

# WALLACE STEVENS: THE PROCESS OF ABSTRACTION

by

Wai-lim Yip

In his attack on the romantic view of imagination in the essay "Imagination as Value," Wallace Stevens places a very strong emphasis on abstraction. He writes:

The imagination is the genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction. The achievement of the romantic, on the contrary, lies in minor wish-fulfillments and is incapable of abstraction. (NA, 138-139)\*

Six years before he made this statement, he wrote a long poem on aesthetics, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." To the first section he attributed the subtitle: "It must be Abstract"; one of the statements in his "Adagia" is

The momentum of the mind is all toward abstraction. (OP, 179)

Poetry has usually been valued for its concreteness rather than for its abstraction. How is it that Stevens assumes the reverse position by insisting upon abstraction? Wherein lies the poetic value of abstraction? Edith Sitwell once described her *Farcade* poems as "abstract." By abstract, she meant "patterns in sound,"<sup>1</sup> just as music is nonrepresentational or nonobjective. Although some of Stevens's early poems displayed a concentration upon sound effects,<sup>2</sup> he certainly has no intention of becoming

\* All references to Wallace Stevens's poetry and prose will, hereafter, be abbreviated as follows: NA=*The Necessary Angel*; CP=*Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*; OP=*Opus Posthumous*.

<sup>1</sup> E. Sitwell, "On My Poetry," *Orpheus*, 2 (1949).

<sup>2</sup> For example "Bantams in Pine-Woods" (CP, 75).

a poet of pure music, for he is vitally concerned with visual presentation.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, we ought to recall the traditional depreciation of abstraction one finds in Philip Sidney and the Romantics. Sidney, in his *Defence of Poesie*, places poetry above philosophy because of its greater concreteness, and the Romantics have openly attacked abstract personifications and the use of abstract reasoning as a whole. As a pronounced opponent of the Romantics in this respect, how is Stevens different from them, particularly when everywhere in his poetry he shows signs of the exuberance of Romantic imagery?

The case is further complicated by the fact that some of Stevens's poems are reminiscent of the Imagist poets, for instance, his poems "The Load of Sugar-cane" and "Some Friends From Pascagoula." The Imagist poets have suspected the romantics of having actually smuggled into their poetry philosophic statements incognito, and, as a reaction against the Romantics, the Imagists, mainly T. E. Hulme and Ezra Pound in his early phases, advocate a wholly concrete poetry of objects uncontaminated by idea and statement.<sup>4</sup> Stevens's affinity with the Imagists, however tenuous, indicated a distinct concern for concrete images in his poetry. Indeed, much of his poetry concentrates on the buildup of a sensuous surface of imagery. It is in this paradoxical connection that we find his concept of abstraction ambiguous and intriguing. A comprehensive study of "abstraction" in poetry made by

<sup>3</sup> As Michel Benamou has ably shown in his "Wallace Stevens: Some Relations between Poetry and Painting" (cf. *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, ed. by Ashley Brown & Robert S. Haller, pp. 232-248). See also NA, 159-176.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. T. E. Hulme's *Speculations*, but more specifically, Ezra Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." "An *Image* is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth."

comparing Stevens's concept to previous theories would be instructive to the future studies in aesthetics. Such a study must be left for another time. In this essay, I will be concerned with one particular level of meaning of the word "abstraction," in order to see what it means and how it works in the artistic process, in the process of actual composition as reflected in Stevens's poems. However, before attempting such an analysis it would be useful to review several previous interpretations of Stevens's "abstraction."

Professor R.P. Blackmur, commenting on "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," discusses abstraction in the following terms: "It [poetry] must be archetypical, and a source, an initiator of myth and sense, and also a judgement for myth and sense."<sup>5</sup>

Harold Bloom, writing on the same poem, offers another interpretation:

Elsewhere in his work the idea of abstraction is what more usually would be called "fabrication." The possible poet has the power to abstract or withdraw himself from outworn conceptualizations of reality, and to live in the world, yet outside the existing conceptions of it, and he can do this only by fabricating his fictions<sup>6</sup>

Northrop Frye has commented similarly:

By abstract Stevens apparently means artificial in its proper sense, something constructed rather than generalized.<sup>7</sup>

Robert Pack, on the other hand, thinks that abstraction is the way

<sup>5</sup> R.P. Blackmur, "An Abstraction Blooded," from *Form & Value in Modern Poetry* (Anchor), p. 213.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Bloom, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction: A Commentary," reprinted in *Wallace Stevens*, edited by Marie Borroff., p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Pack, *Wallace Stevens: An Approach of His Poetry and Thought* (Rutgers), p. 96.

to approach the source of all our ideas, images and metaphors, so that the closer we come to the first idea, the closer we come to the fountain-source of reality.<sup>8</sup>

All the above interpretations, except Frye's are given in relation to the poem, "Note Toward a Supreme Fiction." All of them are valid and adequate explanations, yet they do not lend themselves to the clarification of Stevens's method in his other poems. What is "an archetypical image of situation"? Let us consider Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The knight's quest for the life-giving water is an archetypical image or situation, which resolves both the quest of love in sex and the quest for religion. All the other events in the poem, each in itself a quest for meaning in life, are united into the ritual inherent in the archetypical quest. For Stevens, as Professor Blackmur has indicated, the sun is the archetypical image. But many of Stevens's images do not always return to the sun-image, and if they ever do, they rarely return to it for a ritualized or mythical meaning. Stevens is almost completely terrestrial.

How can a poet withdraw himself from outworn conceptualizations? Harold Bloom's answer is: by fabricating his fictions. The word 'fictions' remains to be defined. And Frye's definition seems to have ignored the special form of intellectual activity bound up in the process of abstraction as it will be shown later in this essay.

Robert Pack's interpretation is only a paraphrase of Stevens's own undefined "basic images, basic emotions to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world" (NA, 145). The point is: What constitutes these basic images, basic emotions? In the artistic process, how can the poet get at these basic images, basic emotions, and free his mind from outworn conceptualizations, so that these images and emotions may become archetypical?

Language is a meaning-object structure, that is, each word always carries with it a referential meaning to a cultural context from which the word derives. Language often employs objects to represent an idea. Does the process of abstraction mean, then, an effort to go beyond meaning and beyond object? The conventional usage of the word 'abstraction' as a direct, irreconcilable opposite to figuration (as in painting) and to concrete objects (as in the traditional view of poetry) has obscured a very important level of meaning the word once carried. The process of abstraction begins with isolated individuals, and groups them together by virtue of perceived resemblances, to arrive at a unity in plurality. This last sentence is one of the many definitions given in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (11th Edition). If this definition can be accepted as valid, Stevens's theory of resemblances and correspondences becomes quite relevant. In his "Three Academic Pieces: I," he says:

Take, for example, a beach extending as far as the eye can reach, bordered, on the one hand, by trees and, on the other, by the sea. The sky is cloudless and the sun is red. In what sense do the objects in this scene resemble each other? There is enough green in the sea to relate it to the palms. There is enough of the sky reflected in the water to create a resemblance, in some sense, between them. The sand is yellow between the green and the blue. In short the light alone creates a unity not only in the recedings in the distance, where differences become invisible, but also in the contacts of closer light. So, too, sufficiently generalized, each man resembles all other men, each woman resembles all other women, this year resembles last year. The beginning of time will, no doubt, resemble the end of time. One world is said to resemble the other. (NA, 72)

Northrop Frye's interpretation of the word *resemblance* is illuminating here:

By resemblance he does not mean naive or associative resemblance, of the type that calls a flower a bleeding heart, but the

repetitions of color and pattern in nature which become the elements of formal design in art.<sup>9</sup>

The stress that *resemblance* means more than *likelihood* is important, because by extending its meaning from *likelihood* to *relation*, Wallace Stevens has incorporated into it a perspectivism which is peculiarly his, and which gives him, so to speak, a sudden liberation from the restrictions imposed by time and place. It seems that his theory of resemblance and his artistic process are so indissolubly bound up with this perspectivism that we should try to adapt ourselves to his angle before we can understand some of his devices in the process of abstraction. For, as Northrop Frye has also noticed, "there is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of the parallel" (*NA*, 118). Let us digress for a moment in order to examine Stevens's perspectivism and "the strange rhetoric of that parallel."

Stevens has more than once stated explicitly that his concern as a poet is to grasp the interdependence of reality and imagination, "the incessant conjunctions between things as they are and things imagined."<sup>10</sup> His idea that objects are relational and interdependent, that the imagined depend upon the real, and yet at the same time each of the objects has its individuated, almost absolute existence, has its origin in one of his earliest work. *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise* (1916) is meant to be such a "demonstration."<sup>11</sup>

The play begins with three Chinese waiting for the sunrise. Three Chinese may be taken as representing

<sup>9</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," in *Wallace Stevens*, ed. by Marie Borroff, p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> Stevens on his *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, from the Introduction to the Vintage edition of Wallace Stevens's poems by Samuel French Morse, p. xi.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *OP*, p. xxxvii.

three different views of reality, i. e., philosophical, poetical, and practical. A porcelain jug evokes in the Third Chinese's mind an association with a secluded court that had not known poverty and wretchedness until the invasion of humanity. As the poem continues they then get involved in an illustration:

Second Chinese: This candle is the sun  
This bottle is earth

"The earth remains of one color / It remains red, / It remains what it is. / But when the sun shines on the earth, / In reality / It does not shine on a thing that remains / What it was yesterday. / The sun rises / On whatever the earth happens to be. (Third Chinese:) And there are indeterminate moments / Before it rises, / Like this, / Before one can tell / What the bottle is going to be... there are moments / When the candle, sputtering up, / Finds itself in seclusion / *And shines, perhaps, for the beauty of shining.*"

Both the sun and the earth have their moment of seclusion when neither affects the other, each one being self-contained, self-sufficient, having an existence of its own: as the sun shines for the beauty of shining, as the earth remains what it is. But when the sun shines on the earth, that is, when they come into relation, their individual existences are accordingly modified: one seems to have added something to the other, and yet neither suffers major changes in its mode of being. But by multiplying the relations among objects, we have a totality of existences, which we may perhaps call the cosmic unity. The simultaneous existences of different objects, each possessing its potential as a mode of being, build up a context which we call reality. The perspective is not yet circumscribed until the intrusion of death in the play. Right before the sun rises, the Chinese find a dead body hanging on the trees. Death has certainly

changed the atmosphere of the human world, but it has not signally modified the superhuman world, the poetic or aesthetic world, for the sun

will shine soon  
 Upon the trees,  
 And find a new thing  
     (indicating the body)  
 Painted on this porcelain,  
     (indicating the trees)

There is nothing ugly, tragic, or comic about death. Death, like any other object, is part of the texture of reality. Nothing is intrusive; nothing is really outside. And thus,

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.

Instead of conceiving reality as having an ontological status, Stevens perceives it as a context of synchronous relations, a context constantly changing and growing with the multiplication of diverse, but never-conflicting, modes of being, and thus, a consciousness that transcends time and place. This peculiar perspectivism of Stevens's is one of the major subjects of his poems on aesthetics. For instance, in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," we find the poet elaborating on the difficulty of building up his own world, because, unlike the real world, he has to make a choice in the ordering,

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)



The poet is always obsessed with "the final relation, the marriage of the rest" (*CP*, 464) which reality displays.

The problem is how these preoccupations determine the artistic process and what, in this connection, the process of abstraction means. In correspondence with the synchronous relations among the externals, the process of abstraction, as a poetic device, tries to posit all the phenomena as they actually are by the condensation of each of them to its essence, liberating each from time and place.

The communicability of a poem is sometimes obstructed, not because the poet fails to make the sense plain enough in the poem, but because so much of its significance is determined by the cultural and social contexts as restricted by time and place. The poet in order to energize the poem with the highest degree of communicability, should give himself the task of grasping the peculiar quality inherent in the objects. Stevens makes this very explicit in an essay entitled "On Poetic Truth":

To know facts as facts in the ordinary way has, indeed, no particular power or worth. But a quickening of our awareness of the irrevocability by which a thing is what it is, has such power, and it is, I believe, the very soul of art. But no fact is a bare fact, no individual is a universe in itself. The artist exhibits affinities in the *actual* structure of objects by which their significance is deepened and enhanced. What I desire to stress is that there is a unity rooted in the individuality of objects and discovered in a different way from the apprehension of rational connections.<sup>12</sup> (*OP*, 237)

The very first duty of the poet is to seize the *individuality* of the objects, like the sun and the earth (the candle and the porcelain) in *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise*. Once

<sup>12</sup> The same paragraph, with slight change in wording, reappears in his discussion of one of Marianne Moor's poems, in which he goes one more step to say that this is abstraction. (*NA*, 95)

the individuality of the objects is established, they, being free from time- and space-bound conceptualizations, will automatically fall into such a unity as that demonstrated in the play, a unity that depends on the juxtaposition of disparate objects as simultaneous potentials, rather than on causal relations.

Stevens's poetry starts with a group of isolated objects of distinctive individuality. He achieves this by making them into self-contained or self-sufficient images. A self-contained image is one that is capable of giving forth a poetic vigor without the rest of the context. A strong self-contained image can, in fact, be considered a poem in itself. It is sufficient in this sense because it carries the force of the entire situation, as, for example, these lines:

Birds that came like dirty water in waves. (*CP*, 200)

Canaries in the morning, orchestras  
In the afternoon, balloons at night. (*CP*, 142)

A dynamic fearfulness of a cosmic sweep is suggested in the first instance. In the second, we find the condensation of three cross-sections of one day's life, synecdoches of three important events. An image may become self-sufficient due to its immediate sensation, as in

The wind dissolving into birds  
The clouds becoming braided girls (*CP*, 246)

Or it may become self-sufficient when the actuality of the situation is captured in intimate objects as yet uncontaminated by the intellect:

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar limbs. (*CP*, 95)

These modes of being are grasped in a very casual way, as if they had not been removed from the actual place and time. Without any trace of poetic deliberation they are now placed before our eyes as if for the first time. They are like the sun seen again with "an ignorant eye" (*CP*, 380); they are like the sun that "shines, perhaps, for the beauty of shining." In one of Stevens's last poems, "Of Mere Being" (*OP*, 117), such images are purified to an even greater extent. The existence of external objects is taken at face value; their *suchness* is their final meaning:

The palm at the end of the mind,  
Beyond the last thought, rises  
In the bronze distance,

A gold-feathered bird  
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,  
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that is not the reason  
That makes us happy or unhappy.  
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.  
The wind moves slowly in the branches.  
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

Without the reader being referred to the sun's moment of seclusion in the play, he will still feel the forceful, and yet peculiar, directness which the poet attains by locating, or rather, relocating the external objects into their existential contexts. The significance thus given to the objects sweeps away the problem of irrelevance. Like the example of the death-scene in the play, there is nothing intrusive as soon as the existential actuality of the object is established. Therefore, the dump is not considered a jarring image among the moon and flowers. (*CP*, 201). In fact, what we normally consider intrusive seems to gain an incremental effect in Stevens's poems

under his peculiar perspectivism. For instance, in *Esthétique Du Mal* VI, the speaker finds that the sun has brought the day to perfection and then failed. He is longing for a further consummation in life when he finds

space is filled with his  
Rejected years. A big bird pecks at him for food. (CP, 318)

The emergence of the big bird is sudden indeed. Yet it arrests us, not so much for the possible symbolic meaning of "devouring hunger" as for the immediate contact forced on us without our preparation. The vigor comes from the dynamic action; the symbolic meaning is added to it only after the image has arrested us. In the same poem, among a Mr. B, a piano, and music, we find

that Spaniard of the rose, itself  
Hot-hooded and dark-blooded, rescued the rose  
From nature, each time he saw it, making it  
As he saw it, exist in his own especial eye. (CP, 316)

In this example, not only are we not bothered by the intrusion of the Spaniard, but we are not even eager to find out the specific context, the specific place and time in which the Spaniard and the rose are together. Here, we are moving into a particular device in abstraction which Stevens is fond of using.

Many of Stevens's characters are anonymous, and are, thus, never restricted by time and place. They are "fictive" names and "fictive" places. The person may be Mrs. Papadopoulos ("So-and-so Reclining On Her Couch"), Swenson ("Lions in Sweden"), or Ramon Fernandez<sup>18</sup> ("The Idea of Order at Key West"). The place may be Biscayne, Monhegan, or Anacharsis. The exotic flavor which the names may evoke, and the local coloring the

<sup>18</sup> Although Ramon Fernandez was a French critic, he is used in a fictive way in the poem.

place names may call to our mind, are gradually reduced in significance as they enter into the building up of the context. These people and places are there simply for the sake of satisfying the reader's habit of mind. These are not specific people at specific places. They are the final abstraction of man (*CP*, 388) with whom we are constantly driven to identify. This particular concern of Stevens's seems to explain why his *Owl's Clover* underwent such radical revisions and why he finally omitted it completely from his *Collected Poems*. All the major revisions in this poem consist of the omission of details traceable to the specific time with which the poem deals. The most obvious omission is Mr. Brunshaw, a Marxist critic who in 1935 criticized Stevens rather unfavorably.<sup>14</sup> The next to go are a group of historical figures and places. Even after all these efforts, he is still dissatisfied with the poem. One of the reasons may very possibly be its failure to become abstract in the sense I have explained above.

Meanwhile, in a poem like "The Idea of Order at Key West" (*CP*, 128), the somewhat mysterious and impressionistic "she," who appears singing before the stage of the sea, is absolutely anonymous. As a protagonist, she is universalized; she is anybody and everybody. She is the poet's (also the readers') dramatic and immediate presence in the world, for her voice soon becomes "the voice of the sea," "the outer voice of sky," "the heaving speech of air, a summer sound / Repeated in a summer without end / And sound alone,"

But it was more than that,  
More even than her voice, and ours, among  
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,  
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped  
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres  
Of sky and sea.

<sup>14</sup> *New Masses*, Oct. 1, 1935, p. 42.

Toward the end of the poem the figure of Ramon Fernandez is introduced, whose personal or historical references are no longer noticeably significant. Like the "she" in the poem, Ramon becomes anonymous, and more than anonymous, he is transitional. He is like a ferry-boat that brings us from one island to another, a mere vehicle, and yet without it, the "final relation" could not be completed.

It may be interesting to notice here Stevens's obsession with the *voice motif* in his poetry. Many of his poems use the same motif as the core of aesthetic unification. Both in "The Course of a Particular" (*OP*, 96) and "Not Ideas about the Thing, but the Thing Itself" (*CP*, 534), he pursues a *cry* that transcends the emotional and realistic references. The cry of the leaves becomes at last a cry that "concerns no one at all." The bird's cry becomes "part of the colossal sun, / Surrounded by its choral rings, / Still far away."

The above examples have been taken, more or less, from his natural images. Now let us look at another example in which Stevens starts with a human situation, and see how, through the process of abstraction, the external events and objects gradually lose their temporal and spatial references and build up what we may call an abstraction of a situation. The passage is from "Esthetique du Mal":

How the red rose that is the soldier's wound  
 The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all  
 The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood,  
 The soldier of time grown deathless in great size.

A mountain in which no ease is ever found,  
 Unless indifference to deeper death  
 Is ease, stands in the dark, a shadow's hill,  
 And there the soldier of time has deathless rest,

Concentric circles of shadows, motionless  
 Of their own part, yet moving on the wind,

Form mystical convolutions in the sleep  
Of time's red soldier deathless on his bed.

The shadows of his fellows ring him round  
In the high night, the summer breathes for them  
Its fragrance, a heavy somnolence, and for him,  
For the soldier of time, it breathes a summer sleep,

In which his wound is good because life was.  
No part of him was ever part of death.  
A woman smoothes her forehead with her hand  
And the soldier of time lies calm beneath that stroke. (*CP*, 318)

To paraphrase the poem is to do it injustice, although there is certainly a "something said." Wallace Stevens himself, in protesting against paraphrasing, gives us a hint:

The extraction of a meaning from a poem and appraisalment of it by rational standards of truth has mainly been due to the enthusiasm for moral and religious truth... The "something said" is important, but it is important for the poem only in so far as the saying of that particular something in a special way is revelation of reality. (*OP*, 237)

The "special way" in which Stevens conveys *the timeless aspect of death in war* (an archetypical death), is by relating and repeating the objects in such a way so that toward the end of the passage, we are no longer aware of the objects that constitute this sizeless death-feeling, but of the death-feeling itself. This is comparable to viewing a scene of varied mountains and cliffs where one does not notice each individual mountain or cliff, but the entire panorama as naturally formed.

In examining various poetic devices in Wallace Stevens's poetry, I having been trying to relate them to the peculiar perspectivism illustrated in *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise*. We have been dealing with (1) self-contained images, (2) images taken at their existential actualities, (3) the problem (or rather, merit) of intrusion

in relation to the context of synchronous relations, (4) “fictive” names and “fictive” places, and, above all, the common goal of these devices, the goal of escaping restrictions of time and place. We remember that in *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise*, Stevens concludes with:

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

And earlier in the same play,

There are as many points of view  
From which to regard her  
As there are sides to a round bottle. (*OP*, 136)

The poet's concern, is, therefore, to build up a context by the multiplication of diverse points of view, which M. Benamou calls “the multiple perspective.”

M. Benamou, in his essay on the relations between poetry and painting,<sup>15</sup> had singled out this aspect for us. While there are certainly similarities between Stevens and the cubist painters in this respect, Benamou has ignored the fact that it is an inseparable growth within Stevens's peculiar perspectivism. In the poems “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (*CP*, 92) and “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” (*CP*, 98) (both are paramount examples of the “multiple perspective”), the very meaning of the poem as an artistic entity is the context the poet builds up, a context in which the conventional associations of the constituents (words and images from different modes of being) are sloughed off through the process of abstraction, providing a context, therefore, necessarily new and original. Similarly, the unity of these poems is not

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Note 3.



to be defined by the direct, causal relations among the objects, but by their simultaneous presences as potentials grasped in their essence by way of abstraction.