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WALLACE STEVENS

AND

ORIENTAL CULTURE

By

ZHENGMING ZHU

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE GRADUATE FACULTY IN ENGLISH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY,

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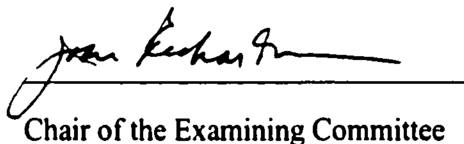

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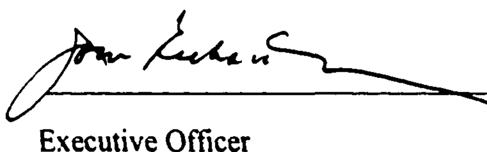

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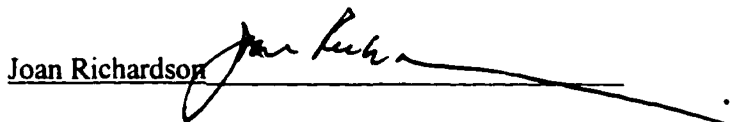
Joan Richardson 

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Abstract

WALLACE STEVENS AND ORIENTAL CULTURE

by

Zhengming Zhu

Adviser: Professor Joan Richardson

This dissertation focuses on the influence of Oriental culture in Wallace Stevens's poetry and thought. In the introductory part (Chapters 1-3), I first survey the critical history in Stevens scholarship pertinent to this topic, and then argue, on the basis of my examination, that some important aspects of Oriental influence on Stevens have so far been overlooked in the current Stevens scholarship. To follow up this argument, Chapters 4 and 5 explore Stevens's poetry, prose, and life in order to provide a substantial amount of evidence. Chapter 4 concentrates on the discussion of Stevens's "anecdote poems" and the Eastern koan, which eventually leads to a comparison of Eastern exemplary cases (respectively from language, religion, and poetics) with Stevens's particular poems, so as to provide evidence of Oriental culture's reverberations in Stevens's writings. Chapter 5 examines

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Stevens's "Affair of Places," with a special focus on exploring how the physical settings of Stevens's poetry are modulated by his interest in Eastern landscapes. In studying landscape motif in Stevens's poems, I also investigate Stevens's Oriental art collections as well as his personal library, reading habits and museum visits in the hope of tracking this kind of particular Oriental influence in Stevens's poetry. In addition, this chapter also involves some discussion of the relationship between poetry and painting, a topic that once fascinated Stevens, and now sheds light upon the focused subject of this chapter. In the last chapter, Chapter 6, I conclude my study by briefly bringing in the issue of philosophy – both personal philosophy and philosophical history – in relation to Stevens's multi-faceted poetry, in the hope of orientating my study in Stevens scholarship. For I believe that, at a level deeper than what we realize today, Stevens was profoundly influenced by certain classical Oriental thoughts, such as the twofold world outlook and the idea of change, both of which are jewels of the Oriental wisdom.

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Abbreviation of the Primary Texts (arranged chronologically)

NA *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951.

CP *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954.

OP *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose by Wallace Stevens.* Ed. Samuel French Morse. New York: Alfred A.. Knopf, 1957.

L *Letters of Wallace Stevens.* Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.

SP *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens.* Ed. Holly Bright Stevens. New York: Alfred A.. Knopf, 1977.

SM *Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and Jose Rodriguez Feo.* Ed. Beverly Coyle and Alan Filreis. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986.

OP89 *Opus Posthumous.* New edition, revised, enlarged, corrected, ed. Milton J. Bates. New York: Alfred A.. Knopf, 1989.

WSCB *Sur plusieurs beaux sujets: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book.* Milton J. Bates. Stanford Univ. Press & The Huntington Library, 1989.

CPP *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose.* Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: The Library of America, 1997.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

WHAT IS CHARACTER BUT THE DETERMINATION OF INCIDENT? WHAT IS INCIDENT BUT THE ILLUSTRATION OF CHARACTER?

– Henry James

THE TRUTH IS THAT LIFE IS A MINGLING OF THE INDIVIDUAL ELEMENTS AND THE FORMAL STOCK-IN-TRADE; A MINGLING IN WHICH THE INDIVIDUAL, AS IT WERE, ONLY LIFTS HIS HEAD ABOVE THE FORMAL AND IMPERSONAL ELEMENTS. MUCH THAT IS EXTRA-PERSONAL, MUCH UNCONSCIOUS IDENTIFICATION, MUCH THAT IS CONVENTIONAL AND SCHEMATIC, IS NONETHELESS DECISIVE FOR THE EXPERIENCE NOT ONLY OF THE ARTIST BUT OF THE HUMAN BEING IN GENERAL.

– Thomas Mann

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This project aims to examine the influence of Oriental culture on Wallace Stevens and his poetical works. Although the mass of Stevens criticism has extended itself to cover a wide variety of interests and subjects, this topic has not been explored to the extent which it deserves.

Since the key expression in the title, "Oriental Culture," will frequently occur in this paper, it is important to clarify at the outset what is exactly meant by these two words. Throughout this study, I will use "Oriental culture" to indicate the philosophical thought, literary works, aesthetic ideas, and artistic traditions of the Far Eastern regions/countries. Although I will sometimes also use expressions like Eastern aesthetics, Eastern landscapes, or Eastern poetics and literature, they are still loosely covered by this general nomenclature. As a matter of fact, I will employ "Oriental culture" as an equivalent expression to indicate what Wallace Stevens meant in his use of "Orientalism," which was in circulation in Stevens's time, and had often been used by critics prior to our post-colonial era. In his lifetime, Stevens always used the word "Oriental" to refer to the Far Eastern Asian countries, such as China, Korea and Japan (plus, sometimes, two Indian Subcontinent countries, India and Ceylon, to which Stevens extended the meaning of these words). To him, none of the expressions derived from the Latin "oriens" would have carried the meanings that Edward Said designates in *Orientalism*

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(1978) (such as "appropriating the idea of the Orient," "the discursive imposition of a political doctrine over the Orient," or "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[1]).

As an influence-study on a major American poet of the twentieth century, this paper will focus on the poetry and poetics of Wallace Stevens, though in the process of doing this it is inevitable that I will inquire into, and even discuss at great length, the life of the poet and the epoch he lived in. It is true that this topic is not new in Stevens scholarship, yet it has not been treated fully as it deserves. Among some important Stevens scholars, those who do discuss this topic in their

---

[1] Edward Said. *Orientalism*. Introduction, pp.1-28. To defend Stevens's usage of these words by the above demarcation line against the possibility that Said would argue that Stevens used these words in the way Said designates them, I will provide two further distinctions. First, the oriental countries Stevens talked about did not cover the same area as that which is discussed by Said in his book. Said himself explicitly indicates that the orient discussed in his book primarily refers to 'the Muslim Orient.' And the instances cited by Said do not involve the above-mentioned Far Eastern Asian countries either. Secondly, when Stevens used the word 'Orientalism' and the related expressions, his thoughts were mainly directed toward the literary tradition, artistic values, and philosophical thought of those eastern Asian countries, whereas Said's primary concern in his *Orientalism* are political issues, such as colonialism, or social history written from the European perspective, or research conducted on the basis of 'European Western experience.' In his introduction, Said clearly mentions that: 'The Oriental was almost a European representation of the Orient. Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very differently with the Far East (China and Japan, mainly).' This passage distinguishes the Americans from the French, the British, and the other European colonialists. It also verifies the above-mentioned demarcation of the designated meanings for these words in this paper.

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works include the following: Marianne Moore ("Well Moused, Lion" 1924), Robert Buttel (*Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium*, 1967), James Baird (*The Dome and the Rock*, 1968), A. Walton Litz (*Introspective Voyager*, 1972), Joan Richardson (*Wallace Stevens The Early Years*, 1986; *Wallace Stevens The Later Years*, 1988), and William W. Bevis (*Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature*, 1988). In the nineteen nineties, this topic seemed to receive less attention than it had in the previous decades, for many books published in that decade on Stevens did not index or even mention this topic at all. Among articles in periodicals, the most recent one focused on this topic is an article in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* entitled "Chinese Landscape Painting in Stevens' 'Six Significant Landscapes'." All these works, which have some bearing on the arguments and methods I plan to use in this project, will be discussed in the second and third chapters. However, another preliminary point I have to make clear here is the following: although I am writing about Oriental influence on Stevens and his work, I still have to accept the indisputable fact that Stevens is fundamentally an American poet trained and saturated in the Western heritage as a Western intellectual, traditional or otherwise. In other words, I will try not to let my enthusiasm for this project obliterate this obvious fact while I am tracing how the Eastern heritage infiltrated into Stevens's literary works and colored his thoughts as well as his life.

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A historical review of Stevens criticism indicates that critics have treated Oriental influence in Stevens in the following different ways. A great many of them give the topic mere passing notice while only a few discuss it at some length (ranging roughly from some paragraphs to a few pages). Among these acute critics, some recognize the constructive influence of Oriental culture on Stevens, while others deny the importance of such influence. In terms of a structural treatment, some critics study it as an independent topic by itself, whereas others deal with it only in relation with certain relevant topics/events. What distinguishes my project from all the previous criticism are the following two features. First, my project is a systematic study concentrated exclusively on this subject. Secondly, inasmuch as I regard this influence-study as a "two-way" channel rather than a one-direction course, I intend to treat the relationship between Stevens and Oriental culture from cross-cultural perspectives. I mean "two-way" in two senses. First, not only does my project study the Eastern influence on Wallace Stevens, but it also presents how Stevens reacted against this influence. In the second sense, it studies Oriental influence in Stevens from both Western and Eastern perspectives. The reason for my adopting this critical approach and structure of argument will receive a full treatment later in the third chapter. However, in order to elucidate and justify my method of criticism, I think, it will suffice to mention briefly at this moment two important factors that necessitate this method. One is the current

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state of Oriental-influence study in Stevens criticism, which will be discussed fully in the following chapter; the other is related to Stevens's personal life. Inasmuch as this historical background knowledge and biographical information are of prerequisite importance to this project, I will examine them prior to the examination of the critical history of Oriental-influence study in Stevens scholarship. These biographical facts are pertinent as they provide solid evidence for the study of Stevens's particular interest in the East, and therefore help at once in establishing the validity of my project and calling readers' attention to certain difficulties arising from these biographical particularities.

From his early youth onwards, Stevens had developed a keen interest in Oriental culture and art. Later, especially in the formative years of his poetry-writing, Stevens reflected this interest in his journals, letters, and poems, as well as in the texture of his life (such as his home decorations, art collection, and readings). Evidence of his study of Oriental culture and his contacts with people related to the Oriental countries (i. e., people who either lived there or visited those countries) can be found in his *Letters*, or in his daughter's valuable recollections, *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, and in various versions of his biography.[2] Many critics

[2] See *Letters of Wallace Stevens*(1966) and *Souvenirs and Prophecies(1977)* by Holly Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life* (1971) by Morse, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (1985) by Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (1986), both *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879-1923* (1986) and *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923-1955* (1988) by Richardson.

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have noticed and cited these incidents, from Stevens's early interest in, and reading of, Oriental literature and culture (primarily during the years when Stevens studied at Harvard and worked in New York), to his later-year foreign correspondence, his Hartford home collection of Chinoiseries and other "bric-a-brac objects" from the East Asian countries. Attempts to disclose Oriental influence in the poetry of Stevens have until now been thwarted by the unavailability of substantial evidence, largely on account of the poet's idiosyncrasy – his "personal reticence" as Holly Stevens named it. Generally, Stevens was discreet in publicizing his being a poet. He was also circumspect about revealing the "influences" or sources of his inspiration. One critic describes this inclination in this way: "...aided by his wife, Stevens seems to have been at some pains to cover his early tracks."[3] Another critic observes that Stevens's early proclamation of his fascination "with orientalism" was cut short, or even denied, in his later years.[4] In addition, Stevens was a skillful master, good at muffling the traces of his poetry-writing. His methods were such that it is often difficult or sometimes impossible to obtain the remaining manuscripts that might indicate the provenance of individual poems and reveal the poet's thought at the time of writing. A few critics suggest that Stevens's caution in covering traces of his writing poems is also related to his

[3] Charles Doyle ed., *Wallace Stevens, The Critical Heritage*, 'Introduction' p.1.
[4] James Baird. *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 55-56.

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wife's objection to his poetry-writing, though most critics agree that it is only a matter of personal "reticence," because

> Stevens began hiding early. He erased, crossed out, commented, and tore entire pages from his journals as he periodically reread them. Completed poems as well as personal reflections shaped into finished sketches disappeared this way. Other entries...were later "worked over" or "revised"(...).[5]

Another unquestionable fact is: in addition to Stevens's own habit of writing and his personal reticence, this situation of "erased traces" was later irreparably aggravated by his wife Elsie, who, in the years following her husband's death, destroyed many of the letters he had written to her, and even some of her husband's manuscripts. This unfortunate event made it more difficult for critics to track the provenance or to reveal the poet at work.

Difficulties, however, are often indicative of some unknown keys to critics. And some clues to the unknown keys may already be supplied by these difficulties themselves. For instance, in the middle and later periods of his writing career, not only did Stevens seldom jot down his daily reading, or important impressions of and reflections upon his reading, but he claimed to have scarcely read other poets, as is revealed here in his letter to one of his literary confidants:

> I don't read a line. My state of mind about poetry makes me very susceptible and that is a danger in the sense that

[5] Joan Richardson. *Wallace Stevens The Early Years*, p.72.

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> it would be so easy for me to pick up something unconsciously. In order not to run that danger I don't read other people's poetry at all.[6]

Though such a confession might be one of Stevens's usual "disclaimers," this passage may also provide some clue to his temperament and manner of writing. For instance, these words suggest that the older Stevens could be quite different from the young Stevens as an eager reader in his Harvard and New York years. They may also imply that Stevens was a person who was inclined "to pick up something unconsciously," and whose "state of mind" was indeed sometimes "very susceptible" to other people's ideas. In addition, this kind of confession points to the possibility that a close examination of the poet's life could reveal more hidden connections for Oriental-influence study today. Joan Richardson sums up an important but often neglected fact in the poet's life this way:

> The germ of interest in things Oriental that had begun during the poet's years at Harvard had developed into an integral part of his personality. As Stevens rightly recognized, personality was identical with style, so it was understandable that a reader as astute as Moore would isolate this important element.[7]

Indeed, there are two periods in the poet's life – the Harvard years and the period of residence in New York City – that exerted an important influence upon Stevens as a man of letters. In these formative years, his mind was shaped in such a way that he could never undo this decisive formation or deny this influence much

---

[6] Letter No.626 To Jose Rodriguez Feo, January 22,1948. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. P.575. Similar statements can also be found in Letters No.534 and No.653 of the same book.
[7] Joan Richardson. *Wallace Stevens The Later Years*, p.33.

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as he might sometimes want to do so in his later years. For instance, Holly Stevens records some important facts and certain original phrases and poetical lines Stevens copied into his journal from his reading during the New York period. In some of his letters from that period, Stevens mentioned that he frequented the Astor Library in New York City around 1909, and jotted down extensive notes from his "considerable reading" in the evenings. Some insightful notes from this period are:

> Arab chivalry, Persian poetry, Chinese ethics, Indian thought ...Japanese color prints...
>
> The glory of the Tang emperors or the refinement of Sung society
>
> Sakyamuni – all evil resides in the individual will to live
>
> "It is in landscape and the themes allied to landscape, that the art of the East is superior to our own – the art of West excels in the human drama [."]
>
> Landscape-Gardening – another art of Chinese origin aimed at a definite influence on the beholder's mind. (*SP* 221)

Stevens was so influenced by his reading in Oriental literature and art that he further copied the followings:

> The Four Accomplishments [of Chinese literati:]
> Writing Poetry
> Playing Music
> Drinking Tea
> Playing Checkers
>
> The seven traditional subjects of Chinese Painting:
> The Evening Bell from a Distant Temple

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Sunset Glow over a Fishing Village
Fine Weather after Storm at a Lonely Mountain Town
Homeward-bound Boats of a Distant Coast
The Autumn Moon over Lake Tung-ting
Wild Geese on a Sandy Plain
Night Rain in Hsiao-Hsiang

A poem by Wang An-shih:

It is midnight; all is silent in the house; the water-clock has stopped. But I am unable to sleep because of the beauty of the trembling shapes of the spring flowers, thrown by the moon upon the blind.

Chinese Landscape –

flight of wild geese in Autumn
willow in Spring

Chinese saying of poetry –

The sound stops short. The sense runs on. (*SP* 222)

Despite the poor translation of the poem by Wang, despite the fragmented representation of the traditional subjects of Chinese painting, or even the inaccurate recording of the Four Accomplishments,[8] the exceptional insight of young Stevens into the essence of Chinese culture and literature is astounding, especially when we take into consideration the fact that the information and printed materials regarding Oriental literature and art were not yet widespread and easily accessible at that time. It is that very "germ of interest" that enabled him to sift through the scanty information and meager materials and to grasp some of the quintessential aspects of Eastern aesthetics. The mentality of young Stevens had

[8] 'Drinking Tea' should be 'Painting' as is recorded in most Chinese literary books, whereas the significance of Wang's poem and the implications of the traditional subjects of Chinese painting will be discussed in detail later in the fifth chapter.

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certainly received adequate impact from such centripetal scrutinizing, which would later affect his way of thinking and poetic style. Although some critics tend to accept the face value of Stevens's "later disavowal of orientalism,"[9] and overemphasize its significance,[10] this issue may be more complicated than what these critics think to be.[11] Even if many critics would agree that Stevens lost his interest in Oriental culture after the trend of exoticism in the early twentieth century had passed, nevertheless, there is evidence that Stevens channeled his interest in the East into other manners different from his open enthusiasm in his youth. For instance, his letters reveal that he maintained his interests in Oriental thought and materials by asking friends to purchase oriental souvenirs and artistic works. He corresponded with friends living or traveling in Eastern Asian countries and made the acquaintance of some others in the United States. Even in the 1930s – a period in which, according to some critics, Stevens lost his "interest in orientalism" – Stevens still read about oriental countries and their cultures. Such reading is evidenced by one of his "commonplace" notebooks. He copied into his commonplace book a key sentence by Confucius, the content of which is revealing about his own usually well-hidden character:

Sous le règne des grands principes, tout ce qui est

[9] James Baird. *The Dome and the Rock*, p.56n.
[10] Robert Buttel. *Wallace Stevens The Making of Hamonium*, p.73.
[11] This point will be dealt with fully in the next chapter.

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sous le ciel était à tous.[12]

Phrases like "the Grand Course" and "a public and common spirit" in this quotation indicate the orientation of Stevens's thought and suggest an image of Stevens markedly different from that of the "dandy" poet that some critics characterized him. Between 1936 and 1937, Stevens also copied another sentence by W. B. Honey:

> It would be truer [sic.] to say that Chinese painting is a branch of poetry and that calligraphy is the medium of both[.] (*WSCB* 51)

Though some copied sentences might appear inadequate to sustain the argument for Oriental influence in Stevens, when they are considered in relation to the copied lines and readings mentioned in the previous pages, they together confirm Richardson's suggestion that such influence had become "an integral part of his personality." Since traces of personality are usually too subtle to describe, I shall give a few more examples here in order to demonstrate how such an "Eastern personality," so to speak, was acted out, and how these nuances came to be overlooked by critics.

One good example to start with is the disparity between Stevens's open career as a lawyer and his secret calling as a poet. Frank Kermode points out:

---

[12] *WSCB*, p. 45. The English and Chinese versions of this quotation are: 'When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky.' ('*Da dao zhi xing ye, tian xia wei gong.*')

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> [This is] an aspect of Stevens which has attracted much attention: the divorce between his activities as a man of business...and his work as a man of letters. This issue gets...too much attention of the wrong kind...corrupted by wonder or annoyance at the poet's double life. Stevens did not find that he must choose between the careers of insurance lawyer and poet. The fork in the road where he took the wrong turning is a critic's invention, and there is no point in dawdling there.[13]

To take up Kermode's point and extend it to the discussion of personality, I would suggest that, given Stevens's extensive reading in Oriental classics, he had become so accustomed to the ancient Oriental sages' way of living that he would either accept such a "divorce" as normal or prefer to play down this "double life" phenomenon. For, to a person with a mind oriented after the Eastern sages' life, such "divorce" is not surprising at all. The East Asian classics show us that, in the ancient times, many Oriental sages did live a "double life" of "two careers" (judged by modern standards): the sage was only a poet in his private life among the circle of his intimate friends while before the public he might appear to be a fisher, a farmer, or a woodsman in his hermitage. If these sages came out of their hermitage to become government officials, many of them were still poets in their private life among their literati friends. The writing of poetry would hardly hinder them from living a putatively public life in performing their official duties as some magistrate or governor, or certain imperial administrators in whatever positions

[13] Frank Kermode. *Wallace Stevens*, p.1.

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they were assigned to serve. Though Stevens could not have deliberately chosen these particular routes, it would be unreasonable to exclude absolutely the possible role model of those Oriental sage-poets. Stevens once wrote:

> The solitude I desired came on the roof at sunset tonight. ... There wasn't much to think of up there, after all – although I always have the wise sayings of Meng Tzu and K'ung Fu-Tzu to think of, and poetry ... to dream over.[14]

And it will be really interesting to explore this particular fact of double roles so as to find out whether it had an indirect influence on Stevens. Such a thought could become more appealing if we would compare Stevens's peculiar reticence, personal temperament, and life style with those of Oriental sages. Late in his life Stevens specifically mentioned "people who are interested in poetry as a literary activity not as something expressed out of need or desire."[15] Surely Stevens wrote

---

[14] *Letters* (p. 170) presents only part of this letter of August 20, 1911, and misreads one expression as:

> I always have the wise sayings of [Ming?] Tzu and K'Ung Fu-Tzu.

But I doubted its accuracy ever since I read it, for in Chinese history there was never a philosopher by the name of Ming Tzu except a philosophical group called the Min School (*Min* is different from *Ming*). After I read WAS 1926 in The Huntington Library, I made two corrections - one is here, another on page 20. And I will resume my discussion of this letter in the fifth chapter since it contains some important passages, which were unfortunately omitted by the editor of *Letters*.

[15] WAS 2487. Again, *Letters* omitted the whole paragraph which contains this sentence when it presents this letter of June 25, 1954.

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poetry not out of economic "need" or at the "desire" of other people. This act, out of such a personality, does bear a striking affinity with the Oriental sage-poets.

Another example is the poem "Man Carrying Thing" (*CP* 350-351).

MAN CARRYING THING

The poem must resist the intelligence
Almost successfully. Illustration:

A brune figure in winter evening resists
Identity. The thing he carries resists

The most necessitous sense. Accept them, then,
As secondary (parts not quite perceived

Of the obvious whole, uncertain particles
Of the certain solid, the primary free from doubt,

Things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow
Out of a storm we must endure all night,

Out of a storm of secondary things),
A horror of thoughts that suddenly are real.

We must endure our thoughts all night, until
The bright obvious stands motionless in cold.

Stevens wrote this poem some time in 1946. In it he uses a "brune figure" to illustrate the quality a poem must have in the way this "representative man" carries thing(s). Both the metaphor and the scene it represents are indications of how Oriental art and literature still held their influence on Stevens in his later years. The title of this poem might well be renamed "Thoughts on Watching an

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Oriental Landscape Painting" since the whole poem illustrates the comprehension of poetry through an example and method associated with the appreciation of Oriental landscape paintings. "A brune figure" is the figure that often appears in many Eastern landscape paintings while the background (such as "winter evening" and "floating ... flakes of snow / Out of a storm") is typical of the perspectives employed by many Asian painters in their landscape painting. In comparing the difficulty of ascertaining the meaning of a poem to that of contemplating an obscure figure "carrying" an unidentifiable "thing" against nebulous background (note that both the foreground and background of this poem resemble those of an Eastern landscape painting), Stevens disclosed an experience he learned well from his appreciation of Eastern landscape painting. Such infiltration of the influence from Eastern landscapes is usually more subtle than the likeness in poetic image or metaphoric process, and will be tackled in the following fifth chapter.

A more eloquent example of the influence of Eastern culture on Stevens's character is the Buddha figure and its potential effect on Stevens. In his fascination with China and the Eastern religion, Stevens had, time and again, asked some friends to purchase for him a Buddha statuette. In 1937, when he received a box of Oriental objects from Leonard C. Van Geyzel, Stevens's

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correspondence friend in Ceylon, he sorted out a Buddha figure for himself, saying:

> I selected as my own the Buddha, which is so simple and explicit that I like to have it in my room. (*L* 328)

Since then, Stevens kept writing back to ask Geyzel to find more Buddha figures for him, with specific solicitations as the following:

> If you happen to come across a seated Buddha and also a reclining Buddha that would go along with the one that you sent me in the box, I should be very glad to have them. I don't, of course, want tourist's junk. The one that you sent me in the box is a most desirable one; at the same time I want you to feel free to incur any reasonable expense. (*L* 333)

And a few months later he wrote again:

> I don't want a thing that is ornamental: pretty, but something that is true to its subject. That was the merit of the figure that you sent last year; it was simple, but it meant exactly what it was intended to mean.[16]

Then the next year he reminded Geyzel again in his letter:

> I shall be most grateful to you if you will continue to bear the Buddha in mind. Somehow or other, with so much of Hitler and Mussolini so drastically on one's nerves, constantly, it is hard to get round to Buddha. If I have not already said so in an earlier letter, I want you to feel sure that, if ever you come across anything that you think I should like to have, do please pick it up for me. I shall be glad to reimburse you promptly.

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[16] WAS 2475, the letter was dated as September 13, 1938.

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(*L* 337)[17]

One cannot help wondering why Stevens became so obsessed with Buddha figures as such. Was it merely a personal hobby? Or was there something deeper in his mind repeatedly making particular requests, and with such "Flickings from finikin to fine finikin" (*CP* 488)? One possible reason might be the shadow of war looming large in the world in the late 1930's. Based on the biographical facts, I would suggest that, this obsession could be traced further back, to the early 1920's. When Stevens received a box sent from Peking by Mrs. Calhoun, Harriet Monroe's sister, he found in it a statuette and grew very fond of it (the facial expression of this figure often appears not so different from that of the Buddha he got years later). He described it to Monroe in a letter (October 28, 1922):

> But the old man, Hson-hsing, has the most amused, the nicest and kindliest expression: quite a pope after one's own heart or at least an invulnerable bishop telling one how fortunate one is, after all, and not to mind one's bad poems. He is on a little teak stand as is, also, each of the other things. (*L* 230)

The reason for his fondness of this old man figure is:

> I have had considerable experience in buying things abroad through other people. This, however, is the first time the thing has been wholly successful; for this group has been chosen with real feeling for the objects. The old man is so humane that the study of him is as good as a jovial psalm. I must have more . . . .

[17] I owe a great deal to Richardson, who traces, and calls readers' attention to, Stevens's interest in the Buddha figures. See her entries on Buddhism in *The Early Years*.

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He wanted more of this, because he knew "China's . . . own classics" could bring more of "this blissful adventure" into his life. Yet a more important fact I have inferred from this letter is: since Stevens used words such as "pope," "bishop" and "prophet" to describe this kind of oriental man with a smiling face, he must have granted it a substitute role to replace the Western God, who was "dead" in his contemporary culture. "Hsou-hsing" (misread by Holly Stevens as "Hson-hsing" in *Letters*) is actually the God of Longevity in China, where people like to send the statuette of this god to friends as a birthday gift or prefer to have this statuette at home as an auspicious omen for a long life. Judging from Stevens's letter quoted above, I do not think there could have been any note of explanation accompanying this statuette. Thus, Stevens could have thought, throughout his life, that the statuette was somehow a figure like a pope/god or Buddha. But the effect of watching the facial expression of this god at home every day might have given Stevens some idea which he later implanted into his notion of Buddha-like image when he asked Geyzel to buy specific kind of Buddha figure for him. If we connect this with Stevens's habit of signing his letter to his fiancée a few times as "Your Buddha," it is not difficult to detect Stevens's psychological affinity with "Hsou-hsing" or Buddha. Such affinity could have

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affected his personal attitudes both in his early years and in the later period of his life. Richardson keenly observes:

> Stevens the insurance company executive. . . and Stevens the poet, reading and writing in early morning and evening hours, musing on how best to shape language for his new vulgate of experience, [was] also not different from Buddha, the figure the Chinese named the "red-bearded barbarian from the West.[18]

And in another place she also points out that: "Meditating over the years on Buddha and the attitudes he represented, Stevens slowly assumed the Buddha-like smile... ."[19] It was this kind of psychological affinity that underpinned Stevens's fascination with Oriental culture. The inclination began as early as the Harvard years when Stevens and Witter Bynner shared their "readings in Buddhism as part of their undergraduate involvement with the Orient."[20] Although Stevens did not turn out to be an "Orientalist" as Bynner did, both of them did become poets with strong interests in humanism and arts. When Stevens felt disappointed in the Western humanism of his age, he turned to Eastern humanism and religion. If he did not find some lasting consolation in them, he found at least a different kind of comedian mask for him to wear in his life as well as in his poetry. It is in this sense that I feel it safe to say that, the subtle influence of Buddha figure on the

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[18] *Wallace Stevens The Later Years*, p. 89.
[19] Ibid., p. 152.
[20] *Wallace Stevens The Early Years*, p. 535.

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character and poetry of Stevens should never be overlooked in appraising the poet's relationship with Oriental culture.

These three examples are only some typical instances of Oriental influence in Stevens and his writings. Later in Chapters four through six, I will use some of them as paradigms to explore different aspects of Oriental influence in Stevens and his works.

Admittedly, "definite influence" (to quote Stevens's own words) as such often scattered in different places and manifested in subtle ways. What we need to do is to follow up these traces, and explore further so as to divulge more instances of such influences. It is precisely for this reason that I chart this research. In my exploration of this topic, I will even go back to some Oriental classics so as to discover if they could suggest some clue to the study of Stevens's poetical works. This kind of back-formation[21] method and cross-culture perspective is indispensably necessary to the study of Stevens's relation to Oriental culture. By carefully tracing the blurred lineaments, and breaking them down into easily discernible elements, I hope to offer an alternative method/perspective,

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[21] *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines this method as

> A new word created by removing from an existing word what is mistakenly thought to be an affix, as *laze* from *lazy*, or *edit* from *editor*.

For me, I borrow this term to suggest the method and necessity of going back to the original source in order to find the truth or correct answer.

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which will prove fruitful in revealing those erased or overlooked subtle connections between Stevens's writing and Eastern culture.

This study will be divided into three sections. The first section, including this introduction and the following chapter, is a survey and evaluation of criticism and biographical facts pertinent to Oriental-influence study in the current Stevens scholarship. In the second section (Chapter 3), drawing from other critics' valuable researches, and moving among different approaches, I will present my arguments by demonstrating how an important half is missing from the current Stevens criticism in its study of Oriental-influence on Stevens. These arguments will lead to what I aim and intend to explore in the third section of this dissertation (Chapter 4-6). Throughout this key section, I will trace all possible directions, sources, materials, ideas, facts and signs in order to determine what Stevens had absorbed, transformed, or rejected from his study of oriental arts and culture. I will also examine how he expressed these Oriental ideas, factors and elements in his poetry. Respectively in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I will analyze the poetic language, the poetic vision (including both images and perspectives), and the philosophical ideas of Stevens's. At times I will also compare them with certain concepts from Oriental philosophy and poetics by pinpointing the sources or citing the original works.

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Although I have clarified the term "orientalism" as different from Said's orientalism, and instead shall use expressions like "Oriental culture" or "Oriental influence," still I have to indicate one point related to Said: It is his very stance that has offered me what Harold Bloom called the "stimulation of disagreement" in regard to this "new oriental approach." This "disagreement" is the difference between the stance of Said and mine. Indignantly, Said calls Orientalism "systems of thought ...discourses of power, ideological fictions" and therefore "mind-forg'd manacles."[22] However, he is aware of the fact that "the racial, ethic, and national distinctions were less important than the common enterprise of promoting human community."[23] This common "enterprise of promoting human community" is the very cause and goal of my research. F. S. C. Northrop once asserted that "the meeting of East and West" is "the major event of our times."[24] After half a century, I think, this assertion is still applicable to our contemporary world. To expedite this meeting, we must endeavor to reduce the cultural gap between the East and the West rather than to focus on the political power-struggle between "the dominating" and "the dominated." To some extent, this is also the contribution that I hope my project will make in relation to the fact mentioned above (that to date there is still not a systematic study dedicated to this subject in

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[22] *Orientalism*, p.328.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Northrop. *The Meeting of East and West* (1960), Preface.

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this field). Said proclaims: "I certainly do not believe the limited proposition that only a black can write about blacks, a Muslim about Muslims, and so forth."[25] In a similar manner, I ought to point out that, any person (regardless of where he/she comes from), as long as he/she understands both the Western and Eastern cultures, can write well about Eastern influence in Stevens's poetry. Based on such a belief, I will summarize my attempt in this project in the following way: to fill out that blank in Stevens criticism with a book-length study on Wallace Stevens and his relationship with Oriental culture. Given the importance of Stevens's position in modern American poetry, the call for a book-length study on his relation with the East will be more pressing if one happens to observe the fact that many books have been published with similar topics on some of Stevens's outstanding contemporaries.[26] And I do hope that my project and its special approach will attract the attention of specialists as well as general readers to this overlooked topic.

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[25] *Orientalism*, p. 322.
[26] These books include: *Ezra Pound's CATHAY* (1969), *Blossoms from the East: The China Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1983), *T. S. Eliot, Vedanta and Buddhism* (1985), *Oriental Influences in T. S. Eliot* (1988), *T. S. Eliot and Indian Philosophy* (1990), and *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (1995).

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CHAPTER 2

Review of Eastern-influence Studies

in Stevens Criticism

LITERATURE IS NEWS THAT **STAYS** NEWS.

* * * * *

TCHING PRAYED ON THE MOUNTAIN AND

WROTE **MAKE IT NEW**

ON HIS BATH TUB.

DAY BY DAY MAKE IT NEW

CUT UNDERBRUSH,

PILE THE LOGS

KEEP IT GROWING.

- Ezra Pound

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This chapter will chart the landscape in Stevens criticism pertinent to the influence of Oriental culture on Stevens. It will start from a general backward glance to specific review of this topic. In the process of recounting the critical opinions of Stevens critics on the topic, I will add a few remarks whenever the evaluation of polemic arguments is called for. The focus of this chapter, however, will still be the general review of pertinent studies in this field.

John Serio, editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, records the beginning of Stevens criticism as early as 1916 when reviews of some of Stevens's early poems began to appear in *Minaret* and the *New Republic.*[1] Serious criticism of Stevens's work, however, did not really begin until the publication of *Harmonium* in 1923. By that time, almost a decade had elapsed since Stevens published his first gathering of post-Harvard poems in *The Trend*, and had other poems published in various magazines.[2] Hi Simons points out that the earliest criticisms

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[1] Serio, John. *Wallace Stevens: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography* (1994), P.3.
[2] The magazines that published his early poems were: *Trend, Brown, Contact, Others, Poetry, Rogue, The Dial, Secession,* the *Modern School, Soil,* the *Little Review,* and the *New Republic.* (See Part VII and Part VIII of *Wallace Stevens The Early Years 1879-1923* by Joan Richardson.) The first known criticism of his poems in print appeared in the *Minaret* (February, 1916). Later, there were articles on Stevens's poems in *The New York Times, New York Tribune,* the *New Republic, Poetry,* and other 'little magazines' such as *Trend, Brown, Others, Rogue,* and *Secession.* (See the Introduction to *Wallace Stevens, The Critical Heritage.*)

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of Stevens are to be found in the different reviews of collections, especially in the *Others* anthologies.[3] During a period of about eighty years following the earliest reviews of Stevens's poems, Stevens criticism has been a field marked by disparate opinions attempting to explicate and appropriate this major American poet. Joseph Riddel mentions that the reception of Stevens's poems "constitutes in itself a significant footnote to contemporary literary history."[4] Melita Schaum suggests that Stevens's changing reception among the different critical schools has revealed much about the shifting scene of American literature and criticism as well as about the poet and his works. She explains the diverse responses to Stevens and his works as:

> Wallace Stevens lends himself especially well to a study of the changing nature of critical engagement. The length of Stevens' career; the volume and quality of his poetry and prose; his wealth of connections to fine arts, philosophy, and theory; and his extensive correspondence have made Stevens a rich vehicle for the deployment of aesthetic theories.[5]

Serio describes those

> major trends in Stevens criticism around the conflicting theoretical movements that have defined our century – aestheticism versus humanism; new humanism versus New Criticism; structuralism versus poststructuralism.

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[3] 'Vicissitudes of Reputation, 1914-1940,' *Harvard Advocate*, Vol. cxxvii, No.3 (December,1940), pp.8-10.
[4] *The Clairvoyant Eye, The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*, p.9.
[5] 'Preface' by Melita Schaum for *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools*.

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Then he asks:

> So what is Wallace Stevens – dandy, hedonist, aesthete, modernist, romantic, metaphysician, phenomenologist, decreator, deconstructor, postmodernist, visionary, nihilist, affirmer? [6]

Indeed, the polemic theories responding to Stevens's poetry are so rich and diversified that it is impossible to trace all of them in this study. It is only necessary to review here certain sections of Stevens criticism pertaining to this dissertation. The early reviewers in those "Little Magazines" (see Note 19) baptized Stevens with epithets such as: dandy, hedonist, aestheticist, dadaist, imagist, symbolist, exquisite, and exotic. Two of these tag names – imagist and exotic – are in fact the earliest suggestion of the oriental inclinations in the young Stevens. As he lived in the milieu of New York City, and lingered among art galleries, chinoiseries and exhibitions in different museums, local libraries and vanguard salon parties, Stevens was caught in avant-garde ideas, and even wrote an experimental play titled *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise.* This verse play first appeared in *Poetry* in 1916, and won the magazine's play-contest prize. Since the play involves Chinese characters and Eastern philosophy, critics also regard this as another example of Stevens's using "the orient as one of the sources of his perception."[7] When *Harmonium* was published in 1923, some reviewers quickly

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[6] 'Forward' by John Serio for *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools.*

[7] Joan Richardson. *Wallace Stevens The Early Years 1879-1923.* P.455.

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observed Stevens's dibbling attempt at writing poems which made use of oriental material and style. A typical instance of such an attempt, often cited, is "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Mark Van Doren first singled out this poem to readers' attention, and cautioned them that the poem was "not about a blackbird but about 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'."[8] Llewelyn Powys, an English essayist and journalist in New York at that time, wrote a six-page review in the *Dial* on *Harmonium* entitled "The Thirteenth Way", and called this poem "One of Mr. Stevens' most impertinent and precocious productions." Near the end of his article Powys wondered that if readers would be "permitted to regard Mr. Stevens' own poetry as the thirteenth way of looking upon life – the thirteen ways of Mr. Wallace Stevens, this 'tiptoe cozener'."[9] Another critic called "Thirteen Ways" "the exquisite Chinese bits about the blackbirds."[10] Though a later reviewer proclaimed that "the bulk of what came of Imagism ... had more to do with transported teas and Crockery than with the Orient,"[11] some critics did view this poem and some other short pieces from *Harmonium* as part of a larger movement called Imagism.[12] To look back at that early period of this century,

[8] Mark Van Doren, 'Poets and Wits' in *Nation* (10 October 1923), p.402.
[9] *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, p. 69.
[10] See 'Our Singing Strength' by Alfred Kreymborg, in *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, P.85.
[11] See 'The Beau as Poet' in *Commonweal*, Vol.15, 6 April 1932, 604.
[12] As *Harmonium* contains many lyrics previously published in various magazines, some reviewers of these magazines had labeled Stevens as an 'imagist' poet years before the

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many Stevens critics would agree that Stevens's early shorter poems are more or less close to the Imagist poems even though Stevens was not a conscious participator of this short-lived movement. As many of Stevens's early lyrics did not become widely known until the publication of *Opus Posthumous* in 1957, and the later publication of Stevens's daughter's two books in the 1960s, comments from the period around 1920 about Stevens's "orientalism" were mainly based on examples found in Stevens's short lyrics like "Thirteen Ways" and "The Snow Man," and the play "Three Travelers". However, comments as such on Stevens's Oriental-oriented poems did not continue to appear following the publication of *Harmonium*.

After the birth of Stevens's daughter Holly in 1924, there occurred a six-year interruption in Stevens's writing.[13] When Stevens began to write and publish poetry again, he no longer produced apparently oriental pieces such as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" or "Six Significant Landscapes." Thus, for some years, Stevens's poems did not elicit new comments on the topic of orientalism. Then, things began to change gradually in the early 1950's when Stevens published *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), *The Necessary Angel* (1951), and *The*

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publication of this volume. For instance, Conrad Aiken puts Stevens together with the Imagists poets like John Gould Fletcher and Amy Lowell (see *New Republic*, May 10, 1919, pp. 59-60).

[13] A. Walton Litz speculates that there are other reasons accounting for Stevens's stopping writing during this period. See p.15 from *Introspective Voyager*.

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Collected Poems (1954). When *Opus Posthumous* was published two years after the poet's death, it brought more of Stevens's early works before the readers' eye. Beginning with two book-length studies on Stevens (*Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought* by Robert Pack, and *Wallace Stevens* by Frank Kermode) respectively published in 1958 and 1960, and along with the publication of *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, volumes of book-length studies on Stevens and his poetry appeared one after another, not to mention countless articles being written exclusively on Stevens's poems and published annually in various periodicals. To date, among one hundred or so books on Stevens, there are nearly twenty volumes that deal with the topic of Oriental influence in Stevens's poetry. Among them, some merely provide biographical facts related to the poet's fascination with Oriental arts and literature, while others briefly mention this topic in passing.[14] As a general rule, book-length critical studies (with a few exceptions to be discussed in the following part) tend to make light of or even ignore this topic. In a similar manner, contributors to periodicals have not paid adequate attention to this subject either. For example, since *The Wallace Stevens Journal* began its publishing in the early 1970s, it has carried only two articles (in 1982 and 1985) that deal with Oriental influence in Stevens. One is a four-page article titled "Wallace Stevens and Zen"; the other is titled "Stevens and Zen" and includes

[14] Such as *The Clairvoyant Eye,* and *On Extended Wings.*

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lengthy quotes from Stevens's poetry, Zen masters' stories, and Japanese haiku poems. In addition, despite the large number (near four hundred!) of dissertations on Wallace Stevens done during the period from 1952 to 1997, there is only one that concentrates on the study of Oriental influence on Stevens.[15] Naturally, as can be expected, academic conferences have not given enough attention to this topic either.[16] Among those critics who in their books do take into consideration Oriental influence on Stevens, some classify "Stevens' 'oriental' canon"[17] as the imagist or impressionist influence; others only mention the mere facts and then completely drop the subject.[18] In short, most studies that do touch certain aspects of the Eastern influence in Stevens's poetry merely mention that Stevens "was drawn to oriental art" like "many of his contemporaries during the current wave of Western enthusiasm for oriental thought and art."[19] Or they retell certain facts

[15] 'Wallace Stevens and The Dao' (see DAI, vol. 49-09A, 2823, 1988).

[16] Of all conferences, only the recent one -- 'Orientalism and Modernism,' held at Yale in October 1996, had one presenter(Professor Zhaoming Qian from University of New Orleans), who mentioned the Eastern influence on Stevens in his speech at the conference. So far Qian has one book and an article published, both on American poets in their relation to Oriental culture: *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams*(1995), and 'Chinese Landscape Painting in Stevens' Six Significant Landscapes' (*WSJ*, Fall 1997). In the former, Stevens is mentioned five times in passing (pp. 1,3,4,5,148), but none of his poems is discussed. For the latter, I will comment on it when dealing with Eastern landscape painting in the fifth chapter.

[17] James Baird, *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p.56.

[18] Such as *The Dome and the Rock*, and *Wallace Stevens, The Poem as Act*.

[19] Robert Buttel, *Wallace Stevens The Making of Harmonium*,

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which are already revealed in Stevens's published letters and journals – such as Stevens's reading of Kakuzo Okakura's *Ideals of the East*, or his journal entry describing some Japanese color prints, or even his notes recording a Chinese poem and a list of "the seven traditional subjects of Chinese painting."[20] Accordingly, two typical conclusions often reached by these critics are:

1) Stevens was fascinated with orientalism, which led to his introducing into his early lyrics certain "exotic details," "Chinese painting methods" or Japanese "haiku" style;

2) Stevens's interest in Oriental art and literature did not outlive the "faddish Trend" of the 1920's, or at least did not affect the poems that he wrote after the publication of *Harmonium*.

After the above brief backward glance, I will now focus on certain individual opinions, which represent some "common-stock" ideas in the current Oriental-influence study in Stevens criticism.

Robert Buttel is one of the earliest Stevens critics to have introduced the topic of "orientalism" into Stevens criticism. Recognizing the significance of Stevens's fascination with oriental arts, he includes these facts and instances as part of his study and indexes "orientalism" as an independent topic in his first book

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p. 64.

[20] See the above part (p.10 ff.) and the following Chapters 5-6 for details.

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on Wallace Stevens's early poetry, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (1967). In this pioneering work on Stevens's orientalism, Buttel finds Stevens's "fascination with orientalism" is "inevitable" as a result of "his search for exotic details and different techniques...".[21] However, his ambivalent treatment of this topic is sometimes misleading for general readers as well as for non-Stevensian critics. In this respect, he is representative of some critics who, after his example, do admit the factor of orientalism into their consideration while denying its significance for some wrong reasons. Buttel observes, on the one hand, that "Stevens's imagination had been captivated by oriental art – and by oriental literature as well." Yet, on the other hand, Buttel also suggests that Stevens "would soon reject...emphatically the orientalism." To prove this point, Buttel even quotes something from Stevens's own writing:

> "Wrong as a divigation to Peking" says Stevens in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Toward the end of his life, he wrote emphatically to Mlle. Paule Vidal, "I hate orientalism" (in a letter dated August 19, 1953).[22]

But Buttel fails to explain why he should regard this particular poetical line from Stevens's early imaginative work as evidence of self-criticism concerning that phase of Stevens's enthusiasm in the East. In addition, the sentence he quotes

[21] *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium*, p. 73.
[22] Ibid., pp. 68,70,73-74.

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from Stevens's letter is not necessarily a justified evidence of Stevens's "hatred" for or "disavowal of orientalism" either, as another critic points out clearly:

> Stevens wrote to his Paris bookseller in 1953, with reference to his acquisition of paintings: "I hate Orientalism." He refers here to the oriental pose in Western painting.[23]

Even Buttel himself does not seem so convinced of his conclusion, for he writes in the same book that:

> Even so, orientalism left its mark on *Harmonium*, in delicacy of effect and in such details as "Utamaro's beauties," "umbrellas in Java," and "a woman of Lhassa." Moreover, it was another way out of the relinquished vale, and it helped bring him into the mainstream of poetic experiment.

Obviously, as the title of his book suggests, Buttel does not go further to explore Stevens's orientalism in the post-*Harmonium* years, and his research in this field halts at where he thinks Stevens halted the poetic experiments of that period.

A. Walton Litz published his study on Stevens's, *Introspective Voyager, The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* in 1972. Like Buttel, he also recognizes the Imagist mode in the early Stevens. But he goes further to link this mode with Impressionist techniques and relate Stevens's plays to "the Japanese Noh plays." He does more than Buttel by his digging into Stevens's early poems

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[23] James Baird, *The Dome and the Rock*, p.55.

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(such as the "June Book" and other unpublished poems). And he summarizes "the essence of Stevens's early interest in the East" as:

> an attraction to its vast "irreality" tempered by a delight in the "little realities" of color and landscape. But the poetry in which he tried to express this complex response could not carry the burden of his perceptions; it is vague and derivative, a poetry of "mood" rather than idea....[24]

He went further to mention "Stevens' fascination with Oriental ... poetic chinoiseries," and interprets Stevens's methods in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" as "a series of Japanese prints rendering the same scene in different seasons or from different viewpoints...". Yet Litz's conclusion is rather negative. To him, Stevens's interest and study in oriental arts and literature were only a "derivative" form of exoticism which "culminated in the HAIKU-like stanzas of 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'." And he called these "experimental" poems some "period piece," which only leads to "the paradoxes in Stevens' own art."[25]

Another kind of critic tends to concentrate on the influence of Oriental philosophy/religion on Stevens. But this treatment is often brief, usually not going beyond touching on one or two aspects, like the oriental ideas of Nothingness or Nature. William W. Bevis is a representative of this kind of critic. In his *Mind of*

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[24] *Introspective Voyager*, P.16.

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Winter, Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature (1988), Bevis points out the similarity of attitudes toward nothingness/death between Buddhists and Stevens. Yet, his book is in the main a historical/philosophical study of MEDITATION as "a state of consciousness" (also expressed in other alternative locutions loosely used by the author, such as "a state of mind," "an experience," or the "meditative perception as against imaginative perception"). In this four-part book, Bevis uses his Part I to offer an overview of meditative issues, and Part II to get into more subtle and various meditative problems (including the physiological study of meditative experience). It is in these two parts that he dissects four of Stevens's major lyrics as the core cases of his examination ("The Snow Man," "The Course of a Particular," "The Latest Freed Man," and "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself"), in addition to examples from other Stevens lyrics. Part III is given to the discussion of Stevens's milieu, whereas Part IV shifts to critical theories, citing different contemporary critics (plus one or two of Stevens's later long poems) in order to support Bevis's own meditative theory of "the Comedy of Consciousness." Some of his comments on these four cases are insightful, and his careful tracking of Stevens's prominent contemporaries is very helpful in giving his readers a better understanding of the influences and the epoch in which Stevens wrote and developed his poetic styles along with the development of the "Western

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[25] Ibid., pp. 56-57.

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meditative tradition." In addition, Bevis is able to grasp some key sets of dichotomies (Asceticism versus Hedonism, Self versus Other, or Something versus Nothing), and to go beyond them. Instead of the usual Stevensian counterpoising of Imagination and Reality, Bevis offers the following:

> They [imagination and reality] are central, but not, say, as opposing nouns in a parallel construction. Rather, imagination in Stevens is a verb, a process, a way of approaching reality; the other way is meditation. Thus Stevens is a poet who repeatedly considers imaginative versus meditative approaches to reality; he is a poet not of imagination and reality, but of imagination and meditation in relation to reality. This *imagination* is made of romantic, neo-Kantian and modernist elements familiar to us.[26]

It is this last relation that forms a "third reality," which offers Bevis a pivotal point in his examination. He applies some physiological and scientific data to provide a ground for his study, and distinguishes four kinds of "Mysticism" (the occult, vision, ecstasy and meditation),[27] though none of these types deals with Zen

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[26] *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature* by William W. Bevis, pp. 8-9, 11, 14.

[27] His definitions for these categories are too long to be quoted here. Tentatively, I risk a brief summary as follows:

A. The Occult include four subtopics (telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and psychokinesis);
B. Vision (in life as hallucination, and in art/literature as some vague, honorific, metaphoric representation of hallucinatory phenomena);
C. Ecstasy (an excited self-loss, beyond thought but not beyond feeling, often related to feelings of unity, thrills on beautiful views, drug highs, and orgasm);
D. Meditation (a calm state of self-loss, beyond both thought and feeling, often related to lowered metabolism, heartbeat, and brain-wave length, in a half-awake state).

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philosophy. They, like the emphasis of the whole book, all deal with Western Christian Mysticism. Despite such limitations, nonetheless, Bevis has correctly pointed out some important connections between Stevens's poetry and Oriental poetry/thought, even though he has failed to provide convincing evidence through detailed discussions of pertinent poetical examples.

In contrast to Bevis, Earl Miner is another kind of critic who rushes to certain pre-determined conclusions about the provenance of Stevens's poems in his study of oriental-influence in Stevens. In his well-known book, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (1958), he examines many American poets of the early twentieth century, especially the Imagists. He proclaims that "there is a more important debt to Japan in the poetry of Wallace Stevens." He indicates that Stevens had written to him admitting that "he [Stevens] knew about haiku," but "his [Stevens's] interests in oriental poetry were cursory in nature." But Miner reaches his conclusion in haste, and declares that certain poems by Stevens "recall" some Japanese prints, and "echo" this-or-that haiku by the Japanese poet Basho.[28]

Actually, criticism such as the examples discussed above does not progress very far from the earliest critical opinions offered by Marjorie Allen Seiffert and

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Bevis also notes that ecstasy and meditation are similar in sharing three marks of William James (transience, ineffability, and noetic quality).

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Marianne Moore. In her review of *Harmonium* entitled "The Intellectual Tropics" (published in the December 1923 issue of *Poetry* magazine), Seiffert mentions, despite her sarcastic observation and damning praise, that the language style and the lovely patterns of Stevens do belong to "an Oriental tradition." Yet Moore points out, more directly and emphatically than any other critics, in one of her reviews entitled "Well Moused, Lion" (published in January 1924 *The Dial*) that "In his positiveness, aplomb and verbal security, he has the mind and method of China." Unfortunately for Stevens scholarship, Moore's laconic and sagacious opinion did not attract much attention from critics of Stevens until more than five-dozen years later when Joan Richardson sums up this point: "The germ of interest in things Oriental that had begun during the poet's years at Harvard had developed into an integral part of his personality."[29] To indicate how this part had become part of Stevens's personality, she points out in another article that:

> Stevens also knew of Eastern practices of meditation and had read certain central texts. One of these was a translation of one of the classical T'ang anthologies, *The Jade Mountain, Being Three Hundred Poems from the T'ang Dynasty, 618-906* (translated by Witter Bynner).

She goes further to point to Oriental poetry and painting:

> But it was, in large part, what he learned from reading both Chinese and Japanese poetry and from studying Oriental paintings and prints ... that enabled him to

[28] *The Japanese Tradition* by Earl Miner, pp. 190,194,196.
[29] *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years*, p. 33.

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> transform the set of feelings he had been taught as
> a child to attach to a Christian definition of the sacred
> into an aesthetic that celebrated as sacred each and every
> element of the natural world. [30]

This article, entitled "There Is No Sound In An Empty Room," focuses on Stevens's skillful use of sound. It briefly mentions Oriental influence on Stevens's use of sound imagery and natural landscape, but does not touch all the possible Oriental influences mentioned in her biography of Stevens. As a matter of fact, among all books published on Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years*, gives by far the fullest account of Oriental influence on Stevens and his works. Not only does this book index an entry on "Oriental influence" which includes more than 30 passages of discussion on Stevens's orientalism, it also indexes entries related to oriental influence (such as: Buddhism, Confucianism, Imagists, or even names of two ancient Chinese poets). These entries offer useful and interesting discussions of "Stevens's deepening interest in the East" plus his study and exploration of it. In addition, Richardson emphasizes the importance of Buddhist texts in helping the poet to form his "Oriental attitude" and "Eastern mood of contemplation and oneness with nature." She refrains "from detailing" the "strong echoes in Stevens's work of Eastern texts" because

> [. . .] it was the literature of Zen Buddhism that most enticed
> Stevens though no titles of the classical Zen collections

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[30] 'There Is No Sound In An Empty Room' in *Whole Earth Review*, 55(Summer,1987), pp. 73-74.

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> remain in Stevens's library, if he had, in fact, once acquired them – and he did not name any of these works in the papers that are part of the Huntington Library holdings.[31]

Nevertheless, she mentions many other aspects of Oriental influence on Stevens's poetry which so far have been overlooked by many Stevens critics. Some examples of the overlooked points are:

> [...] striking resemblances between concepts expressed throughout the *Mumonkan* and *Hekiganroku* and concepts that were clearly operative for Stevens.
>
> * * *
>
> [...] the programmatic formal elements of the Zen canon, including the purpose of using nonsense syllables to mimic the insufficiency of reason to deal fully with reality and the use of obvious paralogisms in the koans to prompt enlightenment, are echoed in Stevens's use nonsense syllables and in his repeated counterpointing of titles and poems.
>
> * * *
>
> Stevens pointed directly to the Orient as one of the sources of his perception. [...] His years of preoccupation with Oriental poetry and thought were now affording him the possibility of articulating an alternative to the Western myths.
>
> * * *
>
> In "The Snow Man" it was all he had learned from the "old Chinese" whom he wanted so much to imitate.
>
> * * *
>
> Perhaps both Stevens's playing with various pseudonyms during his college years, and many named personae he used in his later poetry, and Bynner's similar playing had to do with readings in Buddhism as part of their undergraduate involvement with the Orient.[32]

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[31] *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879-1923* (1986), pp.24, 292.
[32] Ibid., pp. 24, 405, 455, 516.

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Passages like these point to some possible directions of research for Stevens critics who are interested in studying Oriental influence in Stevens. I have used them as a guidance to help me find directions for my research. Some of my sub-topics and major ideas are either derived from or closely related to these two books (*The Early Years* and *The Later Years*), as can be seen from the "Contents" at the beginning of this paper, or from discussions in the following chapters. Most of all, I will follow the idea, raised by Moore and deliberately developed by Richardson (that "the mind and method of China" became an integral part of Stevens's writing, and that "personality was identical with style"), to explore further along this line in order to pinpoint some concrete examples of the influence of Oriental culture on Stevens's thinking and writing. To conclude, I would quote Richardson's own words, which I still feel to hold true after thirteen years since Richardson published her Volume One of the Stevens biography, "There is much work to be done in these areas, [...though]... some scholars have recently began to examine them."

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CHAPTER 3

The Missing Half

PROUST'S MOST PROFOUND LESSON, IF POETRY CAN CONTAIN LESSONS, CONSISTS IN SITUATING REALITY IN A RELATION WITH SOMETHING WHICH FOR EVER REMAINS OTHER, WITH THE ***OTHER*** AS ABSENCE AND MYSTERY, IN REDISCOVERING THIS RELATION IN THE VERY INTIMACY OF THE "I."

– Emmanuel Levinas

LOOKING FOR CULTURE'S OTHER HALF IS LIKE THAT IMPORTANT BUT DIFFICULT PART OF A MARRIAGE WHICH SUFFICIENTLY EMBRACES ONE'S OWN SELF-FULFILMENT WHILE ARRIVING AT AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRUE NATURE OF ONE'S PARTNER.

– Jiafong Wang, *Sinorama*

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This chapter will first raise some questions about the current Eastern-influence studies in Stevens criticism. After that, I will propose my thesis, argument, and approach for this dissertation.

To follow up has been reviewed in Chapter Two regarding Oriental-influence study in Stevens criticism, and to clarify what still has to be done in this field, I will start from an obvious fact drawn from the previous chapter. This fact is: despite the progress made so far, the study of Oriental influence in Stevens criticism as a whole has been underemphasized on account of the following two phenomena. First, studies of Oriental influence in Stevens are often random, fragmentary, and sometimes arbitrary or even self-contradictory. Secondly, many studies of this topic are conducted primarily from an occidental perspective, i.e., studying Oriental influence in Stevens only from the perspectives of the intellectuals who are trained in the Western tradition like Stevens but nonetheless without Stevens's keen interest in and wide knowledge on orientalism.

These two phenomena are related, the first being the inevitable corollary of the second. Since Chapter Two has supplied some instances to demonstrate that many Oriental-influence studies in the current Stevens criticism are largely composed of common-sense observations pus some arbitrary impressions, I will discuss some of them here in support of my argument in this chapter – the missing half in the study of Oriental influence in Stevens criticism.

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In the case of most critics, it is quite understandable that they only make random comments on this topic. For instance, both Doven and Powys observe that "Thirteen Ways" is a poem not about the blackbird but about "ways" of studying the bird (see the previous chapter, page 33). But none of these two critics could explore the issue further because their criticism is based either on the first impressions or on a limited access to documents of Eastern literature and arts in the English language. However, in the following cases, there must be something wrong or missing when these critics only offer some casual observations or contradictory comments in their criticism. This contention is applicable not only to critics who contradict themselves (such as Buttel's accounting of Stevens's attitude toward Stevens's "disavowal of orientalism"[1]), but also to critics who contradict each other. For instance, there are quite a number of critics who have said that Stevens's interest in Oriental literature and art was a "shortly-lived enthusiasm" extant only in his early poetry like the *Harmonium*. There are also critics who mention that Stevens was then influenced by Witter Bynner, one of his Harvard friends, whose translation of Chinese poems had "a profound effect on Stevens." However, a careful examination of historical facts will reveal an anachronism presented by these statements. For instance, Bynner's earliest success in translating the classical Chinese poetry into the English language was an

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[1] See my comments in the previous chapter, pp. 37, 39-41.

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anthology he collaborated on with Kiang Kang-Hu, a Chinese scholar and a member of the faculty at the University of California at Berkeley in the late 1910s and early 1920s. This anthology was first published in 1929.[2] By that time Stevens's *Harmonium* had been out for six years, and Stevens had, according to certain critics, long "stopped" his experiments in the "Imagist" style and "lost" his interest in Oriental culture. Yet, obviously, at the time when Stevens wrote his early poems (most of them were written from 1914 to 1923[3]) before the first publication of *Harmonium* in 1923, he could not have read this anthology by Bynner which was actually published in 1929, not to mention his being influenced by Bynner's translation of Chinese poems.[4]

Another example will also explain, from a different angle, why there is something missing in the current Oriental-influence study of Stevens's poetry.

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[2] See 'Remembering a Gentle Scholar' by Bynner in the Winter 1953 issue of *The Occident*. Bynner mentions in this essay that he 'had known next to nothing of the world's Asiatic background' until he met Dr. Kiang in 1918 at Berkeley. This essay appeared again as a kind of Preface in Bynner's *The Chinese Translations* (1978).

[3] See 'The Intellectual Tropics' by Marjorie Allen Seiffert, in *Poetry* (Vol. XXIII, no.3, December 1923, p.154). Seiffert describes Stevens's poems collected in *Harmonium* and the dates of composition as follows:

> [...]*Harmonium* is Wallace Stevens['s] first book, although he has been writing and publishing in magazines for the last nine years, so that the great majority of the poems the book contains are familiar, and many have been included in anthologies.

[4] It is possible that Stevens could have known the progress of Bynner's translating. But so far I have not found any letters (of either Stevens or Bynner) that reveal Stevens's knowledge of the oncoming anthology.

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Eleanor Cook's article, "Riddles, Charms, and Fictions," is a well-thought and insightful essay on Stevens's use of riddles and charms.[5] Cook mentions her intention as "an exploration" extending the "topography of riddles and charms ... mapped by Frye in his 1976 essay, 'Charms and Riddles'." The second exemplary poem by Stevens discussed in this essay is "The Desire To Make Love in a Pagoda." For this riddle-poem, Cook discusses "the double sense of the title," and words like "rioter" and "peak." But she fails to discuss the key word/image "pagoda" except for merely quoting Ruskin's definition of pagodas as "strange buildings which come to a point at the end," and for observing "that a pagoda is for most of Stevens' readers a foreign or 'alien' temple." Some readers cannot help asking: Couldn't Stevens mean more than just this point by choosing such an exotic architecture as the "trope of the body"? Isn't this poem, published in *The Wake* (1950),[6] another example, among others, of the persistent influence of Oriental culture still working in the later Stevens? As a matter of fact, Stevens had learned about the Oriental pagoda a long time before. In his journal of April 5, 1906, Stevens recorded his reading of G. Lowes Dickinson's "Letters from John Chinaman." He particularly mentioned his liking of the "friendly Chinese pictures," about which he copied down a passage in the journal:

[5] More than one anthology of Stevens criticism include this essay, such as *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens* (1988, edited by Axelrod and Deese) and *Modern Critical Views: Wallace Stevens* (1995, edited by Harold Bloom).
[6] *OP*, p.81; *OP89*, p.119.

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> For many miles along the valley, one after the other,
> they (the houses) lift their blue- or red-tiled roofs out
> of a sea of green; while here and there glitters out over
> a clump of trees the gold enamel of some tall pagoda.
> (*SP* 162-163)

Here is quite clearly evidenced Stevens's early knowledge of the pagoda. He could have learned about this Oriental architecture from his reading *Buddhism in China*, in which the author gives, at least in four places, explanations about pagodas, depicting not only the building itself but also "the reverence [of Asian people] for sacred spots and buildings."[7] Besides, after his hometown built a seven-storied Japanese pagoda on the summit of Mount Penn in 1908, Stevens had frequented this site many times when he visited Reading.[8] In his letter of March 16, 1909, Stevens mentions that he dislikes moralizing, and adds:

> ...priggish morality versus wisdom, as different as a
> goddess from an old hen in curl papers – think of Buddha
> directing millions of aspiring souls, fashioning a happiness
> for them: . . . . I propose, then, still to worship the wise
> and reverence [sic] wisdom, or as Solomon says, to "get
> wisdom, get understanding." Look for me in Sacred Pagodas;
> in shadowy temples, in groves hallowed by ikons... .[9]

Obviously Stevens wrote the above poem in connection with his memories of visiting the pagoda, and with the purpose of self-mockery or challenging

[7] See *Buddhism in China* (1884, London, by Samuel Beal). Stevens had a copy of this book, which is still in the Stevens Collection at The Huntington Library.
[8] *The Later Years*, p.373.
[9] *The Early Years*, p.340.

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something. During his many visits to the Mount Penn, he must have greatly enjoyed the panoramic view of Reading city and the Schuylkill Valley, as is confirmed by the poem's last couplet describing the pagoda and mountain:

> As if, alone on a mountain, it saw far-off
> An innocence approaching toward its peak.
> (*OP89* 119)

Moreover, related to the above-mentioned first example (regarding Bynner's influence on Stevens), there is also an issue apropos of the source of Oriental influence on the poet. Given the fact that, like Ezra Pound, Stevens could not read in either Japanese or Chinese, the medium through which he possibly could have received some influence of the East (such as certain translated versions of the original Eastern literature, or some introductory articles and reportage/ travels written by Western writers) would often have been inadvertently "contaminated" to different degrees. In addition to that, there is also the problem of cross-influence coexisting with the ages-long acculturation of Oriental civilization in the Western world. For more than a thousand years, this Asian civilization has exerted its subtle influences upon the Western mind for so long a period, and through so many generations of scholars, that it may sometimes become very difficult to tell where the clear-cut demarcation line lies, and much more difficult to tell certain stereotypes or misconceptions other than the truth. In the case of the second instance ("The Desire To Make Love in a Pagoda")

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mentioned above, the Western critic underestimates the significance of Stevens's choice of words (and image) for his title, thus misleading readers (or at least giving an inadequate treatment of the poem and its image). As Stevens had a keen interest in the Eastern Asian countries and their cultures, we can certainly presume that Stevens could have comprehended the connotations of "pagoda" more profoundly than an ordinary reader could. Even ordinary dictionaries often offer adequately clear definitions and the word's background as:

> A religious building of the Far East, esp. a many-storied Buddhist tower, erected as a memorial or shrine.[10]
>
> * * *
>
> A temple or sacred building (in India, China, and adjacent countries); especially a sacred tower, usually of pyramidal form, built over the relics of Buddha or a saint, or in any place as a work of devotion.[11]

One cannot but wonder: For a poet who was looking for a substitute "vehicle of faith" in a time when the traditional faith in God is pronounced dead, is it possible that he injected into this "Godless World" some other faith or idea from the East? If such is the case, how can some critics of Stevens fail to relate this poem with this potential influence from Oriental religion? And we can even ask: could there still exist more instances of misinterpretation or inadequate reading in Stevens criticism?

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[10] See *The American Heritage Dictionary* for PAGODA, definition 1.

[11] See *The Oxford English Dictionary* for PAGODA, definition 1.

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In view of all these facts/reasons, I will argue that the current Oriental-influence study in Stevens criticism has only attained half of the goal it is supposed to carry out. In other words, what some critics have examined and presented so far is only an incomplete, or even partially misconceived, "orientalism." The perspective of these critics is the one that has been confined by their traditional training in the Western culture. Such a perspective prescribes only a one-directional impact on Stevens without examining in an adequate manner Stevens's reaction to that influence. By presuming that Oriental-influence-study in Stevens criticism ought to be a two-way traffic, I argue that the response of the poet (Stevens) to the specific influence should also be included and adequately studied. For this purpose, it would be more appropriate to employ a more comprehensive approach in the study. Such an approach ought to demonstrate the other half unfortunately missing in the current studies of Oriental influence on Stevens. Furthermore, since this genuinely "oriental" approach will incorporate different interdisciplinary studies (like Asian studies, Chinese literary history, and the history of Chinese painting), this method will have an advantage over the traditional approach – it will enable us to analyze Oriental influence in Stevens's works from the perspectives of Oriental culture. It will also help distinguish the genuine Oriental influences and their sources from the stereotyped /misrepresented ones by tracing this influence back to its origin in Oriental arts, poetics, and

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aesthetic theories. In order to supply the missing half in this field, a more systematic in-depth analysis will be incorporated into the current Oriental-influence study. This analysis will ask the following questions:

a) In what specific aspects is Stevens's poetry influenced by Oriental culture?

b) What is the measure by which one can tell the genuine Oriental ideas reflected in Stevens's works from certain stereotypes and misconceptions?

c) Are there some Oriental ideas that had been first absorbed into the Western tradition, and afterwards influenced Stevens in his writing?

d) What is Stevens's own response to Oriental culture of his time? In particular, what had caused him to "desert" or "disavow orientalism" (as some critics proclaim) later in his life?

Answers to these questions will comprise the "missing half" in the current Oriental-influence study in Stevens criticism. In the following three chapters, I will carefully explore the possible traces of Oriental culture in different aspects of Stevens's works and life, aiming to discover more evidence of Oriental influence in Stevens's own writing and life. In the process of this exploration, I will discuss, in addition to Stevens's poems, some Oriental classics, such as *I Ching (The Book of Changes), The Analects of Confucius*, and *Tao de Ching,*[12] and compare them with Stevens's poems and prose. Besides, I will also provide discussions of

[12] Its variations in translation could be: *The Way of Life, Book of Taoism*, or *The Sayings of Lao Tzu*.

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Eastern poetics congruous with Stevens's poetics (like the theories of Chinese lyrics or Japanese haiku), and demonstrate this congruity with examples from the literary works of Eastern Asian countries as well as from Stevens's works. These textual and theoretical explorations will broaden and deepen the Oriental-influence study in Stevens criticism, because new evidence will be added to the current studies in this field, and new approaches (such as cultural, religious, and interdisciplinary approaches) will be added to the traditional approaches, thus forming a comprehensive study of Oriental influence in Stevens's works and contributing to Stevens scholarship.

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CHAPTER 4

From the Buddhist Koan to the Stevens Anecdote

DICTION MAKES OR MARS THE POET

– Herbert Read

POETS ARE NOT CONTENT TO USE LANGUAGE AS IF IT WERE A SUCCESSION OF VAGUELY EMOTIVE NOISES INTENDED TO PROD THE LISTENER INTO TAKING SOME SORT OF ACTION. THEY MUST, BY THEIR VERY NATURE, REFUSE TO CONFINE HEMSELVES TO A STANDARDIZED VOCABULARY AND A CONVENTIONAL GRAMMAR WHICH...ARE CLUMSY INSTRUMENTS FOR THE DELICATE AND DIFFICULT TASKS THAT POETS ARE CALLED UPON TO PERFORM.

– John Press

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In this chapter I will probe the poetical language and poetical style of Stevens. Starting from the "anecdote poems" of Stevens, and from his predilection for this form, I will first trace the definitions and roots of both "anecdote" and "koan," then I will try to establish some connection between the works of Oriental civilization and Stevens's library and his readings. After that, I will base my study of his poetical language and style on a comparison of it with "koan" – the special discourse employed by the Zen-Buddhist masters and favored by Chinese intellectuals of the classical tradition. Finally, I will discuss other characteristics of Stevens's poetical language and style that reveal affinities with Oriental poetical language and style.

Both critics and readers of Stevens have observed a peculiar feature in his poetry: one favorite form in Stevens's poetry is the "anecdote" poem. By "anecdote," I mean, as a few Stevens critics have implied but not explicitly clarified, not only those poems that employ the word "anecdote" (occasionally "anecdotal"), but also poems that either approximate an anecdote in the form, or prompt the impression of an anecdote in the content. The former type is obvious as can be seen in the following poems with the word "anecdote" appearing in their titles:

"Earthy Anecdote" (*CP* 3)
"Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" (*CP* 51)
"Anecdote of Canna" (*CP* 55)

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"Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" (*CP* 57)

"Anecdote of the Jar" (*CP* 76)

"Anecdotal Revery" (*OP89* 31)

"Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" (an early version) (*OP89* 40)

"Anecdote of the Abnormal" (*OP89* 43)

A few more poems use the word "anecdote" in the different places of their poetical lines, such as "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "The Comedian as the Letter C." Yet, such implied "anecdote" poems (poems that either approximate or prompt an anecdote) can also include many Stevens poems that do not contain the word "anecdote" in either their titles or poetical lines. For me, some of the implied "anecdote" poems are: "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," "Gubbinal," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Study of Two Pears," "The Indigo Glass in the Grass," (part of) "Lettres d'un soldat," "Six Significant Landscapes," "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," "Conversation with Three Women of New England," "Landscape with Boat," "Yellow Afternoon," "Saturday Night at the Chiropodist's," "Artificial Population," and "A Room on a Garden." Since readers can find many instances of implied and explicit "anecdote poems" in Stevens's poetical works, naturally, they could not help wondering: what significance does this inclination of Stevens's suggest?

To answer this challenging question, I have to discuss first the definitions of the word "anecdote," and then the meaning of the Eastern "koan," which is

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semantically related to "anecdote." The common dictionary definition for "anecdote" is: "A short account of some interesting or humorous incident." Yet the etymon of this word in Greek, "anekdotos" (negative prefix *an-* and root *ekdotos*, meaning "give out, publish"), denotes "something unpublished."[1] When "anekdotos" becomes "anecdote" in modern English, its meaning is extended from "something unpublished" into "a short account of some interesting or humorous incident." In this lexical evolution, modifiers like "interesting or humorous" are added to the original definition so as to enable the survival of an "anecdote" – i. e., in order for this unpublished incident to be passed over from one person to another person, and from one generation to another generation.

To most people, the word "koan" does not appear to be related to "anecdote," because the common definition for "koan" in some popular English dictionaries reads as follows:

> A nonsense question asked of a Zen student to bring him, through contemplation of it, to a greater awareness of reality.
>
> * * *
>
> A riddle in the form of a paradox, used in Zen Buddhism as an aid to meditation and a means of gaining intuitive

[1] According to *Dictionary of Word Origins* by John Ayto (p.25), the sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius first used *anekdota* as the title of his unpublished memoirs, which reveals 'juicy details of court life under the Emperor Justinian.' Later, there appeared the Latin word *anecdota* and English word *anecdote*, both meaning 'revelations of secrets.' The current meaning ('brief amusing story') did not develop until the mid 18th century.

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knowledge.[2]

Although each of these two definitions depicts certain characteristics of "koan" in its modern usage, none of the definitions is complete by itself. In addition, both fail to trace the word's original meaning. Strictly speaking, definitions as such are quite misleading, for "koan" is not always "a nonsense question" or "a riddle." D. T. Suzuki clearly points out:

> The *koan* is neither a riddle nor a witty remark. It has a most definite objective, the arousing of doubt and pushing it to its furthest limits. [3]

Etymologically, the root of "koan" came from a Chinese phrase "gong-an," which means:[4]

1) the long table behind which a magistrate sits when he is administering and exercising his judicial authority;
2) a legal case (usually a complicated one);
3) a literary genre popular in the Sung Dynasty (as an earlier form of Chinese fiction, it is also referred to as "gong-an fiction"), or a story from this genre[5];

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[2] Quoted respectively from *The Collegiate Webster's* and *The American Heritage Dictionary*. Many English dictionaries (like *OED, Random,* or some *Webster's*) do not even include this entry as they still regard it as a foreign word. Usually, the etymology label for this word indicates its origin as *Japanese, ko-an* [*ko*,public + *an*,matter.]
[3] From *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Kyoto: Eastern Buddhist Society, 1934), collected in *The World of Zen* (ed. Nancy Wilson Ross), p. 53.
[4] The following definitions are my translation of *gong-an* entry from the most authoritative Chinese lexicographical dictionary, *The Lexicon* (Shanghai Lexicographical Publications, revised edition, 1999), p.339.
[5] This genre approximates modern Western detective stories since both involve a legendary story basically describing how an agent investigates a crime. Two typical examples from

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4) government documents, or [by extension] Zen-Buddhist forefathers' saying, instructions, dialogues, and other instances of nonverbal communication.

Among these four definitions, the first is obviously the original literal meaning, while the second and the third are derived meanings, which are still closely related to a judicial magistrate (as a case by him or a story about him). Interestingly, in the process of verbal evolution, the fourth denotation had undergone complicated changes before it was transferred into Japanese (to become what is meant by "koan" today). In China, as more and more previously unpublished cases became known ("published"), or were turned into well-known fictional stories during the Song Dynasty (A. D. 960 – 1279), the primary meaning of "gong-an" was shifted from the first two denotations onto the last two. In addition, along with the popularization of Zen Buddhism in China starting from the Tang Dynasty (A. D. 618 – 907) and reaching its apex in the Song Dynasty, the religious meaning (in the fourth denotation) began to overshadow the secular meaning. By the end of the Song Dynasty "gong-an" in its popular circulation tended to indicate stories ("anecdotes") about "the sayings, instructions, and dialogues of the various Ch'an [*Chan*, the original Chinese expression, which was

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this genre, which many Western readers have either read or heard of, are *Judge Dee at Work* (London: Heinemann, 1967) and *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao* (Hong Kong: Heinemann, 1974).

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later rendered in Japanese as *Zen*] masters and their students."[6] Furthermore, stretched at the risk of going beyond recognition, its meaning even came to include some extreme forms/instances of instruction by the famous Chan [Zen] masters.

One reason to account for the popularity of "gong-an" in its new religious meaning is its incredible flexibility and versatile serviceability. It could be a brief but amusingly instructive story; it could also be an episode of a story, or only a short dialogue, a quotation, a fable, a phrase, or just a couple of poetical lines. Sometimes, it could also be a repartee, a maxim, an oxymoron, a paradoxical expression, or a perplexing riddle. At its extreme, it could even be a senseless strange sound, a cryptic gesture, or a violent action (like the beating or torturing of the disciple's body). Notwithstanding these extreme instances, *gong-an* in its basic usage denotes the exemplary instances of Zen masters' teaching and encounters (with the skeptical, the secular as well as the religious). At first these instances were only orally passed from one master to another, and from one generation to another generation. Eventually, the body of *gong-an* had become so colossal as to necessitate the use of written language. Besides, a need also arose to well preserve *gong-an*, and in an accurate manner, as if these instances of *gong-an* were government-documented cases to be carefully studied by novice officials.

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[6] Master Sheng-yen. *Chan* (Taiwan: Dong-Chu Publisher, 1979, 1992), p.107.

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Therefore, in spite of the Chan doctrine ("no setting up of written words"[7]), written records appeared, and explications of *gong-an* were welcomed and eagerly sought.[8] Whether *gong-an* should be defined as an "unpublished" or "published" case became a negligible matter. Gradually, as successive generations of Zen masters used and taught *gong-an* – the Zen anecdotes – to their disciples, *gong-an* became not only a powerful tool for Chinese Zen masters, but also a popular topic among the secular folks, the ordinary people, and men of letters as well. A Zen master would know by heart many *gong-an,* by means of which he could illustrate principles of Zen, and facilitate or test students' ultimate "enlightenment." As a kind of "graduation examination," a Zen disciple would often be asked to respond to a particular *koan* (or a situation in some *koan*), and/or create a "ji" (in Sanskrit, *gatha*, which means *hymn* or *a religious verse*) to testify his enlightenment.[9] Men of letters would cite *gong-an* in their conversation and works, and poets (especially poets of the Sung Dynasty) would seek inspiration from these Zen anecdotes, and write their own "ji" to testify their philosophical enlightenment or secular

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[7] See the following part (p. 85 ff.).

[8] Two well-known examples, from among hundreds of such publications, are *Mumonkan* and *Hekiganroku*. The former recounts and briefly comments on forty-eight *gong-an* and the latter explicates one hundred *gong-an*, with cross-references to hundreds of *gong-an*.

[9] A dramatic instance of such testimony is often told of about the succession of the Fifth Patriarchy Hong-ren. Hui-neng, an illiterate chore monk, defeated his rival by creating a better *ji*, thus becoming the Sixth Patriarchy of

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accomplishment. When Zen Buddhism was brought to Japan, it was the religious denotation of *gong-an* that lent its meaning to the newly created Japanese derivative expression "ko-an" (*koan*). Since then, not only has *koan* obtained its widest circulation, it has also been introduced into modern Western languages.

This evolution of *koan* seems too complicated. But one only has to remember that, in the final analysis, the ultimate etymon of "koan" denotes "a case/incident" – whether it is secular (like the government documents) or religious (such as the instances of Zen Buddhist teaching). Some Japanese-English dictionaries simply define "koan" as: "a phrase or snatch of dialogue used as a subject of mediation by Zen Buddhists." But insofar as it imparts a puzzling instructive story cased in a flexible form, *koan* approximates the English "anecdote" ("a brief amusing story") and its Greek root "anekdotos" (an "unpublished" – or later "published" – narrative). It is only in the hand of later-generation Zen Buddhists that these Chinese/Japanese cognate expressions have become a paradigm in the form of "a riddle," "a paradox," "a question," or a "snatch dialogue." Today, for most contemporary Chinese, *gong-an* is understood as either "an intricate case/ incident" or "an illuminating example from the Zen-Buddhist history." In Japan, the religious denotation is even more emphasized in *koan*. Moreover, by virtue of the strenuous efforts of Japanese scholars in the

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Zen Buddhism in China. The function of *ji* will be discussed

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twentieth century, the derivative expression *koan* even outshines its Chinese root *gong-an* and has become part of the English vocabulary.

The form of a koan, as I have indicated in the above discussion, is especially flexible. For generations, Zen masters have reiterated an admonition that the form in which a *koan* happens to present itself does not matter so much as what it reveals. The important thing is its expediency and its usefulness as a means to assist the disciples to learn the truth. Among the typical examples of *koan,* some are ambiguous or enigmatic, others are directly simple or figuratively refined. Some may be too violent, or even extremely vulgar. Yet they have all become the repertoire of Zen Buddhist literature and history.

Having gone so far into the history of *anecdote* and *koan*, I will now examine what light these two words will throw upon Stevens's use of the "anecdote poems." Despite the poet's own reticence, traces Stevens left in his life and writing indicate that such a phenomenon is not a mere coincidence. It is for some specific purpose(s) that Stevens deliberately chose this word and this rhetoric of discourse – the "anecdote poem" – to represent a favorite form for his poetry. Joan Richardson mentions Stevens's indebtedness to the Eastern Zen masters and to their use of koan at two different places in her biography of Stevens. At one place, she observes:

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again later in this chapter.

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> Using a title that was puzzling, Stevens hoped, in part, to force pauses or rests, spaces where the reader could attempt to figure out the relationship between title and poem. Stevens exploited this device to its fullest, drawing on lessons he had learned from the Oriental masters who established the same kind of tension in their koans.[10]

And at another place, she points out that:

> Nonetheless, [...] there are many, many other striking resemblances between concepts expressed throughout the *Mumonkan* and *Hekiganroku* and concepts that were clearly operative for Stevens. I offer one such observation here to illustrate my point. One of the lessons of the Sixth Patriarch involved settling a dispute between two monks who were arguing about the movement of a temple flag. [...] The Sixth Patriarch said, "It is not the wind that moves, it is not the flag that moves; it is your mind that moves.[11]

Richardson goes on to cite the "penultimate section" of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and then concludes:

> [Zen canon's...] using nonsense syllables to mimic the insufficiency of reason to deal fully with reality and the use of obvious paralogisms in the koans to prompt enlightenment, are echoed in Stevens's use of nonsense syllables and in his repeated counter-pointing of titles and poems.

These passages evince two insightful observations on two of Stevens's habits in writing: one, using puzzling titles to establish "tension" and "pauses"; the other, using paralogisms and nonsense syllables "to prompt enlightenment" and to "provoke the sublime laughter that accompanies insight."

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[10] *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879-1923* (1986), p.405.
[11] Ibid., p.24.

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From among the huge Zen collections, Richardson has cited one koan, as a typical example, to illustrate Stevens's "echoing of some Eastern texts" in his poems such as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." To establish the link between the Zen literature and Stevens's writing, I will follow up this direction, and go further by exploring Stevens's reading activities, his poems and prose works, so as to discover vestige of possible influence of Eastern *koan*, among other things, on Stevens's poetry.

Stevens once wrote: "The great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of earth remains to be written"(*SP* 134). In a certain sense it can be said that, in the course of preparing himself for that "great poem of earth," Stevens's writing of "anecdote poems" is his special way of sending his "Letter to the World," in which he could "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" as Emily Dickinson did. Of course it would be a too-far-fetched idea to relate Dickinson's riddle-like poems to the Eastern Buddhist koans. But in Stevens's case, even though I do not agree with someone calling him "a Daoist" [Taoist],[12] I maintain that there are numerous biographical facts and textual evidence to prove the influence of Zen koans on him. Even though there are "no titles of the classical Zen collections remain in Stevens's library,"[13] Richardson confirms that Stevens did read two books – *The Book of Tea,* and *The Ideals of the East* – by Kakuzo

[12] See Note 15 in the second chapter.

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Okakura, copied into his notebooks some passages from Okakura's books, and sent one of these passages to Elsie Moll as a "motto" for her.[14] In addition, Stevens read many other books on Oriental wisdom and literature, such as *Buddhism in China*, *The Way of Life*, and More's *Century of Indian Epigrams*. At one time, Stevens wrote in his journals "I should like to have a library of such things" [meaning "maxims and aphorisms" from other countries] (*L* 88). According to A. Walton Litz, "Stevens did acquire such a library" of "collection of aphorisms, proverbs, or pithy journal entries." These books include "volumes on the proverbial wisdom of France, Italy, Morocco, China, Japan, and India."[15] Among the titles concerning or coming from Eastern countries, there are:

> *Wit and Wisdom in Morocco: A Study of Native Proverbs.*
> *Chinese Proverbs.*
> *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese.*
> *Japanese Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases.*
> *English-Japanese and Japanese-English Dictionary of Proverbs.*
> *A Collection of Hindustani Proverbs.*
> *A Collection of Proverbs, Bengali and Sanscrit* [sic].[16]

In fact, Stevens could have used as germs of perception for his poems some ideas or proverbs from these books. Though Stevens did not specify any particular

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[13] See the previous chapter Note 31.
[14] *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years*, pp. 29, 246, 253, 341, 555.
[15] 'Particles of Order: The Unpublished *Adagia*' in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* (ed. by Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel), pp.57-77.

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source for his individual poems, we can still compare his poems with certain source books, for we do know, from his *Letters* and Holly's memoirs *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, part of what Stevens had actually read about the East and Oriental culture. For instance, Holly mentions that her father had read these scholars on the Asian countries and cultures: Lafcadio Hearn, Kakuzo Okakura, G. Lowes Dickinson, Paul Elmor More, Witter Bynner, and Laurence Binyon.[17] Among the books written by these authors, one title particularly worth mentioning here is *The Book of Tea* by Kakuzo Okakura. This book is not just an ordinary "book of tea" as its title suggests. As an interpreter for Ernest Fenollosa, Okakura had worked and studied with Fenollosa, from whom he gained not only knowledge but also an "awakened new understanding for the native heritage of Japan."[18] On account of his expertise, Okakura had held many important positions (such as Secretary to the Minister of Education in Japan, Member of the Imperial Art Commission, and Director of the Imperial Art School) until he became the Advisor and then Curator of the Chinese and Japanese Art Department at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.[19] As an ardent enthusiast for advocating Asian cultures, he read and wrote a great

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[16] Ibid., p.341.
[17] *SP*, pp. 96, 163-164, 218, 220-221.
[18] See the publisher's FORWORD and INTRODUCTION to *The Ideals of The East*.
[19] His acquisition activities of Asian arts (especially Chinese and Japanese arts) at the Boston Museum, and the works of arts that might be seen by Stevens, will be mentioned in the next chapter.

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deal on Asian arts and literature. Hence, what he puts into this book is more than knowledge merely about tea. He also introduces to his Western readers Oriental thought, history, and style of living, as can be seen from the chapter titles of this book.[20] Through reading these books, the Eastern way of life and the Zen Buddhist ideas might have struck Stevens in a manner more profound than critics can fathom. In her biography, Richardson cites a particular example to demonstrate that Stevens learned – from Oriental culture via the observation of Charles Lamb – how "to do good by stealth and have it discovered by chance."[21]

In addition to this example, there are other instances that illustrate how Eastern religions also get involved in this particular "tea book," and could have influenced Stevens's writing. For example, in the third chapter entitled "Taoism and Zennism," Okakura recounts the history of three Eastern religions. His narrative covers not only religious founders and doctrines but also history and geography of China (as both Taoism and Zennism are native religions of China). He mentions Confucianism, *The Book of Changes*, *Tao-te-King*, and "the worship of Relativity." He also recites the contributions these religions made to "Asiatic life," especially "in the realm of aesthetics." On top of that, Okakura explains some important ideas of Taoism and Zen philosophy (such as their principles with

[20] The titles of the seven chapters are: I. The Cup of Humanity; II. The Schools of Tea; III. Taoism and Zennism;

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regard to action, non-action, nature, and meditation). In telling brief stories about the founders of these religions, such as Lao Tzu (the proverbial founder of Taoism) and Eno (Hui-Neng, the Sixth Patriarch), he cites some interesting anecdotes to demonstrate these founders' teachings on "Nagativism [sic], Supreme Reason, the Mode [of ethics]," and the "love of the Abstract."[22] Okakura also describes the Zen masters' propensity for painting. It is in this chapter that Okakura recites the familiar koan story about Eno, who instructs "two monks watching the flag of a pagoda fluttering in the wind."[23] If Stevens had not read *Mumonkan*,[24] it must be this "book of tea" that first taught Stevens such a koan story about the moving of the wind and of the mind.

In the other book by the same author, *The Ideals of the East, with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, Okakura also briefly discusses the major Eastern religions as well as the history of Japanese arts. Amazingly, I discover that, it is from this book that Stevens copied some pithy phrases summarizing the highlights of Oriental culture. When Okakura discusses the unity of Asia and its brilliant civilization, he mentions "Arab chivalry, Persian poetry, Chinese ethics, and Indian

IV. The Tea-Room; V. Art Appreciation; VI. Flowers. VII. Tea-Masters.

[21] *The Early Years*, pp. 29, 555.

[22] *The Book of Tea*, p.26.

[23] Ibid., P. 27.

[24] *Mumonkan* contains this koan about Eno and the two monks, but *Hekiganroku* does not.

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thought."[25] These four phrases are the exact words that appear in Stevens's journals.[26] Conspicuously, such an instance suggests that *The Ideals of the East* is a source book for some of the entries Stevens jotted down in his journals, and possibly a "germ of perception" for some of Stevens's poems too. In addition to their proclaimed aspect of knowledge respectively on the "Oriental way" of tea and arts, these two books (*The Book of Tea* and *The Ideals of the East*) actually represent a general introduction to the Eastern ways of life for Stevens, thus giving him a sense of direction in his subsequent reading about Oriental culture. In this sense it could be said that *The Book of Tea* and *The Ideals of the East* served as guide books for Stevens in his study of Oriental cultures.

These two books are by no means the only sources of Oriental influence for Stevens. For instance, according to Robert Moynihan, there are more books, in Stevens's private library, that compose "Stevens' own gathering of Chinese and other proverbial lore."[27] After examining Moynihan's list carefully, I find that Stevens owned at least the following books, which exclusively cover the subjects of China and its literature/culture:

The Chung-yung or the Centre, The Common [sic.]
The Analects

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[25] *The Ideals of the East*, pp.3-4.
[26] *SP*, p. 221.
[27] Robert Moynihan, 'Checklist: Second Purchase, Wallace Stevens Collection, Huntington Library,' *WSJ* (Spring, 1996) (76-103), P. 79.

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The Classics of Confucius: Book of Odes (Shi-king)
The Way of Life According to Lao-tzu: An American Version
(by Witter Bynner)
A Collection of Chinese Proverbs
Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese
Gems of Chinese Literature: Prose (by Herbert Giles)
Gems of Chinese Literature: Verse (by Herbert Giles)
Cathay: Translations for the Most Part from the Chinese Rihaku
(by Ezra Pound)
Translations from the Chinese (by Arthur Waley)[28]

If Stevens did read all of these books, they could have taught him a great deal about the Chinese people and their ways of life, and could have supplied him with many perceptions for his poems. To explore this possibility, I went to The Huntington Library, and found six books from the above ten titles available to researchers. Some of these books were actually marked by Stevens in many places. One of them is *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese.* This book is of particular interest to my topic. I noticed, for example, certain words written with pencil at the end of its first four chapters. These words indicate that

[28] Ibid., pp. 79-84,87,91,95,98. This list is by no means an exhaustive one. For instance, Moynihan's list does not include *Buddhism in China*, which is stored in the 'Wallace Stevens Collection' at The Huntington Library. Stevens made some marks on this book, including the date of purchase, or of reading. Besides, Bynner's *Jade Mountains* is not on Moynihan's list either.

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Stevens had actually read at least one hundred pages of this book.[29] The book not only introduces Chinese proverbs and quotations to readers, but also includes some general chapters summarizing background knowledge on the Chinese ways of life, China's history, myth, folklore and literature. These chapters are: the INTRODUCTORY, the CONCLUSION, and some chapters respectively dealing with *Quotations from the Classics and Other Standard Books, Proverbial Phrases, Proverbial Quotations, Chinese Poetical Quotations, Antithetical Couplets, Chinese Fables, Chinese Riddles, Chinese Character Puzzles, Chinese Parodies, Chinese Puns – Puns and Linguistic Diversions, Picture Puns, Conversational Puns, Double Puns, and* ...[Homonym] *Puns.*"[30] The subtitle of this book is also very informative though rather long: "*together with much related and unrelated matter, interspersed with observations on Chinese things in general.*" As an erudite book of more than 400 pages, it may have become an encyclopedic source book on Chinese culture for Stevens. Since this book may contain possible provenance of Oriental influence on Stevens, I will come back to this book again and cite passages/expressions from it in the following parts when discussing

[29] Stevens marked the specific dates indicating when he finished reading those four chapters. They are respectively: *21.2.1912*, *22.2.1912*, *23.2.1912*, and *24.2.1912*. I assume Stevens read at least 100 pages, because the last of these marks is on page *84*, and the *Preface* and *Table of Contents* amount to fourteen pages in Roman numerals.
[30] The italic words are the original expressions from the *Table of Contents* of this book.

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Stevens's poems. Moreover, there are also some books from Stevens's library that are not included in Moynihan's list. For instance, the above-mentioned book, *Buddhism in China*, is not on Moynihan's list, though I do find it in The Huntington Library. As Stevens had read the whole book, and marked out certain sentences/paragraphs from this book,[31] I will use it as a possible source book as well later in my discussions.

With the sources of influence circumscribed, I will now proceed to examine the relationship between Stevens's anecdote poems and the Eastern *koan*. Traditionally, scholars have divided documented koans into five general categories,[32] which are still used by the *Rinzai* School – one of the most influential Zen-Buddhist sects in Japan.[33] For the sake of convenience in discussion, I will borrow these categories, and designate their equivalent expressions in English to

[31] Stevens's first mark is on the title page, and the last mark is on page 263 (the last page of the Index section).
[32] These categories are: 1) *hosshin-koan* 2) *kikan-koan* 3) *gonsen-koan* 4) *nanto-koan* 5) *kojo-koan* or *go-I-koan*. For definitions and detailed discussion of them, see 'Zen koans' (by Eido T.Shimano) collected in *Zen: Tradition and Transition* (edited by Kenneth Kraft, Grove Press, 1988), pp. 70-88. Also see *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), pp. 182-183.
[33] *Rinzai* is the Japanese derivative from the original Chinese word *Lin-tsi*. Stevens certainly knew about this school, for he marked one specific paragraph with a thick vertical marginal line on his copy of *Buddhism in China*. The first sentence of this paragraph is: 'This priest belonged to the *Lin-tsi* branch of the contemplative school of Chinese Buddhists.' See *Buddhism in China*, p. 198. The call number for this book in the Wallace Stevens Library in The Huntington Library is 442233. Stevens's own handwriting in

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head different sections in the following part of this chapter as I discuss Stevens's poems. These expressions are: A) the "oneness of Buddha-nature" (the so-called *satori* or *kensho* in Japanese, or in plain English "the enlightenment," "distinctions within non-distinction" or "interlocking of differentiation"); B) "paradoxes"; C) "puzzles"; and D) the "imperturbability of mind" (or "the joyful mind unshakable in the midst of everyday turmoil").[34] Of course, Stevens could not have used such a system of division or its categories in writing his poems, though evidence indicates that Stevens was familiar with the *Rinzai* School and its doctrines.[35] My rationale for employing these expressions/concepts is as follows. After reading so many books on Oriental culture, Stevens must have acquired such a familiarity with *koan* and its implications that he could, and did, mimic/borrow these concepts unconsciously in a random manner. His familiarity with *koan* could have important bearing on his thought, and affect part of his writing. In Chapter Three I

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the title page indicates that he bought this book in Boston on February 12, 1919.

[34] To compare these headings with the five categories in Japanese in the above note(#32), heading A) is approximately the combination of 1) and 2), while headings B) corresponds to 3), C) to 4), and D) to 5).

[35] See the above Note 33 about *Rinzai* and Stevens's marginal line in *Buddhism in China* Concerning *Lin-tsi*. Also it is possible that Stevens learned about *Rinzai* from *The Ideals of the East*, in which there is a passage describing Zen schools. (See p. 171, beginning with this sentence: 'The doctrines of *Baso* and *Rinzai* are clearly demarcated from those of the early exponents of this school.')

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have mentioned Stevens's favorite Buddha figure, which Stevens could see and meditate on everyday. Richardson has a vivid description of such scenes:

> Projecting himself into the figure of the Buddha sitting on his windowsill, he imagined himself in Ceylon and the East because the Orient seemed to hold the possibility of a different kind life. As events in the West became more violent, his early interest in the East became keener and less purely aesthetic. Meditating over the years on Buddha and the attitudes he represented, Stevens slowly assumed the Buddha-like smile that characterizes one of his favorite photographs of himself. This one he eventually chose for the dust jacket of *The Collected Poems*.[36]

Thus, it is most likely that, when Stevens wrote poems, memories from his previous readings could float up, and inspire many "striking resemblances between concepts expressed throughout the *Mumonkan* and *Hekiganroku* and concepts that were clearly operative for Stevens."[37] As a matter of fact, one of Stevens's poems, "A Weak Wind in the Mountains" does provide a poetical description of his thought and the circumstances at the time when he was writing at night:

> So afterward, at night,
> The wind of Iceland and
> The wind of Ceylon,
> Meeting, gripped my mind,
> Gripped it and grappled my thoughts.
>
> The black wind of the sea
> And the green wind
> Whirled upon me.
> The blood of the mind fell

[36] *The Later Years*, p. 152.
[37] See Note 10 on page 67.

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To the floor. I slept.

Yet there was a man within me
Could have risen to the clouds,
Could have touched these winds,
Bent and broken them down,
Could have stood up sharply in the sky. (*CP* 212)

Here Stevens presents the crosscurrents in his mind symbolized by the "black wind" and the "green wind" (respectively, Ceylon / the East, and Iceland / the West). They are two cultures "meeting" in his mind and "grappling" his thoughts. And the "man within me" is the Buddha, or Stevens's "Buddhahead" aspiring ("risen to the clouds") to an ideal unity "in the sky." However, scene and poem as such is rare. Because Stevens seldom jotted down resources for his poems – as an inspired being, he has no obligation to carry the burden of proof or provenance – the only "hard evidence" for such "striking resemblances" may exist solely in his own poetical writing. In the following three parts of this chapter, I will discuss, in accordance with the direction indicated by the above headings, these affinities between Stevens's poetry and the Eastern *koan*.

A) Oneness of Buddha-nature

Included in this category are instances from Stevens's poems dealing with different notions/images/expressions of oppositions. In my opinion, these various oppositions are only "distinctions within non-distinction" for Stevens, because, in

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the light of Zen Buddhism, all distinctions are only the "two sides of one coin" – the oneness of the Buddha-nature, or the interlocking of differentiation for the enlightened mind. That Stevens learned this concept from his contact with the Oriental classics is clearly evidenced in his anecdote poems. Critics have written innumerable articles and books on the "Stevensian dichotomy." Yet, few articles have been devoted to the exclusive discussion of Stevens's dichotomy in its relations to Eastern koan demonstrated by his "anecdote poems." Although for different Stevens critics, Stevens's "anecdote poems" might stand for different things and convey various meanings, the following summation by Susan Weston is insightfully laconic in its treatment of this aspect:

> A glance at the table of contents of *Harmonium* confirms his favorite title "Anecdote." Many of the poems, and not just those so entitled, are indeed "anecdotes," little stories that are apropos of something under discussion. ...These "anecdote" poems all dramatize some abstraction, and ... only in his poetry could Stevens resolve the inherent contradictions he felt. He concretizes the abstractions – usually imagination and reality – with a particular set of images: firecat, jar, candle, moonlight are some of the figures for imagination; bucks, Tennessee (or any Southern landscape), wind, ocean, sun are some of the figures for reality.[38]

In other words, Weston sees Stevens's "anecdote poems" as, first, the poetic dramatization of certain abstractions, and then, the resolution of these abstracted contradictions. Though it is debatable whether Stevens's anecdote poems all

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contain some abstractions and offer resolutions, Weston's observation reveals an interesting fact, if not theory, about Stevens's poetry: that for some reason the poet is especially fond of anecdote poems.

According to Richardson, there are three things Stevens "learned from the Oriental masters": "nonsense syllables," "obvious paralogisms," and "counter-pointing of titles and poems."[39] Since these three are all features related to *koan*[40], I would further suggest that Stevens's anecdote poems could relate to Eastern *koan* as the result of his interest in, and his reading of, books of Oriental literature and arts. To date it is not proved that Stevens ever said anything in regard to the relationship between his anecdote poems and Eastern koan. Nor have critics established any direct connection between Stevens's poetry and the Eastern thought in this particular aspect. Opinions closest to associating Stevens's anecdote poems with *koan* are the comments made by Richardson. She has made two references to the link between Stevens's poetry and koan. One is the second passage I have quoted in the above part on page 66. The other is the following:

> Stevens constructed poems that were puzzles, riddles.
> They were to be like Japanese koans, which, when
> understood, produce in the moment of illumination
> the "angelic hilarity" Stevens, while still a youth, had

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[38] *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1974), pp.24,27.
[39] See the above part on page 67.
[40] The last of these can be regarded as one special kind of Paradox, which will be discussed in the next section B).

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found to be a goal most worthy achieving.[41]

To find out what kind of lessons Stevens had actually learned from koans, and in what ways his poems are akin to the Eastern koan, we have to examine more anecdote poems. And one outstanding example of Stevens's explicit anecdote poems is his first anecdote poem as follows:

Earthy Anecdote

Every time the bucks went clattering
Over Oklahoma
A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,
They went clattering,
Until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the right,
Because of the firecat.

Or until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the left,
Because of the firecat.

The bucks clattered.
The firecat went leaping,
To the right, to the left,
And
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept.

Stevens arranged to have this poem placed at the beginning of his first volume of poetry, *Harmonium*. Later, after more than thirty years, he chose again

[41] *The Later Years*, p. 93.

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to have this poem arranged as the first poem in his tour de force *The Collected Poems*. Some critics have noticed this special arrangement, and viewed this poem as a symbolic "synecdoche" or a parable.[42] But to me, putting this particular poem twice at the beginning of the collection of his poems could be Stevens's deliberate attempt to emphasize his "anecdote poem" by empowering it with this commanding position to "preface" other poems. By so saying I do not mean to deny the possibility that this particular poem could have taken after *Aesop's Fables*, since Stevens also depicts some animals (in this case, two fowls) acting like human characters. In his letters to friends, Stevens also mentioned the poem twice:

> There's no symbolism in the "Earthy Anecdote". [sic] There's a good deal of theory about it, however; but explanations spoil things. (*L*, 205)
>
> * * *
>
> Walter Pach's illustration is just the opposite of my idea. I intended something quite concrete: actual animals, not original chaos. (*L*, 209)

Whether there is symbolism or not, in its essence, this anecdote poem is both an Aesopian fable and an Eastern koan. In fact, some famous koans also use animals to illustrate Zen ideas (like dog, cat and ox in *Mumonkan*[43]). Under the influence of either *Aesop's Fables* or Zen koan (or possibly both), Stevens ends

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[42] See the following books: *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* by Morris (pp. 23-24); *Wallace Stevens, the Making of the Poem* by Doggett (pp. 57-58).

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the poem with a conspicuous alteration: he leaves out the moral lesson customarily found at the end of a fable. Instead, at the place where readers expect to discover a moral lesson, Stevens only gives a laconic description: "Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes / And slept." Such an ending recalls, quite amazingly, a familiar situation found in many Zen Buddhist lectures or koans:[44] at or near the end of a lesson/dialogue, when a Zen disciple is still obsessed with asking questions, the master often turns the head aside and closes the eyes. In a similar manner, when the firecat got tired of the endless "clattering" of the bucks, it did the same thing as a Zen master would.

In addition to this "stylistic" lesson from koan masters, Stevens could have also learned another lesson from the Eastern poets – an aesthetic lesson on writing poems. An important feature of Chinese poetry is that it values implicitness. I have mentioned before that Stevens was interested in the Chinese poetics and copied some "Chinese saying of poetry" into his journal – "The sound stops short. The sense runs on." Stevens understood the principle underlying this sentence: it is better to imply the sense in the sound (or the act of sounding) itself. Truly in "Earthy Anecdote," when the sounds (such as "went" "swift" "bright" "right and

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[43] See respectively the first, the fourteenth and the thirty-eighth koan from *Mumonkan*.

[44] Many koans are actually anecdotes about Zen Buddhist lectures, which offer a perfect opportunity for disciples to learn through observing how different masters act/respond under various circumstances.

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left" or "slept") finally disappear, the sensations implied by them and the impressions they left behind still linger in readers' minds. In particular, those plosive sounds ("t" "d" "b") are still "clattering," making readers' minds "swerved," and invoking the image of the "bristled" firecat with its impressive "bright eyes." Though Stevens himself denied any "symbolism" in this anecdote poem, he did admit "a good deal of theory about it," which could be, among other possibilities, a theory or lesson learned from the Zen koan.

Moreover, in addition to being a "riddle," a koan is often (just as Stevens describes "Earthy Anecdote" in his letter) "something quite concrete." On the other hand, a koan could also be an abstraction at the same time. It is in this manner that "Earthy Anecdote" approximates the structure and function of a koan, because its subtle implication can be flexibly extended to a lot of things in the real world. For instance, the combat between the firecat and bucks could allude to something familiar in everyday life, such as some dichotomous arguments, two striving (contending) parties, certain diametrical opinions, any entangled ideas, or even irreconcilable beliefs.

Ezra Pound, a contemporary of Stevens, is renowned for his use of the Oriental "Ideogrammic Method" in some of his poems. In contrast, to my surprise, a fact far less known among readers of modern poetry is the koan-like feature in

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Stevens's anecdote poems.[45] As a general rule, Stevens's abstraction of reality in concrete images/symbols, as is exhibited in "Earthy Anecdote," could be held true for his other anecdote poems as well. But before I move to other examples from Stevens's anecdote poems, there is still one more affinity I have to mention here. Apart from his own taciturn disposition, Stevens could also learn from those koan masters the advantage of being implicit. Inasmuch as a Zen master never gives explicit explanation to his koans, Stevens usually does not give clue to his poem as well as to his "theory." He would rather, as a Zen master lets his disciples discover the meaning of koans, let readers themselves find out about poems he wrote. An exception to this, however, may be found in the placement of "Earthy Anecdote": Stevens did prepare his readers, by putting this poem at the beginning of his *Harmonium* and *Collected Poems,* for a salient thought in his poetry that, everywhere in reality, desultory dichotomies might exist in various forms. And as a poet Stevens would often abstract these dichotomies in the various forms/images of his poetry.

The remarkable conception of "Earthy Anecdote" – being implicit yet versatile – is also embodied in other anecdote poems. Stevens titled some of them

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[45] Even critics may overlook this issue. For example, there are many critical articles and books (such as *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method* and *Ezra Pound's Cathay*) on Pound's Eastern *Ideogrammic Method*. Yet so far there is neither a book nor articles that study Stevens's *Koan-Method*.

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with "anecdote" as if to suggest that, as his "Anecdotal Revery [reverie]" these poems are his reflections on the constant theme of his writing – the relationship between imagination and reality. Yet, if this relationship is to be viewed from the perspective of a Zen master, it becomes the relationship of self-nature ("Buddha-nature") with the physical nature (the real world). The well-known doctrine of Zen Buddhism is:

> Special transmission outside the Scriptures
> No setting up of words and letters
> Point directly at man's mind
> See self-nature and attain Buddhahead.[46]

The last two lines express the essential doctrine of the Zen sect Buddhism. Okakura mentions this doctrine in both *The Book of Tea* and *The Ideals of the*

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[46] This doctrine is said to be advanced by Budhidharma, the First Patriarch, and advocated by Hui-Neng, the Sixth Patriarch, whose disciples jotted down this doctrine in a four-line verse in sixteen Chinese characters (words), i.e. in only sixteen syllables since all Chinese characters are monosyllabic. It is an extremely compact expression, thus very difficult to be translated. The version I quote here is from *The Golden Age of Zen* by John C.H. Wu. A variant of it, from *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, is as follows:

> a special transmission outside the [orthodox] teaching
> nondependence on [sacred] writings
> direct pointing [to the] human heart
> realization of nature [and] becoming a Buddha.

D.T. Suzuki translates the last two lines as:

> Direct pointing at the soul of man
> Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood.

The original statement of this laconic doctrine is found in *Liu-Zu-Tan-Jing* (translated into Japanese as *Rokusodankyo*).

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East.[47] Samuel Beal also recounts it in his *Buddhism in China.*[48] Besides, van Geyzel, Stevens's correspondence friend in Ceylon, also sent him a booklet entitled *Essence of The Buddha's Teaching.* Stevens claims in his reply letter to van Geyzel that the "pamphlet is so good."[49] As Stevens read all of these books, and kept in his private library at least two copies of them, he could become quite familiar with this doctrine (not to mention the possibility that he could have read about it in his extensive reading on Oriental religion and literature). Could it be possible that he meditated on this doctrine and then absorbed something from its principle? Or could he have modified the dogma and amalgamated it into his poetic theory?

Most Stevens critics believe that Stevens's conception of his dichotomies results from his contacts at Harvard with Professors George Santayana and William James. However, I will contend for the possibility that, in addition to concepts learned from Santayana and James, Stevens could also mix into his theory what he had learned from the Eastern thinkers. For although Hegel and other Western dialectic philosophers have developed their theory of dialectics, the Western dialectics is still different from the Eastern dialectics. In Stevens's case,

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[47] In the former, p. 25 ff., in the latter, p. 171 ff..
[48] Op. cit., pp. 169 ff., 188 ff., 194, 198-200, 213 ff., 229-230.
[49] Stevens's letter to van Geyzel. dated October.14.1941 (file at The Huntington, WAS 2455).

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his dichotomy actually embraces more than Hegelianism can hold. For, even after thesis and antithesis are logically synthesized, so to speak, there is still

> ...a point
>
> Beyond which thought could not progress as thought,
> He had to choose. But it was not a choice
> Between excluding things. It was not a choice
>
> Between, but of. He chose to include the things
> That in each other are included, the whole,
> The complicate, the amassing harmony. (CP 403)

This peculiar "harmony" is, as the poet depicts, born out of his "choice" not "Between, but of." It is quite different from Hegel's synthesis. It is in fact a mixture of ideas coming from Oriental philosophy, like the harmony sought by *The Prajnaparamita* dialectics, or the union of striving forces of *Yin* and *Yang* pursued by the Taoists. Though the choice Stevens describes here is not exactly a Buddhist one, it could have some bearings from Oriental classics, such as *The Diamond Sutra* or *The Heart Sutra*. All these Buddhist sutras, plus Confucian classics and Taoist classics, mention the "Great Harmony" as an ideal state, yet also a choice reachable through one's willed choice. The choice that Stevens presents in this poem is akin to the question that is often put before Zen disciples. It is even a question asked of modern scientific philosophers as well: "All things return to One. Where does the One return to?" In another of his poems Stevens describes this harmony and tries to paraphrase "the choice not between, but of" as:

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> It is the huge, high harmony....
> .... It is and it
> Is not and, therefore, is. (*CP* 440)

As a trio of three phases, this series (of "is" "is-not" and "therefore is") is actually a concept that had existed long before Stevens's time, and in more than one *koan* form.

Here I will cite a well-known example from D. T. Suzuki. In *Zen Buddhism* Suzuki describes this triplex process in a *koan* anecdote as follows:

> Before you have studied Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; while you are studying it, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers no longer rivers; but once you have had Enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and rivers are rivers. [50]

The three phases of Zen Buddhist rationalization in this koan has become the staple of Zen lectures and books. This *koan* anecdote also has so many versions and become so widely disseminated that even some nonmembers of Zen community can repeat or apply it in their everyday life. Given the fact about Stevens's avid reading in Oriental literature, Stevens surely read or even copied it. With impression of this koan lingering in his memory, he devised his own version of it (is + is-not + therefore is) in "A Primitive Like an Orb" years later. Because at the moment I am only discussing the influence of koan on Stevens, I will save

[50] D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, pp. xvi-xvii.

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the theoretical issues involved in the context of this passage, and of the previous one from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," for the sixth chapter.

To illustrate such subtle influences from Zen Buddhism, let us examine another example from Stevens's anecdote poems. This time it will again be an entire anecdote poem.

Anecdote of Men by the Thousand

The soul, he said, is composed
Of the external world.

There are men of the East, he said,
Who are the East.
There are men of a province
Who are that province.
There are men of a valley
Who are that valley.

There are men whose words
Are as natural sounds
Of their places
As the cackle of toucans
In the place of toucans.

The mandoline is the instrument
Of a place.

Are there mandolines of western mountains?
Are there mandolines of northern moonlight?

The dress of a woman of Lhassa,
In its place,
Is an invisible element of that place
Made visible.

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The major statement of this poem appears in the first stanza by a mysterious "he," unidentified yet authoritative, presumably a master on spiritual issues. To buttress this general maxim, Stevens illustrates it with a number of particular instances, and then concludes the poem with another generalization. This last declarative sentence not only illustrates but also reinforces the beginning statement. If removed from this poem and read separately, either of the first and the last stanzas can alone pass for some Eastern koan. By reiterating the interdependent relationship between the characteristics of a place and the soul of the inhabitants of that place, Stevens emphasizes a point he suggested in his early play, *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*. In one of his letters Stevens explains:

> The point of the play, by the way, is not in these
> lines but in the last sentence of the final speech.
> God forbid that I should moralize. The play is simply
> intended to demonstrate that just as objects in nature
> offset us...so, on the other hand, we affect objects in
> nature, by projecting our moods, emotions etc. (*L*, 195)

And the last sentence of the play referred to by Stevens is:

> Sunrise is multiplied,
> Like the earth on which it shines,
> By the eyes that open on it,
> Even dead eyes,
> As red is multiplied by the leaves of trees. (*OP89*, 161)

Seen from such an angle as is explained by the poet himself, the topic sentence or the concluding stanza of "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" may not sound like a riddle or an esoteric maxim. Yet, on the other hand, the maxim about

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"the soul" is still incongruously problematic. Inherent with a quasi-oxymoron quality, it is almost illogical, for people with a commonsense perception usually regard "soul" as something not extrinsic but intrinsic.

Critics of Stevens also suggest that the maxim of "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" is related to American Transcendentalism, and they generally hold Emerson as one of the philosophers who influenced Stevens.[51] Notwithstanding this common belief, I still suggest another possibility: that the conception of this anecdote poem may also be related to the above-mentioned Zen doctrine. In other words, when Stevens describes that "Sunrise is multiplied, / Like the earth on which it shines, / By the eyes that open on it.../ As red is multiplied by the leaves of trees" (*OP89*, 161), he is not merely playing "color games" as some critics suggest. The key issue here, often overlooked by these critics, is how to understand a human being's physical surroundings in relation to his mind – the thinking "soul" of a human being. We cannot afford to overlook either one of them because they "affect" and "offset" each other. Therefore, just as the point of *Three Travelers* is not merely about colors, the point of this anecdote poem is not merely about places either. Even if Stevens claims in his letter that he does not "moralize" in his anecdote poem, he is still "theorizing" on something else, which

[51] While not denying truth in this belief, I also want to point out an equally important fact - the Eastern thought does, as critics have often observed, have an undeniable

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is disclosed in the first phrase – "The soul." Since Stevens knew "God is dead" as he mentioned a few times in his journals and notebooks, what could he mean by the word "soul"? I think that by this he probably means "mind," and I will digress a little in order to clarify this point.

According to the Zen doctrine, man's self-nature and physical nature can be related as one entity. As the purpose of Zen practice and contemplation is to obtain Buddhist enlightenment, the so-called "Buddhahead" is actually a synecdoche for "the mind of Buddha" (or "Buddhahood").[52] And "self-nature" may include concepts such as "self-knowledge," "intuitive insight," "experience of awakening" or "self-realization." By starting this poem with "The soul," Stevens is in fact referring to the "mind," "self-nature" or the "nature of one's heart."[53] Although this "soul" or "mind" as a notion is not as "visible" as a concrete object,

influence on the major philosophers of American Transcendentalism.

[52] The original meaning for *Buddha* in both Sanskrit and Pali is the *awakened one*. For Buddha's enlightenment, the Chinese call *Wu* or *Jian-xing* while the Japanese call *Satori* or *kensho*.

[53] In the previous pages (85-86), I have used, in translating the Zen doctrine, three different versions--each being a typical variorum for this short yet compact doctrine. Specifically, there are three key words causing such difficulties in translation: the Chinese word for HEART has three meanings (*heart, mind,* and *soul*) which are used respectively by each version, so have the other two Chinese words (NATURE--*nature, self-nature,* and *one's nature;* BUDDHA--*Buddha, Buddhahead,* and *Buddhahood*). It is my speculation that Stevens could have read different versions of this doctrine, thus confused MIND and SOUL. In addition, *Buddhism in China* has two chapters on MIND and SOUL: Chapter

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the gist of this anecdote poem is still reasonably comprehensible. It is simply about "people" and "place," because the poet uses different images to reiterate these two concepts, and to suggest the link between the physical features of people and the particular places where they reside. These images are primarily those salient features that catch a visitor's attention in an exotic land: people of different localities, words (dialect with accents) spoken by the local people, sounds made by native birds, musical instruments played by people there, and the costume worn by people of that particular place. In addition, many prompts are supplied in such expressions as "composed of" and the repeatedly used "is" and "are" (too many times!). Hence, "men of the East . . . are the East," and "men of a valley . . . are that valley." Their words become the "natural sounds /Of their places," and their belongings (like "mandolines [mandolins]" and "dress") become "an invisible element of that place / Made visible."

Actually, Stevens does not have to state explicitly what is the "invisible element" of a place, for readers can infer without difficulty that it is the "soul," the "mind" or the "inner self." In this manner, Stevens links "the external world" with the inner "soul." Though the poet does not mention anything about the Zen doctrine, the purport of this anecdote readily reminds readers the gist of some famous koans that "all outside things we see are the products of our mind." In

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XVI (titled *Buddha's Conception of God*), and Chapter XVII

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these koans, when some disciples asked a Zen master "where is the Buddha," the reply was often something like "Buddha is right around you" or "you are the Buddha." In simulating this koan example, Stevens answers the question "where is the soul" through the utterance of a mysterious "he." Clearly, "he" is one of "Men by the Thousand." Real and common yet unlike that EVERYMAN from the medieval morality play, he is a Zen master transplanted to the twentieth century America from the Tang and Song Dynasties of China.[54] He does not have to give an answer with an import such as: "the soul is around you in whatever you see" (or, by extension, in "whatever you hear, smell, touch or sense"). He simply writes an anecdote poem. And if readers are able to retain only the first two words plus the last two lines from this poem, then, magically, they will get a koan:

> The soul, ...
> Is an invisible element of that place
> Made visible.

Such a wonderfully operative conception of koan is actually embodied in other anecdote poems too. "Anecdote of the Jar" is another good example. This poem is about an ordinary object ("jar"), with a homely look ("gray and bare"), and the action is extremely commonplace – being "placed" by a self-effacing actor (and a narrator as well), a nameless "I" who never appears again after the first word. Just consider: all this is a typically emphasized characteristic of koan and

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(titled *On the Soul*).

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Zen Buddhism. For instance, koan anecdotes are mostly stories about ordinary folks and their dialogues with Zen masters, whose demonstrations are chosen from simple actions and common happenings involving some everyday phenomena (like rice, bowl, dog, cat, cow, bamboo, stick, bridge, flag, stream, hill, wind, cloud, or the moon). In this anecdote, similarly, the central object (or rather, subject) is an ordinary jar, while the referential objects Stevens chooses as the setting for his jar are also commonplaces like "bird," "bush" or an unattractive "hill" surrounded by "the slovenly wilderness." Stylistically, all words chosen are plain words, except for the Latinate word "dominion." Does the poet imply the shape of the jar is discernibly akin to a "dome"? Given the humorous character of Stevens, could it suggest the dome-like shaved head of a Zen master? In the above section (see Note 9) I have mentioned that a common chore monk was selected to become the Sixth Patriarch. Thus, for a serious Stevens perplexed by the spiritual issues in contemporary life, isn't this pun ("took dominion everywhere") a modern version of a chore subject becoming the spiritual lord? Moreover, this anecdote is enigmatically paradoxical and logically contradictory. These are also features of a koan. In terms of figurative language, koan usually contains tropes from everyday life, which nevertheless are evocative with flexible implications. In this anecdote, Stevens uses an ordinary jar as his "vehicle," and his tenors (though negatively

[54] See page 61 for the chronological history of Zen Buddhism

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used) are equally common and simple (just "bird" and "bush"). In addition, the literally functional tenor after the word "like" is an unexpected word "nothing"! This word could allude to the Zen Buddhist concept VOID, as is often pointed out by critics of "The Snow Man," who "beholds" "nothing." Otherwise, of all the choices available in selecting something (an object or phenomenon) for his tenor, why did Stevens choose "nothing" (though he added, quite skillfully, an extra word "else")? Based on observations as such, I maintain that this anecdote poem is also influenced by the Zen koan. And I will have more to say about this poem in the following C) part.

Some interesting questions may arise here: how did Stevens start his search for a poetic form? Did he ever muse over some exotic versification or literature, seeking for a model or a mode of design? Where did he land in his search for a form? The following passages from a long poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C," might provide us with some hints, if not an answer. Though Stevens did not title this so-called "autobiographical epic" as an "anecdote," the following passages eloquently tell about the evolution of Stevens's search for a form/direction.

> Score this anecdote
> Invented for its pith, not doctrinal
> In form though in design, as Crispin willed,
> Disguised pronunciamento, summary,
> Autumn's compendium, strident in itself
> But muted, mused, and perfectly revolved

---

and *gong-an*.

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In those portentous accents, syllables,
And sounds of music....
* * *
Or if the music sticks, if the anecdote
Is false, if Crispin is a profitless
Philosopher, beginning with green brag,
Concluding fadedly....
Glozing his life with after-shining flicks,
Illuminating, from a fancy gorged
By apparition, plain and common things....
* * *
And so distorting, proving what he proves
Is nothing, what can all this matter since
The relation comes, benignly, to its end? (*CP* 45-46)

These passages contain some pithy "anecdotes" about the young poet: who he is (an "obscure" "green brag"); how he worries, hesitates ("fickle, and fumbling") and doubts about the "false[hood]" of his "profitless" pursuit; what is his creative process ("anecdote [i]nvented for its pith....[yet] muted, mused, and perfectly revolved"); and why he persists (he is inspired by the "Seraphic proclamations of the pure" and "illuminating" "fancy" rooted in "plain and common things," and he hopes this pursuit "comes, benignly, to its end"). It is in these lines that readers detect an early example of the Stevensian discourse ("proving what he proves is nothing") approximating an Eastern koan. But again, Stevens would not, as could be expected, artlessly employ the word *koan*. In some cases he uses *anecdote*, and more often he does not. Sometimes he even prefers other designations to *anecdote*, like this expression "parable":

This parable, in sense, amounts to this:
The honey of heaven may or may not come,

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> But that of earth both comes and goes at once.
> Every day, I found
> Man proved a gobbet in my mincing world. (*CP* 17)

Unmistakably, Stevens's parable is not that of heaven, or of hell, but of the earth, where his "sense of place" roots, the same as with Zen believers.[55] A few lines later from the above passage, Stevens finished the poem with "until now I never knew / That fluttering things have so distinct a shade" (*CP* 18). For a change, Stevens's image is extended from "A white pigeon...that flutters to the ground" to the plural indefinite "fluttering things" in this constantly changing "fluent mundo." Recalling the "fluttering banner" in the Zen anecdote about the sixth Patriarch Hui-Neng, one wonders if the poet's mind is "moving" likewise. Moreover, textual evidence indicates that, early in *Harmonium*, Stevens has also employed this image ("fluttering") for a few times. For, in addition to the "fluttering things" in "Le Monocle," the poet also chants about "the genius of the sea" "fluttering its empty sleeves," ducks "fluttering the water," or birds "Fluttering in Blue Leaves" (*CP* 109, 128, 332; *OP89* 113). All these identical images – from "the external world," and with the same dynamic force of flapping (mystically symbolizing the beating of a human heart?) – affect "the soul" of the poet, whose "act of mind" unceasingly seeks its own enlightenment in poetry.

[55] Of all the sects of Buddhism, Zen Buddhism is the only one that emphasizes the present world.

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Stevens's enlightenment may not be exactly the same as a Buddhist's "satori." Yet the influence of koan and Zen Buddhism is tangible in his poetry. In the above quoted lines, the poet meditates: "In Every day, I found / Man proved a gobbet in my mincing world" (*CP* 17). The tone of the sentence and this image of "gobbet" can relate, thematically, to another poem – a Stevensisn koan about the people and the world.

Gubbinal

That strange flower, the sun,
Is just what you say.
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad.

That tuft of jungle feathers,
That animal eye,
Is just what you say.

That savage of fire,
That seed,
Have it your way,

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad. (*CP* 85)

Stevens wrote this poem in a time "when his disillusionment was complete" and he "had to confront the ultimate experience of death's painful arbitrariness" (referring to the deaths of his parents as well as his sister Mary Katharine).[56] Nonetheless, many features of this poem strikingly resemble those found in a

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Buddhist's lecture. The speaker's rueful attitude toward the pitiable conditions of human being echoes that of Buddha. His tragic outlook mimics the Buddhist's view on life, and his resigned demeanor parallels that of a Buddhist monk. The content of the poem, like its style, also resembles parables from Buddha's sermon (the fire sermon, stories of the animal and the jungle). In particular, the images from this poem correspond to those related with Buddha's sermon: The "strange flower" duplicates Buddha's fingering of a golden flower during his sermon (the sixth koan in *Mumonkan* is titled as "Buddha Fingering Flower"). The flower image is followed by "the sun," which simulates the metaphor of enlightened wisdom. The "sun" image also refers back to the "strange flower," thus associating Buddha's sermon with his enlightenment. All these are recounted in *Buddhism in China*, which contains three exclusive chapters about Buddha.[57] As Stevens just finished reading this book nearly two years before, the occasion of his sister's death could revoke what he remembered of Buddhist doctrines on life/death. Whether he did or did not go to consult the book is no longer important, because what he put into the poem is clearly comparable to things Buddhists would say at a Buddhist funeral rite. And the monotonous repetition of the shorter stanza ("The world is ugly, / And the people are sad") reminds readers of the Buddhist

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[56] *The Early Years*, p. 491.
[57] These three chapters are about the Origin(VI), the Legend(VII) and the Life(VIII) of the Buddha. Stevens had

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chanting of sutra for the dead as well. Stevens could be familiar with those funeral scenes, for in another poem depicting a death ceremony he also mixes into it such Oriental elements as "turbans they wear" "a chirr of gongs" and "a chitter of cries / And the heavy thrum" (*CP* 74).

In other poems, like "Six Significant Landscapes," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," or "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," similar passages also abound, reflecting, subtly and in different degrees, the indebtedness of the poet to Oriental culture and its koan tradition. In the first section of "Six Significant Landscapes," an old Chinese man sees everything moving in the wind because his mind, as the sixth Patriarch demonstrates, also moves in the wind. In the third section, the poet writes in the irrational manner of a koan:

> I measure myself
> Against a tall tree.
> I find that I am much taller,
> For I reach right up to the sun,
> . . . . . .
> ...I dislike
> The way the ants crawl
> In and out of my shadow. (*CP* 74)

The beginning and ending of this section cited above resemble Zen masters' koans since both hide some irrationally obscure messages and read just like riddles. I use "read like" for the reason that utterances as such would make you *intuitively* feel like you are reading a koan, which never appeals to reason. It goes

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three vertical marginal lines in pencil marking out three

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without saying that Stevens could not write a koan, intentionally or not, in every poem he wrote. Even those examples I have so far discussed may not be the poet's *purposefully conceived imitation* of Eastern koans. Nevertheless, with or without premeditation on the part of the poet at the time of his writing, that is not the point to be argued here. Neither is whether or not Stevens was aware of the vestiges of koan in some of his poems (though later I will discuss Stevens "being watchful" in such matters when I deal with "sensibility"). The undeniable fact is that the influence of Oriental culture is detectable in certain Stevens poems. In the ensuing sections I will also occasionally resort to such logic (the Buddhist "three-phase logic") when it is necessary.

Though there are still other examples, to conclude this section, I will cite what Okakura reiterates in his books, which seems appropriate here for the section on Stevens's anecdote poems. Okakura mentions that Zen followers "aimed at direct communication with the inner nature of things," and that "A special contribution of Zen to Eastern thought was its recognition of the mundane as of equal importance with the spiritual." The "transcendental insight of the Zen" is "this Zen conception of greatness in the smallest incidents of life," for the masters "were ever prepared to enter the unknown" and sought "always to be in harmony

paragraphs from chapters VI and VII.

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with the great rhythm of the universe."[58] It is exactly these Zen concepts, as Richardson puts it, "that were clearly operative for Stevens." They helped Stevens shape his dichotomies (especially the dichotomy of mind and reality), in which he effectuates his enlightenment as a poet. In such a process, koan does serve as a "magic mirror" for Stevens to view the "fluent mundo," and to dissect it in his poems.

B) Paradoxes

Any one familiar with Zen Buddhism would know that Zen masters often employ paradoxes in order to enlighten their disciples on the truth about the nature of worldly phenomena. According to D. T. Suzuki, "all mystics are fond of paradoxes to expound their views. For instance…in its way of thus expressing the truth there is something we may designate characteristically Zen. [… because] Zen is more daringly concrete in its paradoxes than other mystical teachings."[59] When Suzuki expounds further about "the concreteness and vividness of expression" in the Zen paradoxes, he cites such an example:

> Empty-handed I go and yet the spade is in my hands;
> I walk on foot, and yet on the back of an ox I am riding.
> When I pass over the bridge,
> Lo, the water floweth not, but the bridge does flow.

---

58 *The Book of Tea*, pp. 27-29, 62-63.
59 *Zen Buddhism*, pp. 115-116.

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Suzuki also points out that "Zen abounds with such graphic irrationalities." As Stevens is also fond of using paradoxes and oxymora in his poems, there is the likelihood that he might have learned something from Zen masters in this aspect. Bevis points out that: "Stevens may have gleaned important ideas from his Eastern readings, but it would be unwise to draw those ideas from the reading first instead of from the poems" (208). When those gleaned "important ideas" are expressions (like some famous paradoxes) that appear also in Western canons, it becomes extremely difficult to determine the accurate source of influence. Still Bevis's advice is a sound one insofar as we can "draw those ideas" from Stevens's own writing. Thus let us go to examine Stevens's ideas first.

In one of his letters Stevens describes, paradoxically, his habit in writing as follows:

> With me, how to write of the normal in a normal way is a problem which I have long since given up trying to solve, because I never feel that I am in the area of poetry until I am a little off the normal. The worse part of this aberration is that I am convinced that it is not an aberration ... Everything is incidental to the normal, not the abnormal. ...a certain amount of the abnormal is also incidental to the normal;... (*L* 287)

This issue (of being normal or not normal) seems to become a life long question for Stevens as a poet. He reveals here that he can write poems only when he was "off the normal." Yet to him it is "not an aberration" at all. Though he explains away "normal" and "abnormal" as a relatively "incidental" thing, the

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opposing feelings he feels about this "aberration" may give us hints about his writing. His different dichotomies as well as his opposing feelings may be one reason, among other factors, for his fondness in employing paradoxes and oxymora.

One good example from among these series of seeming opposites is found in section IV of "It Must Change" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" which I have discussed in the previous section. Other poems by Stevens also embody vivid instances of paradox and oxymoron. For example, in "The Comedian as the Letter C" such devices are aptly employed in depicting Crispin's "rude aesthetic" (*CP* 36). "This connoisseur of elemental fate" is "an aesthetic tough, diverse, untamed" (*CP* 31) as a Zen Buddhist is often called. He tries to fight a state of "both of remembering /And of forgetfulness, in alternate strain" (*CP* 29). And this "general lexicographer of mute / And maidenly greenhorns" (*CP* 28) is trying to become an "introspective voyager" (*CP* 29), and to have a taste of the "elemental potencies and...beautiful barenesses [sic.] as yet unseen" (*CP* 31). "Through sweating changes, never could [he] forget" his voyaging "up and down between two elements" (*CP* 35). Nor could he forget the "hallucinating" "wakefulness or meditating sleep" (*CP* 33). As "an aspiring clown" (*CP* 39), he is an heir of "dreamers buried in our sleep," though he dreams "in a gingerly way"(*CP* 39). In his solitude of "long soothsaying silence," he is "Marching a motionless march"

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(*CP* 42) toward the goal of "proving what he proves / Is nothing" (*CP* 46), thus bringing "this anecdote / Invented for its pith" (*CP* 45) "benignly, to its end" (*CP* 46). These instances are almost a feast of irrational statements/descriptions. Similar to the states of mind experienced by Crispin are the sensations which Stevens describes in the following examples. There are the "intenser calm" (*CP* 6), "the incredible calm in ecstasy" (*OP89* 63), and "the excitements of silence" (*CP* 402). Here, I wonder if the "scullion of fate" (juxtaposed with "intenser calm") could hint at a germination (not an intentional allusion, perchance) from the story of The Sixth Patriarch, who used to do chores in kitchen. Or if "the incredible calm in ecstasy" (which is often used by Zen Buddhists to describe their satori) could be distantly related to Zen enlightenment.

"The Poems of Our Climate" is another noteworthy example. In this poem, Stevens describes a kind of "bitterness [of] delight" (*CP* 194), and "this complete simplicity" (*CP* 193), which eventually leads to another important belief of Stevens's that "The imperfect is our paradise" (*CP* 194). While trusting Stevens is talking about affairs in his contemporary world, I wonder if he also hints at Zen Buddhist belief. After all, Oriental thinkers did talk about such things a long time before, and "counter-pointing" is a device Stevens loves to use (see the quote on page 67). Therefore, it is highly possible that Stevens's using of a contemporary scene of a bowl of flower could insinuate a distant land a long time ago.

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Stevens also states that the "romance of the precise" is "the ever-never-changing same" (*CP* 353), that "one moonlight" reminds the poet of "the sameness of his various universe" (*CP* 531). According to Bevis, this concept of "sameness" or "suchness" is an Eastern idea. Yet Stevens does reiterate it in these poems, and in elsewhere as well. For instance, in "Conversation with Three Women of New England" he depicts:

> There is a drop that is life's element,
> Sole, single source and minimum patriarch,
> The one thing common to all life, the human
> And inhuman same, the likeness of things unlike." (*OP89* 134)

We know Zen masters have used "a drop of water" as a trope for life, and emphasized that things "human and inhuman" all embody "Buddha-nature" (see discussions in the previous section). Stevens's paradoxes ("the human...inhuman same, the likeness...unlike") obviously duplicate things mentioned by many koans. In particular, these expressions are associated with the word "patriarch" in this passage. All this proves that Stevens had mixed into this poem something he learned from his previous reading. In addition to this example, there are also the following examples: "It is a world of worlds to the end of it, / In which nothing solid is its solid self" (*CP* 345). And "one is most disclosed when one is most anonymous" (*CP* 145). Sometimes, even a title implies a paradox, like: "Continual Conversation with a Silent Man"(*CP* 359). In another case, Stevens also finds paradoxes in a painting that may allude to his wife:

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> The reflection of her here, and then there,
> Is another shadow, another evasion,
> Another denial. If she is everywhere,
> She is nowhere, to him. (*CP* 231)

These examples may not strongly suggest Oriental influence, because they are casual or even personal. Yet, they could be regarded as the indirect results of some habit-formation or mode of thinking shaped by the poet's "spiritual exchange" with Zen masters, or through his reading on Oriental classics. For instance, the following lines could be allusions made to Stevens's personal life, but the poet's counter-pointing habit may be an indirect outcome of a special "anecdotal bliss" – his reading of koans.

> There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
> Like the clashed edges of two words that kill. (*CP* 13)

In a manner kindred to that of an Eastern Zen monk, the poet sings on:

> And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
> Or was it that I mocked myself alone?
> I wish that I might be a thinking stone.

And this dramatic monologue continues in the following stanza:

> Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing?

There are some paradoxes that allude to Oriental thought/images more directly than others. In the above example from "Conversation with Three Women of New England," Stevens considers the "minimum patriarch" statue as "the human / And inhuman same, the likeness of things unlike." In another poem he

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mentions "The wide night mused . . . the sleepless sleepers moved" and refers to the "patriarch of other spheres" "(*OP89* 92, 94). Similar things could also be found in the following examples: "The absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined"(*CP* 503) at a time when "We believe without belief, beyond belief" (*CP* 336). It is also a time when people began to feel "Pleased that the irrational is rational" (*CP* 406), and the spirit of the age "resides / In a permanence composed of impermanence" (*CP* 472). In this age we have to meditate on the "sudden time in a world without time" (*CP* 237) and to ponder on "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" (*CP* 357).

A particularly well-known paradox fitting for our time is the sentence at beginning part of "Connoisseur of Chaos" – "A violent order is disorder; and /A great disorder is an order." Though no reference to Oriental thought is made here, the concept does echo a Taoist idea from *Tao de Ching* (*The Way of Life*). Stevens had a copy of this Eastern classic translated by Bynner. From this source Stevens could also learn a lot, which might later help him shape some of his beliefs. For example, the spirit of human beings "resides / In a permanence composed of impermanence" (*CP* 472) is similar to a concept mentioned in *Tao de Ching.*

To take another example, in "Landscape with Boat," Stevens begins the poem with "An anti-master-man, floribund ascetic" (*CP* 241). Such an attitude is often mentioned by koans in urging disciples not to stick to their master's words.

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Then, after a long stanza, Stevens gives a paradoxical description of the stance of a Zen ascetic:

> It was his nature to suppose,
> To receive what others had supposed, without
> Accepting. He received what he denied.
> But as truth to be accepted, he supposed
> A truth beyond all truths. (*CP* 242)

Near the end of the poem Stevens gives a marvelous exposition of the "Buddha nature" as a new kind of divinity:

> He never supposed divine
> Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
> Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
> And that if nothing was the truth, then all
> Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth. (*CP* 242)

If "He" in this passage were to be substituted by The Sixth Patriarch, no disciples of Zen would doubt that what is written here was their essential Zen faith – that divinity and truth exist in "the world itself," in every human being and all living things as well; and that one must strive to find that divinity by one's own effort, not by any conventionalized idea of "God" (I have discussed this belief from a different approach in the previous section).

Then, if one is still unconvinced that Stevens could write a Westernized version of Zen Buddhist truth, he may read "Yellow Afternoon" and find, literally, "the patriarch" there.

> It was in the earth only
> That he was at the bottom of things
> And of himself. There he could say

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Of this I am, this is the patriarch,
This it is that answers when I ask,
This is the mute, the final sculpture
Around which silence lies on silence.
This reposes alike in springtime
And, arbored and bronzed, in autumn.

He said I had this that I could love,
As one loves visible and responsive peace,
As one loves one's own being,
As one loves that which is the end
And must be loved, as one loves that
Of which one is a part as in a unity,
A unity that is the life one loves,
So that one lives all the lives that comprise it
As the life of the fatal unity of war.

Everything comes to him
From the middle of his field. The odor
Of earth penetrates more deeply than any word.
There he touches his being. There as he is
He is. The thought that he had found all this
Among men, in a woman – she caught his breath –
But he came back as one comes back from the sun
To lie on one's bed in the dark, close to a face
Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks.
(*CP* 236-237)

Critics usually overlook this poem. A few of them mention it in passing, saying it is a war poem about a soldier who "reposes" in "the middle of his field." But in my opinion, this poem is obviously about the Buddha figure ("the patriarch") and Stevens's meditation on him ("This it is that answers when I ask"). In the previous section I have quoted a passage by Richardson describing Stevens's meditation on the Buddha figure Stevens kept at his home. All detectable signs from these three stanzas indicate that the center of this poem is the

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Buddha figure. The last four lines from the first stanza depict this "mute" "bronzed" "sculpture" that "reposes" in Stevens's house through different seasons. The second stanza tells about the patriarch's teachings on love, life and unity. Although the last stanza is more divergent, its central object is still the Buddha figure, as is confirmed by the beginning and ending lines. "Everything comes to him," because he teaches all things, and his teaching "penetrates more deeply than any word." When it is evening, "he came back as one comes back from the sun" (the satori). And "in the dark," though the poet cannot see him ("without eyes or mouth"), he still "looks at one and speaks." At times the "he" figure may speak paradoxically, yet the poet has no difficulty in presenting his teaching as Stevens is familiar with the facts about Buddha's life and teaching,[60] which could be part of his frequent meditation on the Buddha figure at his home. Stevens also alludes to the Buddha figure elsewhere. For instance, he presents "Patron and patriarch of couplets" (*CP* 105) in "New England Verses." Both the "patriarch" image and "couplets" verse form (a poetical form especially favored throughout classical Chinese poetry and used widely by Zen masters in their enlightenment *Gatha*) point to a direct influence from Oriental culture. In "A Duck for Dinner" he refers to the "source and patriarch of other spheres" as the "base of every future" (*OP89*

[60] See the above Note 56.

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94). He even describes a man's daily "thinking" as some "obscurest parent, obscurest patriarch, / A daily majesty of meditation" (*CP* 518).

It is true that Stevens's allusions/references to Oriental religion and culture are only scattered in different places. For example, in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," the poet aptly sings "Out of the spirit of the holy temples" of Zen Buddhism as he reveals, in this fifty-stanza poem, the paradoxical truth in an "Empty and grandiose" world:

> Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the end. (*CP* 150)
>
> * * *
>
> ...when the tree is leafless...one first
> Knew the eccentric to be the base of design. (*CP* 151)
>
> * * *
>
> Poetry is a finikin thing...
> ...radiantly beyond much lustier blurs. (*CP* 155)
>
> * * *
>
> The [chrysanthemums] ... disguise the clanking mechanism
> Of machine within machine within machine. (*CP* 157)
>
> * * *
>
> Music is not yet written but is to be. (*CP* 158)
>
> * * *
>
> Union of the weakest develops strength.
> ... the wise man avenges by building his city in snow. (*CP* 158)

All these examples demonstrate Stevens's indulgence in such devices as paradoxes, irrational/contradictory statements, or esoteric expressions. In some instances, he could have picked the idea/image from sources other than koans. Yet in the examples that are particularly inclined to imply an allusion or references to Oriental thought, it is demonstrably clear that the influence of Zen Buddhism and

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koan does operate in providing conceptual/figurative apparatuses for Stevens and his poems.

C) Puzzles

Readers of Stevens sometimes say that Stevens's poetry is so difficult as though Stevens were trying to puzzle, frustrate, or even torture his readers. Being difficult itself is not something new to Zen masters and their koans. Since both Stevens's poetry and Zen koans are compared to riddles and similar things, one cannot help wondering if Stevens did imitate koan's stylistic features (such as the irrational, the mysterious, the enigmatic, or trapping, contradiction, and ambiguity) in writing some of his poems. An exemplary poem with devices like contradiction and trapping is this short poem written in 1919, "The Indigo Glass in the Grass."

> Which is real –
> This bottle of indigo glass in the grass,
> Or the bench with the pot of geraniums, the stained
> mattress and the washed overalls drying in the sun?
>
> Neither one, nor the two together. (*OP89* 42-43)

As a typical instance, this poem reads just like a riddle, yet is more than a riddle. Beginning with a query often found in koans, the poem raises a question in the first stanza as to "which is real" between two choices. Then, abruptly, the poem ends with a neither-nor sentence. This negation is unusual in that it nullifies

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not only the answer (actually all answers) but also the question itself. Such devices are in fact common features in most koans. For instance, in *Mumonkan*, there are four koans that begin with almost the same question. The first one, the "Wu" koan (*Mu* in Japanese), begins with a monk's question "Is there Buddha-nature in a dog?" and ends with the master's answer "No!" The twenty-seventh koan begins with two questions and ends with three negative answers. Subsequently, both the thirtieth and the thirty-fourth koans begin with the same question as to what is the so-called Buddhahood. All these koans could be models for this Stevens poem. Besides, the poem's trapping is akin to the title *Mumonkan* too. In its original Chinese, *mu* is *wu* meaning no, *mon* is *men* meaning door/gate, and *kan* is *guan* meaning gate/ pass. Hence, as a posture of trapping, *Mumonkan* literally means [a] "gateless gate/pass." Obviously, Stevens mimics this frame of mind in the poem.

"Anecdote of the Abnormal" is a poem written about the same time as the one above. Though both poems can also be titled as "Anecdote of Colors," this second one is more complicated because of its presentation of colors "changeable to see." "The Abnormal" actually turns out to intimate "normal" for Stevens, just as he talks about his feelings about writing (cited in the above part). The central point of this anecdote argues that:

> Because new colors make new things
> And new things make old things again...

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And so with men. (*OP89* 43)

This can be the Stevensian manifesto of "making it new." It is more comprehensive and concrete than that of Pound's on account of its philosophical implication. It tells how Crispin-valet becomes Crispin-saint, who in his turn will become "tattered manikin" when time is due for him to change.

Now let us examine an often-anthologized poem, "Anecdote of the Jar." In section A) I have briefly commented on the poem without quoting the whole poem, which is as follows:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Some critics explain this anecdote as the product of the transcendental spirit, others see it as a dichotomy of nature and artificiality. I ponder, however, if it is possible to examine this marvelous jar with Zen methodology. As I do not want to repeat what has already been mentioned so many times by so many critics

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about "the Jar," I am going to illustrate a different signification of this poem relating to my topic here.

In the previous A) section, I have mentioned a well-known koan telling how a Zen master views mountains and rivers in three different phases, and discussed Stevens's derivative version of this koan (is + is-not + therefore-is). As a matter of fact, this special three-phase formula is applicable not only to mountains and rivers but also to many phenomenal objects. In the history of Zen, for generations, many koan stories have been produced with references made to this story. From different Western perspectives based on different theories, this koan story may be expounded with various explanations. For instance, to followers of Hegelianism, this koan could be another version of Hegel's thesis-antithesis-synthesis theory.[61] On the other hand, deconstructionists might also claim this method as a replica of their routine "construction + deconstruction + whatsoever-follows-up" procedure. But how does this three-phase koan relate to Stevens's anecdote of an ordinary jar and other puzzle-like poems? Let us find out the answer by analyzing these individual poems.

[61] Some Chinese scholars argue that Hegel's theory is a modern adaptation of the ancient Chinese Taoist theory. While this is a controversy unlikely to be solved in the near future, one fact at least is now proved true: Hegel read and strenuously studied *Yi-Jing* (*The Book of Changes*, one of the original Taoist scriptures).

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As a poem, "Anecdote of the Jar" implies a conception similar to the construction of the Chinese three-phase koan. In the first phase, the narrator placed an ordinary jar in Tennessee. At this stage prior to the interaction between the jar and its environment, the jar is still a jar by itself. Then, as the jar casts its "charisma"or "spell" (as has been discussed by many Stevens critics), the poet as the viewer enters into the arena, and brings the object in view into the second phase. In its sublimation, for a moment,

> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.
>
> The wilderness rose up to it,
> And sprawled around, no longer wild.
> ......
> It took dominion everywhere.

Having reached its consummation, with its spell discharged, the jar enters the third phase, in which the narrator finds the jar is nothing else but still a jar:

> The jar was gray and bare.
> It did not give of bird or bush,
> Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Just as mountains and rivers become mountains and rivers again in the eye of that Chinese monk, this jar becomes an ordinary jar again. For Zen believers, this final phase represents the stage of their enlightenment, or at least a higher level of comprehension apropos of the object/phenomenon. But for Stevens, after the second stage of sublimation – just like the way Stevens watches stars in

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another poem, "Star at Tallapoosa" – "the mind herein attains simplicity" (*CP* 71).

In "The Plain Sense of Things" Stevens also describes a situation similar to this stage:

> After the leaves have fallen, we return
> To a plain sense of things. (*CP* 502)

The three-phase notion conforms to Stevens's ideas of change, as he chants that "Death is the mother of beauty" (*CP* 68), hence he adopts it and conceives the anecdote story about the jar. Besides, the image of this jar could be an inspiration that the poet derived from reading the following passage in *The Book of Tea*:

> It is in us that God meets with Nature, and Yesterday parts from To-morrow. The Present is the moving Infinity, the legitimate sphere of the Relative. Relativity seeks Adjustment; Adjustment is Art. The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings. Taoism accepts the mundane as it is . . . . The Sung allegory of the Three Vinegar Tasters explains admirably the trend of the three doctrines. Sakyamuni, Confucius, and LaoTzu once stood before a Jar of Vinegar, -- the emblem of life,-- and each dipped in his finger to taste the brew. The matter-of-fact Confucius found it sour, the Buddha called it bitter, and Lao Tzu pronounced it sweet.[62]

Some amazing points about this passage are: a) it contains some *triads* of aggregates or concepts, like three doctrines, with their three founders, or the temporal triad of "yesterday-present-tomorrow"; b) it advocates *Relativity* and *Adjustment*, and mentions "art of life" as being "constant readjustment to our surroundings"; c) it contains *the jar* image, which is used as a metaphor to stand

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for the emblem of life. Stevens could have learned many things from this passage, and could have used some of them as germ for his poems. Some of these "germ concepts" are: the image of the jar as the emblem of life, the concept of change and readjustment, the acceptance of the mundane world as it is, and the idea of relativity (thus the Stevensian dichotomy). Also, Stevens could have learned this threefold perspective from koan, and thus used it in this poem and in other poems as well. We can detect a most typical example of such influence in "The Poems of Our Climate," in which the poet delineates "the never-resting mind," the "escape" and the "come back /To what had been so long composed." This triad perspective also leads to the often-quoted poetical line in his poetry: "The imperfect is our paradise." This sentence and its view of life are reminiscent of the Zen masters' teaching on attaining one's Buddhahood (or the idea of "Nirvana").

In addition to the jar anecdote, Stevens also uses the triad method in poems not titled with the word *anecdote*. For instance, in "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "Twenty men crossing a bridge, / Into a village" [20/1/1] becomes "twenty men crossing twenty bridges, / Into twenty villages, / Or one man / Crossing a single bridge into a village." [20/20/20 or 1/1/1] Then what follows is this central stanza:

> Twenty men crossing a bridge,
> Into a village,

---

[62] *The Book of Tea*, p. 24.

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Are
Twenty men crossing a bridge
Into a village. [20/1/1]

This stanza [20/1/1] is a "central" one not only because of its position but also because of its epistemological value. The abstract process of knowing has completed its full circulation – i. e. from 20/1/1 through 20/20/20 or 1/1/1, and back to 20/1/1. This final 20/1/1 is what Zen master calls "mountains and rivers are mountains and rivers again." To stress that this final 20/1/1 is not the same as the initial 20/1/1 (in the first two lines of the poem), Stevens extends his third-phase statement into five lines, and separates the word "Are" from other words. "Are" becomes the only single-word line in the whole poem occupying the central position of this central stanza. Moreover, after the third phase, Stevens offers more than an Eastern koan does by continuing his epistemological search:

That will not declare itself
Yet is certain as meaning . . .

The last two stanzas indicate the contemplation of the poet moves on: from the "boots of the men" on the "boards of the bridge" to "The first white wall of the village / Rises through fruit-trees." The poet still asks himself:

Of what was it I was thinking?
So the meaning escapes.

But the ultimate fade-out scene of the whole poem is:

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> The first white wall of the village . . .
> The fruit-tree . . . .

Stevens arranges these two images not simply as repetition of previous lines – he takes away the verb, and juxtaposes these two noun phrases as the concluding stanza, without using any conjunctions. This asyndetic method (asyndeton) is in fact the "Ideogrammic Method" which critics use in describing Pound's poetic theory and what Pound has learned from the Chinese language. But in the current Stevens criticism, critics merely call such phenomenon the influence of Cubism and Impressionism, or the technique of "collage," of the Imagists, and of Picasso. Since later I will discuss the relation between Stevens and the Eastern painting, I will come back to this issue in the fifth chapter. At any rate, here in this poem, Stevens calls these images (metaphors) and his contemplation which follows his metaphors [20/1/1 etc.] "a Magnifico." If by this he does not mean "the nobleman of the Venetian Republic" or the old title of a noble, he may refer back to the word's origin in *magnificus* to imply something "magnificent, sumptuous, and sublime." And his images (especially of "twenty men crossing twenty bridges, / Into twenty villages") do carry an air of some "ostentatious ceremony or impressive display" characterized by the Venetian noblemen.

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is another poem in which we find many instances of Stevens's using this triad method. For example, in Stanza II Stevens writes:

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> I was of three minds,
> Like a tree
> In which there are three blackbirds.

With each blackbird representing one mind, "three minds" may also allude to the three-phase process in knowing the world. Then, in Stanza IV, the poet mentions a trio – "A man and a woman and a blackbird." This pattern of trio reappears in the seventh stanza – "O thin men of Haddam," "the women about [them]" and "the blackbird." The poet stresses that this trio of three phenomenal objects is not to be regarded as three but one, because "A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one." In the next stanza (VIII), the poet chants:

> I know noble accents
> And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
> But I know, too,
> That the blackbird is involved
> In what I know.

Instead of being merely physical sounds with rhythms, these "noble accents" and "inescapable rhythms" could have three layers of meaning. They denote physically audible *sounds and rhythms of poetry*, yet they also embrace the *intangible rhythms of reality*, in which the mysterious "blackbird is involved." And they include the *rhythms of the poet's imagination* as well. For, it is the latter two kinds of rhythms that compose a dichotomy which the poet does "know" very well.

Subsequently, in Stanza IX, "When the blackbird flew out of sight," the poet is on "the edge / Of one of many circles." Together with the previous "noble

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accents" and "lucid, inescapable rhythms," these "circles" create a "mood" occupying the poet's mind. The "indecipherable cause" for such a mood is "The shadow of the blackbird / Crossed it, to and fro." The movement of the "shadow of the blackbird" becomes a symbol standing for the mind's activity. The poet's mind is busy with the different phases in the process of "knowing." These phases of "crossing" reverberate with "the three minds" of the second stanza. In the process of abstract activity as such, Stevens could have found it convenient to use this triad pattern/method he learned from the Zen masters and their koans. Hence he applied this as a formula, so to speak, for the presentation of his poetical images, like the above metaphor of twenty men crossing a bridge into a village, or like the ambiguous image of the blackbird(s) in this poem. These three phases also correspond with the three choices Stevens puts forward in the fifth stanza:

> I do not know which to prefer,
> The beauty of inflections
> Or the beauty of innuendoes,
> The blackbird whistling
> Or just after.

The image of this "whistling" blackbird with its "beauty of innuendoes" is pregnant with meanings. Yet, whatever meaning a reader may infer from it, there is still something else impending there "just after." Which of the choices is appropriate, or more attractive for the poet to select? Stevens does not give a definite answer, though he might well imply all of them. In addition, the "just-

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after" choice offers an open end for the poet in this ever-changing world, as Stevens believes that

> There might be, too, a change immenser than
> A poet's metaphor.... (*CP* 341)

The effectiveness of this three-phase method in koan often works out well in Stevens's poetry. Sometimes, these three steps become what Stevens calls the "fluctuations of certainty, the change of degrees of perception" (*CP* 395). Besides, it is clearly discernible, from discussions in the previous section A), that Stevens has developed his own version of it ("is + is-not + therefore is"), which will be examined at length in the sixth chapter.

The above instances as such are indicative of Oriental influence upon Stevens's writing. "If ever," as Stevens puts it in "Like Decorations," the poet did launch "the search for a tranquil belief," he could have found at least part of it when he wrote this koan-like section:

> The sun of Asia creeps above the horizon
> Into this haggard and tenuous air,
> A tiger lamed by nothingness and frost. (*CP* 153)

The general gist of the whole stanza is clear, though the meaning of the last line is rather ambiguous. Though a collage is often a composite complex, the one in this stanza still resembles a common scene from some Eastern painting – a tiger in the center of the foreground, and a setting sun at the far background over the

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faded-out horizon. Psychologically speaking, it could be an appropriate symbolization of Stevens's somehow waning ardor in the East and its culture, though when an enthusiasm declines it may still persist in the form of an habitual interest or hobby, which turns out to be true in Stevens's case.

Some critics probably would argue that Stevens could have learned this method from sources other than the Eastern masters. For instance, in addition to the above-mentioned tendency to use Hegelian syllogism or Deconstruction in accounting for Stevens's favorite "three-something," Adalaide Kirby Morris proposes a non-Hegelian theory in *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith.* This book has a proclaimed focus on the religious heritage of Stevens, because the author believes that there exists "a poetic trinity" in Stevens's poetry:

> Implicit in his [Stevens's] mystical theology is a poetical trinity which, though never thrust upon us fully formulated, can be deduced from his elaborations on the statement that "God and the imagination are one."[63]

In the third chapter, "A Mystical Theology: Stevens's Poetic Trinity," Morris affirms that Stevens is "systematic in his attempt to find God" and that "his theory of poetry did in time become a mystical theology."[64] Thereafter Morris sums up

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[63] *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith*, p. 82.
[64] Ibid., pp. 82-83. Morris has based his observation on Stevens's own words, as he quotes Stevens saying:

> The theory of poetry, that is to say, the total of the theories of poetry, often seems to become in time a mystical theology.

Thus Morris concludes: 'The poet as a theologian' writes '*to*

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"three of Stevens's habits of mind" to help him [Stevens] "create a secular deity." These three "habits of mind" are:

a) Stevens' belief that personification is characteristic of both poetry and religion;

b) Stevens' conviction that poetry must subsume concerns hitherto confined to religion;

c) Stevens' tendency toward triadic forms.[65]

Morris also points out the source for his third observation above:

> "A triad," R. P. Blackmur insists in an essay on Stevens, "makes a trinity, and a trinity, to a certain kind of poetic imagination, is the only tolerable form of unity."

Then, he goes on to list Stevens's poems with "a cast of trios or a triadic title," such as: "Plot against the Giant," "Three Travelers," "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," and "Conversation with Three Women of New England." Then he concludes: "He [Stevens] seems to think in threes."[66]

When Morris mentions Stevens's habit to "think in threes[,]" she does not mention anything about the Eastern religions. To me, though "trinity" is a very plausible argument in explaining those "three-something" in some poems by Stevens, it does not necessarily exclude the possibility that such a conception

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create something as valid as the idea of God has been.' (I use italic letters to distinguish Stevens's own words quoted here by Morris.)

[65] Ibid., pp. 87-93.

[66] Ibid., pp. 93-94.

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comes from the Eastern religion. In addition to the above-mentioned biographical facts and textual sources, I have cited examples from Stevens's poems to demonstrate the influence of Zen Buddhism in Stevens's poetry and thought. Overall, when one mentions the concept "three," one can associate it with various implications in accordance with one's training/upbringing – such as *Triangle* for geometry-oriented people, *Trinity* for Christians, *Three Feats* as a test for heroes in myths / fairy tales, *Three Brothers/Kings* in the folklore of many countries, or *Perfection / Mystery* for certain religions /occultism). For Stevens, he could have thought of (consciously / subconsciously) a variety of things he had previously read about when he was writing these "triadic poems." In particular, as he had read extensively about Oriental culture, and learned a great deal about Buddhist koans (at least from Okakura's two books), an extremely plausible inference is that he uses this concept of triad under the influence of Oriental thought. Of course, the triad itself is not exclusively an Eastern concept as a koan is. But Buddhism does contain many notions related with triad, such as: "knowledge (bodhi) as the three bodies (trikaya)," the Three Truths, the Three Worlds of Reincarnation, or the symbolic image of the "Three Jewels."[67] When early Buddhism was resolved and Zen Buddhism emerged, Zen masters applied this concept of "Three Jewels"

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[67] Trikaya is composed of dharma-kaya (true being), nirmana-kaya (the earthly mode, Gautama Buddha), and sambogha-kaya (the functioning of the community of believers). Related to

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to their practice, and created a new method for contemplating on reality and training their students. Also it must be remembered that there were at least two books on Hinduism in Stevens's library. They certainly helped Stevens acquire knowledge about Trimurti (the Hindu triadic gods of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu). Furthermore, Hinduism surely influenced the American Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, etc.), and therefore could have left an indirect influence on Stevens via this New England school.

Along with the issue of "triad," there is another question interestingly related to numbers: why did Stevens specifically choose "Thirteen Ways" to represent a mode of understanding the world? We know that, in the eye of most Westerners, this number (thirteen) is always an unlucky one (which may even denote death / evil). But Stevens employed it anyway, as was typical of his other unorthodox images/ideas. Could he have used this number under the influence of Eastern religions?

To trace this influence, we have a religious image as our clue. In the above part, I have mentioned that Stevens did use the image of pagoda in one of his poems. That means he at least knew about this religious architecture. The earliest form of pagoda is a Hindu *stupa* (Sanskrit, its equivalent in Pali is *thupa*) of some stories in height (usually in odd numbers like three, five or seven). But when this

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Trikaya is Tri-ratna, meaning the 'Three Jewels,' which

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religious architecture was transplanted to China and Japan, it becomes a *pagoda*, often of seven, eleven or thirteen stories in height since people of these countries deem these numbers lucky/pious.

As many Westerners believe that thirteen is an unlucky number, a question then arises: why does Stevens incorporate this "unlucky" number into his poem that shows people ways of looking at reality? Overall, there can be three possibilities. One, Stevens completed, randomly, thirteen stanzas, and thus named the poem "Thirteen Ways." Two, he incidentally picked up this number without meaning anything at all. The third possibility is that he deliberately selected the number *thirteen* first, and then proceeded to write out thirteen stanzas to represent these special ways to comprehend reality. Of course, some might favor the first possibility, arguing that this number was just picked up by the poet at random. Others might agree with the second possibility, insisting that whatever number the poet picked up is not very important because, after all, this is only an imaginary work. Yet, on the other hand, numbers could also become specific indexes, at the subconscious level, to people's hidden, though unspecified, thoughts. At any rate, in deciding Stevens's case, the first and second possibilities weigh not as much as the third one because they just dismiss the choice of *thirteen* without giving sound reason. The third possibility appears to be more feasible since it takes into

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stand for the Law, the Buddha, and the Community.

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consideration Western people's traditional attitude of eschewal toward this unlucky number, thus implying a likelihood of Oriental influence on Stevens's thought at the time when he was writing this poem. Stevens could have picked this number after he read *Buddhism in China*. When he is recounting the Buddhist concept of *Amitabha*, Samuel Beal explains:

> The thirteen, corresponding to the thirteen heavens of the Buddhists, the character of the "unbounded" (*amita*), and the general plan of the conversation between the actors in this singular work, -- all lead to an impression that there was a general knowledge of the later Buddhist literature spread beyond India, even as far as Alexandria and Egypt.

This passage mentions "the thirteen heavens of the Buddhists," which may have left a deep impression upon Stevens's mind. That impression in his memory could float up when Stevens wrote this poem, thus he created thirteen stanzas. As a good many of Stevens's poems are puzzling poems, they involve some kinds of Oriental influence as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." These exemplary poems illustrate traces of Eastern thought not only applicable for my discussions in this section, but also for topics in the following parts, where I will mention some again from different angles.

D) The Imperturbability of Mind

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In *Adagia* Stevens copied two maxims, which concern the topic of this section:

> Happiness is an acquisition.
> Thought is an infection. In the case of certain thoughts it becomes an epidemic. (*OP89* 184-185)

Like happiness, imperturbability of mind is also "an acquisition." As thought is infectious and even "epidemic," what the Eastern Zen masters think about turmoil of the world could also infect Stevens, who was caught in the "epidemic" fervor for Oriental culture in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century. But before discussing Stevens's poetry, I have to explain first what is exactly meant by this expression – the imperturbability of mind.

All Buddhist practice is mainly comprised of three parts: discipline, concentration and wisdom. Of these three, Zen Buddhists overall disdain the first, stress the second, and maintain a unique way (somewhat a mysterious / utilitarian approach, as is seen from the above discussion about *Buddhahead*) to obtain and verify the third. Zen masters accentuate the cultivation of "concentration," by which they mean not only close/undivided attention but also the ability to compose oneself in the vicissitudes of the world. For this purpose *kojo koan* is designated, as is pointed out by Shimano:

> The next category . . . is known as *kojo* or "crowning" koans. Kojo koans are used to cultivate imperturbability, the mind

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which remains unshakable in the midst of everyday turmoil.[68]

According to Shimano, "the three most worthwhile contributions that the East can make to the West are Buddhist thought, zazen practice, and koan study."[69] As the influence of Buddhist thought on Stevens has been discussed (and will be dealt with again later), whereas *zazen* practice, in Stevens's case, is out of the question, I will move to the issue of imperturbability. My argument is: though Stevens did not receive a formal training in koan study or plan a systematic study of *kojo koan*, his reading of koans from Zen and other Oriental classics could have affected his frame of mind. As a natural result of his contacts with Zen Buddhism and koans, he acquires a distinctive composure of mind common to Zen masters, and displays signs of this composure in his writing.

Psychologically speaking, whether one could be affected by the turmoil of life depends, to a greater degree, on two factors: one is extrinsic – the circumstances, the other intrinsic – the psychological quality (diathesis). For Stevens, the latter had played a more important role since he settled in Hartford and secured his position at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Colleagues of Stevens there remembered him as a quiet man of few words. In "The Auroras of Autumn" Stevens describes an attitude related to his composure:

He says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes

[68] *Zen: Tradition and Transition*, p. 79.
[69] Ibid., p. 83.

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> To no; and in saying yes he says farewell.
>
> He measures the velocities of change.
> He leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly
> Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames. (*CP* 414)

This is the later Stevens nearing seventy. He had seen too many phenomena of changes to be affected by them. Hence, instead of being a "bad angel…in flames," he "leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly," and knows how to respond to different situations. Could he write this under the indirect influence of koans?

In Zen classics, there are many koans telling how a Zen master ought to respond to different kinds of questions (such as: saying *yes* to negative / positive questions, and saying *no* to negative / positive questions).[70] If the above example from Stevens's later poems is not convincing enough because no hard evidence is supplied, there are still examples from his early poems, like the well known and much-talked-about "The Snow Man." Many critics have focused their discussion of this poem on the "mind of winter" and "nothingness, " which I will discuss at length in the next chapter. But in terms of what Stevens could have learned from koans, critics have not given enough thought to this poem's relation to Eastern koans. To date, among Stevens critics, Aitken and Richardson have briefly

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[70] See, for instance , *Zen Buddhism* by Suzuki, pp. 146-154, or *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism*, pp. 95-101.

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mentioned the snow man's provenance from the "old Chinese" masters.[71] Both Bevis and Griswold have related this poem to Zen ideas and discuss it in detail in their criticism.[72] Yet, despite his attention to "The Snow Man," Bevis only uses the word *koan* twice in his book, and fails to make thematic comparison between koan and "The Snow Man" because his focus is on the comparative study of the Western and Eastern meditative moods. For this reason, I will focus on Griswold's essay, and examine the said poem from where he has stopped – the indebtedness of this poem to koan.

In his essay, "Zen Poetry, American Critics; American Poetry, Zen Criticism: Robert Aitken, Basho, and Wallace Stevens," Griswold first introduces and sums up Aitken's essay "Wallace Stevens and Zen":[73]

> Aitken proposes, the Snow Man makes a Zen-like discovery of the primordial emptiness of the universe which is at the same time full of phenomena. . . .

Then, abruptly, Griswold dismisses "The Snow Man" – "as does Stevens' critic Samuel French Morse – as a kind of elaborate joke."[74] But elsewhere in the same article, Griswold also suggests that "Stevens' poem is a kind of echo of a Zen

[71] Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens, The Early Years*, p. 516. Robert Aitken, 'Wallace Stevens and Zen' in *WSJ* (Fall 1982): 69-70.
[72] Bevis, *Mind of Winter*. Jerome Griswold, 'Zen Poetry, American Critics; American Poetry, Zen Criticism: Robert Aiken, Basho, and Wallace Stevens' in *Zen in American Life and Letters* (ed. Robert S. Ellwood).
[73] Aitken, 'Wallace Stevens and Zen,' *WSJ*(Fall 1982): 69-73.
[74] *Zen in American Life and Letters*, pp. 12-13.

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koan." This latter statement contradicts his early view of "The Snow Man" as a joke, unless Griswold means that Zen koan is also a kind of joke like Stevens's poems.

Whatever reason may he has, Griswold is right in detecting a similarity between Zen koan and Stevens's poems, though he fails to understand a point Stevens stresses many times in his writing. In *Adagia,* for instance, Stevens writes: "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption." And in "Two or Three Ideas" he reiterates that:

> In an age of disbelief, or, what is the same thing, in a
> time that is largely humanistic, in one sense or another,
> it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in
> his measure and in his style.

Stevens's statements as such demonstrate seriousness about his poetical writing. Some critics attribute Stevens's point to the influence of George Santayana, as both Stevens and Santayana did "consider religion as a form of poetry and ... consider poetry as a form of religion."[75] In section XII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens proclaims:

> The poem is the cry of its occasion,
> Part of the res itself and not about it.

[75] Doggett, *Stevens' Poetry of Thought*, pp.121-22.

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Given Stevens's own confession that "The feeling of piety is very dear to me" (*L* 32), it is hard for readers to accept his poetry "as a kind of joke." In particular, "The Snow Man" could be anything but "an elaborate joke." Stevens wrote to tell Simons about his intention:

> I shall explain The Snow Man as an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it. (*L* 464)

A snowman is certainly a plaything for children. But for Stevens, and particularly in this poem, the Snow Man is a significant trope in presenting the poet's understanding of reality just as a koan reveals Zen masters' understanding of the world. In "Wallace Stevens and Zen" (*WSJ*, Fall 1982), Aitken cites from haiku and a Zen classic, *The Blue Cliff Record* (*Hekiganroku* in Japanese or *Pi-yen Lu* in Chinese) in an attempt to indicate "a mind of winter" as the common ground between Zen masters and Stevens. The question is: since the English version of *The Blue Cliff Record* did not get published until 1978, Stevens could not have read this Zen classic in its English version. Could Stevens have read any earlier French version of this Zen classic? If not, could he have read about koans associated with snow or snowman somewhere else?

Judging from Stevens's extensive reading list, I would think this as highly probable. *The Blue Cliff Record* contains koans about three famous Zen masters whose religious titles are related to snow (respectively *Snow Cave*, *Snow Peak* and

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Snow Cliff).[76] But stories about these three masters are widely spread in the Zen lore, not to mention other stories about, and allusions made to snow, snowflakes, snow scene, snowman and viewers of snow. Stevens had read Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, and must have known the so-called "pathetic fallacy." Yet he still intentionally employed images of "snow," "ice," and "the January sun." As a title, "The Snow Man" only comprises part of the winter images in this poem. Though this expression never appears again in the poem, it certainly is not a joke about a children's game but a mixed metaphor. When Stevens ends the poem with an ambiguous sentence in an enigmatic air:

> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

critics begin to see "the tree" but forget "the forest." A huge amount has been written about this ending, about its syntax, and about "nothingness." To me, however, this sentence with its ambiguous syntax is only a branch of "the tree," and much less "the forest." This "listener" can also refer to the snow man. But whether the listener is identical with the snow man, either is only **one** image

[76] Examples of these can be found in Volumes VI, VII, IX and X of *Pi-yen Lu (Hekiganroku)*. Actually, this collection is the explication of one hundred koans (plus hundreds of stories/koans related to them) by *Chong-xian*, a renowned Zen master whose Buddhist epithet is *Snow Cave*. By the Chinese custom, only a master's epithet, not his name, is mentioned in Zen records whenever a reference is made to him. About two-or-three-dozen koans used by *Snow Peak* and *Snow Cliff* are cited in this ten-volume book.

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among **many** winter images as I have indicated above. The forest, so to speak, is what Stevens mentions in his letter. According to Stevens, the image of "The Snow Man" stands for the "necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it." To accentuate this "necessity," Stevens begins the poem with an emphatic tone ("one must have..."). In an abstract way, the first stanza is in effect saying "one must have the imperturbability of mind" "in order to understand" the winter world (which is also a metaphor itself). Like "the listener," this "one" can be a human being or a snowman – anyhow being still a tree not the forest. The last stanza of the poem is not a complicated "double negation" at issue. It is just a metaphor, cased in a paradoxical statement, to supplement the first stanza (as the case in "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand").

Actually, the ending of "The Snow Man" is very closely akin to a Zen master's answer in some koans (such as "I do not see anything" or "I see nothing but snow"). Nothingness, like the Snow Man, is also a "vehicle" in its own terms, not a "tenor" per se. The tenor for what "the listener...beholds" is the Buddhist concept "Void" (or the more accepted term "emptiness") while the ultimate tenor for the poem, including all of its images and the title, is the imperturbability of mind. With this diathesis (or quality), one is able to, as Stevens puts it, "understand it [reality] and enjoy it."

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The imperturbability of mind as a stance is also visible in "The Wind Shifts":

> This is how the wind shifts:
> Like the thoughts of an old human,
> Who still thinks eagerly
> And despairingly.
> The wind shifts like this:
> Like a human without illusions,
> Who still feels irrational things within her.
> The wind shifts like this:
> Like humans approaching proudly,
> Like humans approaching angrily.
> This is how the wind shifts:
> Like a human, heavy and heavy,
> Who does not care. (*CP* 83-84)

Whatever human feelings are embodied in these adverbs –"eagerly" "despairingly" "proudly" or "angrily"– the mind is not disturbed. As a modern "Patriarch of Zen" comments on the movement of the wind ("the thoughts of an old human"), the poet represents an abstract being that is simply "without illusions" of any kind. But this can also be a supreme human being "who does not care." Like a poem from the ancient Tang Dynasty, this poem so successful fuses elements from nature and humankind. Yet it is also an anecdote about the wind, or a koan on imperturbable mind.

Some poems from *Opus Posthumous* also present this imperturbability. For instance, "Saturday Night at the Chiropodist's" begins with the observation of a

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"he" – presumably a nameless doctor – describing "rotting man," "wry" neck and heart, "the tumbler" and "belly of tears." The last stanzas are as follows:

> Did they behold themselves in this
> And see themselves as once they were,
> O spirit of bones, O mountain of graves?
>
> Take counsel, all hierophants
> And sentimental roisterers,
> They did not so. But in their throats
>
> They pied and chuckled like a flock,
> They were so glad to see the spring.
> The rotting man was first to sing. (*OP89* 61)

The image from the last line prompts a figure created by the ancient Chinese thinker Chuang Tzu (supposedly the successor of Lao Tzu). Chuang in his works describes a thinker (in his own name), who sings when he sees a skeleton.[77] When his wife dies he also sings while beating a clay musical instrument as accompaniment. When asked why so doing, he says that death and "rotting man" would usher in a new life in the spring. Stevens could have read this story somewhere, especially in the earlier French version of the story (possibly the reason why he puts "Histoire" underneath the title of the poem?), hence he writes this poem of a "Saturday night" at the house of a doctor who deals with "bones." (He hopes this doctor could dispose "rotting" bones and hasten the advent of the Resurrection on the next day?) .

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In another poem "Desire & the Object," the poet asserts "I had not invented my own thoughts... ." Then he adds: "thinking was a madness, and is: . . . feeling was a madness, and is." After repeating "it could be" for a few times, Stevens brings the poem to its end in this stanza:

> It could be that the sun shines
> Because I desire it to shine or else
> That I desire it to shine because it shines. (*OP89* 113)

For whatever reason the sun shines, "I" as a person is not swerved, thus preserving his imperturbability of mind in a materialistic world of "desires and objects." Likewise in "This As Including That" (*OP89* 113-114), Stevens poses as a "priest of nothingness who intones" "thoughts /That move in the air as large as air, /That are almost not our own, but thoughts /To which we are related ... ." He transcends what in an earlier poem he wished himself to be – "a thinking stone." He becomes a rock – free of thoughts as well as of feelings, though like a rock with solid foundation he is still "related" to "birds" "blue leaves" and "air." And in "The Course of A Particular" (*OP89* 123-124), though "the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind," the poet still feels "the nothingness of winter becomes a little less." With imperturbability of mind, whatever "conflict" and "resistance" may exist, "One feel the life of that which gives life as it is." In other words, Stevens has found an absolute reality (where things "transcend

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[77] Volume Eighteen **Perfect Happiness** from *The Book of Chuang*

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themselves") despite the relative reality (where "one is part of everything"). He still hears the "cry" – a word he uses nine times in this poem – yet "the cry concerns no one at all." After all, as a Tang poem puts it: fallen leaves will nourish more beautiful flowers of the next spring. That is the very natural "course of a particular." And that is what "the poems of our climate" ought to sing about.

Partly out of his humorous character, and partly thanks to the freedom and peace of mind, Stevens heartily enjoys reality and relishes the gaiety of language in writing poetry. Critics have often dubbed Stevens with different epithets describing this predilection in him, and have suggested different factors accounting for Stevens's inclination to such gaiety. But none has inquired into the possibility that Stevens's sense of gaiety in language is related to Eastern koans. Could it be possible to relate Stevens's "anecdotal bliss" to Zen koans?

In *Adagia*, Stevens reiterates his belief as follows:

> Poetry is the gaiety (joy) of language.
> The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness.
> Poetry is a health.
> Poetry is a cure of the mind.
> Poetry is, (and should be,) for the poet, a source of
> pleasure and satisfaction, not a source of honors.

In his poems, Stevens also upholds the similar idea:

> Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
> The gaiety of language is our seigneur. (*CP* 322)

Tzu (translated by Martin Palmer, published by Penguin Arkana in 1996), pp.149-154.

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The underpinning logic supporting such idea is that, Stevens believes in the purgative effect and purifying function of poetry, as he zealously writes in *Adagia*:

> Poetry is a purging of the world's poverty and change
> and evil and death. It is a present perfecting, a satisfaction
> in the irremediable poverty of life.

Since Stevens believes "Literature is the better part of life," he writes in the spirit "Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun":

> Some things, nino, some things are like this,
> That instantly and in themselves they are gay
> And you and I are such things, O most miserable. . .
>
> For a moment they are gay and are a part
> Of an element, the exactest element for us,
> In which we pronounce joy like a word of our own.
>
> It is there, being imperfect, and with these things
> And erudite in happiness, with nothing learned,
> That we are joyously ourselves and we think
>
> Without the labor of thought, in that element,
> And we feel, in a way apart, for a moment, as if
> There was a bright scienza outside of ourselves,
>
> A gaiety that is being, not merely knowing,
> The will to be and to be total in belief,
> Provoking a laughter, an arrangement, by surprise. (*CP* 248)

This overwhelming sense of "gaiety" and "laughter" is akin to Zen believers' view that life itself is enjoyable in spite of its miseries. The joy is just being "there," life is "erudite in happiness," and "we are joyously ourselves." But can Buddhists really be jolly? And how is Stevens influenced by this spirit?

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Of all sects of Buddhism, Zen is the only one that holds such a cheerful view of life. This is endorsed by the first sentence of their doctrine.[78] One may argue against a seeming contradiction: since Zen is also the sect of Buddhism that opposes the using of words,[79] the doctrine of Zen seems to run against Stevens's gaiety in language. In my opinion, though both the Zen doctrine and Stevens's joy in using words are true, they are by no means necessarily opposites. We see Zen koans using words, being preserved in words, and Zen masters' lectures being delivered, for the most part, through words. Still Zen masters as well as believers enjoy all this, because an important distinction is already built up in the mind. As long as one remembers that mind (or, in Stevens's vocabulary, imagination) creates all instead of being fettered by anything (including words, language, rules, etc.), no distinction really exists between the seeming opposites. In this sense, Stevens's own poetry is also, so to speak, "An ancient aspect touching a new mind" (*CP* 16). Some Zen monks are in fact also called "hedonists" by their critics. To them, epithets like "a hedonist" or "an aesthete" make no difference as to who or what they are.

In Stevens's case, since the important thing is what he writes as a poet, we may not naively accept his "gaiety" as a matter of merely personal predisposition.

[78] See the previous pp. 85-86 for the doctrine: 'Special transmission outside the Scriptures.'
[79] Ibid., 'No setting up of words.'

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Stevens himself once wrote: "The aesthetic order includes all other orders but is not limited to them" (*OP89* 192). This emphasis upon the "aesthetic order" does not necessarily means Stevens is an "aesthete," but it does reveal that Stevens appraises arts highly, and treats aesthetics as a matter of principal belief. Most critics agree that, ever since Nietszche had pronounced "God is dead," no poet of the twentieth century is more aware of the role of poetry in a secular epoch than Stevens is. But what "other orders" could be suggested by Stevens? To find out the affinity that Stevens's "gaiety" shares with Oriental thought, especially with the Zen intellectuals of ancient China and medieval Japan, let us look at more examples from his poems.

In the above part, I have cited "Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun" and mentioned some affinity it bears with the Zen Buddhism, the religion with the largest population of followers in Asia. Now I will illustrate this affinity with more facts. In this poem, Stevens declares, under the persona of an adult giving a parable lesson to his "nino", that we as human beings are "imperfect" and "most miserable," yet, as a "part /Of an element" "in happiness" we are also "gay [cheerful]." This persona prompts an Eastern "sage" or "Buddha" teaching the truth of life to his disciples, telling them that though human life is "most miserable" human beings are nevertheless "a part of" the eternal "happiness" – "A

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gaiety that is being, not merely knowing."[80] Such an understanding of "being imperfect" yet "erudite in happiness" is Stevens's secular acceptance of a non-Western spiritual path, which can be used a solution to enable

> That we are joyously ourselves and we think
>
> Without the labor of thought, in that element,
> And we feel, in a way apart, for a moment, as if
> There was a bright scienza outside of ourselves....

This very "bright scienza"explains Stevens's "gaiety that is being," and offers a new way to explicate Stevens's riddle-like poems.

Stevens accepts, as does a Buddhist, that "Life is a bitter aspic "(*CP* 322). On the other hand, he has also to find a way to bring out "the joyous element" in human being. As a poet, Stevens finds such a means in language, and embraces "the gaiety of language." But he is not a Wilde or Pater, an advocate of "art for art's sake" merely writing poem for poem's sake. For Stevens,

> It is life that we are trying to get at in poetry. (*OP89* 185)
> The purpose of poetry is to make life complete in itself. (*OP89* 188)

Many of Stevens's poems manifest this viewpoint. For instance, in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," Stevens declares:

> Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
> And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.

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[80] In Buddhist teachings, the first truth of 'The Four Noble Truths' is DUKKHA (life is suffering), but a supreme optimism prevails everywhere, not only because of SAMADHI (spiritual ecstasy), but also because of NIRVANA in SAMSARA (enlightenment through the extinguishment of all desires) in the endless cycle of transmigration (reincarnation).

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> I was myself the compass of that sea:
>
> I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
> Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
> And there I found myself more truly and more strange. (*CP* 65)

The poet's mind becomes the source of happiness – "the golden ointment" – and creates "the blowing hymns." And the poet "I" becomes "the world in which I walked, and ...[everything] came not but from myself." This could be a Zen master chanting his hymn (*ji*) of enlightenment!

Stevens also states in *Adagia* the goal of poetry as follows:

> The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness.
> Poetry sometimes crowns the search for happiness. It is
> itself a search for happiness. (*OP89* 188)

He asserts that poetry and religion are all alike in that they help people find happiness, for he believes that: "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption." He also presents this idea in poetical images / metaphors. For example, in "Artificial Populations," he writes:

> And the Orient and the Occident embrace
> To form that weather's appropriate people,
> The rosy men and the women of the rose,
> Astute in being what they are made to be. (*OP89* 138)

Although "this artificial population" could be too idealistic to be true, we must remember that: in order "to get at" life (reality), joking is one of the devices employed by both Zen masters in koan and Stevens in his poetry. In this respect

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we can find another striking similarity between Stevens and the Eastern Zen masters.

To begin with, we know that Stevens always regards poetry as "a source of pleasure and satisfaction." Such a stance finds its curious counterparts in the ancient Oriental intellectuals' fascination with word-play and poetry-writing. Both Zen Buddhists and many Chinese men of letters often derive an intuitive ecstasy in writing and meditation. For ages, this ecstasy has become a kinetic force in Zen poetry and Oriental literature as well. Stevens must have read about this ecstasy somewhere in the books I mentioned above. At the end of "three-phase process" (i.e., first, the superficial first-hand impression of certain objects, then, the close-up dissection with some doubts, and finally, the wise acceptance of reality as it is), a more mature realization, which is often accompanied by the reemergence of the viewer into the real world,[81] marks the obtainment of *satori*, or of a higher level of knowledge concerning the world. When one can thoroughly see beyond the phenomena of things, he becomes Stevens's "Snow Man," who is able

> . . . not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

[81] The reason I mention 're-emergence' is because of a popular reference often alluded by people in the Eastern Asian countries. They refer hermits/monks living in seclusion as EXITING the world. For hermits returning to the world, and monks who still live in society because they want to help people in their misery, their stance is called ENTERING the world. Hence REEMERGENCE often alludes to people who return to reality after they denounce/desert it for different reasons.

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. . .

It is only at this stage – the stage of being free of, or at least above the ordinary misery /misfortune – that one becomes capable of "provoking a laughter, an agreement, by surprise." Such a minute process explains the reason why both Zen koans and Stevens's poems are often full of surprises and hilarious laughter. Just as some critics misunderstand Stevens's "nothing" or "nothing himself" as either negation or something negative (see the above part[82]), other critics also pile up expressions to describe Stevens's "hedonist" fondness of pleasure in playing with language/words. To me, since Stevens does not write poetry as an art-for-art's-sake artist does, he would never use sensuous or hilarious words for the sake of hilarity alone. This corresponds to Zen masters' use of their koans: they would never use enigmatic expressions or drastic devices merely for the sake of puzzling or shocking people. For this reason, critics should use their discretion to separate means and end, and to sift out the essence from the superficial. Stevens certainly derived great delight in his use of nonsense syllables and hilarious expressions.

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[82] For criticism regarding this 'nothingness' as absolutely negative, I can also cite some instances among many similar comments, such as:
'the stripping away of illusion is accompanied by a barrenness of landscape (Fuchs, 42); 'a sense of man's aloneness in the coldness of space (Doggett, 69); 'the pathetic fallacy'; 'man is confronted with a plain unyielding landscape, nothingness, the old misconceptions gone and the place empty [as] in THE MAN ON THE DUMP'; 'the clinched language, the stale imagination' (Morris, 115); or

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But a fact we should be aware of is: Stevens often has a specific purpose or occasion for employing nonsense and hilarity, because poetry for Stevens is "a cure of the mind" and "the cry of its occasion."

In terms of images, "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" discloses some features echoing the features from both Eastern religion and the Chinese classic poetry too. For instance, Stevens depicts "western mountains" and "northern moonlight." These images are part of a common staple in Tang poetry. Certainly Stevens had read Tang poetry because he owed at least three or four books of Chinese poetry.[83] A great majority of poems collected in these books are from Tang poetry. For instance, Arthur Waley's *Translations from the Chinese* "contains all the poems originally published in Arthur Waley's two famous collections – *170 Chinese Poems* and *More Translations from the Chinese*."[84] Many of these poems describe the homesickness of the exiled men of letters, who would often yearn with deep feelings toward the north (the northern land was then the central area of China) and the west (where the capital, Chang-An, lay and was surrounded by mountains).[85] Although Stevens was fond of using the South and

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'the emptiness which is the mark of Stevens' skepticism' (Morris, Introduction).

[83] See the last three books from the list on page 73, plus *The Jade Mountains* by Bynner.

[84] From the front flap of *Translations from the Chinese* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1919).

[85] Chang-An is the ancient name for today's Xi-An, where many ancient dynasties set their capital. The famous pottery soldiers and horses were unearthed there too.

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the North to suggest his dichotomies, the use of west or "western mountains" is not frequent for Stevens. Neither is the yoking of north and moonlight. Could Stevens be influenced by some Oriental examples?

Here we have to refer back to in *The Book of Tea*, and *Buddhism in China*. In these two books, the division of the Southern and Northern Schools is mentioned so many times that Stevens could have a very deep impression of the differences between these two geographic regions. Given the context of this poem, we have reason to suspect that he could have used these images under the influence of Oriental poetical images. For readers somewhat familiar with the poetics of classical Chinese poetry, they may discern some subtle connection between the Chinese poetics and Stevens's thought, although to pinpoint the exact source is a still puzzling problem. Stevens usually is, as Harold Bloom puts it, a "great coverer of traces."[86] But, occasionally, some of his poems do reveal such traces. For instance, in *Three Travelers*, he represents the second Chinese as a lover of maxims (I have briefly mentioned Stevens's love of proverbs/maxims), and thus "a man of sense and sympathy":

THIRD CHINESE

> I drink from it [i.e., bottle], dry as it is,
> As you from maxims, [to Second Chinese] [sic]
> Or you from melons. [to First Chinese] [sic] (*OP89* 150)

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[86] See his *Modern Critical Views: Wallace Stevens*, p. 9.

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As we know that Stevens had bought many books of epigrams/proverbs originated from different countries (especially Asian countries[87]), this second Chinese could well be a surrogate figure for the poet himself – with a "finicky" fascination for maxims, epigrams and proverbs. And these pithy sayings from the East could be possible sources whence Stevens drew on and conceived ideas / images for his literary writing. A typical example of such case is also found in this play:

Drink from wise men? From jade?" (*OP89* 151)

Here both the image "jade" and its reference to "tea" and "wise men" come from Stevens's reading of *The Book of Tea* and *Buddhism in China*. In the former book, there is a sentence describing poets from Southern China as having a "fervent adoration of the 'froth of the liquid jade'."[88] Stevens learned this euphemism by heart, which was later used here in this play. For the latter book, there is a passage describing Bodhidharma, the First Patriarchy and "the wise man," "arriving in China" "on the leaf of the tea-plant."[89] Stevens learned from both books and combined these images in this sentence.

Moreover, *The Book of Tea* and *The Ideals of the East* could even influence the title of this play. The notion of "three travelers" is derived obviously from

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[87] See the previous page 69.
[88] *The Book of Tea*, p. 11.
[89] *Buddhism in China*, p. 214.

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these books. In the previous Chapter Three, I have mentioned the story of the three Eastern religious founders tasting "a jar of vinegar." In *The Ideals of the East*, there is "a quaint folk-story of three travelers" respectively from India, China and Japan.[90] These expressions (underlined by me) actually became the title of the play.

Furthermore, *Three Travelers* contains many passages reminiscent of the special qualities of *koan*. The following will adequately exemplify such a particular Eastern influence in the play.

SECOND CHINESE — All you need,
To find poetry,
Is to look for it with a lantern.

THIRD CHINESE — I could find it without,
On an August night,
If I say no more
Than the dew on the barns. (*OP89* 149)

This piece of dialogue imitates that kind of dialogue exchanged between Zen Buddhists in koans. In *Three Travelers* there are plenty of such instances:

> Dew is water to see, / Not water to drink: / We have forgotten water to drink. (*OP89* 150)

> There is a seclusion of porcelain / That humanity never invades. (*OP89* 151)

> This candle is the sun; / This bottle is earth: / It is an illustration / Used by generations of hermits. (*OP89* 151)

> Let the candle shine for the beauty of shining, / I dislike the invasion / And long for the windless pavilions. (*OP89* 154)

[90] *The Ideals of the East*, p. 114.

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> But it is a way with ballads / That the pleasing they are / The worse end they come to.... (*OP89* 157)

In these examples, not only the tone and content, but also the images (such as "hermits" "porcelain" or "pavilions") reflect the style of koan. In fact, all examples as such can pass for Zen koans. In addition, there is a passage describing a song, which is of particular interest on account of images and the illogical assertion:

> I have a song
> Called *Mistress and Maid.*
> It is of no interest to hermits
> Or emperors,
> Yet it has a bearing;
> For if we affect sunrise,
> We affect all things. (*OP89* 154)

Both the title of the song ("Mistress and Maid") and expressions like "emperors," "hermits," and "sunrise" recall images (of figures / objects) from some famous Ukiyo-e print works. The conclusive irrational statement, which implies a quasi-truth similar to what Stevens asserts as the "point of the play" (see previous pages 90-92), also strikingly echoes with koans from the Zen classics.

There is one more feature of Stevens's poems that could be associated with both koan and the poetical style of classical Chinese poetry. Critics have observed that Stevens is fond of using the form of tercet. Though in English this form has had a long history since its introduction by Sir Thomas Wyatt in the sixteenth century, Stevens's particular inclination for it could also be an indirect influence of

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the "triad" method he learned from koan. More often than not, the tercet Stevens uses appears to be an extension of the three-phase method from Zen koans, as can be seen from the above discussion.

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CHAPTER 5

The Eastern Landscape Painting and Stevens's "Affair of Places"

UT PICTURA POESIS.

- Horace

POETRY IS A SPEAKING PICTURE,

PAINTING A SILENT POETRY.

– Simonides of Keos

POEM IS PAINTING WITHOUT VISIBLE SHAPE,

PAINTING IS POEM PUT INTO ACTUAL FORM.

– Chinese Classical Verse

PAINTING AND WRITING ARE ONE

AND THE SAME ART.

– Sun Chou

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This chapter will examine Stevens's "Affair of Places," with a special focus on how the physical setting of Stevens's poetry is modulated by his "sense of place," which in turn is influenced by, among other factors, Eastern landscape painting. My argument for this section is: although Stevens is by no means a landscape poet, places and landscape do play a prominent role in the different stages of his writing career. Among factors that shape his sense of place and exert a cogent influence on his peculiar "affair of places and people," the element of Eastern landscape painting tends to be overlooked by most Stevens critics. For example, after Stevens read a paper, "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting," at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1951, critics have showed interest in this field, and have written some articles on Stevens's rumination of the relationship between poetry and painting. These articles often disclose a fact that some critics are apt to show interest only in the relationship between Stevens's poetry and Western painting, or in the convertibility between poetry and painting. Could criticism sanction, as a legitimate topic, the influence of Eastern landscape painting on Stevens? To me, evidences from Stevens's own works will certainly validate a positive answer to this question.

In his speech, which was later collected in *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens defines roughly four areas of possible relation/influence: sensibility, subject

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matter, aesthetics, and technique.[1] He did not cite his own poetry, as could be expected in conformity with his disposition, as illustration of the point under discussion, though criticism since then has cited Stevens's works as illustration of his own topic. As most critical studies focus on relation between Stevens's poetry and Western arts, I would contend, on the basis of my research in this field, that Stevens's works also offer substantial instances illustrative of the relations between his poetry and the Eastern landscape painting. Following Stevens's own method of division, I will divide my discussion in this chapter into two parts, with each concentrated on the exploration of one kind of influence brought up by Stevens in his own paper. In other words, I will discuss the influence of Eastern landscape painting on Stevens in his sensibility, subject matter and technique. More appropriately, I prefer to discuss issues involving aesthetics – the last kind of influence mentioned by Stevens – in the sixth chapter.

Two points have still to be mentioned here. First, the apportionment of these elements is only an expedient arrangement, for the interplay among these three elements is inclined to make them an interwoven trio rather than some unrelated segments. For example, discussions on sensibility will entail the discussion of subject matter, which in its turn will also involve discussion on technique. Secondly, the topic I have chosen and my approach to it do not

[1] *The Necessary Angel* (hereafter will be cited as *NA*), pp.

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necessarily evoke the exclusion, or register a denial, of the influence of Western paintings on the poet. Instead, the following study can only be made feasible when it is based on the realization or the premise that Stevens in his lifetime showed an interest mainly in the Western painting while preserving at the same time a keen interest in Oriental arts and culture. On the other hand, in order to do full justice to Stevens, the significance of Eastern painting has to be studied too in spite of the meager resources or scantiness in measure. After all, in the process of Stevens's poetical musing, both Western painting and Eastern paining had served as a catalytic agent in their own distinctive way.

A) Sensibility

The unique sense of place is a topic often mentioned by Stevens critics. For instance, John Serio calls Stevens's sense of place a "postcard imagination," which "reflects the intricate nuances of thinking and feeling."[2] Truly, Stevens possessed an uncommon sense of place, which made his poetry unique. But does this distinct attribute relate, in some ways, with the Eastern landscape painting? Let us first examine what the poet himself said about this.

In the first chapter I have cited one passage from Stevens's journal, which describes the poet's admiration for "the art of the East" "in landscape and themes

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160, 163 ff.

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allied to landscape"(see page 10). Stevens particularly mentions that Eastern art in this aspect "is superior to our own – the art of West excels in the human drama[.]" William Bevis comments on this point as follows:

> Stevens' landscapes and floral decorations and minute pleasures were superior to his human drama: even in his play, *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, he wrote to Harriet Monroe that he did not wish "to become involved in the story or characters of the men and the girl."
>
> The delicacy, specificness, and economy of Chinese and Japanese arts certainly appealed to Stevens' sensibility; ... [3]

Bevis goes on to discuss how "that economy also dovetailed with the new Imagist movement as advertised by Pound in *Poetry*." But in my opinion Bevis ought to go further in this discussion of "Stevens's sensibility" instead of shifting to things such as subject matter ("landscape, flower arrangement, plum and cherry boughs") and techniques ("economy" and "balance"). For it is exactly this sensibility that shapes Stevens's sense of place and the direction of his writing.

To illustrate this point, I will cite a quasi-paradoxical passage from *Adagia*, which sometimes puzzles its readers:

> Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me
> life is an affair of places and that is the trouble. (*OP89*, 185)

Several questions arise here. Did Stevens write down this passage into his notebook as his own words or as something he copied from his reading? For what

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[2] 'Stevens' *Affair of Places*,' *WSJ*, Spring 1978, p. 26.
[3] *Mind of Winter*, p. 211.

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reason, and in what sense, can life be said as "an affair of places"? Why life being "an affair of places" is "the trouble" for him? Apropos of the first question regarding the "authorship," most critics accept this passage as Stevens's own writing since it is not a trite expression like some others in Stevens's notebooks. The other two questions are not so easy to resolve. Serio suggests that the key word is "affair," which, "with its etymological root in the French *a faire*, implies an act of making, a vital process of the imagination in response to place which become equivalent to Stevens's sense of poetry as an 'act of the mind'."[4] And he reaches his conclusion as follows:

> As "an affair of places," life – and hence poetry – becomes for Stevens an act of the mind composing the scene in which it dwells, a willful composing of place that becomes the central act of the mind in a willful composing of self.[5]

From "*a faire*" to "making," then from "a willful composing of place" to "a willful composing of self," this logical process neatly explains the above second question, albeit it still does not tell why all this could finally lead to Stevens's concluding sentence ("that is the trouble"). Critics often comment that Stevens is not good at presenting life as the "drama of people" – the very point made by Bevis in the above comment. Then, after Stevens's exclusion (of life as "affair of

[4] 'Stevens' *Affair of Places,*' *WSJ*, Spring 1978, p. 26.
[5] Ibid.

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people"), this "act of mind" in composing poems "of place" and "of self" ought to, presumably, bring ease to the poet's heart, and save him from the alleged trouble.

To me, this is where the influence of Eastern landscape painting applies to resolve the seeming discrepancy in the above third question. It is the Eastern landscape painting that helps Stevens cultivate his sensitivity toward place in its relation to people. Early from his New York period, Stevens had construed "landscape-gardening" as "another art of Chinese origin aimed at a definite influence on the beholder's mind" (*SP* 221). Later, in a letter to Elsie in early 1909, Stevens specifically revealed how this sentiment affects him. After telling his fiancée about his reading "Mr. Okakura's book" and going to some museums, Stevens warms up toward his topic:

> I do not know if you feel as I do about a place so remote and unknown as China – the irreality of it. So much so, that the little realities of it seem wonderful and beyond belief. – I have just been reading about the Chinese feeling about landscape. Just as we have certain traditional subjects that our artists delight to portray (like "Washington Crossing the Delaware" or "Mother and Child" etc. etc!) so the Chinese have certain aspects of nature, of landscape, that have become traditional. (*L* 137)

This passage is tantamount to illustration of how Stevens's "postcard imagination" functions: the mind longs for "the irreality" of some remote places, which are transmuted, through the poet's sensibility, into certain "wonderful" "little realities" "beyond belief." This imagination not only envisions the

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landscape but also comprehends people's "feeling about landscape." Although Stevens doe not explicitly name the feelings, his examples suggest that "patriotic" feeling is implied in his first example, and "parental" feeling in his second example. Such implied feelings appeal to the sensibility of both the artist and audience, and retain their "definite influence" on people. When the relation between certain subjects and feelings associated with them becomes conventional, these subjects become "traditional."

Stevens was keenly perceptive to such relations because he had involved himself in the appreciation of Eastern landscape painting since his Harvard years. He frequented the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston together with Bynner and others when they were students of Harvard.[6] Later in New York City Stevens often visited The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Both of these museums, especially the former, are famous for their collections of the Far Eastern arts. In 1911, two years after he wrote the above passage describing his "reading about the Chinese feeling about landscape," Stevens clipped an article, "together with an editorial comment, from the newspaper" on the Chinese landscape painting.[7] This clipping is still in The Huntington Library, but the extant part has only the editorial comment rather than the original excerpt from the essay by the Chinese painter Kuo Hsi.

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[6] *The Early Years*, p. 62.
[7] Ibid., pp. 383-384.

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In the previous part (page 15) I have cited part of Stevens's letter of August 20, 1911. If we can read the whole letter (Holly Stevens's omitted two parts of this letter in her editing of *Letters*), we will have a fuller understanding of what the Eastern works meant to Stevens in his formative years.

> ...I always have the wise sayings of Meng Tzu and K'ung Fu-Tzu to think of, and the poetry of the Wanamaker advertisements to dream over. In addition, I had this clipping from the "The Noble Features of the Forest" etc. (which must be a very interesting document) to console me.[8]

It is clearly shown here that Stevens in that time used works of Confucius (*K'ung Fu-Tzu* in Chinese) and Mencius (*Meng Tzu* in Chinese), and the essay "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream" by the Sung painter Kuo Hsi "to console" himself. The significance of reading these Chinese sages and painter is manifest from the clipped editorial article:

> One should note the background of civilization, quietism and rural idealism implied in...the "luxuries of nature." Nor should one fail to see that what is brought into the home of the restless worldling is not the mere likeness of nature, but the choice feeling of the sage.[9]

This "choice feeling of the sage" is that particular sensitivity Stevens learned from the Eastern sages. Richardson points out that "[Stevens's] newspaper clipping suggested a mode of contemplating oneself in the world that he later translated into one of the basic features of his poetry. This was the focus on

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[8] File # WAS1926, The Huntington Library.
[9] Ibid.

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landscape imbued with feeling."[10] Mixed with this sensitivity toward landscape is Stevens's "desire" to represent nature in his poems. As Richardson puts it, Stevens's "writing verses" has "a purpose that transcended his personal need: He could paint pictures of landscapes in words so that people could behold the grandeur of nature without stepping out of their houses."[11] Even though the editorial clipping quotes only a couple of sentences from the beginning section of "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream," what Stevens could have learned from this Chinese painter can nevertheless be deduced from Fenollosa's book, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art,* published in the following year (1912). In his book, Fenollosa uses nine pages to comment and introduce Kuo Hsi's major points and the "Chinese virtuosity and insight at this important period [the Sung Dynasty]."[12] As Stevens had a copy of Fenollosa's book, he could have read about this section on "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream." Memorable expressions and passages learned from reading Fenollosa's book and Kuo's essay could have remained dormant in Stevens's mind for years. Later, in the process of poetry writing, his imagination could conjure up memories of some most impressive concepts / expressions, and prompt him to use these concepts /

[10] *The Early Years*, p. 384.
[11] Ibid., p. 385.
[12] op. cit. Vol. II, pp. 11-20.

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expressions in his poems. In the subsequent discussion I will illustrate such cases with examples from both Stevens's early and later poems.

For the early period of Stevens's writing, critics have noticed the role played by the exotic Oriental poetry and arts in Stevens's poems. Yet most of critics tend to stress merely the role of subject matter rather than the more important role of a poet's sensibility. Critical articles focusing on Stevens's special "sense of place" have appeared in different journals and magazines,[13] nevertheless, articles specifically concentrating on Stevens's indebtedness to Eastern landscape painting and prints are still few and far between. Overall, critics accept that Stevens was fascinated in Oriental material only in his early period. While admitting that there is truth in this estimation, I also have to point out that such a opinion might only be partly true. Surely the years after the publication of *Harmonium* saw a drastic decline in Stevens's use of exotic material as his subject matter. Yet "decline" is not the same as "cessation." Nor does it necessarily

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[13] Such articles are:
'Walllace Stevens' Landscapes and Still Lifes' (Doris Eder, *Mosaic* 1971);
'Wallace Stevens: At Home in Pennsylvania' (Thomas Lombardi, *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 1978);
'Stevens' *Affair of Places*' (John Serio, ibid.);
'Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut' (Frank Kermode, in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, 1980);
'A Sense of the Place' (Sammuel Morse, *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 1982);
'Wallace Stevens: The Adequacy of Landscape' (Bonnie Costello, ibid. 1993);
'Chinese Landscape Painting in Stevens' *Six Significant* Landscapes' (Zhaoming Qian, ibid. 1997).

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follow that his sensitivity toward Eastern landscape changed as much, and as drastically, as his subject matter.

A good example to evince this unchanged sensibility is the poem "A Weak Wind in the Mountains" (discussed above on page 77), written in 1938 – fifteen years after the publication of *Harmonium*. This was the period that Stevens kept frequent correspondence with his new friend Leonard van Geyzel in Ceylon. Readers of Stevens's *Letters* may have already learned about Stevens's exchange with van Geyzel of opinions on literature in general, but they may not know what *Letters* has left out. Not only are some letters from Stevens to van Geyzel left out, but also some passages are cut from those letters that are currently collected in this volume. Some of these passages reveal Stevens's eager interest in Ceylon, and his admiration for a life in the remote mountain and forest (as is depicted by "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream").

For instance, in the letter of May 26, 1938, Stevens told van Geyzel he received "a number of postcards, which have helped me to see what Newara Eliya is really like. There cannot be a moment's doubt about the interest of the place as a background for one's tea."[14] Though these postcards were not from van Geyzel, they were related to him because he was the agent who made the tea purchase. The correspondence and friendship between Stevens and van Geyzel began with

[14] File # WAS2472, The Huntington Library.

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Stevens's asking him, in the fall of 1937, to purchase "Christmas things" for Stevens's family. After a package of tea (being only part of van Geyzel's purchase for Stevens) arrived from Ceylon, Stevens wrote to the tea company in Newara Eliya. In this letter (January 10, 1938) he said that he liked the tea and therefore would "attach 50 rupee" for the purchase of more "good tea" from the company. An interesting point here is that, in this tea-business letter, Stevens displayed his fascination with the locale where the tea he drank grew. For he particularly asked that: "If you could have someone pick up a dozen or so picture postcards of Newara Eliya, or else a decent photograph of the place, to be placed in the package, I shall be grateful."[15] If we associate this particular interest with Stevens's habit of buying postcards at places where he visited, we will have a fair comprehension of how his "postcard imagination" works.

Actually, this special fascination with different locales can be traced back to his reading "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream." This essay teaches that "One should note the background of civilization" (see the aforesaid editorial article on page 169). In addition to what is mentioned in this article, there are some concrete depictions about "the choice feeling of the sage" in "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream" translated by Fenollosa in his *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* as follows:

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[15] File # WAS1348, The Huntington Library.

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> The sage [Confucius] said: – "It is well to aim at the moral principle (Tao) . . . and to let the mind play in the sphere of Art.
>
> * * *
>
> Wherein do the reasons lie of virtuous men so loving sansui (landscape)? It is for these facts: that a landscape is a place where vegetation is nourished on high and low ground, where spring and rocks play about like children, a place which woodsmen and retiring scholars usually frequent. . . . The noisiness of the dusty world, and the locked-in-ness of human habitations are what human nature, at its highest, perpetually hates; while, on the contrary, haze, mist and the Sennin sages (meaning, poetically, the old spirits that are supposed to haunt mountains) are what human nature seeks, and yet can but rarely see.
>
> * * *
>
> Man, in studying painting, is under the same condition as in studying writing.[16]

Passages as such could help to cultivate in Stevens "a mode of contemplation" on nature, which was not only manifested in his early *Harmonium*, but also reflected in his later poems, especially in poems collected in "The Rock." Though the exact extent of Stevens's indebtedness to this essay and Eastern landscape painting is hard to assess, but "a definite influence" (in Stevens's own words) is certainly there. And a comparison between the above passages (and other similar ones to be quoted later) and Stevens's writings will evince the influence of Stevens's reading "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream."

In the first place, the title of this clipped essay bears a certain similarity to that of Stevens's "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Both titles begin with the marked adjective "noble" accentuating the same quality, albeit one has its

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purport intended for nature and the other for humanity. Then, bearing this connection in mind, we proceed to compare the two articles' similarity in content. Stevens uses a mixed metaphor, borrowed from Plato's *Phaedrus*, and proclaimed at the beginning of his essay:

> Let our figure be of a composite nature – a pair of winged horses and a charioteer.[17]

For Stevens, "the image of the charioteer and of the winged horses"[18] alludes first to statues of generals mounted on high horses, and then is extended to the poet and his imagination. But, inevitably, Stevens also mentions, as he usually does, reality, which is set to bring out the nobility of the poet. Stevens considers it the role of the poet "to help people to live their lives" in reality. Yet he also exalts the poet for his "resistance to" "the pressure of reality" and for his ability to use "words" and "sounds" in poetry. This function of the poet and his poem parallels that of the painter and his painting mentioned by Kuo in his essay, as both poet and painter, and both poetry and painting, have the capability to lift people's spirit and help them live their lives. To Kuo, a painter with "the guiding sentiment of Chinese landscape painting" and "the choice feeling of the sage" is noble because his painting "affords pleasures of a nobler sort by removing from one [people] the

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[16] *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (II), pp. 12,14.
[17] *The Necessary Angel*, p. 3.
[18] Ibid., p. 32.

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impatient desire of actually observing nature."[19] Though Stevens is talking about poets, he admits that both poet and painter have "the measure of his power to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination."

Stevens also writes that: "The poet has his own meaning for reality, and the painter has [too]...."[20] In other words, to Stevens, a poet helps people by abstracting reality with/into his imagination just as a painter observes "nature" and "affords pleasures of a nobler sort" to people. Thus, Kuo's essay could have helped, if not inspired, Stevens develop his own poetics (like "imagination-reality dichotomy" or "It-Must-Give-Pleasure"). For another instance, Stevens mentions in "The Noble Rider" "the many points of view" on "the nature of poetry" but nevertheless holds his own as follows:

> It is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals. This is not a definition, since it is incomplete. But it states the nature of poetry.[21]

About two pages later he says: "Nothing could be more evasive and inaccessible" than "the peculiarity of the imagination" and its "nobility," yet

> I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it.[22]

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[19] See Notes 9,10 and 16 above.
[20] *The Necessary Angel*, pp. 23 and 25.
[21] Ibid., p. 27.

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These words, especially the last two lines, sound quite like an Eastern Taoist founder talking about Tao unable to be defined, or water as never being "fixed" (see the detailed discussions in Chapter Six about Taoism and Lao Tzu). Theory/ definition aside, what matters more is the way Stevens develops his perceptiveness toward nature/landscape,[23] and represents this sentiment in special poetical images associated with Eastern landscape painting, as will be seen from the following examples.

"Man Carrying Thing" (written in 1946) is a good example from Stevens's later poems. In the first chapter (pages 16-17) I have cited this poem to show that even Stevens's later poems could also be influenced by the Eastern culture, for the "brune figure" and its background are familiar features of Eastern landscape painting. Actually, the influence of Eastern landscape painting is manifested not only in the objects described in this poem, but also in the poet's perceptiveness toward his objects. The latter is usually more important, because, to Stevens, the matter of sensibility is "the primary free from doubt," whereas the former (objects chosen for his illustration like the "brune figure" and the "thing he carries") are "secondary" things. Stevens wrote down the thematic sentence for this poem in

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[22] Ibid., p. 34.
[23] In his translation Fenollosa uses *nature*, *landscape*, and *sansui* alternatively to stand for **landscape**. *Sansui* (or *shanshui*) literally means 'mountains and rivers' or

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Adagia prior to the writing of the poem – "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully" (*OP89* 197). Still, he had to convene something to illustrate such resistance. From his years of experience in appreciating Oriental art works, Stevens picked up some typical subjects capable of connoting what Eastern landscape painting appears like in the eye of Western audience. Such subjects are: the unidentifiable man, the indiscernible thing in his hand, and things "floating like the first hundred flakes of snow" (often seen in Eastern landscape painting and the Japanese prints). They often pose obstacles for Western audiences in their appreciation of Eastern landscape painting, just as difficult words and obscure images are often obstacles for Stevens's readers. Since Stevens wants his readers to grasp "the obvious whole, ...the solid, the primary" instead of the "uncertain particles" of "a storm of secondary things," he selects these details which are usually secondary in a landscape painting. This instance of selection attests to Stevens's understanding of the art of Eastern landscape painting.

To comprehend this poem better, we may also use another approach. Stevens's initial proposition and the subsequent illustration can be regarded as a reversed syllogism, in which Stevens presumes an analogous identity between Eastern landscape painting and poetry: they both "resist the intelligence." To emphasize his syllogistic conclusion, Stevens places it at the beginning of his

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'mountain and waters' in Chinese; by extension it denotes

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poem. Then he implies the two premises in his illustration. The process of Stevens's "act of the mind" is as follows: every brune figure resists intelligence; the poem is a brune figure; therefore the poem resists intelligence. At any rate, without this medium term, and without his sensibility cultivated by his long appreciation of Eastern landscape painting, Stevens could not have conceived and constructed this poem so successfully.

There is one point, related to the "brune figure" and "things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow," which has to be mentioned here prior to discussion of subject matter and technique in the subsequent sections. Critics may ask "how" and "why" these expressions should relate exclusively to Eastern rather than Western tradition. From the earlier discussion on *The Blue Cliff Record* (or the *Hekiganroku*, see pages 136-137 in Chapter Four) it is clear that the Eastern usage of "snow" may have some bearing on Stevens's using the image of a "snow man." Yet another possibility is that the Japanese prints may also contribute to Stevens's preference for snow images. Holly Stevens's memoir mentions that her father had collected some Japanese prints. According to the catalogue from the Wallace Stevens Collection in The Huntington Library, two of Stevens's collected Japanese prints are still in the possession of The Trinity College at Hartford. These are two Ukiyo-e works by the Japanese artist Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858), entitled

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the genre of *landscape painting* too.

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"Fireworks at Ryogoku" and "New Year's Eve Foxfires at the Changing Tree, Oji."[24] The former is a summer scene, and the latter a winter scene with snow background. From among the whole set of this Ukiyo-e series (there are 118 prints in this series entitled *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*), Stevens only picked these two with "fire" scenes and from different seasons.

While we can presume that the reason for Stevens's choice as such could be his keen perception of seasonal changes and his fascination with light – his favorite symbol for imagination, I also want to point out a few important facts related to our discussion here. First of all, both prints are nocturnal scenes with a darkish background. "Fireworks at Ryogoku" depicts Ryogoku River, Ryogoku Bridge, two dozen or so boats, and fireworks in the sky. On the bridge, and in the tiny boats, are silhouettes of numerous "brune figures." "New Year's Eve Foxfires" presents a "winter evening" scene with two old trees and sixteen foxes in the foreground, plus barely distinguishable dark figures of uncountable foxes coming toward the old trees from nearby and faraway snow-covered fields. Thus, while such expressions as "winter evening" and "brune figure" could be used incidentally, they also open up the possibility that these two prints could prompt

[24] Since there are misspellings and wrong names in the titles used by The Huntington Library (probably errors inherited from The Trinity College catalogue, as the Ukiyo-e works I saw at Huntington are copies sent to Huntington from Trinity), I cite here the titles from the original 1858 catalogue of *Hiroshige's One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*.

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Stevens to use such images as are found in "Man Carrying Thing" and other poems.

Secondly, both prints can be categorized, in the Western tradition, as a combination of "genre painting" and "landscape painting." "Fireworks at Ryogoku" is a landscape mixed with local people's entertainment activities as their expression of seasonal feeling. "New Year's Eve Foxfires" depicts the nocturnal activity of legendary animal rituals (to predict the crops of the coming year). Hence both landscape prints are imbued with human feelings of pleasure and piety, or ideas about change, mystery and fantasy. It is these human feelings that often color Stevens's sensibility for a place.

Lastly, both prints are well-known ones among the whole series by virtue of their artistic expressions and quality. As both contain some barely discernable "brune figures," I suspect the role they play in shaping Stevens's sentiment to nature. Of course, it is possible that such "brune figures" could also be inspired by the human figures in some monochromic ink landscapes from China and Japan, which Stevens could see during his many trips to different museums. And in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding of being taken as some "brunet" or "brunette" figures, he picked this obsolete word "brune" to stand for human figures painted in darkish color. When all (facts, possibilities or speculations) are

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added together, they point to the influence of Eastern art works on these Stevens poems..

If "Man Carrying Thing" is a poem exemplifying Stevens's using his knowledge of Eastern landscape painting in conceiving his poems, then another poem, "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," will serve as a good example in illustrating the convertibility of poem and painting in Stevens's poetry.

> 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)

Holly Stevens associates this poem (written in 1952) and a 1939 poem "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" with one of Stevens's early outings in Long Island (*SP* 107-108). Her speculation could be right, though she might not realize that this 1952 poem could also be connected with concepts and expressions

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Stevens learned, in his early years, from reading "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream" and other similar articles.

If we compare the title and the first three stanzas of this poem with the following passage:

> But what a delightful thing it is for lovers of forests and fountains ...to have, at hand, a landscape painted by a skilful artist! To have therein the opportunity of seeing water and peaks, of hearing the cry of monkeys, and the song of birds, without going from the room! ...This is the fundamental idea of the world-wide respect for sansui (landscape) painting... .[25]

we find that this concept of using *sansui* (landscape painting)[26] to take the place of "water and peaks" is rephrased in Stevens's poem as using word / poem to surrogate nature – "The poem that took the place of a mountain." In other words, the notion from Kuo's essay ("The painting took the place of a mountain") is appropriated by Stevens, with the change of one word ("painting" being changed to "poem"). This change is the corollary of the belief in the convertibility of poetry and painting, which is also related to the influence of the aforesaid "choice feeling of the sage" of ancient China.

In Fenollosa's *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* there is a passage recounting:

> The ancient sages said that a poem is a painting without visible shape, and a painting is poetry put into form. These

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[25] *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (II), p. 14.
[26] See Note 23 for *sansui*.

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> words are ever with me.[27]

This passage could offer a theoretical base for the analogy, discussed in the previous example "Man Carrying Thing," between landscape painting and poem. The assertion of the convertibility of painting and poetry could also prompt Stevens to conceive the title "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain." In the second couplet, "the book [that] lay turned in the dust of his table" might be the book by Fenollosa, which "reminded him how he had needed" to write such a "poem that took place of a mountain." For the remaining part of this poem, Stevens writes about "the outlook" from the mountain peak, which commands a view of "the pines," "the rocks" and "clouds." All such expressions and images are exactly subjects that are discussed by Kuo Hsi in "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream." Based on his own experience as a painter and critic, Kuo Hsi inscribes subjects that compose a landscape painting, and explains the significance and techniques of painting them. In his translation, Fenollosa divides these subjects into such sections as "ON CLOUD PAINTING" "ON MOUNTAINS AND WATER" and "ON ROCKS."

The following are some passages that afford a glimpse of the "staple" subjects discussed by Kuo Hsi:

> Rocks are the bones of heaven and earth; and being noble, are hard and deep [sic.]. Dews and water are the blood of

[27] *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (II), p. 19.

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> heaven and earth; … .Great rocks and pines should always be painted beside great banks or tablelands, and never beside shallow, flat water.
>
> * * *
>
> Rocks and forests (in painting) should pre-eminently have reason. One big pine is to be painted first, called the master patriarch, and then miscellaneous trees, grass, pebbles …as subjects under his supervision, as a wise man over petty men.
>
> * * *
>
> The aspect of clouds in sansui is different according to the four seasons. In spring they are mild and calm… .And in painting clouds…one will paint only the great total aspect of the thing… then the forms…of the clouds will *live.*[28]

These staple subjects are used by Stevens not only in this poem, but also in many other poems. Kuo's description of them, especially of "rocks" as "the bones of heaven and earth, and being noble," could have impressed Stevens so deeply that he used these images years later in this poem (and in other poems from *The Rock*). Like a landscape painter, Stevens describes minutely

> 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 his effort to recreate scenes he experienced in his youth, and to express the sentiment he learned from the "choice feeling" of the Chinese sages, Stevens concludes this poem with a heightened sense of the place,

> Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
> Recognize his unique and solitary home.

[28] Ibid., pp. 15-17.

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Many passages from Stevens's letters and journals collected by Holly in her memoir testify to the scene from this stanza.[29] The "right" "outlook" (plus those objects in view) also points to the sustained influence of Kuo's essay and Eastern landscape painting, even in Stevens's later years. Another fact that testifies to this Oriental influence is: Stevens was particularly fond of landscape paintings from the Sung Dynasty, a period in which "The emphasis changed from human figures to nature (landscape, birds and animals)."[30] Fenollosa observes that "Tang culture probably found its supreme expression in poetry, while the Sung culture found its supreme expression in pictorial art."[31] Unlike the thematic amplitude of the Tang poetry that poses great difficulties for translators as well as readers, the Sung landscape painting appeals directly to many Westerners with its visual presentation of a natural world. It attracts Stevens, with its sensory images "imbued with" human feelings, and exerts a special influence on Stevens's "sense of place." This kind of anthropomorphism is ingeniously exhibited by Kuo Hsi in his essay:

> Mountains make water their blood; grass and water their hair; mist and cloud their divine colouring. Water makes of mountains its face, of houses and fences its eyebrows and its eyes, and of fishermen its soul. [32]

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[29] See instances in *SP*, pp. 44, 46, 48, 107-109, 240.
[30] Quoted from the introductory comment to a later time translation of Kuo's essay, which though has a different title 'Kuo Hsi: A Father's Instructions.' See p. 69 in *The Chinese Theory of Art* by Lin Yutang.
[31] *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (II), p. 19.
[32] Ibid., p. 15.

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Fenollosa praises this point highly in his comments preceding Kuo's essay:

> It [Kuo's essay] shows well how every characteristic form of things may be held to correspond to phases of the human soul.... Thus nature becomes a vast and picturesque world for the profound study of *character*...because *character*, in its two senses of human individuality and nature individuality, are seen to become one [sic.]. The very beauty of the natural side counteracts any latent moral formalism, and this is the very antithesis to the later *bunjinga* – "literary man's art," – which...swallows up beauty in pedantry. [33]

The comprehension of nature as an entity corresponding to "the human soul" and as a "*character*" embracing both "*human* individuality and *nature* individuality" is congruous to Stevens's sentiment for nature. Kuo's description of natural world in anthropomorphic terms (like "mountains" and "water" being face, hair or blood for each other, or the above-cited description of "rocks" as the "noble" "bones of heaven and earth") is influential and contagious. This Oriental anthropomorphism leaves its vestige in both Stevens's early and later poems. To cite some examples from his early poems, we read:

> *The pine-tree sweetens my body*
> *The white iris beautifies me.* (*CP* 5)

And we find these images of nature ("the Giant") and art (the "Third Girl"):

> He will bend his ear then.
> I shall whisper
> Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals.
> It will undo him. (*CP* 7)

A passage from the famous "Six Significant Landscapes" reads:

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> The night is of the color
> Of a woman's arm:
> Night, the female,
> Obscure,
> Fragrant and supple,
> Conceals herself. (*CP* 73)

Notwithstanding the various explanations as to why "Night [is] the female," and why "The night is of the color / Of a woman's arm," critics have overlooked the Eastern ideas on anthropomorphism and Yin/Yang principle (which I will deal with in the next section). In "Tattoo" Stevens presents light as the "webs" and "filaments" of the "eyes" of nature:

> The webs of your eyes
> Are fastened
> To the flesh and bones of you
> As to rafters or grass. (*CP* 81)

Similar examples are also found in "The Wind Shifts" or "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" discussed in the previous chapter. As to instances of anthropomorphism from Stevens's later poems, they may seem a little different from the *Harmonium* examples, yet they are still related to this anthropomorphism from the Eastern tradition. For instance, "Dezembrum" describes "the stars" as "a crowd of faces / Moving round the sky and singing / And laughing... ." In the first poem from *Transport to Summer*, Stevens writes:

> Look round, brown moon....
>
> Look round you as you start to rise, brown moon,

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[33] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

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......
In your light, the head is speaking. It reads the book.
It becomes the scholar again, seeking celestial
Rendezvous. (*CP* 285)

Near the end of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" he renders reality as:

Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night, ...
Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
You remain the more than natural figure. You
Become the soft-footed phantom.... (*CP* 406)

In "A Primitive Like an Orb" Stevens also abstracts reality in anthropomorphic terms learned from Kuo Hsi:

Here, then, is an abstraction given head,
A giant on the horizon, given arms,
A massive body and long legs, stretched out.... (*CP* 443)

Likewise he indites the four seasons:

So lewd spring comes from winter's chastity.
So, after summer, in the autumn air,
Comes the cold volume of forgotten ghosts.... (*CP* 468)

And he also invests natural phenomena with human attributes:

The mornings grow silent, the never-tiring wonder.
The trees are reappearing in poverty.

Without rain, there is the sadness of rain
And an air of lateness. The moon is a tricorn

Waved in pale adieu. (*CP* 495)

As Stevens states in *Adagia* that "The poem is a nature created by the poet" (*OP89* 192), his later poems turn more to nature for haunting images and thought:

A repetition of unconscious things,

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Letters of rock and water, words
Of the visible elements...

The rocks of the cliffs are the heads of dogs
That turn into fishes and leap
Into the sea. (*CP* 232)

Nature helps the poet create his poem, just as what nature does for a landscape painter. Writing poetry on nature becomes for Stevens a special "mode of contemplation." The poet easily dissolves himself into the landscape:

This cloudy world, by aid of land and sea,
Night and day, wind and quiet, produces
More nights, more days, more clouds, more worlds.
......
The feelings of the natures round us here:
As a boat feels when it cuts blue water. (*CP* 233-234)

He imagines he becomes a landscape painter:

The world images for the beholder.
He is born the blank mechanic of the mountains,

He is the possessed of sense not the possessor. (*CP* 492)

That means now he reaches a status in which he fuses word, man and images of nature into one entity:

The fiction of the leaves is the icon

Of the poem, the figuration of blessedness,
And the icon is the man . . . .
These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man. (*CP* 526-527)

In addition to his sensitivity to nature, Stevens also learns, from Kuo's essay, about a fundamental quality of a landscape painter. This quality is one's

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ability to see nature with his mind's eye. Overall Chinese masters of landscape painting often urge their disciples to do two things. One is to learn to paint with mind's eye before learning to paint with the brush; the other is to commit nature to the mind before one can represent it on paper. This advice certainly catches on with Stevens's idea of a poet and the power of poetical imagination – "it should be true that reality exists / In the mind" (*CP* 485). Like a landscape painter, a poet ought to be able first to paint with his mind before he is ready to use his pen. Stevens happened to possess this ability. In "Poem Written at Morning," Stevens renders such a quality as "The truth must be / That you do not see, you experience, you feel... ." Hence the truth has to be grasped first by the mind before it is recorded in the written lines. In a much later poem, "Crude Foyer," Stevens uses some key words ("mind," "eye" and "landscape") in a way most Chinese landscape painters would use them:

> There lies at the end of thought
> A foyer of the spirit in a landscape
> Of the mind, in which we sit
> And wear humanity's bleak crown;
> * * *
> ...we know that we use
> Only the eye as faculty, that the mind
> Is the eye, and that this landscape of the mind
>
> Is a landscape only of the eye; (*CP* 305)

To Stevens's mind's eye, natural scenery become materials fitting for both painting and poetry. Endowed with this power, which his father called the "power

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for painting pictures in words"(*L* 14), Stevens further cultivated his sensibility in his walking and traveling as his "exercise in viewing the world" (*CP* 233). These excursions provided him with opportunities to observe the natural world, and nature in turn offered the "painter-like" poet materials for his "act of the mind." With his mind's eye trained like that of an Eastern landscape painter, Stevens sees the world in a new perspective. As Stevens observes that "Freud's eye was the microscope of potency" (*CP* 368), we may also deem Stevens's mind's eye "the microscope" of a landscape painter. To exemplify this, I will cite the first section of "Six Significant Landscapes":

I

An old man sits
In the shadow 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. (*CP* 73)

In this seemingly static picture of an old Chinese man gazing at the vista in front of him, the poet's "microscopic eye" is able to detect several kinds of movements (of "larkspur," of the old man's "beard," and of the "pine tree" and "water." Could these described objects really move in the painting Stevens saw? What Stevens writes in *Adagia* can be regarded as his answer to this question:

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> What we see in the mind is as real to us as what we see
> by the eye. (*OP89* 188)

It is the poet's mind rather than his eye that detects these movements so vividly.

With the special perception of a landscape painter, and through endless observations of the world as "exercises," Stevens developed his special sensibility to places. He claims in *Adagia* that "poetry is an affair of the heart," which is also the relationship "between a man and the world." This "affair of the heart" cannot become true without the "affair of the places." An old Chinese saying about the painter is "he is homeless, yet he has home everywhere." Stevens could have read this, for he depicts images with similar impressions in his poem: "Certain Phenomena of Sound." He feels that "The room is emptier than nothingness." And the "Redwood Roamer" is often "home again," since he has "the house" in his "nature, a place in which itself / Is that which produces everything else, in which / The Roamer is a voice taller than the redwoods" (*CP* 286-287). Likewise, the poet as a "seer" has a clairvoyance broader and sharper than the view a naked eye can see because the poet knows "what we see is what we think" as well as "what we think is never what we see" (*CP* 459-460).

In "John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean," Stevens explains that:

> One turns with something like ferocity toward a land that
> one loves, to which one is really and essentially native, to
> demand that it surrender, reveal, that in itself which one
> loves. This is a vital affair, not an affair of the heart (as
> it may be in one's first poems), but an affair of the whole

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> being (as in one's last poems), a fundamental affair of life,
> or, rather, an affair of fundamental life... . (*OP89* 248)

From "an affair of the heart" to "an affair of the whole being" or "an affair of fundamental life," Stevens's sensitivity to place – that "something like ferocity toward a land one loves" – never changes. For Stevens the demarcation for the "land one loves" is indefinitely broader than a particular locale. In a much later poem, Stevens uses a body of water to stand for "a local abstraction" and calls it "a river, an unnamed flowing, / Spaced-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore / Of each of the senses" (*CP* 533). So comprehensive is "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" that Stevens has to "call it, again and again, / The river that flows nowhere, like a sea." To find out how inclusive these "mountains and rivers" would be in his poems, we will move to the next section to explore Stevens's subject matter.

B) Subject Matter

Subject matter as the content of a literary work is not difficult to detect. Like subject matter in its sister arts (painting or music), subject matter for poetry essentially concerns the primary level of content. One only has to take inventory of what one reads, and describe what subjects (objects), facts, events, or scenes are there in the work under discussion. On the other hand, subject matter may also

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involve images, motifs, and traditions that may entail background knowledge. The latter kind is usually less tangible, and subtler to handle. There is also the question of personal preference in the selection of materials for one's writing. For all these reasons, how Stevens handled his subject matter is not simply an easy affair as one might first think it to be. In the following section I will focus on Stevens's subject matter in terms of Eastern landscape painting, which is still a topic not often discussed by Stevens critics.

In the first chapter I have mentioned one essay entitled "Chinese Landscape Painting in Stevens' 'Six Significant Landscapes'." As a critical article closely related to my topic here, this essay is a good starting point for me to facilitate my discussion. Besides, the essay is also valuable in offering clues to the available materials that reveal Stevens's contact with Eastern landscape painting.

In spite of its impressive title, this essay discusses a very limited portion of the relationship between Stevens and Chinese landscape painting, "exemplified by section I of 'Six Significant Landscapes'."[34] For other sections, the author only quotes part of them in passing. He does not even mention the two left-out sections of this poem. Yet an interesting point worth mentioning is that the author begins his essay by recounting W. J. T. Mitchell's citation of "ekphrasis" and comment on Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar." After this, as this essay pendulums between

[34] *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 21.2 (Fall 1997): p.123.

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the propositions set up by its title and introductory argument (i. e., treating "Six Significant Landscapes" as an "ekphrastic poem"), the author fails to mention the significance of this poem in terms of its relationship with other pertinent Stevens poems. This treatment reminds me of another critic's comment, somewhat relevant to Qian's essay because both Qian's essay and that comment are involved in the same "pictorial mode" of literary works. Commenting on "the literary pictorialism,"[35] Jean Hagstrum recites from Professor Reuben A. Brower an insightful observation, which I will pertinently quote here:

> Whatever the immediate condition, the pictorial is more effective when it is more than merely pictorial, and when it serves some larger aesthetic or intellectual purpose. The achievement of the merely pictorial may be interesting as a stroke of technical virtuosity. But it must join with and support other values if it is to be fully satisfying.[36]

To apply this comment to Qian's essay, we would deem the essay constructively satisfying if the author could discuss the overall influence that Chinese landscape painting exerts in "Six Significant Landscapes." Furthermore, it would be even better if this essay could examine the said poem's relationship

[35] This term was employed to mean 'iconic' or 'ekphrastic' poems when the term 'ekphrasis' had not floated in the twentieth century for wide use again since the classical period.
[36] Jean H. Hagstrum, *Sister Acts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*, Introduction.

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with other pertinent poems by Stevens. For my discussion, therefore, I will proceed from what this essay fails to discuss.[37]

According to Qian's essay, Stevens wrote four "ekphrasis" poems: section I of "Six Significant Landscapes" (1916), "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"(1917), section III of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"(1918), and "Anecdote of the Jar" (1919).[38] To explain this literary mode, Qian quotes James Heffernan's definition of "ekphrasis" as "the verbal representation of visual representation."[39] To me, this definition is rather simple, and repetitiously general. By this definition, only the first and the third of these four poems are appropriate "ekphrastic poems." For a better explanation of this term, I will quote John Hollander's definition to demarcate the boundary. Hollander prefers to spell this word as "Ecphrasis," which, according to him, means

> a verbal description of a work of art, of a scene as rendered in a work of art, or even of a fictional scene the description of which unacknowledgedly derives from descriptions of scenes.[40]

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[37] I wrote my outlines for this dissertation before Qian's essay came out. At that time, my original title for this chapter was 'The Oriental Landscape Painting and Stevens's *Postcard Imagination,*' which is slightly different from the current one for this chapter.

[38] Stevens's ekphrastic poems should at least include, among other choices, two important examples selected by Hollander, i.e., the opening stanza of 'Sunday Morning' and 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans.' See Hollander's *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (p. 29).

[39] *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Fall 1997, p. 123.

[40] *The Gazer's Spirit* (1995), p. 5.

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Hollander further distinguishes several kinds of "ecphrastic poems," such as the classical ecphrasis, the Renaissance ecphrasis, and the "neoclassical imitations," or the "actual ecphrasis" and "notional ecphrasis."[41] If we scrutinize the first stanza of "Six Significant Landscapes" and the third stanza of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," we will find that these two are "notional ecphrasis" rather than "actual ecphrasis" poems, for they simply describe some visual scenes with "no putative occasion" or "particular, identifiable work of art" involved.[42] Of these "four ekphrasis poems," Qian selects "Six Significant Landscapes" as the central focus of his essay. Thus I will begin with this example.

The opening stanza (section I) of "Six Significant Landscapes" (quoted on page 186) is about an old Chinese man gazing at landscape around him. In Qian's opinion, Stevens saw several Chinese landscape paintings, depicting some old Chinese men in similar scenes, which inspired him to write this stanza. To support his proposition, Qian traces seven paintings – two are reproduced from Fenollosa's *Epochs*, the rest are from the collections of famous museums in the northeast area of America.[43] Based on my examination of these seven paintings, I would

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[41] Ibid., pp. 4-8. For the actual and notional ecphrastic poems, Holander also makes subcategories as a), b), and c)... (see p. 32-35).
[42] Ibid., pp. 7, 32.
[43] They are the following Sung landscape paintings: 1. *A scholar and His Servant on a Terrace* (Cleveland) 2. *A Luohan Contemplating a Lotus Pond* (MFA, Boston) 3. *A Scholar Seated Under a Pine Tree* (Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*) 4. *Landscape* (Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese*

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consider two paintings (of illustrations) from Fenollosa's book, and two others (from MMA and MFA), as possibly the inspirational model for Stevens because most details from these four conform to Stevens's stanza here. Yet we can still call this stanza a "notional ekphrasis" as there is the possibility that Stevens composes this stanza from recollections of different paintings rather than a particular one. In his essay on "Six Significant Landscapes," Qian mainly discusses section I, and mentions in passing sections V and VI. But since there are "Six Significant Landscapes," to discuss only the first section alone will hardly do justice to this poem as a whole. One may ask: if the first is an ekphrastic landscape, how about the other five "landscapes"? What about the two which were cut off before publication?

To discuss Stevens's other "significant landscapes" left out by Qian in his discussion, let us examine them one by one now. After the opening section, we confront a very different stanza, with scenes changed and motif sheathed in different images:

> II
> The night is of the color
> Of a woman's arm:
> Night, the female,
> Obscure,
> Fragrant and supple,
> Conceals herself.

Art) 5. *A Sage Under a Pine Tree* (MMA, New York) 6. *Scholar Under a Tree in Autumn* (MMA, New York) 7. *Landscape* (MFA, Boston). See *WSJ* (Fall 1997), pp. 126-132.

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A pool shines,
Like a bracelet
Shaken in a dance. (*CP* 73-74)

In addition to the aforesaid anthropomorphism (see page 182), an obvious feature of this section is the sharp contrast to section I. Stevens's employment of different images, scenes, and sound effects provides important hints for reading these two stanzas. For readers who have read *Tao de Ching*, and learned about the "Yin" and "Yang" principles as Stevens did, they can detect what these changes may imply. From "man" to "woman," from daytime to "night," and from external dynamic velocity (although the old man "sits," it is other verbs and nouns that indicate fast movement, such as the movement of the eyes, the changing of scenes / focuses from "larkspur" to "beard," then to "wind" and "water," or the repetition of "move" and the dynamic image of water that "flows") to inward quiescence (section II contains only two verbs – "conceal" and "shines," other important words being adjectives like "supple," "obscure," and "fragrant"), the stanza switches from the *Yang* principle to the *Yin* principle. As a general rule, *Yang* stresses force, brilliance and motion, whereas *Yin* suggests suppleness, obscurity and serenity. To represent their difference in visual images, Stevens uses the contrast of daytime and nocturnal scenes. This is unquestionably resulted from his reading *Tao de Ching*, which teaches that day is masculine and night feminine. Functioning together, section I and section II emphasize a higher level of wisdom

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of life: the combination and reciprocity of opposing forces in the real world. Without exaggeration, it can be said that these two contrasting stanzas represent a typical Stevensian polarity, and foreshadow the reoccurring dichotomies appearing in many Stevens poems written after this one.

If the first two sections are a pair of "ekphrastic" and "Taoist" landscapes, then, interestingly, sections III and IV will form another pair shifting from vivid pictorial presentation to narrative dramatization. As a result of this change, "landscapes" in these two stanzas become metaphorically symbolic without any reference to their specific locality.

III
I measure myself
Against a tall tree.
I find that I am much taller,
For I reach right up to the sun,
With my eye;
And I reach to the shore of the sea
With my ear.
Nevertheless, I dislike
The way the ants crawl
In and out of my shadow.

IV
When my dream was near the moon,
The white folds of its gown
Filled with yellow light.
The soles of its feet
Grew red.
Its hair filled
With certain blue crystallizations
From stars,
Not far off. (*CP* 74)

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One link that ties these two stanzas as one pair is the first person narrator. Among all sections, it is only in these two stanzas that the poet uses first person expression like "I" and "my." One may wonder why Stevens suddenly switches to the subjective first person. The answer is implied in the context. As two transitional stanzas between the first two and the last two sections, sections III and IV serve as a middle chain in this series of "significant landscapes." In order to proceed from the opening pictorial scene to the conclusive abstract setting, these two transitory stanzas are fittingly composed of both descriptive scenes and subjective statements. For instance, the poet depicts "tree," "ants," "moon," and "stars." He chooses words denoting different colors and preferences ("white, yellow, red, blue," and "taller, dislike, shadow"). However, if we pay close attention to the shift of images and their meaning, we will notice that, the scenic pine tree from section I has become an abstract tree in section III representing a mysterious reality, and that the palpable images from section II (like the night with its pale color and the nocturnal pool shining with ripples) have been replaced by the elusive lights of moon and stars, which in Stevens's poetic world often stand for an artist's imagination.

To bring his point home in the conclusive part, Stevens resorts to Imagist's methods in the last two stanzas:

V

Not all the knives of the lamp-posts,

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Nor the chisels of the long streets,
Nor the mallets of the domes
And high towers,
Can carve
What one star can carve,
Shining through the grape-leaves.

VI
Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling,
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses –
As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon –
Rationalists would wear sombreros. (*CP* 74-75)

A. Walton Litz picks up section VI as the central section because of its "anti-rational" theme.[44] If such is the case, then the fifth section – with its contrasting images of "knives, chisels, mallets" on the one hand, and starlight "shining through the grape-leaves" on the other – will form a matching pair for section VI. The tools and products of architects foreshadow the rationalists and their square habits, and the starlight and grape-leaves forecast the attractive image of "the half-moon" in the last stanza. But what are the targets of Stevens's critique and who are those "rationalists"? Though critics have offered different conjectures, Stevens's intention is clearly indicated by the images he uses at the end of these two stanzas. He just disapproves anything that (or anyone who) acts

[44] *Introspective Voyager*, PP. 30, 39.

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against nature, whether it is the promising science (represented by "lamp-posts," "long streets," and "domes [and...] high towers" built with such tools as "knives" "chisel" and "mallets") or the ambitious but mentally cramped thinker/ doer/ scientist (represented by "square hats" or "right-angled triangles").

In its original version as "Eight Significant Landscapes," this poem contained eight sections, two of which were left out when it appeared as "Six Significant Landscapes" in the *Others* in 1916. These two left-out sections are:

V
Wrestle with morning-glories,
O, muscles!
It is useless to contend
With falling mountains.

VII
Crenellations of mountains
Cut like strummed zithers;
But dead trees do not resemble
Beaten drums. (*OP89* 23)

When these two (V and VII) were taken out, the original VI and VIII respectively became section V and section VI. According to A. Walton Litz, the current six-section poem is quite an improvement over the original eight-section poem without losing its "major images and central theme." He is right in this point, because the original V ("Wrestle with...") has a theme similar to that of the original VI ("Not all the knives..."). Both disapprove unnatural efforts but commend natural images. Yet when Mr. Litz calls these deleted sections "two

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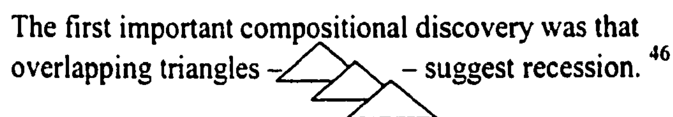
self-indulgent poems where the imagery exploits incongruity for its own sake,"[45] he seems to ignore that the cutoff sections (especially the original VII) can reveal more features of Eastern landscape painting. For example, these two sections contain staple images from the Eastern landscapes. Both V and VII contain some images of "mountains," an almost indispensable feature from Eastern landscape scenes. And expressions like "crenellations of mountains," "dead trees" or "strummed zithers" are exemplar line-patterns from Eastern landscapes too. Any one acquainted with Oriental arts can easily recognize those zigzagged /curved lines representing tree branches, tree trunks, and mountain contour/scenes.

To illustrate this feature, I will cite some examples from *Images of the Mind.* Wen C. Fong recounts:

> The first important compositional discovery was that overlapping triangles –  – suggest recession. [46]

And he uses some diagrams and paintings, which I attach here (see "Illustrations" 1 and 2), to demonstrate this special feature of Eastern landscape painting. When this compositional principle is concretized into visual images, landscape painters often create icons that resemble certain "crenellations" and "zithers." These icons are what Stevens suggests in these lines:

> Crenellations of mountains
> Cut like strummed zithers; ....

[45] *Introspective Voyager,* pp. 30, 39.

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"Crenellations" and "strummed zithers" are almost an accurate description of the mountains depicted in a typical Chinese landscape painting, "A Rare View of the Hsiao and Hsiang" (see "Illustration 3").[47] Given Stevens's frequentation of museums/galleries, he could have seen this painting, and/or other Asian landscapes with similar arrangement of lines and masses. Together with landscape paintings, there are also literary works, which Stevens could have read, describing motifs related with "dead trees" or arch-like huge "falling mountains." As these images are too conspicuous to Asian art collectors, frequent museum-goers, or readers of books on Oriental cultures,[48] the endeavor to avoid these images/motifs could be one of the factors that contributed to Stevens's decision to take out these stanzas.

Another factor that could cause this cutoff is the title of this poem, which reveals a more conspicuous indebtedness to Eastern landscape painting. In the first chapter, I have cited some passages Stevens copied into his journals during his New York years. One passage is about the customary motifs in Chinese landscape

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[46] Op.cit. p. 23.

[47] Incidentally, the title of this painting resembles one of *The seven traditional subjects of Chinese Painting* Stevens copied in his journals (see the previous page 11 and the following part discussing 'The Eight Views'). I strongly suspect that Stevens had seen this painting somewhere, though I failed to get on the track of it through the incomplete records of Asian landscape paintings on exhibitions at both MMA (New York) and MFA (Boston).

[48] For instance, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* contains a lots of illustrations from representative Eastern landscape paintings, many of which present images (like old trees, or curve-lined mountains) looking just like some crenellations or zithers.

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painting epitomized in a series of paintings called "Eight Views of the Hsiao and Hsiang Rivers." Stevens jotted down seven titles of this series as "The seven traditional subjects of Chinese Painting."[49] Later he copied them in one of his letters to Elsie. In an effort to share with Elsie his enthusiasm about China, Stevens writes the following passage (which succeeds what I have cited on the previous page 164):

> ...the Chinese have certain aspects of nature, of landscape, that have become traditional. – A list of those aspects would be as fascinating as those lists of "Pleasant Things" I used to send. Here is the list (upon my soul!) –
>
> The Evening Bell from a Distant Temple
> Sunset Glow over a Fishing Village
> Fine Weather after Storm at a Lonely Mountain Town
> Homeward-bound Boats of a Distant Shore [sic.]
> The Autumn Moon over Lake Tung-t'ing
> Wild Geese on a Sand Plain [sic.]
> Night Rain in Hsiao-Hsiang.
>
> This is one of the most curious things I ever saw, because it is so comprehensive. Any twilight picture is included under the first title, for example. "It is just that silent hour when travellers say to themselves, 'The day is done', and to their ears comes from the distance the expected sound of the evening bell."
>
> (*L* 137-138)[50]

Reflected here is Stevens's comprehension of some typical subjects for the Chinese landscape painting. Such "aspects of nature" represented by these seven

[49] Obviously Stevens copied these titles from Binyon's *Painting in the Far East* (1908 edition, in which Binyon had included only seven titles from the original Chinese *Eight Views*, though he later corrected this error in the 1913 edition).
[50] I mark two lines with [sic.] because they are slightly different from those I have cited from *SP* (see page 10). An

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landscape subjects actually turn out to be the favorite, thus frequently employed, motifs for the Chinese painters.[51] Those titles are often abbreviated as "The Eight Views" as follows:

平沙落雁	Wild Geese Descending to Sandbar
遠浦歸帆	Returning Sail off Distant Shore
山市晴嵐	Mountain Market Clear with Rising Mist
江天暮雪	River and Sky in Evening Snow
洞庭秋月	Autumn Moon over Lake Tung-t'ing
瀟湘夜雨	Night Rain on Hsiao and Hsiang
煙寺晚鐘	Evening Bell from Mist-shrouded Temple
漁村落照	Fishing Village in Evening Glow[52]

Stevens considers very highly these motifs (as "the most curious things" and "so comprehensive"). Though he copied only seven titles, he could have

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instance of *slip of hand* occurred when Stevens copied them from his notes onto the letter here.

[51] This set of 'traditional subjects' was originated in the landscape paintings of Sung Ti, a Sung Dynasty painter and court official. In various books of literary history as well as of art history, these eight subjects are often discussed, thus becoming well loved by the Eastern painters and widely known among connoisseurs.

[52] This version of 'Eight Views' is from Shen Kua, a famous Chinese historian of the Sung Dynasty adept in literature, arts and science. The parallel version comes from *Images of the Mind*, which is slightly different from those copied by Stevens. Accidentally, the original titles are written in the earliest verse form in classic Chinese poetry, with each line comprised of four characters (the same form used by the Zen doctrine cited on page 86). The form might be compared roughly to the English dimeters, though its stresses and tones are quite different from the dimeters. It is used extensively in *The Book of Songs*, of which Stevens had a copy (translated by Arthur Waley as *The Classics of Confucius: Book of Odes*). See also p. 73 above.

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found out later about this error (of not his own), either from Binyon's second edition or from somewhere else. He accurately estimates these subjects as "so comprehensive" and representative of typical scenes/situations of real life, and concedes "It makes me wild to learn it all in a night" (*L* 138). Truly, these subjects reflect not only some beloved motifs, but also the individuality, interests, and tastes of the Chinese artists and men of letters. In history, Chinese musicians and poets used these subjects for centuries, approximately from the late Five Dynasties to Sung and Yuan Dynasties (i. e., from the tenth century to early fifteenth century). For painting, after replacing figure painting and becoming the most popular type of Chinese painting for years, landscape has never lost its everlasting charm, and is an epitome of Chinese people's pursuit of harmony with nature.[53] Stevens's letters and notes indicate that he had comprehended in these subjects some quintessential ideals in Chinese literature and arts long before he wrote his first version of "Eight Significant Landscapes." Then, one question arises: why did he not use the original "Eight Significant Landscapes"?

Since Stevens did not mention this anywhere in his writing, we have to figure out the answer to this question. My speculation is that those "Eight Views" of Chinese landscapes certainly inspired Stevens to write an early version as "Eight Significant Landscapes." This version must have been written between the

[53] Zhaoguang Ge. *Zen and Chinese Culture*. pp. 125-126.

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late 1913 and early 1916, because Binyon's revised edition of *Painting in the Far East* came out in 1913 and Stevens's landscapes appeared in the *Others* in March 1916. Though it is hard to pinpoint the exact occasion for Stevens to take out these two sections and changed the title accordingly, a highly probable reason could be that: after Stevens first copied those titles, he read more about "Eight Views" and wrote his first draft of "Eight Significant Landscapes." Later, when Stevens found more sets of Eastern landscapes titled as different "Eight Views," it might have occurred to him that his original title ("Eight Significant Landscapes") would appear too imitative of the well-known "Eight Views" landscape series. As Stevens wanted to make sure that readers could not easily connect this poem with any Eastern landscape painting titled similarly, he had to take out some stanzas and change the title to "Six Significant Landscapes" so as to eschew the possible accusation of imitating the Chinese landscape painting.

One may ponder: could Stevens cut out two stanzas simply because he was not satisfied with them? After all, Stevens copied only "seven traditional subjects of Chinese Painting."

While admitting the probability of this conjecture, I also want to contend that Stevens did know about the "Eight Views," and therefore both the first draft and the later change were influenced by his knowledge of these Eastern Eight-view

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landscapes. To prove this, I have to mention again the subject of the Japanese prints.

In the previous section I have examined the two Japanese prints collected by Stevens. As Stevens was familiar with this art form o fine arts from Japan, he could be well aware of the numerous sets of new-sprung "Eight Views" from the Japanese Ukiyo-e works he read about and saw. In the history of Asian arts, generations of Asian painters had not only painted those landscape motifs from the original "Eight Views" but also produced art works of new "Eight Views" using either the same or imitatively modified titles. As the Chinese influence was spreading all over the Far Asian countries up to the late nineteenth century, such imitation took place not only in China, but also in Korea and Japan. For instance, the Japanese Ukiyo-e artist Hiroshige (1797-1858), whose prints Stevens had collected, created about ten different sets of "Eight Views."[54] Another Japanese Ukiyo-e artist of an earlier era, Hokusai (1760-1849), was also a famous landscape

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[54] According to *Images from the Floating World*, Utagawa (Ando) Hiroshige did the following sets of 'Eight Views' on Japanese cities and well-known scenic spots:
Omi Hakkei (*Eight Views of Omi*);
Edo Kinko Hakkei No Uchi (*From the Eight Views of the Suburbs of Edo* [i.e., today's Tokyo]);
Toto Hakkei (*Eight Views of the Eastern Capital*);
Shiba Hakkei (*Eight Views of Shiba*);
Koto Shokei (*Fine Views of Edo*) [eight in this series];
Toto Meisho No Uchi: Sumidagawa Hakkei (*Famous Places of Edo: Eight Views of the Sumidagawa River*);
Kanazawa Hakkei (*Eight Views Kanazawa*);
Omi Hakkei No Uchi (*From the Eight Views of Lake Biwa*);
Omote-Ura Ekiji-Hakkei (*Eight Views of Stations Front-Back*).

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painter, who had created near a dozen sets of "Eight Views" too.[55] In Stevens criticism, it is acknowledged that a set of landscape prints ("*Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*") by Hokusai had "contributed" to Stevens's composition of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" as well as "Six Significant Landscapes."[56] Having read a great deal about the Japanese Ukiyo-e, and bought some Japanese prints, Stevens certainly learned about some of the "Eight Views" series. In his notes Stevens wrote:

> Ukiyoye is the Japanese equivalent of genre.
>
> "Pictures of the fleeting world" – it means – colored with the Buddhist reproach of all that appears to the senses and belongs to the transitoriness of miserable mortality. It came to mean a recognized style. (*SP* 221)

These notes are only from Stevens's early years. Later, when his job was secured and his domestic economy stabilized, Stevens started to buy, subscribe and collect arts catalogues. Among them there are some Japanese arts/prints catalogues, from which Stevens could learned a great deal about the new sets of "Eight Views" and similar titles. Unfortunately, "his collection of art catalogues" was disposed off along with other unwanted material (including "the ms. of

[55] Katsushika Hokusai created many sets of landscape prints celebrating attractive scenes from the emerging cities as well as the beautiful nature. The lists for his different '*Eight Views*'/'*Twelve Views*'/'*Thirty Views*'/ '*Forty Views*' etc. are too long to be included here. From the previous note, we can get at least a good idea of how these new sets of various '*views*' are reflected in their modified titles.
[56] *The Early* Years, p. 477.

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'From the Journal of Crispin') when the family moved to 735 Farmington Avenue after Holly's birth.[57]

Even though these first-hand hard evidence was lost, we can still find proof of Stevens's familiarity with Ukiyo-e in his poems. For instance, in "The Auroras of Autumn" he alludes to Ukiyo-e (the "floating world" with "the transitoriness" of "clouds") in these lines:

> It is a theatre floating through the clouds,
> Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
> And mountains running like water, wave on wave,
>
> Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed
> To cloud transformed again, idly, the way
> A season changes color to no end . . . . (*CP* 416)

The ephemeral nature of the changing world is captured here through images learned from Eastern landscape painting. A similar instance may also be found in another poem "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream":

> We were the appropriate conceptions, less
> Than creatures, of the sky between the banks,
> The water flowing in the flow of space.
>
> It was passing a boundary, floating without a head
> And naked, ...in a world
> Of nakedness. . . . (*CP* 371)

Since Stevens knew well about Ukiyo-e works, he must have learned about the well known "Eight Views" (in fact almost a trite expression) even if he did not read Binyon's revised 1913 edition of *Painting in the Far East*. In that decade the

[57] Tony Sharpe. *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life*, p.114.

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talk and study of Oriental arts and literature were still in the fullest swing. Being well aware of the fact that it would be too eye-catching to use a title like "Eight Landscapes," Stevens felt he had to take out some stanzas from his draft of "Eight Significant Landscapes." Naturally, he would cut off two stanzas which were to him either too obviously an imitation, or intrinsically inferior (or still better being both). Thus, the poem came out as "Six Significant Landscapes."

If we are to make an inventory of subject matter used by Stevens, images from nature will form a great part of this inventory. Among the natural images, critics have discussed many if not most of them, such as the sun, the moon, the weather, or the colors. What is overlooked, comparatively speaking, is the subject of landscape. Although some critics have talked about the rocks, they have not regarded such images as related to the Eastern landscapes. Also, critics have discussed Stevens's use of "sea" and "water" images. Yet, there is a fact they may not be aware of: images of "sea" and "water" are also associated to the influence of Eastern landscapes. The key to such association lies in the word "landscape" itself.

From the above discussion, at least from the passages by Fenollosa and Kuo Hsi, it is clear that rocks are a part of, as well as an epitome of, mountains. In his translation of passages from Kuo Hsi's essay, Fenollosa uses "sansui" to stand for "landscape" (see the above page 179 and note 23). Actually Fenollosa explains a

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few times that "sansui" in Chinese means "mountain" and "water" (including the plural "mountains" and "waters").[58] Stevens certainly knew this expression in its Chinese connotations since he had read Fenollosa's book. His understanding "sansui" as such is significant. It means that, to Stevens, "sansui" (the Chinese *landscape*) incorporates "landscape" and "waterscape" (plus "seascape") in English. Therefore, the exploration of Eastern landscapes' influence in Stevens's poetry ought to include the study of such images as land/rocks/mountains, and different bodies of water (like the sea, rivers, lakes, falls, ponds and so on). Such an expansion surely will give Stevens criticism a new perspective for its study of Oriental influence.

With this new perspective in mind, let us examine the third stanza of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," which is called by Qian "an ekphrasis" of Chinese landscape painting.

III

Is it for nothing, then, that old Chinese
Sat tittivating by their mountain pools
Or in the Yangtse studied out their beards?
I shall not play the flat historic scale.
You know how Utamaro's beauties sought
The end of love in their all-speaking braids.
You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath.
Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
That not one curl in nature has survived?
Why, without pity on these studious ghosts,

[58] *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, Vol. I, p. 38 and Vol. II, pp. 11-16.

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Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep? (*CP* 14)

Since the primary subject matter in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is love, (or rather the love of life), it seems that the poet would have less reason here to employ pure landscape images. Nonetheless Stevens renders some nature images and scenes affiliated to Eastern landscape painting. The "old Chinese / Sat" by "mountain pools" or "in the Yangtse" are conspicuously familiar scenes often found in traditional Chinese landscapes. However, such imagery expressions are only fragmentary impressions of scenes cursorily synthesized from different Oriental art works, and therefore do not make this stanza "a visual presentation" of Chinese painting, as is proclaimed by Qian. At the most, we may call the first three lines a "fictional ekphrasis." From the fifth line onward, Stevens employs Ukiyo-e images to set off a familiar scene of the human world. In the Western arts, artwork dealing with such scenes is called "genre painting," as Stevens properly states that "Ukiyo-e is the Japanese equivalent of genre" (*SP* 221). Love and "Utamaro's beauties," with their delicately groomed "braids," are typical tableaux in Ukiyo-e prints by Utamaro, though Utamaro does not often set a landscape background for his "big-headed" beauties. In addition, there is another mental picture – "the mountainous coiffures of Bath." This image may not exclusively denote beaches at England or Maine, since the intricate fashion of high braid worn by the Japanese beauties presented in Utamaro's prints can also be

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appropriately described as "the mountainous coiffures." Presumably, Stevens must have seen these scenes somewhere from his reading or museum-hunting trips. With impressions of these scenes still lingering in his mind, he furnishes his poem with such collaged Ukiyo-e images of "studied" mannerism of sitting, hairdressing and beard styling.

Similar exotic images connotatively associated with the Eastern scenes also appear in other sections of "Le Monocle." Some of such examples are: "A red bird flies across the golden floor" and "I greeted the spring" in section II, "A damsel heightened by eternal bloom" in section VII, "Two golden gourds" in section VIII, or "The faith of forty" and "Bravura" in section IX. Richardson points out that the section "I greet the spring" could come from Stevens's reading "a Chinese poem of Ou Yang Hsiu."[59] Yet I also suspect "The faith of forty" or "men at forty" could be ideas from Confucius, who mentions, in his *The Anelects,* that "men at forty" should have established their "faith" firmly, and therefore shall not be puzzled by choices in, and phenomena of, life. Stevens owned one copy of Confucius's *The Anelects,* he could have borrowed a few ideas from Confucius after reading this book. By fusing personal views with scenic views in these composite images transformed from Oriental culture, Stevens successfully represents a vivid spectacle of contemporary life. Thematically, these Ukiyo-e

[59] *The Early Years,* p. 144.

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images adequately render ideas fascinating to the poet in his early writing career, and cover a wide range of motifs such as love and passion, manner and beauty, or youth and age. As images seen through the perspective of an exotic culture, they also provide Stevens with an opportunity to amuse himself, in a self-mocking manner, as he was probably confronting his choices of life.

"Six Significant Landscapes" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" are two most conspicuously "Oriental-oriented" ekphrastic poems in Stevens's poetry, and have thus become two of the most frequently discussed poems in Stevens criticism. Yet, if we could examine the deep structure of Stevens's poetry – beyond the cursory appearance of some fragmentary Eastern landscape images, we will find that some poems are influenced, in their deep structure, by the poet's contacts with Eastern landscape painting. William Bevis comments:

> Stevens' landscapes and floral decorations and minute pleasures were superior to his human drama.[60]

Here, being "superior" is not simply a matter of quantity, though quantity sometimes counts. What we should look for here is qualities that are able to move readers. To find out how and why "Stevens' landscapes" are "superior to his human drama," we have to look into his poetry for evidence. In the above section I have discussed the Oriental anthropomorphism. As Fenollosa points out, "nature" provides "a vast and picturesque world for the profound study of

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character" (see page 181 above). Stevens also learns this skill and uses "landscape" to promote his "profound study" of the land he loves. Since we know that landscape is a rare subject matter in Western poetry, due to the fact that landscape poetry did not become a comparatively popular choice for most Western poets until the advent of Romantic poets, Stevens's preference for this subject (in particular, for this word "landscape") is really peculiar.

A careful examination of this peculiarity could reveal the subtler influence of Oriental poetry and painting in Stevens's poems. For example, in "The American Sublime," Stevens asks:

> But how does one feel?
> One grows used to the weather,
> The landscape and that;
> And the sublime comes down
> To the spirit itself.... (*CP* 131)

From the statue of "General Jackson" – presumably a symbol of the sublime landscape, Stevens probes further and asks about its "definite influence on the beholder's mind." Here he applies the method for viewing a landscape painting to the dissection of "the American scene." The poet's heart is longing for some answer to questions such as "what is the sublime?" and "how does one feel?" in facing a landscape with "The empty spirit / In vacant space." But he also learns to paint with "a lingering touch." Hence he ends the poem rather light-heartedly:

---

[60] *Mind of Winter*, p. 211.

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What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat? (*CP* 131)

In another poem, " The Latest Freed Man," Stevens places similar words into the mouth of his narrator, who is:

Tired of the old descriptions of the world,
The latest freed man [...] said,
"I suppose there is
A doctrine to this landscape. Yet, having just
Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist,
Which is enough: the moment's rain and sea,
The moment's sun (the strong man vaguely seen),
Overtaking the doctrine of this landscape. . . ." (*CP* 204)

Here Stevens "granted a Nietzschean vision" of the new world[61] to the Major Man ("the strong man"), who challenges the traditional "doctrine of this landscape." (Imagine what would be missing if "land" or "terrain" replaces the word "landscape"?) The mentioning of "the doctrine of this landscape" is really reminiscent of the aforesaid newspaper clipping Stevens sent to Elsie a long time before his writing poem. Fascinated by the art of Chinese landscape painting and its theory expounded by Fenollosa and Kuo Hsi, Stevens creates his own hero "Overtaking the doctrine of this landscape." With natural images ("color" and "mist, or the "sun" and "sea") haunting the mind, Stevens gives an unusual expression of his perspective on life. He is prescribing "a man without a doctrine"

[61] Harold Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate*, pp. 149, 240.

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in a land "without a description of to be." What Stevens writes here is not merely visual scene but also personal feeling as what is rendered in an Oriental painting:

> It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.
> It was being without description, being an ox.
> It was the importance of the trees outdoors,
> The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much
> That they were oak-leaves, as the way they looked.
> It was everything being more real, himself
> At the centre of reality. . . . (*CP* 205)

In his years of pursuit "to poke around more or less in the dust of Asia," Stevens tried to "bring to light" a poetics "more beautiful than that anywhere, or more Chinese." He found it in the Eastern landscapes and Ukiyo-e prints as well as in the Western painting. All these paintings taught him to appreciate life as if it were a painting, and to look for poetical inspirations in common scenes of everyday life. The above-discussed "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" is such an example. In this poem Stevens presents a hidden truth about the universe and human nature: the sense of place and the sense of belonging are something human beings can not invent capriciously. Rather, these senses are preconditioned by mankind's physical environment in which they live (see the previous discussion on pages 90-95).

To take "The Man on the Dump" as another example. This poem can be regarded as an ekphrastic poem since some passages in it involve some "verbal descriptions" of scenes at a local dump. But these scenes could also be "fictional,"

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as is defined by Hollander. In "The Man on the Dump," such fictional scenes are depicted by Stevens and are made into metaphors insinuating human society's situations. Likewise, "Variations on a Summer Day," Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," "Description Without Place," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" all give symbolic descriptions of landscape scenes, which recall, more or less, images/ impressions from Eastern landscape paintings in an abstract way. The abstraction of these images and scenes helps Stevens conceptualize his poems.

This method operates particularly well in some of Stevens's later poems, though Stevens began to use this method earlier in a few of his *Harmonium* poems. "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" is such an instance.

> There are no bears among the roses,
> Only a negress who supposes
> Things false and wrong
>
> About the lantern of the beauty
> Who walks there, as a farewell duty,
> Walks long and long.
>
> The pity that her pious egress
> Should fill the vigil of a negress
> With heat so strong! (*CP* 71)

In this poem Stevens borrows a typical scene from Eastern painting. The virgin maid and "the lantern of the beauty" are both favorite motifs of Asian painters. They are images frequently found in Eastern figure painting, fan painting,

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and landscapes. Near the end of this poem, Stevens presents an image of a virgin on the vigil in the spring night. This nocturnal scene is reminiscent of the Chinese poem by Wang An-shih he copied for Elsie (see page 10). But Stevens make this virgin a "negress," probably in an effort to cover the obvious trace of provenance of his inspiration. There are other subjects that Stevens learned from the motifs of the aforesaid Eastern landscape "Eight Views." In this type of painting, the most typical images are the employment of "mist" (or "rain") and "dusk" (by extension "night" or early "dawn") scenes – needless to mention "mountain" and "water" scenes – as the background of the painting.

In his later poems, Stevens also uses a lot of such images to frame his poetical scenes. For instance, in the first section of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" he uses rain image for three times. In "Human Arrangement" he describes the "evening rain" first, and then moves to "Rain without change within" to produce a deeper sense of time and place. In sections XV and XXVI of "An Ordinary Evening," he frequently resorts to the image of rain. Related to this image are his descriptions of mists and clouds, which are not only common images from the "Eight Views" but also traditional subjects for most Eastern landscapes. As early as in "The Comedian as the Letter C" he began to depict these mixed images:

> The natives of the rain are rainy men.
> Although they paint effulgent, azure lakes,

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> And April hillsides wooded white and pink,
> Their azure has a cloudy edge… .   (*CP* 37)

Later, in XXXIV of "Like Decorations" and in XIV of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" he also depicts briefly rain, night, or misty scenes. Besides, mountain scenes and waterside scenes also become Stevens's favorite images, as they often provide him with opportunities to frame the confounding phenomena of "many worlds":

> This cloudy world, by aid of land and sea,
> Night and day, wind and quiet, produces
> More nights, more days, more clouds, more worlds. (*CP* 233)

Yet, while painting these "mountainous rock and sea" with words, Stevens knows to see "beyond the days, beyond . . . the nights" (*CP*308-309). As to other types of framework image, there are trees and forest ("Farewell to Florida"), rock and swampland ("How to Live, What to Do"), sunset and sunrise ("The Sun This March," "A Fading of the Sun," or "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise"). On some occasions, Stevens combines different images, such as clouds, sun, water, night or dawn, or seashore and rivers. For instance, in "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," he presents the garden, clouds, and woods as a composite background for the poem. In "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" he uses many times images like frost, clouds, night-wind, joyful sun, changed light, and blue water. Even tiny objects could become a framework for his poems, as in "Study of Two Pears" and "The Glass of Water." In "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" and

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"Note on Moonlight," he uses an image from a moonlit background to structure his poem and to present his central idea. In some other cases, he puts these images in the title of his poems (*CP* 241, 243, etc.). These examples make evident his otherwise less perceptible indebtedness to Eastern landscape paintings, and are worthy of further exploration.

Closely related to "subject matter," there is also the issue of technique – another aspect in which Stevens could have learned something from the Eastern landscape painters. We all know that in poetry, as in painting, there are angles of observation, or perspectives. In Western painting, the traditional and predominant perspective is linear perspective. Yet the perspectives used by Eastern landscape painting are often much more complicated on account of a wider range of available choices. Among these the most common kinds are the "Multiple Perspective" and the "Moving Perspective." The former usually refers to various perspectives coexisting together in one painting, while the latter refers to a perspective that keeps moving from one point (or level) to another, or from one observer to another. Moreover, these perspectives can often be combined in presenting the foreground, the middle ground, and the background of large-scale landscapes (as is often seen in Eastern handscrolls and hanging scrolls). Stevens's critics often mention his indebtedness to different trends of Modernism (such as Dadaism,

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Cubism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism).[62] Admitting that there is truth in critics' attributing some poetical features of Stevens's to the effect of Cubism, Surrealism, Impressionism, and Abstract Expressionism, or even method of "collage"/ "montage," I also argue for an alternative approach. During his years of museum going and art appreciation, Stevens did examine Oriental paintings closely, and learn some modes of thought and technique from the ancient Oriental masters. This is particularly true of the Eastern landscape painting, which influenced both Stevens's early and later poems.

To take an example from the early period, there is the often-discussed "The Comedian as the Letter C." Critics have mentioned many aspects of this long poem except its "painterly perspective." To me, Stevens employs, in composing this long poem, both the above-mentioned "Multiple Perspective" and the "Moving Perspective." The focus of his narrative follows Crispin (the "I" voice) in different locales and periods of time, but the real narrator (the poet himself) also observes and comments on Crispin's activities from different angles. To compare a reading of this long poem to the inspection of an Eastern handscroll, I suggest regarding "The Comedian" as a lengthy handscroll. Along with the gradual

[62] See these entries in different biographies of Wallace Stevens. For criticism, see particularly MacLeod's *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism*, and Chapter One (Poetry and Painting) from *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* by Michel Benamou.

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unfolding of this "scroll" of a biographic "landscape," one espies the scenes/activities of its protagonist. Like "an introspective voyager" described by Stevens himself in the poem (*CP* 29), the reader/viewer of this adventure story cruises through both land and sea, undergoes the "vicissitudes" of the protagonist, and perceives the hero's "voyaging ...up and down" and "fluctuating between son and moon" (*CP* 35).

The above discussed "Six Significant Landscapes" is also a handscroll composed of a series of landscape scenes in their different perspectives. In a similar manner, despite its synchronous time span ("November") and single locale ("Tehuantepec"), "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" can also be examined in the way we appreciate a landscape painting. There are various perspectives of viewing the sea and its waves in this early poem, not to mention Stevens's use of many color-related expressions. When he describes "the sea unfolding," Stevens uses disparate images/colors (such as "rosy," "hued," "gilt," "pied," "motley hue" or "darkened," and "watery radiance," "too-fluent green," "the swimming green," "the glistening blue," "silver petal of white blooms," "clearing opalescence," "the macabre of the water-glooms" or the "fresh transfigurings of freshest blue") (*CP* 98-102), and makes this poem a rare symphony of sounds and colors.

In a like manner, some of Stevens's later long poems can also be compared to this kind of long-handscroll landscape, and be likewise appreciated. For

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example, certain sections of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" employ both the "Multiple Perspective" and the "Moving Perspective," which account for the poem's "floating" structure and "living changingness" (*CP* 380). Stevens must have realized that changing perspectives, as Chinese painters do in their landscape, is most appropriate for the multiplicity of human vision. It is especially so for a long poem (with complicated ideas too) like "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." In another later poem, "The Auroras of Autumn," the poet's perspectives also change many times. Having acquired a familiarity with Chinese landscape, Stevens introduces his new project (poem/landscape) as:

> It is a theatre floating through the clouds,
> Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
> And mountains running like water, wave on wave,
>
> Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed
> To cloud transformed again, idly, the way
> A season changes colors to no end, ... (*CP* 416)

Among Stevens's later poems, there is also a less discussed poem, "Things of August," that also evidenced the poet's borrowing from Eastern landscape technique. Bloom sees "Whitmanian" influence in Stevens's images (like "rocking" or "the lilacs") here.[63] Yet, as a retrospective meditation, this poem presents many of its images in the way an Eastern landscape painter handles his. For instance, in Section VI, Stevens writes:

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[63] *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, pp. 16, 197.

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VI

The world images for the beholder.
He is born the blank mechanic of the mountains,

The blank frere of fields, their matin laborer.
He is the possessed of sense not the possessor.

He does not change the sea from crumpled tinfoil
To chromatic crawler. But it is changed.

He does not raise the rousing of fresh light
On the still, black-slatted eastward shutters.

The woman is chosen but not by him,
Among the endlessly emerging accords.

The world? The inhuman as human? That which thinks not,
Feels not, resembling thought, resembling feeling?

It habituates him to the invisible,
By its faculty of the exceptional,

The faculty of ellipses and deviations,
In which he exists but never as himself. (*CP* 492-493)

This is the ode – of an "eastward" "Sylvan historian" – to a different kind of "still unravished bride of quietness" of his own. In spite of the mixed metaphors (like the "bland frere of fields, their matin laborer"), we will still find the poet/painter's insinuation of Eastern landscape scenes, and some techniques he learned from Eastern landscape painters (such as "the blank mechanic of the mountains," the "chromatic crawler" and the "faculty of ellipses and deviations"). In Section VIII alone, Stevens uses the word "archaic" four times. Inadvertently,

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he could allude to images from Kuo's essay when he brings up the following "outlines of similarity" (*CP* 494):

> ... It had to be
> In the presence of a solitude of the self
> An expanse and the abstraction of an expanse,
> A zone of time without the ticking of clocks,
> A color that moved us with forgetfulness.
> ... the archaic form
> Of a woman with a cloud on her shoulder rose
> Against the trees and then against the sky ... .
> The forgetful color of the autumn day
> Was full of these archaic forms ...
> Evoking an archaic space, vanishing ... . (*CP* 494)

In Fenollosa's "Extracts" of Kuo's essay, there are images of Chinese hermits, and mountains presented as a beauty in clouds.[64] In addition, Stevens's mentioning of "the impersonal person" and "human shadows" recalls one familiar image from a poem he wrote three years earlier in 1946, "Man Carrying Thing." Particularly, here Stevens mentions the following:

> And it had to be,
>
> A text of intelligent
> At the centre of the unintelligible,
> As in a hermitage, for us to think,
> Writing and reading the rigid inscription. (*CP* 495)

This image of a hermit "Writing and reading" is both some ancient Chinese painter writing colophons on his painting and the modern Stevens writing his own poems after years' immersion in Oriental arts and literature.

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[64] Op. cit., pp. 12-19.

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Even in his shorter poems, Stevens sometimes also uses this technique he learned from Eastern painters. One of such examples is "Dance of the Macabre Mice":

> In the land of turkeys in turkey weather
> At the base of the statue, we go round and round.
> What a beautiful history, beautiful surprise!
> Monsieur is on horseback. The horse is covered with mice.
>
> This dance has no name. It is a hungry dance.
> We dance it out to the tip of Monsieur's sword,
> Reading the lordly language of the inscription,
> Which is like zithers and tambourines combined:
>
> The Founder of the State. Whoever founded
> A state that was free, in the dead of winter, from mice?
> What a beautiful tableau tinted and towering,
> The arm of bronze outstretched against all evil! (*CP* 123)

From the very beginning of the narrative, the perspective is divided between a broader one (that of the poet grandly announcing "In the land of...") and a confined one (that of the mice chanting "At the base of the statue"). Then, as the perspective begins to move, along with the dancing mice ("we go round and round" / ... "We dance..."), upward (from "the base of the statue" to the horse, and then to "the tip of Monsieur's sword) and back (to "the inscription"), the poet does not lose sight of his broader vista and historical outlook ("The Founder of the State" and the "free" state). In the last sentence, Stevens manages to cooperate the two angles through introducing three words ("tableau"/ "tinted"/ "towering") and through his concluding observation: "The arm of bronze outstretched against all

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evil!" Stevens handles his subjects just as painters do theirs. In Eastern landscape painting, a painter does not say but only depicts objects, though his selection of material and angle does reflect his attitude explicitly. This is exactly what Stevens does in this poem.

The same technique also works well in Stevens's short lyrics. In "Like Decorations" the perspective changes so many times through the various divisions of the poem. As the lyric movement progresses, the perspective also moves, either constantly shifting, or with various foci of location. Stevens uses "the mind's eye" to perceive reality omnisciently:

> XXIII
> The fish are in the fishman's window,
> The grain is in the baker's ship,
> The hunter shouts as the pheasant falls.
> Consider the odd morphology of regret. (*CP* 154)

With pictures of three walks of life (fisherman, peasant, and hunter) in the pre-industrial society, Stevens renders a comprehensive picture of historical reality. Though the "odd morpology of regret" is ambiguous, it is associated with either the creation of the physical world (the organism of nature – all plants and animals included) or with the origin of human language, which was said to be regretted by a non-existing God. Yet, to Stevens, in our present time it is the poet, not God, who is the omnipotent. Afterward,. Stevens quickly moves the scene to the next section, depicting a bridge or bridges as: "A bridge above the bright and

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blue of water / And the same bridge when the river is frozen." Interestingly, the changing of perspectives, in time rather than in space, may insinuate a hidden message that the change of reality between two states (past and present, or present and future) is inevitable. Light-heartedly, Stevens gives some riddle-like phrases in the next line to alleviate his tone – "Rich Tweedle-dum, poor Tweedle-dee." Are they merely non-sense expressions? Or do they show clues of some kind of preference? Probably the arbitrary assignment of two antonyms "poor" and "rich" is too simple. Perhaps they imply some desirability/undesirability hidden in the casual musical sounds. In XXVIII and XXXIV the poet also shows his "clairvoyant eye" – a special insight of a poet – more unreservedly than in other stanzas of this poem. The poet states that he expects a pear to be "popped with juice, /Ripened in warmth," yet he also knows that "autumn beguiles the fatalist." For him, he has gone beyond the naive romanticist stage and is able to see the undercurrent through the "reflection stagnant in a stagnant stream." And he would not be beguiled by the calm autumn or sunny weather either, for he knows, by the power of his mind's eye, that some "invisible currents clearly circulate." Later, section XLIV picks up this theme again, and recounts:

> There is no such thing as innocence in autumn,
> Yet, it may be, innocence is never lost. (*CP* 157)

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For a poet, the mind's eye is dialectical, being able to see both innocence and sophistication, both fiction and fact, and both the world of imagination and the world of reality.

In *The Pound Era*, Kenner concludes one chapter as follows:

> Two boys went to Harvard. One stayed home afterward, and became an insurance executive. The other went abroad, and became a banker and publisher. Both wrote poetry.
>
> Two boys went to Penn. One stayed home afterward and became a physician. The other went abroad, and became Ezra Pound.
>
> Stevens: Eliot. Williams: Pound. It is as neat as a laboratory experiment. And Williams, the intensely local, was often in Europe, whereas Stevens, the exotic, never went there. ...Of the four, Stevens alone concerned himself not at all with a paideuma: rather with
>
> Pure coruscations, that lie beyond
> The imagination ...
>
> in fact,...an Edward Lear poetic, pushed toward all limits.[65]

To Kenner, America's poetical "quartet" is not a harmonious one. He especially sees Stevens's contradiction in being "the exotic" but never going abroad. But what Kenner overlooks is Stevens's special sense of place: one does not have to go abroad to prove himself to be "exotic." Hasn't Kenner read about the anecdote that a traveler is unable to say anything about the place he just visited whereas another person staying at home talks fluently about places he has never visited? Is the former (the traveler) more "exotic" than the latter (the talker)? To Stevens's readers, the difference here is the very concept Stevens emphasizes – the imagination. Stevens concludes "The Man with the Blue Guitar" with: "we choose

[65] Op. cit., pp. 516-517.

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to play / The imagined pine, the imagined jay" (*CP* 184). Like landscape for a painter, a poet's art reflects "The world washed in his imagination," and "To which his imagination returned" (*CP* 179). Stevens learned partly from the Eastern landscape masters that an artist ought to have the ability to render "Description without Place":

> There might be, too, a change immenser than
> A poet's metaphors in which being would
>
> Come true, a point in the fire of music where
> Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe,
>
> And observing is completing and we are content,
> In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,
>
> That we do not need to understand, complete
> Without secret arrangements of it in the mind. (*CP* 341)

"Dazzle yields to a clarity," for "observing is completing." And so are Stevens's contacts with landscapes. Wordsworth writes that "Minds that have nothing to confer / Find little to perceive." Yet Stevens had learned further from Eastern landscapes "that the mind / Is the eye, and that this landscape of the mind / Is a landscape only of the eye" (*CP* 305). Is this kind of a paradoxical conclusion? If it is, how does Stevens conceive such dialectics of landscape? The answer will be discovered in the next chapter, which will deal with the relationship between his thought and the Oriental thought.

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CHAPTER 6

The Snow Man as the Connoisseur of Chaos

HIS MIND PRESENTS THE WORLD

AND IN HIS MIND THE WORLD REVOLVES.

......

THE MIND RENEWS THE WORLD IN A VERSE...

......

IN THE GENERATIONS OF THOUGHT, MANS' SONS

AND HEIRS ARE POWERS OF THE MIND,

HIS ONLY TESTAMENT AND ESTATE.

– Wallace Stevens

THE CHINESE HAVE NEVER FAILED TO

RECOGNIZE THE PARADOXES AND THE

POLARITY INHERENT IN WHAT IS ALIVE.

THE OPPOSITES ALWAYS BALANCE ONE

ANOTHER – A SIGN OF HIGH CULTURE.

ONE-SIDEDNESS, THOUGH IT LENDS

MOMENTUM, IS A MARK OF BARBARISM.

– Carl Jung

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Stevens could not have build his "poetical empire" without some serious thought about life, aesthetics, and philosophy, just as any statesman could not found a nation without certain sublime ideas. Accordingly, any discussion about Stevens's indebtedness to Oriental culture and art will not approach comprehensiveness if it does not take into consideration the influence of Eastern thought on Stevens. Having discussed this influence on Stevens's poetical language, by way of affinities with the Zen-Buddhist koan and Asian landscape painting, I will proceed to present a synoptic typography of Stevens's theoretical borrowings – "echoings" as some critics would suggest – from the Orient. I will first provide a brief statement to advance my argument. I will then support this argument with analyses of specific examples from the poet's life, correspondence, and literary works. These instances are chosen from different periods and aspects of Stevens's life and will cover various theoretical issues involving both Occidental and Oriental cultures. More exactly, it will include discussions of poetics, aesthetics, ethics and other philosophical perceptions of art and life in general. As we know, Stevens was an avid reader with a very inquisitive mind, but the oddity of his character as well as the diversity of his mind often make it difficult to pinpoint, or summarize, in one or two sentences, the subtle activities and minute interactions going on in his mind at the time of writing. For the

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convenience of narration, I will arrange the traces of what I see as Oriental thinking into the following general categories:

A) A twofold world outlook which pervaded the poet's everyday life and aesthetic experience;

B) The idea of change, which Stevens learned from both Western philosophers and the Eastern thinkers;

C) Ethical values having affinity with Eastern ideas;

D) Aesthetic values derived from, or related to, those of Oriental systems.

Despite the arbitrariness of this division, these categories are functional and by no means exclusive of one another (i.e., they may sometimes overlap with one another in my discussion in spite of my effort to avoid unnecessary overlapping). They are grouped in this manner with each section dealing with one prominent feature in Stevens's thought.

A) The Twofold World Outlook

A notion in common currency in Stevens criticism is "dichotomies." Yet critics seldom relate this phenomenon to any Oriental idea (with the exception of a few critics who occasionally mention the idea of Yin and Yang, whose work I will discuss when I deal with the topic of the "Interdependency of Opposites"). Truly, the characteristic motion of Stevens's mind is an oscillation between opposite

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ideas/objects: order and chaos; spirit and matter; artifact and nature; life and death; reality and fiction; man and woman; north and south; light and darkness; day and night; sun and moon; imagination and reality. It is the existence of these opposites in their diverse forms that prompted Stevens to stress repeatedly the importance of "harmony," and, which I feel, prompted him to choose the word "harmonium" as the title of his first collection of poetry. Is this aspect of Stevens's work involved with Oriental culture?

The answer is positive. To begin, a good example of such twofold view of life is Stevens's stance toward his two careers/roles. I have briefly mentioned in the first chapter the possible influence of the Eastern sage-poets on Stevens's "double life." On the one hand, economic obligation did play a decisive part in Stevens's life, as Stevens himself noted: "money is a kind of poetry." On the other hand, he longed for an ideal, a spiritual life. For him, this was poetry. It is this pursuit that enabled him to find peace in his confrontation with the conflicts resulting from his two roles. To his friends and close colleagues Stevens never kept his role as poet a secret. Indeed, he never regarded his "two careers" as harmful to his integrity. Such an accepting attitude of his double nature could be the indirect influence of the Eastern sage-poets. In Chapter One there is a passage in which Stevens observed that he "always[had in mind] the wise sayings of Meng Tzu and K'ung Fu-Tzu"(Mencius and Confucius). In speaking of Stevens's

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"imaginative immersion in the Eastern tradition[,]" Richardson observes that: "internalizing the Oriental attitude affected more than Stevens's poetic style."[1] In other words, this became an intrinsic psychological activity.

To Stevens, "The poet / Increases the aspects of experience," and can "reconcile us to our selves...in those pacific words, /And the adroiter harmonies[.]" Such kind of poet is, like the Eastern sage-poet, a "ten-foot poet among inchlings,"

> And out of what one sees and hears and out
> Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
> So many selves, so many sensuous worlds... (*CP* 326)

Stevens himself is an example of the reconciliation of one's many selves. Not only did he manage to pacify his "many selves," but he also ably balanced "so many sensuous worlds" of diverse phenomena into his peculiar outlook on dichotomies. He perfectly understood that, despite exterior differences, opposites are only part of each pair to which they belong. Like his hero Crispin,

> Thus he conceived his voyaging to be
> An up and down between two elements,
> A fluctuation between sun and moon... (*CP* 35)

Theorists tend to regard this kind of attitude toward opposites as dualism. But Stevens did not use such terms. Instead, his poetry abundantly evidences his metaphoric integration of "these poles." In "The Glass of Water" Stevens

> Shows that this object is merely a state,

[1] *The Early Years*, p.33.

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> One of many, between two poles. (*CP* 197)

And in "Connoisseur of Chaos":

> A great disorder is an order. These
> Two things are one. (*CP* 215)

Beyond the surface level there exists "a law of inherent opposites, /Of essential unity," and his poetry "Proves that these opposite things partake of one, /At least that was the theory… ." Hence, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" the poet chants "Two things, the two together as one," in expressing his view on the self and world, music and nature, or imagination and reality. In the final canto, he concludes: "That's it, the only dream they knew, … a wrangling of two dreams." Similarly, in "Jouga" the poet presents a "Ha-ee-me" and his guitar as

> Two beasts. But of the same kind – two conjugal beasts.
> Ha-ee-me is the male beast…
> …The guitar is another beast
> Beneath his tip-tap-tap. It is she that responds.
> Two beasts but two of a kind and…
> Yet two not quite of a kind. (*CP* 237)

But the poet is also striving for "a freedom of the two, /An isolation which only the two could share." (*CP* 419) In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens states clearly that "Real and unreal are two in one," and moves on to explain that

> This endlessly elaborating poem
> Displays the theory of poetry,
> As the life of poetry. (*CP* 486)

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Then he adds that "the theory /Of poetry is the theory of life." Yet, it is in the second part, "It Must Change," of "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" that Stevens gives this world outlook the fullest treatment. For instance, in the following section of "It Must Change," the poet concretizes his concept of changes with a long series of opposite images:

IV

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Music falls on the silence like a sense,
A passion that we feel, not understand.
Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple
And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
That walk away as one in the greenest body.

In solitude the trumpets of solitude
Are not of another solitude resounding;
A little string speaks for a crowd of voices.

The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
The child that touches takes character from the thing,
The body, it touches. The captain and his men

Are one and the sailor and the sea are one.
Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,
Sister and solace, brother and delight. (*CP* 392)

Here it is easy to hear echoings of the key ideas of the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu, and of images from his most widely translated work in the West, *Tao Te*

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Ching. Stevens's college friend Bynner translated this book as *The Way of Life According to Lao-tzu*, and sent a copy to Stevens.[2] Some expressions and ideas from this Eastern classic have become so familiar to the Western readers of Lao-tzu that they just cannot miss recognizing them. For example, one eminent idea from Lao-tzu is examined in the following passages from *Tao Te Ching*:

2

Being and nonbeing give birth to each other,
Difficult and easy complete each other,
Long and short form each other,
High and low fulfill each other,
Tone and voice harmonize with each other,
Front and back follow each other –
it is ever thus.

......

42

The Way gave birth to unity,
Unity gave birth to duality,
Duality gave birth to trinity,
Trinity gave birth to the myriad creature.

The myriad creatures bear Yin on their backs
and embrace Yang in their bosoms.
They neutralize these vapors
and thereby achieve harmony.

......

The dominant notion in these lines is the interdependency of opposites, which may manifest itself in different forms. A careful comparison of these passages with the above quoted section IV of "It Must Change" suggests Stevens's affinity with this notion. In "On the Road Home" from *Parts of a World*, Stevens

[2] *Witter Bynner: Selected Letters*, p.189. This copy is held by The Huntington Library in its collection of 'Stevens

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presents an "I" and a "you" arguing about truth(s). According to one side's argument, "There is no such thing as the truth," but the other side insists:

> "There are many truths,
> But they are not parts of a truth." (*CP* 203)

As each of these two opposite opinions vie with each other, the poet throws in a "Taoist" voice as the last word in the last stanza:

> It was at that time, that the silence was largest
> And longest, the night was roundest,
> The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
> Closest and strongest. (*CP* 204)

When we compare this stanza with these passages from *Tao Te Ching*, we are able to track some marks of influence:

> The great square has no corners.
> The great vessel is never completed.
> The great note sounds muted.
> The great image has no name.
> * * *
> The doctrine without words,
> The advantage of nonaction –
> few under heaven can realize these!
> * * *
> One who knows does not speak;
> One who speaks does not know.
> * * *
> Attain utmost emptiness,
> Maintain utter stillness.[3]

These passages stress the importance of non-speaking and stillness, or non-action, which is highly valued by both Buddhism and Taoism. No only is the

---

Library.'

[3] *Tao Te Ching*, pp. 7, 11, 25, 78.

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affinity they bear with Stevens's idea obvious in the above stanza from "On the Road Home," the reverberation of such thinking appears early in Stevens's poems, like "The Snow Man":

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow; (*CP* 9)

or in "Thirteen Ways":

> Icicles filled the long window
> With barbaric glass.
> The shadow of the blackbird
> Crossed it, to and fro.
> The mood
> Traced in the shadow
> An indecipherable cause. (*CP* 93)

Marks of Oriental influence as such appear as echoing ideas or transformed images in other *Harmonium* poems too. For example, Stevens urges his readers to "Take the moral law and make a nave of it" as well as to "take / The opposing law and make a peristyle," because "We agree in principle" (*CP* 59). Critics have pointed out that even the title "Harmonium" bears a mark of Oriental influence since this obscure musical instrument "derives from the Chinese Sheng."[4] This emphasis on harmony achieved out of conflict persists well into the late poetry of Stevens. In Stevens's last book of poems, "The Rock," we find that the lines

> ...kept saying over and over one same, same thing,

---

[4] Joan Richardson, 'By Their Fruits: Wallace Stevens, His Poetry, His Critics,' Ph.D. Diss., CUNY, 1977, pp. 94-95.

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In a kind of uproar, because an opposite, a contradiction,
Has enraged them and made them want to talk it down. (*CP* 522)

The poet sees the opposite sides of "a contradiction" as "the same thing." It is this notion of the interdependency of opposites that Stevens learned from Oriental philosophy. Once learned, he chanted this thematic melody till his last moment, believing that "[the] Real and unreal are two in one" (*CP* 485).

B) The Idea of Change

Closely related with the interdependency of opposites is the idea of "change" stressed by Stevens. Not only is this idea scattered throughout his lines, but also receives a focused treatment in the "It Must Change" section of "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction." Readers of Oriental philosophy are generally familiar with one of the most famous books of Eastern classics – the "scripture" for both Taoism and Confucianism – *The Book of Changes* (or *The Classic of Changes*, or *I Ching*[5]). This book was originally used for oracle purposes by the ancient people encountering a world of mutability and unpredictability. Generations of Chinese scholars and philosophers developed the concept of change, making it go beyond the seemingly primitive symbol of yin-yang, and the

[5] ***I*** in Chinese means 'change,' ***Ching*** is often translated into 'scripture' or 'classic.'

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eight trigrams, into a complicated net of meanings (represented, for instance, by the combined systems of trigrams – those sixty-four hexagrams). Consequently, the book has become, in our modern age, "a psychological tool, a way of connecting with the creative imagination," and a book about the wisdom of life to show how people "can best live as individuals in contact with both inner and outer worlds."[6] Though so far a copy of this book has not been found in Stevens's library, there is evidence that Stevens had read of this book and used ideas from it. Stevens did own *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese*. The second chapter of this book, "Quotations or Adaptations of Quotations from the Classics and other Standard Books," contains sub-sections such as "Proverbs from the Confucian Analects," and "Proverbial Phrases from the Doctrine of the Mean" (i.e., proverbs and phrases in both sections are from Confucius). It also has a section called "Proverbial Phrases from Mencius" (the sage-disciple of Confucius). The last section is called "Proverbial Sayings from the Book of Changes." This means Stevens at least knew some ideas from T*he Book of Changes*.

[6] Introduction to *I Ching, The Classic Chinese Oracle of Change* (translated by Rudolf Ritsema and Stephen Karcher, 1995 B&N Books).

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Stevens also owned a copy of *Tao Te Ching.*[7] In addition to the concept of "interdependency of opposites" discussed above, this book also mentions the ideas of change and relativity. For instance, it defines "the Way (Tao)"as "the great Way," and gives such description as: "Being great implies flowing ever onward, /Flowing ever onward implies far-reaching, / Far-reaching implies reversal." "Reversal is the movement of the Way." "Things may be diminished by being increased, increased by being diminished." "Rippling is the Way, flowing left and right!" "A whirlwind does not last the whole morning, A downpour does not last the whole day." Strongly echoing what is emphasized by *The Book of Changes,* these lines could also influence Stevens. For example, in "Montrachet-le-Jardin" Stevens most openly points to his Asian masters:

> One of the sacraments between two breaths,
> Magical only for the change they made.
>
> The skeleton said it is a question of
> The naked man, the naked man as last
> And tallest hero and plus gaudiest vir.
>
> Consider how the speechless, invisible gods
> Ruled us before, from over Asia, by
> Our merest apprehension of their will.
>
> There must be mercy in Asia and divine
> Shadows of scholars bent upon their books,
> Divine orations from lean sacristans

---

[7] While another common English version of this title is *Lao-tzu,* Bynner rendered this title as *The Way of Life According to Lao-tzu.* ***Tao*** literally means ***the Way*** in Chinese. See also the note on the above part on Stevens's private collection of books at The Huntington Library.

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Of the good, speaking of good in the voice of men.
All men can speak of it in the voice of gods. (*CP* 262)

The image of the "tallest hero" in this section is strikingly close to that of a Taoist priest performing some mystical "sacraments between two breaths, / Magical only for the change they make." The "two breaths" could be the air of Yin and the air of Yang, which, according to the Taoist classic and some sinologists, are the "vital energy" of "*ch'i*" (meaning "air" in Chinese).[8] To obtain and refine *ch'i*, all Taoist adepts are supposed to practice their "breathing exercises" every day – that is to say, to collect *ch'i* from nature in the early morning before sunrise when the air is the purest, and maximize / optimize ch'i whenever these practitioners find an opportunity to repeat their "breathing exercises" during the day.

Stevens presents similar notions of change in other poems as well. In "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," Stevens proclaims:

After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends.
No was the night. Yes is this present sun. (*CP* 247)

[8] Many books on Taoism mention such theory and practice. Here, to avoid obscure jargon, I cite from one of the popular books on religions, *The World Religious* by Huston Smith (pp. 200-204). Ch'i is also used in expression like *Ch'i Gong*, which literally means Breathing Exercises, and is popular nowadays in the Western countries.

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Interestingly, in the section "Proverbial Sayings from the Book of Changes" from *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese*,"[9] it is mentioned that, he who has read *The Book of Changes* "knows how to tell fortunes," and that, the "*P'i* Diagram" is symbolized by "The sun and moon revolving, cold and heat alternate."[10] In Chinese, there is a common saying derived from two hexagrams out of the sixty-four hexagrams from *The Book of Changes*, that "after *P'i* (hexagram) there comes *T'ai* (hexagram)." "*P'i*" means "obstruction, blocking, no-way or no," and "*T'ai*" means "prosperity, smooth-going, or yes."[11] In this poem, then Stevens's proclamation in the first line, and his images of "night [moon]" and "sun" in the third line appear strikingly similar to the Eastern idea.

Other instances of Stevens's echoing the idea of change taught by *The Book of Changes* and *Tao Te Ching* can also be found in "Connoisseur of Chaos." In the beginning of this poem, the poet chants his belief that "A violent order is disorder; and / A great disorder is an order." This paradoxical statement suggests that "order" and "disorder" are another pair of the Stevensian interdependent opposites. Related to this pair of opposites is the notion of change, which occurs inevitably as order and disorder supersede each other. Then, in the second section, the poet

[9] Stevens made numerous marks on the margin of this book. At the end of this specific chapter, he wrote **22.2.1912**, which means he finished reading this chapter on that date.
[10] *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese*, pp.41-43.
[11] *I Ching: The Classic Chinese Oracle of Change*, PP. 186-205, where these two diagrams are fully expounded.

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uses a series of "if" clauses to introduce his idea about the overlooked side of his "opposites":

> If all the green of spring was blue, and it is;
> If the flowers of South Africa were bright
> On the tables of Connecticut, and they are;
> If Englishmen lived without tea in Ceylon, and they do;
> And if it all went on in an orderly way,
> And it does; a law of inherent opposites,
> Of essential unity, is as pleasant as port,
> As pleasant as the brush-strokes of a bough,
> An upper, particular bough in, say, Marchand. (*CP* 215)

The poet confirms these suppositions so as to establish the conclusive statement concerning the "law of inherent opposites /Of essential unity," which governs all changes. Beneath the disorderly reality, Stevens, like an Oriental sage himself, detects the "essential unity" "as pleasant as port." Out of unpredictable changes, this law persists, unifying the raw materials and giving order to reality.

In a similar manner, near the end of the "It Must Change" of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens resolves the problem of a dying old order by importing an Oriental image into his world,

> ...in which swans
> Were seraphs, were saints, were changing essences.
>
> The west wind was the music, the motion, the force
> To which the swans curveted, a will to change,
> A will to make iris frettings on the blank;
>
> There was a will to change, a necessitous
> And present way, a presentation, a kind
> Of volatile world, too constant to be denied,

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The eye of a vagabond in metaphor
That catches our own. The casual is not
Enough. The freshness of transformation is

The freshness of a world. It is our own,
It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves,
And that necessity and that presentation

Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer.
Of these beginnings, gay and green, propose
The suitable amours. Time will write them down. (*CP* 397-398)

Such freshness of "changes" echoes with what the poet proposes at the beginning of this section:

This changes and that changes. Thus the constant

Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths
Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause
In a universe of inconstancy. (*CP* 389)

Similarly, in the beginning of "The Place of the Solitaires" Stevens gives quite an imperative call:

Let the place of the solitaires
Be a place of perpetual undulation.. (*CP* 60)

The poet realizes "There must be no cessation /Of motion, or of the noise of motion" and their "manifold continuation." He reinforces this urgency at the end of this poem:

And, most, of the motion of thought
And its restless iteration,

In the place of the solitaires,
Which is to be a place of perpetual undulation. (*CP* 60)

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Words like "motion" and "change" are repeatedly used to suggest the "perpetual undulation."

Stevens had, with the aid of Eastern thought, discovered "in the way / Invisible change discovers what is changed" (*CP* 435) and learned how to see "beyond the compass of change"(*CP* 168). Most of all, he understood that "[w]hen the whole habit of the mind was changed," one would achieve a special insight "in a final change" (*CP* 455). In "Our Stars Come from Ireland," for example, Stevens used "a" instead of "the" to modify that "final change," since he knew that "It is / The instant of the change that was the poem" (*CP* 347). One stanza from "Variations on a Summer Day" gives another marvelous description of such a change:

X

To change nature, not merely to change ideas,
To escape from the body, so to feel
Those feelings that the body balks,
The feelings of the natures round us here:
As a boat feels when it cuts blue water. (*CP* 234)

Like "a boat" ready to sail into uncharted water area, Stevens is ready to face the challenges of changing reality when he obtains such "a sense in the changing sense [o]f things (*CP* 479). The law of nature applies to human beings as well, such is the insight into physical and human world taught by the Eastern masters,

Because new colors make new things

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> And new things make old things again...
> And so with men. (*OP89* 43)

Man now becomes "the giant of nothingness...the giant ever changing, living in change"(*CP* 443), while the disorderly reality becomes a world with order," Where luminous agitations come to rest, / In an ever-changing, calmest unity" (*CP* 433).

In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" Stevens gives another example regarding reality and human beings. Depicting a bronze statue, the poet says,

> His spirit is imprisoned in constant change.
>
> But ours is not imprisoned. It resides
> In a permanence composed of impermanence.... (*CP* 472)

The last sentence here summarizes Stevens's insight into reality under the tutelage of the Eastern masters. From *Tao Te Ching* and *The Book of Changes*, he learned "All things destroy themselves or are destroyed." (*89OP* 78). Hence he came to see why "So great a change / Is constant." And he felt "It is only enough / To live incessantly in change" "though these / Are chaos and of archaic change." (*OP89* 82)[12]

C) Ethical Values and Eastern Philosophy

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[12] Such archaic change is mentioned *in Tao Te Ching, The Book of Changes*, and *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese*. In addition, 'All things destroy themselves or are destroyed' is an idea reiterated in many chapters of *Tao Te Ching* (30,40,42,58,76).

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Tao Te Ching registers in many of its chapters the centrality of a set of what could be called "negative capabilities." This is a set of qualities remarkably similar to the virtues we find extolled by Stevens, as can be seen in the following:.

> Nothing under heaven is softer or weaker than water,
> and yet nothing is better
> for attacking what is hard and strong,
> because of its immutability. **(54)**
>
> * * *
>
> Seeing what is small is called insight,
> Abiding in softness is called strength. **(21)**
>
> * * *
>
> Not exalting men of worth
> prevents the people from competing;
> Not putting high value on rare goods
> prevents the people from being bandits;
> Not displaying objects of desire
> prevents the people from being disorderly.
> ......
> Always causing the people
> to be without knowledge and desire. **(61)**
>
> * * *
>
> The highest good is like water;
> Water is good at benefiting the myriad creatures.... **(67)**
>
> * * *
>
> The valley spirit never dies –
> it is called "the mysterious female";
> The gate of the mysterious female
> is called "the root of heaven and earth." **(65)**
>
> * * *
>
> Know masculinity,
> Maintain femininity....
> By being a ravine for all under heaven,
> Eternal integrity will never desert you. **(93)**

It is illuminating to set these lines against the tune of "Six Significant Landscapes":

> The night is of the color

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> Of a woman's arm:
> Night, the female,
> Obscure,
> Fragrant and supple,
> Conceals herself.
> A pool shines.... (*CP* 73-74)

In this passage as short as merely seven lines, Stevens presents a scene replete with images possessing qualities emphasized by *Tao Te Ching* (night, moonlight, water, obscurity, suppleness, concealing, and femininity).

To turn our attention from the above to personal traits, we also detect Oriental influence. For instance, we know that by nature Stevens was a reticent person. But one might wonder: could his reticence reveal more than mere personal disposition? Could this personal trait be a tacit gesture related to Eastern influence such as, say, the Eastern attitude toward life and people? In *Tao Te Ching*, there is a passage saying:

> The sage
> is self-effacing in his dealings with all under heaven....
> The common people all rivet their eyes and ears upon him,
> And the sage makes them all chuckle like children. (17)

I would suggest that this quality of the Eastern sage contributes to Stevens's stance as a comedian in poetry, and his self-effacing manner in life. Similarly, early in his journals Stevens mentioned the "effeminate" nature of poetry. As Richardson notes:

> The feminine principles had long roots in Stevens's experience .... Counterbalancing and stabilizing this principle was Stevens's deepening interest in the East.

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> While in the West the preoccupation with the feminine virtues had been sweetly shaped into the Virgin...in the East the same idea remained unattached to a particular form and so abstractly permeated all aspects of attitude and behavior. Over the years Stevens derived a great deal from cultivating this attitude and imitating this behavior. [13]

She goes on to trace some features of "the Oriental attitude" Stevens learned from reading Paul Elmer More. Scattered through three or four pages are treatments of synoptic features such as: "the feminine principle," "the Easterners' basic belief in the transitory illusiveness of human endeavor," their focus "on contemplation, the nonprogressive, nonutilitarian way," and "the doctrine of Buddha...[in] the overwhelming spirit of gladness and simple charity that pervades them."[14] Since I have touched some of these in other sections of this chapter as well as in other chapters, I will proceed to the discussion of another feature, "Eastern acceptance," also mentioned by Richardson.

Most critics of Stevens tend to concentrate on a couple of poems (usually "The Snow Man" and "Thirteen Ways") from *Harmonium* as the typical examples of Stevens's attitude toward reality learned from Eastern masters. For example, in *Mind of Winter*, William Bevis lists eight critics' different opinions concerning "The Snow Man," but none mentions the notion of Stevens's "Eastern acceptance."[15] As for the poet himself, in his letter to Hi Simons, Stevens explains

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[13] *The Early Years*, pp. 292, 246.
[14] Ibid., pp. 246-248.
[15] Op. cit., pp. 22-26.

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this poem "as an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it." When this explanation is set off against a maxim by Stevens that "Poetry is a means of redemption,"[16] it will become clearer what the poet means by these words, and what "he had learned from the 'old Chinese' whom he wanted so much to imitate."[17] What Stevens learned from the Chinese is their understanding of the world and their attitude of acceptance toward life. To redeem, we must remember, is simply to turn in something and receive another in exchange.

For Stevens, "the necessity of identifying oneself with reality" means to turn oneself into the world, encompassing both nature and human life – the "Not-me" and the "Me" in Emerson's terms. This attitude of acceptance reflects the orthodox philosophy of China, where *Tian-Tao* (Way of Heaven) and *Ren-Tao* (Way of Man) are unified in such a harmony that the unceasing creation of ever new beings is brought about in the constant changes of universe and human society. This ever new life in the former is called *Sheng-sheng* (birth of new life), whereas the new life and values in the latter is called *Jin-Xing* (letting out, or playing out one's inherent nature). In Stevens's case, his reality-imagination dichotomy corresponds to these Chinese dichotomies (*Tian-Tao* and *Ren-Tao*, or *Sheng-sheng* and *Jin-Xing*). Understanding reality and human creation as such, the

[16] *OP89*, this appears twice in Adagia, in p.186 and p.188.

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poet naturally understands, accepts, and enjoys the world. This attitude is different from the "cold" attitude of a "mind of winter" some critics find in Stevens. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens mentions:

> The subject-matter of poetry is not that "collection of solid, static objects extended in space" but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. (*NA* 29-30)

And after he reiterates a poet's role "is to help people to live their lives," Stevens goes on to defend himself against the accusation of "escapism":

> he is un amoureux perpetuel of the world that he contemplates and thereby enriches; (*NA* 30)

This kind of love for life, and thereby poetry, is far from the kind of coldness some critics find in the snow man. Behind the external reality of being a "Snow Man" is the internal attitude of Eastern acceptance. Confronting the bareness of winter, the snow man figure enjoys the scene with its mind of winter, and sees, in his ecstasy, all that is there and all that is not there. This is exactly what Richardson calls the "Eastern acceptance" Stevens had learned from the Chinese. In another poem, "Man and Bottle," Stevens also uses these snow images and concepts in its first and last stanzas.

> The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,
> Who, to find what will suffice,
> Destroys romantic tenements
> Of rose and ice....
>
> * * *

[17] *The Early Years*, p. 516.

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It is not the snow that is the quill, the page.
The poem lashes more fiercely than the wind,
As the mind, to find what will suffice, destroys
Romantic tenements of rose and ice. (*CP* 238-239)

Though Stevens uses the same or similar images (wind, snow, winter and mind), this poem seems not as successful as "The Snow Man." The reason is, I think, that instead of using the Oriental ideas of acceptance and dualistic harmony, the poet appears to pit some images against others on two opposite sides (or at least make them contend with each other, if not battle against each other). On one side he allies man, mind, poem, quill and page; on the other side wind, snow and winter. This kind of open contention, or battling, weakens these images, and renders the poet more judgmental than he usually is. Perhaps it is because of the background of war, or perhaps Stevens had a particular purpose in his mind ("destroys romantic tenements of rose and ice"). At any rate, this poem, with similar images but without the feeling of Eastern acceptance evinced in "The Snow Man," reads more like an imperative statement crying "Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Of other traits Stevens learned or shared with the sage of the East, another important idea is the notion of nothingness. "The Snow Man" closes with this important notion:

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, behold
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (*CP* 10)

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Readers have been persistently puzzled by the ambiguity of these lines; there are two problems that emerge here. One is the syntax of "nothing himself," the other the logic of double negation. If we remember the explanation offered by Stevens himself, "nothing himself" simply indicates that the listener has so completely identified himself with nature that he, or his self, no longer exists. In terms of Oriental philosophy, he has achieved *Jin-Xing* (letting out, letting go) and his self has dissolved into nature. As to the double negation, "nothing that is not there" does not necessarily mean "everything." By this clause Stevens is indicating the interplay of non-existence and existence, or of non-being and being. For Buddhists, this "emptiness" is not the "emptiness" or "void" as Westerners understand it. The term "emptiness"[18] in Buddhism includes *both existence and nonexistence*. So does "nothingness" for Stevens. Hence, "Nothing that is not there" does not equal "something" or "everything"; and "the nothing that is [there]" does not equal "nothingness" either. To Stevens, since "Death is the mother of beauty," winter is also the mother of spring, emptiness or bareness the complement of fullness or activity. Besides, to Eastern monistic thinkers, a snow man's mind does not make the differentiation of self and other, or something and

[18] This is the central notion for Buddhism. It recognizes all composite things, hence reality, as empty, impermanent, devoid of an essence, and characterized by suffering. The Sanskrit word for this notion is *sunyata* or *shunyata*. It is

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nothing, or existence and non-existence. Like the reality in which this figure with the mind of winter stands, it is just there with an air of (non)existence, imposing nothing upon its beholders.

D) Aesthetic Values Related to Oriental Ideas

Stevens once wrote that: "The aesthetic order includes all other orders but is not limited to them." This is more than an apt notation concerning his own aesthetics since he had, over years of extensive reading, gleaned ideas from different disciplines and subjects in order to build his own "rude aesthetic." From discussions above, in particular those in Chapters IV and V, it is clear that Stevens gathered many ideas on language, poetic style, and fine arts from Oriental culture. Having dealt with those aspects of Eastern influence in Stevens's poetry, I shall now proceed to an overall evaluation of his borrowings from, or echoing of, Eastern aesthetics.

For example, classical Chinese poetics emphasizes that poetry is to be valued for its implicitness and suggestibility, and that good poetry must have feeling or sentiment concealed in its scenes and images. For years, Stevens copied

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expounded by many major Buddhist scriptures, such as *Diamond Sutra*, or *Heart Sutra*.

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sentences about the Chinese poetics in his journal; among them, there is the following:

> Chinese saying of poetry –
> The sound stops short. The sense runs on. (*SP* 222)

In this short note, Stevens has recorded one special feature of Chinese poetics that sense ought to linger much longer than the sound/word. Among Stevens's poems, "Invective Against Swans" is a perfect example of such practice. This poem contains six couplets in blank verse – all in iambic pentameters except the last couplet:

> And the soul, O ganders, being lonely, flies
> Beyond your chilly chariots, to the skies. (*CP* 4)

In both lines, the masculine rhyme suddenly catches readers' attention with the long vowel "*i*" plus a sibilant sound. This abrupt change, from the iambic to either spondaic ("O ganders") or anapestic feet ("And the soul," and the final "to the skies"), creates the desired special effect upon its reader's mind. In addition, the sense of motion indicated by the word "flies" straddles two lines to reinforce the lingering effect of "beyond." Such a deliberately arresting scheme calls readers' attention to the "Swans" in the title, and gives more emphasis to the "soul" that "flies" to the "skies." After readers finish reading the last couplet, the rhyming sound still lingers, haunting readers' ears, while the sense – the last impression of the soul – stays and "runs on" as if it would keep reminding readers

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of the yearning of the soul for something more permanent than the dying summer, and for something beyond and above the horizon.

Another poem, "In the Carolinas," achieves a similarly enduring effect in its ending. In this short poem, the first stanza has four irregular lines describing the change of seasons in nature and human life. The second stanza has only three lines imparting the poet's wonder at the image of Mother Nature. But the last stanza drops to two lines in italic letters:

> *The pine-tree sweetens my body*
> *The white iris beautifies me.* (*CP* 5)

Instead of employing some kind of sound effect as the case of "Invective Against Swans," the poet here juxtaposes two unexpected images, iris and pine tree. This juxtaposition, with all words in italics and in the same length of four feet, also produces a lingering effect in readers' mind. Moreover, these two lines have a signification that pleases readers by means of synesthesia. Two vowel sounds – the long "i" in "pine" and "white," and the long "e" in "tree," "sweetens" and "me" – reverberate with one another in the short span of two closing lines, and help join both images closer to impart a pervasive pleasure in aural, visual, and olfactory senses.

In relation to the Oriental mode of thought (such as the interdependency of opposite ideas discussed above), Stevens was also influenced by a special kind of Chinese poetic form. We know that Stevens uses couplets in many of his short

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poems. This preference for the couplet form could result from his reading of Chinese classic poems. For example, in his private library, Stevens owned a copy of *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese.* The marginal marks indicate that Stevens had carefully read the preface and the first four chapters of this book. In the preface, Stevens drew a vertical mark in the right margin next to the author's advice for readers "to form from the beginning the habit of committing to memory Chinese sentences." Then in the following chapters, Stevens also drew different marks (circles, lines, curved lines, etc.) in the margin to pick out specific points or sentences he liked. Some of these passages are of special interest to the issue under discussion here:

> [Chinese is] A tongue which ignores all discriminations of human language hitherto considered indispensable, with no distinction of gender, number, and case in its nouns, no voice, mode, tense, number, and person in its verbs the – no certainty, in fact, as to what are nouns and what are verbs… . a tongue in which the phrases 'solid' and 'hollow'(…), 'dead' and 'alive'(…) form the single key to all the grammar which is recognized by those who speak it – what are we to expect of such a language as *that*?
>
> * * *
>
> [the Chinese favorite] Scrolls and Tablets in one or two sentences…[described] as "Couplets, Labels, Hangings, Distichs, Paralleled Aphorisms, Antithetical Sentences, or by whatever other name they may be known."[19]

This "art of literary match-making" is the method/expression of antithesis, which is explained elsewhere with similar terms as: "antithetical sentences,"

[19] *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese,* pp.15, 48.

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"parallels," "rhetorical opposites," or "the Chinese *tui tzu*...the opposition of characters."[20] Then, the third chapter of this book is entitled "Antithetical Couplets." Stevens read this chapter very carefully as can be seen from the marks he left in the book. In the introductory part of this chapter, he used small circles in the left margin to mark out three lines.[21] Then, two paragraphs down, he used a vertical line in the left margin to mark out the following:

> It is the opposition of characters. Its essence is thesis and antithesis – antithesis between different tones and different meanings, resemblance in the relations between the characters in one clause and those in another clause.[22]

The author then describes the early training for this special form – as early as when "children are yet in their most ductile intellectual condition, and as soon as they begin to appreciate the flavor of characters, they are taught *to set one against another*."[23] Two paragraphs afterwards, Stevens marked out another passage with a vertical line on the right margin:

> The habit of always seeking for an antagonist to every expression, and of regarding a well rounded line in the light of a well-formed row of teeth – of no particular use except when opposed to another similar row – results at length in reducing the art of literary match-making to an instinct rather than an acquisition.[24]

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[20] Ibid., 48-50.
[21] These lines are presented above as the second passage (beneath the * * *).
[22] Ibid.
[23] My emphatic italics.
[24] Ibid., p. 49.

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These marks, among other things, show that Stevens had a very deep impression of this antithetical method favored and employed by the ancient Chinese poets. Earlier I have indicated that Stevens finished reading this chapter on "*23.2.1912*" (see page 73 for Note 29). As he obtained more copies of classical Chinese poetry, and read many poems written in couplet form (see lists of them on previous page 73), he could be tempted to give it a try in, say, "New England Verses." This poem was published in the *Measure* 26 (1923). It is written in couplets of opposite ideas. All titles for its fourteen stanzas are in pairs opposing or contrasting with each other. Titles of I and II are: "*The Whole World Including the Speaker*" and "*The Whole World Excluding the Speaker.*" Titles for III and IV are "*Soupe Aux Perles*" and "*Soupe Sans Perles,*" and similarly so are titles for other stanzas. The only pair of stanzas with titles looking less opposing are stanzas XI and XII – "*Land of Locust*" and "*Land of Pine and Marble.*" But the first line in stanza XI uses such an expression to intimate its connection with the East: "Patron and patriarch of couplets… ." Stevens could refer here to some ancient Chinese poets he likes. Yet in stanza III he uses the opposition differently – "The vile antithesis of poor and rich." These phrases reveal the poem's provenance from sources like *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese* and other copies of Chinese poetry. Of course, couplet is also a common poetical form in English poetry used by many other English and American poets. However, the

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special features as are displayed in "New England Verses" are unique qualities not only of Chinese poetry but also of Oriental thought. In addition to the above cited titles and phrases from this poem, stanzas XIII and XIV have titles ("*The Male Nude*" and "*The Female Nude*") alluding to the Eastern Yin/Yang principle. The image of "the slenderest courtesan" also insinuates an Eastern figure rather than those from the West.[25] Titles of stanzas XV and XVI ("*Scene Fletrie*" and "*Scene Fleurie*") could be the result of influence from the Chinese poetic style too.

In addition, Stevens also owned another book, *A Collection of Chinese Proverbs*. The author of this book points out that: "the first and greatest law evident in the formation of Chinese proverbs is that of Parallelism." This observation is supported by the contents of this Chinese proverb book. As there are so many proverbs in antithetical or parallel forms, Stevens could have fallen for this rhetoric form, and had "unlimited admiration bestowed upon successful antithesis as such."[26]

As a closing remark, I will draw out some provocative questions from the above quoted passages and facts. First, since Stevens had read these Chinese proverbs, could the odd syntax form found in his poems result from his being

[25] Though the word *courtesan* may refer to a *female courtier* of Italian court, female figures from the Western paintings of classical period are usually buxom and corpulent. Hence Stevens's allusion points to the Eastern rather than the Western female figure.
[26] Ibid., 51.

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influenced by the Chinese language ("which ignores all discriminations of human language hitherto")? Then, reading those proverbs from the chapter named "Antithetical Couplets," could Stevens have learned such techniques and applied them to his poetry? Lastly, and most importantly, as he became acquainted with these antithetical Chinese proverbs, is it possible that his mode of thinking and writing became influenced by these "rhetorical opposites"? The best way to answer these questions is to turn again to Stevens's own writings for evidence. For instance, those "Two things of opposite natures" (*CP* 392)[27] are typical Stevensian antitheses, though critics prefer to call them "dichotomies." Then, in the closing canto of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens presents another similar antithesis:

> Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.
> They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,
> Two parallels that meet if only in
>
> The meeting of their shadows. . . . (*CP* 407)

Truly, it depends on Stevens's readers how they interpret this kind of "opposites" in pairs. As the quotation preceding this chapter points out:

> The Chinese have never failed to recognize the paradoxes and the polarity inherent in what is alive. The opposites always balance one another – a sign of high culture.

From such Oriental wisdom Stevens learned how to use polarities.

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[27] The whole canto is quoted on page 239.

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Since no criticism is final, I shall conclude with Stevens's plangently ponderable lines that highlight the importance of parallelism in thinking:

> Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
> It is as if in a human dignity
> Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
> Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.
>
> How easily the blown banners change to wings...
> Things dark on the horizons of perception,
> Become accompaniments of fortune...
>
> The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
> The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
> Of the unknown. (*CP* 508)

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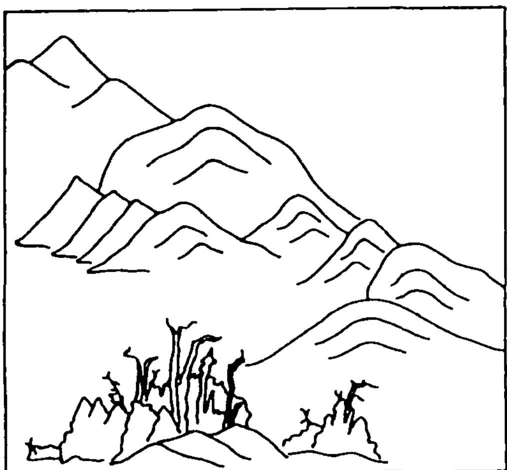
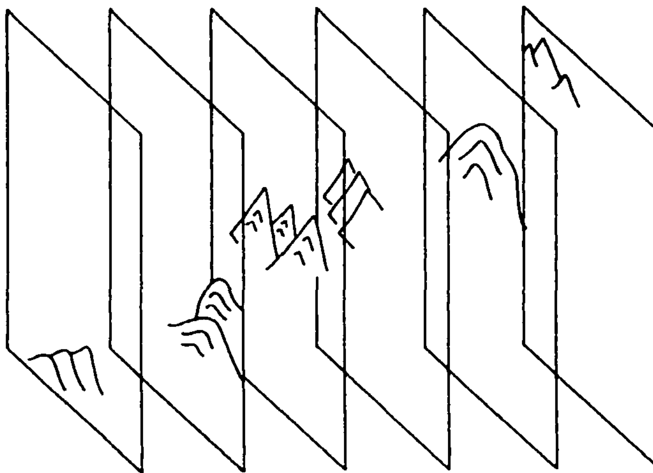
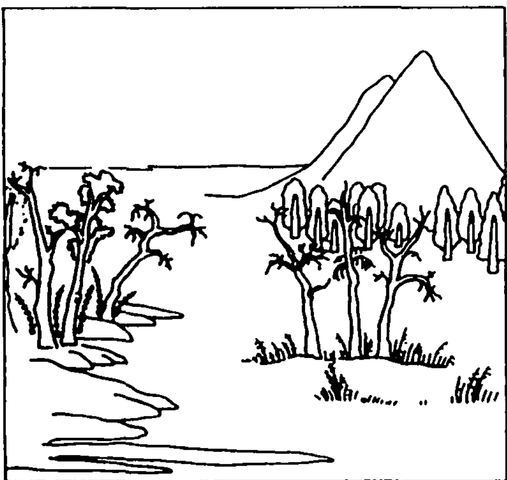
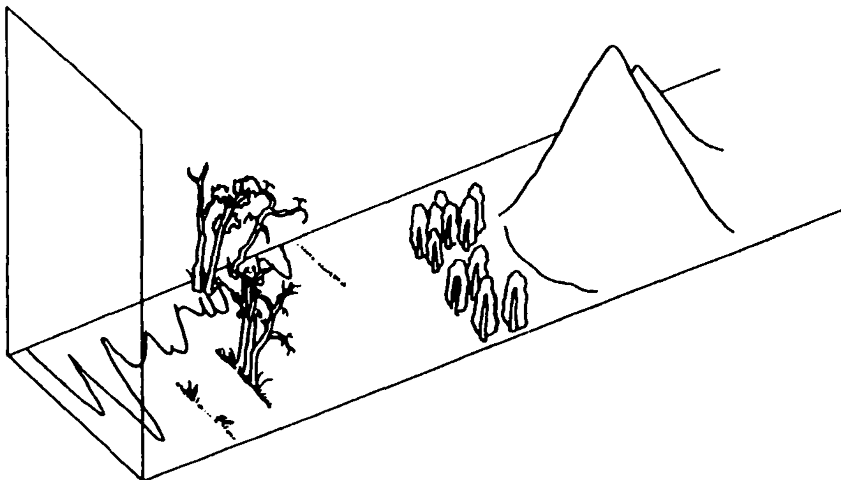
Illustration 1 (from *Images of the Mind*)





Figs. 14a, b. Diagrams of Li-sheng, *Dream Journey through the Hsiao and Hsiang Rivers*, fig. 53, showing overlapping mountain motifs receding in a continuous sequence





Figs. 15a, b. Diagrams of Chao Meng-fu, *Autumn Colors on the Ch'iao and Hua Mountains*, fig. 66, showing landscape elements arranged along a continuously receding ground plane

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Illustration 2 (from *Images of the Mind*)

Fig. 11. Anonymous, detail, *Life of Buddha.* Undated, 9th century. Banner, ink and color on silk, from Tun-huang, Kansu province. The British Museum, London

Fig. 12. Anonymous, detail, *Mount Wu-t'ai (Wu-t'ai-shan)*. Undated, 10th century. Wall painting, Cave 61, Tun-huang, Kansu province

1.7 Mi Yu-jen, *A Rare View of the Hsiao and Hsiang.* Handscroll, ink on paper, ht. 19.8 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. From *Chung-kuo li-tai hui-hua,* vol. 3, pl. 3.

Illustration 3 (from ***The Lyric Journey***)

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