

“Poet, be seated at the piano”: The Imperative of Change and the Sounds of Music in the Poems of Wallace Stevens

SHOBHA ELIZABETH JOHN

Abstract: The abundance of musical terms and metaphors in Wallace Stevens’s poetry relate to his interrogation of music as a temporal artform that can address a world of change. Music represents the self-sufficient and truly abstract art capable of dispensing with the mimetic imperative completely – something poetry may never fully accomplish. Contemplations on the pre-poetic in his work also relate to the temporality of music, allowing emphasis on processes over products. This paper traces the multiple duties assigned to music in Stevens’s poems and ascertain the role of a time-bound art in addressing a dynamic universe. It also discusses how the essentially “pure” origins of music embody the model for poems to follow to qualify as true products of the imagination in a constantly changing world.

Keywords: Change, music, mimesis, modernist representation, temporality

Virginia Woolf’s observation that “on or around December 1910, human character changed”¹ reflects the effect of Roger Fry’s 1910 ‘Post-Impressionist Exhibition’² on the masses of London. Though highly criticized and ridiculed at the time, this art exhibition marked a major climacteric in early twentieth century art. Woolf continued by saying that all human relations shifted and “when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature”. This shift was heralded in by particularized events such as the exhibition, the influence of sociocultural and technological developments of the time – the proliferation of small printing houses and scientific inventions like the light bulb and the X-ray – as well as the global political unrest of the era which led to the World Wars, redefining all past human experiences. These factors compelled the early 20th century artistic circle to deliberately break away from traditional modes of thought and representation in order to address contemporary themes. Self-reflexive and novel structural forms replaced static narratives which were rendered incapable of sufficiently representing a chaotic, changeable and dynamic world, a notion that prompted Marcel Duchamp to paint the Modernist classic “Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2”. The constant flux and whirl of change are undeniable features of the early 20th century world, however uncomfortable they prove to be.

As borders and mediums blurred, art became an amalgamation of multiple perspectives, an experimental ground framed by intermediality for poets, many of whom worked day jobs in offices and wrote poetry simultaneously. Among them was Wallace Stevens, an American insurance company executive cum pioneer of Modern poetry, who in his writings paid great attention to the change and transformation that characterized the world around him. For Stevens, life is motion³. The abundance of musical terms and references is another conspicuous feature of Stevens’s poetry. Through musical metaphors, Stevens addresses a world of change and the art of poetry that attempts to speak to its own times.

Change is central to the poem “Domination of Black” from Stevens’s debut poetry collection *Harmonium* (1923). Uncertainty dominates the room with a fireplace where Stevens creates an ominous environment chiselled out of well-chosen words and forbidding images. The movement from generalization to personalization in the poem parallels the transition from partial to complete darkness, from twilight to night. Every element in the poem is in a state of doing – nothing stays static. Each object continually relates itself to and mimics the activity of other things with which they do not essentially share any resemblance. Marianne Moore’s poem “The Steeple-Jack” exemplifies this idea by verbally painting a seaside town where all objects are identified based on similarities – the waves are “as formal as the scales on a fish” and the sea “purple as the peacock’s neck is paled to greenish azure”⁴. The theme of transition thus clearly gains artistic pertinence in the Modernist schema.

There is an abundance of images that indicate change and movement in “Domination of Black”, starting with the fire in the hearth that embodies kinetic energy. The season changes, the leaves turn in the wind, the hemlocks come striding, the planets father, the peacocks fly from the boughs of the hemlocks, they cry against the twilight. The fear in the poem stems from uncertainty, a kind of Heideggerian *angst* where it is the ontological absence of the object that creates the affect, and the inability to place it and name it. This idea of the direct revelation of the world through nothingness is more explicit in “The Snow Man”: “For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (Stevens, *CP* 10).⁵ For the being existing in the temporal dimension, ‘nowhere’ is not the negation of all possible places but the possibility of place. The Snow Man’s ‘mind of ice’ does not apprehend the ‘sound of the land’ and the ‘misery in the sound of a few leaves’. This nothingness of being lets him behold the absence of ‘everything’ around him, and thereby makes him aware of all things.

The present-continuous ‘turning’ occurs six times in the poem, excluding other variations of the word ‘turn’, and associates itself with the process and the act of change, while ‘wind’ is typically considered as the medium of change with agential power.⁶ The phrase “turning in the wind” thus connects itself with an ongoing event of transformation. Stevens employs the wind as an extremely dynamic and perpetually active force in his poetry; the wind blows,⁷ pours⁸, shifts⁹, thunders¹⁰ and roars¹¹, to list a few instances. In “The Valley Candle”, the blowing of the wind fashions a context of total darkness that enables the imagination to work. Stevens proposes that the only guaranteed certainty to be is through artistic enterprise initiated by the imagination. For him, imagination is the “one reality in this imagined world”¹².

The metapoetic “Metaphors of a Magnifico” also contemplates transition and the process involved. Here, Stevens guides the reader on a journey from thinking about something to experiencing the actual thing; parallelly, he also demonstrates the process of writing poetry – of ideas taking shape, being discarded and rewritten. The starting idea of twenty men crossing a bridge into twenty different villages, although it is physically the same village, highlights the weight given to individual experience and subjective response in the Modern era. The poem emphasises how experience takes supremacy when the clump of the boots sound over the bridge and the village rises into view. Abstract ideas are set aside when the thing itself is at hand – “not ideas about the thing but the thing itself” as Stevens puts it.¹³ The state of ‘doing’ and not just ‘being’ also reflects in the white walls that “rises through fruit trees” and the boots that “clump on the boards of the bridge” (Stevens, *CP* 19; italics mine). The village itself is a collection of particulars that are not immobile but come out to meet the men halfway. This ‘doing’ ties in with the Modernist mantra that a thing is what it does.

For Stevens, the poet’s participation in reality, and in the reinvention of it is by a direct addressal this reality. Karl Marx’s epigrammatic thesis, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it”,¹⁴ can be extrapolated to the Modernist artistry where a re-creation of reality effecting a rupture from past modes of representation become cardinal. As Richard Allen Blessing notes, “[I]n the continually shifting techniques, subjects, images,

moods, and tones of *The Collected Poems* Wallace Stevens demonstrates his solution to the modern poet's problem of how to present growth, motion and organicism in a work of art" (6). Stevens's poetical discourses on change and transformation often bring in music as the medium to address the contemporary world. Poetry and music, both being arts essentially made up of sounds, are inextricably connected for Stevens. Barbara Holmes opines that "music dominates the Stevens canon . . . He was both listener and shaper . . ." (7).¹⁵

The poet-musician is a recurring figure in Steven's poetry, which amplifies the interconnectedness of the two arts in his writing and the interstitial space the different mediums come to share. Stevens's musical sense was "so critically acute that a conjunction of the poetical and musical arts in his work was inevitable" (Holmes 10-11). "Mozart, 1935" presents one of Steven's most important poet-musician figures called to address the chaotic world around him by an opening imperative. The use of such imperative sentences in Stevens could be a technique by which he attempts to create order, commanding stations of doing and being. Stevens's personal aversion to disorder might have contributed to this proclivity for a "blessed rage for order" as well.¹⁶ Ideas of chaos and order are extremely important to Stevens, especially in an era of unparalleled change. However, it is not a resolution of chaos but a sense of concurrence that Stevens aims to achieve in his poems, many of which themselves seem wrought in contradicting premises and paradoxical struggles. This concept also perfectly captures the ethos of the era where Moore comments that "it is a privilege to see so much confusion" (Moore 183). The title *Harmonium*, according to Robert Rehder, "demonstrates the strength of this demand, not simply for order, but for an order that establishes a peaceful and aesthetically pleasing concord among the parts of a unified and consistent whole – harmony" (24).

The address in the first line of the poem establishes the presence of two characters in the poem, with one person speaking to the other. The unnamed speaker addresses all artists here when he says, "Poet, be seated at the piano" (Stevens, *CP* 131) – a call to be present at their station of work with the instruments of their art; a call to represent things as they are in the moment with all its cacophony and disorder. This might even signify the merging or influence of one art on the other – a feature characteristic of the era. Ezra Pound advocated that the relationship between poetry and music was to be maintained closely. He argued, "Poets who are not interested in music are, or become, bad poets. . . . poets should never be too long out of touch with musicians. Poets who will not study music are defective" (Pound 42). The situation in the streets and the situation inside the room of the poet appear conspicuously disparate throughout the poem. Incidentally, this involuntarily reflects Mozart's love for the piano concerto, one of his favourite musical forms. "He [Mozart] identified strongly with the concept of the solo piano (himself) set in opposition to the orchestra" (Harrow House 98) – the lone musician against a multitude of voices.

The furore in the street outside is not to distract the poet from his work of addressing this chaos, of 'playing the present'. This implies that the poet cannot be an escapist who creates music to forget the anarchic world outside. As Marianne Moore commented on the art of poetry in her poem "Poetry", "these things are important not because a / high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are / useful" (Moore 135). This usefulness directly relates to how those who are recipients of the art respond to it; and the recipient can only respond to something that is comprehensible to him, that speaks his language and engages in his reality. The disillusioned 20th century man, a witness of war and the breakdown of the world as he knew it, will find no use for abstract romanticism or comfort in crusades that do not address his needs. Stevens thus constantly urged artists to be contemporaneous and speak to their own times. In "Of Modern Poetry", he comments on the duties of the modern poem, and by extension, the poet:

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. (Stevens, *CP* 240)

The learning of speech aids comprehension of meaning. It also designates intentionality in the act of poetry. Further on in the poem, the poet is described as a 'metaphysician in the dark' who twangs strings that pass 'sudden rightness'. This poet-musician producing musical sounds that "wholly contain the mind" is the antithesis of the 'wasted figure' in the "Burghers of Petty Death" who "pounds blank final music" (Stevens, *CP* 362). Empty music and intelligible sounds are inextricably associated with death for the poet who seeks meaning. Stevens's "The Snow Man" asks the listener to not ascribe meaning to the sounds he hears, requiring him to possess "a mind of winter" (Stevens, *CP* 10) – a state of numbness that denotes incapability of response, death and even the absence of soul. Such a state cannot act as the voice of that placates sorrow and dispels grief. This escapism is not acceptable to the Modernist poet whose duty binds him to address the present.

It is the execution of this duty that Stevens illustrates in "Mozart, 1935". The 'war' outside the room should become what the pianist's art is about – the voice of 17 "Poetry is a Destructive Force" (Stevens, *CP* 192). angry fear. The idea of the past as a 'lucid souvenir' in this poem is also seen in the line "Its past was a souvenir" (Stevens, *CP* 239) from "Of Modern Poetry" – reinforcing the 'pastness' of what has been and the need for direct apprehension of the present. The appearance of the word "thou" in conjunction with the "voice of angry fear" outside integrates the past and the present. The obsolete word put into the contemporary context is forced to address the pain and worry of today and not of yesterday – like how Mozart is contemporized in the title of the poem.

The mob, however, does not always realize that their cure lies in their artists. In "Mozart, 1935", they target their anger at the poet for his apparent lack of sympathy or attention, while the speaker's steady instructional voice infuses a sense of calm. Stevens's use of words which do not have any particular meaning such as 'hoo-hoohoo' and 'ric-a-nic' can be interpreted as a verbal representation of the anarchy of the times, the meaningless repetitions that do not make sense. It could also be a manner in which the poet tries to name experiences that the past has not named. The cries in the streets appear as, or rather, must appear as 'cachinnations' to the poet who is to go on practicing his art even amidst this chaos. The fact that the poet chooses to be engaged in something relatively trivial while the people around him suffer enrages the society who throws stones and creates their own sound / noise, but the poet is not to respond in anger. The body in rags could be a representation – the 'souvenir' – of the dead past to which the society is still holding onto. The tension created by their animosity to change makes them hostile to the poet who embraces the change and plays the present. The pain and confusion of that period becomes what the pianist/poet is to write/play about sandwiched between what was and what yet is not – between holding onto a souvenir and dreaming of a future.

The imperative command to "strike the piercing chord" appears as an anomaly in an arpeggio practice session. The chord is to pierce through the uproar in the streets and the deadness of winter, affecting man and nature. Forcefully grabbing the attention of those listening, this chord prepares the stage for the artist to be the voice of anger as well as fear that pervades in that uncertain age. It is this very portrayal of the change, not the denial of it, that can bring about a pacification, a soothing of the sorrow that things have changed and the acceptance that the old has died. The music of the poet is the "airy dream of the future" and the sound "by which sorrow is released / Dismissed, absolved / In a starry placating" (132). Music acts as the placating and uniting force, capable of restoring order to a chaotic world. The references to absolution, starry placating, besieging pain, and wintry sound can all be read as pointers to the birth of Christ. The poet is to preach the good news of forgiveness from sin and relief from pain – the cure for a suffering world.

Performing Mozart's music now involves translating it to a different time on a different instrument, which influences the message or the feeling of the music as well. The music is the same, but the mode of expression and the feeling has changed. The line, "The feeling of Liadoff was changed" (Stevens, *CP* 347) from "Two Tales of Liadoff" echoes a similar idea. This invites the imperative command to "play the present" – things as they are now, with the poet seated at the piano and not

distracted by the endless chaos and cachinnations of the outside world in order to be the voice that can speak to the times. Mozart's music was innovative and grandiose when it was composed, but now it is a souvenir of the past. The challenge is to make relevant what has lost its essence in constant representation. Mozart also died an untimely death at a young age, something that the speaker could be alluding to when he mentions his own advanced age.

The tension between the dichotomies of calm and riot, of change and resistance to it, is again palpable in the last few lines: "The snow is falling / And the streets are full of cries" (Stevens, *CP* 132). The poem does not address the pain in the streets directly; it addresses the music and the poet who is to address the pain. The title 'Mozart, 1935' also suggests the bringing together of the past and the present. By placing Mozart, who was a Classical composer of the 16th century, side by side with 1935 when Modernism and its philosophies are in their full bloom, there is again a convergence of disparity and tension.

The peril of being rendered invalid owing to the poet's inability to make his art communicate to its time on its terms is very real. The pianist is not to muffle his music but "strike the piercing chord" (Stevens, *CP* 132). Production of "voluble but archaic and hard to hear" (347) sounds are not to be encouraged. "Two Tales of Liadoff" from the collection *Parts of a World*, also showcases a pianist practicing on his piano. Anatoly Konstantinovich Lyadov — frequently spelled Liadov (or as Stevens spells it, Liadoff), was a Russian composer, conductor and teacher. The somber tone and the sense of doom pervading the poem are amplified by the black piano of Liadoff; this is the artist addressing the contemporary tragic world. The pianist attempts to superimpose his art and the order it entails by literally playing 'over' a world that is fragmented by war and change. Stevens often took liberties with spelling and word construction — while also concocting words with meanings he decided upon when he needed them. The word 'epitone' is one such word (as is the spelling of 'Liadoff'). The word 'epi' is associated with meanings such as above or upon; consequentially, epitone would signify something beyond or above the 'normal' tone. Liadoff's spatially elevated seat on the clouds and his subject of practice both signify a different viewpoint to apprehending the world. Music as more than just notes and tones is contained in this word; it is something that brings about change, something with soul that resides on a higher plane than where the mortal occupations of chaos and destruction abide.

Stevens's 1937 poem *The Man with the Blue Guitar* takes inspiration from a Blue Period¹⁷ painting of Pablo Picasso titled "The Old Guitarist". This thirty-three-stanza poem begins with a man bending over his blue guitar like a 'shearsman', evoking the picture of a shepherd shearing the sheep; in this case, he shears the day that is green with rich crops for the imagination. The guitarist responds to those who ask for a tune of "things exactly as they are" by saying that "things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar" (Stevens, *CP* 165), implying repetition of reality to be a redundant endeavour. The instrument of the guitar, which itself produces music, becomes a metaphor for the imagination which is to produce art. Things as they are is the reality of life as it "picks its way on the blue guitar". The intervention of the guitarist not only contributes to representing reality, but also to transforming it. Mere imitation of life as it is does not contribute to the Modernist aestheticism which was disposed to be more anti-mimetic. By not mimicking, but manipulating and changing art which reflected reality, the artist has the power to change reality itself.

The act of effecting change does not grant the artist supreme powers to impose unity and cohesive order. He can only 'patch up' a fragmented world, not make it whole. The Modernist tendency to focus on parts and not the whole is visible here. The detail patches all point to the whole but in the process achieves new forms themselves as they morph into a projection of their maker himself: "Say that it is the serenade / Of a man that plays a blue guitar" (Stevens, *CP* 166). The 'of' implies fact that it is him playing the music and designates the music as a representation of himself. By singing to the world, the guitarist is also addressing himself. This change of perspective — from looking outward to looking inward — also reflects what poetry and art of the era is in the process of becoming. Such a journey from external experience to internal transformation is at the heart of Stevens's long poem

Comedian as the Letter C. It is this intentionality, the consciousness of an intended being, that makes the work of art capable of addressing contemporaneous issues.

Stevens elaborates on transformations effected by art and imagination by extensively employing music, perhaps the only truly abstract artform, as medium. The synthetic quality of music appealed to the Modernist sensibility that sought to reinvent reality and “make it new”.¹⁸ The different roles ascribed to music by Stevens – of music as the truly synthetic object, as capable of addressing change and as the medium to impose order on chaos – converge in “The Idea of Order at Key West” from *Ideas of Order* published in 1936. The poem presents music wielding its power to reenchant reality through a synthetic song. The woman’s singing “beyond the genius of the sea” (Stevens, *CP* 128) encompasses her spirit. The presence of such a spirit forges an affect, ‘causes a cry’ that the listener understands. Her apparent ignorance of the listener and yet, the intentionality inherent in her art, exemplifies the poetic model to effect transformation. The moment of Edenic creation that makes the world appear new and fresh to the observer is contrived by the song she creates. Stevens emphasizes that she was the ‘single artificer’ of the world in which she sang, for she was the maker. ‘Artifice’, for the Modernists, was proof of the artistic labour involved. Every work of art also involves an affirmation as well as a reflection of the individual who created it. The creator takes the ordinary and changes it – transforms it into something beyond the sum of its particulars, and himself changes in the process. The inspiration for the song achieves new forms embodying the soul of the singer.

Stevens places the woman on the shores of the sea as she sings, juxtaposing the voice of the sea and her song. The act of mimesis that the sea is engaged in reflects thematically and structurally in the poem as well, with repeated lines and ideas. Dispensing with the mimetic imperative implies a freedom from being bound by the structure of the world. The sounds of the sea lie in the vicinity of mimesis while the song exemplifies synthetic endeavour. The synthetic power of the imagination is at work in the production of art, and particularly in the production of music which is essentially non-mimetic. The two intermingled sounds in the poem thus present the mimetic and the synthetic forms of art, and thereby initiate a dialogue on how art can be rescued from mindless imitation. The importance of a synthetic origin is well conveyed in the words of William Carlos Williams when he said, “The only realism in art is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation” (198).

The lines “‘But play, you must, / A tune beyond us, yet ourselves...”” in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (Stevens, *CP* 165) reflects on the concept of the ‘beyond’. The transition from sea to ocean, from the making of a cry to causing a cry and the capability to understand a cry not of oneself, all show a transition onto a higher plane – something *beyond* where it already is. Art, being a combination of reality and imagination, elevates the ordinary into the realm of the extraordinary. This song changes, transforms and elevates reality, making the poet aware of ‘keener sounds’ and ‘ghostly demarcations’, and in this process becomes aware of himself. This internal transformation created by the woman’s song is the duty of music that poetry and all of art is to emulate.

Kant’s Third Critique suggested that the bridge between pure reason and practical reason could be the work of art. Art, for Kant, is a connecting and unifying force as well as a purposive object. And because it is intentionally created, there is guarantee that the work of art does exist, though duplicitous or ambiguous. While the ‘real’ world might be some kind of illusory projection or hyperreality, the product of artistic creation cannot fail when subjected to any ontological or existential interrogation. The act of conscious creation in the mind guarantees the existence of that which is create, even when all other realities can be doubted out of existence. The world created by the woman was real to her and to those who listened to her song since they “Knew that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made” (Stevens, *CP* 130). Therefore, art’s function as a bridge into the real is all the more relevant during a period of history where the existence of the world made up of fragmented realities and disjointed perspectives is uncertain. This making also represents the model of imaginative subjectivity. The synthetic power of the imagination that is

idiosyncratic to each individual comprises each work of art made. Stevens elaborates on the imagination as “the magnificent cause of being, / The imagination, the one reality / In this imagined world” (Stevens, *CP* 25).

Stevens’s poems maintain an extremely close relationship with the primary states of sound where meanings do not exist. Poems like “Life is Motion” (Stevens, *CP* 83); “Depression Before Spring” (63); “Mozart, 1935” (131–2); and “Page from a Tale” (421–3) all possess strings of consonants and vowels that make no logical sense. This could be a manner by which Stevens’s poetry attempts to dispense of the mimetic imperative and return to epistemic origins. Even while experimenting, poetry has to be careful that it does not fall into the peril of being completely meaningless. Sound by itself is a mechanical product and cannot carry intention. It is intentionality and the presence of soul that differentiates music from sound enabling its transformative quality. Peter Quince, a poet–musician himself, echoed this idea when he mused that “Music is feeling, then, not sound” (Stevens, *CP* 90).

Through this discussion, this paper has attempted to illustrate the cardinal position held by the art of music in the treatment of phenomenon such as transformation and temporality. Music can transcend or outlast its own spatial and temporal limits. It also becomes more than the sum of its parts – changes into something beyond its constituent elements as it is performed. Moreover, it changes and enlarges the presence of its creator or performer. It makes them sing ‘beyond’ what they take inspiration from. The man who plays the tune is the maker of the song that affects the soul of the listener, even when the tune is made from the commonplace. His tune is riddled with the present, but like the pianist in “Mozart, 1935”, he is seated, he is aware and his response to the world is his music. His playing changes things as they are and imposes order over chaos, transcending points of origin and becoming more than the “outer voice of sky and cloud” (Stevens, *CP* 129). If the guitarist is the artist and the guitar, the imagination which he uses to produce his art, the phrase “Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar” (Stevens, *CP* 165) is the crux of Stevens’s poetics and the slogan of the era.

Music, being consciously intentional, does not derive from the prior existence of any one thing. This also accredits it with the quality of being unpredictable and essentially non-repetitive. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche comments that while “concepts contain particulars only as the first forms of abstracted perception, as it were, the separated shell of things” and thus they are ‘abstracta’, music “gives the inmost kernel which precedes all forms, or the heart of things” (Nietzsche 16). Though comprised of both mimetic and non-mimetic elements, music ultimately assumes its identity as an art created purely from the mind and of the mind. This independent abstractness is something Stevens clearly approved of as is evident from the title “It Must Be Abstract” that he assigns to the first section of “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”. “The poem of the act of the mind”¹⁹ is to attempt such abstraction, like the unadulterated origins of music wholly formed in the mind.”

However, poetry’s imitation of such epistemological novelty also creates challenges for the existence of the poem. While Stevens often tends to move towards meaningless sound or sound prior to sense in his poetry, there remains the questions of how far the poem can travel thus and still exist as a poem. If the poem finds itself capable of traveling this distance and achieving autonomy over meanings and mimesis, would it be the end of poetry? Or would it be its fulfilment? Music’s freedom from all obligation to contain words of meaning legitimizes its celebration of just sound. It travels all the way to the land of pure sounds and finds no need to come back. However, poetry attempting to do the same would result in the existence of the poem being questioned; it would lose its identity and thereby abandon a world that requires it to be contemporaneous. Music, being no stranger to change itself, is the one art that can help poetry maintain its connection to the contemporary world. Poetry inspired by such a music of intentionality and inherent change is what the Modernists need for their times. The mind’s capability to return to epistemic points of origin reveals itself most strongly in the art of music. And the challenge music instances Stevens’s poetry is to lean towards the territory of purely synthetic sound and yet retain meaning to affirm its space in contemporaneity.

“The first idea is an imagined thing” (*CP* 387), says Stevens, and this idea cannot be doubted into inexistence. The reinvention of ideas and re-representation of what has been rendered meaningless

by clichéd repetition in the past eras is what the Modernist combats through his singing, through his blue guitar, through his intermedial experiments in art. The hope abides that even when all order seems lost and the world appears discordant and incoherent, art will impose its surety upon human reality:

Some harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music
 Will unite these figures of men and their shapes
 Will glisten again with motion, the music
 Will be motion and full of shadows. (Stevens, *CP* 122)

The music and the musician here are not scholars beyond all reproach but ‘skeptics’ creating skeptical music in a skeptical world. But this suffices to ‘unite’ that which is fragmented. The glaring light and weight of ‘primary noon’ is absent here nor is it needed. In fact, it is the very presence of the shadows and the movement of objects that serve to unite the scene of dance. Perhaps, the waltz itself will unleash its powers of transformation and save its skeptical creators from falling into the peril of existential dread and nihilism. Certainty gained through artistic enterprise in an uncertain world “fixes”, “arranges”, “deepens”, and “enchants”²⁰ [sic] this night humanity lives in. Music, poetry and all art through their dialogue and mediation thus carve centres of certainty in an uncertain world, and “‘help us to live our lives’, not by explaining life, whose demarcations must remain ghostly, but by responding to its own music, its ‘keener sounds’” (Kessler 101).

IISER Bhopal, India

Notes

- ¹ “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (Woolf, *Collected Essays*, I 320–321).
- ² ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionist Exhibition’ organized by critic Roger Fry, was held at London’s Grafton Galleries from 8 November 1910 to 15 January 1911.
- ³ See “Life is Motion” (Stevens, *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* 83).
- ⁴ “The Steeple-Jack” (Moore, *The Poems of MARIANNE MOORE* 183–184).
- ⁵ All references to *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* have been abbreviated to *CP*.
- ⁶ The popular phrase ‘wind of change’ is an example of this ingrained idea.
- ⁷ “Valley Candle” (*CP* 51).
- ⁸ “Ploughing on Sunday” (*CP* 20).
- ⁹ “The Wind Shifts” (*CP* 83).
- ¹⁰ *The Comedian as the Letter C* (*CP* 32).
- ¹¹ “To the Roaring Wind” (*CP* 113).
- ¹² “Another Weeping Woman” (Stevens, *CP* 25).
- ¹³ See “Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself” (Stevens, *CP* 534).
- ¹⁴ This is the 11th thesis of the *Theses on Feuerbach* that was included in and first published as appendix to *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* by Engels in 1888. (Marx 65).
- ¹⁵ (Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* 259).
- ¹⁶ “The Idea of Order at Key West” (Stevens, *CP* 130).
- ¹⁷ The Blue Period of Picasso refers to the years between 1901 and 1904 in which Picasso produced several paintings that were essentially monochromatic. The somber scenes he painted reflected the artist’s mental unease, emotional turmoil and financial destitution of the time (“Pablo Picasso Blue Period”).
- ¹⁸ Widely considered as the poster slogan for Modernism, “Make It New” is a phrase popularized by Ezra Pound who even made it the title of a collection of his essays. This aphorism was first coined in Pound’s translation of the Chinese poem *Da Xue*, published as *Ta Hio: The Great Learning, Newly Rendered into the American Language* in 1928 (North).
- ¹⁹ “Of Modern Poetry” (Stevens, *CP* 240).
- ²⁰ “The Idea of Order at Key West” (Stevens, *CP* 130).

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