

Ecopoetics Groundwork

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I begin with a
bit of a poem, the way a rabbi or
preacher would start with a biblical verse.
Today's sermon is drawn from Wallace Stevens'
massively canonical poem "The Idea of Order at Key
West," in which two men philosophize as they watch and lis-
ten to a woman singing at the seaside, and they are struck by the
sense that. . . there was no world for her Except the one she sang
and, singing, made. The men are trying to come
to terms with what, if anything, the singing
(standing for art, language and consciousness
generally) does to the world—its re- lationship with
the sea, and the question of who dances to whose tune. As
in Stevens' poem "Anecdote of the Jar," in which the simple placement of an empty
glass jar on a hill has somehow organized the wilderness around it and has taken
"dominion everywhere," the effect of her singing is both vanishingly subtle and to-
tal; the sea and the night sky are harmonized, enchanted, and thrown into mystical
perspective by it. What can be the effect of human meaning-making on the world,
and how do language and art participate in shaping it? An open, high-stakes ques-
tion for us in the 21st century, and for ecopoetics. Part of the point of Stevens'
poem seems to be how philosophy— which Stevens codes as masculine—
falls short of art— which he codes as feminine— but the poet,
by folding philosophy back into art in the form
of the poem, manages to
perform a tran- scending syn-
thesis. It's an old Wordswor-
thian move: a kind of dialectical mas-
culinism, starting with the binary distinctions of
culture and nature, singer and sea. The poet
is the woman singing and the men
philosophizing.