



Faculty of Al-Asun

**The Self and the Other: Spiritual Realism
in the Poetry of
Wallace Stevens and Li-Young Lee
PhD Thesis Submitted to the Department of English by**

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CONTENTS

	Page No.
Preface	ii – v
Introduction	1 – 6
Chapter One	A Journey Without and a Flight Within: An Introduction to Spiritual Realism
	7 – 29
Chapter Two	Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation
	30 – 143
Chapter Three	Li-Young Lee: The Interior Other
	144 – 215
Chapter Four	Wallace Stevens Meets Li-Young Lee
	216 – 225
Conclusion	226 – 230
Bibliography	231 – 246

Abstract

Throughout history, man found himself entrapped between the materiality of the physical world and the spirituality of the metaphysical one. Natural or man-made disasters that resulted in devastation and destruction in the wide world; created not deformed bodies, but fragmented selves lost in the world of the external reality. Looking at reality became similar to looking at a ferocious monster that is waiting to devour all what comes on its path. Hence, man started to dispense with the external world as it were and indulge into activities of the inner spirit in an attempt to forget the frustrations that surround him. To understand the aim and meaning of 'being', thereupon, man should make two journeys: without, to realize the other and within, to comprehend the self. The outer other and the inner self will confront one another, reflect one another, then become part and parcel of each other in an endeavour to have a tight grasp of both existence and essence.

Wallace Stevens (1879 – 1955) and Li Young Lee (1957 -) have been intensely dissatisfied with the external world and have exerted strenuous efforts to find a way to understand it. Sharing a Christian background, they seem to have found two ways to comprehend the reason behind their existence: through the physical world (the other) and through the self. Comparing and contrasting the two poets is an attempt to underscore the odyssey each of them has taken to understand the external world. In search of being, Stevens and Lee have embarked on a lifelong journey following two distinct routes but heading towards the same destination: voyaging through the universe and flying within the spirit. By digging deep into Stevens' Harmonium (1923), Ideas of Order (1936), Parts of the World (1942), and Transport to Summer (1947) and Lee's Rose (1986), The City in Which I love You (1990), Book of My Nights (2001) and Behind My Eyes (2008), the thesis will attempt to highlight the relationship between the self and the other in the poetry of Stevens and Lee.

Preface

Man has always been wondering about his spirit: how it came into existence and what it is made of and how can it reach a comfort zone, even on a temporary basis. The history of earth is a history of destruction and devastation and man has become the scapegoat of all these happenings. During the wars, bloodshed and deaths were incarnations of man's fragility and helplessness and embodiments of his failure in being the sole controller of his life. In the era of technology and artificial knowledge, man tended to distance himself from other human beings and evolved weak relationships with real people. Hence, his sense of self has become inclined to more alienation and disconnectedness. The self and its relationship with the outer other has become at stake giving birth, at times, to an individual lost physically and metaphysically, unaware of what he wants and what his aims in life are. Associations with God were found to be fulfilling answers for such a human who has discovered that God could be or at least could provide the answers for his life-time queries for which he failed to find responses. In an attempt to locate the self and the other in such a world that signifies nothing but dislocation and fragmentation, the thesis will examine the poetry of Wallace Stevens (1879 – 1955) and Li-Young Lee (1957 -) and will highlight the results of their journeys in life. Through the application of the theory of spiritual realism, the researcher will attempt to trace the poets' lifelong odysseys: both in their inner selves and in their outer realms and underscore the destinations they both arrived at.

The thesis falls into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The **introduction** encompasses a very concise philosophical background of the notions of the self and the other. **Chapter One**, which is entitled 'A Journey Without and a Flight Within: An introduction to Spiritual Realism' sets the theoretical framework

of the thesis. This chapter introduces the philosophy of spiritual realism and explains what it means and what it proposes. The chapter, also, traces the philosophical trends in human history that led to the appearance of an approach that combines realism and spiritualism together. The philosophies of materialism and idealism are defined, compared and contrasted and then intermingled to come out with the philosophy of spiritual realism. Philosophical trends in Western civilization have been examined in relation to the search for God both in the external world (parts of nature, for example) and in the inner realm of the spirit. In addition, the interdisciplinary critical approach followed in the analysis of the poems used in Chapters two and three and which is proposed by Professor Shebl El Komy is introduced and explained.

Chapter Two which is entitled ‘Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation’ aims to investigate the poetry of Wallace Stevens from the context of spiritual realism. In an attempt to highlight Stevens’ views on the self, the other, God and the world, his poetry is located in a spiritual context that renders his personality as a poet very clear. The chapter explicates Stevens’ life-time dilemma of clipping the notions of reality and the imagination together in order to create harmony in both his inner and outer worlds. It, moreover, explains Stevens’ profound belief in poetry and poets to the extent that he sees poetry as a sacred activity. In such a secular world, the poet believes that the answer to his problems lies in his imagination that created an illusory world in which he explores feelings of peace and reconciliation. However, living in a world that is only part of his imagination resulted in more fragmentation in the self and more alienation from the external world. Thus, he resorts to his ‘Supreme Fiction’ which is considered one of the most debatable concepts proposed by Wallace Stevens. Being Supreme (related to the Supreme Being who created the universe: God) and fiction (poetry – or

activities related to the imagination), it could be contended that Steven's supreme fiction is nothing but a combination between inner and outer realities; and that is the target of the philosophy of spiritual realism. The chapter, furthermore, demonstrates Stevens' technique as a poet who plays skilfully with words and infuses all poetic tactics to produce a body of poetry that transcends the confinements of language.

As for **Chapter Three**, which is entitled 'Li-Young Lee: The Interior Other', it traces Li-Young Lee's philosophy in life by putting forth the philosophy of spiritual realism at the background. In an endeavour to underline Lee's perspectives on the self and the other, the poetry of the Chinese-American is analysed not only in relation to spiritual modes, but also to ethnic and racial issues. Being always in exile with no specific origin or home, Lee finds it very difficult to engross into the American society with its customs and traditions. At the beginning of his life in America, Lee was alienated both from his inner world (being unaware whether he is American or Chinese or eventually Chinese-American especially at his incessant denials of having a dual identity) and his outer one. Coming to terms with the external reality created a fragmented self lost in a country that is not its own and feeling nostalgia for a country it does not belong to. Lee sees himself as a guest, not only in America, but on planet earth as a whole. Searching for a Supreme entity that could help him realize his spirit in a better light becomes his aim in later volumes. To assert that he succeeded in locating such a Being in his life, the later volumes are abundant with words related to God, prayer, and meditation. Putting God and poetry on the same level of meaning and significance is one of Lee's interests to the extent that he compares God to a text. Lee's God resides in his spirit, and not anywhere else, there is where he should have searched in the first place. Although He is always invisible and empty, God is visible in his

creatures and full in Lee's own spirit. All his ideas are illustrated in an artistic manner that renders Lee's poetry that of serious thematic concerns and talented creative structures.

Chapter Four is the virtual space that brings Wallace Stevens and Li-Young Lee together. The chapter is entitled 'Wallace Stevens Meets Li-Young Lee' and its one and only aim is to bring the two poets face to face and compare and contrast their ideas. The striking observations that the chapter highlights are the similarities between the two poets and that put them on a high level of spirituality tied with a deep sense of belonging to earth. It is the search for spirituality in a profane world that connects the two poets. The two poets are found to be analogous in their love for poetry, in their linking poetry with God and religion and most importantly, for using their poetry as the spiritual tool with which to search for answers for questions about life, essence and being. Their life-long journeys have been compared and the result is that no matter where the human belongs and no matter his origins are, the self and the other must come to terms in order to feel some kind of satisfaction. **The conclusion** crystallizes the findings of the thesis and comments on the relationship between the self and the other in the poetry of Wallace Stevens and Li-Young Lee in the context of the philosophy of spiritual realism.

INTRODUCTION

The Self and the Other

*O Chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?*

(William Butler Yeats, 'Among School Children')

The dichotomy of the self and the other plays an important role in Western philosophy. Throughout history, the two notions have been regarded as opposites, when the self goes right, the other would definitely go left; they can never be united. As a number of philosophers point out, when encountering the other, the self finds itself in a state of chaos as to where it should stand and how it must react. On the one hand, the other is present as an object of the world and on the other hand, it stands as another version of the self. The paradoxical relationship between self and other and how they are united / separated from one another is the main aim of this thesis. The following paragraphs encompass a very brief introduction for how different philosophers interpreted the meanings of self and other.

'Who am I?' and 'What is the self made of?' are questions asked by humans throughout history and whose answers are difficult to discover. Despite its ontological and epistemological centrality and the vast literature on the topic of selfhood, there are still no agreed definitions of the self. However, it is defined in The Blackwell Dictionary of Philosophy as:

The subject or bearer of mental attributes such as experience, consciousness, thoughts, beliefs, emotions, intentions, and sensations.

The self is the human agent who deliberates and initiates actions, and who bears responsibility for its action. It is the referent of the first-person pronoun. The self is sometimes considered to be the equivalent of the person, although a person is associated with the body and with public or social roles, while the self is more related to the inner part or aspect of a person. Sometimes, the self is identified as the pure I, ego, unity of consciousness, metaphysical subject, soul, or mind. The self is a unity that integrates all experiences, beliefs and feelings of an individual and enables an individual to have identity as the same person at different times (627).

The self is, hence, taken to “be the subject of self-consciousness, which includes itself or its states among the objects” (Bunnin 627). It stands for the inner part of the human that is not shown to other human beings. To identify the self in terms of the other, in addition, the self could be defined as:

Ego, subject, I, me, as opposed to the object or the totality of objects, maybe distinguished from ‘not-me’. One great splitting of the whole universe into two halves is made by each of us, and for each of us almost all of the interest attaches to one of the halves; but we all draw the line of division between them in a different place. When I say that we all call the two halves by the same names, and that those names are ‘me’ and ‘not me’ respectively, it will at once be seen what I mean (Runes 287 – 288).

The self could, hence, be described in terms of ‘something I am not’. Besides, there exists the “metaphysical principle of unity underlying subjective experience, which may be conceived as dependent upon the given organism or as distinct in

nature; sometimes identified with the soul” (Runes 288). The self is that ‘thing’ that refers to the human spirit and that is not related by any means to physical or empirical phenomena.

The nature of the self has been a litigious issue in the history of philosophy, starting with the Greek injunction to know oneself. It is in the seventeenth century with Descartes, however, that the idea of the self takes central place in the Western tradition. Descartes stresses “the autonomy of the first person: I can realize that I am existing regardless of what the world I live in is like” (Borghini). In other words, for Descartes the cognitive foundation of one’s own thinking is independent on its ecological relationships. According to Decartesian philosophy, “factors such as gender, race, social status, upbringing are all irrelevant to capture the idea of the self” (Borghini).

Kant is the philosopher who developed Descartes’ philosophy of the self. According to Kant, “each person is an autonomous being capable of envisaging courses of action that transcend any ecological relationship (customs, upbringing, gender, race, social status, emotional situation” (Borghini). Kant, hence, agrees “that the self is not an object of experience, but offered a complex doctrine, with the self as unity of appreciation grounding the possibility of experience and the noumenal self grounding freedom and morality” (Bunnin 627). For Kant, there are two kinds of consciousness of self: “consciousness of oneself and one’s psychological states in inner sense and consciousness of oneself and one’s states via performing acts of apperception” (Brook). Thus, the two types of consciousness of self, for Kant, have absolutely different sources.

Many philosophers consider the self as an inner entity. However, David Hume rejects this kind of perspective. David Hume’s philosophy of self begins

with his contradiction that some philosophers feel the self intimately, and are certain of its existence “beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity” (Hume 349). Instead, he wonders if everything falls into the category of any ‘impression’, which one represents the self?: “For from what impression could [the self] be derived? The question is impossible to answer without a manifest contradiction and absurdity and yet ‘tis a question which must necessarily be answered, if we would have the idea of self pass for clear and intelligible” (Hume 349). To Hume, therefore, the self is that to which one’s several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. He, further, maintains that emotions and sensations occur at the same time, always changing, and never at all exist equally all at once. Since the self must be omnipresent, he decides “it cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions or from any other that the idea of self is derived and consequently, there is no such idea” (Hume 349). Thus, Hume refers to his theory as the Bundle self theory which is defined as “the conception of the self as a mere aggregate of mental states” (Runes 42). For Hume, eventually, the self is a “bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (Runes 42).

Ostensibly, there are diverse conceptualizations related to understanding the self. This could be due to many factors. First, “the complexity of the self as a quintessence of human psyche and sociality” (Glaveanu 270) is obvious. Second, “the difficulty of measuring the self since it lacks materiality” (Gergen 247) and remains invisible and internal. Third, the need for conceptual delineations since the self appears as synonymous with consciousness, personality, the psyche and especially with identity. Fourth, the “inflation of terms and the analytical discussions of the self: self-concept, self-esteem, self-presentation, self-awareness,

self-identity, and self-knowledge” (Glaveanu 270). Finally, the challenges of the post-modern culture “that eliminate previous romanticist or modern views and scatter the self into plurality of voices” (Gergen 248). The concept of the self is, hence, complex and could be tackled from a variety of angles.

As for the other, it is defined as anything other than the self. The other or otherness refers to that which is alien and divergent from that which is given, such as norm, identity, or the self. In phenomenological philosophy, the other is identified as “human other than the subject, self, or ego” (Bunnin 496). Tracing the idea of the ‘other’ in philosophy, it is constituted in Plato’s dialogues as the interlocutors of Socrates, “is represented, only, to be ultimately assimilated into the discourse of the same, namely the dialectical movement of the Socratic method” (Chen). The form of the dialogue is itself deceptive in its double gesture of “appearing to receive ‘the other’ only to draw him or her closer to oneself and one’s point of view” (Chen). The dialogues were great influences to Aristotle, Cicero, Leopardi, Kierkegaard, Santayana, and Murdoch and helped formulate their philosophy of the other.

Hegel is among the pioneers to introduce the idea of the other as constituent in self-consciousness. Husserl, in addition, uses the idea as a basis for intersubjectivity. Sartre also makes use of such dialectic in his Being and Nothingness when he describes how the world is altered at the appearance of another person. The self’s relation to the other gave rise to the problem of one’s knowledge of other minds that is also discussed in analytical philosophy but issues concerning the Other in ontology, ethics, and political philosophy have come to be considered fundamental.