This Man Loved Earth, Not Heaven, Enough to Die

Death, Imagination, and Reality in Wallace Stevens' *The Man with the Blue Guitar*

"We are born to die."
—SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*

Wallace Stevens' *The Man with the Blue Guitar* has a definite progression and a depth of content that belies its slim thirty-nine pages. The volume has as its focus the imagination, reality, and largely, death, moving from espousal and denial of Stevens' beliefs to affirmation and acceptance. Interestingly, when the volume is viewed as an evolution of thought, in some ways it resembles parts of the Kübler-Ross (or 'Five Stage') model of dealing with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance being present sometimes in order, and at other times, out of order.[1] Granted that this model wasn't formally espoused until 1969, these stages were almost certainly universal long before they were given a name. In *The Man with the Blue Guitar,* Stevens writes about his vision of the end of our lives, and of his own life. Studying this volume allows one to consider how death fits into his work as a whole, straddling escapism and reality. Death can neither be escaped nor easily dealt with in reality, which makes Stevens' willingness to discuss it even more interesting. Though all poets age and inevitably die, perhaps only a poet like Stevens, who started out on his poetic journey late in life, could write with such resonance and portent on the topic of death. The core of much of Stevens' works, especially his later poems, resides in the liminal space between the imagined and the actual, between escapism and reality. *The Man with the Blue Guitar* designates death as the supreme reality, for which Stevens had a secular answer: the supreme fiction of poetry.

Before delving into the volume *The Man with the Blue Guitar* itself, it is helpful to Consider some of Stevens' other writing outside of his poetry, most of which is extremely

[1] Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969.

illuminating when it comes to his vision of art, as well as his vision of death. While some have described Stevens as self-effacing[2], a wealth of is available to study in conjunction with his poetical works. In *The Nobel Rider and the Sound of Words*, originally given as a lecture at Princeton in 1942, Stevens discusses at length, among other things, the dialectic between imagination and reality. "Reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality; that is to say, the imagination and reality are inseparable," he writes. [3] In writing these words, Stevens not only propounds his theories, but also refutes the theories of others who had written that poetry, in general, is escapist in nature. If life does indeed consist of "society and the imagination and reality," then any poetry written, any work brought forth by the act of living (in other words, all poetry) is rooted in reality and necessarily not escapist at all.

It is at this junction that Stevens introduces his belief that while poetry is not an explicitly social or moral tool, it is an art form that can benefit mankind. The poet's function in society, in his view, is "to make his imagination theirs," and to fulfill himself "only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role in short, is to help people to live their lives."[4] This act of helping people "to live their lives" is abstract, and takes many forms, one of which, as we will see, is the acceptance of death as inevitability and secular worship of the world as it is.

Poetry can also protect: Near the end of the piece, in a sentence that could easily have been an axiom, he writes, "It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without."[5] We will see in "The Men That Are Falling" as well as in "A Thought

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[2] "Wallace Stevens." The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Vol. 1." Third Edition, Ed. Jahan Pamazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. (235).
[3] Wallace Stevens. "From *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Vol. 1*." Third Edition, Ed. Jahan Pamazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. (976).
[4] *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.* (980).
[5] *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.* (983).

Revolved" that Stevens offers poetry as just this kind of interior ferocity that has the power to protect mankind from external strife.

Stevens' aphorisms, taken from his personal notebooks and written throughout the 1930s and 40s, are also revealing. While some certainly have a sense of humor to accompany their insight ("Poetry is a pheasant," etc.) others are extraordinarily succinct and brilliant in their summation of Stevens' views. "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption," he writes in one such maxim.[6] Another aphorism in the same vein reads, "It is the belief and not the god that counts."[7] And as Stevens' aphorisms sought to imbue belief and instruct, so too does his poetry— each poem "like a missal found," as he writes in the first lines of "The Man with the Blue Guitar."[8]

From the opening lines of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the musical quality of the poem is apparent. The piece, consisting of thirty-three sets of rhymed or unrhymed couplets, begins like a song and ends like a sermon, moving from a melodious introduction to a beautiful if austere set of beliefs. The entire poem functions on a kind of theme-variation-theme structure, which is also evident from the beginning. "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 piece begins, "And they said to him, 'But play, you must, / A tune beyond us, yet ourselves, // A tune upon the blue guitar, / Of things exactly as they are.'"[9] The repetition of phrases such as "things as they are" and the constant expectation of "play, you must" makes the opening of this long poem sound like a song or a lullaby for the old and weary.

It is a convention of the theater that when a character is too moved to speak, he sings, and

[6] Stevens, Wallace. "Aphorisms." The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Vol. 1. Third Edition, Ed. Jahan Pamazani, Richard Ellmann, Robert O'Clair. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. (972).
[7] "Aphorisms." (972).
[8] Wallace Stevens. *Collected Poetry and Prose.* New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1997. (145).
[9] *Collected Poetry and Prose.* (135).

When he is too moved to sing, he dances.[10] When considered in this context, it seems fitting that Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is rooted in a musical metaphor: By using the guitar and the song as vehicles for his views on the imagination, reality, and even death, Stevens lends a further dimension to the piece, couching his beliefs in the form of a guitarist, or guitarist-poet's, song.

The speaker in this poem admits that he "cannot bring the world quite round / Although I patch it as I can," setting up the rest of the piece as an attempt to bring the world and indeed the reader "around" to his view of things "as they are."[11] In the fourth section of the poem, the guitarist-poet already begins to address the grip of denial, in the line "So that's life, then: things as they are?" He chafes at the thought of "A million people on one string? / And all their manner in the thing…"[12] He seems to wonder, can this really be it? Are we all, then, consigned to the same fate? Are we all in this together? In the fifth set of couplets, Stevens attempts to apply a salve to the wound he has rent in human consciousness by declaring that there is no God. He writes "Poetry // Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns."[13] In place of religion, there is poetry, which while it does not offer everlasting life, does offer, in some ways, provisional life: an appreciation of things "as they are," of the secular world and its absurdities as well as its glories. For those skeptical of this displacement of God, in the sixth set of couplets, Stevens writes that if the worship of poetry seems strange and mercurial, it should be compared with the alternative, for "The thinking of god is smoky dew."[14]

The poem slowly moves closer and closer to the figure of death itself after this point.

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[10] Spurrier, James. *The Integration of Music and Lyrics with the Book in the American Musical*. Ph.D. Dissertation: Southern Illinois University, 1979.
[11] *Collected Poetry and Prose.* (135).
[12] *Collected Poetry and Prose*. (136).
[13] *Collected Poetry and Prose*. (136-137).
[14] *Collected Poetry and Prose*. (137).

Along the way, in section eleven, Stevens notes that "Slowly the ivy on the stones / Becomes the stones. Women become // The cities, children become the fields / And men in waves become the sea."[15] The world of men, who created God, is crumbling in the face of immutable nature, the earth being the only worthy object of worship in this godless view. Then, in section twenty-three, Stevens unleashes half a dozen haunting, beautiful lines about the actual act of dying. "The grunted breath serene and final / The imagined and the real, thought // And the truth, Dichtung und Warheit, all / Confusion solved, as in a refrain // One keeps on playing year by year, / Concerning the nature of things as they are."

We are assured here, again, that the dying breath is a "final" one, that nothing exists beyond death, and that man has no choice but to keep "playing year by year," pretending that death will not come, though he knows that it will. But more importantly, in the actual moment of death, the imagined and the real, "Dichtung and Wahrheit" (Poetry and Truth), are finally reconciled. It seems, for Stevens, then, that life occurs entirely in the widening and narrowing gap between the real and the imagined, and that death is the full closing of the space between them. The tone of these lines, though they discuss death, is neither fearful nor brave. It is instead final and bare. The impersonal voice advances Stevens desire to speak universally, but it also shields him from disturbing self-exposure.[16]

In "Owl's Clover," the next piece in the volume, we see more examples of nonbelievers of Stevens' system. In the second part of the poem, the sculptor of the horses sees "more" than his muddy hands in their manes, and "more" than his mind in the wings, but is left with just that: his hands and his mind.[17] He reaches for sublimity, for a divinity that simply is not there. The

[15] *Collected Poetry and Prose.* (139-140).
[16] *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*. Ed. John N. Serio. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. (47 and 134).
[17] *Collected Poetry and Prose.* (152).

last sentence, broken over two lines, "The rotten leaves / Swirled round them in immense autumnal sounds," paints a desperate picture of the sculpture, dreaming of the heavens and yet surrounded only by the material, the "rotten leaves" of death.

The woman who then enters the poem is equally lost, and is alternately described as "unmoved," "tortured," and "destitute." Stevens writes that "Wings / And light lay deeper for her than sight,"[18] wings and light being heavenly, angelic images that the woman clings to despite her "sight," what the world has to offer, the way things are. The poem also culls from the everyday and harvests its imagery to create something elegiac in nature. "What I tried to do in OWL'S CLOVER," Stevens wrote in a letter to Ben Belitt, "was to dip aspects of the contemporaneous in the poetic."[19] We see, as Joseph Riddel writes in *The Clairvoyant Eye*, that "Owl's Clover" is concerned, at its root, with the opposition that Stevens would later explore further in "The Man with the Blue Guitar": the opposition between things as they are and things as they are imagined.[20] In a way, this dichotomy is tantamount to the opposition between reality and death and imagination and heaven.

This emphasis of "things as they are" and the one true reality of earth does not automatically spell despair and doom for Stevens— there is still beauty here on earth, for the short time we are here. It is true that the world "moves from waste / To waste, out of the hopeless waste of the past / Into a hopeful waste to come," yet even where "this wreckage lies," some "portentous lustres, shades and shapes / Of rose" exist, color being a favorite method of Stevens' for expressing the good, the joyful, and the living. Though death is final, Stevens does not seem unhappy at the prospect of a secular existence. Certainly, in "Imagination as Value," Stevens

[18] *Collected Poetry and Prose*. (153).
[19] Wallace Stevens. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966. (314).
[20] Riddel, Joseph N. *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967. (135).

expressed his desire to see the earth exalted in poetry, as heaven and hell are, when he commented that "the great poem of the earth remains to be written."[21]

This kind of joy in the secular, possible only once an understanding of the finality and reality of death has been achieved, is discussed in "A Thought Revolved." True, the poet is "Happy rather than holy," but he is nevertheless "happy-high," singing not hymns praising God but instead "hymns of the struggle of the idea of god," not spiritual hymns but hymns of "The middling beast, the garden of paradise / And he that created the garden and peopled it," which is to say, man. Repeatedly in this poem, Stevens writes of "an earthly leader" and the fact that there is "no god but man / Of men whose heaven is in themselves." It is clear from this piece, that what is to be feared is not death, but "a death before [men] die," a race "that sings and weeps and knows not why."[22]

Unlike the woman who appears before the sculptor in "Owl's Clover," we find in "A Thought Revolved" a woman who is not blind to the reality and finality of death, who bows before the enormity and importance of the imagination. The opening image of "A Thought Revolved" is an old woman "dying of diabetes" whose "useless bracelets fondly fluttered." We are told that "The idea of god no longer sputtered / At the roots of her indifferent curls."[23] Stevens chooses his words carefully here: The lady's bracelets are "useless," her curls "indifferent," indicating that while she is not afraid of death, as we will see, she understands the duality of the fact that she must cling to the secular, though the secular is essentially, finally, as meaningless as life is.

[21] "Wallace Stevens." (235).
[22] *Collected Poetry and Prose.* (172).
[23] *Collected Poetry and Prose.* (171).

We also learn that to this lady, "It seemed serener just to die… // Accompanied by the exegesis / Of familiar things in a cheerful voice."[24] As the poem travels from despair to joy, Stevens moves from the negative images of "diabetes," "lesser dithyrambs" and "useless bracelets" to images of "the floweriest barge," "a cheerful voice," and "the night before Christmas and all the carols." This first section ends with the lines, "Dying lady, rejoice, rejoice!" This line would seem too glib or too silly had it not been preceded the first two poems in the volume, which outline Stevens as a champion of the secular, a poet less afraid of death than of a life whose pleasures remain unacknowledged.

If men are not to fear death, then what are they to fear? To this also Stevens seems to have an answer in the form of the final poem in the volume, "The Men That Are Falling." The poem is intimately linked to "Owl's Clover" in its discussion of the fate of the poet in times of danger.[25] "The Men That Are Falling" is a penetrating reflection on war. In a letter to Bernard Heringman, Stevens wrote that he "did have the Spanish Republicans in mind when I wrote *The Men that are Falling*."[26] The cruelty of man toward his fellow man, perhaps, is to be feared and avoided in death's stead. Those who set their store by "God and all angels" are possibly to be evaded as well.

The subject of the poem is a man alone in a room at night, unable to sleep, plagued by visions of "The head of one of the men that are falling, placed / Upon [his] pillow to repose and speak."[27] But we are made aware that the man whose head lies on the pillow is not to be pitied, for he "loved earth, not heaven, enough to die." The terror of the real, here, is catastrophic and frightening, but not to be shied away from.[28]

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[24] *Collected Poetry and Prose.* (171).
[25] *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens.* (47).
[26] *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. (798).
[27] *Collected Poetry and Prose*. (174).

This last poem in the volume *The Man with the Blue Guitar* ends with the phrase "life's voluble utterance," a secular, humanistic image. There is no need to reiterate what has already been said throughout the volume— instead Stevens ends his majestic series with a strong image that speaks for the entire work. His diction is precise, for he does not write merely of "life's utterance" or of "life's reticent utterance." His view of life is positive, and life's utterances are "voluble," garrulous and bountiful. Life has much to say, it seems, and also, much to give and teach us.

Perhaps David Perkins illustrates the issue best when he writes— referencing Stevens' "mountainous coiffures of Bath" from the poem "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"— that "Perhaps [for Stevens] religion is a hairdo. It was a myth that humanized the facts of man's situation and fate. The facts never changed essentially," he proposes, "but the myth did and must."[29] If Stevens believed that poetry could help people live their lives, then the looming specter of death was the ultimate challenge to a society (and indeed a poet) that did not or could not believe in God, particularly in turbulent times. He was the mythmaker, the creator of something that man *could* conceivably believe in when faced with death, or even, with life.

Though Stevens surely did not seem trouble himself (at least from what we can observe) over whether or not his message was accepted and understood, reading some passages of his poetry feels strangely like intercepting an augury from beyond the grave. Perhaps it is Stevens' maintenance of an impersonal tone even during the most personal of confessions, or perhaps it is the finality of his words, so many of which read like his aphorisms, but whatever the cause, the last two lines of section thirty-one in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "It must be this rhapsody

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[28] Baird, James. The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968. (210).
[29] Perkins, David. "Wallace Stevens." *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the high Modernist Mode*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976. (544).

or none, / The rhapsody of things as they are" seem so portentous that they might have been a fitting ending to "The Man with the Blue Guitar," or to the volume as a whole.

Stevens maintains that the poet-guitarist's song, his rhapsody, is the absolute truth, and that this truth must be accepted or "none" may be accepted. In other words, this is the truth, as he sees it. While he may not have subscribed to religious dogma, this was his secular version of dogma, his credo that places death at the intersection of reality and imagination.[30] For Stevens, imagination and reality are a set, a pair of ideas or instances that are impossible to separate: He wrote in a letter to Hi Simons in August of 1940 that "reality = the imagination, and the imagination = reality."[31] These two spheres feed off one another, exist primarily in relation to one another.

In the case of death, the supreme endpoint of reality, the only tonic is what Stevens' referred to as the "supreme fiction,"[32] that is, poetry, which, like God, has the ability to bring hope and comfort to man though he may be aware that both are born of the imagination. As Stevens writes in *Adagia*, "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly."[33] No one knows exactly what man experiences at the moment of his own demise— perhaps Wallace Stevens himself experienced the transcendent moment of unity between imagination and reality when he passed away in 1955. Whatever the case, the meditative, intellectual poetry that he left behind espouses a way of thinking that accomplishes the goal he spoke of so frequently, of "to help people to live their lives." When faced with the emptiness of the heavens, Stevens' poetry did not crumble under its own pointlessness— instead,

[30] *The Clairvoyant Eye.* (162).
[31] *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. (364).
[32] *Collected Poetry and Prose.* (47).
[33] *Collected Poetry and Prose.* (903).

it turned to champion the earth, the secular, and all that is mankind in its fleeting moment of consciousness.

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