Wallace Stevens: Chaos, Complexity, and System of Self-reference*

Gi Taek Ryoo

A. A violent order is disorder: and
B. A great disorder is an order. These
Two things are one. (“Connoisseur of Chaos,” CP 215)

I. Introduction

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) is perhaps, along with Prigogine and Poincaré, chaos’ prototypical connoisseur in the 20th century. Stevens interrogates the borders of reality and imagination, dramatizing the ongoing dialogue between them, in his search of the secret by which chaos gives birth to order. Stevens’ poetry is unique in the remarkable coincidence of its subjects with Prigogine’s concerns (chaos and order) and system theories in general. His unique poetic style, in particular, illustrates how poetry may act as a self-organizing system, evolving through the chaotic feedback loops of self-reflective metaphors towards higher orders of systematic organization. Stevens’ poetry reveals an infinitely bifurcated self-similar structure, an instance of fractality, in which each part of the structure resembles each other and the whole. This fractal geometry is created by predictable periodicity of certain patterns intermingled with unpredictable variation. The constant movement of repetition is precisely what generates the creative natural force, which, in turn, provides the energy of the textual system to consistently self-organize and produce itself anew. Stevens’ poetry organizes itself by means of an interlocking series of self-reflective metaphors that generate contextual dependencies of its terms. His poetry communicates not so much through the propositional content of its utterances as by the structure of the self-referential system, revealing a pattern of organization similar to what is at work in an self-organizing autopoietic system. Stevens’ poetry betrays

* This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2011-327-A00612).
a continual embodiment of an autopoietic pattern of organization in a dissipative structure. This paper examines Wallace Stevens’ self-referential repetition, a metaphor-making mechanism, using the ideas of chaos and systems as metaphors for his writing, intending to show how his poetics reflects the changing scientific paradigm in the 20th century.¹

II. Changing Paradigm & Absence of God

Stevens struggled throughout his poetic career with the philosophical question of order and chaos, reaching in his poetry to moments of paradoxical truth that moved beyond Cartesian dualism. Coincidentally, at the same time, many scientists in the 20th century were moving toward a similar vision. The new physics including chaos, complexity, and systems, present a view of reality which encompasses Stevens’ vision much more fully than the traditional paradigm of science. Scientists of the 20th century have challenged the traditional dualistic conception of order and chaos, discovering an underlying order beneath the seemingly chaotic interaction of elements in a complex system. Katherine Hayles puts it that “Chaotic or complex systems are disordered in the sense that they are unpredictable, but they are ordered in the sense that they possess recursive symmetries that almost, but not quite, replicate themselves over time” (51). Complexity implies “a mingling of symmetry with asymmetry, predictable periodicity with unpredictable variation” (*ibid*).

The skepticism of Cartesian dualism, for Stevens, runs parallel to the loss of a belief in God. The loss of faith entails a radical transformation in the way we see the world. As Hillis Miller says, “After the disappearance of God, the poet finds himself in a place where opposites are simultaneously true” (97). Stevens’ solution is a rapid oscillation between the two opposites, blurring each other’s boundary, thereby attaining the moment of reconciliation or “the amassing harmony” (*CP* 403) between them. The nature of poetry, he maintains, is “an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equal” (*CPP* 659). Stevens searches for ‘the

¹Chaos and system theories have allowed us to analyze the complexity of poetic form from a new perspective. As Alice Fulton argues in “Fractal Poetics: Adaptation and Complexity” published in *Interdisciplinary Science Review*, “Over the last twenty years the poetics has evolved through engagement with complexity studies that provide ways of understanding irregular, chaotic or turbulent systems” (323).