Theory as Praxis: *The Man With the Blue Guitar*

THE GUITARIST AND HIS AUDIENCE

Although many years later Stevens claimed that he confined his focus in *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937) to ‘the area of poetry’ (*L*, no. 873), this brilliantly concise poem – or perhaps we should say sequence of 33 poems – explores the necessary preconditions to creativity: self-knowledge and knowledge of man. While Vendler misses the vastness that she admires in the other longer Stevens poems, should we not applaud its efficiency, intensity, control, and unity?1 If any poem defines the nature of Stevens’s creative and artistic life, it is this one. Stevens used his poems to create metaphors of himself, tropes of his essential being as a poet separate and apart from his diurnal concerns. To read Stevens is to participate in the adventure of his creating his persona. In this poem he tests various notions of the poet – as comedian, *vates*, legislator, lyricist. Within the poem, both the speaker’s self-concept and the external space undergo constant change and modification. Indeed, we should think of *The Man With the Blue Guitar* not only as a Socratic dialogue in which various theories of poetry are proposed, but as an exhibition of ventriloquy where the speaker tries on every conceivable voice of the poet. Among other things, Stevens is auditioning for the crucial roles of the major modernist poet – the poetic counterpart of Picasso – and the major American poet in the tradition of Emerson and Whitman.

By using painting as a model and metaphor for poetry – a painting that evokes music – Stevens was taking issue with Walter Pater’s claim that music was the highest art form and that all art aspires to the purity of music. By seeking to ‘resolve’ other art-forms on the plane of poetry, he was making a claim for poetry’s centrality. What he liked about modern painting was its engagement with reality:
Thinking about poetry is the same thing as thinking about painting. . . . [Pissaro and Bonnard] attach one to real things: closely, actually, without the interventions or excitements of metaphor. One wonders sometimes whether this is not exactly what the whole effort of modern art has been about: the attachment to real things. When people were painting cubist pictures, were they not attempting to get at not the invisible but the visible? They assumed that back of the peculiar reality that we see, there lay a more prismatic one of many facets. Apparently deviating from reality, they were trying to fix it; and so on, through their successors.

While one thinks about poetry as one thinks about painting, the momentum toward abstraction exerts a greater force on the poet than on the painter. (L, no. 655)

The poet is conceived as a painter – 'The world washed in his imagination' – trying to find the appropriate forms and colours with which to render man (XXVI). It may be helpful to think of the blue guitarist as a painter painting a series of canvases, a set of frescoes for the palace of his and our minds. Indeed, the poem is a kind of mural in which various ideas about the poet and imagination are depicted. The poem has the illogic of a surrealistic dreamscape: 'The color like a thought that grows out of a mood' (IX). Some of the paintings are self-portraits. The blue guitar is an image of the imagination; it is also a sexual trope ('And I am merely a shadow hunched above arrowy, still strings' or 'Raise reddest columns'). As the poem proceeds, it enacts a number of conflicts, including the one between concept and sensory perception, or what Stevens calls thesis and instinct: 'Life cannot be based on a thesis, since by nature, it is based on instinct. A thesis, however, is usually present and living is the struggle between thesis and instinct' (Adagia, OP, 187). Finally, as we shall see, the crescendo – Poem XXXIII – casts aside the concept of thesis and enters into the world of imaginative play.

The 'I' is not a stable but an evolving entity. When we recall how Stevens spoke of each unit not as a stanza but as a poem, we can see that he imagined The Man With the Blue Guitar as something akin to a sonnet sequence. He is the picareseque troubadour who sings about what he observes; he is the comedian who observes the folly of the human comedy in an amoral, indifferent universe. Although Stevens was sceptical of the sincerity of the tragic mode