

"The Man with the Blue Guitar"
(CP, p. 165)

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" is a set of thirty-three variations as if played on the guitar as a symbol of the imagination, by a figure presumably suggested by a Picasso painting. The guitar player in the poem represents the poet, "meaning by the poet," in Stevens' words, "any man of imagination."²⁴ With regard to Picasso, Stevens has written that he "had no particular painting of Picasso in mind" (LWS, p. 786). The identity of the Picasso is, of course, incidental; the relevance of the painting is that through it are combined in their exercise of the imagination, painting, music, and poetry. The implication is that the guitar symbolizes not merely an art, or art in general, but is what Stevens in fact has called it, "a symbol of the imagination."²⁵

Stevens thought of the arts as deriving commonly from the imagination (see NA, pp. 160, 170-71). This helps to account for the extent to which music and painting play a part in his poetry. The high incidence of metaphors from music, painting, and sculpture is obvious in even casual reading. The various manifestations of the imagination are often used interchangeably; music frequently stands for poetry and the figure of the statue is frequently a synecdoche for the inventions of the imagination. Items from the history of art as seen in a museum are used as illustrations in his poetic meditations. The succession of sections of fast and slow rhythms in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (CP, p. 89), and the variations on a theme of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and other poems, resemble forms of musical composition. That the titles of the poems are often like titles of paintings is a common and correct observation. One critic has found in the impressionism especially of a poem like "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," and in Stevens' sensitiveness to the changes of weather and to change, in general, a resemblance to the arch-Impressionist Monet.²⁶ Stevens' conception of reality as a series of changes, not the least important of which are those that occur in the mind of the observer (OP, p. 214), leads him to the relative value of

the object described, and the final importance of the time, the climate, and the point of view. These points, along with the pervasive references in the poems and essays to modern French painting, indicate at least a considerable rapport with that school especially, and with painting generally. In the degree to which the arts represent for Stevens a common exercise of the imagination they may also be commonly addressed to the problem of belief: "in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince" (NA, p. 171). So it is that in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" a reference to one of the arts is a reference to the others and to the imagination itself.

Stevens comments as follows on the intention of "The Man with the Blue Guitar": "The general intention of the *Blue Guitar* 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" (LWS, p. 788). The "area of poetry" should be read in view of what has been said above.

With regard to the first two lines of section I, Stevens writes: "This refers to the posture of the speaker, squatting like a tailor (a shearsman) as he works on his cloth" (LWS, p. 783). The day is described as green, possibly with reference to the fertility of vegetation to indicate that it will be fruitful. In any case the green of the day contrasts with the blue of the guitar. Blue, in its contexts in this poem, usually represents the imagination. Thus the shearsman does not play "things as they are" (couplet 2); rather, as he points out, "things as they are" are changed by the imagination (couplet 3). The audience then demands that the player include this imaginative element in his tune, in order to express people as they are. Stevens writes of this section that the poet is

"required to express people beyond themselves, because that is exactly the way they are. Their feelings demonstrate the subtlety of people" (LWS, p. 359). The way people feel prompts their imagination, and this too is part of what they are. The poem returns to this idea in section IV, according to Stevens. The player continues, in section II, by explaining (couplet 1) that he cannot re-create "things exactly as they are" (I, l. 10); consequently, with regard to a conception of man, he can only produce a version of man's reality through imaginative constructions such as the statue he describes. In interpretation of this section Stevens writes: "It is never possible for the artist to do more than approach 'almost to man'" (LWS, p. 789). Such a version of man as is comprised by the "hero's head" (II, l. 3) must answer the request of his listeners in section I for, "A tune beyond us yet ourselves"; that is, a credible representation of themselves. Section III asserts the value of a dissection, or analysis, of such an abstraction, "man number one," an idea of man, which Stevens also characterizes as "Man without variation," "Man in C Major," and "Man at his happier normal" (Poggioli, p. 174).²⁷ The source of the image in the third couplet, according to Stevens, is a custom in his native Pennsylvania of nailing up a hawk to frighten off other hawks (LWS, p. 359). Stevens explains the fourth couplet as follows: "This means to express man in the liveliness of lively experience, without pose; and to tick it, tock it etc. means to make an exact record of the liveliness of the occasion" (LWS, p. 783).

In IV "things as they are" changes from one meaning at the beginning of the section to another at the end. In the first line it is asked whether life may be equated with "things as they are" as it represents reality. The next two couplets question whether everyone can be confined to reality. Stevens comments on these lines, "It is not possible to confine all the world (everybody) to reality. They will pick beyond that one string merely by picking it into something different" (Poggioli, p. 175). Thus life as "It picks its way on the blue guitar" of the imagination (l. 2) is transformed by the feelings (l. 7), which will not allow of one static interpretation of

reality. "In this poem," Stevens comments on the section, "reality changes into the imagination (under one's very eyes) as one experiences it, by reason of one's feelings about it" (LWS, p. 793). The last couplet answers the first by asserting that the idea of "things as they are" as shown in the intermediate couplets, cannot be confined to reality, but will be metamorphosed by the imagination, "This buzzing of the blue guitar."

Section V speaks directly of poetry and belief. The great poems are no longer meaningful to us except as poems. The poetry of old mythologies such as that of the Classical era, and, perhaps, of the medieval heaven of the *Paradiso*, like the noble horses of Plato (NA, pp. 3-5), move us as imaginative constructs but do not move us to faith (ll. 1-3). We live in a secular world (ll. 4-5) and we face reality without the mediation of a faith; hence, "The earth, for us, is flat and bare." We are in need of a poetry that moves us beyond the esthetic pleasure of its music to a point where it can take the place of faith. Poetry,

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

We need a fiction credible to the present as is prescribed in "Owl's Clover" and the poems of *Ideas of Order*. Such a fiction will be based on a secular conception of man—"Ourselves in poetry"—instead of on a conception of god. Poems about ourselves must replace hymns to god. (See Stevens' comments on the section, LWS, p. 360.)

An adequate fiction will not distort the nature of reality (VI, ll. 1-2). Stevens' idea of the imagination is that like light, it adds nothing but only allows us to see more (NA, p. 61). Again, in the same essay, he notes that, "the imagination never brings anything into the world but that, on the contrary, like the personality of the poet in the act of creating, it is no more than a process" (NA, p. 59). The idea or version of man, first mentioned in I and developed in II and III, is conceived in the imagination as if it were in reality ("as if in space"); the imaginative version is based on the percep-

tion of reality, but is drawn from reality into the imagination: "Yet nothing changed, except the place." Since the conception is withdrawn from reality by the imagination, it is "beyond the compass of change" to which reality is subject. As such the fiction is "For a moment final," in the sense that poetic, or imaginative truth is final: it brings about that agreement with reality believed, for a time, to be true (NA, p. 54)—believed, that is, until the constant change of reality demands a new imaginative adjustment. This is the compensation of the imagination in an age—in Stevens' terms—of disbelief (NA, p. 171), when theology is "smoky dew," or inane. When this finality in the conjunction of the imagination and reality is brought about, a transformation takes place. It is no longer "as if" the imaginative construction were in "space," or reality, while it exists in the imagination. The distinction between the two terms disappears. Stevens summarizes by saying that "things imagined . . . become things as they are" (LWS, p. 360). The metamorphosis of the imagination becomes reality ("The tune is space") and the realm of the imagined and that of the real are identical (ll. 12–13). Thus the imagination brings about a transformation of reality in which the "senses"—by which Stevens means "an assembly of all possible senses: the totality of understanding" (Poggioli, p. 175)—are composed. The process described is like one of contemplation at the end of which reality is brought into intense rapport with the mind, in a state which bridges what Stevens has elsewhere described as "the dumbfounding abyss/ Between us and the object" (CP, p. 437).

Human activities have to do with the sun, or reality (VII). The moon, or the imagination, is meaningless to that working world of reality, a sea, as in "The Comedian as the Letter C." If one were to exclude reality from one's work, the work would be abstracted from the life lived in reality, so that men would seem "Mechanical beetles never quite warm." One would not then, as one could when a sharer in reality, be able to call on the imagination, the moon, as a "merciful good" for relief from reality. (Literally, ll. 8–10 read: "could I then

call on the sun, reality, the way I now call on the moon, the imagination, as an escape?") Such a state of mind, withdrawn from life, leaves the imagination cold; the speaker cannot approve of it and hopes not to fall into it. (See Stevens, LWS, p. 362.)

The first two couplets of VIII describe, according to Stevens, the morning after a storm (LWS, p. 783). The poet is "struggling" to express himself with regard to the scene he observes (ll. 5–8). Although he knows "that this poem . . . does little more than suggest the tumultuous brightness, the impassioned choirs, the gold shafts of the sun as the weather clears" (LWS, p. 791), it is "like the reason in a storm" (l. 10) in that it brings the chaos of the storm into significant rapport—"brings the storm to bear"—as distinguished from understanding it. His words "control" the storm "and bring it to bear: make use of it" (LWS, p. 783); the poem "puts it in the confines of focus" (LWS, p. 791).

Stevens begins his comment on IX by stating: "The imagination is not a free agent. It is not a faculty that functions spontaneously without references. In IX the reference is to environment" (LWS, p. 789). He goes on to explain that the overcast blue of the air here represents the environment, and the weather—of which, presumably, the air is to be considered an element—is "the stage on which, in this instance, the imagination plays." The guitar, then, is "described but difficult," the man "a shadow," and the tune as yet unmade, because the imaginative creation is here not clearly distinguished from the environment on which it depends. Thus the figure blends in with the background, and emerges from it like a thought from a mood, colored by that from which it emerges; "the color of the weather is the robe of the actor" (Poggioli, p. 176);²⁸ and the color of his background, as his environment, determines "half his gesture, half/ His speech," and the manner of his expression ("the dress of his meaning") which in this case is tragic. Stevens considered VIII and IX companion pieces in the first of which the imagination is comparatively passive in relation to the environment and, in the second, more dominating (LWS, pp. 362–63).

Section X begins with the raising of "reddest columns" and the tolling of bells because the occasion is a red letter day, the occasion of a parade, but the tone toward it seems to be derisive, as indicated, among other things, by the noise of tin in the second line, which Stevens paraphrases, "Fill the air with the banging of tin cans. Hollows = spaces" (LWS, p. 793). The papers thrown in the streets are "the wills/ Of the dead" possibly because the celebration of the hero betrays the dead and makes their wills worthless. For the rest of the poem, Stevens' explanation is adequate:

If we are to think of a supreme fiction, instead of creating it, as the Greeks did, for example, in the form of a mythology, we might choose to create it in the image of a man: an agreed-on superman. He would not be the typical hero taking part in parades (columns red with red-fire, bells tolling, tin cans, confetti), in whom actually no one believes as a truly great man, but in whom everybody pretends to believe, someone completely outside of the intimacies of profound faith, a politician, a soldier, Harry Truman as god. *This second-rate creature is the adversary.* I address him but with hostility, hoo-ing the slick trombones. I deride & challenge him and the words hoo-ing the slick trombones express the derision & challenge. The pejorative sense of slick is obvious. I *imagine* that when I used the word hoo-ing I intended some similar pejorative connotation as, for example, booing or hooting. . . . The word back of it in my mind may have been hooting. Yet it may have been *hurrooing*, because the words that follow:

Yet with a petty misery
At heart, a petty misery

mean that the cheap glory of the false hero, not a true man of the imagination, made me sick at heart. It is just that petty misery, repeated in the hearts of other men, that topples the worthless. I may have cried out Here am I and yet have stood by, unheard, hoo-ing the slick trombones, without worrying about my English. (LWS, p. 789.)

Section XI initially presents two versions of the effect of environment on life, neither of which is correct. The propositions may be stated as follows: "One becomes his environment—but the statement (chord) is wrong, for the environment becomes the person and overwhelms him." The first of these propositions is false in that it is too complacent, and the second is no better because it is excessively negative: "The discord merely magnifies." In both versions it is the consuming effect of the environment on life in the course of time that is being emphasized. ("Slowly the ivy on the stones/ Becomes the stones"). But more remote ("Deeper") in the gestating process ("the belly's dark") of time²⁹ may lie an era when life is nourished by reality rather than consumed by it ("time grows upon the rock"; Stevens glosses "time" to mean life, and "rock" to mean the world in this phrase, which he says looks forward "to an era when there will exist the supreme balance" between reality and the imagination—LWS, p. 363).

In section XII the poet begins by identifying himself with the blue guitar, by which we may take him to be at one with his imagination. He thus interprets the music of the orchestra in an imaginative way so that, as Stevens puts it, "The orchestra by the music it makes also makes one think of a multitude of shuffling men who are, in height, as high as the hall and who fill the hall with their forms" (LWS, p. 790). The sanction for such an imaginative conception of a multitude lies in the individual's resolution of the distinction between his ego and objective reality or, as the question is specifically put, "Where do I begin and end?" To what extent may the ego project itself upon reality? The answer to the problem is that in fact as the imagination operates ("As I strum the thing,") he perceives that which seems to be apart from the ego ("That which momentarily declares// Itself not to be I") but which, like the tall men, is not part of reality and thus must be the product of the ego. That is, there is a realm which is neither that of the ego nor of reality, but in which the demarcation between ego and reality breaks down: the realm of the imagination. This section, in which the poet

states at the outset that he is wholly identified with the imagination, is a demonstration of that realm. The tall men are purely products of the imagination, and what follows is a justification of such a projection. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," as throughout Stevens, the relation between reality and imagination fluctuates; here the relation is entirely in favor of the imagination. "We live in the mind," as Stevens puts it in one of his essays (NA, p. 140); the mind is more or less in contact with reality, and it is not always bad for it to be less so.

Like the preceding poem, and in contrast to IX, section XIII presents the relation between imagination and reality as wholly favorable to the imagination. Stevens says of it that it "is a poem that deals with the intensity of the imagination unmodified by contacts with reality, if such a thing is possible" (LWS, p. 785). The "pale intrusions" into the blue of the imagination represent the invasion of the imagination by something of an alien nature, perhaps thought, perhaps experience. They may prove fruitful to the imagination as "blue buds" or, possibly, they may not as "pitchy blooms"; they may prove expansions of the imagination, or diffusions of it.³⁰ Whatever the nature of these intrusions, they are "corrupting" to the imagination. The artist is adequate as a pure, thoughtless ("unspotted imbecile"), focus of the imagination, and as such is a symbol of the imagination ("heraldic center of the world// Of blue"), which, as Mac Hammond has put it, is "enormously fat with potential"³¹ ("sleek with a hundred chins"). Imaginative contemplation is a "revery" because it is in this case divorced from reality, like a dream. The "amorisist Adjective" means blue, according to Stevens (LWS, p. 783). It is "aflame" because the blue of the imagination is here intensified until, as Stevens says, "intensity becomes something incandescent" (LWS, p. 785). The "Adjective" is qualified as "amorisist" because at this intensity the imagination would be in sympathetic rapport with everything, and because, as Hi Simons says, the impulses of the imagination and love are loosely associated for Stevens.³²

Stevens has glossed the first half of section XIV as the

coming of scientific enlightenment (LWS, p. 363), though the imagery seems derived from a seascape on a misty dawn. "One after another," he comments, the discoveries of the sciences "irradiate us and create the view of life that we are now taking." Each of these discoveries is both a star that shines with its own light and, possibly, a world in itself ("orb"). The abundance or "riches" of their luminous atmosphere is day, or enlightenment. The profusion of beams and of light is compared to a German chandelier which, in Stevens' words, is "oversized, overelaborate" (LWS, p. 783). It may be that this scientific enlightenment is "just a bit of German laboriousness. It may be that the little candle of the imagination is all we need" (LWS, p. 363). The imagination is sufficient to order the world and bring things into meaningful relation. Lines nine and ten indicate that the candle is not a real, physical light, but the light of the imagination. The candle, as opposed to the elaborate chandelier, brings imaginative order to the ordinary things it lights, as the light effects of chiaroscuro compose a painting (compare "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," CP, p. 524).

The first three lines of XV ask whether our society is in the state of dissolution reflected in the intentional deformation of reality in a Picasso painting. (The quoted phrase, "hoard/Of destructions," is from a comment by Picasso in "Conversation with Picasso," published by Christian Zervos in *Cahiers d'Art*, VII-XX, 1935, 173: "Chez moi, un tableau est une somme de destructions.") The poet continues by asking whether he, as a member of his society, is deformed like the reality in the painting. "A naked egg" refers, perhaps, to a condition of pure potentiality, unformed by the forms of society which the poet here questions. Stevens writes of lines five and six, "the words Catching at Good-bye refer to a popular song entitled Good-bye, Good-bye Harvest Moon. I suppose I had in mind the way that particular line kept coming back to mind. . . . In line 5, harvest moon is, as I have just said, a part of the title of the song. But in line 6 the words harvest and moon refer to the actual harvest and the actual moon" (LWS, p. 783). Thus lines five and six may be taken

to ask whether the poet as an individual in his society has been so deformed by the dissolution of the forms of the society that he can mechanically repeat the cheap lyrics about the harvest moon without being aware of the real harvest or the real moon. The formerly acceptable vision of social reality has been destroyed (l. 7); the poet asks if he has been destroyed in a corresponding way (l. 8). Has his sensibility been killed with regard to the food before him as it has been in the case of the harvest and the moon (ll. 9-10)? And does he sit at a feast which, like the former vision of social reality, is already stale? Is his thought merely the mechanical memory of stale perception, as in his recollection of the popular lyrics? Is the spot on the floor the spilt wine that is thus wasted or the spilt blood that drained his life? If either are his, the implication is that he is past revival.

Stevens says of the repetition of "but" in the first two couplets of XVI that "it implies a stubborn and constantly repeated rejection of the image of the earth as a mother" (Poggioli, p. 178). In the first three couplets, then, earth is seen as alien and oppressive to life. "To chop the sullen psalter" means, according to Stevens, "to write poetry with difficulty, because of excess realism in life" (LWS, p. 360). To live on these terms is to live joylessly at odds with earth, or one's environment (ll. 7-8), in "war" that at best might accomplish material amelioration ("sewers," "electrify") of a difficulty that is spiritual ("Jerusalem," "nimbuses"). One disenchanted by these considerations ("You lovers that are bitter at heart"), might as well sacrifice any hoped for sweetness in life ("Place honey on the altars") and give up the "war" ("die") which on these terms is not worth fighting.

Stevens comments on the first two lines of XVII as follows: "Anima = animal = soul. The body has a shape, the soul does not" (Poggioli, p. 179). The soul is not such as "The angelic ones," the religious or spiritual ones, conceive it but, as Stevens goes on to say, "The soul is the animal of the body." That is to say, the conception of the soul is secular and based on the sensual nature of man. Through the imagi-

nation, or blue guitar, the animal tries to give a definite mould to itself; its claws propound on the guitar and it tries to articulate its situation on a desert that is secular and arid of religious myth. But, as Stevens' comment concludes, "Art deceives itself in thinking that it can give a final shape to the soul." Hence, "The blue guitar a mould? That shell?" The tune of the guitar can give a version of the soul only as the sound of the north wind manages to express the wind in the image of the worm, whose soundless composition is the final decomposition of all composers. (Compare Stevens, LWS, p. 360). That is, the tune of the guitar, the particular articulation of the soul, is transitory, not final.

Section XVIII is an important statement of the operation of the imaginative construction, here called a dream, elsewhere, a fiction. A fiction which is credible in face of reality and through which reality is interpreted, is no longer a fiction. That is to say, a myth which is believed in is not a myth; a myth is an archaic belief. Such a fiction becomes the version of reality as perceived—"things as they are." As a belief it is not held as an intellectual construction, but has a reality like that of the wind whose sensory presence is its only meaning ("wind-gloss"); or like dawn, whose light makes the cliffs rising from the sea seem without reality (LWS, p. 360), and the sea itself seem unreal ("a purely negative sea," a "realm of has-been without interest or provocativeness," as Stevens defines "a sea of ex"—LWS, p. 783), while one knows at the same time that they are in fact real.

The monster of section XIX represents nature, according to Stevens (LWS, p. 790), which he further defines as "the chaos and barbarism of reality" (Poggioli, p. 179), and which he wishes to "master, subjugate, acquire complete control over and use freely for my own purpose, as poet" (LWS, p. 790; there is a less careful, but parallel reading in a letter to Hi Simons, LWS, p. 360, in which the monster is identified as "life"). The poet desires to be more than a part of nature; he wants to be of the essence of nature "in the form of a man, with all the resources of nature" (LWS, p. 790; ll. 3-5). When he thus acquires control over nature so that all its re-

sources are available to him, he wants to face nature as a poet and be its interpreter, or "its intelligence" (ll. 5-10). As such he will be the "equal in strength" (LWS, p. 790) of the monster he seeks to interpret, facing nature "the way two lions face one another" (LWS, p. 790): the lion of poetic interpretation ("of the lute"), and the lion of that which it interprets, and which is otherwise imprisoned in its own element, uninterpreted ("locked in stone"). Stevens sums up his comment by saying, "I want man's imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality."

Section XX parallels to some extent section XVIII. Stevens says of it, "This stands for the search for a belief" (LWS, p. 793). Belief would not be a matter of holding an idea but would be a matter of more sympathetic rapport than the rapport with sensory life itself ("Friendlier than my only friend,/ Good air"), as it brings that sensory life into a sympathetic agreement with the ego. Belief, in fact, would be that agreement with life rather than an idea, would be "the mere joie de vivre" (LWS, p. 793). Since the passage is in the conditional, the guitar as the imagination is here in a condition of no belief and is therefore addressed as forlorn: "Poor pale, poor pale guitar . . ."

"The shadow of Chocorua" of section XXI, as in the poem "Chocorua to its Neighbor" (CP, p. 296), is one of those representative abstractions by which men conceive themselves and which take the place of the religious myth. Since it is a secular fiction it is not anthropomorphically supernatural ("not that gold self aloft"), but is a magnification of "One's self and the mountains of one's land." Stevens gives the information that Chocorua is a mountain in New Hampshire (LWS, p. 783), and comments on the passage, "The anthropomorphic can only yield in the end to anthropos: God must in the end, in the life of the mind, yield to man" (Poggioli, p. 180).

In section XXII the statement, "Poetry is the subject of the poem," derives from Stevens' conception of the poem as an esthetic abstraction with a reality of its own. Its subject matter is not reality or an imitation of it but an esthetic in-

tegration of "things as they are." The end of the poem is not imitation but poetry. Its perception of reality, or "absence in reality" ("absence" from its esthetic essence), provides the version of "things as they are" embodied in the esthetic integration. (Stevens says of this section that "I have in mind pure poetry," then goes on to add that "imagination has no source except in reality"—LWS, p. 364.) But immediately following this argument is the suggestion that the argument is sophistic (ll. 6-7). The poem's "absence," or perception of reality, is always an imaginative version of reality: perhaps it should not be considered separate from the poem's esthetic character. The poem's perception of reality, from which it gains its "true appearances," is at the same time the projection of an imaginative version of reality which amounts to metamorphosis; thus, "Perhaps it gives,/ In the universal intercourse," and thus the projective distortions of the fifth couplet. Section XXIII follows from this one. It consists of a series of contrasted terms, all of which parallel the basic opposition of "The imagined and the real," as it is put in the fifth couplet: "thought// And the truth," or "Dichtung und Wahrheit," poetry and the truth, the mortal ("the undertaker"), and the transcendent ("the voice/ In the clouds"). These terms are resolved because they are complementary and participate in a continual interchange, coming to progressively new adjustments to each other. This is "the universal intercourse" referred to in the preceding section.

The "poem like a missal found/ In the mud" (XXIV), specifies a poem that recites credible belief about reality ("the mud") as the prayers of the mass recite religious belief, that gives knowledgeably (in "latined," or learned phrase) a sharp vision of reality, and which may therefore be called a "hawk of life," a "hawk's eye" (compare LWS, pp. 783-84, 790). Stevens comments on lines 7-9: "The sort of scholar to whom one addresses oneself for all his latined learning finds in 'brooding-sight' a knowledge that seizes life, with joy in his eyes." The last line is explained as deriving from the poet's (player's) reticence to give any indication of meaning beyond what is expressed in the poem itself: he

limits himself to playing his tune, to writing his poem for such a hawk-eyed scholar (*LWS*, pp. 360–61).

The personage of XXV is, according to Stevens, any observer (*LWS*, p. 790), but Stevens also says that his robes and symbols show that he is a great personage (*LWS*, p. 793); in an earlier gloss (*LWS*, p. 361) he identifies him as “the man of imagination” who moves the world though people do not realize this, and as the poet, who is “a comedian.” Stevens further says of the passage: “A man who is master of the world balances it on his nose this way and that way and the spectators cry ai-yi-yi” (*LWS*, p. 784); he “revolves it to see it this way and that” (*LWS*, p. 793). What he finds in this examination is that the world is subject to change, evident in the metamorphoses of the seasons, of life, and of the cosmos (the “grass,” the “cats,” and the “worlds”); that, in short, “Everything revolves, goes through transformations. The grass revolves (the first meaning) and changes through the seasons (the second meaning)” (Poggioli, p. 181). Only the poet, who stands for the imagination, the master of transformation, the nose on which the world is flung, is eternal. The world “is fluid, its changes are like generations, but there is an eternal observer—man” (*LWS*, p. 793). The “fat thumb” of the last line represents, according to Stevens (*LWS*, p. 361), “stupid people at the spectacle of life, which they enjoy but do not understand.”

Section XXVI deals with the changes wrought on reality by the imagination, in contrast with the preceding section, which deals with the changes of reality itself. Reality is here treated from the point of view of perception, so that it is seen as an abstraction in the mind: “The world washed in his imagination.” It was “a bar in space,” or “a sand-bar in a sea of space” (*LWS*, p. 784) on which his imagination washes and ebbs. Reality is the point of departure for the flights of the imagination, its “swarm of thoughts, the swarm of dreams/ Of inaccessible Utopia.” Stevens comments: “Our imagination of or concerning the world so completely transformed it that, looking back at it, it was a true land’s end, a relic of farewells” (*LWS*, p. 364). But reality is also the point

to which the imagination must return, and so it is described as the “giant that fought/ Against the murderous alphabet”; that is, against words as a medium of the imagination. One of the “adagia” is apposite: “The real is only the base. But it is the base” (*OP*, p. 160). The “mountainous music” is a music that accompanies these transformations of reality (“mountainous”) as, perhaps, they are expressed in poetry which, like the changes of the imagination, is not static, but seems always “To be falling and to be passing away.” (Compare *LWS*, p. 364.) Section XXVII shifts the balance in the interchange between the imagination and reality in favor of reality, and the juxtaposition of the two sections indicates that the relation between the two may first be dominated by one and then by the other (compare section XXIII, ll. 5–10). Thus, for example, Stevens speaks in one of his essays of a picture that is “wholly favorable to what is real” (*NA*, p. 12). This section is like the first section of “The Comedian as the Letter C” in its use of the sea to represent reality as it overwhelms the imagination. The sea here is not a real sea but “the sea that the north wind makes,” suggested by its sound in the wintery scene: “The noise creates the image of the sea” (Poggioli, p. 181). If the sea were not incomprehensible the geographers and philosophers would be able to discover definitions of it. But as it is, “The sea is a form of ridicule” that satirizes the observer (or “demon”; see *LWS*, p. 790) who does not accept the changes of reality as they occur, but goes in search of them, goes on a quest for metamorphoses of reality or tries to create them himself (“tours to shift”), when all the while reality is itself changing (“the shifting scene”; compare *LWS*, p. 790). Thus the sea mocks the imagination when the latter tries to project its metamorphoses onto it. It eludes the formulations of the imagination and must be perceived in its reality: “Why traverse land and sea, when, if you remain fixed, stay put, land and sea will come to you” (*LWS*, p. 790). The “tours” or flights of the imagination are in this case useless.

Section XVIII is the end point of all the formulations of the poem, and is one of the major statements in Stevens’

work of his central concern: the discovery of a favorable adjustment to secular reality.

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

His thought drives constantly from the position described in the preceding section in which reality is a chaos inconceivable to man who is an alien in it, to a position in which man is brought into an agreement with reality through the imagination by means of a credible description of his relation with it. This section itself comprises such a description and is one of those imaginative constructions that mediate between man and reality which Stevens' theoretical formulations, as in this poem, attempt to define. The credible relation to reality, although it is created by the imagination, is not solipsistic, because the imagination must always adhere to reality (ll. 3-4; compare section XXVI). Reality, furthermore, provides in its cyclical changes constant points of reference, landmarks for the mind of the native: the mind may change, but the pattern of changes in reality are "fixed as a photograph" (ll. 7-10). In agreement with reality, one draws strength from it as a native from his soil (ll. 11-12). "Things are as I think they are" because they are things as perceived in, though not divorced from, reality, and expressed in the imaginative construction created by the blue guitar. "Gesu," in the second couplet, is not intended to be blasphemous; it perhaps is meant to lend the fervent tone of faith to the secular belief that is to replace religion. Stevens says of it, "it was just a word with that particular spelling that I wanted" (LWS, p. 784), possibly to ensure the soft "g" in its pronunciation as opposed to the possible "y" sound of "Jusu."

The subject of section XXIX is a speculation like one that might appear in "a lean Review." The speculation includes the second through the sixth couplets. In paraphrase it says that the delights of religious experience, or the "'degustation,'" presumably of wine, in the vaults of the cathedral which opposes the past for the sake of present pleasure, bal-

ances the pleasure of the festival outside, with its "'nuptial song,'" which is "a wedding with reality" (Poggioli, p. 182). The point of resolution in the search for the credible is a point of balance between possible attitudes, the spiritual and the earthy, each of which has its merits (ll. 7-8). Now one version of reality may seem credible, now another, in an "ancient argument" between reality and the evasions of it, between "external life" and "religious ceremonies and delights" (Poggioli, p. 182). The point of balance, the particular resolution, is never the same as reality itself ("the mask is strange"), and is always changing (ll. 10-12). This argument is "like a comparison of masks" (Poggioli, p. 182) to choose the most appropriate (ll. 9-10). The comment on this speculation is that though the version of reality implied by the shapes and bells of the cathedral is wrong (ll. 13-14) for one who would read a Review in it ("I" of l. 1), the speculation ("fertile glass," or mirror of reality) it gives rise to is as fruitful as any that one of the faithful ("Franciscan don") might have there (ll. 15-16).

Stevens says about the first line of XXX that "The necessity is to evolve a man from modern life—from Oxidia, not Olympia, since Oxidia is our only Olympia" (Poggioli, p. 182). For the rest of the section his explanation is both full and adequate.

Man, when regarded for a sufficient length of time, as an object of study, assumes the appearance of a property, as that word is used in the theatre or in a studio. He becomes, in short, one of the fantoccini of meditation or, as I have called him, "the old fantoche." . . . As we think about him, he tends to become abstract. We cannot think of him as originating in Oxidia. We go back to an ancestor who is abstract and being abstract, that is to say, unreal, finds it a simple matter to hang his coat upon the wind, like an actor who has been strutting and seeking to increase his importance through centuries, whom we find, suddenly and at last, actually and presently, to be an employe of the Oxidia Electric Light & Power Company. (LWS, p. 791.)

Of the line, "his eye// A-cock at the cross-piece on a pole," Stevens says: "man facing his particular job: in this case, an electric lineman" (Poggioli, p. 183). But in an earlier gloss (*LWS*, p. 362), Stevens identified "the old fantoche" as "a fantastic actor, poet, who seizes on the realism of a cross-piece on a pole (the way the nightingale, I suppose, pressed its breast against the cruel thorn)"—as the poet, in other words, deriving poetry from the banal. This would make the "fantoche" the poetic exponent—in both senses of the word—of common man. Stevens here includes a drawing of a smoke-stack with a lid on top (Poggioli, p. 183); it is this lid on which he comments:

This is a dew-dapper clapper-trap. It goes up and down or is fixed at an angle. Dew-dapper is merely an adjective. Clapper refers to the noise as this opens and shuts. Obviously, not a modern piece of equipment. When flame pours out at white heat it looks dew-dapper [in the earlier gloss Stevens defined "dew-dapper" as "bright"].

. . . if I am to 'evolve a man' in Oxidia and if Oxidia is the only possible Olympia, in any real sense, then Oxidia is that from which Olympia must come. Oxidia is both the seed and the amber-ember pod from which the seed of Olympia drops. The dingier the life the more lustrous the paradise. [This probably refers to the penultimate line: Oxidia is to Olympia as soot to fire; and the line probably is meant to indicate in addition that Oxidia is the grimy product of its industrial fires.] But, if the only paradise must be here and now, Oxidia is Olympia. (*LWS*, pp. 788–89).

With regard to the last line Stevens further says:

These are opposites. Oxidia is the antipodes of Olympia. Oxidia (from Oxide) is the typical industrial suburb, stained and grim. (*LWS*, p. 790.)

This poem may be said to answer to the demand of section I for "A tune beyond us, yet ourselves/ . . . / Of things exactly as they are."

Section XXXI speaks of the reality of nature as opposed to that of modern civilization, the former represented by the sleeping pheasant and the latter by the employer and employee who contend while the pheasant sleeps, spring sparkles, and the cock-bird shrieks. The pheasant can sleep because he doesn't have to get up and go to work, but there is no place with the employer and employee for an absolute and idyllic conception of nature (ll. 8–10); the cock will serve only to awaken them for work. Neither is there place for a morning of sun; morning is a posture of the nerves in which a poet blunted by business civilization desperately grasps, or tries to grasp (*LWS*, p. 362), the nuances of poetry. His poetry must be of things as they are in this description of them: "this rhapsody or none."³³

Section XXXII means that it is necessary to break through preconception in order to perceive the unpredictable variety of reality, "the madness of space." The use of the phrase "jocular procreations" for this variety indicates that it is the joyful fruit of life. One must throw away all preconceptions to gain progressively fresh perceptions of reality. To do this one must accept the direct response of the senses to the stimuli of the environment without the intervention of old definitions or, in fact, of any definitions (ll. 8–10). Thus the conception of the self to be taken in face of reality ("You as you are"), is that dictated by the direct response of perception: "You are yourself." To be oneself in this way, to allow oneself to be defined by one's spontaneous response to the "jocular procreations" of space is, Stevens observes (*LWS*, p. 364), to be such a "jocular procreation" oneself. This would be, Stevens continues, "the key to poetry, to the closed garden, if I may become rhapsodic about it, of the fountain of youth and life and renewal."

"That generation's dream" (XXXIII), probably the dream of the creative generation of 1910–1920, was "aviled" (degraded, violated) in the light of Monday's work-a-day world. The trouble with that generation's dream was that it was the only dream they knew: it was static and final. One must conceive the future not as the domination of one dream,

which has proved unfeasible, but as the "wrangling" of two: one concerning the imagination, and one Monday's world. This will be the reality ("its actual stone") of time to come, and our portion ("bread") in it. We will accept that hard reality, and take in it what comfort we can. We will forget other concerns in our daily life, except on occasion, when we choose to indulge in the exercise of the imagination. So may this dream evade the "dirty light" of the work-a-day world, and still coexist with it.

"The Man on the Dump" (CP, p. 201)

The scene is that of nightfall. The setting sun with its colors, is like a basket of flowers, "a bouquet" placed on the horizon by the moon, which is "Blanche," white. The poet gloats ("Ho-ho") over the images to be found on the "dump" (such as the moon as "Blanche" and the sunset as "a bouquet"). The days themselves are like daily papers which bring their contents to the dump, including their daily sunset ("The bouquets"). The daily advent of the moon, as well as that of the sun, comes to the dump, along with the most ordinary things ("the janitor's poems/ Of every day"). These things come to the dump as our stale descriptions of them. Thus, the days come like old newspapers, and the rejected trash of the quotidian comes in terms of "the janitor's poems." The real, beyond stale descriptions of it, endures in its freshness. But even as one describes that reality it turns stale and literary. The "blowing of day," like a wind blowing, ever fresh as it passes (and perhaps also "blowing" in the sense of the blooming of day at dawn) may be described as comparable to a reading of Cornelius Nepos (a Roman historian of the first century B.C.) insofar as his style, presumably, conduces to a fresh and breezy reading. One may compose this or that metaphor in description of the day. The fact is that one's experience of the day is immediate and sensuous, not descriptive and literary. The images used to express this are concrete and sensuous, especially in compari-

son with the literary metaphor about Cornelius Nepos. How many men and women have copied the ephemeral freshness ("dew") of reality in order to make of it something decorative, merely pretty, something with which to adorn themselves? One grows tired of such artificiality except as it is rejected on the dump. Now, in the freshness of spring, with the flowers blooming, one feels, in that moment of the present between the stale past and our descriptions of the immediate moment which will soon become stale, the freshness of reality itself. As one feels "the purifying change" of season from the staleness of the old to the freshness of the new, so one feels the change from our stale images of reality to immediate perception of reality in the present moment, before one has a chance to make new images of that reality which will themselves become stale. One rejects "the trash" for reality itself. It is in that moment of the immediate present that one sees reality afresh. It is a quietly dramatic moment, as if accompanied by the music of bassoons, when one sees things as they actually are, and the music and moon rise also indicate a readiness for a new release of the imagination in description of a bare reality ("the elephant-colorings of tires"). One's images for things have been stripped away, and one sees the moon as the moon itself rather than in terms of metaphor like that of line two (the moon as the woman Blanche placing a basket of flowers); one sees things as a man rather than as a literary conception of a man ("an image of a man"), and the sky is empty of all descriptions of the sky. One keeps stubbornly making a point of the ordinary ("lard pail"), calling attention to it. It is that which one believes to be real, which one desires to approach. Could one, on the contrary, be trapped in solipsism? Could the real "Be merely oneself?" could the mind be projecting itself onto reality, making meanings of it as the ear makes meaning of a meaningless crow's call? Would the song of the nightingale have such an unpleasant effect on us as that of the crow (packing the heart, probably, with unpleasant feelings, and grating on the mind)? Would the ear choose such an ill-tempered bird as the crow, if it were in fact creating what it