

Unexplored tone of human emotions: Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the approach that went through the pioneers of narrative poets, Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens. They lived in an era of great poets who advocated for rhyme, rhythm and meter in poetry. We shall see how narrative poems, despite being described as inappropriate and absurd, still attracted their creativity and motivated them to sail against the wind. I have analyzed their poems not only on the criteria of words or the underlying emotions but also on the basis of grammar, sentence structure, syntax and punctuation. We come to realize that it's the essence and soul of the language that causes great minds like Whitman and Stevens to explore the unfathomable aspects of human existence.

Keywords—An Extraordinary Evening in New Haven, Leaves of Grass, Narrative Poem, Wallace Stevens, Walt Whitman.

I. INTRODUCTION

Major renowned poets of the nineteenth century, were quite traditional and refrained themselves from experimenting in the field of long and narrative poems. They employed strict rhetorical principles and symphonised style. Walt Whitman was the first one, who is attributed to simply break all the rules of poetic genre. The same is claimed for Wallace Stevens in his long and narrative poems. They were in fact the frontiers of the experimental, long narrative poem.

Here, two sets of poems have been chosen that should ideally represent the idea 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.

II. LONG LONG NARRATIVE POEM AS SEEN FROM CONVENTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Edgar Allan Poe wrote an essay called "*The Poetic Principle*"¹ in which he took issue with the concept of the "long poem." He states, "I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase 'long poem' is simply a flat contradiction in terms."²

What is meant by length is subject to question, but apparently roughly corresponds to the following formulas:

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 favourite 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.490). This statement represents the kind of traditional thinking in poetic literature that Walt Whitman was trying to abandon.

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?*"³ This same paradox confronts Stevens as well as Whitman and structurally moulds their respective styles.

III. LEAVES OF GRASS AND WHITMAN'S STYLE

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 anapaestic. Yet, the verb phrase beginning with "*found no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones,*" could be iambic as well.

*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.

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.

However, Whitman follows the same format, 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, incantatory 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 rhythmical 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.

Roethke once described Whitman as a "*maker of catalogues.*"⁴ 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.

The book, *Language and Myth*, authored by Ernest Cassirer mentions 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.
5

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.

IV. BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES OF RHYME

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."⁶ 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 unspoken

interrogatories, By experience I know them. (Leaves of Grass p.49)

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.

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."⁷ 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.

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."⁸ He openly celebrated the value of creating long poems.

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 tintinnabulation. You are free for tintinnabulation 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.⁹

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.

We have also seen how the modern narrative poem presumes the facade of an implied conversation. It allows the poet another prospect to replicate order and rationale while actually accomplishing the synthesis of contrasting notions. Given below is a final long quotation in which Stevens used this style.

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 statement. "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 imprisoned. 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. 479)

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. At this point, my guess is that a more detailed investigation of these two poets would yield and confirm more similarities. The text, no abbreviation is used and "Table" is capitalized.

V. CONCLUSION

One apparent denouement we can ascertain 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. Unquestionably, much dissimilarity between Whitman and Stevens present themselves. If nothing else, their disposition avows noticeable and prominent distinctions.

However, I am overwhelmingly flabbergasted by what they have in common. What they have in common is the fervour to embrace the paradoxical sides of all existence, to observe all minutiae of life, to grasp the "plain" truth without sentimental prejudices, and to echo these occurrences within language as truthfully as possible. At this point, my conjecture is that a further comprehensive exploration on these two poets would capitulate and corroborate more resemblance.

I also believe it is conclusive that the writings of these two poets are structurally just as carefully envisaged as any poetry in the English language. Additionally, after the work of Whitman, Stevens, and others, Poe's claim for devices like stringent rhythm and rhyme model simply no longer relevant. In fact, it may work against itself, and Whitman was the first individual to recognize this. After generations of English writers employed those customary devices for hundreds of years, the forms too often exhausted themselves. Rhyme and rhythm recurrently cause poetry to be lacklustre and comatose. Whitman unconfined poetry from its narrow precincts and allowed us to notice how earlier poets had constricted the artistic 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 bear in mind that they were pioneers and their work was experimental. I would reflect that this would be further testimony to the convolution of language itself. They were the ones to discover new veins and mine their riches.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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