is involved in a confrontation with the "pressure of the contemporaneous." He is concerned with the poetry of this subject matter, and his "herrings and apples" are the "man" and the "blue guitar." Stevens' use of metaphors drawn from the plastic arts, as
well as music, is consistent with his statement that "when Harmonium was in the making there was a time when I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together. I then believed in pure poetry, as it was called." (LWS 288) Stevens' treatment of the image of the guitar (and its historical analogues) indicates his profound attempt to incorporate the idea of artistic and musical orderings of the world into a poetry that would try to "penetrate to basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world." (NA 145)

A. Walton Litz observes that in Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917) "the 'idea' of the poem is obvious, to sustain a complex relationship among feeling, music, and color." The structure of the poem takes the form of a set of variations on a theme, a technique common to many of Stevens' "guitar" poems. This structure also recalls the intensely limited framework within which Stevens worked in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." Litz describes the poem in terms of its context within the Imagist experiments in the relation between poetry and painting:

Both Stevens and Pound were searching for ways to express the new impressions of the physical world delivered to them by the modern painters, who had provided fresh schemata for familiar scenes, but they were unwilling to settle for a diffuse surface which would simply blur the impression or sensation. In the technique of "super-position," the juxtaposition of precise images, they found one way of recording a complex perception in condensed form.
The important distinction that must be made, however, is that the image of the blackbird represents "pure poetry"; the blackbird is a theme that is established within the context of the series of landscapes, or variations, in which it appears. The blackbird is always present as either an object or an idea of the object in each of the thirteen constructions. Michel Benamou comments with regard to this poem:

The multiple perspective of the cubist, the dance round the object which causes Picasso to add an eye to his profiles, or the shifting optics of Cézanne, by virtue of which a saucer seems to bulge on either side of a bottle placed in front of it--these modes of vision stress the role of an imaginative eye exploring the hidden facets of an object.43

Clearly, the blackbird appears as an object, but this object is also an icon endowed with meaning by Stevens. Like the "man" and the "blue guitar," the blackbird is incorporated in this particular poem in order to deal with what the poet identifies as "the painter's problem of realization...trying to see the world both as I see it and as it is."(LWS 316) The blackbird accumulates significance as a principle of a perceiving focus on the constructed realities of which it is also an integral part. It is both the object and the subject of the composition. As an object, the blackbird is destroyed in its capacity to sustain a continuity of meaning throughout all the "thirteen ways" that it may be perceived. As subject, however, the blackbird is created as an image that informs the poet's sense of his own relation to the world. The blackbird, like the poem, is abstracted into a fiction that is curiously similar to the dissolution of the "blue
guitar" into "the imagined pine, the imagined jay" ("MBG", XXXIII; CP 184). The guitar becomes the evergreen "pine" out of which the instrument has been constructed. The blue of the guitar is transformed into the blue of the jay-bird. Similarly, "The blackbird sat / In the cedar limbs" (CP 95). It is significant that the blackbird is "black" (but associated with "blue" through this comparison) and is thus consequent with Stevens' figuration of blackness connected with the dispossession and suffering of the American black man. The bird's presence in the evergreen cedar also recalls the cross and Christ's redemption of man's suffering as a principle of continuity in Western culture.44 Thus, Stevens' created fiction of the blackbird is associated with suffering and the redemption of that suffering. It is the poet, however, and not the traditional Christ, who becomes the creator of a poetry that will sustain meaning. Christ, like the "blue guitar," is decreated into an essential "blackbird" which reveals Stevens' central concern with the tragedy inherent in man's confrontation with the forces of the world. This concern is substantially prefigured by Stevens' earlier poetry in terms of man's creation of art, music, and poetry as basic responses to the things of reality with the capacity to create meaning and value within the ongoing cycles of destruction and creation in both nature and culture. In the poems contained in Harmonium, this process is given the gloss: "death is the mother of beauty." In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens embodies this phrase within the structure and technique of the work as a means of creating a believable fiction, a credible poetry.
Chapter One


2 Ibid., p. 35n.


4 Panofsky, p. 39.

5 Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 120.


7 Bloom, p. 120. Harold Bloom maintains that "The Man with the Blue Guitar" conforms to the structure of what he calls "poetic crossings" of "Election," "solipsism," and "identification" in the "post-Enlightenment crisis-poem."

8 Vendler, p. 132.


11 Vendler, p. 142.


13 Ibid., p. 79. Nassar also suggests the similarities between Stevens' "portal" and the vision of "The palm at the end of the mind" in which a bird sings "without human meaning, / Without human feeling, a foreign song." (CP 117).

14 There are eleven poems preceding "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in which Stevens uses the words "cithern[s]," "guitar[s]," "lute[s]," "lyre," or "mandolin[es]": "On an Old Guitar" (1914), SP 260; "Sunday Morning" (1915), CP 69; "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1922), CP 38; "The Ordinary Women" (1922), CP 10; "O Florida, Venereal Soil" (1922), CP 47; "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand: (c. 1922), CP 52; "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (1922), CP 59; "Mandolin and Liqueurs"


17 Gilbert Chase, "The Negro Spirituals," in his *America's Music* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), pp. 232-258. Chase writes: "Apparently no sharp distinction was made, either in the occasion or the manner, between the singing of purely secular songs and those having some sacred or spiritual import. Sir Charles Lyell, writing about a visit to a Southern plantation in 1849, remarks of some Negro boatman: 'Occasionally they struck up a hymn, taught them by the Methodists, in which the most sacred subjects were handled with a strange familiarity'. . . . What is distinctive about the Negro song, besides the manner of singing, is the adaptation of the imagery and vocabulary of evangelical hymnody to concrete situations related to his own environment and experience" (pp. 234-235).
18 *Ibid.*, p. 260. "On an Old Guitar" was first published by Pitts Sanborn in *The Trend* (September 1914) as one of a group of eight poems entitled "Carnet de Voyage." "On an Old Guitar" has never been included in any edition of Stevens' work.


20 Furia and Roth, p. 67.

21 Litz, p. 251.

22 Furia and Roth, p. 67 *et passim*. This article maintains that Stevens worked with (at least) one basic "code" in which reality without imagination is designated as an A state, the imagination without reality is a B state, and the interrelation between reality (A) and the imagination (B) is a C state. These "ABCs" correspond to their terminal coefficients, XYZ. Similarly, these states may also be denoted as alpha, beta, and gamma and as a vocable alphabet, A-E-I and I-O-U.


24 Sidney Feshbach, "Wallace Stevens and Erik Satie: A Source for 'The Comedian as the Letter C,'" *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, (Spring 1969), 811-818. Feshbach notes that "as the key of Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata' is 'C sharp minor,' so the poem is in 'the Letter C'" (p. 814).
25 See fn. 10.


27 The spindle of *Ananke* (in the final book of Plato's *Republic*) turns the eight rings of the universe producing a unified harmony from one note sung by a Siren. *Ananke* (Necessity) and *Tyche* (Fortune) are dimensions of *Moira* (Fate). Stevens' marginalia in his copy of Freud's *The Future of Illusion* designates *Ananke* as the "external reality." (See Peter Brazeau, "Wallace Stevens at the University of Massachusetts," *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 2 [Spring 1978], p. 50).

28 Litz, p. 231.

29 Benamou, p. 36.


31 This statement is a reversal of Stevens' four preceding representations (in French) of the artist's stance as creator: "C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme"; "C'était mon frère du ciel, ma vie, mon or"; "Oh! C'était mon extase et mon amour"; "C'était ma foi, la nonchalance divine."

32 This letter to Ronald Lane Latimer (publisher of Stevens'
Owl's Clover) is dated March 17, 1937. Samuel French Morse (OP 299) assigns 1935-36 as dates for the composition of the extant "Stanzas for 'The Man with the Blue Guitar.'" There is, however, no indication in any other available source that Stevens began work on the poem before late in the year 1936.


34 Cited in Litz, p. 232.

35 Samuel French Morse, ed., *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), pp. 216-35. This paper was delivered by Stevens at Harvard on December 8, 1936 under the auspices of the Morris Gray Committee. Morse dates the paper "(1937?)" in OP 301. The work was completed sometime before December 8, 1936 as documented in *LWS* 313.

36 In this letter to his wife dated August 3, 1915, Stevens describes his having had dinner with Walter Arensberg and Marcel Duchamps after which they went to Arensberg's apartment to look at some of Duchamps' recent paintings.

37 See Samuel French Morse, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination*, pp. 141-4 et passim. Morse and Benamou both note the contents of Stevens' personal art collection and catalogues and offer some suggestions as to the extent of Stevens' interest in and use of subjects and poetic treatments drawn from and inspired by impressionist and modern art. Many of Benamou's particular insights, suggestions
and short-comings are useful for the purpose of this thesis.


40 From a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer dated October 31, 1935.

41 Litz, p. 64.


43 Benamou, p. 9.

44 In numerological terms, there are thirteen stanzas in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and thirteen participants at the Last Supper. In the original version of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" that appeared in *Poetry*, 50 (May 1937), pp. 61-69, there were also thirteen stanzas, the last of which is the authorized poem's stanza XXXIII. It will be remembered that Christ was thirty-three years old when he died.
CHAPTER TWO

Wallace Stevens' "Mid-kingdom": "The Man with the Blue Guitar"

The black man, forlorn in the cellar,
Wanders in some mid-kingdom, dark, that lies,
Between his tambourine, stuck on the wall,
And, in Africa, a carcass quick with flies.

(Hart Crane "Black Tambourine")

In the poetry that precedes the composition of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" we have seen that Wallace Stevens establishes the images of the man and the guitar in contexts that indicate a "history of style" in Stevens' work: a delineation of the fundamental nature of the tragedy inherent in man's confrontation with the forces of the world. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens situates his images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" in a "mid-kingdom" between the ritual orderings of life and the reality of death. These images facilitate Stevens' illumination of a "mid-kingdom" as the continuity of man's relation to the world. The poet's creation and "decreation" of images in the work is a process of transformation that sustains the tension between man's imaginative capacity and the reality of natural and artificially constructed forces of the world. What Crane calls the mid-kingdom "lies" in the sense that in Stevens' poem it is the fertile ground over which the imaginative man wanders in his attempt to
"realize" the world "both as I see it and as it is" (LWS 316). The creative movement in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is a process of accumulating a multiplicity of musical, artistic, and poetic associations and qualities that cohere to the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar." Stevens' mid-kingdom also "lies" in its postulation of the reality of imaginative orderings that are nothing more or less than fictional constructions of meaning expressed as a music, an art, or a poetry of existence. The process of creation therefore involves a corresponding "decreation" of images that is necessary to Stevens' sense of a credible poetry. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens represents the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" in terms of man's process of creating and destroying his "robes and symbols" (XXV) while relying on the continuity of their essential significance: the mid-kingdom between an inherited language of forms that confines man to its ongoing procreation an an essential silence and an emptiness (of those forms) which liberate man. The tension between confinement and liberation is significant to the sense in which Stevens' "blue guitar" is a "blues" guitar. Wilfred Mellers comments with regard to the blues music of the American black man:

The rigidity of the form was a part of his act of acceptance: a part, therefore, of the reality from which, without sentimental evasion or even religious hope, he started. This is why, though the blues are intensely personal in so far as each man sings, alone, of his own sorrow, they are also—even more than most folk-art—impersonal in so far as each man's sorrow is a common lot. Though the blues singer may protest against destiny, he is not usually angry, and seldom looks
to heaven for relief. He sings to get the blues off his mind; the mere statement becomes therapeutic, an emotional liberation.

The antiphony of the "blues" is, for Stevens, a synecdoche for the tragedy of man's relation to the forces of the world as man copes with it and expresses it in music, art, and poetry. The images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" are culturally accessible and significant iconic material that allow the poet to assert a continuity between "The rhapsody of things as they are" (XXXI) and "the madness of space" (XXXII).

Furia and Roth's recent discussion of Stevens' "iconic alphabet blocks" establishes the poet's use of the letters of the alphabet as basic code that shows the tension between "the movement of the alphabet... [as] a sacred and sterile process that assumes a final, frozen dispensation as 'heavenly script'" (CP 11) and "the movement of the alphabet... [as] an artistic act that continues to mediate between the emptiness of things and the imagination to create poetic heavens on earth." The alphabet is both "murderous" and "fusky," both destructive and creative. Similarly, Stevens' images sustain the tension between man's confinement to and liberation from a language of forms. The images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" provide the poet with a language that penetrates to the fundamental relation between man and his world in terms of his music, his art and his poetry.

Stevens' treatment of his subject matter is reflected and facilitated by the tension between form and freedom that pervades the structure of "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Stevens indicates his
attitude toward the expressive capacity of form in terms of this
tension in his comment that

There is such a freedom now-a-days in
respect to technique that I am rather
disinclined to disregard form so long as I
am free and can express myself freely. I
don't know of anything, respecting form,
that makes much difference. The essential
thing in form is to be free in whatever
form is used. A free form does not assure
freedom. As a form, it is just one more
form. So that it comes to this, I suppose,
that I believe in freedom regardless of
form. (LWS 323)8

This comment introduces the problem of Stevens' organization of "The
Man with the Blue Guitar." At best critics have seen in Stevens'
organization an evasion, and, at worst, as Helen Vendler maintains, the
poem "could be rearranged internally without loss."9 The most
ambitious attempt to describe the overall coherence of this work has
been made by Harold Bloom. Bloom maintains that the poem conforms to
"the characteristic ordering of the post-Enlightenment crisis poem"10;
that is, a pattern of poetic crossings of "election," "solipsism" and
"identification" which correspond to the poet's confrontations with the
death of his creative power and instinct, the death of love, and the
death of the self which confirms man's mortality. Bloom's general
sense is that "The Man with the Blue Guitar" shows a developmental
coherence of the poetic materials in a tripartite movement. The three
parts function first as defensive tropes in the confrontation with
death, second as Stevens' recognition of man's plight as a prisoner
of the mid-kingdom of his constructive and destructive capacities and
third as Stevens' presentation of man's escape from this mid-kingdom.

The difficulty with Bloom's intertextual study arises from his tendency to use abstract and eclectic terminology which makes more difficult an already complex work. Assuming the value of critical study as an illumination of art, we need a more accessible apparatus.

A Walton Litz discusses Stevens' use of theme and variations, a form that recalls Stevens' earlier "guitar poems" such as "On an Old Guitar" and "The Ordinary Women", the cubism of "A Thought Revolved" and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds", and the "pure poetry" of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Litz writes:

The pattern described by the poems is one of variation and recapitulation on a series of related themes, and the inner harmonies of the sequence are far more precise and subtle than its general structure. Sometimes a group of poems will build variations on a single theme (e.g. Poems XXII-XXVIII); at other times the movement from poem to poem is one of deliberate contrasts. Poems are linked to each other by leitmotifs, by similarities in imagery, and occasionally by likenesses in rhyme structure (e.g. poems IV and VI). In short, the progression of the sequence is musical, and individual poems may be linked with several others by a complex network of formal and thematic resemblances. 11

Stevens' recurrent expressions of his central preoccupation in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is best summarized by this subsequent comment:

The general intention of the Blue Guitar was to say a few things I felt impelled to say 1. about reality; 2. about the imagination; 3. their inter-relations; and 4. principally,
my attitude toward each of those things.
(LWS 786)

The dialogue in stanza one states these first two intentions as "things as they are" and "things as they are on the blue guitar" (I). These phrases are repeated and improvised upon in terms of variations in landscape, sound, colour, shape, ideas, and meaning. The scope of this discussion does not allow for a full treatment of Stevens' complex use of variations on thematic statement. The representation of the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" are, as Litz suggests, indicative of the general approach that the poet takes to his materials.

The image of the guitar in its musical appropriation suggests the improvisatory quality of folk music as well as the classical theme and variations form. In folk music the performer improvises upon the music that he has learned in a particular way expressed in relation to the conventions that attend a specific piece of music or style. The folk performer does not create except as he orders the specific musical materials that are available to him. Gilbert Chase discusses the musical syncretism of West African and European elements in black spirituals in terms of the

proviso that they were made largely out of pre-existing elements, both as regards to the words and the music. That the factor of invention, as well as of accretion and transformation, entered into the process is not to be denied. But it was probably invention of detail rather than of a whole: some felicitous phrase of contagious tag line thought up and caught up on the spur of the moment and incorporated into the ever-changing content of a traditionally
Similarly, Wilfred Mellers indicates that in "blues" music the despair finds release in the emotionally expressive blue notes of the guitar, which speaks more passionately, more subjectively, than the voice itself. As voice, indeed, the singer is an anonymous member of his race; as guitar player he is a particular individual at a specific time and place.14

Stevens' guitarist is "A shearsman of sorts" (I) who plays his guitar "squatting like a tailor (a shearsman) as he works on his cloth" (LWS 783). The guitarist stitches together the available woven materials of his world:

I cannot bring a world quite round, 
Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye 
And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can 
And reach through him almost to man. (II)

The guitarist's attempt to patch together a world and a man from whole cloth is significant as the posture of a craftsman whose "serenade almost to man" is not consequent with "things as they are." the guitar's "changing" and "missing" these "things as they are" accounts for the audience's demands for a music or a poetry of "ourselves": "A tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (I); "Ourselves in poetry must take their place" (V). Though the classical theme and variations form uses improvisation on the constituent qualities of music (melody, harmony,
rhythm, tone, color) as the basis for thematic development, it is man as the composer (as opposed to the performer) of the fabrications of his material that is at the basis of his art. The composer has the capacity to be "The maker of a thing yet to be made" (IX). He is able to compose a music of ourselves in such a manner that "things are as I think they are / And say they are on the blue guitar" (XXVIII). The tension between man as a performer and man as a composer is essential to an understanding of Stevens' confining and liberating mid-kingdom. This tension is consonant with Stevens' use of a theme and variations form which is suitable to his treatment of the images of the man and the guitar in the work as a whole.

The thematic statement in stanza one is generated from the antipathy between the guitarist and his audience. He and his blue guitar are confronted with the "pressure of the contemporaneous" (OP 225) demand for "A tune upon the blue guitar / Of things exactly as they are" (I). The guitarist's romantic serenade is an evasion of reality that begins the first variation. This first variation sustains the decreative and creative development of the images of the man and the blue guitar in terms of "blues" music as a context for man's relation to the world (stanzas two through twelve). Stevens' treatment of these images involves two subsequent variations in which this development is approached first in the context of the plastic arts (stanzas thirteen through twenty-one) and then in a distinctly poetic context (stanzas twenty-two through thirty). A final coda (stanzas thirty-one through thirty-three) recapitulates the poet's concerns. Though this schematic outline is useful and demonstrable as an organizational
and interpretive basis for the work, it is important to recognize that it suggests these variations as suitable contexts for the sustained development of the poet's materials and is intended to illuminate rather than to diminish the importance of the crucial interrelations and correlations of these contexts of music, art, and poetry in the work.

The blue guitar suggests as most critics agree, a figuration for the imagination. Nevertheless, Stevens insists on its qualities as an instrument, an object in terms of which man establishes his relation to the world. At the beginning of the first variation the blue guitar's changing of "things as they are" does not indicate a transformative process but rather an evasion of reality. Its failure to meet the demands of reality results in the decreation of its "serenade" (II) into a dissonant, yet highly expressive, sequence of sounds: "To bang it from a savage blue, / Jangling the metal of the strings" (III); "This buzzing of the blue guitar" (IV); "the chattering of your guitar" (V); "The strings are cold on the blue guitar" (VII); "I know my lazy leaden twang / . . . I twang it out and leave it there" (VIII). The previously mellow serenade played on gut strings has become a cacophonous twanging on metal strings. The transformation is clear:

The blue guitar

Becomes the place of things as they are
A composing of senses of the guitar. (VI)

Whereas the serenade is "the chord that falsifies," the sounds of the guitar's expression of reality is "the discord [that] merely magnifies"
In this "sense" Wallace Stevens' blue guitar is a "blues" guitar. As Mellers comments with regard to blues,

it is as though the monotonous reiteration of the guitar, with chittering telescoped dissonances low in its register, is the reality that goes on and on, unalleviated: against which the voice can do no more than speak, rather than sing, broken disjointed phrases, separated by silences.15

The creative movement toward re-forming the image of the blue guitar as a viable formulation for man's relation to the world issues from the identification of "blue" with reality rather than with the romantic imagination and its serenades. Stevens alludes to the notion of "feeling blue" in his reference to "The color like a thought that grows / Out of a mood" (IX). The expressions of alienation ("To stand / Remote and call it merciful" (VII) and suffering ("a petty misery / At heart, a petty misery" (X), reinforce the poet's sense that "Music is feeling, then, not sound" (CP 90). The image of the blue guitar as a "blues" guitar is summoned by its qualities of sound but also by these associations that suggest man's suffering. It is significant, as Gilbert Chase notes, that the blues "are not sentimental at all, but combine realism and fantasy in a straightforward projection of mood and feeling."16 The blues not only express reality, but more importantly serve to cope with reality's potentially destructive force:

I know my lazy, leaden twang
Is like the reason in a storm;

And yet it brings the storm to bear.
I twang it out and leave it there. (VIII)
Stevens indicates the tragedy inherent in this relation to the world in his paraphrase of this stanza:

where apparently the whole setting is propitious to the imagination, the imagination comes to nothing. What is really propitious (the florid, the tumultuously bright) antagonizes it. Thus one's chords remain manqué; still there they are. They at least state the milieu, though they are incapable of doing anything with it. (LNS 362)

The blue guitar's "blues" music thus fails to produce "A tune beyond us" (I) despite the fact that it is the music of "ourselves." The blue guitar establishes man's relation to the world's reality of decretions but confines him to "the overcast blue / Of the air" as his environment: "The weather of his stage, himself" (IX). The "blue" of the guitar is thus "this dividing and indifferent blue" perceived by the speaker in "Sunday Morning" (CP 68).

Stevens' image of man is both the performer and the subject of the musical expression of his relation to the world. The "serenade almost to man" (II) attempts to integrate the fragments of a representation of man as a classical hero. The guitarist's subject is man patched together from available materials rather than a "man number one" (III) who is inaccessible to the performer. The guitarist regrets the fact that he can neither express nor assume the role ("to play") of this fictional idea of man. Stevens suggests several associations in his description of this remote "man" including the Promethean dimension denoted by the dagger and eagle images. The regenerative aspect of man's ongoing suffering also recalls the Christian significance of the
crucifixion and, in particular, Luther's attack on the consensus of Christian belief: "To nail his thought across the door, / Its wings spread wide to rain and snow." Stevens recreates this iconoclastic act in his own attack on conventional belief in "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Michel Benamou emphasizes Stevens' Adamism ("man number one") in terms that suggest Roy Harvey Pearce's view that this preoccupation represents "the continuity of American poetry." Benamou comments:

Adam nailed like an eagle on display. The poetic act is not self-sacrifice but savage purification. . . . It is an act of savage decreation. . . . Decreation is not destruction, because art decreates to promote the idea of man.19

It is therefore important to recognize that Stevens' decreative thrust in this stanza comes to rest with his image of the bird. This image is the poet's metaphorical expression for man's thought as an "extraordinary object" which in turn affirms "man in the liveliness of lively experience, without pose; [and] make[s] an exact record of the liveliness of the occasion" (LWS 783): "To strike his living hi and ho, / To tick it, tock it, turn it true" (III). The guitarist's desire to express and to be the "man number one," the creation facilitated by the abstraction of the images of Prometheus, Christ and Adam, indicates the tragedy inherent in his relation to the world as a performer whose improvisations are confined to ideas of man that are available to him. He is "The maker of a thing yet to be made" and being such a figure, he wears "the tragic robe / Of the actor" (IX). Nevertheless, it is
this figure who confronts the "pagan in a varnished car" (X)--the "false hero" of the twentieth century.21 It is the guitarist's "petty misery" expressed in the urban blues of jazz music ("hoo-ing the slick trombones") that establishes his relation to the modern world and foreshadows his dominion as a credible hero who changes Louis' imperial "l'état, c'est moi" to his own "Tom-tom, c'est moi" (XII).22 The images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" are unified at the close of Stevens' first variation. The music of "ourselves" expresses and copes with the creations and decreations of a modern reality, but reflects the tension between man's confinement in and liberation from the blues of both the imagination and reality. In short, the "blues"

momentously declares

Itself not to be I and yet
Must be. It could be nothing else. (XIII)

The "blue guitar" is an image that is transformed into an icon that is uniquely American and expresses the particular as well as the more universal tragedy of the man's confrontation with the world. The viability of this poetry suggests Stevens' important transformation of, what he considered to be in his earlier work, the unpropitious landscape of the (specifically southern) United States.23

It is unfortunate that Stevens criticism and scholarship has consistently refused to acknowledge the poet's use of his poetic materials in the context of an American environment. These materials are precisely to the point of the poet's attempt to delineate a reality which will facilitate the liberating capacity of the imagination's
creative movements. The transformation of the romantic serenades of the blue guitar into the indigenous "blues" of the American tradition of folk music indicates the poet's concern with expressing the character of a ground upon which the oppressive realities of alienation, dispossession and suffering are confronted by man. It is therefore important to maintain the awareness that Stevens' approach to the nature of man's relation to the world is the confrontation with the "shadow of Chocorua" (XXI) and "Oxidia, banal suburb" (XXX). Stevens' sensitivity to his American cultural environment exists in an important tension with the orthodoxy of the conventional critical attitude that he succumbed to the same hostility for the American environment which had crippled the work of so many earlier generations of American artists. In the nineteenth century many American artists had tried to ignore the 'indignities' of their crassly materialist environment by pretending that, through acts of sheer will-power and imagination, they could re-create the seemingly poetic qualities of European experience. What Stevens did is not much different. Stevens, too, tried to escape America. As a collector, for instance, he consistently ignored the work of American painters, although there were now several who had developed a means of visual notation capable of evoking the realities of their environment. Instead he bought works of European painters of little or no distinction.

Stevens' adoption of materials garnered from the art objects and literature of the visual arts for his own poetic purposes is the subject of much critical debate. Harold Bloom maintains that "The Man
with the Blue Guitar" has "little to do with Picasso's painting 'The Old Guitarist' and much to do with Romantic poetry, particularly Shelley. . ."26 Stevens' interest in European art, specifically Picasso, has been more perceptively indicated by several critics.27 The most important recent contribution to an understanding of Stevens' use of Picasso's subject matter and technique has been made by Susan B. Weston. She discusses "The Man with the Blue Guitar" by demonstrating Stevens' incorporation into the poetry of comments by and on Picasso in Christian Zervos' 1935 issue of Cahiers d'Art with the premise that "Stevens is working less from a visual influence than from a verbal medium that provoked his imagination."28 Weston's work establishes one of the specific source materials that indicates the importance of Picasso's works to an understanding of Stevens' European, and specifically his artistic, sensibility.

In Stevens' earlier poetry the cubist technique of abstraction is associated with the improvisational quality of a (frequently unstated) theme and variations approach to the poetic treatment of his materials in works such as "A Thought Revolved," "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The poet's similar incorporation of his art metaphors in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" shows the important relation between Stevens' musical first variation and the development of the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" within a context of art in a second variation (stanzas thirteen through twenty-one). Several years after his composition of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens referred to the sequence of the stanzas in this
manner:

My impression is that these are printed in the order in which they were written without rearrangement. There were a few that were scrapped. I kept them in their original order for my own purposes, because one really leads into another, even when the relationship is only one of contrast. (LWS 359)

It is difficult to substantiate Stevens' "impression" in the light of available documentation. A thirteen stanza version of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" was published in Poetry magazine (May 1937) under that title, and subsequently in Twentieth Century Verse (September 1937). This version, completed sometime before March 22, 1937 (see LWS 377), largely consists of the second half of the work with the exception of stanzas two, nine, and fifteen of the authorized version. These first three stanzas of the earlier version effectively conflate Stevens' art metaphors and particularly emphasize the sense in which Stevens' "Man with the Blue Guitar" is Picasso's "The Old Guitarist." A comparison of this version with the final one contained in The Man with the Blue Guitar (Knopf, October 1937) shows Stevens' development of his image of the "blue guitar" in its musical context over the course of the almost dozen stanzas with which he fleshed out the first third of the work. His use of art metaphors is consequently less explicit during this development but emerges dramatically as "this hoard / Of destructions" (XV) in the structural center of the composition. The poet's shift from his preoccupation with visual metaphors in the original version to the development of the audible qualities of the blue guitar in the
final version serves to broaden the effectiveness of the final third of the work ("Poetry is the subject of the poem" [XXII]) which dominates the early version. The musical and artistic contexts enhance the broader thematic exploration of the relation between reality and the imagination at the basis of Stevens' poetic concerns with man's relation to his world. Though the stanzas in both versions appear in the same order, the expansion of the work as indicated shows Stevens' concern for its organization not reflected in his subsequent statement. 30 The treatment of the subject matter and technique represented in Picasso's work is germinal to Stevens' composition of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," but it is in the work's second variation that Stevens' use of the process of abstraction in relation to the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" is established in the qualities of colour, light and shape.

In stanza nine, Stevens presents his faithful verbal reproduction of Picasso's painting, "The Old Guitarist" (1903): 31

> And the color, the overcast blue
> Of the air, in which the blue guitar
> Is a form, described but difficult,
> And I am merely a shadow hunched
> Above the arrowy, still strings,
> The maker of a thing yet to be made;
> The color like a thought that grows
> Out of a mood, the tragic robe
> Of the actor, half his gesture, half
> His speech, the dress of his meaning, silk
> Sodden with his melancholy words,
> The weather of his stage, himself. (IX)
Stevens' transposition of the colour of the guitar from the brown of the original to the blue of this poetry is appropriate to the continuity of his figuration of blue as the colour of the imagination as well as the more specific use of the colour in this work to denote the "blues" and their expression of a pathos and tragedy reflected in the Picasso painting. It is important, however, that Stevens does not overtly suggest his appropriation of this work of art until the allusion in stanza fourteen to "a chiaroscuro where / One sits and plays the blue guitar." The images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" are now objects in a work of art that effectively extends the "blues" metaphor. In his second variation, Stevens thus introduces the "idea" of blue as an artifice of the imagination's perception of the world. Stevens creates a still-life representation of reality illuminated by "The amorous adjective aflame" (XII)--the "candle" of the imagination:

At night, it lights the fruit and wine,  
The book and bread, things as they are,  
In a chiaroscuro where  
One sits and plays the blue guitar. (XIV)

Stevens then immediately refers to "this picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard / Of destructions'" (XV). The poet's substitution of the word "hoard" for Picasso's word "une somme" indicates Stevens' interest in the social dimension of Picasso's works as well as the analytical abstractions of the painter's innumerable still-lifes. This conflation of the subject matter of the early blue period works with the techniques used in the cubist still-lifes sufficiently parallels Stevens' own
creative and decreative movements in the treatment of his poetic materials. The blurring of a distinction between the decreations of modern reality and those in a work of art betrays the problem for an imaginative man who would create "a picture of ourselves" (XV) as a source of meaningful belief.

The pictures, whether "The Old Guitarist" described in stanza nine or the representative still-life in stanza fourteen that recalls that earlier painting, sustain the tension between the processes of creation and destruction. Stevens establishes this iconic material in the work and then proceeds to perform radical acts of decreation of the painterly qualities of colour, light and materialized form. The image of the guitar becomes a "sullen psaltery" (XVI), a "mould" and a "shell" (XVII), a "monstrous lute" (XIX), and finally, the "Poor pale, poor pale guitar" (XX). The image of man is he who questions whether or not he is "deformed," blind ("without seeing"), and "dead" (XV). The "Last Supper" images associated with this man as a Christ figure maintain that he is incapable of defining either himself or his symbols: "Is the spot on the floor, there wine or blood / And whichever it may be, is it mine?" (XV). Stevens' decreative process of abstraction undermines the artifice inherent in Picasso's visual icons in the sense that they are imaginative projections of reality: "A dream. . . in face of the object / A dream no longer a dream, a thing" (XVIII). Nevertheless, this verbal abstraction penetrates to an essential relation between painting and poetry: "the process of art itself is its subject." Thus, Stevens decreates the sense in which
"blue" is a viable figuration for man's imaginative capacity to illuminate the world:

The unspotted imbecile revery,
The heraldic center of the world

Of blue, blue sleek with a hundred chins,
The amorist Adjective aflame . . . (XIII)

The poet's "realization" of a heraldic image for man's relation to the world is a representation of man's primal voice confronting the world's primal silence: "the lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone" (XIX). This abstraction of colour, light and form into an emblem that designates an idea is a poetry an icon, poetry created as a fiction to convey the tension between man's confinement within a primal relation to the world and his liberation to ask the question: "What is there in life except one's ideas, / Good air, good friend, what is there in life?" (XX). For Stevens, this tension allows that man's belief is a process such that the verb "to believe" is a noun:

Believe would be a brother full
Of love, believe would be a friend,

Familiar than my only friend,
Good air. Poor pale, poor pale guitar . . . (XX)

Stevens concludes his second variation with the resolution of man's artifices of order into a final relation of man and his world--death:

One's self and the mountains of one's land,

Without shadows, without magnificence,
The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone. (XXI)
The mountain is Chocorua; the place is New Hampshire; the poet's representation of man as "A substitute for all the gods" (XXI) is the image of man in America who wanders in the "mid-kingdom" between his inherited European "robes and symbols" which he uses to order the world and the reality of death as his final decreation and liberation.

Stevens' third variation (stanzas twenty-two through thirty) explores man's relation to his world in terms of the capacity of poetry to mediate between process and stasis as a "mask" (XXIX). It is important to Stevens that language maintain a transformative power to affirm a balance, or equation, between reality and the imagination as well as to show that "the balance does not quite rest" (XXIX). Stevens insists on the poetic process as a resistance of the "pressure" of the contemporaneous" through a "poetry of the contemporaneous" (OP 225) "To and to and to the point of still" (XXIX). The transforming interrelation between reality and the imagination is a movement "to" the achievement of a balance so that the process of creating a credible poetry is emphasized. Thus, Stevens' word "still" implies the ongoing nature of this process but is also significant as a denotation of a state of repose. The assumed relation between reality and the imagination that facilitated the poet's treatment of his musical and artistic materials is predicated on the operative thesis that "Poetry is the subject of the poem" (XXII). For Stevens, however, the question remains: "are these separate?" If poetry is to be the subject and the poem is to be the object the result is "An absence in reality." This "absence" liberates the imagination ("sun's green, /
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?), but only insofar as it "exists" in relation to the "universal intercourse" that resists the separation of poetry and poem, subject and object, and the imagination and reality. Stevens summarizes stanza twenty-two by expressing the "fundamental principle about the imagination: It does not create except as it transforms" (LWS 364).

The "blue guitar" is tacitly heard in Stevens' "duet / With the undertaker" (XXIII). The poet's technique of apposition in the stanza is discussed in an interesting manner by Helen Vendler in terms of its movement toward an equation of "The imagined and the real, thought / And the truth, Dichtung and Wahrheit." She maintains that "both voices, in identical modification become equally serene and final." Stevens' assertion of a coherence of meaning in which there is the possibility of "all / Confusion solved" is a tentative balance that effectively conflates the "serene and final" with "a refrain / One keeps on playing year by year." This "refrain" maintains the transformative tension between "absence" and "universal intercourse" implied by the very phrase "duet / With the undertaker." The capacity of the blue guitar image to designate this tension between its silence as a decreated object and the refrain of its associations and accumulations of meaning reestablishes the sense in which it expresses and copes with life as a "duet / With the undertaker." The important point Stevens makes is that the image that confined man is also the instrument of his liberation:

Here I inhale profounder strength
And as I am, I speak and move
And things are as I think they are
And say they are on the blue guitar. (XXVIII)

The image of man associated with this freedom is the comedian in stanza twenty-five: "The man of imagination juggles the world on the tip of his nose, but the world does not realize that it moves as an imagination directs" (LWS 361). The observers of this performance watch the man's manipulation of his "robes and symbols" into a freedom of forms and colours that represents the world in a constant process of metamorphosis. These transformations are performed within the meter and rhyme scheme of a folksong or a nursery tune. The poet-comedian's elemental relation to the world contrasts with his audience's chorus of "ai-yi-yi" that betrays them as "stupid people at the spectacle of life" (LWS 361). Stevens indicates that the expression "ai-yi-yi" refers to a Pennsylvania Dutch as well as a Spanish idiom. The colloquialism also recalls, however, the myth of Apollo and Hyacinth. The untimely death of Hyacinth prompts Apollo to create a new flower which grows from the youth's blood bearing the letters AI AI. Apollo grieves over the tragedy and maintains that Hyacinth's death "will be my theme as I pluck my lyre and sing my songs." Stevens' own theme is the tragedy of man's relation to the world in terms of the "robes and symbols" that express a vital transaction between the imagination and reality without the understanding that these things "are merely paraphernalia used to produce an effect of comedy" (LWS 361).

The image of man in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" endures the
poet's creations and decreations until finally Stevens says: "From this I shall evolve a man" (XXX). Stevens' "old fantoche" is an abstraction, an "essence," of man who is confronted with his existence in the reality of the twentieth century. This "man" is a performer complete with the inherited "robes and symbols" (XXV) that he has accumulated during his "evolution." Stevens explains:

Man, when regarded for a sufficient length of time, as an object of study assumes the appearance of a property, as that word is used in the theatre or in a studio. He becomes, in short, one of the fantoccini of meditation or, as I have called him, "the old fantoche." (LNS 791)

This image of man is not the comedian of stanza twenty-five or Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C." He is "Man without variation. Man in C Major. The complete realization of the idea of man. Man at his happier normal."³⁹ The word, fantoccini, means "little puppets" and it is therefore necessary to establish who it is that manipulates the strings. The image is complex and it is useful to recall the guitarist who performs in the first variation. The guitarist's serenade decreases into the "blues" music in which one hears the "Jangling [of] metal of the strings" (III), the "buzzing" (IV), the "chattering" and feels that "the strings are cold" (VII). This music of "ourselves" is played by the man who is confronted by an audience's demand for reality. The guitarist is the figure who plucks the strings and it is significant that these strings connote the "heavy cables, slung / Through Oxidia, banal suburb" (XXX). In stanza
thirty, however, the "man" as "puppet" stares at "the cross-piece on a pole" which is the contraption by means of which the puppeteer operates his marionette. Stevens' phrase is appropriate to the sense in which the man whom he "evolves" is both puppet and puppeteer, guitar and guitarist: "his eye / A-cock at the cross-piece on a pole." The tension between the man's perception of the "cross-piece" that gives a sense of meaning and order to his actions and man's position on that "cross-piece" reminds one of an image of the "universal intercourse" (XXII) between the subject and object in music, art, and poetry. The creation of the image of man's confinement to the Christian symbol of the cross necessarily involves the corresponding decrative movement in which there is an "absence" (XXII) in the reality of man's confrontation with the modern world such that the "cross-piece on a pole" is no more or less than a telephone pole. The liberating effect of this realism establishes man as "suddenly and at last, actually and presently, to be an employee of the Oxidia Electric Light and Power Company" (LWS 791). The tension between the "absence" and the "universal intercourse," the decrative and creative movements in the work, is thus sustained as man's relation to the world. In other words, "Oxidia is Olympia" and as Stevens comments, "if I am to 'evolve a man' in Oxidia and if Oxidia is the only possible Olympia, in any real sense, then Oxidia is that from which Olympia must come" (LWS 788-89). The invocation of the Greek tradition suggests the tragic dimension of man's position in a "mid-kingdom" characterized by his confinement to the "robes and symbols"
of his past which is held in a tension with his liberation from this poetry.

Stevens' coda (stanzas thirty-one through thirty-three) asserts the nature of man's tragedy in terms of a recapitulation of the three variations' contexts of music, art, and poetry, respectively. The first stanza of the coda expresses "The rhapsody of things as they are" (XXI) and recalls the aural dissonance of the blue guitar that plays a "Rhapsody in Blue" as a means of expressing and coping with reality. The distinction between the arguments of the employer and the employee and the shriek of the cock-bird becomes indefinable: "The shriek / Will rack the thickets." This reality precludes the imagined dreams of a romantic "lark fixed in the mind / In the museum of the sky." It is "this rhapsody or none" that must be the dance of order and meaning which man both plays and performs. The second stanza of the coda asserts the "absence" (XXII) which liberates man from his confinement within the "blues" of "things as they are." The light and shape of the blue guitar is a "jocular procreation" of "the madness of space" (XXXII) that reestablishes man as a creator:

Nothing must stand
Between you and the shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed. (XXXII)

The resolution of light and shape into primal darkness and space is significant for Stevens:

The point of the poem is not that this can be done, but that, if done, it is the key to poetry, to the closed garden, if I may become rhapsodic about it, of the fountain of youth and life and renewal. This poem depends a
good deal on its implications. (LMS 364)

These first two stanzas of the coda recapitulate, in musical and artistic terms, the "wrangling of two dreams" (XXXIII) that takes place throughout "The Man with the Blue Guitar." These "dreams" denote any number of the relations of man to his world which places him in the "mid-kingdom" between his confinement and his liberation. The tragedy "issues and returns" (XXII) to the predication that "Nothing must stand" (XXXII) as a reality that is coped with through artifices which are defensive tropes, the expression of which reifies the artifice into existence.

In the final stanza of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens'
"The imagined pine, the imagined jay" (XXXIII) are things that exist in nature without meaning beyond man's capacity to endow them with qualities and associations ordered into constructions of meaning as to their sound, form, colour, and so on. These natural images are also cultural realities with accessible accumulations of meaning. The "evergreen 'pine,'" for instance, denotes the continuity of life associated with the death and resurrection symbolism of the cross in the Christian tradition. Similarly, the "jay" as "J" suggests a cipher for Jesus which is reinforced by the fact that the thirty-three stanzas of the poem correspond numerologically to the age of Christ at his death. Another reasonable approach would emphasize the relation between the green colour of the pine and the blue colour of the jay as they are associated with the earth and the sky. The sense in which they are "played," or integrated, into a unified yet separate existence allows
for an important statement about the relation between reality (green) and the imagination (blue) that draws heavily upon the romantic tradition of Western literature. Finally, it must be recognized that Stevens indicates these plausible significances and at the same time maintains that the image is a poetry that "we choose to play" (XXXIII). Hence, Stevens' image of the "blue guitar" is decreated into the natural forms of the wooden pine tree and the blue jay which figuratively suggest the origins of the instrument's construction. This movement toward the guitar's being liberated from its artifice of order (sound, colour, shape, etc.) is a decreative act that not so ironically sustains its reality as an icon—a verbal sign designating the culturally accessible material of the American black man's "blues" music, Picasso's "The Old Guitarist" and the symbolism of the cross which depends so much on the meaning associated with the poetry of a word made flesh. Wallace Stevens' poetic treatment of his material is a process that affirms a continuity of the creations and decreations of man's cultural activity as a theme and variations on his relation to the world. This continuity is established by Stevens' use of the blue guitar as an American "blues guitar" that expresses and copes with "Chocorua" (XXII) and "Oxidia" (XXX). Stevens' treatment of the European art work of Picasso indicates an important adoption of these materials suggesting the usefulness of an iconology for the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar." "The Man with the Blue Guitar" reflects a procreative tension between Stevens' American and European sensibilities that confronts the tragedy of man's liberation from and confinement to the "mid-kingdom" of
continuity in which "Nothing must stand" (XXXII). Stevens' own words are appropriate:

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know is a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly. (OP 163)\textsuperscript{40}
Chapter Two


2Panofsky, p. 35n.

3The word "decreation" is a crucial word in Stevens' poetic and critical vocabulary. In The Necessary Angel Stevens writes: "Simone Weil in La Pensateur et La Grâce has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discover it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything. Poets and painters alike today make that assumption and that is what gives them the validity and serious dignity that become them as among those that seek wisdom, seek understanding." (p. 75)
See W. K. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), p. X et passim. A useful definition of "icon" is provided by Wimsatt who writes: "The term icon is used today by semiotic writers to refer to a verbal sign which somehow shares the properties of, or resembles, the objects which it denotes. The same term in its more usual meaning refers to a visual image and especially to one which is a religious symbol. The verbal image which most fully realizes its verbal capacities is that; which is not merely a bright picture (in the usual modern meaning of the term image) but also an interpretation of reality in its metaphoric and symbolic dimensions. Thus: The Verbal Icon."

Furia and Roth, p. 66.

Ibid., p. 67.

This letter to Norman Holmes Pearson is dated June 24, 1937 and is either concurrent with or slightly subsequent to Stevens' completion of "The Man with the Blue Guitar."

Vendler, p. 141.

Bloom, p. 120.
Robert Fitzgerald and Samuel French Morse suggest both of these associations in their early review articles of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. Fitzgerald says that the "blue guitar" is "a symbol characteristic of Stevens, suggesting improvisation, which is the essence of a creation; a literally light tone and the profound overtones of folk music. . . . It rhymes with 'things as they are.'" See Robert Fitzgerald, "Thoughts Revolved," *Poetry*, 50 (December 1937), p. 155 Morse writes that Stevens "serenades, he bangs, buzzes, chatters, twangs, composes against the whole orchestra, and resolves his work to a chorale." See Samuel French Morse, "Man with Imagination," *Twentieth Century Verse*, 8 (January-February 1938), p. 169.

Chase goes on to maintain that while "one current tended to assimilate the spirituals into the forms and techniques of European art music" there was another current which "tended to conserve their traditional folk character with retention of primitive and archaic survivals." (p. 251)

Mellers suggests that the syncretism of black music as it is indicated by Chase arises from nothing specifically African about the so-called blues scale, for its fundamentally pentatonic modality is common to folk music all over the world. The characteristic flavour of jazz comes largely from a subterranean conflict between this age-old and instinctive approach to melody and the
rudimentary harmonic and tonal structure which was inherited from Europe's and America's recent past; and this conflict is almost a musical synonym for the conflict between two worlds, old and new, black and white. Both worlds are accorded their own value: though the harmonic sequence is basic, one cannot say that the blue notes are "out of tune", since they may merely be veering towards a Just Intonation that will not square with tempered harmony. So this ambiguity between vocal and instrumental style represents, musically, the Negro's attempt to come to terms with his new environment; and it is a two-way process."

15 Ibid., p. 268. Mellers goes on to say that "the howls and falsetto yells are... not only savage and grotesque, they are also broken lost, centreless. The almost lunatic emotional excitement is reinforced by the harsh dissonances of the guitar, its piercing vibrato scraped with knife-blade or bottle-neck on reiterated single-notes; voice and instrument no longer comfort one another on dialogue, but stimulate one another to further frenzy." (p. 272)

16 Chase, p. 453.

17 Stevens maintains that the bird he had in mind was an eagle (see LWS 359). The reference to Prometheus (III 2-6) is illuminated by the following passage from Hesiod's Theogony (520-530): Zeus "bound devious and wily Prometheus with hard and inescapable bonds, after driving a shaft through his middle; and roused up a long-winged eagle against him that used to eat his immortal liver. But all the
long-winged bird could eat during the whole day would be completely restored in equal measure during the night. Heracles the mighty son of Alcmene of the lovely ankles killed it and rid the son of Iapetus from this evil plague and released him from his suffering." Prometheus's confinement and liberation is consequent with Stevens' own concerns in "The Man with the Blue Guitar." The allusion recalls Prometheus's gift of the arts to mankind as he describes them in Aeschylus's **Prometheus Bound (450-506):** "I discovered for them numbers, a lofty kind of wisdom, and letters and their combination, an art that fosters memory of all things, the mother of the Muses' arts. . . . I established for them the difficult interpretation of sounds and omens of the road. . . . In a brief utterance learn the whole story: all the arts come to mortals from Prometheus." Though the scope of this thesis does not permit a fuller consideration of Stevens' use of the numerous representations of Prometheus's significance, such a study is warranted particularly when one considers Stevens' view of man's relation to the world in terms of the arts (see especially "MBG" XXXII) and the following lines from Shelley's **Prometheus Unbound (IV, i, 415-418):**

Language is a perpetual orphic song,  
Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng  
Of thought and forms, which else senseless  
And shapeless were.

18. It should be remembered that Luther's publication of the Ninety-five theses effectively resulted in the burning of pictures of saints in Wittenberg (1521), the removal and destruction of works of art in Zurich (1524), and the destruction of icons in England under Henry VIII.
19 Benamou, pp. 101-02.

20 "On farms in Pennsylvania a hawk is nailed up, I believe, to frighten off other hawks. Here in New England a bird is more likely to be nailed up merely as an extraordinary object to be exhibited. . . . On several occasions I have seen eagles. I feel sure that a farmer would nail up an eagle because it was an eagle." (LWS 359)

21 Stevens' gloss on stanza ten reads: "If we are to think of a supreme fiction, instead of creating it as the Greeks did, for example, in the form of a mythology, we might choose to create it in the image of man: an agreed-on superman. He would not be the typical hero taking part in parades, (columns red with red-fire, bells tolling, tin cans, confetti) in whom actually no one believes as a truly great man, but in whom everybody pretends to believe, someone completely outside of the intimacies of profound faith, a politician, a soldier, Harry Truman as god. This second-rate creature is the adversary. I address him but with hostility, hoo-ing the slick trombones. I deride and challenge him and the words hoo-ing the slick trombones express the derision and challenge. . . .'Yet with a petty misery / At heart, a petty misery' mean[s] that the cheap glory of the false hero, not a true man of the imagination, made me sick at heart. It is just that petty misery, repeated in the hearts of other men, that topples the worthless. I may have cried out Here am I and yet stood, unheard, hooing the slick trombones, without worrying about my English." (LWS 789)

"O Florida, Venereal Soil" (CP 47) and "The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP 27) are both important treatments of "unpropitious" landscapes.

Joseph Warren Beach suggests, with regard to the later Stevens work, "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," (1942), that the poet "is giving the anatomy of the folk concept of a hero, with full awareness that he is dealing with a mythological creation, with something in the psychology of all times that corresponds with that which operated in the age of magic and the age in which the magical powers are deified. The hero is man at his highest power 'with nothing higher than himself.' He might be Aristotle's Nicomachean man, except that Aristotle is concerned only with so many faculties and virtues that are social and 'moral' whereas Stevens, in the folk tradition, is concerned only with what exalts the man and gives us, who identify ourselves with him, the feeling of exaltation." (Joseph Warren Beach, Obsessive Images: Symbolism in Poetry of the 1930's and 1940's, ed. William Van O'Connor [Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1960], p. 211).

Bram Dijkstra, "Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams: Poetry, painting and the function of reality" in Encounters: Essays

Bloom, p. 120.


Weston, p. 113. Weston's study will be discussed more extensively in connection with the iconology of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in the final chapter of this thesis.

Stevens gave the manuscript of the title poem of The Man with the Blue Guitar to the Lockwood Memorial Library at the University of Buffalo. It contains "poems that have been discarded and, of course, it contains versions of poems that were used in different forms." Stevens states, however, that the manuscript is not to be "copied nor published in any form, nor... extracts from it[to] be published" explaining that "this manuscript would ordinarily go into the waste basket now that it has served its purpose, and... I don't want anything more to come of it than as it if had, in fact, been thrown into the waste basket, except that you can keep it and show it to anyone that may be curious about that sort of thing: exhibit it, but not make any other use of it." (LWS 325) Hence, the Lockwood Memorial Library refused to make a copy of the manuscript available for study purposes.
or to provide any descriptive outline of its contents.

30 A comprehensive comparative study of the two versions of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is not facilitated by the provisions of space and scope of this thesis. The existence of the thirteen stanza version is footnoted in LWS, 317 but has never been referred to in any treatment of Stevens' work. The version appears in Poetry, 50 (May 1937), pp. 61-69, and subsequently in Twentieth Century Verse, 5 (September 1937), pp. 85-90. These materials would provide a useful focus for further study. Other relevant documentation would include: "Inaccessible Utopia" and "The Place of Poetry" ("MBG" XXVI and V respectively) in Twentieth Century Verse, 3 (April-May 1937), p. 43; LWS 316, 317, 323, 325, 359; and the three extant stanzas for "MBG" in OP, 72-73.

31 The final chapter of this thesis will establish the iconological basis for Stevens' substantial treatment of this work in "The Man with the Blue Guitar."


33 Benamou, p. 103.

34 Stevens glosses these lines: "I want to face nature the way two lions face one another—the lion in the lute facing the lion locked in stone. I want, as a man of imagination, to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom
I write. I want man's imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality." (LWS 790)

35 Vendler, p. 135.

36 Ibid., p. 128-29. Vendler remarks: "The poet here is Jocundus; the meter, as we might expect, is markedly dance-like; the language is deliberately primitive, the rhymes frequent, the sentences tumbling on each other, linked in childish 'ands.' The literary prototype of all this is "And the green grass grew all around, all around, all around,' together with Stevens' importation from the Pennsylvania Dutch. . . . This is the poet of 'Ploughing on Sunday,' and 'Earthly Anecdote,' the poet as folk-composer, barefoot and rude, for all his robes and symbols."

37 LWS, 784. Stevens comments: "This-a-way and that-a-way and ai-yi-yi are colloquialisms, at least in Pennsylvania and elsewhere for that matter. People think of ai-yi-yi as Spanish but it is equally Pennsylvania Dutch. A man who is master of the world balances it on his nose this way and that way and the spectators cry ai-yi-yi."

Holly Stevens footnotes this gloss with an early letter written by Stevens to his wife (July 8, 1909). "Bechtel told me a good story tonight. It was about a Pennsylvania Dutchman that went to the World's Fair. When he had been there a day he wrote a post-card to his wife; and this is what he said: 'Dear Maria: -I-yi-yi-yi-yi! I-yi-yi-yi-yi! I-yi-yi-yi-yi! Sam.' That's the best story I've heard for a long time."
"Your wound that I look upon accuses me. You are my grief and
my guilt--my own hand is branded with your death! I am the one who is
responsible. But what fault was mine? Can it be called a fault to
have played a game with you, to have loved you? . . . we are bound to
fate's decree . . . You will be my theme as I pluck my lyre and sing my
songs and you, a new flower, will bear markings in imitation of my
grief . . . ' The blood that had poured upon the ground and stained the
grass ceased to be blood and a flower arose of a purple more brilliant
than Tyrian dye . . . The god himself finally inscribed his laments
upon the petals and the flower bears the markings of the mournful
letters AI AI." (from Ovid, Metamorphoses, 10:174-219)

Cited in Litz, p. 250; from the Stevens quotation in Mattino

This aphorism from Stevens' Adagia cannot be dated more accurately
than Morse's designation of "(1930" - 55)" as the period during which
the poet wrote these "sayings". The statement may be compared, however,
with these lines from "Asides on the Oboe" (1940):

The prologues are over. It is a question, now
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be a fiction. It is time to choose. (CP 250)
CHAPTER THREE

"A Tune Beyond Us, Yet Ourselves"

In "Peter Quince at the Clavier" Wallace Stevens describes the tension between man's volatile orderings of the world through music and poetry, a beauty "momentary in the mind" (CP 91), and the "immortal" desire for an idea of beauty which is manifest in man's works. Stevens' "fitful tracing of a portal" conveys the sense in which man's relation to the world is consonant with his capacity as an artist both to draw and to embellish the imaginative orderings which are his "constant sacrament of praise" (CP 92). W. K. Wimsatt, in The Verbal Icon, quotes from Croce's Aesthetic:

He who conceives a tragedy puts into a crucible a great quantity, so to say, of impressions: expressions themselves, conceived on other occasions, are fused together with the new in a single mass, in the same way as we can cast into a melting furnace formless pieces of bronze and choicest statuettes. These choicest statuettes must be melted just like the pieces of bronze, before there can be a new statue. The old expressions must descend again to the level of impressions, in order to be synthesized in a new single expression.1

It is significant for Wimsatt that this process transforms works "into something more than their simple, abstracted, and dictionary selves."2 Stevens' representation of the cultural process of describing a
"Portar" in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" has much in common with Croce's analysis, particularly in the light of Stevens' aphorism, "Music is feeling, then, not sound" (CP 90). Wimsatt suggests, however, that Croce's view of the artist's relation to his materials is deficient to the extent that "words which are fused into a poem have their new value not by losing their first or ordinary meanings but only by retaining these." The significance of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" similarly derives from the values denoted by the created and decreated images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" so that the process of abstraction allows that "the bread and the stone of life remain unchanged, and yet they are powerfully transformed." The "man" and the "blue guitar" retain their culturally accessible meanings so that the "blues" of man's "mid-kingdom" relation to the world is the fundamental poetry which integrates materialized form (object), idea (subject matter manifest in a work of art), and content (meaning) into these images as icons. In other words, Stevens' treatment of the icons of the "man" and the "blue guitar" illuminates the "portal" which opens into a poetry that attempts to "penetrate to basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world" (W 145). An iconic reading of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" reveals Wallace Stevens' central concern with the tragedy inherent in the underlying continuity of man's confrontation with the forces of the world.

For Stevens, there could be no such thing as a poetry of "ourselves" (I, V) which was not an evasion of reality unless it revealed the
tension between man's inherited language of musical, artistic and poetic orderings of the world and man's freedom to express and to cope with life in a world in which these constructions of meaning are created "ideas" rather than the Neoplatonic Idea. Stevens' creation and decreation of the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" establishes the iconic representation of this tension as a fusion of the poet and the poetry of reality in the "mid-kingdom" of man's relation to the world. Susan B. Weston's discussion of Stevens' use of remarks on and by Picasso in Christian Zervos' 1935 issue of Cahiers d'Art establishes the poet's treatment of verbal material which is important to a sense of the iconic schema of "The Man with the Blue Guitar." In "The Irrational Element in Poetry" (1936), for instance, Stevens quotes from Zervos' article "Social Fact and Cosmic Vision" (See OP 226) to indicate the essential freedom and responsibility of the artist and the poet to confront the reality of his own time in his work. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" this need for confrontation is affirmed by Stevens' borrowing of Zervos' word "fantoche" for "the artist who closes his eyes to his own time". The context of a social reality for art is communicated by Stevens' use of the word "hoard" (XV), rather than Picasso's word somme, to emphasize the responsive relation between destructions in society and destructions in a work of art. The tension between the processes of life and art is discussed by Picasso in Cahiers d'Art in terms of creation and decreation as the transformative process of abstraction whereby his paintings are a "sum of destructions".
A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on us by our life from day to day. This is natural enough, as the picture lives only through the man who is looking at it. . . . Destroy the thing, do it over several times. In each destroying of a beautiful discovery, the artist does not really suppress it, but rather transforms it, condenses it, makes it more substantial. What comes out in the end is the result of discarded finds.11

Stevens' treatment of the "man" and the "blue guitar" suggests that this transformative activity of the human imagination facilitates, what Picasso calls "materializing a dream":12

A dream (to call it a dream) in which
I can believe, in face of the object,

A dream no longer a dream, a thing
Of things as they are. . . .(XVIII)

The realization of a language (of words, images and metaphors as "things") which penetrates to an idea of an ordered relation to the world underlines Stevens' sense that the informing consciousness of a poet and a poetry of reality is a word made flesh. For instance, Stevens' "The imagined pine, the imagined jay" (XXXIII) preserves the essential tension between the creations and decreations of the "blue guitar" as an icon of the continuity of man's suffering and alienation. The world is coped with and expressed by "blues" music, "this picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard / Of destructions'" (XV), and "the cross-piece on a pole" (XXX). The "blue guitar" is an icon whose meaning is sustained by these contexts of music, painting, and poetry so that it becomes both a synthetic abstract principle of man's relation to
the world and a "thing" which is constituted by the natural forms of
the "pine" and the "jay." Stevens' representation of a unity of art
and life, or the word and the flesh, is illuminated by Picasso's sense
of an abstraction as an idea which preserves life. Picasso comments
that though

two people once existed for me, they exist
no longer. The "vision" of them gave me a
preliminary emotion; then little by little
their actual presences became blurred; they
developed into a fiction and then disappeared
altogether, or rather they were transformed
into all kinds of problems. They are no
longer two people, you see, but forms and
colors: forms and colors that have taken on,
meanwhile, the idea of two people and
preserve the vibration of their life.13

Similarly, Stevens' poetic creations and decreations of the "man" are
purposeful to his representation of man as an "essence" (XXX) who finds
himself confronted by modern reality. The "man" is an iconic fusion of
his abstract identity as "the old fantoche" (XXX) (or subject) and his
actual presence as a lineman on a telephone pole (or object). This
process of "blurring" subject and object is elaborated in an article,
"Picasso Poète" by André Breton, which appeared in Cahiers d'Art.
Weston observes that Breton "ranges back and forth between Picasso as
an instrument and the instruments Picasso actually uses" and goes on to
comment perceptively:

Consider the steps in Breton's discussion
of Picasso as "poet":14 Picasso is a
self-perfection violon; he uses the guitar
in his paintings as a rapprochement for two
other art-forms, poetry and music; the guitar,
mute and frail, awaits the poem (painting) and constitutes a support, almost a ladder toward the creation of a world. . . [The extension is] from Picasso as instrument to Picasso using an instrument to reach an inexpresasurable world. Stevens too reaches beyond the identity of guitar/guitarist to the world that both create and yet, paradoxically, by which they are created. Guitarist and guitar are shadowy forms in blue dependent on the world in which they exist; yet the poem is again and again about a "tune beyond us as we are, / Yet nothing changed by the blue guitar" (VI) 15

Stevens' icons, the "man" and the "blue guitar," are thus representations that depend on the reality of the world as it is and yet give meaning to this reality by producing "a tune beyond us" which is derived from significant and culturally accessible iconic material.

Weston and Michel Benamou 16 deal with "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in terms of its relation to Picasso's later work, specifically cubism. It is clear that Stevens' technique and subject matter is influenced by the process of abstraction visually significant to Picasso's cubist aesthetics as well as by the comments in Cahiers d'Art. It is equally important and perhaps more illuminating, however, to consider the sense in which a specific early "blue period" work, "The Old Guitarist" (1903), is the germinal visual image for Stevens' "'hoard of destructions,' a picture of ourselves" (XV). Weston mentions the fact that the first Picasso retrospective exhibition to appear in the United States was one which inaugurated the opening of the Avery Memorial Gallery in Hartford from February 7 through March 1, 1934 and that Stevens attended the world premier of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson's Four Saints in Three Acts which commemorated this opening
Weston is correct in assuming that Stevens, consistently more interested in art than in modern opera, would have gone to the exhibit. Weston does not include in her article the fact that Picasso's "The Old Guitarist" was included in this prominent retrospective of works from each of the artist's "periods." This same painting was subsequently featured by Jacques Seligmann and Company's exhibit in New York that took place from November 2 through November 26, 1936. A concurrent retrospective of Picasso's work (1901-1934) was being shown at the Valentine Gallery from October 26 through November 21, 1936. Although there is no available documentation to support the view that Stevens actually attended these later two exhibitions, it seems unlikely that the poet would neglect them. Stevens' "The Irrational Element in Poetry" was written sometime during this period as the paper was delivered at Harvard on December 8, 1936 (LWS 313). Stevens' first mention of the work that was to appear as "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is dated January 7, 1937 (See LWS 316). It is unlikely that the poet, accustomed to ordering expensive exhibition catalogues from European galleries through a Paris art and book dealer, would have passed up both the exhibitions and the catalogues of work by an artist whose technique and subject matter so significantly influenced his prose and poetry shortly after these showings. Stevens' personal experience with Picasso's work, specifically "The Old Guitarist," cannot be documented further than his presence at the opening of the Avery Gallery. "The Man with the Blue Guitar" certainly indicates, however, the poet's substantial adaptation of
"The Old Guitarist" to his own poetic purposes. The relation between
the poetry and the painting suggests a number of profound similarities
in terms of the figures and their artistic treatments and the iconic
meaning of the "man" and the "guitar" that underlies these representations.

In the original thirteen stanza version of "The Man with the
Blue Guitar" that appeared in Poetry magazine, the phrase, "Is this
picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard / Of destructions,' a picture of
ourselves, / Now an image of our society?" (XV) immediately follows
Stevens' most overt poetic representation of "The Old Guitarist":

And the color, the overcast blue
Of the air, in which the blue guitar
Is a form, described but difficult,
And I am merely a shadow hunched

Above the arrowy, still strings,
The maker of a thing yet to be made;

The color like a thought that grows
Out of a mood, the tragic robe

Of the actor, half his gesture, half
His speech, the dress of his meaning, silk

Sodden with his melancholy words,
The weather of his stage, himself. (IX)

The representation of man as an actor, a performer, whose appearance
and "meaning" are identified with his environment (the "weather of his
stage") is emphasized by the artifice of light and shadow in "a
chiaroscuro where / One sits and plays the blue guitar" (XIV). The
"blue" of his environment and his "blues" music is the "tragic robe"
that man has inherited through time, just as Stevens himself improvises
on the "given" material of the "blues" music of the American black man
and the European artistic tradition from which Picasso's chiaroscuro of the "blue period" works, effectively "serves to remove the figures from the everyday world and to set them in an indeterminate region where they become suffering souls rather than individual laundresses and acrobats." Stevens' icon of human suffering in stanza nine is an integration of the disparate materials that make man a physical and spiritual "hoard of destructions" (XV). "The man bent over his guitar" (I) is the "shadow hunched." The guitarist's attempt to "patch" together an image of man from "found" materials (II) suggests the tattered clothes of Picasso's guitarist who wears "the tragic robe / Of the actor." The tragedy of man's relation to the world fuses Stevens' subjective treatment of the icon ("his gesture," "his speech," "his meaning," "his melancholy words," "his stage," "himself") with the objective voice of the performer of the inherited materials of his world as guitarist, painter, and poet ("I am merely a shadow"). In other words, Stevens' "blues" guitarist who identifies himself with his instrument ("The blue guitar / And I am one [XII]), is Picasso who

```plaintext
has looked at the human images that vacillate in the blue haze of memory and that generate metaphysics, through their unity with the divine: pious heavens disturbed by scenes of rape: dim pervasive lights like those in caverns... For a whole year Picasso has lived this dewy life, blue like the damp bottom of the abyss, compassionate, with a compassion that has made him harsher.24
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The "compassion" of the artist as the observer and the "harshness" of the artist as the participant in human suffering are like Stevens' own
technique in confronting the "abyss": the fixed "plastic" representation of man's anguish in Picasso's painting is transformed into the fluid iconic figuration of man as both the subject and the object of "The Man with the Blue Guitar." This transformative capacity of poetry suggests Stevens' valuation of the artist and his art as the integrating consciousness for an artifice or order which is derived from and imposed on the chaotic world, "this 'hoard of destructions'" (XV).

Wallace Stevens' poetry is founded on his perception of the necessity for a restoration of order, value, and meaning to the reality of the world in 1937. The icon of man as guitarist and painter is assimilated into the artist as poet. A key to Stevens' icon of man may be found in the sequence of stanzas twelve through fifteen in which the man as "blues" guitarist ostensibly becomes Picasso's "The Old Guitarist." Stevens' musical variation (stanzas two through twelve) concludes with the guitarist pronouncing his dominion: "Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar / And I are one" (XII). The man questions the nature of his dominion by asking "Where / Do I begin and end?" thus echoing Christ's assertive "I am Alpha and Omega." In stanza thirteen the "blues" of the guitarist is the "amorist Adjective aflame," Stevens' image for poetic destruction of "blue" as a reality and the creation of "blue" as the light of the imagination. This unity is proclaimed to be "The unspotted imbecile revery, / The heraldic center of the world." The identification of "blue" with human suffering, as well as with the imagination, recalls Christ's redemption of this suffering as a principle of unity which transcends the ongoing cycles of
destruction and creation. This indication of Stevens' "heraldic center" is reinforced numerologically by the number thirteen that designates the stanza. "Thirteen" is suggestive of Stevens' earlier work "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" which concludes in the thirteenth stanza with the phrase "The blackbird sat / In the cedar-lims" (CP) (See Chapter One). It will also be remembered that in the original thirteen stanza version of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the work ended with the lines: "The moments when we choose to play / The imagined pine, the imagined jay: (XXXIII). The representation of a crucifixion in terms of the image of a bird (an eagle) in stanza three ("To nail his thought across the door, / Its wings spread wide to rain and snow") is yet another indication of the numerological basis upon which Stevens is working in stanza thirteen. Christ's representation as the thirteenth person at the "Last Supper," his age of thirty-three at his death, and the specific significance of his resurrection on "the third day" (as well as the more general trinitarian implications) are revelatory of the identity of Stevens' "heraldic center" in stanza thirteen. The symbology of Christ as the "light" reinforces this reading of the stanza. In stanza fourteen, an illumination of the world is described:

First one beam, then another, then
A thousand are radiant in the sky.

Each is both star and orb; and day
Is the riches of their atmosphere.

The representation of these "beams" of light both as reflected light
("star") and as self-contained sources of light ("orb") suggests the significance of the illumination of the world by "a thousand." Furia and Roth's discussion of Stevens' iconic alphabetical code \(^{25}\) may be more loosely applied to the sense in which the number "thirteen" in its association with "the heraldic center" designates the letter "M" as the center of our alphabet. Just as the "comedian" is the "letter C," Stevens' "mid-kingdom" icon of "man" is the "letter M," "Man in C Major," \(^{26}\) "Major Man," or simply "the heraldic center of the world."

Stevens' fusion of man with Christ in the "mid-kingdom" of the continuity of human suffering provides a deeper resonance to the significance of what Furia and Roth have described as Stevens' "C" state. \(^{27}\) More importantly however, Stevens demands that the light of "one beam" is the light of "A thousand." The figure of a "German chandelier" represents one kind of light. Stevens glosses:

\[
\text{I don't know that one is ever going to get at the secret of the world through the sciences. One after another their discoveries irradiate us and create the view of life that we are now taking, but, after all, this may be just a bit of German laboriousness. (LWS 363)}
\]

He goes on to say with regard to the phrase, "A Candle is enough to light the world," that

\[
\text{It may be that the little candle of the imagination is all we need. In the brilliance of modern intelligence, one realizes that, for all that, the secret of the world is as great a secret as it ever was. And then too, the world has its own appearances in the light of the imagination. Imagination compared to reason. Rather}
\]
It is this light from the "candle of the imagination" which "glistens in essential dark." The candle illuminates Stevens' and ostensibly Picasso's, still-life and thus the enveloping blue chiaroscuro of "The Old Guitarist," of the representation of man in stanza nine, and of the generalized continuity of human anguish:

At night, it lights the fruit and wine,
The book and bread, things as they are,
In a chiaroscuro where
One sits and plays the blue guitar.

In "The Irrational Element in Poetry" Stevens alludes to the importance of an illumination such as this when he writes that

there are those who, having never yet been convinced that the rational has quite made us divine, are willing to assume the efficacy of the irrational in that respect. What it really finds is the unknown always behind and beyond the known, giving it the appearance, at best, of chiaroscuro. (OP 228)

Stevens thus maintains that the chiaroscuro appearance of the relation between the "known" and the "unknown" is an artifice, a play of light and shade that obscures man's reality as the creator of such appearances. The divinity of man as Christ, as the light of the world, is reflected in Stevens' rational schematization of an iconic alphabet, numerology, and figuration for the image of man which effectively gives order and meaning to the chiaroscuro appearance of "this picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard / Of destructions,' a picture of ourselves" (XV). In the
last stanza of the sequence under consideration, stanza fifteen, Stevens' "man" confronts the fact that "Things as they are have been destroyed." The obliteration of any distinction between his "memory" and his "thought," between his "blood" and his "wine," and between his existence as Christ or man indicates the nature of the destruction as the collapse of a consensus of meaning about the nature of the world. The man's questions,

Is my thought a memory, not alive?

Is the spot on the floor, there, wine or blood
And whichever it may be, is it mine?

reveal his assumption of the "role" of Christ at the "Last Supper" without the apparent answers to questions about his own transformative power to restore order and meaning to the world. Stevens' response to the reality of man's "chiaroscuro" existence is the icon of man as the artist-poet who must attempt to create a credible poetry which will illuminate the realization of man as the word made flesh.

Many critics, including Weston and Harold Bloom, have ignored Stevens' adaptation of Picasso's "The Old Guitarist" based on the fact that whereas Picasso's guitar is brown, Stevens' is blue. Stevens' transposition of color is a significant variation on the theme of a continuity of human anguish which is purposeful to and consequent with his use of accessible iconic material. Stevens' emphasis on the artifice of light inherent in the blue chiaroscuro of the painting effectively "blurs," in the poetic treatment of these icons, Picasso's distinction between subject (man) and object (guitar). The blue guitar
is a fluid syncretic icon which fuses the pathos and tragedy of the "old guitarist" with the "blues" of the guitar as an instrument that seeks to express and cope with that tragedy. The sense that "Music is feeling, then, not sound" (CP 90) allows Stevens to represent this icon as a place where music and painting come together in a poetry which gives order to the disparate creations and decreations of meaning with which he endows his resonant guitar images. The "blue guitar" serves to mediate between the oppressive chaos of the world and the informing consciousness of the poet. Stevens' appropriates Picasso's "The Old Guitarist" for his own poetic purposes and he penetrates beneath the level of a poetic integration of its materialized form (object) and its idea (subject matter) in order to illuminate the meaning communicated by the "blue guitar" as icon. Picasso's interpreters, specifically Phoebe Pool, emphasize the artist's adoption of the conventions of sixteenth-century Mannerism represented most notably, in the plausible sources for the painting, by Holbein's "Man of Sorrows," Jacques Bellange's "Blind Hurdy-gurdy Player," and the work of El Greco.28 Erwin Panofsky describes the Mannerist tradition in terms of its essential split with an objective theory of art represented at its height by the work of Albrecht Dürer in Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion (1528) which refined an artistic "Theory of Human Proportions" Panofsky defines as "a system of establishing the mathematical relations between the various members of a living creature, in particular human beings, in so far as these beings are thought of as subjects of an artistic representation."29 Though Dürer's refinements were important
to the developing studies of biology and anthropology, the previous artistic preoccupation with this theory was undercut by the development of the comparatively modern "subjective principle" introduced in fifteenth-century art with the affirmation of "the autonomous mobility of the things represented and the autonomous visual experience of the artist as well as the beholder." Hence, it is on the basis of this "subjective principle" of artistic representation that Panofsky says:

The styles that may be grouped under the heading of "non-pictorial" subjectivism—pre-Baroque Mannerism and modern "Expressionism"—could do nothing with a theory of human proportions, because for them the solid objects in general, and the human figure in particular, meant something only in so far as they could be arbitrarily shortened and lengthened, twisted, and finally, disintegrated. 

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens' icon of man is, as we have seen, realized in terms of a rational system of numerological and alphabetical correspondences which fuse Picasso's subjective, but static, "plastic" representation of man with an objective, but transformative, poetic icon of man which derives its meaning from its rational nature. In other words, Stevens effectively establishes man as an icon which is derived from and is the fusion of the sixteenth-century abyss between an objective and subjective view of man and his relation to the world. The icon of the blue guitar, however, is the transformative basis upon which the meaning of this poetic fusion is predicated.

In stanza thirty-three of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the
blue guitar is decreated into the evergreen "pine" tree and the blue "jay" in such a way that it is liberated as an object from its artifice of created form and colour. The "wood" of the pine tree and the "blue" of the blue jay figuratively suggest the origins of the instrument's construction in the natural forms of existence as essences which have been obscured by man's attributions of meaning and significance.

Stevens' source for "The imagined pine, the imagined jay" (XXXIII) clarifies the "intrinsic meaning" of this decreation. In his seldom discussed review article of Marianne Moore's Selected Poems, "A Poet that Matters" (1935), Stevens quotes these lines from a poem entitled "The Steeple-Jack":

```
a sea the purple of the peacock's neck is
paled to greenish azure as Dürer changed
the pine green of the Tyrol to peacock blue.33
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Stevens' own response to these lines is: "The colors of the first and second lines acquire a quality from their association with the word Dürer and the image of Dürer and the pine green and peacock blue of the last line owe something to the word Tyrol and the image of the Tyrol" (OP 249). Stevens' own treatment of "The imagined pine, the imagined jay" not only establishes the correspondences between the "pine" and the "guitar" and the "jay" and the "blue," but a whole series of coordinate points on an algebraic grid of x and y values which are generated by the poetry. In stanza thirty, the "blue guitar" becomes "the cross-piece on a pole / Supporting heavy cables" which denote the strings' "Jangling metal" (III), "buzzing" (IV), "chattering" and
"coldness" (VII). The "pine" is thereby given the value of the telephone and hydro pole and the "jay," the value of the lineman's "eye / A-cock" [my emphasis]. Similarly, the "cross-piece on a pole" denotes the Christian symbol of the cross and its significance as the principle of a continuity of life which corresponds to the evergreen "pine" in the poem. The "jay" is the "J" as a cipher for Jesus reinforced by the numerological symbology employed by Stevens. The more general significance of the relation between green and blue and the principle of the hieros gamos of earth and sky are also generated by this series of correspondences. Stevens' "cross-piece on a pole" is integrated by the transformative poetry of the "blue guitar" as a fluid icon which stands for all the values of x and y (reality and the imagination, respectively, in Furia and Roth's discussion) where x and y are horizontal and vertical lines intersecting at the "heraldic center": Man.

```
  x
  sky
  blue
  "jay"
  J (Jesus)
  "eye / A-cock"
  (lineman)

  y
  earth
  green
  "pine"
  cross
  "cross-piece on a pole"
  (hydro pole)

  Man
```

Stevens' schema for the icon of the blue guitar thus generates the multiplicity of accumulations and associations which characterize Stevens' creation and decreation of the image of the blue guitar. The mathematical correspondences of Stevens' material are consonant with
Moore's poem in the sense in which Stevens says "The view is that of Dürer or of Miss Moore in the mask or mood of Dürer, or, more definitely, perhaps, under the stimulus of Dürer" (OP 249). Moore's association of Dürer with a landscape of surfaces in which nature is ordered into a static representation of the "formal," the "scales" at the core of this artist's theory and practice, is indicated in the opening lines of "The Steeple-Jack":

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
to look at; with the sweet air coming into your house
on a fine day, from water etched
with waves as formal as the scales
on a fish.

Stevens notes that "throughout the dozen stanzas the lines repeat themselves, syllable by syllable, without variation. The stanzas are mechanisms. Yet instead of producing a mechanical effect, they produce an effect of ease" (OP 248). Similarly, Stevens' blue guitar renders the disorder of the "blues" with the result being the disintegration and reintegration of an artifice of order which in Moore's poem is based on "hope" as the ground upon which rests the hero's formulation of an elaborate set of rules to govern the "plastic" representation of mobile forms:

It could not be dangerous to be living
in a town like this, of simple people,
who have a steeple-jack placing danger signs by the church
while he is gilding the solid-pointed star, which on a steeple stands for hope.
The blue guitar is an icon which depends for its meaning upon its
capacity to transform the fixed "scales" of music, the artifice of a
"theory of human proportions" or a "blue chiaroscuro" into a poetry of
the "universal intercourse" (XXII) between subject and object such that,
as Panofsky notes with regard to Dürer, "artistic activity is a
'creative thing like unto God.'"34 The blue guitar embodies a set of
correspondences that denote order and meaning in a world in which all
appearances of "this 'hoard / Of destructions,' a picture of ourselves"
(XV) are integrated by the medium of the blue guitar as an icon of
transformation whereby man is realized as the word made flesh. Man's
position on the modern "cross-piece on a pole" (XXX) is thus established
in terms of a continuity of order which we may "choose to play"
(XXXIII) as "A tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (I).

Wallace Stevens describes man's relation to the world in terms of
an "heraldic" image of "the lion in the lute / Before the lion locked
in stone" (XIX). This emblem of "the past and the festival" (XXIX)
suggests a balance between the fragile construction of the instrument
and the music of the Renaissance "lute" and the invincible and
irreducible essence of the "stone." Stevens' indication of a
correspondence between an internal and an external world of order
symbolized by the lute and the stone respectively is also expressed in
stanza twenty-nine: "What is beyond the cathedral, outside, / Balances
with nuptial song." The cathedral (literally and figuratively stone)
contains the music which echoes that of the external world, the "tune
beyond us" (I). The representation of the cathedral (stone) as an
internal world of order in stanza twenty-nine reinforces the mirroring effect of Stevens' heraldic emblem: "So it is to sit and to balance things / To and to and to the point of still" (XXI). The sense of the world as a place of harmony represented by the cathedral as the stone is decreated as the ground upon which man can base his sense of meaning and belief:

The earth is not earth but a stone,
Not the mother that held men as they fell

But stone, but like a stone, no: not
The mother, but an oppressor, but like

An oppressor that grudges them their death,
As it grudges the living that they live. (XVI)

In the companion poem to "The Steeple-Jack," the idea of the hero as the artist of order is similarly antagonized by a landscape where "the ground is sour" and his sense of "hope not being hope / until all the ground for hope has / vanished" brings him face to face with the world in which "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar" (I). Moore's hero of order--an abstraction identified with Dürer, an old fantoche--is met by a world where mathematical rules and conventions are no longer followed.

Moses would not be grandson to Parach
It is not what I eat that is
my natural meat,
the hero says. He's not out
seeing a sight but the rock
crystal thing to see--the startling El Greco
brimming with inner light--that
covets nothing that it has let go. This then you
may know as the hero.
In this artistic climate, the representation of "the rock," or Stevens' "stone," as a ground that corresponds to a spiritual ground is no longer a concern (Dürer's) with the qualities of a surface reality but rather with the expression of man's capacity to create his own relation to the world. The image of man as "the startling El Greco / brimming with inner life" is the image of man who can survive and create meaning in a world in which, as Stevens writes,

The shapes are wrong and the sounds are false.
The bells are the bellowing of bulls.

Yet Franciscan don was never more
Himself than in this fertile glass. (XXIX)35

It is from El Greco and Picasso's world, as well as Dürer's, that Stevens must "evolve a man" (XXX) and it is appropriate that the blue guitar is an icon which expresses and copes with man's relation to the world as a figuration for man's constructions of meaning and belief when the "pine" and the "jay" not only denote the "universal intercourse" (XXII) between the objects and subjects of belief but also the "absence" (XXII) of the blue guitar. For Stevens, the compelling quality of Moore's poetry is its struggle to delineate the "truth" of reality and he concludes his discussion of her work by commenting on the relation between objective and subjective notions of truth.

The romantic that falsifies is rot and that is true even though the romantic inevitably falsifies: it falsifies but it does not vitiate. It is an association of the true and the false. It is not true. It is not false. It is both. The school of poetry that believes in sticking to the facts would
be stoned if it was not sticking to the facts in a world in which there are no facts: or some such thing. (OP 254)

Similarly the icon of the blue guitar "is not true. It is not false. It is both." In this sense, the blue guitar as the "truth" of reality is the blue guitar as a "poetry" of reality. It is therefore significant that in the series of correspondences, established by the blue guitar as "The imagined pine, the imagined jay" (XXXIII), the blue guitar is "the cross-piece on a pole" (XXX). The association of the guitar with the cross as the icon of Christ's "truth"--the word made flesh--establishes the guitar as the transformative icon whereby the reality of the lineman on a telephone pole becomes an icon of "truth." The value of the "truth" is derived from its relation to reality denoted by the figuration of the "stone" in Stevens' heraldic emblem. Thus, the internal world of man as the "truth" may be said to mirror the external world.

The "external" world with which Stevens' "man" is confronted is "Oxidia, banal suburb" (XXX). The truth of Oxidia can only be rendered by man as the poet of reality who illuminates the world. In a positive sense, the "man" as the lineman on a telephone pole has access to the medium of communication in an electronic, technological age which may be viewed as man's salvation from suffering. In a negative but more realistic sense, the "man" is being crucified by technology, by the medium that promises him salvation. Nevertheless, "Oxidia is Olympia" and if Stevens is to
"evolve a man" in Oxidia and if Oxidia is the only possible Olympia, in any real sense, then Oxidia is that from which Olympia must come. Oxidia is both the seed and the amber-ember pod from which the seed of Olympia drops. The dingier the life, the more lustrous the paradise. But, if the only paradise must be here and now, Oxidia is Olympia. (LWS 788-89)

Stevens' sense of Oxidia as an Omega point which is equated with Olympia as an Alpha point, with a beginning, suggests the significance of the world that Stevens would have us behold ("Ecce"). "The Man with the Blue Guitar" presents "a Wrangling of two dreams" (XXXIII) the nature of which might be expressed in a multiplicity of different terms of reference but none is more crucial than the Armageddon of man against machine:

\[ \text{--behold} \]
\[ \text{The approach of him whom none believes,} \]
\[ \text{Whom all believe that all believe,} \]
\[ \text{A pagan in a varnished car.} \]
\[ \text{Roll a drum upon the blue guitar.} \]
\[ \text{Lean from the steeple. Cry aloud,} \]
\[ \text{"Here am I, my adversary, that} \]
\[ \text{Confront you, hoo-ing the slick trombones,} \]
\[ \text{Yet with a petty misery} \]
\[ \text{At heart, a petty misery,} \]
\[ \text{Ever the prelude to your end,} \]
\[ \text{The touch that topples men and rock." (X)} \]

The man "with a petty misery" whose anguish is expressed in his confrontation with the world of "the false hero" (LWS 789), "A pagan in a varnished car," is Stevens' icon of man as the artist-poet. The
tragedy of this man's confrontation with the forces of the world is the continuity of human suffering, the "intimacies of profound faith" (LWS 789), which gives order and meaning to man's "interior" life. Stevens' own faith in this continuity of "a petty misery" is sustained as the "prelude" to the end of false heroes and the edifice of belief in technology as the source of man's salvation. Stevens maintains that the meaning of man's future in "That generation's dream aviled / In the mud, in Monday's dirty light," (XXXIII) of Oxidia, ("Here is the bread of time to come, / Here is its actual stone" [XXXIII]) is to be found in the "bread" and the "stone" which are ours in reality without any meaning beyond life as an existence in which "we shall sleep by night. / We shall forget by day" (XXXIII). This "actual stone" (XXXIII) is the essence of existence which ominously faces the lute (XIX), without meaning or value beyond the artist's capacity to construct a relation of transformative correspondences between himself and the world.

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens deals with the relation between "things as they are" and "things as they are on the blue guitar" in a world in which an "idea" is a construction of meaning rather than a transcendent "truth." In the sixteenth-century, Frederico Zuccari proposed a relation between the disegno interno (the "internal design" or "idea") and the disegno esterno (an artistic representation)36 such that the artist's creative capacity was evidence of the a priori creation of man and nature by God. Therefore, the artistic creations of man were deemed to be imitations of God's work. The belief that art imitates nature was reaffirmed in terms of a
Neoplatonic philosophy that enabled a transcendence of the abyss between man's objective (Dürer's) and subjective (El Greco's) view of reality. For Stevens, there can be no transcendence of the abyss which does not acknowledge that the "pine" and the "jay" of nature are "imagined" things without meaning beyond a continuity of creative and decreative cultural activity. The poet's icon of transformation, the "blue guitar," sustains poetry as a place where the "immortal" and the "momentary" continually confront one another on a ground that "lies" between the embellishings and the drawing of a "portal" (CP 91) which is the veritable poetry "Of Mere Being":

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down,

(CP 118)
Footnotes


2 Ibid.

3 Stevens' knowledge of the work of Benedetto Croce is indicated by his reference to G. A. Borgese as "a disciple of Croce" followed by this remark: "But is it possible to discuss aesthetic expression without at least discussing Croce?" (From a letter to Henry Church dated January 9, 1941 in LWS 384-85). Stevens' library included at least one work by Croce, *The Defence of Poetry: Variations on the Theme of Shelley*, trans. E. F. Carrit (London: Oxford University Press, 1933). This work is included in Peter Brazeau, "Wallace Stevens at the University of Massachusetts: Checklist of an Archive." *The Wallace Stevens Journal, 2* (Spring 19780), 51.

4 Wimsatt, p. 130.


See Susan B. Weston, "The Artist as Guitarist: Stevens and Picasso," Criticism, 17 (Spring 1975), 111-120. Weston dates Stevens' composition of "The Irrational Element in Poetry" as December 1936. Stevens delivered the paper at Harvard on December 8, 1936 (See LNS 313) and it seems more likely that it was written in October or November of 1936. Weston is mistaken when she asserts that "it was not until early in 1937, in fact, that Stevens began thinking of the poet as working with the same problems as the painter" (Weston, 112). The poet's use of art metaphors in his earlier work has been discussed in chapter one of this thesis. The work of Michel Benamou, as well as numerous other specific critical references, supports this contention.


Weston, p. 114.


Ibid.

14 André Breton, "Picasso Poète," in *Cahiers d'Art*, 186. Breton writes: "Le frêle instrument, que j'ai tenu sans songer à le faire résonner, m'a paru muet de l'attente de ce poème même. . . .Cette guitare prenait figure de support idéal en la circonstance. . . .Le poème en puissance se déroulait contre cette guitare à la façon de la bandero le-oriiflamme."

15 Weston, pp. 119-20.


17 Weston, p. 112. It should be noted that Thomson and Stein's opera is set in Spain but that the Hartford production used an all-black cast which Thomson says "moved, sang, spoke with grace and with alacrity, took on roles without self-consciousness, as if they were the saints they said they were. I often marveled at the miracle whereby slavery had turned them into Christians of an earlier stamp than ours, not analytical or self-pitying or romantic in the nineteenth century sense, but robust, outgoing, and even in disaster sustained by inner joy, very much as Saint Teresa had been by what she took for true contact with Jesus, Saint Ignatius by dictates from the Holy Ghost. . . . The Negroes gave meaning to both words and music by making the Stein
text easy to accept." Thomson goes on to say that "the theme of Four Saints is the religious life--peace between the sexes, community of faith, the production of miracles--its locale being the Spain Gertrude remembered from having traveled there. The music evokes Christian liturgy. Its local references, however, are not to Spain, which I had never seen, but rather to my Southern Baptist upbringing in Missouri." (See Virgil Thomson, Virgil Thomson [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967], pp. 104-07; pp. 238-39). Another critical source contends:

"For the libretto's devout episodes his [Thomson's] music has the grave beauty of Anglican chant, but the brass choir of American revivalist meetings and echoes of the harmonium of rural American chapels pervade his instrumentation. Where there are secular implications, the parlor piece, the Stephen Foster ballads, and the dance tunes of nineteenth-century America are evoked. Gertrude Stein's esoteric fantasy emerged from Thomson's hands clad in homespun. Yet his setting is anything but monotonously local. It has Spanish overtones, madrigalian echoes of Elizabethan England, and a Satiean humor resulting from the deliberate discrepancy between text and score." (See Kathleen Hoover and John Cage, Virgil Thomson [New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959], pp. 63-65; pp. 82-83.) These comments indicate the usefulness of a discussion of the influence of Four Saints on "The Man with the Blue Guitar in terms of its plausibility as a source and its comparative similarity in subject matter and treatment.

18 See the supporting documentation in Pierre Daix and Georges Boudaille, *Picasso: Blue and Rose Periods: A Catalogue Raisonné of*
the Paintings, 1900-1906 (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1966), p. 229.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., p. 347.

21 Ibid., p. 229. Catalogues accompanying the Avery and Seligmann exhibitions published "The Old Guitarist" as item number eleven and item number fifteen respectively.

22 The additional documentation is provided on the basis of Panofsky's statement that "in defining a work of art as a 'man-made object demanding to be experienced aesthetically' we encounter for the first time a basic difference between the humanities and natural science. The scientist, dealing as he does with natural phenomena, can at once proceed to analyze them. The humanist, dealing as he does with human actions and creations, has to engage in a mental process of a synthetic and subjective character: he has mentally to re-enact the actions and to re-create the creation. It is in fact by this process that the real objects of the humanities come into being. . . in so far as they have meaning." (Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," p. 14).

24 Guillaume Apollinaire, "Les jeunes: Picasso peintre," in La Plume (Paris: May 15, 1905). Apollinaire's article is reproduced in translation in Paolo Lecaldano and Denys Sutton, The Complete Paintings of Picasso: Blue and Rose Periods (New York: Abrams, 1968), pp. 10-12. Apollinaire was a writer, poet, and friend of Picasso's whom Benamou discusses with regard to his affinity with Stevens' cubist sensibilities. Though Apollinaire's article contains a number of phrases and attitudes similar to Stevens' own poetic expression in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," there is no indication that Stevens was aware of these specific comments on Picasso's work. This would be a useful area for further study and research. Phrases such as "The blue haze of memory," "to have reached an end which is still blue, yet no longer the horizon," and "this dewy life, blue like the damp bottom of the abyss" would all have significance for Stevens in his composition of "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Apollinaire's comments on the "rose period" suggest a number of other ideas which parallel developments in Stevens' work. Apollinaire writes: "Under their rages, harlequins come to life, when the painter summons his colours together and makes them burgeon or fade to show the strength and duration of passions. . . . Paternity trans-figures the harlequin framed in his room, while his wife washes herself in freezing water and is happy with herself, as slim and lithe as her husband is puppet-like. . . . The mothers, bearing a child for the first time, were not expected to do so: because of a chattering old crow, perhaps, or an unfavourable omen. Christmas! And so, they will give birth to future acrobats, a cross between tame monkeys
and bear-like dogs. Picasso's predilection for the fugitive and the transient penetrates to the core of things and changes them, producing utterly unique originals in flowing chalcographic lines, in which the general appearance of the world is not one whit altered by the light, which moulds the form as its colour changes."

25 Furia and Roth, pp. 66-77.

26 Whereas Stevens comments that in "The Comedian as the Letter C" he "deliberately took the sort of life that millions of people live, without embellishing it except by the embellishments in which I was interested at the moment: words and sounds" (LWS 294) (See chapter one), in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens presents "Man without variation, Man in C Major. The complete realization of the idea of man. Man at his happier normal." (Cited in Litz, p. 250; from the Stevens quotation in Mattino Domenicale Ed Altre Poesie, trans. Renato Poggioli [Turin, 1954], p. 174.)

27 See Furia and Roth, p. 68 et passim. Furia and Roth identify Stevens' "C" state with the interrelations between reality (A) and the imagination (B) such that "the character C understands the necessity or inevitability of imaginative projection in any apprehension of reality, yet he insists on the equal necessity of overwriting and underwriting the opposed and incompatible attitudes of A and B. C always seeks to work back to the ground, to the object, without denying the reality of the imagination in that process. In that Way, C
continually mediates between the limited and fixed contraries of A and B, so that he is, literally the letter C as co-median. C redeems both heaven and earth." C's redemptive capacity as "co-median" between reality and the imagination, heaven and earth, is questionable and will be discussed in terms of Stevens' "man" as the "heraldic center" of modern reality at further length.

28 See Blunt and Pool, p. 114 et passim. It should be noted that Pool does not believe that Picasso could have seen Bellange's etching at this early stage in his career despite its remarkable similarity to "The Old Guitarist." I suggest "The Blind Beggar" (1903) which is reproduced in Daix and Boudaille's catalogue (p. 62). The resemblance is even sharper and indicates that Picasso's figure of a blind man with a guitar is perhaps a study based on Bellange's etching. In general Picasso's use of the three characteristics of Mannerist paintings--the distortion of space, the distortion of form and the expressive handling of colour--are most fully apparent in terms of the influence of El Greco. Phoebe Pool writes: "Picasso knew his work before going to Toledo in 1901, but after this visit his enthusiasm increased. There had already been a revival of interest in Greco who was soon to be the 'patron saint of Expressionism,' culminating in the Fiesta Modernista at Sitges in 1897, when two of his pictures were carried in procession and a monument was erected to him. This revival, in which Picasso's friends Casas and Utrillo took part, arose out of the medievalising literary movement of the fin-de-siecle with its anti-classicism and cult of spirituality and pain, which naturally found El Greco's ascetic
art congenial. In El Greco's works Picasso seems to have found encouragement for his distortions, particularly for his use of emaciated legs, fine fingers, and elongated faces, and for cold colours and chalky lights, features also to be found in many of the artists now called 'Mannerist,' in whom Picasso later showed an interest." (p. 21) Pool emphasizes Picasso's adoption of the conventions of Mannerism such as the elongated limbs and angular pose of the figures which he uses in "a much more sharply linear style than that of his sixteenth-century predecessor." (p. 114)


30Ibid., p. 105.

31Ibid., p. 106.

32OP 247-54. This article originally appeared in Life and Letters Today, 13 December 1935), 61-65. It was probably written in June, 1935 (See LNS 281) and was thus contemporaneous with Stevens' growing exposure to and interest in materials on and by Picasso such as the 1934 Avery exhibit and the 1935 issue of Cahiers d'Art.


Stevens comments on this stanza in a letter to Renato Poggioli:

"You have me up a tree on this one. I suppose, although I really do not remember that I was, that I was trying to make a choice of a priestly character suitable for appearance in the context of the poem, and I imagine that I chose a Franciscan because of the quality of liberality and of being part of the world that goes with the Franciscan as distinguished, say, from a Jesuit. I have no doubt that I intended to use the word don with reference to a clerical figure. But in this instance my primary concern was with the mental image" (LWS 784).

See Erwin Panofsky, *Idea*, p. 85-86. Zuccari's formulation was a confrontation with the Mannerist rebellion against the rigid mathematical rules of a theory of proportions and conventions adhered to in the Renaissance which was reflective of a theory of ideas which opened a chasm between nature and the perceiving mind. For instance, Stevens' "painter's problem of realization" (LWS 316) echoes Dante's distinction between two methods of reproducing reality in a work of art: "ritrarre which reproduces reality as we see it, and imitare, which reproduces reality as it ought to be seen" (*Idea*, p. 81). The sense that things as we see them and things as they are exist in opposition to one another resulted in an art in which "the happy balance between subject and
object, one might say, was irreparably destroyed" (Idea, p. 81). Similarly, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" deals with poetry as an attempt "to balance things / To and to and to the point of still" (XXIX), while at the same time being confronted by the knowledge that "the balance does not quite rest" (XXIX). Stevens' poetry profoundly confronts the questions, not only of "How does the artist represent things correctly?" and "How does the artist represent the beautiful?" but also the Mannerist and contemporary dilemma: "How is artistic representation and in particular the representation of the beautiful, at all possible?" (Idea, p. 84).
Conclusion

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Wallace Stevens anticipates a poetry which provides a glimpse of this "gold-feathered bird that / Sings in the palm" by illuminating the "portal" of human cultural activity as a continuity whereby an internal design or "idea" (The palm at the end of the mind") corresponds to an external design or artistic representation ("The palm stands on the edge of space"). Stevens' "The imagined pine, the imagined jay" effectively dissolves any distinction between man's experience of the desert "wasteland" of the modern world as a mirage and as an oasis of culturally accessible meanings. The poet and the poetry of reality fuse together as fluid iconic transformations in the fulfillment of a "mid-kingdom" continuity of musical, artistic and poetic meaning. Chapter one examines Stevens' work preceding "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and demonstrates a "history of style" in which the images of the "man" and the "guitar" denote the tragedy of man's relation to the world. Man's responses to the world in terms of the improvisations and repetitions of music, the technique of abstraction in painting, and the figurative language of poetry, are represented by Stevens as attempts to mediate between the creations and destructions of meaning and belief which characterize man's experience of both nature and culture. Chapter two provides an interpretation of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" which shows that
Stevens establishes a procreative tension between the creation and the decreation of form and meaning in terms of man's confinement to an inherited language of forms and his liberation from that language as an essentially silent and empty artifice of meaning. Stevens' poetic treatment of the images of the "man" and the "blue guitar" in the contexts of the "blues" music of American black culture--an aspect of Stevens's work usually ignored by his critics--and the "blue chiaroscuro" of "this picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard / Of destructions'" sustains the "mid-kingdom" continuity of man's anguish and suffering. The iconic reading of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in Chapter three reveals that the figures of the "man" and the "blue guitar" generate a multiplicity of particular meanings which achieve their "realization" in the time-place of "Oxidia, banal suburb." The collapse of a consensus of meaning about man's relation to the world facilitates the response by Stevens' "man" as the artist-poet who uses the "blue guitar" as an icon to represent man's imposition of values of order on a chaotic world. The continuity of man's suffering as a series of transformative correspondences becomes the viable schema that sustains poetry as meaning. The poetry of "The imagined pine, the imagined jay" is chosen as the schema whereby the "internal design" or "idea" of order and beauty which is "momentary" in the poet's mind fuses with the "external design" or "poem" which is "immortal" so that the word and the flesh, imagination and reality, mind and matter, and subject and object are inseparable. The truth of the icon, "The Man with the Blue Guitar", rests upon its credibility as a construction of meaning
about man's relation to the forces of the world. Stevens' expressed claim for his image of man in this work is "Man without variation. Man in C. Major. The complete realization of the idea of man. Man at his happier normal." This iconological approach to Stevens' poetry maintains that man is the "heraldic center" of the world's creative and destructive forces.

The methodology of assigning particular meanings to the figures in a work of art in terms of a system of correlations, or "code", is intended to preserve the "idea of man" as a synthesis of accessible materials. Stevens' expressed intention to "evolve a man", a process of creative and decrative artistic activity, indicates that it is through a poetry of order that man enters the "portal" which facilitates "the extension of the mind beyond the range of the mind, the projection of reality beyond reality, the determination to cover the ground, whatever it may be" (Ex. 171). The tragedy of man's confrontation with the forces of the world issues from and returns to "trying to see the world about me both as I see it and as it is" (LWS 316). This present study has attempted to illuminate "The Man with the Blue Guitar" with documentation and interpretation which is consonant, in terms of a critical approach, with the manner in which this bifurcation of vision is unified in Wallace Stevens' poetic art.
Conclusion - Notes

1 See Litz, p. 250.
Bibliography

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