

◎ 新人文话语丛书 ◎

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[**Abstract**] Living in an age of disbelief, Wallace Stevens takes up the challenge of a poet in the modern world to search for order in chaos. This book approaches Stevens and his poems in an attempt to study how he employs his own imagination to create “the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it ” and to give to life “the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. ”

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Acknowledgements

This book began five years ago when, in preparing my doctoral dissertation, I first noticed the importance of the function of the Jar put upon the hill of Tennessee. Wallace Stevens once said that “the reading of a poem should be an experience.” If I am permitted to change the statement slightly, I would add that writing a book like this and expressing acknowledgements to those individuals and units who deserve the author’s thanks and pleasure in the poet should also be an experience.

Professor and Dr. Jiang Hongxin introduced me to Stevens when I was a Ph. D. candidate in Hunan Normal University and it was him who guided me in my early work and doctoral dissertation writing. Professor Jiang offered generous advice, purposeful direction and good humor as well in directing my dissertation that laid a good foundation for this project. I am grateful to other teachers as Professor Xiao Minghan, Professor Ning Yizhong, Professor Jiang Jiansong, Professor Huang Zhending, Professor Wang Fengzhen, Professor Liu Jun and Professor Wai – lim Yip. Their insightful comments help me to clarify key points in my argument. My special



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A Note on the Text and Abbreviations

Grateful Acknowledgement is made to Literary Classics of the United States, Inc. , for permission to copy material from *Collected Poetry and Prose* by Wallace Stevens, copyright 1997 by Literary Classics of the United States, Inc. ; *Letters of Wallace Stevens* by Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens, copyright 1966 by Holly Stevens; *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* by Wallace Stevens, copyright 1951 by Wallace Stevens; *Opus Posthumous* by Wallace Stevens, revised, enlarged, and corrected edition by Milton J. Bates, copyright 1989 by Holly Stevens; and *Souvenir and Prophecies* by Holly Stevens, copyright 1966, 1976 by Holly Stevens.

The following abbreviations are used to refer to Wallace Stevens' works cited throughout the text:

CP *Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York, 1997.

L *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Selected and Edited by Holly Stevens. London, 1966.

NA *The Necessary Angel*. London, 1951.

OP *Opus Posthumous*. Edited by Milton Bates. New York, 1990.

SP *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*. Edited by Holly Stevens. New York, 1977.



Stevens as a Man and a Poet

Poetry as manifestation of the relationship that man creates between himself & reality.

Wallace Stevens, *OP* 204

The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness.

Wallace Stevens, "Adagia"

No one can offer an easy biographical piece about Wallace Stevens. He was born four years after Robert Frost, whom he does not resemble, and born before Pound and Eliot, who do not resemble him. His life presents, like that of Emerson and those of most literary figures in the history of the world literature, an image of attentive boisterousness in youth and boisterous discrimination in age. Not much is known about his life in either period, and perhaps not much is to be known. ^① Richard Ellmann said that he resembled his Crispin, who is the hero of his long poem "The Comedian as the Letter C," and whom he described in his own writing as "an every day man who lives a life without the slightest adventure except that



he lives it in a poetic atmosphere as we all do" (*L*, 778).

Wallace Stevens was slow in his poetic development, or we say that he was a late starter in putting his poetry before the public. That first "damned serious affairs" *Harmonium* did not appear until 1923 when its author was exactly forty – four years old. Various explanations have been set forth to account for this genius of poetry, including his family life, poetic ambition and business ability. Stevens himself admitted that he determined to be a writer when he was a small boy. This ambition was enhanced by the time he became a student at Harvard. Holly Stevens, the beloved daughter of Stevens, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, once said, "Wallace, whose ambition was to be a writer, enrolled at Harvard as a special student in the fall of 1897" (*L*, 13). Born in 1879 in Reading, Stevens before the turn of the twentieth century attended Harvard where he became friends with George Santayana, a poet – philosopher who encouraged him with his writing. Stevens also studied William James whose explorations of mankind's need to believe in a higher order—a problem that had become acute following Nietzsche's declaration that, in the post Darwinian universe, "God was dead" —had a profound impact upon Stevens' views. As a man, his desire is "to live in the world but outside existing conceptions of it" (*OP*, 164) and as a poet, he takes to "musing the obscure" (*CP*, 88) by "the extension of the mind beyond the range of the mind," and "the projection of reality beyond reality" (*NA*, 171) —Wallace Stevens obviously sets for both himself and his reader a difficult task. That is why his poems are often labeled as "vague," "obscure" and "difficult." Though much of his poetry, both early and late, remains difficult and at times obscure, Stevens



is one of the greatest poets I have ever read. In what Sainte – Beuve^② says :

For us the greatest poet is the one who in his works has given the reader the most to imagine and to dream about, who has moved him to be himself a poet. The greatest poet is not the one whose work is the most accomplished; he is the one who suggests the most, with whom at first one does not grasp entirely all that he has meant to say and express, and who leaves one much to ask, to explain, to study, much for one to finish.^③

It is true that Stevens in his works has given us the most to imagine and to dream about. In his lecture “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens clearly points out that: “What makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (NA, 31). Though he largely ignored the literary world and he did not receive widespread recognition until the publication of his *Collected Poems* in 1954, Stevens was critically regarded as one of the most significant American poets of the 20th century. Early critics as William Van O'Connor, Roy Harvey Pearce, Randall Jarrell, G. S. Fraser, Louis Martz, Frank Kermode, Yvor Winters, R. P. Blackmur, taken as a group, have all focused on what is, for Stevens at least, the central issue, that is, “The theory of poetry is the theory of life,” which indicates that “reality is the central reference for poetry,” and the role of the poet “is to help people to live their lives.”



Their view places Stevens in the romantic tradition, and what they have done is crucial in the evaluation of Stevens' position in American poetry. J. Hillis Miller goes beyond the early critics, saying that "A new kind of poetry has appeared in our day, a poetry which grows out of romanticism, but goes beyond it."^④ Miller calls Stevens a poet of reality, and he admits that it is impossible to find out one single theory in Stevens' poetry, because it is just like the reality which is a "jungle".

Besides J. Hillis Miller, there are some other critics who interpret Stevens' poetry from diverse perspectives. Harold Bloom, for example, has emphasized Stevens' long poems and sequences, and their complex relations both to one another and to the work of Stevens' unacknowledged precursors: Wordsworth, Keats, Emerson and especially, Whitman. Criticism of Wallace Stevens, in 1980s and 1990s, has been enriched by a series of works addressing the more historical and political dimensions of Stevens' poetry. In 1984, Fredric Jameson wrote a seminal essay starting this trend. Following Jameson, Frank Lentricchia wrote two books, one is *Ariel and the Police*, the other is named *Modernist Quartet*. In 1991, James Longenbach produced his *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, stressing Stevens' actual encounters with events: presidential elections, revolutions, wars, strikes, taxes and other historical and political events. In the same year, Alan Filreis wrote his *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, focusing upon the poet's political concerns between 1939 and 1955, particularly the poet's response to World War II. In his 1994 *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties & Literary Radicalism*, Alan Filreis goes back to the 1930s and makes a major to our understanding of the



literary culture of that era by demonstrating how left – wing radicals knew and appreciated Modernism more than has generally been recognized. In addition, Gyorgyi Voros, in his 1997 *Notations of the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, from a new perspective, reread Stevens' work as a modernist Nature poetry that reimagines the Nature and culture dialectic and seeks to reinstate the forgotten term — Nature or, to use Stevens' term, "reality."

Criticism of Wallace Stevens, at the very beginning of the new century, has set off a new upsurge. In 2000, Angus J. Cleghorn published his *Wallace Stevens' Poetics: The Neglected Rhetoric*, investigating Stevens' language skills through analyzing his long poem of the Depression, "Owl's Clover" which is usually rejected by the reader. In the same year, Theodore Sampson contributed his *A Cure of the Mind: The Poetics of Wallace Stevens*, making his effort to delve into Steven's poetic mind answering some difficult questions about Stevens' poetry. Sampson focuses his central argument on Stevens' long poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." In 2001, George S. Lensing wrote the book *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*, observing an interesting phenomenon that Stevens writes so many poems of autumn, winter, spring, and summer, which few critics even mention it. In 2003, Jacqueline Vaught Brogan's *The Violence Within, the Violence Without* came out. In this book, Brogan describes Stevens as an ethically responsible poet, especially in relationship to the political climate of World War II, as well as to feminist concerns. As time goes on, criticism of Wallace Stevens will be carried to a new stage, and more and more remarkable critical works will be published.

All the critics of Wallace Stevens have contributed a lot to pro-



moting Stevens' reputation in the literary world and he has received a widespread recognition throughout the world. Unfortunately, domestic criticism of Wallace Stevens is far from enough, and there is nearly no systematic review on Wallace Stevens in China, except for several Chinese articles introducing some aspects of Wallace Stevens' poetics. The reason Stevens' poetry is usually eschewed by Chinese critics is that, in my view, Stevens' poems are somewhat beyond interpretation, in the sense that they are too complex. Considering the complexity of Stevens' poems, we can quote what Frank Lentricchia said, Stevens' poetry is "a series of networks of interrelation whose connections and boundaries are not securable because they are ruled by never-ending movements of linguistic energy."^⑤

As a poet of the beginning of 20th century, like other modern poets, Stevens lived in the modern world where the existence of the traditional values and of a providential order in the cosmos was not universally accepted. At that time, the world had ceased to provide the sanction for the values and order that men needed to live their lives. Without any hesitation, Wallace Stevens took up the challenge of the poet in the modern world to search for the values and order that men needed in their lives. Though some western critics of Stevens have mentioned Stevens' ideas of order and his pursuit of order in their works, and they have suggested in the passing that Stevens may have been preoccupied with "rage for order" and "ideas of order," their exposition is fragmentary and their views are different and far from complete and comprehensive, no systematic study has yet been done with respect to their suggestions. The point of departure for my present study is to expound systematically Stevens' "rage for order" "ideas of order" and his search for order,



by means of discussing and clarifying some crucial points concerning Stevens' poetics, which can provide some fresh perspectives for understanding Stevens' poetry. Certainly, what all the critics have done provides me the theoretical matrix for my argument in my thesis.

Living in an age of disbelief, when all gods have come to an end, Stevens affirmatively believes that "in an age of disbelief, . . . in one sense or another, it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and in his style" (*OP*, 259). In his own measure and in his own style, Stevens asserts that "The death of one god is the death of all," and "Poetry is a means of redemption" (*OP*, 186 ~ 191). Preoccupied with "ideas of order," Stevens is convinced that the imagination can discover "the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos." In this sense, Stevens is a "Connoisseur of Chaos" who makes his every effort to pursue the final order, as Stevens calls, "The Supreme Fiction." For Stevens, "reality is the central reference for poetry" and "the structure of poetry and the structure of reality are one" (*NA*, 71 ~ 81). In order to "press back against the pressure of reality," or chaos, Stevens employs the means of what he calls in his remarkable poem, "Connoisseur of Chaos," "a law of inherent opposites, / Of essential unity." According to Hi Simons, "law" here is a metaphor for "feeling," a feeling of supreme pleasure in the recognition of the interrelationships of such contraries as the actual and the imagined, the real and the ideal, order and disorder, man and woman, life and death.⁶ In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens writes:



That's it: the more than rational distortion,
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.
They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational.

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

Stevens is convinced that he would discover the mundo, the world he is in and the world he is, the world beyond reason, the final order man lives his life, which will be fixed and illustrated in a supreme fiction. It is a moment of delight, and in this moment, he knows the world and knows himself and knows reality and imagination in intersection. Stevens makes this clear in a passage published in *Sewanee Review* in 1944, later collected in his *The Necessary Angel*:

It is the mundo of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights and not the gaunt world of the 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. (NA, 57 ~ 58)

The “mundo” is a thing created by the imagination, clearly by saying this, Stevens means poetry. In a small poem, Stevens says that “one’s final belief must be in a fiction.” Therefore, “the Supreme Fiction,” as Stevens calls, must be the final belief, the final



order people need to live their lives. This leads to an important contrast between Stevens and T. S. Eliot, that is, while Eliot sought the order in the Christian moral tradition, Stevens was in search for his order in his poetry—— “the scholar’s art.” For Stevens, it is the imagination that creates fiction, the art with which man endlessly defines his connection with the world. Stevens’ imagination owes a great debt to the romantic imagination, especially Coleridge’s theory of the imagination. In what Stevens says in his lecture: “As poetry goes, as the imagination goes, as the approach to truth, or say, to being by way of the imagination goes, Coleridge is one of the great figures” (*NA*, 41).

On the other hand, Stevens’ imagination is quite different from the imagination articulated by the romantic writers. In his famous essay “Imagination as Value,” Stevens declares that “the imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make that use of liberty” (*NA*, 138). The idea of the imagination, as understood both today and in the romantic period, is connected with the idea of creativity. The two words “imagination” and “creativity” are often considered as synonyms. Therefore, for the romantic writers, the imagination is generally regarded as an active force of creation. Stevens, however, holds that the imagination “is not worthy to survive if it is to be identified with the romantic” (*NA*, 138). For him, the imagination is a paradox. In one aspect, the imagination is the creative force of the mind, and it creates and realizes itself when it manifests itself in a work of art or in a religion; in the second place, it is the decreative force of the mind, and it decreates or releases itself from the fixity when it rejects a



work of art or a religion in which it is embodied. Stevens applies the concept of decreation which was defined by Simone Weil, who said that “decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated” (NA, 174). Poetry, the product of the imagination, is certainly a decreative force of the mind, which constantly liberates the imagination from its own creation. Stevens further explains in his “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” that “modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers” (NA, 175). Thus, it is relatively easy to understand that, in Stevens’ poetry, there is no final and absolute truth in the whole world. “The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever we discovered it, is that man’s truth is the final resolution of everything (NA, 175).” Stevens himself is a poet in the 20th century who tried his every effort to “make that assumption” and to “seek wisdom” and to “seek understanding” as well as seek the final truth in his own field, poetry.