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## Research Paper

# Mystery of the Muse in Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West"

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## Abstract

This study aims to address the critical status of the woman singer (the muse) in Stevens' poem "The Idea of Order at Key West." In many critical commentaries on this work, the muse is seen as vacillating between two extreme states, that is, as being either resistant to interpretation or as nonexistent whatsoever. The conclusion drawn by these diverse commentaries is that Stevens makes a systematic attempt to suppress the feminine voice by inscribing the determining and determinable male poet at the center of the poem. This research, however, is an attempt to refute this interpretation by drawing on Giorgio Agamben's philosophical theories concerning the "end of the poem," and by focusing specifically on formal aspects of the poem. In light of Agamben's theories, it will be argued that the muse should be seen not only as the sole site of a meaning-making event by referring to its own pure moment of existence without presupposing any transcendental signifier that precedes it, but also as the only reference point that allows fresh possibilities of meaning to emerge. As such, we will show that the muse's voice is not expropriated by a misogynistic male poet, but on the contrary, it is precisely her indeterminate deictic presence as the pronoun *she* that makes her, the poem, the poet, and the readers as the ultimate creative sources of meaning who do not yield to any masculine logic of exclusion.

**Keywords:** Muse; Phallus; Enjambment; Deixis; Anaphora; Impotentiality; Creativity

## 1. Introduction

During his life, Wallace Stevens encountered many social, economic, and political upheavals. He lived during World War I, and he saw the Great Depression, the atrocities committed by the Nazi Germany during the Second World War, the changing status of women around the world to name a few. The effects on Stevens of these dire external events were so great and lasting that, in a lecture he delivered at Harvard university in 1936, he said that "the pressure of the contemporaneous from the beginning of the World War to the present has been constant and extreme" (Stevens, 1997, 788). In his essay "The Nobel Rider and the Sound of Words," published in *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens (1951) defines the pressure of reality as the "pressure of external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (p. 20).

Instead of an acquiescent surrendering to the events of the world, Stevens (1951) insisted that "the resistance to this pressure or its evasion in the case of individuals of extraordinary imagination cancels the pressure so far as those individuals are concerned" (p. 23). Without doubt, for Stevens, these individuals endowed with such a gift of resistance were none other than poets "who exceed us in nature as they do in speech" (p. 49). But surely, Stevens needed a solid theoretical ground on which he could sketch the contours of such a resistance enacted by the poetic imagination. It is well documented (as, for example, in Richardson's (1988) biography of Stevens in *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923-1955*; and, in Jarraway's (1993) *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief*) that, during this period, Stevens came into possession of a book by Freud (1961) called *The Future of an Illusion*. In this book, Freud argued that religion and, by extension, any transcendental signifier feeds on man's inability to tolerate the harsh external realities; therefore, to



compensate for their "helplessness," human beings return to what Freud called the protective "father nucleus," reasserting that religious belief "had laid open to view the father who had long been hidden behind every divine figure as its nucleus" (p. 19). With the religious convictions going into decline in the modern period, Freud concluded that the place of this protective phallic signifier hiding behind the mask of religion should not be left empty, otherwise human beings would fall prey to the continuous perpetuation of violence against themselves. Freud's substitute for the weakened position of the phallus was scientific positivism which "has given us evidence by its numerous and important successes that it is no illusion . . . to explore the external world" (p. 55).

Stevens was pretty much aware of what was at stake in the Freudian scientific positivism. In "The Nobel Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens (1951) criticized Freud for wanting man to "surrender to reality," and that as a result of the "decline of religious belief" man "must venture at last into the hostile world and that this may be called education to reality" (pp. 14-15). The education to reality was perhaps the reason why in his letter to Harry Duncan in 1945, Stevens (1966) confessed that "I should probably not be able to stand up to Freudian analysis" (p. 488). He might have been dissatisfied with education to reality because there was, as it appeared to him, a distinct possibility that scientific positivism could easily revert to occupying the position of the totalitarian primal father who would "cut poetry's throat" (p. 14). Therefore, instead of propagating the logic of the protective father nucleus as a means to survive the deadly violence of the external world, Stevens assigned the poet the task of employing his imagination to bulwark against the encroachments of the phallus. As such, to avoid the trap of the logic of the phallus, Stevens proceeds to outline his understanding of poetic imagination in the negative so as to make it as indeterminate as possible. After posing a question regarding the role of the poet's imagination, he states that the function of the poet's imagination "is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves . . . I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs . . . to help people to live their lives" (1951, p. 29). Following Hicok (2010), the lesson to learn from Stevens is that "the danger of social control, of how the desire to find a substitute for religion might lead into dangerous forms of hero worship (p. 134), something that Stevens went to great lengths to discredit. It is perhaps the reason why at the end of one of his most famous articles "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens (1951), knowingly or otherwise, has seen behind the mask of the masculine poet a feminine figure to whom he addresses his invocation:

Inexplicable sister of the Minotaur, enigma and mask, although I am part of what is real, hear me and recognize me as part of the unreal. I am the truth but the truth of that imagination of life in which with unfamiliar motion and manner you guide me in those exchanges of speech in which your words are mine, mine yours. (p. 67)

In the rest of the article, we will argue that far from representing a masculine worldview which is guilty of instigating totalitarian poetic closure, Stevens made every attempt not only to shatter the myth of the father, but also to deoedipalize the poet's imagination.

## 2. Review of Literature

Many critical commentaries on "The Idea of Order at Key West" try to map out the relationship between the lyric persona as the narrator of the events and the woman, the muse, who inspires a new vision and an idea of order in the narrator. After examining these diverse, and at times even contradictory commentaries, one gets the feeling that the female muse is believed to play a role that escapes all the myriad attempts to fix her "in a formulated phrase," in the words of Eliot (1952). In an influential research in 2000, Baeten goes so far as to even doubt the existence of the muse in Stevens' poem. Baeten agrees with LaGuardia (1983) and McCann (1995) that the woman singer is a "manifestation of the imagination, which has the power to order the chaos of reality, at least within the mind" (2000, p. 25).

Similar to LaGuardia, Baeten (2000) points out that the power of imagination is equal to that of poetry, in general, because the powers of both are harnessed to the benefit of bestowing a structural unity on the brute and chaotic presence of the natural real. For Baeten, then—and it is easy to conclude—imagination shares poetry's duty to bring order to chaos, however perceptual and internal it might be. This is the main drive behind her claim that "it is thus the power of imagination to make poetry, to alter perceptions within the mind, so that reality is no longer external and chaotic . . . but can become a private world by its internalizations, ordered through the intervention of the imagination" (2000, p. 25). The conclusions to be drawn from this line of reasoning depend certainly on some conditionals. If the woman singer is a prosopopoeia of imagination who creates order and if Stevens believes that it is only poetry that can do so, then the result,

by inference, is that the woman singer is the poet himself. This is an argument that both LaGuardia and McCann share. Summarizing McCann's (1995) argument only to refute it, Baeten (2000) remarks that "it is thus this woman's role as poet not only to transform her own understanding of the world, but also to transform the world of those who observe her. Hers is not a purely individual power, but a transcending force that reaches beyond her own mind and, through her song, into the minds of others" (p. 26), the implication being that to transcend the limit of her own mind, she must first be able to master the world.

After realizing the inadequacies of LaGuardia's (1983) and McCann's (1995) idea of seeing the woman singer as the personification of imagination, Baeten (2000) maintains that because the process of creativity is associated with masculine economy "the woman at Key West, then, is not simply the imagination personified . . . . She is rather a composite figure representing several poetic conventions: the poetic spirit, the imagination, and the traditional muse, of course, but *also the poet himself* [emphasis added]" (p. 24). Even if we agree to allow this much, certainly we cannot overlook a crucial stage in Baeten's article where she, unwittingly, touches upon a crucial fact whose exegetical implications remain untouched, an exegesis whose unravelling discloses the inadequacies of Baeten's reading of Lacan (1999).

We do not intend to engage in a full-scale critique of her argument based on Lacan's (1999) own teachings about the mirror stage and the status of women in his seminars. Suffice it to say that, for Lacan, the phallus is the signifier that anchors (*point de capiton*), both men and women without exception, "everyone knows there are phallic women, and that the phallic function doesn't stop men from being homosexuals" (p. 71). This fact is referred to by Baeten (2000) herself when she says that "taken at a purely theoretical level, the phallus as signifier is indeed gender-neutral" (p. 27). But she misses a fundamental point in Lacan that the woman *qua* woman in the sense of an ontological condition is not subjected to the phallic *jouissance* but is, instead, empowered by the logic of not-all (*pas-tout*). "Unlike the male way," says Andreja Zevnik (2016), "which is constructed around one singular and totalising way of enjoyment, the feminine side knows two ways of enjoying. One way is phallic, hence the same as the male way, and the other is the 'unknown' or *not-all* . . . . It signifies that there is something that escapes the discourse" and that "this logic is not totalising, it does not allow for the existence of the exception" (p. 44). Baeten pays no attention to this supplementary (albeit not complementary) form of *jouissance* that defines the feminine form of enjoyment. Based on this supplementary *jouissance*, then, the woman singer must not be defined in accordance with the "totalising" phallic enjoyment. Instead, we presume that a critical commentary must focus its attention on the logic of the not-all which produces no exception, and this means, against what Baeten suggests, it is precisely the presence of the woman singer that does not allow for the perpetuation of the inside-outside logic, presupposed by the phallus.

### 3. Methodology

As suggested earlier, in what follows, we will not read "The Idea of Order at Key West" through Lacanian psychoanalysis. Instead, we will make use of Giorgio Agamben whose ideas have had an enormous impact on helping us recognize and do away with the logic of the exception. Agamben is most notably recognized as a political philosopher, but as Watkin (2010, p. 117) has rightly observed with great vigour, Agamben's entire philosophy rests on his relationship to poetry, and especially to its end. Agamben's interest is not, however, in poetry *per se*, but in its possibilities and potentialities to stage a terrain of pure ontology in which the sovereign's power (the phallus) to declare a state of exception is rendered inoperative. Nor is he intrigued by the unity that poets strike between stylistic features and their semantic embodiments. On the contrary, Agamben (1999b) focuses his attention on "a poetic institution that has until now remained unidentified: the end of the poem" (p. 109). This state of exception is achieved once we expect the poem to come to an end and thereby achieve a closure in terms of both its content and form.

In *Idea of Prose*, Agamben (1995) urges us to "call poetry the discourse in which it is possible to set a metrical limit against a syntactic one," whereas "prose is the discourse in which it is not possible" (p. 39). The only criterion that embodies this opposition is none other than *enjambment*. To explicate the importance of this, he claims that the poem is "a prolonged hesitation between sound and sense." The effect of enjambment depends, therefore, on a "rupture" that also defines rhyme. Agamben (1999b) defines rhyme as the "disjunction between semiotic event (the repetition of sounds) and semantic event, such that the mind searches for an analogy of sense in the very place where, disenchanting, it can find only a formal correspondence" (pp. 34-35). However, the fundamental thing about enjambment as the poem's *principlium*

*individuationis* appears only at the end of the poem. What happens there is that because the possibility of any further occurrence of enjambment is withdrawn from the end of the poem, the end is not a verse. The end suffers a crisis that threatens the poem's very identity. To solve this, Agamben (1999b) believes, like Dante before him, that the poem at the end falls into a silence that is far from "a mystical marriage of sound and sense" (p. 114) by means of which the opposition of semantics to semiotics is resolved ultimately. Poetry should not and must not seek to resolve this chiasm because it dwells in this chiasm as it is traversed by the two extremes of the opposition. Agamben's (1999b) thoroughgoing definition of poetry is worth quoting at length:

Is this not precisely what happens in every genuine poetic enunciation, in which language's movement toward sense is as if traversed by another discourse, one moving from comprehension to sound, without either of the two ever reaching its destination, the one to rest in prose and the other in pure sound? Instead in a decisive exchange, it is as if, having met each other, each of the two movements then followed the other's track, such that language found itself led back in the end to language, and comprehension to comprehension. This inverted chiasm—this and nothing else—is what we call poetry. (p. 41)

It is precisely this "inverted chiasm" that hurls the end of the poem into the abyss of silence. Far from being an abyss in which what is said is always already preceded by the unsaid and the negative, the "inverted chiasm" privileges the logic of the not-all in such a way that, without being ensnared in the religiosity of the exception, it points us toward the materiality or an *idea* of language.

In *Idea of Prose*, Agamben (1995) ties, once again, his theory of language to enjambment. He claims that "in the very moment that verse affirms its own identity by breaking a syntactic link, it is irresistibly drawn into bending over into the next line to lay hold of what it has thrown out of itself. It hints at a passage of prose with the very gesture that attests its own versatility" while *versura*, "the turning-point which displays itself as enjambment . . . constitutes the core of verse. It is an ambiguous gesture, that turns in two opposed directions at once: backwards (*versus*) and forwards (*proversa*). This hanging-back, this sublime hesitation between meaning and sound is the poetic inheritance with which thought must come to terms" (pp. 40-41). This prolonged hesitation attests to the fact that for Agamben truth resides neither in poetry nor in prose alone but in the in-between space that he sees as a place of indifference. In a nutshell, poetry is defined, in prosodic terms, by cataphora and anaphora, embodied as they are by enjambment, rhythm, and rhyme as well as other prosodic elements.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Muse and Deixis

The first stanza of "The Idea of Order at Key West" helps us to find ourselves in the middle of a memory that the narrator (Is the narrator to be identified with Stevens himself or with the lyric persona? Is the narrator a he or a she?) relates about a past event when he or she encountered a woman singing on the beach. The narrator sets in an opposition between the song he or she heard from the woman singer and the one coming from nature itself, that is from the sea, hence the two interrelated elements: the woman singer and the sea. The woman is presented variously as the one whose song is "beyond the genius of the sea" while, at the same time, her song is unequivocally reduced to and identified with its source of inspiration in the second stanza (lines 8-11):

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.  
The song and water were not medleyed sound  
Even if what she sang was what she heard,  
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.

Nonetheless, the lyric persona is quick to suggest that although "in all her phrases stirred/the grinding water and the grasping wind/but it was she and not the sea we heard" (lines 12-14). The same pattern of identity and difference is repeated in the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas save for the last two where he or she disappears completely and is replaced by a critic and the persona. For instance, in the third stanza the woman singer is shown to be "the maker of the song she sang," whereas the "ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea" is shown to be merely "a place by which she walked to sing" (lines 15-17). Analogously, in the fifth stanza, as opposed to the second where the singer merely repeated verbatim what the sea

has dictated, a self is conferred on the sea that was nonexistent before the song itself since, as we are informed, “when she sang, the sea/Whatever self it had, became the self/That was her song, for she was the maker” (lines 38-40). What needs to be done is to ask, taking our cue from the narrator, who this *she* is, what is the essence or the nature of her song? What is her essential characteristic as regards her potentiality to create and to make? What is it that she makes?

A more precise question would be: to what does any pronoun refer in general? According to the French linguist Émile Benveniste (1971), these pronouns refer to “something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: *I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker . . . . The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. It is in the instance of discourse in which *I* designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the ‘subject’” (p. 226). Implicit in this event of personal pronoun referring to the instance of discourse is the fact that every linguistic event containing a personal pronoun is possible to have a specific meaning because it presupposes a movement from *langue* to *parole*, that is, from language as a set of universal linguistic rules to individual and particular utterances. Commenting on the importance of deixis for an understanding of Agamben’s philosophy, Claire Colebrook (2008) makes it clear that:

Through speaking, in *this* act or *parole*, one must assume a lawfulness or *langue* that determines this speech as speech, as that which must have sense or be interpreted as bearing a meaning beyond itself. In every speech act, there is, therefore, a generality or translatability *and* a pure event of speaking (before one determines *what* I mean or say, there is the event *that* I am saying), the pure potential to speak. (p. 114)

Whereas any linguistic predication necessarily designates a being with certain properties, personal pronouns bring forth an aspect of language that refers only to its instance of taking place, an event that marks a movement from the semantic to the semiotic: pure existence regardless of any differentiating properties. Deixis indicates an ability to speak irrespective of whether it is actualized or not. For Agamben (1999a), truth resides ultimately in the tautology of linguistic reference, meaning that language always refers to and presupposes itself. This is why for Agamben “the idea of infancy as a presubjective ‘psychic substance’ . . . cannot merely be something which chronologically precedes language and which, at a certain point, ceases to exist in order to spill into speech; rather, it coexists in its origin with language” (p. 48).

We have arrived now at an opportune moment regarding the status of the woman singer in “The Idea of Order at Key West.” The *she* of the first stanza stages an incongruity between the particularity of her existence and the universality of her presence within the poem for the *she* serves a dual function. On the one hand, the *she* refers to the singularity of the woman singer’s presence before the eyes of the narrator—the definite article “the” before the woman singer attests to this fact. We know this much for the simple reason that the narrator had seen *this* particular woman “striding” on the beach, making her song, and inspiring an idea of order at Key West. Is this not the case therefore that what is unique and particular must be resistant to repetition so that it can remain so? And this is the second point. Our crude and everyday experience, however, as readers of literary works proves the opposite since, as readers, we are always *repeating* and *rereading* the poem together with the singularity contained therein: it is precisely this act of repetition which threatens the uniqueness of what is considered as singular. As Watkin (2010) observes, “The singular cannot be attained except through its being named in language, yet the process of being named is the very thing that robs any event of singularity for the name allows the event to be reiterated and transmitted through space and time” (p. 131). This shows that as readers we do not need to reconstruct “the ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea” (line 16) in its actual presence before our very eyes as “merely a place by which she walked to sing” (line 17) in order to actually hear her song. It is enough for any reader to only recognize and to reproduce both the *she* and the *sea* in their imagination. The very moment the narrator, or whoever reads the poem, utters the *she* at the beginning, they have already consigned her to their memory (she is not actually present) and is thus infinitely repeatable (later instances of reading the poem). These moments of memory and repetition in the poem signal to us an important aspect of language through which readers understand that “these words have always already come to be, that they will return again, and that the instance of the word that takes place in a poem is, for this reason, ungraspable” (Agamben, 1991, p. 78).

It is, thus, the very ungraspability of the origin of language that is captured by the presence of the shifter *she* at the beginning. And, if the *she* refers to the very ungraspability of language, that is, to the nothingness that is inherent in any instance of discourse, then the locution consigns to memory the nothing itself. In other words, as Agamben (1995) states “the memory that brings back to us the thing forgotten is itself forgetful of it and this forgetfulness is its light . . . . An elegiac note vibrates so enduringly in the depth of every human memory that, at the limit, a memory that recalls

nothing is the strongest memory" (p. 67). This nothingness that is so enduringly remembered is the brute fact of language itself.

This fact has not escaped Baeten's attention. For her, the presence of the *she* is very much akin to the existence of the muse in poetic tradition who inspires poets to create their poetry. Baeten (2000) links this to the Western phallo(go)centric tradition, claiming that in this poem "the creative process is explicitly linked to potency, to virility, to masculinity" (p. 29). The muse's role, Baeten (2000) says, is limited only to that of a driving force that "enlightens" and "urges" the virile poet to create, although, ultimately, "her influence becomes that which is never outwardly spoken, which exists only within exchanges that precede speech, precede poetry" (p. 30). She concludes that because of her femininity, "the muse here is disregarded or rather claimed, possessed" (p. 30), opening a way toward a reading of her as being "the projection of the male speaker's poetic identity, representative of the poet as complete and therefore fully capable of mastering the world. She is his mirror image. This woman is an external representation of the cohesion of the 'poet's parts: the poetic spirit, the imagination, and the internalized muse" (pp. 31-32). This point is also made by Brogan (2007) in her essay "Stevens and the Feminine," where she claims that "too often, women in Stevens remain precisely figures – empty ciphers for masculine rumination and scripting . . . who is clearly the singular and superior intelligence of the poem" (pp. 184-85). Longenbach (1991) links the desire to oedipalize the feminine voice to Stevens' biographical facts. He contends that because "The very act of writing poems had always seemed feminine . . . , Stevens needed to redefine his status as a poet and the status of his poetry as masculine" (pp. 225-26). Longenbach traces this tendency in Stevens back to his "desire to suppress feminine energies" as "something that is defined by its very lack of energy" (p. 226).

However, the cohesion that Baeten, Brogan, and Longenbach suggest is no less the effect of an illusory phallus that has never existed in the first place, but gives only a semblance of cohesion and mastery. This is precisely the point that Nesme (2010) makes regarding Stevens' "Domination of Black." Nesme contends that the "black may be a metaphor of the cry [of the peacock] that then tropes the lack at the center of the poem, but this lack itself, corresponding to the Lacanian concept of object *a*, has no metaphor . . . insofar as it resists symbolisation" (pp. 184-85). As we have already established, the deictic *she* cannot transcend itself, nor can it refer to an actual object; lacking an actual referent, the *she* as deixis:

Is not a name but an indication of a thing which can be named in the world . . . . In this sense, it is a sign without referent or, by definition, pure semiotics. In addition, the possibility, in literature, of references to things in the world which are not in the world but merely discursive and references back to events that never occurred means that deixis can be both meaning without matter and matter without meaning . . . . Deixis suspends difference through its application of indifference (Watkin, 2014, p. 96).

#### 4.2. *The Muse as Anaphoric Reference*

Let us look back at the first line once again to see how this works: "She sang beyond the genius of the sea." Apart from the fact that the *she* is established here as a singularity, there is another aspect to her unique presence, that is, her commonality. The *she* at the beginning rhymes with word "sea" at the end of the line, making a formal correspondence where the one reflects and echoes the other so as to introduce a kind of sameness between themselves. The *she* anticipates the sea and the sea refers back to the *she*. The sameness suggested here is confirmed once we recall that the muse only "utters word by word" what she has heard from the "plungings of water and the wind." In being singular, the *she* insinuates a 'here,' a 'this,' and a nearness, she is brought closer to the reader's imagination. The *she* is disclosed as an instance of discourse and is thus brought near to us. At the same time, the idea of sameness shows that the *she* must be interpreted as being the "there," a "place by which she walked to sing" (line 16), allowing the *she* in this way to be both near and far. The second line of the third stanza could thus be translated as follows: *There*, the ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea / was merely a place by which *she* walked to sing (emphasis added). Thus, a nearness of the *she* is thereby consigned to the distance of the "there" of the sea. The *she* is both a *here*, a proper, and at the same time a "there," a common, a universal. Therefore, the relation of sameness between the *she* and the sea entails, in linguistic terms, a cataphora, where the *she* already anticipates the sea, and an anaphora, where the sea mirrors the *she*.

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben (2007) exposed the twofold characteristic of anaphora and the pronoun. He claims that by referring to its very immanent instance of taking place, deixis presupposes "the immediate being-there of a nonlinguistic element, which language cannot say but only show," whereas "in anaphora, through reference to a term

already mentioned in discourse, this presupposition is posited in relation to language as the subject that carries what is said” (p. 95). In other words, the *she* refers to an indeterminate being that acts with complete freedom with respect to different modalities of the symbolic structure (the phallus); anaphora, on the other hand, determines the pure being of deictic reference. The same pattern appears in the reverse order of cataphoric and anaphoric references in the first line of the second stanza, where the sea looks forward to the *she* whereas the latter glances back at the former. The difference in sameness between the sea and the *she* “creates a dialogism in terms of narrative vagueness, where different marginalized and repressed textual and contextual forces come into play with patriarchal forces of totalitarianism” (Daram & Kharrasi, 2014, p. 182). The result of this Bakhtinian dialogic heteroglossia manifested in the presence of the indeterminate *she*, which is created by the movement of narration from anaphoric to cataphoric modes, is that “the possibility of free-floating signification or better to say contextual freedom from patriarchal system seems to give further meanings and purposes to the sporadic emergence of the subaltern discourse” (Moosavinia & Kharrasi, 2017, p. 104).

It is easy to detect the tautology that inheres in this relationship inasmuch as the singularity of the pronoun *she* presupposes the commonality of the sea and the other way round. This should not, however, be interpreted to mean that once determined by the *sea* (anaphora), the *she* (pure being) is anchored and whereby lodged within the symbolic structure. On the contrary, “we have to conceive,” Agamben (2007) says, “of an anaphora that no longer refers back to any meaning or any referent, an absolute *thus* that does not presuppose anything, that is completely exposed” (p. 94). Exposed as she is, the muse, then, is empowered by necessarily remaining silent. The power of the muse resides, besides in her inspirational capabilities, in her escaping, in the form of the deictic *she*, the discursivity of language, and in dwelling instead in pure silence. Her role, then, as it stands, does not root back so much to the reductive action that reduces her to the imaginary mirror held up before the narrator to bestow a sense of false coherence on him as to the mirror that reflects the nothingness itself, that is the muse.

Understood in this way, then, the muse becomes creative in a manner that is doubly invested. On the one hand, she “makes” her song in the sense of exercising her potential in order to *complete* the form of her song, to exercise her mastery over it. Is this not precisely what the *she* as the muse does in most interpretations where the muse is reduced to a mirror image of the virile poet? And it is in this sense that we must begin to understand Baeten’s analogy between the muse who confers a sense of imaginary mastery upon the narrator. For here the presupposition is that the muse (the phallus) must be in *complete* possession of what the narrator lacks so as to be able to offer to the latter what he or she is in want of, that is, an imaginary sense of sovereignty. In this reading, because the male poet achieves his dominion, the muse must necessarily cancel herself in this process because her voice cannot but be subdued by the “forceful expressions of the virile masculine master” (Baeten, 2000, p. 33). This explains perfectly well why critics such as Baeten and Brogan see the silence of the muse in misogynistic terms.

On the other hand, the muse is capable of exercising a potentiality that, as Agamben (1999a) states, “*does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it as such* [italics in the original]” (p. 183). In other words, as suggested before, the mirror only mirrors the *she*, indicating that the muteness of the muse can never be appropriated because “mastery is not formal perfection but quite the opposite: it is the preservation of potential in the act, the salvation of the imperfection in the perfect form . . . . Tastelessness is always a not being able not to do something” (Agamben, 2019, p. 15). Thus, impotentiality becomes the *principium individuationis* in the sense that the *she* is or becomes the “single artificer of the world/in which she sang” (lines 37-38). The implication of the *she* being single is that her pure existence refrains from engendering any differential basis of any *essential* mode of determination. The *she* is single or rather singular because, as Agamben (2007) maintains, “the passage from potentiality to act, from common to singularity, is not an event accomplished once and for all, but an infinite series of modal oscillations” (p. 18).

In Stevens’ poem, this is attested to by the narrator at the end of the fifth stanza where he or she says that “then we/as we beheld her striding there alone/knew that there was never a world for her/except the one she sang and, singing, made” (lines 40-43). The *she* is nothing other than her *way* of being or, better still, she is the “being that does not remain below itself, that does not *presuppose* itself as a hidden essence that chance or destiny would then condemn to the torment of qualification, but rather *exposes* itself in its qualifications, *is* its *thus* without remainder—such a being is neither accidental nor necessary, but is, so to speak, *continually engendered from its own manner*” of exposure (Agamben, 2007, p. 27). Having already established that the *she* presupposes the spatial proximity and farness in the same breath, it would not be far-fetched if we claimed that not only does the *she* “continually engenders” herself, but, as a result, she also

remains spatially unrepresentable insofar as she is without world: The *she* occupies the space of an impotentiality. This fact is captured perfectly well at the beginning of stanza five. This is the only stanza in the poem which begins with the formal characteristics of an indentation. It should not be forgotten that it appears after the fact that the narrator has figured out that the muse's song is more than "the heaving speech of air" (line 26), even more than the sound of nature itself. The indented space externalizes, on the materiality of the page, the impotential space of being that the *she* occupies. This becomes pretty much akin to the place that, according to a Talmudic story, Agamben calls *ease*. "Ease is the proper name," Agamben (2007) says, "of this unrepresentable space. The term ease, in fact, designates, according to its etymology, the space adjacent (*ad-jacens, adjacentia*), the empty place where each can move freely in a semantic constellation" (p. 24). That is why her voice can freely reach beyond "the theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped/On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres / Of sky and sea" (lines 31-33), that is, the muse moves and sings freely beyond nature itself, taking with her the narrator and readers of her story to the indeterminable space adjacent to herself. It is along the same lines that Shinbrot (2005) claims that, in "The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens creates a correspondence between the speaker and the external audience, one derived from a mutual longing to know or grasp a 'spirit' that eludes possession" (p. 265).

#### 4.3. The Muse as a Creative Force

Now what is the impact of all this on the narrator who heard the song of the muse? Is he or she the "virile poet" who declares his or her sovereignty at the expense of crushing the feminine voice of the muse? In order to answer these questions, the whole poem must be recast in the form of a quest to unravel the mysterious content of the song. A cursory look at the whole poem reveals that what the narrator relates is not so much what he understood regarding the meaning of the song as narrating the experience of being under the influence of the muse. Even so, this does not indicate that poets are either ignorant of the meaning of the inspiration or lethargic to recount it. Rather, it points to a poetic existential moment when, after being inspired by the muse, poets feel the emptiness of the said experience. Translated into linguistic parlance, it means that the semiotics of the moment of inspiration is never reduced to the semantic sphere that allows for the recounting of the experience. This implies that in poetic experience the poet is located in the middle of self-referential experience that never gets verbalized. As Agamben (1995) notes:

This is why the lyric, which uniquely keeps to such dictation, is necessarily empty; it is always transfixed on the verge of a day that has always already set: it doesn't have, literally, anything to say or recount. But thanks to this sober, exhausted dwelling of the poetic word in the beginning, something like a lived experience (which the narrator will gather as the material of his tale) comes to being for the first time (pp. 52-53).

That the narrator (or the lyric persona) of "The Idea of Order at Key West" attempts to pin down the meaning of the muse's mystery is apparent in two important moments in the poem: one appears in the fourth stanza and the other in the last two ones. The crucial moment is again in stanza four. After the attempts by the narrator to define the "spirit" of the song, the narrator, instead of coming up with an adequate answer, renounces the very existence of such a possibility. This stanza begins, as mentioned earlier, with a hypothetical situation in which the reason as to why the "spirit" of the song cannot be equated with the "dark voice of the sea" is that, if it were equated, "it would have been deep air" and "sound alone." We have to wait for an answer until the appearance of a *but* that divides the stanza into two halves. Nevertheless, our expectations soon give way to an experience of impossibility because the narrator fails to identify the nature of the song in either of its two modal characteristics, namely its essence and existence, but manages to *repeat* what he has already told us:

But it was more than that  
More even than her voice, and ours, among  
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,  
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped  
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres  
Of sky and sea (lines 38-43).



Consequently, the much expected *but* does not point toward a moment when an Archimedean point of view reveals the transcendental signifier that brings the poem to an end, but instead it veers off toward the narrator's inability or unwillingness to recount a story based on his or her vision into the secret of the song. The narrator is only able to see "her striding there alone" (line 41), without transforming either her or the secret he or she learnt into an object of his or her knowledge. The absence of such an object of knowledge is not a saddening experience for the narrator; rather it is a happy and a liberating moment when the experience of the secret, by falling back upon itself, "saves us from an irremediable sadness of things" in which the "objectifying discourse . . . would necessarily be a doom, our condemnation, as it were, to truth" (Agamben, 1995, p. 56). Springer (1992) sees in Stevens' resistance to any kind of condemnation of the paternal truth a tendency that bulwarks against any phallic "permanence of meaning." Drawing on the distinction that the French philosopher Julia Kristeva makes between explicit completion and structural finitude, Springer claims that relying on "resonances, repetitions, nonsense, murmurs and silences (such as a whole line of ellipsis) marks the poet's recognition of the ultimate failure of the *logos*, the central Word that made up its mind" (p. 171). As Springer makes clear, to Kristeva this failure is a poetic "practice as feminine, a 'semiotic disposition' of the child still in the realm of the mother, making 'potential meaning' not yet realized in the masculine closure of symbolization" (p. 169). As such, by employing the abovementioned techniques, Stevens manages to fashion a world in which our duty is:

To hear only what one hears, one meaning alone

As if the paradise of meaning ceased

To be paradise, it is this to be destitute. (Stevens, 1971, pp. 320-21)

The resistance to any kind of closure was alluded to by Stevens himself in the letter he wrote to Heringman in 1951 in which he talked about the fact that "I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion. Sometimes, I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in it and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want to do just that" (Stevens, 1996, p. 710).

The truth of the experience that the narrator puts on display here is of a different kind and is reminiscent of the ceremonies associated with the ancient mystery cults in which the initiate learns the secrets that will guarantee his or her access to the truth. The one secret that the narrator is initiated into is the very impossibility of there being anything to recount on the basis of the said experience because there was nothing to lay his or her hands on in the first place as an object of knowledge. In the penultimate stanza the narrator makes one final attempt to transfix the truth of the mystery cult in the words of the critic he or she calls Ramon Fernandez. The critic is unable to illuminate the nature of this mysterious experience because he remains silent with respect to the inquisitive approach made by the narrator. His silence, however, is not prophetic of a contradiction that he cannot set straight, a contradiction relative to the existential modes of femininity which makes it difficult for a woman to make meaning or even to write poetry in a masculine world from which she is ideologically excluded. The absence of a definitive response from the critic is attributed, therefore, to the fact that because the female muse is essentially excluded from meaning making process, speaking of meaning will be meaningless.

Ramon Fernandez's silence is a necessity that is demanded of him by the very nature of the initiation into the mystery of the song. The silence does not indicate an absence of a response but *the* response itself. In other words, and in accordance with the tautological nature of the initiation into the truth of cult ceremonies, the critic and the narrator are one and the same figures. Therefore, we should agree with LaGuardia (1983) that:

by striving to understand the intricacies of the relationship of sea and song . . . the narrator participates in a crucial way in the evolving circumstance. The unravelling drama portrays an allegory of the poetic process, depicting poet, poem, and the reader of poem. With the woman as the poet . . . , the narrator as witness becomes a figure for the reader of poems, one who benefits from the poet's formative power and who shares directly in the poet's vision. (p. 61)

The poet, the narrator, the critic, and, finally, the reader of the poem all share the same tautological experience in which the strive toward meaning results in repeating the process of finding meaning itself, that is reading the poem again and again without straining it to the hilt toward a fixed meaning. This means that Fernandez's response would be nothing more than the repetition of the poem itself as it is told by the narrator, inspired in turn by the muse.

This brings us to the final stanza of the poem where time, and not space, gains the upper hand, and where the poem faces its end, a catastrophic moment when the final enjambment finds itself thrown both forward into prose and backwards into poetry. This is the only stanza in the poem from which any clue as to which direction the poem's time is heading is withdrawn. Hence, the timelessness of the last stanza where the narrative abstains from moving toward its completion:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker's rage 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 (lines 52-56).

Traditionally, time is represented, according to Agamben, as being chronological, that is moving well into the future until it is completed and achieves its *eschaton*, its end or completion (Is it not similar to how in Baeten's version the phallus moves through the mirror toward the child [i.e., *chronos*] in order to complete the latter [i.e., *eschaton*]?). Instead, Agamben neologizes the term *kairology* to capture the intricacies of a time that tries to bring the dialectic between *chronos* and *eschaton* to a "standstill." "Kairatic or true messianic time," explains Watkin (2014), "is not the end of time but... the time it takes for time to come to an end . . . . Kairatic time folds back the *eschaton* into the *chronos*, recalling in the end every instant before and leading up to the end while at the same time it projects forward the *chronos*, whose every moment or now is a presaging of the final moment of temporal completion" (p. 81). Accordingly, *kairos* proceeds (prose; *proversa*) by always looking backwards (verse; *versus*). The *kairatic* time of the last stanza turns back toward the *in-fant she* that instigates the whole poem: The *she* remains in the moat separating the semiotic and the semantic *tonoi* of language just as *kairology* stands between *chronos* and *eschaton*. In this way, the "keener sounds," as the last words of the final enjambment, find their echo in the first line (*versus*; the song "beyond the genius of the sea"), while the song of the muse as the "single artificer of the world" *always* hints at the "keener sounds" as "ghostlier demarcations." At the point the poem is only expected to come to an end, we expect yet another reference to its beginning, giving rise to an infinity of possibilities. The mystery of the muse's song, in the last analysis, is that what transpires between its beginning and its end makes every instance of its recitation (repetition) a *kairology* in which "each instant of existence is a way out of one infinity to another, from the uncertainty of the present to the unknownness of the future" (Lieberman & Smirnov, 2020, p. 365).

## 5. Conclusion

The poem harbours an indifferent approach to time by hesitating, so to speak, between its beginning and its end. The timeless end of the poem is the mirror image of the anaphoric-deictic *she* at the beginning. This is an embodiment of a poetic moment that never ends because it has never begun. As such, the four important figures in "The Idea of Order at Key West," namely the narrator, the muse, the critic, and us readers are all presentations of the same deictic *she*, reading and repeating the poem in complete silence to infinity, exposing in the poem at any one time an impotentiality that generates infinitely repeatable instances of meaning. The tautology inherent in this infinite repetition of the poem allows us to conclude that the voice of the muse is not 'possessed' by the masculine poet, giving us the leverage to turn the logic of the phallic process of meaning making into an *in-fantile* experience whereby language, and poetry by extension, are seen not as harbouring the negative dimension of what remains 'unsaid' in what is said (the phallic signifier that transcends language, the father nucleus), but as a process through which the song of the muse is heard in the form of a childish song that is significant only in its brute presence. In other words, she escapes definition not because she does not exist and is resistant to interpretation, but precisely because she is defined by her tautological infancy that resists subsumption under broad and restrictive categories of essence and existence. She is defined by the fullness of the manner of her existence and not by what she lacks.

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