

“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 “lewder” 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

whose critical theory Stevens may have been familiar, though Stevens has insistently denied that he had the critic in mind.²² It is, in any case, a name appropriate to a Caribbean scene. After the singing stopped and they turned from the sea toward the town, the lights in the harbor, tilting on the masts of the fishing boats, seemed to order the sea and the night as it fell, giving them, as the song had given the seascape before, a particular emotional tone. The imagination, through the song the woman sang, has cast its spell on the scene ("enchanting"), "Arranging" it, making it responsive to the feelings ("deepening"). It is our "rage for order" ("Blessed" because it makes the world meaningful) which thus, through the imagination, enchants reality; it is that which impels the poet ("maker") to compose poems of reality ("of the sea"), of the evanescent ("dimly starred") entries into the kind of desirable experience of reality just described ("fragrant portals"), and of ourselves and our "origins" (in terms, probably, of tracing our human identity), in more spiritual definitions ("ghostlier demarcations") and in more acute poetry ("keener sounds").

"Evening without Angels" (CP, p. 136)²³

There is no reason for a picture of the world with the supernatural addition of angels hovering miraculously in midair, playing their heavenly music. Nor should the poet, who helps to create our picture of the world, conduct, help to create, this music of the eternal. "Air is air," it has no reality beyond itself. It is empty, but filled with light ("glitters"); it is a desirable emptiness, the element in which we live. The music that we find there is not that of the angels, but our own: the poetry in which we attempt to define ourselves, a means to realize more acutely our own poorly realized ("unfashioned") human spirit. Further, that light of reality which sustains the angels ("fosters," also in the sense of sustaining something not of its own nature, fostering offspring not its own), and

which creates their adornments as "coiffeur" and "jeweller"—was it not made for men, rather than angels? The supernatural is an imaginative projection of the human. Men who were sad about their own mortality created angels from the light which illumines reality, and from their imagination (the "moon," often, but not always, associated with the imagination in Stevens) made up the idea of the soul ("attendant ghosts"), which would continue living after death and lead them "back to angels" in heaven (in a kind of substitute return to that reality of the sunlight from which the angels were made.) But we are of the nature of the sun, of the real, and not of night, of the moon and the imagined meanings of night ("pointed" probably in the sense that night makes its own peculiar points, meanings). We make poetry that expresses our harmony ("an accord") with the enduring manifestations of that reality ("antiquiest sounds of air") by repeating, in our poems, what we find in it. Yet, though we repeat those manifestations of reality in our poems, they are to begin with native to us, in our own language, are natural expressions of our selves. We are of the nature of the reality we imitate, and it is of ours. Its light, which encases us, crystallizes and forms our thoughts and desires which are then satisfied by reality itself: thus, "desire for day" is satisfied by dawn, for rest, by nightfall. The peace of evening ("rest and silence") is a transition to the slower tempo of night and its emotion-filled ("seething") minor key. This is the best time to confront reality, at night when there is little interference or distraction. The night, the earth are best bare of the supernatural, bare of everything but ourselves and what is familiar to us under the "arches" of the sky and its stars ("spangled air"). The stars ("fire and fire") then seem to be making a rhapsodic music to which we respond aptly ("a true response") with our own voice, our own emotion-filled music demanding expression ("great within us"). This is the appropriate moment for us to use our imagination, represented by the moon, as we compose our poems of bare reality rather than of the supernatural reality of angels.