

CUBIST AESTHETICS IN STEVENS' "THE MAN WITH THE BLUE GUITAR": DEFENCE AGAINST SURREALISM

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ABSTRACT

The critics have discussed the influence of either Cubism or Surrealism on Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar". The paper examines the impact of both of these movements on the poem. It claims that Stevens referred to Cubist aesthetics to protect himself from Surrealism which he found too radical. The argument is partly based on considering artistic events which were taking place in the United States around the time Stevens wrote his poem. It also analyses the importance of Picasso with whom Stevens identified himself in the poem, and Cézanne, who enabled Stevens to come to terms with modern developments in art.

Both Cubism and Surrealism were essential for Stevens who throughout his poetic career was determined to "establish his relation to contemporary ideas" (*Letters*, 340).<sup>1</sup> The aim of this paper is to examine the analogy between the Cubist perception of reality and Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar". It also claims that Stevens used Cubist aesthetics as a means of defence against Surrealism.

Before a proper analysis of Cubist aesthetics and Stevens' use of it, it is important to point out the essence of ekphrasis in his poetry. Stevens does not imitate the means of painting, but conceptualizes the effects of it by means of an allusion. According to MacLeod (1993), the inspiration for Stevens to write ekphrastic poetry came chiefly from what he referred to as "the literature of painting". By the literature of painting he meant art magazines, periodicals, and museum catalogues which he read eagerly as a great lover of art and frequent

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations from Stevens' works come from his *Collected Poems*, *Letters* and *The Necessary Angel*, and will be marked respectively as (CP), (L) and (NA).

gallery visitor (1993: xxiv). Stevens had the chance to live and write during the time when art was in its heyday: movements such as Dada, Cubism and Surrealism were revolutionizing the conventional approach to life and culture, which obviously was not insignificant with respect to his verse. He did not write his poems in isolation from contemporary life, but always participated enthusiastically in what was taking place in the art world of his day. Around the time when "The Man with the Blue Guitar" was written (1937), the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford held the first retrospective of Picasso (1934), the New York MOMA displayed works of Hans Arp, Joan Miró, and Alberto Giacometti in an exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art" in 1935, and in 1936 it exhibited "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" with paintings by Picasso and Dalí.

In the 1930s, Surrealism, a movement that developed from Dadaism, was challenging America. One of the major events that contributed to the Surrealist venture into the unconscious was the expansion of Freudian ideas which spread so rapidly that by 1938 it appeared widely accepted that America had become the centre of psychoanalysis. The art world did not remain indifferent towards these ideas, and artists started to indulge in the processes of the unconscious mind unconstrained by logic and reason. This direction was the basis of Surrealism, which was then one of the most important of all the contemporary movements.

Wallace Stevens was as usual determined to establish his "relation to contemporary ideas" ("What is there in life except one's ideas / (...) Is it ideas that I believe?" *CP*, 175) which is well seen in "Sombre Figuration", a poetic surmise of Freudian psychoanalysis. The poet was well aware of the Surrealist impact on his poetry: "In the camera of the subconscious, things are not (may not be) what they are in the consciousness. The locust may titter. The turtle may sob. Surrealism (...)" (*L*, 375). *Owl's Clover*, a series of which "Sombre Figuration" is the last poem, is an important but poetically failed experiment, a judgment Stevens himself confirmed by excluding it from his *Collected Poems*.

Before having finished *Owl's Clover*, in December of 1936 Stevens started writing his new long poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar". The poem, which soon turned out to be one of his most successful, was completed by the spring of 1936. This rapidity indicates a kind of dissatisfaction with the previous poem that drove him to a radical new beginning (Patke 1985: 69). According to MacLeod, this abrupt and considerable advance can be attributed to Stevens' growing interest in Surrealism (MacLeod 1993: 58-59). Moreover, she claims that thanks to Stevens' own identification with the Surrealist Picasso the poem is such a major success (1993: 66-67): "I sing a hero's head, large eye/ And bearded bronze, but not a man (...) / Ah but to play man number one..." (*CP*, 165-166). Such encounter with the Surrealist Picasso may well be truly Surrealist in itself just like "a chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella" (Lautréamont 1978: 321). Nevertheless, Stevens may not have

approved of this accidental or even unconscious confrontation because of his distrust towards Surrealism. However, Stevens' vision of Picasso as the Surrealists' hero is well seen throughout the poem:

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."

(*CP*, 165)

The first canto introduces one of the main themes of Stevens' poetry, namely the question of whether reality can function without surreality and the other way round. This never-ending dilemma precisely brought him closer to modern art, in which he was looking for an analogy to his poetic conquests. In the poem, Stevens finds compromise between the real and the surreal – the imagination of an artist. For Stevens, the imagination represented by the blue guitar is the ultimate value. The blue guitar makes it possible for the artist to define the purpose of the imagination and of the imaginary reality. Precisely, thanks to his blue guitar the poet is capable of turning reality into imaginary reality. The blue guitar of the poem is therefore a symbol and an embodiment of the artist's power. On the other hand, the blue guitar is also the imagination which makes it possible for the poet to view reality in the context of surreality. Stevens clarifies his stance in the second canto, when he says that despite his efforts he cannot portray the world figuratively because his "blue guitar" prevents him from doing so:

I cannot bring a world quite round,  
Although I patch it as I can. (...)

... that it is the serenade  
Of a man that plays the blue guitar.

(*CP*, 165)

Therefore, he refers to modern art, "to serenade almost to man", to describe the imagined reality.

Arguably, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is a treatise on Surrealist art to which Stevens is trying to find an analogy in his poetry. Americans' widespread

enthusiasm for Surrealism reached its climax in the 1936-37 art season in New York. Everyone who showed even a little interest in cultural events must have been aware of the spirit of Surrealism at that time. In November 1936, *Harper's Bazaar* accurately foretold: "One sure thing, you aren't going to find a solitary place to hide from Surrealism this winter... Department stores have gone demented on the subject for their windows. Dress designers, advertising artists and photographers, short stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*, everywhere, Surrealism" (Lynes 1973: 142-143). The reason for this "upsurge of publicity" was the Museum of Modern Art's much heralded exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism", which opened on December 9, 1936 (MacLeod 1993: 59). Stevens' essay "The Irrational Element in Poetry" shows that the exhibition was familiar to him. The paper was delivered at Harvard on 8 December, 1936 (MacLeod 1993: 59), and its opening lines were a pertinent allusion to the MOMA exhibit: "We are at the moment so beset by the din made by the Surrealists and the surreationalists, and so preoccupied in reading about them that we may become confused by these romantic scholars and think of them as the sole examples of the irrational today. Certainly they exemplify one aspect of it" (*Opus Posthumous*, MacLeod 1993: 59). Such declaration and emphasis on the irrational aspect of Surrealism imply that Stevens might have felt a certain degree of discomfort with it. There is no record of Stevens' visit to the exhibit but we know him to have been an avid reader of museum catalogues, which suggests that at least he must have had read about, if not seen, it. Moreover, his reference to the show was a disapproving one, too. As pointed out by Patke (1985: 75), Stevens preferred to visit the Morgan Library and the miniatures in its exhibition room rather than the Surrealist exhibition, for "the metaphysics of Aristotle embellished by a miniaturist who knew the meaning of the word embellishment knocks the metaphysics of Dalí cold" (L, 315). If, however, one recalls Stevens' own failure in the last section of *Owl's Clover*, which in itself was an exploration of the unconscious, we shouldn't be surprised at his uneasiness with such an endeavor.

"The Irrational Element in Poetry" is Stevens' first attempt to formulate his theory of poetry in relation to modern ideas and it is thus essential that Stevens wrote this essay in response to Surrealism. MacLeod is uncertain whether Stevens intended to refer in this essay directly to Salvador Dalí's *Conquest of the Irrational* published in New York in 1935, however, the allusion to Surrealism is evident already in the title. Stevens admitted to having been "preoccupied in reading about Surrealism", and he subscribed to *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, a British periodical issued by the English Surrealist Group. He even had his poem, "Farewell to Florida" published in that magazine in 1936. There had been a major International Surrealist Exhibition in London the previous summer (June 11 – July 14), so, naturally, Surrealism received much attention in all the serious magazines (MacLeod 1993: 60).

"The Irrational Element in Poetry" is comparable to "Owl's Clover". It is another instance of Stevens' failure to make his stand towards modern ideas, such as Surrealism. Just as he rejected the poem from the first edition of *Collected Poems*, he excluded the essay from *The Necessary Angel*. It is thought of as "much too general to be serviceable" (*Opus Posthumous*, MacLeod 1993: 62). The two attempts are, for instance, vague in their use of terms, such as *irrational*, *imagination*, or *pure poetry*, which are well defined but incoherent as their use is sometimes contradictory in sense (MacLeod 1993: 61-62).

"The Man with the Blue Guitar", written only a few weeks later, seems to have reached ultimate success in Stevens' treatment of Surrealism because he encountered it with Cubism. Picasso seems to have been the major influence here, since there was an exhibition of his art in New York, which became one of the most important of the seasonal attractions in art circles. "Picasso is quite the kingpin of this surprise attack that has put so inescapable a Parisian stamp upon the first weeks of our present art season", reported Edward Allen Jewell in the *New York Times*, "you encounter him at almost every turn" (MacLeod 1993: 62). Therefore, Stevens' acquaintance with, and interest in Picasso's works is not surprising. Also, as the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford held the first retrospective of Picasso in 1934 (MacLeod 1993: 62), it provided opportunities for Stevens to become familiar with Picasso's art a couple of years earlier.

All the same, Surrealism seemed to Stevens unbearable because it was over the conceivable world in which a human being remained outside the Surrealist concept of reality:

A tune beyond us as we are, (...)  
 Ourselves in the tune as if in space (...)  
 Placed, so, beyond the compass of change (...)  
 The thinking of art seems final.

(CP, 167-168)

Yet the imagination is a resolution: "The blue guitar/ Becomes the place of things as they are"; in a Surrealist world the human being can be perceived only thanks to the imagination, and therefore, both poetry and painting should be approached imaginatively:

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.

(CP, 171)

"Issue 10 of *Cahiers d'Art* of 1936 was almost entirely devoted to Picasso. It included an article by Zervos titled "Social Fact and Cosmic Vision", which defended Picasso against the criticism that had claimed the end of his allegiance to pure art. The issue also introduced its readers to the painter's poetry in an article entitled "Picasso Poète" by André Breton. A direct influence of an article "Conversation avec Picasso" by Christian Zervos can clearly be seen in stanza xv of "The Man with the Blue Guitar", as it includes a quotation from Picasso" (MacLeod 1993: 63):

Is this picture of Picasso's, this "hoard  
Of destructions", a picture of ourselves,

Now, an image of our society?  
(...) deformed (...)

(CP, 173)

"Une somme de destructions" Stevens translated into "hoard of destructions". However, not only this single phrase but also the entire issue of *Cahiers d'Art* stands behind Stevens' concept of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (MacLeod 1993: 63). "*Cahiers d'Art* were sympathetic towards Surrealism, and the issues preceding that of Picasso's were devoted to Surrealist figures including Salvador Dalí, Man Ray, André Breton, Benjamin Péret, Paul Eluard, Georges Hugenet, and others. Moreover, Zervos – its editor, who was a close friend of Picasso, apart from his editorship, documented Picasso's life and career. The magazine never shifted its attention from Surrealism and Picasso, who remained in its centre, therefore the Picasso, Stevens encountered in *Cahiers d'Art* was the Surrealist Picasso" (MacLeod 1993: 64-65). Nonetheless, Picasso never officially became the member of the Surrealists' camp. Stevens, who certainly knew about it, had never supported the movement wholeheartedly chiefly because he felt threatened by its avant-garde attitude.

The critics who approach Stevens' poem analytically question whether it really was Surrealism that inspired "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and whether it has some significant analogies with the poem. Arguably, it is not so much a question of which artistic movement it was but rather why did the poet refer to e.g., Cubism or Surrealism, especially if one realises that the poem does not imitate art but suggests the appearances of it. That Picasso was the artist whom Stevens certainly adapted to his own work is rather obvious, but Picasso too had his different "periods" and his works are extremely varied in terms of their style. His early years are referred to as a blue period, 1905 marks the beginning of a rose period; later came Cubism, which also tried to assimilate Surrealism. Bearing in mind this divergence of styles, it is hard, if not impossible to point out which Picasso style in particular appealed to Stevens when he was writing "The Man with the Blue Guitar". Stevens himself was always averse to admitting di-

rect influences on his poems. Picasso's early picture *The Old Guitarist* seems an obvious reference to Stevens' poem, but our deliberation may immediately seem groundless if we consider Stevens' categorical statement that he "had no particular painting of Picasso in mind" (L, 786). Can such a statement be deliberately misleading or does it suggest that Stevens would rather consider the entire Picasso relevant to his own poetry? Should Picasso be treated only in the context of Cubism or Surrealism, or rather as an artistic whole? Stevens indeed may have had considered him holistically, since, as Bonnie Costello asserts, "it is a mistake ... to match Stevens to this or that movement in painting, to this or that artist for he suggests the entire enterprise of painting through naming, allusion, metaphor, narration, argument, and other literary means" (Costello 1985: 65-66). She compares Stevens to Williams and concludes that in the former Picasso, Poussin, etc. are "invoked not imitated". "The qualities of a painting, i.e. light, colour, shape, line, plane, space, grisaille, chiaroscuro, etching are not approximated in language but brought to mind. Stevens does not abandon poetic genres for painterly ones – portrait, still life, landscape – but borrows their associations" (Costello 1985: 66-67). Stevens' relation to painting is far more figurative and conceptual, as he is less interested in the practice of painting than in its theory when he's quoting Picasso's notion of art as a "horde of destructions" and Klee's notion of "the organic centre of all movement in time and place" (NA, 1951: 159). He was interested in the condition of his contemporary painting and the unique experience of beauty suggested within that condition. Costello asserts that the habit of broadly applying categories like Cubism or Impressionism proves particularly faulty with respect with Stevens' poetry (1985: 66-67). Her argument lies between "those who apply the analogy of painting as an attempt to apply painterly modes to the poems, and those who interpret the allusions to painting as plain metaphors for art, especially poetic art. They *are* metaphors, but as such they cannot be taken for granted" (Costello 1985: 67).

Stevens' allusions to Cubism should be interpreted in the context of Surrealism. Despite feeling suspicious about Surrealism, Stevens may well have been inspired by it. Nevertheless, Cubism with which Stevens had already been familiar is present in the poem, especially in an analogy with Picasso and Cézanne. Accordingly, Patke asserts that after the Armory Show Stevens renewed his interest in Picasso and his Cubist period after the 1934 Picasso retrospective in Hartford, and the New York MOMA "Cubism and Abstract Art" exhibition of 1935. Patke claims that the importance of Cubism to Stevens is not surprising in the context of his lifelong interest in painting (1985: 70). He also reminds us that Stevens' appreciation of the more recent trends in modern painting, such as Surrealism, was reluctant, halting and tinged with conservative suspicion (Patke 1985: 70). Cubism in the 1930s had achieved a "more definite status as a movement, and the poet's gradual awareness of the possibilities of

applying its insights and procedures to his own predicament could have crystallized into clarity and form after the failure of the more traditional experiments of "The Comedian" and "Owl's Clover" (Patke 1985: 69-81). Cubism is considered a close link to Impressionism and Post-Impressionism in the figure of Cézanne, a precursor of Cubism. Patke discusses his impact on Stevens' poetry, claiming that his disposition harmonised most comfortably with "the effects contrived by the Impressionists" (Patke 1985: 71): "I share your pleasure in the Impressionistic school. In the pictures of this school: so light in tone, so bright in color, one is not conscious of the medium" (L, Patke 1985: 71). The Impressionists re-assessed the act of perception as the foremost and major element of a painterly composition. Consequently Patke asserts that the exercise of learning to look with an 'innocent eye' required layers of preconceptions acquired through the personal memory of experience in time and collective memory in the form of convention and history to be stripped away (1985: 72). Stevens made a painterly analogy between his return to the "first idea" in poetry and the removal of layers of varnish and dirt from a painting to arrive at its original condition. "A poetry revived by the candour of the "first idea" would be like the canvas cleaned by the restorer, so that one could see the painting for the first time as it must have looked immediately upon completion. Such poetry cleansed metaphor, just as the Impressionist painter's vision cleansed the sensory apparatus of the patina of preconceptions which obscured true visual knowledge" (L, 426-427). Impressionism questioned the presumptions referring to the relation between painting and reality. Painters such as Van Gogh, Picasso and Gauguin in their primitivistic sculptures and masks all attempt to provoke a return to a primeval condition of perception. It is a return to the primitive and the childlike, thus pre-historical and unfettered by values. In this context the importance of Cézanne and Seurat, as the two direct predecessors of Cubism, lay in their anti-theoretical approaches to the progressive series of dissociations set off by Impressionism (Patke 1985: 72). Seurat aimed at a diffusion of the colour spectrum which gave the effect of a blurred image and extraordinary illumination. Cézanne focused on the internal structure of nature and on the subtle modulation of colour spots which helped him achieve an "innocent eye". Stevens referred to Cézanne in *The Necessary Angel*: "Composition was his passion. He considered that a formally complete picture is one in which all the parts are so related to one another that they all imply each other" (NA, 162). In his correspondence Stevens wrote: "On my death there will be found carved on my heart ... the name of Aix-en-Provence" (L, 671). This direct allusion to Cézanne's hometown not only highlights the deep admiration for the painter, but it also demonstrates the central role he and his art played in Stevens' reflective life.

And it was Cézanne from whom Stevens was trying to find an answer to his reality-imagination dilemma: "An absence in reality / (...) an absence for the

poem" (CP, 176-177). Cézanne combined some features of figurative painting with the avant-garde pre-Cubist techniques. Stevens likewise employs a similar approach in Canto xiv, where at first he contrasts the still-life composition with the blue guitar which here symbolizes non-figurative art:

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

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

(CP, 172)

Cézanne had possessed a sober solemnity and composure which enabled him to combine dissolution with re-enactment, so that his paintings combine at one plane what they dismantle first at another plane. These performances were a point of reference to the "restlessly experimenting Cubists, who took up the task of dismantling more energetically than that of reshaping. As their ideas evolved from the analytic to a synthetic phase, the absorption of the painter in technique and in the materials appropriated as the media for his paintings increased at the expense of the hold on reality which had served as anchorage in even the most abstract of Cézanne's work" (Patke 1985: 72-73). They were also a point of reference for Stevens:

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

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

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

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

Its true appearances (...)  
(...) In the universal intercourse.

(CP, 177)

Stevens also found Cézanne important in diminishing his uneasiness with Surrealism. Cézanne, who was both Impressionist and Cubist, enabled Stevens refer Surrealism to Cubism through Impressionism. Like the Impressionists who moved away from reality to express their 'impressions' of reality, Surrealists moved through a similar pattern as well. Stevens must have been aware of this relation between Cubism and Surrealism which well justifies his reference Cézanne.

Nonetheless, Stevens admitted that he did not particularly approve of the work in which "one is not conscious of anything except the medium" (L, 577), which signals his distrust towards Surrealism. He even wrote down in his commonplace notebook a reference to Picasso as an "over-intellectual designer" (L, Patke 1985: 73). After "The Man with the Blue Guitar", Stevens, just like the Cubists, wrote poems which were utterly different in their formula and manner, but which had been immersed in the experience of the Cubist experiment of "The Man with the Blue Guitar". This experience showed an analogy between Cubist practice and poetry. Likewise, Cubists such as Picasso and Braque were constantly exploring the opportunities that Cubism embodied but these experiments did not provide absolute reassurance of the ultimate result. However, that which they had learned during that time later served them as a certain point of reference, and although they moved beyond, they still retained some aspects of it. Stevens, too, kept returning to his previous remarks and discoveries in seeking his "relation to contemporary ideas", by returning to Cubism he attempted to clarify his stance to Surrealism.

"The radical rephrasing of familiar motifs practised by the Cubists can be illustrated by comparing an example of good art in the representational convention – say Manet's *Woman with Guitar* (Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut) – with a typical example of early Cubism, say Picasso's *Woman with Mandolin*, (plate in Steinberg 1972: 161), or Braque's *Man with a Guitar* (MOMA, New York). Each contains a recognizable double – object as the subject of the painting: a human being holding a musical instrument. Music is being played, we presume, but the atemporal space of each picture suspends the implied allegorical subject (music) as a stilled metaphor" (Patke 1985: 74). There is a magical bond between music and other arts, as they are all acts of creation and perception and, moreover, they all rely on imagination. The fact that the painters, as well as Stevens, used a musical instrument in their works is not just coincidence. All the artists seemed to have liked the concept of music as an abstract idea. Indeed, music is the subject of each of the works although it is not literally present there; it is represented by metonymies such as the instrument and the performer. Music, usually associated with sound, is sometimes accompanied by a human voice, but in the above-mentioned works only instrumental music is displayed although it is still performed by humans. Music as a subject of painting – in the context of a silent museum where painting is displayed – approaches absurdity, a circumstance which is less so in case of the poem, since poetry and music used to be performed as one in the form of, e.g. a ballad. Thus, the true nature of music, which cannot be captured like light in an impressionistic painting and put on canvas or a piece of paper, is revealed. The very idea of music depicted in a work of art was in fashion then. In 1939, Henri Matisse painted *Music*, which likewise portrays a woman playing the guitar. Picasso's

*Still-life violin*, and *Three Musicians* also show the importance of musical motifs in fine arts at that time.

Patke claims that the Cubist use of a traditional metaphor of music was instructive and prescriptive for a poet and painter who struggled to assimilate reality into pure art (1985: 75). Stevens admits "under such stress, reality changes from substance to subtlety" (NA, 1951: 174). The artist encounters such a difficult transfiguration as soon as in the first canto:

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."

(CP, 165)

Cubism usually denies claims for representational adequacy. Its essence is composed of two phases. The first is the process of covering up while painting, the other is the uncovering of the triple structure of the artist, art and object ("The blue guitar/ And I are one. The orchestra (...)") CP, 171). The former is the artist's task, while the latter is the task of the spectator. The logic of discovery followed by Cubist practice re-enacts itself in the poetic medium of "The Man with the Blue Guitar". The analogy between Stevens's poem and Cubist works of art lies in an apparent reality of destruction ("Things as they are have been destroyed", CP, 173) which recalls the technique applied by Picasso. He claimed that at first he made a painting and then he destroyed it, but after all nothing was lost because he learned something out of it, he gained a new type of experience which was relevant to the process of uncovering. The spectator had to re-design the whole structure, which Stevens consequently refers to as "hoard of destructions" (CP, 173) which sends us precisely back to the Surrealist Picasso. He brings up this issue of decreation in modern culture in *The Necessary Angel*, "...decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation" (NA, 174-175). Decreation in a way rejects one aim of painting which is to reproduce "things as they are". In order to create an illusionary reality "things as they are changed upon the blue guitar". However, the initial vision of the artist remains unchanged anyway, contrary to what is seen by the spectator:

A tune beyond us as we are,  
Yet nothing changed by the blue guitar;  
(...)

The thinking of art becomes 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.

(CP, 167-168)

Creation, or moreover reproduction may be compared to imitation which still was essential in Surrealist endeavor of which Stevens must have been aware (“...Things are as I think they are” CP, 180). In his *Declaration* of 1929 Dalí baldly asserted: “Those who do not want to imitate anything, produce nothing” which highlights that some degree of imitation, even in the most reality-departed art was necessary. This aspect of Surrealist art which slightly approaches figurative art certainly makes Stevens cling to it in his general distrust to the entire movement. The element of imitation makes the otherwise unbearable Surrealism seem more acceptable. The fact that, as Dalí puts it, “Surrealism is destructive, but it destroys only what it considers to be shackles limiting our vision” (Beckett 2002) was definitely too radical for Stevens, to whom Cubist destructions were nevertheless more appealing. Surrealism destroys the existing reality entirely because it ignores it. The Cubist type of destruction is more passable to Stevens because it is a two-stage process which culminates in the creation of a new reality, whereas the Surrealist destruction is a one-stage process, therefore, it is more radical. Cubist destruction is literal, Surrealist destruction is surreal. Yet in a Cubist painting the destruction brings another form of creation. The new reality is composed of several pieces, each of which in itself creates a new reality, but when regarded as a presence it becomes the initially conceived form.

In “Owl’s Clover” Stevens was still uncertain as to his concept of reality, and so the real was often disfigured as the unreal. However, his statement “I am myself a part of what is real” from *The Necessary Angel*, (1951: 60) is already affirmed in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, in which the poet – guitarist has a double role: that of a lyrical subject and lyrical object. According to Patke (1985: 76), such dualistic objective can be referred to all the metonymic appearances made by objects and subjects. Consequently, the guitarist does appear in the poem, whereas the sculptor in *Owl’s Clover* is virtually absent. The juxtaposition refers us again to a Cubist work of art which can be perceived dualistically on two layers. Likewise the guitarist is the subject of the poem yet he speaks in the first person narration:

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

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

Being the lion and the lute (...)

(CP, 175)

Stevens used disjunctions especially in his two previous long poems. The sequential ordering of disjunctions of some sections in “Owl’s Clover” takes on a particularly formal overtone. The disjunctions of “The Comedian with a Letter C” set up tensions between the heroic commitment and the ironic detachment, between subject matter and mode of expression. “The Man with the Blue Guitar” exercises disjunctions in an all-encompassing way (Patke 1985: 77). There is an apparent impression of chaos and randomness as far as the order of cantos is concerned. As Stevens writes, “My impression is that these are printed in the order in which they were written without rearrangement. There were a few that were scrapped. I kept them in their original order for my own purposes, because one really leads into another, even when the relationship is only one of contrast” (L, 359).

The juxtapositions in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and in Cubism are not fortuitous. The separate cantos which make part of the whole poem, and the poetic devices, such as metaphors, can be compared to individual parts of a fragmented cubist painting which are combined to form the entire work. Colour and shape differentiation may be analogous to the lyricism of the guitarist and his character. Explicit discontinuities of each canto deepen the overall meaning of discontinuity itself. Just as a Cubist painting alters the conventional positions of objects by means of eccentric dispersion, so in the poem objects are displaced from their traditional centrality (Patke 1985: 77). The Cubist juxtaposition of images was an attempt to force the mind to reach all the parts of the poem simultaneously. Stevens also uses juxtapositions in “the interplay of reality and the imagination (...) perception and action, decreation and creation, decomposition and arrangement, patching and rounding, darkness and lightness, simplicity and multiplicity, knowledge and discovery – [which] crisscross (...) the poem to give it its fluid and enigmatic character” (Ambroży 2003: 286). Stevens aims at a Cubist perception of art precisely by means of the juxtapositions; just as we do when in viewing a Cubist painting we look at it all simultaneously - not separately at each of its component parts. Stevens wants us to do the same with his poem “in the universal intercourse”. This was obtainable only because of the collage technique which Stevens also adapted from Picasso, who in early 1912 had produced a work which moved away from the Cubist analysis of objects in relation to the solidified space (...) towards a synthesis or building up of separate objects on the picture plane, whose relationships could be intriguingly defamiliarising (Butler 1994: 167). But, juxtapositions were not unique to Cubism, they were well unfold in Surrealist art, too. By juxtaposing real and natural elements, objects and scenes Stevens creates a new reality, or surreality.

The monumental draft of the guitarist and still-life objects in Cantos xiv, xv and xxxiii of Stevens’ poem resembles some of Cézanne’s still-lives.

...the fruit and wine,  
The book and bread, things as they are.

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

(CP, 172-173)

By referring to Cézanne, Stevens combines figurative art (i.e. Dutch still-lives) with non-figurative Cubist dispersion leading him to a satisfactory resolution of his "relation to contemporary ideas":

...are these separate? (...)  
A few final solutions, like a duet  
(...)  
The grunted breath serene and final,  
The imagined and the real, thought

And the truth, Dichtung and Wahrheit, all  
Confusion solved, as in a refrain

One keeps on playing year by year,  
Concerning the nature of things as they are.

(CP, 177)

Both Stevens and Cubists drew inspiration from African sculpture. With Picasso, who was profoundly inspired by African masks while painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*, the mask is an explicit theme. In the case of Stevens it is precisely the blue guitar which constitutes a kind of mask. And this likening of masks also brings him closer to Cubism: masked objects represent the essential image of Cubist art, but with a mask on Stevens also identifies himself with the poet and the guitarist (i.e. Picasso):

(...) the blue guitar  
Is a form, described but difficult,  
And I am merely a shadow hunched  
Above the arrowy, still strings,  
The maker of a thing to be made;  
The color like a thought that grows.

(CP, 169)

For Patke (1985: 77), the simplification of the mask of the guitarist in Stevens also corresponds to the stripping away of all indications of identity except the most banal or the most generic ones in Cubism. Thus the long lists of metonymies from

*Owl's Clover* are replaced in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" by the most economically used tokens of object and person. The poem shares this feature with Cubism:

So it is to sit and to balance things  
To and to and to the point of still,

To say of one mask it is like,  
To say of another it is like,

To know that the balance does not quite rest,  
That the mask is strange, however like.

(CP, 181)

Precisely the identity of a Cubist object, i.e. a mask, derives from the function and placement it is assigned by an artist, and not from the bare object itself. The identity of the guitarist is confirmed only with his metonymic object – the guitar. The incorporation of such metonymies as a guitar (mask) into the poem is analogous to collage. Collage was practised by Picasso and Braque during 1912-1914, as Cubism moved from its analytic phase to the synthetic one. In a collage work of art, ordinary objects were put onto the surface of a painting to make a complete entity. A piece of metal, wire, cord or painted wood were incorporated in a painting in an attempt to integrate every-day objects in the domain of art in a very literal fashion. Collage technique allowed for an interpretative dislocation in poetry, because shapes which imply objects could also be linked by poetic analogy, verbal association and visual punning: for example, by exploiting the similarities between a violin and a mask-like face. The aim was not just the formal one of making intriguingly ambiguous geometrical relationships work within the picture plane, but of eliciting associations which could reinforce this strangeness (Butler 1994: 168). In this way, collage became a new syntactic principle of Cubism. The analogy with Duchamp's readymades is rather obvious. Furthermore, Duchamp is also evoked in Stevens' intention to deprive his guitar of its conventional role. They both take delight in disturbing the habitual expectations of the viewer. MacLeod (1993: 72-73) supports this thesis in her further research by mentioning the fact that Duchamp was actually considered by Surrealists as one of them, and his readymades were exhibited in 1936 in Paris at *Exposition Surréaliste d'Objects*. Stevens' guitar, just like a readymade, reveals a special reality: imaginative intertextuality because in the meantime it becomes an emblem of reality. The tangible guitar, on the other hand, ceases to be real in the very milieu, as it only provides context for the poem and therefore it gains abstract value. Thus the essence of reality/ imagination and imagination/ reality reassignment is suggested once again. Stevens himself commented in his *Letters* on Canto iv: "In this poem, reality changes into imagination (under one's very eyes) as one experiences it, by reason of one's feelings about it".

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" the narrative becomes compressed into a spiral framework. The poem is open-ended and incomplete; moreover, the end is not even foreseen. There is only inherent and ethereal reality to be exposed. In this sense its structure is reminiscent of a Cubist painting and theory.

For MacLeod it seems very unlikely that Stevens had suddenly been inspired by cubist aesthetics in 1937, since he had been familiar with it long before, and by the 1920s Cubism had ceased to be a vital movement (MacLeod 1993: 58-61). But, on the other hand, Cubism served as safe and bearable protection against the violent and unattainable Surrealism, which for Stevens was:

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

(CP, 179)

The intertwined analogies to Cubism and Surrealism are the result of Stevens' deep and lifelong interest in art which enabled him to fulfil his eagerness to define his own perception of art in his times.

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