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### Introduction

Of the aphoristic statements in Wallace Stevens' poetry, the most often-quoted line is probably "the theory/ Of poetry is the theory of life" (*CPP* 415) in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." For those who took this sentence as a kind of pragmatic proposition that tells a life lesson, the word "life" means lifetime, or possibly, everyday life. But few readers noted the other "theory" in the same poem that verges on the non-propositional manner: "This endlessly elaborating poem/ Displays the theory of poetry/ As the life of poetry" (*CPP* 415). In the latter case, what does the word "life" denote?

The word "life" is admittedly charged with philosophical implications in the twentieth century. Critics tend to read Stevens' idea of "life" in line with the Nietzschean Philosophy of Life or the Bergsonian Vitalism, both to which Stevens referred occasionally. As some lyric theorists have acknowledged, the liveliness of inorganic things in poetry has a long-standing tradition in the Anglo-Saxon lyric, especially when linked to the genre called "riddle." The work of Daniel Tiffany is of seminal importance here. Tiffany focuses on the enigmatic voice of certain everyday artifacts in the riddle such as weapons or jewelry. He assumes the substance of these lyric objects consists of the formal techniques of poetry, by which he means "prosody and the crafts of ordering words" or "the poem's image-making and rhetorical apparatus" (77). Stevens might agree with Tiffany's argument because Stevens' idea of "life" is rhetorically constructed both in his poetry and prose. Yet, even if we can trace the possible source of the Stevensian "life" of poetry to some extent, neither philosophical nor generic

concepts stabilize the definition.

What is more crucial than the contextualization and the definition of the word is the rhetorical power of abstraction when Stevens refers to key terms. Against the grain of his contemporary critics, Stevens often uses abstraction in the form of a proposition to formulate his theory of poetry. In common parlance, the word “abstraction” connotes a pejorative sense of withdrawal or seclusion. But with the help of abstraction, which is also the major term in Stevens’ discourse, Stevens enhances the connotative range of the word. For him, abstraction is a rhetorical device for persuading the reader to appreciate the value of the words. In particular, in his essay titled “The Noble Rider and the Sound of the Words,” Stevens does not only propose his poetic theory concerning “imagination” but tries to test the rhetorical valence of the sets of key terms such as “nobility,” “reality,” and “life.” Through complicating and unfixing the definition of terms in the essay, Stevens demonstrates how the word ceased to denote a generally accepted sense. Being able to acknowledge the wide connotative range of the key terms, the reader shall direct attention to a hidden “sounds of words,” that is, a vitality of words. In what follows, this paper aims to articulate Stevens’ rhetorical elaboration and abstraction of “life” through considering the varied use of the term from Stevens’ essay. Before the reading of the essay, we shall contextualize the essay according to the critical trend of the time. By doing so, this paper tries to show Stevens’ insight on a propositional use of language deserves greater attention than it has been assumed.

### **I: Logical Abstraction: “The Noble Rider and the Sound of the Words” in Context**

The opening essay in *The Necessary Angel* is probably the best known and cited among Stevens’ essays because it not only reflects the immediacy of World War II but challenges the critical presumption of the epoch. “The Noble Rider and the Sound of the Words” was originally a lecture at Princeton in May 1941, and then issued in 1942 as part of the book titled *Language of Poetry* edited by Allen Tate. Tate’s choice of the contributor reflects the dominant criticism of

the early twentieth century. The book contains the essays of the New Critics and its surrounding writers such as I. A. Richards' "The Interaction of Words" and Cleanth Brooks' "The Language of Paradox" (the first chapter of *Well-Wrought Urn*). These contributors draw a similar distinction between the literary language and scientific (or philosophical) language. In his essay, in its use of words, Stevens regards the former's nature as "connotative" in contrast to the latter's "denotative" disposition (*NA* 13). While Stevens was seemingly toying with these distinctions, New Critics employed the opposition as part of their critical strategy.

For New Criticism, science was essentially abstractive because it reduces the complicated meaning of words into the mere propositional statement, and hence dismissing an organic experience or bodily knowledge of understanding poetry. From such a standpoint, in *Science and Poetry*, Richards assumes that poetry is the "reverse of the science" (32), yet, it is a "pseudo-statement" that cannot be empirically verified or be logically abstracted as a propositional statement (58-61). "The poet is not writing as scientist" Richards says, because the poet uses words "*as a means of ordering, controlling and consolidating the uttered experience*" (33). In a similar vein, Brooks asserts in "The Language of Paradox" that the tendency of science is "to stabilize terms, to freeze them into strict denotations; the poet's tendency is by contrast disruptive" (9). Brooks also famously denounces "heresy of paraphrase," a belief that a poem's meaning can be reduced into a statement apart from its specific formal properties such as figure or trope in his last chapter of *Well-Wrought Urn*. Instead, he stipulates that "a true poem is a simulacrum of reality . . . by *being* an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience" (213). Though Brooks or other New Critics distanced themselves from Richards' appeals to psychology, they similarly attribute figural or experiential elements to poetic language. In this way, both critics agreed that the poem is an experience itself that cannot be paraphrased or abstracted into a single statement or proposition.

Unlike New Critics, Stevens does often use a proposition entailing abstraction as an indispensable component for poetry. For instance, in his miscellaneous

book of the aphorisms titled *Adagia*, Stevens insists: “Literature is based not on life but on proposition about life,” and “Life is a composite of the proposition about it” (CPP 910). More significantly, his masterpiece “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942) opens with the propositional section: “It Must Be Abstract.” Against his tendency to adopt a proposition, even literary associates who highly admired Stevens castigated the logical abstraction for its hollowness. Applauding “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” except an opening section titled “It Must Be Abstract,” John Crowe Ransom claims to prefer the “the innocent, non-philosophical” part of the poem (*Letters* 316). He also assumed that science abhors a figurative and tropical language as against art that is incompatible with a logical mode of thinking represented by a proposition. He claims: “When the trope begins to reduce to a proposition, we are coming out of the solid world of art into the abstract plane of science” (“Arts” 198).

Thus, New Criticism despises logical abstraction represented by the proposition. By contrast, Stevens uses propositional statements in his poetry and prose, especially when he formulates his poetic theory. Even so, his mode of abstraction is different from that of science and philosophy. As we will see in the next section, Stevens abstracts the word’s meaning not to fix its denotation but to enhance its range of connotation. His use of propositions does not judge true or false problem about some vocabulary. Rather with a varied and repetitive definition of the words, Stevens alerts the reader to suspend general comprehension of them. This usage of proposition marks Stevens’ peculiar mode of abstraction, which will follow the following discussion of “The Noble Rider and the Sounds of the Words.”

## II: Abstraction of “Reality”

With these critical contexts in mind, we then turn to consider Stevens’ rhetorical use of key terms in “The Noble Rider and the Sounds of the Words.” In this essay, Stevens places a set of notions such as “imagination,” “reality,” and “life” in the broad context of Western philosophy, the ongoing European war, and the representative history of arts. Against

this backdrop, the first half of the essay examines the seeming conflict between imagination and reality concerning the transition of “nobility” in several horse-mounted figures. The prefatory section begins with the mythic anecdote from Plato’s *Phaedrus*: about the description of a soul as a charioteer with the two-winged horses, one of the noble, the other of the ignoble. Throughout the essay, Stevens uses the first-person plural “we” to involve the reader with his illustration of “nobility.” Without notice, he starts identification with Plato’s figure: “we have scarcely read the passage before we have identified ourselves with the charioteer” (*NA* 3). But soon “we remember . . . that the soul no longer exists,” Stevens says, and our analogous responses to the figure and exultation of the mind “settle on the solid ground,” thereby “[t]he figure becomes antiquated and rustic” (*NA* 4). Stevens names this disillusionment with Plato’s anecdote as an “experience” of both poet and the reader at the beginning of the first section (*NA* 4). Here, he is not merely imposing his view on the reader but demonstrating the ongoing shift of their aesthetic response to “nobility.”

The key to understanding this changing mind is Stevens’ supposition for imagination and reality. To sum up his ideas, too close an adherence to reality at the cost of imagination offers a restrictive sense of vitality. On the other hand, imagination that completely departs from reality may not work well. Based on these principles, in the first section, Stevens argues that “[t]he imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real” (*NA* 6). As to the cause of the descent from the divine to the earth in Plato’s anecdote, he therefore says, the chariots’ figure loses its vitality because “the imagination adheres to what is unreal” (*NA* 7). It seems Stevens’ argument about “nobility” depends on what the key term like “imagination” or “reality” means, namely, on the definition of these words. Even so, we can only infer mere logic that the interdependence or the equilibrium of “imagination” and “reality” are crucial. Stevens dare not strictly define the meanings of these terms throughout the essay except suggesting an oblique association with other terms. By doing so, Stevens attempts to awaken the reader’s sensibility toward their self-evident reception of the words. So the reader needs to keep in mind that following Stevens’ use of

proposition is not an explicit statement about truth but a rhetorical performance that questions the very definition created by the abstraction of the terms.

At the beginning of the second section, Stevens argues he has demonstrated that “there are degrees of imagination, degrees of vitality, and, therefore, of intensity” (*NA* 7). In other words, the point at issue here is to what degree the reader abstracts the meaning from these key terms along with the poet. Stevens is implying here that it is the taste of contemporary readers that affects the fate of “nobility” in the arts, and determines the degree of it. The second section then proceeds to the discussion of the “illustrations that constitute episodes in the history of the idea of nobility” (*NA* 7). Adding to Plato’s chariot figure, Stevens takes the two examples of work featuring horse-mounted figures: Andrea del Verrocchio’s statue of Bartolommeo Colleoni and the romance figure of Don Quixote. The first stands for the side of the imagination whose noble style perpetuates its “nobility” by evoking one’s “passion of rhetoric” that “even to grow furious” (*NA* 8). The second embodies the representative tradition of reality that marks a signature style of Spanish “nobility.” For Cervantes, Stevens asserts, nobility “was part of reality, it was something that exists in life” (*NA* 9).

Given these examples, at this stage of the essay, Stevens seems to use the word “reality” as a mere opposition to “imagination.” Besides that, the idea of “life” is synonymous with “reality,” an external event isolated from the mind. But in satisfying to restore such a sense of reality, “we,” the poet and reader, “become wholly prejudiced against the imagination” (*NA* 10). Stevens repeats the point here: it is a contemporary taste that invests “reality” with such authenticity. But in the following analysis of the artworks, Stevens moves onto the specific mode of representation, that of “realism.”

Before we get to the next examples of “reality,” we ought to have a glance at Stevens’ critique of imagism. Only Gillian White has pointed out Stevens’ harsh attacks on the early version of William Carlos Williams’ imagism in relation to the essay. In the 1930s and 1940s, Stevens continuously attacked the wrong concepts of Imagist’s “reality.” White rightly sums up Stevens’ view as follows:

For Stevens, the imagist artist’s wish to disclaim personal desire (and political



drives) in singling out and describing certain things in certain ways revealed a willful ignorance of the social nature of description and a disclaiming of the artist's involvement in the establishment of discursive truth. (246)

For an imagist like Williams, who thinks direct treatment of things is supreme in their use of language, "reality" should be free from any contamination of "personal desire." Imagists use the word "reality" as if it were unmediated by the individual mind, therefore they often repress the rhetoricity of the words. In his preface to Williams' *Collected Poems 1921-1931*, Stevens labeled Williams a "realist" who "still dwells in an ivory tower" (CPP 770). Here Stevens uses "realist" as a metonymy for imagist or escapist. As White argues, "reality" for an imagist connotes authenticity of "actual," "true," or "objective," thereby "passing unmediated through the artists into her work and just as clearly out to the reader" (247). This is what Stevens feels apprehension about the innocent use of "reality."

Based on these assumptions, Stevens then refers to the two realistic modes of representation in America: the first is the mounted statue of Andrew Jackson by Clark Mills in Lafayette Square, Washington, D. C. that has no relevance with the imagination and reality but merely as a product of "fancy" (NA 10). Stevens here appends "fancy" to the discussion as an antithesis to "imagination." By this famous notion of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, by way of the I. A. Richards' *Coleridge on Imagination*, Stevens means the minds' faculty of "selection from among objects already supplied by association," and this selection made for the "purpose" that "have been already fixed" (NA 11). To be more specific, the work of "fancy" can only serve for the already fixed pattern of reality, in the instance of Jackson's figure, the stereotypical ideal of the American character. White rightly noticed that Mills' statue is "the work of American propaganda" that only iterates its simple "American myth of untortured spontaneity" (251). Thus, the figure of Jackson represents the propagandistic plainness of American reality, it would be "easily satisfied in its efforts to realize itself in knowing itself" for the contemporary Americans (NA 11).

The second example is a painting entitled *Wooden Horses* by Reginald Marsh, the contemporary American social realist painter. The picture depicts an almost

grotesque reality of lower Manhattan with four people riding on a merry-go-round. Though tracing the realistic description in detail, Stevens makes a hasty conclusion that the picture shows no intriguing aspect “except that it is a picture of ribald and hilarious reality” (*NA* 12). He characterizes this work as “wholly favorable to what is real,” but adds qualification: “It is not without imagination and it is far from being without aesthetic theory” (*NA* 12). “Reality,” in short, is favorable to the particular version of reality, that of the quotidian life of Lower Manhattan. In the course of analysis, Stevens initially imitates the realist style on purpose, then suddenly relinquishes the method for implying its limit. As he reveals later, he uses “reality” here as a “bare word” (*NA* 24), as a generally understood meaning. Through observing the realistic representation of “noble rider,” Stevens makes these examples a bridge for the broader topic of discussion as we will see now.

### III: “The sound of Words” and the Life of Poetry

Having thus chronologically outlined several examples of the “noble rider” from Plato’s chariot to the social realist painting in the first part of the essay, Stevens can introduce the topic of the last half of the title, “the sound of words.” The plural attributed to the “words” suggests a “variation between sounds of words” that depends on the conflict between the “connotative and denotative forces in words” (*NA* 13). At this point of the essay, Stevens attempts to respond to the demands of the age named “pressure of reality” (*NA* 13). Stevens then depicts the brief history of these forces over several centuries. Like the New Critics, Stevens locates symptomatic usage of denotative words in that of seventeenth-century philosophers like Locke or Hobbes, who desired “a mathematical plainness; in short, perspicuous words” (*NA* 13). Following the eighteenth-century, “an era of poetic diction,” (*NA* 13), according to Stevens, the nineteenth-century becomes more connotative, and the contemporary writer like James Joyce is typically connotative in his use of words. These classifications seem to be reasonable. As Sidney Feshbach noticed, Stevens intendedly enlists these proper names as iconic for suggesting their “denotation

and conventional associations” with the science (91). The function of “the sounds of words” is thus limited to a scientific plane of centrifugal and referential meaning because of the “pressure of reality.”

In the fourth section, Stevens returns to the topic of American reality in the second section. Seeking to construct the figure of “a possible poet,” (NA 23) he somewhat abruptly quotes the passage from Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*:

[Bergson] says: “The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless, the vision I now have of it differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant later than the other. My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present.” (NA 25)

Though turning the topic from the semantic of the word to the psychology of perception, Stevens iterates the matter of shifting mind that originates from the outset of the essay. Stevens’ emphasis on the interdependence of “imagination” and “reality” transforms into that of subjective mind and objective reality. Instead of explicating Bergson’s citation, Stevens immediately cites the comment of C. E. M. Joad, a British philosopher, in relation to Bergson’s argument with the false view of reality. It would seem that the citation from Joad’s follows a Bergsonian critique of the objective perception of external reality, as he asks: “How, then, does the world come to appear to us as a collection of solid, static objects extended in space? Because of the intellect which prevents us with a false view of it” (NA 25). But without adequate consideration nor precise contextualization of these texts from the philosophical point of view, Stevens immediately shifts the discussion from the perception of reality to the subject-matter of poetry as follows:

The subject-matter of poetry is not that “collection of solid, static objects extended in space” but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life lived in it. Reality is things as they are. The general sense of the word proliferates its special senses. It is a jungle in itself. (NA 25-6)

For presenting the wrong concept of reality, Stevens recites the part of Joad’s comment “[a]collection of solid, static objects extended in space.” Perhaps, this

is the very “reality” we have already seen in Jackson’s statue and *Woden Horses*, which only attaches to a particular type of reality. He then adds a new definition of “reality” that is “the life lived in it.” Perhaps, this “life” is a reality mediated by the subjective mind or individual experience if we recall Bergson’s citation.

“[T]hings as they are” is a paraphrase of this vital state of “reality.” Besides that, “life” is presented here as a synthesis of “imagination” and “reality.” Here abstraction entails the word “life” as interchangeable terms in contrast to the bare use of “reality.” Thus by iterated use of proposition, Stevens expands the connotative range of words. That is why he says “[t]he general sense of the word proliferates its special senses.” Due to this proliferation, the word sense becomes confusing “jungle” for the user.

Stevens refocuses on the subject-matter of poetry in the final section of the essay. Redundantly, Stevens emphasizes that “life” is the supreme subject of poetry: “Reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality; that is to say, the imagination and society are inseparable. . . . Yes: the all-commanding subject-matter of poetry is life, the never-ceasing source. But it is not a social obligation” (*NA* 28). Following the definition by Stevens, “reality” is equal to “life.” At the same time, almost tautologically, life comprises “imagination,” “society,” and “reality.” It seems that the word “life” here is endowed with a special connotation of authority and vivacity. But why does “life” composed of “society” evade “social obligation”? Stevens is not clear about this point. Put another way, the word “life” or “society” here ceases to retain any specific meaning. Ultimately, they meant nothing if not meaningless. Only the sounds of words remain, instead of the meaning. This might be something more than nonsense. Rather, it sheds new light on the primacy of the poetic sound, which will be the last topic of the essay.

Preceding this quotation, Stevens declares that the poet has no social or political obligation: “He has none” (*NA* 27). So what is the role of the poet? Stevens contradictory answers that: “ [the poet’s] role is, in short, to help people to live their lives” (*NA* 29). As proof of the poem’s support of life, Stevens firstly quotes William Wordsworth’s poem “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802.” This is the same poem quoted in I.

A. Richards' *Science and Poetry*, the chapter of which concerns the peculiarity of poetic experience as we have already seen in the first section of the paper. Yet what is more important than Stevens' proximity to the Richards' is a point that is a "sounds of words" that "help people their lives." In the next, Stevens haphazardly turns the topic: "And what about the sound of words?" (NA 31). According to Stevens, the sounds of words "are all the truth we shall ever experience," which encourages the hearer to search for "a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration" (NA 32). The quest for the truth is not accomplished by just recognizing the quality of sounds but by acknowledging the rhetorical evasiveness of the abstraction. At the end of the essay, Stevens self-referentially performs his crafts of unfixing words as follows:

On the other hand, I am evading a definition. It is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it. Let me show you unfixd. (34)

This quotation sounds strange to the reader who does not appreciate Stevens' rhetorical performance here. But we have already considered the unfixing of the term, especially of "life." Despite his frequent use of a proposition, here he says "I am evading definition." But this statement is understandable because he successfully evades the definition by investing words with the iterative definition. To be more precise, he has performatively used the proposition to amplify the connotation of the words. By so repeating the sounds of the same words, in the process of abstraction, Stevens ascribes the sound to "a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration." It is as though the reader hears something like truth in the sound of a proposition. After all, what does Stevens bring to light is not only the connotative meaning but also the sound of the connotation that bestows "life" on the word. Stevens thus completes his performative essay, by demonstrating how the "sounds of words" help us to hear a sense of truth.

## Conclusion

This paper has elaborated on Wallace Stevens' rhetorical elaboration and abstraction of the words through examining his varied use of the key term.

Stevens abstracts the meaning of the word by both enfolding and unfolding its connotation. He self-consciously uses proposition to persuade the reader to suspend their general understanding of the words. But as the reader tries to grasp the content of the proposition, it becomes difficult to infer the concept because Stevens interchangeably defines another notion. By so iterating the seemingly meaningless words, Stevens directs the reader's attention to the sound of words, not only to its auditory aspect but also to its sense of truth. This truth is less inherent in "the sounds of words" than haphazardly appears in the moment of reception by the reader. By this trust in the reader's ability, Stevens' essay is no less alluring than his poetry. Ultimately, Stevens was well aware of the generative force of language and exigency of the age, so he invited the reader to listen carefully to "the sound of words" that "help us to live our lives" (NA 36).

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## Wallace Stevens' Modes of Abstraction and the Life of Poetry

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This paper aims to articulate Wallace Stevens' rhetorical elaboration and abstraction of the word "life" through considering the varied use of the key terms from Stevens' essay titled "The Noble Rider and the Sounds of Words." Whereas some critics have identified Stevens' idea of "life" in line with the Western philosophy or Lyric history, the paper examines the rhetorical force of abstraction that goes by the name of "life." Before the close reading of "Noble Rider," we contextualize the essay according to the critical trend of the time, that is New Criticism. Whereas New Critics dispised of the logical abstraction in scientific language, Stevens uses abstraction as a rhetorical device for persuading the reader to appreciate the value of the words. In particular, throughout the discussion of "The Noble Rider," Stevens tries to test the rhetorical valence of the sets of key terms such as "nobility," "reality," and "life." Through complicating and unfixing the definition of these terms in the essay, Stevens demonstrates how the word ceased to denote a generally accepted sense. Being able to acknowledge the wide connotative range of the key terms, in the end, the reader shall direct attention to a hidden "sounds of words," that is, a vitality of words.