

“Anatomy of Monotony” (CP, p. 107)

We are derived from the earth (I), which brought us forth as part of that nature which it breeds. The earth was “lewd” when it bred us, in that it was less chaste, therefore, more fecund. (Also, perhaps, “lewd” in the obsolete sense of secular, as opposed to clerical: our origin was natural, not divine as in the religious myth which later grew up about it.) We are of the same nature as the earth. Therefore, since we age toward death, so must the earth. As we have an aging autumn in our life, so she has the autumn of her planetary life, an old age larger than that earthly one which chills our spirits; and beyond our skies, bare of the promise of heaven after death, the earth lives and dies in terms of the still barer, bleaker expanse of the cosmos (“sky that does not bend”).

The body exists in terms of its physical life in nature (II); it is in our naked bodies that we live. Nature, out of affection for us, or sadness for our fate, comforts us with companions who complement our desire and pleasure (“phantasy” and “device,” archaic usages, also, our illusions and contrivances), who, through their finesse in gesture, touch, and sound, arouse in us desire for the still finer, more urgent pleasures (“implacable chords”) of sexual love. But this nature in which the body exists and which seems so benevolent is a deception, for its light and space have as their source that bleaker cosmic sky in which the earth, and all that exists on it, lives and must die (therefore, “fatal”). The spirit senses this, and is oppressed. It is this oppression of cosmic bleakness, this “monotony” or ennui, that the title speaks of analysing.

“The Idea of Order at Key West”  
(CP, p. 128)

The woman that the poet heard beside the sea sang a song that was beyond the ability, intelligence, of the presiding spirit of the sea (“beyond the genius of the sea”). The sea

never completely crystallized into an intelligence, never became completely articulate: it was like “a body wholly body” and nothing more, without head, or even the expressive hands and arms, its sleeves empty. And yet its “mimic motion,” mimic because it seemed that of an intelligence, but was only an imitation, created an intelligible articulation, not our articulation, though we understood it, but an inhuman cry, that of the ocean itself (“the veritable ocean”). The sea was not a disguise for our intelligence (“a mask”), nor was the woman. The song was not a mixture of the woman’s utterance with the sound of the water (“medleyed sound”), even though it may have been an expression of the sea sound, because the song could be distinguished “word by word,” unlike the sea, completely articulate. It may be that her song was of the sea, but it was her distinct articulation we heard, and not the sea. For she created the song, and the mysterious (“everhooded”) tragic-seeming sea was merely a place where she chose to sing. But it was not she in herself, but the spirit embodied in her that we sought. If her song were simply the sounds of the seascape, it would merely be their low pitched (“deep”) reverberations in the air, the sounds of a summer sea in the semitropical climate of Key West (“a summer without end”). But the song was more than meaningless sound; it was more than her voice alone, and more than ours adding meanings to the meaninglessness of the waves, wind, and clouds (“bronze shadows”). It was an imaginative version of the world that the spirit, through her, created. Thus it was her voice that gave point to the sky (“made/ The sky acutest”), made the sky most meaningful, most poignant at sunset (“its vanishing”). She gave to that time its feeling of loneliness. She made, through her art, the world in which she exists (“maker,” a few lines below, has the obsolete meaning of poet). When she sang, the sea took on the identity that her song gave it. When we recognized this we realized that her world was the one she made up in her song, that of the imagined. Thus the spirit is the imagination, mediating between the self and reality, neither one nor the other. The poet then apostrophizes “Ramon Fernandez,” a French critic with