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Stevens, Key West, and the Supreme Fiction

Tyson Mark Lies

References to the idea of a supreme fiction appear constantly in Wallace Stevens's poetry and personal correspondence, yet for all of his interest in the idea, the poet seemed perplexed, even frustrated, in his approach to conceiving and invoking a supreme fiction. In a letter to an associate, he once admitted, "I ought to say that I have not defined a supreme fiction . . . I don't want to say that I don't mean poetry; I don't know what I mean" (*Letters* 435). Perhaps what perplexed the poet is that the idea of the supreme fiction is relatively straightforward, yet the actual attainment of it is elusive. Stevens's conception of supreme fiction was that of a fictive ideal, something which critic Gregory Brazeal explains "would be a specific idea, known to be a fiction, that would be as valid and fulfilling as the idea of God, and which people could will themselves to believe" (84). Stevens conjectured that his supreme fiction would help fill the gap that had arisen as the idea of God had destabilized. Though hesitant to declare exactly how he saw the supreme fiction manifesting itself, he hypothesized that attaining the supreme fiction would be a matter of "pure poetry, essential imagination" and that the poet who achieved the supreme fiction would similarly be able to convey that fiction to the world around him (*Letters* 369). The pursuit of creating supreme fiction was an attempt to fashion order and structure in a world that faltered under the crippling fragmentation of modernity.

"The Idea of Order at Key West" exemplifies Stevens's conception of the supreme fiction as it highlights the poet-singer's quest for

order. In the poem, the narrator relates his experience of beholding a woman who sings as she walks along the seafront. Interestingly, though the shore and surf teem with natural energy, “gasping” and “grinding,” this singer imposes order on the world for “when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker.” The narrator similarly highlights the singer’s power to order the world as he asks his mysterious companion, Ramon Fernandez, why the boats in a nearby harbor seem to order the night in imitation of the singer’s song. The poem therefore revolves around the singer’s peculiar ability to project her “idea of order” on the world and provides an abstruse depiction of how Stevens’s saw a supreme fiction influencing the world.

Though the poem certainly exhibits the theme of order, critics wonder what, if anything, Stevens is trying to say through his portrayal of the supreme fiction. Johnathon Wordsworth asks whether the singer might be the incarnation of Stevens’s “extreme poet,” one who paints the world in an imaginative abstraction and achieves a “supreme fiction” that is “equivalent to the idea of God.” He suggests that the narrator and Ramon Fernandez are both listeners who “catching from her the power . . . portion out the harbour lights, subduing the darkness and the sea, ordering the landscape and investing it with significance” (131, 133–35). In Wordsworth’s reading the supreme fiction is an abstraction that the audience believes in and then emulates, creating their own fictions in imitation of the extreme poet’s supreme fiction. Joseph Riddel, on the other hand, suggests that the poem presents a very personal and internal search for order. He says that the singer in the poem represents the interplay between man and his surroundings. As the singer absorbs and transfigures the world around her, she creates order, which Riddel claims represents the creation of art (335–36, 347–48). Both of these readings build on Stevens’s aesthetic philosophies to determine meaning in the poem, yet in treating the poem as a complete abstraction they both overlook other possible avenues for determining meaning. More particularly, both interpretations ignore the fact that Stevens visited Key West regularly during his career and thus overlook how his personal experiences on the island modify his argument in the poem.

As one considers Stevens's personal attachment to Key West as well as his personal efforts to define the supreme fiction, one realizes that "The Idea of Order at Key West" must be more than just a general look at the theme of order. Indeed, Stevens's consideration of the supreme fiction in the poem comes only through the frame of Key West, in which case it becomes clear that while Stevens deals abstractly with the idea of order, he also somehow grounds the idea in the real world. As one looks to the form of Key West to find out what real-world applications Stevens may be referencing, he finds that Stevens's description of how the poet orders the world through the supreme fiction is also a broader comment on the different methods of order-making that he sees going on in small, colonized islands like Key West. Specifically, "The Idea of Order at Key West" unveils a frustrated Stevens who initially explores how imagination and the natural environment at Key West both contributed to his conception of supreme fiction. Once Stevens has established his own conception of how the supreme fiction is attained and the order it creates, however, he uses that conception to criticize how imperialist nations impose a corruptive influence and insufficient order on the different lands and peoples that they conquer.

Key West, Stevens, and the singer

To understand how Stevens uses the supreme fiction to comment on the imperial projects of certain nations, one must first understand the relationship between Stevens's supreme fiction and Key West. Stevens had a personal attachment to Key West that spanned nearly two decades. He first visited the island in January of 1922, and after spending only a day in a cottage on Key West's shores, wrote to his wife, "This is one of the choicest places I have ever been to . . . The place is a paradise" (*Letters* 224). Over the next twenty years Stevens made regular visits to Key West, and even after circumstances made it impossible for him to return, he still spoke of it affectionately in letters to friends (*Letters* 355, 806, cf. 268). Because Key West was a popular travel destination for many authors and poets, it is tempting to interpret Stevens's fondness of the island simply as fondness for his favorite vacation getaway. A thorough reading of Stevens's personal correspondence in conjunction with a study of "The Idea of

Order at Key West,” however, shows that Stevens’s love for Key West was more than a passing fancy. Stevens loved Key West because the island inspired him to better understand his vocation as a poet, and also helped him develop his conception of the supreme fiction.

“The Idea of Order at Key West” is often interpreted as Stevens’s attempt to show the role of imagination in achieving the supreme fiction. A cursory reading of the poem affirms this interpretation, for we can discern that it is the singer’s imaginative power that enables her to discover the supreme fiction as she sings. Her “song” is “not medleyed sound” with the sounds of the sea or the world around her, but it is her own creation, “For she was the maker of the song she sang.” The narrator insists that the sea “was merely a place by which she walked to sing” and that the creative, ordering power evident in the song rests with the singer. The singer is therefore “the single artificer of the world” because she is able to order the world around her through the imaginative overlay that she places upon it.

As the singer sings and imposes order on the world through her imagination, she creates a fiction that her audience can believe in and thus invokes the supreme fiction. When she “measures the hour its solitude” and makes “the sky acutest at its vanishing” the singer limits the world and makes it comprehensible for the narrator and his companion, who understand her song on some metaphysical level “inhuman of the veritable ocean.” Her song is so potent that the sea, “whatever self it had, became the self that was her song” and falls into order with the fictive world that the singer creates and the narrator perceives. She becomes “the maker” of not just a song, but a new world, one that exists in place of the world that the old idea of God had created. Stevens therefore shows through his singer that the supreme fiction arises out of the individual imagination and that it orders the world for both the poet and her audience in a very real way.

As he displays in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” Stevens sees the supreme fiction as a product of the imagination. He does not, however, maintain that imagination is the sole force responsible for creating the supreme fiction. Rather, he observes that nature must play a role in the realization of poetry, and by extension, the supreme fiction. He once commented that “poetry has to be something more

than a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature” (*Opus* 191). Robert Harrison reaffirms that Stevens looked to nature as a source for pure poetry: “‘idea’ and ‘nature’ are essentially homologous in the thought of Wallace Stevens . . . Nature is the birth, or coming into being, of the idea as such” (661). Stevens saw poetry as a “revelation” from nature in the sense that he felt that one’s experiences with nature contribute to the process of idea-formation that lead to the production of poetry. To Stevens, nature possessed an essential self that the poet pursued, and as the poet was able to connect with this essential self, he developed a phenomenological understanding that contributed to his or her concept of poetry and fiction. “The Idea of Order at Key West” affirms this interpretation of nature influencing poetry and shows that just as nature inspires poetry it also affects the pursuit of the supreme fiction.

Because Stevens saw the supreme fiction ultimately manifesting itself in the form of poetry, and because he equated the realization of poetry with a revelation from nature, it follows that nature would similarly play a role in his perception of the supreme fiction. Thus, in “The Idea of Order at Key West” Stevens does depict the singer achieving the supreme fiction through her imaginative power, but he also asserts that this supreme fiction only comes about through the influence of her natural surroundings. In the poem, the sea has an identity itself, possessing a voice of “deep air” and a “summer sound.” Because it exists as a distinct force outside of the woman’s voice, the singer and the sea do not sing in “medleyed sound”; rather, the sea acts as a form of inspiration for the singer. It “causes constantly” her song and is so influential to her poetry that “It may be that in all her phrases stirred / The grinding water and gasping wind.” The pairing of the woman and the sea in “The Ideas of Order at Key West” is an affirmation that poetry comes about as a product of the imagination, but only through the influence of nature.

Stevens’s assertion that nature combined with imagination attains the supreme fiction consequently illuminates some of his comments about Key West. For instance, Stevens once remarked that God “seems a nuisance from the point of Key West” (*Letters* 274). In another case, frustrated at the spread of American civilization south through Florida, he wrote, “in a few years the only true

temples will have to be found in Tobago or in the mountains of Venezuela” (*Letters* 247, emphasis added). These comments demonstrate that Stevens saw Key West as more of a “temple” in which he discovered his supreme fiction than a simple vacation spot. He saw God as a nuisance at Key West because it was at Key West that he received a “revelation” of a supreme fiction to which he attributed power equal to that of God. A look at the setting in “The Ideas of Order at Key West” affirms this interpretation, showing that Stevens’s perception of the supreme fiction grew out of his experiences at Key West and are reenacted within the poem.

The setting of “The Idea of Order at Key West” displays most prominently the connection between the poem and Stevens’s observations about the material island of Key West. In the fourth stanza, for instance, the narrator speaks of “the sunken coral water-walled,” an obvious allusion to the coral that surrounds Key West and which Stevens noted as being all over the shore there. The narrator also speaks of “a summer sound, / Repeated in a summer without end.” Stevens noted on different occasions Key West’s “midsummer weather” and compared it to paradise (*Letters* 225, see also 234). The “meaningless plungings of water and the wind” is similar to the wind in Key West which Stevens said “cries in the eaves in a most melancholy manner” and which he “lay in bed for several hours listening to” (*Letters* 258, 234). The correlation between these images and the material aspects of Key West show that Stevens definitely had the specific island in mind as he composed the poem. The narrator’s remarks that “in all her phrases stirred / The grinding water and the gasping wind,” therefore, do not just signify that the singer sings her song by a sea. Rather, they signify that the singer sings a song as she discovers it *at Key West*. Stevens’s careful description of the singer’s surroundings, as well as his depiction of how nature and imagination coalesce, represents his own spiritual experience at Key West. He shows how the surroundings that he loved so much inspired him with their natural order, and thus how they helped him draw nearer to his orderly ideal of the supreme fiction.

Key West greatly influenced Stevens’s understanding of the supreme fiction, but the impact of Key West on Stevens and the consequent influence that this impact had on his construction of the singer

in “The Ideas of Order at Key West” is only half of the story. Stevens depicts the singer’s achievement of the supreme fiction, not only to explore the poetic connection between imagination and nature, but to comment on forces that would corrupt that connection between mind and nature. By portraying the singer as he does, Stevens compares the order that is achieved through supreme fiction to the order that imperial nations impose on small islands like Key West. Through his comparison of the singer to the lights in the harbor, Stevens argues that the order imposed by imperial nations overlooks the essential nature of conquered islands and peoples and thus falls short of the true order that places like Key West can inspire.

The navy and politics

Key West’s power over Stevens began to wane a decade after he first visited it. Early in the 1930s, Stevens began to express his reservations about Key West, asking “who wants to share green cocoanut ice cream with these strange monsters who snooze in the porches of this once forlorn hotel” and saying that it was “unfortunately, becoming rather literary and artistic.” Eventually, Stevens felt that “Key West is no longer quite the delightful affectation it once was,” and after 1940 he ceased visiting the island altogether (*Letters* 274, 278, see also 355).

There are undoubtedly numerous reasons that Stevens forsook Key West, but one of the most prominent was the intrusion of the U.S. Navy. The military designated Key West as a major strategic holding many years before Stevens ever began visiting the island (see “Key West” 2), and in 1934 (the year in which Stevens composed “The Idea of Order at Key West”) he experienced the military’s interest in Key West firsthand. He wrote to his wife that “owing to the disturbed conditions in Cuba there have been warships in port here for a good many months . . . The men . . . come on shore in large numbers and from about four o’clock until all hours of the night they are walking up and down the streets” (*Letters* 268). Stevens obviously had a strong distaste for the sailors’ raucousness, and by 1941 he began to avoid Key West claiming that “it is said to be full of the Navy and is probably very pushing and hard to get along with” (*Letters* 386). By 1945, military operations completely preempted

any chance for Stevens to return, as he noted in a letter that visiting had “not been possible these last two or three years, because that hotel has been in the hands of the Government and, since it is the only decent place there, I have not gone at all” (*Letters* 386, 484). The United States military returned to Key West frequently over the years, and ultimately Stevens chose to cease visiting his beloved island.

While Stevens’s failure to return to Key West is partially due to the presence of the Navy, his own political leanings also may have discouraged him from returning to the island. As critic Paul Bauer proposes, Stevens’s poetry and prose reveal a distrust of “rhetorics of totalization” which he saw in the idealistic policies of both extreme socialism and extreme conservatism. To Stevens, these political philosophies “[provide] a ‘worldview’ for people who had previously seen the world piecemeal” (14–15) and thus did not offer an orderly response to the world’s chaos and fragmentation. The presence of the United States military in the Caribbean therefore could have displeased Stevens more than the raucousness of the sailors did. The rhetoric of totalization that led to the appropriation of Key West as part of the American empire certainly conflicted with Stevens’s own political opinions and thus dissuaded him from returning to the island as years wore on.

Though Stevens apparently disliked the United States’s military presence in Key West, he does not voice his displeasure barefacedly in “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Stevens generally tried to avoid being overtly political in his writing, but even if he shied away from openly expressing his opinion, his political views still inevitably bled into his poetry. Critics like Jan Pinkerton suggest, “If a basic concern of his poetry is the interaction of reality and imagination, the prose does reveal that he most frequently conceived of reality . . . in terms of political reference . . . The poetry as a whole, if reexamined, could yield as many political and economic connotations as the multitude of philosophical connotations that critics currently find” (9). “The Idea of Order at Key West” reveals the political consciousness of its author. In the poem, Stevens suggests that a poet, spiritually synched with nature and capable of wielding his or her imagination, can create a supreme form of order that contrasts with the insufficient

and contrived order of the totalizing imperial projects of powerful countries.

Notes on an ineffective Imperialism

Stevens creates two forms of order within his poem: the order created by the singer on the beach and the order that the “glassy lights” create in the second to last stanza. These two forms of order are related, but not, as Wordsworth asserts, because the latter grows out of the former. Rather, the order that the narrator notices in the glassy lights stands in direct opposition to the supreme form of order that the singer creates. The singer creates a supreme fiction that is so believable that all those around can willingly invest themselves in it. The glassy lights, on the other hand, “portion out the sea” that lies beneath them and thus figuratively represent how imperialist countries project their own dominating influence onto the world around them. As he juxtaposes these two order-creating forces in the poem, Stevens conveys his own distaste for the totalizing effect that imperialism has on conquered lands and peoples and upholds the supreme fiction as the only way of imposing true order on the world.

Stevens initiates his argument against the totalizing influence of imperial nations by calling on the character Ramon Fernandez. Stevens’s incorporation of a character of Spanish descent in the poem stirs up images of Florida’s colonial heritage and thus signifies that the following stanza relates directly to the modern imperial discourse. The narrator chooses to ask Ramon why the lights of the boats in the harbor seem to “master the night and portion out the sea” because, as his name suggests, Ramon is the symbol of a perpetual colonial subject, one who has roots stretching back to the conquest of Spain and who now lives under the banner of the American empire. The narrator asks Ramon to enlighten him on what he sees in the “glassy lights” because the narrator presumes that, because of his heritage, Ramon will better understand the imperial “mastering” of the sea that is taking place before them.

By addressing a descendant of an imperial project, the narrator highlights how imperialism overlooks the essential “voice” of the places and people it conquers in order to establish an unsatisfactory form of oppressive order. The narrator’s trust in Ramon’s response

springs out of his recognition that Ramon himself has been a victim of the totalizing influence of imperial projects and thus can accurately interpret the influence of the glassy lights in the harbor. Ramon, however, lacks a voice in the poem, just as the “voice of the sea” that rages in the beginning of the poem seems to lose its voice as the lights “master” and “portion out the sea” in the sixth stanza. Perhaps this is because both Ramon and the sea have lost a voice and identity as both have been subsumed to the overriding will of a conquering power. Whatever the case may be, the totalizing effect that imperialism has on individuals like Ramon parallels Stevens’s experience at Key West, where he saw how the United States’s need to protect its imperial possessions in the Gulf of Mexico overshadowed all that he himself had discovered at the island.

Stevens articulates his displeasure with imperialist projects by comparing the “glassy lights” on the “fishing boats at anchor” to nations that create political boundaries and divide up the world and showing how both fail to truly “arrange” or “enchant” the world as the supreme fiction might. The singer is the “sole artificer of the world” who sings “beyond the genius of the sea,” yet, as the narrator takes care to note, “the water never formed to mind or voice.” Stevens thus shows through his singer that the supreme fiction is a creation that arises out of and conforms to nature, but does not necessarily force nature to conform to a fixed framework. Transversely, the “glassy lights” of imperialist ships of state create “emblazoned zones” and “fiery poles” to divide up and portion out the globe. Imperialist powers try to arrange the chaos of the unconquered world around them just as the “fishing boats” in the poem “Arrange, deepen, enchant night.” Of course, the lights, as well as the borders of imperial nations, only cast a superficial glare over their surroundings, creating limited spheres of influence that only exist because of the chaotic dimness that is night. These limitations show that as imperial powers “address” the “night,” or seeming disorder, of the world around them, they also “deepen” and “enchant” it, bending it to fit their needs but never really bestowing true order on those lands and peoples they conquer. For Stevens, imperialism does not categorize and interpret lands and peoples as in encounters them, but instead

glosses over their essential characteristics as it forcefully labels them part of an empire.

By contrasting the order created by the supreme fiction to that of imperialism, Stevens displays his opposition to the homogenizing effect of conquest. He argues in a similar vein as Amy Kaplan, who says that “not only about foreign diplomacy or international relations, imperialism is also about consolidating domestic cultures and negotiating intranational relations” (14). Stevens feels that just as the glassy lights on the fishing boats try to “master” and “portion out the sea,” imperialistic enterprises try to order the world by forcing different lands to unite under a single banner. With regards to Key West, the United States consolidated the island into its domestic culture by making it a military stronghold, effectively denying the island’s essential characteristics and recasting it as a single factor in a grander scheme of the United States’s Caribbean military campaigns. Stevens accordingly views the United States intrusion on Key West as a perversion of the order that he found there. He purports that the United States’s efforts to negotiate relations with Key West have been self-serving and forced, leading to the spiritual sterilization of the island. Using the United States’s encroachment on Key West as an example, Stevens shows that in constructing political territories without regard to place or people, imperial nations establish a contrived and unnatural form of order on the world they conquer.

Having introduced the flaws of imperialism through the figures of the “glassy lights,” Stevens closes his poem by claiming that the order that the poet creates through supreme fiction eclipses the order imposed on the world by imperial nations. When the narrator cries “Oh! Blessed rage for order . . . / The maker’s rage to order words of the sea” he is proclaiming that it is the poet who can “make” the world. The poet, the narrator declares, is so powerful that she can use “words” to create “fragrant portals, dimly starred” and can tell us of “ourselves and of our origins.” These phrases denote the poet’s power to discover a supreme fiction that is equivalent to the notion of God, for God has also often been approached in rituals that employ “fragrant” incense and that aim to access the “portal” to his habitations in the “dimly-starred” sky. The power of the poet contrasts sharply with the chaotic imposition of the imperial powers addressed in the

previous stanza. In juxtaposing the two, the narrator shows that the poet can order the world through “ghostlier demarcations” rather than the “emblazoned zones” created by imperial powers. Moreover, the poet relies on “keener sounds” than the explosive sounds of war fought over colonial possessions. Through his narrator, Stevens compares the pursuit of the supreme fiction to nations’ pursuits of empire and shows how the former creates a natural and ultimate form of order while the latter provides only a semblance of order.

Conclusion

“The Idea of Order at Key West” contains both an exposition of Stevens’s understanding supreme fiction as well as the commentary that it makes on the inter-war political atmosphere. Stevens provides one of his clearest explanations of the supreme fiction and the extreme poet when he describes the singer in his poem. The poem persists without the singer, however, and as the narrator begins to express his own individual perception of the world, we see that he becomes disenchanted as he views the boats lying in the Key West harbor. The boats represent nations that pursue imperial projects, and Stevens resents these nations’ efforts to partition off the world and impose their own order upon it. Stevens denies countries’ tendencies towards totalization because he believes they glut the world and force it into a false order that denies the true order that nature inspires. Stevens had found his “revelation” at Key West, a revelation which directed him towards finding his supreme fiction, and he wished that the rest of the world could share in the order that he found and in so doing, find peace.

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