

## ANALYSIS

“The Idea of Order at Key West” (1935)



Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

“In this poem, Stevens dramatizes the artist in process of creating a new world of order by imposing the structure of the imagination on the amorphous fluidity of reality. The girl singing by the sea may symbolize the poet—or any individual—involved in imaginative apprehension (or creation) of the world. When Stevens writes of the girl that ‘there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made,’ he suggests that the only world man can know—really know—is the one he perceives, consciously or unconsciously, through his or the artist’s imagination. The rest is flux, shapeless and without meaning. Stevens has written of Ramon Fernandez, the companion in the closing lines of the poem: ‘I used two every day names. As I might have expected, they turned out to be an actual name’.”

James E. Miller, Jr.  
*The Literature of the United States* 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 982

“In ‘The Idea of Order at Key West,’ the woman who personifies the idea of order sings ‘beyond the genius of the sea’—i.e. the sea without human spectators. Here, as frequently in Stevens, order is symbolized by language, which is sound given intelligible form. The singer utters the sea ‘word by word,’ transforming its inarticulate cry, its ‘dark voice,’ into the rhythmic and expressive language of the ‘maker’ or poet. The resultant order is founded on reality, expressive of ‘the veritable ocean,’ but it is equally the creation of the ‘single artificer’ who makes the world in which she sings.”

Marie Borroff, ed.  
Introduction  
*Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*  
(Twentieth Century Views: Prentice-Hall 1963) 9

“In the most famous, and perhaps greatest, poem in the volume, ‘The Idea of Order at Key West,’ Stevens explores the old problem in the old terms by way of a new example, a girl singing beside the sea. How did the ‘order’ of the song arise from the ‘disorder’ of reality, if the girl herself is a part of nature? ‘Whose spirit is this?’... Between the sound of the sea and the sound of the song, there seemed to be no real relationship: ‘The sea was not a mask.’... Nature is not a symbolic language; nature does not reveal

spirit. The beauty of the girl's song is her creation alone: 'She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang.' How then could the effect have been to 'master' the night and 'portion out' the sea? Can a momentary subjective impression of beauty, even if we are wholly caught up in it, change the way things are? The sea, reality, the poem says, is what it is, and what it is, is not in any sense melodic or harmonious. 'Reality' is alien not only to song but to the girl and to us.

Nevertheless, though the terms of the dichotomy have not changed from what they had been in Stevens' earliest poems, the mood has changed. Crispin, to be sure, had allowed for the possibility that prose truth might approach poetic truth at last; but his tone in making the concession seems to imply that the possibility of this ever happening is slight and the significance, if it should happen, trifling. What the speaker is meditating on at the end of 'The Idea of Order' is no mere conceptual possibility but something desired, an even more significant, or revealing, song than the girl's, a song made of 'Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred, / And of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds'."

Hyatt H. Waggoner  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 434-35

Michael Hollister (2015)