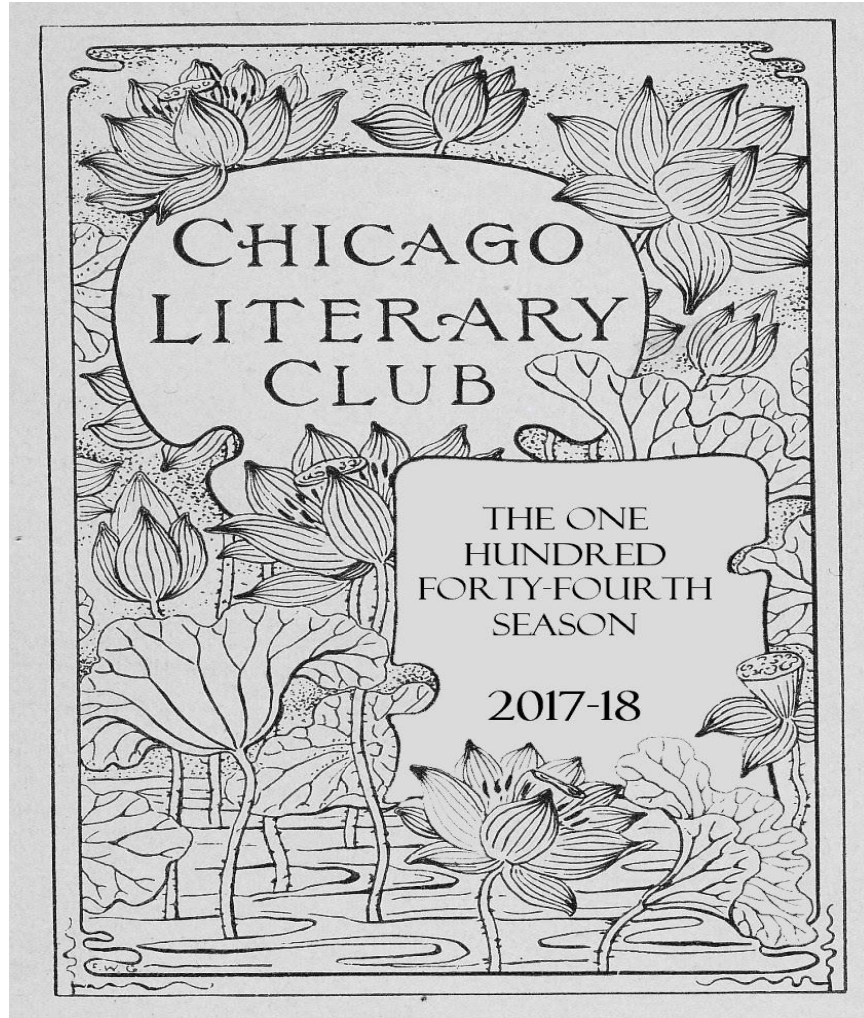


**The One Hundred Forty-Fourth Season
of The Chicago Literary Club**



“SEA, WOMAN AND SONG: WALLACE TELLS ALL”

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May 14, 2018

Introduction

I had joined the firm of Yeats, Frost, Eliot & Pound, as a mail clerk. I had answered the phone for Lowell, Ginsberg, Bishop & Rich. But it was not until later that I began to appreciate the poetry of Wallace Stevens. I learned that the Ubercritics—Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler—revered him. I read Joan Richardson’s biography. I relished the fact that Stevens had been a fidelity and surety lawyer, like me. I knew my coverage opinions were sweet, but hey! I discovered he had not published his first book of poetry, *Harmonium*, until he was 44. I had written wherefore clauses; had my time come to write a wherefore art thou clause?

Next time I was in Hartford I visited the surety department of The Hartford Insurance Company. The new boss was a friend of mine. As he knew, from 1916 until his death in 1955, Stevens had worked in this department, as boss from 1934. I asked for a tour. We saw Wallace’s office. Some plaque said something. We drove by his house. We admired a tree he might have planted for his daughter, Holly. We scrutinized the sidewalk he took to work, composing as he went. All other tourists were down the road at Mark Twain’s house. I looked, I learned, I left. I did not get any surety files or poems out of it but I came away astonished. How could Stevens have done it? Surety claims are interesting but I am unaware of any ode to a surety claim. Something else was going on. Tonight we will see if we can get any insight. We will study a particular poem: “The Idea of Order at Key West.” First though, some background.

A Biographical Sketch

Of mainly Dutch extraction, Wallace Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania in 1879. His mother read the bible to him and sang hymns. His father, a lawyer, expected his son would be one too. Wallace got these messages but spent a lot of time outdoors while also becoming a scholar. At Harvard from 1897 to 1900, he began to write poetry.¹ That first book of poetry that he published 25 years later did not materialize ex nihilo. Stevens’ poetry was at first conventional. He believed in a “divine force behind every physical fact.” “Modernity,” in contrast, was “so Chicagoan, so plain, so unmeditative.”² Skepticism was creeping in though. In an exchange of sonnets with Santayana, who had taken a liking to him, he wrote one arguing that “[c]athedrals are not built along the sea” because nature would be too distracting.³

¹ Mariani at 1-25.

² A.K. Morris, *WALLACE STEVENS: IMAGINATION AND FAITH* (1974) 12, citing *LETTERS OF WALLACE STEVENS* (Holly Stevens, ed. 1965) 32 (Jnl. Entry of Aug. 1, 1899).

³ Mariani at 22-23.

After Harvard, Stevens went to New York and tried to make it as a journalist. He quickly switched to law, but stayed in New York. On graduation from law school, he worked for a series of law firms and then insurance companies. Long hikes plus hours in St. Patrick's Cathedral provided solace.⁴ On a visit home, he met Elsie Moll, from the poor side of Reading. They married in 1909. His parents refused to attend the wedding. The Stevenses found an apartment in the Chelsea neighborhood and met the sculptor who would put Elsie's image on two US coins. In 1916, they moved to Hartford so Wallace could begin working at The Hartford.⁵

Meanwhile, a naked French lady came bopping down the staircase. Patrons were shocked. Not by the nudity of the painting but by the biomechanics. She looked like what later came to be known as a Slinky. Voilà! Good morning modern art. New York's 1913 Armory show featured Fauvism, Futurism and Cubism. Stevens' Harvard friend, Walter Arensberg, started collecting the art and organized a salon. Stevens met the Slinky painter, Marcel Duchamp, along with the poets William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore and Donald Evans, the poet and painter Mina Loy and the writer Carl Van Vechten. Everyone celebrated the new art and also the new music, including jazz.⁶ Though Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot had gone off to London, Stevens stayed home. In Chicago, Harriett Monroe began publishing his work in her new magazine—*Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.⁷ If modernity was so Chicagoan, Stevens was now a convert.

Disillusionment and not simply novelty was the common denominator. The Great War only deepened this. For Pound and Eliot, "make it new" meant "make the past new." Pay homage to Confucius or Brahman. Revive the troubadours.⁸ Later it would be Mussolini for Pound and the Archbishop of Canterbury who was martyred in the year 1170 for Eliot. Williams and Stevens were more optimistic, more wholeheartedly modern. "Phoebus is dead, ephebe."⁹ It was time to move on. Experience the present moment; express oneself freely; be sensuous; have a sense of humor; pick up on the energy of America.¹⁰

True, you will not find a photo of Stevens not wearing a suit and tie, even in his yard. True as well, he was reticent and ascetic by nature and perhaps because he thought he had to be to hold his job. But remember, he was a corporate lawyer. He

⁴ Morris at 15-16.

⁵ Mariani at 53-69.

⁶ Allan Burns, THEMATIC GUIDE TO AMERICAN POETRY (2002) 145-49.

⁷ Morris at 127-8.

⁸ R.P. Draper, AN INTRODUCTION TO TWENTIETH CENTURY POETRY IN ENGLISH (1999) 31; Marie Borroff, WALLACE STEVENS: THE WORLD AND THE POET, in WALLACE STEVENS: A COLLECT OF CRITICAL ESSAYS (Marie Borroff, ed., 1963) 3.

⁹ "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," in Wallace Stevens, THE COLLECTED POEMS OF WALLACE STEVENS (1955) (hereafter "CP") 383, 383.

¹⁰ Draper at 332; Borroff at 3; Daniel R. Schwarz, NARRATIVE AND REPRESENTATION IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS: A TUNE BEYOND US YET OURSELVES (1993) 30.

could not go about as a Whitmanian roughneck. He did have another side though and it came out in the poems. “Stevens, for all his respectability and desire for order and control, had another self in his poetry that gave voice to his libidinous, anarchic side that flouted bourgeois values and expectations.”¹¹ Yet vulgarity was not his thing. One critic characterized him as a dandy but Stevens rightly took issue with that.¹² Stevens did write with elegance, grace and good taste, but, like his fellow modernists, he sought to ground this in self-evident substance. “No ideas/but in things,” as Williams put it. MacLeish declared: “A poem should not mean/But be.” “Show rather than tell,” said Hemingway.¹³

Stevens needed a new subject though. In the course of his surety claims work, he found one: Florida. To represent The Hartford in the South, Stevens hired Arthur Powell, an ex-judge of the Georgia Court of Appeals. The two took a business trip with colleagues to Miami in 1922. After finishing their work, the group headed to the Keys for some drinking and fishing. The tropical setting enchanted Stevens. Sun, moon, sea, sand. Palm trees, flowers, birds. Imaginary nudes. He and Powell would return year after year, often staying at the Hotel Casa Marina in Key West. Florida would feature heavily in Stevens’ first book of poetry, *Harmonium* (1923).¹⁴

From 1924 to 1934, however, Stevens the poet all but closed shop. Key West was losing its charm. One year, Hemingway punched him out, after Stevens drank too much and started the fight. The surety job took precedence; he and Elsie now had a daughter to raise—Holly. Little intimacy remained between Wallace and Elsie though. Dissatisfied but resigned, Wallace took a separate bedroom. Elsie, the model for the “Walking Liberty” half dollar and the Mercury dime, had become a cold and dowdy recluse, the “Paltry Nude” of a poem in *Harmonium*, who “scuds the glitters, not on a shell/ but on the first-found weed.” As Richardson put it: “Within a few years, the robust beauty of her Liberty head presence had withered into wizened eccentricity and she dressed like a maiden schoolmarm of sixty.”¹⁵ She never understood his poetry and by this time she despised it. Wallace consoled himself by indulging in French goodies—food, wine, art, books, phonographs—things he picked up in New York or that a dealer sent from Paris. Wallace’s surety work continued to go well though and in 1934, The Hartford made him a vice-president. His salary in today’s dollars was \$350,000 a year. It was the middle of the Depression.¹⁶

¹¹ Schwarz at 32.

¹² Mariani at 163.

¹³ Burns at 150-51.

¹⁴ Schwarz at 8; Janet McCann, WALLACE STEVENS REVISITED: THE CELESTIAL POSSIBLE (1995) 25-6; Paul Mariani, THE WHOLE HARMONIUM: THE LIFE OF WALLACE STEVENS (2016) 127-8, 142-3.

¹⁵ McCann at 25, quoting Joan Richardson, THE LATER YEARS: WALLACE STEVENS 1923-55 (1988).

¹⁶ Mariani at 155-85.

An amazing thing now happened. Stevens the poet rose from the ashes, 55 years old. Harold Bloom believes Stevens recovered when he “ceased to fear his own solipsism” and embraced Emersonian self-reliance.¹⁷ Stevens launched the comeback with a poem about “a walker making a world by singing it.”¹⁸ He called it “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Bloom dubs this the Wordsworth crisis-poem in its American romantic modification.¹⁹ Jay Parini ranks it as the second greatest poem in American history, after Whitman’s “Song of Myself.”²⁰ Stevens would go on writing masterful verse until his death in 1955, twenty years later—“a glory almost unique in the history of poetry.”²¹

Stevens’ Poetic Style

A Stevens poem requires “acrobatics of attention.”²² All kinds of address are used—aphorisms, anecdotes, soliloquies, dialogues, invocations and myths. Many have a biblical form—parables, psalms and hymns. Simple words abound, but so do perplexing associations, obscure words and unusual constructions. Often there are masks to uncover or symbols to decipher. Stevens was reluctant to overtly divulge anything personal. Notwithstanding an abundance of wit and comic relief, his poems often arose out of “catastrophic disappointment, bitter solitude, or personal sadness,” but they were “not a vehicle for the direct outpouring of emotions.”²³ He was not going to confess, confide or complain. His poems are full of bizarre characters such as the Canon Aspirin, Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, the Doctor of Geneva, Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan and the Emperor of Ice Cream. Yet essentially he is said to be conversing with himself by responding to his own prior words as if spoken by another.²⁴ This “aesthetic aloofness” was not unique to Stevens; it was a feature of modernism. But Stevens was particularly erudite, fastidious, precise and uncompromising. We find an “unwillingness to make concessions to the common reader, resulting in almost intimidatory difficulty.”²⁵

Yet a Stevens poem typically is profoundly satisfying, once you make sense of it. No words are wasted. He manages to be both lyrical and meditative. Narrative is secondary. The observation of nature and the passage of time are central. Stevens is “one of our most visual poets.”²⁶ Images and colors, sounds and scents, seasons and hours. American “blessings of place” rather than European “glorification of

¹⁷ Harold Bloom, *WALLACE STEVENS: THE POEMS OF OUR CLIMATE* (1980) 94.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at 88.

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/mar/11/best-american-poems>

²¹ Bloom at 89.

²² Schwarz at 14.

²³ Helen Vendler, *WALLACE STEVENS: WORDS CHOSEN OUT OF DESIRE* (1984) 11.

²⁴ Schwarz at 14-15; Eugene P. Nassar, *WALLACE STEVENS: AN ANATOMY OF FIGURATION* (1965) 13.

²⁵ Draper at 26.

²⁶ Schwarz at 20.

heroes.”²⁷ Stevens was not a nature expert though. What nature gave him was insights about mind and spirit.²⁸ He was more an Emerson than an Audubon.

Stevens’ Poetic Theme

Though plagued by self-doubt, Stevens saw himself as a prophet and teacher.²⁹ A “poet of process,” his subject was the meaning of experience. This required a dialogue between imagination and reality.³⁰ The imagination lost vitality if it departed from the real.³¹ Rejecting Platonic timelessness (yes, another rebel), he sought “a dynamic moving in and out of rare moments of equilibrium”—moments of exalted hedonism or sublime aestheticism.”³²

According to Burns: “No American poet has made the themes of thought and perception more central to his work than has Wallace Stevens.”³³ As Perkins observes, for Stevens, “[t]he world of the unimagining is dull and incoherent. More exactly, since any world is an imagined one, whoever does not exert imagination is invaded by the common imagination and in our time, at least, the common imagination is remarkably unorganized, inert, unconscious, sordid and clichéd. Whereas the strenuous imagination is fresh, ordered, meaningful, and essentially happy.”³⁴ Stevens did not mean engage in blithe fantasy though. We must face up to the actual world, including pain, evil and death. Quoting *Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction*, a poem Stevens would publish in 1942: “We live in a place/that is not our own and, much more, not ourselves/And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.”³⁵

Moreover, at best, reality is “a thing seen by the mind/ Not that which is but that which is apprehended.”³⁶ Thus, “we must believe in a fiction while knowing it is a fiction.”³⁷ Perkins sees this as a “leap of faith”—“ironic, desperate, and maybe profound.” Stevens proposed to live by moving from one poem to another, not longing for an escape. Wanting anything other than to be “completely physical in a physical world” was a “desire too difficult to tell from despair.”³⁸ Take that Plato!

By imagination, Stevens did not mean mere figures of speech. Rather, one should “[t]race the gold sun about the whitened sky/Without evasion by a single

²⁷ Id.

²⁸ Id.

²⁹ Id. at 9.

³⁰ Id. at 11.

³¹ Id. at 12.

³² Nassar at 21-22.

³³ Burns at 190.

³⁴ David Perkins, *A HISTORY OF MODERN POETRY: MODERNISM AND AFTER* (1987) 291.

³⁵ Id. at 288, citing “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” CP 380, 383.

³⁶ Id. at 289-90, citing “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” CP 465, 468.

³⁷ Id. at 291.

³⁸ Id. at 292-93, citing “Esthétique du Mal,” CP 313, 325.

metaphor./Look at it in its essential barrenness/And say this, this is the center that I seek.”³⁹ “[T]he reader experiences the quest for the words that would give to ephemeral thoughts the tangibility of things.”⁴⁰ This is a passionate struggle. “[F]or Stevens the mental life is reality, and its narrative is as much a story as an adventure-tale or myth.”⁴¹ “What our eyes behold may well be the text of life but one’s meditations on the text and disclosures of these meditations are no less part of the structure of reality.”⁴²

Like Matthew Arnold in *Dover Beach*, however, Stevens feared religion was no longer viable. Poetry would have to take its place.⁴³ Myth was dead too. “The solar chariot is junk.”⁴⁴ Nor did science answer anything, outside of its domain. The poet should look at the stars directly and record his own thoughts.⁴⁵ Philosophy did not cut it either. Reason alone would never yield “the truth.” Stevens refused to be a “logical lunatic.”⁴⁶ Truth is found in “one’s own experience with one’s state of consciousness at a given time.”⁴⁷ Imagination must reach beyond both “the gaunt world of the reason”⁴⁸ and the bygone world of revelation.

Yet, like the painter Kandinsky, Stevens “sought to find the spiritual essence of nature rather than record the outward look.”⁴⁹ As such, Stevens was shaped by his religious heritage far more than he was willing to admit, until late (converting to Catholicism at the end of his life).⁵⁰ Helen Vendler writes: “Stevens’ meditation on the restlessness of the soul, the heart, and the mind are the most unsparing account in poetry of the oscillations of skepticism and faith Never was there a more devout believer – in love, in the transcendent, in truth in poetry – than Stevens. And never was there a more corrosive disbeliever – disillusioned in love, deprived of religious belief, and rejecting in disgust the credulous ‘trash’ of previous poems”⁵¹ Even so, Stevens sought “a happiness invulnerable to the ravages of time, to personal tragedy, and the world-catastrophe of war.”⁵²

Stevens’ critics acknowledge his extraordinary originality but identify many influences. Bloom traces Stevens (and many other of his favorites) to Lucretius but

³⁹ William W. Bevis, *MIND OF WINTER: WALLACE STEVENS, MEDITATION AND LIFE* (1988) 57, citing “Credences of Summer,” CP 372, 373.

⁴⁰ Schwarz at 4.

⁴¹ Id.

⁴² Id.

⁴³ Id. at 13.

⁴⁴ Borroff at 3, citing “The Pure Good of Theory,” CP 329, 332.

⁴⁵ Burns at 188.

⁴⁶ Nassar at 21-22.

⁴⁷ Borroff at 2-3.

⁴⁸ Draper at 28, citing Wallace Stevens, *THE NECESSARY ANGEL* (1951) 58.

⁴⁹ Schwarz at 33.

⁵⁰ Mariani at 391-407.

⁵¹ Vender at 41-42.

⁵² Borroff at 6-7.

points especially to Whitman, Emerson and the English Romantics, along with certain Victorians, especially the Renaissance scholar and aestheticist, Walter Pater.⁵³ Schwartz detects more high modernism: Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, Yeats. Others emphasize strands of French symbolism: Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Verlaine. Stevens had studied those poets at Harvard, along with fin de siècle aestheticists such as Baudelaire.⁵⁴ Stevens also was up on Pragmatism (William James), Dadaism, Surrealism, Nietzsche and Freud.⁵⁵ Socialism, nihilism or anarchy never appealed to him though. His poetry generally avoided social issues or politics.

Stevens sought to tell of “things exactly as they are.”⁵⁶ This did not mean grim. Many poems of *Harmonium* are ecstatic, witty and playful. “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”⁵⁷ chronicles the sexual angst of an aging man but does so wryly. One is left aghast and amused. “The Snow Man”⁵⁸ conveys a “mind of winter”—snow indifferent to observation but observed with Zen-like equanimity.⁵⁹ In “The Comedian as Letter C,”⁶⁰ Crispin voyages from France to Honduras, Cuba and Carolina but the sea is overwhelming. In “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,”⁶¹ Hoon is a solitary romantic who calmly confronts the sea as a means of knowing himself.⁶² Stevens sent Hoon back to the barn after *Harmonium* but ten years later, he was back, in *Ideas of Order*.

The Idea of Order at Key West

The Idea of Order at Key West (“IOKW”)⁶³ expounds an idea Stevens never let go of, once he found his voice again: poetic imagination can give meaning to reality.⁶⁴ If orthodoxy dictated the opposite, Stevens was not a subscriber. Schwartz credits IOKW as Stevens’ first achievement of the American sublime—Emersonian transcendence achieved.⁶⁵ Bloom does not quite concede that but throws in that it

⁵³ Harold Bloom, *THE ANATOMY OF INFLUENCE: LITERATURE AS A WAY OF LIFE* (2011) 134-6, 143, 159, 180-81, 252-3.

⁵⁴ Christopher MacGowan, *TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY* (2004) 190. Michael Bernamou, “Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination” in *THE ACT OF THE MIND: ESSAYS ON THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS* (R.H. Pearce and J.H. Miller, eds. 1965) 92-120.

⁵⁵ MacGowan at 190.

⁵⁶ Draper at 6, 32.

⁵⁷ CP 13.

⁵⁸ CP 9.

⁵⁹ Draper at 27; Borroff at 13-14; Schwarz at 1-2.

⁶⁰ CP 27.

⁶¹ CP 65.

⁶² Bloom at 104.

⁶³ CP 128, and also in Wallace Stevens, *IDEAS OF ORDER* (1936).

⁶⁴ Id. at 92-93; Mariani at 122-23; Merle E. Brown, *WALLACE STEVENS: THE POEM AS ACT* (1970) 65-68.

⁶⁵ Schwarz at 76.

shows the power of the mind over the Miltonian universe of death.⁶⁶ Well, take your choice. Power over the Miltonian universe of death sounds good. These are extravagant claims though. We must hear the poem ourselves, and who better to recite it than Wallace himself?:⁶⁷

THE IDEA OF ORDER AT KEY WEST⁶⁸

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard,
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped

⁶⁶ Bloom at 96.

⁶⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLUNw6w4ynI>

⁶⁸ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43431/the-idea-of-order-at-key-west>

On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

Why Key West Is in the Title

To begin with, we should ask: what does the reference to Key West in the title signify? Is it a pun—Key West as key to the west? Is it key to this poem? Nothing we could only ascribe to the island of Key West can be found in the text. The tropical descriptions—the water-walled coral, the endless summer, the heaped sky, the fragrant portals, when coupled with the title, do suggest that is where we are though. Note also that the sun is setting over the sea so the sea is to the west. If we are in Key West, we are looking at the Gulf of Mexico. That is still the sea though, in the generic sense, i.e., “a great body of salt water that covers much of the earth; broadly: the waters of the earth as distinguished from the land and air.”⁶⁹ Besides, poets have license to call things what they will. Walt Whitman, in “Starting for

⁶⁹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sea>

Paumanok” calls the Gulf of Mexico “the Mexican Sea.” Bloom tells us though that when the first line refers to the genius of the sea, this is not a genius limited to the sea off Key West. The sea would have this genius anywhere.⁷⁰ If so, we can infer that the idea of order is portable too. Stevens did in fact take it with him, but he would leave Key West behind. A companion poem was titled “Farewell to Florida.”

IOKW’s Prosody (Poetic Technique)

The opening line of IOKW is superb: “She sang beyond the genius of the sea.” The critic Allen Burns asks: “Is there a lovelier opening line in American poetry?”⁷¹ It sets a calm and lucid atmosphere. It previews the whole poem. It ties in to the closing line’s “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.” It does all this with extraordinary sonority. First, there is alliteration (not only sang sea but she gee). Second, there is assonance (she, be, gee, sea). Third, the s and sh sounds mimic surf. The line is not merely sibilant; it is onomatopoeic—it sounds like the sea, the world’s greatest “s” factory. Fourth, it does all this in a rhythmic arrangement of simple words.

These techniques continue throughout the poem, e.g., the “constant cry,” the “mimic motion,” the “summer sound,” the “high horizons.” A “double” is scored in the second stanza: “The grinding water and the gasping wind.”

The opening line also sets the poem’s meter, and it is a classic one—iambic pentameter: ten syllables in five measures with the beat on every second syllable: “She sang beyond the genius of the sea.” Yet the words ending each line are not rhymed. This is blank verse—the meter of choice for the exposition of serious ideas since Milton. It made extra sense in a poem about order.⁷² Bucking the free verse trend, Stevens used it often.

One effect of all this is sea, song and poem come together in a sonic blend. Marie Borroff asks whether IOKW’s cadences invite us to escape from reality “into a poetic never-never land of refined sensations and beautiful emotions.” She says no. The poem restores and refreshes us.⁷³ Stevens tunes us in to his idea of order.

Indeed IOKW’s technique, a technique Stevens used often, is designed to convey the process of thought in action—the turning of an elusive experience or observation into poetry. The “pensive style,” Vendler calls it.⁷⁴ We witness the formation of an idea of order in the narrator’s own mind rather than have it drummed into us as

⁷⁰ Bloom at 93, 96.

⁷¹ Burns at 192.

⁷² Burns at 143.

⁷³ Borroff at 11.

⁷⁴ Helen Vendler, *ON EXTENDED WINGS: WALLACE STEVENS’ LONGER POEMS* (1969) 13-37.

dogmatic certainty. The poem does this in part by uttering many ifs, yet, but, and maybes.⁷⁵ Several examples appear in the second stanza:

Even if what she sang was what she heard
...
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
...
But it was she and not the sea we heard

Similarly, in the third stanza there are two “if it was onlys” in the first three lines, followed by an “it would have been” in the fifth line.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
...
If it was only the outer voice of sky
...
... it would have been deep air

Another device that captures the passing moment in IOKW is the present participle, e.g.:

Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

We are right with the narrator in his very moment of assessment. As the poem moves to a conclusion, the narrator is moved by what he hears and sees and we share intimately in that.⁷⁶

The poem is relatively short on metaphors and similes. The one overt simile is that the sea is “[l]ike a body, wholly body/fluttering its empty sleeves.” At another point, a metaphor is denied: “The sea was not a mask. Nor was she.” Instead, the figuration is primarily allegorical. At the same time the ongoing physical description is transportive, even with a minimum of adjectives, much less metaphors. Nor are there any obscure or obtrusive words.

The Sea

We now will attend to what I will call IOKW’s characters, starting with the Sea. Citing Paul Fussell, Bloom lists Stevens as a master of the “American Shore Ode,” a subgenre of the “Promenade Poem.” An American Shore Ode “is a lyric of some length and philosophic density spoken (usually at a specific place) on an American beach.” It compares “the wholeness and flux of the sea to the discreteness and fixity

⁷⁵ Id. at 36-37.

⁷⁶ Borroff at 14; Schwarz at 33.

of land objects.” It does more than provide “transcendental meditations about the sea;” it explores the dissimilarities between land and sea and their “paradoxical marriage.”⁷⁷ IOKW meets this definition but only by implication since no land objects are expressly mentioned other than, towards the end, the town. However, we know the woman is walking, and later, striding, so we do think of the shore or beach. Further, we know from Stevens’ other work that he does draw both a strong contrast and a fatal attraction between sea and land.

In Stevens’ poetry, the sea is not our friend. Man rather is at home only on land. He is the “Socrates of snails.” He is “the intelligence of his soil, the sovereign ghost.” At sea, chaos rules and man trembles. As “The Comedian as Letter C” puts it, the sea is our “pedagogue,” we are not its “preceptor.” “The sea severs not only lands, but selves.” In IOKW, the sea is still chaos, i.e., unformed reality, the “primordial flux.” It is immense, hooded (a reference to the waves), tragic-gestured (reaching for what it cannot attain, says Brown),⁷⁸ grinding, howling, in constant motion; it offers no comfort.⁷⁹ It is “the chaotic unconscious from which man awakes to a realization of the form-giving power of his own voice.”⁸⁰ The characters of IOKW experience this as they walk along the shore.

IOKW attacks the pathetic fallacy though. The sea is neither a human being nor a god. Already, in “The Comedian,” the sea was not “Triton, nothing left of him,/ Except in faint memorial gesturings,/ That were like arms and shoulders in the waves.” Not even a trace of Triton can be found in IOKW. The sea is simply a “place” one can walk by and sing of, distinct from human symbols or fantasies. Just as the snow is not “the snow” in “The Snow Man,” the sea is not “the sea” in IOKW. Any emotion about it is in the perceiver’s response. We should not personify it as might have been credible in 250 or 2500 B.C.⁸¹ And yet we are told that the sea in IOKW still has a body. It may be empty yet it flutters sleeves. It may never have been formed to mind or voice yet it cries, constantly. Must it not have a self of some kind, a genius? We are told after all that the woman made a song out of that genius, or rather, beyond it.

The Woman

We do not know the woman’s name, nor anything about her appearance, age or attire, if any. All she does is stride and sing, while the narrator overhears her. We never directly hear her own lyrics or song.⁸² The leading view is that she is Stevens’

⁷⁷ Bloom, *ANATOMY OF INFLUENCE* at 239.

⁷⁸ Brown 68

⁷⁹ Nassar at 28, 47-51; Guy Rotella, *READING AND WRITING NATURE* (1991) 66-67; David M. LaGuardia, *ADVANCE ON CHAOS: THE SANCTIFYING IMAGINATION OF WALLACE STEVENS* (1983) 61.

⁸⁰ Edward Kessler, *IMAGES OF WALLACE STEVENS* (1972) 102.

⁸¹ Burns at 191.

⁸² Rotella at 68.

muse—"the mistress of the philosophers—wanton, beautiful, fecund, like a personification of creativity."⁸³ She is "the instinctive life of the unconscious, especially of the erotic impulse, in accordance with the traditional image of the siren lying by the sea."⁸⁴ "The poet's function in this poem is to listen rather than create, a vision of the old (inescapable) notion that the muse sings within the poet and that poetry is the notation of that song"⁸⁵

We can also simply say she is the imagination, a feminine faculty, traditionally.⁸⁶ She could be an alter ego for the wife Stevens wanted—one who really appreciated his sensibility, unlike Elsie.⁸⁷ We can even say she is both the muse and a woman the narrator sees.⁸⁸ Ultimately, like Stevens' characters in general, she may just be a version of himself that he created to explore his mind.⁸⁹ In this view, IOKW is "a dialogue between diverse aspects of the self."⁹⁰ Whoever she is, her words are "abstractions by which the poet temporarily orders his world into fictive things—poems."⁹¹ She is the "single artificer of the world/in which she sang." She makes a song by which the sea, whatever self it had, becomes the self that was her song. She is the poet, i.e. the maker. She does not merely sing about the sea; she creates it. Stevens really did want us to believe and be sustained by that somehow, as a "Supreme Fiction," even though we know it is false in a literal non-poetic sense.

The Song

The song in IOKW is the imagination trying to capture the unruly sea.⁹² An "allegory of the poetic process" unfolds.⁹³ A sense of separation prevails at first. The singer is unable to elicit more than emptiness. Mere mimesis would not suffice and is not attempted. The sea's constant cry comes through though. Something almost human is in it and the singer works her magic.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the narrator begins to ask questions. Whose spirit is this? Again, this is how a poem comes to be—you ask questions.⁹⁵ The narrator becomes lyrical along with the singer, as the song shapes the sea.⁹⁶ The camera pans up to reveal a majestic vista. Meaningless plungings give way to a towering sky—"theatrical distances," "high horizons," "mountainous

⁸³ Frank Doggett, WALLACE STEVENS: THE MAKING OF THE POEM (1980) 94.

⁸⁴ Id.

⁸⁵ Alan Perlis, WALLACE STEVENS: A WORLD OF TRANSFORMING SHAPES (1976) 143.

⁸⁶ Draper at 26-27.

⁸⁷ Schwarz at 4-5, 7, 76.

⁸⁸ Schwarz at 6.

⁸⁹ Id.

⁹⁰ Burns at 192.

⁹¹ LaGuardia at 67.

⁹² McCann at 31.

⁹³ LaGuardia at 61.

⁹⁴ Schwarz at 77-78.

⁹⁵ Bloom at 95.

⁹⁶ Schwarz at 78.

atmospheres.” The stage is set. As the sun sets, the singer now “striding there alone,” has done it, by her song alone: the sea is redeemed from chaos, given shape, intensified, transformed.⁹⁷ Though it lasts only a moment, a profound vision of wholeness ensues.⁹⁸

Yet the critic Guy Rotella insists this is not a moment of romantic unification with God or Logos. The song reaches beyond the sea but complete transcendence is not achieved. The sea retains “whatever self it had.” The song is an impression of the sea, not a replacement.⁹⁹ Rather, the song modulates the sea’s cosmic rhythms. It “allows the sea its immensity and vitality but “brings it within sensible proportions.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the Stevens scholar Joseph Riddel concludes that the song is not the sea.¹⁰¹ Neither sea nor song is a mask for the other. By the words of her song, the singer creates poetry, not the sea. She turns the sea into art—something more than mere sea sounds. The latter would just be “deep air”—lovely but without order.¹⁰²

Again we see how poetry is made. The singer does not impose an intellectual order on reality but invokes the musical order inherent in it. She unites with the higher reality behind the sea through a creative act of acute perception. She intensifies and makes new what is there. Her music is “the creative power of mind over nature or, more precisely of mind with nature.”¹⁰³ The song is so potent that the sea becomes the self that was her song. This makes the listening narrator ecstatic. She turns meaningless into meaningful not only for herself but for her audience. She evokes a tragic sense of evanescence—the sky at twilight, “acutest at its vanishing.”¹⁰⁴ As Stevens would later declare in “Man with the Blue Guitar:” “Poetry is the subject of the poem.”¹⁰⁵ However, the song does not replace the world or persist beyond the moment of being sung.¹⁰⁶

The Narrator

The narrator’s task is to show us what is going on between sea, woman and song. He (or she, but probably he, as an alter ego for Stevens himself) realizes the song is distinct from the sea yet partakes of its nature. The sea is real but the song is needed because the sea, without an idea of order, is an unformed, meaningless

⁹⁷ LaGuardia at 61-63; Schwarz at 79.

⁹⁸ LaGuardia at 62.

⁹⁹ Rotella at 66-68; Joseph N. Riddel, *THE CLAIRVOYANT EYE: THE POETRY AND POETICS OF WALLACE STEVENS* (1965) 118.

¹⁰⁰ Rotella.

¹⁰¹ Riddel.

¹⁰² Id.

¹⁰³ Kessler at 104.

¹⁰⁴ Rotella at 67; McCann at 32.

¹⁰⁵ Perlis at 138, quoting “Man With the Blue Guitar,” CP 165.

¹⁰⁶ Rotella at 68.

plurality. If the woman is the poet, then the narrator is witness and we readers share with the narrator in the vision that the woman creates—a new reality, a fresh perception, a new truth, a higher form, a union between voice and sea. Again, this leads to a vision of wholeness—a profound if momentary experience which expands the narrator’s awareness through the ordering process of the song.¹⁰⁷ “When we first really look at, for example the blue sky, not merely see it, but look at it and experience it . . . few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings.”¹⁰⁸

The narration is in first person plural. Who does the narrator refer to when he says “we”? It could still just be himself, it could include the man we discover the narrator is walking with—Ramon Fernandez (see below), or it could include (along with Ramon, any readers of the poem. Schwartz argues the narrator is just Stevens, a “mite in the cosmos,” soothing his “pain at making mimic motion in an unfulfilled marriage . . . on a holiday.”¹⁰⁹ He had once idealized Elsie and still wrote faithfully to her. But she no longer had muse status. Real love had eluded him and he feels lonely. In this scenario, the “we” are just different voices in Stevens’ psyche, while both Ramon and the singer are imaginary.¹¹⁰

Ramon Fernandez

In the last full stanza, Ramon Fernandez appears out of nowhere. He must have been tagging along with the narrator. He represents the comfort of human company—someone to talk to. He may be a stand-in for us, the poem’s readers.¹¹¹ He never says anything, for one thing. As the narrator and Ramon turn back to town, night has fallen and the sea is dark but the glassy boat lights in the harbor carve out emblazoned zones and fiery poles in the water. The lights arrange, deepen and enchant the night. Ramon is asked what he knows about this. His nonresponse may suggest he does not understand. His paleness and lack of response, “if he is there at all,” may point to something missing in the narrator’s life.¹¹²

But why is he called Ramon Fernandez? Years later, Stevens insisted that he used chose two everyday names out of the blue to create Ramon as a fictional character. If that was true, however, Riddel tells us “we are witness to the most astounding instance of critical telepathy in literature,” because a real Ramon Fernandez happened to exist who was a French literary critic.¹¹³ In 1927, this Ramon wrote: A poet “creates what he understands, in such a way that his creation necessarily

¹⁰⁷ LaGuardia 61-3, 67.

¹⁰⁸ Susan B. Weston, WALLACE STEVENS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE POETRY (1977) 62-63.

¹⁰⁹ Schwarz at 8, 76.

¹¹⁰ Id.

¹¹¹ Schwarz at 80; Brown at 65. Mariani at 187.

¹¹² Schwarz at 79.

¹¹³ Riddel at 117.

modifies reality without betraying it. . . . The known depends greatly on the act of knowing.”¹¹⁴ Just what Stevens was getting at. *Mais il y a une différence*. Both Stevens and Fernandez were formalists, but IOKW is High Romantic while Fernandez was an anti-Romantic like T.S. Eliot.¹¹⁵ Bloom asserts that Ramon does not answer the narrator because he does not understand romanticism.¹¹⁶ An in-joke for Bloom and other future critics. By the way, Bloom and Stevens did meet once, at a New Haven cocktail party.

The Lights

The narrator and Ramon pivot away from the sea as the song ends. They start back towards the social order as represented by the town. The narrator pauses though, to experience a new vision.¹¹⁷ Inspired by the singer, he notices the glassy fishing boat lights projecting into the sea. By imagining them as mastering the night and portioning out the sea, he creates a new moment of sublimity. By the way they fix “emblazoned zones” and “fiery poles” (the ripples creating a flaming effect), the lights seem to set fires or torches that burn in the dark waters of the sea. These are fires under our control though, campfires, as it were, our oldest comfort against the night, not to mention the sea at night—fires that arrange, deepen and enchant a scene that would otherwise be cold, unknown and forbidding. In short, the narrator conceives the lights imposing order over both night and sea.¹¹⁸ Bloom calls this a moment of “Paterian strangeness.”¹¹⁹ Like a painting by Paul Klee, the lights convey a fusion of imagination and reality.¹²⁰ Interesting comparisons could also be made to Picasso’s 1939 canvas, “Night Fishing at Antibes.”

The Blessed Rage for Order

As we have seen, the first act of ordering in IOKW is when the woman translates the sea’s dark voice into words, i.e., a poem. This order derives from the reality of the “veritable” ocean but “it is equally the creation of the single artificer who makes the world in which she sings.”¹²¹ The second act of ordering is when the narrator finds words to describe the lights. Brown sees even more ordering than this. The woman with her song orders the sea’s inarticulate commotion—its “meaningless plungings.” The narrator orders the song—explains how it is more than those

¹¹⁴ “Modern Poetry:” Brown at 50-51, quoting Ramon Fernandez, *MESSAGES: LITERARY ESSAYS* (1927) (repr. 1964) 50-51. Probably Stevens later wanted to disclaim any association with this critic, after learning of his Nazi sympathies during the occupation of France in World War II. <http://mason.gmu.edu/~rnanian/Stevens-IdeaofOrderatKeyWest.html>.

¹¹⁵ Bloom at 95.

¹¹⁶ Schwarz at 80; Bloom at 102.

¹¹⁷ Doggett at 97.

¹¹⁸ Kessler at 100.

¹¹⁹ Bloom at 103.

¹²⁰ Bevis at 60.

¹²¹ Borroff at 9-10.

plungings. Then he orders the lights. The latter is not an echo of the song (the conventional understanding) but a continuation of what the narrator was doing all along. Both the woman and the narrator are makers. Both have the rage for order. Moreover, even the sea expresses a rage for order as it moves and cries. The poem calls this gesturing tragic because it is indefinite and incomplete.¹²²

The poem thus sets up multiple perspectives. The narrator eavesdrops on the woman in her act of ordering the sea. He delivers his take on that drama to us. This commentary is a “realized moment of order” itself. “The poem, strangely enough, is not *about*, but *is* the experience.”¹²³ An “impressionistic marriage of subject and object” occurs.¹²⁴ The poem depicts the creation of a “moment of psychic order—of taking the thing impressionably into the self and maintaining it there in sentimental unity—that . . . is the essence of art. Heaven and earth, abstraction and reality, are collapsed in the order of aesthetic vision.”¹²⁵ The experience redeems the narrator’s faith in poetry and the creative self.

But why speak of a rage to order as opposed to a desire or a passion to order or something else less extreme, with no connotation of anger? Various theories have been advanced but maybe Stevens was just giving us a taste of what it takes to produce a poem of this caliber. Perhaps rage is the word because Stevens had to work one up to bring forth IOKW or any of his poems. People assume great poems just float by in dreams and the poet simply cocks an ear. Maybe Kublai Khan came about like that but morphine is dangerous.

We do all cope with reality by imposing order on it to a degree. But according to B.J. Leggett, by becoming an artist or appreciating an artist, we can do this better—more acutely, more spiritually, at a higher level. The rage for order is the passion that drives the artist to do for the nonartist what the latter would do if more gifted or practiced. IOKW calls this a “blessed” rage because it transforms dispiriting reality into art and make life desirable. The fundamental human instinct for order is best satisfied by art. Art gives us the chance to look at the world through the mind of a Dionysian artist.¹²⁶

Bloom, as usual, has a slightly different take. The sea expresses death but the maker transcends death by composing a poetry of the deep self and its origins. This is the rage to order, dispelling the anxieties of influence that had brought Stevens’ poetry to a halt. “To order the words of the literary tribe in keener sounds is the ambition of every poet, and like Tennyson before him Stevens largely succeeded in

¹²² Brown at 66-67.

¹²³ Riddel at 119.

¹²⁴ Id.

¹²⁵ Id.

¹²⁶ B.J. Leggett, *EARLY STEVENS: THE NIETZSCHEAN INTERTEXT* (1992) 185.

this.”¹²⁷ Instead of “parroting” the perceptions of others, he perceived reality directly himself.¹²⁸ “Immediate insights” are better than “sterile belief.” Stevens did not want to repeat himself either. He wanted to write on what was in front of him, not anything he had ordered already.¹²⁹ In short, Stevens came off the disabled list. He returned to the struggle—the agon (to use Bloom’s favorite word). It took a rage to rouse him, but in IOKW Stevens did it again—he wrote a real poem.

We have addressed how the rage to order creates keener sounds but why then does it create ghostlier demarcations instead of sharper ones? Bloom again has a treat for us. The sky acutest at its vanishing. Sounds keener but demarcations ghostlier? Why it is Shelley of course. Ode to a Skylark. The faint keen song of the skylark that cannot be seen at dusk.¹³⁰ Ghostlier is better. Keener is better. Ghostlier and keener? Poetry at its best.

¹²⁷ Bloom at 104

¹²⁸ LaGuardia at 38.

¹²⁹ Id.

¹³⁰ Bloom at 101-04.

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