

Poetry, Poetics and the Senses: An Interview with Prof. Susan Stewart

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Abstract Susan Stewart is the Avalon Foundation University Professor of the Humanities and Director of the Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts at Princeton University, USA. She is fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a former MacArthur Fellow, and a former Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Her most recent books are *The Poet's Freedom: A Notebook on Making* (2011), *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002), which won the Christian Gauss Award for Literary Criticism in 2003 from Phi Beta Kappa and the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism in 2004; and *The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics* (2004), etc. Her most recent books of poetry are *Red Rover* (2012), and *Columbarium*, winner of 2003 National Book Critics Circle Award. This interview begins with a talk about her book *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, the Chinese translation of which came out in February 2013, and covers issues concerning poetry, poetic creation and the role of the senses. Stewart argues that the human senses have a history and that works of art provide an enduring record of that history. She also expresses her idea about how poetry can create meanings between persons and counter the denigration and degeneration of the senses in contemporary culture as it expands our imagination of the range of human expression.

Key words Susan Stewart; poetry; poetics; the senses

I have had a correspondence with Prof. Susan Stewart since 2010, when I began to translate her book: *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. In June 2013, when she was making a scholarly tour in China and as chairperson attended the 2nd Convention of Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics in Wuhan, we had an opportunity to meet each other for the first time. My interview with her began then and continued by email in the following months. Our talk focused on her aesthetic and philosophical ideas about poetry and the senses, involving both her poetry and her criticism.

Shi: Prof. Stewart, thank you very much for accepting my interview. My first question is concerned with the book title, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. Each of the three substantive words, I think, bears multiple meanings. Would you please clarify and illustrate the title in general? What do you want to emphasize or suggest to readers, or what particular implications you want to convey?

Stewart: The title of my book is designed to indicate that the human senses have a history and that works of art provide an enduring record of that history. The term “aesthetic” itself is derived from the family of Greek terms for sense perception, just as the word “poetry” is derived from the Greek word “poiesis,” or making. I was concerned with this relation between sense perception and the intended creation of forms of art, for such forms are both a response to sense impressions and new occasions for sense impressions.

The idea that human beings literally “have a hand” in, or determine the fate and development of their own senses was first expressed in Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where he writes “The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.” Marx day-dreamed that we might develop new senses—he proposed, for example, a “mineral sense,” that might emerge as we evolve as a species.

As I was writing my book, I felt, and I still feel, that I was writing at a moment of enormous changes in our use of our senses. In the developed, and developing, world, we’ve come to live more and more within a realm of the visual, spending much of our time attached to secondary images viewed on two dimensional screens. I did not want to write an elegy for the full array of sense experience, but I did want to call attention to the choices we are making at this moment in history and to the loss of a certain alertness, an awareness of the natural world and appreciation of its beauty and complexity, that has followed these changes.

Throughout my book, I am interested in art works in general [all of which are created through “poiesis”], but I am a poet and so I focused for the most part on lyric poetry—that is, first person expressions organized by lines and/or measured duration. It is the work of lyric poetry to create the terms of face to face communication, to preserve the memory of persons by registering how and why we speak to one another under the compulsions of rhythm and physical presence.

Shi: According to Marx, we might develop new senses as we evolve as a species, such as the “mineral sense” in the eye of mineralogists. Does this mean the senses of human beings can be multiplicative if we keep alert enough to make “proper” choices in natural world? In this changing world today, do you think what choices we should make to keep our sensibility? Is this what you want to call our attention to by this book?

Stewart: Yes, it seems that Marx meant we could attune our senses in new ways—and of course we have opportunities not only to use the traditional categories of the five senses (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling), but also to explore our capacities for synaesthesia. I don't think we can make "proper" choices, for that indicates we already would know what we might develop or discover, rather than finding ourselves surprised by, and newly open to, sense experiences. But I do agree that we can be alert against numbing ourselves and actively try to use our senses. For example, listening only to very loud music or letting cameras "see" for us are ways of suppressing our powers of hearing and seeing. I fear that our technology devoted to very brief messages—"texting" and "tweeting"—will do damage to our ability to engage in conversation and to appreciate the many forms of written literature. In contrast, learning to play an instrument, to draw, to cook, or to recognize bird songs; immersing ourselves in the qualities of materials—the flowers and fabrics and clouds and barks and stones and shapes of water we see in an ordinary day; learning about the art forms of cultures that are strange to us; reading the literature of the past and writing imitations—all these activities might awaken our senses.

Shi: There have been many conflicting viewpoints since Plato's time concerning the relation of mind and body, or senses and reason, and you have discussed and quoted a good few of great philosophers and writers in your book, I think, some of them must have had more influence on your way of thinking about art, such as Allen Grossman, whom you have made a special mention of in the very beginning chapter. May I ask you to talk a bit more about those figures by naming a few of them who have meant a great deal in shaping your aesthetic idea as a critic and a poet?

Stewart: I would say that the entire history of writing on poetry has had an impact on me. To mention a few figures in chronological order, I would say Aristotle's emphasis on close observation of the art work and his interest in art objects as made forms that otherwise would not exist have been foundational for me. I also have learned a great deal about English meter and stanza forms from Renaissance debates on the subject and have taken many devices of metaphor and ode form from the Baroque. Giambattista Vico's theory of poetic wisdom, with its emphasis on "verum factum" and the role of metaphor in building culture and institutions, has also been important. Kant's positions on the disinterestedness of beauty, the mental experience of sublimity, and the freedom of reason; Hegel's account of the role of making in consciousness; Wordsworth's approach to diction and to the social life of poetry; Coleridge's interest in the imagination all have been great resources to me. Of the poets I have known in my own lifetime, Allen Grossman has been the greatest intellectual influence on my work. Allen's sense of lyric poetry as the preservation of the image of the person, his belief in the poetic vocation, his deep understanding of the

poetry of the past as a living force—these are gifts I rely on each day.

Shi: I noticed a word which has been repeatedly used— anthropomorphism—in this book, in sentences like “Poetic making is an anthropomorphic project” (2), and “My study as a whole has been concerned with the long historical and material project of anthropomorphization” (327). It seems to suggest that the idea of anthropomorphism serve as a thread running through the whole book to emphasize the importance of the senses, is that the case? If so, in a time of technology-dominated and digital world like ours, why is anthropomorphism still important in relation to poetic creation?

Stewart: By “anthropomorphism” I meant to indicate that art works as a whole give us an image of who we are and who we have been. What is a human person? What does he or she care about? What do we think of as an adequate, or imaginative, or grotesque, representation or expression of our being, and how do such representations and expressions change in time? When I make an art work I extend myself and go beyond mere experience and so I convey something of my relation, not only to my past and present, but also to my future and to what I can imagine.

To address the last part of your question, I worry about the passive way we talk about technology. Technology is simply “know how” and we human beings have decided to make and use it—we often forget that we as well can decide to ignore or destroy it. We have a “digital world” because we have made one and “technology dominates” only because of the myriad decisions we make each day to keep it functioning. I have the impression that we speak more and more frequently of technology as we speak of nature—as if it were something outside of us, with powers of its own, with its own unknowable aims and consequences. This is, I believe, a mistake that may result in a total eclipse of our own agency, both as individuals and as societies, for we have made technology; we have not made nature. The first question to ask ourselves is “what is human being for?” Surely the answer is not “to keep the machines running and to make sure everyone has them.”

Shi: As you argued that poetry in its making and reception bound up with the somatic, with memory as well as sense experience. From this and much reading of your book, I guess you must live a life that is close to nature which is pastoral-like or idyllic, for from your analysis of “Nocturnes,” I see you are very familiar with “natural” life, probably in a Wordsworthian sense. Is this the reason you keep a very strong sensual imagination in relation to language and speech? And how much does it have to do with your writing, both as a critic and as a poet?

Stewart: Every poet’s imagination owes a great debt to his or her childhood. I spent my own childhood, about half of my time, in the countryside where most of my family lived on dairy farms surrounded by meadows, springs, streams, and deciduous

forests. The rest of the time I lived in the capitol city of our state where there was a symphony and an excellent public library system and good public schools. I was fortunate to have a sense of contrast between the rural and the urban, which was in many ways a contrast between the 19th and 20th centuries. Today I still live in both kinds of places—in the city of Philadelphia and also in a rural area near Princeton. Silence, changing light, weather, effects of wind and water, birdsong, the myriad forms of insect and plant life, the presence of quick and wild living beings—I imagine I would not be able to write without these phenomena around me. But I also benefit very much from the sounds of street life and new cinema and great libraries and universities and the varieties of languages that come from dwelling in the city. In Philadelphia we have an enormous public park where it is possible to walk for miles in the forest and we also have two rivers, the Delaware and the Schuylkill—on the latter it is possible to row a small boat and I like to do that, too, on summer mornings. Wallace Stevens wrote a wonderful poem, “A Completely New Set of Objects,” about the Schuylkill.

What does this have to do with poetry? As Coleridge, Wordsworth, Valery, and many other poets have noted, walking and rowing and other everyday forms of rhythmic motion are spurs to thought and composition. Yet any poet’s environment will create a space of the familiar and the surprising that will enter into the construction of a body of work. Yesterday, for example, someone put an old piano out on the edge of the very busy street where I live in Philadelphia; people walk by, then return to play it, or sit down to practice, or run their hands down the keys as they pass. It has created a sense of wonder in those whose paths intersect it—it’s something out of place, yet something inviting. The piano is an “art work” I never could have anticipated—will it appear in a poem? Will it provide some new sense of form in public space? Will it become a ruin? Disappear? I don’t know yet, but it seems to have something to do with poetry.

Shi: Thank you so much for giving us such a vivid description of your own life. I think, your living in “both kinds of places,” especially your benefit from the sounds of street life is very helpful for us in mediating our role in modern society. In the following chapter, you write: “By means of the incantatory, the poet acknowledges in the work’s very being this inevitable paradox of human life: that we actively pursue an *eidōs* or fixed image of the human and at the same time passively long for its dissolution.... It is the figure of poetic making who most fully and tragically represents the duality of this human desire for representation”(329). Both the paradox and the duality are somewhat complicated. How should we understand it? Compared to other literary genre, why is it the poem that tragically represents the duality?

Stewart: I am making a simple point there about what Allen Grossman has called “the violence of representation.” We long to have an image of our thoughts and

being, but as soon as we complete such an image, we are dissatisfied with it—not only because we idealize the power and form of what we project about ourselves, but also because we live in time and no stilled or static work of art will ever meet the terms of such temporal change. And so we need new art; we constantly seek out new forms and new means of making forms.

Shi: Since poetry-making is the process of form-giving, then what's the relation of poetry-making and other forms of art creation, such as novel, drama, painting etc.?

Stewart: Every culture has a system of genres that fulfill its needs. For example, we have proverbs to organize and shape the world into predictable patterns and we have riddles (which are often proverbs turned inside out) that break down our categories of thought and show us anomalies and paradoxes. Let's survey some of the standard definitions of the forms or genres you mention. The novel by definition is a tremendously capacious and mutating form, and it can include first, second, or third person point of view, omniscience and occlusion. That said, novelists most often have relied on narrative structure in general and plot teleology in particular, as well as an exploration of character that is both typifying and individuating. As Aristotle clarified for us, drama involves many of these same features of multiple points of view, plot teleology, and narrative form, but drama also involves the direct representation of actions and their consequences. Painting, which is the organization of color, line, and/or texture on a two-dimensional, supporting, surface, can also be narrative, as in history painting, or it can take any number of other approaches to its field of representation, including the presentation of pure color or the application of objects. With the latter practice, it begins to lose its two-dimensionality and become sculpture.

What distinguishes the poet's work is that he or she makes forms with measured language. Because language is both material and immaterial [the "matter" of thought]; because poetry has its origin in bodily rhythms and ritual occasions; because poems can take narrative form and at the same time indicate cycles of return and transformation, the work of the poet overlaps with the work of other artists. Yet the lyric poet is speaking in a first person voice, which may or may not be the voice of the poet and that voice will be measured and punctuated by another set of forces and decisions. Finally, I would say the fundamental immateriality of poetry [the poet can compose even without pen or paper or other physical aids] gives it a particular relation to human memory—it arises from the pulse of feeling and returns, internalized through memory and imagination.

Shi: In Chapter 2, especially with the section entitled as "Dynamics of Poetic Sound," you went to great pains to give us such a thorough analysis of the relation of poetry and sound, to show us how much can be at stake in a poem, a word, a sound, a pause, a break, etc. in terms of the poems of Stevens, Hardy and Hopkins. Do you

mean to remind us that in poetry sounds always take predominance compared to writing forms?

Stewart: Poets organize sound in particular patterns; there are many varieties of rhyme, dissonance, assonance, consonance, interval and punctuation. Even though a poem is on the page, the reader can “hear” the sounds of the words, lines, and stanza forms. It’s true that some poets—John Skelton in the 15th century, Michael Drayton at the turn to the 17th century, Abraham Cowley in the 17th century; Alexander Pope in the 18th century; the Romantic poets John Keats and George Gordon, Lord Byron; the American 19th century poet Emily Dickinson, the Irish modernist William Butler Yeats, and, as you mention, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Hardy, and Wallace Stevens—put sound in the forefront of their poetic practice. Sometimes it is a single line or a single poem in a poet’s work that crystallizes the poet’s relation to sound, silence, and noise. This is the kind of issue that is most interesting when approached on the local level—through close reading of what the poet actually is doing. I wouldn’t say that other kinds of writing—particularly literary writing—don’t rely on sound and sound play as well; sound is tremendously important in many novels, for example--think of the sound of names and tics of speech alone in Dickens or what it’s like to read a paragraph of Herman Melville’s prose or Virginia Woolf’s writing aloud. But with the exception of the fictional poetry of the Victorian era, I’d say it is rather unusual for poets to present their work as silent documents—poetry more often than not is framed as living speech.

Shi: During your stay in Wuhan, you have given three lectures on poetics—“The Poet’s Freedom,” “Imagination and Freedom,” and “Freedom and Rhyme.” All of them contain the word “freedom,, would you tell us more reasons why “freedom” is used in all the three topics?

Stewart: These lectures come out of my new book, *The Poet’s Freedom*. I’m concerned in them with the kinds of free play and open-ended process that art making involves. As for these lectures, my first lecture was concerned with how the poet begins to compose without knowing the outcome of the work; the second lecture explored how the imagination can be both an impediment and aid to freedom of thought; and in my third lecture I considered how rhyme may seem to be a constraint, yet patterns of rhyme allow us to explore meaning beyond convention and to claim that it is rhyme itself that determines, or undermines, our intentions in speaking. My goal was to explore the inherent freedom in these practices—freedom as extension, as non-teleological process, as release from utility.

Shi: I’m much impressed by your analysis of Dickinson’s “A Narrow Fellow in the Grass”; your indication of the pairing of identical letters in this poem is absolutely wonderful! With your help I’m coming to see the doubled letters—rr, ll, ss, cc, ll, dd,

ss, tt, ee, gg, oo, etc.—culminating in a chorus of serpentine and “oo” circles that have emerged from the grasslike ll’s before they [ha]llt (*Poet’s Freedom* 160). But honestly speaking, I have two doubts about this example: first, should we treat every poem in the context of reading aloud as skillfully as you did? And then how can we use our imagination that way?

Stewart: There’s no special trick to finding a pattern like this—it just requires patience and close reading and a knowledge of the poet’s usual habits and history. Dickinson put the pattern there for us to find, and even if we don’t “see” it, it has something to do with the chilling effect with which the poem leaves us as we read the last line. It seems to me we never can go wrong by going back to a work, by looking at it from a new angle, by accepting we’ll never come to “know” or “explain” it as a totality—and why would we want to?

Shi: My last question will be somewhat “teleological.” In translating your *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, a great difficulty for me is: there are so many poetic or critical terms and proper nouns, and probably because of this, at the end of the book you have made long and detailed notes, I’m sure they are helpful, would you give us Chinese readers some advice on how to make a good use of them?

Stewart: I always try to leave a full “trail” of the influences and sources of my scholarship—this is the standard of good practice in academic life and it is very important that readers can return to the source texts, either primary or secondary works, and follow the scholar/author’s journey toward completion. Because we quote selectively, it is also important to give readers an opportunity to know what the full context might be. I try to make my books readable, even if they are sometimes difficult, and I try to create a trove of references for anyone who would like to do more work in the field. Many scholars now prefer to write without notes, but I find notes always generate new knowledge and insights as I finish a work. I have also experimented with new formats, or revived older practices, for my scholarly work. In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, I thought it was important to have a separate index for anyone who wanted to read the book as a commentary on particular poems, And in *The Poet’s Freedom*, I requested wide margins and blank pages at the back of the book so that the reader could use the “notebook” as a notebook.

Works cited

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