

**“Life Is a Bitter Aspic”:
The Translation of Food
into Poetics of Stevens’ Poems**

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Abstract

Recent academic concerns of food have drawn our attention to food as a source of need to food as a site of social selection, cultural tradition, and literary expression. The translation of food, or the transformation of food imagery and the shift of the meaning of food, is indeed claiming its ubiquitous presence in anthropological records, philosophical discourse, cultural studies, and literary creation.

In the eponymous poetic line, “life is a bitter aspic,” Wallace Stevens has shown such translation of food into a metaphor of human condition. Life is here compared to a serving of aspic, a jelly-like delicacy. The shift from need to art, from taste to life, from food to poetics, is a process and production of intricate cultural translation that renders tangible materiality into metaphoric aesthetics.

This thesis, in light of cultural translation of food, aims to realize how the following three shifts are possible and significant, namely to analyze how:

- (1) food serves as the most unique subject matter in material culture for its transition/function from an external entity into an internal identity (in light of food culture and foodways);
- (2) food acts as a poetic element with agency that actively affects humans instead of being passively consumed by humans (in light of new materialism);
- (3) food speaks for human nature and condition through its

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representation of human need, pain, and memory, with specific attention to its temporality and spatiality in poetry (in light of food poetics).

Related observations and analyses shall be focused solely on Wallace Stevens' poetic work for discursive convenience although the applicability of such cultural translation of food can otherwise prevail.

Keywords: cultural translation, food culture, foodways, new materialism,
Wallace Stevens

「人生是一道苦苦的冷盤」： 從食物到詩學的演繹看史蒂文生的現代詩

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摘 要

在史蒂文生（Wallace Stevens）詩作中，可見食物演繹為意象，進而反映種種的人生處境。生命，在詩人的筆下，被喻為一道凝苦結凍的冷盤。演繹若此，生養蛻變成藝術，口腹消化成人生，飲食衍生成詩學。

本文著眼於食物的文化演繹，旨在解析下列三種食物的義涵轉換：

- (1) 食物如何以其獨特的功能，由外在的個別物品轉化為內在的身分認同；
- (2) 食物如何脫穎於被動的食用功能，轉為成為詩歌的美學元素，獲得主動的作為與影響力；
- (3) 食物透露人性之餘，如何進一步詮釋人類的需求、痛苦、記憶，並在詩歌中經營出獨特的時間性與空間性。

關鍵詞：文化翻譯、飲食文化、新物質論、史蒂文生（Wallace Stevens）

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To eat and to be eaten—this is the operational model of bodies . . . they [bodies] coexist within one another. To speak, though, is the movement of surface What is more serious: to speak of food or to eat words? . . . If we then speak of food, how can we avoid speaking in front of the one who is to be served as food?

—Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* 23.

Eating is never a one-party thing. It involves two parties. In a conventional point of view, the two parties are the eater and the eaten. From an object-oriented point of view, the two parties are the influencer and the influenced. It is a combination and it is surely a form of interaction. To speak of food is to speak of this interaction. To speak of words of food is to deal with food poetics. Then, according to Deleuze, we are in a way taking surface talk into an in-depth operation.

Food poetics, like any other poetics, is a way to interpret poetry, to extract meanings from signs. Wallace Stevens provides us with abundant food signs in his poems, but the food in his poems is idiosyncratically challenging. Many of the food objects, mostly desserts, are typical examples of his eccentric choice of words. Speaking of food in poetry is an in-depth difficulty in itself. Wallace Stevens, as widely believed, is responsible for making it even more difficult. Yet, in addition to his idiosyncratic choice of erratic words, there is another reason why his food signs remain contentedly unknown.

For readers and scholars of Wallace Stevens, there is always an inevitable embarrassment—the intermittent fits of pausing and wondering: “what is he insinuating with that food?” “Aspic,” “bread,” “chocolate,” “curd,” and his celebrated “ice cream,” to name only a few, are all example of his inscrutable food objects in poetry. This long-standing embarrassment has been effectively ignored with the aid of one recourse—Stevens’ own letters and essays. People irked by this intolerable embarrassment almost always turn to his letters and essays for the following quote:

Those of us who may have been thinking of the path of poetry,

those who understand that words are thoughts . . . must be conscious of this: that above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds. (Stevens, *Collected Poetry & Prose* 663)

By this quote, a lot of choices of words by Stevens, since he says this himself, are justified—he chooses words for their sounds. That supposedly shall be the final word and the definitive conclusion that silences all other attempts of interpretation. This convenient explanation seems unimpeachable as it is said by the poet himself. Readers and scholars no longer need to live in the shadow of grudging footnotes and incomplete understanding. It is acceptable to read Stevens without understanding the meaning of his words here and there, because what matters is the sounds they carry, not meanings. It is so convenient that people tend to forget that turning back to the author for interpretation—whether it is his aesthetic perspective or his (auto)biography—simply stifles the sustainable values of a literary work.

As long as we stay in close contact with scholarship on Wallace Stevens, we will often come across remarks like, Stevens “takes the sounds, colors, and capacity for suggestiveness of words,” and his “fascination with suggestive sound and color is a central element in his poetics.” The writers typically conclude their understanding of his poetic art by saying, “The poetic use of sound becomes not only a challenge to ideological meaning but anagogic . . .” (Holander 122). Though wordings may vary, the gist is the same. The ultimate answer to some of his choice of words always seems to be: “He likes the sound of it.”

Except for this sound-above-all assertion, from time to time, stray and sporadic efforts are made to look for hints and traces in daily correspondence to explain some particular words and phrases. A number of reference books on Stevens’ poems, like *A Reader’s Guide to Wallace Stevens* (2007), include meticulously collected anecdotes and remarks on Stevens’ milieu and times in order to make sense of Stevens’ fantastical banquet of words and food signs, his “confected ocean.”

“Esthétique du Mal,” the poem in which “confected ocean” has its first

appearance, was inspired, in time of war, by a soldier who once wrote to a literary magazine complaining that the “the relation between poetry and . . . pain” was not fully reflected by literature of his time:

Whatever he may mean, it might be interesting to try to do an *esthétique du mal*. It is the kind of idea that it is difficult to shake off. Perhaps that would be my subject in one form or another. (Stevens, *Letters* 468)

“*Esthétique du Mal*,” therefore, starts out as a project focused on pain and poetry, with pain as an element in life and poetry as a voice of pain. This poem is “a study in suffering but of an existential kind” (Fuchs 191). Food poetics does not renounce social milieu or political climate for poetic interpretation, but neither does it rely merely on the background information for definitive interpretation. With this in mind, we now proceed to “*Esthétique du Mal*,” applying our analysis to food objects in this poem.

In defining and deciding on the title of “*Esthétique*” in a letter, Stevens mentions, “I am thinking of aesthetics as the equivalent of *apérçus*, which seems to have been the original meaning” (*Letters* 469). *Apérçus*, derived from a past participle of “to be perceived,” is the first shade of meaning that designates *esthétique* here, as Harold Bloom asserts that Stevens is here “returning ‘aesthetic’ to its root meaning of ‘perceptiveness,’” and what is perceived here is “the pain and suffering inseparable from a consciousness of self” in a cruel, devastated world (226). While *esthétique* stands for αἰσθάνομαι (*aisthanomai*; to know or understand through sense) and *mal* stands for the necessary evil of pain, “*Esthétique du Mal*” is both the aesthetics of evil and the perception of pain. Both senses enrich each other on the basis of the oxymoronic nature of the title, which suggests poetic engagement of chaos or an act of sampling a bitter sting to the taste of the affected human being (Riddel 202).

By tracing keywords back to their roots, we are minding two things central to food poetics: the materiality of language and the methodology of foodways. The emphasis on language is an awareness that language affects

people and conveys meanings through the senses. It has materiality and its function is based on such materiality. Sensuous influence and material agency are central to food poetics as they are to any field of materialist studies. Foodways, as stated earlier, refer to the humanistic tradition of food discourse which deals with various food histories, food cultures, food impacts, etc., mostly from viewpoints of cultural and sociological studies. The foodway methodology is to food poetics as archaeology and anthropology are to material cultures. It is not always indispensable, but for a wartime poem, it may be conducive.

The entire scene is a writer at work at his desk, with his study facing the volcano Mt. Vesuvius. What probably comes through the window visibly and what he probably thinks freely of are thus interwoven, across different spaces, into the following verse:

I

It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human.
There were roses in the cool café. His book
Made sure of the most correct catastrophe.
Except for us, Vesuvius might consume
In solid fire the utmost earth and know
No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up
To die). This is a part of the sublime
From which we shrink. And yet, except for us,
The total past felt nothing when destroyed. (*CP* 314)

Here we have a corresponding point of lunch: pain. As James Hans points out, the pairing of “It is almost time for lunch” and “Pain is human” is a reinforced “awkward juxtaposition” and yet at the same time it sends out a message that “time for lunch” is no less important than “pain is human,” or, “pain is human” is not more important than “time for lunch” (80).

The corresponding connection between lunch and pain in this context renders pain into something which answers the human need of dining. The materiality of the word “pain,” its sound and spelling especially, reminds

readers who are familiar with Stevens' frequent references to the French language of bread (*le pain*).¹ The materiality of the word "pain" makes sense of such a corresponding relation. The pain inflicted by the human condition is no different from the bread provided for human need.

With pain and bread as corresponding points, the index label between the two must be a similar or overlapping quality. We live on bread, but we may live on pain unknowingly as well. Says Jeffrey E. Foss in his *Beyond Environmentalism*: "consciousness of pleasure and pain extend within the natural world" (230). What is more, from an evolutionary point of view, pain serves the purpose of "avoidance of damage and death, nursing of wounds, prevention of further damage" (ibid). Pain that warns us and bread that feeds us are thus of the same index label of human survival. Pain and pleasure are equally important to human need.

The pairing of disparate elements continues between "roses" and "cool café," and between "book" and "catastrophe." All these objects in the poem follow the first pairing at lunch time, i.e., the bread and the pain. If what we see in the first pairing of bread and pain is a mutually nurturing and awakening quality conducive to human survival, these two ensuing pairings, following the same logic, may surely function likewise. They are the projected scenes of the lunch-pain association. Specifically, they are carrying on in parallel the poet's emphasis on the pairing of nurture and torture.

Consequently, the roses that feast the eye are yoked with a chilly eating place ("cool café"). A medium of learning ("book") enables us to learn about disasters ("catastrophe"). The coexistence of positives and negatives is ubiquitous. If this is what we see, this is probably the basic scene of the human world. The symbiosis of pain and pleasure becomes what meets our eyes most of the time. The "awkward juxtaposition" is no longer awkward. It is a scene that defines the human condition. It takes both pleasure and pain to define our survival, to define human life. Hence, "It is almost time for lunch. Pain is human."

The obvious act of dining in this stanza, however, is not conducted by

¹ Thanks go to Dr. Lloyd Haft of Leiden University, a devoted Stevens reader and a scholar of modern poetry, for pointing out this interpretation.

the human being, but by Vesuvius the Volcano. It consumes the earth, and unlike human beings, it feels no pain. Nearing the end of the stanza, there is a follow-up line that says “The total past felt nothing when destroyed.” The volcano which consumes the earth feels no pain. Likewise, the total past, when destroyed, feels no pain. The earth and the past are equated. The earth, or the human world, is the past while the memory is the record of human civilization. No pain shall be felt when the total destruction of human civilization arrives. But, how so?

The agent that performs the act of eating is not human. The act of devouring the human world means pain only in the human eye. To the volcano, to Nature, it is part of its course. Nature’s powers are all alike whether in destruction or in creation. So are human powers alike either in seeking pleasure or in sensing pains. The perception of pain belongs in an anthropocentric narrative. The destruction of human civilization, like any other destruction, is neutral and amoral by nature. Following the same logic, we may have a better insight into the seeming contradiction in the coexistence of necessary nurture and necessary torture. It may be an ultimate hope that we may doff our idea that all things serve a human purpose and that all other life forms answer to a human need. To see beyond this is a thing too sublime for us to achieve, and as a result we shrink from the sublime law of nature that pain (pain/bread, pain/pleasure) is human. Here, pain is the bread for life and for philosophical thoughts.

In Poem XI of “*Esthétique du Mal*,” we do not have as many paired objects, but various objects and spaces are bursting out from another food metaphor:

XI

Life is a bitter aspic. We are not
At the centre of a diamond. At dawn,
The paratroopers fall and as they fall
They mow the lawn. A vessel sinks in waves
Of people . . . (*CP* 322)

To facilitate poetic interpretation when no obvious corresponding points are available, we take the development of a passage as a process of distancing. The point of departure is the bitter aspic. Aspic, the soft, salty, savory jelly made of fish or meat, comes with a bitter taste. In other words, this is a bitter taste following the word “life.” Later, the materiality of aspic is contrasted with that of a diamond. The verisimilitude of the bitter aspic to life brings us away from the hard, immobile mineral. Distancing continues and more space is being created along with the objects in the space.

The paratroopers fall, not to fight, but to do household chores like lawn mowing. Instead of having a vessel of people sinking in waves, we have a vessel sinking in waves of people. The two scenes in this distancing process seems hilarious and absurd. Since in this poem the paratroopers are the later development of distancing which follows upon “Life is a bitter aspic,” we have to look into the intensity that powers this development. Intensity, being in itself amorphous, is ever-changing in shapes. It is helpful to bear in mind the noted metaphor of intensity: the white wall. No matter what shape is drawn on the white wall, the whiteness of the wall, hence the whiteness within the shape, “remains univocally the same under whichever modality it is considered” (Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy* 96).² If intensity has to remain amorphous, and we have to choose among “life,” “bitter,” and “aspic,” bitterness is the only one qualified, for it is the only amorphous quality among them (unlike “life” as a form of being or “aspic” as a dish in a specific form).

The three characteristics of intensity are indivisibility and expandability, transformability, and transportability. The latter two are self-evident in this case: the bitterness in life has been transformed and transported into airborne rangers doing chores and a sea of people drowning a ship. How does bitterness travel, first from life to the aspic, and then from the aspic to the two seemingly ridiculous scenes or spaces? What is the intense feeling that strings them together?

² Another vivid definition of the lasting but amorphous intensity is “an intense feeling of transition, states of pure, naked intensity stripped of all shape and form” (Deleuze and Guattari 18).

Half-fluid, unstable, and lacking in substance, the aspic is compared to life. These qualities, when compared to those of a diamond, seem to render an even stronger sense of emptiness. The feeble and bitter life suddenly appears familiar in the taste of the aspic. The serious disappointment toward life is now a casual taste of food. In like manner, the serious battle scene of air-borne rangers falling from the sky is no different from the routine of mowing the lawn. Losing life is a form of cropping grass, or the other way around. What enables people to better communicate with each other (a vessel) seems to be sabotaged by people themselves. Instead of the sea, people themselves are the major barrier to communication. By tracing the intensity that flows through life, the aspic, the paratroopers’ scene, and the vessel sunk into a sea of people, the bitterness is enhanced and the absurdity becomes resolved. The seemingly unrelated objects—soldiers (“paratroopers”), cuisine (“aspic”), transportation (“vessel”)—all utter voices of a bitter life. Bitterness in this context may be awareness of the absurdity of human life. Relevant in this connection is that Agnes Heller, while dealing with the comic phenomenon in art and literature, subsumes both the ridiculous and the bitter under the laughable (16).

Part XI continues as follows:

A man of bitter appetite despises
A well-made scene in which paratroopers
Select adieux; and he despises this:
A ship that rolls on a confectioned ocean,
The weather is pink, the wind in motion; . . . (CP 322)

A man with the awareness of the true taste of life, of all absurdity in life, despises any sugar-coated depiction of life. Intensity of bitterness of life, or intensity of real life is simply blocked outside the following scenes/spaces where paratroopers choose to be sacrificed like heroes, where the vessel faces no confrontation but confection, where the pink sky foretells tomorrow’s sunny weather, where the wind helps advance the sailing of the ship. A man with the awareness of what life really is despises the idea of

confusing real life with fairy tales.

The seeming difference between these scenes and spaces are resolved when bitterness is extracted from all of them. In a way, all scenes internalize in them a sense of bitterness. Out of the same sense of bitterness, different scenes and objects are created, and then we have the poetic space. The poetic space, i.e., the virtual, which encompasses all scenes of bitterness and resolves their differences, is the essence of intensity. In this case, the poem is the essence of the inevitable absurdity and the helpless awareness thereof. The poem is the essence of human pain.

Ice Cream

Probably the most famous food poem by Wallace Stevens, “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” appeals to the senses and a considerable number of objects which offer an enhanced sense of materialized intensity, even from the very beginning:

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. (*CP* 64)

Before we even start, it is necessary to point out that many interpretations of the “concupiscent curds” rest or are arrested on the he-likes-the-sound-of-it explanation of the poet’s personal preference: Jahan Ramazani (92), Bonnie Costello (176), Warner Berthoff (190 n. 36), Eleanor Cook (*Against Coercion* 262), to name only a few. They usually refer us to Stevens’ own words: “I like words to sound wrong” (*Letters* 340). Although nothing is more intriguing than a humorous remark about a poet or an anecdote about a

certain poetic line, a working comprehensive system of poetics should aim for proper functioning than anecdote retrieval.

The poem describes two conflicting scenes on the same occasion—a funeral day. The first stanza is so full of life and actions that it shows no signs of mourning over the loss of life. Instead, people seem to be gathering for some sort of celebration. The seeming celebration scene is the funeral reception where rituals begin. This is the living present in which life is built upon habits. In the living present of *Habitus*, worldly signs function as empty, ritual signs that perform routines and offer “factitious exaltation” (Deleuze, *Proust and Sign* 9).

Worldly signs that perform rituals are: the cigar roller, the wenches, and the boys. They either have a duty assigned to them (“rollers” of cigars) or they perform rituals the way they perform routines (“used to wear,” “bring . . . in newspapers”). The muscles, the cigars, the kitchen, concupiscence, and the curds are all converged upon the cigar roller. Two of them are carnal—muscles and concupiscence, whereas another two are culinary—the kitchen and the curds. One of them is neither about contact nor intake but about a burning sensation and scent—the cigars. When the cigar roller is taken as a ritual performer whose function is to mediate the carnal, culinary, and burning sensations, we can focus on the factitious exaltation a funeral actually provides rather than blaming people for enjoying themselves at a funeral.

The wenches dawdle in their everyday dress. They may be helping hands of the family. Their dress is the same and they are standing by as helpers around the house as usual. They are the habit of the living present. Life goes on as they dawdle away, and life is based all upon habits. The boys maybe bring in a lot of things in newspapers on a daily basis as they are also helping hands who often help with delivery. What they deliver is of course new (the fresh flowers), but the wrapping on the outside is always old (last month’s newspapers). The boys are like time in the first synthesis, the present that passes. The presence of them, like the present, immediately reminds us of the lapses of time. The news that newspapers convey is always already-happened history, not new. Anything the present time delivers is

brought into the passing present that tells of lost time. Nor are the flowers in a static state. One part of them is living while the other part of them is already dying. The fresh flowers may look more living than dying at the moment.

The three media of worldly signs—the cigar roller, the wenches, and the boys present the first synthesis of time—the synthesis of the living present. They show us how the world is filled with rituals and factitious exaltation which people take for comfort or even luxury (the cigar roller). They show us how the world of habits remains the same and one person's death does not change the course of the world (the wenches). They show us how the living present introduces all and at the same time sends all away (the boys). The rituals, the habits, the living present—the three are the first synthesis of time ritualized. In the first synthesis of time, the actual life is established upon habits and habits are practiced upon rituals and ceremonies on the objectified “seeming” side of life. That is what Judith Brown says about “Let be be finale of seem”—“seeming has actual consequences . . . in the lived world” (39). All the performed rituals and habits become the idea of real life in the first synthesis of time.

While what we can have in the first synthesis of time are merely empty worldly signs, we are allowed to seek and have meanings in the second synthesis of time:

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. (*CP* 64)

In this poem, the second stanza represents the second synthesis of time where meanings are produced and things make sense. Before the second stanza, in

the synthesis of rituals and habits, various behaviors are carried out without being informative. We finally realize in the second stanza that all these actions are glimpsed at a funeral. In the second synthesis of time based on love and memory, objects stand for effort and confusion (love) but also memory (meaning).

The dresser is presented with something missing. The sheet seems to suggest a shroud in disguise. The limbs, instead of decently folded in death, are displaced. The concluding sensations are cold and mute. The dresser is a sign of both effort and confusion: its effort is to keep things inside while its confusion is caused by the intent to hide. Obviously the sheet was embroidered and put away for some future purpose, but that future never comes. The sheet then is appropriated as a shroud in disguise to cover the dead body even though embroidery does not match the occasion of funeral. With the embroidered sheet taken for a shroud and the limbs displaced at a bizarre angle, the inappropriate party scene in the first stanza seems much more appealing than the real reason for the funeral. The joy of the reception has rid the funeral of its solemnity and makes death ugly and out of place, as if it is the party that is spoiled rather than the funeral being spoiled by people coming in for a party.

Then the last line with which both stanzas echo each other: “The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.” In the first stanza, i.e., in the first synthesis of habit, the ice cream is there as part of the ritualized arrangement. It is a dessert prepared at the reception, an empty sign that all the worldly signs converge upon. In the second stanza, i.e., in the second synthesis of love and memory, the ice cream is there as an amoral “impersonal commentary” (Vendler 51). It is a sensuous sign that produces meanings. In the first stanza, the ice cream is ice cream *per se*, but, in the second stanza, it means more.

The ice cream in the first stanza is the main attraction or main distraction at the funeral. This is how the poem reminds us of the fall of Icarus in Bruegel’s painting. The busy boisterous world never stops to mourn over the loss of life. Even the people at the funeral entertain themselves and feed their needs. The ice cream might be the sole purpose for some of them

to be there. However, it is not a sin. It is rather an expected preparation for the living, because funerals, like any other activity in memory of a late person, are not altogether about the dead. This is part of the habits and rituals that constitute the world of the living present. So, when the ritualized performance becomes real life (“Let be be finale of seem”), the ultimate principle that rules the world is to focus on the living present and feed the living (“The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream”).

The ice cream in the second stanza is not a distraction from the funeral, but a conclusion. It is also different from the ice cream in the first stanza in that the ice cream in the second stanza has nothing in common with the rest of the objects. The incomplete (with knobs missing) dresser, the shroud in the guise of a sheet, and the displaced limbs have to find their meanings in the ice cream. This is the second synthesis of time where signs find meanings, and meanings are products of difference powered by **disguise** and **displacement** (in their Deleuzean sense as in *Difference and Repetition*, 98-99 in particular). In other words, these disparate objects are merely materialized media for the same intensity.

In the second synthesis of time, meaning stays based on a materialist sense. Back in *Proust and Signs*, it is the madeleine that stands for Combray. Here, it is the dresser for the ice cream, the sheet for the ice cream, and the lifeless limbs for the ice cream. To conclude, the ice cream as a meaningful sensuous sign in the second synthesis of time is the final transformation of all three—malfunction, disguise, and displacement. The ice cream here claims a double meaning by splitting itself in two—ice and cream. The “ice” in “ice cream” is the “mal” and “dis” that ruin the comforting “cream” of life. The ice cream is another phrase for the broken dresser, the wedding-bed sheet/the shroud, and the lifeless limbs. It is ice and cream, a conflicting combination in itself. The cold and dead “ice” speaks for the dying past of the second synthesis of time while the soft and sweet “cream” speaks for the living present. It is more than a combination of conflicts. It is also a combination of two syntheses of time. In the end, the lamp sheds light on the cold fact and the dead body in its beam to tell us, “let it be plain that this woman is dead, that these things, impossibly ambiguous as they may be, are as they are”

(Blackmur 117). For an insensate eye, it is a helping of dessert served at the funeral, nothing more. For a sagacious eye, it may be an inner shout that one never lets out—“I scream.” The only ruling principle in a world full of meaning and understanding is the helpless recognition of conflicting elements in life that muffles a shout of intensity.

Simple Tea and Daily Bread

It is quite rare for the reader to come across a poem by Wallace Steven and find it self-evident and free of any esoteric choice of words. Among his food poems, there happen to be two: “A Fading of the Sun” and “Paisant Chronicle.” In them, the poet mentions food as a simple meal for daily need. In them, food defines humanity. These two poems seldom incur interpretative disagreement. Food poetics may function differently in interpreting them from the way it interprets the previous two poems in which abstruse diction and inter-image disconnections abound.

The food objects in both poems are alike in that they serve to feed humans and further to define humans. In “A Fading of the Sun,” however, the second stanza starts in gloom:

The warm antiquity of self,
Everyone, grows suddenly cold.
The tea is bad, bread sad.
How can the world so old be so mad
That the people die? (*CP* 139)

The poet looks for things to blame for people’s death. The world that breeds people is an “old,” “warm,” and “antique” self. Self, in the sense of being self-centered and tending its own “warmth,” is the world that goes mad and watches people die. For this, the poet puts the blame on the bad tea and the sad bread.

What we have here are two mere objects without a specific time setting. The consequence is also clear: bad tea and sad bread lead to death. There is

no way to read the food signs in a time frame. Therefore we are denied the methodology of distancing and channeling because in comes the food and out goes death. Everything seems linearly straightforward. We are left with one choice—read food as a sign.

Tea, as a worldly sign, is itself almost a schedule—morning, afternoon, mealtime, etc. Bread, as a ritual sign, is a routine staple food and a ceremonial symbol for the flesh of Christ. When the time is bad and religion is sad, people die. This is what tea and bread, as worldly signs, signify.

Tea as a sensuous sign is a materialized sign which quenches thirst while bread as a sensuous sign is a materialized sign which satiates hunger. As both satisfy human needs, both produce joy. In the system of sensuous signs, when joy is produced, obligation ensues and the search for meaning begins. But then the tea is bad and the bread is sad. When they malfunction and fail to serve their purposes, no joy is produced and no obligation is assumed. In the meantime, no search of meaning is under way. Life is stagnant and people die without any meaning. This is how tea and bread function as sensuous signs.

In the fourth stanza of the poem, tea is yoked with wine, and bread with meat. This is to say that the meanings of signs stay in the phase of sensuous signs. We do not see any dematerialized meaning beyond the object-for-object meaning production. We do not see something new coming out from the aforementioned objects. The reasoning remains the same: if the food (nutrient/time/religion) is good, people live. If not, people die. Although tea and bread as signs in a sense have entered the world of sensuous signs, they are trapped rather than furthered into dematerialized meanings of art. Trapped signs are signs of love representing confusion, effort, and jealousy.

Any yet, somehow, hope and comfort seem to arrive:

Within as pillars of the sun,
Supports of night. The tea,
The wine is good. The bread,
The meat is sweet.
And they will not die. (*CP* 139)

Tea is reconfirmed by wine as a ritual sign, and bread by meat. The ritual where wine stands for Christ’s blood and bread for Christ’s flesh leads us back to the first phase of worldly signs. The signs do not evolve. All the poet does here is to look inward for hope and warmth. As is pointed out by Lucy Beckett, “instead of crying for help to God or one of the gods, we should look to ourselves for help” (99). The seemingly promising time to come is the only recourse. When there is nothing else to turn to for help, we turn inward. The poem may seem optimistic at the first read, but in fact it is written in trapped signs of love. It is therefore full of characteristics of love: attempts, confusions, and jealousy—especially jealousy of a warm world where people are well nourished and do not die.

James Longenbach seems to be one of the few critics to discover this. He points out that the poet of “A Fading of the Sun” is a poet who “desperately needed to feel successful” (131), and who had to overcome fear as well, so that the whole poem “concludes too easily” (*ibid*). Or, it never concludes, because it is trapped in the end. In “A Fading of the Sun,” food means a nutrient, a point of time, a hint of belief, a trapped feeling, and an effort to seek meaning or comfort. In reality, human life is inextricably associated with food whereas in this poem, human life is involved in or even trapped in food.

In “Paisant Chronicle,” the poet first draws to our attention the fact that in human history, the hero (“the major man”) “is the choice of chance” because in some sense everyone can be brave and everyone endures. How could anyone be singled out as a hero? Human beings, however, enjoy fame and “live to be admired by all men.” So, heroes are made:

The major men—
That is different. They are characters beyond
Reality, composed thereof. They are
The fictive man created out of men.
They are men but artificial men . . . (*CP* 334)

From the third stanza of the poem, we see how the poet defies the idea of

“the major men,” the heroes created by chance to be admired. The hero is beyond reality and a composite. He is a fiction concocted by collective labor in two senses: (1) He takes credit for everyone else’s effort. (2) He is created by everyone’s imagination. In either case, the hero himself becomes something of a sign, an empty sign for worship. He is the center of rituals created by collective imagination.

Then, food is served. The poet, right after the creation of this myth, this hero, puts aside his argument of how heroes are made and shifts to the topic of how humans are defined by the most basic needs:

The baroque poet may see him as still a man
As Virgil, abstract. But see him for yourself,
The fictive man. He may be seated in
A café. There may be a dish of country cheese
And a pineapple on the table. It must be so. (*CP* 335)

For an old-time poet who seeks legends, the hero has to be more “fictive” than factual. The hero is depicted fictive and abstract and is compared to legendary Virgil. However, as a sign of empty ritual, the fictive man is not a genuine art sign which creates a new meaning that defies human limitation. He is an ill-grounded empty sign that answers the human need for an idol.

The poet then tips the hero off his perch by showing us that the superhuman hero is situated in a common human place characterized by the need of food. His intake is what makes us human, what defines us as human. If his intake is no different from ours, the only difference about him is the way we look at him, for it is our opinion of him that makes him a hero. For that matter, Jacqueline Brogan points out that “‘Paisant Chronicle’ satirizes all men, all nations, the human race itself—and even the idea of ‘major man’” (81). Although Edward Ragg suggests the poet is actually rescuing the heroes by telling us their “humanness” is glossed over by our opinion of their “superhumanness,” there is a mutual agreement that food serves to identify human dependence which actually defines humans.

The poet’s deliberate reference to the most common food objects—the

country cheese and pineapple³—gives us an impression that the fictive hero is nothing unlike us at core. Among all sorts of cheese, the poet assigns the kind with a name of a rustic air, popular among us. Among all sorts of fruit, the poet chooses the kind whose supply is always sustainable in time of peace or war. The fictive man is not anything different from us, not even by a higher taste or a finer need for his intake. If we are what we eat, he is what we are.

The common saying prevails—“You are what you eat.” This is a resort to food culture, not to Deleuze. Even so, the presence of food as a down-to-earth reminder of the human position is relatively rare in poetry, not just in Stevens. Food poetics here relies heavily on food as a worldly sign to equalize all human beings. But, turning back to Deleuze, the worldly sign of food harbors within itself a self-subverting power—it is a worldly sign that defies the worldly sign. Food is here a sign of routine: it is to feed humans, but in feeding humans, it makes the hero become one of us. In making the hero one of us, food as a down-to-earth routine sign (=worldly sign) is employed to defy the hero as a worship-centered ritual sign (=worldly sign). Worldly signs in poetry may function in many more ways than we could first have imagined. Food as a worldly sign possesses a self-subverting power from within.

³ By the First World War, the American pineapple industries around the world were powerful enough to help the U.S. government gather “a wide variety of intelligence.” “The pineapple industry,” in return, “made considerable use of the BFDC [Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce]’s San Francisco and Chicago offices” (Hawkins 166). In 1932, one of the largest merger cases in the U.S. involved “Hawaiian Pineapple,” “a company that supplied three-quarters of the world’s pineapple supply” (Wong 133). At the beginning of the Second World War, “pineapple” becomes a term for American success in agriculture and economic assimilation of Hawaii, so that the army recruited from Hawaii for the war effort was nicknamed the “Pineapple Army” (a partly racist nickname, of course, for the members were Japanese-American soldiers) (Bartlit and Rogers 166). These were all in Wallace Stevens’ time (1879-1955) when pineapples became a common food, whole or canned, even in time of war. The idea of pineapples being exclusively tropical and therefore unavailable or expensive may come from Renaissance impressions.

Chocolate

One of the most enigmatic food signs in Stevens is the chocolate in “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” which consists of “five portrayals of the sea surface off Tehuantepec, Mexico” (Cook, *A Reader's Guide* 80). In each of the five portrayals, three elements repeat themselves: chocolate, umbrella, and green. Here is the first:

I

In that November off Tehuantepec,
The slopping of the sea grew still one night
And in the morning summer hued the deck

And made one think of rosy chocolate
And gilt umbrellas. Paradisal green
Gave suavity to the perplexed machine

Of ocean . . .

[. . .] in that ambrosial latitude (*CP* 98-99)

This is Stevens’ version of the production of involuntary memory. For Proust, the madeleine produces memory of Combray. For Stevens, the chocolate is tied up with the seashore near Tehuantepec, a tropical area in Mexico.

The opening stanza does not provide any ready corresponding points like those of “lunch—pain” and “life—aspic” in “Esthétique du Mal.” We must start, when corresponding points are yet unavailable, by taking objects as the creation of distancing. This is a portrayal of a seashore, a poetic depiction of scenery. The time is November but the location is tropical. What remain unchanged through the five sections are the chocolate, the green, and the umbrella. While chocolate is what meets our sense from inside, green is what meets our sense from outside. The umbrella produces shadows and comes between the inside and the outside.

On the seashore, the unchanged green we have been sensing can be understood as the sea. The sea is too boundless and too enormous for human

senses to contain. The sea is symbolic of the entire world out there. The sea out there is to the eye what the cup of chocolate in the mouth is to the tongue. Just as the chocolate drink is too bittersweet to categorize, the sea water is too huge a body of water for the eye to contain. The inarticulate sea is addressed as “green” and the inarticulate taste is addressed as “chocolate.” This is a moment of affect. The affective encounter cuts between the external world and the internal sense and forms a shadow (“umbrella”) of extraordinary joy (“paradisal”).

The distancing-channeling approach claims its best functionality while reading into Stevens’ poetic deployment of seemingly random signs of color and objects, for it focuses on the expansion and contraction of space and the objects in such space. Stevens oftentimes spreads dazzling colors and objects which take long to finally make sense as a whole. We may therefore have the following understanding: green is the sea, symbolic of the external world, whereas chocolate is the taste, symbolic of the internal feeling for the world. The umbrella is the shadow, symbolic of the projection of the world as represented in front of us. The reference of the umbrella, partly from the materiality of the word—its spelling, is relatively obvious. Not only does the umbrella always function between objects (as between the sun and the person), but the “umbra” in its spelling reminds us of its Latin root of “shadow” and “projection.”⁴

⁴ As one of the most enigmatic poems by Stevens, “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” has invited three kinds of explanation ever since its publication: authorial, biographical, and non-critical analytic explanations. In a letter “To John Pauker,” Stevens explains to his reader that the Chinese chocolate in the fifth section is “a big Chinese with a very small cup of chocolate: something incongruous” (*Letters* 426). A friend of Wallace Stevens, Peter Brazeau, in a biography of Stevens says that a piece of brown paper (of scraps by Stevens) in his possession points out that the “chocolate” in the poem is derived from “chouchouter” in French, meaning “to pet, to caress,” while “hue” is derived from “hoo,” a mimicry of the sound of petting or brushing over (104). According to Sarah Riggs, this poem is another example of Stevens preference for “colors and food” in his poems. “This is a savoring and sensing of language itself,” though his words are not to be taken literally (27). Such resort to “linguistic indulgence” (*ibid.*) is quite common among Stevens scholars. Detailed and sensible as some of them may sound (Even the exhaustive guide to Stevens by Eleanor Cook misses out on the

In the first section, where the poetic locale is set, the affective encounter tells us the time is winter but the location is tropical. There is a lot of sun in winter. Therefore the evening hue touches the deck and gives our feeling for the world a rosy color. The chocolate taste of the world is neither sweet nor bitter and the color it is tinted with is neither red nor white (“rosy”). This place seems neither heavenly nor mundane (“paradisal” and then freely “swimming”). Such sensuous experience is later situated in “ambrosial latitude”—ethereal and yet still sensuous. “The sea-blooms,” or the waves, seem to come from the clouds. All dictions seem too vague. The poet then refers to the sea as “the perplexed machine of ocean.” In our Deleuze-based food poetics, this is the affective encounter between the chocolate and the taste of the complicated world. All the in-betweenness, all the mixed feelings, all the non-solid and unanchored sensations are signs of the working of the affect. The first section of the poem is the first phase of the operation of the Deleuzean memory machine. This is the inarticulate moment of the affective “apparition” (*PS* 37). After the affective encounter, the time and place will be relegated to the background in the opening of every section.

In the second section, as if we were ushered into another space with the same setting, the extraordinary joy we first felt from the affective encounter has been subdued into a mundane world as a routine in life:

II

In that November off Tehuantepec
The slopping of the sea grew still one night.
At breakfast jelly yellow streaked the deck

And made one think of chop-house chocolate
And sham umbrellas. And a sham-like green
Capped summer-seeming on the tense machine

Brazeau anecdote.), we here ignore all, for biographical interpretation often hinders a systematic study or the generalization into a larger humanistic perspective.

Of ocean, . . . (CP 99)

Time in the second section of the poem begins with a hurried breakfast with yellow jelly, the most convenient smear on a piece of toast. The word that describes our feeling toward the complicated world with multiple layers of flavor is a chop-house—a homely eating place, a makeshift restaurant. The breakfast is conveniently prepared in a makeshift fashion, and so is the lunch. But the taste of all things, including the taste of the world, comes with a business-like stench. Nothing is missing, but everything seems perfunctory. The projection ("umbrella") of the world seems fake ("sham"). The sea/world out there seems fake ("a sham-like green").

All signs here are worldly signs. The space constituted in the second section is a world of worldly signs: a hurried breakfast (with jelly dropped on the ground to streak the deck), a ready meal from the chophouse, a perfunctory façade of the world, and the phony sea. The entire world appears in the eye of the poet as a "tense machine," a scheduled, functional, business-style kind of world. In this world as well as in this ocean, empty and ritual signs abound. All the waves in the ocean turn into "the mortal massives of the blooms." In the world of the second section, the search for poetic meaning is conducted in a world of worldly signs. The empty, functional, and ritual way of life seems to be concluded by "the mortal massives of the blooms"—this is how the majority of people consume themselves to death.

In the third section, all objects seem to mellow down. The worldliness in the second section disappears while everything appears a bit fuzzy and silvery. From the first paradisaic seashore to the second greasy restaurant, now we have a gauzy vision—pleasant but in a gauze:

III

In that November off Tehuantepec,
The slopping of the sea grew still one night
And a pale silver patterned on the deck

And made one think of porcelain chocolate
And pied umbrellas. An uncertain green,
Piano-polished, held the tranced machine

Of ocean, . . .

[. . .] *Oh! C'était mon extase et mon amour.* (CP 100)

The sea/world seems uncertain. Hence we feel such a world is delicate and fragile (“porcelain”). The color that identifies the affective encounter is rosy. The color that dominates the mundane world is business yellow (legal pads for school notes and yellow pages or industry directory for business people). The color that presages this world is moonlike silver (“pale silver”).

The world is lightened up by the moon and the feeling inside is delicate. What is projected in front is colorful (“pied” and, of course, mild in moonlight). The sea/world itself is full of uncertainty. Upon the sea, the silvery waves are blooming into white flowers. All is concluded and confirmed by the manifesto of love: “Oh! It was my ecstasy and my love.” This is the world of signs of love. The machine is a “tranced machine.” Signs of love do not produce meanings. They are awareness of memory, attempts at search, and efforts during uncertainty. The word “tranced” also speaks for the experience of love as confusion. It is a phase between the actual and the virtual as the world of signs of love is half-aware of the memory but cannot recollect any. The polished piano adds up to the sensuous indulgence by suggesting the music of “*La Luna*” in the moonlight.

In the fourth section of “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” we have references to specific, solid sensuousness:

IV

In that November off Tehuantepec,
The night-long slopping of the sea grew still.
A mallow morning dozed upon the deck

And made one think of musky chocolate

airiti
And frail umbrellas. A too-fluent green
Suggested malice in the dry machine

Of ocean, . . . (*CP* 101)

Instead of an adjective for color (“rosy,” “yellow,” “silver,” etc.), we are given a specific flower—the mallow, a flower with notched petals in color of light purple—to set the color of the day. The sign of a flower then grows into a sign of a sleeping beauty, dozing off upon the deck. Unlike the beginnings of other sections, this is more of a portrait than a picture of scenery.

Our internal feeling for the world is then covered with a musky scent, the typical scent of perfume. The way we feel about the world becomes sensuous as if we were facing a lady. The world/sea suddenly becomes eloquent like a person. As the world becomes real, its projection becomes frail. The sensuous world stands out from behind the shadow. The clouds in the sky start to look like waves. All these transformations indicate that this is a world of sensuous signs, the world of genuine signs which produce meaning when one object turns into another (as “signs of alteration,” *PS* 14). The eloquence or expressiveness of the world is so personified that what it says can mean solid impact and hurt people (“malice”). The sensuous world is dense and solid (“dry”) and acts like a human being (“too-fluent” green and a follow-up “thinking green”). The world of sensuous signs is a world that communicates with us and we are accordingly given meanings. The world appears to be a lady with a flower, smelling of perfume, coming out of the shadow. As she is fluent, the world is fragrant.

The sensuous qualities offered by the signs render prodigious joy. The joy then makes us feel a sense of obligation to seek their meanings. The meanings appear to reveal to us the concealed objects (*PS* 8). In the world of sensuous signs, it is through these procedures that the ocean and the world appears to the poet a lady. What he sees in the entire world is a lady, and the way she feels and the air she emits are like a suggestion of muskiness in the air. The chocolate smell of her.

The sea in the fifth section of “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” is a diverse,

exhaustive, all-encompassing sea. It seems that all things converge upon it as all signs converge upon art the world of signs of art:

V

In that November off Tehuantepec,
Night stilled the slopping of the sea. The day
Came, bowing and voluble, upon the deck,

Good clown . . . One thought of Chinese chocolate
And large umbrellas. And a motley green
Followed the drift of the obese machine

Of ocean, . . . (*CP* 101-102)

As the ocean/world reflects various colors, mixed and many (“motley”), the adjective to describe the poet’s feeling for the world is Chinese—ancient, oriental, and distant. The temporal distance is matched by spatial distance: “large umbrellas” and “the obese machine of the ocean.”

In the world of signs of art, all signs shall converge upon art by becoming dematerialized to produce a new meaning. That is the reason why in the fifth section all the attributes tend to be the most amorphous among all sections. The incongruity of the combination of “Chinese” and “chocolate” nevertheless makes sense in our interpretation here—an ancient, exotic, and distant (“Chinese”) mixed feeling toward the world (“chocolate”)—the word “Chinese” has already been rid of any materialized sensuousness. Later in the section, we see no clouds left as we saw in other sections of the poem. It is just “the wind of green blooms.” What used to fill our vision over the ocean (clouds and waves) has been displaced by the invisible wind.

The same principle seems to apply to other recurrent elements than chocolate. Hence the green, the sea as a representation of the world, is described as “motley”—colors alongside colors or colors within colors—without tangible, solid bases yet including the entire spectrum. The ocean, the world, the specific space constituted by signs of art is now “obese,”

whose sound rhymes with “Chinese” and whose sense becomes equally amorphous and encompassing. This world of art promises all possibilities and resolves all differences. When all differences are resolved and internalized in a world of art, the search for meaning, the production of memory, and the creation of art consummate essence—“real without being present, ideal without being abstract” or “virtuality incarnated in involuntary memory” (PS 39-40).

In this world of art, Combray is preserved in the madeleine as the world is preserved in the chocolate. The memory is now in the food object (internalized) rather than in the consciousness of a human agent. This is the world where all senses converge upon art. This is the world where childhood can melt in the mouth. This is the world where a cup of chocolate can be churned into an ocean.

Through the reading of food poetics, the poem appears as a series of sign and meaning productions: affect, worldly signs, signs of love, sensuous signs, and finally signs of art. The sequence fits the idea of art creation according to Deleuze. The choices of words appear coherent. The separate themes in each section in the end come together. While each section speaks a different mood in the face of a different world, the entire process from the encounter of paradise (affect), scheduled routines (worldly signs), uncertain trance (signs of love), dating the world like a lady (sensuous signs), to entering an enlarged world with assorted objects (signs of art), is telling of the production of memory, meaning, and of art, as Deleuze understands.

Maybe Deleuze has always known the poetic reading of distancing and channeling but by some other name. In *Difference and Repetition*, discussing *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, he points out that the dilemma of interpreting esoteric words in literature is that esoteric words appear as nonsense but then create sense by repeating themselves and by expressing “displacement of sense” and “disguise among the series” (123). In other words, we have to read into the words or signs to find out what has been displaced by them and what category they actually belong in. So, in Proust’s case, Combray is displaced by the madeleine, and it is a disguised or ill-labeled childhood. Deleuze seems to simplify the entire

distancing-channeling process into the equation: “object= x ” (*Difference and Repetition* 122).

Since displacement and disguise are the two powers of repetition (*DR* 288) and repetition is a power of involuntary memory (*PS* 40) in Deleuzean thought, in dealing with meaning and memory, Proust and Joyce, Deleuze may have developed a way to read Wallace Stevens. While no interpretation of any poem can be definitive, the comparatively applicable Deleuze-based food poetics seems to find an edge to cut in with. With the main distancing-channeling approach for interpretation and with the help of sign categories from *Proust and Signs*, the reader of Stevens is allowed to lay aside supposed biographical evidence for obscure expressions or allusions. Poetics is expected to serve more than as theory and it must help understand poems. Food poetics is an attempt to qualify for the definition of genuine poetics.

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