“Behold[ing]” “Genius”: A Study of Imagination via the Heideggerian Concept of Thingness in William Wordsworth's “The Solitary Reaper” and Wallace Stevens' “The Idea of Order at Key West”

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Introduction: The Genius of the Imagination

Modern-day scholars' readings of the canons of Wallace Stevens and William Wordsworth, from M.H. Abrams' discussions on the earliest foundations of romanticism to J.H. Miller's perspective on Stevens and the modern, often put the two poets as emerging from a similar Romantic cloth. While I agree with this statement, it is also very clear to me that their relationship to each other is much extended; there is a great deal more at work here than the more obvious aspects that can be used to classify the works of these poets as Romantic. The common thread of Wordsworth's retreat into the creative capabilities of the human mind and the belief that this generates that is so central to his work evolves dramatically over time into the canon of Stevens, wherein these main themes hold weight through the observation of the imagination.

Therefore, my argument is that the work of Stevens not only grows out of the Wordsworthian canon, but rather exceeds it, not in strength as a compilation but in its assessment and understanding of itself. The major themes that Wordsworth grapples with that culminate in his recognition of a "beauty exalted, as it is itself/Of substance and of fabric more divine" (Wordsworth Prelude Book Twelfth 451-452) on Mt. Snowdon are in reality controlled uniquely by the same imagination later invoked and studied closely by Stevens. The common thread of creative force that brings these poets' temporally distant realities together is nothing other than a philosophical one. As creators, who "stand now/sensitive, and creative...soul[s]" (Wordsworth Prelude Book 11: 255-256), Wordsworth
and Stevens are both motivated by the being of the thing in space and time, a concept that we will elucidate from the standpoint of German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, whose work in thing theory demonstrates exactly how this creative spirit can manifest. Over this landscape of the thing, and all that creates it, including the emptiness of space, we are able to watch Stevens pick up where Wordsworth left off in the Simplon Pass of the Alps in terms of assessing the creative aspect of the imagination. Whereas Wordsworth begins to address the presence of a human creative force, something he classifies as "a presence that disturbs [him] with the joy/ Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused" (Wordsworth "Tintern Abbey" 94-96), Stevens assesses these elements of the creative world through a more modern lens. He incorporates the idea of the thing clearly within his canon, and, in using this example, he examines the greater implications of the "thingly substructure [and] the essence of the thing" (Heidegger Art 163) on the imagination.

Two prime examples of this evolution of the accessibility of the imagination and how it is manifest in poetry in through the essence of the thing are found in William Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" and Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West". Wordsworth's "Reaper" portrays the poet's reaction to a solitary female singer in a field. The poet-wanderer comes across a sublime scene and assesses and preserves it through memory; the female singer controls the land around her through her song. Stevens' "Key West" is yet a re-
glimpsing of the Wordsworth scene in many ways. The poet observes the
ordering of a nature scene by the powers of the imagination:

And when she sang, the sea,/Whatever self it had, became the self/That
was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,/As we beheld her striding
there alone,/Knew that there never was a world for her/Except the one
she sang and, singing, made ("Key West" 38-43).

Wordsworth’s poem suggests a powerful control of the female voice as creative
force over the landscape, and Stevens hones in on this power of the creative
voice to “s[i]ng beyond the genius of the sea” ("Key West" 1) and thus bring an
order to nature through the use of the imagination. In my discussion, I will
augment the imagination theory motivating these two poems with two more
philosophically rooted pieces out the poets’ respective canons, Wordsworth’s
text “The Prelude” and Wallace Stevens’ philosophical collection “A Necessary
Angel”.

**Part I: Heideggerian Thingness and the Imagination**

Martin Heidegger’s approach to Thing Theory provides us with a lens
through which to look at the imagination by means of “order[ing]” (Stevens 1).
Ordering is indeed an organization of the creative forces of the imagination—
something Wordsworth refers to as “music in [his] heart” ("Reaper" 31) and
Stevens refers to as “genius” ("Key West" 1). If we agree that to Wordsworth and
Stevens, ordering is an act of the imagination, and Heidegger argues that
ordering has much to do with the form’s sense of being and time in space, then,
by transmutation, being in time and space have much to do with the imagination.
While the study of poetry and philosophy are different mediums altogether, “[t]hey are equal in importance and related because they both deal with the same kinds of problems...where the philosopher seeks epistemological certainty, the poet seeks aesthetic adequacy. Where the philosopher seeks an ontological system, the poet seeks to express his sense of Being” (Hines 28). It is evident that these divisions, sharing a kinship in the sense that Thomas Hines describes in his work “The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger”, complement each other’s aims quite clearly in “Reaper” and “Key West”, with the poetry looking towards the elucidation of the workings of the imagination in relation to the sublime landscape and the philosophy serving to provide this explanation through ordering. Each study of the humanities supplements the other, working together to render this idea of ordering.

To properly, “behold” (“Reaper” 1) this space in the scene, the human must be first established as a living cavern capable of holding, much like the inanimate but active jar in Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar”. The act of holding is directly related to the presence of thingness, the ultimate ability of a person, object, or landscape to “behold” ("Reaper"1) some sort of genius or imaginative power. The given object has much agency on what is around it and exerts an extensive force, an ordering, over what surrounds it. For example, in Stevens’ “Anecdote” we see a placed jar “ma[k]e the slovenly wilderness/[s]urround that hill” (“Jar,” 3-4). If Thing Theory is applied to this example scene, “[t]he human actor becomes a panoramic onlooker, a distant voice, an innocent bystander: the
jar takes on, somehow, an intentional life of its own" (Lentricchia 140). Thing Theory as discussed in terms of order through space and time is not solely applicable to objects, as we see in the case of the two female figures acting as things in “Reaper” and “Key West”.

Martin Heidegger’s article, “The Thing,” is of much help to us here as we slowly awaken to the overlaps between poetry and philosophical thought, both of which involve their own sense of “taking dominion...mak[ing] something even as unmanageable as a wilderness shape up” (Lentricchia 145). In “The Thing”, Heidegger discusses the ideas of nearness and remoteness, both of which he claims have very little to do with distance (something merely close in location but with no agency is considered an object) and much to do with accessibility: “What about nearness? How can we come to know its nature? Nearness, it seems, cannot be encountered directly. We succeed in reaching it rather by attending to what is near. Near to us are what we usually call things” (Heidegger “The Thing” 405). How then, do we achieve this nearness? Via the thing. The self-supporting and independent are known as things, while objects exist only when thought of. Technically, the song of the reaping siren, then, has constant thingness and becomes an object of Wordsworth’s intellect when it is experienced in nearness, not physically but emotionally.

Heidegger’s theory on the independent role of the thing having some sort of emotional agency is the ideation behind Wordsworth’s development of memory, the ‘spots of time’ that make up The Prelude. Each integral moment in
The Prelude is established through the memory. And because thingness is intrinsic, true things present in memories have the power to hold and contain. The thingness of the jar in Stevens' ‘Anecdote of the Jar’ allows the ‘slovenly’, unordered landscape to be ordered. This example is one of the least abstract between the two canons as it directly discusses the ordering: “the act of the jar placing is contextualized, almost literally—it is surrounded by wilderness—and its consequences are illuminated by the natural setting within which the act is said to take place” (Lentricchia 140), giving the object the power to “behold” (‘Reaper’).

Here the power to hold and experience comes not from an earthenware object created in proportion to the environment solely activated by holding, but from the Heideggerian “void that holds” (Heidegger “Thing” 169), the human imagination. Heidegger writes in his exposition “The Thing”, “[t]he vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds” (Heidegger “Thing” 408). Thus, to bring us back to the two poems in discussion, in “Reaper”, the thingness of the female’s song creates an imaginative space so that the song can order and access the world around it. At the same time, in response, the seemingly omniscient and overpowering landscape “beholds” the song within its peaks and meadows. In Wallace Stevens’ “Key West”, the thingness of the female ordering the genius of the sea allows her the power to control nature.
Stevens himself was very preoccupied with modern philosophy, and he took on the role of a 20th century poet-philosopher, integrating his ideas into his collection, *The Necessary Angel*. Heidegger, too, was looking forward into revolutionizing archaic philosophies, and "[t]he entire work of Martin Heidegger points in distinct steps away from traditional views of philosophy and philosophizing toward original visions of thinking and poeticizing that speak directly to Stevens's own development" (Hines Preface 2).

While it is universally accepted that Stephens was foremost a poet, he was also philosopher, given his work in *The Necessary Angel* and the metaphysical aesthetic in his canon. He not only embraces unique concepts of being, but readily shapes new theories of the imagination. For example, Stevens explicates the idea of the genius (the same genius we see developed in "Key West" out of "Reaper") in his article "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet". He defines this genius as an emphatically certain intellect combined with a visceral sense of the imagination:

> It is the *mundo* of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights and not the gaunt world of reason. The pleasure is the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation. The morality of the poet's radiant and productive atmosphere is the morality of the right sensation (Stevens "Virile" 58).

The search for this truth witnessed through the sensate is essentially what drives both "Reaper" and "Key West". While the philosopher pursues truth through the intellect, the poet seeks truth in the imagination, which dwells in the
Part II: The Romantic Tradition and the Development of Poetical Imagination

Coming out of ages of revolutions, the Romantic tradition originally served as a way to mitigate an overflow of emotion. Looking to nature supposedly mollified heightened socio-political emotions. Nature served as an attempt to return to the way things were, simple and unadulterated before change. Yet, in fact, following the high hopes of industrialism as well as the French Revolution, the “world [proved to be] too much with us” (Wordsworth “The World is Too Much With Us”) to be so easily and emotionally dismissed by pastoral talk of rivers, flowers, and sheep.

What was once the simplistic pastoral had transformed by time into emotions bridled with conflict taken out into nature. Wordsworth’s work teemed with this emotion: “[c]onflicts in a world gone mad are reflected in Wordsworth’s inner divisions and conflicts, until the integrity of his spiritual development is shattered in what seems incipient madness” (Abrams 107). In his text *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams claims that Wordsworth looks to a large and looming supernatural power in nature as a divine inspiring force during such times of change. The poet places himself as wanderer amongst monstrous natural forms looking to find perhaps some sort of mimetic relationship between his emotions and the titanic aspect of the overpowering natural world around
him. The overpowering landscape was not enough for Wordsworth, and the poet still felt a dynamic sense of urgency to find a sense of harmony between man and the lush natural world he inhabited, especially since this did not exist in his social world.

While Wordsworth supported and even facilitated the Romantic in many ways, his turn to the supernatural and the manifestation of the imagination played a central role in demystifying the inaccessible idea of the pastoral poem. He rather created a work for the ages. While Wordsworth starts out pastorally, embracing the landscape and the common man, the "order" that Wordsworth finds through recognizing the sublime in this world deconstruct the age-old myth of the shepherd and cloudless skies that were once poetically fulfilling historically.

The purpose of this new Romantic consisted of observing realistic emotional truths and making them as permanent as the nature surrounding them. While the automatic thought revolving around the genre was such that "[s]een against the large, tranquil and impending forms of nature, human life itself [would] become reduced in importance and human passions felt to be less urgent and compulsive" (Perkins 44), Wordsworth looks into the mind and notices more, which we refer to as the sublime. This sense of searching is what leads Wordsworth to the solitary reaper in the first place; the poet must go to nature as the wanderer and carry with him only the "pedlar's pack of his own emotions, character, and experience " (Perkins 94).
Stevens takes this one step further in attempting to analyze the truth of the being of the imagination, rather than just observe it. The “Idea of Order at Key West” rises out of the ashes of Romanticism, resultant of a love for the imagination. Writing out of another era of change and unsettlement, Stevens proposed a way for humanity to take control through his attempt to answer the questions of ordering the world. According to Jacqueline Vaught Brogan in “The Violence Within, The Violence Without: Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of A Revolutionary Poetic,” Stevens’ ambiguities and oddities arise from the urge to protect himself against impending change, and to keep awareness of his imaginative faculties at all times. Vaught writes, “the need for this control—the imperative to create and to control a world in words—can in part be explained historically and culturally. The Great Depression, the Great War, the threat of a second world war to come, would easily give rise to the need to defend oneself against looming chaos” (14). Stevens, a century Wordsworth’s younger, did not find the acute sense in the natural world that his predecessor did, but still rather the landscape as a background for imaginative thought. Very few of Stevens’ poems show him in awe of the natural world, let alone ordered by it. Instead, Stevens, in his twentieth century world, “orders” the fauna that surrounds him into abstraction as “he is not satisfied to produce poetry that is adjacent to nature or merely part of it. He must reduce the monster, engulf him, and appropriate the monster entirely to himself” (Miller 9).
Stevens turns to various forms of incongruencies, with “tantalizing half-parallelisms and assymetrical analogies” (Miller 401) in his attempt to order the newly up-roared world, which he does quite abstractly by comparison to Wordsworth. Stevens as poetic puzzler mastermind instead creates self-conscious works “something like a microcosm...all various forms and effects of systematic endeavor; all the creation of structure, systems, reasons, all effects—in a word ambivalently dear to him (Lentricchia 143)” of this aforementioned abstraction. Yet that is not to say that Stevens does not access the same imagination that Wordsworth does, he rather rivals with a less accessible form of it. In his essay “The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet”, Stevens argues that “in order to fulfill himself [the poet] must accomplish a poetry that satisfies both the reason and the imagination”(Stevens “Virile” 42).

Reason is clearly seen in the unique philosophical approach that Stevens takes in his poetry, which culminates with the creation of genius, with both heightened sense of reason and imagination. Stevens writes:

“The youth as virile poet, is concerned, the genius, because of the abnormal ranges of his sensibility, not only accumulates experiences with greater rapidity, but accumulates experiences and qualities of experience accessible only in the extreme ranges of sensibility” (Stevens “Virile” 66). When Stevens takes a philosophical approach, one that is very much like Martin Heidegger’s in his approach to the difference between being in imagination and being as simply a human figure, he is able to see how the great human powers of thought are often belittled into being as simply a human figure
in the manner of the Romantic. Stevens writes in *The Necessary Angel*: “The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty” (Stevens “Imagination” 138). Although Stevens does make these anti-Romantic claims with preference for a more realistic and abstract assessment of the modern world, it is evident in his work that he springs out of the Romantic in his aesthetic and approach to beauty.


Wordsworth's rambling role as bardic wanderer not only solidified his relationship with nature, but also vastly matured it. As we discussed in Part II, the poet's rapport with the surrounding landscape emerged out of the pastoral and grew into the deep new-Romantic assessment of the sublime through the imagination. This motion, from its simplistic successes to its tribulations of self-doubt, resembles a long-term human relationship in the ups and downs it has weathered over the course of Wordsworth’s struggles with the imagination over his canon. JH Miller describes this advancing relationship seamlessly in *The Linguistic Moment*:

Conflict there may be in Wordsworth, but this conflict has been seen by many critics as a middle stage in a three-stage dialectic leading from an early harmony with nature to an antithetical period of self-consciousness and alienation. This second stage is the discovery of the dangerous
autonomy of the imagination. The final stage is the rejection of that detachment and a consequent return at a higher level to a calm reconciliation with nature, for “Nature never did betray/The heart that loved her” (Miller 43).

Wordsworth’s travels through nature and the looming forms with which he puts himself in contact on his journeys put him in an alienated position, but one he seeks out due to his fascination, and, in his first stage, confusion, by the sublime:

I saw before me stretched a boundless plain/Of sandy wilderness, all black and void,/And as I looked around, distress and fear/Came creeping over me (Wordsworth The Prelude Book V 71-74).

With Wordsworth’s initial contacts with nature we see the impermanence of humanity measured against monumental images of time. Because of this impermanence there is often the great question of what aspects of humanity are human and which are divine. Are humans mere observers of this natural force or are they able to partake in it? How does human emotion assess something so grandiose? For Wordsworth, is the natural world that surrounds him the epicenter of all of his thoughts (a theory that still gives humans power external to the natural world) or is it the origin—“From Nature doth emotion come” (Wordsworth The Prelude Book XII 1)?

1 Stevens as wanderer addresses the answer to this question, re-raised a century later. In his poem “The Idea of Order at Key West”, Stevens as narrator gives up his agency as master, allowing himself to be possessed by another human or the sublime sense of that human. Here, “the male poet relinquishes not only his own centrality as “maker,” but also the "truth" of his own fiction” (Arensberg 35).
Apart from this question of human and supernatural sublime raised by the question of monumentality and impermanence, Wordsworth focuses on a fairly narrow subject matter. His canon, consisting of the "basic triangle of language, nature, and childhood" (Ward 275), shows nature's position in relation to humanity in context of the basic elements of human and political life. The integral medium holding all three of these themes together is memory, something that Wordsworth refers to as "Food/for future years" (Tintern 65-66).

Put broadly, it is because of the realization of beauty in these spots of times or, simply put, memories—the "bliss" ("Notes," It Must Give Pleasure, VIII. 12) that we will discuss in terms of "The Solitary Reaper", that Wordsworth discerns in the Lass's melodic expression of her inner being or, in Heideggarian terms, "thingness"—that the poet is able to fully experience the present recurrently through transcending time. He transcends time by carrying this bliss, whether joyful or eerily awe-inspiring, with him into the future. Wordsworth is then later able to depart from the human fate as "unhappy people in a happy world" ("Auroras," X.1) through memory, and, instead, return to a recurring momentary emotional state.

Just as The Prelude is a magical combination of childhood, nature, and magnificently inaccessible scenes, it is also comprised of critical realizations about the role of the human mind. These observations allow us to read

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2 "Tintern Abbey" for example: Wordsworth returns to a scene looks on a sublime church scene adulterated by the Industrial Revolution, accompanied by sister Dorothy; thus, a familial reflection on memory and the imagination.
Wordsworth as a poet outside of his time, via his developments on the creative human force of the imagination. What Wordsworth sees visually from the beautifully treacherous natural landscape around him, he experiences emotively which he realizes is ultimately catalyzed by this human imagination. He concludes that the heightened awareness of the sublime sense is thus the imagination at work.

Wordsworth culminates his search for fulfillment in nature with his arrestment following his explosive personal discovery on Mt. Snowdon. The sense of paralysis at the awe of the natural world that Wordsworth first witnessed in the beginning of *The Prelude* returns as he finds himself in the glorious, seemingly omnipotent moon amongst a “huge sea of mist” (Wordsworth *The Prelude*, XIII 43) as the scene overflows, “roaring with one voice” (XIII. 59):

> At distance not the third part of a mile/ Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,/A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which/Mounted the roar of waters, torrents streams/Innumerable, roaring with one voice (*Prelude* Book XIII 55-59).

Grand in itself alone, but in that breach/Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,/That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged,/The soul, the imagination of the whole (*Prelude* Book XIII 62-65).

Through this “homeless” (XIII.63) voice in which “[n]ature [had] lodged/[t]he soul, the imagination of the whole” (XIII. 64-65), Wordsworth recognizes the supremacy of the “mighty mind” (XIII. 69). It is critical to note that this mind is
also endless and permanent, just as the natural world surrounding it, for it is a
mind that feeds upon infinity. The mind of the human is powered by, “exalted
by... an underpresence”(XIII. 71), or imaginative aspect that allows for such
human “[b]ehold[ing]” (“Reaper” 1) of meaning as seen in the “Solitary Reaper.”

This sublime scene of Mt. Snowdon is very symptomatic of the landscape
behind the female figure in “The Solitary Reaper.” Stevens introduce us to an
organic, generative female form in her isolation and productive qualities. The
small figure is placed, like the poet, against a violent backdrop, a vast mountain
scene, which was frequently symbolically used to represent the magnitude of
original sin.

Mountains and other wild, waste places were the product not of divine
benevolence but of human depravity, for they had been wrecked by the
wrath of a just God at the original fall of man in Eden (Abrams 99).
It is ironic\(^3\) that the beautiful and delicate (although a field worker nonetheless)
be placed—so small in scale and unassuming in her loveliness—against an
infinite, unbridled, and boisterous sublime landscape. The feelings of terror seem
not to affect the reaper, as she carries on with her work unphased by the
backdrop.\(^4\)

Instead of fear, we see the human spirit projected beautifully, although
this aestheticism funnels not from the woman’s physical qualities but rather,

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\(^3\) But not surprising
\(^4\) This is to a much different effect in Stevens’ “The Idea of Order Key West” as the
female figure seems to work and rear up into accordance with the eerie sublime
landscape that surrounds her.
from the figure’s song. Because the poet is indeed the “orator of the imagination” (Stevens “Imagination” 142), the singer is similar as such: she, once given thingness through Wordsworth’s observation of her, is the orderer of the mind.

It is so very interesting here that the song is foreign and it is not the words which lead to Wordsworth’s arrestment but instead the melody and tonality of the verse. Wordsworth as poet spent so much effort working to make his poetry accessible to the common man, through common language and personal, relatable utterance, yet here we are presented with something beautiful despite being devoid of relatability. It is not the meaning of the work or even the words, but rather the sound of the words that give the poem or song its magical quality. In doing such, Wordsworth creates a universal aural space that is transformative, contrary to popular music theory:

For without a set of gestures common to the social group and without common habit responses to those gestures, no communication whatsoever would be possible. Communication depends upon, presupposes, and arises out of the universe of discourse which in the aesthetics of music is called style (Rosu 12).

Music theory claims that linguistically speaking, one’s semantic footings are cultural markers, which sometimes have ambiguous boundaries. For instance, within English, there is North American English, and within that there is Appalachian English. Yet there are many idioms in other social groups within North American English that are accessible across race and region. Another sort of dialogue exists between speaker and listener, hence the phrase “Lost in
Translation”. Typically communication has so much worth to humans (as something they definitively have over nature) in that it is believed to be an “effusion from the human heart via the larynx” (Ward 279). The valuable tool of language was especially critical to Wordsworth, who aimed to increase his poetic accessibility through linguistic appeal to the common man, so it is odd here that he places such value in an unrelatable singer.

Will no one tell me what she sings?—/Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow/For old, unhappy, far-off things,/And battles long ago:/Or is it some more humble lay,/Familiar matter of to-day?/Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,/That has been, and may be again? ("Reaper" 17-24).

Clearly, the scene is not about accessibility, but the power of the imagination. In "Reaper," enlightenment comes not in the form of a sublime natural force, but through the invocation of the mystical powers of the larynx of solitary human figure “single in the field” ("Reaper" 1), singing a “melancholy strain” ("Reaper" 6) that Wordsworth cannot even elucidate the meaning of. “Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang/As if her song could have no ending” ("Reaper" 25-26), Wordsworth found the aural quality so arresting that he catalogued the song in his memory, through the powers of the imagination:

I listen’d, motionless and still;/And, as I mounted up the hill,/The music in my heart I bore,/Long after it was heard no more ("Reaper" 29-32).

This song is observed by another solitary figure, and here we see, through the snowglobe like view of this isolated woman that “there never was a world for her/ except the one she sang, and, singing, made” ("Key West" 41-42). This muse
is isolated, albeit in "Reaper" primarily by her remote region. Here, the
tingness of the woman figure is given great agency, as she has the power to
elicit a response we have only seen from nature in the Wordsworthian canon to
this point in time. Because he claims that the voice of the girl caused the "Vale
profound/ [to] overflow with the sound," ("Reaper" 7-8) it is easy to see that the
instance exerts such an influence over the poet that the indiscernible song
transforms into more than sound. The emotional gushing and flooding
permeates Wordsworth's memory as if "[a] voice so thrilling ne'er was heard"
("Reaper" 13).

Having witnessed this scene and sound, in the third stanza, Wordsworth's
mind is able to now "behold" as he oscillates between acceptance of uncertainty
and desire for the definite in an imaginative questioning of the unknown, as he
fiendishly thirsts for the content of the song. We witness the motion in the poet's
mind, a sense of searching as he wonders about the subject of the song, touching
on the thread of memory and recalling a sort of temporal suffering—"Some
natural sorrow, loss, or pain,/ [t]hat has been and may be again?" ("Reaper" 23-
24). The aspect of the song that makes it so arresting and gives it the power to
"order" the land around it as we will discuss in relation to Heidegger, is this
melancholic quality, for despite the beauty of the "Nightengale's" ("Reaper" 9)
tune, Wordsworth says that this atmospheric and undiscovered reverie indeed

5 Rather than the gender barriers we will see by comparison in Stevens' created
phallocentric world in "Key West."
surpasses the truest bard, the ever-valued songbird, so often immortalized in poetics.

While Wordsworth claims the voice to “chaunt/...welcome notes” (“Reaper” 9-10), he also states that the song is ultimately a somber one, an embodiment of the sublime in its mysterious quality and in its virginal, untouched natural discovery. In connection to this eternal motion or universal diurnal course of suffering, just as the power of memory has virtually no ending, the “[m]aiden sang/[a]s if her song could have no ending” (“Reaper” 25-26). The song indeed has no ending for Wordsworth, especially once it becomes a spot of time that he can return to through rememory. Because of the sense of permanence in memory despite the song’s impermanence, Wordsworth is seemingly calmed by the sound, not racing to record it, but, rather, soothed, “listen[ing], motionless, and still” (“Reaper” 29). It is in this soothed state that he concludes his poem, which seems to mirror the calm conclusion of his thoughts. The stillness in Wordsworth as observer is striking in contrast to the “overflowing” (“Reaper” 8) quality of the song. The stillness in the observer defies the expressive powers of the surrounding romantic nature, and the underemphasized nature is demoted to take on the role of a common, simple backdrop in this poetic scene.

Wordsworth has much practice in studying the preservation of the finitude of human art, an exercise developed across his spots of time. He seems confortable at the closing of the poem that the scene has been ordered enough
that he will be able to recollect the feelings elicited by the song, if not the song itself, which is why the content alone is so extraneous, even in its exotic beauty.

This foreshadows the power of the female voice in establishing the thingness in Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West," for the human figure sings "beyond the genius of" ("Order" 1) nature, creating a sense of exotic and inaccessible power. Keeping with the idea of simplicity of scene yet "profound" ("Reaper" 7) depth of thought from "The Solitary Reaper," the setting is simple and mostly unmentioned as are, once more, the human actors. Both poems becomes personal not through physical characterization of singer or observer but in their common, accessible language, an element of writing very important to Wordsworth that is much mutated by Stevens. There is an overarching theme of simplicity here, from the common reaper to the laborious action of farming, the simple language and short rhymed tetrametric lines, and, lastly, to Wordsworth's frank, directly addressed questions and reactions. This is mirrored in Stevens' slowly paced poem (in comparison to his others), written primarily in free verse with forward moving punctuation and ordinarily end-stopped lines.

In "Reaper", out of her commonness and crudeness, the female reaper reveals an original song. The reaper's song has no literary predecessors and instead contains an unknown essence of the imagination. For that organic reason, it is directly tied with nature. This idea of the fresh mind once more summons

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6 But seemingly not so much in this particular Stevens' poem.
Stevens, who stated that the poem (or song) "refreshes life so that we share,/ [f]or a moment, the first idea" ("Notes," It Must Be Abstract, III.1-2), and, instead of repetition of a past creed or style, encounters materials new and previously not approached. Clearly, this is how Stevens is able to take the focus away from his dark sensualist singer and focus on the "blessed rage for order" ("Key West" 52) of the creative process, which we now see through "The Solitary Reaper" is facilitated by thinging.

**Part IV: Stevens and the Female Siren: Ordering landscape Through Imagination**

Moving between Stevens as philosopher and Stevens as poet, we see a cacophonously resultant element of sound arising from the Romantic. Stevens not only plays with language in an a-logical manner, he also assembles a variety of aural, oral, and aesthetic images of things and objectifies them in a "visionary, almost mystical [manner that leads to a true] understanding of Being itself" (Hines Preface 2). Stevens, like Wordsworth, is acute in his observations.7 These observations produce a fiction of the most exquisite kind, ones that "rehearsed in language the motion of his mind, suffic[ing] to allow the continuation of the process of repeated creation" (Hines Pref).

Just as Wordsworth's common woman, bestowed with Heideggarian

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7 Yet, exceedingly so in comparison to Wordsworth as Stevens abandons the emotional response to the photographic nature scene for an abstracted response to a seemingly "fictive" scene.
“thingness”, overtakes her environment, the lone singing female figure in “The Idea of Order at Key West” transforms the seascape around her, for she serves as “the single artificer of the world/in which she sang” (“Order” 37-38). In doing this, the singer is able to “behold” (Reaper 1) the space around her. In the opening stanzas of the poem, we are introduced to this space, the inhuman sea, only “like a body” (“Order” 3) and mindless in the realm of the human, for it lacks Wordsworthian inscape until the singer defines it through her creative art and imagination:

The water never formed to mind or voice;/ Like a body wholly body,
fluttering/ Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion/ Made constant cry,
caused constantly a cry;/ That was not ours although we understood./
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean (“Key West” 2-7).

While the sea is certainly physically existent in its chaotic way of “constant cry[ing]” (“Order” 5) and “fluttering” (“Order” 3), it is unable to be identified, unlike the human song, even though it is also active in song. It is interesting, here, to note the very large difference in the “cry” (“Order” 5) of the ocean and the “song” (“Order” 9) of the human. The ocean cries in its existence but is limited to only an unmelodic “sound” (“Order” 9), “meaningless” (“Order” 30) and insufficient as an imaginative force with creative powers but concrete in its existence and unceasing perpetuation as a natural force.

The human, on the other hand, is defined by her song’s expressive value. In a sense, the sea is “cry[ing]” (“Order” 5) because, unlike the human, it is predetermined to have that quality by nature and is not alone capable of being in
a deeper sense. However, the ocean is “not a mask” (“Order” 8) and does not, is not, able to mimic the human just as the human singer is also not masked. Each exists individually.

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. Then we,/As we beheld her striding there alone,/
Knew that there never was a world for her/
Except the one she sang and, singing, made (“Key West” 34-43).

In this startling departure from the Romantic where nature commonly serves to mimic human emotion as a substance upon which human emotion is projected and is in return enacted or mirrored, in Stevens’ poem the sea exists on its own and serves as a setting which inspires the female figure but is by no means embodied by her song. The sea does not need human definition or making; it is already a part of nature although it is not translatable to the human as far as deeper meaning is concerned. In this same sense, the female figure is “no more” (“Order” 8) a mask than the sea. This singer is real and embodied as human, the creator of a song fully her own. Although her song is propelled by the sea, fundamentally rooted and perhaps inspired by the sea— “even if what she sang was what she heard” (“Order” 10)— her song is uniquely hers, for she is the crafter of her reality while the sea merely provides setting for her creative art.

Interestingly, in a departure from the Wordsworthian idea in “The Solitary Reaper” that the vale and nature were “overflowing” (“Reaper” 8) with sound after being brought to life and given inscape by the reaper’s song, the sea
and the singer, nature and human, in “Key West” do not act upon each other.

Neither mimics the other and their sounds are not naturally “medleyed” (“Order” 9) outside of the singer’s individual world. Instead, the female figure’s voice triumphs over nature as she produces a creative order in nature through artistry, a product of imagination, “more” (“Order” 8) powerful than both the sea’s voice and the solitary human voice. The singer orders this world around herself, a world in which nature is given greater meaning to her and, later, through her to the external world, for

> When she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / that was her song (“Order” 38-39).

Although it is clear that these two essences, sea and human, exist separately, the observers—Stevens and companion—are still moved to question, “Whose spirit is this?” (“Order” 18). What is the force that drives this powerful song, out of which springs a world of the singer’s own? Indeed, the female is the creator, inspired by the sea, but what is at the root of her inspiration? Does a small, insignificant figure have the power to order nature? According to Stevens, this is the “spirit [he and his companion] sought” (“Order” 19) to discover.

It is upon the posing of this question that “The Idea of Order Key West” begins to vary profoundly from the work of Wordsworth as exemplified in “The Solitary Reaper.” In Wordsworth’s poem, although the incomprehensible song relates closely to the unidentified song in Stevens’ poem in that the content is insignificant in terms of the greater meaning implied, Wordsworth as passerby takes the song for what it is, allowing it to influence him profoundly and
conclusively without questioning it. In "Key West," Stevens, already in search of
the deeper meaning prompting this sort of creative expression, peruses the
entity of human imagination in search of a much larger understanding of the
meditative and creative human mind, one he does not necessarily fully discover
by the poem's end.

The key to understanding Stevens' interest, and, on a larger scale, canon,
is recognizing his belief that the human "live[s] in the mind" (The Necessary
Angel 140) and that out of this living springs the "great human power [of the
imagination which is by] the Romantic belittle[d]...[while imagination is] the
liberty of the mind" (The Necessary Angel 138). Stevens' search for
understanding the power of the human imagination is ever-present throughout
the poem, and is brought out especially in the entrancing, culminating two
stanzas of his lyrical writing.

While the singer was present in the scene, small but triumphant in the
face of a vast seascape that Stevens sets up to almost resemble the Romantic
sublime in its chaotic power, darkness, and "mountainous atmosphere/of sea
and sky" ("Order" 32-33), it was easy for Stevens and companion to accredit her
powerful translation of the sounds of the sea into a larger force as personal and
individual, much like Wordsworth's recognition of the near, the clear in "The
Solitary Reaper." However, the strange unlike created around and in the singer's
world remained after the figure vacated the scene and all was silent. This hints at
the presence of the larger, more widespread effects of the "imagination that
[Stevens and his companion] spurned and crave" (“Fictive” 36), a phrase remarkable in its convergence of past and present and an idea at the core of belief for Stevens. The higher power Stevens addresses is indeed through belief, a belief in a new “spiritual vision of the world” (Carroll 88), a new Romanticism that will challenge creative power in a quest “to find the real,/ to be stripped of every fiction except one...[to hear] the luminous melody of proper sound” ("Notes," It Must Give Pleasure, VII. 21). Stevens’ canon springs from his desire to establish this new poem, the result of his felt need for a poetry that will help the human order in the present, outside of the dated language of the past, the “speech [that would be spoken but] never know[n]” (“Postcard”18). In this example, known can be likened to being, realization on a higher level of the “thingness” within.

After the singer left and the observers and the Key had been transformed and remained so, suggesting the broader effect of the song, Stevens turns to his companion, Ramon Fernandez and questions how “the glassy lights [of the town].../mastered the night and portioned out the sea” (“Order” 46-49), ordering the darkness and continuing what the female figure started in her song. With his direct address in second person to Ramon, the focus has switched from the first person plural, somewhat narrative aspect to a more personal and immediate level. A higher power is at work here, one that has transcended a personal influence and holds a unifying power over the scene. The manner of order becomes visual as night, “arrange[d], deepen[ed], and enchant[ed]” (“Order” 51)
by the lights, is given meaning that it, like the sea, originally lacked. It is interesting to remark here, in a brief aside, on Stevens’ companion, Ramon Fernandez. Stevens sets Ramon up as a conversational component, yet the manner in which he addresses him appears as if he is possibly the philosophical equivalent to his poetic genius, (“tell me” (“Order” 44)) or a representative of some sort of either opposing or similar ideal. Ramon is questioned as if he may have insight yet Stevens seems to ultimately speak out of what seems to be a higher knowledge or insight in the final stanza. At the same time, though, Ramon functions as the ultimate orderer and usurps the glory from the female form. Perhaps this is a sign of Stevens’ anxieties about the feminine power of emotion. Not only do “[w]omen appear in Stevens’ poetry about one fifth as frequently—a total of 106 times compared to 507 for men.” (Vaught 11), women are often presented as inactive and speechless (think Sunday Morning), both of which are included in this poem. Part of Stevens’ seemingly uneased self—awareness lies in his relationship to women, albeit the reclining figure in “Sunday Morning” or the massively inaccessible figure in “The Idea of Order Key West”. Writing amidst the women’s suffrage movement, I am unsure whether his approach to women is consistently culturally observant, self-identified, or simply a sarcastic act of the “comedian”.

Stevens approaches the question himself in the final stanza. The poet’s words here touch on the human concept of imagination, their “rage for order” (“Order” 52) simply a desire to reach a “portal” (“Order” 54) to a higher
presence. Through this belief, it is possible despite the impermanence of these "dimly-starred" ("Order" 54) instances, to, through "ghostlier" ("Order" 56) poetic boundaries, experience "keener" ("Order" 56) instances and senses by means of accessing the imagination and really being, as Wordsworth was in "The Solitary Reaper."

In this final stanza, Stevens, like Wordsworth, admits to the fleeting nature of such "dimly-starred" opportunities to access the higher power of imagination, yet the poets' ideas on the role of the imagination surely diverge. Wordsworth sees imagination, as discussed earlier, as an adjunct to the mind to behold scenes and witness the inscape of them in both real time and through memory. In "The Solitary Reaper," Wordsworth capitalizes on memory such that he could hear the lass's song "long after it was heard no more" ("Reaper" 32). To Stevens, the scene, the activation of imagination, is not retrospective but is deeply rooted in the present looking to the future. In his essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," Stevens discusses this idea of memory. His opinions on how the mind works with memory are very different than Wordsworth's idea of memory as reconstructive. Stevens states that the mind does not merely recall memories. Rather, it uses the imagination "as material with which it does whatever it wills...using familiar to produce the unfamiliar" (The Necessary Angel, 165) in attempt to find the new "dimly-starred" ("Order" 54) order mentioned in his poem. Through the powerful addition of this concept of the imagination to the romantic observation of "thingness" projected by the
human onto nature as seen in Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper," the observer/poet/singer is able to discover aspects of reality and "know [them] well" ("Notes," *It Must Give Pleasure*, VII.10) in a form that extends out of the Wordsworthian personal realm and into a broader context as do Stevens' final stanzas in "The Idea of Order at Key West." Thus, "[i]t is possible, possible, possible" ("Notes," *It Must Give Pleasure*, VII. 13) to create a more far-reaching fiction in which humans may then order the world around them, creating an "enchant[ment]" ("Order" 51) through imagination.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, the Heideggarian concept of Thing Theory is profoundly at work in both Wordsworth and Stephens, and it is through the bestowing of creative power onto an object, albeit in this case the female form, that the imagination is able to be harnessed and ultimately produce "genius" ("Key West" 1). It is evident that we should not stop with "The Solitary Reaper" and "The Idea of Order at Key West" for they invoke an entire prophetic reality, or revolution, in the idea the the object serves merely as inspirer of the poet. Rather, the object, when given thingness becomes the poet and the ultimate orderer/preserver of earthly beauty.

8 In the words of JH Miller, it is through "this verbalized transformation the poet stamps his image on nature, inscribes himself on it, makes nature into emblem. In so doing he brings death, imagination, and human time into being" (Miller 77).

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8 Often making the inaccessible, such as the sublime, accessible.
The reaper’s song and the seaside siren’s ordering are not unlike the Arabian shell in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, which seems to envelop qualities of both “The Solitary Reaper” and “The Idea of Order Key West”.

I did so,/And heard that instant in an unknown tongue,/Which yet I understood, articulate sounds,/A loud prophetic blast of harmony;/ An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold/Destruction to the children of the earth/By deluge, now at hand (Prelude Book V 92-98).

Again, we see the innate power of an object—when given thingness, no matter how foreign or inaccessible—to produce an unwittingly and unparalleled “blast of harmony” (*Prelude* V 95). It is integral to note that the harmonies in all three of these contexts, whether as beautiful and unassuming as the reaper’s song, as passionate and foreign as the shell, or as controlled and uproariously eerie against the sea as the temptress’s aria, are prophetic and telling, capable of “beholding” true genius.
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