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Musical Metaphors in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

ABSTRACT

Wallace Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937) is widely recognized as one of the most important and influential poems of the 20th century. Inspired by Picasso's painting *The Old Guitarist*, the poem in turn inspired Michael Tippett's sonata for solo guitar, "The Blue Guitar" (Tippett 1983) and David Hockney's *The Blue Guitar: Etchings by David Hockney who was inspired by Wallace Stevens who was inspired by Pablo Picasso* (Hockney and Stevens 1977). Central to "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the metaphor of the musical instrument as a transformational symbol of the imagination is common in Stevens's poems. The structure of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," according to J. Hillis Miller, is the structure of stream-of-consciousness. Stevens's poem creates what has been called "the deconstructed moment in modern poetry," "an attempt to project a spatialized time that can be viewed from the privileged position of a timeless, static moment capable of encompassing a life at a glance" (Jackson 1982). This consciousness, which Derrida refers to as the "trace," Stevens calls "the evasive movement of language." The trace is the perception of the absence of meaning after the word or perception has passed, the glimpse of a hidden meaning that immediately vanishes. Stevens's poem influenced not only other poets, artists and composers; references to and echoes of his ideas and techniques can be seen in popular music and culture well into the 21st century.

Keywords: Wallace Stevens; musical metaphor; ekphrasis; "The Man with the Blue Guitar"

Glasbene metafore v poeziji Wallacea Stevensa

POVZETEK

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937) pesnika Wallacea Stevensa velja za eno najpomembnejših in najvplivnejših pesmi 20. stoletja. Navdih zanjo je dobil pri Picassovi sliki *Stari kitarist*. Wallaceova pesem je navdihnila Michaela Tipetta, da je napisal sonato za solo kitaro "The Blue Guitar" (1983) in Davida Hockneya, ki je napisal *The Blue Guitar: Etchings by David Hockney who was inspired by Wallace Stevens who was inspired by Pablo Picasso* (Hockney in Stevens 1977). Osrednje mesto v pesmi "The Man with the Blue Guitar" – in tudi sicer v Stevnsovi poeziji – zavzema metafora glasbenega instrumenta kot transformacijskega simbola domišljije. Glede na strukturo je pesem, po J. Hillisu Millerju, primer poezije toka zavesti. Stevens z njo ustvari to, čemur pravimo "dekonstruirani trenutek v moderni poeziji", "poskus projicirati poprostorjeni čas, ki ga lahko opazujemo iz pozicije brezčasnega, statičnega trenutka, sposobnega v hipu zaobjeti vse življenje" (Jackson 1982). Gre za zavest, ki jo Derrida imenuje "sled", Stevens pa "izmikajoče gibanje jezika". Sled pomeni, da se v trenutku, ko beseda izgine, zavemo odsotnosti njenega pomena; je torej bežen pogled na pomen, ki ga v hipu ni več. Stevnsova pesem ni vplivala le na druge pesnike, umetnike in skladatelje, pač pa so njegove ideje in tehnike našle odmev tudi v popularni glasbi in kulturi 21. stoletja.

Ključne besede: Wallace Stevens; glasbena metafora; eksfraz; "The Man with the Blue Guitar"



Musical Metaphors in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

1 Introduction

The ritual greeting, “Hey, how are things?” invites a formulaic reply: “Fine, how are things with you?” Wallace Stevens’s “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937) answers the question in an unexpectedly thoughtful and thorough way; “Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar.” Stevens’s central theme, that religion has been replaced by poetry in the modern world, is developed in the metaphor of the guitarist projecting his imagination by “speaking” through his guitar. The metaphor is not original to Stevens; many other authors, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, used it, but Stevens expands it at length, and uses variations of it in other works. “The Man with the Blue Guitar” has inspired a great deal of critical debate over the years, and it is widely regarded as a pivotal expression of Modernist thought. Its discussion of the role and function of the artist has influenced artists in other genres as well; for example, Jeff Tilton refers to it in the context of his analysis of the blues (Tilton 2004).

2 *Harmonium*: Metaphors for the Imagination

Stevens’s influences were not confined to poetry and music. Jacqueline Brogan notes that Stevens was influenced by Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1882 story “Providence and the Guitar” (Stevenson 1976). “Caught in the magic of the guitarist’s performance, various characters in the story appear to transcend their limitations and to become, in the fictional relativity of the story, their truer selves” (Brogan 1987). A similar transformation through music can be seen in Stevens’s earlier poem “Peter Quince at the Clavier” (1915), from his first collection of poetry, entitled *Harmonium*. Stevens’s interest in the relationship between music and poetry is evident in the title of the volume. A harmonium, alternatively known as a reed organ or Melodeon, is a keyboard instrument that produces sound as air is pumped by a foot-pedal operated bellows over a set of reeds. The concept is similar to that of the Aeolian harp in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “The Eolian Harp” (Coleridge and Lamb 1796).

Stevens’s clavierist expresses in a metaphor the connection between music and emotion:

Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,
Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music. (Stevens 1979a, 4–8)

The metaphor contains a similar inversion to the “music is magic: magic is music” trope. Here “music is feeling: feeling is music.” The transcendent quality of the imagination is expressed in the lines: “Beauty is momentary in the mind – /The fitful tracing of a portal;/But in the flesh it is immortal (Stevens 1979a, 51–53).¹ What this really says is that one should trust the flesh over the imagination; in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” this double paradox is twisted into a counter-truth.

¹ Newell Ford extends the metaphor in an essay loaded with puns on musical instruments (Ford 1960).

The musical instrument as a transformational symbol of the imagination is central to “Peter Quince at the Clavier.” Peter Quince is a character in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Shakespeare and Holland 2008), one of the commoners, and the director of and one of the actors in the play-within-a-play, “The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe,” performed for the Duke Theseus and his wife Hippolyta at their wedding. Stevens’s Quince, transformed from amateur player to pianist, says, “Just as my fingers on these keys/Make music, so the selfsame sounds/On my spirit make a music, too.” Stevens harnesses another paradox here, in the picture of the lowly mechanical making music on the sophisticated instrument, where this forms an analogy for the triumph of the apparently absurd “Pyramus and Thisbe” in the world of the play.²

In Stevens’s poem, Quince adapts the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders in musical, rather than dramatic, form. The opening lines of the poem set the scene in which the music evokes a visual image, “what I feel,/Here in this room, desiring you,/Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,/Is music.” In a synaesthetic transference, music is associated with desire, which in turn evokes a memory of the story of Susanna and the Elders. Susanna’s story is then told with comparisons of every emotion described in the story through a musical motif: the elders felt “The basses of their beings throb/In witching chords, and their thin blood/Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.” Throughout the poem, sensory impressions are compared to musical elements, building upon the central metaphor of “Music is feeling, then, not sound.”

This metaphor is common in poetry, from the harpstring in Christina Rossetti’s sonnet “A Triad” (1862) to the lyres of Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush” (1900) and Shelley’s “Mutability” (1816), and the stringed instrument implied in Wordsworth’s sonnet “The World Is Too Much With Us” (1807). A version appears in Eliot’s “The Waste Land” in the lines “A woman drew her long black hair out tight/And fiddled whisper music on those strings” (Eliot 1922, 378–79). In each poem, the stringed instrument is compared to a human being who is more or less “out of tune” with the natural world.

Not all of Stevens’s contemporaries were impressed by the centrality of Stevens’s use of musical metaphor to the theme and structure of his poems. Critic Percy Hutchison wrote in *The New York Times*:

Hence, unpleasant as it is to record such a conclusion, the very remarkable work of Wallace Stevens cannot endure. The verses which go to make up the volume *Harmonium* are as close to “pure poetry” as one could expect to come. And so far as rhythms and vowels and consonants may be substituted for musical notes, the volume is an achievement. But the achievement is not poetry, it is a tour de force, a “stunt” in the fantastic and the bizarre. From one end of the book to the other there is not an idea that can vitally affect the mind, there is not a word that can arouse emotion.... Wallace Stevens is a martyr to a lost cause. (Hutchison 1931)

Time, however, appears to have been kinder to Stevens than Hutchison predicted.

Stevens returned to the theme and the metaphor in 1935 in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” from the collection *Ideas of Order* (Stevens 1935). He writes, “she was the maker of the song she sang”:

² Pyramus and Thisbe is, according to its title, an embodied paradox. Stevens thus uses that figure most beloved of the New Critics, paradox, to suspend the reader’s logical relation with the text and thus to create a receptivity closer to that mode in which we hear music. The play within the play is another regression, this one not infinite, but “nested” within the outer triple play of love’s tribulations.

It was her voice that made
 The sky acutest at its vanishing.
 She measured to the hour its solitude.
 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. Then we,
 As we beheld her striding there alone,
 Knew that there never was a world for her
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made. (Stevens 1979b, 34–40)

In this poem, prefiguring “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” it is the artist, in this case a singer, who imposes order upon the sounds and images of nature, and therefore creates meaning.

3 “The Man with the Blue Guitar”: Ekphrasis and Regression

“The Man with the Blue Guitar,” published in 1937, is constructed around the figure of ekphrasis; Stevens based it on Picasso’s painting *The Old Guitarist* (1904), as the opening lines of Canto XV explain: “Is this picture of Picasso’s, this ‘hoard/Of destructions,’ a picture of ourselves,/Now, an image of our society?” The poem itself was in turn the inspiration for Michael Tippett’s sonata for solo guitar, *The Blue Guitar* (Tippett 1983) and David Hockney’s *The Blue Guitar: Etchings by David Hockney Who Was Inspired by Wallace Stevens Who Was Inspired by Pablo Picasso* (Hockney and Stevens 1977). Musicologist and pianist Siglind Bruhn, drawing on Claus Clüver’s definition of ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system” (Bruhn 2001, 552), proposes a musical equivalent of ekphrasis in the development of 19th-century program music, in which a musical composition “narrates or paints stories or scenes created by an artist *other* than the composer of the music, and in another artistic medium” (553).³ “The Man with the Blue Guitar” briefly describes Picasso’s painting, but most of the poem is more like traditional program music in that it describes scenes from the poet’s imagination. The series of inspired art works in various genres of which it is a part combines ekphrasis with the infinite regression of nested mirror images.⁴

“The Man with the Blue Guitar” is a long, complex, impressionist work comprising 400 lines in 33 sections. Each section is a variation on the central theme, some more closely connected to the central organizing metaphor than others. For clarity, I have provided a brief summary of its structure in the Appendix.

Many literary critics writing about “The Man with the Blue Guitar” have used terminology

³ Some well-known examples of program music include Felix Mendelssohn’s *Hebrides Overture* (1830), Arthur Honegger’s *Pacific 231* (Honegger 1924), and Charles Ives’s *Central Park in the Dark* (Ives 1906). One of the best-known examples of ekphrasis in music appears in Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874), a series of musical pieces that emulates, using sound imagery and metaphor, the experience of walking through an art gallery.

⁴ Here is an expanded version of the earlier regression in “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” which referred to the Bible though the play within a play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

and concepts from music criticism. Helen Vendler, for example, points out that Stevens limited himself in the vocabulary he used in the poem in much the same way that a(n acoustic) guitar is limited in tone and range (Vendler 1969, 126–27). Vendler argues that by limiting himself to simple vocabulary and structure, Stevens duplicated the way folk musicians and practitioners of “primitive” music create an aura of authenticity in their works. This is not to say that this poem, or folk art or music in general, is simplistic. Stevens’s choice of simple language and structure recalls Wordsworth’s advice that poetry should use

a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect...such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets... (Wordsworth 2001).

Stevens uses words in this sense of “colouring of imagination,” or, as Steven Pinker calls it, “phonesthetics,” “the feeling of sound” (Pinker 2014, 22):

Onomatopoeia and sound symbolism are the seeds of a more pervasive phenomenon in language called phonesthesia, in which families of words share a teeny snatch of sound and a teeny shred of meaning (Pinker 2007, 301).

In “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” Stevens uses phonesthesia extensively. The central trope in the poem is the guitar as a representation of the imagination:

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.”

Through this mechanism, reality is perceived, filtered, and transformed through the imagination, and thoughts and perceptions are presented as sound images; in the end, reality is a construct. Newton Stallknecht argues in a Platonic reading of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (Stallknecht 1959) that the poem is about the idea that perception and imagination distort whatever is perceived. Viewed in terms of Lacanian topology, playing things on the guitar, like writing, gives those things another dimension, and converts them into symbols of themselves (Ragland-Sullivan and Milovanovic 2004). Thus, talking, writing, or playing “things as they are” changes them into other things entirely (Cook 1977).

One of the themes in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” is the conflict between artist and audience: the artist creates new meaning through his/her perceptions of the world, but the audience resists, desiring to hear only what they already know: “They said, ‘you have a blue guitar,/You do not play things as they are’” (3–4). The artist defends himself and his art by saying, “I cannot bring the world quite round/Although I patch it as I can” (11–12). He claims that he cannot create the real world; these lines denote an echo of the concept of mimesis: art is a representation, which is

thus a new creation. In this sense, Stevens's guitarist echoes Coleridge's speaker in "Kubla Khan," who describes his dream vision:

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air... (Coleridge 1798, 37–46)

Building a dome in the air is a metaphor for what artists do (and the first step in what architects do). Instead of a damsel with a dulcimer in a vision, however, Stevens describes an old man with a guitar in a painting.⁵

In keeping with Stevens's theme, the sounds emanating from the guitar are described with discordant, grating imagery: at the end of section III, the guitarist's playing is described as "To bang it from a savage blue,/Jangling the metal of the strings..." (29–30). The next three sections end with similarly grating sonic images: "And that's life, then: things as they are,/This buzzing of the blue guitar" (37–38), and "the chattering of the blue guitar" (50). The metaphor is extended in later sections of the poem: section VII, which describes the distance between man and nature, no longer seen in the early twentieth century as romantic and benevolent, ends with the line "The strings are cold on the blue guitar" (78). In Section VIII, the sound of the guitar is compared to a stormy sky: "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" (87–90). The following lines continue the weather metaphor, "And the color, the overcast blue/Of the air, in which the blue guitar/Is a form..." (91–93), completing the synaesthetic circle. The guitar's banging, jangling, buzzing, chattering, cold strings, twanging, and color have spoken to all the senses but taste and smell, and Stevens completes his sensory inventory in section XV, when he asks "Am I a man that is dead/At a table on which the food is cold?" (172–73).

In section XI, Stevens uses metaphors of metamorphosis to describe natural interactions between people and nature: the ivy becomes the stones, women become the cities, children become the fields, and men become the sea. To describe how art changes the way we perceive these natural processes, and how such perceptions in turn alter reality, he says "It is the chord that falsifies" (123), before reversing the previous metaphors: "The sea returns upon the men/The fields entrap the children, brick/Is a weed and all the flies are caught..." (124–26). Reversing the tenor and vehicle of the metaphors in this case changes their meaning completely.⁶ Perception

⁵ The concrete allusion is similar to the line "Just like the old man in/That book by Nabokov" (*Lolita* (Nabokov 1958)) from The Police song "Don't Stand so Close to Me" (Sting 1980).

⁶ In "Adagia," Stevens provided examples of metaphors carefully constructed to be reversible, for example; "All our ideas come from the natural world: Trees = umbrellas" (Stevens 1982).

psychologists Chiappe, Kennedy, and Smykowski examined the reversibility of metaphors and similes and found that reversal of the terms of a metaphor often rendered it incomprehensible (Chiappe, Kennedy, and Smykowski 2003). When we examine the metaphorical pairs in section XI, it is clear that the inversion does not mean the same thing as the original. New meaning has been created in the reversal. The effect of this, in turn is “The discord merely magnified” (128), a play on the words “chord” and “discord.”⁷

In the end, Stevens claims “The blue guitar/And I are one” (131–32). “Where/Do I begin and end? And where,/As I strum the thing, do I pick up/That which momentarily declares/Itself not to be I and yet/Must be” (136–42). The identification of the artist with his instrument in turn suggests the identification of the artist with his art.

Adding another dimension to Stevens’s novel use of ekphrasis, Section XIV extends the sound imagery of the poem to visual imagery. Starlight and candlelight alike create “a chiaroscuro where/One sits and plays the blue guitar” (162–63). The pattern of light and dark, harmony and discord, sight and sound, touch and feel are sensory equivalents for the conflict of ideas of the twentieth century. George McFadden noted an interesting subtlety in Stevens’s use of colour symbolism in an article entitled “Probing for an Integration: color symbolism in Wallace Stevens” (McFadden 1961). While superficially, the mention of green and blue is usually understood to symbolize the contrast between reality (earth) and imagination (sky), in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” Stevens uses blue to represent the limits of the imagination (McFadden 1961, 192).

Section XVII addresses the ancient debate of the nature of man, between man, animal and angel, and between the soul and the mind. The guitar takes on the attribute of the player; just as in Section XII, where the artist was identified with the instrument, in lines 192–94, where he says, “The blue guitar--/On that its claws propound, its fangs/Articulate its desert days,” the guitar partakes of the animal nature of the guitarist. In the next section it is connected not to the physical, but the mental state of the guitarist: “the blue guitar/After long strumming on certain nights/Gives the touch of certain senses, not of the hand...” (202–4).

Section XIX summarizes this metaphoric metamorphosis with a new image:

That I may reduce the monster to
 Myself, and then may be myself
 In face of the monster, be more than part
 Of it, more than the monstrous player of
 One of its monstrous lutes, not be
 Alone, but reduce the monster and be,
 Two things, the two together as one,
 And play of the monster and of myself,
 Or better not of myself at all,
 But of that as its intelligence,
 Being the lion in the lute
 Before the lion locked in stone. (209–20)

⁷ Tippett’s musical restatement of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and Hockney’s graphic one recreate this discordant style in their respective media.

In recognizing the synthesis of the artist and his art, and calling it a “monster,” the artist simultaneously accepts and rejects the identification with his instrument and his art, and captures the distaste of the conventional audience for this new way of seeing the world. The creation of the self involves reconciling the artist with the creative principle, but in the end, striving for a whole greater than the sum of the parts, the “play of the monster and of myself” resembles the play between signifier and signified. The final couplet constructs another level of ekphrasis, combining “the lion in the lute” signifying the animal nature of music, an art of time, with another metaphor, “the lion locked in stone,” in the form of sculpture, an art of space.

Section XXII turns to the figure of metafiction in lines 241–45:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and
To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is
An absence in reality...

Here Stevens shows how the interplay between reality and art create what deconstructionists term “aporia,” the state where the work of art loses meaning.⁸ A creation is a reflection of something in the world, but because it is not exactly what it reflects, the guitarist’s interlocutors claim that it is really nothing, refusing to see it for what it is, something new in its own right. Like old-fashioned critic Percy Hutchinson, they cannot see what is in front of their own eyes because it is not what they are looking for, an affirmation of their existing ideas.

In Section XXXII, Stevens turns to the eternal dilemma of the poet, the fact that the words we depend on to define and shape the world for us actually reflect things rather poorly:

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. (376–79)

This is the challenge of the artist to every listener or viewer, to form one’s own interpretation, to describe from the evidence of the senses and from this to form one’s own opinions, rather than fall back on received wisdom. There is an implied irony here between light and dark, since traditionally light implies enlightenment and dark ignorance; in Stevens’s view, the lights provided blind one to what is really there in the actuality of experience, for here dark is not really ignorance, just the unknown. The names of things are rotted because they are both outmoded and arbitrary, depending as they do for their meaning on the sanction and approval of others. To the poet it is experience that illuminates life, not education.

⁸ Deconstruction is a mode of criticism which seeks to subvert or undermine the assumption that language is adequate to provide boundaries, coherence, unity or determinate meaning in a literary text by finding conflicts and contradictions in the assumptions underlying the text. Aporia is “an insuperable deadlock, or ‘double bind,’ of incompatible or contradictory meanings which are ‘undecidable,’ in that we lack any sufficient ground for choosing among them” (Abrams 1999, 58).

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. (383–86)

These stanzas suggest that we can see reality clearly only if we can do away with old names and definitions. It takes an active imagination to be able to see clearly. For each generation, names and definitions are reinvented by the artist, so we must create the world we live in by seeing it for ourselves, rather than by accepting previous generations' word for it. If we allow our perceptions to be clouded by the expectations of others, then, rather than becoming individuals, we become merely simulacra, the creation of others.

Stevens's stanzas here echo the theme of Gertrude Stein's "If I Told Him; a Completed Portrait of Picasso," published thirteen years before "The Man with the Blue Guitar". Like "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stein's poem is a meditation on a painting by Picasso, in this case, a painting of Gertrude Stein herself, one that questions the viewer's expectation of exact resemblance in a work of art:

Exact resemblance. To exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact as a resemblance,
 exactly as resembling, exactly resembling, exactly in resemblance exactly a resemblance,
 exactly and resemblance. For this is so. Because. (Stein 1924)

Stein's repetition and variations show how the meanings of words change with use. Her syntax challenges the traditional rules of grammar to demonstrate that the way we see and perceive things is in reality far more varied and complex than old ideas of order would permit. In Stein's, as in Stevens's poetry, meaning is fluid, changing with context, and cumulative, as each word and phrase affects the next.

Similarly, David Lehman's "Poem in the Manner of Wallace Stevens as Rewritten by Gertrude Stein" (Lehman 2005) continues the progression begun by Picasso with a postmodern parody (in Hutcheon's sense of the word (Hutcheon 1985, 1986)) in the form of a poem about a series of letters. The poem begins with a conditional statement, "If night were not night but the absence of night/an event but not the same event twice..." and ends with "here you read the letter as written not the night/as performed and this would be nice you and I and nothing between/the same event twice a ball of white as I write I write." The poem is a series of propositions and negations describing the act of communication, the limitations of modes of communication, and the meaning that merges when words and letters are stripped away. Its theme is that, despite the failure of words to communicate exactly, meaning is, in fact, communicated.

These experiments in poetry illustrate W.J.T. Mitchell's observation that

For modern criticism, language and imagery have become enigmas, problems to be explained, prison-houses which lock the understanding away from the world... instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparence concealing

an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification. (Mitchell 1986)(8)

Although Mitchell is primarily concerned with pictorial images, he notes that the relationship between pictorial images and words is similar to the relationship between material and mental images; there is a similar interplay between pictorial and linguistic images and the thoughts they represent. Mitchell proposes that the main problem in trying to understand images is that of recursion, in which “idea” and “image” come to represent each other. The solution he proposes is to pay

attention to the way in which images (and ideas) double themselves: the way we depict the act of picturing, imagine the activity of imagination, figure the practice of figuration. These doubled pictures, images, and figures... are strategies for both giving into and resisting the temptation to see ideas as images. (Mitchell 1986, 5–6)

This is precisely what we see in the recursive play between Picasso, Stein, Stevens, Tippett, Hockney and Lehman as each translates and revises the images of the other, and within their works, their own pictorial and verbal imagery.

4 Stevens’s Influence on Twentieth-Century Thought

Throughout Stevens’s works, the human imagination is, despite its limitations, the ordering principle of the world. Dana Wilde notes the parallels between Stevens’s idea of the imagination and Coleridge’s, quoting “Stevens’ proposition that the imagination “participates in creating our experience of reality” (Wilde 1999, 118). Going one step further, Wilde notes that

In the ‘postmodern’ age of literature and literary criticism (roughly, anything written after 1945), critics have explored Stevens’ rhetorical structures and his philosophical occupation with how words — both others’ and our own — shape our experience of the world. (Wilde 1999, 117)

As the guitarist says, “I am a native in this world/And think in it like a native thinks...” (315–16) so that “things are as I think they are/And say they are on the blue guitar” (327–28). He affirms the priority of the artist’s perception over the audience’s expectations.

The guitarist’s perception of the change of things as they are when played upon the blue guitar corresponds to Sartre’s insight into the author’s dilemma regarding the relationship between subjective and objective in his essay “What is Literature?”: “The results which we have obtained on canvas or paper never seem to us *objective*. We are too familiar with the processes of which they are the effects” (Sartre 1965, 1337). Sartre distinguishes between writer and reader, between writing and reading, and between the subject and the object of writing. In his view, a writer can never experience the act of reading his own work because reading is an act of discovery and the writer already knows what he is going to write about. Literature is about an agreement and a relationship between the writer and reader: “It is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others” (1338).

The change is not just a change in meaning; the act of putting an object or an idea into words transcends the medium:

Thus, from the very beginning, the meaning is no longer contained in the words, since it is he (the reader), on the contrary, who allows the significance of each of them to be understood; and the literary object, though realized through language, is never given in language (1339).

In Sartre's view, the artist's dilemma is that he or she can never experience his or her creation as the reader, listener or viewer can. The act and process of creation forever prevents the artist from being able to perceive it as a reader, for the act of the reader is an act of discovery

When I am enchanted by a landscape, I know very well that it is not I who create it, but I also know that without me the relations which are established before my eyes among the trees, the foliage, the earth, and the grass would not exist at all... the result is that I fix my dream, that I transpose it to canvas or in writing... I have captured this illusion in flight... I lay it out for other men and have disentangled it and rethought it for them... As for me, I remain, to be sure, at the border of the subjective and the objective without ever being able to contemplate the objective arrangement which I transmit (1343–44).

Implicit in the act of creation, however, is the perception that the creator has changed the initial object by imposing his creative activity on it. The natural object itself changes, and as time passes what is left behind is a static record of the order imposed on the object by the author's imagination, a record which is itself changed by both the author's and the reader's initial and subsequent perceptions of it.

Glen MacLeod notes that "The Man with the Blue Guitar" was written in response to a wave of critical and public appreciation of surrealism in art in the United States in 1936 (MacLeod 1987). As I have written elsewhere, early twentieth-century surrealism inspired later generations of artists in other genres (Kennedy 2013). For example, the jazz musicians of the twenties and thirties developed dissonance into an art form, using polychords and new instrumental techniques to get new sounds from traditional instruments. Technological developments allowed electronic music to create sounds never heard before. Modern classical composers created new soundscapes based on new sounds created by technological developments, such as Arthur Honegger's *Pacific 231* (Honegger 1924), in which the orchestra sonically emulates a steam engine, and Stockhausen's *Helikopter-Streichquartett, for string quartet and four helicopters* (Stockhausen 1996); the new musical images and aural techniques and tropes they developed gradually became accepted and adapted by popular musicians (Robinson 2013). Stevens's figurative description of the distorting effect of the sound of the guitar became literal in later decades. Starting in the 1950s, musicians began to use this effect intentionally.⁹ Pop music guitarists of the 1960s and 70s, such as Jimi

⁹ The distorted guitar sounds created by jazz and blues artists of the 1950s overdriving their small, low-powered amplifiers trying to fill large rooms and clubs (and the Beatles vainly trying to be heard over the enthusiastic screams of their audiences in arenas and stadiums) became the sought after tones of authentic rock, blues, and psychedelic musicians, who started artificially adding distortion when their more powerful amplifiers sounded too "clean"; the echo and reverberation added by studio engineers to the "spooky" western and blues music of the 1940s became part of the standard guitar sound when

Hendrix, Ronnie Montrose, and Danny Weiss used their electric guitars metaphorically to emulate motorcycle engines, spacecraft, and airplane crashes, among other things (Hendrix 1968, Montrose 1973, Ingle 1968). All of these developments are prefigured in Section XXXII of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” by artists who see, listen to, and describe the world they live in, instead of the world they have been taught to see.

J. Hillis Miller explains the central mythology underlying Stevens’s poetic works: “This evaporation of the gods, leaving a barren man in a barren land, is the basis of all Stevens’ thought and poetry” (Miller 1964, 87). “The human self, for him, is divided against itself. One part is committed to the brute substance of the earth, things as they are, and the other just as tenaciously holds to its need for imaginative grandeur” (Miller 1964, 88). The structure of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” says Miller, is like that of stream-of-consciousness. Subjects are introduced, developed and then dropped as new ones appear. “There is no cogenerate pattern of symbols and metaphors, each one referring to all the others” (88). At the end of his essay, Miller summarizes the metaphysical underpinning of Stevens’s thought, referring to the “evanescent insight into being” referred to earlier by Hudson. Difficult to put into words, this insight is conveyed by the shifting styles and metaphors of Stevens’s poetry: “The poetry of fluttering metamorphosis is the only poetry which is simultaneously true to both imagination and reality, and it is the only poetry which will catch being” (Miller 1964, 103).

One of the main themes throughout Stevens’s poetry is the existentialist claim that God is dead, and art is His replacement: “Poetry/ Exceeding music must take the place/Of empty heaven and its hymns,/Ourselves in poetry must take their place...” (47–50); “The thinking of art seems final when/The thinking of god is smoky dew./The tune is space. The blue guitar/Becomes the place of things as they are,/A composing of senses of the guitar” (60–64). Leonora Woodman notes that Steven’s philosophical ideas are drawn from a very old tradition:

Stevens’ use of a vocable to designate the Heavenly Man reflects the importance accorded music and sound in Hermetic thought. The notion that both the universe and man are constructed on the same harmonic proportions homologous to music is a common theme in alchemy, deriving perhaps from the Pythagorean conception that the numerical relationships between the notes of the musical scale equally defined the harmonic relations of the cosmos. (Woodman 1983, 93)

Part of what makes Stevens’s poetry engaging is its updating of mysticism for modern times, and its insistence that there is a mystery underlying the surface of rationality. Deatt Hudson writes of the “mystical quality beyond the immediate experience” in Stevens’s thought (Hudson 1955, 136). As the twentieth century progressed, many popular artists and musicians found

manufacturers began to add reverb circuits to their amplifiers in the early 1960s. The late 40s sci-fi sound of the theramin became the groovy sound of the Beach Boys’ “Good Vibrations” when Brian Wilson used the newly developed electrotheramin, showing how the surrealism of the 1930s became the popular consciousness of the new age. The guitar has become a cultural icon as guitar playing as a recreational activity boomed in the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. Ryan and Peterson cite figures showing a huge increase in guitar sales in the nineteen sixties (following the appearance of the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show in 1964), followed by a resurgence in the late 1990s as the guitar-playing kids of the nineteen sixties reached retirement and bought the expensive guitars they had longed for as kids (Ryan 2001). In 1940, 190,000 thousand guitars were sold in the United States; in 1972 the figure was 2,669,480. The number was 1,154,921 in 1998 (101–102). These are new instruments. There are no figures available for used sales.

this concept useful for expressing some of the difficulties of coping with modern life. Proving Hutchinson's dictum "there is not an idea that can vitally affect the mind, there is not a word that can arouse emotion" wrong, over forty years after Stevens wrote "The Man With the Blue Guitar," Pink Floyd restated Stevens's idea in the song "Comfortably Numb":

When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse,
 Out of the corner of my eye.
 I turned to look but it was gone.
 I cannot put my finger on it now.
 The child is grown, the dream is gone. (Waters and Gilmour 1980)

While in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" music is a stimulus for the mind, in "Comfortably Numb," a liminal vision of the deeper reality behind everyday experience is brought back to the speaker's memory by drugs administered by a quack doctor to overcome the incipient effects of a nervous breakdown in the performer who is being pressured by his handlers to "go on with show."¹⁰ Waters's lyrics satirize the use of drugs as a superficial treatment for deep-seated psychological problems in an easily-relatable image.

5 Conclusion

The attempt to capture the essence of experience is an example of the deconstructed moment in modern poetry, which is an attempt "to project a spatialized time that would be viewed from the privileged position of a timeless, static moment capable of encompassing a life at a glance" (Jackson 1982, 306). Richard Jackson points out that "attempts to construct such timeless moments have been common in poetry," quoting T.S. Eliot, "A moment in time but not a moment of time" (307). The timeless or spatialized moment is an element in the metaphysics of presence. Time and space are both constantly changing, and even as we perceive them we are conscious of their passing.

This consciousness is what Derrida refers to as "the trace" in *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1976, 46–47, 68–69). In Stevens's poetry, the trace is found in the evasive movement of language. The trace is the perception of the absence of meaning after the word or perception has passed, a glimpse of a hidden meaning that immediately vanishes. In this view, words and utterances are only meaning deferred. Words are static signifiers that can only mean something when placed in context with other words, which are constantly changing and being replaced with new words and utterances. Naming cannot make present what is lost, it can only substitute for what has been lost, and thus language is primarily a substitute for things. "The movement of the poem, then, becomes, to use Derrida's term, a *supplement* to 'nothing,' a reinscription that marks a unique presence of absence" (Jackson 1982, 315). The ekphrastic poem plays with the difference between static (word) and non-static (musical sound) signifiers, in such a manner as to provide the illusion of retrieval or in fact of the continued presence (echo) of the elusive meaning. Stevens's challenging, elusive poem is an important one for Modernist and Postmodernist audiences and critics alike, demonstrating a novel use of technique to express the concerns of its time.

¹⁰ Waters and Gilmour are critical of the use of drugs for creative stimulation in the era of psychedelic music, as were Romantic authors such as Coleridge and De Quincey.

Appendix: The Thematic Structure of “The Man with the Blue Guitar”

“The Man with the Blue Guitar” is a 400-line poem in 33 sections:

I introduces the metaphor and the conflict

II introduces the ekphrasis

III describes how the metaphor can be used to analyse its subject

IV describes the relationship between art and real life

V introduces the theme of the death of religion and its replacement by poetry

VI the idea that art is eternal but religion is ephemeral

VII humanity’s isolation from nature (symbolism of the sun and moon)

VIII pathetic fallacy – metaphoric identification with nature

IX synaesthesia – the relationship between sensory impressions

X the hollow feeling of the loss of faith

XI reversed metaphor of transformation of people and their environment

XII the difficulty of the artist’s task

XIII the distorting effect of the artist’s medium

XIV analogy of macrocosm-microcosm: sky and candlelight; explanation of metaphor

XV ekphrasis “this picture of Picasso’s”

XVI simile vs. metaphor

XVII mind/soul/body dichotomy expressed through art

XVIII imagination (dreams) become reality through the artist

XIX synthesis of art and artist described as “monster”

XX ironic reality of ideas

XXI consciousness of the self “a substitute for all the gods”

XXII metafiction – “absence in reality” of poetry is a mistaken convention

XXIII in contrast, it is the faith in the truth of religion that is a mistake

XXIV simile: “A poem like a missal”

XXV poems described in a playful manner; implies that poetry is more alive than “gray” religion

XXVI the imagination encompasses the world vs. the difficulty of expressing it

XXVII the link between the song and the sea (to which Stevens returns in “The Idea of Order at Key West”)

XXVIII “native of the world” vs. “native of a mind” – identity & immediacy of concrete vs. abstraction

XXIX error of received thought

XXX personification of microcosm/macrocosm in “the old fantoche”

XXXI human conflict detached from nature

XXXII knowledge and identity come from individual experience, not received definitions

XXXIII knowledge and dreams are renewed with each generation

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