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# The Endlessly Elaborating Poem: A Comparative Study of Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, and the American Experimental, Long Narrative Poem

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The Endlessly Elaborating Poem:  
A Comparative Study of Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens,  
and the American Experimental, Long Narrative Poem  
(TITLE)

BY

Paul Freidinger

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1981

YEAR

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THE ENDLESSLY ELABORATING POEM:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WALT WHITMAN, WALLACE STEVENS,  
AND THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENTAL, LONG NARRATIVE POEM

BY

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B. A. in English/Philosophy, Eastern Illinois University, 1971

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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1981

## Abstract

Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, British and American poetry was expected to employ rigid metrical and rhythmical patterns. Any verse that did not conform was considered devoid of aesthetic merit. In addition, some critics, Edgar Allan Poe being one of those, argued that there was no place for a long poem in poetry. Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens, two proponents of the long narrative poem, both wrote in free verse and, thus, directly confronted these traditional theories.

This study demonstrates that the verse of Whitman and Stevens constitutes a new approach to poetic style and structure. A close examination reveals that their poems are neither unstructured or undetermined. Both men believed in the concept of the inseparability of language and the ideas fused within language. The purpose of the paper is to identify the cadences, rhythms, and syntactical structures used by Whitman and Stevens to determine what specific devices they shared. The most difficult question to answer is whether there are syntactical structures inherent in the language that necessarily bind both poets (and hypothetically, other American free verse writers) and shape the form their poetry finally takes.

The opening section of this study examines Poe's view of poetry and contrasts Whitman's own stated goals for his long poem, Leaves of Grass. Whitman envisions a rhythm and meter which erupt and are formed from the language itself. Furthermore, Whitman thought the use of predesigned conventions such as rhythm and meter stifled poetry and made it boring and lifeless. In addition, traditional poetry, because of these conventions, was unable to embody the often paradoxical nature of human existence.

The middle section examines Whitman's use of particular devices in Leaves of Grass such as the repetition of syntactical structures, the use of ellipses, gerunds, participles, and so on. As the subject matter of Whitman's poetry changed, likewise his methods of writing about these experiences changed. He frequently uses ungrammatical structures (in traditional terms), sentence fragments, and other devices to achieve his results. Certainly, Whitman's new approach to poetry forced others who followed him to consider his claims for poetry and the topics it should confront.

The study continues with an examination of Wallace Stevens' long poem, An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, published in 1949. Stevens explicitly defended the value of the long poem. Furthermore, within this poem, Stevens investigates the subject of writing poetry itself. His theory of poetry is in direct opposition to the closed couplet, the

highest ideal of nineteenth century rationalism. Like Whitman, he used whatever necessary syntactical and structural devices to reveal the paradoxical and often irrational nature of reality.

This study concludes that both Whitman and Stevens left us with a new way of looking at poetry and the world, one richer in its potential than any we have had before.

Unlike British and American poets up to the middle of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens, two proponents of the experimental, long narrative poem, both use free verse. Earlier poetry was expected to employ rigid metrical and rhythmical patterns. Any verse that did not conform was considered devoid of aesthetic merit. Critics first claimed that Whitman simply broke all the rules of poetic genre. They said he used none of the poetic devices that make poetry poetry. The same can be said of Wallace Stevens in his long poems. However, to say the poems of these men are unstructured and their verse is free and undetermined is a gross misstatement. A careful reading of either of them will show the opposite to be true.

Their verse, of course, constitutes a new approach to poetic style and structure. The purpose of this paper is to identify the cadences, rhythms, and syntactical structures used by Whitman and Stevens and to determine what specific devices they shared. The most difficult question to answer is whether there are syntactical structures inherent in the language that necessarily bind both poets (and hypothetically, other American free verse writers) and shape the form their poetry finally takes.

I have chosen two sets of poems that ideally should be representative of the long narrative poem. Whitman's Leaves of Grass, first published in 1855, certainly is the springboard of this study. Stevens' An Ordinary Evening in New



Haven, published in 1949, is next. It is one of his later poems and one of many of more than moderate length.

Finally, the critical approach this paper assumes is not a structuralist one. I am not attempting to reduce the paper to linguistic formulas. These poets understood grammar and prosody, and it may often be appropriate to describe many devices in traditional linguistic terms. Yet, I think it is fair to say that the poets in question shared a belief in the concept of the inseparability of language and the ideas fused within language. Hence, in their eyes the need to revolutionize the structure of poetry was equally eminent with the need to alter the subject matter of poetry.

In epic poetry, the language of narrative was expected to meet definite requirements, considerable length being one of them. Only five years before the first publication of Leaves of Grass, Edgar Allan Poe wrote an essay called "The Poetic Principle"<sup>1</sup> in which he took issue with the concept of the "long poem." In his view, there was no place for a long poem in poetry. In fact, he says, "I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase 'long poem' is simply a flat contradiction in terms."<sup>2</sup>

What is meant by length is subject to question, but apparently roughly corresponds to the following formula: any poem that is too long to be read comfortably in one sitting is too long to be a poem at all. Poe's argument asserts that an epic such as the Illiad is comprised of a "series

of lyrics" (p. 477), i.e., a series of short poems. The result of the compilation of so many poems within the guise of one giant encompassing poem is that the positive effect of the work nullifies the individual's capacity to attain the full potential of the aesthetic experience. The poet obliterates his own goal in writing too long a work. Though Poe ambiguously states his hypothesis, his assertion that the long poem is comprised of a series of shorter poems is a plausible one. During this study of Whitman and Stevens, I will return to Poe's premise and see whether their poems do conform to his claim. However, neither poet accepts his hypothesis in its entirety.

Poe also insisted that poetry uniformly employ rhythm, rhyme, and meter. His favorite analogy for poetry is music. He claims, "contenting myself with the certainty that Music, in its various modes of metre, rhythm, and rhyme...is of so vast a moment in Poetry as never to be wisely rejected...is so vitally important and adjunct, that he is simply silly who declines its assistance." (Poe, p. 480). This statement represents the kind of traditional thinking in poetic literature that Walt Whitman was trying to abandon.

The mimetic posture that Poe and others wanted so desperately to protect was precisely what Whitman wished to dispense with. He wanted a poetry that was free of the roots of the literary past. To accomplish this task, he deemed it necessary to adopt an entirely new perspective on

the poet's relationship to language. His preface to Leaves of Grass is full of proclamations defining the poet's path, his goals, and his responsibilities. He emphatically states:

The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush and take shape as compact as the shape of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form. The fluency and ornaments and orations and recitations are not independent but dependent.<sup>3</sup>

He wanted to sever his ties to the past, not because he was unadmiring or unappreciative, but because the poetry of traditional literature simply was inappropriate, unalive and untrue for him. Indeed, he desired the freedom to write in a language that embodied a living America, a raw and unfettered language full of the existential exhilaration that embodied such a metaphysical leap. His stylistic stance and aesthetic perspective changed simultaneously. The point is not to rely so much on Whitman's self-assessment and risk the intentional fallacy, but merely to demonstrate his acute sensitivity to the question of rhythm and meter. His statement is a paradoxical one, however, because he envisions a rhythm and meter which erupt and are formed from the language itself. Elsewhere he writes, "what sensible man or woman has not felt there should be far broader and higher flights of poetry than any at present pursued? Who does not tire of rhymes, anyhow--and of regularly continued metre?"<sup>4</sup> This same paradox confronts Stevens as well as

Whitman and structurally molds their respective styles.

One can open any page of Leaves of Grass and find numerous examples of Whitman's attempt to develop meter freely from language. One particular section of the opening poem of Leaves of Grass is a case in point. The page consists of twelve separate sentences, each divided in traditional stanzaic form. The stanzas randomly vary in lengths of two, three, and four lines. It would initially appear to be without order. The first sentence would perhaps convey that impression even further:

I have pried through the strata and analyzed  
to a hair,  
And counselled with doctors and calculated  
close and found no sweeter fat than sticks  
to my own bones. (Leaves of Grass p. 26)

The line rambles and virtually defies a typical scanning of meter. It does not rhyme. Upon reading the sentence, however, an unmistakable cadence is evident. Whitman does here effectively what he does so frequently throughout Leaves of Grass. Form is shaped through the repetition of grammatical devices. It is tempting to read the line and force a meter upon it, one that is awkwardly anapestic. Yet, the verb phrase beginning with "found no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones," could be iambic as well. What is consistent is the following: the line begins with the personal pronoun and is followed by a verb phrase. The verbs invite a heavy accent after a suspension of movement caused by the conjunction and and the end of the previous verb phrase. It is a declarative

sentence; it is a pronouncement that gives the line an emphatic quality. Also, the series of modifiers set a cadence that is brought to a close, not just in the period (full stop) but with the shift to a direct object, the usual complement of English sentences. Still, this sentence is only an indication for what follows throughout the entire page. The page of twelve sentences contains twenty-seven independent clauses that begin with the pronoun I followed by a verb phrase. Certainly, this evokes the effect of an incantation. Specifically, the phrase "I know" is repeated six times.

In this section, Whitman's poetry presents his marvelous sense of balance. It is a balance that is as visually present to the reader as it is audibly present to the listener. For example, view the following sentence:

I am the poet of the body,  
And I am the poet of the soul. (Leaves of Grass p. 26)

The grammatical structure of each clause is identical, with repetition of exactly the same words, except for the last word. The next sentence achieves a similar symmetry in a slightly different way.

The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the  
pains of hell are with me,  
The first I graft and increase upon myself...  
the latter I translate into a new  
tongue. (Leaves of Grass p. 26)

In a traditional scanning, the two subjects of the first two clauses respectively are not strictly identical. Instead, the noun followed by the prepositional phrase initiated in the first

clause sets the order for the second one. The same is true of the second line with the clause "the first I graft..." and the completion of the line "the latter I translate...." This technique allows him wide freedom structurally but still gives a distinct measure of control. One could look at the entire last sentence quoted above and make another comment. An English teacher seeing a sentence like that on a typical student's composition would label the sentence ungrammatical; it is a run-on sentence. With Whitman, the order of the language comes not from obeying grammatical rules of traditional English but rather from the syntactical units that comprise a phrase or clause. One final example round in the same section is the very next sentence. A subtle shift of the same device occurs.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,  
 And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be  
 a man,  
 And I say there is nothing greater than the  
 mother of men. (Leaves of Grass p. 26)

Once again, each clause begins with I immediately followed by the verb. Also, a polarity is established between the words woman and man (or men) emphatically ending each line.

Walt Whitman continually speaks of the contradictions inherent in himself and all human existence. The contradictions cannot be denied. Truth affirms and embodies them. The contradictions are inherent in the language. Logic leaves one with contingencies and judgements to be made that eliminate at least one side of the contradiction. Whitman was particularly adept at dealing with and revealing this

structurally. He is very fond of using conditional and disjunctive statements, often intermixed within a given passage, which manifest the ambiguities of language and logic. One can easily find countless examples at random. In addition, it should be remembered that any of these techniques is not isolated from the others; they are used in all possible combinations and seemingly at will. The following quotation from Leaves of Grass is representative and also important because it demonstrates a use of the language that Stevens also especially exploits for himself.

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages  
 and lands, they are not original with  
 me,  
 If they are not yours as much as mine they are  
 next to nothing,  
 If they do not enclose everything they are next  
 to nothing,  
 If they are not riddle and the untying of the  
 riddle  
 they are nothing,  
 If they are not just as close as they are distant  
 they are nothing. (Leaves of Grass p. 24)

Here are five full lines that constitute one sentence. It appears to go nowhere semantically. It states the conditions necessary for semantic satisfaction with the context of the stanza. The words not or nothing occur nine times. This fact, coupled with the repetition of the identical syntax, gives the impression of a decree being delivered. The repetition also serves to build tension. The repetition of the five lines here certainly is not exorbitant comparatively. Two pages earlier in the same poem, Whitman repeats the same structure,

each line with an almost identical syntactical distribution, for an entire page. Nevertheless, in this example, his technique for resolution is the same. He follows the negative, incantory buildup with a short, two-line affirmative statement.

This is the grass that grows wherever the  
land is and water is,  
This is the common air that bathes the globe.  
(Leaves of Grass p. 24)

The short, simple structure (demonstrative pronoun/copula/predicate nominative) is as important to preserve the rhythmic balance as is the long progression of conditionals leading up to it. The affirmation serves to tie an ontological knot as well as providing a structural end. It resembles the resolving note at the end of a chord progression in a piece of music. With this in mind, another related device can be discussed.

Roethke once described Whitman as a "maker of catalogues."<sup>5</sup> This may be one of the more blatant and obvious facts about his style. He frequently lists images, one after another with complete disdain for standard English usage. He often makes no attempt whatsoever to write a complete sentence. It is during these passages Whitman seems most reckless, free of syntactic bondage, and at odds with the likes of Poe and other traditional poets. Such a claim simply stated is misleading and entirely inaccurate. Whitman never loses sight of the nature of paradox that epitomizes human existence.



Another section of Leaves of Grass exemplifies this point. The passage begins with a simple declaration.

I am afoot with my vision. (Leaves of Grass p. 35)

Over eighty meandering lines interspersed with dependent clauses, isolated present participles, prepositional phrases and other apparently unconnected grammatical units follow this sentence. This eruption of fragments is randomly perpetuated primarily by ellipses, semi-colons, and commas in no evident systematic way. Perhaps, an adverse critic of Whitman's would view a passage like this and be ready to excoriate the poet's mad pursuit of freedom. It may appear to be freedom in its worst sense--exhibiting total absence of order and a naive neglect of conceptual responsibility. I do not think this is the case. Let us look once more at the sentence that begins this cascade of collective images. "I am afoot with my vision." He is walking and the very sense experience is the food of his awareness. It proclaims a state of mystical apprehension overwhelming to the limited comprehension of Aristotelian logic. A vision is a gift, an intuition, a wave of wonder crashing ex nihilo on the unsuspecting sand of one's own perception. Whitman desired a language true to experience; in this instance, he wanted a visionary language. The rhymed iambic pentameter of an Alexander Pope or John Dryden simply would not do justice to the experience. But, this is not to say the poet does not exercise control. If we analyze the passage in question, we can see that it is another attempt to

seek an order and control that stems from freedom. The same devices seen before are present here as elsewhere. He frequently repeats the same syntactic structure for several lines. Also, an unmistakable rhythmical emphasis is present within the images themselves. He uses alliteration and assonance constantly. He is particularly fond of using words heavily accented on the first syllable and speech with a triplicate rhythm. Notice a random selection of the section just discussed:

By the city's quadrangular houses....in log  
huts or camping with lumbermen,  
Along the ruts of the turnpike....along the  
dry gulch and rivulet bed,  
Hoeing my onion-patch, and rows of carrots  
and parsnips....crossing savannas....  
trailing in forests,  
Prospecting....gold digging....girdling the  
trees of a new purchase....  
Where the alligator in his tough pimples  
sleeps by the bayou,  
Where the black bear is searching for roots  
or honey....where the beaver pats the mud  
with his paddle tail;  
Over the growing....over the cotton plant....  
over the rice in its low moist field;  
Over the sharp-peaked farmhouse with its  
scalloped scum and slender shoots from the  
gutters; (Leaves of Grass p. 35)

Today, an ellipsis with four spaced periods indicates a period at the end of a sentence plus the omission of a word or words between the phrases. Whether Whitman intended his use of the punctuation in this manner can only be conjecture. The occurrence of it does lend itself very well to analysis, however. Remember that these images are at the perimeter of the poet's vision. The vision would be timeless; the images are in

flux. They seem to come in three categories. The first group of images are those that begin with a preposition and indicate place--places viewed in passing. The second group is characterized by present participles (prospecting.... gold digging....girdling) which give the impression of movement and life right now. They also give the impression of something that will go on and last. The period ends the image and makes it complete. The ellipsis makes it incomplete and unfinished. The third group of images are those dependent clauses that begin with an adverb (of place) and contain a present tense verb. In his book Language and Myth, Ernest Cassirer states that

the intellectual process...is one of synthetic supplementation, the combination of the single instance with totality, and its completion in the totality. But by this relationship with the whole, the separate fact does not lose its concrete identity and limitation. It fits into the sum total of phenomena, yet remains set off from them as something independent and singular. The ever-growing relationship which connects an individual perception with others does not cause it to become merged with others. Each separate "specimen" of a species is contained in the species; the species itself is "subsumed" under a higher genus; but this means, also that they remain distinct, they do not coincide.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, Whitman, through the extensive use of cataloguing of images, repetition of words and syntax, the particular use of certain types of words (present participles, prepositions that indicate relation to place, etc.) and the employment of traditional poetic techniques like alliteration

and assonance, achieves the desired aim. The desired aim is the concrete universal, order in freedom, movement in the timeless, the eternal now.

It is impossible to talk about Whitman and not talk of music. "Whitman's departure from conventional poetic forms has led some to believe that he had no ear for the music of poetry. And it is this very combination of freedom from convention with attention to subtle formal properties that give Whitman's poetry its distinctive quality."<sup>7</sup> It is not a symphony by any means. The analogy works better between his poetry and the improvisational flights of modern jazz. His poetry, more often than not, is characterized by hard, methodical accents that convey an impression of constant plodding. This occurs partly because of the predominance of the subject/verb/object syntax involved in the continual narration. The use of alliteration and the often long strain of adjectives, present and past participles, gerunds, and infinitives contribute to this effect. Again, the alliteration creates a way of sustaining the swirl of motion around the image. Likewise, gerunds and infinitives anchor the motion in the always rippling wave of time. They are like exclamations suspended on their own, leaping into their own meaning. A brief example is the following:

Down-hearted doubters, dull and excluded.  
 frivolous sullen moping angry affected  
 disheartened atheistical.  
 I know every one of you, and know the un-  
 spoken interrogatories,

By experience I know them. (Leaves of Grass p. 48)

The lack of punctuation between descriptive words in the second quoted line puts the burden of the reading and interpretation of the rhythm on the reader. The reader of conventionally metrical poetry often displays the tendency to try and force a standard rhythm into Whitman's poetry. But, the words in these four quoted lines almost seek their own rhythm. Thus, we see another instance of the paradoxical question for freedom and control.

T.S. Eliot has said that "a sound poetic style was the heightened conversation of the time...and...for our society, that if you know an author well enough personally you do not need to read him."<sup>3</sup> Whitman manifests this trait, and we shall see it also exhibited in Stevens. The narrative poem is more than a simple narration. It is an implied conversation with the reader often being asked questions. Even though the answers (if there are any) are necessarily supplied by the poet himself, the reader is left with the impression of listening in on an important dialogue. It may be a mistake to say there is a necessary linguistic connection that leads the two writers to use the same syntactical structures. However, before we begin to examine Wallace Stevens' poetry, let me offer an hypothesis that may encompass both poets. When Whitman pronounces that it is as "great to be a woman as to be a man" and "nothing is greater than the mother of men," he is discursively relating a metaphysi-

cal truth. The result is that the conception conveyed is universalized. But in the act of writing that is admittedly conversational, the poet must be aware of the duality of human existence. He is conscious and determining and definitely not a mystic at this moment. In addition, this passage or the numerous others quoted above are not overtly symbolical in the traditional poetic sense. The only avenue left to the poet who still largely accepts the validity of English grammar and syntax is to embrace the paradoxes of life and elucidate its contradictions. If one accepts Cassirer's assertion that language is inherently metaphorical, then the poet's task is to unify the polarities. One is reminded of Yeats' claim that truth cannot be known; it must be embodied. Poets like Whitman and Stevens heighten the tension between opposites (appearance and reality) and, thus, achieve the release of that tension in their poetic resolutions.

This concludes the section on Whitman. It is certainly inconclusive. At best, it gives birth to a few hypotheses and builds a foundation for looking at Stevens. Other comparisons will be made with Whitman as the need arises in the remaining portion of the paper. The few isolated passages examined barely break the surface of the enormous complexity of Whitman's poetry. Perhaps in the eyes of Stevens and others who have followed, Whitman's poetry may have forced them into totally new perspectives concerning the function

of language itself.

Wallace Stevens most certainly possesses a refined, rarefied style, at times extraordinarily abstruse and immersed deeply in the philosophical perplexities of perception. He consistently writes poems on the subject of writing poems. He explores with fervent dedication, from his first to his last poems, the metaphysical eddies of aesthetic waters. If Whitman is a democratic poet of the common people, then Stevens is a benevolent dictator ruling the realms of "fine ideas," creating the constitution of a "supreme fiction." His poems may appear, in style and content, to be far apart from Whitman. Yet, I think without question, Stevens extends the territory of language that Whitman first opened for exploration. Though he composed a large number of short poems, he regularly felt compelled to produce longer pieces of writing. At one point, he states, "One never gets anywhere in writing or thinking or observing unless one can do long stretches at a time. Often I have to let go, in the most insignificant poem, which scarcely serves to remind me of it, the most skyey of skyey sheets."<sup>9</sup> He openly celebrated the value of creating long poems. Remember Poe's argument against the long poem and observe how Stevens' view contrasts with it. In defense of Poe, however, I will say that the length of Stevens' long poems is not prohibitive and can be fairly comfortably read in a single sitting. Furthermore, they are usually divided into sections or cantos in similar fashion

to Whitman. Still, Stevens writes that a long poem

comes to possess the reader...and naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there. In a long poem so many emotions, so many sensations, are stirred up into activity that, after a time, the reader finds himself in a state of such sensibility that it cannot be said that the scale and deliberateness of allegory fail to produce an emotional effect. A prolonged reading of Spenser's Fairie Queen, for instance, creates such a state of sensibility. In general long poems have this attribute, derived from their very length, assuming they have been charged throughout with the emotions of the poet.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that Poe deploras, that of length itself, is exactly what Stevens admires. He composed several poems that fall into this category. I have chosen to focus on An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, one of Stevens' later poems. Published in 1949, it follows Whitman's Leaves of Grass by nearly one hundred years. It is also appropriate because of its subject matter. One of Stevens' lifelong passions was grasping the role of language in shaping, defining, and penetrating reality. Like Whitman, Stevens chose to explore the mines of appearance and reality. Ultimately, Whitman and Stevens came to believe that the key to metaphysical truth lay in language itself. Hence, the absolute necessity to experiment with the traditional approaches to poetry evolved into a compulsion. This poetic compulsion possessed Stevens his entire life. About An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, Stevens wrote, "My interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a



question of grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false."<sup>11</sup>

However, like Whitman, Stevens also found himself the inheritor of a literary tradition he could not accept. In eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalism, the heroic couplet was the epitome of rhythmical and conceptual order and symmetry. The formula for the heroic couplet was clearly defined. "It was a strictly iambic pentameter couplet, strongly end-stopped, and with the couplets prevailingly closed."<sup>12</sup> The couplet contained a complete unified thought. When Whitman first published Leaves of Grass, it appeared to many to be a descent into the irrational, a fall into madness. We have already seen how he answers those charges. Stevens was no less sensitive to the departure from reason. He states

You can compose poetry in whatever form you like. If it seems a seventeenth-century habit to begin lines with capital letters, you can go in for the liquid transitions of greater simplicity, and so on. It is not that nobody cares. It matters immensely. The slightest sound matters. The most momentary rhythm matters. You can do as you please, yet everything matters. You are free, but your freedom must be consonant with the freedom of others. To insist for a moment on the point of sound. We no longer like Poe's tintinnabulations. You are free to tintinnabulate if you like. But others are equally free to put their hands over their ears. Life may not be a cosmic mystery that wraps us round everywhere. You have somehow to know the sound that is the exact sound, and you do in fact know without knowing how. Your knowledge is irrational....The incessant desire for freedom in literature or in any of the arts is a desire for freedom in life.<sup>13</sup>

Stevens presents us with another version of the paradox of freedom with control, the irrational contained within the rational.

In the first canto, Stevens plunges into this paradox. The first three lines set the tone for the entire poem.

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,  
The vulgate of experience. Of this,  
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet--  
(Canto i, p. 465)

He begins with the simple declarative statement. The poet tells us the poem will describe an "ordinary evening" in a typical town--"the vulgate of experience." What could be simpler? Yet, the "few words" he needs for this narrative require thirty-one cantos and twenty-four pages. This contrast with the heroic couplet is difficult to ignore. The lines each contain ten syllables and may be loosely iambic. However, they do not include a complete unified thought that ends with a terminal mark of punctuation. Just the opposite is the case. The stanza ends with a dash. What started simply comes to an abrupt halt. The dash indicates a sudden break in thought, a change of tone, or perhaps an unexpected interruption. We do not know for sure. It causes an immediate end to order and symmetry. With the repetition of the phrase "and yet, and yet, and yet" followed by a dash, Stevens gives the impression this description could go on forever. Poetry of this kind, he seems to be informing us, possesses no predesigned lengths, forms, or

rational structures. The second sentence, which would be considered traditionally ungrammatical, flows on with a series of images for seventeen lines.

Let us look more closely at the last seven lines of this canto. Stevens states that the poem is

A recent imagining of reality,

Much like a new resemblance of the sun,  
Down-pouring, up-springing, and inevitable,  
A larger poem for a larger audience,

As if the crude collops came together as one,  
A mythological form, a festival sphere,  
A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age.  
(Canto i, pp. 465-466)

As with Whitman, we should notice Stevens' use of alliteration, heavily accented words, gerunds, and participles. "A recent imagining of reality" is one that is part of a process. It comes from the past and continues into the future. It is "mythological" and "alive with age." This is Stevens' own way of sustaining the swirl of motion around the images. The pendulum sways back and forth from movement to timelessness, from timelessness to movement, and so on forever.

Whitman and Stevens repeatedly stressed the dichotomy between appearance and reality. We have already mentioned that a discursive explanation would not adequately embody that dichotomy. The alternative for Stevens was to use language that embraced logical contradictions. Observe a section of Canto xvi.

Among time's images, there is not one  
Of this present, the venerable mask above

The dilapidation of dilapidations.

The oldest-newest day is the newest alone.  
 The oldest-newest night does not creak by,  
 With lanterns, like a celestial ancientness.  
 (Canto xvi, p. 476)

Two typical Stevens' devices are present in this passage. If he desires to inform us about the nature of reality, he frequently states what it is not. The first statement is one which invites ambiguity. Though time encompasses the present, no image, no "venerable mask above/The dilapidation of dilapidations" exists. Stevens is searching for the underlying form, the connection between the manifestation of the phenomenon and the thing-itself. The connection does not lie in logic. The structure of the fourth sentence appears simple on the surface. The only way to reflect the true nature of reality is to embrace the alogical progression of time with the hyphenated contradictory adjectives oldest-newest. One is reminded of Eliot's line "Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future,/And time future contained in time past."<sup>14</sup> The experience of life in the flow of time cannot be expressed with heroic couplets. Time cannot be wrapped in neat, orderly packages. The language that reveals this experience cannot be neat and orderly either. Compare Whitman on the same subject.

Endless unfolding of words of ages!  
 And mine a word of the modern....a word en-  
 masse  
 A word of faith that never balks,  
 One time as good as another time....here or  
 henceforward it is all the same to me.

A word of reality.... (Leaves of Grass p. 28)

Whitman goes on to say, "Do I contradict myself?/Very well then....I contradict myself...." (Leaves of Grass p. 55)

Stevens also pursues the language of reality wherever it may lead him. In another section, he says the poet wants "still speech/As it touches the point of reverberation--not grim reality but reality grimly seen..." (Canto xiv p. 475). The turnabout of adjective and noun (grim reality) to its opposite has the effect of a slick understatement at first sight. Yet, it serves to reveal the paradoxes of language. The syntax of the phrase following the dash is a typical, rational proselike statement. Reality is not A, but rather it is B. However, when he reverses the adjective and noun, the logic of the syntax is swiftly erased. Stevens ends the canto in similar fashion. "The tink-tonk/Of the rain in the spout is not a substitute./It is of the essence not yet well perceived." (Canto xiv p. 475) The poet's task today demands an acceptance of paradoxical language.

Both Whitman and Stevens felt they were reacting to literary tradition, stifling in its rigidity. One of the subtle ironies of Stevens is the manner in which he often employs an ostensibly syllogistic series of conditional and disjunctive statements that yield the impression of an ethereal logic. As we stated earlier, this poem appears to maintain a patterned structure that is lacking in Whitman's poems. His use of conditional and disjunctive statements may induce the

uninitiated to think Stevens is a proponent of traditional logic. The following is a typical example:

If it should be true that reality exists  
 In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of  
 bread on it,  
 The long-bladed knife, the little to drink  
 and her

Misericordia, it follows that  
 Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven  
 Before and after one arrives or, say,

Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,  
 Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes  
 Or Paris in conversation at a cafe.

This endlessly elaborating poem  
 Displays the theory of poetry,  
 As the life of poetry. (Canto xxviii p. 485-486)

The sense of syntactical balance and symmetry of syntactical forms so evident in Whitman are present here, too. Yet, these lines have little in common with the closed couplet. The beginning stanza states the formula, and it seems easy enough to grasp. If A occurs, then it follows that B is the case. Of course, with a hypothetical statement, evidence is required for verification. The poet supplies the evidence in a manner that again destroys the illusion of logic. Examples of how "the real and unreal are two in one" include New Haven before one sees it and afterwards, a picture of Bergamo, "Rome after dark" when it cannot be seen, an account of Sweden, and so on. All are images conjured by the poet, and they all are part of "This endlessly elaborating poem." Logic will not do justice to this "theory of poetry" because it cannot adequately describe reality. The underlying form Stevens uses

here, the appearance of logic, itself becomes paradoxical. When Stevens uses conditional statements he keeps the reader in a state of suspension. It would be impossible to write a closed couplet with a conditional statement. Also, a conditional statement could never contain a complete unified idea. What appears to be logical and orderly results in the opposite. As Stevens himself states, "the rational mind, dealing with the known, expects to find it glistening in a familiar ether. What it really finds is the unknown always beyond and behind the known, giving the appearance, at best, of chiaroscuro."<sup>15</sup> Stevens' prosody in this poem exemplifies the philosophy stated above. Furthermore, the length of his sentences is seldom constant. They may begin in the middle or near the end of a line; they may also extend from stanza to stanza. Some are three words long; some continue through an entire canto. The reader of his poetry remains off-balance. He cannot become complacent like the reader of traditional poetry. He cannot look for the rhymes or rhythms before they occur.

Stevens frequently uses a single word several times with slightly different meanings within a few lines. The fourth canto manifests this quality. The focus is on the word plain.

The plainness of plain things is savagery.  
 As: the last plainness of a man who has fought  
 Against illusion and was, in a great grinding  
 Of growling teeth, and falls at night, snuffed  
 out  
 By the obese opiates of sleep. Plain men in

plain towns  
 Are not precise about the appeasement they  
 need. (Canto iv p. 467)

The number of syllables is fairly constant in each of the lines. But, it is clearly the syntactical units and repetition of certain words and phrases that define the rhythm in these stanzas. Nothing could be plainer than the words plainness and plain, yet on each succeeding use of the words, an emphasis or accent becomes evident that draws special attention to them. The poet is devoted to metaphor, and when dealing with concepts that are deemed opposite by nature, the discursive reconciliation of those opposites compels him to employ the above mentioned grammatical structures. A is B or like B, and B is C or like C. The progression is infinite.

In addition to devices we have already explored, Stevens found that the structure of dialectical reasoning served his purposes well. If the paradoxical nature of human existence constantly sways between the contradictory poles of appearance and reality, then dialectical reasoning offers an ideal tool for the poet. In fact, the belief in the inseparability of language and the ideas fused within language require the method of writing and the meaning of poetry to be inextricably entwined. As Stevens says, this idea, "This endlessly elaborating poem/Displays the theory of poetry,/As the life of poetry." We have also seen how the modern narrative poem assumes the guise of an implied conversation. It allows the poet another opportunity to simulate order and reason while actually



achieving the synthesis of opposing concepts. Let us look at a final long quotation in which Stevens made use of this technique.

It is fatal in the moon and empty there.  
But, here, allons. The enigmatical  
Beauty of each beautiful enigma

Becomes amassed in a total double-thing.  
We do not know what is real and what is not.  
We say of the moon, it is haunted by the man

Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died.  
We are not men of bronze and we are not dead.  
His spirit is imprisoned in constant change.

But ours is not imprisoned. It resides  
In a permanence composed of impermanence,  
In a faithfulness as against the lunar light,

So that morning and evening are like promises kept,  
So that the approaching sun and its arrival,  
Its evening feast and the following festival,

This faithfulness of reality, this mode,  
This tendance and venerable holding-in  
Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces.  
(Canto x p. 472)

Nearly every stanza declares opposing statements. "It is fatal in the moon and empty there." We, however, are not in the moon. Here, every "beautiful enigma/Becomes amassed in a total double-thing./We do not know what is real and what is not." We seem to know about the moon and its inhabitants. Even the individual sentences yield perplexing paradoxes. The "man of bronze" possesses a spirit "imprisoned in constant change." By now the reply is almost expected. With a subtle twist of thought, the poet tells us our spirit "is not im-

prisoned. It resides/In a permanence composed of impermanence." It is not only not of the moon but "against the lunar light." This cascade of contradictions finally synthesizes itself delighting in "This faithfulness of reality." It is the language that is the "mode"; only language employed in this dialectical manner can expect to cover the full spectrum of reality. I may add that the use of dialectic fits the narrative form of long poems especially well. It allows room for the reader and listener, the questioner and his opponent, and the poet who seeks to overcome the conflicts of experience. Perhaps this is all the poet can do. When language stops emanating in paradoxes, when language lacks invention, then language dies, and the people speaking it die also.

Numerous passages echo the same ideas clothed within similar structures.

The poem is the cry of its occasion,  
Part of the res itself and not about it.  
The poet speaks the poem as it is,

Not as it was. (Canto xii p. 473)

The life and death of this carpenter depend  
On a fuchsia in a can--and iridescences  
Of petals that will never be realized,

Things not yet true which he perceives through  
truth,  
Or thinks he does, as he perceives the present,  
Or thinks he does, a carpenter's iridescences,  
(Canto xvii p. 478)

A scholar, in his Segmenta, left a note,  
As follows, "The Ruler of Reality,  
If more unreal than New Haven, is not

A real ruler, but rules what is unreal." (Canto xxvii p. 485)

The list seems endless. We could go on ad infinitum. Stevens' verse keeps revolving around the same structural and conceptual hub. Reality is not an absolute, and only the process of creating envelops its dimensions. He says only that reality "may be a shade that traverses/A dust, a force that traverses a shade." (Canto xxxi p. 489). Stevens explicitly purports that the nature of language is such that it cannot literally define reality. Consequently, there is no objective world for a rational mind to grasp. The rational mind's understanding of reality will always be incomplete. Stevens leaves us with a new way of looking at poetry and the world, one richer in its possibilities than any we've had before.

One possible conclusion we can draw from the poems of Whitman and Stevens is that the essence of language itself causes other poets with similar goals in mind (i.e., long, narrative poems, for example) to adopt the usage of common syntactical structures, rhythms, and cadences. Certainly, many differences between Whitman and Stevens present themselves. If nothing else, their dispositions manifest striking differences. However, I am overwhelmingly impressed by what they have in common. What they have in common is the passion to embrace the paradoxical sides of all existence, to observe all details of life, to grasp the "plain" truth without sentimental bias, and to reflect these occurrences within lan-

guage as honestly as possible. At this point, my guess is that a more detailed investigation of these two poets would yield and confirm more similarities.

I also think it is conclusive that the writings of these two poets are structurally just as carefully conceived and controlled as any poetry in the English language. Furthermore, after the work of Whitman, Stevens, and others, Poe's demand for devices like strict rhythm and rhyme patterns simply no longer applies. In fact, it may work against itself, and Whitman was the first person to recognize this. After generations of English writers used those traditional devices for hundreds of years, the forms too often exhausted themselves. Rhyme and rhythm frequently cause poetry to be boring and lifeless. Whitman released poetry from its narrow confines and allowed us to see how earlier poets had constricted the creative potential that our language possesses. If it appears that Whitman's and Stevens' poetry does not always "shed the perfume impalpable to form," we should remember that they were pioneers and their work was experimental. I would think that this would be further testimony to the complexity of language itself. They were the ones to discover new veins and mine their riches.

Finally, I would take issue with Poe's argument against the length of long poems. First of all, his definition is arbitrary and ambiguous. His claim that long poems merely consist of a series of short poems has merit. It does not

have to detract from the poem in the way he suggests, though. It would be just as silly to argue against the composition of a symphony divided into several movements. Stevens' argument is well taken. Long poems can "come to possess the reader." Whitman's and Stevens' own poems demonstrate this quality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Poe, Edgar Allan, "The Poetic Principle" Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgement, ed. Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, Borden McKenzie, (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1948), p. 477.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 477.

<sup>3</sup> Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, (Brooklyn, New York, 1855), p. v.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> Roethke, Theodore, "The Abyss," The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> Cassirer, Ernst, Language and Myth, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1946), p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, James E., A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> Eliot, T.S. quoted by Davie, Donald, T.S. Eliot: The Four Quartets, ed. Bernard Bergonzi, (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Stevens, Wallace quoted by Vendler, Helen Hennessey, On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>12</sup> Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume I, ed. M.H. Abrams, (New York: Norton and Company, 1962), p. 2549.

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<sup>13</sup> Stevens, Wallace, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," The Poet's Work, ed. Reginald Gibbons, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Eliot, T.S., "Burnt Norton," Collected Poems, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963), p. 175.

<sup>15</sup> Stevens, p. 57

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