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‘Music is feeling, then, not sound’: Rhyme in the Development of Wallace Stevens

Wallace Stevens sits uneasily in the modernist canon. Whereas the verse principles of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound – two obvious comparators – have become almost synonymous with the broader movement they did so much to shape, Stevens’ poetics are less easily defined. He appears more at ease with the legacies of Romanticism than are many of his peers, and less committed to the premise that radical poetic techniques are essential to the apprehension, and generation, of radical insights. Indeed, admirers and detractors alike have tended to emphasise Stevens’ formal conservatism.¹ In Harold Bloom’s eyes, Stevens extends a Romantic and consciously lyric tradition in exchanging modernist anxieties for Emersonian amplitudes.² And Marjorie Perloff reaches similar conclusions, though she is far less enamoured of them, in her influential essay, ‘Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?’³ She contrasts Stevens’ lyrical abstractions unfavourably with the tactile immediacy of Pound’s verse, and argues that only the latter is adequate to the distinctive pressures of modernity.

Each of these readings has enjoyed lasting critical currency, but both underplay the trials that fomented Stevens’ mature poetry. His long apprenticeship encompasses false starts, technical setbacks and radical shifts in tone. And Stevens’ evolving attitude to rhyme offers especially revealing insights into his private creative anxieties. *Harmonium* (1923) contains a number of poems in which rhymes, whether regular or irregular, achieve a musical felicity at the expense of the semantic integration of the verse: style trumps substance. *Ideas of Order* (1934), contains fewer instances of rhyme, as if Stevens were growing more wary of its effects; although individual poems, such as ‘Some Friends from Pascagoula’, show one ostensible limitation of regular rhymes – their risk of sing-song glibness – turned to the poet’s advantage. However, in 1936, Stevens reached a creative crisis embodied in the opacities of ‘Owl’s

¹ There are, of course, exceptions. Studies emphasising the deceptive radicalism of Stevens’ techniques include Beverly Maeder, *Wallace Stevens’ Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999) and Stefan Hollander, *Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

² Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1977) pp. 1-26.

³ Marjorie Perloff, ‘Pound / Stevens: Whose Era?’, *New Literary History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Spring, 1982) pp. 485-514.

Clover', a poem notable for its ornate rhetoric and dense sound patterns. Stevens had experimented with similar techniques before, notably in 'The Comedian as the Letter C'. But 'Owl's Clover' pushes its sonic contrivances to a deleterious extreme, as if, by capturing the phonetic patterns latent in language, the poet might somehow impose order upon the cacophony of modern life. The effects are disorienting. 'Owl's Clover' is the only major work that Stevens chose to omit from his *Collected Poems* of 1955. Yet Stevens' response to this impasse was not to abandon the chimes and flourishes that supply what he called 'the essential gaudiness of poetry', but rather to economise. Accordingly, rhymes are deployed sparingly yet incisively in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' (1937), an underrated poem of crucial importance to Stevens' development.

So far so staid: it is unremarkable to suggest that a major poet should eventually find freedom in devices that had at first constrained him. But other complications intrude. For one thing, in the age of modernism, the very act of rhyming is no longer aesthetically or politically neutral. In the nineteenth century, as Peter McDonald observes, 'a rhymed poem did not, in any useful sense, reflect a *decision* to use rhyme', whereas it is tempting to read Stevens' persistent rhyming as offering, in part, an implicit rebuke to the radical pretensions of his peers.⁴ Certainly, in the final phase of his career, Stevens had little scruple in dismissing verse he deemed experimental merely for the sake of experimentalism:

One sees a good deal of poetry, thanks, perhaps, to Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, in which the exploitation of form involves nothing more than the use of small letters for capitals, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation and similar aberrations. These have nothing to do with being alive. They have nothing to do with the conflict between the poet and that of which his poems are made.⁵

One wonders what Stevens would have made of creative writing programmes. Nonetheless, it is possible to overstate his opposition to the 'aberrations' of the *avant garde*: even here the hauteur is carefully generalised, so that 'a good deal of poetry' may, or may not, encompass major rivals such as Pound or William Carlos Williams.⁶ Indeed, if the sensibility revealed in

⁴ [Emphasis in original] Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012) p. 7.

⁵ Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Lib. of Amer., 1997) p. 746. All references to Stevens' poetry and prose are to this volume (CPP).

⁶ Stevens had little to do with Pound. His complex relationship with Williams is explored in Martha Strom, 'The Uneasy Friendship of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams', *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Jul., 1984), pp. 291-298.

his *Letters* is any guide, then a genuine indifference to the prevailing fashions, rather than an active hostility to them, may explain Stevens' frequent deployment of rhymes, regular metres and conservative lineation. But the passage above also gestures toward a more profound concern about the function of rhyme: 'the conflict between the poet and that of which his poems are made'. Poems are a web of words. Of course, Stevens' phraseology also implies the daunting weight of experience, and the tension between the imagination and reality. Yet even extra-linguistic forces, and the intuitions to which they give rise, must finally be transmuted into 'flawed words and stubborn sounds'.⁷ Rhyme presents particular challenges, in that the effort to fulfil a set of formal expectations may distract from, or even diminish, the semantic rigour of the verse: euphony and profundity do not necessarily go hand in hand. In selecting words for their phonetic compatibility, the poet is, to an extent, uncovering patterns already latent in the language. Words that do not rhyme cannot be forced to rhyme, and the circumstance in which available rhymes might also afford fruitful semantic conjunctions owe more to happy accident than to design. My contention is that Stevens' weaker poems seem almost to surrender to these happy accidents, suborning the poet's creative agency to the contingencies of language. 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', in contrast, witnesses a renewed stringency: the rhymes do not merely carry a superficial melody, but amplify and reframe a conceptual pattern of the poet's own making. This, for Stevens, is a new beginning.

Stevens' first collection, *Harmonium*, published in 1923, reflects diverse influences. It contains several experimental, free-verse lyrics, which draw upon Imagism and the French Symbolists. Other, more discursive poems derive their effects largely from the skilful manipulation of syntax. And arguably the volume's most striking achievement, 'Sunday Morning', is composed in tightly controlled blank verse. Rhymes, and end-rhymes in particular, are comparatively scarce. And, in the few poems in which rhymes are prominent, they are deployed in the service of an ornate, even affected diction. Take 'To the One of Fictive Music':

Yet not too like, yet not so like to be
 Too near, too clear, saving a little to endow
 Our feigning with the strange unlike, whence springs
 The difference that heavenly pity brings.
 For this, musician, in your girdle fixed

⁷ Stevens, 'The Poems of Our Climate', *CPP* p. 179.

Bear other perfumes. On your pale head wear
 A band entwining, set with fatal stones.
 Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:
 The imagination that we spurned and crave. (CPP, p.71)

The intricacy and poise of these lines are impressive, but they lack vitality. Prominent end-rhymes, ‘springs...brings’ and ‘gave...crave’, also conjoin complementary verbs, creating too easy a symmetry between the sound and sense. And in line 6 of the stanza, the pleasing consonance of the internal rhyme, ‘bear . . . wear’, comes at the cost of a stilted word-order, which disregards the cadences of natural speech. These devices typify a recurring weakness in Stevens’ early verse: the emotional energies of a poem are too often vitiated by excessive artifice. The often anthologised ‘Anecdote of the Jar’ presents a more complex instance of the same phenomenon, as here the deadening effects of rhyme may be deliberate:

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

The wilderness rose up to it,
 And sprawled around, no longer wild.
 The jar was round upon the ground
 And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
 The jar was gray and bare.
 It did not give of bird or bush,
 Like nothing else in Tennessee. (CPP, pp. 60-1)

The acoustic symmetries of the opening stanza invest otherwise gnomic abstractions with a telic focus. Though ‘slovenly’ strains against the iambic metre, the ‘wilderness’ that it describes, in echoing the sibilance and inverting the stresses of ‘Tennessee’, is brought stealthily within the realm of the known. And the identical rhymes of the second and fourth lines underscore a shift from the general to the ostensibly definitive, from ‘a hill’ to ‘that hill’.

These rhetorical closures regiment the objects they describe. Indeed, ‘Anecdote of the Jar’ is often interpreted as symbolising the power of art to restore order and intelligibility to a chaotic modern world. Helen Vendler’s influential reading casts the poem as a deliberate response to Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, in which a Romantic sensibility cedes to a renewed stringency of thought.⁸ The contrast is certainly striking. Keats’s urn is lavishly engraved, ‘What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape’, and its evocative images ‘lead’ the poet toward his final, inevitable recognition that ‘beauty is truth, truth beauty’.⁹ But Stevens’ jar is ‘grey and bare’, a tabula rasa. It exchanges emotional urgencies for an austere and simple lexis, which nonetheless resists paraphrase. In the second stanza, an ostensibly approbative description, ‘the jar was round upon the ground’, is complicated by the orotund vowels of the internal rhyme, which evoke a controlling force that is rather remote and complacent than active or benign. If we are to read the poem as dramatizing an aspect of the creative process, then the jar’s very inertia – ‘it did not give of bird or bush’ – suggests a sterile, deadening art, which misses the very vitality of the experiences that it would apprehend.

‘Anecdote of the Jar’ is not unique in chafing against tradition: several poems in *Harmonium* discard cultural totems with a rebellious flourish. ‘The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage’, for instance, famously exchanges Botticelli’s ‘archaic’ Venus for a heroine adequate to the American sublime. But, even as ‘Anecdote of the Jar’ casts off Keats, its rhetoric self-consciously undercuts the very imaginative triumph being described. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the ebbing confidence in the creative act that certain poems in *Harmonium* disclose. Though the volume’s aesthetic consistency is widely attested, it collects poems written over more than a decade of Stevens’ career, from circa 1912 to 1923, and it is arguable that the later poems evince a deepening wariness about the adequacy of poetry to the reality that it would apprehend. Consider, for instance, the final, wonderfully affirmative section of ‘Sunday Morning’, which first appeared in 1915.¹⁰ Here Stevens effectively speaks *in propria persona*, crafting a lyric meditation on the enduring value of human experience, even in the shadow of death:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;

⁸ Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1984) pp. 45-6.

⁹ Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allot (New York: Longman, 1970) pp. 534-7.

¹⁰ When parts of the poem were first published, in the November 1915 edition of *Poetry*, what we now know as the final stanza appeared as the second. The poem achieved its final form in the 1923 edition of *Harmonium*.

Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
 And, in the isolation of the sky,
 At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
 Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
 Downward to darkness, on extended wings. (CPP, p. 56)

These natural images are not transcendent, but entropic: their cadences lead, ineluctably, ‘to darkness’. But the initial dive enacted in ‘sink / Downward’ gracefully flattens out, metrically and semantically, into the long glide of ‘on extended wings’, the fragile beauty of this image reminding us of life as its own transient reward, not as an adjunct to some contrived Elysium. ‘Sunday Morning’, like many early masterpieces, is marked by a metaphysical confidence – a clear sense of the artist’s rôle and purpose – reflected in its style and form. Stevens’ supple blank verse sustains an unapologetically vatic and authoritative voice, whose otherworldly resonances are licensed by the scope of the poem’s ambition and the grandeur of its setting. Both this vatic voice and the creative confidence that it reflects are absent from the final poem written for *Harmonium*, ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ (1923):

Crispin was washed away by magnitude.
 The whole of life that still remained in him
 Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear,
 Ubiquitous concession, slap and sigh,
 Polyphony beyond his baton’s thrust. (CPP, pp. 22-3)

In describing the travails of a minor artist, Stevens is also acknowledging dilemmas for which he himself seems to have no immediate answer. He subdues his own sensibility to that of an unedifying avatar, the hapless Crispin, whose voyage becomes an extended metaphor for Stevens’ creative anxieties. Initially, ‘The Comedian’ develops as a narrative of expanding consciousness and understanding – the growth of a persona’s mind – but, over the course of the poem, Crispin moves gradually from idealism to fatalism. He learns enough to recognise the limitations of selfhood, ‘Glozing his life with after-shining flicks’, but not enough to subdue that self to the exigencies of his art (CPP, p. 37). This failure of the imagination is reflected in a mannered and hyperbolic diction:

Portentous enunciation, syllable

To blessed syllable affined, and sound
 Bubbling felicity in canteline,
 Prolific and tormenting tenderness
 Of music, as it comes to unison,
 Forgather and bell boldly Crispin's last
 Deduction. Thrum with a proud douceur
 His grand pronunciamento and devise. (CPP, p. 35)

These lines are not without felicity, 'bubbling' or no. 'Bell boldly' captures perfectly a mock-heroic tone that elsewhere is sorely overdone, while 'Deduction' is beautifully placed, as the delayed judgement separates Crispin's urgent prolixities from Stevens' supervening insight. But the sonic intricacies add up to less than the sum of their parts. Though the pervasive sibilance accentuates an obvious semantic pattern – 'blessed . . . sound . . . felicity . . . tenderness . . . music . . . douceur . . . devise' – the associations are as stolidly expected as the rhymes in 'To the One of Fictive Music'. We are left with an empty virtuosity, which affords no genuine response to Crispin's creative uncertainties.

In its acknowledgement of a threat to the imagination from 'one vast, subjugating, final tone' 'The Comedian' articulates an anxiety that would confound its author for some years. After the publication of *Harmonium* in 1923, Stevens entered a long period of poetic inactivity, and published nothing of significance for over a decade. His correspondence in this period contains frequent excuses that he was too busy to write, citing a sense of added responsibility after the birth of his daughter, Holly, in 1924. But these quotidian duties cannot entirely explain Stevens' lack of output, as a more intimate and unguarded letter to William Carlos Williams seems to show: 'I have been moved to the attic, so as to be out of the way, where it ought to be possible for me to smoke and loaf and read and write and sometimes I feel like doing all of these things but, so far, I have always elected to go to bed instead'.¹¹ Outwardly, Stevens seems not to have been exercised by his long silence, and it would be wrong to impute to him an unspoken turmoil merely to satisfy the romantic assumption that genius must ever be restless and unconsolated. But it is striking that Stevens' next volume, *Ideas of Order*, drew similar criticisms to *Harmonium*: it seemed too much withdrawn from reality, and too stylised.¹² One

¹¹ 14 Oct. 1925. Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996) p. 245. All references to Stevens' letters are to this volume (*Letters*).

¹² Discussed below.

poem that bucks these charges is 'Some Friends from Pascagoula', in which the faux-naïf diction is complicated by rhyme:

Tell me more of the eagle, Cotton,
And you, black Sly,
Tell me how he descended
Out of the morning sky.

Describe with deepened voice
And noble imagery
His slowly-falling round
Down to the fishy sea.

Here was a sovereign sight,
Fit for a kinky clan.
Tell me again of the point
At which the flight began, (CPP, p.103)

The sing-song rhymes and artless diction of these opening stanzas have led several critics to read the entire poem as sardonic, or worse: Cotton and Sly seem victim to a sneering parody. Unusually, patterns of sound highlight a poverty of sense, contrasting the 'noble imagery' divined by these adult figures – who speak 'with deepened voice' – with their childlike articulation of a 'fishy sea'. The lexis alone is troubling: 'kinky' jars, sonically and semantically. Its contemporary, titillating overtones may post-date Stevens' poem, but the racist, mid-nineteenth-century origins of the phrase – to mean 'curled' or 'twisted', referring especially to black hair – offer an unsettling subtext to lines so overt in their apprehension of primal and exotic energies.¹³ J.M. Linebarger argues that these associations 'imply that the image [of the eagle in flight] and its meanings are suitable for Negroes but not for a sophisticated white poet'.¹⁴ It is perhaps unsurprising that Linebarger's has become the conventional reading, as the condescension of the first three stanzas is overt, and, for most

¹³ According to the *OED*, the modern sense of 'kinky' – 'given to sexual behaviour regarded as strange or unconventional' – did not emerge until the 1950s, although earlier occurrences often carry seditious connotations, if not explicitly sexual ones.

¹⁴ J. M. Linebarger, 'Stevens's Some Friends from Pascagoula', *The Explicator*, 35:2 (1976), pp. 12-13.

modern readers, discomfiting. Yet we should question whether this condescension is co-extensive with Stevens' own attitudes. Does the phrase 'kinky clan' deliberately belittle and dismiss the religiose impulses of one marginalised group, or is the uncomfortable language rather designed to undermine the implicit pretensions of the nameless speaker? Certainly the final two stanzas observe a shift from mocking grandiloquence to reverence:

Say how his heavy wings,
Spread on the sun-bronzed air,
Turned tip and tip away,
Down to the sand, the glare

Of the pine trees edging the sand,
Dropping in sovereign rings
Out of his fiery lair.

Speak of the dazzling wings. (CPP, p. 104)

Now the speaker is transported by the very ecstasies that earlier he caustically belittled. The rhymes no longer magnify a tension between gauche articulation and grand spectacle, but integrate vivid perceptions into a singular, sensate vision. Whereas, in 'Sunday Morning', the 'ambiguous undulations' of birds in flight poignantly reflect the poet's own uncertainties, here the eagle's 'sovereign rings' and 'dazzling wings' rather expand our sense of human possibility. Stevens' own remarks on the poem, in a gloss for Hi Simons, are characteristically cryptic; but they suggest that he had more than mere satire in mind:

A man without existing conventions (beliefs, etc.) depends for ideas of a new and noble order on 'noble imagery'. This poem is an attempt to give a specimen of 'noble imagery' in a commonplace occurrence. What seems to be mere description is, after all, a presentation of a 'sovereign sight.'¹⁵

A trace of self-censure persists in the phrase 'man without existing conventions', which combines a neutral sense of the poet as disinterested observer with more damning implications of cultural deracination. It is certainly significant that the energetic rhymes of 'Some Friends

¹⁵ Letter to Hi Simons, 9 Jan. 1940 (*Letters*, p. 349).

from Pascagoula' emerge from a borrowed register of language, just as the poem's 'noble imagery' must be annexed from a cultural tradition foreign to its speaker. For Stevens' apparent wariness of simple lyric effects in *Ideas of Order* reflects in part his ongoing uncertainty about the social and political rôle of poetry in turbulent times. As I shall argue, Stevens eventually returns to rhyme in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' in order to confront and finally to resolve manifold tensions between the imagination and reality. Hackneyed rhymes dramatise the deadening expectations against which the poet must contend; fresh, incisive rhyming affirms the creative intelligence. But in *Ideas of Order*, an aversion to public expectation results rather in inertia than in innovation. The volume reveals an impersonal character that extends far beyond technical affectation – the avoidance of the lyric 'I'. Several contemporary reviews diagnosed a dissolute and enervated sensibility; and, whilst our appreciation of complex poems such as 'Mozart 1935' and 'Anglais Mort à Florence' need not be limited by these early judgements, their immediate influence upon Stevens' own creative trajectory is arresting. *Ideas of Order* received a particularly hostile review from the Marxist critic, Stanley Burnshaw, who reproached 'the record of a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance'. Burnshaw diagnosed a "scientific," objectified sensuousness separated from its kernel of fire and allowed to settle, cool off and harden in the poet's mind until it emerges a strange amazing crystal' (a description that recalls Percy Hutchison's notorious dismissal of *Harmonium* as 'a glittering edifice of icicles').¹⁶ Chastened, Stevens' initially responded with a satirical poem, 'Mr Burnshaw and the Statue', an ill-advised attempt, in his own words, to 'apply the point of view of a poet to Communism'.¹⁷ This project grew into 'Owl's Clover', an elaborate pastiche of Marxist precepts, which is marred by too sterile and self-consciously literary a style. In his understandable aversion to Burnshaw's precepts, Stevens went out of his way to craft a poem that would resist, not only in its themes, but also in its knotted textures, coercive demands for demotic language and political engagement. Echoes, half-rhymes, and elaborate patterns of consonance complicate and pressurise Stevens' blank verse, corrupting the very form that in 'Sunday Morning' had produced such limpidity:

Be maidens formed

Of the most evasive hue of a lesser blue,

¹⁶ Stanley Burnshaw, 'Turmoil in the Middle Ground', *New Masses*, Vol.17, Oct. 1935. Rpt. in *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1939) p. 139; Percy Hutchison, 'Pure Poetry and Mr. Wallace Stevens', *NYT Book Review*, Aug. 1931. Rpt. in *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁷ Letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, 31 Oct. 1935 (*Letters*, p. 289).

Of the least appreciable shade of green
 And despicable shades of red, just seen,
 And vaguely to be seen, a matinal red,
 A dewy flashing blanks away from fire,
 As if your gowns were woven of the light
 Yet were not bright, came shining as things come
 That enter day from night, came mirror dark,
 With each fold sweeping in a sweeping play. (CPP, p. 574)

Stevens later verse delights in fine distinctions between shades of perception and feeling, but here his earnest qualifications merely vitiate abstractions ‘just seen, / And vaguely to be seen’. Indeed, the internal rhymes, and their ponderous semantic integrations – ‘light . . . bright . . . night’ – contribute to an oddly schematic effect. Stevens is writing to a thesis, and his deterministic rhetoric creates an inertia that is deeply paradoxical: in the very act of proclaiming poetry naturally immune to the constraints of ideology, Stevens betrays his own susceptibility to formulaic thinking. The ghost of Crispin lingers in the overwrought diction of ‘Owl’s Clover’, but Stevens’ preoccupations have shifted. Whereas ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ dramatises a personal anxiety about the poet’s creative gift, ‘Owl’s Clover’ is chiefly concerned with the public rôle of art in politically febrile times:

How shall we face the edge of time? We walk
 In the park. We regret we have no nightingale.
 We must have the throstle on the gramophone.
 Where shall we find more than derisive words?
 When shall lush chorals spiral through our fire
 And daunt that old assassin, heart’s desire? (CPP, p. 586)

These lines, which conclude the penultimate section of the poem, ‘A Duck for Dinner’, achieve a thematic focus lacking in other passages. ‘Where shall we find more than derisive words?’ will become the animating preoccupation of ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, though as yet Stevens’ style seems rather to mimic the ‘throstle on the gramophone’ than to anticipate the nightingale’s song. So the sonic closure of the final couplet, despite its arresting fusion of collective will and private longing, of ‘fire’ and ‘desire’, seems somehow premature and unearned. Even as Stevens seeks to defend his art from the deadening encroachment of

ideology, the hyperbolic sound patterns and ‘lush chorals’ of his verse betray a failure of nerve. ‘Owl’s Clover’ may offer bursts of engaging polemic, poking fun at the dogma that ‘Everything is dead / Except the future’, but the poet’s lyric gifts are squandered in a political treatise set to verse (*CPP*, p. 570). Stevens’ own attitude to the poem is reflected in the fact that ‘Owl’s Clover’ was the only major work omitted from his *Collected Poems* of 1954. So ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, composed briskly in the months following the publication of ‘Owl’s Clover’, can be read as an urgent response to a crisis. From the very beginning, the poem’s language is markedly spare and direct, as if Stevens feels compelled to return to the foundational components of his style:

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

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

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

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

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.” (*CPP*, p. 135)

Here we can hardly object to ornate diction. The obtrusive rhyming of ‘guitar’ with ‘things as they are’, occurring thrice in the space of ten lines, dramatises a persistent and ineluctable tension between individual creativity and public expectation. The guitar, more humble than an Orphean lyre, is nonetheless a symbol of transformation. For this democratic instrument, well suited to a popular tune, will instead become the source of a strange and subtle music, just as Stevens will invest a demotic language with fresh intensities. Meanwhile, several concepts are compressed into the *faux-naïf* expression ‘things as they are’, a phrase deeply conscious of its own complacency. On one level, the refrain is a token of conventional wisdom, of a stultified, collective understanding that the artist may safely dismiss. But the phrase recurs throughout

the poem, accruing steadily more urgent connotations. Reality is increasingly figured as a force at once abstract, yet also invasive and threatening, recalling ‘Anecdote of the Jar’.

At the outset of his poem, Stevens’ is turning the aspect of rhyme he most distrusts, its tendency to constrain and codify poetic language, to his advantage. Though the guitarist chafes against the expectations of his audience – just as, implicitly, the poet chafes against the expectations of his readers – he is nonetheless constrained, at first, by the *language* of those expectations. Even in rejecting any duty to represent ‘things as they are’, the guitarist is unable, as yet, to articulate a more compelling approach to the world. Accordingly, the opening cantos of the poem deploy rhymes as if to throw a restricted and iterative lexis into sharper relief. The effect evokes a struggle to draw meaning from a poverty of experience. Consider the fourth canto:

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

And all their manner, right and wrong,
And all their manner, weak and strong? (CPP, p. 136)

Helen Vendler finds in these lines ‘a certain silliness’, and suggests that Stevens’ alignment of his own perspective with that of the guitarist is fatally limiting: ‘the controlling figure with his reductive guitar . . . is incapable of the vastnesses explored by the later long poems’.¹⁸ Certainly, these early cantos struggle to match the assurances that will later characterise Stevens’ ‘central man’. In ‘Of Modern Poetry’, for instance, the poet becomes, via a metaphor that deliberately recalls ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’:

A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise. (CPP, p. 219)

¹⁸ Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens’ Longer Poems* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1969) p. 124.

Though the alien sound of the metaphysician's instrument, rendered by the repeated and incongruous 'twanging', has the same static insufficiency as the notes of the blue guitar, the surrounding verse achieves an elegance and poise that Stevens denies himself at the outset of the earlier poem. The sibilant flourish of 'string that gives / sound passing through sudden rightnesses', and the patterning of 'below . . . descend', 'beyond . . . rise', speak of an assurance that the embattled guitarist struggles to project. Set against this refined idiom, the early cantos of 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' appear almost a rite of passage, striving to clarify the accommodations with reality that are a necessary precursor to the limpid yet economical diction of *Parts of a World*. But whilst sing-song glibness is irritating, it can also be calculated, dramatising the absurdity of the notion that art can, or should, encompass every facet of human experience. The hackneyed phrases that describe the multitude afford a deliberate contrast with the energy of the individual creative act as it is presented in Canto III:

To nail his thoughts across the door,
Its wings spread wide to rain and snow,

To strike his living hi and ho,
To tick it, tock it, turn it true,

To bang it from a savage blue,
Jangling the metal of the strings.

The rhymes of 'snow . . . ho' and 'true . . . blue' are made possible by two lines of near-nonsense. But this is an affirmative nonsense, which indicates a nascent resistance to conventional idioms. It is better to be inarticulate than simply derivative. Still, even as the guitarist begins to overcome the internal pressures of conventional language, the external pressures of a disorienting, intractable reality loom ever larger. Witness the hostilities of Canto VIII:

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

The morning deluged still by night,
The clouds tumultuously bright

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

Crying among the clouds, enraged
 By gold antagonists in air –

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

And yet it brings the storm to bear.

I twang it out and leave it there. (CPP, p. 138)

There is an echo in lines three and four of Ben Jonson's 'Hymn to Cynthia': 'Thou that mak'st a day of night, / Goddess excellently bright'.¹⁹ But whereas Cynthia's irenic glow is a soothing light amidst the darkness, Stevens inverts the trope, so that the ominous chaos of night encroaches upon the day. The act of borrowing and twisting this rhyme is richly suggestive. Perhaps Stevens is indicating that the guitarist has yet to find his Cynthia, or perhaps we are enjoined to reflect, more soberly, that certain consolations available to Jonson are not available to a poet writing in the modern age. The sonic emphases of the following lines certainly support the latter reading. First the decline of religious faith, a vast and unwieldy subject, is left beautifully implicit in the half-rhyme of 'chords . . . choirs', the subtle dissonance of which effects a tremor of doubt. And, when collective worship fails to console, individual creativity struggles to compensate: after the description of the guitarist's 'lazy, leaden twang', the banal rhymes of the final couplet perform the sonic equivalent of a *faute de mieux* shrug: 'And yet it brings the storm to bear. / I twang it out and leave it there.'

These early cantos intersperse deliberately gauche idioms with bursts of original perception – the former mostly rhymed, the latter mostly not. But the trite closures engendered by these rhymes are not only, as several critics have noted, a satire on social convention. They also represent a conscious expiation of creative anxieties that had troubled Stevens for decades. His first attempts at verse, at Harvard, employed rigid and traditional forms, most of which he would later discard. The regular rhymes of these juvenilia were a particular source of

¹⁹ Ben Jonson, *The Oxford Authors: Ben Jonson*, ed. Ian Donaldson (London: Oxford UP, 1985) p. 482.

retrospective *chagrin*, as Stevens confessed in a letter to his wife: ‘In the ‘June Book’ I made ‘breeze’ rhyme with ‘trees’, and have never forgiven myself. It is a correct rhyme, of course – but unpardonably expected’.²⁰ As I have already suggested, the weaker of Stevens’ early poems deploy rhyme in a fashion that surrenders the poet’s creative agency to the contingencies of language, and the diminishing occurrence of simple rhyme in *Ideas of Order* suggests an attempt to escape from ‘unpardonably expected’ echoes. But this attempt resulted in overcorrection, as ‘Owls Clover’, which substitutes intricate sound patterns for simple rhymes, tends towards an empty virtuosity, which goes in fear of what Stevens later termed ‘The Plain Sense of Things’. The function of rhyme in ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ can only be understood against the backdrop of Stevens’ complex and evolving attitudes to language and to the pressures of reality. Geoffrey Hill, a radically different poet, adapts Emerson to a telling account of modernist poetics – an account particularly applicable to Stevens’ preoccupations in the 1930s:

Whenever we have made anything of our own and made it well – a poem, say – our words come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. In the act of creation we alienate ourselves from that which we have created, or, conversely, the genius of language alienates us from itself. We are no longer masters of a well-considered *curriculum vitae* in free verse, or blank verse sonnets, or whatever; the anecdote is no longer the agency of our self-promotion; something recalcitrant has come between us and our expectant and expected satisfaction.²¹

Hill’s terminology, ‘something recalcitrant’, has a particular application to the dense and knotted idioms of his own verse. But his penetrating description of the poetic process – ‘the genius of language alienates us from itself’ – tenders a truth to which Stevens is only belatedly reconciled. Both the persona of Crispin and the mannered speaker of Owl’s Clover are more ‘masters of a well-considered *curriculum vitae*’ than inheritors of alienated majesty. So it is striking that in 1936, in a lecture entitled ‘The Irrational Element in Poetry’, Stevens should articulate a vision of poetry that prefigures Hill’s:

If we say that we desire freedom when we are already free, it seems clear that we have in mind a freedom not previously experienced. Yet is not this an attitude toward life resembling the poet’s attitude toward reality? In spite of the cynicisms that occur to us when we hear of

²⁰ Letter to Elsie Moll, 17 August 1909 (*Letters*, p. 157).

²¹ Geoffrey Hill, ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) pp. 565-6.

such things, a freedom not previously experienced, a poetry not previously conceived of, may occur with the suddenness inherent to poetic metamorphosis. For poets, that possibility is the ultimate obsession.²²

This lecture, written between ‘Owls Clover’ and ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, demonstrates a recrudescence of confidence in ‘poetic metamorphosis’ as a *liberating* energy. The poet, rather than attempting to accommodate language to the variegations of extra-linguistic reality, should license the play of the imagination over the web of words: Stevens divines ‘an un-written rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning’.²³ These cautious affirmations are emphatically restated, four years later, in a more obvious ‘manifesto’ piece, ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’ (1940). As this essay makes clear, Stevens became convinced the poet could legitimately strive for forms of subjective insight that lie beyond the purview of the politician, the preacher, and even the philosopher. ‘The poetic process’, he writes, ‘is psychologically an escapist process’.²⁴ For the radical particularity of poetry – its conjunction of semantic and aesthetic energies, its manifold textures, its unpredictable felicities – stands opposed to rationalism. Stevens embraces the essential strangeness of the imagination – ‘the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility . . . that nobility which is our spiritual height and depth’ – and this emphasis upon the uniqueness, the idiosyncrasy, of poetic insight parallels Hill’s sense of the fully achieved poem as somehow estranged, through the inscrutable magic of words, from the intuitions that fomented it.²⁵ Accordingly, in his mature verse, Stevens becomes increasingly wary of formal devices – rhyme included – that might invest his work with coherences that are premature or superficial. But this wariness never amounts to rejection. As Eliot observes, in his 1917 essay, ‘Vers Libre’, a ‘liberation from rhyme might be as well a liberation *of* rhyme. Freed from its exacting task of supporting lame verse, it could be applied with greater effect where most needed.’ In the later cantos of ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, fresh and incisive rhymes signal the advent of a renewed lyric freedom. But this freedom will be hard won. Darker preoccupations first intrude, and simple rhymes initially become scarcer, just as the closures and symmetries that they reflect are left behind. For Stevens’ guitarist cannot produce harmonies in abstraction. He must first confront disorder:

²² CPP, p. 790.

²³ CPP, p. 790.

²⁴ CPP, p. 662.

²⁵ CPP, p. 664.

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, brick
Is a weed and all the flies are caught,

Wingless and withered, but living alive.
The discord merely magnifies.

Deeper within the belly's dark
Of time, time grows upon the rock. (CPP, pp. 139-40)

The opening lines might initially strike the reader as a benign parable of human experience, condensing the ebb and swell of civilisations, but order is swiftly destabilized: 'It is the chord that falsifies'. In this dissolute passage, the most compelling rhetorical flourishes are rhythmic – 'Wingless and withered, but living alive' – whilst the delayed rhyme of 'falsifies' with 'magnifies', and the unsettling slant rhyme of 'dark' and 'rock', alerts us to the possibility that the easily rhymed 'chords' of earlier cantos offered a misleading euphony. Now the corrupting harmonies of music have become agents of destructive revelation, magnifying squalor and natural decay. This daunting vision provokes a rich and compelling response in Stevens, which combines an overt fear of nature's destructive power with an implicit yearning for sublimation in the sibylline rhythms of eternity, beyond the ephemeral human scale: 'time grows upon the rock'. As Stevens remarks in his *Materia Poetica* (1940), 'The real is only the base. But it is the base'.²⁶ The guitarist, therefore, is a projection of the poet's struggle with the intractability of the material world. But, in contrast with previous poems, Stevens' language reflects a

²⁶ CPP, p. 917.

determination to approach reality on his own terms. Whereas Crispin, a breathless catechumen of the imagination, is forced into a gaudy parody of lyricism in the vain attempt to apprehend ‘the one / Discovery still possible to make’, the guitarist increasingly breaks his world into single frames (*CPP*, p. 29). Canto XV records a specific debt to Picasso. The lessons of Cubism, licensing multiple perspectives, and, conversely, permitting single, exaggerated facets of an object to signify the whole, inspire Stevens to an arresting fusion of intimidating abstractions with tactile images:

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*, p.142)

The art that cannot escape reality fails to console. At the beginning of this canto, Stevens invokes Picasso’s famous description of painting as a ‘hoard of destructions’, which, like the discordant music of canto XI, seem only to exacerbate the chaos of reality. And he discerns in the increasingly intractable and alien appearance of the world an air of Shakespearean betrayal: ‘Is the spot on the floor, there, wine or blood / And whichever it may be, is it mine?’ Wish is father to the rhyme of ‘wine’ with ‘mine’, exploiting linguistic symmetry as a fragile stay against encroaching fears. For blood will have blood: the primal figurative idioms of Picasso’s ‘Blue Period’ haunt the poem, although Stevens himself claimed that he ‘had no particular painting of Picasso’s in mind’.²⁷ There are, nonetheless, compelling parallels between canto XV and Picasso’s ‘The Frugal Repast’, in which a blind man and a sighted woman, both emaciated, sit at a table almost bare of food, indicating the poverty of experience and the poverty of the artist’s response to experience. Stevens’ description of his own creative anxieties employs strikingly similar imagery: ‘Am I a man that is dead / At a table on which the food is cold?’ Stevens and Picasso share a horror of monochrome worlds, shorn of imaginative transfiguration, and both embody in their mature work a reverence for the radical particularity

²⁷ Letter to Renato Poggioli, 1 July 1953 (*Letters*, p. 786).

of the artist's shaping perception. It is no accident that our sense of the uniqueness of the guitarist's vision deepens as the poem proceeds.

Crudely, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' is divisible into three movements: the first fifteen cantos explore the uneasy relationship of the poet to his public; the next fifteen probe the exigencies of a private confrontation with reality; and the final three cantos recapitulate and extend the insights gleaned by the solitary poet in a universalising hymn to the imagination. Therefore, despite several, typically incisive judgements, it is not entirely fair for Vendler to claim that the poem might be 'rearranged internally without loss'.²⁸ The thirty-three sections of the poem may not make up a strictly linear narrative, but they are linguistically and thematically accretive. By reordering and re-contextualising particular words, the poem builds up its own weight of phrase, creating, in its concluding sections, an extraordinary richness from an economy of means. Often these repetitions, occurring at the end of lines or in the same line, form identical rhymes. But even where repeated words, such as 'earth' or 'stone' are more loosely distributed, they can evoke both physical constraints and metaphysical uncertainties. It is customary to remark that identical rhymes are never really identical – words alter their timbres and connotations in fresh contexts. But Chris Beyers makes the important observation that, for Stevens, repetition often 'does repeat: it means to depict perfect systems of order that do not incorporate, or are unconcerned with, the human'.²⁹ As I have argued, the artist's estrangement from the natural order is a central theme of the poem, and the repetitions associated with this struggle are subtly modulated:

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

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

An oppressor that grudges them their death,
As it grudges the living that they live. (XVI – *CPP*, p. 142)

²⁸ Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, op. cit., p. 141.

²⁹ Chris Beyers, *A History of Free Verse* (Fayetteville, US: U of Arkansas P, 2001) p. 132.

A flurry of negations destabilises successive similes, as if to dramatise a tortuous process of introspection, in which associations must be tested, qualified, discarded and remade. Even identical rhymes cannot be relied upon as tokens of stable meaning, for the continuity of sense between grammatically contingent statements is explicitly denied. And the subtleties of the imagination, which operates at a tangent to the real, have yet to resolve the obdurate binaries encapsulated in the sense rhyme of 'death / live'. Stevens' 'stone' figures, initially, as an inert counterpoint to the idealised, Romantic conception of nature (not unlike Yeats's stone 'in the midst of all', an immovable and ineluctable force, opposing creativity).³⁰ So in canto XIX, the function of the stone as a barrier to understanding is emphasised: 'Being the lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone' (*CPP*, p. 143). In his gloss for Hi Simons, Stevens says: 'The monster is what one faces: the lion locked in stone (life) which one wishes to match in intelligence and force, speaking (as a poet) with a voice matching its own.'³¹ Gradually, the poem rises to meet this challenge, so that reality, though stark and unadorned, seems finally less threatening:

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

Without shadows, without magnificence,

The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone.

(XXI – *CPP*, p. 144)

These repetitions rather conjoin than destabilise the sense, as mind, 'One's self', and world, 'one's land', are reconciled phonetically and syntactically. The stone has become a token of the poet's humility, and of his newfound sublimation in a natural order that had previously seemed inimical to art. There is, perhaps, a distant echo of Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal', which sees the poet's love 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees'.³² For the Romantic poet, the stone constrains spiritual transcendence, signifying the deadened state to which all things must eventually return. But, for Stevens, a return to these essential monads is a blessing, stripping away preconception, and permitting the poet finally to approach reality on his own terms:

³⁰ W.B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916', *The Major Works*, ed. and introd. Edward Larrissy. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) p. 86.

³¹ Letter to Hi Simons 8 Aug. 1940 (*Letters*, p. 360).

³² William Wordsworth, 'A slumber did my spirit seal', *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) p. 147.

To meet that hawk's eye and to flinch

Not at the eye but at the joy of it.

I play. But this is what I think. (XXIV – *CPP*, p. 146)

Here the moment of joyous perception, an immediate and irreducible experience, becomes a gateway to more lasting insight: 'this is what I think'. The finest passages of Stevens' later verse pursue a similar effect, when the rhythm comes to rest on an image or phrase for which nothing has prepared us, yet which gives the emerging insight a sudden, clinching emphasis. Stevens' temporary retreat, through the proxy of the guitarist, into an abstract and experimental idiom, marks an important juncture in the evolution of his verse. In deliberately dislocating his poem from public concerns, and in subduing reality to imagined and figurative settings, Stevens liberates himself from the anxieties that had begun to asphyxiate his creative gift. But the poem is no mere exercise in solipsism. Instead, in the final cantos, the insights gleaned during the guitarist's solitary meditations are recapitulated as an extended lyric sermon. It is a paradox of the poem that it eventually reaches an instructive and empathetic voice by at first turning away from public concerns. As Yeats observes, in 'Anima Hominis', '[w]e make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry'.³³ By this light, it is possible to read 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' as enacting a gradual progression from the rhetorical to the poetic. Accordingly, the later cantos of the poem slowly recapture a conventionally musical diction, in which rhymes are prominent. But rather than reflecting sterile, deadening associations – 'they said "you have a blue guitar, / you do not play things as they are"' – rhymes now enhance the irrational effects that Stevens is pursuing:

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

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

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

³³ Yeats, op. cit., p. 411.

And the nose is eternal, that-a-way:

Things as they were, things as they are,

Things as they will be by and by . . .

A fat thumb beats out ai-yi-yi.

(XXV – *CPP*, p. 146)

The apparent simplicity is deceptive, for these are the projections of an inscrutable wizard, who ‘held the world upon his nose’; a comic conflation of Atlas and Prospero. Language is no longer at the service of factive reality. Rather, the material world is now glimpsed, obliquely, through figurative, faux-naïf phrases that mimic both the simplicity and the idiosyncrasy of childhood perceptions. Animated by verbal shifts, the repetitions of these lines, no longer static and circular, signal dynamic change: not only cats, but whole worlds can multiply in the mind’s eye. So the interlocking rhymes of canto XXV serve a new and vital function. Whereas the end rhymes of earlier cantos act chiefly to constrain or destabilise the sense, here they assimilate eccentric and disparate images to a continuous, generative sequence. The imagery is more evocative than descriptive – ‘No doubt these sombre cats are merely sombre people going about their jobs’, Stevens offers, in an impish gloss – but the sonic integration of gnomic images and forceful verbs alerts us to the agency of artists in creating ‘things as they will be by and by’.³⁴ We witness a similar effect in canto XXIX, in which half-rhymes, underscored by exuberant alliteration, enact the paradox of perception being described.

The shapes are wrong and the sounds are false.

The bells are the bellowings of bulls.

(*CPP*, p. 148)

These sonic felicities do not merely embellish the paraphrasable content of the verse: they generate expressive intensities resistant to paraphrase. Careworn and programmatic thought has been exchanged for spontaneous insight, and the final two cantos universalise this lesson, extending the poet’s own creative practice as a template for collective imaginative renewal:

Throw away the lights, the definitions,

And say of what you see in the dark

³⁴ Letter to Hi Simons, 9 Aug. 1940 (*Letters*, p. 361).

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

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

Nothing of its jocular procreations? (XXXII – *CPP*, p. 150)

These unrhymed lines have their own internal music: in patterns of consonance ‘say of what you see’, ‘it is this . . . it is that’, and in the rhythmical balance of ‘walk in that space’ and ‘madness of space’. At the close of this canto, Stevens finally and symbolically refutes the deadening pressure of external expectations, by burying the language of those expectations: ‘You as you are? You are yourself, / The blue guitar surprises you’. These altered phrases, subverting the expected end-rhyme, enact the shock of self-recognition that art is capable of provoking, and this awakening of the senses is the prelude to a prophecy:

The bread
Will be our bread, the stone will be

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

The moments when we choose to play
The imagined pine, the imagined jay (XXXIII – *CPP*, p. 151)

These final lines, skipping confidently across the internal rhymes, ‘bread...bread...bed’ and ‘day...play...jay’, both enact a quickened sensibility, and invest the final couplet with a definitive finality that is aesthetic, not philosophical. Crude and predictable rhymes underscored the fatuity of received wisdom at the outset of the poem. Now, in shaping the interplay of Stevens’ luminous abstractions, rhymes reflect the subtlety and flexibility of thought that the guitarist has finally achieved.

In his search for a language purified from the trivia of personal anxiety, and immune to the weight of public expectation, Stevens continually recalibrates his approach to rhyme. In

Harmonium, rhymes contribute to an idiom that, though elegant, can also appear affected and remote. Subsequently, Stevens becomes increasingly wary of rhetorical devices, rhyme included, associable with borrowed or derivative insight. When rhymes resurface in *Ideas of Order*, they tend to do so under cover of an ironic mode, exceeded in rare instances by poems such as ‘Some Friends from Pascagoula’, in which a lyric vision is belatedly affirmed. As the comparable creative anxieties of ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ and the later ‘Owl’s Clover’ demonstrate, Stevens is hampered well into his fifties by an idiosyncratic sense of accountability, as if to transfigure reality for the purposes of art were tantamount to a deception. The excessively mannered diction of these poems, exchanging rhymes for hyperbolic sound patterns, reflects a deepening unease about the adequacy of poetry to the reality it would transform. Only in ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ does Stevens finally alight on the combination of stylistic economy and measured abstraction that characterises his late, meditative works. The insights of this poem are, in the most elementary sense, metaphysical: they are a return to first principles. And, in the articulation of these principles, language itself seems somehow purified, as crucial Stevensian terms – ‘sight’, ‘space’, ‘stone’ – are gradually cleansed of unwanted associations, and the act of rhyming is transformed from restrictive obligation to creative opportunity. Stevens will go on to write greater poems, but ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ represents a pivotal moment in his career. The renewed freedom of the poem’s language, in which rhymes play a central rôle, challenges us to match Stevens’ own aesthetic progress from disaffection to an appeasement won by the mind from the recalcitrant world.