

Fictions of Nature in Wallace Stevens and Wang Wei

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Abstract: *Wallace Stevens's vision of nature is characterized by a paradox: while he yearns to circumvent, with the aid of the imagination, the barriers of human consciousness and cultural tradition so as to "return" to a pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic intuition of nature, he is perfectly cognizant that such a mental grasp is itself a fiction created by the human mind. In contrast, Wang Wei seems to always refrain from exploring the intellectual intricacies of the relationship between nature and human consciousness, resting content with his quasi-objective representations of the physical universe. Reading the two great poets alongside can illuminate differences between the conceptions of nature in the two cultural traditions they work with, and give us, by mutual mirroring, glimpses to subtleties in their poems that otherwise do not easily meet our eye.*

Keywords: *Nature; human consciousness; imagination; tradition; fiction*

*An old man sits
In the shadows of a pine tree
In China.
He sees larkspur,
Blue and white,
At the edge of the shadow,
Move in the wind.
His beard moves in the wind.
The pine tree moves in the wind.
Thus water flows
Over weeds.*

The above is the first section of Stevens's early poem "Six Significant Landscapes."¹ Though we cannot assert that he drew inspiration from Chinese poet Wang Wei (701-761CE), who wrote in one of his great poems, "bright moon incandescent in the pines, / crystalline stream slipping across rocks"², Stevens in this poem almost captures the spirit of classical Chinese nature poems. However, the word "thus" betrays his identity as a Western poet, for it reveals a desire to impose human logic on nature, as if the sheer mental force of imagined causation could compel the water to move, even though thematically Stevens seems to suggest here the necessity of diminishing human consciousness if we are to view nature in its pristine purity. Throughout his career, Steven's vision of nature is characterized by a paradox: while he yearns to circumvent, with the aid of the imagination, the barriers of human consciousness and cultural tradition so as to "return" to a pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic intuition of nature as it is, he is perfectly cognizant that such a mental grasp is itself a fiction created by the human mind, that art inevitably invents

nature since we can never confront nature without the mediation of our consciousness. In contrast, ancient Chinese masters, adhering to the Taoist attitude of "forgetting" their egos and immersing their spirit in the ubiquitous circulation of Tao, the inactive yet all-powerful life force of the universe, seldom consciously attempted to interpret nature when composing poetry, and thus found it not difficult to create what Stevens calls "supreme fictions" of it. Wang Wei has especially been revered since his own time because his fictions of nature appear so artless that the Chinese believed nature itself molded his poems. Unlike Stevens, Wang Wei seems to always refrain from exploring the intellectual intricacies of the relationship between nature and human consciousness, resting content with his quasi-objective representations of the physical universe. Reading the two great poets alongside can illuminate differences between the conceptions of nature in the two cultural traditions they work with, and give us, by mutual mirroring, glimpses to subtleties in their poems that otherwise do not easily meet our eye.

1. Nature and Human Consciousness

Even though Stevens does not view tradition in a favorable light, his constant doubt of the authenticity of nature as perceived by human beings is a typical Western stance. As early as Plato, the material existence of nature was already questioned. The visible world was reduced by Plato to a mere shadow of the world of Ideas. Throughout Western history, the mainstream tendency, both in religion and in philosophy, has been to diminish, even totally refuse to acknowledge, the validity of sensual experience. Stevens's skepticism shares with this

tradition a mistrust of the senses, but differs in that he, in most cases, does not begrudge an actual existence to nature. His emphasis is placed on the impossibility, given the restriction of a human perspective, of accurately perceiving nature. Once we behold nature, it ceases to be naked, but is seen as invested with human thoughts and emotions. In this sense, the very act of perception becomes an act of invention. However convincingly it represents nature, a work of art can only be a fiction.

Stevens is well aware that he is predestined to live in an “invented world”³, but his craving for “things as they are”⁴ often impels him to create some highly self-conscious myths. In “Nuances of a Theme by Williams,” he apostrophizes a star:

*Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses
You in its own light.
Be not Chimera of morning,
Half-man, half-star.
Be not an intelligence,
Like a widow's bird
Or an old horse⁵.*

He longs to see a star that is simply and purely a star, not a symbol of light, or of wisdom, or a sign of religious significance. This ideal is better embodied in his late poem “Of Mere Being,” in which he envisions a palm “beyond the last thought” and a gold-feathered bird singing “without human meaning, without human feeling.”⁶ But paradoxically, such crystalline beauty is achieved only after laborious cerebration and conscious human intervention.

Stevens comes closer to a supreme fiction of nature in his less self-conscious moments. The opening section of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” successfully gives the reader an illusion of regarding nature itself: “Among twenty snowy mountains, / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird.”⁷ To be at one with nature, as advocated in and evidenced by Stevens’s poetry, we have to momentarily suppress our consciousness, that is, lull to sleep our emotions and intellectual faculties. Instead of humanizing nature, we need to integrate into nature by transforming ourselves into a natural object, an empty site where phenomena unfold without human intervention, where nature reveals itself in crystal transparency. It is for this reason that images of sleep hold a unique place in Stevens’ poems. As J. Hillis Miller comments, “Sleep is the beginning, the radiant candor of pure mind without any content, mind as it is when it faces a bare unimagined reality or as it is when it has completed the work of decreation and is ready ‘in an ever-changing, calmest unity’ to begin imagining again.”⁸

In “The Snow Man,” Stevens presents this state of slumber succinctly: “One must have a mind of winter / To regard the frost and boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow.” The “mind of winter” is void, passive, uncontaminated, free of emotion, ensuring that it will not “think of any misery” when hearing “the sound of the wind”, remaining impervious to infiltrations of ethical associations, and able to behold “[n]othing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Only when the beholder seems to have lost his ability to see and become “nothing himself” can he finally filter out everything added by human consciousness and see the original appearance of nature, even the ultimate nothingness behind it⁹. Thus to be privileged with a glimpse of nature as it is, the beholder has to pay the price of turning himself into an object, turning a man into a snowman. But significantly, the title of the poem is “The Snow Man,” not “The Snowman.” A snow man after all is not a snowman, a lifeless thing, but a human being hoping and striving to enter the role of a snowman, a man who has a mind of snow. As hinted by the space between “Snow” and “Man,” the chasm between the two is unbridgeable.

What Stevens calls for here is a neutral, almost non-human perspective. This Wang Wei unselfconsciously achieved in his late poems. The first poet landscape painter of China, he introduced techniques of traditional Chinese painting into his poetry. Ancient Chinese artists did not adopt perspective, which implies a human-centeredness. They often spent months even years in some mountain and then produced a panoramic work that was intended to give an overall representation of the scenery. More significantly, human beings depicted in their works rarely obtrude; they are like trees or stones, merging naturally into the landscapes.

To the Chinese mind, nature and humanity are never polarities. Even though Taoism, the only half-metaphysical school of ancient China, worships Tao, the supreme creative force of the universe, it is believed to be a material, though invisible, entity rather than a spiritual presence. Zhuangzi (3rd century BCE), whose philosophy has been the major inspiration for Chinese landscape painting and nature poetry, advocates that we should regard ourselves as on equal footing, since Tao has no bias for the human species, with everything else in the world. Furthermore, the process of logical thinking brings with it an array of conceptual and value distinctions that are essentially arbitrary and futile, having no counterparts in the natural world¹⁰. Therefore, the wisest approach to nature is to forego the intellect, that most cherished property of human beings. As philosopher Shao Yong (1011-1077 CE) puts it, “To observe things in terms of those things: this is to follow one’s nature [*xing*]. But to observe things in term of the self: this is to follow one’s feelings [*qing*]. The nature is impartial and enlightened; the feelings are partial and

blind.”¹¹

In “Deer Park,” Wang Wei successfully effaces his own presence from the scenery: “No one seen. Among empty mountains, / hints of drifting voices, faint, no more. / Entering these deep woods, late sunlight / Flares on green moss again, and rises.”¹² A trap into which Western translators of this poem often fall is to supply an “I” in their renditions, but the original is detached from the perspective of any persona, floating, as it were, in perceiver-less perceptions. The word “empty” corresponds to *kong* in Chinese and *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit. Influenced by native Taoism, Chinese intellectuals tend to regard *śūnyatā* as a state of mind or a way of observing worldly fluctuations, rather than a metaphysical summary of the nature of the universe. Wang Wei’s poem is empty in that it is devoid of any emotional response and intellectual engagement, as if everything has been recorded by an automatic camera. We seem to forget that it is a poem, a human creation; what absorbs us is simply the scenery. Yet the choice of details and the structural control displays the ingenuity of a poet-painter. More importantly, the very effort at self-effacement reminds us of the reining in of wandering thoughts that takes place in Taoist and Buddhist meditations.

At such moments, even if there is human presence, it is hushed by, and absorbed into, a sense of cosmic unity: “It is dusk—heaven and earth vast silence, / mind all idleness a spacious river shares.”¹³ In “Visiting Provision-Fragrance Monastery”, this freedom for things to reveal themselves and the paradoxical power of stillness are given fuller expression:

*Provision-Fragrance beyond knowing,
I travel miles into cloud-hidden peaks,
follow deserted trails past ancient trees.
A bell sounds, lost in mountain depths.
Cragged rock swallows a creek’s murmur,
Sunlight’s color cold among pines. Here
on lakeshores, water empty, dusk spare,
Chan stillness masters poison dragons¹⁴.*

The “I” in the poem serves to string together frames of landscapes, but never intrudes on the natural scenes. The shifting focal points are always on the things themselves, whose combinations, contrasts and changes are presented as the real “events” of the work. Even though *Chan* (the Chinese word for Zen) hints at a human religion and culture, it exercises its power as a pervasive “stillness” that is hardly distinguishable from the self-contained physical world. The human intellect, through abdication and inaction, achieves a sensuous enlightenment, dispensing with the logical imperatives and emotional self-resistances indispensable with

Stevens.

2.The Nature of Nature

There are moments when Stevens almost believes that he can arrive at a true communion with nature, but his dominant fear is that the chasm between nature and human consciousness is impassable. With the presence of this opaque boundary, it is natural for him to suspect that nature may be hostile and so to suffer from a sense of insecurity. Once human beings realize that the world is not really anthropocentric, and that they have been acting like “A Rabbit King of the Ghosts”¹⁵ living with delusions in a universe full of latent threats, they may well be overwhelmed by an inexorable fear. In “Domination of Black,” Stevens writes:

*Out of the window,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks.
I felt afraid.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks¹⁶.*

In this poem, the fear that springs from the indecipherability of nature is compounded with a sense of doom that even the gigantic universe itself will come to an end. Though in his middle career, Stevens largely suppressed this haunting fear and concentrated on the human creative power, whatever the external world was like, it obstinately re-emerged in his late poems. In “Auroras of Autumn,” he is again drawn into his accustomed turbulence. Absorbed in the natural spectacle, he doubts that the power of the human imagination, however great, could confront, let alone incorporate, the immense universe. All the domestic warmth and comfort, all human attempts at building an illusory happy world, seen in this light, become insignificant and desperate, “a tragedy.”¹⁷ He cannot reconcile the two polarities; he has to invoke his imagined “rabbi” to contrive “balance,” “the vital, the never-failing genius.”¹⁸

Ancient Chinese poets were immune to such intellectual angst regarding nature. In Wang Wei’s case, nature was always a friendly presence, healing all the wounds he had received in the human realm. The catastrophic An-Shi Rebellion (755-763 CE), which almost cost Wang Wei his life¹⁹, never cast its shadow on his nature poems. In his eyes, while the human world is full of vicissitudes, nature is a haven of stability, repose and beauty. The cyclic change of nature for him is the very form of its eternity. In “Hearing an Oriole at the Palace,” he writes, “We wander life, no way back.

Even a simple / birdcall starts us dreaming of home again.”²⁰ Even at this early stage in his life when the *cursus honorum* yet beckoned, he was already harboring nostalgia for a simple life in woods. This divided mindset is typical of ancient Chinese intellectuals. Despite the imperatives of socially oriented Confucianism to serve the prince and benefit the community, there is a tradition among them to dismiss all worldly affairs as empty and vain, compared with the simple but essential pleasures associated with nature. While they were conscientious, even religious in their zeal to help the prince achieve a golden reign, a hermit’s dream always glistened in the back of their minds. Wang Wei thus comforts a friend disillusioned with politics (“A Farewell”):

*Off our horses, I offer you wine,
ask where you’re going. You say
your work has come to nothing,
you’ll settle at South Mountain.
Once you set out, questions end
and white clouds keep on and on*²¹.

Nature, in its wordless eloquence, is the ultimate source of consolation and strength.

Having known the futilities and dangers of political careers, Wang Wei lived a secluded life in his late years. He comments on his hermitage in an epistle: “In these twilight years, I love tranquility / alone. Mind free of all ten thousand affairs, / self-regard free of all those grand schemes, / I return to my old forest, knowing empty.” To people asking about “the inner pattern behind failure and success,” he answers, “Fishing song carries into shoreline depths.”²² Nature is the realm of freedom, where human definitions of failure and success do not apply, where meanings we impose on our secular aspirations evaporate. Fishermen in the Chinese literary tradition represent a detached wisdom, an enlightened perception of the vanity of pursuits after wealth, power and fame, a perfect sense of belonging in the natural world.

In “Whole-South Mountain Hermitage,” Wang Wei describes his carefree life:

*I cared enough for Way in middle age,
so now I’m settled beside South Mountain.
Setting out alone in old age, emptiness
knowing itself here in such splendor;
I often hike up to where streams end,
gaze into a time newborn clouds rise.
If I meet some old-timer in these woods,
we laugh and talk, all return forgotten*²³.

Stevens could never feel so much at ease with

nature, with his intellectual intensity and under the shadow of a long metaphysical tradition. It is interesting to note that the poet in the above poem enjoys talking with “some old-timer,” maybe a farmer or woodcutter. Though he may not share a Taoist-Buddhist belief with Wang Wei, the common bond with nature enables them to communicate without difficulty.

3. Nature and Art

If nature is felt as the ultimate haven for humanity, any dichotomy between human perception of nature and nature itself is downplayed, and the subjectivity of the artist seems to be taken over by a “common” consciousness that envelops both the natural setting and the human presence in it. Art ceases to be a mirror held up to nature, but becomes, as it were, a manifestation willed and filled by the very soul of nature. When another great poet Su Shi (1037-1101 CE) praises Wang Wei’s painting and poetry as containing and illuminating each other, he is marveling at the ability of this 7th century poet to know the “heart” of nature, and to reveal it equally extraordinarily in two art forms, in a way nature would have had itself revealed. A quintessential short poem picked by Su Shi reads: “Bramble stream, white rocks jutting out. / Heaven cold, red leaves scarce. / Up here where the mountain road ends, / sky stains robes empty kingfisher-blue.”²⁴ It is amazing to see how Wang Wei manages, in a minimalist manner, to penetrate to the peculiar spirit of a late-autumn landscape, especially its rich, fluid, mysterious palette and the expressive stillness of tactile diversity.

Like other ancient Chinese poets, however, Wang Wei is as a rule not interested in meticulous accuracy of detail when depicting nature; in order to capture the essence of nature, he usually adopts as his way of representation an impressionistic juxtaposition of images of poetic intrigue. In “Whole-South Mountains,” he ambitiously aims to re-create the area in its entirety:

*Star mountains for a deep-sky capital, these
Great-Origin peaks stretch to the far seas.
Returned to white cloud, my gaze is whole;
in azure haze, sight empties nonbeing utterly.
Our star-lands orbit around this central peak,
valleys all shifting shadow and light. Here,
If I wanted human company for the night,
I’d cross water, visit a woodcutter, no more*²⁵.

While he excludes, in his accustomed manner, redundant emotional or intellectual engagement with the scenery, the excellent descriptive skills, as of painting and cinematography, convince us that the poem is not an objective description of the mountains, but an artistic invention of Wang Wei the poet-painter. This distinction

between art and nature certainly does not bother him. For him, art is part of nature.

In "Bamboo-Midst Cottage," art (here music), like bamboo and the moon, nothing alien or external, pulsates in a quiet yet lively microcosm: "Sitting alone in silent bamboo dark, / I play a *qin*²⁶, settle into breath chants. / In these forest depths no one knows, / this moon come bathing me in light."²⁷ If one's life is in tune with the rhythms of nature, every object, every trivial detail, every uneventful moment, is transformed into ongoing drama by an acute sense of its beauty. Wang Wei thus addresses a rock: "Dear stone, little platter alongside cascading streamwater, / willow branches are sweeping across my winecup again. / And if you say spring wind explains nothing, tell me why, / when it scatters blossoms away, it blows them here to me?"²⁸ This friendly banter crosses the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, just as the frontiers between art, nature and life temporarily disappear in his poems at moments of intense perceptual involvement: "Faint shadow, a house, and traces of rain. / In courtyard depths, the gate's still closed / past noon. That lazy, I gaze at moss until / its azure-green comes seeping into robes."²⁹ In this empty trance, the moss seems to have been summoned by the spell of the poet's oblivion into the interiority of human sensation, with its color, as in a painting, invading and occupying the motionless human figure.

For Stevens, art and nature are more in tension than in harmony. As a way out of his obsession with the division between nature and the human mind, he devotes himself to celebrating the creative power of human beings. He is aware that "[he] cannot bring a world quite around," and that "things as they are changed upon the blue guitar" ("The Man with Blue Guitar")³⁰, but he seems to believe that we at least can create another world in works of art. In "The Idea of Order at Key West," the fact that we cannot replicate nature in art is not taken as dismaying but encouraging:

*It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hours its solitude.
She was the singer 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*³¹.

Art acts as a constructive force that brings the chaotic fragments of the world, which are alien and unmanageable, into unified wholes of order and harmony, which are within human control. Thus art mollifies the human fear in a universe that is largely inexplicable to them, and can serve as a substitute for

crumbling religion in providing a spiritual haven. In "Anecdotes of the Jar," the human utensil, a symbol of art, even subdues the wilderness and "[takes] dominion everywhere."³²

For Stevens, an important function of art is that it helps him to be reconciled with death. By rejecting orthodox Christianity, Stevens also deprived himself of the comfort of a promised heaven. The unsatisfied human desire for immortality had tormented him for a long time before he found the solution in art. In "The Rock" he suggests that, though death will obliterate our bodily existence, poetry as ambassador of human consciousness can resist the tyranny of time:

*These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man.
These are a cure of the ground and of themselves,

In the predicate that there is nothing else.
They bud and bloom and bear fruit without change.
They are more than leaves that cover the barren rock*³³.

When a poet ceases to be, his poems transform from subjective projections of his mind into objects of contemplation; for the reader, they become purely part of the external world, part of nature. The consciousness of the poet is revived whenever a reader approaches his works and engages in a cross-time dialogue. In this way, Stevens seems assured, immortality is accessible to him. However, he forgets that the material on which his poems are written or printed is subjected to change, that many masterpieces have been lost simply because natural or social catastrophes destroyed the manuscripts or books.

Although Stevens worships the remedial powers of the imagination for human spirituality, his conception of this mental faculty, derived from his own understanding of nature, differs considerably from the traditional Orphic version of it. Orpheus in Greek mythology, as archetype of poets, was able to move animals, plants and even lifeless rocks, to turn the gloom of Hades into a dreamland of art. In the history of Western esthetics, he represents a human-centered, humanizing imagination, for which the visible world (nature) is merely the projection and embodiment of the invisible world (human consciousness). Stevens does not subscribe to this assumption, claiming, "It is important to believe that the visible is the equivalent of the invisible, and once we believe it, we have destroyed the Imagination, that is to say, we have destroyed the false imagination, the false conception of the imagination as some incalculable *vates* within us, unhappy Rodomontade."³⁴ For Stevens, the *vates* is the Orphic bard, always inclined to mold nature according to human will, but the true artistic imagination must overcome this humanizing tendency and strive

towards the abstract.

The first section of “Notes towards a Supreme Fiction,” his masterpiece, is titled “It Must Be Abstract.” The word “abstract” comes from the Latin verb *abstrahere*, which denotes “to drag away.” For Stevens, “dragging away” means stripping human concepts and perceptions of those historical, cultural and linguistic sediments hidden therein. Before eliminating these prior and pre-conditioning fictions, we can never attain “a supreme fiction.” In this poem, human ancestor Adam serves as the symbol of the false imagination, dubbed by Stevens “the father of Descartes,” the French philosopher commonly hailed as the icon of rationalism. Owing to Adam’s inescapable presence, “[t]he first idea was not our own.” As Descartes builds his whole conceptual edifice on the foundation of *cogito*, so Adam erred in the very beginning by succumbing to human centrism. Since the true imagination ought to be pre-historical, pre-logical and even pre-linguistic, Adam’s naming of things was already an act of distorting nature: “Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named.”³⁵ As Robert Harrison argues, even before his disobedience to God’s edict, Adam had already committed an original sin, “not the sin of transgression by which he lost the garden but the sin of denomination by which he took possession of it in the first place.”³⁶ To find the true imagination, we need to move back beyond Adam, to return to a stage where nature was not yet treated as an extension of human concepts: “There was a myth before the myth began, / Venerable and articulate and complete. // From this the poem springs.”³⁷

4. Nature and Tradition

Stevens realizes that apart from the limitation of personal bias, cultural heritage is also responsible for our inaccurate perception of nature, as it is constantly molding our mentality. He suffers from an anxiety that he cannot, as Emerson puts it, “enjoy an original relation to the universe.”³⁸ He is suffocated by the sense that he is looking at nature through the eyes of the dead, and resents the tradition that weighs down on his free imagination. In “The Man on the Dump,” he implicitly compares the literary tradition to a dump:

*One feels the purifying change. One rejects
The trash.*

*That’s the moment when the moon creeps up
To the bubbling of bassoons. That’s the time
One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.
Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
(All its images are in the dump) and you see
As a man (not like an image of man),
You see the moon rise in the empty sky*³⁹.

Stevens reminds us that, when we think that we are beholding the moon, what we really see is but a mixture of the *images* of the moon poets in the past have created. Only if we reject these images as trash can we see “the moon [come] up as the moon...in the empty sky” that is not populated by ghosts of the past. He is tired of all the second-hand experiences, the bulky interpretations that have accumulated in thousands of years. As a poet imbued with modern spirit, he longs to break new ground for poetry and establish his own domain. In his masterpiece “Notes towards a Supreme Fiction,” he expresses his fervent wish: “You must become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it.”⁴⁰

Yet Stevens cannot “become an ignorant man again”; he is too intellectual for that. Paradoxically, his very urge for circumventing culture so as to return to nature is itself a product of culture. In it we can at least trace the influences of three cultural factors. The first is modern scientism. During Stevens’ lifetime, great breakthroughs were achieved in the natural sciences, pushing their frontiers into the subatomic level. The prestige of the humanities, in contrast, suffered serious blows, resulting in a crisis for these traditional disciplines. In order to prove their worthiness in a changed world, they also moved in the same direction, aiming at objectivity and precision venerated in science. Husserl’s phenomenology, Russian Formalism and the Linguistic Turn of the humanities all bore witness to this trend. Under such circumstances, it was no surprise for Stevens to dream of grasping nature objectively and purely through the artistic imagination. Steinman points out, after analyzing elements of Planck’s physics and Whitehead’s scientific philosophy, that Stevens’ artistic visions were verifiably influenced by the natural sciences⁴¹.

Stevens’ concept of nature also grew out of the American nation’s persistent myth-making. Harrison believes that in disposition Stevens is most close to Thoreau⁴². Similar to Stevens’ emphasis on a pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic original state, Thoreau regarded the morning as a symbol for the source of spiritual awakening: “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep.”⁴³ For Thoreau, the morning is the moment when the soul reawakes and reestablishes living links with the world. Such a complex for priority is deeply engrained in the American psyche. As Harold Bloom writes in *The American Religion*, “Americans regard priority as superiority, doubtless because we are the belated Western nation, the Evening Land of Western culture.”⁴⁴ For this reason, American culture places great value on internal awakening achieved in religious or quasi-religious practices. They are attracted by the

prospect of retrieving a sense of priority, lost through their historical belatedness, by tapping the pre-history, pre-universe existence of God. This space within their mind, this pure realm transcending time, is inseparably connected in American culture to images of wilderness or nature. Stevens' enterprise of pursuing art in a nature free of human consciousness is powered by the same psychological dynamic that triggers Thoreau's endeavor to regenerate spirit by a hermit's life in the woods.

Viewed in a larger cultural framework, Stevens' hankering after something pure and absolute fits nicely into the metaphysical tradition of the West. For millennia, it has been the dream of countless philosophers, poets and artists to arrive at the ultimate Being that is absolute, eternal, independent of all the fluctuations of the physical world. Stevens is different in this: he removes the religious and ethical accretions from the dream, and affirms the inaccessibility of pure nature, assigning to poetry the role of mediating between passive, apathetic nature and human beings' passionate pursuit for absoluteness. With his imaginative richness and rational vigor, his poetry creates for us a distinctively Stevensian world, much more compressed, bare and dispassionate than the world in traditional Western poetry.

Compared with Stevens, Wang Wei's position on tradition is more temperate. Even a subtle reader can hardly detect in his nature poems any marked deviation from those anterior to his time. Yet he is an innovator both technically and thematically. Most poets before him in whose works nature features prominently took nature as the inherent setting for human activities, echoing the tenet, embraced by all major schools of thought in China, of the mutual activation and mirroring between nature and humanity. But they tend either to show an emotional attachment to nature, like Tao Qian (352-427 CE), or to be carried away by their eagerness to enlighten readers on Taoist-Buddhist truisms, like Xie Lingyun (385-433 CE). Wang Wei, however, is both intense and detached; his insights rarely obtrude. Silent parallels between natural scenery and states of mind, and ingeniously orchestrated presentation inspired by mountains and streams, help to convey his message.

In "Azure Creek," after a meandering boat journey, the poet arrives at his destination: "My mind's perennial form is idleness, / and the same calm fills a river's clarity, / so I'll just linger here on this flat stone, / dangle my fishing line--and stay, stay."⁴⁵ All of a sudden, as illumined by lightning, yet all too naturally, as following the inevitable course of a river, we are overwhelmed by a sense of perfect sympathy between the purpose of our existence and that of nature, the nostalgia and resolution at the end of the poem pointing at once to the physical here and now, and to the metaphysical beyond. But any

symbolist or allegorical reading would fail to do justice to the unassuming narration of the work, as realistically, it is certainly legitimate for anyone to indulge in such temporary luxury of forgetful tranquility after a tiring trip and surrounded by an alluring landscape, and as any laborious interpretation automatically violates the "perennial form" of "idleness." Similarly, when he is gazing out from a terrace, the poet suddenly glimpses something lurking in the view: "In farewell on the terrace, we gaze / across boundless plains and rivers. / It is dusk. Birds in flight returning, / travelers setting out—it never ends."⁴⁶ The event is commonplace—saying farewell to a friend, and the scene is ordinary—birds returning to their nests, but when they are juxtaposed, and when Wang Wei ends the poem with "it never ends," a picture of eternal tragedy emerges. Seen in this light, human beings, with Sisyphean labors and Odyssean wanderings imposed on themselves, whatever pleasant names they call them, are essentially exiles in nature, striving against the universal law of home-coming. But even without such philosophizing, the poem still stands as a moving farewell piece.

When he makes more explicit reference to Buddhist doctrine, Wang Wei differs from his predecessors in his ability to dissolve it in his poems in a homely, effortless manner. His "Off-Hand Poem" is a best example:

*I'm ancient, lazy about making poems.
There's no company here but old age.
I no doubt painted in some former life,
roamed the delusion of words in another,
and habits linger. Unable to get free,
I somehow became known in the world,
but my most fundamental name remains
this mind still here beyond all knowing⁴⁷.*

While recognizable Buddhist motifs of *samsāra* (reincarnation) and *sūnyatā* (emptiness) thread the poem, the witty, self-deriding tone and the colloquial language give this miniature narrative of incarnations a grace that cannot be found in most literature inspired by that faith. Interestingly, although he suggests that his identity as a poet is ultimately a fiction and delusion in the ceaseless cycle of rebirths and fluctuating chances, Wang Wei leaves us with the impression that he is not ready to sever his affectionate ties with art or life, a revealing print of his native Confucianism. It is also owing to the influence of another Chinese tradition of Taoism that he, a devout Buddhist in his years of creative peak, seems never to relegate manifestations of nature, not even his own representations of them, to the realm of emptiness as understood by orthodox Buddhism. Wang Wei silently revolutionized Chinese nature poetry. He opened a new vista for later poets, especially those drawn to Zen Buddhism. Yet those Zen poets are more self-conscious

because they like working Zen concepts into their works. With his disarming fictions of nature, Wang Wei replaced for the Chinese *the* moon, to borrow Stevens's metaphor, with his own version of it.

While Wang Wei's serenity helps him, arguably, come closer to a genuine communion with nature and perfect his artistry in representation, it restricts his imaginative power and intellectual sophistication. Stevens, on the other hand, fully exploits his own imagination as he is dismayed at the dichotomy between nature and human consciousness, but can never quite feel at ease with nature. Perhaps the "rabbi" whom Stevens calls upon to "contrive a whole"⁴⁸ should be able to combine the talent of the two artists and the strengths of the two traditions, at once immersed in nature with amiable humility and celebrating his creative energy with confidence, keeping an intellectual awareness without suppressing his/her instinctual responses to nature. This is certainly too idealistic, but it is an ideal worth striving for.

¹ Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind* [hereafter cited as *PEM*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990, p. 15.

² Wang Wei, "Autumn Twilight, Dwelling among Mountains," in David Hinton, trans., *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei* [hereafter cited as *WW*]. New York: New Directions, 2006, p. 76.

³ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* [hereafter cited as *CP*]. New York: Knopf, 1954, p. 380.

⁴ Stevens, *CP*, p. 424.

⁵ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 39.

⁶ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 398.

⁷ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 20.

⁸ J. H. Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1965, p. 269.

⁹ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 54.

¹⁰ Chuang-Tzu, "Khi Wu Lun, or 'The Adjustment of Controversies,'" in James Legge, trans. and ed., *The Texts of Taoism: The Tao Te Ching, the Writings of Chuang-Tzu, and the Thai-Shang, Tractate of Actions and Their Retributions*. New York: Julian Press, 1959, pp. 224-245.

¹¹ Qtd. in Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 2. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983, p. 467.

¹² *WW*, p. 40.

¹³ "On a Wall Tower at River-North City," *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei*, p. 4.

¹⁴ *WW*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 150.

¹⁶ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 14.

¹⁷ Stevens, *CP*, p. 415.

¹⁸ Stevens, *CP*, p. 420.

¹⁹ The rebel army stormed the capital before many officials, including Wang Wei, could make their escape. They were either murdered or, like Wang Wei, served in the rebel regime under coercion. After the rebellion was quelled, Wang Wei was charged along with others for treason, but he was finally pardoned with the intervention of his brother, premier at that time, and extenuated by a poem written during rebel occupation that proved his loyalty to the Tang court.

²⁰ *WW*, p. 10.

²¹ *WW*, p. 29.

²² "In Reply to Vice-Magistrate Zhang," in *WW*, p. 97.

²³ *WW*, p. 90.

²⁴ "In the Mountains," in *WW*, p. 91.

²⁵ *WW*, p.33.

²⁶ Ch'in, a seven-stringed classical Chinese instrument.

²⁷ *WW*, p. 49.

²⁸ *WW*, p. 13.

²⁹ "The Way It Is," in *WW*, p. 96.

³⁰ Stevens, *CP*, p. 165.

³¹ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 98.

³² Stevens, *CP*, p. 76.

³³ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 362.

³⁴ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. London: Faber, 1951, p. 61.

³⁵ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 383.

³⁶ R. P. Harrison, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." *New Literary History* Vol.30, no.3 (1999), p. 663.

³⁷ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 383.

³⁸ R. W. Emerson, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960, p. 21.

³⁹ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 163.

⁴⁰ Stevens, *PEM*, p. 207.

⁴¹ Lisa Steinman, *Made in America: Science, Technology and American Modernist Poets*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987, pp. 133-168.

⁴² Harrison, p. 663.

⁴³ H. D. Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. New York: Norton, 1966, p. 61.

⁴⁴ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion*. New York: Simon, 1992, p. 260.

⁴⁵ *WW*, p. 85.

⁴⁶ "Gazing out from the Upper Terrace, Farewell to Li," in *WW*, p. 18.

⁴⁷ *WW*, p. 100.

⁴⁸ Stevens, *CP*, 420.

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