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# Late Stevens, Nothingness, and the Orient

ZHAOMING QIAN

WHEN PEOPLE SPEAK of Wallace Stevens' orientalism, they are thinking primarily of his interest in the Far East in the early phase of his career, the phase of "Six Significant Landscapes," *Three Travelers Watching a Sunrise*, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "The Snow Man." For many this interest appears to have faded in the poet's last years. A statement Stevens made in 1953 seems to support this view: "I hate orientalism."

To know what Stevens actually meant by this remark, however, we must look into the context in which he pronounced it. This assertion Stevens made on 19 August 1953 to Paule Vidal with regard to the French artist Roger Bezombes: "I lost a great deal of my interest in Bezombes when I read the brochure which you were kind enough to send me. I hate orientalism" (L 796). A week later, it is important to note, the poet confided to Barbara Church why he had changed his mind about Bezombes: "No Bezombes after all. Miss Vidal sent me a brochure about him which he had given her which gave me a painful chill. He is an orientalist and he has ideas about painting from a universal point of view. By this I mean that he thinks that a painting should be neither eastern nor western, but a conglomeration of both, a kind of syncretism. I can only say that I detest orientalism: the sort of thing that Fromentin did, which is the specific thing, although I like it well enough the way Matisse does it" (L 797). So what Stevens abhorred was the idealistic thematic orientalism of a Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876),<sup>1</sup> what Edward Said would call "a European invention" of the Orient (1). This abhorrence clearly had nothing to do with Far Eastern culture.

By 1953 Stevens had befriended Peter H. Lee. His vigorous correspondence with the Korean poet is sufficient proof for his sustained interest in the Far East.<sup>2</sup> Lee's gifts to Stevens—two large scroll paintings from Korea—no doubt rekindled an old passion in him.<sup>3</sup> But with or without Lee, Stevens' meditative creativity was to shine in his final phase.

Stevens' poem "The Rock" (1950) and those afterward, in fact, consist principally of meditations upon the thing itself and nothing. This tendency is revealed in titles: "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour"; "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"; "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain";

"Looking across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly"; "The World as Meditation"; "The Dove in Spring"; and, of course, the powerful lyric on the last page of *The Collected Poems*, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself."

Robert Tompkins is no doubt justified in singling out the title poem of *The Rock* as a fine example of late Stevens' "illimitable insight," which closely parallels those of Buddhism (26): "this poem marks the point of greatest tension in Stevens' thought. Here the being of time imagines itself as *evolving* toward a spiritualization or cure which, if true, must destroy not only its own current self-image but the very basis of that image, time, the apparent opposition by an inhuman other—the 'not yet' " (35). This concept might be amended by saying that the poem's equilibrium between life and illusion, "the houses of mothers" and their "rigid emptiness," "The words spoken" and "nothingness" (CP 525–26) results in a progress toward suppression of both self and other, a motif that, according to Tompkins, cannot be interpreted without reference to "the notions of emptiness (*sunyata*) and suchness (*tathata*), which lie at the heart of Mahayana thought" (35). The concept (nothing/the thing itself) attributed to Buddhism is also helpful in uncovering the meaning of "cure," a key word of the poem:

It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.  
We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground  
Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure

Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness. (CP 526)

For J. Hillis Miller, "a cure of the ground" signifies both "scour[ing] it clean" and "making it solid" (31). For me it suggests at once "emptying it" and "filling it up." Following Miller, the two meanings of "cure" deconstruct one another, whereas following Buddhism they join each other, becoming one.

"The Course of a Particular," more so than "The Rock," presents Stevens' Chan-like insistence on the unity of the thing itself and nothing. The "particular" refers to the "cry" of leaves, while the course is the movement toward its being through persistent purging. The "cry" of the leaves reverberates throughout the poem. The thing itself rises, not "despite every Stevensian rejection of it as pathetic fallacy," as Harold Bloom claims (354), but *because of* every Stevensian rejection of it as "not yet" so. This continuous negating or purging culminates in the final two tercets, where the thing itself combines the nothing and "a busy cry, concerning someone else" is metamorphosed into one that "concerns no one at all":

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,  
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.  
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more  
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing  
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all. (*OP* 123–24)

We witness a merging of the thing itself and the nothing in “The Snow Man”: “And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (*CP* 10). Its abstraction here has given way to a series of concrete denials and assertions, which signal a marriage of the thing itself and the nothing. To some readers this marriage or equation is hardly thinkable. Yet, in the East, as D. T. Suzuki notes, all schools of Buddhism teach “*śūnyatā* (‘emptiness’) is *tathatā* (‘suchness’), and *tathatā* is *śūnyatā*” (36). Thus a Chinese reader impulsively senses suchness (or the thing itself) and emptiness (or the nothing) in the Tang dynasty poet Bo Juji’s references to “the mountains” and “the Nine Roads”:

A thousand coaches, ten thousand horsemen pass down the  
Nine Roads;  
Turns his head and looks at the mountains,—not one man!  
(Waley 173)

Similarly, the Japanese reader perceives both nothingness and suchness in “water-sound” in Basho’s famous haiku:

Old pond—  
and a frog-jump-in  
water-sound. (Henderson 20)

Surprisingly, in “The Course of a Particular” the trope for the thing itself/the nothing is also a particular sound. Was Stevens thinking of Basho? Had he acquired certain Chan qualities from the Japanese haiku? That is possible. However, Stevens in 1950 professed to Earl Miner a greater interest in Oriental art.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, from Chan art one can learn as much, if not more, about the attainment of the thing itself/the nothing through meditation. An example showing art’s power of conveying the spirit of Chan is *Luohan in Meditation Attended by a Serpent*, a masterpiece on display in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, during and after Stevens’ Cambridge years (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> The painting illustrates the very moment a Luohan (a Buddhist saint who remains in the human world) perceives the thing itself in meditative nothingness. The suchness in the “cry” of waves cannot be attained without his denial of sight. The Luohan has shunned all distractions. The stirring of the serpent in front of him and the “cry” of the leaves by his side, for instance, are not reflected in his halo.

Similarly relevant to Stevens’ recurrent motif of nothingness is Bunsei’s *Landscape* (fig. 2), another Boston masterpiece to which Stevens had access. We might see the painting as an example of “pictorial self-reference,”



Fig. 1. *Luohan in Meditation Attended by a Serpent*. Zhou Jichang, Chinese, second half of 12<sup>th</sup> century. Hanging scroll mounted as panel; ink and color on silk. Denman Waldo Ross Collection. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 2. *Landscape*. Bunsei, Japanese, active mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. Hanging scroll; ink and light colors on paper. Chinese and Japanese Special Fund. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

focusing on the relation between the perceiver and the perceived.<sup>6</sup> From the Western standpoint, the figure in the picture cannot be the painter/perceiver because his face is turned away from that scene. From the Chan standpoint, nonetheless, the painter/perceiver absolutely needs this “turning away” (“emptying out”) to achieve the thing itself/the nothing of the scene. The “turning away,” like the denying of sight in the Luohan painting, precisely distinguishes a work as a Chan masterpiece. Further, one may wonder why the figure is positioned under a roof. My answer is that such a positioning may lead us to imagine him at once as the painter and as the collector of the painting. This interpretation is based on the Daoist view that art can “speak” on nature’s behalf. Guo Xi, a spokesman of this theory, maintains that an artist’s business is to enable those who wish to “enjoy a life amidst the luxuries of nature” but “are debarred from indulging in such pleasures” to “behold the grandeur of nature without stepping out of their houses.”<sup>7</sup>

As early as 1911 Stevens was fascinated by Guo Xi’s essay on “The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream” that expressed once and for all that outlook. It is amazing that four decades after his discovery of Guo Xi, the eleventh-century art critic’s sentiment resurfaces in “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain”:

There it was, word for word,  
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,  
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed  
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,  
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,  
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses  
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,  
Recognize his unique and solitary home. (CP 512)

That is the mode of Guo Xi, whose painting took the place of mountains, streams, clouds, rocks, and pines. Bunsei’s *Landscape*, one of the thousands of pictures in Guo Xi’s tradition, shows that a scene affects its viewer/

perceiver even when his face is turned away from it. Similarly, as Daniel Schwarz remarks, Stevens' poem affects its reader, "Even when he is not reading it" (217): "He breathed its oxygen, / Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table." Stevens is once more returning to "The Snow Man," whose character, like a Chan meditator, perceives not with his eyes but with his ears, not with his ears but with his mind, not with his mind but with an achieved state of no mind.

Late Stevens was a far more brilliant and complex poet than the Stevens of "The Snow Man," however. A. Walton Litz, with the acutest eye for stylistic changes, attests that the impersonality of "The Snow Man" is not as rigid as that of "The Course of a Particular" (293). An intense impersonal stance, though vital, in my view, is not Stevens' greatest achievement in the meditative mode. In his final years, I would argue, Stevens was able to enact within the limited space of a short lyric something like a debate between meditative sublimity and imaginative sublimity. This double representation, a greater success than intensified impersonality or sharpened clarity, is nowhere more evident than in "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." The poem opens remarkably with a man's meditative experience:

At the earliest ending of winter,  
In March, a scrawny cry from outside  
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,  
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,  
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,  
No longer a battered panache above snow . . .  
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism  
Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .  
The sun was coming from outside.

Stevens' earlier meditative poems present vivid imaginative moments only to be dismissed and replaced by suchness/ nothingness. By contrast, "Not Ideas about the Thing," despite its declaration of a bias for the thing itself in the title, concludes with a beautiful epiphany that is not the thing itself but ideas about the thing:

That scrawny cry—it was  
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.  
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,  
Still far away. It was like  
A new knowledge of reality. (CP 534)

William Bevis aptly suggests “The last line leads back to the title, the title to the first line, the first line to the last” (151). This way one can avoid catching an ironical tone. In the poem’s opening and middle sections, the man’s perception has transformed through a series of denials (“No longer . . .”; “It was not . . .”) from an idea about the thing (“a scrawny cry from outside / Seemed like a sound in his mind”) to the thing itself (“A bird’s cry, at daylight or before . . .”). Why does Stevens choose not to close at the end of the fourth tercet? Why must he go on to offer the beautiful epiphany? Does he desire to express a greater yearning for imaginative sublimity? If so, he ought to have named the poem differently. What he wants to show, I think, is the ephemeral nature of the thing itself. That is to say, he wants to demonstrate how easily one can lose what has been gained. Bevis drives this point home when he comments that “The plot of the poem, from the Buddhist and from Stevens’ point of view, is based on the tragedy of desire: to love the other is to lose it by making it oneself” (153).

“Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” with a sudden swerve from meditation to imagination marks a giant leap forward in Stevens’ appreciation of Chan Buddhism. Near the end of his career, Stevens in fact was able to present double representation in a variety of ways. “A Clear Day and No Memories,” the poet’s ultimate vision, for example, opens with extraordinary elements of the imagination:

No soldiers in the scenery,  
No thoughts of people now dead,  
As they were fifty years ago:  
Young and living in a live air,  
Young and walking in the sunshine,  
Bending in blue dresses to touch something—  
Today the mind is not part of the weather.

We are not to be distracted by the negatives—“No Memories . . .”; “No soldiers . . .”; “No thoughts. . .” They are unlike those in, say, “The Latest Freed Man,” where the hero dismisses not splendid memories but abstract ideas. One may want to call them litotes. However, this possibility is questioned first by the line “Today the mind is not part of the weather,” and then by further negations in the second half of the poem:

Today the air is clear of everything.  
It has no knowledge except of nothingness  
And it flows over us without meanings,



As if none of us had ever been here before  
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,  
This invisible activity, this sense. (OP 138–39)

Is it uncharacteristic of Chan, one wonders, to recall splendid memories prior to the attainment of the thing itself/nothing? Not really. Chan meditation seldom begins with denial of abstract ideas. More often it starts with denial of concrete thoughts. The Luohan painting in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as a Chan masterpiece elects to present the “unnoticed” serpent and leaves in the foreground. In Basho’s haiku, enlightenment or *satori* resides in the contrast between the old pond and the sudden splash of water caused by a frog leaping in. Similarly, the thing itself in “A Clear Day and No Memories” is made only fiercer following the speaker’s rejection of spontaneous, dazzling memories.

Critics who are quick to notice a chilling tone in “A Clear Day and No Memories” seem slow in recognizing a strong sense of elation in theme. In a letter to Peter Lee written four months before he died, it is worth noting, Stevens found it necessary to allude, in a personal way, to his final vision that unites joy and desolation: “the rabbits are definitely out of their holes for the season; the robins are back; the doves have returned from Korea and some of them sit on our chimney before sunrise and tell each other how happy they are in the most melancholy tones. Robins and doves are both early risers and are connoisseurs of daylight before the actual presence of the sun coarsens it” (L 879). The robins and doves are tropes for Stevens himself and the young Korean poet. As “early risers” they recall “A Clear Day,” “Not Ideas,” and “The Dove in Spring.” It seems that Stevens had a sense that he owed much of his final lyrics’ sensibility to the Orient, and it is logical that he felt comfortable sharing his insight with someone from Korea.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Mark Jones, Roger Bezombes (b. 1913), educated in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, “worked principally as a painter, adopting the saturated colours of Henri Matisse in landscapes and figure studies often based on observation of ‘exotic’ cultures, notably Mediterranean and North African” (902). Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876), according to James Thompson, studied with the Neo-classical landscapist Jean-Charles-Joseph Remond (1795–1875), traveled to and stayed long in Algeria, and “establish[ed] himself as an Orientalist, exhibiting 11 Algerian works in the 1850–51 Salon.” His prolific writings based on his North African experiences later served to strengthen his position as “a leading Orientalist” (800–801).

<sup>2</sup> See eleven letters from Stevens to Peter Lee, 21 March 1951 to 1 April 1955 (L 711, 741–42, 826–27, 839–40, 840, 845–46, 855–56, 862–63, 865–66, 872–73, 879).

<sup>3</sup> See Stevens to Peter Lee, 26 February 1952 and 4 January 1955 (L 741–42; 865–66). For a reproduction of the first scroll painting, courtesy of Peter and Gail Hanchak, see the front cover of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 21.2 (Fall 1997).

<sup>4</sup> For Stevens' acknowledgment of "influence by Chinese and Japanese lyrics," see Stevens to Ronald Lane Latimer, 5 November 1935 (L 291). For his denial of haiku as an important influence, see Stevens to Earl Miner, 30 November 1950 (L 291 n 9).

<sup>5</sup> On Stevens and the Oriental Wing of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, see Qian 129–32.

<sup>6</sup> Compare W. T. J. Mitchell's characterization of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* as "an encyclopedic labyrinth of pictorial self-reference, representing the interplay between the beholder, the producer, and the object or model of representation as a complex cycle of exchanges and substitutions" (58). In *Las Meninas* the painter is glancing from the model to his unfinished painting.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Stevens' newspaper clipping enclosed in his 20 August 1911 letter to his wife (Huntington: WAS 1926). The text of the clipping is printed in Qian 140 n 17.

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