

Wallace Stevens and Zen Buddhism

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Abstract

American poet Wallace Stevens describes nature in his poetry, discussing the relationship between poetry writing and nature, and expresses his ecological poetics to the world. The poet also integrates the concepts of Buddhism into his ecopoetry, advocating that humans should control the constantly expanding material desires, being indifferent to fame and wealth, and form a peaceful state of mind, thereby reducing human damage to the environment and nature, and constructing a deep ecological view which advocates all creatures are equal.

Keywords: Wallace Stevens, ecopoetry, Buddhism

1. Introduction

Wallace Stevens, as a famous modern American poet, enjoys the honors of “Poet of Poets” and “Poet of Critics”. He devotes his entire life to writing and was a prolific writer, often regarded as a representative of modern American poetry. He proposes the concept of “supreme fiction”, viewing imagination and reality as an inseparable contradiction, thus presenting his poetics with avant-garde qualities. Stevens was deeply influenced by romantic poets, especially Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson. But unlike romantic writers, he describes nature in his poetry, discusses the relationship between poetry and nature, and expresses his ecological poetics to the world. If Thoreau advocates the use of a language that connects with nature and land, or Whitman uses nature as the standard for measuring literature and art, Stevens expresses the view of using poetry to integrate nature and human souls. He uses text as a tool in a large number of poems, shifting readers’ attention from books and literature to “books of nature” through text.

2. Literature Review

Japanese scholar Hiroyoshi, Taiken Tanaka in his paper “Buddhism in Some American Poets: Dickinson, Williams, Stevens and Snyder”(2008) points out that Romantic poet Dickinson, modernist poets Williams and Stevens, and postmodern poet Snyder are deeply influenced by Buddhist thoughts. Stevens often uses the word “negation” in his poetry, which is very similar to the idea of “emptiness” in Zen Buddhism.

Some scholars in China point that Stevens’s ecopoetry is closely related to Zen Buddhism. Qian Zhaoming traces the relationship between Stevens and Zen in his paper “The Zen Thought in Stevens’s Early Poetry”. He believes that Chinese and Japanese Zen paintings and Zen classics collected by the Boston Museum of Fine Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York at the beginning of the last century have a significant impact on Stevens, such as his works “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”.

However, it is controversial about the specific relationship between Stevens and Zen. The characteristics of Stevens’s ecopoetry with Zen thoughts still need systematic studies. This paper tries to analyze the relationship between Stevens’s ecopoetry and Zen Buddhism, especially the influence of both the concept of deep ecology and Zen thoughts on Stevens’s writing.

3. Wallace Stevens’s Ecopoetry and Buddhism

Buddhism advocates that all things have Buddha nature, so all beings are equal and there is no distinction between highness and lowness. “All sentient beings are equal, indistinguishable, and have the same body and good roots” (Hong Qisong, 2014, 240). Every object in the vast world has spirituality and Buddha nature, and every flower and leaf is a small world with a meaning of existence. When flowers wither, people have days to bury themselves, and at the end of their lives, they should return to nature. In the vast universe, all things are like tiny dust. Although small, it can also become a small world on its own. A glimpse reveals the whole leopard, and a drop of water reveals the vast sea. Tiny things are a microcosm of the vast world. Human beings can find great wisdom from these small things,

and experience the philosophy of life. *Avatamsaka Sutra* believes that the world should be a perfect state of utmost truth and goodness. With a peaceful mind, an individual can focus without distractions, and have the freedom to comprehend all phenomena. Flowers, and other plants can be a paradise of extreme pleasure, allowing one to glimpse the Buddha nature and achieve the so-called Avatamsaka state. Buddha once said in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, “by using the Indra net, it is convenient to separate and unify all Dharma realms. By entering one world with various worlds, it cannot be said that the immeasurable world enters into one world. By installing the immeasurable world in all Dharma realms, it has entered into one world. By installing the immeasurable world in all void realms, it is not harmful to the appearance of peace.” (Hong Qisong, 2014, 193) The Indra net was originally a net made of precious pearls in the palace of the Heavenly King of Traya. The pearls shine on each other. Buddhists often use the Indra net to show the myriad connections and causal relationships among all things. In Stevens’s ecological poetry, the poet believes that humans and nature, as well as humans and the environment, are integrated. Each thing has its own characteristics. Respecting all things is also a human respect for oneself; seeing differences and connections among all things, and examining the universe from a holistic perspective, Stevens also aligns with the deep ecological origins of Eastern culture, elucidating the characteristics of “all things have spirits” which is similar to what Buddhism talks about.

Arne Naess once explained the concepts and connotations of shallow and deep ecological movements in his article “The Deep Ecology”, and first proposed the concept of deep ecology. The Western philosophical tradition has always emphasized rationality and the value of humanity, viewing humanity and nature as two opposing poles. There is an insurmountable gap between the two, and therefore humans claim to be masters of all things to conquer and rule nature. The deep ecology aims at breaking the shackles of anthropocentrism and establish a diverse ecological environment. Ecocentrism equality is one of the two core principles of deep ecology, which is essentially a high degree of identification with the ecosystem, promoting the harmony between humans and nature, eliminating differences in value between humans and all things to achieve a kind of unity between the ontology and the object. Stevens fully embodies the concept of ecological equality in deep ecology in his many ecological poems. The poet examines the development of each individual in the entire ecosystem from an ecological perspective, treating each individual equally, thereby weakening human value and promoting mutual benefit among individual organisms. The establishment of deep ecology has its Western philosophical foundation, while also absorbing the wisdom of Eastern philosophy, such as “Buddhism provides appropriate background and source connections for deep ecology.” (Lei Yi, 2012, 41) Stevens’s ecological poetics not only reflects recognition of the concept of deep ecology, but also demonstrates compatibility with the Buddhist view of interconnection between things, emphasizing the unity of all things in the universe.

3.1 “Indra Net” in Buddhist Philosophy: The Concept of the Whole and Parts of Nature

In Stevens’s poem “Parts of A World”, it is believed that the whole is composed of parts, but the sum of each individual does not represent the whole; just like a poetry collection is composed of each poem, but each poem is a fragment, attempting to piece together a whole “world”. The poet’s intention is very clear, which is to see characteristics of each individual and pay attention to the existence of every thing. The poem “The Course of a Particular” (Stevens, 1997, 460) criticizes human rationality and expresses the concept of the integration of all things. The poet personifies the image of “crying leaves” in a natural way, which appears five times and essentially represents the poet’s sympathy for nature and satire on anthropocentrism. The traditional anthropocentrism can be traced back to the Greek era, where humans were regarded as the subjects of God and thus had privileges. During the Renaissance period from the 14th to the 16th century, the relationship between humans and nature was seen as an opposition between subject and object, and the value of human rationality was infinitely magnified. Today, with the rapid development of science and technology, humans have become “creators”, trampling on nature at will and causing their own ecological crisis. American philosopher Brian Norton once advocated that humans should bear a certain moral responsibility towards nature; William Modi believes that humans should moderately develop and utilize nature, and expand their moral concerns. But these two perspectives have not yet broken out of the circle of anthropocentrism. Stevens’s depiction of leaves in this poem is closer to Aldo Leopold’s view of “earth ethics”. Leopold believes that “when something helps to protect the harmony, stability, and beauty of the biological community, it is right; when it goes against it, it is wrong.” (Leopold, 1949, 213) This actually recognizes that humans are a member of the biological community, and the value of each member of the community should be respected, creating equal and harmonious relationships between humans and other organisms.

The leaves hanging on the branches in the poem shout in the cold wind, “it is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.” Shadows and snow symbolize death and coldness, and their significance can be extended to difficulties faced by humans, whether it is environmental deterioration, life setbacks, diseases, or even being lost. The poet realizes that

“where there is a conflict, there is resistance involved.” The destruction of humanity has led himself and nature towards two opposing sides. The leaves represent all things in nature and show a cry of resistance. This cry “is not of divine attention, nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry. It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves.” Unlike Western tradition, Stevens denies that the highest form and essence of things are God, but “nothingness, an uncertain, abstract universe” (Jianer, 1980, 71). Here, the poet fully affirms the value of leaves, which is to regard nature as a faith that replaces God. Human beings are no longer supreme gods. All beings are equal, and have no privilege in front of others. Human behavior towards nature is not honorable, and poets use a satirical tone to praise it as a “hero”. The poet pointed out that “one is part of everything”, indicating that nature does not need any human pity, because humans themselves are a member of this ecosystem, and humans do not need anyone’s salvation. What humans need is their own redemption. He emphasized that “in the thing itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.”

Baruch de Spinoza believed that “God is nature, equating God with nature. Nature is the only entity, like the essence of God, eternal, infinite, and unique.” (Zhao Yuanjun, 2017, 16) He points out that humans and other entities are creations of nature, and humans are not superior to other objects, but rather a form of interdependence. The existence of natural is not intended to satisfy human material desires, but rather has inherent value, showing the concept of equality and wholeness. Only by achieving unity with the objective world and forming a strong sense of identity can humanity achieve the true harmony. Stevens sees this process as “one feels the life of that which gives life as it is” reflecting on the fusion of Spinoza’s ontology and object perspectives. The poet believes that the subject of human beings is not a component of the object, so deliberately integrating humans into the object can only be in vain. Only by giving up rationality and breaking free from the cycle of anthropocentrism can humans see the essence of life clearly. Master Du Shun of Huayan Sect once proposed the “everything is combined with its surrounding environment”, which means “The Zen environment refers to the Dharma realms. In other words, it means to encompass everything, and no Dharma realm can exceed the void realm.” (Zheng Yanhong, 2009, 187) He regards the entire natural world as the Dharma realm, and everything is contained within it. This kind of tolerance requires the Buddhist “emptiness” state of mind to understand. The poet realizes that “it is a busy cry, concerning someone else”. As long as a person has a winter like heart and realizes that they have set aside the distractions in their hearts and achieves that everything in the world is void. Only then can they find the original form of life through the chaotic world and discover the most beautiful side of nature and the heart.

In his poem “July Mountain” (Stevens, 1997, 476), Stevens provides a clearer explanation of the concept of the “Indra Net”, telling the story of his personal experience of climbing high and looking out, and interacting with nature, presenting a holistic ecosystem to readers. “Indrajala” (Sanskrit for indrajala), also known as the Heavenly Emperor’s Web, was originally a network in front of the Imperial Palace, consisting of countless beads connected and reflecting on each other. Each bead can reflect countless images. The reflection between beads can form countless layers of images, which is called the “Emperor Pearl Heavenly Knot”. The true meaning of the Indra net lies in the interconnection and mutual reference between things, highlighting the whole and emphasizing the relationship between the whole and the parts. In this poem, Stevens believes that the ecological environment in which humans live, just like “we live in a constellation,” is a whole composed of countless individuals. “Of patches and of patches, not in a single world” indicates that individuals seem to be connected and inseparable by threads, and their relationships are chaotic and complex. Each individual is a response to the other, and the other is the meaning that sustains their own existence, similar to the “Indra Net” in Huayan Buddhism. The poet emphasizes that the constellation as a whole is not a single world, but a diverse group composed of different individuals. Each individual belongs to this whole, but has its unique side. This world is not something that can be said beautifully through music, on the piano, or in speeches. It is an objective existence, not a product of human civilization, and does not rely on human consciousness. The so-called progress brought about by science and technology is just a “beautiful lie”, and the truth of human survival is covered up by the “civilization” we are proud of. Humans’ understanding of all things in the universe is still far from sufficient, just like on a page of a poetry collection. Thinkers have not come up with a final idea about a constantly starting universe.

3.2 Buddha nature in Buddhist Philosophy: The Concept of Equality of All Things

Buddhism believes that all living beings have Buddha nature, and all living beings have the ability to enlightenment. The Buddha nature of all beings is equal. Naess once pointed out that “only the whole, which is formed by the combination of the objective properties, traits, and recurring characteristics of things, can have Buddhahood.” (Naess, 2008, 196) The realization of Buddhahood must be achieved within a whole shared by all living beings, which Buddhism interprets as “birth and death”. The nature of birth and death is shared by all sentient beings, and they seek liberation from it, that is, rebirth from the infinite cycle. “Buddhism emphasizes reincarnation because only within

the scope of non anthropocentrism or superhuman centrism, that is, within the realm of birth and death shared by all beings, the problem of human life and death can be considered to be completely solved. Only on this broader basis can the nirvana beyond reincarnation be considered to be achievable.” (Masao Abe, 1989, 40) Stevens specifically mentions the “constant beginning” of the universe in his poem, believing that it is in constant change and implying that the universe, as the “realm of birth and death” in Buddhism, is the place of reincarnation, where all beings can understand Buddha’s nature and the mysteries of the universe. Only by transcending the perspective of anthropocentrism, seeing oneself and all things coexisting in the universe, and obtaining transcendence with equal identity, can humanity truly recognize its relationship with the environment. The poet concludes by saying, “The way, when we climb a mountain, Vermont throws itself together” “The way” can be seen here as the path of Buddhist meditation; climbing implies that the reader’s journey is not easy and full of hardships; “mountain” means the profound realm of Buddhist meditation practice; the term “Vermont” originally meant “green mountains” and is understood as natural at this moment. The poet believes that through this spiritual journey, humans can be liberated from the constraints of the world and the soul, comprehending the essence of Buddhism and Zen, to recognize the integrity of the environment, transcend the boundaries between subject and object, integrate into nature, obtain eternal life in nature, and purify their souls.

The poem “Indian, River” (Stevens, 1997, 93) outlines the face of the Indian River with a few strokes, shaping an integrated ecological environment in the form of an Indra net. The poet first depicts the busy scene of the Indian River dock, where the “trade wind” and the “jingles the rings in the net” represents human activities. This sound seems to be stirring roots of the American sunflower tree, and the red sparrow standing tall in the cedar facing the orange tree. “The bioregionalism movement advocates division based on characteristics such as biological composition, watershed boundaries, land types, and cultural phenomena.” (Lei Yi, 2001, 101) The poet uses flowing rivers as a dynamic form to depict collisions between different organisms, viewing the biological areas along the river as an inseparable whole. “A place can be heard, seen, smelled, imagined, loved, hated, feared, and revered.” (Walter, 1988, 141) American ecological critic Lawrence Buell also believes that a place is like a container of some kind of space, and humans have a strong attachment to it. In the poem, Stevens displays a strong sense of place, with the American sunflowers, orange trees, cedars, and cardinals being representative flora and fauna of North America. Plants rely on water for growth, the roots of sunflowers draw nutrients from the soil of river water, the red sparrows inhabit cedars and feed on the fruits of orange trees, while plants rely on birds for survival. Each organism has intricate connections and interdependence, forming a rich and diverse ecosystem, which also shows the poet’s attachment and familiarity with their environment. The biological area formed by the Indian River is a real existence that can be perceived through various human senses, even human imagination. The Indian River nurtured Native Americans in North America, which revered and were close to nature, representing a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. However, the commercial activities that followed changed this relationship. This ecological balance does not exist in bustling Florida, nor on the beaches of convents, and the shrubs are nowhere to be found. The poet warns us that human influence on the environment far exceeds the range that the environment can bear. The destruction of ecosystems cannot be compensated for by human wealth and prayer. Humans should restrain their desires, reduce harm to the environment, and only then can they hear the beautiful sounds of nature again. And this sound is not only a call from nature, but also a call from the depths of human soul.

In a letter to his wife Elsie, the poet mentioned, “there is so little in New York that I desire enough to work for: certainly I do not desire money, and yet my thoughts must be constantly on that subject.” (Holly Stevens, 1996, 100) Stevens’s words satirizes the extravagant life of New York, believing that money supremacy has corroded the entire city, representing the value of money. The growth of red ferns reminds the poet of the chaos of the city, familiar places. The city is so “unfamiliar”, and humans are so stubborn. “Crowding” symbolizes the rapid increase in urban population, while “the overlapping red” represents the law of the jungle of society in the city, where the law of the fittest prevails and humans trample on it. Stevens feels heartbroken about this scene, and he mentioned more than once in his diary and letter to Elsie that he loves nature and enjoys being close to it. On August 10, 1902, the poet wrote in his diary, “I can fancy myself at ease there. How often I shall stretch out under those evergreens listening to the showers of wind around me-and to that little tinkling bit of water dropping down among those huge rocks and black crevices! It is very undisturbed there.” (Holly Stevens 1996, 61) It can be seen that the poet always regards nature as his companion, from which he could find comfort and joy.

Feminist scholar Karen Warren once pointed out that “there is a close connection between human conquest and plunder of nature and oppression of women. In the ultimate sense, the dual domination of women and nature has something in common, namely binary opposition thinking and value hierarchy.” (Warren, 2000, 1) Therefore, nature is often connected to women, and men represent the opposite of nature. The word “father” appears four times in the

poem “Red Fern”, symbolizing male power, while “father’s flame” represents humanity’s conquest of nature. The red fern is not as stable as its father’s flame, but it is imbued with his characteristics, occupying space; Gradually, it goes beyond the connection with the father’s branch, implying that the reader’s human behavior has lost control and rationality. The dazzling, expanding, and extremely bright core is like many desires of humanity, difficult to suppress. The fiercely burning father’s fire indicates the escalating ecological crisis. American ecological poet Kenneth Rexroth believes that human beings not only see themselves as independent entities fundamentally opposed to the natural environment, but also as the only valuable creator in the world, a relatively eternal factor in this painful world.” (Zheng Yanhong, 2009, 147) Stevens also has a similar view in “The Red Fern” to Rexroth. He pointed out that in order for humans to recognize themselves, they must go back to the essence of life, face all things in nature with the childlike innocence and purity of the soul in the works of writer William Blake, and discover the true meaning of life. It is not until the scene awakens the tiring eyes of humanity that one can perceive the tangible difficulties of all things. The poet places his own observations, feelings, and thoughts in the plant image of the red fern, warning people that only by reducing desires, having a clear state of mind, and avoiding their obsession, can they overcome their current difficulties and obtain spiritual liberation.

4. Conclusion

Obviously, Stevens’s writing is influenced deeply by Zen which donates him inspiration and new concepts of the relationship between humans and nature. He reflects on the equality of all things from the perspective of Zen Buddhism. It can be believed that Zen Buddhism provides a chance for Stevens to think about how to eliminate the current ecocrisis and help humans rebuild the harmony between themselves and nature.

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