
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

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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

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

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

that 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

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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