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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Transformation of Taoist Philosophy into Deep Image in W. S. Merwin's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Eastern philosophies have undeniably left an indelible mark on the American poetry scene in the twentieth century, with the Deep Image school standing as representative. This paper focuses on how American poet W. S. Merwin realizes the transformation of Chinese Taoism into the Western deep image poetry. In the collection of poems, The Shadow of Sirius, the Taoism of reconciliation with death is transformed into the exploration of the collective unconscious. Simultaneously, the natural view of the unity of heaven and man is transformed into the communication of the image of "The third body", skillfully effectuating the transformation of Eastern philosophy into Western poetics, employing diverse avenues of poetic expression.

KEYWORDS

W. S. Merwin, Taoist Philosophy, Deep Image Poetry

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Since Ezra Pound's translation of Li Bai's poem The Wife of the River Merchant graced the literary scene in 1914, the resonance of Chinese poetry and philosophy had profoundly permeated the twentieth-century American poetry world. A second wave of a renewed fervor for classical Chinese poetry and philosophy emerged in American poets during the late 1950s (Zhao, 1989), and among them, the Deep Image (also known as Neo-Surrealism) poets represented by Robert Bly and James Wright, have greatly incorporated the tenets of Chinese Taoism.

American contemporary poet W. S. Merwin, a double laureate of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1971 and 2009, also the seventeenth United States Poet Laureate in 2010, stands as a pivotal figure in contemporary American poetry. Merwin is also one of the representatives of the Deep Image poetry (Christopher, 2003), and similar to Robert Bly and James Wright, Merwin is a poet deeply influenced by the Chinese philosophy of Taoism. In many of his interviews and the review to the Taoism work such as Tao Te Ching, we can see his deep insight into Taoism.

At present, among the research on Merwin's poetry relevant to the topic, there are a small number of papers exploring his poetry from the perspective of deep image to explain its radical subjectivity (Elliott, 1978), and some scholars have delved into the relationship between Merwin's poetry and Chinese Taoism and Zen Buddhism (Zeng, 2021). But there remains a conspicuous absence of a comprehensive exploration intertwining the Chinese Taoism influence on Merwin's poetry and its connection with the formation of deep image in his poems yet. Given that Merwin's poems so well link Eastern Taoism and Western deep imagism, the purpose of this paper is to explore the connection between the elements of deep image in Merwin's poetry and the Chinese philosophy of Taoism, and how Merwin was influenced by Chinese Taoism to develop his deep image poetry. Meanwhile, due to Merwin's long creative career and varied styles, this paper mainly focuses on his 2009 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of poems, The Shadow of Sirius, to explore the traces of mutual understanding between Chinese and Western cultures from a new perspective.

2. Connection among Merwin, Deep Image and Chinese philosophy of Taoism

Deep Image school of poetry reveals its distinctive poetic concepts in the middle and late twentieth century. Diverging from Pound's advocacy of the "image", which "presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" from Pound, the

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Deep Image school transcends conventional bounds. Imagism poets' knowledge and experience are used to discover the external world, while "deep image" enables the poet's unconscious to communicate with the reader's unconscious, allowing a plunge into the depths of the inner unconscious to discover poetic imagery. What distinguished deep image poetry from other contemporary forms of poetry was, in the words of Dennis Haskell, the "rational manipulation of irrational materials" (Mambrol, 2020). Merwin's poetry also distinctly embodies the traits of deep image, resonating with himself, who once mentioned that "a real poem comes out of what you don't know" (1982). His verses are imbued with the frequent presence of dreams, subconscious realms, and other supernatural elements, in order to discover the surreal elements in the unconscious. In The Shadow of Sirius, we can still see these characteristics.

Simultaneously, "Deep Image", from its theoretical proposition to the poetic creations, manifests a profound resonance with Chinese Taoist. Robert Bly, the notable representative of Deep Image poetry, said in an interview with Zhao Yiheng that "Good poetry always extends beyond our daily experience, or rather, extends to what lies beneath the surface of human consciousness. And Taoist thought is most useful for this purpose. So many poets have struggled to understand revelatory mental images, and they have struggled to achieve a better understanding of the Tao."(1992), referring here to the Tao of Chinese Taoist philosophy. Merwin, as also one of the representatives of "deep image" school, is unique in his translation of Chinese Taoist culture into the American concept of deep image.

3. Death Writing: The Unity of Life and Death, and the Reconciliation with Death

Death stands as a paramount aspect of the eternal experience of mankind; the most inevitable thing in life is that it will happen. Therefore, writers across diverse cultures and epochs have grappled with articulating the inevitable nature of death in various forms throughout history. In the Shadow of Sirius, we can see the harmony between Eastern Taoist philosophy of life-and-death concept and the themes of Western deep image poetry from form to content.

In Lao Tzu's Taoist philosophy, the universe is envisaged as an expansive living organism, and all things in the universe are not isolated, but all elements share a common origin: the Tao. The Tao gives all entities the potential of life. According to Taoist philosophy, life and death are not individual phenomena, but are interconnected within the vast universe. They undergo a perpetual transformation, just a shift in material form. "Man imitates earth, earth imitates heaven, heaven follows the divine law, and the divine law follows nature." (P.52), human life is portrayed as "when there is life, there is death, and when there is death, there is life" (P.40), which assumes just a form of Tao. Therefore, death ceases to signify disappearance or nothingness, instead, it constitutes a return to nature and the Tao, life and death are entangled in the same body. Each of us experiences the infinite beginnings and endings of all life, embodying the boundlessness of cosmic existence. Death is the latent form of life. Simultaneously, in the concept of "deep image poetry," poets place images into the unconscious, producing "deep image" through the combination of subjectivity and objective images. Here, "the unconscious" is derived from Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. Jung believed that the collective unconscious is a communal consciousness passed down from primitive times, a reservoir of memory potentials manifested in specific forms (Zhang, 2003). In deep image poetry, the realm of the unconscious where images penetrate into is also the collective body of knowledge, experience, and memory that all humanity has possessed since ancient times, a communal entity that transcends time and space, representing a universal existence. In Merwin's poetry, the collective unconscious that forms a deep image is combined with the Taoist concept of "Equality of Life and Death"(齐生死). Death no longer represents an end but becomes the collective unconscious in which all life sleeps, awaiting awakening into each of our lives. Death lives within us, embedded in the darkness of our individual lives, as a form of collective unconscious. Thus, Merwin's expression of the Taoist notion of reconciling with death, where life and death coexist harmoniously in Tao, finds its manifestation in the form of deep image within the unconscious, hinting at the exploration of subtle traces of a quest into the depths of the unconscious. The "Tao", where life and death coexist, is embodied in Merwin's poems as a collective memory embedded in the unconscious within the realm of the deep image. For example, in To Paula in Late Spring, Merwin writes "the worn griefs will have eased like the early cloud\ through which the morning slowly comes to itself\ and the ancient defenses against the dead\ will be done with and left to the dead at last"(4-7), cloud is a image which awakens the archetype in unconscious. The worn griefs have eased like the dissipation of an early cloud; death, once shrouded in fearful nothingness and unknown realms, is no longer a fearful being. This transformation is not solely attributed to the solace found in the companionship of a like-minded lover; it extends further to the return of death to its primal essence—the Tao, which encompasses all the shared sentiments of humanity and common emotions of human beings. Much like the natural cycle of clouds participating in material transformations, death, in returning to the Tao, becomes an integral part of the universal ebb and flow.

In Nocturne II, the transformation to unconscious and collective memory is shown more eloquently: "but in the stillness after the rain ends\ nothing is to be heard but the drops falling\ one at a time from the tips of the leaves\ into the night and I lie in the dark\ listening to what I remember\ while the night flies on with us into itself"(9-14). The image of "shadows" frequently aligns with the unconscious. Shadows, functioning as projections from the diurnal realm, frequently symbolize a dreamlike subconsciousness and unconsciousness in the works of deep image poets. This stands in contrast to the "waking consciousness" associated with daytime, symbolized by the "night" and "dark." These elements signify the poets' transition into the realm of the

unconscious. In the darkness of the night, the poet wrote down this nocturne, engaging in the act of "listening to what I remember" amidst the darkness, which is the representation process of the poet's immersion into the unconscious. This process of attentive listening in the darkness and the quest for memories unfolds as the poet's journey of diving into the unconscious in pursuit of "plural memories". Just as the encompassing nature of the Tao that holds all things, "what I remember" transcends mere "my" personal recollections, but the poet's attempts to dive into the collective unconscious and listen to the flow of all things in the cosmic symphony. In this way, the dissolution and reconciliation of the fear of mortality in Taoist philosophy, where life and death reside seamlessly in the transmuted form of Tao, is transformed in Merwin's poems into a quest for profound interconnectedness within the deep unconscious community and collective memory.

This transformation of thanatopsis helps the poet construct the reconciliation of death. In Blueberries After Dark, Merwin wrote: so this is the way the night tastes\ one at a time\ not early or late\ my mother told me\ that I was not afraid of the dark\ and when looked it was true".(1-6) Merwin writes about his mother's loss of both parents at an early age and the subsequent death of her first son, but she tells "I" "that I was not afraid of the dark\ and when looked it was true". Here, darkness serves as a metaphor for death, expressing an openness to the inevitability. The experience of death here becomes a natural entity—the blueberry, which connects with the sense of taste, eliciting the imaginative consciousness of the senses, death thus resides softly and sweetly in the darkness.

In another poem By Dark, Merwin pens:
When it is time I follow the black dog
into the darkness that is the mind of day
I can see nothing there but the black dog
the dog I know going ahead of me
not looking back oh it is the black dog
I trust now in my turn after the years
when I had all the trust of the black dog
through an age of brightness and through shadow
on into the blindness of the black dog
where the rooms of the dark were already known
and had no fear in them for the black dog
leading me carefully up the blind stairs(1-12)

In this poetic realm, Merwin's departed dog friend assumes the role of a messenger weaving threads of death and unconsciousness, leading the poet into the unknown darkness. "the rooms of the dark were already known" alludes to the familiar yet unexplored realms of human existence, death. Whereas for the poet, this unknown territory holds "no fear"; rather, it resonates with a sense of intimate familiarity. The poet, devoid of fear, already embraces death as an intimate presence. Merwin combines the Taoist concept of "Equality of Life and Death" from the East with the Western theory of the collective unconscious, integrating "Tao" with the collective unconscious. In his poetry, death coexists with life within the human body, serving as the latent collective unconscious and also as a part of the cyclical Tao. Such a view of death also leads to the poet's reconciliation with death.

4. Nature Writing: Returning to Primal Unity, and "Unity of Heaven and Man"

Another noteworthy facet of Merwin's transformation of Eastern Taoist philosophy into Western deep image poetic view lies in the metamorphosis of the ecological concept of the "Unity of Heaven and Man"(天人合一) into deep image. In the late 20th century, the Western world began to increasingly pay attention to the ecological issues, and topics of anti-anthropocentrism gradually entered the public eye. Merwin also expressed his frustration with ecological destruction in an interview: "I don't see that our culture and our species are behaving in a more enlightened and gentle and harmonious fashion now than we were twenty years ago... And I'm not talking about a big bang; I'm talking about something that is happening as we are sitting here talking about it—the destruction of the seas, the destruction of species after species, the destruction of the forests...The feeling of awe—something that we seem to be losing—is essential for survival."(Elliott, 1998). Merwin retreats from the hustle and bustle of urban life to seclude himself on a small island in Hawaii, nearly living a "primitive" lifestyle. Many of his poems also reflect ecological considerations. Simultaneously, the development of deep image poetry is associated with breaking the binary opposition between humans and nature. Robert Bly argues that poetic image, especially "deep image" and "surrealist image," serves as a gateway linking the public and the natural world (Quetchenbach, 1993), with the unconscious represented by deep image connecting humans and the natural world.

In Chinese Taoist philosophy, Lao Tzu emphasizes the interconnectedness of humanity with nature, stating: "Man imitates earth, earth imitates heaven, heaven follows the divine law, and the divine law follows nature" (P.52). Similarly, Chuang Tzu expresses the oneness of all things with oneself, stating, "Heaven and Earth and I came into existence together, and all things with me are one" (P.43), this philosophy advocates aligning with nature, dissolving the distinctions between self and the surroundings, and achieving unity "one" with heaven and earth and all things. The existence of human beings is intricately tied to the functioning of

nature, where the changes in all things are mere manifestations of natural phenomena. Thus, human beings should observe everything through the lens of nature, and immerse their lives in the boundless dimensions of infinite time and space to experience it.

Within the theory of the collective unconscious that guides the formation of deep image poetry, the human race possesses an inherited "archetype". All images created by poets as words are, in fact, activated from the unconscious, thus embodying the overall pattern or archetype of human literature, enabling them to resonate widely with readers (Zhang, 2003). Perhaps it is the drive of this instinct to return to primal unity that leads poets of the deep image school to hold a concept of integration in their confrontation with nature. Robert Bly once proposed a theory akin to the natural view of "unity of heaven and man" called the "third body." This term finds its origin in the poem The Third Body by Robert Bly. In this poem, Bly writes:

They obey a third body that they share in common.

They have made a promise to love that body.

Age may come, parting may come, death will come.

A man and a woman sit near each other;

as they breathe they feed someone we do not know,

someone we know of, whom we have never seen. (8-13)

The third body here initially denotes the consciousness emerging from the union of a man and a woman in love. Subsequently, Bly extended the concept of "The third body" to express the consciousness of the fusion of man and nature (Zeng, 2021). According to Robert Bly, consciousness exists not only in human beings but also permeates the entire natural world. The abstraction of human consciousness makes it merge with the sensibility inherent in nature, where nature becomes a catalyst for varied emotional consciousness in humans— joy, sadness, or loneliness; at the same time, the natural things themselves are also endowed with a kind of sensual emotion. As Zeng explained that, the convergence of these dual consciousnesses, human and natural, gives rise to the third entity that transcends both realms, that is, "The third body" (2021). In Merwin's poetry, the integrated natural view of "unity of heaven and man," which involves integrating the human perspective into nature, employs the concept of "The third body," derived from the fusion of subjective consciousness with nature, to explore the unconscious communication of the infinite time and space shared by humans and nature. It is noteworthy that in The Shadow of Sirius, the concept akin to "The third body" is frequently embodied through birds. Merwin, in interviews, has emphasized his profound affinity for birds and the spiritual impact they impart as emblematic expressions of wordless nature: "the crows were calling in the trees. And the voices of the crows just sort of went through my chest in some way, and I felt the tears running down my face." (2012) Consequently, within this collection, birds frequently play a pivotal role in shaping the deep image that facilitates communication between humanity and the natural world.

In Far Along the Story, Merwin wrote: The boy walked on with a flock of cranes following him calling as they came from the horizon behind him sometimes he thought he could recognize a voice in all that calling but he could not hear what they were calling and when he looked back he could not tell one of them from another in their rising and falling but he went on trying to remember something in their calls until he stumbled and came to himself with the day before him wide open and the stones of the path lying still and each tree in its own leaves the cranes were gone from the sky and at hat moment he remembered who he was only he had forgotten his name (1-18)

In this narrative, the crane became a guide, steering the child towards the most primal memories. At first, the boy did not understand the crane's subtle guidance and reminder, but as he went through an immersive communion with nature, the crane, the stones, and the leaves of the trees gradually converged into a singular entity, and it was then that he realized, "that moment he remembered who he was\ only he had forgotten his name". He remembered the true essence of his or all human's own existence—this epiphany transcended individual nomenclature, delving into the unconscious memory shared by all elements in the world. As he integrated into nature, he became an indistinguishable part of the collective existence of all things within the continuous flow of natural transformations.

In The Laughing Thrush, Merwin wrote:

O nameless joy of the morning

tumbling upward note by note out of the night and the hush of the dark valley and out of whatever has not been there song unquestioning and unbounded yes this is the place and the one time in the whole of before and after with all of memory waking into it and the lost visages that hover around the edge of sleep constant and clear and the words that lately have fallen silent to surface among the phrases of some future if there is a future here is where they all sing the first daylight whether or not there is anyone listening (1-16)

In this poem, the thrush serves as more than a mere conduit for the convergence of human and natural consciousness; it also embodies the "Tao" of life and death within the cyclical rhythm of nature. Amid the realms of unconsciousness of the "edge of sleep," "night," and "darkness," the melodic notes of the thrush guide the poet into a realm of life after death—a world that the poet can't quite figure out—"the future", and the new "the first daylight" that he sees after crossing the darkness of the night. The cyclical rhythms of human life and death harmonize with the natural progression of day and night, converging into a unified cycle that encompasses a broader cosmic community—the Tao.

In Gray Herons in the Field above the River, Merwin wrote:

Now that the nights turn longer than the days

we are standing in the still light after dawn

in the high grass of autumn that is green again

hushed in its own place after the burn of summer

each of us stationed alone without moving at a perfect distance from all the others

like shadows of ourselves risen out of our shadows

each eye without turning continues to behold

what is moving

each of us is one of seven now

we have come a long way sailing our opened clouds

remembering all night where the world would be

the clear shallow stream the leaves floating along it

the dew in the hushed field the only morning (1-13)

In the poem, the gray heron is united with human, and the collective "we" embodies "The third body" of humanity and nature (Zeng, 2021), seamlessly entwined with the vast expanse of the world. Thus, "shadows of ourselves risen out of our shadows", the unconscious, which blurs the boundaries of time and space, converges into one singular entity within the shadow—constantly flowing and perpetually transforming. And subsequently "we have come a long way sailing our opened clouds\ remembering all night where the world would be", enlightened as beholding the sun blazing forth from a cloudy sky, The third body, metamorphosing the concept of "the unity of all things" into the fusion of man and nature, delves into the shared memories of all existence, establishing communion with the consciousness of every living being, thereby actualizing the resonance of deep image.

Merwin's poetry, driven by the returning to the archetype, breaks the barrier between nature and humans, pursuing integration. The Taoist philosophical view of nature, "Heaven and Earth and I came into existence together, and all things with me are one" transforms into "The third body" of unity between humans and nature, blending into the unconscious of deep image, becoming a bridge of integration of man and nature, residing in the collective body of human experience, evoking echoes of unity between humans and nature transcending time and space.

5. Conclusion

Oriental philosophy, represented by Taoism, serves as a foundational influence in shaping poets with "deep image" in the Western literary landscape, and Merwin's poems combine the two into one, undergoing a reciprocal transformation. In his poems, the Taoism philosophy of "Equality of Life and Death" represented by the reconciliation to death and mortality, is transformed into the shadow of the unconscious, which is expressed by a subtle dance of the unconscious and the timeless flow of the "Tao" within all things through every aspect of the past and the present. The philosophical concept of "the Unity of

Heaven and Man" becomes "The third body", where humanity and the elements of nature coalesce, constructing a deep image of communication within the realm of the unconscious.

The consensus of human experience across cultures and time and space is transformed into each other and finds expression in various forms. Human thoughts and wisdom traverse cultural boundaries and breaking down barriers in the words of poetry, radiate with the gesture of communion, which provides valuable reference ideas for the exchange and amalgamation of poetic artistry.

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