

# Ordering the World through Imagery: Western Metaphysical and Eastern Jin Xuanyan Poetry Responding to Their Crises

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## Abstract

From the perspective of cultural poetics, this article employs a typological comparative method to examine how the seventeenth-century Western Metaphysical poetry and the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry (东晋玄言诗) diverged in their poetic responses to crises of order and their subsequent reconstruction. The study finds that the two traditions responded to crises of order distinct in nature: the Western Metaphysical poetry confronted a “cognitive disorder,” in which the Scientific Revolution and religious warfare shattered the world-picture into fragments, rendering it unintelligible; the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, by contrast, faced a “value disorder,” in which aristocratic politics and the transience of life suspended the meaning of individual existence. From these distinct crises emerged two fundamentally different poetic paths: the Western Metaphysical poetry, employing conceit and paradox as its instruments, established momentary, intellectually ignited cognitive order through an “intellectual reconstruction”—creating order within paradox and rebuilding meaning out of fragments; the Xuanyan poetry, taking natural imagery as its vehicle, realized a continuously subsisting cosmological order through a “philosophical return to the root”—not to remake the world, but to roam with the Dao. In terms of historical influence, the former followed a pattern of “rupture—oblivion—recall,” while the latter exhibited a pattern of “transformation—permeation—sedimentation,” patterns respectively rooted in the Western progressive view of history characterized by “paradigm revolutions” and the Chinese continuous view of history characterized by “all-embracing inclusiveness.” In cross-cultural transmission, the Western Metaphysical poetry was reimagined by modern Chinese poetics as an “avant-garde methodology,” while Xuanyan poetry was envisioned by Western ecological poetics as a “mirror image of Eastern wisdom,” each reborn through productive misreadings by the “Other.” This article contends that in the face of contemporary compound crises—ecological crisis, the impact of artificial intelligence, and disciplinary fragmentation—the two poetics require deep dialogue and mutual complementarity: we need both the momentary intellectual reconstruction of the Western Metaphysical poetry to break cognitive impasses, and the enduring rooted settlement of the Xuanyan poetry to rebuild our spiritual home. The two, like yin and yang, together constitute

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a complete poetic wisdom: possessing both the courage to confront disorder and the composure to settle body and mind.

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## 1. Introduction

For the poet, poetry constitutes a core practice through which one cognizes the world and settles the self—a bond both intimate and singular. In eras of “disorder,” however, the relationship between poetry and poet grows tighter still: when established understandings of the world or prevailing social norms begin to waver, the poet is often the first “cultural antenna” to perceive the fractures and to attempt, through language, a reconstruction of order. Such a tightening of this bond occurred in seventeenth-century Europe and again in fourth-century China. The former, convulsed by the Scientific Revolution and religious warfare, sank into a “cognitive disorder,” its world-picture shattered into fragments, rendered unintelligible; the latter, shaped by aristocratic politics and the transience of life, fell into a “value disorder,” in which the meaning of individual existence was suspended. Faced with crises that bore a structural resemblance, the poets of these two cultures nevertheless embarked upon radically divergent poetic paths—a divergence that compels attention to the poetic dispositions and deeper cultural logics underlying each. It is precisely this divergence that constitutes a problem in comparative poetics demanding sustained explication.

To this end, this article draws on Max Weber’s concept of the “ideal type” (Weber, 1949, Chapter 2) to open a space for in-depth comparison. By constructing the pure heuristic of a “poetics of disorder,” the poetic responses of the Western Metaphysical poetry and the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry (东晋玄言诗) are rendered functionally comparable, and the act of comparing these distinct responses serves to reveal the distinctive cultural logics embedded in each. To grasp these divergent poetic responses and excavate their cultural logic, however, a clear conceptual delineation is first required—of the “crises of order” in which each tradition

was situated, and of the “Metaphysical poetry” and “Xuanyan poetry” themselves.

First, concerning “order.” In this article, the term “order” is delimited to two dimensions: spiritual order and aesthetic order. Spiritual order pertains to the inner logic by which individuals cognize the world and settle the self—a crisis of spiritual order occurs when one's worldview is shaken. Aesthetic order pertains to how poetry uses language to reconstruct meaning and establish new perceptual frameworks—it is here that divergent poetic paths become manifest. The two dimensions are interconnected: a crisis in spiritual order precipitates a transformation in aesthetic order, while the establishment of a renovated aesthetic order provides a pathway for the restoration of spiritual order.

Second, concerning the selection of comparative cases. Within the Western Metaphysical poetry, this article focuses on three poets: John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell. Donne, the originator of the tradition, exhibits the most paradigmatic use of conceit; Herbert excels in religious verse, embodying the qualities of paradox and self-scrutiny; Marvell integrates metaphysical speculation into natural themes. Together, their poetic practices cover the core dimensions of the Western Metaphysical poetry.

Within the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, this article focuses on the three poets Sun Chuo (孙绰), Xu Xun (许询), and Zhi Dun (支遁). Sun Chuo and Xu Xun, jointly referred to as “Sun-Xu,” were canonized by Zhong Rong (钟嵘) in his *Shipin* (《诗品》) as the foremost representatives of Xuanyan poetry (Zhong Rong, 2020, p.140). Zhi Dun exemplifies the confluence of Neo-Daoist and Buddhist thought characteristic of the tradition. As for figures such as Wang Xizhi (王羲之), Xie Lingyun (谢灵运), and Tao Yuanming (陶渊明), they are excluded from the present study. Wang Xizhi's extant poetic corpus is too slender; Xie Lingyun's landscape poetry represents a “transformation” of, rather than a continuation within, Xuanyan poetry; and Tao Yuanming's pastoral verse diverges from the distinctive interests of pure metaphysical poetry. Concentrating on these representative poets serves to

safeguard the typological rigor of the investigation.

Scholarship both domestic and international has yielded a substantial body of research on the Western Metaphysical poetry and the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry; nonetheless, systematic, cross-civilizational typological comparison awaits further development.

With respect to imagery studies, research on the Western Metaphysical poetry is relatively mature. Scholars have extensively examined how devices such as conceit and paradox reconstruct the image system, and Chinese scholars have also begun to investigate its view of nature from the perspective of ecocriticism (Wang, 2021). Studies of imagery in Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, by contrast, have largely centered on the evolution of “landscape” (山水) imagery from a handmaiden of metaphysical principle to an object of independent aesthetic appreciation (Guo, 2015; Yang, 2013).

In terms of cultural studies, scholarship on the Western Metaphysical poetry has developed a multidimensional range of perspectives (Wu, 2011; Xiong, 2008; Nan, 2010). Research on Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry has explored themes such as aristocratic politics and the confluence of Neo-Daoism and Buddhism (Shi, 2014; Xue, 2019; Zhang, 2013). Yet existing cultural studies largely confine their analyses to a single tradition and have yet to bring the two poetics into a unified framework centered on the “crisis of order” for comparative examination.

Regarding explicitly comparative research, scholars have previously noted the morphological similarities (Wu & Cong, 2004) and fundamental differences (Li & Liu, 2011) between the two poetics, and studies by Qi Changhai (2014), Chen Lin (2010), and others have undertaken systematic comparisons. However, such work has largely remained at the level of cataloguing shared and divergent poetic features, without sustained engagement with the deeper problematic of the “crisis of order.”

Taken as a whole, while the existing scholarship has addressed the poetic features and

historical contexts of the two traditions, it has mostly remained confined to their respective cultural milieus, lacking a cultural-poetic comparison that takes the “crisis of order” as its point of departure. This article accordingly adopts this starting point, seeking to reveal, through the typological distinction between “cognitive disorder” and “value disorder,” the divergent cultural logics that underpin the two poetic paths.

In response to these limitations, this article adopts a dual perspective drawn from cultural poetics. In the West, Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicist cultural poetics emphasizes the “circulation of energy” between texts and society. He argues that a “social energy” exists, flowing between texts and society through “an irregular chain of historical transactions.” The text is not a mirror passively reflecting reality, but a vehicle that actively participates in the flow of cultural energy: “The ‘life’ of the literary work... lingers after the death of the author and the culture it belongs to,” because “social energy was initially encoded in these works” (Greenblatt, 1988, p.6).

In China, Jiang Shuzhuo first advanced the project of “cultural poetics” in 1995, advocating the examination of literature from the holistic perspective of culture, combining cultural interpretation with aesthetic analysis, and expanding the reach of literary criticism through cross-cultural dialogue, both between past and present and between China and the West. The core of his project is to ground itself in the native Chinese cultural context and to examine literary phenomena within the totality of culture (Jiang, 2018, pp. 15-18).

Drawing on these two conceptions of cultural poetics, this article analyzes how the imagery systems of the two poetics received the energy of the “crises of order” of their respective eras, and how, through poetic creation, they released new cultural energies that exerted influence on later ages and effected cross-cultural impact. Building on this foundation, the article further introduces Weber’s “ideal type” as a comparative methodology, constructing “poetics of disorder” as a consistent ideal-construct that renders the two poetics functionally

comparable.

## **2. The Collapse of Order: Poetic Symptoms of Two Crises**

### **2.1 Types of Crisis: Cognitive Disorder and Value Disorder**

Seventeenth-century Europe and fourth-century China each sank into a crisis of order, but the nature of these crises was fundamentally distinct.

What the Western Metaphysical poetry confronted was, above all, a “cognitive disorder”—a world-picture that had shattered into fragments, rendered unintelligible. In the late Renaissance, the established cosmology faced unprecedented challenges: Copernicus’s heliocentrism overturned the geocentric tradition, the discovery of the New World dissolved inherited geographical boundaries, and the Reformation tore apart the unified fabric of Christendom. As scholarship in the history of science has revealed, Europe underwent a profound “crisis of conscience” from the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth century, during which both classical and emerging sciences came under the scrutiny of skepticism: “The epistemological debates generated by the ‘crisis of conscience’ took place through the written or printed word, but also in certain key institutions, notably royal courts, universities and other educational bodies” (Sturdy, 2004, p. 54). An anxious questioning took hold: What, after all, can we know? Where does the standard of certainty lie? While the philosopher-scientist René Descartes responded to this anxiety with “I think, therefore I am”, the Metaphysical poets offered a more literary rejoinder—washing the divided world with tears so that one might “doth in eating heal” (Donne, 1633/2020, pp. 310–311).

By contrast, the collapse of order confronting the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry was, in its essence, a “value disorder”—the suspension of the meaning of individual existence. Following the Yongjia migration southward, the aristocratic clans, though politically dominant and able to secure a sheltered corner of the realm, underwent a persistent, subterranean, and profound crisis of value at the spiritual level. Recurrent warfare, the fragility of life, and the

perils of official service eroded the stable foundation of the traditional Confucian chain of values—“cultivate the self, regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to all under heaven.” As Lü Xinfeng has observed, a tendency toward the “dual cultivation of Confucianism and Neo-Daoism” prevailed among the Eastern Jin scholar-officials (Lü, 2019, p.175). This dual value structure itself intimates a crucial fact: while Confucian norms could still be followed in the public sphere, in the private sphere—in the ultimate meaning of individual life—traditional values had already been shaken. The scholar-officials were compelled to draw upon the intellectual resources of Daoism and Buddhism, aligning their personal worth and actions with the operation of the “Dao,” the underlying principle of the cosmos. The Xuanyan poetry composed by Sun Chuo, Xu Xun, Zhi Dun, and others constitutes the literary testimony to this process of “philosophical return to the root”—a reaffirmation of self-worth achieved by elevating individual existence to the cosmological plane.

It must be stressed that the above distinction between the two crises of order is analytical rather than absolute. The Western poetics manifests itself more prominently as a crisis of the cognitive paradigm, while the Eastern Jin poetics more vividly registers the shaking of the value foundation—yet this is by no means an exclusive binary opposition. The cognitive crisis of seventeenth-century Europe was equally attended by value anxiety, just as the value crisis of fourth-century China entailed a re-cognition of the frameworks through which the world was interpreted. Nevertheless, it is precisely this difference in emphasis that determined that the two poetics would embark upon radically different paths in responding to their respective crises.

## **2.2 Poetic Symptoms: The Revolt and Transformation of Imagery Resources**

As established above, the Western Metaphysical poetry responded predominantly to a cognitive disorder, while the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry responded predominantly to a value disorder. When the existing spiritual order falls into disarray, a transformation of the aesthetic

order necessarily ensues—and the imagery system of poetry becomes the most immediate and visible field in which this aesthetic transformation is staged.

### **2.2.1 The Treatment of Traditional Imagery Resources: Two Paths of Revolt**

Faced with crises of order, both the Western Metaphysical poetry and the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry mounted a revolt against the imagery conventions of their predecessors, but the manner and direction of their revolts were sharply divergent.

What the Western Metaphysical poetry revolted against was the Petrarchan tradition of elegant conceits that dominated Elizabethan lyric poetry. The very label “Metaphysical” carries with it the imputation of critical transgression: in the eighteenth century, Dr. Samuel Johnson censured these poets for “the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together” and for discovering “occult resemblances in things apparently unlike” (Johnson, 1779–1781/2006, p. 200). Yet it was precisely this “violent yoking” that constituted the core of the Metaphysical imagery strategy: they did not abandon inherited images but instead redefined and reinterpreted the logic behind them. As Qi Changhai (2014) has noted, the Metaphysical poets, “grounded in erudition and animated by a spirit of skepticism, used ingenious devices such as conceit and paradox to propel English poetry to unprecedented heights.” Consider Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (Donne, 1633/2020, pp. 84–85), in which the souls of two lovers are compared to the two legs of a compass—an image borrowed from geometry, seemingly devoid of any connection to love. Yet it is precisely within this “resemblance discovered in the dissimilar” that the poet reconstructs the cognitive framework of separation and reunion. The Metaphysical “conceit” is not an evasion of imagery but an intellectual “violent reconstruction” of it—generating new meaning out of old things through paradoxical conjunction.

The Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, by contrast, adopted an altogether different strategy of revolt. What they revolted against was the ornate, densely wrought imagery system of earlier poetry, with its emphasis on sensory experience—the kind of direct lamentation over the

brevity of life and the vicissitudes of worldly affairs found in the “Nineteen Old Poems (《古诗十九首》)”. The Xuanyan poets, however, did not reinterpret the old images; rather, they chose to “step aside”—to set aside the traditional images laden with worldly emotion and to open up new imagery resources. As Ge Xiaoyin’s (1992) research has demonstrated, catalyzed by the infusion of Buddhist thought into Neo-Daoist discourse, poetry gradually moved from the realistic mode of “embodying objects and expressing intent” toward ethereality, and “nature, as an abstract philosophical concept, was thereby transposed into the aesthetic domain.” The Xuanyan poets introduced natural objects—mountains and waters, forests and wilds, birds in flight—in abundance, shifting the perceptual field of poetry from the strife of human affairs to the expanse of heaven and earth. In his “Poem on the Bamboo Fan” (《竹扇诗》), for instance, Xu Xun takes the crafting of a bamboo fan as his thread, directing his gaze toward natural objects such as fragrant groves, autumn cicadas, and the bright moon. With delicate strokes, he renders the fresh and limpid charm of the objects themselves, rather than using them as vehicles to express worldly sentiments of parting or melancholy. This is not a “reworking” of imagery but a “shift of field”—a retreat from the anxieties of human relationships into a cosmological space in which one roams with the Dao.

The revolts of both traditions jointly constitute a rejection of the old order, yet their paths are clearly distinguishable: the Western Metaphysical poetry intervenes in inherited imagery through an intellectual “reinterpretation,” creating new cognition within paradox; the Xuanyan poetry, through a poetic “return to the root,” takes refuge in new imagery, settling old values within nature.

### **2.2.2 The Construction of New Imagery Resources: Two Types of Media**

The two poetics differ not only in their treatment of traditional imagery resources but also, and just as fundamentally, in the media upon which they rely to construct new imagery systems.

The Western Metaphysical poetry relies predominantly upon intellectual contestation—that is, a cognitive activity centered on rational speculation, achieved through rhetorical devices such as conceit and paradox. The “conceit” is the core rhetorical strategy of Metaphysical poetry: it compares two vastly different things by means of a simile or metaphor, producing a highly unusual comparison that is cognitively original. In Marvell's “To His Coy Mistress,” (Marvell, 1681/2005, pp.543-544) for example, conceits such as “vegetable love” and “Time’s wingèd chariot” emerge in rapid succession: the former forcibly links the slow growth of love to the natural rhythms of vegetation, while the latter concretizes the urgency of death as a pursuing chariot. What truly governs the progression of the poem is not any particular image but the intellectual structure itself, by means of which the poet organizes his images and deduces his conclusion; the conceit and paradox are but the outward instruments of this intellectual contestation.

The Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, in contrast, relies more heavily on traditional Chinese philosophical thought, dissolving the anguish brought about by binary oppositions to ultimately achieve a state of consummate unity. The imagery strategy of Xuanyan poetry is not “reconstruction” but “return to the root”—re-examining individual life within a cosmological dimension. As Liu Yunhao (2025) has argued, during the Wei-Jin period, the mutual oscillation of Neo-Daoism and Buddhism internalized the philosophical concept of “original nothingness” (本无论) into a mode of thought and externalized it as a cultural current, propelling Xuanyan poetry from the discourse of Daoism toward a discourse integrating both Daoist and Buddhist language. When Zhi Dun writes, “How free, to roam through heaven and earth, / Carefree, observing being and non-being (畅哉游天地, 逍遥观有无),” he is not arguing for the possibility of carefree roaming but presenting a state already attained. Here, natural imagery is not an instrument of argument but the direct manifestation of the Dao. Such “harmonious integration (圆融)” is precisely the ultimate pursuit of Xuanyan poetics—through the

dissolution of the binary oppositions between self and world, subject and object, to unite individual value with the operation of the Dao.

### **2.3 Summary: The Emergent Shape of Two Poetic Paths**

To summarize, the “cognitive disorder” of seventeenth-century Europe and the “value disorder” of fourth-century China unsettled the existing spiritual order from two distinct dimensions—the intellectual and the existential, respectively. When the collapse of spiritual order precipitated revolt and transformation in aesthetic order, the imagery system of poetry became the most immediate and visible field in which this transformation was staged. The differences in poetic symptoms between the Western Metaphysical poetry and the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry already reveal, in embryonic form, two divergent directions for the reconstruction of order—though these features remain somewhat scattered at the level of poetic symptoms, they nevertheless adumbrate the contours of two distinct paths.

The Western Metaphysical poetry employs intellectual contestation as its means, generating cognitive tension through conceit and paradox; its poetic path can be summarized as “reinterpretation”—erecting new cognitive frameworks within paradox to respond to the fragmentation and uncertainty at the cognitive level. Xuanyan poetry, by contrast, takes philosophical consummation as its ultimate aim, dissolving binary oppositions and realizing the operation of the Dao; its poetic path can be summarized as “return to the root”—settling individual value within nature to dissolve the nihilism and anxiety at the value level. The former tends to create order within contradiction; the latter tends to transcend contradiction and return to the order of the origin.

How these two poetic paths—born of different crises and leading toward different ends—respectively undertook the work of reconstructing spiritual order will be further unfolded and substantiated in the textual analyses of specific poems that follow.

### **3. The Reconstruction of Order: “Intellectual Reconstruction” and “Philosophical**

## **Return to the Root” as Divergent Poetic Paths**

This section examines how Western Metaphysical poetry and Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry responded to crises of spiritual order through distinct imagery strategies. Although both traditions sought to reconstruct the relationship between the individual and the world, they followed different paths: the former relied on intellectual tension, conceit, and paradox, while the latter turned toward nature, the Dao, and the integration of self and cosmos. The discussion begins with the imagery strategy of Western Metaphysical poetry.

### **3.1 Intellectual Reconstruction: The Imagery Strategy of the Western Metaphysical Poetry**

Western Metaphysical poetry responds to cognitive disorder by transforming imagery into an instrument of intellectual inquiry. Its poetic strategy unfolds through three related stages: the manifestation of crisis, the breaking of established conceptual boundaries, and the reconstruction of order through conceit and paradox.

#### **3.1.1 Manifestation: The Cognitive Crisis in Imagery**

John Donne’s “I am a little world” opens with a direct presentation of spiritual division. The poet writes:

I am a little world made cunningly  
Of Elements, and an Angelike spright,  
But black sinne hath betraid to endlesse night  
My worlds both parts, and (oh) both parts must die.

(Donne, 1633/2020, pp. 310–311)

The “microcosm” was a traditional concept widely circulated during the Renaissance—“the human body is a reflection or miniature copy of the larger universe” (Waddell, 2021, Chapter 3, p.75). Donne, however, does not here reaffirm this harmonious picture but instead proclaims its rupture: he compares himself to a little world composed of elements and angelic

spirit, yet this little world has been split in two by sin. “Both parts must die”—the “two parts” refer to body and soul, and their division signifies that the human being is no longer a unified and ordered whole.

This is precisely the poetic encapsulation of the seventeenth-century cognitive crisis. When classical cosmology was overturned by Copernican heliocentrism, when the unified Catholic faith was torn apart by the Reformation, the “Chain of Being” upon which people had relied to understand the world was broken. Donne does not describe this anxiety in abstract philosophical language; instead, he takes the traditional image of the “microcosm” as his vehicle, giving concrete form to the state of spiritual tension: the shattered, unintelligible world-picture is quietly transformed, within the poem, into the internal division and disorder of the individual.

### **3.1.2 Breaking: The Transgression of Imagery Domains and Conceptual Reconstruction**

If “I am a little world” represents the Western Metaphysical poetry’s presentation of the cognitive crisis, then Donne’s “The Flea” demonstrates a paradigmatic mode of responding to that crisis—actively breaking down established conceptual boundaries through the transgression and reconstruction of imagery, and guiding the reconstruction of spiritual order by way of reconstructing aesthetic order.

In “The Flea,” accordingly, Donne deploys a still more radical imagery strategy. He selects a flea—a lowly, squalid insect utterly unrelated to love—as the poem's central image. The poem reads:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,  
How little that which thou deniest me is;  
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,  
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.

(Donne, 1633/2020, pp. 58–59)

Donne takes a biological fact as his logical starting point: the flea has sucked the blood of both lovers, and their two bloods are now mingled within its body. From this, he deduces a startling conclusion—that he and his beloved have already been united within the body of the flea. The flea, a negligible pest, is transformed into a “marriage bed” and “marriage temple.” This transformation is the first step in the reconstruction of aesthetic order: through the transgression of imagery domains, the ossified definitions that old concepts have imposed upon love and bodily relations are broken apart.

It is worth noting that Donne is engaged here not in a simple choice of image but in a complete logical demonstration. The poet uses syllogistic reasoning to sublimate a biological fact into a sacred symbol of love. Here, the boundaries of love are broadened: body and spirit, the secular and the sacred, instinctual desire and free will are not opposites but achieve a paradoxical unity within the microcosm of life. When the boundaries of imagery are broken and concepts are reconstructed at the aesthetic level, the cognitive framework at the spiritual level is correspondingly loosened and rebuilt—the reader, following the poet's intellectual contestation, is compelled to re-examine the binary oppositions between body and soul, the secular and the sacred, and thereby to accept a new, unified worldview. This is the core of the Metaphysical imagery strategy: not to evade inherited images, but to guide the reconstruction of spiritual order through a “violent reconstruction” of aesthetic order, generating new meaning out of old things through paradoxical conjunction.

### **3.1.3 Reconstruction: The Intellectual Integration of Imagery through Conceit and Paradox**

If Donne's “The Flea” demonstrates how the Western Metaphysical poetry “breaks” established aesthetic boundaries through the transgression of imagery domains and conceptual reconstruction, then Marvell's “The Garden” further presents the “reconstruction” that follows such breaking—the intellectual integration of heterogeneous things through conceit and

paradox, establishing new metaphysical connections between them, thereby completing the reconstruction of aesthetic order and ultimately guiding the formation of an entirely new spiritual order. At the close of “The Garden,” the poet writes:

How well the skilful gardener drew  
Of flowers and herbs this dial new;  
Where from above the milder sun  
Does through a fragrant zodiac run;  
And, as it works, the industrious bee  
Computes its time as well as we.

(Marvell, 1681/2005, pp. 553–555)

Here, the two images—the sundial and the garden flowers and herbs—are juxtaposed through conceit. The sundial is, in scientific terms, a marker of the temporal dimension: it calculates the passage of hours by the sun’s cast shadow. The flowers and herbs, by contrast, manifest the turning of the seasons within the natural environment: their blooming and withering mark the rhythm of time. Through this juxtaposition, Marvell reveals the common essence shared by both: the reckoning of time. This intellectual integration is a crucial step in the reconstruction of aesthetic order—forcibly linking two things that originally belong to separate categories, the “artificial/scientific” and the “natural/poetic,” within the tension of conceit, and thereby creating a new classificatory framework at the cognitive level.

The time measured by this “dial new” of flowers and herbs, however, is qualitatively different from the time measured by a traditional sundial. The latter is “human time”—time that passes for utilitarian purposes; the former is time governed by nature’s own rhythm—time that can only be measured by flowers and herbs (Yoshinaka, 2012). When the reader, guided by the poet, accepts this conceit—viewing sundial and flowers as different manifestations of the same temporal dimension—the cognitive framework at the spiritual level correspondingly

undergoes a fundamental transformation: time is no longer a linear process driven by human utilitarian activity but the poetic unfolding of nature's own life rhythms.

Through conceit, the poet connects two seemingly unrelated domains—the artificial instrument of time-measurement and the natural growth of vegetation—revealing, within paradox, a truth of a higher order. At this point, the reconstruction of aesthetic order completes its guidance of spiritual order: the reader is no longer a passive follower of time but, like the bee, “computes” a time of sweetness and health that is proper to the self, within the garden of flowers.

### **3.1.4 Summary: The Imagery Strategy—From Cognitive Disorder to Intellectual Reconstruction**

From the poetic manifestation of cognitive crisis in “I am a little world,” through the transgression and breaking of established conceptual boundaries in “The Flea,” to the intellectual integration achieved through conceit and paradox in “The Garden”—the imagery strategy of the Western Metaphysical poetry reveals a clear logical chain: the reconstruction of spiritual order is guided by the reconstruction of aesthetic order. The poet, through the innovative use of imagery, breaks down the conceptual boundaries between established domains; then, through conceit and paradox, establishes new logical connections between apparently unrelated things.

This process is not a simple replacement of old images but an intellectual reconstruction of the cognitive framework—creating order within paradox, rebuilding meaning out of fragments. When the reader, guided by the poet, undergoes the complete aesthetic experience of “manifestation—breaking—reconstruction,” the cognitive framework at the spiritual level correspondingly moves from fragmentation toward unity, from anxiety toward settlement. This is the ultimate destination of the Metaphysical imagery strategy: to respond to the cognitive crisis of the age with the power of poetics.

## 3.2 Philosophical Return to the Root: The Imagery Strategy of the Eastern Jin Xuanyan Poetry

### 3.2.1 Manifestation: The Value Crisis in Imagery

Unlike the Western Metaphysical poetry, which presents the cognitive crisis through the intellectual “reinterpretation” of inherited images, the value crisis of the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry first manifests itself in a wholesale shift of the imagery system—the turn of imagery itself is the poetic symptom of the crisis.

What the Xuanyan poets revolted against was the ornate, densely wrought imagery system that had prevailed since the Western Jin, with its emphasis on sensory experience. The meticulous descriptive elaboration in Lu Ji’s “Imitations of the Old Poems” (Nigu shi, 《拟古诗》) and the emotional investment in material objects in Pan Yue’s “Poem Lamenting the Departed Wife” (《悼亡诗》) both use dense clusters of imagery to construct an emotional field: an imagery world centered on individual feeling and anchored in secular values. Yet when, after “the southward exodus during the Year of Yongjia (永嘉南渡)”, recurrent warfare and the transience of life eroded the stable foundation of the Confucian value chain of “self-cultivation, family management, state governance, and bringing peace to all under heaven (修身齐家治国平天下),” this imagery system correspondingly revealed its limitations—its inability to settle individual existence.

The Xuanyan poets did not continue this tradition. They set aside the traditional images laden with worldly emotion and instead introduced, in abundance, natural objects—mountains and waters, forests and wilds, birds in flight. In Sun Chuo’s “Orchid Pavilion Poem” (《兰亭诗》) and Zhi Dun’s Poems Expressing My Feelings (《咏怀诗》), the perceptual field of poetry had already shifted from the strife of human affairs to the expanse of heaven and earth. This wholesale shift of the imagery system is itself the poetic manifestation of the “value

disorder”: when the old value system can no longer provide meaningful support for individual life, the poet turns to nature, seeking, within a cosmological dimension, a new place in which to settle the self. Natural imagery—mountains and waters, forests and wilds, birds in flight—thus becomes the most immediate aesthetic symptom of the value crisis.

### **3.2.2 Return to the Root: Natural Imagery as the Direct Manifestation of the Dao**

If the wholesale shift of the imagery system described above is the poetic “manifestation” of the value crisis, then Sun Chuo’s “Poem on the Autumn Day” (《秋日诗》) demonstrates the core path by which the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry responds to crisis—directly realizing the operation of the Dao through natural imagery, re-establishing the ordered connection between humanity and the cosmos at the aesthetic level, and thereby guiding the individual spirit from value nihilism toward tranquillity. The poem reads:

Sparse groves gather the cool wind,  
Empty peaks congeal the frozen clouds.  
Clear dew sprinkles the courtyard trees,  
Dense leaves take leave of flourishing boughs.

(Sun, in Lu, Ed., 1998, pp.901)

Sparse groves, cool wind, empty peaks, frozen clouds, clear dew, dense leaves—these images are not the conventional symbols of parting, feasting, or brooding that appear so frequently in earlier poetry; they are the direct presentation of nature itself. The poet does not endow these objects with elaborate humanistic associations but allows them to be “present in their own right.” Sun Chuo’s poem does not declaim upon the abstruse philosophy of Daoism but merely expresses a Daoist attitude toward life—an attitude that arises precisely from the poet’s response to the autumn scene (Xie, 2016, pp. 472-474).

In this poem, natural imagery is not an instrument of argument but the direct manifestation of the Dao. This is precisely the starting point of the reconstruction of aesthetic

order: the web of imagery is no longer woven out of human-centered secular emotions; instead, nature is allowed to enter the poem in its own true aspect, establishing a direct aesthetic connection between humanity and the cosmos. The principle of heavenly operation and the turning of the four seasons, requiring no appended interpretation, are already revealed in the sparse groves and cool wind, the clear dew and dense leaves. The flourishing and withering of all things in the bleak autumn air is itself the immediate manifestation of cosmic order. Sun Chuo's poem touches upon metaphysical principle, yet is by no means bland or insipid, because the author's praise of the spirit of the Hao River is evoked precisely through the depiction of the autumn scene and the feelings of melancholy and admiration that arise from it (Xie, 2016, pp. 472-474).

When the reader is immersed in the aesthetic field constructed by these natural images—feeling the bleakness of the sparse groves and cool wind, apprehending the rhythm of dense leaves taking leave of flourishing boughs—the value framework at the spiritual level correspondingly undergoes a fundamental transformation: the individual is no longer a rootless being suspended in a vacuum of value, but is taken up into the cosmic transformation of the four seasons and the flourishing and withering of all things, moving together with the operation of the Dao. Nature here becomes the medium for realizing the Dao—through immersion in the seasonal transformations of the landscape, the poet resonates with the Dao. At this point, the reconstruction of aesthetic order completes its guidance of spiritual order: from the anxiety of the value crisis to the tranquillity of roaming with the Dao.

### **3.2.3 Integration: From Natural Imagery to the Projection of Self-Worth**

If the natural imagery in Sun Chuo's "Poem on the Autumn Day" remains at the level of the direct manifestation of the Dao—the poet presenting cosmic order through sparse groves and cool wind, clear dew and dense leaves—then Zhi Dun's "Five Poems on Expressing My Feelings" (《咏怀诗五首》) pushes this path to a deeper level: natural imagery is no longer

merely the external manifestation of the Dao but becomes the direct projection of the poet's inner personality and self-worth. This is the completion of the reconstruction of aesthetic order: when external nature and the inner mind achieve unity in the poem, the individual spirit walks fully out of value nihilism and returns to the tranquillity of roaming with the Dao.

As an eminent Eastern Jin Buddhist monk and a representative Xuanyan poet, Zhi Dun fused Buddhist thought with Lao-Zhuang philosophy in his poetry. In the first of his “Five Poems on Expressing My Feelings,” he writes:

Limpid and luminous, the mind and spirit gleam,  
Embracing emptiness, they mirror nature.  
Ceaselessly, sunken feelings depart,  
Radiantly, the rushing heart grows fresh.  
Lingering among the manifest things,  
I have never yet seen the ox whole.  
Fur and scales have their value,  
But what is valued lies in forgetting the trap.

(Zhi, in Lu, Ed., 1998, p.1080)

Here, the natural imagery is no longer merely external scenery but the projection of the poet's mental state of “embracing emptiness and mirroring nature.” The phrase “forgetting the trap” (忘筌) alludes to the parable in the Zhuangzi (“External Things,” 《庄子·外物》) of “forget the means by which the end is attained (得鱼忘筌)” —signifying the transcendence of outward forms and the direct realization of original truth. The landscape in Zhi Dun's brushwork has become a symbol of the spiritual realm, refined through the dual baptism of Neo-Daoism and Buddhism. At this point, aesthetic order completes its crossing from “external nature” to the “inner mind”: nature is no longer an object standing in opposition to the human being but the direct reflection of the mind's limpid clarity.

When the reader, guided by the poet, undergoes the complete aesthetic experience from “nature as the manifestation of the Dao” to “nature as the projection of the mind”—first realizing cosmic order in external nature, then achieving unity with the Dao in the inner mind—the value framework at the spiritual level correspondingly completes its fundamental reconstruction: the individual is no longer a solitary existence suspended in a vacuum of value, but, within the state of “embracing emptiness and mirroring nature (含虛映自然),” achieves ultimate identity with the origin of the cosmos. Unlike Donne, who “reconstructs” the cognitive framework through intellectual demonstration, Zhi Dun dissolves the binary opposition between self and world, “returning to the root” within an order of a higher dimension. At this point, the imagery strategy of the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry completes its full logical circle: from manifesting the crisis, through returning to the root in the Dao, to integration with the self—guiding the spirit, through the reconstruction of aesthetic order, from value crisis toward unity with the Dao.

### **3.2.4 Summary: Return to the Root and Integration—From Value Crisis to Unity with the Dao**

From the natural imagery as the direct manifestation of the Dao in “Poem on the Autumn Day,” to the natural imagery as the direct projection of self-worth in “Five Poems on Expressing My Feelings”—the imagery strategy of the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry reveals a clear logical chain: taking natural imagery as the medium, and following the aesthetic path of returning to the root in the Dao and integrating with the self, it guides the spirit from value crisis toward unity with the Dao. By setting aside worldly imagery and introducing natural imagery, the scholar-officials established a cosmological field that transcended the strife of human affairs. Nature is not merely an object of contemplation but a field for realizing the Dao, for returning to the root.

When the reader, guided by the poet, undergoes the complete aesthetic experience of

“manifestation—return to the root—integration,” the value framework at the spiritual level correspondingly completes its fundamental reconstruction: the individual is no longer a solitary existence suspended in a vacuum of value but, in the state of “roaming with the Dao,” acquires a new inner order and renewed confirmation of value. At this point, the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, in its own poetic manner, has settled the value crisis of the age.

### **3.3 Summary: Intellectual Reconstruction and Philosophical Return to the Root—The Establishment of Two Poetic Paths**

As noted above, when facing crises of order, the Western Metaphysical poetry and the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, owing to the difference in the emphasis of their respective crises, embarked upon two divergent poetic paths.

The strategy of the Western Metaphysical poetry is “intellectual reconstruction.” In “I am a little world,” Donne presents cognitive anxiety through the rupture of the “microcosm,” giving concrete form to the state of spiritual tension; in “The Flea,” he uses conceit as his instrument to sublimate a biological fact into a sacred symbol of love, breaking through established conceptual boundaries (Cooper, 2024); in “The Garden,” Marvell juxtaposes the sundial with flowers and herbs to reveal the essential difference between two conceptions of time (Yoshinaka, 2012). Amid cognitive disorder, they create cognitive tension through the intellectual reinterpretation of inherited images, establishing new cognitive frameworks within paradox. The “reconstruction” here is, in essence, a poetic act by which the subject actively intervenes in the world—creating order out of fragments, rebuilding certainty amid uncertainty. A metaphorical correspondence is established between the fragmented form of the poetry and the fragmented condition of the world: this is precisely the core strategy by which the Western Metaphysical poetry “counters disorder with intellect.”

The strategy of the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, by contrast, is “philosophical return to the root.” In “Poem on the Autumn Day,” Sun Chuo directly presents the operation of the Dao

through natural imagery, re-examining individual life within the cosmic order of the four seasons' turning (Ge, 1992); in "Five Poems on Expressing My Feelings," Zhi Dun, through techniques such as "forgetting the trap" and "embracing emptiness," transforms natural imagery into the projection of personal character, achieving "unity of Dao and self" amid the landscape. Amid value disorder, they set aside traditional worldly imagery and, through natural imagery, realized the operation of the Dao, synchronizing individual value with cosmological order. The "return to the root" here is, in essence, a poetic path by which the subject dissolves its own opposition to the world—not to remake the world, but to roam with the Dao. Through the posture of "losing the self" (吾丧我)—the dissolution of the ego-centered perspective—the Xuanyan poets evaded the direct impact of value disorder, and then, drawing upon the intellectual resources of traditional Chinese philosophy and Buddhism, linked their own value with a value of a higher dimension, achieving renewed confirmation of value and inner tranquillity.

The "philosophical return to the root" of the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry and the "intellectual reconstruction" of the Western Metaphysical poetry, though their paths diverged radically due to differences of era and culture, together bear witness to the core concern of Jiang Shuzhuo's cultural poetics: how literature, within a specific cultural context, participates in the construction of spiritual order through aesthetic form. Both paths are, in essence, paradigmatic cases of the kind that cultural poetics attends to—the poets did not passively reflect their times but, through their choices of imagery, rhetorical strategies, and structural arrangements, actively participated in the restoration and reconstruction of spiritual order. It is for this reason that a transhistorical dialogue between these two kinds of poetic wisdom becomes possible.

#### **4. The Circulation of Order: A Transhistorical Dialogue between Two Poetic Wisdoms**

The preceding analysis has revealed the divergent paths of "intellectual reconstruction"

and “philosophical return to the root.” Yet when we shift our attention from “reconstruction” to “circulation,” a further dimension emerges: as Stephen Greenblatt argues, literary texts carry a “social energy” that continues to circulate across time and space “through an irregular chain of historical transactions,” such that “the ‘life’ of the literary work... lingers after the death of the author and the culture it belongs to” (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 6). Taking this as its framework, this chapter unfolds a transhistorical dialogue between the two kinds of poetic wisdom across four dimensions: essential differences, contrasting patterns of influence, cross-cultural reinvention, and contemporary implications.

#### **4.1 Essential Differences: Types of Poetics, Types of Order, and Relations to the World**

The fundamental differences between the two poetic paths can be grasped along three interrelated dimensions.

In terms of the type of poetics, the Western Metaphysical poetry is the product of an “intellectual poetics.” Its core lies in the interrogation of essential commonalities behind everyday things, forcibly linking different categories through conceit and creating new cognitive frameworks within paradox. As T. S. Eliot observed, the Metaphysical poets are intellectual poets who by association, can integrate experiences that have no apparent connection, thereby constructing a new totality of experience (Liu Lihui, 2021, p. 63). This stands in sharp contrast to the tradition of “xingxiang” (兴象, evocative imagery) in classical Chinese poetics—the core here is the intellectual integration of “thought,” not the imagistic emergence of “feeling.” By contrast, the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry is the product of a “perceptual poetics,” concerned with the spatiotemporal field formed by multiple everyday things through which the Dao may be sought. Natural objects such as “landscape” in Xuanyan poetry are symbolic images carrying the poet’s philosophical speculation (Hong Yanlong, 2010). Its accomplishment lies in a semiotic turn from “expressing emotion and aspiration” toward “realizing the Dao and apprehending principle”—nature becomes the direct

manifestation of the Dao.

In terms of the type of new order established, the Western Metaphysical poetry creates an order that is momentarily ignited and intellectually constructed. The reader follows the poet's logical demonstration and, within the tension of conceit, suddenly achieves "insight"—order is "created" through intellectual contestation. The aesthetic effect pursued is "wonder," the establishment of order through the coexistence of contradictory experiences. The Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, by contrast, establishes an order that is continuously subsisting and revealed. Through the depiction of an immediate field, the poet guides the reader to realize a cosmological order that has always already existed. Order is not "created" but calmly "revealed"; the reader enters an immersive, enduring experience of roaming with the Dao.

In terms of the relationship between the human being and the world, the Western Metaphysical poetics presents a painful dialogue between the solitary individual and a shattered world. In "I am a little world," Donne presents the internal division of the individual soul; in "The Flea," he counters the unintelligibility of the world through intellectual demonstration—this is a process of confrontation, with tension persisting between subject and object. The Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetics, in contrast, presents the harmonious coexistence of the independent subject with a tranquil cosmos. In "Poem on the Autumn Day," Sun Chuo allows natural imagery to present the Dao directly, showing the human being gradually attuning itself to the world. This is a process of "returning to the root"—dissolving the binary opposition between self and world, settling the self within the Dao. As noted above, this is not to remake the world, but to roam with the Dao.

#### **4.2 Patterns of Influence: "Rupture—Oblivion—Recall" and "Transformation—Permeation—Sedimentation"**

If the above differences constitute a synchronic structural contrast, the transhistorical development of the two poetics within their respective cultures reveals sharply divergent

patterns of influence—a diachronic contrast of trajectories.

The influence pattern of the Western Metaphysical poetry can be summarized as “rupture—oblivion—recall”: a tradition that underwent rupture, was forgotten, and was later recalled and reconstructed in a new context. Disparaged by Dr. Johnson in the eighteenth century as a heterodoxy, it was all but forgotten for nearly two hundred years. It was not until Herbert Grierson’s 1912 edition of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, and especially T. S. Eliot’s 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” that the Metaphysical poetry was “rediscovered” and became a significant resource for Modernism. As Li Zhimin (2024) argues in his study, modernism is “more accurately understood as an evolutionary step built upon preceding movements rather than a complete break” (p.121). Its “craving for Newness” (p.123) manifests not only in its departure with tradition but also in its appropriation of innovative techniques from the past. Viewed from this perspective, the “rediscovery” of Donne by poets such as Eliot serves as a paradigmatic example of how modernism drew sustenance from earlier traditions to achieve its own creative evolution.

The Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, by contrast, exhibits a pattern of “transformation—permeation—sedimentation.” Although long criticized after the Eastern Jin—Zhong Rong’s Shipin noted it “subordinates language to principle, rendering it bland and flavorless” (Zhong Rong, 513/2020, p.2) —it was not “forgotten.” Through differentiation and permeation, it continued to nourish later poetry, branching into landscape poetry, pastoral poetry, and poetry of roaming as an immortal. Its spiritual core—realizing cosmic order through natural imagery—permeated the deep structure of classical Chinese poetry, sedimenting into a distinctive cultural disposition: a spiritual mode of settling the self in nature, a life attitude of roaming with the Dao.

At the most fundamental level, the difference between these two patterns is rooted in the deep structures of thought of the two civilizations. The Western “rupture—oblivion—recall”

is rooted in the progressive view of history with its pursuit of “paradigm revolutions” (Kuhn, 2012, p.92) and a binary oppositional structure—the new replaces the old, and rupture signifies transcendence. The Chinese “transformation—permeation—sedimentation” is rooted in the continuous view of history with its “all-embracing inclusiveness” and complementary duality—the new grows out of the old, transforms it, and sediments into it. Both patterns, it should be noted, contain creative “misreading” and “reconstruction”: Eliot’s rediscovery was itself a “creative misreading” that “translated” seventeenth-century strategies into a Modernist avant-garde methodology; the absorption of Xuanyan poetry’s spirit by Song-Ming Neo-Confucians was likewise a “creative transformation” of spiritual resources for the present. This “creative reconstruction” is precisely the mechanism by which great poetic traditions transcend their eras.

#### **4.3 Cross-Cultural Reinvention: Misreading and Rebirth in the Gaze of the “Other”**

If “rupture—oblivion—recall” and “transformation—permeation—sedimentation” describe vertical trajectories within their own cultures, then when the two poetics crossed cultural boundaries, they underwent a horizontal and more dramatic fate—reinvention by the “Other.”

After entering China in the early twentieth century, the Western Metaphysical poetry exerted a significant influence on contemporary Chinese poetry. The “Nine Leaves School” (九叶诗派), represented by Mu Dan (穆旦), received the profound influence of Modernist poets such as Eliot and W. H. Auden during the Southwest United University period, and both its creative style and mode of thought were deeply shaped by the Metaphysical poetry. The school has accordingly been described as “the poetic school that absorbed Western Modernism most thoroughly and profoundly” (Ai Ping, 2012); having studied Donne’s work, its poets began to imitate his style in their own creative practice (Guo Jianwei, 2021), incorporating the ingenuity of the Metaphysical poetry into their own Modernist experiments.

The life wisdom of “Dao Operates Naturally (道法自然)” carried by Xuanyan poetry, after its transmission into the Anglophone world in the mid-twentieth century, offered a different spiritual possibility to Western readers mired in the predicaments of modernity. In the 1950s, amid the spiritual wounds of war and the alienation of industrial civilization, the Beat poets sought a spiritual outlet in Eastern wisdom, regarding “Chan” and the “Dao” in Chinese poetry as “a balm for spiritual wounds” (Tan, 2025). Kenneth Rexroth’s *One Hundred Poems* from the Chinese profoundly influenced a generation of poets. He acknowledged that Chinese poetry had influenced him far more than any other, and that he mostly followed a kind of “Chinese rule” in his own writing (Tan, 2025, p. 189). Gary Snyder carried this further: he lived as “the American Han Shan,” responding to spiritual alienation with the spirit of landscape poetry (Tan, 2025, pp. 191–198). Snyder’s *Han Shan* embodies “things and self as one”—Han Shan is at once the poet, the mountain, and the awakened mind. This resonates with the Xuanyan poetry’s core spirit of settling the self in nature, roaming with the Dao. Snyder’s “Han Shan” is, in truth, the Sierra Nevada; he “Americanized” him. This is precisely “creative misreading” in cross-cultural transmission: Xuanyan poetry as seen by the Other has been reinvented as a “mirror image of Eastern wisdom” for postmodern ecological thought.

From the perspective of cultural poetics, the direction and mode of transformation of cultural energy in cross-civilizational transmission depend on the “structure of lack” of the recipient—the absences and longings within a specific cultural context. Modern Chinese poetics, experiencing a “lack of intellectuality,” “imported” the Metaphysical poetry and reinvented it as an “avant-garde methodology of Modernism.” Modern Western civilization, experiencing a “lack of nature” and “spiritual alienation,” “translated” Xuanyan poetry and its Daoist substratum, reinventing it as a “mirror image of Eastern wisdom” for postmodern ecology. Both have been idealized in the gaze of the “Other,” becoming mirrors that reflect not only shadows of the original texts but, more profoundly, the deepest longings and anxieties of

the recipients themselves.

#### **4.4 Contemporary Implications: Complementarity and Dialogue**

The historical evolution and cross-cultural transmission of the two kinds of poetic wisdom are both modalities of the ongoing circulation of cultural energy. This circulation points equally to the present and the future. In the face of compound crises—ecological crisis, the impact of artificial intelligence, and disciplinary fragmentation—these two kinds of poetic wisdom remain capable of participating in the reconstruction of the contemporary spiritual order.

##### **4.4.1 Empowerment: The Activation of the Two Poetics by Modern Crises**

The crisis of modernity is shared by both East and West. In the West, it manifests as the hypertrophy of instrumental rationality, the binary opposition between humanity and nature, and cognitive fragmentation; in China, as the shaking of the traditional cultural system and the rootlessness of the individual amid rapid transformation. Yet this crisis is itself an activating force, prompting the two poetics to generate new vitality. The “momentarily ignited order” of the Western Metaphysical poetry, with its conceit-like insight, offers a capacity for intellectual integration increasingly valuable in an age of interdisciplinary dialogue. Donne’s linking of a compass and love—crossing different domains of knowledge—can inspire bridges between the sciences and the humanities. The pursuit of “the principle of all things is one” (万物一道) in Xuanyan poetry, for its part, may assist the emergence of momentary order through the dissolution of binary oppositions. The impact of AI on literary creation, for instance, is itself a juncture for development. The wisdom of “moving with the current” (顺势而为) intimated by Xuanyan poetics is not passive acquiescence, but the establishment of a non-confrontational order of coexistence after recognizing a new force’s instrumentality and inevitability—a contemporary interpretation of “return to the root.”

##### **4.4.2 Response: The Complementary Response of the Two Poetics**

If “empowerment” reveals how modern crises activate the two poetics’ energies, this energy ultimately points toward their complementary response. The crisis of modernity is compound—cognitive disorder and value disorder, ecological crisis and spiritual alienation, the impact of AI and the erosion of tradition are interwoven. No single poetic wisdom can independently address them; rather, like yin and yang, the two poetics should jointly respond.

In an age of cognitive fragmentation and AI, we need the Western Metaphysical poetry’s capacity for active, creative cognition and reinterpretation. When information explosion fragments knowledge, when AI challenges our understanding of “originality” and “authenticity,” we need the courage of “intellectual reconstruction”: to establish new cognitive frameworks within paradox, to rebuild certainty amid uncertainty. This is the value of Eliot’s “intellect”—it combines disparate experiences, creating order out of chaos and integrating meaning out of fragments. Yet beyond momentary order, we also need enduring “roots.” The continuous, harmonious order contained in Xuanyan poetry can help settle body and mind amid ecological crisis and spiritual alienation. When the relationship between humanity and nature grows ever more strained, we need the wisdom of “philosophical return to the root”—not to struggle against nature but to settle the self within it; not to remake the world but to roam with the Dao, achieving the harmony of “the principle of all things is one.”

The complementarity of the two poetics is, in essence, a yin-yang balance: the Western Metaphysical poetry provides the force of yang—active, reconstructive, creative; Xuanyan poetry provides the wisdom of yin—root-returning, intuitively realizing, settling. Together, they constitute a complete poetic wisdom: possessing both the courage to confront disorder and the composure to settle body and mind.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article has adopted cultural poetics as its theoretical perspective and employed Max Weber’s “ideal type” as its comparative methodology to systematically examine, through

the analytical distinction between “cognitive disorder” and “value disorder,” the divergent poetic paths taken by the seventeenth-century Western Metaphysical poetry and the fourth-century Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry.

The study has demonstrated that the two poetics responded to two crises of order that were distinct in nature. The Western Metaphysical poetry, confronted with the “cognitive disorder” brought about by the Scientific Revolution and religious warfare, employed conceit and paradox as its instruments to establish, through “intellectual reconstruction,” a momentarily ignited cognitive order—creating order out of fragments and rebuilding certainty amid uncertainty. The Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry, confronted with the “value disorder” brought about by aristocratic politics and the transience of life, took natural imagery as its vehicle to realize, through “philosophical return to the root,” a continuously subsisting cosmological order—not remaking the world, but roaming with the Dao.

In terms of their patterns of influence, the two traditions exhibited the sharply contrasting models of “rupture—oblivion—recall” and “transformation—permeation—sedimentation,” respectively rooted in the Western progressive view of history characterized by “paradigm revolutions” and the Chinese continuous view of history characterized by “all-embracing inclusiveness.” In cross-cultural transmission, each was reinvented by the “Other” according to its own “structure of lack”—the one as an “avant-garde methodology of Modernism,” the other as a “mirror image of Eastern wisdom” for postmodern ecological thought—finding rebirth through productive misreading.

In the face of contemporary compound crises—ecological crisis, the impact of artificial intelligence, and disciplinary fragmentation—the two poetics remain capable of releasing their cultural energy. The intellectual reconstruction of the Western Metaphysical poetry grants us the courage to confront cognitive fragmentation; the philosophical return to the root of the Eastern Jin Xuanyan poetry offers us the wisdom to settle body and mind. The two, like yin

and yang, together constitute a complete poetic wisdom: possessing both the courage to confront disorder and the composure to settle body and mind.

The vitality of great poetic traditions lies precisely in this: they belong not only to the past, but to the present and the future.

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