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SPIRITUAL FIDDLINGS:
A STUDY IN THE POETICS OF WALLACE STEVENS

By

Michael Kreisberg

B.A. Portland State College, 1964

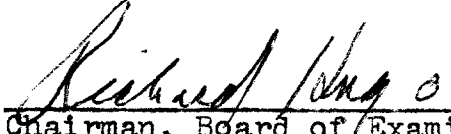
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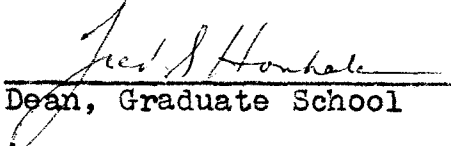
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The essential poem at the center of things,
The arias that spiritual fiddlings make,
Have gorged the cast-iron of our lives with good
And the cast-iron of our works. But it is, dear
sirs,
A difficult apperception, this gorging good,
Fetched by such slick-eyed nymphs, this essential
gold,
This fortune's finding, disposed and re-disposed
By such slight geni in such pale air.

("A Primitive like an Orb")

2442-1

I N T R O D U C T I O N

This paper concentrates on only one of Wallace Stevens' poems, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (CP 165), which was written in 1936-37.¹ Stevens had published his first volume, Harmonium, in 1923 at the age of 44, and had then written very little for almost ten years. Ostensibly he was solidifying his business position in Hartford, but he was also deeply rethinking his understanding of poetry and of himself as poet. That he changed considerably during these ten years is apparent in his second volume, Ideas of Order, published in 1935. Here he is still the poet of Harmonium, but he has taken himself to task over the lushness and diffuseness of the earlier book, and is now intent on disciplining his imagination, giving a firmer order to its energy. The probing of the sensual has given way to an increasing inwardness, a concern for the inner balance and how it is achieved. The poet joys less in his purely imaginative flights, drawing back now to examine his resources, now to suggest a tentative poetic theory. This poetry of the 30's and into the 40's is characterized by Stevens' concern to relate this increasingly inward self to what is happening outside in the natural and political worlds -- and happening with such an alarming, impinging intensity during these years.

I think in Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction (1942)

The key is: Collected Poems (CP)
Opus Posthumous (OP)
The Necessary Angel (NA)

Stevens integrates everything he has hitherto dealt with, and that this long poem is his fullest and strongest statement of his vision of himself and his relation to the world around him. The poetry that follows in the late 40's and 50's, until his death in 1955, is no longer split between inside and outside, the mind and the world, imagination and reality (Stevens' favorite polar pair). The problem of an imagining mind either enjoying or escaping from a physical world is no longer a concern, for the mind is now seen as nourished by the world, and the world is seen as requiring the mind in order for it to be conceived. Thus mind and world, imagination and reality, are part of, are the two poles of, perception itself. They are inseparable. The dualism, for Stevens, has been overcome.

The unity that Stevens affirms is thus a unity compounded of the poles of the earlier dichotomy. The still center he achieves embraces both poles, and his poems can be seen as meditations emerging from this serenity and returning to it. There is finally no where else to go. The overwhelming assurance of verbal felicity in these late poems is shared only by Shakespeare in his late plays. But it is an equality that goes beyond verbal power as we commonly observe it, as say in Keats, Tennyson, and Dylan Thomas, for what we see is two giant minds engaged in what has been called "the dance of life," continually creating and dis-

solving figures, thoughts, dramas. It is life as a dream not because its harshness or triviality or mere appearances annoy or deceive us, but because sometimes the mind seems to be able to attain such a state of consciousness that it is its own supreme reality. For Stevens and Shakespeare the mind is finally an elemental renewing force, and because it thus participates in the on-going life processes of birth, growth, and death, and because both men are artists, the mind of each finds its formal equivalent in his art. While such a remark is all-too-obvious in relation to Cymbeline, Pericles, A Winter's Tale, and the Tempest, it perhaps has not been realized that most of Stevens' poems written in the 50's are structured in terms of a simple renewal. An impoverished situation is plumbed to the very depths of its spiritual inadequacy, a turning point is reached, and the imagination's power is affirmed as a new world is richly brought into being. Shakespeare's continual dramatization of death and rebirth in the late plays is only a more explicit form of the same gesture, that of loss and gain.

I do not want to go too particularly into Stevens' total development, more specific elements of which will emerge in the pages below, but it is necessary to say as much as I have in order to locate "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and to understand my approach to it. I see it as Stevens' major effort to come to terms with his own develop-

ing vision as it was shifting from Harmonium towards "Notes" and the later poems. The loss-gain structure that characterizes the later poetry is prefigured here. A fixed state is shattered, delved into until bottom is touched and the potential is recognized, then this potential is explored until finally realized. This gesture is more complicated in the "Blue Guitar" than in the later poems because Stevens has not yet centralized it, and he wants to get all of the complexities into it. He is not sure where he is going and, for this reason, is utterly faithful to the actual process of discovery he is going through. The poem strictly mirrors this process and my discussion primarily aims at establishing its structure.

By the time of the later poetry, Stevens can "simplify" his vision in the same way that Shakespeare "simplified" his. We could see this as arriving at a deeper, more essential renewal pattern underlying the earlier, more confused patterns. Just as Shakespeare fuses both comic and tragic elements in his final plays, Stevens grants each of his two poles its due by subsuming both in a larger unity. Most of the poems from the 50's begin with a statement of our poverty and descend into the barrenness and loss this involves. But then a turning point is reached, a "cure" is discovered, and the poem climbs up into a vision of radiance. Loss and gain. Through the recognition of change, loss,

death, a living center is uncovered that generates the affirmation of increase, rebirth, life. Stevens can be seen to move around and about this simple pattern in many of his early poems, sometimes stressing the loss, sometimes the gain, but never clearly seeing himself as representative man squarely in the center of this cycle. "Blue Guitar" is at least one of the poems (whether there are others is really not very important) that structures Stevens' movement out of the peripheral and scattered regions of this large cyclic pattern of renewal towards the living center of it.

I think it is important to appreciate the fact that Stevens, even when probing in a variety of different directions in his early poetry, always returns to the vision of a man who does embody the wholeness Stevens only finally arrives at. This figure appears under many guises (the philosophers' man, the rabbi, central man, major man, the hero, etc.), is treated in a variety of ways (comically, tragically, incredulously), and is usually grasped in future time -- thus used as a contrast to our present, more limited condition. I keep returning to this figure throughout the following pages, for he is a major strand in the thematic pattern, so here I only want to establish the general significance of central man (as I will hereafter usually refer to him). As Stevens moves closer and

closer to being the man who is whole, who can synthesize unsatisfactory dualities, we realize that the central man functions not merely as a kind of wish-fulfillment, but as a concrete stimulus for growth. I argue below that it is in "Blue Guitar" that Stevens seems to discover this significance of central man, and that he does so by working with his conception of the central poem (which is the wholeness of the central man's vision, his hyperconsciousness). As he moves towards his understanding of the central poem, he moves simultaneously closer to being the central man. It seems clear to me that Stevens achieves this status by the time of "Notes," although he continues to implicitly deny this in his poetry. Nevertheless I think we are forced to read his late poems as being informed by the one, unspoken central poem that is the poet's ripened awareness.

Let me here offer one word of caution. Because "Blue Guitar" comes in the middle of a process of development from one major poetic stance to another, it partakes of both. We find the lushness, the rhetoric, the frustration of the earlier stance, and we also find the leaner style, the tough-minded analysis, the major issues, and the suggestions of serenity of the later stance. Because the poem is one of growth, because it charts a process of growth, it both points backwards to the roots and onwards to the flowers. It is consequently a complex poem, one

that often seems to fall apart. I try to provide a way into the poem that locates the overriding pattern and the minor correspondences, without damaging the essentially non-verbal experience underlying it. But I demand a great deal from the guitar player in the poem, refusing to let him back away from the issues raised. He is Stevens' persona, and because Stevens was being rigorous with himself, it is only right that we be rigorous with his guitarist.

In conclusion I quote three passages from Stevens which serve to support my abstract statements above. He defines his unwearying effort to push one stance deeper to its ultimate roots, and he offers several insights into the general development he underwent, a development from a singularly imaginative position to one of a more fundamental centrality. Let my entire paper be considered a commentary on the following, for I will not analyze them here.

My idea is that in order to carry a thing to the extreme /necessary/ to convey it, one has to stick to it Given a fixed point of view, realistic, imagistic, or what you will, everything adjusts to that point of view; and the process of adjustment is a world in flux, as it should be for a poet. But to fidget with points of view leads always to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility. A single manner or mood thoroughly matured and exploited is that fresh thing.²

²Letter to W.C. Williams, 1917 or 1918, quoted by Samuel French Morse, "The Native Element." In the Achievement of Wallace Stevens (Philadelphia; Brown and Haller, 1962), p. 198.

When one is young everything is physical;
when one is old everything is psychic.³

One turns with something like ferocity toward a land that one loves, to which one is really and essentially native, to demand that it surrender, reveal, that in itself which one loves. This is a vital affair, not an affair of the heart (as it may be in one's first poems), but an affair of the whole being (as in one's last poems), a fundamental affair of life, or, rather, an affair of fundamental life; so that one's cry of O Jerusalem becomes little by little a cry to something a little nearer and nearer until at last one cries out to a living name, a living place, a living thing, and in crying out confesses openly all the bitter secretions of experience.⁴

³"Adagia" (OP 167)

⁴"John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean" (OP 260)

Stevens twice indicated that the structure of "Blue Guitar" was quite casual. On the dust-jacket of The Man with The Blue Guitar (1937) he describes the title poem as merely a series of jottings on "the incessant conjunctioning between things as they are and things imagined," while in one of his less whimsical responses to Poggioli he says that his general intention was "to say a few things that I felt impelled to say: 1. about reality; 2. about the imagination; 3. their interrelations; and 4. principally, my attitude toward each of these things. This is the general scope of the poem, which is confined to the area of poetry and makes no pretense of going beyond that area."¹ I do not intend to follow Stevens too closely on his claim to casualness, for besides the character of "Blue Guitar" itself, Stevens was delightfully misleading and impish with critics, all of whom seem to have accepted his remarks as more or less accurate, and perhaps their commentaries have suffered mainly for this reason.

I have divided the poem's thirty-three sections into four parts. I do not argue that this is either Stevens' conception or even a necessary critical one, for I do this only to organize more intelligently my

¹Wallace Stevens, Mattino Domencale, trans. Renato Poggioli (Milan, 1954), p. 170.

understanding of what is taking place. It is possible to work out a somewhat different arrangement (particularly between Parts II and III), but this is not important since I am not trying to guess at some carefully hidden secret. I will emphasize the extremely tight structuring within each part and between parts, for I believe the dramatic, dialectical patterns to be the poem's core. I will briefly preview each part as a whole before descending to a careful textual analysis, and I will also indicate afterwards what I think has been presented. Thus the length of the following analysis should not interfere with the clarity of the poem's progression.

Before proceeding to Part I let me say one more thing. The method I employ is one that leans heavily on other poems and the essays, but specifically on three poems: "Notes" (CP 380); "A Primitive Like An Orb" (CP 440); and "The Rock" (CP 525). One reason for this is obvious. Stevens is a poet who works obscurely and often relies on the accumulative impact of his many poems. It is because he works consistently with certain themes that one can use one poem to get at a particularly recalcitrant phrase in another. Thus I will often do this rather than force meanings on a passage which may superficially appear to resist them. I use later works primarily because I see "Blue Guitar" as a kind of watershed for Stevens, a poem in which he begins the

strongest (to this date) re-evaluation of his previous work and stance and pushes certain elements deeper towards a larger vision. What I will focus on is the way these elements appear, how they are valued, the way in which they undergo transformations and the total process these transformations are part of. I will indicate many of the cross-references in footnotes in order to interrupt the text as little as possible.

Part I

Part I (Sections i - vi) is an overture, the whole poem played in miniature. It sets the tone and style, establishes the voices, previews the significant themes -- in short, it sets the stage for the ensuing performance. Because the relationships in this poem undergo a continual shift it is absolutely essential for a proper reading to grasp the initial identities, attitudes, and ideas. The overture presents us with the debate between the player of the blue guitar and an unidentified "they." Each presents his case; each is obliged to listen to the other. It ends on a luminous note, a vision of how the polarity they establish may be transcended. It is the skeleton of demand, response, and the generation of a new possibility that I am interested in here.

Here is the opening section in its entirety:

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

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."

And they said then, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."

The narrator who defines the parties in the debate above does not appear anymore in the poem. (I offer a possible exception to this below.) There is no reason to doubt the validity of his brief descriptive statements, and the fact that he almost immediately leaves the stage to the other actors suggests that what is to follow will be entirely dramatic and thus there will be no place for an omniscient voice. There is to be no fixed external reference; what is developed will come from the bare stage. There will be no script and no prompter. Our characters, though they have found a stage, will be in search of an author.

The color contrast (blue versus green) fixes the elemental level of the confrontation between player and audience. He is a shearsman "of sorts" -- and they are an audience "of sorts" also. They side with the green world, while he defends his playing. Readers of Stevens immediately recognize his use of blue and green to establish the poles

of the imagination and reality respectively.² Here green is for the world, day, "things as they are," while blue represents the mind's capacity to effect things as they are, and the making of a "tune beyond." The debate that develops between these two voices is not just a device to get ideas thrown against each other, but is a very real and consequential opposition, involving a detailed and subtle psychology. The audience begins by merely observing that the player does not play "things as they are," while he calmly replies that "Things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar." They are not satisfied with this simple solution, so they insist this time: he "must" play not only "things exactly as they are" but "a tune beyond" simultaneously. (Italics mine.)

Joseph N. Riddel, one of the most astute of Stevens' critics, might here argue that the player is free from time because he has accepted it wholly (The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 55)³ and thus link this up with "Sunday Morning," the acceptance of change and death, etc., but this would be too strict a reading. And when he would

²The relationship, not the terms, is the difficulty. "Reality" used in this way simply means the everyday world. It has no platonic overtones. It is the central poem and the central man that move closer to the values associated with any heightened sense of the "real." See below section xxii for a simple definition.

³Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (Baton Rouge, 1965), p.

go on (with vast company this time) to defend the player's position as one of "eschewing transcendence," we would really be in a morass. Then looking to Riddel's specific comments on this opening section, we would find him grimly distinguishing between "poet" and "prophet," finding "victory in defeat," and noting the "self-defeating" task of trying to play both "things as they are" and a "tune beyond" (pp. 138 - 139). At this level of understanding, the paradox urged by the audience is dismissed as unattainable. But it seems to me that the poem illustrates precisely the opposite -- namely the player's attaining such a stature -- and it is thus essential for us to recognize the authority of the audience. Riddel would identify himself with the player here, whereas it is dialectically clear that the player finally accepts the audience's demand and grows into an understanding of it, thus becoming the larger whole that includes both of these earlier voices. Riddel fails to recognize the larger whole being groped towards, and thus he too eagerly adopts the player's here-casual self-defensiveness. The player is beguiling, but dishonest as we soon realize. In any case, here the audience has reiterated its position, and although they do not speak again until section v, we are prepared for their stubborn re-entrance when they interrupt the player and imperiously vouch for their vision of things.

Thus section i establishes the extremes of imagination and reality -- the particulars of a common-sense world and the power of the human mind to work on those particulars. Obviously, each is necessary to the other, the mind needing something to work on, things needing to be put into some ordered vision. Thus the opening section is important not in that it pretends to adopt two viable, serious positions -- for neither is exclusively possible -- but because it lays down a duality that demands a synthesis. The player's response to the audience's demand that he be more responsible to "things as they are" is too easily given. He doesn't care what they call his playing -- he just wishes to be left alone.

The tone of section ii casually defends the underlying seriousness and frustration of the player's position, but we also see more deeply into that position. He knows that all he can do is "patch" the world he wants to capture wholly -- for he is only a shearsman, one who cuts out and pieces together.⁴ But it is not an ordinary world he wants to capture:

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.

⁴For other uses of "patch" see "July Mountain" (OP 114); "Primitive" (x); and the code to "Notes," quoted below in connection with "Blue Guitar" section vi.

He wants to play an heroic world, to begin with the hero (A tune beyond") and work with him until he also represents ordinary man (one example of "things as they are"), but strain as he might he cannot bring the two together.⁵ So he rather cavalierly tosses the problem off. But in section iii we see that just the mention of the hero has touched off the fullness of his dream. The restraints have been washed away, and the ten lines of this section are pure wishing:

Ah, but to play man number one,
To drive the dagger in his heart,

To lay his brain upon the board
And pick the acrid colors out . . .⁶

The frustration evident in the dissonant playing, the violent imagery, and the single uncompleted sentence, all betoken the impossibility of solution at this point. The murder-imagery is evidence that his thwarted desire may potentially turn destructively upon himself. Man number one (or the hero) is beyond his ability to play, and all he manages to do here is to pile image on image in a savage attempt to manipulate his imagination and force it to engender things. As Stevens says elsewhere, "to impose is not/ To discover" ("Notes" III, vii), and here the disso-

⁵For an interesting possibility that the hero is Jove see Stevens' statements on Jove (OP 205) and the similar passage in "Sunday Morning" (iii).

⁶See "Primitive" (x and xi) for a more highly developed and serene description of the hero employing the same images.

nance that partially pleases still cannot allow the desired form's discovery. Thus the section falls into an ellipsis, which in the poem is always evidence of weakness and/or frustration.⁷

The "hero" and "man number one" are variously "the central man," "major man," "the philosopher," "the scholar," "the rabbi," etc. He is:

The impossible possible philosopher's man,
The man who has had the time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.
(Asides on the Oboe" CP 250)

This composite figure takes on many names as we read through Stevens' Collected Poems, but he is always that man who has thought and felt enough to have arrived at a supreme ordering of his experience, an ordering that does justice to the fierceness of both the actual world's resistance and the human mind's hunger. In other words, he functions as the fully imagined potential of human awareness (a condition of ripeness -- not a static state) -- similar to Jungian dream figures, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Kazantzakis' Odysseus. All of these figures operate as extreme demands for growth, while at the same time indicating the direction and quality of that growth.

The frustration the player feels at not being able

⁷A similar ellipsis occurs in sections xii and xx.

to overcome the distance separating man number one from ordinary man is the key to the transition into section iv. The audience has insisted that he must be more attentive to "things as they are," so here, rather than honestly face what they mean, he alters their meaning of "things as they are" so that he can mock it: "So that's life, then: Things as they are?" But obviously they have not said that this is what life is; in fact it is entirely evident that life for the audience is a synthesis of both poles, which even the player yearns for in his stronger moods, as we have seen. Nevertheless he proceeds to show how foolish a demand for just "things as they are" would be:

A million people on one string?
 And all their manner in the thing,

 And all their manner, right and wrong,
 And all their manner, weak and strong? . . .

This is terrible poetry (playing), being neither blue nor green but uniformly grey. It is a kind of poetic democracy pushed to its logical idiocy, monotonous, unleavened by sense or interest. And even the player cannot sustain such puerility and falls into a spontaneous, sensuous cadenza, an apology of sounds: "The feelings crazily, craftily call, / Like a buzzing of flies in autumn air." This is a shift from bad thinking to good playing, and we must get used to this, for both thinking and playing are going on simultane-

ously -- sometimes antagonistically, but at best in harmony.⁸ The jazz world he gives us here is one of his mastered worlds -- the madness of high summer, the richness of sap pulsing through trees. He is the guitar when he feels so good, and the buzzing of the flies is the same as "This buzzing of the blue guitar." But then just as craftily he tries to shift back to "thinking and claim that "things as they are" are the same as the buzzing of his guitar, or that his feelings are really "things as they are!" In terms of the audience's demand this is an indefensible trick, for though sounds are a kind of meaning and Stevens would be the last poet to reject poetry's laserie, in this context the player's pure defense is definitely a diversionary tactic. He knows it and the audience knows it.

They have listened long enough to his monologue, and they break in with a long, twenty-six line crescendo that effectively overwhelms (silences) the player.⁹ They forcefully reject his imaginative defense of his vision of the isolated hero. And here we finally get a glimpse into

⁸Although this is an obvious tension throughout the poem, section xxiv explicitly recognizes it: "I play. But this is what I think."

⁹Sections i-iv are ten lines each; section v twelve lines; section vi fourteen lines. The opening of this crescendo also begins with the three longest lines in the eight-syllable base that has been more or less regular up to this point. The audience's weighty style thus supports their desperate plea.

the depth of their cause, the genuine pain and poverty
that is the soil of their demand. They do not want to
hear about the "greatness of poetry" for,

The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
And of its nature, the idiom thereof.

. . . But apotheosis is not
The origin of the major man . . .
("Notes" I, ix)

Their rejection of "torches wisping in the underground"
recalls the similar rejection of the "golden underground"
in "Sunday Morning" for in both poems the absolute con-
solations of pagan and Christian traditions are refused.¹⁰
There is the suggestion that they want only denotative
language, that the richness of connotation ("The structure
of vaults upon a point of light") is an unsatisfactory
masking of their inescapably harsh and barren world. They
are suspicious of the poet's drowning the actual beneath a
flood of rhetoric:

Day is desire and night is sleep.
There are no shadows anywhere.

The earth for us is flat and bare.
There are no shadows. Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

¹⁰See sections viii and xxi for similar rejections
of "gold." It is perhaps significant that the player becomes
analogous to the woman in "Sunday Morning," while the poet
in the earlier poem is closer to the audience's position
here. The demand for growth, and the dialectical forms
established, thus take on a consistent structure in Stevens'
work.

Ourselves in poetry must take their place,
Even in the chattering of your guitar.

The absence of shadows is reiterated and is indicative of the pitiless light they live in, for shadows are a part of healthy desire, light and dark being implicit in any rhythm of renewal. The extremity of their condition here grounds the sun-darkness imagery that plays so important a part in "Blue Guitar," for one of the strongest movements is the player's affirmation of "chiaroscuro" in section xiv.¹¹ (I will explain the shift from "shadowless" to "chiaroscuro" later on.) What they demand is a new myth, a secular myth, one that will do justice to their experience. "Not to console nor sanctify -- but plainly to propound" ("Notes" I, x). As Stevens says in his "Adagia:" "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (OP 158). This is why the audience turns to the player -- they have nowhere else to go. Only the poet-player can take this poverty of their lives and give it form, a style. Even if all he will do is "chatter," they have committed themselves into his keeping, they seem to depend on one of Stevens'

¹¹See the "shadowless" South in "Farewell to Florida" (CP 118). The north wind also later functions in "Blue Guitar" as it does in the earlier poem.

¹²See specifically Stevens' essay, "Two or Three Ideas" (OP 202-215), which I discuss below.

deepest certitudes: that the style of poetry is the style of living, as it is the style of imagining gods.¹²

But it is essential to realize that though they are at rock-bottom, they do not demand a new and bigger lie. If they are to replace the gods in any way, it is as yet in an unconceived form, and one beyond any crude transference, for

To say the solar chariot is junk
Is not a variation but an end.
(*"The Pure Good of Theory"* CP 329)

The great conquest is the conquest of reality. It is not enough to present life, for a moment, as it might have been.
(*"Adagia"* OP 168)

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.
(*"Notes"* I,1)

They demand that he dedicate himself to this project of the sun. They are wise and know that the balance achieved between the flat and bare world and the creative mind of the imaginer can only be "for a moment final," before its form must also give way to another. The care with which they voice their plea is carefully qualified and thus rhetorical precision is further evidence of their

¹²See specifically Stevens' essay, "Two or Three Ideas" (OP 202-215), which I discuss below.

anti-romanticism:¹³

Ourselves in the tune as if in space,
Yet nothing changed, except the place

Of things as they are and only the place
As you play them, on the blue guitar . . .

They are groping for an accurate statement of their vision of a unity between mind and world that they know can yield only momentary finalities. ". . .The blue guitar/Becomes the place of things as they are,/A composing of senses of the guitar," because only in the artist's hands does the actual world find its clearest form. The guitar here is seen as the meeting ground of the blue-green polarity, endowed with senses like a person, creating compositions of and for the moment, yet paradoxically also final.

This section thus ends on a very high level of conception. Neither the "final atmosphere" nor the "flat and bare earth" is to be lost sight of, but out of this confrontation is affirmed the possibility of a renewing relationship. That the guitar is finally imaged as human proves it to be the point of contact between the man who plays (ideally central man) and the music he plays (ideally the central poem), and the use of "senses" in this context

¹³This careful rhetorical technique is a consistent element in "Blue Guitar." It is not just a carefulness with language, and a good study could be attempted. Suffice it to say that formal precision is doubly mandatory in a poem that tries to discover itself as it goes along.

occurs in many other poems.¹⁴ Here is at least the possibility of a new "glory" (Stevens was not afraid of this word) coming out of the very poverty of our condition, the possibility of ordering the audience's seemingly paradoxical demand and making it viable experientially. This is thus the first high point in "Blue Guitar," the climax of the overture, and as such it has brought to its own momentary finality the conflict in the poem. It has given us the progression of the entire poem in miniature: the apparent incompatibility of "things as they are" and a "tune beyond;" the demand that they be synthesized; and the vision of such a possible achievement.

I want to clear up a few points before proceeding to Part II. The player has not simply defended a purely imaginative position, one irresponsible to "things as they are." He shares the audience's impoverished condition, and he too has a dream for overcoming it. He tries to sing the hero's head (he cannot even attempt the whole man) but cannot do that and quite reach through him to man as he is. And so he chooses the hero. The audience should be seen as exerting a balancing emphasis -- one on "things as they are," while the player emphasizes the "tune beyond" -- but both must be understood as embedded in the same existential situation. They need him to be more responsible to "things

¹⁴For other examples of "senses," see section xviii; "Note on Moonlight" (CP 531); "A Clear Day and No Memories" (OP 113); "Primitive" (throughout).

as they are" because they cannot sing the hero. He, not they, is the maker of tunes.

The player has thus always thought in mythic terms but has not been able to connect satisfactorily his envisioned hero with the surrounding social and physical world (or even with his own life).

The audience demands not that he throw away his concern for myth, but rather that he locate it more precisely in the world of "things as they are." In sections ii and iii we see the player is isolated and thus frustrated, cut off in a world of romantic intoning where every attempted statement is its own mockery. Here he pounds his head against a wall -- progress is impossible. The audience provides a way out of this dilemma, a cure.¹⁵ Because they urge him to listen to their vision of a balance between the real and the imagined, because they urge his commitment, and because they speak with a combined authority and prescience, we must see them as functioning in terms of wholeness, health, growth. Only a greater fidelity to "things as they are" will allow him to reach the vision he inwardly desires and they project -- for only then will he be able to relate himself (as he is) to man number one (what is

¹⁵"Cure" is a consistent word in Stevens' late poetry, and although it is not used in this poem, its significance is basic to it. See "The Rock" for a clear statement, or "Artificial Populations" (OP 112).

now beyond him) -- for he is potentially both. They want the central poem (in which they will have a place;) he wants the hero and the poem. Ultimately they are one and the same. The growth thus patterned is implicitly towards the conjoining of central man and the central poem.

Thus there is a very subtle shift grounded in this first part of "Blue Guitar" that is worked out in the next three. The shift is from writing about man number one, singing about him, dreaming about him, to the realization that man number one is only an image for each man's potentiality. The shift is from detached description to being, from manipulation to discovery. To use a word strong with the right overtones, the player is "claimed." He is pulled from his bound-in situation where he could not find a way out and shown that he had externalized his conflict, projected it, and was thus unable to effect a solution. The audience functions as a cure by indicating that the conflict between ordinary man and man number one can be dealt with only in terms of our concrete human condition. It is their larger vision which serves to establish the direction of growth.

The fact that the audience disappears in the same way that the narrator did previously cannot be tossed off as Riddel would do:

The conversational interchange which takes place early in the poem . . . is dropped without warning at the end of the sixth section, and one does not miss it at all. Indeed it is hardly noticeable [sic], for the poet's questioners are never really identified. Nor need they be [sic], for this is not a dramatic poem.¹⁶

This kind of criticism is irresponsible because the critic, even after he has recognized an event in the poem that may be crucially important, offhandedly dismisses it simply because he cannot find a ready explanation for it. I think my discussion so far has established that we are indeed dealing with a "dramatic poem," and I think I have indicated how this disappearance of the audience ought to be interpreted. Let me tie this all together and stress the growth process that has been anchored.

We must conclude that the debate is an interior one. The poet, as narrator, stages a drama in which he is both voices, one demanding and one resisting. The drama is the beginning of a complex self-exploration, a journey of the soul. We should not identify with either voice, because the audience's rejection of his jaserie does not indicate that the finally reintegrated poet will share their view. Here he takes two voices in order to get at the two major elements of the conflict. Once put back together these elements will have changed because of their new relationship.

¹⁶Joseph Riddle, The Clairvoyant Eye (Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 137.

But here the audience functions in terms of health, they can be seen as "conscience," or, if one wants to adopt a richer position, say one closer to Jung, as the hyper-conscious portion of the poet's total personality. The player is locked in his frustrated desire, isolated, shrugging off the demand made upon him that potentially leads towards wholeness. This resistance is a common occurrence, and the dialogue in the first six sections of the poem subtly follows the twistings and turnings of the player's half-knowledge and three-quarters reluctance. The tension develops at a fast pace, for it is evident that the audience's demand is not to be put off any more. They overwhelm the player, present him with a coherent, serene vision of what he is potentially capable of, and then they leave the stage. The dynamics of this, it seems to me, are open to only one explanation. The player has been presented with a demand, has been told his responsibilities, been silenced (easily because he is already well-aware of his imprisonment), and his acceptance of their demand makes their presence no longer necessary. He can work the problem out alone now, and this is why their "voice" disappears after section vi. (In the same way the omniscient voice of the narrator -- the poet before the drama begins -- had only a limited role to play.) When they say, "our-

selves in poetry must take their place," they establish the fundamental identity that binds them to the player, and his subsequent playing is for them also. He plays his becoming, finding himself as he follows up the enigmatic golden thread they have given him. In section vii he begins to examine their demand, which sufficient evidence that he has accepted it, at least to the extent of working with it. This proves they are no longer needed.

In the following sections the player reworks all of the issues presented in the overture, structuring the emotional (passional) base for understanding it. "Blue Guitar" shows an increasing identification between player and potential poem, player and potential man, and this is the development that I will concentrate on. We must not forget in the ensuing complexity that he has at least glimpsed the possibility of transcending the dualism he is now embroiled in, and that it is his response to this possibility that sets him on the path of growth and self-discovery, the path that leads ultimately to man number one. And because we know the vision he will grope towards, we can catch him at all of his tricks. He is not yet wholly committed to the "difficulty of what it is to be" ("Notes" I, 1), for knowing oneself limited and frustrated is often more desirable (certainly easier) than struggling upwards towards a distant and unknown and thus risky wholeness, and

he will have many occasions to attempt an escape when the uncertainties become too great. So the reader can be on his guard -- if he has grasped the dynamics of the overture. Gradually the player dives deeper and deeper into the mysterious relationship between himself, his art, and the world about him, and gradually he commits himself to a larger understanding of that relation. And he finally does learn to locate his myth-making first in the natural world, then in Oxidia (a generalized suburbia). He realizes himself as the meeting place between the green world without and the blue world within, and he accepts the unity that binds them together. But to get to this awareness he has to first go down to the roots of the paradox presented to him, constantly judging his own response and readiness, and this is both a delightfully adept and amusing, as well as an infinitely serious, performance.

Part II

Part II (sections vii - xi) begins the reworking of Part I. It steadily deepens the dualism of mind and world by organizing the large weight of experience and value that each pole is seen to center. The player slowly is involved in discovering the metaphysical identities of the terms he uses. Thus what began as a minor squabble

takes its central place in his consciousness. The still-playful quality of these sections is shattered by the eruption of the violent image concluding Part II, where, for the first time, there is a strong enough note potentially to meet the demand of the audience in section v. Just as Part II is formed on a higher level of awareness than Part I, so the shattering at the end of Part II will allow the regrouping of its material on a higher level in Part III.

Section vii begins this reworking, significantly, by generating a new set of terms -- the sun and moon. This polarity functions roughly in the same way as the blue-green polarity: the sun being associated with the teeming, green, physical world, while the moon is associated with the blue, inner world of the imagination.¹⁶ It is logical that the player would here turn to examine the limits of the polarity he now has reason to believe can be transcended.

First he turns to the green world of the sun and discovers that "The greatest poverty is not to live/In a physical world . . ." ("Esthetique du Mal" XV, CP 313). Without the sun to "share our works," we would become "creeping men,/Mechanical beetles never quite warm." He

¹⁶This is a traditional mythic polarity which Stevens adapts for his own purposes. As with the use of blue and green, this contrast is only gradually loaded with the values it has here.

describes himself as now "standing in the moon," and he wonders whether it would be possible for him one day to "stand in the sun" and "call it good, / The immaculate, the merciful good." Such a remoteness in the sun would not be merciful, as now it is in the moon, and "The strings are cold on the blue guitar" because he cannot even imagine this detachment from "things as they are." The guitar is always an index of the player's imaginative capacity.

While his affirmation of the sun's indispensability is clear, his understanding of his present stance in the moon is ambiguous. The sun's role is vital, it cannot become immaculate, merciful, detached, whereas: "The moon shares nothing. It is a sea." If we look at two later statements I think this becomes clear:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night.

It is
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room . . .
(Coda to "Notes")

It is fatal in the moon and empty there.
But here, allons.

("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,"
x, CP 465)

It seems to me that there are two threads woven tightly together here. One is the persistent affirmation that the war between the mind and sky never ends. The poet must

stand in the sun because that is where his material comes from, but he must also retire to his room and patch that material into some formal order as best he can. The sun and moon, blue and green, establish the rhythm of this performance. The second thread of the above is part of the overall development of Stevens' understanding of himself and his relation, as poet, to the social world about him. Stevens moves from a position focused on the imagination to one focused on the central man and central poem. Here in section vii he stands aloof more than he will later, when the poet becomes less a special case and more just a representative imaginer. Whether one accepts the latter statement, it is important to see that section vii, whatever else it may also do, is an exploratory exercise in that it establishes the lower limit of the player's freedom, for the sun cannot be detached from "things as they are" and neither can he, for even trying to imagine this possibility threatens one thing -- his guitar. This potential freezing of the guitar is the opposite extreme from the sun's vitality. (We should note the formal balance of this section, for it corresponds to the player's hesitant awareness: the first seven lines affirm the sun; the last seven try and fail to reduce the sun from its vital role to a merciful one. Here, as always, the imagination is used to define its own limitations, and this becomes an increasingly significant fact.)

Because of the variety of relationships operating in this poem between player, audience, guitar, and poem, the transition to section viii is simultaneously dictated by the need to warm up the now-cold guitar, the need to overcome the frustration of the close, formal thinking of section vii, and by the impetus of the dialectical movement of the self-probing the player is engaged in. For these reasons, he strongly wills his imagining here, proving he still possesses his full powers. He warms up his guitar and produces a very 'poetic' poem, one of simulated intensity, dog-trot rhythms, and sounds for their own sake. We could call this "pure poem," in that "reality" is not pushing back, resisting the imagination:

The vivid, florid, turgid sky,
The drenching thunder rolling by,

The morning deluged still by night,
The clouds tumultuously bright

And the feeling heavy in cold chords
Struggling toward impassioned choirs,

Crying among the clouds, enraged
By gold antagonists in air--¹⁷

He gets his confidence back with this impassioned singing, where he competes with the older, now sterile romantic images of the self (the "gold antagonists") and perhaps even with the personae of older poets. His repressed emotion

¹⁷See section xxi: "this self, not that gold self aloft. Also "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (11) (CP 13) for a similar conjunction of images.

issues in this poetic largess, although its formal realization falls short of the intensity of his feeling. Thus, although we naturally appreciate the expediency and delight of this jaserie, the player feels obliged to assert a serious defense of his behavior:

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.

This is a theory of poetry, and as Stevens says in his "Adagia," "The theory of poetry is the theory of life" (OP 178).¹⁸ (This partially explains the great variety of styles in "Blue Guitar," for Stevens is exploring his "theory of life," and as he shifts his perspective his attitude takes a different poetic style.) Here we get a theory remarkably close to Dylan Thomas' famous dictum on the "momentary peace" that issues from the clash of "warring images." The actual (green) world is the "storm" (elsewhere a "jungle"), while the player also experiences a storm within. His mind orders the scene as best it can, and though lazy and leaden, he makes the only order there is (at least as far as he knows.). Momentarily, privately, even unsatisfactorily, the imaginer joins with the imagined in the fictions of order, thus overcoming the storm. But

¹⁸ See "Two or Three Ideas" (OP 202-215) for an extended prose development of this idea and also the discussion of section xxii below.

he does not become too dependent on such temporary constructions -- he twangs them out and leaves them there.¹⁹ This is again a permanent resource, and it will be repeatedly asserted throughout "Blue Guitar," but the player is intent on going deeper into this whole affair, and once reassured is anxious to proceed.

Section ix extends the role of the imagination, finding its value to rest in a cosmic relation that was not realized earlier. The blue guitar is kin with the blue air, in which it is "a form, described but difficult," for the storm persists into this section with its "overcast blue." The player describes himself as "merely a shadow hunched/
Above the arrowy, still strings,/The maker of a thing yet to be made . . ." The poem is being made as he writes (plays), but he does not know where it is going as yet, for this is a poem where the way is discovered only gradually. The player withdraws himself from the picture so that he can analyze the role of the blue guitar, its blueness, for it is difficult to separate out its form:

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

¹⁹Here, then, is the insistence that any effort of the mind is a kind of ordering, for the 'thing in itself' cannot be grasped unless by the mind, and thus the mind is participant in the order that is perceived -- or the disorder. See "Connoisseur of Chaos" (CP 215), where "A great disorder is an order."

Sodden with his melancholy words,
The weather of his stage, himself.²⁰

Blue is a power of the player's private world, it grows out of his response to the world. It is a tragic robe because it extends beyond his consciousness, beyond his ability to capture in words. The live actor on the stage can use gestures to get his meaning across, but the poet is limited to his words and, perhaps, that secret gesture that gives them up to the page. The poet is an actor because he employs masks, and the stage is his own because his sense of the world is a unique thing and largely limited to his own consciousness. (See "The Idea of Order at Key West.")²¹

The color, blue, is seen to go through a series of analogies, approximations, as the player tries to find the proper relation. It (blue) is like a thought, a tragic robe, the dress of the actor's meaning, the weather of his stage, and finally, at the most inclusive level, it is himself.

This weather-image, as it is a fundamental one for

²⁰See section xxv: "his robes and symbols;" "Notes" I, vi; "Adagia": "The poet makes silk dresses out of worms" (OP 157); and the beautiful "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (CP 524):

Within a single thin, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor,
a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

²¹It is possible to see the player here as having his mask half-on and half-off, but I think this aspect of the poem is better illuminated by focusing on the larger

Stevens, deserves closer attention. As I have already mentioned, Stevens has a vast faith in the renewing powers of the natural world, the green world. Many of his early poems especially are purely primitive hymns to nature -- her variety, cyclic patterns, and responsive otherness. The "weather" is roughly used as the renewing potentiality of the green world. In the same way that he pushes deeper into man and discovers "major man," he pushes deeper into weather and arrives at "major weather" ("Notes" III, vii). When he uses the expression, "the weather of his stage," we necessarily associate it with the weather of the green world just described. The imagination (blue) is thus seen to emerge out of a mood, only half captured in words, the rest left to a gesture not available to the poet as poet, and yet it is the only resource he has.

I think it is useful to see how the weather functions in another poem. In "How to Live. What to Do," (CP 125) two naked figures emerge before the rock that is the poverty of their condition and pause as Adam and Eve must have done prior to their descent/ascent into the outer world. These figures are static, and while the rock looms

movement of growth. To put it another way, the necessity for wearing a mask is only one evidence of the player's frustration. As a poet, Stevens is so consistent in both theme and attitude, that his concern for multiple masks is markedly less pronounced than is the case with a poet such as Auden.

numinously before them, the wind and light comprise the only movement. Thus the promise of the poem is necessarily associated with these elements of weather. "The Rock" shows the final possibility of clothing the rock with meanings. Many images of the weather abound and often enough with the giant or major man, and often enough with the rock, to suggest its primal significance and the direction of meaning and success towards which its use was tending. (I develop this later.)²²

Because of the above examination of the player's imaginative resources, he is feeling confident, and in section x he sets the stage and acts out a small melodrama, a mock confrontation with god. He calls for "reddest columns" to be raised (red being associated with high sensuousness for Stevens), summons the bells to toll, and bids the now meaningless "wills of the dead" be thrown into the streets like confetti (their claims to places in heaven no longer being valid).²³ He dismisses the god

. . . whom non believes,

Whom all believe that all believe
A pagan in a varnished car.

He declares himself to be god's "adversary," and though

²²For other examples of Stevens' use of the idea of "weather," see "Artificial Populations" (OP 112); "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu" (CP 128); "Notes" and "Primitive" throughout.

²³For red, see "Notes" I, vi and III, iii.

confessing to a "petty misery/At heart," he is still more than adequate to the contest. God has become a "pagan" because no longer associated with belief, and his "varnished car" is rejected as were the "torches" and "vaults" of section v and the "gold antagonists" of section viii. All of the glitter of dead divinity is discarded, so that "the real will from its crude compoundings come" ("Notes" I, vii). The poet's petty misery is the emotional correlative of this period of transition:

Ever the prelude to your end,
The touch that topples men and rock.

The player's "hoing the slick trombones" is the musical thread of this prelude, for the imagination does not die but constantly renews itself by finding new and viable images for experience. Just as the old gods were the products of the imagination, so they are toppled when the imagination goes on to new constructions. The falling of the rock, along with the knelling of the bell and the raised columns, all assert the supercession of the new over the Church, while we are carefully introduced to the rock-imagery that is expanded in the next section and is to become the central image for the last two parts. The rock of section vi cannot be toppled like the rock in section x, and this ties the two sections firmly together while under-

lining the player's last uncommitted "chattering."²⁴

The pivotal and final section xi of Part II employs a wave-like building of thought without any of Stevens' usual qualifications. There is a hardness to the imagery, a clear and tightly-controlled antithesis between, even an arbitrary examination of, two possible renderings of one experience or idea. This is the first of the two major architectural efforts Stevens makes in "Blue Guitar" and the second (section xxii) significantly enough, concludes Part III. What we get in each of these two sections is a strong summing-up of the part as a whole, a final ingathering of the material in its clearest form. It is this achievement of perfect balance that enables the following parts to begin on higher levels.

The first attitude adopted in section xi is one that emphasizes the romantic intoning, the blue pole:

Slowly the ivy on the stones
Becomes the stones. Women become

The cities, children become the fields
And men in waves become the sea.

This is a comforting vision of death, a naturalism that avoids the harshness of the actual events. Thus bees encase the starving drone in wax when he comes to steal their

²⁴This is only one example of Stevens' casual introduction of words or motifs that only claim our full attention later. Part of the rich texture of his poetry is the dependence of such images on later passages, on our rereading. Ithaca is the journey, not the destination, as Cavafy's poem says.

honey. But the price of such harmony is the loss of reality. The player is aware of this and dissatisfied: "It is the chord that falsifies."

So he tries the opposite approach, this time weighing the green or "realistic" pole:

The sea returns upon the men,
 The fields entrap the children, brick
 Is a weed and all the flies are caught,
 Wingless and withered, but living alive.

Here death is the end and not the doorway to a greater harmony, the bricks are made of weeds, not ivy, and death is built into every one. The image of the flies trapped -- "but living alive" -- recalls the player's feelings which he described in section iv as "like a buzzing of flies in autumn air" and also the "buzzing of the blue guitar." Here, then, fidelity to the harsh 'facts' threatens to destroy the human response to those facts. Death is a human event, even if it cannot be grasped in transcendent terms, but it is this very living quality that this second approach would negate. Again the player announces his dissatisfaction: "The discord merely magnifies."

There is an impasse here, and though the player is substantially more aware than in the similar situation depicted in sections ii and iii (i.e., section xi is more explicitly and formally organized), it is psychologically

similar, for growth seems to be impossible. The falsification of the overly-imaginative (ll. 1-4) perfectly balances with the discord of the ultra-realistic (ll. 6-9), while the two recognitions of this impasse (ll. 5 and 10) serve to freeze and isolate the two barren efforts. But once again the player is claimed, discovering the inescapable beneath his apparent freedom to manipulate attitudes. The image of the rock rises and shatters his fetters, "Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike, / Warmed by a desperate milk" ("Notes" III, vii):

Deeper within the belly's dark
Of time, time grows upon the rock.

The poet does not work with this image either immediately or directly. He leaves it as it is, a primordial eruption of darkness. This powerful and violent emergence destroys the impasse created and potentially points towards a deeper level of meaning. I think it is helpful to quickly trace the development of this rock-image in Stevens, for then we can seize on the pattern in "Blue Guitar."

The image of the rock functions for Stevens as both the bare, impoverished, and unadorned essential of our lives, the floor of the human condition, and also as the potentially adorned, rich and thus transformed strength of our fullest life. It is both the starting point and the end point, alpha and omega, the inescapable and the promised, "things

as they are" and the "tune beyond." "How to Live. What to Do" (c. 1934) shows the starting point most nakedly, for here a modern Adam and Eve face the rock and prepare for the struggle. "Credences of Summer" (1946) images the rock half-barren, half-fertile, the balanced image of blue and green:

It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
A mountain luminous half way in bloom
And then half way in the extremest light ...
(section vi, CP 372)

Finally "The Rock" (c. 1950) envisions the rock as capable of being covered with the green leaves of imaginative affirmations:

In this plenty, the poem makes meanings of the
rock,
Of such mixed motion and such imagery
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things

And so exists no more . . .
(section ii)

Thus we can see that the image of the rock undergoes a transformation. It never abandons the earlier barrenness, but as Stevens moves closer to the simpler image of renewal characteristic of his late poetry, the rock takes on the role of skeleton for that renewal. It is finally an image of the self, its nakedness and its potential richness.

By giving the dates of composition, I mean to suggest that this shift in perspective corresponds to Stevens' own personal development. I think that "Blue

Guitar" charts the entire span of the rock-image, although it is seen there in a more complex, and only gradually realized, central position. In the three poems cited above, the image of the rock operates centrally (though differently) from the beginning of each poem. In "Blue Guitar" it is found suddenly, mysteriously, and only when needed. It becomes central only as the poem slowly shifts towards the significance imbedded in it, as the player becomes aware of its meaning. I intend to focus on this shift and show how "Blue Guitar" establishes this pattern of development.

Now let me return to its enigmatic appearance in section xi. I have argued that the movement in "Blue Guitar" is one of self-discovery, and have indicated the player's resistance to growth. The first ten lines of section xi registers this resistance in the form of an impasse, and the player is fully aware that neither of his two alternate proposals can successfully render the experience of death. This is not a "failure of the imagination" as Kermode would have it, rather it is an examination of various possible uses of the imagination.²⁵ But beneath the exclusive arbitrariness of the attitudes opposed, time engenders change, change related to the "grey particular" of the player's life.²⁶ Here the rock functions

²⁵Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens (Edinburg and London, 1960), p. 69.

²⁶The phrase is from "The Rock."

in all its ambiguity and condensation as the precursor to the finally earned affirmation that will accept the rock and give it meaning. (See especially "the stone will be/Our bed" of section xxxiii.) The significance for us to realize is that the image is here condensed and ambiguous because the player does not understand it nor know where it came from. It breaks in on his frustration just as the audience did previously, and he is almost as little aware of the meaning of this claim as he was then. But we can grasp that he has once again been irrationally but substantially moved to face the demand for growth. He has been told what another player is told: "The casual is not/Enough" ("Notes" II,x). Again his impartial descriptive attitude, the cutting off of two possible views of experience and pretending to be able to define and choose, has been made to yield its true ontological status. He must transform himself first -- thus only can he transform the world about him. His attitude towards his art must be grounded in a fuller awareness of his own being. "The freshness of transformation is//The freshness of a world. It is our own,/It is ourselves . . . ("Notes" II,x).

Part II has been a detached survey of the two poles which have been assumed to be separate, and the rock shatters not only the final frozen barrenness of this oppo-

sition in section xi, but the other four sections of this part as well. The emphasis is on discovery again, not imposition, and the impact of this powerful, demonic image allows section xii to establish a higher state of consciousness.²⁷

Part III

The higher state of consciousness evident in Part III (sections xii-xxii) structures the fuller intimacy of the blue and green poles. There is a steady deepening of the significance of this duality, pushing towards its extreme meaning. Only once both the mind and the world are found to be equal giants equally monstrous, can the player grasp, tentatively at first, the underlying unity that ties them together. Such an awareness first demands a full awareness of the forces engaging each other. The strong crescendo throughout sections xv, xvi, xvii, and xix prepares for the assertions in the other sections, and gives them an underlying support. Section xxii envisions and almost affirms the dynamic unity of mind and world earned out of the preceding crescendo.

As evidence that the player has jumped to a higher

²⁷This pregnant image of the rock together with darkness occurs in numerous poems: "The Dove in the Belly" (CP 366); "Two Letters" (OP 107); "Notes" II, vii. Also see the passage Stevens quotes from Focillon on Piranesi in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" (NA 48-49).

level of consciousness, we need only read the opening statement of section xii where the player asserts the identity of self and art:

Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar
And I are one . . .

If we look back to see if this identity is indeed new, we notice that prior to this the player has always seen himself as distinct from the guitar he plays -- he is always "the one who plays the guitar" (In section ii even describing himself in the third person). It is always an object for him, his relationship assuming either the mask of manipulation or the mask of nonchalance. Section ix, as I indicated, sees him examining this relationship closely for the first time, endeavoring to locate the origin of what is blue. In that section he is only "a shadow hunched//Above the arrowy, still strings," dwarfed in comparison to his guitar. (He is "bent over his guitar" in section i, again suggesting an attentive, subordinate relationship.) Only in section xii is this identity of self and guitar established, having grown out of his new awareness of responsibility. The relationship between the player and what he plays is an I - Thou one and here the player realizes this.

Because of his previous relationship, and because of the enigmatic quality of the image of the rock concluding the previous section, this affirmation of identity

indicates a jump, one that is presented rather than explained. We know that learning involves plateaus, where expended effort seems to get nowhere and the frustration builds, until suddenly one has broken through and is at a higher level -- expertise on a bicycle, the conjugation of a French verb, or the grasp of a complex work of art. Usually, if the experience is not terminal (as in the case of the French verb), one is only on a new plateau -- for the work of art will once again probably yield a new and finer meaning. Growth, or learning, thus seems to be analogous to a step-function, or non-continuous function, in math. The jumps do have an explanation, but they must be formally and systematically given -- the page itself only exhibits a blank space and two levels of operation. It is enough here to recognize that section xii represents such a jump from section xi, and does so in the same way section vii manifested it -- implicitly, but none the less powerfully.²⁸

The identity he asserts, however, involves a com-

²⁸Concrete evidence here is that as he describes the orchestra filling the high hall "with shuffling men/High as the hall" and the whirling noise of this "multitude," he hauls himself up short and confesses that he is imagining all this, that it is all finally reduced to "his breath that lies awake at night." Having begun to play his old tune of "a million people on one string," he reduces it to himself as representative imaginer. He has come some way since section iv.

On men and hall see the rich image in "Adagia" (OP 168).

plex epistemological problem which he must face:

I know that timid breathing. Where
Do I begin and end? And where,

As I strum the thing, do I pick up
That which momentarily declares

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

There is a hard analytical thrust in these lines, a new toughness in the player's thinking. He still weights the imaginative pole (he always will) and is still without recognized roots in the green world, though he has accepted its mysterious participation in what he plays, but he cannot find the proper perspective from which to view this, cannot "bring it quite round." There is something that insists on its greenness, denies him its origin, but he cannot explain it. Here he only recognizes the problem, but we should realize that this is possible only because he has accepted responsibility for what he plays. His affected nonchalance has been shattered by the rock, and somehow that claim has allowed him to stabilize himself and proclaim his responsibility. He no longer just plays and "leaves it there" -- he pushes deeper. The rock thus functions, at least partly, as the familiar archetypally suggestive object of our ordinary experience. It is what is firm, unyielding, the floor. Stevens builds from this without destroying its common sediment of connotations.

His evident confusion occasions another 'pure poem.' The "not I" that cannot be explained is here seen as "pale intrusions into blue," and because the player has regressed to his earlier defensive position, they are "corrupting pallors." To toss off the origin of "that which momentarily declares itself" is simply an attempted escape from the rigor of the necessary philosophical quest, and the player's semi-awareness of this reversion allows only a senseless ideal to be presented here. He urges himself to be content to be

The unspotted imbecile revery,
The heraldic center of the world

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

Mac Hammond, in a rather trivial article on the "grammar" in this section, notes the predominance of adjectives and nouns, observing that "in spite of the absence of concrete verbs, the stanza is redolent with action."²⁹ This is a limited perception because the author makes no attempt to link it up with anything in any way significant. It is true that the action here is confined to an interior rhythm of "expansions, diffusions," and this is because the player has retreated from a direct, immediate relation to the green world. He wants to be an adjective, a non-personal, spontaneous and flaming amorist response.

²⁹Mac Sawyer Hammond, "On the Grammar of Wallace Stevens." In Pearce and Miller, eds. The Act of the Mind, p. 182.

But it is precisely action that he has been urging upon himself, not a frenzied adjectival flood, but a careful sifting out, a paring down. And as in section ii, the form of the section (mirroring his inner condition) breaks down. He cannot sustain his tune, and the ellipsis he falls into at the end seems, ironically, to be the very state of imbecility he desires.

As is often the case in "Blue Guitar", frustrated regression is but momentary, and here it clears the atmosphere for the beautiful, calm vision of section xiv. We get another glimpse of the height being climbed, and the potentiality here asserted recalls the audience's sustained cry in sections v and vi. Here the player affirms not an imbecile revery, but an intelligible, ordering vision of the imagination. (The balance here contrasts strongly with the 'overwhelmed' character of section ix's "bringing the storm to bear.")

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 sea appends its tattery hues.
The shores are banks of muffling mist.

This conception of the mind's ordering of the world presented to it is the central thrust of every Stevens poem, but here the strong communal note goes beyond merely

the claim for the individual's unique vision. Here, picking up "our works" from section vii, is the promise of one great imagined world. The day can become the shared, and partly created, riches of our atmosphere. And here, too, the weather that has been conceived of as highly private (see section ix) is now shared -- potentially fulfilling the player's wish in section iiii to have man number one's "wings spread wide to rain and snow."

This possibility of communion excites the player, and he begins to elaborate an image of a "German chandelier" -- but he catches himself (again evidence of his growth) and reduces it to the humbler: "A candle is enough to light the world." He affirms the darkness that before broke in upon and silenced him, for the candle makes the world clear, and "even at noon. It glistens in essential dark." The vision of the poet now partly takes its value from the relation it bears to the world's essential dark. The poverty and barrenness of the rock are not to be avoided. It is only by direct confrontation that the cure can be effected and the rock leaved. There are inescapable shadows in the sun, even at highest noon, and it is the sun and essential dark that together create the conditions of the green world: "In a chiaroscuro . . ./One sits and plays the blue guitar."

Let me place two remarkably similar passages next

to the ones quoted above:

The air is not a mirror but bare board,
Coulisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro

And comic color of the rose, in which
Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips
Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them.
("Notes" I,iv)

How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air
In which being there together is enough.
("Final Soliloquy")

Returning to section xiv, we can see this same strong emphasis on the value of simple things imaginatively grasped, their richness and capacity for renewal:

At night, it lights the fruit and wine,
The book and bread, things as they are.

One important observation should be made as to the psychological dynamics of this section. The audience has previously declared their sun to be without shadows, while here the player insists on the essential dark and a chiaroscuro. Thus it is obvious that the player's process of growth is not merely a movement over to the audience's position. I have said that they function in terms of remedying the unhealthy emphasis that characterized the player's poetic stance. But as he responds to their demand for a fuller responsibility to "things as they are," as he examines it more closely, and as he begins moving towards a more mature awareness, he alters his position,

and thus the audience's demand no longer functions in the same way. Were they to speak here or, for that matter, anywhere after section vi, then they would not say the same things they said then. It would be a mistake to say that the player is not responding to their demand simply because he recognizes an inescapable chiaroscuro. His quest is not towards accepting their cry of barrenness, but rather towards understanding their vision of a potential wholeness (section vi). Their assertion of a blank and shadowless land operated as a remedy at that particular time because it broke through the player's shell. "Blue Guitar" very subtly structures the transformation of these beginning voices as the player moves through the mist shrouding the paradoxical demand made upon him. The poet that was originally split into the debating personae will eventually be reintegrated, and he will be content with the jaserie the audience must reject, but he will be content with it because it will then be based on a newly-explored consciousness. It will therefore mean different things. The tough-minded adagia rhythm that concludes "Blue Guitar" comes from a wholeness that sections ii, iii, and iv do not possess. (This problem of similar-appearing statements meaning very different things is one of the slyest tricks Stevens employs, but in this poem it is necessary because of the experience being recorded. It is not just a trick as it sometimes is in his poems.)

The player's growing love for "things as they are," coupled with his new awareness of the essential dark as a given, reawakens his concern (of section xii) about the relation between himself and what is not himself. Undoubtedly the vulnerability of his one candle also adds to his fear (see "Valley Candle"). He strokes six urgent questions, punctuated by only one assertion -- "Things as they are have been destroyed." The tranquillity of the previous simple scene is violently threatened by the "not I," the "essential dark," or, as it becomes here, "this 'horde/Of destruction.'" This is Picasso's world, ours, fragmented and oppressive. It is easy to see why, as the green world is seen to be increasingly capable of violence, the player is forced back to the question of his own survival. If he cannot distinguish himself from "things as they are" and they are destroyed, then he too, in some way, is destroyed. Stevens puts this issue more centrally in "Asides on the Oboe" (CP 250), but here he stays with the rhetorical and implicit affirmation of his own continuance. (He thus separates himself out from "things as they are," but not until section xxviii will he assert the undeniable status of the object-world, and by then it will be apparent that this is in many ways merely a philosophical ordering that is below the primary concern, namely the conjunction of "thing seen and the seer." The ontological status of the 'thing in itself' will finally not be of much signifi-

cance.)

It is important to realize that there is no affirmation here in section xv, there are only hovering questions. "Am I a man that is dead//At a table on which the food is cold?/Is my thought a memory, not alive?" . . . The food of section xiv is spilled, and the light of its candle flickers in the night wind. This section anchors the crescendo that builds through sections xvi, xvii, and xix. The player progressively explores the violence inherent in the relation between mind and world, and eventually (section xix) the conflict reaches its intense stony balance when the lion in the lute (the monster, man) faces the lion locked in stone (the other monster, the world). As this point of ferocious balance approaches, the images become more antagonistic, the syntax more tortured, the rhythms harsher.

Section xvi establishes the necessity of living in and at war, for we are no longer innocently children of the earth, which would be part of the romantic possibility considered in section xi. Section xvi clearly chooses the "ultra-realistic" pole, where the weight is thrown on the fields' entrapping the children, the sea's returning upon the men:

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.

We have seen that Stevens' vision of the rock functions as both starting point (the bare essentials) and the end point (that which can be so adorned as to disappear). It can be seen to function as the central image for Stevens, although he is given to weighting different aspects of it according to context. Here in section xvi, because the player is determined to get down to the elemental stratum of his life, he rejects the connotation of the earth's being "earth" or soil, for this nourishing quality is seemingly beyond reach. Nor is the earth that mythic construction of all cultures -- the Earth Mother. It is a stone, but not indifferent, for it is actively engaged in resisting both our living and our dying. It "grudges" -- resists.

It would be incorrect to link this section too completely with the different handling of the mother-figure and death in other poems. But it may serve to set section xvi in perspective, so I here offer two passages, the first written by 1915, the second around 1950:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.
("Sunday Morning" vi.)

This is that figure stationed at our end,
 Always in brilliance, fatal, final, formed
 Out of our lives to keep us in our death

To watch us in the summer of Cyclops
 Underground, a king as candle by our beds
 In a robe that is our glory as he guards.
 ("The Owl in the Sarcophagus"
 iv, CP 431)

In both these poems different questions are engaged and thus the quotations must be handled with care. The passage from "Sunday Morning" is specifically concerned with seeing death and change as the source of our sensitivity to beauty and with showing the origin of our comforting myth of the mother. Thus it is fairly close to the point reached in "Blue Guitar." But the passage from "Owl" (the figure described is "Peace," but for our purposes this is not important) shows a higher level of awareness, one that affirms death as much more than the mother of beauty, asserting an essential unity that allows for a flowing from life into death and from death into life. Stevens has moved very close to late Shakespeare and Rilke by the time he writes "Owl."³⁰

I have tried to suggest the large sweep that the figure of the mother makes as it carries Stevens' changing

³⁰It is not at all gratuitous to mention Rilke here. He and Stevens are remarkably close in many ways. I specifically refer to late Rilke here, or specifically to the shift that takes place between Malte and the out-poured poetry of the 20's. For a marked parallel, here is a passage from his Sonette an Orpheus (I,7):

Er ist einer der bleibenden boten
 der noch weit in die Türen der Toten
 Schalen mit rühmlichen fruchten hält.

vision of death. It cannot be too strongly urged that one must get a comprehensive view of Stevens' spiritual development before descending into the complexities of any single poem or passage. This is why I am trying to give the roots and blossoms of ideas we see only as stalks in "Blue Guitar." As I have stated in the Introduction, the general pattern is that whatever is seen as hostile and barren and in conflict is finally affirmed as part of a greater overriding oneness. Stevens seems to accept not only as necessary, but as good, and in this he is one with Shakespeare and Rilke, these very hostilities that make the earlier poems more limited statements. It is his fascination with his own growth of awareness, his inner changes, that leads Stevens to write constantly about it, and more particularly, to return constantly to its rudimentary promptings and to speed ahead to its most fully imagined flowerings. That he does this is the rationale for my doing it.

Unlike the later poems section xvi does not affirm the unity and interflowing of life and death. In fact, death is a muted theme here and elsewhere in the poem, largely figuring implicitly in the images of darkness, barrenness, the mother, and the elemental confrontation of blue and green. It functions here primarily because it is indissolubly bound to the archetypal imagery essential to the poem, but to get at it explicitly requires the kind

of extension made above. (Nevertheless it is important to grasp what happens to the various elements of this poem as Stevens moves towards the serenity of his later poetry.)

Instead of affirmation, there is a strong commitment to the oppressiveness of the situation perceived. The player sees the bare and flat land of the audience and now will meet it without running:

To live in war, to live at war,
To chop the sullen psaltery,

To improve the sewers in Jerusalem,
To electrify the nimbuses--

He accepts the condition of war and the modernity that partially mocks the oldest symbol of the world's spiritual hunger.³¹ Electrifying the nimbuses is certainly one of Stevens' most delightful notions, but it is also a willingness to go ahead and not backwards. There will be a new kind of spirituality, one without overflowing sewers and despite electricity. The player now wants only companions in this struggle who can 'take it,' and the pure romantics who cannot: "Place honey on the alters and die,/You lovers that are bitter at heart."³² The old religion and the old

³¹The player even plays an ancient instrument here. Later he will play a lute (section xix). There is probably intended a pun on "psalter" so that "chopping" is also a gesture of rejection.

³²"Notes" I, iv has a slightly different emphasis than the lovers have here, but the parallel is still strong. As for the honey-image, a frequent one with Stevens, see "Le Moncle de Mon Oncle" vii, and "Esthetique" iii.

romance are instructed as to the only honorable gesture remaining to them.

Section xvii pushes the war-image into perspective by examining the strengths and weaknesses of the adversaries. First the player plays lightly with "the angelic ones'" conception of "the soul, the mind" and puns on 'anima' when he insists the soul is "an animal."³³ It may well be that "the person has a mould, but not/Its animal," for regardless of our social identity, our definable self, there is the hugeness of the inner and (here) darker self, and it is this larger, animal self that plays on the blue guitar: "On that its claws propound, its fangs/Articulate its desert days." Opposed to the external mould of the person (thus persona, or again the poetic mask by extension) is this inner primitive force, where the poet

. . . is like a man
 In the body of a violent beast.
 Its muscles are his own.

The lion sleeps in the sun.
 Its nose is on its paws.
 It can kill a man.

("Poetry is a Destructive Force"
 CP 192)

Our primal roots are in desert days, our present ones in art. This is one conception of the Shiva-quality of man, the destructive-creative center that makes him a participant in the largest natural cycles. But here the player is

³³This is surpassed in "Esthetique" x, where "His anima liked its animal/And liked it unsubjected . . ."

affirming the unique imaginative response to the external oppression of reality. He finds in his conception of man's soul as animal the mysterious ability to confront the world on the strength of his own constructions:

Well, after all, the north wind blows

A horn, on which its victory
Is a worm composing in a straw.³⁴

This analogy propounds that even the worm's success at his natural function in the face of the encroachment of nature is an example of the animal's ability to cope with the harshness that confronts him. Thus it is an image of the artist composing his victory songs, however humble. (The image of the worm as either the lowest that man can become or as representative fellow sufferer is a common enough one to not require comment here.)³⁵

This section begins to turn towards a future promise, as the player finds an animal force within himself that is at least potentially able to balance the tough world outside. He is not ready to assert the evenness of

³⁴For north wind see also section xxvii. For the significance of North vs. South for Stevens, see "Farewell to Florida." For the worm-image, see the similar lines in "Notes" I, v.

³⁵This worm-image is not an easy one to decipher. First I think of puffy-cheeked cherubs blowing the winds in the corners of old maps. Coupled with the assumed sounds, this would explain the horn. Exactly what the worm is doing evades me. His composing in a straw could be simply his normal nutritive act, and he has perhaps sought shelter in the straw and/or is eating it. His victory song could be either a purely biological one of survival, or something more. Symbolically, whatever he does in the straw is what is alive in a way the puffing and ferocity of the north wind can never be.

the adversaries, as he was so willing to do in section x, so he plays for a section, dreaming and re-imagining his goal, before he is ready for the affirmation in section xix. Thus section xviii functions as sections vi and xiv have done by reshaping the whole that he is working with, giving it a new form that incorporates what has since been learned. Each operates as both overt demand and promise, and thus each serves as a reminder of the total pattern of growth involved.

In section xviii the player is concerned with the problem of belief (as in section xx). He expresses his fear that the contemporary world can overpower him, for he has progressively realized the monstrous force inherent in "things as they are," yet he needs to believe in something:

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, . . .

Here the identity between creating music and creating one's life is established in terms of desire. The player has always accepted his playing as something distinct from the rest of his life, although it has always been a partial cure of its poverty. But the audience's demand for the central poem that would give them a place has gradually merged with his awareness of the dream of central man, and the identity between a theory of life and a theory of

poetry is gradually being welded. The thing itself, the object, cannot be reached without the participation of the perceiver. He knows this now. He wants to believe in the poem -- the thing made -- a momentarily final composing of the senses of the guitar. It is not a "touch of the hand" that he wants, for that would be too much of the old detachment from "things as they are," but rather "the touch of the senses . . . // . . . the very senses as they touch/The wind-gloss." Now he can state the same sense of transient form as the audience did, and he is almost ready to affirm it. (They could only demand it.)

Even more indicative of the affirmation he is moving towards is the transmutation of the image of the rock under a dawning sun:

. . . as daylight comes,
Like light in a mirroring of cliffs,
Rising upward from a sea of ex.

This is one of Stevens' most richly imagined gestures, caught enigmatically but powerfully. The "sea of ex" would seem to be the world of objects, of "things as they are," that are always just beyond reach, just below our grasp -- always "ex." The thing-in-itself is a dead, cold object -- if we can say anything at all about it. The rock of our being has moved away from the barrenness of its first appearance and is seen in its promise of a new glory. Here the sun meets the sea and, glancing up from it, momentarily

transforms the cliffs into a mirror. Thus man at his best is a mirror: "the man of glass,/Who in a million diamonds sums us up." (It is owing to Stevens' tightness of imagery that he also condenses here the image of the candle -- which shows the influence of section xiv.) We can see that the rock is moving into its central position in the player's vision, according to the general pattern I discussed above. The rock is rich in potentiality here, having transcended the earlier barren, shadowless state. The rock functions then as an image of the self, but the player needs ten sections to work with it after its first appearance (section xi) before it is seen in these terms. By section xxi, the rock has assumed its explicitly central position in the player's thought, and it is affirmed in a complex image of the self.

After this serene and promising aside, the player draws a deep breath and pushes his awareness of the duality of mind and world to its deepest roots. This section is thus the culmination of the major gesture of Part III. Here he is ready to face the animal's capacity for visiting the horde of destructions. The war-image of section xvi and the animal-image of section xvii, here find their resolution in the monstrous balance between two lions. The intensity of this perfectly adjusted confrontation is held in formal order only by the subtle rendering of

spiraling thought as it moves towards the concluding equilibrium. I quote it in full because of the way its one sentence moves through the gauntlet of qualifications.

That I may reduce the monster to
Myself, and then may be myself

In face of the monster, be more than part
Of it, more than the monstrous player of

One of its monstrous lutes, not be
Alone, but reduce the monster and be,

Two things, the two together as one,
And play of the monster and of myself,

Or better not of myself at all,
But of that as its intelligence,

Being the lion in the lute
Before the lion locked in stone.

It can be seen that the player here recapitulates what he has learned, painstakingly insisting on just the right distinctions, just the proper nuances. Part III began with the hunt for "That which momentarily declares/Itself not to be I and yet/Must be," and here the reiteration of "monster" cements the two (even to the sound of heavy "m" words). Here, conditionally stated, is the player's realization that it is not a case of either/or, but of:

. . . He chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate, the amassing harmony.
("Notes" III,vi)³⁶

³⁶This is seen as "imposing" in "Notes," but I don't think this finally affects my wrenching of contexts, for Canon Aspirin is only partially in error there -- and far less so than the player here.

The player puts it as, "Two things, the two together as one." Of course, he is not sure he can manage this. The firm statement of belief counters the previous section's doubt, while the tentative personal commitment continues it. One of Stevens' most suggestive comments in his "Adagia" is that, "The poet must come at least as the miraculous beast and, at his best, as the miraculous man" (OP 160). Here the player, at best, is but a beast, for the section is frozen in stony balance. The animal in the instrument confronts the animal in the stone. Each needs the other, each is necessarily included in the other as far as human perception is concerned. But this locked-in quality is not resolved until section xxii.

Section xx is again a frustrated, but non-flamboyant withdrawal from the situation depicted in the previous section. Here the player questions the existence of anything but his own ideas. He addresses "good sir, good friend," but there is no answer possible. He needs something to believe, but with the question, "Is it ideas that I believe?" He implies that one must believe in something beyond ideas, something which informs ideas. Indeed, he has just been engaged in a strenuous probing of the monstrousness that resists him, so he is actually fully alive to what momentarily declares itself. Thus there is this central ambivalence here, for though he knows that what is beyond

his imagination must itself be imagined, must be an idea, he still needs to believe in something beyond his ideas. This dilemma works out as having to accept a place both in the natural and social worlds, and it is what engages him in Part IV. It has of course been implicit in all that has come before this, but it is appropriate that it should be focused on here in the last section of doubt before the problem is faced directly and solved in the last sections of "Blue Guitar." Section xx ends in an ellipsis, for with only the air for friend, the guitar is "pale" and "poor," reminding us of its genetic state in section ix, back to which it appears to go. As usual, the ellipsis signifies the player's inability to sustain any strong affirmation.

The player immediately rejects this self-pitying mood, and, disciplining himself, in section xxi sketches in the necessary paradoxical stance which recognizes both poles (mind and world) and yet forms them into one. Responding to the very terms originally used by the audience, he sees his choice of "this self, not that gold self aloft" as being a "substitute for all the gods."³⁸ As opposed to

³⁸See sections v and viii and footnotes to both; also "the gold center, the golden destiny" of "Notes" III, viii for a similar rejection.

a 'romantic' self, he is choosing an 'engaged' self. Corresponding to the two poles that act as foci for his sense of things, the form of this section first builds imaginatively, presenting the potential majesty of this engaged self, and then it suffers a firm reduction down to the bare rock, imaging the inescapable barren expanse out of which that majesty must come, if it comes at all.

The imaginative crescendo glorifies the solitary self, its "shadow magnified" -- for the darkness has been accepted and affirmed by now. This self is seen as the promised lord in "an immenser heaven" (vs. section v's "empty heaven"), but still "aloft" like the romantic, golden self: ". . . aloft,/Alone, lord of the land and lord//Of the men that live in the land, high lord." Stevens here deliberately forces the similarity and contrast, for what we have here is nothing but central man, and he is a re-imagined figure of (and thus similar to) the old romantic self, one that no longer corresponds to our contemporary experience (thus different). The rock-image is balanced in the paradox, and for the first time is grasped strongly enough to serve as the fulcrum for the bi-symmetry of an entire section. The majestic self is seen as "the shadow of Chocorua" (a favorite mountain of Stevens' in

Vermont), the rock as promise.³⁹ Then, without shifting tone or breaking his sentence, the rock provides the link to the reduction that occurs:

One's self and the mountains of one's land,
Without shadows, without magnificence,
The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone.

Here the shadows and magnificence are as sternly absent as in section v, and the lines return the flesh and bone of majesty back to their beginnings as dirt and stone.

The image of the rock here functions as an image of the self. Having undergone various transformations since its apocalyptic appearance in section xi, it now can function centrally.⁴⁰ It is used for both "things as they are" and the "tune beyond." The polarity structured here in section xxi is expanded into more than one-hundred lines some ten years later, in a poem entitled "Chocorua to Its Neighbor" (CP 296). This poem is one of Stevens' major attempts to define central man. Here I offer some elements

³⁹The conjunction of central man and majesty is an obvious one, and therefore frequently encountered. For example: "there is a time/In which majesty is a mirror of the self" ("Notes" III, viii); "invested in the serious folds of majesty" ("Primitive" xi). For the legend associated with Chocorua, see William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit (Chicago, 1950), p. 81.

⁴⁰See sections v (where the rock is implicit), xvi, xviii, xix. Also see sections xxvi and xxxiii. There is no need to recapitulate the transformations as I have detailed each step.

of all the later poems of Stevens. "Blue Guitar," as I have been arguing, is the building of the foundation of all the later poetry.

In "Blue Guitar" the development of the image of the rock has corresponded to the player's awareness, that is to say, the rock is only progressively seen in its more central function as he works with the significance of its first appearance. In section xxi he specifically expands his enigmatic vision in section xviii of the cliffs in light, for he has related himself to the potential majesty of self implied in these. He sees himself, at least embryonically, as central man, the bare stone and majestic radiance together as one. To finish Part III's probing of the roots of the blue-green polarity, he needs only to relate his playing (poetry) to the central poem, which is done by relating it to himself. The central poem and the central man are, of course, unthinkable except in terms of each other. Here the two poles have been brought together and have been accepted by the player into himself. In rejecting the romantic solutions that by pass the struggle he is engaged in, he has come to an understanding of himself that involves at least the potentiality for perceiving the central poem, which is, after all, only a metaphor for the supreme quality of his perception. He can envision this supreme fiction because he has found the roots of the two poles,

found that each is monstrously insistent on its own terms, and that each is ultimately dependent on the other.

I quote section xxii in full because it is the second major architectural effort in "Blue Guitar" (the first being section xi):

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. Or so we say.

But are these separate? Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks,

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse.⁴²

As was true of section xi, this summing up section does its work dialectically, in miniature form reiterating and formally organizing the material presented up to this point. The first five-and-one-half lines present the old arbitrary division between the imagining mind and "things as they are." Ignoring for the moment the pregnant first line, we see the assumed clean outline of each pole, clean to the point that the poem can issue from one, move into and stay with the other, and then return. It is very neatly presented. But then the middle split-line questions

⁴²See "Notes" II, ix which changes the emphasis (recalling Valéry) but uses the same opposition. Also see "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" xii.

the validity of this soothingly simple construction, while the last five-and-one-half lines tentatively assert the possible mutual participation of inner and outer worlds in a larger unity, a universal intercourse that embraces them both. Let me explore the implications of this. (The tentativeness of the assertion derives from the futurity of the conceptions of central poem and central man. The player always carefully explores before he affirms.)

When Stevens says that poetry is the subject of the poem, he means a fairly simple thing. As he says in "Adagia": "Poetry is the statement of a relation between a man and the world" (OP 172); or again, "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (OP 176). And remembering that (1) "The theory of poetry is the life of poetry," and (2) "The theory of poetry is the theory of life" (OP 178), I think it is easy to see what is meant. Because the mind and the object come together in the act of perception, what is perceived involves the nature of both. Neither can be isolated for examination -- although the argument in "Blue Guitar" has shown how the different poles can be exaggerated. The very act of perception is poetic, which only means that it is not reducible to a purely scientific determination. Thus because each of us necessarily must get the world right, so as to be able to act and think, poetry is a statement of our individual

relationship to the world. Thus poetry, in this sense of perception, must be the subject of the poem, for there can really be nothing else to talk about, or if one thinks there might be, he is only assuming the subject of poetry implicitly. It follows, therefore, that the attempt to isolate the mind and the 'thing-in-itself' is impossible, for they are mutual participants in any relation that involves either one.

It can be seen that the player has answered the question he raised in the beginning of Part III as to the point where he "begins and ends." It is impossible to say. And to the problem faced in section xv as to whether he is destroyed when "things as they are" are destroyed, the answer must be that one relationship between self and world must give way to another. We are changed in such a process rather than destroyed. Because we have a peaceful relationship now, it does not mean it shall always be so. Man must be of the substance of his place:

One year, death and war prevented the jasmine scent
 And the jasmine islands were bloody martyrdoms.
 How was it then with the central man? Did we
 Find peace? We found the sum of men. We found,
 If we found the central evil, the central good.
 We buried the fallen without jasmine crowns.
 There was nothing he did not suffer, no; nor we.
 ("Asides on the Oboe")

The fact that poetry is the subject of the poem, precludes the possible clean separation offered in the first part of section xxii, and it is precisely on this

point that the player focuses his by-now experienced attention. There are two levels in his argument. The first relates to the poem as the act of perception, seeing that it requires the resistance of the green world. At this simple level, it is seen to be foolish to attempt to isolate the part played by the mind if it can only be approached in terms of its relatedness to what is other than itself. The poem's true appearances do come from the green world. At the second level, the level of the poem employing words, it is necessary that the words refer to something -- cloud's red, sun's green, etc. -- and thus the experience again is dependent on these true appearances (now words) for its expression. The perceiver orders external chaos. One culture with an acute time sense generates a vocabulary that makes possible precise time-distinctions. Another may have no sense of time and so does not perceive what the first does. One person sees 'cloud' distinct from 'sun' and thus "gives" to it in the sense of providing an order of which it is a part. It is only by means of such distinctions and by the binding of such up into verbal vehicles, that we create a somewhat stable background for our lives. When we say 'cloud' or 'cloud's red,' something is instantly brought to mind, brought into being, something that may never have existed before. Of course this is most true of language when it becomes highly

individualized; for example the phrase, "sky that thinks," definitely evokes a process that is the birth of something new. Here there is a strong echo of Whitman's powerful conception of "words of the earth," or, as Stevens might say, regarding "The Idea of Order at Key West," words of the sea. Section xxxii will return to the problem of how a word becomes the thing, but it needs only be shown here that this has become one of the subjects of "Blue Guitar." In my Introduction I showed why this should be so, and that this is a central feature of all the later poetry.⁴³

The tentativeness of section xxii is significant. A dynamic unity between self and world is proposed but not affirmed. The "perhaps" gives the player more time to explore. But the only real problem remaining is for him to fully accept the green world as both beyond his mind and yet uniquely presentable to it. He wants still to cling to his power over what he feels and thinks and is not ready to affirm a world that is "not his own" ("Notes" I, iv). He has not completely ceased to impose his desires on his

⁴³See, for example, "Primitive" x: "man and earth inform each other;" "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" (CP 51): "There are men whose words are natural sounds of the place;" and "A Mythology Reflects its Region" (OP 118), which has a certain authority as it was probably the last poem Stevens wrote.

reflections, and until he does so, he will not discover the order that lies waiting for him. But the statement of the possibility of such a universal intercourse is the winding-up of the issues dealt with in Part III.

Part IV

The final eleven sections (xxiii-xxxiii) further examine the above conception of issue and return and furnish a solution through the player's affirming his place in nature and society. This is the only possible result given the responsibility he implicitly accepts after Part I. He must furnish a new myth, and one that grows out of the specific conditions of our time and place. He affirms his nativity in a world that cannot be reduced to mind (section xxviii) and takes his place in the banalest of suburbs, Oxidia (section xxx). Oxidia shall be his subject and his Olympia. His new conception of his identity is seen to be firmly wedded to his new conception of his playing (poetry). His potentiality to be central man is the same as his potentiality for the central poem. These concluding sections are the most disparate as a unit, and this results from the player's having come pretty close to this final position and feeling very relieved. Now he can tidy-up almost off-handedly at times, toss off pure poems that yet are crammed with meat, digress on themes that need some statement but no prolonged attention. An evenness of

tone is immediately evident in section xxiii, and this again clues us to the realization that Part IV operates on a new-found level, one higher than Part III, and assumedly resulting from the achievement of the latter. The world is seen as somewhat less harmful now that the player has realized he is a participator in its creation, but this participation involves a new weight of responsibility. He has accepted a modern version of Shelley's "legislator" (contra Riddel et al), where poetry is a cure, the poet the curer.⁴⁴ Part IV can be seen as the synthesis of all that has preceded it, where the player gets to the very center of his quest, finds and announces his new relationship to the green world and to Oxidia. "Blue Guitar" thus becomes a vision of the central poem, an approximation of it, because the player has grown into an understanding of himself as potentially central man.

Section xxiii proclaims "a few final solutions, like a duet/With the undertaker."⁴⁵ This is certainly the most delightful section in the poem and it is strongly structured in the form of a (very!) secular catechism, the two voices being the old polar representatives. To use

⁴⁴The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 48. I return to this issue in my Conclusion.

⁴⁵The humorous introduction of death here should not lead to a discussion of it except in the terms used above on section xvi. It is again incorporated into other issues.

the descriptions from section xxi, one is "Lord of the body, looking down," the other "without magnificence." But again what happens is a miniature recapitulation of the entire poem's progression, for the two voices begin far apart (the voice of ether prevailing) and gradually attain a formal balance, as the grunted breath achieves the same serenity and momentary finality as that of its adversary:

. . . a voice in the clouds,

Another on earth, the one a voice
Of ether, the other smelling of drink,

The voice of ether prevailing, the swell
Of the undertaker's song in the snow

Apostrophizing wreaths, the voice
In the clouds serene and final, next

The grunted breath serene and final . . .

This balance is of course momentary, the form is but a time and place for the coming together of two worlds, and the player can laugh at this continual making and dissolving of forms, whimsically proclaiming that with each form, "all/confusion [is] solved." He recognizes his preoccupation with this theme and can laugh at it and himself, seeing the solution to rest only "As in a refrain//One keeps on playing year by year,/Concerning the nature of things as they are." There are still two monsters facing each other, but that has become less important once he realizes that

neither can be said to exist in a finally significant way until they have come together in some, however momentary, ordering. Thus his old "refrain" does indeed solve the confusion.⁴⁶

Since poetry has been declared to be a way of knowing, indeed has been seen as the only conceivable way of knowing, Stevens takes a moment to consider the desired reader of his poetry. Proceeding from the catechistic nature of the previous section, and refusing to ignore the flesh, bone, dirt, and stone that underlie our condition, the representative "poem" is here seen as a "missal found/ In the mud." It is not intended for a congregation of responses, however, but for that single "young man," the solitary worshipper:

That scholar hungriest for that book,
The very book, or, less, a page

Or, at the least, a phrase, that phrase,
A hawk of life, that latined phrase . . .

O'Connor here rightly sees "poetry as a means to knowledge, even desperate knowledge."⁴⁷ We have Stevens' consistent practice of letting us into his focusing process, not doing it beforehand and just giving us the finished product, but involving us in the very act of his mind. He

⁴⁶The superficial similarity to section vii should not lead us to overlook the far greater awareness here.

⁴⁷The Shaping Spirit, p. 117

states his desire for a reader of his book, then reduces it to a page, then to a phrase, finally that phrase -- for it is the quality of the response that he wants. In section xxii words were seen as inextricably wedded to the 'cloud' or 'sky' they stand for, and here a phrase is seen as "A hawk of life" because it swoops down, captures, and thus contains, experience -- "cloud" or "sky." Stevens wants the reader to not "flinch" at the phrase itself ("that hawk's eye") perhaps meaning its ornateness or difficulty, its surface -- but rather "at the joy of it," at the living perception that went into it.⁴⁸

Stevens frequently comments on language, and I offer the following to add to the above: "Poetry is the gaiety (joy) of language;" "A poem is a meteor;" "The thing said must be the poem, not the language used in saying it. At its best the poem consists of both elements."⁴⁹ The emphasis is always on the vitality of language, the effort of the poet to "get" as much of his experience within the constraints of the words. The hope is that the reader will be able to get back to that which is forever beyond language, below language. Or as Stevens says elsewhere in his "Adagia:" "The eyes see less than the tongue says. The tongue says less than the mind thinks" (OP 170). It is not surprising

⁴⁸The pun on "latined" is at Stevens' usual high level. It is part of the religious and mock-religious imagery here.

⁴⁹"Adagia" (OP 158, 174, 165).

that the player concludes this action by distinguishing between his "playing" and his "thinking." It is partly the playing, the laserie, that creates the texture, the richness, that assists the "thinking" and gets more of the poet's experience onto the page.

The next section (xxv) is a marvelously liquid lyric transferring the possibility of universal intercourse to the level of physical renewal. The player holds both his "robes and symbols" (blueness) and "the world" (greenness) "upon his nose" and strums and juggles for all he is worth.⁵⁰ The enigma is that he both plays about, and is sustained by, the basic cyclic patterns of birth and death:

Sombre as fir-trees, liquid cats
Moved in the grass without sound.

They did not know the grass went round.
The cats had cats and the grass turned gray

And the world had worlds, ai, this-a-way:
The grass turned green and the grass turned gray.

More and more firmly the player is associating what he can, and does, do with the larger natural rhythms, the archetypal patterns of growth and decay. We have an increasingly strong, though still implicit affirmation of this green world. Here, though he has a "fat thumb," he plays the span of our natural lives: "Things as they were, things

⁵⁰See footnote #20 on "robes and symbols."

as they are,/Things as they will be by and by . . ." The next two sections gradually approach the explicit acceptance of the external world in section xxviii, when it will be only necessary for the sake of 'philosophical completeness.' The player has never been very interested in purely philosophical issues, but only with locating himself responsibly in terms of them.

Section xxvi is, I think, the most powerful, beautiful, and serene section in "Blue Guitar." In terms of the poem as a whole, it further develops the idea of 'issue and return' introduced in section xxii, and plays a few more changes on the poem's fundamental images. I think this is one of the few sections that could be legitimately pulled out of the whole and worked with by itself. This implies the completeness that characterizes it.

The world washed in his imagination,
The world was a shore, whether sound or form

Or light, the relic of farewells,
Rock, of valedictory echoings,

To which his imagination returned,
From which it sped, a bar in space,

Sand heaped in the clouds, giant that fought
Against the murderous alphabet:

The swarm of thoughts, the swarm of dreams
Of inaccessible Utopia.

A mountainous music always seemed
To be falling and to be passing away.

Again the focus is one of an "incalculable balance," a "time of inherent excellence," ("Notes" I, vii). It is

each imaginative act that tries to wash the world clean of its compoundings, tries to get back to "the first idea," to "see it clearly in the idea of it" ("Notes" I,1). But because the world cannot be washed absolutely clean, because it must always have "fictive coverings" ("Notes" II, viii), it must be seen as a shore to which, and from which, the imagination speeds. It is not possible to say anything about the world as without the addition of the mind's imagining -- alone the world could be either "sound or form/Or light." It is only possible to recognize that it functions as a necessary pole that, with our imagination, makes our perception possible. It is thus a rock in the root sense of being beneath things and supporting them. It fights our arrangements, resists our intelligence, always squirms out from beneath our inspections. But because we can get at it imaginatively, that is when we add ourselves to it, the world also becomes that which yields itself. The image Stevens' uses is that of a mountain of sand, a mountain that resists our swarming thoughts and dreams, yet grants itself to us grain by grain. I have shown that later the rock is seen as so covered with leaves as to disappear, and this is merely another way of saying what is said here. It is our insistent imaginative activity that vanquishes the rock, which, in itself, may be inaccessible. But we assail it, give it meanings, leave it with images, and thus effect its

transformation.

It is significant that the serenity of this section still allows for the full recognition of the energies involved, for the rock is a giant fiercely resisting the poet's effort to capture it, his only weapon being his "murderous alphabet." There is thus, simultaneously, a radiant imagery of sea, shore, and light and also the brute nakedness of the contending blue and green.

The final image of mountainous music falling effectively brings together the parallel meanings suggested by the "bar in space." This "bar" is both a sandbar (a temporary, but solid enough, form erected naturally) and a bar of music (a fragment potentially part of a larger musical whole). Thus the mountain that falls is both the world and the poet, green and blue, sand and music. The falling is the mutual giving of both mind and world, the solitary poles coming together in one vision. The poet becomes maker of the poem, the rock becomes part of the poem. The poet's coping with the rock, giving meanings to it, creating music, is the act of overcoming the rock and overcoming himself. Thus growth is implicit in any valid relation between mind and world.

The conception of "falling," as presented in this section of "Blue Guitar," seems to me as central to Stevens' poetry as it is to Rilke's, and it comes to involve a cluster

of ideas about loss and gain, death and renewal. The well-known passage from Rilke is, of course, the closing lines from the Duino Elegies:

Und wir, die an steigendes Glück
denken, empfänden, die Rührung,
die uns beinah bestürzt,
wenn ein Glückliches fällt.⁵¹

And, as with Rilke, Stevens moves from the literal employment of this image in such poems as "The Death of a Soldier" (CP 97) and "Of Men that are Falling" (CP 187), through the still somewhat rhetorical and impersonal modulation here in section xxvi of "Blue Guitar," and on to the final and simple affirmations of "Notes," where for major man "The good of April falls tenderly" (I,ix), where "music falls on the silence like a sense" (II,iv), and where this sense of weight and spirit attains its apotheosis in Stevens' 'angelism,' when the poet as imagined angel "leaps downward through evening's revelations" (III,vii).

Two other passages from even later poems are helpful here. The first is from "Primitive" where

. . .in the instant of speech,
The breath of an accelerando moves
Captives the being, widens -- and was there, (ii)

⁵¹I translate these lines as:
And we, who have always thought of happiness
(prosperity)
climbing (rising), would find the emotion
that all but confounds us,
when happiness falls.

See also Valéry's "Dance" in his Dialogues (New York, 1956), pp. 55 - 59, where the emphasis is on flame and the rising/falling movement of the dance. Both Rilke and Valéry shared

and the second is from "Reality is an Activity of the August Imagination" (OP 110), where we have

An argentine abstraction approaching form
And suddenly denying itself away.

Frank Doggett, in a truly fine article on Stevens, focuses on this conception of "falling" from a slightly different perspective.⁵² He sees in Stevens an instant simultaneity of what he calls "doom and genesis" (p. 71), the losing and gaining of a world moment by moment. He sees Stevens' poetry as "alternating between a consideration of the coming and of the going" (p. 70). He insists on Stevens' debt to Bergson, and I think this is indisputable, for there is the same strong affirmation of energy that "endures" beneath the "flux" of change and appearances. Doggett refers to Stevens' essay, "A Collect of Philosophy" (OP 183-201), where Stevens explains that the poet must substitute images for strictly 'philosophical' terms, so we should not expect the poet to mention flux, endurance, etc. The poet gives us

Bergson's stronger thrust of matter becoming spirit, but I think the ultimate human valuation of their position is extremely similar to Stevens'. It is significant that Rilke translated Valéry's Eupolinus at the end of his life, and that Stevens' introduction to the English translation of Valéry's Dialogues was almost his last work. The convergence of these three men seems to me to largely be in the area indicated by my discussion of 'falling,' renewal, and the possibility of transcendence.

⁵²Frank Doggett, "Wallace Stevens' River that Flows Nowhere," Chicago Review, XV (Summer-Autumn 1962), pp. 67 - 80. I disavow some of Doggett's finer distinctions, but mainly I object to his static framing of the dynamic center he recognizes in Stevens' work. Thus he precludes any real growth, and his remarks require qualification.

the experience, the perception -- not the conception. And if Stevens is more hesitant about affirming the increasing "spirituality" of matter, it is because he finds his emphasis elsewhere. There is still a "universal strength" underlying change, there are still patterns of growth and decay, but Stevens is more concerned with the focusing act of the mind that meets this ongoing world, than in examining the evolutionary implications of this ongoingness. (These are, I think, ultimately the same affair.) The significant fact is that he locate each perception within a cosmic frame of reference, in relation to the forces flowing beneath it. We have seen how Stevens steadily pushes deeper and deeper into the realest identities of his blue-green poles, how he reaches down into the largest forces flowing through these poles, and beneath and beyond them at the same time. As Heraclitus says, "Fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you," and Stevens, like Thoreau before him, has his feet in the stream while touching rock bottom.

To return to section xxvi, we can see that Stevens affirms the underlying rhythms always by grasping the mind in the act of grasping what is present to it. The self is seen as able to catch that which is only possible in a given moment and place, only when everything is 'just right.' We must find, not impose artificial orders. We must be attentive in such a way that we are the registers for what is falling and passing away. We can move into a relationship

with the rock that accepts and affirms it, and in so doing, effects its transformations upon it. Poetry is getting yourself right (ideally the central man) so that one can get the world right (ideally the central poem). Death is the mother of beauty, change is the source of what we know, because only a continual rhythm of coming and going, of loss and gain, allows for man's participation. As I stated in Introduction, Stevens' central poetic gesture is the imitation of this action, the stripping bare and the re-imagining of riches. Most poems are centered on this process of renewal, the poem being its formal equivalent. Section xxvi is considerably along in the process of re-imagining the richness of self and world -- far enough along to give us one of Stevens' finest iconic lyrics.

Having fixed the world's relation to us, its final dependency on us, in one of his supremest fictions, the player is at last ready to move into an explicit statement of its otherness. Section xxvii is the preliminaries for section xxviii's assertion. In section xxvii Stevens does with the sea-image what he has done with the rock-image. It was introduced in section xi, went through various modulations in sections xiv, xviii, and xxvi, and here it emerges in its full green embodiment. It is not a 'symbol' for the actual world, any more than 'green' or the 'sun' are such symbols, but rather, through deliberate

reiteration, all three have come to group themselves together around this single numinous center. Here the sea "whitens the roof," "drifts through the air," is "in the falling snow," and even "this gloom is the darkness of the sea." But again Stevens is careful to distinguish between that which we perceive and that which is there 'in itself' -- and so he distances the green world that we know from its inaccessible origin: "It is a sea that the north wind makes." The north wind, as in section xvii, is the inescapable harshness that serves to keep "things as they are" imbued with mysterious depth.

The player mockingly addresses all philosophers and geographers, those inclined simply to ignore the sea. He begins an unfinished statement:

Regard. But for that salty cup,
But for the icicles on the eves--

The sea is a form of ridicule.

Even though one can reduce the sea metaphorically to a salty cup, or physically to an icicle hanging from an eve, still, were it not for the sea's capacity for innumerable forms, there would be nothing. This was what the player began to say, but seeing that his philosophers and geographers do not "regard," the sea becomes a form of ridicule (instead of a fructifying force), and

The iceberg settings satirize

The demon that cannot be himself,
That tours to shift the shifting scene.

The last lines associate the player-poet with the geographers and philosophers, though his intent is primarily self-criticism for the sea ridicules the poet with his murderous alphabet who cannot stay in one place and deal with his world, but must constantly run from the struggle. Romantic flight is thus seen as irresponsible to both self and world, and it is this that is pushing deeper in the following sections.

In section xxviii the player (unlike "Gesu") accepts the natural world and stands still in it:

I am a native in this world
And think in it as a native thinks,

Gesu, not native of a mind
Thinking the thoughts I call my own,

Native, a native in the world
And like a native think in it.

It could not be a mind, the wave
In which the watery grasses flow

And yet are fixed as a photograph,
The wind in which the dead leaves blow.

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.

Ultimately inexplicable, with the north wind numinously behind it, there is an essential, green world that is real, that is beyond the mind, that cannot ever be strictly and finally reduced to the mind -- "It could not be a mind." It is significant that "Notes" begins

with such an insistence, rather than growing towards it as "Blue Guitar" does. In "Notes" the following is considered the first and necessary statement in the examination of man's relation to the world that includes him:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

And three sections later in the same poem:

. . .the clouds preceded us.

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.

In both poems, the poet is asserting the essential bodiness of the world, its impersonality, its non-human-ness, its mysteriousness. He "inhales profounder strength" because he now recognizes his roots. Unless we are careful to relate this to the total process of the player's growing awareness, we might see this as 'unrootedness.' But it is important to remember that the player's quest is not for the security of a comfortable world, but rather for the hard and real limits that can help him to establish an honest relation between himself and the world about him. He is no longer "the demon that cannot be himself." His "thinking" and "saying" are so changed that now he can

say: "things are as I think they are/And say they are." He is not avoiding responsibility here, but accepting it without mediation. He has reworked the roots of his words and has progressed beyond the complacent simplicity of the earlier, "Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar." He and the guitar are one, but he knows now that the natural world is paradoxically both beyond and dependent on him. It is finally because he thinks like a native in this world, that his "thinking" and "saying" can be one. He accepts the existence of an object-world beyond perception that enters into perception to join with the imagination in the structuring of a unique vision. But as it has always been the imagination that engrossed the player, so here, when the affirmation of an object-world is finally arrived at, it has already been implicitly taken into the player's sense of things because he is aware of its dependence on the imagination. Section xxvi already achieved implicitly what is explicitly stated here, and this is what I have meant when I have said that the final acknowledgment of a world beyond perception will only be important in terms of the player's public avowal of his position. He does not want to be a philosopher. There is a nakedness in section xxviii that goes well with the firm, confessional character of the statement.

Section xxix makes an ironic jab at the wrong kind

of critic, the lean and hungry sort, who sticks with the cathedrals and the past and is unable to honestly confront the festival proclaimed by such a poet as Stevens. In response to Poggioli, Stevens says: "Religious ceremonies and delights are evasions of reality. External life, the opposite, is all a wedding with reality. The ancient argument goes on forever. It is like a comparison of masks".⁵³ It is what is beyond the cathedral, outside, that "balances with nuptial song." And the effort needed is that which will "balance things/To and to the point of still," yet still know that "the balance does not quite rest." It is impossible to get the thing just right, so we must be content with approximations. It is as true of the poet as of the poem, that "one mask is strange, however like."

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.

His example of falseness and wrongness (the second line quoted above) is delightful, but it should not, however charming and condensed it is, claim to be more than an approximation of what the poet wants. The only valid test for the poet is whether or not he has given us his carefully

⁵³Mattino Domencale, p. 182

explored sense of the world as it changes. Thus his responsibility is to the quality of his perception -- not to its specific content. And then, despite the shifting scene, despite the approximations, despite knowing that one is never quite right nor even that for long, one is never more himself than in this fertile glass, the mirror held up to our nature.

Section xxx at last locates the poet firmly in the social world, placing him in the likeliest center of modern America -- suburbia. From man's long journey through history, and from the player's more recent journey through his own psyche, an image of modern man appears -- comic, battered, but a potentially victorious "fantoche,"

Hanging his shawl upon the wind,
Like something on the state, puffed out,

His strutting studied through centuries.

Again the "shawl" returns us to the genesis of the blue robe in section ix, for here too, it is our ultimate weapon against the world over and against us. "Poetry is a cure of the mind" (OP 176). And major man must evolve from this fantoche, for there is no comfortable way around this strutting poverty of our condition. Christianity has been reduced to A.T.&T.: "The cross-piece on a pole/Supporting heavy cables, slung//Through Oxidia, banal suburb/One half of all its installments paid." And thrown against the cry that rang out at that older crucifixion, "Ecce Home!",

what greets ours is Ecce Oxidia!

Dew-dapper clapper-traps, blazing
From crusty stacks above machines.

Ecce, Oxidia is the seed
Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,

Oxidia is the soot of fire,
Oxidia is Olympia.

Blackened residue of a fire both in factories and the spirit, Oxidia is yet the seed, the only possible birth-place of a new Olympia. The new, secular myth demanded in section v must gestate in Oxidia, there is no other place. And it is gestating, if "Blue Guitar" is any indication.

Section xxxi merely reiterates that Oxidia is, indeed, the place:

It must be this rhapsody or none,
The rhapsody of things as they are.

The romantic (here equipped with "larks") is again rejected. Combat is the song of the day: nature, employer, employee all contend, while the fat thumb of the here "blunted player" beats out the "nuances" as best he can. But as we now expect, however droll and wearisome the affairs between the contenders may be, the natural world will continue to beat out its elemental rhythms: "The bubbling sun will bubble up,/Spring sparkle and the cock-bird shriek."⁵⁴

⁵⁴"The Man on the Dump" (CP 201), written a few years after "Blue Guitar," strongly resembles both this and the last section. See especially one of Stevens' favorite images: "the moon creeps up/To the bubbling of bassoons."

And even though the suburbanites "will hear//And continue their affair," the promise of renewal is grounded beyond their capacity to do harm. And here the player firmly asserts his presence; here he will play "The rhapsody of things as they are." Even the very phrase he now uses incorporates the demand of the audience for "a tune beyond us, yet ourselves." He has indeed studied through centuries.

Section xxxii is the strongest and calmest statement of resolution in "Blue Guitar." The darkness and difficulty are joyously affirmed, for the candle of the imagination is enough:

Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names.⁵⁵

The poet here rejects the false consolations of religion-philosophy, all the traditional definitions, and wants only what can be seen in the actual, raw conditions of difficulty that are the real conditions of seeing and saying. The

⁵⁵Note the following from "Auroras of Autumn" (CP 416):

This is nothing until in a single man contained,
Nothing until this named thing nameless is
And is destroyed . . . (vi)

Also see "Primitive" iv and v.

names are rotted unless they are words hewed from fresh,
individual experience, for

How should you walk in that space and know
Nothing of the madness of space,

Nothing of its jocular procreations?

The audience's demand to be "in the tune as if in space" (with its attendant qualifications -- see section vi) is here fully transformed according to the poet's vision of the immense space within each act of perception (and surrounding it). In the darkness, one must try to create order and know the utter difficulty, or madness, of this attempt and yet still do it. The player is sure enough now of his strength to smile at the prospect of future jocular procreations coming from the interminable struggle. "Blue Guitar" is certainly an example of jocular procreations: and it is certainly a thing made out of darkness, with few guidelines for help, made out of the absolute space between the imagining mind and the actual world. Only at this single point of naked contact is there light:

Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand

Between you and the shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

You as you are? You are yourself.
The blue guitar surprises you.

Before language creates an intermediate world
between self and object, there is the fusion of self and

object, that moment of pure relation, before words can get to it and work on it. It is this creative center that is now valued by the player once the old crusts of shape have been discredited. He implicitly rejects his old vocabulary style therefore. We must get back to this experiential center and let nothing stand in the way. We must let our words grow from our experience and not dictate terms to it. Language must once again be a bridge and not a barrier; crusts must give way to forms, and those only for a moment final. And when we realize the old crusts are not valid, when we realize that they came out of the living center of our having taken various shapes, and that we still do take shapes, then we can let our language once again be responsible to these immediate forms. The implicit question in "You as you are?" is "How can you tell when you are you?" And the answer is you are always yourself, you can never not be yourself, or, as it is put in "Notes," echoing Jehovah's mighty statement, "I have not but I am and as I am, I am" (III,viii). The blue guitar does indeed surprise you.

To say we are the shapes we take, is to say we are co-creators with the world we meet of the forms that come into being from our relation. And having raised the status of the two poles of his vision as they were established in the Overture, having found them to be inseparable as far as our knowing is concerned, the player has remade his con-

sciousness. The poles originally structured the exploration of his own awareness as it then existed, but during this exploration the terms (as we have seen) necessarily changed value as he came to understand them better. For in the same way that the poem could not have been plotted in the beginning, his journey through his own psyche could not have been plotted. In this case they were both the same journey of self-discovery, poem and man finding their form only through action. The player found a form that united him with central man, and this poem ("Blue Guitar") found a form which unites it with the central poem. These unions are to be seen potentially, for the actual man and poem never exist wholly within the envisioned possible centrality. But this is not the issue. It is rather a question of which direction to grow in, and it is that that the player has found.

Section xxxiii comes after the above climax, letting us down from its height by gently rounding off the issues involved. Stevens often ends his poems with codas, just as he usually lets us see him set the stage in the beginning and follow his thought through its careful meditative spirals.

The final contrasting of the traditional assertion of rigidity with the modern emphasis on growth, discovery, and change, is accomplished in terms of two kinds of time:

That generation's dream, aviled
 In the mud, in Monday's dirty light,

That's it, the only dream they knew,
 Time in its final block, not time

To come, a wrangling of two dreams.

The traditional Christian position finds time locked tightly between two expanses of non-time, where we are wedged between the before-creation and the after-judgement. Thus time is a "final block" because it cannot transcend these boundaries or alter them. It is a dream not only because it rests on a set of unprovable assumptions, but because it is further rigidified by the Monday mockery of its Sundays. Contrasted with this is time to come, where not just human life is seen as a dream thrown against the absolute reality of god, but where there is a dynamic confrontation of two elementally opposed forces, the blue of the mind and the green of the world, and where these two wrangling dreams can continually create a different vision. That they are both seen now as dreams is because both are in themselves inaccessible without being imagined. They make both thus uninteresting. Also the player goes beyond any real interest in the ultimate metaphysical identities of "things as they are" and the "tune beyond" because he has discovered that each, to be known, presupposes their relationship. And thus there is finally nothing to say about the bare rock in itself or about the imagination in

itself. Any strictly logical analysis is irrelevant. As a skeletal schema the extension of the player's understanding has some value, but it is finally only the tension, the dynamics, the interpenetration of and between these poles that is of any truly human significance.

So instead of sleeping by night and desiring by day (the audience's condition as announced in section v), the player envisions sleeping by night but "forgetting" by day. Thus he defines a continual recreation of self and world day after day:

Here is the bread of time to come,

Here is its actual stone. The bread
Will be our bread, the stone will be

Our bed and we shall sleep by night.
We shall forget by day, except

The moments when we choose to play
The imagined pine, the imagined jay.

Here the inner rock of our condition has not only been accepted, but it has been joyously affirmed. It is not only an image of our barrenness and potentiality together -- the spanning of our being -- it is our very bed. At night we shall rest, and by day we shall forget -- possibly the now-inadequate visions of the past, the rigid ideas, the extreme harshness of the outside world -- except, and this is the final twist and insistence that we do not read this as escape, the moments when we choose to form our days and

nights into a vision of life. But we play both parts, we are both dreams, both the imagined pine and the imagined jay, the blue and green of creating, because we have earned this by forming it into an order -- one of many possible orders -- and because this forming has been an imaginative act, the poet insists on reaping the fruit of his gesture. Since it is only through the imagination that one can construct the idea of the imagination and the idea of a physical world, the imagination should get credit for its achievements.

C O N C L U S I O N

and declares itself. I suggested in the Introduction that "Blue Guitar" possibly is Stevens major effort to understand his moving from the rich, but finally hesitant poetry of the 20's to the full repose evident in "Notes" and in all the subsequent poems. Because of this I think the poem should be accepted as an important document in the growth of a poet's mind.

To give one example of Stevens' late poems, here is "Artificial Populations," written in the Winter of 1955, and quoted in its entirety:

The center that he sought was a state of mind,
 Nothing more, like weather after it has cleared --
 Well, more than that, like weather when it has cleared
 And the two poles continue to maintain it

And the Orient and the Occident embrace
 To form that weather's appropriate people,
 The rosy men and the women of the rose,
 Astute in being what they are made to be.

This artificial population is like
 A healing-point in the sickness of the mind:
 Like angels resting on a rustic steeple
 Or a confect of leafy faces in a tree--

A health -- and the faces in a summer night,
 So, too, of the races of appropriate people
 Of the wind, of the wind as it deepens, and late
 sleep,
 And music that lasts long and lives the more.

(OP 112)

I chose this poem because the terms are so appropriately close to those of the "Blue Guitar." Here the poles -- blue-green; imagination-reality; Orient-Occident -- are recognized in their individuality, yet simultaneously seen

as buttressing a larger unity. The poles are to be maintained, indeed they are necessary, but now they are envisioned as upholding the cured whole, the health of a radiant consciousness. Thus Stevens continues to use his favorite "terms" long after he has recognized their ultimate indistinguishability, for they are necessary if one is to talk at all about the still center, the state of mind, the healing-point in that mind. But he will always be both "the imagined pine" and "the imagined jay."

It should perhaps be observed here that the critics are almost universally agreed that Stevens' theory of the imagination is not kin to Coleridge's, that he would never assert that the imagination finally alters what is "out there." This seems peculiarly thick-headed to me, for Stevens has done nothing at all if not to proclaim that we can only know what is "out there" by means of the imagination, that the mind inevitably is involved in the construction of things seen. He insists he is both pine and jay, because subject and object are fused in the act of perception and only subsequently separated out -- and separated out by means of an imaginative act.

Obviously it is difficult to work with a poet if one's preconceptions keep intruding, but this particular rub seems endemic. The bias is to any "romantic" remaking of what is accepted as 'hard fact' -- even though scien-

tists have backed away from such assertions for almost half a century now. I think if we could accept Stevens as sharing both Coleridge's theory of the Imagination (though without God) and Shelley's conception of the poet as Legislator, we would all be closer to Stevens' very romantic core. Unless we can accept this, we fail to appreciate the rather awesome stature of Stevens, the value of the verbal world he ultimately inhabits, and the growth he undergoes. We thus would fail to understand how his mind moves through all of his later poems, making and dissolving moment by moment, finding relations, holding them for an instant's meditation, then putting aside as his mind flows on to something else:

Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,
So that they become an impalpable town, full of
Impalpable bells, transparencies of sound,

Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self,
Impalpable habitations that seem to move
In the movement of the colors of the mind
(*"An Ordinary Evening" ii*)

(And this delicate possibility is pursued for twelve more lines, in one unbroken sentence, before it is dropped and another momentary relation is grasped and allowed to ripen.)

The center Stevens sought was indeed a state of mind, but a state of mind ever alive to the two vital principles informing it. And the wonder of his late poetry, as with Shakespeare's late plays, is in the words -- words with

more "thinginess" than what we call the actual things. His strong inward impulse even in the earliest poems is towards this ultimate capacity where words are things, but if the critics were to have their way this would be theoretically forbidden. I have tried in the above to suggest something of the stature of Stevens' mind and of the supreme consciousness he finally arrived at, and we must accept what he presents us with: a mind that is its own world; a detached intimacy; a ripeness that renews simply through its motion; a serenity that attests to a quality of life remote from ours, but connected to it by its absolute humanness.

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