

"She measured to the hour its solitude": "The Idea of Order at Key West" and the Emotional Purpose of Meter¹

Griefe brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,
For, he tames it, that letters it in verse.
—John Donne, "The Triple Foole"

I am always pleased when I see someone making motions like this [gesture of conducting a chorus]—like a metronome. Seeing the music measured. Measure always reassures me. Measure in love, in government, measure in selfishness, measure in unselfishness.

—Robert Frost, "Observations and
Declarations of a Poet-Statesman"

But say my verses do not scan,
And I get me another man!
—Dorothy Parker, "Fighting Words"

The crux of the question is measure.
—William Carlos Williams, "Free
Verse," *The Princeton Encyclopedia of
Poetry and Poetics*, 1st edition, 1965

1 This essay began as a talk in the critical seminar "Expressive Purposes of Rhythm" at the 19th Annual West Chester University Conference on Poetry in June 2013. I am grateful to the leader of the seminar, Natalie Gerber, and to all the participants, particularly Rayne Allinson, for invaluable criticism.

As long as we can believe anything
we believe in measure

—W. S. Merwin, “The Long and the
Short of It”

1.

“The Idea of Order at Key West,” which first appeared in 1934 in the journal *Alcestis* and then the following year in the volume *Ideas of Order*,² is often read as a convoluted philosophical riddle, and by now this unfortunate approach has been used to torture generations of students. Indeed, many critics, when approaching Stevens and this poem in particular, seem only to want to muddy the waters. Consider this comment by Harold Bloom, about the fourth stanza: “The crossing to this topos of Comparison, from the place of Cause and Effect, is an *aporia* or *logos* of Solipsism.” The criticism is more obscure than the text. And here is a passage from Helen Vendler’s 2000 Warton Lecture at the British Academy, discussing the end of the poem:

Stevens’ final interpretation of the maker’s *furor poeticus*, the “blessed rage for order,” is secure only because it has been arrived at after he has given a full display, by means of his *ifs* and *buts*, of both Darwinian determinism and of the submissive mimetic sublime of Wordsworth’s *Elegiac Stanzas*, “That rueful sky, that pageantry of fear,” a phrase akin to “mountainous atmospheres / Of sky and sea.” Stevens’ inching progressions—“If . . . or . . . If . . . But . . . more . . . more”—track a mind at work investigating its first thoughts and rejecting

2 The volume first appeared in a limited edition of 165 copies from *Alcestis Press* in 1935, and then in a trade edition from Alfred A. Knopf in 1936.

them for a more accurate one—one that announces the spirit's mastery, by the geometrical abstraction afforded by lyric language, of the sublime landscape of the night sky. (231)

In showing how Stevens considers and rejects various ways to make sense of the song, the singer, and the sea until he arrives at “the spirit's mastery, by the geometrical abstraction afforded by lyric language,” Vendler strikes closer to the mark. Like Bloom, however, she still errs by overlooking the obvious, which is that the mastery Stevens achieves is not a function of language *per se*, “the geometrical abstraction afforded by lyric language,” but rather of measurement, which is a different faculty from language altogether.

In fact, and I will stake my argument on the assertion that it is a fact, Stevens' poem, like the poems (and prose by poets) that provide the epigraphs for this essay, stands squarely in a well-defined tradition of poems that directly address their own craft, in particular their versecraft, specifically the practice of meter, and then use such meditations to comment on greater things, as well. If we read the poem in that tradition, it opens far more readily to delight than if one bludgeons it with ideas in, of, and about language. Unlike philosophy, critical theory, theology, and so on, versecraft does not supply an otherwise hidden interpretive strategy to help us read the poem; it is a foundational practice hiding in plain sight, the ground of the “spirit's mastery” to which Vendler refers, albeit one has to accept just how serious such matters are to strong poets in order to see what is going on.

On this score, Stevens may have slyly encouraged misreading of his own work in places. As he wrote in “Man Carrying Thing,” “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully.”³ But perhaps what he meant is not that we should redouble our intellect in order to overcome

3 In her Warton address, Vendler mistakenly places it in the *Adagia*.

such resistance, but rather that the intelligence is not what we should primarily use when we respond to poems. After all, he did not write “The poem must resist delight / Almost successfully,” and delight is generally his goal, as he said in a number of places, such as the closing lines of “The Poems of Our Climate”:

The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

One is not always forced to choose between intellect and delight, but perhaps the point is that when one is responding to a poem one should not lead with “the intelligence,” even with a book titled *Ideas of Order*. All we need in order to consider such a possibility with Stevens is to realize there may be a whiff of irony lurking about that title, that the deeper purpose may be delight, and that the orderliness of measuring—again, a non-linguistic faculty—is fundamental to that delight.

2.

According to the concordance of Stevens’ poetry on the website of the Wallace Stevens Society,⁴ Stevens uses the word “measure” or some cognate of it (“measured,” “measureless,” “measuring”) 22 times. While he also uses many other words that describe or allude to counting (he uses the word “number” or a cognate 11 times, “count” or a cognate also 11 times, and many others), “measure” is a particularly resonant word for Stevens, indeed a climactic word, appearing most frequently in lengthier and more ambitious poems, often in crucial passages, even when that crux is a kind of failure, as it often is before “The Idea of Order at Key West.” “Measure” is also as close a synonym

4 <https://www.wallacestevens.com/concordance/>

to “meter” as English affords us, and when Stevens uses it (like many other strong poets when they use explicit terms of quantity, ratio, and degree), he is almost always offering either an overt or slanted commentary on his own versecraft. While he does not offer the practical prosodical observations that Pope does in the famous passage from the “Essay on Criticism,” or Shakespeare in Hamlet’s advice to the players, or W. S. Merwin in his lyric “The Long and the Short of It,” Stevens does suggest again and again in these crucial passages what the purposes of meter might be. These purposes always tie directly and powerfully to the broader aims of his art, not merely as metaphor, but rather as a crucial element of its foundation.

Perhaps the most significant of Stevens’ meditation on measure is the climax of “The Idea of Order at Key West.” The passage I am calling the poem’s climax begins in the fifth verse paragraph (ll. 34–43), where the speaker resolves the contradictions within and among the singer, the sea, and himself and his companion, Ramon Fernandez:

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.

To appreciate and enjoy this passage, perhaps even to read it coherently, we should first recognize what the strongest poets tell us again and again: versecraft is fundamental to making poems. It is not merely a musical scoring of the words and no mere imitation, adornment, or after-effect of meaning, but rather one ground of their creation. The passage is not, as Vendler suggests, an appeal to an extrinsic geometrical abstraction, but rather a forthright description,

as it is simultaneously a song and an enactment of what songs have to do in order to be songs in the first place: measure.

How did Stevens arrive at this point, in his mid-50s, where he saw, as have so many other strong poets, the embrace of measure as the key not only to his own poetics but also to a meaningful and creatively successful vision of life? Whatever may have happened in his psyche, we can trace his approach to this crucial choice in the poems. One development in Stevens' poetry between *Harmonium* (1923) and *Ideas of Order* was a shift away from shorter, more playful poems and subjects into more apparently philosophical meditation and more syntactically complex language. As Donald Justice has argued, this inclination to expand led Stevens away from the short free verse lines of poems such as "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," which was similar to much of what was appearing in journals such as Alfred Kreymborg's *Others*, where a number of Stevens' poems from this period were first published. While Stevens' earlier poems use terms like "measure" frequently, there is little exploration in them of what that might mean. However, beginning with *Ideas of Order* we find a more explicit investigation of what measure is and does, and the first thing to which Stevens applies such ideas of order is the words of the poem themselves.

Taking measure seriously as a term of art was not new to Stevens. As Natalie Gerber has pointed out in discussing a letter written by Stevens on January 13, 1921, to Ferdinand Reyher:

We might say of Stevens' modulated blank-verse rhythms, as he said of the abstract paintings of modern artists like Marcel Gromaire, that they illustrate "the human spirit seeking its own architecture, its own 'mesure' that will enable it to be in harmony with the world" and that "It is

from the intensity, the passion, of this search that the quality of works is derived, not from the codes and manuals . . . compiled by doctrinaires and conformist pedagogues.” In short, we might see in Stevens’ versification ways in which the human spirit seems a *measure* that is neither an escape from existing meters nor a doctrinaire fulfillment of existing forms (“Stevens Mixed-Breed Versifying” 199, quoting Stevens in *CPP* 827).⁵

Stevens’ interest in measure continued in his prose. In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” an essay delivered at Princeton in 1942 (and therefore presumably composed not many years after “Key West”), he writes:

[A possible poet] will consider that although he has himself witnessed during the long period of his life, a general transition to reality, his own measure as a poet, in spite of all the passions of all the lovers of the truth, is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. (*Necessary Angel* 23)

Such measured commitment to a successful abstraction of himself and reality, to an “imagination” or “nobility,” which can then counter the incoming pressure of reality, with creative “violence” (36) if necessary, requires the philosophical or metaphysical expansions Justice suggests. Such expansion, Justice argues, had a pronounced impact on Stevens’ versecraft:

5 Reyher (1891–1967) was a sophisticated audience for such a letter. He not only read and wrote poetry, but enjoyed success as a novelist, journalist, and screenwriter. I am grateful to Natalie Gerber for providing this citation along with many other bibliographical sources for this essay.

The short line clearly would not do for the development of ideas, which may be one of its virtues for the lyric, but not for the kind of poem Stevens had come by the end of *Harmonium* to be interested in. In the very narrowness of the short line there was simply no room for the occasional polysyllable, the obligatorily complex phrasing, and certainly not if the line, refusing to break across grammar and sense, was to retain its identity and autonomy, as it had done in Stevens' handling. (26)

All of the foregoing suggests that Stevens was concerned ("obsessed" is not too strong a word) with the ways that measure brings order to life. Indeed, measure and order seem to be synonyms for him. Such measuring is absolutely central to his poetics, and his attempt to balance the pressure of reality with the power of the imagination, to create "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" ("Noble Rider" 27) that is necessary to poetry, draws upon such measuring. Critics who are not poets (and, unfortunately, even many who are) often miss this focus on versecraft, which is the creation of measured language (even in free verse) by strong poets, despite the overwhelming evidence that they are concerned with it always and everywhere. Such critics tend to think primarily in terms of construing language, in other words, how language conveys semantic meanings. Bloom and Vendler were both my teachers and I learned a great deal from both, but both miss this crucial point. For strong poets know that to make poems is not merely to *say* something but also to *do* something: the ineluctable poetic modality of giving shape to meaning is the creation of verses, which are indifferent to what is said in them. The signal difference between verse (including free verse) and prose is that verses, by definition, "turn," whereas prose (*pro-* + *versus*) does not,

or are verses that only turn forward. By such “turning,” verses become countable and, because they are continuous, measurable, which is their signal distinction as a mode of inscription. This distinction makes it possible for verses to prime another faculty of the mind, the number sense, in addition to language.⁶ As Stevens puts it, “Poetry is a revelation in words by means of the words,” and in many of his strongest poems, those words are not only measured, but also contemplate their own forms of measurement.⁷

Forging a powerful, meaningful versecraft is one of the greatest challenges for any poet, and Stevens was no exception. A number of poems in *Harmonium* foreground

6 I am grateful for Emily Grosholz, a participant in the West Chester seminar, for pointing out the crucial difference between counting and measuring, which can only take place along a continuum.

7 The only other critique I have seen that seeks to bring Stevens’ work and the crucial question of measurement together is “Poetry and Mathematics,” by the poet Jonathan Holden. Holden was at one time a high school mathematics teacher and asks some of the same questions I do here: “. . . the function of poetry, like the function of mathematics, is measurement; and ‘measurement’ presumes that there is something to measure. What then does a good poem attempt to measure?” (93). He also reaches a very similar conclusion, which is that the preeminent measuring that goes on in poems occurs in prosodical transformations: “How can language measure its own value without reference to some extrinsic, critical meta-language? . . . [P]rosody can wring value from language itself and measure that value” (101). Holden does not discuss “The Idea of Order at Key West,” but his other readings of Stevens’ poems (including “Anecdote of the Jar”) are thoughtful and convincing, including the observation that “Measurement is done, Stevens tells us, by imposing upon the world constructions of the imagination” (94). Where we part company is that Holden refers to mathematics as a “language of silence” (91), whereas I think that mathematics is not a language at all, but rather a non-linguistic graphic system that engages a different faculty, the number sense. Strong poets rely on this number sense as a fundamental basis of poetic composition. Any attempt to render mathematics referential that is analogous with linguistic constructions can obscure how the number sense works and how strong poets depend directly on it to make verses.

measurement, some more significantly than others, but in those poems it seems clear that Stevens has not yet quite figured out how to put forward what he might find or make by measuring; or else in the end he retreats, in one way or another frustrated, if not defeated, in his attempts to give it significance. In “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” a very strong but failed poem, or, in any event, a poem about tremendous frustration, specifically the frustration of his own attempts at erotic intimacy, Stevens can only rise to measure as mockery, perhaps not yet sure how his own measures might redeem his frustrated imagination (and sex life). In the opening lines, the speaker curses in the name of the “Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,” and yet such words about clashing words (an argument between him and Elsie?) deflate immediately into a joke: “And so I mocked her in magnificent measure, / Or was it that I mocked myself alone?” (ll. 5–6). In this case, the inner world of imagination and the outer world of reality seem not to have joined; measure only causes pain. In part V, this seems clear again, as the speaker contemplates erotic disaster:

In the high west there burns a furious star.
It is for fiery boys that star was set
And for sweet-smelling virgins close to them.
The measure of the intensity of love
Is measure, also, of the verve of earth.
For me, the firefly’s quick electric stroke
Ticks tediously the time of one more year. (ll. 45–51)

The speaker cannot join with “the measure of the intensity of love,” and the poem, while powerful, is an erotic elegy that collapses into farce.⁸ Passionate boys may contemplate

8 Helen Vendler places this poem at the center of her understanding of Stevens’ “words chosen out of desire,” insisting that this poem indicates he is far more than “a poet of more than epistemological questions alone” (6), a compelling insight.

furious stars as they approach sweet-smelling virgins, but this poet looks at a firefly, is bored, and does nothing. The trope of measurement also cuts to the quick of verse-making itself. If we understand “measure” as one foundation of art, this passage suggests that the poet is also unable yet to measure either “the intensity of love” or “the verve of earth” either in his imagination or in reality, the internal world or the external. The only thing he can measure is his own lovelorn tedium, hardly the triumph of love or of art. It is an inherent and harsh critique of his own words in their measured pentameters.

Something similar occurs in “Six Significant Landscapes,” although the mood is more ironic than elegiac. This time the frustration occurs in the shorter free verse line. “Measure” appears near the beginning of part III, when Stevens has a moment of Whitmanian exuberance and reaches to the sun:

I measure myself
Against a tall tree.
I find that I am much taller,
For I reach right up to the sun,
With my eye;
And I reach to the shore of the sea
With my ear.
Nevertheless I dislike
The way the ants crawl
In and out of my shadow.

Here Stevens reaches for the vast measures of imagination, something that might equal Whitman’s singing and celebration of himself and yet is once again frustrated, deflated, and reduced to observing insects.

In the closing section, part VI, Stevens teases “Rationalists” by describing the geometry of their hats:

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
 Think, in square rooms,
 Looking at the floor,
 Looking at the ceiling.
 They confine themselves
 To right-angled triangles.
 If they tried rhomboids,
 Cones, waving lines, ellipses—
 As, for example the ellipse of the half-moon—
 Rationalists would wear sombreros.

These terms of geometrical measure (after all, those who make them are “rationalists,” so think in ratios, even when contemplating shapes) may foreshadow the more powerful formulations of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” but here they remain mostly negative and ironic. To use Stevens’ own terms, it does not yet seem that the poet has devised a way to bring to bear the internal pressure of the imagination against the external pressure of reality in a language that is sufficiently “noble.” The suggestion of a move by rationalists to more interesting, exuberant, and complex shapes and equations (from algebra to calculus?) is all conditional, dependent on a deflating “If.” These poems can only make elegiac or ironic sounds, not keener ones. They are lush testimonies of frustration, of creativity thwarted.⁹

There is insufficient room here to review in its entirety “The Comedian as the Letter C,” but the passage in which the word “measure” appears in part IV, “The Idea of a Colony,” is telling in its exuberance and also, again, in its ironic frustrations. In this section Crispin plans an extravagant tropical arts colony where he might make “a new intelligence

9 As Emily Grosholz wisely pointed out in the West Chester seminar where this paper was first presented, geometry is quite different from arithmetic. Nonetheless, here as elsewhere, Stevens generally identifies geometrical shapes with corresponding references to measure, e.g. “square rooms,” “right-angled triangles,” and “ellipses,” all of which are defined by equations.

prevail" (IV.15, CP 37), an intelligence where it would be possible, among other delightful impossibilities, to include "the blind man as astronomer" (IV.23, CP 37). The language of this impossible colony draws upon measure more and more, until it includes intoxicated Latin American men contemplating the landscape in terms of poetic metrics: Sepulchral señors, bibbling pale mescal, / Oblivious to the Aztec almanacs, / Should make the intricate Sierra scan (IV.58–60 CP 38). The section reaches a climax in yet another ecstatic ode of frustration in which Crispin cannot find a suitable language for his life:

He could not be content with counterfeit,
With masquerade of thought, with hapless words
That must belie the racking masquerade,
With fictive flourishes that preordained
His passion's permit, hang of coat, degree
Of buttons, measure of his salt. Such trash
Might help the blind, not him, serenely sly.
It irked beyond his patience. (IV.81–88, CP 39)

The result of Crispin's failed "fictive flourishes," his measuring of buttons and of salt, as opposed to the successful supreme fictions and necessary angels Stevens would later forge in his most ambitious and achieved poems, is that he can only be a hopeful clown: "a clown, perhaps, but an aspiring clown" (IV.91, CP 39). This self-mocking tone characterizes the poem throughout. If *The Prelude* is an epic about "the Growth of a Poet's Mind," this is its mock epic, and again and again the problems of measure and of measured language stand very near the core of that mockery, tormenting the poet with possibilities. He may write fluidly in meter, but he recognizes that its greatest imaginative powers to encounter and transform reality still elude him.

Other poems in *Harmonium* touch briefly on measure, occasionally with expressions of greater delight and success from the speaker. In “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” the dresser of deal lacks exactly “three glass knobs.” “The Anecdote of the Jar,” which is in effect a parable, foreshadows “The Idea of Order at Key West” in the way a single made thing, characterized here in part by its geometry, subdues the uncountable, disorganized, “slovenly wilderness.” Perhaps most significantly, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” not only names its numbered sections in its title, but is a poem shot through with measurement at every turn. The speaker stands “among twenty snowy mountains”; he is “of three minds”; “A man and a woman are one. / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one.” When the blackbird flies out of sight it “marked the edge / Of many circles.” There is so much measuring and counting in the poem that even the singulars and plurals begin to vibrate. Much of this, however, while suggestive, remains mysterious: “an indecipherable cause.” It gives the sense of a poet groping towards an idea of order, wrestling with it.

At the close of part II of “Sunday Morning,” Stevens uses and tropes the word “measure” unironically and with greater success than in the other works considered above. This foreshadows the expansiveness of “The Idea of Order at Key West” and Stevens’ subsequent blank verse (and blank-verse-like) poems:

Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

The “measures” here are not only the grievings, elations, emotions, pleasures, and pains, but also, with a deft manipulation of the referent of the deictic “these,” the lines that name them. Stevens is fusing language and measure, or, more specifically, meter, to make his words embody what they describe, for indeed such lines *are* “measures.”

“Sunday Morning” is as close as Stevens comes in *Harmonium* to a successful investigation of the power of measure in verse and in life, and it suggests a way forward into a more integrated, successful art, where the measures of language can meet the pressures of reality without irony. In “The Idea of Order at Key West” (also, it is worth noting, a paean to an anonymous muse who measures) we find this meditative impulse in full cry and utterly achieved in a dynamic balance of reality and imagination. Significantly, as Justice points out, the shorter *vers libre* line is inhospitable to such a sustained meditation. Stevens instead uses the blank verse line that became so predominant over the rest of his career. Much as I do enjoy “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” its shades of irony have now vanished, and Stevens’ rejuvenated imagination meets reality with equivalent force. It is not a philosophical meditation; it is a heart-wrenching triumph of spirit.

3.

“The Idea of Order at Key West” is so well known that perhaps it needs no paraphrase, yet so much nonsense has been written about it that its central theme is worth restating. This poem is a clear and well resolved, indeed jubilant poetic response to a philosophical problem and also to a personal problem. It is not a final response, not a vanquishing of doubt, but a moment of joy and meaningfulness apprehended and integrated into life. Because the solution revolves not only around the idea of making, but also the techniques and process of making, it

is less a philosophical poem than a celebratory one that ultimately proposes, both *in* and *with* verse, that the best way to live in an incomprehensible world, perhaps the only way to survive, is to pursue a highly disciplined—*measured*—creativity. It is an emblematic and climactic poem because despite ongoing doubts, deflations, mockeries and frustrations, this is one of the first places where Stevens rises to a problem that had troubled him throughout his career: how to make sense of the “slovenly wilderness,” a natural world, a brute external reality, that presents only “meaningless plungings of water and the wind.” As Vendler and many others have seen, this is the problem, along with various possible solutions to it, that appears in various forms again and again in the first four stanzas of the poem, and is answered after the broken line in that fourth stanza and then ramified in the dramatic context of the poem’s conclusion, where the speaker suddenly addresses Ramon Fernandez.

Throughout the poem, Stevens presents the conundrum of how to make meaning out of the meaningless sea variously, considering and rejecting a number of typically Romantic responses. The water cannot form to mind or voice, because it is inhuman and remains that way; no pathetic fallacy can deceive the speaker, and the ocean therefore remains “a body wholly body.” The painful problem remains, however, that the sea seems to have a *genius loci* independent of our lives and still makes “constantly a cry” that cannot be ignored, even as it cannot be comprehended or made meaningful. A theory of masks will also not work, suggesting that the troubling genius of the ocean cannot be allegorized. Unlike a pagan god or, closer to home, the spirit of sublime nature in Shelley’s “Mt. Blanc” or Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” the spirit the speaker seeks will not allow itself to be named. Wordsworth can penetrate through nature, as if it were simply a sign or mask of something else, to “a sense sublime”:

a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. ("Tintern Abbey" 95–102)

But Stevens, knowing more of nature than Wordsworth, cannot so easily see through nature to name the sublime and identify it with a spirit. Wordsworth can answer the question "Whose spirit is this?" Stevens' truer ("veritable") ocean may make a cry, but, like Robinson Jeffers' vision of nature, it is "inhuman" and does not so easily inhabit "the mind of man." Stevens would interfuse the two if he could but finds his imagination blocked by an honest assessment of reality itself. The challenge then remains of how to fuse that reality with poetry, or, better, to find a poetry that is equal to such a reality.

Other Romantic solutions also will not work. Stevens considers and quickly rejects the notion that he might make a "medleyed sound," a harmony, out of words and the genius of the sea. The sea may inhabit the song, but all we can then hear is still only the song, not the sea, because the thing itself remains beyond us. This suggests the instrument that M. H. Abrams identifies in *The Mirror and the Lamp* that many Romantics viewed as such a powerful metaphor of the mingled sounds of nature and imagination: the Aeolian harp. Abrams cites many examples of this notion, but two will do here. In 1795, Coleridge writes in "The Eolian Harp":

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (ll. 44–48)

Notably this poem is addressed by Coleridge to a woman and muse, his fiancée Sara Fricker, at dusk within earshot of the “still murmur of the distant Sea” (l. 11). While Coleridge immediately retracts this philosophical speculation as pantheistic “shapings of the unregenerate mind” (l. 55) in favor of the Christian faith Sara advocates (and thus weakens the poem in most critics’ eyes), this Romantic notion of a medley of nature and the mind strikes quite close to what Stevens rejects.¹⁰

Then, in the third stanza, having rejected the paths of the pathetic fallacy, of sublime signs, and of medleyed sounds, Stevens reaches the central question of the poem: “Whose spirit is this?” What “genius” is it? What “ghostlier demarcation”? Is what the speaker hears the voice of the ocean? Of the woman? Of the world? Of the sublime? For the poet cannot proceed, he cannot speak in, of, to, from, with, or for the world unless he can relate that world to the song. He once again faces frustration.

It is in the next stanza, the fourth, where things begin to build to Stevens’ triumphant answer: that what we hear in the song, its great ordering principle, is not its words,

10 Among many others, Shelley makes similar use of the Aeolian harp in the “Defense of Poetry”:

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them.

It is worth pointing out that no art requires measurement as precisely as harmony. The medley sought is a direct function of, and impossible without, measurement.

but rather its “measure.” He presents such measuring as the bedrock of making and of any possible meaning. In the long first sentence of the stanza, the speaker says, rather mournfully it seems to me, “If it was only . . .” several times. If it was only a voice of nature he heard, “the dark voice of the sea,” of the waves, sky, cloud, sunken coral, and so on, it would have been mere sound, “sound alone,” and still meaningless.¹¹ But it is more than that, more than what any voice can be, whether the voice of the sea, of the singer, or of the speaker and his audience. It is more than what any voice, of nature or of humans, can say. That “more” is *measuring*. For measuring is not exactly words, not exactly language, but rather proceeds from a different faculty, one that can work within, without, and even beyond words. After all, we are never even told what song is being sung! The words are irrelevant. Instead, the speaker directs us to something “beyond” both the human voices and the “heaving speech of air.” He directs us explicitly to their measure.

The trick, perhaps the key to the entire poem, is that its answer, its organizing principle, does not lie in words or in speech or in things themselves but in this measuring, and the climactic moment, one of the great moments in American poetry, arrives with the line “She measured to the hour its solitude.” Note the syntactical ambiguity of the pronoun: “its” can refer both to the solitude of the hour or conceivably also to the sky of the previous sentence, which has also just been measured and made by her voice “acutest at its vanishing.” In any event, measuring is the action, an action inherent in the song but not exactly the song itself, that transforms everything by creating an unnatural set of meaningful, ordered relationships among

11 Note that the speaker uses the past, not the subjunctive, perhaps insisting on the reality and the presence of the conundrum he faces. This may not be as significant as it appears, however. I am grateful to West Chester seminar participant Chris Beyers for pointing out that Stevens rarely uses the subjunctive mood correctly.

whatever phenomena it touches: the hour, the angle of the sky, the solitude, and by extension everything else in time, matter, space, and imagination. Then, seemingly as a result of this epiphany of measure, the world comes even more alive, and the final stanza begins by expanding outward to provide for us an audience, Ramon Fernandez, who has presumably heard this entire speech. Suddenly, once measuring becomes manifest, the speaking voice comes into specific, meaningful relation with another person. Like the silent audience in "Dover Beach," Ramon says nothing, but rather than Arnold's lament, Stevens' poem (which is surely in part a response to that poem, given its setting and the problems it describes), ends, like "Sunday Morning," with praise for measures that suggest an imperfect paradise of the present, one without a God. Taking God's place (or his distant, Deist manifestation, "a revelation in words") is the order of measure, an ordering that unleashes the poem's closing ecstasies.

And these ecstasies constitute a profusion of measurements. As the walkers turn towards town after apprehending the singer's song, a singer now a muse, the speaker asks why the lights in the fishing boats "Mastered the night and portioned out the sea, / Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles, / Arranging, deepening, enchanting night." Other than "mastered," which can be taken as a summary of what the other verbs accomplish, every verb here requires explicit or implicit measuring: "portioned," "fixing," "arranging," "deepening," and even "enchanting," a word that returns us to the magic of song, which is a fusion of measured sound and language. "The maker's rage to order words of the sea" is always and everywhere a measuring. Of course, one can contemplate the philosophical and critical implications of such measuring at great length. But those are secondary effects. To place ideas first is to take the bait, to place the cart before the horse, to miss the forest for the trees, and to confuse what is being said with what is happening, what is being done . . . which is measuring.

All that remains is to link Stevens' assertion about what kind of ordering is going on in the poem, an assertion that is not essentially difficult, but perhaps so cunning it has been utterly misconstrued by generations of critics, back to versecraft; but at this point that is perhaps obvious. To measure words and make something of them is to write verses, in particular metrical verses, though I am more than willing to define meter generously enough to include a very wide range of such measuring. But the point must be clear. The measuring Stevens is referring to occurs explicitly in words, "to order words of the sea," and is literally the making of verses, metrical verses in this case. The evidence for this assertion lies directly in the poem itself, where the last stanza is not a sentence but rather an exclamation in which the speaker answers his own question. Why did the lights themselves seem to master the night and the sea? Because of the maker's rage for order, which is the ability of the words themselves to measure everything they encounter and comprise, "a revelation in words by means of the words," as Stevens defines poetry in "The Noble Rider." Stevens is careful to say that this measuring is *not* a function of what the words merely say. Voices and words are not enough. Language in and of itself is not enough. The measuring he courts is "more than her voice and ours," something that we do with our voices and our ink *only when we also measure with them*. And again, to measure with the voice, to use the voice in song with measure is only possible by definition in the writing of verse, especially metrical verse. Such measuring, a non-construing, non-linguistic organizational faculty, is what combines with the voice to give meaning to the world, even if that meaning is but a supreme fiction.

In the case of "The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens' placement of the poem as it first appeared in *Ideas of Order*

reveals its signal strengths even more powerfully than when one reads it in isolation. It stands just after “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” and just before “The American Sublime,” both brief non-accentual-syllabic lyrics (based on stress counts per line, but not counting syllables) that display the melancholy so much in evidence throughout his poetry. Unlike “The Idea of Order at Key West,” both of these poems end with unanswered questions, the first about how to live “In a world without heaven to follow” (l. 5) and the second almost back in the clowning mode of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” in which the speaker asks, of the sublime, which “comes down” to:

The empty spirit
In vacant space.
What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat? (ll. 16–20)

Interestingly, this poem uses an image, of a statue of General Jackson, that may be the same as the one that Stevens dwells on at length in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” There, describing the statue of Jackson on horseback in Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C., he describes it as a work of “fancy,” as defined by Coleridge to be a mere playful, secondary function of creativity, and comments:

The statue is neither of the imagination nor of reality. That it is a work of fancy precludes it from being a work of the imagination. A glance at it shows it to be unreal. The bearing of this is that there can be works, and this includes poems, in which neither the imagination nor reality is present. (11)

Stevens’ contempt for this kind of trivial, empty art indicates that he is after bigger game, as he wants as much reality and as much imagination as possible to balance each other in

his work. In “The American Sublime,” he has only asked the question of how it might work, but his state is rather comically desperate:

When General Jackson
Posed for his statue
He knew how one feels.
Shall a man go barefoot
Blinking and blank? (ll. 6–10)

Coming on the heels of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the poem is quite a letdown, a complete thwarting, if not a collapse, of imagination in the face of reality. On the day of this poem, it seems that Stevens’ ability to imagine or respond to the sublime might only be salvaged by the fact that, even in moments of emptiness, it is still there, even if only as absence, an absence that notably goes unmeasured in this poem, assuming one could measure pure absence at all. Then again, the poem conveys such a feeling with tremendous honesty. One cannot achieve joy and epiphanies of meaningfulness all the time. Even in the wake of what we might call the deep measuring of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” even after the supreme fiction of triumphant creative integration, emptiness returns.

5.

Although I am confident that versecraft is the central trope of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the core of its ordering principle, the source of its imaginative and emotional triumph for the poem’s speaker, I want to close by reassuring readers that I do not think this means the poem is only “about” prosody and versecraft. Far from it. Stevens’ aims are far more ambitious than that. He takes the combination of faculties at the core of verse making, the fusion of language with measuring, as the ground of

all creative activity whatsoever that might give meaning to a threateningly incoherent world. In this vision of life, meter, like all creative human activity, is not something that emerges from nature, which includes natural language, but something that we bring to bear upon it. Insofar as we are makers, it is artificial, a supreme fiction, something we do with language and to the world. Measure could never emerge on its own from the meaningless plungings of water and the wind, or from mere voices, either ours or nature's. The implications are profound, for what Stevens is telling us is that measures do not reflect meanings, but rather that meaningfulness depends in part on measuring. In the context of all poetry, not just that of Stevens, this suggests that those who seek to make or understand it by merely pursuing what it says, while neglecting what it does, will never master the night or portion out the sea. More broadly, this hardly strikes me as the musings of a dandy, but rather the poetics of someone looking us in the eye and telling us something quite simple, that one can live meaningfully and fully only when *all* faculties combine:

. . . 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.

The rage for order that has so often been misconstrued by Stevens' critics is, first and foremost, a rage to order words, exactly as he tells us, "a revelation in words by means of the words," and that ordering is first and foremost a measuring: versecraft, and, in particular, meter. Such measurely ordering, again, does not begin only with what words *say*, but also and crucially with what they can *do*. One could use any of the words, syntax, or figures of speech in the entire language in prose, but one can only measure those words in verse.

Stevens believed that purposeful ordering could occur in free verse as well as meter, but he referred to free verse as “rhythm” rather than “measure.” In his mature practice he moved towards a hybrid of the two, although as Donald Justice and Natalie Gerber convincingly argue, that hybrid is best understood as an expansion of metrical poetry, not a development out of free verse; the heroic line remains his base.¹² Where Stevens’ poems of thwarted imagination in blank verse can come across as ecstatic but comic odes, the free verse lyrics are often directly melancholy, like “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” and “The American Sublime.” In any event, Stevens makes his support for all serious modes of verse ordering clear in a discussion of free verse in a 1921 letter to Ferdinand Reyher:

Why do you scorn free verse? Isn’t it the only kind of verse now being written that has any kind of aesthetic impulse back of it? Of course, there are miles and miles of it that don’t come off. People don’t understand the emotional purpose of rhythm any more than they understand the emotional purpose of measure. I am not exclusively for free verse. But I am for it.

These emotional purposes of meter and rhythm constitute a major idea of order, an apex of integrated living and of art, nothing less than an archetypal way to live. As he wrote for the jacket copy of the first Knopf edition of *Ideas of Order* in 1936, the book “attempts to illustrate the role of the imagination in life.” Stevens tells us, in surprisingly forthright terms, that for him the success of that project,

12 All the major modes of free verse develop explicitly in relation to metrical tradition. The stress-based, non-alliterative versecraft that Stevens uses in a number of poems discussed here was first defined and described by Robert Bridges in his great work on *Milton’s Prosody*, a project Bridges cared so much about that he published three different editions of it across many decades.

not only in the making of art, but in building a bridge between art and life, depends explicitly on measuring as a distinct human activity, especially, for the poet, in the measuring of language as a fundamental activity in and of itself. As he wrote in the *Adagia*:

To give a sense of the freshness or vividness of life is a valid purpose for poetry. A didactic purpose justifies itself in the mind of the teachers; a philosophical purpose justifies itself in the mind of the philosopher. It is not that one purpose is as justifiable as another but that some purposes are pure, others impure. Seek those purposes that are purely the purposes of the pure poet. (40)

This is the vision at the heart of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” and the way Stevens gives us “a sense of the freshness or vividness of life” in that poem depends upon deep, hard-won insight into the craft of making, far more than it does on philosophy, pedagogy, theology, or aesthetic theory. It depends far more on delight than it does on intellect. And this is the project that Stevens then pursued in his own creative work, with its daily triumphs and failures, for the rest of his life.

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