"Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar": Wallace Stevens and the Visual Arts

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“Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar”:
Wallace Stevens and the Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

Olivia Allen Sweet

Accepted for ___________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
April 21st, 2014
Introductory Notes

Throughout this paper, I will use the following abbreviations for frequently cited texts:

- **CPP**  
  *Collected Poetry and Prose*
- **L**  
  *The Letters of Wallace Stevens*

The quotations in the title and section headings were derived from the following sections of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," respectively: I (*CPP* 135), I (*CPP* 135), VII (*CPP* 138), XIV (*CPP* 141), II (*CPP* 135), XII (*CPP* 140), XXII (*CPP* 145), XXXII (*CPP* 150), XVIII, and XXIII (*CPP* 145).
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"The man bent over his guitar":
Introduction

In 1898 Wallace Stevens’ father, Garrett Stevens, a lawyer in Pennsylvania, commended his teenage son’s “power of painting pictures in words” (Bates 8). These verbal compositions would come to be part of an expansive poetic career spanning four decades and eight books of poetry culminating in Wallace Stevens’ Pulitzer Prize winning _Collected Poems_ published in 1954 shortly before his death in 1955. The poet spent two-thirds of his adult life as the vice-president of the Hartford Accident & Indemnity Insurance Company in Hartford, Connecticut. His disciplined public life informed the discipline of his art; on his daily two mile walks to and from the office, he would often detour through the nearby Elizabeth Park, composing poetry during these intermediate moments of creative reflection (Brazeau 231).

One of his chief concerns as a poet was to make the case for the contemporary purpose of his poetry, which he believed to be manifest of the same “fundamental aesthetic” as painting (CPP 740). “Art must fit in with other things,” Stevens wrote in a journal entry of March 1899; “it must be part of the system of the world” (L 24). In a 1948 letter to the Cuban literary critic José Rodriguez Feo, Stevens wrote: “I pay just as much attention to painters as I do to writers because, except technically, their problems are the same. They seem to move in the same direction at the same time” (L 593). For Stevens, both poet and painter create their art through an effort of the mind as it interacts with the raw material of reality. The poet concerns himself with language, the painter with form and color, but the concern of rendering a reality that displays a dynamic relation between an imaginative inner world and the artist’s surroundings is central to both.

Stevens’ interaction with visual media allowed him to explore the similarities between poetry and painting, but also their differences and capacity for supplementing each other.
Stevens’ use of painting expresses the desire for its presence, immediacy, and the material manifestation of the imagination that it embodies.

For example, the 1942 poem “Landscape with Boat” creates a painterly setting through its color imagery and argues that man cannot make art without acknowledging the presence of his own mediation in his representations of nature. Stevens expresses the fusion of language with the immediacy of painting in the phrase from the last stanza: “emerald becoming emeralds” (*CPP* 220). Here the arbitrary linguistic sign of “color” merges with the physical reality as the verbal construction “emerald” becomes the tangible object “emeralds.”

Stevens’ poetry often includes references and analogies to other arts, such as drama and music, but painting most often exemplifies for Stevens the immediate and direct representation of a relationship between reality and imagination. Stevens privileges the painter’s eye and manner of interacting with the world, writing to William Carlos Williams in 1918, “One has to keep looking for poetry as Renoir looked for colors in old walls, woodwork, and so on” (*Buttel* 155). Stevens’ poetry verbally sought the painter’s visual engagement with the world. In the 1936 poem, “A Fish-Scale Sunrise,” Stevens writes: “Although my mind perceives the force behind the moment, /The mind is smaller than the eye,” emphasizing the importance of visual modes of representing and experiencing the world as they are able to capture something that eludes language and rationality (*CPP* 130). The composing mind and eye pervade Stevens’ work as a metaphor for the poet’s interaction with reality, and Stevens disperses painterly titles, subjects, and references to painterly technique throughout his poetry. Two such titles from early and mid career are “Six Significant Landscapes” and “Study of Two Pears”; the later “So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch” depicts an artist and his classical nude subject, and in his celebrated long poems “The Comedian as Letter C” and “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” he uses the
painter’s term “chiaroscuro” to verbally approximate a visual setting. The range and extent of references to color in his poems also demonstrate Stevens’ interest in painting; throughout his work, he employs a system of color symbolism, similar to that of Kandinsky, who used non-naturalistic color in an attempt to locate a deeper reality beyond the surface. For example, blue in Stevens’ work represents the imagination, while Kandinsky associates blue with spirituality and Stevens uses green to evoke the natural world and fertility, while Kandinsky considers green restful, almost complacent in its effects of tranquility.

Art theory, painting, and painters constituted a sustained, career-long interest for Stevens. Glen MacLeod cites Stevens’ frequent visits to “museums and galleries—the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the National Academy of Design, the American Art Gallery, and so on,” recorded in Stevens’ journal (MacLeod Modern Art 4). Stevens often described these visits to his wife Elsie Viola Kachel, whom he met in 1904 and married in 1909, dating this interest in painting back to the early years of the 20th century. MacLeod also situates Stevens among the avant-garde Arensberg circle during the years leading up to the publication of Stevens’ first book of poetry, Harmonium, in 1923. The group surrounding the American art collector and critic Walter Arensberg consisted of important figures in the modern art world, ranging from photographers, illustrators, and critics, to the Dada radical, Marcel Duchamp. Stevens’ friendship with Arensberg exposed him to avant-garde modern artists in person as well as through the art Arensberg displayed and collected in his apartment.

In 1916 Stevens moved to Hartford, Connecticut, the location of the Wadsworth Atheneum museum, which would prove itself a pioneer in the exhibition of modern art in the United States during the 1930’s. Under the direction of Arthur Everett "Chick" Austin, Jr., the Wadsworth Atheneum held the first Surrealist exhibition in America in 1931, featuring Joan
Miró, Salvador Dali, and Max Ernst among others, and the first retrospective of Picasso in 1934, exhibiting many of the most current European artists even before their work appeared in New York. Stevens’ experience with painting was not limited to museums, however; in his lecture “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting” Stevens discusses visiting a gallery to see an exhibition in the late 1940’s featuring the French cubist painter and brother of Marcel Duchamp, Jacques Villon, one of whose paintings he describes as “A woman lying in a hammock transformed into a complex of planes and tones, radiant, vaporous, exact. A tea-pot and a cup or two took their place in a reality composed wholly of things unreal” about which he found “enchantments of intelligence in all his prismatic material” (CPP 745). Stevens delivered “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting” at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951, where he discussed the essential relationship between poetry and painting as he understood them at this late point in his career, calling the two art forms “poetry in words and poetry in paint” (CPP 740). This lecture also points to Stevens’ particular engagement with art theory, as he argues, “most often the remarks of painters themselves…are [as] significant to poets as to painters” (741). He wrote in a 1952 letter to Thomas McGreevy, “It is easy to like Klee and Kandinsky. What is difficult is to like the many minor figures who do not communicate any theory that validates what they do and, in consequence, impress one as being without validity” (L 763). For Stevens, providing a theoretical basis in language validated painters’ experiments in the visual and provided an access point for the poet’s engagement with painting. Klee was Stevens’ favorite painter and he said of the artist: “I have the greatest liking for Klee. No-one is more interested in modern painting if it really is modern; that is to say, if it really is the work of a man of intelligence sincerely seeking to satisfy the needs of his sensibility” (L 595). Stevens’ personal art collection included a range of works, from an oil painting by the French post-impressionist
Henri Lebasque, lithographs of works by Auguste Rodin and Georges Braque, a charcoal
drawing by Camille Pissarro, to a painting by Pierre Tal Coat.

Stevens first published his long poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in 1937, midway
between the five decades and more of sustained interest in the arts. The poem is one of Stevens’
most painterly, engaging themes that appear to a greater and lesser degree throughout his career.
Stevens wrote that the concern of the series is “the incessant conjunctions between things as they
are and things imagined” (Cook 113). Sections of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" were first
published in the little magazines *Poetry* and *Twentieth-Century Verse* in the spring of 1937 and
the book *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems* was published by Alfred A. Knopf in
October 1937, alongside the poems “Owl’s Clover,” “A Thought Revolved” and “The Men That
Are Falling” (Cook 112).

The central image of a man hunched over a guitar swathed in the blue of the imagination
recalls Picasso’s Blue Period painting, *The Old Guitarist*, painted in 1903, now at the Art
Institute of Chicago. Stevens claimed he had “no particular painting of Picasso’s in mind” during
the composition of the poem, even though the painting was exhibited at the Wasdworth
Atheneum’s 1934 Picasso retrospective and at the Jacques Seligmann and Company gallery in
New York in November of 1936, giving Stevens ample opportunity to have seen the painting
before writing "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (L 786). The poem’s indirect reference to *The
Old Guitarist* emphasizes the theme of fluidity; rather than being bound to a particular place, or
visual source, the poem consists of thematic moving parts that exist in suspension. Its thirty-three
meditative sections explore the creation of art as a process of interaction between man and
nature, reality and the imagination, things of the mind and “things as they are.” Stevens mirrors
this process in the structure—a series of short poems that are joined in theme, but vacillate
between oppositions or make qualified claims to reveal that sense of process and dynamic tension.

“The Man with the Blue Guitar” is a pivotal poem in Stevens’ use of painting as an analogy and metaphor because it occurs at a point in his career and in the evolution of his interest in painting when multiple painterly influences are in dynamic tension in his work. The fluidity of “things as they are” played “upon the blue guitar” (CPP 145), recurs in Stevens’ later poetry to represent more generalized themes of reality and the imagination as he moves towards what he called the “supreme fiction” and evokes his use of painting earlier in his career as a metaphor for the poet’s process.

The “supreme fiction” was Stevens’ major poetic project in his later career and was conceived as an idea that would serve as a fictive replacement for what Stevens regarded as the no longer sufficient remnants of religion and antiquated notions of God. In a 1940 letter to Hi Simons, Stevens writes, “The idea of God is a thing of the imagination. We no longer think that God was, but was imagined. The idea of essential imagination as the highest objective of the poet, appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God” (L 369). The supreme fiction is recognized as a fiction, but willingly believed. For Stevens, an adequate fiction, unlike those of religion, does not distort the nature of reality (Sukenick 85). Through this quest, Stevens attempts to locate a partial or relative truth in the stuff of imaginatively constructed reality. MacLeod describes the “supreme fiction” as “moments of subjective experience so profoundly moving that we are shaken by them as if by a manifestation of the divine” (Modern Art 134).

Shortly after The Man with the Blue Guitar, Stevens published his arguably most painterly volume, Parts of a World (1942). Although the composition of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" developed and extended his interest in painting in this later volume, the visual became
subordinated to language in the volumes following *Parts of a World* as he sought the supreme fiction on a primarily linguistic quest that moved away from the visual focus of *Harmonium* (1923) toward finding a “substitute for religion” through poetry (*L* 348). In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens engages the influence of a varied array of movements from the 19th and 20th centuries, and also employs painting as a general metaphor for his poetics. The poem is thus a pivotal composition with which to examine Stevens’ interest in painting as a parallel and analogy in his poetry. It looks back to his interest in Impressionism and Cubism, to the then current movements Surrealism and Abstraction, and points the direction of some of his major works in the 1940’s and 1950’s, including the more linguistic emphasis of the later poetry.

In *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, MacLeod points out that, “It is impossible to understand fully the development of literary Modernism without at least a rudimentary knowledge of modern art” (MacLeod “The Visual Arts” 194). Critics have long associated many of the major Modernist poets with the visual arts of the early 20th century: William Carlos Williams, E.E. Cummings, Ezra Pound, and Marianne Moore have clear ties to the visual avant-garde through their explicit connections to particular artists, direct quotation from or within a piece of writing, or in similar theoretical statements of artistic and poetic purpose. The imagist movement in particular emphasizes the connection between visual expression and modes of seeing and understanding language. E.E. Cummings refused to choose between poetry and painting and always considered himself a “poetandpainter” (Macleod “The Visual Arts” 207). Williams too was much more literal than Stevens in his use of painting, attempting, in some instances, to apply theories of painting directly to the techniques of poetry (Doyle 194). Williams was also directly interested in Surrealism, experimenting with automatic writing in *Kora in Hell*
Bonnie Costello writes in her book on Marianne Moore, “Almost every poem Moore wrote involved a picture or art object at some stage of composition,” and “Moore’s dominant sense was sight. Her metaphors are based on visual resemblance, her stanzas are arranged by the look of the page. Not surprisingly, she identified the objectives and problems of her art with those of visual artists” (Costello Marianne Moore 186, 192).

Stevens generally uses the analogy of painting more as a process than as a site of formal experimentation. He writes in “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting”: “let me divide modern poetry into two classes, one that is modern in respect to what it says, the other that is modern in respect to form. The first kind is not interested primarily in form. The second is” (CPP 746). Stevens aligns his own work with the former category, modern in what it says, because “while the value of the poem as a poem depends on expression, it depends primarily on what is expressed” (746). Poets associated with modern modes of expression in respect to form would be Williams and Cummings, or Pound in his imagist poetry. Stevens engages with painting on a more theoretical level, not so much “painting with words” but incorporating the practices, words, and works of painters in the conception of his poetics. Stevens sees painters as getting at a “fundamental aesthetic” and shows the process of accessing that substance through language (CPP 740). Thus the phrase “emerald becoming emeralds” reveals not only his interest in painting’s immediacy and substantive embodiment of the imagination, but is an example of how linguistic primacy never entirely diminishes in Stevens (CPP 220). He communicates the importance of the solidity and presence of visual media by generating meaning through the process of word play. For Stevens, each art can supplement insufficiencies in the other, rather than function as equivalents.
Many earlier commentators on Stevens work have pointed to the relationship between his poetry and painting. However, the parallels most often drawn are with Impressionism and Cubism, most influentially by such early critics as Michel Benamou and Robert Buttel, writing in the 1950’s and 60’s, respectively. Benamou names Impressionism as having the most lasting effect on Stevens’ aesthetic vision and emphasizes what he calls Stevens’ “sensitiveness to the flux and change of nature” in relation to the Impressionists’ focus on the transformative effects of weather, season, and time of day (Benamou 48). He calls Stevens’ insistence on the unity of mental reality and visual appearance, the fusion of consciousness with the external world, an “impressionistic theory of environment” (Benamou 49). Buttel also emphasizes Impressionism, as well as Cubism, as having the most direct effect on Stevens’ poetry, writing that Stevens “learned most perhaps from the Impressionists,” using Henry James’ definition of the movement as a “hovering flight of the subjective over the outstretched ground of the case exposed” (Buttel 168). He aligns Stevens’ experimentation with painterly methods and perception in *Harmonium* with Cézanne and his “descendants” the Cubists, who “faceted order upon the multiplicity of experience reducing the object to fragments and the restructuring it” (Buttel 163). The critic James Baird also concludes Stevens’ aesthetic to be wholly Impressionist in his 1968 *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, arguing that “it is the poetics of impressionism that endures” in Stevens’ poetry, and claiming that Stevens exhibited a distaste for modern art and “shunned cubism” (Baird 181, 175).

The discussion of Impressionism and Cubism continues, however, in the more contemporary discussions of Stevens. Bonnie Costello emphasizes the theories and practices of these movements as influences on Stevens. She focuses mainly on Stevens’ use of painterly theory and painting as an analog to poetry for Stevens, but also discusses at length his
relationship to Cubism, referring to Stevens’ poetry written in the Cubist mode as exploring the “radical disassembling and reassembling of representational space” because modern form “must embody prismatic reality” (Costello “Stevens and Painting” 172). She argues that Stevens endorsed the idea that the modern poet and artist must “disassemble the norms of experience…as they have been conventionally perceived,” most successfully embodied in the work of the Cubists (Costello “Stevens and Painting” 172). These critics argue for a more concrete presence of painting in Stevens’ work and discuss Impressionism and Cubism as having the most enduring and prominent influence on Stevens’ poetry.

More recently, some critics have addressed Stevens’ relationship to painting more generally as a process, and also in relation to later movements. Charles Altieri argues for a fundamental relationship that sees painting as a way for Stevens to reach a multi-level presentation of the imagination’s role in the conception of reality, at the same time displaying the process of composition. He posits a more philosophical relationship between Stevens and the visual arts, arguing that Stevens’ meditative process, as explored through language, can better supply the “fundamental aesthetic” and goal sought by both painting and poetry. Both means are necessarily imperfect, but can supplement each other. For Altieri, while Stevens engages with the painter’s process of visual representation, linguistic supremacy still prevails, since language is never fully subordinated to visual modes of expression. Finally, MacLeod argues that Stevens’ interest in Dada, Surrealism, Abstraction, and Abstract Expressionism has been overlooked and emphasizes the presence of these movements as they develop alongside Stevens’ career.

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" invites consideration of these varied interpretations of Stevens’ work and reflects the aspects of painting that recur throughout Stevens’ long career as influences and sites of exploration. Focusing on "The Man with the Blue Guitar" allows for a
holistic examination of Stevens’ interest in painting that spans various movements and over forty years.

“The strings are cold on the blue guitar”: Painterly Influences Outside “The Man with the Blue Guitar”

Critics have argued for the influence of a variety of painterly movements on Stevens’ poetry at various stages of his career. Impressionism, Mannerism, Chinese and Japanese art, Dada, Abstraction, and Abstract Expressionism arguably have their place in some of Stevens’ work and painting interests, but they have little to no place in "The Man with the Blue Guitar.” The painterly influences in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" reflect either sustained motifs that recur throughout Stevens’ career, such as the still life or the statue, or engage artistic movements contemporary to the poem’s composition in the 1930’s such as Cubism and Surrealism. The presence elsewhere of these other artistic influences bears discussion, however, in a holistic reading of Stevens’ painterly interests and influences.

Impressionism is one of the most frequently cited painterly influences on Stevens, especially in the early critical discussion of his work. Benamou, Buttel, and Baird all conclude that Impressionism was the most influential painting movement for Stevens during his career (Benamou 49, Buttel 168, Baird 181). The poem most frequently discussed in terms of Impressionism is the Harmonium poem “Sea Surface Full of Clouds.” To those critics who argue for the importance of Impressionism in Stevens’ poetry, this poem is both the most frequently cited and often the sole, central example of the movement in a particular poem. Vendler reads the poem as producing “a fantasia of shifting possibles” through its “brilliant changes” (35). Benamou likens the poem to Monet’s “Water Lilies” paintings: “Who then beheld the figures of the clouds/Like blooms secluded in the thick marine?” (Benamou 49, CPP 84). The poem is
most frequently compared to Monet’s series of paintings of the façade of the Rouen cathedral meant to capture the transient effects of light on the solid exterior of the building (Costello “Effects of an Analogy” 73, Litz 151, Benamou 50). The poem does indicate through the repetition and slight alteration of the first two lines of each section a sense of approaching a similar scene in evolving contexts: “In that November off Tehuantepec,” is followed by variations on the line “The sloppin of the sea grew still one night,” indicating a familiar subject transformed by the transient realities of atmospheric effects (CPP 82-85). Stevens introduces the importance of environment in the painterly titles of other poems, such as “Variations on a Summer Day,” “Of Hartford in a Purple Light,” and “Blue Buildings in the Summer Air.”

The poem’s use of fluctuating colors, lights, and relationships between elements of the natural world suggest Impressionism’s approach to landscape, which emphasized the particular moment, its atmosphere and appearance, of the painter’s encounter with the world.

The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm
And moved, as blooms move, in the swimming green
And in its watery radiance, while the hue

Of heaven in an antique reflection rolled
Round those flotillas. And sometimes the sea
Poured brilliant iris on the glistening blue.

CPP 83

Benamou emphasizes Impressionism because of what he calls Stevens’ “sensitiveness to the flux and change of nature” in relation to the Impressionists’ focus on weather, season, and time of day, and how changes in light alter the visible landscape (48). He calls Stevens’ insistence on the unity of mental reality and visual appearance, the fusion of consciousness with the external world, an “impressionistic theory of environment” (49). The emphasis on flux and natural effects is clear in this poem, but like Stevens’ use of other movements, the poem is driven just as much
by linguistic as visual elements. Litz argues against reading the poem as fully Impressionist because he suggests that the poem does not have as much a grounding in physical realities as Monet’s paintings, whose work captured the effects of physical phenomena in the environment:

[“Sea Surface Full of Clouds] is like Monet’s Impressionistic renderings of Rouen cathedral in various lights, but with one crucial exception: whereas Monet tried to record the façade of Rouen cathedral as it struck the eye at different times of day, showing how light transforms the density and tactile details of the solid stone, Stevens took as his subject the most fluid of scenes, where the imagination could be sovereign over physical reality.

Stevens arguably engages the important notion of subjectivity and the environment present in the paintings of the Impressionists, but his imaginative transformations indicate a more pronounced focus on the subjectivity and individuality of the speaker, rather than the speaker’s observation of physical realities.

Impressionism does seem to have an effect on Stevens’ understanding and conception of the relationship between reality and the imagination, however, even if it does not necessarily manifest concretely in his poems, as do other painterly movements. Stevens’ writes in, “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting,” “The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us” as he discusses the importance of art in the understanding and interpretation of reality (CPP 747). This quotation supports Stevens’ insistence on subjectivity, the constant interplay between the raw stuff of reality and the imagination that generates the world around us, as well as expresses sympathy for the Impressionist aesthetic. Impressionism stressed the importance of the artist’s mediating eye and the presence of his temperament and subjectivity in the world of his canvases. The Impressionist imbued the natural landscape with the “world within,” depicting a truer Stevensian landscape because of the insistence on imaginative sight. Buttel writes of Stevens’ engagement with Impressionism, “A follower of all the movements in
modern painting, [Stevens] learned most perhaps from the Impressionists… For the Impressionist and for Stevens, technique must render the ‘case exposed’ with the utmost lucidity and immediacy” (168). Impressionism highlighted the developing modernist emphasis on subjectivity and particularity of the individual’s perception in a world previously figured as objective. If Stevens does not engage directly with the process and technique of the Impressionists, the idea of subjectivity and mediation informs his poetics throughout the development of his conception of reality and imagination, and use of other painterly movements in "The Man with the Blue Guitar” and elsewhere.

Zachary Finch, in his recent prize-winning article, “’He That of Repetition Is Most Master’: Stevens and the Poetics of Mannerism,” reads Stevens’ poetry through the lens of Mannerism, which he defines as “a measure of rhetorical artifice by which we feel the ‘attitude,’ the ‘bearing,’ or the ‘pose’ of the writer” (196). He is the only commentator on Stevens to argue this specific connection and his discussion provides a way of understanding the linguistic emphasis in Stevens’ poetry through a similarly theoretical painterly movement. He argues against a critique sometimes leveled at Stevens’ poetry that it is too “mannered” in the more negative sense of the word as resolutely attached to a familiar habit or style. Finch argues the dialectic between originality and mannerism to be a central concern to Stevens throughout his career. He cites a letter from Stevens to Williams from 1918, which he uses to emphasize the importance of repetition to Stevens’ poetics: “My idea is that in order to carry a thing to the extreme necessity to convey it one has to stick to it” (195). Finch’s argument explains the “linguistic artifice” and repetition of ideas in Stevens’ poetry as a method of calling attention to the limitations of language as did the “so-called ‘stylish style’ of the Late Renaissance” in their self-conscious deployment of visual artifice (203). Finch discusses poems generally from
Stevens’ later career, suggesting that this concern with repetition, or at least its articulation, was expressed more in the later volumes of his career, in such poems as “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” in which Finch suggests the art of “practicing/Mere repetitions” became an end in itself (196). Finch discusses Italian Mannerism, but seems mostly concerned with the concept of “mannerism” in art in general, making an argument for the linguistic nature of Stevens’ poetry based on the concern for repetition. Finch’s argument supports a reading of Stevens as primarily concerned with language, but in relation to a reading of a painterly phenomenon.

Like Finch, Zhaoming Qian also takes a unique perspective on Stevens’ poetry, arguing for the influence of Asian art and modes of thinking upon the poet. He focuses on the poem “Six Significant Landscapes,” the first section of which he calls a “verbalized depiction of Song Chinese landscape painting” (124). The section’s subject is a seated old man, merging with the landscape of China: “larkspur…at the edge of the shadow.Move in the wind./His beard moves in the wind./The pine tree moves in the wind” (CPP 58). Qian conceives of this section as ekphrasis, the “verbal representation of visual representation” and “the overcoming of otherness,” that is “those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic or spatial arts” (123). Qian makes the point that in representing Chinese art in “Six Significant Landscapes,” Stevens enacts both these definitions, representing the visual and the cultural “other” of the “Orient.” Qian defines the theme of “Six Significant Landscapes” and “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” from Harmonium through this idea of familiarizing the unfamiliar in how it portrays a unity of all created things. He claims that Stevens’ interest in “consciousness, negation, and serenity” can best be explained through Eastern paradigms of belief, in other words, Stevens finds a “unity” with Eastern thought (136).
Qian presents a compelling argument for the relationship of Asian art to the poems he discusses, but the interest in Eastern modes of expression can also be partially explained by the importance of haiku to the Imagist work of Ezra Pound, H.D., and others and the wider Modernist interest in Asian artistic representation, such as the “japonisme” of artists like J.M. Whistler. The sequential stanzas of “Six Significant Landscapes” and “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” read like a series of Imagist poems in their indirectness and condensation, as each presents an image and its emotional complexities at a specific instance in time. “Six Significant Landscapes” could also be equated to other movements; Buttel likens the fourth stanza to Chagall and even Klee in its dream-like, colorful imagery and the concept of a series of landscapes recalls Impressionism (Buttel 162). Qian’s suggestion that Stevens’ desire to subsume the difference between painting and poetry is also reflective of a desire to subsume cultural difference and embrace Eastern thought widens the scope of Stevens’ interest in painting, which is useful in the poems he discusses, if not "The Man with the Blue Guitar.”

Another movement that appears in Stevens’ poetry, but not directly in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is Dada. MacLeod discusses Stevens’ connection to Marcel Duchamp through the Arensberg circle in New York during the writing of Harmonium in the 1910’s. In a letter to his wife Elsie, Stevens records dining with Duchamp and Arensberg and then viewing some of Duchamp’s work in Arensberg’s apartment (MacLeod Modern Art 9). Stevens writes that he “made very little” of Duchamp’s paintings, but MacLeod argues that the artist’s playful, experimental style and practices influenced Stevens’ creative attitude during the writing of Harmonium (L 185). The crux of MacLeod’s argument compares Stevens’ poem “Anecdote of the Jar” to Duchamp’s readymades. Duchamp’s readymades were based in the theory that art is essentially a series of choices and what makes an object art depends on how the artist perceives it
and chooses to present it. For example in 1917, “Richard Mutt’s” choice to submit a urinal under
the label “Fountain,” makes a utilitarian object of industrial production a work of art. The
creative act in Duchamp’s readymades is choice. The first stanza of “Anecdote of the Jar” reads:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

MacLeod argues that the gesture of placing the jar describes the similar process of creating a
readymade. The speaker “selects an ordinary object and places it in a strange context” so that the
new arrangement is unique and the meaning of the object is transformed, it is “like nothing else
in Tennessee” (MacLeod Modern Art 21, CPP 60). However, while MacLeod’s argument for the
similarity of the poem’s central gesture to the creation of a readymade is convincing, the poem
itself does not embody a readymade in form; it describes a similar process in its content and
presents a tangential relationship to Duchamp’s practices. William Carlos Williams, in poem
XXV of Spring and All takes the found, “readymade” language of a railroad safety campaign
(“Careful Crossing Campaign/Cross Crossings Carefully”) and incorporates it into the language
of his poem, enacting Duchamp’s process of choice-as-art much more concretely (Williams 87).

MacLeod presents Stevens as similarly incorporating Duchamp’s processes into his own, but
here Stevens again engages with art in the content of his work rather than through formal
parallels. The speaker may be creating a readymade, but Stevens does not.

MacLeod makes another argument for Stevens’ interest in Dada through his use of titles,
that, similar to Duchamp’s, present a tangential relation to the works they describe. Duchamp’s
titles were often odd and non-descriptive, such as “King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes”
and “Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even,” but important to the meaning and impact of
the work, acting, as Duchamp put it, as “invisible color” on the canvas (MacLeod *Modern Art* 15). The title creates expectations that the work itself does not fulfill and the two modify each other in unexpected ways. Many of Stevens’ poems create a similar effect with mysterious, sometimes puzzling titles such as “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” and “The Emperor of Ice Cream” that do not directly indicate the poem’s content. Stevens wrote in a 1935 letter to Ronald Latimer, “very often the title occurs to me before anything else” implying he was conscious of the disjunction between work and title, but appreciated the imaginative process it instigated (*L* 297). This activity of generating and modifying meaning reflects Stevens’ interest in the process of creating art and the reader’s process of understanding it; both should reflect a continuous interplay of the imagined and the real as the poet and reader interact with the words on the page. This interaction was a career long interest of Stevens’, for example, the nod to the “audience” in *Parts of a World’s “Of Modern Poetry”* (*CPP* 219). Stevens’ interest in Dada is also behind the strain of playfulness that runs through *Harmonium* and some of Stevens’ later work, especially in the occasional child-like use of nonsense words or sounds, such as “ki-ki-ri-ki/ Brings no rou-cou,/ No rou-cou-cou” in “Depression Before Spring” and delight in punning or clever word play (*CPP* 50).

Stevens’ poetry has rarely been discussed in terms of the Abstraction movement in painting, but MacLeod argues that Stevens sought through his poetry the fusion of imagination and reality that the abstract artist Piet Mondrian depicted through his minimalist art. Mondrian, as a “pure” artist, systematically eliminated every trace of natural representation from his canvases and greatly influenced the aesthetics of the time, promoting the concept of art’s claim to relevance in the modern world through painting as Stevens sought to do with the supreme fiction (MacLeod *Modern Art* 110). Mondrian believed that the balanced relations he perceived
in life and attempted to express in his art were not simply “made” or “discovered” but were really “inherent in things,” speaking to the concreteness of Mondrian’s abstract reality and the fusion of life and art that he insists upon in his painting (MacLeod Modern Art 117). Mondrian envisioned a point in history where there would no longer be a difference between art and life; the disjunction between representation and the thing itself would no longer divide painting from the world. For example, on the walls of his studio, Mondrian displayed linear and colorful elements similar to the formal compositions of his paintings, promoting the intersection of his art and environment.

MacLeod argues that though Stevens’ work might seem anomalous in the world of modernist poetry, his conception of his poetics fits comfortably into the art world alongside artists such as Mondrian. Stevens’ use of “abstract” in his poem “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1947) often puzzles readers because it does not seem to conform to the traditional literary definition of abstract as “theoretical” or “intangible.” Stevens writes that the supreme fiction “must be abstract” (CPP 329), which MacLeod argues more closely approximates how “abstract” in Mondrian’s art signified the “concrete” or “real”: thus “an ‘abstract’ painting is really a most positively concrete painting since it confines the attention to its immediate, sensuous, physical surface far more than does the canvas of a sunset or portrait”(113). MacLeod also cites Mondrian’s ideas that art has at least partly to do with self-expression and subjectivity and that it must arouse emotion, and compares the implementation of these ideas to the titles of the sections of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Art is seen as the product of two opposing elements—the universal or objective (“It Must be Abstract”) and the individual or subjective (“It Must Change”)—whose interaction arouses emotion (“It Must Give Pleasure”) (115). MacLeod argues that Stevens’ interest in Mondrian was more in Mondrian’s theories of art than in the
resulting paintings, since Stevens’ poetry and Mondrian’s painting do not bear any formal similarities to each other in style or in execution.

The parallel between Stevens’ poetry and Mondrian’s theories certainly reflects some of the central tenets of both artists’ theories and practices. Mondrian’s theories can be usefully seen alongside the linguistic emphasis of Stevens’ poetry after "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and *Parts of a World* as he articulates the concept of the “supreme fiction,” borrowing from painting’s linguistic basis (art theory) rather than its process or product at this point in his career. Mondrian sought in his paintings the idea of “dynamic equilibrium,” in the system of oppositions and asymmetrical geometry that made up his paintings and always aimed to depict a process of interaction rather than stasis (Mondrian 312). Mondrian’s emphasis on process reflects the constant interaction between reality and imagination, the self and its environment, that concerns Stevens throughout his career. However, MacLeod does not argue the parallel as effectively through Stevens’ poetry as through the similarity in Stevens’ and Mondrian’s ideas. MacLeod’s main text for the Abstraction argument is “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” whose section titled, “It Must Be Abstract” seems to be the foundation of his discussion. In her review of MacLeod’s book, Jacqueline Brogan writes, “for all his copious research and documentation, MacLeod’s discussion of individual poems remains somewhat superficial” (250).

MacLeod also makes an argument for the influence of the Abstract Expressionists on Stevens’ later poetry, painters who, like Stevens, emulated Mondrian for his “seriousness of purpose and personal integrity” (148). He argues for a similar development of Abstract Expressionist theory alongside Stevens’ poetics during his mature career in the 1940’s and early 1950’s, especially in a shared qualified relationship to Surrealism. Both the Abstract Expressionists and Stevens were interested in Surrealism because of the interest in accessing a
psychological interiority and engaging with archetypes that express the subconscious manifest in reality. However, both also took issue with Surrealism’s tendency to “invent without discovering” as Stevens articulates it, and to rely too heavily on play and witty juxtaposition, lacking “earnestness” and grounding in reality (MacLeod 147). Here MacLeod’s argument relies not on the artist’s influence on Stevens, but Stevens’ influence on the artists.

MacLeod argues most convincingly not necessarily for the shared history of Stevens and the American avant-garde artists, which has more to do with contemporaneity than anything else, but for the interest the artists had in Stevens as they felt their theories were similar to Stevens’ poetics, especially after "The Man with the Blue Guitar.” MacLeod cites a letter from Barnett Newman to Stevens, calling on Stevens to be a rallying point for American artists because of his consistent “aestheticism” or “aloofness” from the “cultural chauvinism” that occurred between the world wars, a chauvinism that sought to isolate and subordinate American art from European art (MacLeod Modern Art 149). MacLeod also draws a parallel between Stevens’ interest in depicting process with the action paintings of Jackson Pollock, whose final product is not of any predetermined subject, but the process of the artist’s interaction with paint and canvas. The argument for the presence of process can be made for many modern artists, however, who began to take a self-conscious interest in depicting the materiality of paint on the canvas and the process of creating their paintings. Van Gogh, for example, calls attention to the physical realities of paint with his impasto brush strokes and swirling lines mirroring the fluid motion of the painter’s hand. The parallels between Abstract Expressionism and Stevens and the artist’s demonstrated interest in Stevens as a figure of American poetry introduce another aspect of intersectionality between Stevens’ poetry and painting, but do not inform a discussion of Stevens’ poetry itself.
The arguments for the influence of these movements on Stevens’ poetry are useful in understanding the larger critical response to Stevens and painting outside of "The Man with the Blue Guitar.” These arguments do take into account, however, the important transition that "The Man with the Blue Guitar,” begins in Stevens’ career through *Parts of a World* away from the visual and painterly toward the primarily linguistic. Many of the arguments for specific painterly movements focus on Stevens’ poetry before "The Man with the Blue Guitar” and *Parts of a World*, such as Asian art or Dada, and those that address Stevens’ later career emphasize the importance of art theory, rather than practice, to the nature of the relationship. More than anything else, these arguments indicate the breadth of Stevens’ sustained interest in painting as he incorporated elements from a wide historical and cultural variety throughout his career. As the history of art cannot be understood as entirely linear, so Stevens’ use of art can be seen as building on various ideas at different points in his career and that development informs his use of painting in "The Man with the Blue Guitar.”

“At night, it lights the fruit and wine”:
*Still Life as Parts of a Larger World*

The painterly moments in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" exemplify Stevens’ interest in painting and provide an access point to exploring painting as it appears in his other volumes, most frequently *Harmonium* and *Parts of a World*. The painting movements that Stevens engages with in "The Man with the Blue Guitar” and his painterly references in the poem cover a range of historical time periods manifest in varied degrees of importance and influence to the meaning of his work. At various points in the poem, Stevens takes up still life and 17th century Dutch painting, statuary and the museum as an institution, color both as symbolic and arbitrary,
specific painters, Cubism, and Surrealism. Each of these painterly ideas in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" has its counterpart elsewhere in Stevens’ use of painting in his career.

“The Man with the Blue Guitar” engages the tradition of Dutch painting in one of its most prominent forms, the still life. In section XIV, Stevens uses painterly effects to achieve an image of the imagination’s successful relation with reality in the familiar setting of the quotidian. In this section, a single candle illuminates a domestic scene and creates a still life through the imagination’s ordering of objects and spaces:

A candle is enough to light the world.

It makes it clear. Even at noon
It glistens in essential dark.

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

In a chiaroscuro where
One sits and plays the blue guitar.

CPP 141

The candle functions here as it does elsewhere in Stevens’ poetry as a symbol of the individual imagination and creative power. In the Harmonium poem “Valley Candle,” the speaker’s candle “burn[s] alone in an immense valley” while “beams of the huge night converge upon it” (CPP 41). The light of the candle contends with the darkness of night as the light of an individual’s imagination makes sense of and competes with reality. The candle’s light illuminates and orders the scene, creating meaning in the empty darkness. In this section of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the candle also functions as an ordering force, here creating a traditional still life by making visible its elements and their relation. The light effects of the imagination compose the still life painting comprised of its traditional elements, “fruit,” “wine,” “book,” and “bread.” The light of the candle casts the scene in the painterly “chiaroscuro,” creating the stark contrast of
opposites—light and dark—that create depth and drama in a still life painting. Using the term “chiaroscuro” as the defining descriptor of the setting (“in a chiaroscuro”) associates the space of the blue guitar player with the space of a painting. Painting functions as a setting for the work of the imagination, the playing of the blue guitar. The inclusion of a book among the objects of the still life suggests the fusion of language and painting that Stevens enacts in the section itself. The literary object existing in the painterly scene plays with the idea of the painterly scene existing in and created by poetic language. In these lines, the visual and the verbal interact to represent how the light of the imagination can order the world and bring things into meaningful relation. The traditional painterly form becomes a site of renewed imaginative interaction with the world as it provides the setting for the tune of the blue guitar.

Stevens’ interest in still life appears to a degree in Harmonium but most prevalently in Parts of a World. Stevens identifies his own Dutch heritage with both his poetry and personality. He wrote to his daughter Holly in 1942 (the same year as the publication of Parts of a World):

“My own stubbornness and taciturn eras are straight out of Holland and I cannot change them any more than I can change my own skin” (L 422). Stevens aligns the extremes of “stubborn” and “taciturn” as inherently Dutch, which he exemplifies in his conceptualization of Dutch still life in his poetry. Dutch still life paintings of the seventeenth century depict a reality of cheer and tranquility. MacLeod writes that Stevens’ poetry often posits an idea of home and the domestic as “a place of revivifying meditation and source of spiritual strength” as opposed to the sense of the external world as a violent, “war-like whole” (MacLeod Modern Art 47). Costello writes of Stevens and still life:

More than landscape or portraiture, still life is a threshold genre, between nature and culture, vital and morbid, private and public worlds. Indeed, in choosing still life Stevens insists on preserving an individual human scale of contemplation, a sense of the personal and the intimate with its accompanying desires; but he
presents this as a struggle for tentative, partial experiences of order and beauty always involved in a greater reality that gives them vitality and refuses them stability. In this way Stevens’ still life brings the splintered planet to the table.

“Planets on Tables” 151

Here Costello emphasizes the insulated space that the still life occupies in the realm of the domestic, as opposed to the world outside. The still life provides a microcosm for imaginatively engaging with the world at large and allows Stevens to explore these “partial experiences of order and beauty” to articulate themes outside the bounded still life composition.

The Harmonium poem, “Sunday Morning” takes place among the “Complacencies of the peignoir, and late/Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,/And the green freedom of a cockatoo,” in a warm, although not specifically Dutch, comforting setting of domestic ease (CPP 53). In section XIV of "The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the still life imagery represents a similar setting where the guitarist “sits” at ease, playing the blue guitar in a space suited to this imaginative pursuit. In this way, Stevens’ use of still life and scenes of bourgeois comfort create a space for the imagination to flourish in opposition to the “war-like whole” of the external world, the “beams of huge night.”

Other instances of still life in Stevens’ poetry include two poems from the beginning of Parts of a World, “The Poems of Our Climate” and “Study of Two Pears.” The first twelve poems of Parts of a World were published together under the title “Canonica” in the Southern Review in autumn of 1938, one year after The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems was published. These poems represent the most concentrated exploration of painterly themes in Parts of a World and especially engage with still life. Along with “Study of Two Pears,” “Canonica” includes the poems “The Glass of Water” and “Dry Loaf,” both suggesting in their titles the objects of still life, and painting as the main compositional force behind the poems.
“The Poems of Our Climate” engages still life in a way similar to "The Man with the Blue Guitar,” in that the still life composed in the first few lines reflects a harmonious whole of domestic objects unified by effects of light. In this poem, however, Stevens investigates more deeply the negative aspects of such tranquility in the face of reality’s darkness—the “war-like whole.” The first stanza composes a balanced, tranquil still life with flowers and their container, interrupted with the acknowledgment of the insufficiency of such simple beauty in a world comprised of more than domesticity’s tranquil comfort:

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.
Pink and white carnations—one desires
So much more than that. The day itself
Is simplified: a bowl of white,
Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
With nothing more than the carnations there.

"One desires so much more” than the “simplified” life represented by the bowl and flowers. The bowl does not contain anything of the totality of reality, but simply “nothing more than carnations.” In this scene, the still life is empty because of its blankness, the “white” of the “snowy air” that covers the objects of the still life that does not allow room for the depth of the imagination. The second stanza elaborates on the potential emptiness of still life:

Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of all one’s torments, concealed
The evilly compounded, vital I
And made fresh in a world of white,
A world of clear water, brilliant edged,
Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents.
Unlike the still life in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," “The Poems of Our Climate” presents a scene devoid of the imagination, the presence of the artist’s mind that makes the objects meaningful in reality. The still life is beautiful, it is “fresh,” “clear,” and “brilliant,” but washed in white, displaying none of Stevens’ characteristic blue of the imagination, or lively color of any kind. Still life functions as a fruitful setting for the imagination, but the imagination must be present for the still life to be meaningful for Stevens.

“Study of Two Pears” uses the medium of still life and the painter’s preparatory study of an object to explore the relationship between representing and seeing, the conflict between the “things changed upon the blue guitar” and “things exactly as they are” (CPP 135). The stanzas vacillate between depicting the pears as in a painting, removed from the essence of “pear-ness,” and as they are in the world, as objects. The poem “Add This to Rhetoric” that appears one poem after “Study of Two Pears” in “Canonica,” accurately summarizes the opposition that exists between the two kinds of pears: “It is posed and it is posed/But in nature it merely grows” (CPP 182). Costello points out that the title contains a pun, reminding the audience, “there are always two pairs or a pair of pears, one in nature and one as idea” (Costello “Stevens and Painting” 175). The pears resist reference in the lines,

The pears are not viols, 
Nudes or bottles. 
They resemble nothing else

... 
They are not flat surfaces 
Having curved outlines 
They are round 
Tapering toward the top.

CPP 180
The pears are not representations of pears that approximate other objects or that lie flat on a canvas; they are essentially pears that exist in a three-dimensional reality. The intervening stanzas present the forms as strictly representation, devoid of their essence and presence in reality:

They are yellow forms
Composed of curves
Bulging toward the base.
They are touched red.

... In the way they are modelled
There are bits of blue.
A hard dry leaf hangs
From the stem.

In these lines that emphasize the pears as representations, the pears are the passive objects onto which a creative force is exerted; they are “composed” and they are “modelled,” they do not actively exert their presence as in the stanzas that emphasize the pears’ essence. To use Stevens’ language about his Dutch heritage, the pears are both “taciturn,” acted upon, or “stubborn,” the agents of their own existence (L 422). The “bits of blue” reflect the imagination’s presence in this depiction of the pears, in opposition to the “hard dry leaf” hanging from the stem that suggests an unproductive reality. The final lines of the poem assert the objects’ presence outside the act of representation: “The pears are not seen/As the observer wills” (CPP 181). The pears ultimately resist depiction, but the poem itself reflects the creative imagination’s process of interacting with nature and the interaction between the “pair of pears” that Stevens’ enacts in the poem. The poem engages the idea that description of an object, either visual or verbal, can make it stale (the “hard dry leaf”), but a productive interaction between the imagination’s composing force and reality can generate a poem, like this one, that shows language’s process of engaging
with the visual in an attempt to access its immediate reflection of an object’s essence. “Study of Two Pears” again shows the objects of still life as a fruitful site for Stevens’ poetic meditation, as he incorporates the language of painting to process the relationship between reality and the imagination that was a “constant source of trouble” to him throughout "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and into Parts of a World (L 316). The poem stays true to the titular theme of an artist’s study as it works through the relationships between objects and their context.

Still life painting in Stevens’ poetry reflects the dualities inherent in the painterly genre as Stevens’ understood it and provides a productive setting for his poetic meditation on reality and the imagination. His representations of the still life present several forces in opposition and dynamic interplay: inside and outside, home and the external world, composition and essential presence, and the theme that unifies them all, reality and the imagination. As the still life provides the guitar player a comfortable opportunity to “sit and play the blue guitar,” to imaginatively engage with the world, the still life provides Stevens that same opportunity to engage in the creative process through the poems that engage still life as a theme and motif.

“I sing a hero’s head, large eye/And bearded bronze”:
Statues and Museums as Sites of Artistic Stagnation

While painting represents a productive site of poetic exploration for Stevens, statuary and museums represent for the poet the potential dangers of the plastic arts to fall into stasis. One of Stevens’ major problems with the visual arts and a reason for his insistence on linguistic supremacy is visual art’s limited capacity for showing process in his verse. While painting can exist as a discrete object, bound to a particular moment, language can construct a narrative and move through time as a painting cannot. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in “Laocoön: An Essay on
the Limits of Painting and Poetry” (1766), argued that there should be a comfortable relationship between the object being represented and the characteristics of the medium of representation. He objected to poetry using the same devices as those of painting, arguing that poetry is fit for telling, while the spatial arts are more suited for showing. This paradigm of painting-as-showing and poetry-as-telling is useful in understanding Stevens’ often qualified use of painterly practice and more substantial engagement with art theory. He does not fully adopt the methods of the painter because he believes that the two have different functions and that poetry can reveal more of the imaginative process of composition.

Charles Altieri’s argument for the subordination of the visual in Stevens’ poetry provides a helpful way for looking at the poet’s use of statues, because he emphasizes the importance of process and narrative that language can convey, arguing that for Stevens language can better access the deeper meaning—the “fundamental aesthetic”—sought by both arts. Painting can be a site of exploration for poetry because “the domain that painting opens becomes, for poetry, a theater in which the process of self-reflection sets about making visible a fully human spiritual architecture” (Altieri 335).

Painting can supplement poetry’s explorations into and understanding of the self and reality, but language’s capacity for process and narrative allow it to more fully express those deeper intricacies of the human experience. For Stevens, statues are the embodiment of the stagnation of the imaginative process, the limited “showing” that visual art can achieve as opposed to the dynamic potentials of language. The museum functions as a similar representation of stagnation, but is a complex symbol of the past’s potential both as a fertile ground for transformation and its potential for stifling the imagination’s growth and progression. In "The
Man with the Blue Guitar,” Stevens’ use of museums and statues reflects the complexity of their associations with both the stasis and capacity for creative change rooted in the past.

The museum provides a helpful index of the imagination’s past incarnations because the history of artistic expression contained within its walls is both invaluable and inescapable. Stevens engages with the idea of the museum most explicitly in Parts of a World. MacLeod suggests that Parts of a World, with its title and exploration of a variety of ideas, can be read as an art exhibition, each poem modifying and contributing to the cohesion of the whole (MacLeod Modern Art 81). Parts of a World engages the idea of the past’s art collected and presented together, as in a museum, and what that distillation of the past’s creative activity can mean for an artist in the present. Museums can also represent a stifling confinement in the past for Stevens; in a 1952 letter to Thomas McGreevy, Stevens wrote: “if every school of painting is to have a museum, then, with the passing of time, there will be a lot of museums, or, say, burial vaults, and Fifth Avenue will become a series of catacombs” (L 762-63). Art contained and relegated solely to the academic realm of the past represents for Stevens a death of the past’s potential for transformation. In his use of the museum, Stevens engages both positive and negative embodiments of the artist’s relationship to the past.

The museum in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" represents the stagnation of the past as here the museum forces a separation of man and nature. The museum appears in a section that addresses nature in opposition to modern civilization. Section XXXI shows how the emptiness of the constructed human world represented by “employer and employee,” limits the imagination and the imaginative possibilities of engagement with nature (CPP 149). Stevens writes, “There is no place./Here, for the lark fixed in the mind./In the museum of the sky” (CPP 149-150). Here Stevens aligns the museum with the constructed human world of the employer and employee.
The museum represents a place for preserving the human past, a past that does not allow space for nature’s lark. The sky, an aspect of nature, has been sapped of its imaginative potential, transformed into a museum, a relic of the human past.

In stanza XVII of the 1935 poem, “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,” Stevens represents the complicated nature of the museum as it acts both as a site of inspiration and an ineffective focus on the past. Stevens writes,

Shall I grapple with my destroyers
In the muscular poses of the museums?
But my destroyers avoid the museums.

_CPP 123

The “muscular poses of the museums,” presumably those of classical statuary, provide the artist an established form to assume, one that offers strength and the potential for development in the present. The speaker appears critical of his “destroyers” because they disregard the important forms of the past in the museums, but ultimately, the fact that the “destroyers avoid the museums,” renders the speaker’s reliance on tradition insufficient. In this instance, the artist needs to create new forms with which to “grapple” with his “destroyers” and the museum represents the past’s insufficiency to effect change in the present. This reference to the museum in “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” is similar to Stevens’ call for his audience to “throw away the lights, the definitions” and “the rotted names” of the past, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (CPP 150). It speaks to the way tradition can be inadequate in encouraging present imaginative activity and representations when society values the past at different levels. The “poses of the museums” have the potential to provide sufficient defense for the speaker, but the “destroyers’” rejection of the past, renders engagement with the past futile.
The *Parts of a World* poem, “Prelude to Objects,” represents the museum in a manner similar to the museum in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" as an opposition to nature as well as a possible site of self-knowledge and exploration. The poem posits nature as a source through which man can know himself: “the sun…is the color of the self…night is the color of a self” (*CPP* 179). In this poem, if man can engage with nature in this way to discover the “colors of a self,” he does not need to look to the human past, the museum, for self-exploration. Here Stevens constructs the museum as a place which is deeply human, that reflects tradition and the intricacies of the self, but which is ultimately insufficient if man can engage fruitfully with nature.

...he has not
To go to the Louvre to behold himself.
Granted each picture is a glass,
That the walls are mirrors multiplied,
That the marbles are gluey pastiches

*CPP* 179-180

Stevens concedes the importance of the human nature reflected from all sides in the objects of a museum and that paintings have the capacity for locating the self as the walls multiply man’s image. However, this reflection and self-identification is not always entirely successful just as the “gluey pastiches” of statuary, which attempt to serve as the sites of self-identification are insufficient; they are distorted replicas of reality rather than reflections. Within the context of the museum, the speaker is “always seeing and feeling oneself,” but knowing the self is a process and the reflections of the museums cannot provide a simple formula for fully identifying the self. As Stevens writes in “The Man on the Dump,” “the dump is full/of images” (*CPP* 184). Furthermore, the beginning of the “Prelude to Objects” asserts that identification with the
museum is unnecessary if man can sufficiently engage with nature—“he has not to go to the Louvre” (CPP 180).

“Connoisseur of Chaos,” another poem from *Parts of a World*, specifically cites the Louvre and asserts the museum’s potential for stifling creative activity in the present. Stevens makes use of a mock pedantry in this poem, setting up paradoxical premises (“A” and “B”) for logical investigation. Engagement with these premises generates the content of the poem, which ultimately posits an “essential unity” of “inherent opposites,” of the vital coexistence of order and disorder (CPP 195). The Louvre represents a dominance of order and the effects of thought confined to academic abstraction:

…Now, A
And B are not like statuary, posed
For a vista in the Louvre. They are things chalked
On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see

*CPP 195*

Ideas “A and B” are meant for the thoughtful man’s consideration in his everyday life and reflect the practical fusion of reality and the imagination that Stevens frequently envisions for his poetry. But statuary kept and displayed for academic consideration in the museum represents the stasis that Stevens seeks to avoid by supplementing the visual with the verbal and grounding the imagination, poetry as an act of the mind, in reality. “Chalked on the sidewalk” recalls the fluidity of “things as they are” played “upon the blue guitar” and the creative process that Stevens seeks through his poetry. Ideas sketched in chalk for common consideration possess the potential for change and adaptation that the statuary posed for stale vistas in the Louvre do not; here Stevens stresses the importance of making truth available to man through appropriate visual means. He mocks the overly academic in “Connoisseur of Chaos” through the poem’s form and
by incorporating the museum as a symbol of creativity’s stagnation in face of the past. The statue represents a cold and impoverished overly intellectual approach to life and art.

Stevens’ use of statuary in “Connoisseur of Chaos” typifies his portrayal of the sculptor’s art throughout his poetry: it is unproductively static and does not fully represent man’s imaginative capabilities. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens shows the emptiness of statues through a figure of heroes past, heroes who cannot represent the complexities of the human experience:

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.

CPP 135

The phrases “hero’s head,” “large eye,” and “bearded bronze” all recall statuary and its monumental tribute to the past. The statue takes the form of man, but is “almost” man; the guitarist uses the statue as a starting point, but ultimately reaches through the emptiness of the symbolic hero. This characterization of the statue recalls the marble “gluey pastiches” from “Prelude to Objects.” The attempted embodiment of the best of humanity—the “hero”—becomes an amalgam of fragments that does not fully represent humanity. The statue is too bound in time and disjointed to provide a fruitful site of imaginative exploration.

Stevens continues to employ the statue as a symbol in his later poetry. In the late poem “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” first published in 1949, Stevens uses the statue in a similar manner as in “Connoisseur of Chaos” to evoke things past that are no longer real in the present. The speaker experiences,

A knowing that something certain had been proposed,
Which, without the statue, would be new,
An escape from repetition, a happening
In space and the self

The statue in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” holds back an idea from becoming “new” and halts the imagination’s process that provides “an escape from repetition” for the speaker. The statue stifles the process that Stevens explores and encourages in his poetry: the constantly evolving relationship of reality and the imagination, the light of the imagination in the act of “Arranging, deepening, enchanting night” in the present’s reality (“The Idea of Order at Key West” CPP 105).

Statuary as a negative force of stagnation and an incomplete approximation of reality assumes a more political character for Stevens in the 1930’s, especially in conjunction with the idea of the hero. An empty hero figure appears in "The Man with the Blue Guitar” in the statue that is “almost” man and Stevens makes an even more explicit connection between statues and unsatisfactory political powers in “Owl’s Clover,” published alongside the title poem in the volume The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems in 1937. Stevens was aware of the potential complications of the statue’s ambiguity. In a 1940 letter to Hi Simons discussing Simons’ reaction to the poem, Stevens writes, “Part of your difficultly arises, very likely, from the fact that the symbol: the statue, is not always the symbol for the same thing. In one poem it is a symbol for art; in another for society” (L 355). Stevens was unhappy with “Owl’s Clover” throughout the process of its composition and publication. Vendler writes of his revisions of “Owl’s Clover”: “Stevens’ massive cutting of the original poem is the work of a man embarrassed by his own rhetorical excesses” (Vendler 81). The version of the poem that appeared in The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems had been extensively revised and
pared down and Stevens ultimately chose to exclude the poem altogether from his 1954 *Collected Poems*.

Statues are central to “Owl’s Clover” and, as Stevens writes, alternately symbolize art and society. Statues as a symbol for art is consistent with his earlier use of statuary and the use that persists into his later career (e.g. “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”), but the use of the statue to symbolize society and systemic societal issues is largely limited to the 1930’s. The shifting meaning of the statue reflects the tumultuous political climate of the 1930’s and early 40’s and posits a more historically engaged Stevens. However, in 1944, Stevens wrote in a letter to Oscar Williams, “A prose commentary on War and Poetry is out of the question. I wonder if the war has not ceased to affect us except as a part of necessity, as something that must be carried on and finished, with no end and no sacrifice involved” (*L* 479). “Owl’s Clover” was in part a response to Stanley Burnshaw’s unfavorable review of *Ideas of Order* published in The *New Masses* in 1935. Burnshaw calls Stevens’ “ideas” in that volume “contradictory notions” and an “escape” from the pressures of modern reality (Burnshaw 30). He wrote: “*Ideas of Order* is the record of a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance” (Burnshaw 30). Where Stevens does refer to the contemporary in *Ideas of Order*, Burnshaw accuses Stevens of taking a disconnected perspective, that of a wealthy insurance executive during the Depression who “earnestly propagates (however vaguely) some form of collectivism” (Burnshaw 30). During the intervening year between the review and the publication of *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems* in which “Owl’s Clover” appeared, Stevens revised and rewrote the poem extensively, making the self-conscious commentary on the contemporary more explicit.
The critical analysis of Stevens’ poetry in relation to how Stevens interacted with his contemporary surroundings frequently, like Burnshaw, sees him as outside history in terms of dealing with contemporary political issues, engaged more with writing esoteric “poetry about poetry” (Dickie 280). However, “Owl’s Clover” addresses current political issues, reflected explicitly through the varied meanings of the statue, including the Great Depression, and even through loosely veiled references to Mussolini’s conquest of Ethiopia (CPP 158). In stanza II of section I, “The Old Woman & the Statue,” “the rotten leaves/swirl round [the statue] in immense autumnal sounds” as the statue confronts the poverty of the old woman and this particular moment in the 1930’s (CPP 153). The two meanings of the statue intersect in stanza IV of section II as Stevens uses the image both to comment on society’s degradation and insist on art’s need for change, woefully stagnated in the statue’s stasis:

At some gigantic, solitary urn,
A trash can at the end of the world, the dead
Give up dead things and the living turn away.
There buzzards pile their sticks among the bones
Of buzzards and eat the bellies of the rich
Fat with a thousand butters, and the crows
Sip the wild honey of the poor man’s life,
The blood of his bitter brain; and there the sun
Shines without fire on columns intercrossed,
White slapped on white, majestic marble heads,
Severed and tumbled into seedless grass,
Motionless, knowing neither dew nor frost.

CPP 156

Evoking the political and social climate in the 1930’s, Stevens accuses the rich of being “fat with a thousand butters” and the poor of having little but “wild honey” and “bitter brain.” The “marble heads” are ironic in their majesty, situated among the remains of men at the “trash can at the end of the world.” Stevens employs a similar irony in the image of the statue in the 1935 poem, “Dance of the Macabre Mice,” in which a hoard of mice perform a “hungry dance” around
the statue of a political leader. Stevens ends the poem with the lines, “What a beautiful tableau tinted and towering/The arm of bronze outstretched against all evil!” (CPP 101). These statues serve as a metonym for societal decay, and Stevens goes on to describe them in “Owl’s Clover” as “parts of the immense detritus of a world/That is completely waste” (CPP 156).

In these lines the statue also serves Stevens’ other use in describing an unsuccessful relationship to art. The two meanings supplement each other since the statue as a political symbol is made even more insufficient by how it fails to exemplify art’s ideal function in a continuous state of change. The fragments of marble fall into “seedless grass” and are “motionless, knowing neither dew nor frost.” Dew and frost recall the cyclical and evolving processes of nature that cannot affect the statue and the seedless grass lies dead and infertile, also suggesting the statue’s stagnation.

“Owl’s Clover” is largely considered to be verbose, overly rhetorical, and uncharacteristically explicit for Stevens in its reference to contemporary social and political issues, but it serves as the fullest articulation of Stevens’ use of the statue motif. Stevens returns to the statue at times in his later work as a representation of what he seeks to avoid through his poetry and engagement with art. Stevens fails in “Owl’s Clover” where he succeeds in "The Man with the Blue Guitar”; the two poems serve as explorations of similar ideas, but Stevens enacts his ideal relationship of art and life, and reality and the imagination, through the language and “showing” of his ideals in "The Man with the Blue Guitar,” while in “Owl’s Clover” he explicitly states his poetic purpose, writing “It is only enough to live incessantly in change,” discouraging the actively imaginative process of generating meaning (CPP 157). Harold Bloom describes "The Man with the Blue Guitar” in relation to “Owl’s Clover” as the poet's "triumph over ... literary anxieties" and adds that, "the poet who had written The Man with the Blue
"The blue guitar/And I are one": References to Specific Painters

As a sustained interest throughout his career, painting, in many forms, provided Stevens an effective way of exploring and communicating his poetics. One way Stevens engaged painting in a significant, although relatively infrequent, way was through explicit references to specific artists. Picasso is a major figure in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and Stevens alludes to the artist to suggest the associations and ideas that Picasso as an artist and historical figure contributes to the poem’s meditation. Stevens refers to other painters in a similar way, visually to create a setting or painterly context.

Stevens invokes Picasso, not only in the chosen title subject of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," but directly by name in section XV, questioning whether Picasso’s cubist art reflects a fragmentation in Stevens’ cultural and historical moment:

Is this picture of Picasso’s, this “hoard
Of destructions”, a picture of ourselves,

Now, an image of our society?
Do I sit, deformed, a naked egg.
Catching at Good-bye, harvest moon,
Without seeing the harvest or the moon?

Things as they are have been destroyed.
Have I? Am I a man that is dead

At a table on which the food is cold?
Is my thought a memory, not alive?

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

CPP 141-42

Stevens borrows Picasso’s language from a 1935 interview in *Cahiers d’art* X, in which the artist calls his cubist experimentation a “somme de destructions,” or “sum of destructions,” which Stevens translates as, “hoard of destructions” (Cook 120). The phrase, “hoard of destructions” connotes a violent visual reality that may indicate a similar tumultuous fragmentation in the modern world. The speaker asks that if “things as they are have been destroyed,” “have I?”. Does the “destruction” of Picasso’s painting reflect or contribute to destruction in “society”? The section plays with the opposition of life and art, dissolving the boundaries between painting and the world of its surroundings to explore how to conceive of the self in this modern age. The inclusion of the table and wine recall still life and create a play between the flatness of the “floor” and the flatness of the canvas, confusing the boundaries of pictorial space and questioning the insularity of a painted world. Stevens works through the issues of boundaries, between the self and its surroundings, the individual and society, art and life, through the scene of a painting, whether specifically Picasso’s or not, whose imagery and objecthood provide the setting for the speaker’s quest for an understanding of self.

The idea of locating a sense of self through art parallels Stevens’ other remarks about Picasso in his prose that conceive of the artist as indivisible from his art. In the essay “The
Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” Stevens writes: “We take a man like Picasso, for instance, and assume here is Picasso and there is his work. This is nonsense, where the one is, the other is” (CPP 676). Throughout his poetry, Stevens understands the artist as one with his art, which reflects the constant presence of the individual imagination in understanding reality. Similar to the example of Stevens’ understanding of Picasso’s personality present in his art, that same union of poem and poet occur in section XV: “Do I sit, deformed, a naked egg?” (CPP 142).

Engaging with art and painting can provide a way of seeing the self anew, proposing redefinitions of the self based on what one sees of society reflected in art. The speaker looks to painting to explore the self, because, as in Stevens’ understanding of Picasso the man and Picasso’s painting, the poem establishes an identification with the self and painting.

In terms of engaging with the idea of Picasso the man and figure in the art world, Glen MacLeod argues that Stevens identifies with Picasso in this poem because of the artist’s qualified relationships to both Surrealism and Abstraction, as both movements sought to claim Picasso as one of their own. MacLeod argues that Stevens too would have situated himself “in the middle” of the spectrum connecting Surrealism and Abstraction: “[Stevens] was familiar with surrealist art theory by the time he came to write Parts of a World. He was also well informed about abstract art theory at that time” (MacLeod Modern Art 92). MacLeod claims that Stevens’ references to Picasso have just as much to do with the artist’s theory and practice as with what Picasso represented of and to the art world. In line with MacLeod’s understanding of Stevens’ relationship to Picasso, the choice of the central image of ”The Man with the Blue Guitar” presents another way in which Stevens understands his poetics in terms of the language of the art world. Choosing to allude to a Picasso painting not only aligns Stevens with what the painting directly represents, but with Picasso’s work in general, from his blue period paintings from 1901-
1904 through his expansive career into the 1930’s. Engagement with Picasso introduces associations with a varied array of painterly techniques, such as Cubist fragmentation, Surrealist investigation of the unconscious, and the expressive use of color, throughout the painter’s long career.

Stevens’ choice of the painting *The Old Guitarist* reflects another similarity between his poetry and the work of Picasso in their use of color. Stevens explicitly aligns blue with the imagination in his familiar pairing in the first section of "The Man with the Blue Guitar": “You have a blue guitar, you do not play things as they are” (*CPP* 135). The guitar’s color, more than anything else, most strikingly indicates its separation from “things as they are” and throughout the poem “blue” continues to represent the imagination’s cast on the world. Both Picasso and Stevens use color symbolism and the emotional efficacy of color. Throughout his blue period paintings of roughly 1901-1904 and in *The Old Guitarist* Picasso engaged, almost exclusively, with cool-toned blues and blue-greens, often to evoke a sense of melancholy, loneliness, and despair. Many of his paintings from this period depict beggars or solitary figures, devoid of warmth in hue and emotional content. Picasso, like Stevens, uses blue consistently for a singular purpose.

Stevens refers to other artists specifically by name in his work, most frequently in the volume directly preceding *The Man with the Blue Guitar: Ideas of Order*, published in a limited edition by Alcestis Press in 1935 and by Alfred Knopf in 1936. That painters appear more often by name in this volume than anywhere else in Stevens’ poetry, suggests that he was carrying the playful, colorful interest in painting from *Harmonium* into *Ideas of Order*, but in a more superficial manner, naming artists as suggestive of some element of their painting or theories. The marked appearance of painters in *Ideas of Order* suggests Stevens’ movement toward the
more substantive engagement with painterly theory in the later volumes *The Man with the Blue Guitar* and *Parts of a World*.

Stevens refers to John Constable and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot in the 1935 “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,” from *Ideas of Order*, and in each instance, the artist stands in for some representative element of his work or style. Stevens’ cites Constable to advocate the need for distinctly American art forms as the painter represents an inherently British aesthetic: “John Constable they could never quite transplant/And our streams rejected the dim Academy” (*CPP* 125). Constable’s style stands in for a British art that, for Stevens, does not “suffice” for America’s landscape. The phrase, “the dim Academy” refers to the Royal Academy of London, the governing body of the medium and self-designated arbiter of British Academic art (Cook 107). Here Stevens uses Constable to insist on the need for new, manifestly American artistic representations, echoing the sentiment throughout his poetry for constantly developing fresh ways of interacting with reality through the adaptable imagination. Stevens uses Corot to represent the atmospheric embodiment of the season that the painter displays in his landscapes. Corot’s tonal landscapes anticipated the Impressionists in their attention to light, as he often creates a unified golden glow that envelops a natural setting. Stevens’ reference to Corot makes a passing claim about painting or even of pleasurable works of art in general: that they are best viewed in a period of absence from the beautiful,

The album of Corot is premature.
A little later when the sky is black.
Mist that is golden is not wholly mist.

*CPP* 136
Here Stevens argues for the separation of beautiful representations of autumn from actual autumn’s beauty; the time “a little later when the sky is black,” makes Corot’s paintings of autumn more pleasurable and powerful, more real amidst the barren lack of winter.

Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin appear in Stevens’ poetry as similar embodiments of their work’s characteristic evocations of pastoral beauty. Stevens refers to “a sunny day’s complete Poussiniana,” using the painter’s name to denote the unified, composed, and idyllic nature that Poussin posited in his 17th century landscapes. Claude appears in the 1934 poem “Botanist on Alp No. 1,” functioning in a similar manner to Poussin, but distinct in the association of outdated modes of expression that Stevens generally aligns with statues. Stevens makes use of the typical elements of Claude’s landscape paintings to insist on the importance of new ways of looking at the world, questioning the constructed passages into landscape that Claude offered his viewers: the view of the world “that is resting on pillars,/That was seen through arches.” Stevens uses Claude to articulate the need for an active engagement with nature—the raw material of reality—that provides the substance of imaginative exploration; the speaker’s rendering of nature reflects the fusion of the imagination and reality that occurs in wild, unrestrained nature, as opposed to the carefully guided entrance into nature that Claude provides his audience:

    Panoramas are not what they used to be.
    Claude has been dead a long time
    And apostrophes are forbidden on the funicular.
    Marx has ruined Nature,
    For the moment.

    For myself, I live by leaves,
    So that corridors of clouds,
    Corridors of cloudy thoughts,
    Seem pretty much one:
    I don't know what.
But in Claude how near one was
(In a world that is resting on pillars,
That was seen through arches)
To the central composition,
The essential theme.

What composition is there in all this:
Stockholm slender in a slender light,
And an adriactic riva rising,
Statues and stars
Without a theme?

The pillars are prostrate, the arches are haggard,
The hotel is boarded and bare.
Yet the panorama of despair
Cannot be the specialty
Of this ecstatic air.

*CPP* 109-110

In this poem, Stevens looks back to Claude critically but also with the sense that Claude’s art is no longer sufficient because of a deficiency in the modern world through its disconnection with nature. There seems to be a qualified longing in the speaker for the “panoramas” of Claude’s pastoral vistas, which communicate the “essential theme” of a union with nature, but the speaker clearly asserts that these modes of seeing the world are “dead” in a modern age. In this poem, representations of nature appear impoverished because of the disconnect between man and nature. “Apostrophes are forbidden on the funicular,” indicates that the separation from nature engendered by this modern mode of transport does not allow the imagination to engage with nature as a fertile site of transformation and halts the creative process of “apostrophe.” In the present moment, “Marx has ruined nature,” which Cook helpfully argues is a reference to “Soviet control of art…and political judgments inappropriately applied to such art” (Cook 98). These forces in the modern world all drive art and nature farther apart and deepen the rift between the imagination and the creative potentialities of nature. The speaker, however, in
communicating the poem itself and living “by leaves,” close to nature, is able to merge productively with nature, exemplified by the fusion of his mind and the landscape in “corridors of cloudy thoughts.”

Claude’s framing devices control the viewer’s entrance into the landscape, offering a balanced, composed nature through the privileged access of the framed pictorial space. In the 1648 painting *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*, for example, Claude uses vertical architectural elements on the edges of the canvas to draw the viewer’s eye through the space to the tranquil sea vista in its center whose focus is a radiant sun sparkling on the ocean. In the modern world, Stevens argues in this poem, “the pillars are prostrate, the arches are haggard” that once stood majestically in Claude’s paintings. The speaker will not abandon the decaying landscape, however, and will continue to strive for new modes of representations, new “panoramas” to communicate the power of the “ecstatic air.” In this poem, Stevens engages with some of the major themes of Claude’s paintings. He argues for the necessity for new modes of representation by engaging with a painter whose century-old scenes he manipulates to communicate his poetic purpose in the present.

Alongside Picasso, the painting and theories of Paul Cézanne prove the most significant influence of a specific artist on Stevens’ poetry. Cézanne’s theories of art resemble Steven’s poetics in the insistence on a fusion of reality and the imagination, in Cézanne, frequently pictured as the fusion of man and nature. In “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting,” Stevens makes a claim for the importance of Cézanne to the development of modern art, stating “there should be scrawled across the façade of the building in which we now are [the Museum of Modern Art], the words *Cézanne delineavit*” as if modern art as it stands can be traced back to Cézanne for its origins (*CPP* 741). Many of the movements Stevens explores find their origins
in Cézanne, mostly notably, Cubism, which found inspiration in Cézanne’s constructive stroke and geometric, proto-cubist renderings of Mont Sainte-Victoire. An early commentator on Cézanne wrote of the artist’s relationship to reality: “the creator’s imaginative deposits discernibly transform the objective givens” (Brion-Guerry 197). Cézanne engages his imagination through the creative eye with which he views the world, and displays this particular perspective in his paintings. Nature becomes a site for creative exploration and a fusion of the painter’s imagination with reality. Cézanne’s distinct way of rendering the world recalls Stevens’ appeal in the penultimate section of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" for his audience to:

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.

CPP 150

Cézanne rejects the visual equivalent of the “rotted names” and paints a reality wholly his own, maintaining a foundation in reality—he never entirely departs from representational painting—but displays a world transformed by his “imaginative deposits.”

Lines from the same section of "The Man with the Blue Guitar” recall another important feature of Cézanne’s painting: the fusion of man and nature. Here Stevens refers to the self and representations of the self becoming one when insufficient modes of representation have been abandoned:

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

CPP 150

Stevens encourages the fusion of the creator and the represented, joining the creator and his subsequent vision of reality. In Cézanne’s paintings, the artist often invests landscape with
human emotion and form. In a 1904 letter to Louis Aurenche, Cézanne wrote, “While a strong feeling for nature…is the necessary basis of every artistic conception…knowledge of the means of expressing our emotion is nonetheless essential” (Doran 40). While Stevens would not necessarily align himself with the emotional component of Cézanne’s ideas, he would agree with the necessity of acknowledging and representing both reality and the self in one’s artistic works—“the blue guitar and I are one” (CPP 140). Wassily Kandinsky observed of Cézanne’s work: “He made a living thing out of a teacup. To be more precise, he realized the existence of a being in this cup. He raised the ‘nature morte’ to a height where the exteriorly ‘dead’ object becomes inwardly alive” (Kandinsky 31-32). The compositions of landscapes and still lifes not only evoke an implied human presence, but also endow the inanimate with human energy, life, and the solidity of the body. In “Of Modern Poetry,” a 1940 poem in which Stevens directly articulates his poetics, he argues that modern poetry should be, “the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice…It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place” (CPP 218). Stevens posits an art that communicates the vitality of the world as it accesses its “being” and “speech,” through the mind’s engagement with reality.

In section XI of ”The Man with the Blue Guitar,” Stevens enacts the Cézannian fusion of man and nature as human bodies transform into the landscape. He uses this fusion to insist on the balance between reality and imagination and how the excess of one overwhelms the mind:

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

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

It is the chord that falsifies.
The sea returns upon the men,

The fields entrap the children
In this fusion of man and his environment, reality overwhelms as man loses himself to become fully a part of nature. Here becoming complacent in one’s relation to the environment forces an imbalance in the relationship between reality and the imagination. For Stevens, one must constantly be reevaluating the relationship of man and nature so that reality and imagination can nourish each other. Cézanne in his paintings often enacts this essential balance, asserting both his perception of the world and nature’s image of itself. Riddel writes of Stevens and Cézanne, referring to Stevens’ comment on Cézanne’s “psychological landscapes” in which Stevens saw the “mind of Cézanne” “constantly described,” “[Stevens’] analogy between style and sensibility, between poem and poet, in whose ‘indirect egotism’ as Stevens calls it, we discover not only one man’s mind, but mind itself. We find ‘ourselves in poetry’” (Riddel 11). Taking poet and painter together, Betty Buchsbaum argues that both Stevens and Cézanne, “seek to penetrate to the essential, altering, shifting perspectives on things as we ordinarily see them” while recognizing the possibility that he may not access “anything more than his own self and needs” (303).

Stevens embodies such a successful relationship of imagination and reality in “The Idea of Order at Key West”:

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

The song of the woman and the song of the sea interrelate in a dynamic equilibrium and reflect the exchange between the self and nature that occurs in Cézanne’s embodied landscapes, as
opposed to the ideas of Romantic fusion of self and nature in the Romantic tropes that Stevens rewrites in this poem.

Stevens’ understanding of Cézanne’s theories of art often mirror his own poetics and practices. The insistence on the interrelation of imagination and reality and each man’s preoccupation with place reflect how Cézanne appears throughout Stevens’ poetry. Several critics have argued that Cézanne was an important influence for Stevens, but only in the latter portion of his career (Riddel 11, Litz 149). Commentators on the relationship between Cézanne and late Stevens often cite “The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain,” published in Stevens’ last volume *The Rock* in 1954. Fred Robinson writes of Stevens and late Cézanne that both artists seek to penetrate to an essential, ultimate reality without losing the familiarity of one’s constantly adjusting perception, while combating the anxiety that they can only penetrate as far as their particular selves (Robinson 282). However, while Stevens most explicitly references the painter in his later work, aspects of his poetics parallel Cézanne throughout his career. Both poet and painter display a deep attachment to place, grafting theories of their art onto specific locations. Florida, Pennsylvania, and Hartford are important locations for Stevens and represent the trajectory of his poetic development. Florida appears frequently in *Harmonium* and provides a place for Stevens to locate a wild, deeply natural fusion of reality and imagination, such as in the *Harmonium* poem, “Fabliau of Florida”:

    Barque of phosphor
    On the palmy beach,

    Move outward into heaven,
    Into the alabasters
    And night blues.

    Foam and cloud are one.
    Sultry moon-monsters
    Are dissolving.
Fill your black hull
With white moonlight.

There will never be an end
To this droning of the surf.

*CPP 18*

Florida represents a land of “sultry moon-monsters” and allows Stevens to articulate his conceptions of man and nature, reality and the imagination, and how that relationship forms his poetics, especially in such poems as “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Pennsylvania and Hartford become increasingly important to Stevens in his later career as he returns to the place of his birth and heritage, and observes the place he made his home for the latter half of his life. Grafting his ideas onto a specific place allowed Stevens to ground his poetry in reality and the physical realities of these locations, while working out the imagination’s relationship to these touchstones of the real. Stevens’ use of Hartford situates his poetry in the actual surroundings of his life, and Hartford represents a more pragmatic embodiment of reality than the “sultry moon monsters” of Florida. The idea of poetry having real world utility relates to his quest for the “supreme fiction” because focusing on actual surroundings parallels his attempts to make his poetry have a function in the real world. The late poem “Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination” uses Hartford as the setting for imaginative transformation:

Last Friday, in the big light of last Friday night,
We drove home from Cornwall to Hartford, late.

It was not a night blown at a glassworks in Vienna
Or Venice, motionless, gathering time and dust.

There was a crush of strength in a grinding going round,
Under the front of the westward evening star,

The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins,
As things emerged and moved and were dissolved,
Either in distance, change or nothingness,
The visible transformations of summer night,

An argentine abstraction approaching form
And suddenly denying itself away.

There was an insolid billowing of the solid.
Night’s moonlight lake was neither water nor air.

CPP 471-72

The poem’s title and its subsequent play with the boundaries of reality and imagination, order and disorder, man and nature embodied in the Aurora Borealis seen from a car in Hartford, represent the ways in which Stevens uses the specificities of place as a means of articulating his poetic ideals.

Cézanne similarly focused on place as a means of developing his theories and practices. Engaging with the landscape of Mont Sainte-Victoire pushed Cézanne to explore new modes of visualizing the familiar and rendering his increasingly planar reality. From the 1880’s to the early 20th century, Cézanne’s paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire evolved from more traditional post-impressionist landscape to increasingly geometric planes of unmodulated color, almost prismatic in their abstraction of recognizable forms. Like Stevens, Cézanne was deeply invested in place throughout his career and this parallel indicates Stevens’ more sustained interest in Cézanne, not limited to his later work.

Throughout his poetry, Stevens engaged with particular artists as a way of articulating his poetics through familiar or traditional artistic works. These references appear in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," frequently in Ideas of Order, and, in the case of Cézanne, in various ways throughout his career. Referring to specific artists allowed Stevens to engage with the themes
and associated means of their paintings, incorporating them into his poetics or using them as sites of transformation.

“sun’s green,/cloud’s red, earth feeling, sky that thinks”:

Color and Color Symbolism

Color is one of the most pervasive examples of Stevens’ interest in painting throughout his career. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the guitar’s color is its first characteristic that indicates its separation from “things as they are”—“You have a blue guitar, you do not play things as they are,” and throughout the poem, blue continues to represent the imagination’s cast on the world (CPP 135). The first section of the poem exemplifies Stevens’ color symbolism. Green in Stevens’ poetry refers to the fecund productivity of nature. In section I, the phrase “The day was green” suggests fertility and growth, indicating the poem as a fertile ground for imaginative exploration. Green is an important color for Stevens because a productive relationship to the raw material of nature shapes his poetics, and green represents the natural.

Blue as imagination is one of Stevens’ most frequent uses of color to embody his ideas, appearing in "The Man with the Blue Guitar,” and throughout his poetry from Harmonium in 1923 to The Rock in 1954. The Harmonium poem, “Landscape with Boat,” is one of Stevens’ most painterly poems and directly engages with the importance of color to emphasize what is here for Stevens the successful relation between reality and the imagination:

An anti-master floribund ascetic.

He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,
Then the colossal illusion of heaven. Yet still
The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.
He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see
And not be touched by blue. He wanted to know,
A naked man who regarded himself in the glass
Of air, who looked for the world beneath the blue,
Without blue, without any turquoise hint or phase,
Any azure under-side or after-color. Nabob
Of bones, he rejected, he denied, to arrive
At the neutral center, the ominous element,
The single colored, colorless, primitive.

... He never supposed
That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
That the things that he rejected might be part
And the irregular turquoise part, the perceptible blue
Grown dense, part, the eye so touched, so played
Upon by clouds, the ear so magnified
By thunder, parts, and all these things together,
Parts, and more things, parts. He never supposed divine
Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
And that if nothing was the truth, then all
Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.

CPP 220-221

The “ascetic” man attempts to sever his perceptions entirely from the imagination, embodied in this poem by repeated references to blue. His ultimate realization of the necessary integration of reality and the imagination moves him away from the “colorless” “neutral” center to an understanding of the imagination’s presence in every element of the world. Throughout his poetry, Stevens argues that there is no “world beneath the blue,” and that the imagination’s blue is deeply fused with reality: “yet still/the sky was blue.” Blue, like green, carries natural connotations through the color of the sky and sea, large bodies of blue that cover and pervade the world with their imaginative associations.

In his poetry Stevens explored a spectrum of colors and their associations, using various colors to indicate different forces, presences, and actors in his poetry. In addition to blue and
green, Stevens associates black, white, red, and yellow, among other color variations, with particular meanings. He associates black with death and nothingness, but black also outlines the forms of nature, and for Stevens a confrontation with the idea of death can be a productive beginning for the creative imagination, as in the *Parts of a World* poem, “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas”:

Be broken and winter would be broken and done,
And being would be being himself again,
Being, becoming seeing and feeling and self,
Black water breaking into reality.

*CPP 230*

The “black water” provides the material for the process of becoming and understanding the self in this poem. The poet can locate opportunities for creative transformation in the forceful unmeaning of black. These lines also indicate Stevens’ associations with the color white in the way that winter is a negative force that wipes blank the mind’s potential and covers the world in emptiness. In “The Poems of Our Climate,” from 1942’s *Parts of a World*, the still life scene is empty because of its blankness, the “white” of the “snowy air” that covers the objects of the still life that does not allow room for the depth of the imagination (*CPP 178-179*). In Stevens’ poems, black is often figured as an emptiness that contains potentialities, while white is a blankness devoid of possibility.

Other colors appear with more or less consistent associations throughout Stevens’ work. Red often symbolizes a reality opposed to the blue of the imagination. In the 1950 poem, “Large Red Man Reading,” Stevens expresses the imaginative fusion of a text and its reader: the words are blue with poetic creativity and the pragmatic-figured man is colored red. The red man begins the poem “reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae” and over the course of the following stanzas the
“tabulae” transform to “purple” through the interaction between the red man and the “blue tabulae” in the creation of meaning. Red fuses with blue to create purple as reality interacts with the imagination, and each transforms the other. In Stevens’ work, purple generally refers to this delight in the imagination and also carries associations of the exotic and, more traditionally, the royal. In the section of “The Comedian as Letter C” titled “Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan,” Stevens writes of the title figure, “into a savage color he went on,” and situates him amidst a wild, jungle landscape of “purple tufts” and other fantastical elements of nature (CPP 25). In the same poem, Stevens refers to an “ancient purple,” associating the color with traditional, doctrinal forms of power, the authority of the “stiffest realist” (CPP 36).

Yellow, like blue and green, has a connotation with nature for Stevens and is usually linked to the sun. Yellow and gold often represent the light of the sun: “A dithery gold falls everywhere” or a scene is “smeared with the gold of the opulent sun” (CPP 113, 108). Because of the sun’s position in the sky, its light and its associated gold and yellow are often figured as too removed from earthly realities and bearing vestigial associations with antiquated ideas of the divine. Gold functions in this way as representative of the disconnected and overly religious in “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” The guitarist finds himself “enraged/by gold antagonists in air” and in attempting to locate a self he rejects “that gold self aloft” associated with the insufficient idea of a Christian God (CPP 138, 144). A variation on the color yellow, bronze, part of the red family, continues Stevens’ color symbolism into another material—the metal of statues. Bearing the negative associations that Stevens pairs with the statue, bronze represents the false shell of humanity and the stagnation of creative powers. In “The Man with the Blue Guitar, the metal statue is “bearded bronze, but not a man,” and in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” “true flesh” is transformed into “an inhuman bronze” (CPP 135, 338).
Stevens’ system of color symbolism engages important aspects of painting and visual representation, while also highlighting his engagement with the natural. Stevens wrote in “Adagia” that “All of our ideas come from the natural: Trees=umbrellas,” indicating the importance that the appearance of nature’s reality has on the construction of a human reality (CPP 903). Many of his symbolic colors have a counterpart in the natural world, which Stevens mirrors (the blue of the sea) or diverges from (the “blue guitar”) to create meaning through these visual means. Stevens also wrote that “a poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have,” which suggests to the reader the need to deny the impulse to decode his poetry (CPP 914). In a review of Harmonium, Marianne Moore, the poet herself of “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” wrote of Stevens’ use of color, “The riot of gorgeousness in which Mr. Stevens’ imagination takes refuge…is ‘a flourishing tropic he requires’; so wakeful is he in his appetite for color and in perceiving what is needed to meet the requirements of a new tone key” and that “one is met in these poems by some such clash of pigment,” likening the volume to “Rousseau’s paintings of banana leaves and alligators” (Moore 92). Moore captures the wild, vibrant energy of Stevens’ use of color, especially linked to the equally fierce array of hues in nature. Moore posits Stevens’ interest in color here not as systematized or dogmatic, but as more primitive and bodily, like the “naïve” post-impressionist, Henri Rousseau, whose work Stevens could have seen in a 1928 exhibition of Modern French paintings at the Wadsworth Atheneum, among other places in New York City itself.

Stevens’ use of a specific color is generally consistent throughout its appearances in his poetry, but there is often variation and play within the pattern itself, testing the boundaries of whether or not his use of color can definitively be called a system. Stevens’ use of color resembles, but is far less dogmatic than, that of Kandinsky, whose varied associations with color
were almost scientifically recorded and similarly rigid. Stevens wrote of Kandinsky in a 1952 letter that “it is easy” to like the painter, whom he names alongside his favorite painter, Paul Klee (L 763). Stevens parallels the artist’s process through color association, but the poet can use color arbitrarily, abandoning connections to representational color (representational of nature or of his established symbolism) and uses bright colors to contrast the absence of color elsewhere and to indicate the presence of an imaginative vitality. The use of color in the first lines of “Sunday Morning” can be parsed according to Stevens’ system, but can also be read as the poet visually establishing a setting in which the central figure enters into the imaginative meditations that constitute the poem. Pictorial, colorful lines from the first stanza include,

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
coffee and oranges in a sunny chair
and the green freedom of a cockatoo

... The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
seem things in some procession of the dead
winding across wide water, without sound.

CPP 53

Benamou and Buttel liken Stevens’ use of color in this poem to the arbitrary, evocative color of Matisse, and Costello likens the opening to Manet’s Young Lady with Parrot acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1866, writing: “we enter an interior life through a contrast of surface intensity and blur, just as in Manet areas of detail work against rough, impressionistic ones,” and claims that the scene is written “as if to create a verbal equivalent to Manet’s visual exoticism” (Benamou 50, Buttel 158, Costello “Effects of an Analogy” 71, 72). She concedes, however, that attempting to match Stevens’ poem through any exact one-to-one correspondence with Manet’s painting is futile; the poem veers into the realm of linguistic meditation, away from recognizable visual sources. As with most aspects of Stevens’ interest in painting, his use of
color is not entirely formulaic or tied to any one specific artist or movement. Imposing specific associations of each color can, as Vendler puts it, produce "some commentary of extraordinary banality" in a reductive reading of Stevens’ poetry (Vendler 53). At times, Stevens seems to encourage his reader to simply relish the vibrant liveliness of color, just as the presence of bright color invigorates the mind, the eye, and the imagination, in the *Harmonium* poem,

“Disillusionment of Ten O’clock”:

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.
None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.
People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches Tigers
In red weather.

*CPP* 52-53

Buttel writes of *Harmonium* that, “in his use of color, Stevens was experimenting with one way of making an extraordinary effect, an intensity…it is clear that Stevens was searching for new ways to give his poetry visual concreteness and subtle emotional suggestion” (Buttel 152). In “Disillusionment of Ten O’clock” Stevens uses color to create an “intensity” that contrasts the blank emptiness of the house filled with “white nightgowns.” Here as elsewhere in his poetry, colors contribute to the presentation of a lively, vibrant imagination. Color in Stevens’ poetry takes its important place alongside language.
Cubism is one of the major art movements behind "The Man with the Blue Guitar," both in the poem’s form and content. Many commentators on the poem point to fragmentation as an important influence in its construction. Bloom writes, “much of the effect of ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ depends upon the interplay of a minimal vocabulary and a disjunctive movement between figurations, a discord founded upon only a very few notes” (Bloom 119-120). By describing the poem in relation to discordant music, Bloom incorporates two major artistic forces behind the poem, Cubism and music, emphasizing the fragmentary collection of reduced forms that govern the format. Costello also uses the tenets of Cubism in describing "The Man with the Blue Guitar,” arguing that the poem indicates that “the poet must disassemble the norms of experience, ‘things as they are,’ or how they have been conventionally perceived” (Costello “Stevens and Painting” 172). One of the poem’s central concerns is to explore new modes of seeing, thinking, and understanding, and throughout the poem the guitarist engages in that process, transforming from ”the maker of a thing yet to be made,” toward figuring new fictions for the modern age (CPP 138). In “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting,” Stevens calls modern reality a reality of “decreation,” borrowing from the process and language of the Cubists to describe the understanding of his historical and artistic moment (CPP 750). Construction of this new reality requires decréative acts and Cubism offered Stevens a way of breaking down reality, the imagination, and their relationship into essential fragments. Section II of "The Man with the Blue Guitar” particularly emphasizes the creative act of decreation: “I cannot bring a world quite round./Although I patch it as I can” (CPP 135). The language of patching, assembling or supplementing a whole with parts describes the Analytic Cubist process of
rendering the world. These parts do not depict modern life in the cohesive, representational “round” of the world, but in fragmentary, “patched” forms.

In a 1948 letter to Barbara Church Stevens wrote: “When people were painting Cubist pictures, were they not attempting to get at not the invisible but the visible? They assumed that back of the peculiar reality that we see, there lay a more prismatic one of many facets. Apparently deviating from reality, they were trying to fix it” (L 601). The balance of seeing reality as it is and creating an imaginative reality is represented in the apparent abstraction of reality into geometric planes of Cubist painting. Cubist prismatic geometry communicates a deeper reality, the one behind the “peculiar reality that we see.” The idea of accessing a truth behind given or traditional perceptions is addressed in lines from the penultimate stanza of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” that argue for knowing the self through approaching a deeper truth:

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.

_CPP 150_

The blue guitar allows for a fuller understanding of the self through its constantly transformative effects on reality, because it destroys the “crust of shape,” or traditional representation, that presents a unified surface. These lines suggest that the true self is variable. It takes on multiple “shapes” and posits a Cubist fragmentation of forms to represent the whole. Analytic Cubist forms, in fact, frequently sought to fully express an object from multiple or all perspectives, using fragmentation and geometric abstraction to access the essence of things. "The Man with the Blue Guitar" serves as one of the infrequent examples of Stevens using the artist’s
method in the form and construction of his poetry, allowing a direct comparison between the practices of poet and painter.

As noted earlier, in Stanza XV of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens borrows Picasso’s phrase “hoard of destructions” that the painter uses to describe the forceful breaking apart of pictorial unity to display a fragmented whole in his analytic Cubist paintings (CPP 141). Picasso’s linguistic approximation of his painterly technique parallels Stevens’ mode of representing the relationship between reality and imagination in the poem as fully as he can. He breaks it down into discrete fragments (each individual section) that tell their own story to modify the whole.

Because Picasso is the most important Cubist figure to Stevens and Picasso’s experimentation with Cubist modes of representation alongside Georges Braque took place in roughly the first decade of the 20th century, Stevens begins engaging with the ideas of Cubism as early as Harmonium. Two poems that engage Cubism from this early point in Stevens’ career are “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” written in 1917, and “The Public Square,” from 1923. Both poems interact with Cubist theory and practice, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” more in the poem’s form and “The Public Square” in the poem’s content.

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is one of Stevens’ most frequently anthologized poems and its form engages ideas of Cubism in the presentation of multiple perspectives. The poem’s separate, haiku-like stanzas suggest a variety of possible viewpoints like those in Cubist painting, and present a succession of images that do not make rational sense but summon a whole and the emotional composite of the images. The perspectives are isolated, but directed toward the same subject just as a figure in a Cubist painting is comprised of discrete, related planes. Buttel proposes that the title "alludes humorously to the Cubist practice of
incorporating into unity and stasis a number of possible views of the subject observed over a span of time" (Buttel 165). Each stanza does not necessarily offer a new visual perspective on the blackbird, but reveals a new aspect of its meaning and significance and is Cubist in its assemblage of related fragments. Costello states that the poem engages Cubism in its “concern with structure and multiplicity in form,” for example in such lines as, “I was of three minds/Like a tree/In which there are three blackbirds,” and she argues that “the poem plays with scale, with the relative value of substance and shadow, with geometric form and other visual elements of painterly experimentation” (CPP 74, Costello “Stevens and Painting” 168). Stevens wrote of the poem in a 1928 letter that “this group of poems is not meant to be a collection of epigrams or of ideas, but of sensations,” emphasizing the sensory aspect of engaging with the blackbird motif, especially through sight (L 251). The poem is painterly in its visualization of the blackbird and vision is the primary sense with which the poet engages the blackbird, but language remains Stevens’ medium for accessing the essence of the object. Several stanzas of the poem indicate an interest in painting, engaging ideas of visual contrast, color, and the task of depicting the reality in “back of the things,” as Stevens believed the Cubists were doing. He wrote of section XII—
“The river is moving. /The blackbird must be flying”—that, “The point is the compulsion frequently back of the things that we do,” indicating that this section and the poem as a whole are attempting to locate the true reality of the blackbird (CPP 76, L 340). Section X also alludes to the interest in transformation that an engagement with the imagination can produce:

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

CPP 76
Stevens wrote of this section: “What was intended by X was that the bawds of euphony would
suddenly cease to be academic and express themselves sharply: naturally, with pleasure, etc.” (L
340). As in Cubism, the altering of visual perspective and representation in stanza X provides
deeper access to the self and the integrated reality of imaginative creativity. The blackbird serves
as a point of reference that acts as something intelligible among the unintelligible, the outline of
recognizable form in the shattered Cubist composition.

The “Public Square,” published in the second edition of *Harmonium* in 1931, describes
the violent demolition of architectural elements in a city square. The act of the building’s
destruction recalls the often violent fragmentation of analytic Cubism:

A slash of angular blacks
Like a fractured edifice
That was buttressed by blue slants
In a coma of the moon.

A slash and the edifice fell,
Pylon and pier fell down.

*CPP* 91

Buttel discusses this poem as written in the Cubist mode, describing Stevens’ illustration of the
building’s ruin as, “faceted order upon the multiplicity of experience—reducing the object to
fragments and then restructuring it” (Buttel 163). The poem ends with the qualified resolution of
“clearing” the square, unifying once again the view into this space. Stevens repeats the action of
“slashing,” emphasizing the violence of the building’s fragmented appearance and suggesting the
sharp, purposeful movements of the Cubist painter’s brush across the canvas as he composes an
object out of interrelated geometric planes. The first stanza of the poem seems to approximate a
visual perspective in the emphasis on the moon’s cast on the scene and the description of the
building’s buttresses as “blue slants,” forms that display a dynamic energy but are not recognizable, merely identified by their color and positioning related to the building.

Though Picasso was the major Cubist figure for Stevens, this poem echoes the more analytic Cubist paintings of Georges Braque, exemplified by the 1908 painting, “Houses at L’Estaque.” The painting depicts a geometric fusion of architecture and nature just as Braque creates a sense of depth as the blocks of houses and trees recede into a relatively shallow space. The illusion of depth in a shallow space crowds the canvas with the abstracted forms of the composition and the central line of blocks feels pushed forward and down toward the bottom edge of the picture plane. This version of Braque’s Cubism was described by Leo Steinberg as a “hithering spill,” describing the compression of forms and their movement down the center of the canvas (Steinberg 119). The lines “a slash and the edifice fell/Pylon and pier fell down,” in particular suggest Braque and describe the dissolution of linear framing and supporting devices replaced by the slashing violent energy of a Cubist composition.

Cubism also appears in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" through the motif of music and the guitar that are central to the poem. Section IV is representative of the guitar and its music as a metonym for the artist and man’s relationship to the collective:

So that’s life, then: things as they are?
It picks its way on the blue guitar.

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

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

The feelings crazily, craftily call,
Like a buzzing of flies in autumn air,

And that’s life, then: things as they are,
This buzzing of the blue guitar.
Here the sound of the guitar, specifically the “buzzing of the blue guitar,” is life—it’s multiple sounds in one unified note represent society’s totalizing effect on individual identity. Through the guitarist, the guitar, and its music, the speaker expresses doubt and distaste in a system that compresses “all their manner in the thing,” and uses language that mirrors a rhyming folksong to express the fury of all the suppressed sounds. Elsewhere in Stevens’ poetry he conflates the role of musician and poet in their shared function in the modern world, calling for the poet “to be seated at the piano” and “play the present” in the *Ideas of Order* poem, “Mozart, 1935” (*CPP* 107).

The guitar and other similar musical instruments often provide a central subject for Picasso and Braque’s development of synthetic Cubism, and, similarly to Stevens’ guitar, represent the expression of their developing artistic theories. If "The Man with the Blue Guitar" finds its source imagery in the earlier Picasso painting, *The Old Guitarist*, the poem, like Picasso in his synthetic Cubist collages, is elaborating on the original motif, making claims about a more fragmented modern reality of “decreation” through suggesting the transformation of the guitar in Picasso’s work as it developed into the 1910’s. Picasso and Braque’s Cubist collages of the guitar also incorporated other materials, such as imitation wood grain paper, stencils, and found objects. These compositions challenged the boundaries of reality in their constructed spaces, flirting with the coincidence of the surface of the canvas and the picture plane with the use of layered materials and drawing. These were all attempts to incorporate reality into the visual language of art in the most literal way possible. Stevens knew Picasso’s development well; at the Wadsworth Atheneum’s 1934 Picasso Retrospective, Stevens would have seen *The Old Guitarist* alongside the later Cubist works, *Three Musicians* of 1921 and 1909’s *Seated Woman*. Thus,
Cubism, in the "The Man with the Blue Guitar," following his earlier interest in Harmonium, provided Stevens a useful framework for shaping his poetry and articulating the fragmentary nature of the modern world.

“A dream no longer a dream, a thing/Of things as they are”:
*Explorations into Surrealism*

Stevens’ interest in Surrealism in part reflects his desire in the 1930’s to involve his poetry more consciously in the world of contemporary ideas. Surrealism as a literary and artistic movement came to prominence in the United States in the 1930’s, during the period in which Stevens was composing "The Man with the Blue Guitar.” The Wadsworth Atheneum held their Surrealist exhibition in 1931, the Museum of Modern Art put on the exhibition, “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,” in late 1936, and Stevens published *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems* in 1937. One of the Surrealists’ primary modes of artistic creation was automatic drawing and writing that, they argued, allowed access to the unconscious mind’s unmediated expression. They frequently sought to locate psychological truths, to sever objects from traditional associations, and to disrupt established boundaries of art and life. Stevens was aware of the Surrealists during the 1930’s, but was not entirely sympathetic to their ideas, writing in 1940: “The essential fault of Surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination” (*Opus Posthumous* 203). Stevens also wrote of the imagination in 1940, “Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality. Here is a fundamental principle about the
imagination: It does not create except as it transforms…. Imagination gives, but gives in relation” (L 364). What Stevens objects to in Surrealism here is the “departure from reality,” the reality that can be accessed through the subconscious through what he believes to be artificial means.

MacLeod usefully points to the distinction between Veristic and Absolute Surrealism as a way of delineating in what ways Stevens engaged with and understood Surrealist ideas (MacLeod Modern Art 129). Veristic Surrealism is illusionistic; it distorts or oddly juxtaposes recognizable objects in order to create a kind of dream image or hallucinatory vision, such as the strange, playful dreamscapes of Salvador Dalí or the deliberate, academic illusionism of René Magritte. This type of Surrealism did not interest Stevens for precisely the reason he explains in the above quotation: it “invents” rather than discovers, and presents, not the natural fusion of reality and imagination, but an artificially imposed “imagination” on the objects of reality. Absolute Surrealism is closer to the idea of “pre psychic automatism”: the use of chance occurrences or spontaneous gestures as a way of starting a painting and gaining access to the unconscious. MacLeod identifies Joan Miró an artist whose work is closer than Dalí’s to the nature of Stevens’ engagement with Surrealism.

Because Dalí was such an eccentric and visible figure during the 1930’s, many mistakenly viewed his art as a metonym for the Surrealist movement in general, while in actuality the interpretation of Surrealist practice and ideas took many forms. Stevens seems to fall into this mistaken attribution, which could help to explain his discomfort with the movement; in a 1936 letter, he wrote: “When I was in New York last week I thought of going to the exhibition at the Modern Museum, but…I went to the Morgan Library instead…The metaphysics of Aristotle embellished by a miniaturist who knew the meaning of the word embellishment
knocks the metaphysics of Dalí cold” (*L* 315). Dislike for Dalí aside, Stevens displays similar motivations to express the deeper creativity of the mind, manifest in the work of artists such as Miró. MacLeod finds an analog with the Surrealist process of automaticity in a passage from Stevens’ essay, “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” which describes an “automatic” method of finding a poetic subject:

> I awoke once several hours before daylight and as I lay in bed I heard the steps of a cat running over the snow under my window almost inaudibly. The faintness and strangeness of the sound made on me one of those impressions which one so often seizes as pretexts for poetry…[The poet] hears the cat on the snow. The running feet set the rhythm. There is no subject beyond the cat running on the snow in the moonlight. He grows completely tired of the thing, wants a subject, through feeling, his whole manner changes. All these things enter into the choice of subject…All this is irrational.

_MACLEOD 789_

MacLeod likens Stevens’ description of this process to that of an Absolute Surrealist interested in automaticity: “The artist manipulates the artistic medium…intently scrutinizing his own emotional responses, until suddenly, automatically, the desired subject matter manifests itself” (MacLeod *Modern Art* 131). MacLeod’s connection seems slightly forced, however, because Stevens’ process still involves the artist’s “choice,” a conscious decision directly opposed to the idea of a subject automatically “manifesting” from the unconscious mind. This passage from Stevens’ essay does indicate an interest in accessing the “irrational,” the aspect of the mind that emerges “through feeling” when the mind is “tired,” indicating a similar motivation to the Absolute Surrealist, if not the same process. Stevens also wrote in “The Irrational Element in Poetry”:

> I should not want to be misunderstood as having the poets of surrealism in mind. They concentrate their prowess in a technique which seems singularly limited but which, for all that, exhibits the dynamic influence of the irrational. They are extraordinarily alive and that they make it possible
for us to read poetry that seems filled with gaiety and youth, just when we were beginning to despair of gaiety and youth, is immensely to the good.

Stevens finds in the literary Surrealists, as he defines them in this essay, a commitment to embracing the new with exuberance and exploring the “irrational,” the expression of the self not limited by the conscious mind or traditional representation. Stevens defines the term “irrational” as a less cohesive or well-developed version of “imagination”; throughout his essay he refers to the “irrational” to mean the individuality of the poet, an emotional response to a stimulus in reality, poetic expression in general, and spirituality. Stevens excluded the essay from The Necessary Angel, but it communicates his desire to work through his relationship to and engagement with Surrealism. Stevens composed the essay in the same period as he was writing “Owl’s Clover” in 1936. Both poem and essay explored Surrealism and both were uncharacteristically rhetorical and verbose, indicating that Stevens was not fully comfortable at the time expressing these ideas or with the nature of their expression later when assembling his collected works.

Stevens delivered this essay as a talk at Harvard on December 8th, 1936, and the first verses of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" appeared in print in April of 1937. Surrealism appears in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" where Stevens explores the irrational of the self and the surrealist process of becoming or accessing the irrational in order to understand and master it. Section XIX discusses the desire to subsume the self’s inner “monster,” a reflection of the Surrealist’s understanding of the wild, untamable unconscious:

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

In face of the monster, by more than part
Of it, more than the monstrous player of
One of its monstrous lutes, not be
Alone, but reduce 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.

CPP 143

These lines can be read in terms of Surrealism’s interest in accessing unconscious expression and creating a deeper understanding of the mind, uniting conscious perception and unconscious desires. Here Stevens does not wish to lock the “lion” unproductively in stone, but locate to it within an instrument of the imagination’s expression. Stevens wrote of this section in a 1953 letter: “I want, as a man of the imagination, to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom I write. I want man’s imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality” (L 790). Here Stevens is creating an opposition between imagination, which in “The Irrational Element in Poetry” was conflated with the irrational, and reality, which could represent the conscious mind’s restrictions on the freedom of the unconscious. The figuring of the unconscious as a “monster” is particularly common to the language of the Surrealists. The mythical Minotaur, for example, represented to the Surrealists the half-man, half-bull embodiment of forbidden and unconscious desire. Artists from André Masson, to Man Ray, to Jackson Pollock found a creative source in the duality of the Minotaur. The Surrealist magazine founded by Albert Skira in Paris that ran from 1933-1939 called itself Minotaure after the evocative monster of the mythological past. Picasso did a series of prints depicting the Minotaur and various human subjects engaged in violent or tender relation, most famous of which is the “Minotaumachy” of 1935, which explored Picasso’s personal
mythologies through this man-beast’s interaction with the world. Stevens engages the language and theories of the Surrealists through the violent struggle between the rational self and the “monster” of the self depicted in these lines from "The Man with the Blue Guitar."

Stevens entertains Surrealist ideas and practice in several other poems, most explicitly in the section, “Sombre Figuration” of “Owl’s Clover.” Stevens wrote of this poem in a 1940 letter to Hi Simons, “What is within us, if regarded as contained within us, may be said to be in a chamber or in camera. But in the camera of the sub-conscious, things are not (may not be) what they are in consciousness. The locust may titter. The turtle may sob. Surrealism” (L 375). In this poem he explicitly states that his purpose is Surrealist, defining a division between the conscious and unconscious mind and the unconscious’s potential for imaginative transformation.

I
There is a man whom rhapsodies of change,
Of which he is the cause, have never changed
And never will, a subman under all
The rest, to whom in the end the rest return,
The man below the man below the man,
Steeped in night’s opium, evading day.

II
We have grown weary of the man that thinks.
He thinks and it is not true. The man below
Imagines and it is true

... He was born within us a second self,
A self of parents who have never died,
Whose lives return, simply, upon our lips

... He dwells below, the man below, in less
Than body and in less than mind, ogre,
Inhabitant, in less than shape, of shapes

CPP 167-68

Here, as in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” Stevens figures the “subman” of the unconscious as a monster, an “ogre,” that is a “second self” to the rational thinking man. Stevens emphasizes the
depth of the “subman’s” place in the unconscious, “the man below the man below the man,” using Surrealist language of the divided self. Here Stevens associates the subconscious with change and imaginative transformation: “There is a man whom rhapsodies of change,/Of which he is the cause, have never changed,” and “The man below/Imaginaes and it is true.” In the same 1940 letter to Hi Simons discussing “Sombre Figuration,” Stevens wrote, “the conscious is a lesser thing than the subconscious. The conscious is, therefore, inadequate” (L 373). Here Stevens appears to encourage the kind of engagement with and expression of the unconscious that the Surrealists sought through automatic practice. Stevens opposes the “subman” with the rational man, positing the need for the “medium man,” the fusion of the two forces represented by these aspects of the self (CPP 170). In the “medium man” figure, “Jocundus,” both the subconscious force of the imagination and the rational conscious mind coexist, which allows the “medium man” to productively exist in modern conditions (CPP 170). The Surrealists, too, felt that an acknowledgement of the unconscious allowed for a fuller understanding of the self. The insistence on balance reflected in the “medium man” illuminates Stevens’ criticism of Surrealism as too involved with an imposed imagination that “invents” rather than “discovers.” This foray into Surrealism was not included in the Collected Poems, however, since Stevens cut the entirety of “Owl’s Clover” from the volume. Litz calls the poem a “product of an age of anxiety,” and sees it as reflecting the pressure that Stevens felt to incorporate the issues and ideas of the contemporary world into his poetry (Litz 203).

The 1942 poem, “Cuisine Bourgeoisie,” from Parts of a World, recalls the Surrealist use of violence, similar to the idea of the “monster” used to represent the uncontrolled, wild unconscious or, in the case of the early Surrealists such as André Masson, the destruction of war. The poem expresses a similar concern as section VI of “The Man with the Blue Guitar”—“Is this
picture of Picasso's, this ‘hoard/Of destructions’, a picture of ourselves”—that the world is in a period of transition where the essential balance between reality and the imagination is unstable and so is the poet’s conception of self. Stevens begins the poem with the lines, “These days of disinheritance, we feast/On human heads” (CPP 209). The imagery of self-cannibalization reflects the degraded state of the imaginative man, forced to look inward for the sustenance that the outside world should provide. The poem goes on to describe the turn toward consuming the self that both reflects and sustains the modern man and the resultant ambivalence about the violent consumption:

This outpost, this douce, this dumb, this dead, in which
We feast on human heads, brought in on leaves,
Crowned with the first, cold, buds. On these we live
No longer on the ancient cake of seed,
The almond and deep fruit. This bitter meat
Sustains us…Who then, are they, seated here?
Is the table a mirror in which they sit and look?
Are they men eating reflections of themselves?

CPP 209

The heads are “crowned with the first, cold, buds” of transformation and growth, suggesting that through this grotesque recycling of the body the mind can locate its imaginative potential. But ultimately the violent imagery represents the spiritual poverty of modern life. This poem is not considered to be particularly successful; For example, MacLeod calls the imagery “too self-consciously weird” and the “point” too “obvious” (MacLeod Modern Art 97) and Cook writes that this style of the grotesque is “not Stevens’ forte” (Cook 150).

“Cuisine Bourgeoisie” extends the same argument and questioning of section VI of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” but Surrealist theory does not advance the development of the idea. Although written later than “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” “Cuisine Bourgeoisie” presents the same issue, but here with more violent Surrealist themes. This lack of development indicates that
Surrealist ideas, though compelling to Stevens, were not usually imaginatively productive in his poetry.

Buttel writes of Stevens’ use of imagery such as that in “Cuisine Bourgeoise”: “such imagery often brought Stevens to the edge of Surrealism…but he skirted it because he desired to accomplish more than presenting the unconscious as a manipulated flight from reality or as a witty exercise indulged in for its superficial surprises” (Buttel 162). MacLeod argues that Stevens was interested in Surrealism because it signified an approach to life imaginatively engaging with the self, rather than any artistic style (MacLeod Modern Art 64). What Stevens appreciated in Surrealist painting were the strange, unexpected, and illuminating pictorial representations of the imagination and subconscious, but his relationship to the movement was qualified by what he believed to be their sometimes artificial, self-conscious and manipulative expressions of the imagination.

“A few final solutions, like a duet/With the undertaker: a voice in the clouds”:

Conclusions

When parts of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" first appeared in April and May of 1937 in Twentieth Century Verse and Poetry magazines, respectively, the poem opened with the lines “I cannot bring a world quite round,/Although I patch it as I can.” These painterly lines reflect a Cubist perspective on artistic production in the modern world. The poem emphasizes the painter’s mode of seeing and assembling the parts of a world that form the pieces of Stevens’ poetic meditation. In the back of the issue of Poetry, among the brief biographical sketches of the writers featured, the editor George Dillon quotes Stevens introducing the poem “whose subject is the individuality of the poet in relation to the world about him, or, to say the same thing in
another way, the balance between imagination and reality” (Poetry Vol. 50 p. 119). By stating that the subject is that of the individuality of the poet himself with his surroundings, Stevens aligns the poet and his work with that of the guitarist, shearsman, painter, artist figure, whose tune embodies the interplay of reality and imagination.

In a letter to Ronald Latimer in March of 1937, Stevens described the process of writing the poem thusly: “what they really deal with is the painter’s problem of realization: I have been trying to see the world as an imaginative man sees it” (L 316). In writing these poems, Stevens takes on the eye of the painter—the “imaginative man”—to work through the balance between imagination and reality, which he describes in the same letter as a “constant source of trouble to me,” adding, “I don’t feel that I have as yet nearly got to the end of the subject” (L 316). "The Man with the Blue Guitar" represents for Stevens a meditation on this theme that has and would “trouble” him for the rest of his career. The poem’s form embodies the sense of process that is the composing force behind it as the relationship between reality and the imagination is in flux. Stevens continues the Cubist, meditative form into the long poems of his later career, using the similar method of exploring a singular idea or subject from varied perspectives. “The Auroras of Autumn” from the 1950 volume of the same name meditates on its variable subject through the multiplicity inherent in the Aurora Borealis. Stevens’ poetry continues to maintain the visual, but the visualization is less painterly while language and meditation govern the trajectory of his later poems. For example, in the 1955 poem, “Of Mere Being,” “A gold-feathered bird/Sings in the palm,” presenting imagery that earlier in his career, for example the opening of “Sunday Morning,” had a more painterly emphasis (CPP 476). Here, the bird sings “without human meaning/Without human feeling, a foreign song”; the image does not function paramount to the “song” of the bird, which Stevens defines through an emptiness of meaning (CPP 476). In this
poem that contemplates death, “The palm at the end of the mind,/Beyond the last thought,” the poem generates meaning through linguistic play, such as the double meaning of “mere” as “only” or “essentially” and the combination of “fire-fang” and “new-fangled” to create the double meaning of “burned” and “inclined to take fire” (Cook 314). The visual is more dependent on language in Stevens’ later poetry.

"The Man with the Blue Guitar” communicates the dialectical tension between forces that persist and generate perception and art in general, a concern for Stevens throughout his career. The importance of “the universal intercourse” and the creations of the man of imagination as “a refrain/One keeps playing year by year,/Concerning the nature of things as they are” reflect the consistent development of the imagination’s relation with the world that later come to inform Stevens’ concept of the “supreme fiction” (CPP 145). The intercourse persists continuously because it concerns the unceasing process of the imaginative mind’s interaction with its surroundings, an interaction that generates our perceptions of reality and through the mind of the poet or painter, generates art.

While reflecting the theme of reality and the imagination that is a consistent concern for Stevens throughout his career before and in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the poem moves towards the major concerns of his later career, especially the “supreme fiction.” In section XXIX, the guitarist sits alone in a “cathedral,” contemplating his relation to the sacred space and how “The shapes are wrong and the sounds are false./The bells are the bellowings of bulls” (CPP 148). The idea of finding a true form of spirituality that Stevens presents in "The Man with the Blue Guitar” directly informs the development of the “supreme fiction,” which Stevens wrote in a 1943 letter should be “something as valid as the idea of God has been” (L 434). Throughout "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens calls for new forms of belief, seeking “A substitute for
all the gods” and something “beyond us, yet ourselves” (CPP 135, 144). Stevens insists on both new modes of belief and creative expression, calling for his generation to:

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.

CPP 150

The poem proposes to name anew and see the systems and beliefs of the past with fresh eyes, calling for a more active engagement with the realities of the present that does not throw away the substance of the past, but only its constructed labels that limit the mind’s imaginative potential. Art was Stevens’ means to the supreme fiction, as he writes in section VI: “The thinking of art seems final when/The thinking of God is smoky dew” (CPP 137). Poetic and imaginative truths are what seem final to Stevens, rather than the inadequate ideas of God that disintegrate and dissipate in the modern age while Stevens progresses into his poetry of the 1940’s and 50’s. In “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting” Stevens names painting as an important manifestation of the arts which lead modern society to a source of belief, to what Stevens conceptualizes as the supreme fiction:

The paramount relation between poetry and painting is simply this: that 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.

CPP 748

The arts are what compel Stevens to belief as he focuses on the importance of imaginative creativity in accessing that belief. The arts provide “the bread of time to come,” the sustenance that needs to be found in a modern age of disbelief (CPP 151). Language and the visual sustain imperfect fictions that together play upon the blue guitar a modern song of imagination.
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Appendix


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