

Orientalist Aesthetics in Wallace Stevens' World of Tea: A Deconstructionist Reading of "Tea" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon"

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Abstract: *As a symbol of combination of nature and culture, "Tea" has also infused dual sides of Wallace Stevens: a connoisseur who was intrigued by tea in his private life and a poet whose poetic practice unveils orientalist aesthetics and philosophy. It is noteworthy that there are two poems involving tea as the central object in Harmonium, which seems at odds that "tea" has thus far escaped due attention from critics. In light of elaborating "Tea" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" from the perspective of deconstructionism, this research focuses on the formation and expression of his orientalist aesthetic in the two early poetic lyrics under Stevens' appreciation of tea.*

Keywords: *Wallace Stevens; Tea; Deconstructionism; dualism; orientalist aesthetics*

1. INTRODUCTION

Arguably being one of the most representative and respected American poets, Wallace Stevens highly regards nature as his "spiritual asylum", where he could have access to order and meaning of life in the chaotic actual world (Deng, 2015:1). More importantly, according to Stevens, it is in the artistic forms of poetry that the supreme combination of imagination and reality could be possibly achieved. Imbued with discontinuity and obscurity, his poetics lyrics contribute to reestablishment of order and justification of human existence in the fragmented universe.

On the whole, studies on Stevens and his poems have gone through several stages: the romantic features, the complicated relations between Stevens and his predecessors, as well as his influence upon the successors. Also noteworthy, the flourishing of literary theories also provides critics with various dimensions to investigate the poems of Stevens, like psychoanalysis, new historicism, ecological perspective and so forth.

Nevertheless, the researches on the connections of Stevens' poems and Chinese culture are far from satisfactory. It is until the late 1980s that western scholars began to attach great importance to Chinese elements embodied in Stevens' poems. Bevis analyzes Stevens' masterpiece "The Snow Man" and interprets the far-reaching influences of Zen philosophy on his literary creation in the book *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation and Literature* (1988). On top of that, Stevens' refection on "nothingness" is fully illustrated in Anne Luyat's critical essay "'Who Will Speak of Our Night?': The Meditation of Wallace Stevens on Nothing". In China, there are few scholars analyzing the Chinese elements in Stevens' poems. In the book *Supreme Fiction: The Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (2007), Huang Xiaoyan uses one chapter to expound on the relationship between Stevens and China, exploring Wallace Stevens' letters to exemplify his fondness for Chinese culture. Moreover, Qian Zhaoming also analyzes some of Stevens' poems such as "Six Significant Landscapes" and "The Snow Man" and elaborates his absorption in Chinese art and philosophical ideas.

As for the Stevens' enthusiasm about tea in particular, Nico Israel explores Stevens' world of tea and explicates the impact of Chinese culture on his literary creation. Huang Xiaoyan also touches upon Steven's fondness for Chinese tea and refers to the oriental aesthetics manifested in Stevens' poems in her book and article. However, the two scholars stop at the surface and do not illustrate the relationship between Stevens and Oriental aesthetics penetratingly, neither an in-depth investigation of Stevens' deconstructionist philosophy the matized in the two poems centered on tea. Based on

thought-provoking study of previous scholars, this research intends to analyze how Stevens textualizes his oriental aesthetics and philosophy explicitly and implicitly in the two early poems about tea.

2. THE FORMATION OF ORIENTALIST AESTHETICS IN STEVENS' ACTUAL LIFE

2.1. Stevens' Connoisseurship of Tea

Accompanied by other Stevens' most famous lyrics like "The Snow Man", "Tea"(1915) is placed in the middle of *Harmonium*, "the most impressive first volume", and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon"(1921) the second last in the volume (Beach 2003:52). Evidently, the repetition of "tea" is more like a poetic representation of Stevens' passion about tea in the actual life, rather than an occasional coincidence.

It is less frequently observed that in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, "tea" has been repeatedly manipulated up to nearly forty times. The encounter with tea was mentioned in his journal in 1903 for the first time: with a seemingly complaining but witty tone, "[Stevens and his family] use nails to stir the tea (owing to a shortage in forks)" (Stevens 1954:65). Furthermore, a letter of October 8, 1937 represents the image of Stevens as a "tea-fancier". He wrote that "I am looking for the very best tea I can get[...] the last tea you sent me had natural fragrance and quality that I very greatly appreciated" (qtd. in Israel 11). Besides, his fastidiousness about tea has been fully unfolded in more details in his letter dated 1937 for asking his friend Van Geyzel to purchase the Christmas presents for the whole family: "As for myself, I should like to have some tea, say, five pounds of the very best tea procurable [...] I should like a tea that would be something not procurable, say, anywhere else, at least not procurable in the general market. The tea, which is non-dutiable, should be sent separately from the other things" (Stevens 1954:324). Furthermore, Stevens devoted more attention to flowering tea in his letters, like "Chrysanthemum Tea", originating from China and keeping the Chinese tradition of tea-making wholly intact (Stevens 1954:303).

As evidenced by those letters imbued with appreciation about tea, there is no denying that, as an overwhelming beverage, a source of pleasure, a widely-spreaded commodity, and an idea giving rise to poetic inspiration, tea is of crucial significance throughout the lifetime of Stevens, no matter whether he was a Harvard student in the early years or later a well-established poet.

2.2. Stevens' Engagement with the Oriental Culture

As for Stevens' connoisseurship of tea, I do not endorse with the interpretation that Stewart and Lentricchia maintain or simply attribute it to "commodity fetishism" or even "mammoth appetite for tasteful things" (qtd. in Israel 20).

Unlike other objects like snow, bird, rock or jar in Stevens' poem, tea is endowed with multi-faceted and intricate connotations. In terms of tea, as a "raw product of nature and a refined product of culture", the object itself hovers the boundary between nature and culture (Israel 2004:9). Besides, what is universally accepted is that tea has been labeled as the cultural icon of the oriental. More or less, Stevens' favor about tea, especially for Chinese tea, is the reflection of his engagement with the oriental arts and culture. It is noted that in a letter dated 1909, Stevens recalled his memorable encounter with the painting about Arhats and highly praised the intoxicating poetic sense embodied in the oriental artwork. Additionally, Stevens also mentioned that he had asked Bynner to elaborately select two Japanese paintings as the birthday present for his fiancée (Richardson 1986:337). Moreover, Qian Zhaoming (2015) observes that Stevens frequently visited the National Gallery where a number of Zenist artworks were on exhibition during the first two decades of the 20th century (64).

Obviously, "tea" has not merely entered Stevens' body, enriched the literary life, and also permeates in the inner mind, shaping his manner as a tea-master to some extent. In Okakura's masterpiece *The Book of Tea* (2000), the tea-masters "have given emphasis to our natural love of simplicity, and shown us the beauty of humility" (97-98). Like a one-hundred percent tea-master, Stevens appeared to be "humble and modest" in his actual life (Yang 2000:413). Although Stevens was hailed as a "true connoisseur of tea" (Richardson, *Later* 126), he still understated that "I know nothing about tea" (qtd. in Israel 11), let alone "self-praise" (Yang 2000:413). With regard to philosophy of tea, the scholar Okakura interprets "Teaism" as "Taoism in disguise". Further he elaborates that Teaism is "art of concealing beauty that you may discover it, of suggesting what you dare not reveal" (2000:25). Without doubt, it echoes the image of Stevens as an "enigmatic, reclusive" American modernist poet and his "abstract representation in an increasingly violent and pressingly 'real' world" in poetic practice to some extent (Ragg 2010:3-4).

Unequivocally, Stevens' engagement with the oriental arts and culture had exerted an invisible but enormous influence on his life in nearly all aspects. As the investigation of connoisseurship posed by tea in Stevens is actually far away from exhaustion by critiques, there is indeed a room for further reexamining his appreciation of tea in a broader sense, like in literary modernism. According to his talk with Barbara Church in 1952, Stevens admitted that "the desire to combine poetry and reality is a constant desire" (Longenbach 1991:302). Since the formation of Stevens' orientalist aesthetics in the actual life has been explored, it may be ripe to probe into his poetic strategies to infiltrate his favor of tea and oriental culture into his two poems centered on "tea".

3. THE EXPRESSION OF ORIENTALIST AESTHETICS IN STEVENS' POETIC LIFE

As what Ellmann explicates in *The Norton Anthology for Modern Poetry* (1988), "precisely what is the domain of the imagination, and what that of the world, is a question that Stevens prefers to keep asking and answering" (280). Blurring the binary opposition of reality/ imagination, the "interplay of reality and imagination" prevails in Stevens' verses, which provides us with a motivational tool to interpret the commonplace, chaotic world and seek for a balanced equilibrium of human existence in the vital contact with the mundane and ruthless reality (Beach 2003:50). Characterized as virtual reality and imaginative perception, "Tea" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" have impressively exemplified his poetic philosophy and pursuit for the orientalist aesthetics by deconstructing the dualism of imagination/reality, Orient/West and self/world.

3.1. Dance of Tea: Deconstructing the Dualism of Orient/West

Arranged in eight lines, "Tea" is a free-verse, one-sentence poem followed and preceded by commas and praised as a feast of boundless artistic imagination. Even though "tea" is literally mentioned only in the title, the impression of tea is conveyed in each line of this poem. By giving an impressive portrayal of leaves-taking pointedly, Stevens suggests his longing for the orientalist culture. This kind of poetic technique resonates with "Little Plum Blossom in Hill of Garden" by Lin Bu, a poet in Song Dynasty. Throughout the poem, "little plum blossom" has not been manipulated for the second time but it still has earned the reputation as the masterpiece among plum-chanting poems.

Acknowledged as Stevens' "most overtly imagistic poem", "Tea" offers abundant images to refer to the tea leaves from different aspects (Israel 2004:4). In the first four lines, the poet depicts the appearance of tea leaves both from the static and dynamic perspective: for refined tea before tea-making, he creatively compares the curling tea leaf to "the elephant's-ear" "shrivelled in frost" (Stevens, "Tea" 112); Then the hovering and dancing tea leaves in the boiled water are paralleled to the running "rats" (Stevens, "Tea" 112). Undoubtedly, the first half of the poem could be served as the splendid scenario for the "reality-imagination complex" of this prominent poet. Through lens of imagination, he builds a bridge between the exterior characteristics of tea leaves and the images of more widely-known animals, implicitly unveiling his delight and fascination surged in the mind as he caught the first glimpse of tea leaf.

Then, shifting from "park" and "path" to "lamp", "pillow", from the public place to the private space, the poet embarks on another whim to concentrate on the internal charm of tea (Stevens, "Tea"112). As an elusive key ingredient of the second-person narrative, "[y]our lamp-light" in the last four lines triggers various interpretations and random thoughts from critics. Some elucidate that "you" is probably an indication of some human listener, like a guest, a friend or the fiancée of the poet. Whereas I am more inclined to elaborate that addressee of "you" is referred as to "tea" itself, the central object in the whole poem. In this sense, the "light" could also be interpreted as the enlightening quality of tea carries within itself: the physical warmth and spiritual refreshment are brought about by tea-drinking. Just imagine that: in stark contrast to the frosting outside world, soft light (what tea brings physically and mentally) falls on shining pillows of shadows, driving away the chill, engendering a sense of warming and a serene atmosphere. On top of that, the forceful simile in the last line is worthwhile to dig out. "The sea-shades" and "sky-shades" are closely linked to "umbrellas in Java" in that they offer a form of shades and symbolizes the role of protector. It easily triggers the readers to conjure up the soothing and protective effect of tea as a kind of medicine.

By virtue of poetic representation of tea, Stevens, in an implicit way, subverts the binary opposition of oriental/west and expresses his own yearning for the orientalist aesthetics which could bring order to the chaotic western world by aesthetic imagination. What is crucial to understand in the poem is the

unidentified “park” in the first line and the exotic “Java” in the last line. The park is the product of modern civilization with the acceleration of urbanization. Presumably, it represents the order, the rationality or more broadly, the western culture. Nonetheless, the “elephant” juxtaposed in the park, as the symbol of uncivilized nature, disturbs the existing order and creates a sense of discrepancy. The incongruity between nature and culture is also in accordance with the imbalanced development of western society at that time with an overemphasis on economic growth and neglect of environment protection. It provides us with some hints to catch a glimpse of the poet’s destruction of the west-oriented cultural values by resenting against disordered reality.

In sharp contrast to park, Java, at the time the poem was written, was in the possession of the Dutch East Indies, where the spice trade emerged out and then the tea trade followed. That is to say, this exotic location is closely related to large-scale tea production and transportation in the 19th century. Instead of a symbol of backwardness or colonialism, Stevens regards it as a civilized place, a wonderland which brought tea to him and enriched both his private and poetic life.

On top of that, taking the phonetic sense into consideration, one could easily observe that, the short vowels like /i/, /e/, /æ/ and /ɔ/ are accumulated in the first four lines, creating a more impulsive rhythm, which echoes the rapid advancement of modernization in the west. Simultaneously, most of the first half is ended with the explosives like /t/, /k/, or its combination with /s/, which strengthens the harsh and sharp effect. By contrast, more diphthongs like /ai/ and /əu/ frequently appear in the latter half. With the progression from open vowels to close vowels, it presents an atmosphere of tranquility and peacefulness, in correspondence with the refreshing spiritual civilization tea could bring to the poet.

According to Derrida, all of western thought forms pairs of binary oppositions in which one component is privileged, marginalizing the other component. With the application of deconstruction, Derrida warrants a tactics of decentering, destabilizing the predetermined dualism and temporarily overthrows the hierarchy (Zhu 2001:203). Through the poetic practice about “tea”, Stevens introspects the procession of western society and culture and fulfills his duty as a poet to help people live their lives, by subverting the existing the west/oriental dualism and “de-center” the superior status of the western civilization. Most importantly, he fully reveals his own philosophy: there is no center in the world at all (Derrida 1997:251). For Stevens, the western culture is not the center of the world anymore. Instead, the oriental culture, what java and tea symbolize, is a land of civilization and spiritual solace that keep appealing to him.

3.2. The Self-Pursuit Journey: Deconstructing the Dualism of Self and the World

Universally acknowledged as a philosophical poem, “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” is much analogous to “Tea”: the poem initially seems to have little to do with tea at all; but actually, it is implicitly associated with sensation, perception and self-knowledge, inspired by teism, Zenist and Taoist philosophy.

Apart from the title, the word “tea” does not reappear in the poem; instead, the rhyming word “sea” appears twice in the lines “What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?” and “I was myself the compass of that sea” (Stevens, “Palaz” 65). Undoubtedly, the relationship between “tea” and “sea” is presented in twofold: on one hand, the boiled water with floating tea leaves is paralleled to the sea with floating boats visually; on the other hand, the limitless vagrancy of the sea is similar to Hoon’s boundless meditation about “finding self” in the world, which is stimulated by tea-drinking in his “palaz”.

In the title Stevens also intentionally manipulated an exotic word “palaz”, the modern Turkish spelling for “palace”. As a transcontinental Eurasian country, Turkey is also known as a meeting point of diverse cultures, where the western and eastern culture intersect and collide. This thoughtful arrangement, unquestionably, conforms to the mixture of orientalist aesthetics and western culture embedded in this poem. Presenting a state of meditation, the oriental poet Hoon begins his journey of self-discovery by “descending the western day” “in purple” (Stevens, “Palaz” 65), which easily conjures up the image of Sakyamuni sticking to seeking for truth (Qian 2015:68). As well as that, “the loneliest air” implies “nothingness” of “emptiness” of the world, sharing a striking resemblance to “nihilism” in Taoist philosophy.

Much more concern from commentators is concentrated on the last stanza “I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw”, which is seen as an extraordinary compelling evidence of solipsism, a narcissism-inclined philosophy of self. Yet I hold the different view that it actually generates a kind of

philosophy of unification of the self and the outside world. For critics, the second stanza is comparatively devoted less attention in evaluating this poem, however, it is of great importance for us to fully grasp the whole meaning. By exerting the three successive interrogative sentences in a bold and powerful tone, Stevens questions that "what was the ointment sprinkled on my beard? /what were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears? /what was the sea whose tide swept through me there?" Evidently, "the sprinkling of ointment" on his beard is indicated as a parody of the ceremony or ritual, which invokes him to reflect about the essence of being. In his meditation the boundary between anointer and anointed, the interior and the exterior is dissolved by Stevens. Put it in another way, there is no distinction between Hoon himself and the outside world, corresponding with the unity of human and nature in Taoism.

Besides, an ecstatic joy is embodied in the following lines "[o]ut of my mind the golden ointment rained, / [a]nd my ears made the blowing hymns they heard" (Stevens, "Palaz" 65). As Anthony Whiting illuminates (1996), "both the sense of creativity and the sense of pleasure expressed in 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon' differ from" other kinds of poetical engagement (97). Arguably it symbolizes that the momentary gushing of delight of Hoon as he finally finds the true self through meditation. To some extent, this kind of enlightenment much resembles epiphany in Zenist philosophy. In this sense, the last stanza provides a thought-provoking, more "true" and "strange" answer: "I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw" (Stevens, "Palaz" 65). As the scholar Huang Xiaoyan (2007) also mentions its close relationship with the unity of self and the outside world (163), I concede the two lines as an evident exemplification of deconstructing the dualism of self/ world and conveying that human is the integral part of the world other than the superior one over the nature. As human is not the center of the world anymore, all the seeing, hearing, and feeling of Hoon is not merely from his own self, but from the world, from the inseparable union of human and world.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, although some critics might hesitate to claim that Stevens' world is closely associated with tea, it is evident that teaism, as well as the oriental culture, has dramatically shaped his private life and literary life. Not only as a refreshing beverage, tea has also served as a source of enlightenment to trigger the philosophical meditation and rekindle his poetic inspiration. Admittedly, there is still much room to further explore the influence of oriental culture on the poetry of Stevens. To some extent, the investigation of Stevens and his world of tea has provided a comparatively new approach to studies on Stevens and exemplified the vital role of the oriental culture has played in his poetic practice.

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