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Performance, Lyric, and the Audience's Demands in Wallace Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar"

Beverly Maeder

The public performance of music or drama requires performers to simultaneously share an experience with others, while maintaining the privacy of their own needs. "The actor's work," wrote Peter Brook, "is never for an audience, yet always is for one" (51). In lyric poetry, on the other hand, the communicative capacity of the text may be allegorized or formalized in terms of an address or invocation made to an absent other or, more obliquely, it may articulate the musings of the mind interpreting perception or experience for itself. The lyric may thus quietly set aside the social requirements of a real, live empirical "audience," and, in its primary existence on the page, it may privilege another kind of listening presence, a fictive other figured as Muse, loved one, rival or, more privately, one's own inward, most intimate ear. Not only does the lyric typically resist becoming ensnared in the drama of social and political power, but the exchange it represents constitutes a moment apart, a moment in which the poet establishes a fictive independence from the collective demands of contemporary readers. From this point of view, the reader's private reading or performance of a lyric poem consists of an interpretive re-enactment of the poetic persona's original, private exchange.

Both criticism and the practice of poetry have tended to oppose the private lyric of individual feeling to the politically or socially engaged poem. At certain moments and in certain places, this intellectually convenient but over-simplified dichotomy has been used as an arm for legitimizing one or the other of these modes, or for either censuring artistic expression or involving it in the struggle for political power.¹ The troubled decade of the thirties in the United States was such a moment and such a place, as politi-

¹ In our own time one might think of poets like Seamus Heaney or Rita Dove, who have attracted both detractors and admirers for favoring one mode or the other at different moments.

cally engaged critics of the right and left put American poets under particular pressure to deal with topical issues. Wallace Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar," composed in 1937, is a direct response to this pressure. The work is Stevens' major poetic attempt at forging an artistic ethos for times characterized by what he would call "contemporary chaos."

Stevens' poem molds mock epic into lyric through the allegorical representation of a public performance on a "blue guitar." His "man" is a maverick guitarist, both singer and player, who responds to his collective detractors. I will argue that the trope of performance enacts a range of ordinarily incompatible stances towards the politically topical poem and the lyric. Although the poem itself does not explore the potential distinction between "singing" and "playing," I would like to use these terms here to define two parallel modes of the allegorical performance. On the one hand, the "man" is a "singer" who responds to his audience by encoding references to the contemporary world into a message. His song picks up the audience's hermeneutic challenge about playing "things as they are" and discusses their social, political and epistemological implications. On the other hand, the "man" is also a "player" who sometimes uses his instrument in such a way as to disengage his tune entirely from any message and from the allegorized audience's expressed needs. In this sense, the poem goes about as far as a verbal text can go as a performance of music. Thus, at one extreme, readers find the allegorical singer opening a few small spaces in the song-poem where the represented audience – and readers in turn – can decode the singer's signs and recognize topical issues. At the other extreme, readers may experience the actual performance or playing of the text-score as a temporal experience of ongoingness, an experience of the kind we usually associate with a performance of music or dance. I will concentrate primarily on the sharpest extremes of the singer's accommodation of the audience's hermeneutic demand and the player's performance of the tune in time, and, in a last stage, I will consider what this double nature reveals.

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In the mid-1930s one of the most hotly debated subjects in the American cultural scene was the development of a new aesthetic that would encompass political engagement. Indeed it was a time when no American could ignore the climate of national labor unrest and political radicalization at home or the spread of totalitarianism and persecutions in Europe. Wallace Stevens

first responded to this situation in *Ideas of Order*² (1935 and 1936). In this volume, he takes a distance from his own earlier concern for finding "form and order in solitude" (mocked in "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" *CP* 121), and reaches out toward broader public concerns as when he begins "Winter Bells" with a topical reference, "The Jew did not go to the synagogue / To be flogged" (*CP* 141). However, most topical allusions in *Ideas of Order* are diffused into more generalized or unspecified images of alienation and confusion, such as that of the man in the development of "Winter Bells" who lives a life-in-death of self-complacency "on the basis of propriety," or the piano player in "Mozart, 1935" who is asked to express the vague "cries" heard in the streets in his own "voice of angry fear" (*CP* 132). Similarly, in "The Men That are Falling," a poem Stevens later claimed to have written in response to the Spanish Civil War, there are no identifiable references to any parties or places in Spain. Rather, the poem's closing couplet – "Taste of the blood upon his martyred lips, / O pensioners, O demagogues and pay-men!" (*CP* 188) – is a generalizable lament about murderous wars fomented by demagogues and their cliques in modern times. *Ideas of Order*, then, typically dilutes or generalizes topical references when they are present. The poems modulate from surprise to surprise, unfastening, as it were, topical references from their contemporary context, and moving among images to create clusters of very tenuous relationships. Moreover, the frequency of ironic and mutually self-annulling propositions prevents the poems from taking anything like a political "stand."

The aesthetic stance adopted in *Ideas of Order* was specifically challenged by Stanley Burnshaw in the leftist journal *New Masses*. Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of Order* depicted Stevens as a poet who knew that his "harmonious cosmos [was] suddenly screeching with confusion," but who had failed to "sweep his contradictory notions into a valid Idea of Order" (Doyle 140). The reviewer expressed hopes that Stevens would cease to write the aestheticizing kind of verse that could be swallowed only in "tiny doses" by a public confronted with "murderous world collapse." Stevens responded to the review in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,"³ one section of a long poem sequence called "Owl's Clover." The sequence is a partially satirical tableau of contending views on the role of poetry in a chaotic and violent world. It is somewhat pompous and awkward, and Stevens would not

² All references to Stevens' poetry will be to Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954 and Vintage, 1982), hereafter indicated as *CP*.

³ Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, Milton Bates, ed. (New York: Knopf, 1989), 78-83. Hereafter referred to as *OP*.

include it in his *Collected Poems*. The “Burnshaw” poem takes a stand against pontification in poetry, yet it summarizes its own message in pontificating style: “A time in which the poets’ politics / Will rule in a poets’ world” will be “A world impossible for poets” (*OP* 80). In such wooden solemnity the poem steps dangerously close to self-mockery, a trait Burnshaw himself had found problematic in other poems. A lecture Stevens gave at Harvard in December 1936 provided a more adequate forum for discussing the poet’s relation to the contemporary world. Stevens’ audience⁴ flocked to hear the poet alumnus speak about what he called “the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet” (*OP* 224), read portions of his “Owl’s Clover,” express his fear of the destruction of civilization by German fascism and Russian communism, and distill that fear in the phrase “contemporary chaos” (*OP* 229). It is precisely because this chaos is so powerful and threatening that Stevens sees the need for an aesthetic ethos that is life-saving. Poetry, in his view, should be free to provide an opportunity for the imagination to step back from and, more importantly, resist “the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance” (*OP* 230). And resistance for Stevens, we should remember, means not avoidance but an active effort of standing against, in order to create what he called “enlargements of life.”

As a sequel to *Ideas of Order*, then, “The Man with the Blue Guitar”⁵ continues the work of justifying a type of aesthetic which values the transforming capacities of the poet’s inward eye and ear, while dispersing and diffusing once again the topical explicitness of a poem like “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” at least in the middle twenty-five or so cantos. Yet its allegory of performance also encompasses both a more subtle and a more directly articulated exchange about the “ideological subject-matter”⁶ that some contemporary criticism saw it as containing. What I would like to emphasize is that the allegory of the performance is Stevens’ main vector for problematizing the political in terms of an aesthetic ethos. Indeed, the sufferers of political and social anxieties are present synecdochically in the poem in the

⁴ The Harvard audience had been incensed by a high Nazi official’s recent donation of a generous gift to Harvard, as well as by the Massachusetts anti-red flag law. See Alan Filreis 248-49. Filreis’s book is an extraordinarily well-researched and detailed account of the politico-literary debate of the time. His work broadens the scope of John Timberman Newcomb.

⁵ All references will be to the thirty-three cantos, numbered I to XXXIII, as they appear in Wallace Stevens’ *Collected Poems*.

⁶ *The Critical Heritage* 180, from an article on American poetry written from the point of view of a Marxist sympathizer, by Dorothy Van Ghent, for the 11 January 1938 issue of *New Masses*.

audience; they are the “they” to whom the “man” replies at the opening of the poem sequence and the “you” he addresses as he both sings and plays.

The hypothetical occasion of the exchange between singer and audience in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” is as unspecified as the occasion of enunciation in most of Stevens’ other poetry. This leaves the poem-performance the space and time for defining its own teleology. At first even the fictive audience refrains from being topical, either directly or metaphorically. They seem almost surprisingly to crave for and yet reject the kind of philosophical and epistemological satisfactions that Stevens’ early poetry of *Harmonium* played with. They express a desire to hear the singer compensate for the disappearance of god, to replace “empty heaven and its hymns” (V); yet they insist that the tune must be, as they say, “beyond us, yet ourselves” (I). Cantos I and V, the only ones that unambiguously give voice to the audience alone, show the audience seeking to integrate outside and inside, on the one hand, and the actual and representation, on the other: Although they call the performance a “tune,” what they desire to hear is a mimetic song of “things as they are,” as well as a song of what is “beyond” them yet identical with them.

In response, the “shearsman”-singer accommodates the audience and allows them to recognize their demands in the poem, while he simultaneously resists their demand and disappoints their wish for containment or resolution by circumventing their values. He initiates this dual move by claiming to sing only “almost to man” (II). Here the singer begins a series of modulations on the word “man,” a signifier that was first applied to himself and not the audience, by the frame which begins “The man bent over his guitar” (I). He also immediately deflects attention away from the possible content and interpretation of “things as they are” and promises a playing that “miss[es]” “things as they are” (II). He brings us back to the instrument in his hands and what can be done with it.

Other forms of accommodation also appear as resistance when turned around. The heterogeneous voice that characterizes several of the opening cantos (III-IV and VI-VII) also demonstrates how the singer specifies or distorts the detractors’ desire, in order to claim the right to step away from it. Cantos III-IV, for instance, act out a generalized version of the political subtext of demagogical leadership and the collective activity of the masses. They specify something that cannot be attributed to the audience directly, and do it in a particularly devious way. Using two contrasting modes, the optative and the interrogative, the poem indeed takes these two concerns as “subject-matter.” “Ah, but to play man number one, / To drive the dagger in

his heart" (III) suggests the fantasy of violent sacrifice of the demagogue, while "A million people on one string?" (IV) betokens a query about the masses. By eschewing the explicit use of a subject of enunciation, these moments of performance contribute to masking the identity of any putative speaker and merge the audience's desire into an indeterminable voice whose speaker is indeed both "beyond" them yet themselves. It is a more topical but, in a sense, an unclaimed voice. Moreover, the non-propositional forms of these cantos prevent them from having a clear hermeneutic or performative status, despite the semantic value of their individual words.

Such means of invalidating distinctions between man and instrument and "things as they are" and of blurring the speaker-listener-statement divide both accommodate and defamiliarize the audience's demands. Just as their subjects of concern are deviously specified, the text provides no acceptable fulfillment of what they seek. For instance, the early cantos – and a fortiori the middle ones – avoid expressing the audience's "ourselves in poetry" (V) except in the most literal way: they are there in the words on the page. But this turns out to be a pun on both "selves" and "poetry," as well as on what we usually mean by what it is to be "in" something. The audience has been absorbed into the tentative exploration of their own themes in such cantos, and led beyond their original vagaries, whether they follow or not.

It is only at what I have called the sharpest "extreme" of the performer's strategy of accommodation that the audience's inferable demands for political relevance are directly met. For although the "referential" occasion of this poem is almost as underspecified as that of Stevens' earlier and later poetry, "The Blue Guitar" sparkles with graphic allusions to social and political facts. Even the recurring phrase "things as they are," used by both audience and performer, was used by Marxists in 1936, as Alan Filreis has shown (262), and is not just a citation of Wordsworth.⁷ In addition, it seems to me that the poem contains myriad other images and phrases that encode contemporary discourse on facts of "contemporary chaos" while they simultaneously suggest allusions more traditional to the lyric. Thus, the image of "mechanical beetles never quite warm" (VII) might point not only to classical metamorphoses, but also to Hitler's VWs; and "the structure of vaults upon a point of light" (V) may not only allude to Dante's hell (an interpretation frequently encountered in Stevens criticism) but encrypt descriptions of

⁷ Wordsworth, who provided Stevens' tradition with many poetic concepts and terms, defined the business of poetry as that of treating "things *not* as they are [. . .] but as they seem to exist to the *senses*, and to the *passions*" and worked upon "in the spirit of genuine imagination" (63).

the elaborate arches of light beams built by the architect Speer as a grandiose setting in which Hitler harangued the crowds. By insinuating such intensely contrasted encodings – or by allowing such contrasted hermeneutic decodings – the poem-song simultaneously provides some token recognition of the demands of Stevens' real-life audience for political relevance, while it also multiplies more obvious connections to the history and interpretation of *poetry* (including the lyric) as a mode with specific possibilities, including hermeneutic expectations.

One of the effects, then, of the performance of poetry is that it enters into a hermeneutic relation with the audience and becomes itself the object of interpretation. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," this hermeneutic function of the text is implied in what the audience is seeking. The latter is shown to be inadequate, however, by the way the player lays bare the fixity and rigidity that they seek in interpretation. Not only, the opening cantos imply, do the detractors expect to find specific relevance that would enable them to integrate their perception of the world and of themselves into their insatiable desire to find a new creed, but they expect the poet to encompass all this in a form of mimetic realism. The "green" of day, the audience protests, is deformed by the guitar's "blue."

When the guitarist counters the audience's desire by insisting on the transforming agency of his instrument, it might make it appear that the audience is only criticizing the defamiliarization brought about by his peculiar interpretive process. But as the performance develops, it brings to the surface the audience's more latent desire to stabilize "things as they are" and themselves in it. This implicit expectation is taken to one of its possible logical ends in canto VI, in which a heterogeneous voice, masking the distinction between singer and audience, echoes the audience's language but ironically transforms it: their protest against "change" is integrated into the phrase "nothing changed." Spatial inscription is made semantically present here in the "compass of change," the "atmosphere," (emphasis mine), in the repetition of "place" and "space;" and it is functionally foregrounded in the giddy repetition of the locatives "in" and "on." The result the audience desires, it is implied, is a tune, song or poem composed or performed as a geometrical organization of metaphors within a "sphere" or confined space, or represented in a tableau as on a stage, motionless because it is "final." Despite the audience's dreams of displacing intellectual and spiritual exaltation and replacing it with "Poetry // Exceeding music" (V), their demand is unmasked as a "composing" that is not a moving process like music, but the mere inscription of their universe within a "place" or space that is metaphorically

represented here and now by the guitar. In this regard, Stevens' guitarist will offer only tangential accommodation to the audience's demands, here and there anchoring the poem in the leitmotifs the audience themselves introduced, and reducing the spatial rhythm of the poem to a series of couplets. These devices provide a few signposts for the audience to pursue their hermeneutic activity within a space that is otherwise, as we will see in a moment, destabilizing.

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" thus uses these various strategies in its dialogical opening as a way of exposing and acknowledging the existence of desires for relevance, including latent forms that the audience themselves do not specify. At the same time, the poem resolutely fails to respect the hermeneutic pact that could be implied in such acknowledgement. For the singer's work of distortion deprives the audience's underlying desire for mimetic and referential stability of any legitimacy in the present context.

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The performer's skills will therefore be devoted primarily to resisting the audience's demands. Stevens' special contribution to poetry seen as an allegory for performance consists of the way in which the player-performer transforms the stabilizing force of the audience's spatialized logic of reduction, even as he exploits the grammatical and semantic potential of locatives ("in," "on," "over") and copular equations (A "is" B), for instance.

The performer's guile in using the grammar of spatial inscription to avoid the stability of a motionless tableau or stilled moment is revealed retrospectively. In the next to the last canto, XXXII, the player turns once again towards the audience, exhorting them to discard the defining limits of what he calls "the crust of shape":

XXXII

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.

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

Nothing of its jocular procreations?
Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand

Between you and shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

You as you are? You are yourself.
The blue guitar surprises you.

This is what should happen if the audience put away their demands for political and topical relevance. The canto provides four different versions of the same process of casting off dead language and discovering another aesthetic, one which, prefiguring Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," rests on the play of change as the basis of pleasure.⁸ Outfitting this enthusiastic canto with the audience's old "space" metaphor, the player urges its abolition by pleading for a space without light, without sight, perhaps without cognitive knowledge – a space whose boundaries and features dissolve so as to produce "jocular procreations."⁹

Such transformations suggest that the central concern of the performance as allegory, as well as of the poem itself as text, is not, and has not been, spatial inscription. Instead, it has been one facet of music-making: temporal process.¹⁰ One means that can be seen as foregrounding this process is the constant reshaping of word combinations in short and long measures of syntax and line. Thus, "Nothing" (three times) affirmatively replaces "things as they are" as it moves through the poem and opposes (in l. 8) any situation in which the subject would "stand // Remote" (VII). It makes possible two near tautologies: "You as you are?" and "You are yourself." But compared to the opening cantos of the poem, the audience's ethos of mimetic representation has been both accommodated and resisted. Their whining need for self completion (I) and their efforts to impose by command (VI) are denigrated and reshaped to fit the syntax and lines of the tune. The canto is an expression of hope for a change of identity, but one which will necessarily be open to transformation; for our player shows by rapid shifts of motif within the canto that motifs are inherently unstable, and at the end of the canto, in a move he reiterates time and again in this poem, he interrupts his play, or moves on to

⁸ The three parts of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942) are titled "It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change" and "It Must Give Pleasure."

⁹ Stevens' sense of the interrelations between poetry and painting and his affinity with Picasso as "surrealist hero" (Picasso is mentioned in canto XV) have been discussed in Glen MacLeod.

¹⁰ William Doreski discusses in terms of the abstraction of musical form what he calls "temporal dislocations" (65) in Stevens' later poems.

the next motif, before any narrative development can spring from the temporary conclusion. It is as though the space-time of the canto gives audience and readers a hint of what Stevens' early poem, "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage," calls the nude's "irretrievable way" (*CP* 6). Confronted with a horizon which consists only of a slightly varying canto length, the listeners and readers of the poem experience an expectation whose development is constantly deferred, giving way to expectation itself.

Although this is almost obvious on the thematic level, it becomes elusive when we try to evoke it as something that is enacted by the poem or performed in reading. For the poem indeed lends itself to synthetic readings of its written, linear space, and it does allow us to concoct allegories both in and of the text, as I am doing now. Yet it resists being reduced to a set of hermeneutic possibilities. At this stage, then, we might invoke one of Stevens' *Adagia*, "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully" (*OP* 197), and leave it at that. However, since the poem contains little (or no) narrative line to create a continuity of "event," we can take a hint from the broader trope of musical performance that underpins the thematic reiterations of change over time.¹¹ It is the very "event" of time in music that we must explore.

It is true that, as Victor Zuckerkandl put it, we are rarely conscious of "time eventuating" (233), whereas we are more frequently conscious of visually traversing a perceived space, for instance. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," just as the guitarist "plays" with the audience's demand for playing "on" and "in," the text seems to propose a foregrounding not only of the grammatical tricks of space but of the temporal dimension itself suggested by the trope of musical "playing," "strumming" and "jangling," for instance. This applies both to the text allegorically being performed in the poem by the guitarist, and to the text performed in "real" time by the mind of a person reading or reciting.

The main strategy used by the player is the deployment of a varied repertoire of formal tactics of incompleteness that frustrate the listener's or especially the reader's sense of full development, as we have seen in canto XXXII. Though space is lacking to demonstrate it here, Stevens' use of the absence of predication, rapid changes enacted by copulas,¹² misleading

¹¹ "The Man with the Blue Guitar" has often been compared to jazz improvisation, most thoroughly in Beverly Holmes. The parallel is not very fruitful, however, and seems inapt since jazz improvisation always has a harmonic or rhythmic (metric) point of reference as its basis.

¹² Statements of identity articulated with the verb "to be" are particularly prevalent in Stevens' poetry. They are almost always followed by some form of their own unmaking – as in "Thir-

repetitions, faulty syllogisms and other forms of contradiction, enjambments that divide similar groups of words in different ways, all contribute to the sense of an almost purposeless movement onward in time, even to a sense of ongoingness itself.¹³ Momentum in time – or its rupture – is the ground of musical production. The possibility of foregrounding momentum through rupture is particularly insistent, one might say, in early twentieth-century works that play with tonal instability, or in others like some by Alexander Zemlinsky, whom Adorno has described as cutting off ongoing movement and developing each rhythmical impulse only to the point at which it “naturally comes to rest.”¹⁴ In “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the moments of “rest” at the ends of lines or sentences or cantos indeed often come sooner than we might desire or expect in terms of representation, but are immediately followed by a new subject or new grammatical strategy.

A single canto will have to suffice here to illustrate how playing music as the ongoingness of time is both allegorically represented and made salient to the reader.

XII

Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar
And I are one. The orchestra

Fills the high hall with shuffling men
High as the hall. The whirling noise

Of a multitude dwindle, all said,
To his breath that lies awake at night.

I know that timid breathing. Where
Do I begin and end? And where,

teen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “A man and a woman / Are one. / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one” (CP 93), to take the simplest example. Stevens’ copulas can be seen as demonstrating what Benveniste described as the “fall” from semantic fullness of the peculiar Indo-European “verb” *to be*, as well as illustrating the distance between language and metaphysics’ ontological ground analyzed by Derrida. For these two diametrically opposed approaches see Benveniste’s “Catégories de pensée et catégories de langue” and “La Phrase nominale,” as well as Derrida’s “Le Supplément de copule.” See also my forthcoming book on Wallace Stevens’ language.

¹³ The questions of ongoingness and momentum as part of the “music” of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” are treated at length in my book on Stevens’ language.

¹⁴ Adorno is describing Zemlinsky’s Third Quartet of 1924 (123; or 362-363).

As I strum the thing, do I pick up
That which momentously declares

Itself not to be I and yet
Must be. It could be nothing else.

This canto begins by a punning echo of the end of the preceding canto's "Of time, time grows upon the rock" (XI), by changing, to adopt Kristeva's terms here, the symbolic content of "time" into the semiotic sound of the drum's "Tom-tom." This transition makes musical time audible. And we find ourselves "waiting for the next tone," as Arnheim said about the special experience we may have, while listening to twentieth-century music, when the composition shifts from one "system" to another (652). The "tom-tom" becomes phonetically associated with the player's own breath (and thus, life) only at a pause mid-section in "timid breathing," which may be read as the section's way of criticizing the narrowness of the definitions – inevitably unstable in "The Blue Guitar" – that the singer will try to construct in the second half of the canto. The word "strum" (/tm/ -> /strm/) adds to the conflation, both thematically and temporally.

Further, as is typical in much of Stevens' poetry, and despite the fact that statements of equivalence outnumber those of process, readers are held in a state of anticipation of thematic and rhythmic developments but find that they change direction or remain incomplete. Here the thematics of filling and dwindling, expansion and reduction are accompanied in the spatial and temporal dimensions by the grammatically irregular enjambments and the suspension of "where" at line end (ll. 7 + 8). In addition, a thread of syllable-signs also runs through the section, providing an irregular rhythm for transforming the original equivalence ("Tom-tom, c'est moi") and bringing out its seeming fortuitousness. This sequence begins with a fullness that risks being overfull, then entertains almost apocalyptic perspectives, and finally verges on emptiness: "shuffling" and "whirling" are bred with "breath" to produce the player's "breathing," which is replaced by the guitar-"thing," which in turn becomes the background of "nothing else" than what the 'I' player plays as "That which momentously declares // Itself not to be I and yet / Must be." What Kristeva has identified as the "semiotic" failure to produce meaning lurks here behind the strict grammatical control the player exercises. Anticipation becomes the anticipation of change in time itself, and not anticipation of a particular resolution or even of any end. Through the seeming self-production of the poem's sound and sense patterns, readers can have an ex-

perience of ongoingness through the irregular and thwarted development in time, which is a parallel to the player's musical activity on the guitar.

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It is only on the broadest level – that of the whole poem – that there is a sense of completion. At the end of the poem (XXXIII) the guitarist makes a neat division between the time of the workaday world and the time for performing poetry. The last two cantos remind us that in dramatic comedy too the epilogue brings the audience back to the world beyond the theatre, hoping that they will go out with new eyes and new self-knowledge. Some critics have been disappointed with Stevens' easy final choice. Yet it is consistent with the agenda of the performance and with the overall working out of the allegory.

During the last few cantos, the guitarist returns his attention to the audience after having neglected them for about twenty-five cantos. He first speaks of their world of struggle in the work place, then exhorts the audience as "you" to take the final step into a "jocular" and surprising space that has been transformed by the transforming time of the poem (XXXII), as we have seen; then he finally includes them and himself in a single "we" while taking a bow, so to speak. There is a temporal logic in reserving a special time for the performance of poetry – "The moments when we choose to play / The imagined pine, the imagined jay." For in order to stop ongoingness, a stop in performance time is induced by a self-reflexive partitioning of spheres. "Time in its final block," as he says, would be the time outside or beyond poetic performance. It is opposed to the time of poetic performance where the audience can experience a release from the defenses they had built up against unpredictable change.

The reincorporation of the audience into the poem's finale, after long cantos of neglect, also reminds us that the performer is in the difficult position of having to remember that the audience is there while trying to ignore the pressure they exert. On the historical level, the "you" brings us back to the social world of 1937 and those encrypted references to "contemporary chaos." But on the level of the lyric, the audience's return ironically confirms the fact that, although the publishing of poetry is recognized as a public act, this performer will not deal with the social and political in his poetry. Indeed, the author Stevens knew that his present would be destroyed in becoming the next generation's past (*OP* 229). All that can be known about the future is that it will be different. What is obvious today – Stevens' "chande-

lier”—“chancellor,” his “structure of vaults upon a point of light,” his earth as an “oppressor” of “the men as they fall” — may have become properly unimaginable tomorrow. The contextual discourses and subtexts that make references decodable may also have perished. Indeed, any reader can see that those references are destined to become out of date, just as the hermeneutic understanding between audience and singer is destined to change, as one audience replaces another, the performer ages and finally dies.

The player Stevens has figured in his poem performs the ongoingness of performance time until a self-imposed end. The end of his lyric returns to expressing the topical, to what I identified earlier as “singing.” The performer has resisted merely listening to his audience and simply mediating or interpreting a repertoire of shared “things as they are.” The exchange he enacts in the central part of the poem has been the private one that takes place when the player listens not to the audience but to the instrument and to the music it makes in his inner ear — leading a motif into the briefest statement possible, allowing something rhythmic or grammatical or phonetic to become just palpable, before leaping to the next motif. This is what it is to “play” this poem’s particular kind of music. This is Stevens’ most perilous leap into lyric. The singer-player leaves it up to the reader-audience to infer the performer’s modesty towards the ever self-erasing, ephemeral conditions of performances, performers and audiences.

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