

# Vanishing Intermedialities in Wallace Stevens's “The Idea of Order at Key West”

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JARKKO TOIKKANEN

**Abstract:** There is a vast catalogue of research on Wallace Stevens's 1934 poem “The Idea of Order at Key West.” The article offers a complementary alternative by carrying out a practical experiment of reading Stevens through a special method. It looks past interpretive determinations in order to bring into view the experience of reading the poem through the medium specific elements of the vanishing intermedialities by which the reader of any inclination is affected. The notions of design and agency are employed in an innovative fashion to evidence the effects of the words employed.

*Keywords:* Intermedial experience, three-tier model of mediality, design, agency, Wallace Stevens

“The Idea of Order at Key West” was published in 1934 in Wallace Stevens's second collection of poetry *Ideas of Order*. There is a vast catalogue of research on the much celebrated poem, with the responses ranging from highlighting its philosophical and stylistic merits to diverse thematic and biographical readings of the piece. I am offering a complementary alternative to such approaches by carrying out a practical experiment of reading Stevens through a special method. In the poem, there is a rich variety of sensory perceptions, both imagined and non-imagined, that are presented to the reader as words, evoking impressions of speech and song, among other things. They give rise to further imagined sensory perceptions, as well ideas about their meaning and attempts to recognize and settle on any meanings at all. In my rationale, it is the triad interaction between the sensory impressions, ways of presenting, and ideas that mediates the reading as a whole and constitutes the *intermedial experience* of the poem. The elements of this experience can be analyzed in detail through the *three-tier model of mediality* to be employed.

I will put forth the hypothesis the intermedial experience of “The Idea of Order at Key West” turns on the vanishing intermedialities the poem effects. The written words of the poem on the page, or screen, give way to what is happening within the world of the poem, engaging with the senses; the speech of the narrator gives way to the song of the she; her song gives way to ideas about the rich trappings of nature; song and speech and writing return as nature disappears, and the process goes back and forth. Previous readings show how the indeterminacy of this process can be observed philosophically or thematically, or anchored in understanding Stevens as the representative of a stylistic period or an individual poet. However, I will look past such interpretive determinations in order to bring into view the experience of reading the poem through the medium specific elements of the vanishing intermedialities by which the reader of any inclination is affected. It is precisely this attention to the material fundamentals of the poem that sustains the practical experiment.

## Theory

The theory of intermedial experience was first developed in Toikkanen (2013) and most recently refined in Toikkanen (2023). Here I am providing a summary of the main features, while advising

the reader to turn to the sources for a more comprehensive account. Basically, the theory concerns the difference between reading as interpretation and reading as experience. On the one hand, interpretation is commonly understood as a hermeneutic or semiotic effort focused on extracting meanings from a textual object that contains them in the manner of a vessel. The meanings change according to time and place, and there is a multiplicity of them in a variety of authors, audiences, and modes of expression, but they are nonetheless extracted from the object by the interpreting subject. On the other hand, in the theory proposed, experience is phenomenologically understood as the whole process of becoming aware of the environment, consisting of sensing, perceiving, grasping, and interpreting (see Virtanen & Toikkanen 2020). In this thinking, experience contains interpretation, instead of the two approaches vying with each other.

Intermediality conjoins the theory by way of realizing that, to become aware of the environment, the awareness must be mediated. Awareness of something is, by definition, a mediated awareness. Whether it is a sensory perception, a grasp of there being something that is presented, for example, as words, sights, or sounds, or the dawning notion that the presentation is somehow meaningful, the experience is mediated. The theory of intermedial experience thus requires defining the concept of medium so that it explains what kinds of media are involved in the process of experience and how they interact with one another. The three-tier model of mediality was launched in Toikkanen (2017) and most recently tempered in Toikkanen (2023). It defines three tiers of media – senses, ways of presenting, and ideas – that function together to produce intermedial experience. As a method, the model is designed, and has been employed, for the purpose of analyzing case studies across second-tier media of presentation. The article at hand is the definitive literary showcase.

Two keywords particular to the analysis at hand are design and agency. First, design in this use refers to how the intermedial experience of the reader, corresponding to the speaker and characters in the poem, is structured through the medium specific elements of the poem, giving rise to ideas about the author, contextual factors, and other potential agencies. For instance, with knowledge of the formal and generic elements of poetry, the designer can employ them through a certain style or technique. The process resulting in a poetic structure can thus be called technological. To design a verbal poem, the poet employs words with knowledge of producing effects by this technology. Their act of designing is purposive in the sense of writing a poem, and it requires employing the resources of the medium of poetry for its execution. This medial condition persists objectively, although it differs from one instance to the next what those resources are, how an individual agentively employs them, and which effects and meanings they may wish to produce. The purposiveness of design, in other words, does not equal intentionality of meaning.

Second, agency in this use refers to the idea of an individual subject or subjects in action. In the model of mediality employed, the idea of a “subject” on the third tier is just as much an effect of intermedial experience as ideas of everything else – “order,” “Key West,” and the “she” of the poem included. The specific quality of the idea of a subject, or “self”, has to do with producing understandings of individual subjects who are discrete from one another, and so agentive in the sense of interacting on a logical and affective idea of discreteness – “I” am not “you” and I do not feel like you do. Without the idea of a self, we would not recognize and tell ourselves apart from any other idea we understood as different from our selves. I am going to demonstrate how the design of “The Idea of Order at Key West” brings to bear this ideational process of subjects in action, dramatized as the intermedial experience of the poem on three tiers of mediality. With the medium of poetry conceived of as a verbal technology – or the knowledge of producing purposive designs through words – and with agency defined as the idea of subjectively interacting on such designs, my hypothesis can be rearticulated so: the intermedialities vanish because they can.

Out of the past research on Stevens’s poem, notes on emphatic intermedialities should be accented in studying their vanishings. Michel Benamou (1959), for instance, has claimed Stevens is abled with “a strong visual imagination,” and he “presents conflicts of ideas as conflicts of forms and shapes” (54),

whereas Alan Filreis (1992) has argued for a paradoxical attitude on Stevens's part to period tendencies of Modernist art: "While deliberately stemming the flow of abstraction in purchasing his paintings, he tried to go along with it in the poetry." (236) It appears that, in terms of the sense of sight and the visual arts, Stevens preferred the traditional and representational techniques of expression, whereas in designing poetry he went the opposite way to bring into view the non-representational aspects of what could (or could not) be seen by an agentive use of words. Helen F. Maxson's (2005) comparison between Stevens and the poetry of Walt McDonald makes a telling point in showing how, in McDonald's technology, "the presence of photographs actually heightens aspects of the book's unifying vision as defined against that of Stevens." (424) There is no aspiration for such medial unity in Stevens, and the effect is purposively designed.

On the sense of hearing and the auditory arts, Angus Cleghorn (1998) has argued for how the poem shows "the supreme power of music over logic" (35), and Aaron McCollough (2002) for how "musical effects surface out of the swirl of sound, become coherent, and just as quickly disperse again into chaos" (101) in design with the poem's primary motifs of song and singing. The imagined sounds of "The Idea of Order at Key West," it seems, are just as powerful and irresistible as they are fleeting and volatile. Then again, as noted by Thomas F. Bertonneau, the audio recording of Stevens reading his poem – see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCilTBwQSZA> – provides a paradoxically fascinating counterpoint to the wild ephemerality of the imagined sounds as the poet conducts a performance that, in the non-imagined audio of the recital, is "simply lugubrious" (61). The medium of oral speech is agentively set against the written word and brought to an interpretive head. The turns of the medial conflict affect the listener and the reader, exciting further intermedial references such as Michael Ryan (1982) noting whether the poem's syntax creates "a pattern of movement" that is "if not like a grand ballet perhaps like a chamber dance." (34) It is indeed a point of wonder if Stevens's vanishing intermedialities are about lofty spectacle or more intimate contemplation.

As can be detected in the previous readings, "The Idea of Order at Key West" strongly engages with sight and hearing, on each of the three tiers of mediality, as the second-tier words seen on the page compel the reader to see and hear imagined sensory perceptions on the first tier. At the same time, the verbal design, through the medium of the written word, produces intermedial references (see Rajewsky 2005) to other second-tier ways of presenting such as painting, music, and dance that are not physically present in the design but are agentively as much part of the experience of the reader as the words. The first and second tiers excite simultaneously ideas on the third tier – about sensorial and artistic conflicts, notions of order and chaos, geographical and biographical contexts, moods of composure and melancholy – by which the process gains further momentum, feeds back to the first and second tiers, feeds back to the third tier, and so on. In this intermedial experience, it must be stressed, what is imagined is objectively as valid as the non-imagined. Whereas it cannot be regulated what exactly an individual will see and hear, and what kinds of interpretive conclusions they will draw based on their imagined sensory perceptions, if they do have the ability to imagine seeing and hearing things, the verbal design of the poem will compel them to do so. The imagined elements belong to the medial condition of technologically employing words for the purpose.

With the theoretical and methodological solution in place, along with a preliminary understanding of where the main foci of interest lie, the unique benefits to be gained from the practical experiment of reading Stevens should be spelled out. The hypothesis is this: the intermedialities of "The Idea of Order at Key West" vanish because they can. Past research has underscored numerous times how the poem's visual and auditory drama unfolds in an uproarious process of observing and creative human minds struggling to found their identities and very being against the vast and impersonal forces of nature (see, for instance, Crowder & Chappell 1987; Fry 2021; Goodridge 1995; Martin 2002; Naqipour, Taghizadeh & Lalbakhsh 2022; Shinbrot 2005; Wilde 1996). The interpretive method by which such determinations of the meaning of a literary text, and a verbal design in this case, are commonly made works like so: the reader reads the words, imagines seeing

and hearing things, may be emotionally and affectively engaged as they feel it, and extracts ideas that define the meaning of the text differently for each reader. This interpretive method indeed involves all of these factors but they are treated as separate, as if the reader, the poem, and the ideas it contains were ontologically removed from one another. In this kind of thinking, the same reader may return to the same poem for the same ideas – or different ones, depending on the interpretation – with the sameness of their agentive individuality guaranteed before and beyond the reading experience. In contrast, the theory of intermedial experience and the method of the three-tier model of mediality are based on the idea of individuality coming into being in the experience, through the purposive design technologically employed. In “The Idea of Order at Key West,” there is a speaker speaking and a “she” singing because that is how the speaker senses and understands what is presented. The agencies keep vanishing as that is how they are coming into being in the poem – this speaker and she do not exist before and beyond the verbal design.

### Analysis

This ineluctability of the intermedial experience makes evident the objectively persisting medial condition under study. The poem’s effects are not immaterial or unreal but part of the verbal design fundamentally materialized in the experience an individual may agentively share with others – both by narrating what they felt and identifying similarities and differences. In what follows, I will share ideas on 1) moments of imagined sensory perceptions complementing sight and hearing in reading Stevens’s poem, 2) notes on the use of the past and present tense, as well as verbs disappearing or changing aspect from single actions to continuous states, and 3) indications of affectively charged moods, the recognition of which may instantly transform the intermedial experience even without necessarily compromising any agentive identification or interpretive determination.

To my knowledge, not much attention has been given on how the poem engages with the senses beyond sight and hearing that predominate in the scene. However, as there are imagined sensory perceptions present such as “The grinding water and the gasping wind,” “The heaving speech of air,” “The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,” and “Words of the fragrant portals,” they are deserving of recognition too. Whereas “the fragrant portals” in the final stanza have to do with the olfactory and potentially the gustatory in the way the “enchanted night” at Key West produces impressions of aroma and taste, the “grinding,” “gasping,” “heaving,” and “plunging” elements of the natural forces activate states of the sense of touch in the moment of the interaction between the sea and she. Specifically in “gasping” and “heaving,” the experience involves interoception, or the feeling of the internal body (see Schmitt & Schoen 2022; Quigley et al. 2021), as the witnessing of the rough duel compels the speaker and reader to imagine what gasping and heaving feel like, losing breath to the wind and air that appear overwhelming. The verbal design presenting this interoceptive experience does not come together in human song and singing, but excites the idea of nature in a state of sheer monotony (“a summer sound / Repeated in a summer without end / And sound alone”) and “meaninglessness,” describing anthropomorphized natural forces whose fleeting pathetic fallacies will never become human save in the similarly vanishing medium of the singing she and her song. To this purpose, the duel of the sea and she is shorn of combativeness, technologically producing an effect of paradoxical synthesis and vanishing similarity also for the speaker and reader as they are compelled to imagine losing their breath to the moment. Through sight and hearing alone, as in Kantian idealism, they can continue to stand apart and ultimately turn away from the scene, as if it was a theatrical performance, but through interoception, they agentively become part of the intermedial experience without which they would not be able to recognize the idea of their selves as different from what they were witnessing.

Some notes on the use of the past and present tense in “The Idea of Order at Key West” can further support the claim of the speaker and reader becoming alike to the sea and she in the verbal design of the poem’s vanishing intermedialities – regardless of any interpretive determinations of who they

might really be and what kinds of meanings they might be agentively assigning to their experience. Cleghorn has argued that "It is no accident that once her song is 'made' the present turns into past tense and she disappears from the rest of the poem." (33) There is a number of issues that I disagree with in this claim. The past tense is nearly exclusively used in the first five stanzas, with a couple of exceptions – the "may" in "It may be that in all her phrases stirred" and the directly cited question "Whose spirit is this?". It is rather with the inquiry in the imperative addressed to Ramon Fernandez in the first and third lines of the second to last stanza that there appears a shift from verbs describing single actions in the past tense to verbs involving continuous states in the present participle. In the first five stanzas, most of the present participles, taking in gerunds and other verbal nouns, consist of those analyzed above, while the rest include "fluttering," "vanishing," "striding," and "singing." In the second to last stanza alone, there are seven similar types of words – "singing," "fishing," "tilting," "fixing," and, at the climax of the final line, "arranging," "deepening," and "enchanting." Through the technology of the English grammar, the words of the poem are purposively designed to produce the effect of abandoning past single actions for present continuous states. The intermedial experience of the scene with the sea and she may not be sustained without it vanishing into the agentive identifications of the speaker with himself and, potentially, of the reader with Ramon.

Moreover, contrary to Cleghorn's argument, the song of the she does not disappear from the rest of the poem either – her imagined singing is the objectively medial condition of the speaker and reader being able to recognize their selves in this very fashion. The imagined touch perceptions to do with interoception in the first five stanzas, "grinding," "gasping," "heaving," and "plunging," along with "fluttering" and the kinaesthetically oriented "striding," connect with the present participles of the second to last stanza in repeating the sound of "singing" that gives way to sights that culminate in the "deepening" and "enchanting" night of the final line. This present night is where the senses are engaged with as a whole, from the auditory and visual to the interoceptive, from outside observation to inside gut feeling that vanish into one another to come into being at all. For Cleghorn, the verbal nouns "emphasize symbolic action" (34) but, for me, they amass the imagined sensory perceptions of the poem's scenes in the most materially fundamental fashion possible. Against Cary Wolfe's (2008) claim of the sensory merely providing the "material and perceptual substrate" for interpretive work by which to locate the "meaning of the artwork" (263), it is the task of the theory of intermedial experience to evidence that the sensory cannot be reduced to raw matter on which interpretation operates. In the three-tier model of mediality, the sensory perceptions, non-imagined or imagined, their ways of presenting, and the ideas they excite all occur simultaneously to produce intermedial experience. The fact that there is not a single verb in the final stanza of Stevens's poem – unless one chose to read "rage" in the first line as an imperative – indicates there is no need for verbs in accepting the sustained continuous state of everything vanishing into everything else to come into being. There is no idea of order, of something coming first and another thing next at a place such as Key West, without the imagined sensory perceptions, the purposiveness of the verbal design, and the agentive identifications and interpretive determinations of Stevens's poem.

I will explore one more aspect of intermedial experience in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the effect of the mood. Many of the previous readings have focused on the consequences of the identifying the speaker in this or that way, drawing on the tumultuousness or contemplativeness of the alternating interaction between nature and the human mind. The affective logic of the encounter has not been articulated as much, unless, for the purpose, one adopts the mood of Charles Berger's (2006) idea of the poem expressing "the charge and discharge of energy between sublimation and erotic fixation or regression" (177), Brooke Baeten's (2000) further psychoanalytical twist of "a complex manifestation of artistry and gender difference," or the Romantic ruminations of Allan Chavkin (1982), Douglas Mao (1994), and Albert Gelpi (1995) as stylistic indicators of what Stevens may have aspired for with his verse. In these alternatives, however, the mood fails to rise bottom up from the imagined sensory perceptions presented in words to excite an array of ideas. Instead, the

ideas of Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis and Romantic style descend top down on the verbal and the sensory to saturate the readings from the start. The mood is regulated by the interpretive determination to match the criteria underscoring the chosen perspective, which is a perfectly valid option for the reader agentively seeking to prove a particular point (philosophical, stylistic, thematic, biographical) about “The Idea of Order at Key West.” The theory of intermedial experience, in contrast, turns the method the other way around, and shows how the affective logic scaffolding Stevens’s poem does not depend on ready ideas but rather makes them possible through the verbal design. The reader may wonder about the mood in the final stanza. Is it one of meditative composure, agitated defiance, resigned melancholy, or something altogether else? Each of these instances serve as indications of affectively charged moods of reading the ending of the poem. Choosing one over another does not necessarily compromise the way the reader understands their self as an individual reader, and it does not have to change the interpretation they have come by this time – they are free to read however they want. What the mood does transform is the experience. When the mood is not regulated by the kind of point the reader sets out to prove in advance, the effect of the verbal design is primed. The imagined sensory perceptions presented in words are evidenced as the objectively medial condition for any experience of mood and ideas that depend on them. As in the three-tier model of mediality, the third-tier ideas cannot exist without the first-tier sensory perceptions and second-tier ways of presenting, all of which keep on feeding back to each other in a continuous process, in medium specific ways. The vanishing intermedialities in “The Idea of Order at Key West” demonstrate how the poet designing a verbal poem can employ words with knowledge of producing effects by the technology of language, employing the resources of the medium of poetry to bring to the fore how intermedial experience comes into being and makes agentive identifications and interpretive determinations possible.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this practical experiment has been to complement the variety of past studies on Stevens’s poem, and to demonstrate how reading understood as intermedial experience both differs from understanding reading as interpretation and contains it. The theory is phenomenological rather than semiotic, the implication of which Simon Critchley (1996) has described thus: “World-experience is word-experience” (287). How the speaker and reader are compelled to lose breath by the words, how everything vanishes into everything else by the lack of verbs, and how mood as verbal design transforms the experience of “The Idea of Order at Key West” – they are all part and parcel of the analysis on display. I close by sharing some ideas on the mood of the last two stanzas of the poem as resigned melancholy. As pointed out, there are no verbs at all in the final stanza, unless, through some uncommon syntax, “rage” in the first line were read as an imperative. The scene between the sea and she has been uncontrollable and strongly auditory, now it is over, and there lingers a sense of static and haunting visuality. If the whole poem was indeed read with the sense of hearing ruling over the first five stanzas and sight assuming the role at the ending, the sensory separation of the composed speaker from the enlivening she might be too much for them to handle. The consequence in mood could well be agentively experienced as melancholy, with a touch of defiance flavouring the repeated calls for rage. Yet, as I am suggesting, the sensory palate of the poem does not rely on sight and hearing alone – specifically interoception has an integral part in connecting the first five stanzas with the last two stanzas of the poem, while aroma and taste are also engaged with. It could well be that, at the end, it is the entire sensorium of the five senses, and beyond them, “In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” that instills the intermedial experience of “The Idea of Order at Key West” with vague ideas of what lies “beyond the genius of the sea” and “her voice that made / the sky acutest at its vanishing.” Is it about God and raw nature? Or rather about “proof of human consciousness as culture and art,” as Helen Vendler (2018) has proposed? I would not just side with either position. Instead, as it is for the genius of the sea and for the she who shows the power of

both the sky and her voice to be at their most intense as they vanish, so it is for the speaker and reader to experience their selves most completely as their world vanishes into the words. In this account, such is the source of mediated awareness, of the human and the rest.

*University of Oulu, Finland*

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