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THE MODERN AMERICAN LONG POEM

by
John Lawrence Foster

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Austin Warren, Chairman
Assistant Professor Max Dufner
Assistant Professor Edward Engelberg
Professor Karl Litzenberg

PREFACE

The long poem has in past centuries been considered the major form of poetry, and success in that form the height of poetic achievement. Somewhat belatedly, I began to suspect this assumption might not hold true for twentieth century poetry. Had the poetic revolutionaries of 1912, with their enthusiasm, dedication, and sense of new horizons, swept away this venerable assumption of an older literary regime? Or possibly, had modern critics, cousins or offspring of the poet-propagandists, caught by the new spirit infusing work at once exhilarating and difficult, failed to describe that revolution accurately or catalogue the full number of its monuments? And had both failed to appreciate the work of their contemporaries who clung to the older ways? The following pages are my tentative answer to such speculations, the answer of one reared according to the old regime, but, like Saul, converted in mid-career.

My purpose, therefore, has been to discover what has happened to the long poem in twentieth century American literature--to describe its nature and consider its apparent decline. The following chapters are cast in terms of problems inherent in the nature of the long poem. Chapter One poses the basic questions. Chapters Two and Three describe the

long poem in structural and textural terms. Chapter Four, in considering problems of magnitude and theme, also tries to account for the lesser number of long poems in the twentieth century. Chapter Five, through a contrast of the long poem with the short, attempts to defend the long poem as an enduring literary form, one obscured in the modern period by certain attitudes inimical to an adequate appreciation of that form on its own terms.

The material I have drawn upon for these chapters, excepting the first, is primarily limited to long poems written since about 1915 and to the criticism of poets who have actually worked with the form. Criteria are developed, aided by the comments of these poets, for describing and evaluating specific long poems in terms of the basic question posed in each chapter. In Chapter Five an attempt is made to unify these criteria into a conception of the long poem as a distinct literary form, with its own standards for judgment, within the larger continuum of poetry.

In the Cantos, Ezra Pound uses the Greek word, periplus, to describe the voyage of discovery along an uncharted coast. The twentieth century long poem has received so little scholarly investigation that the topic becomes just such a periplus, rewarded by the excitement and joy of discovery. The result is a broad perspective of the twentieth century American long poem and, to a lesser degree, of certain fundamental aspects of modern poetic theory and practice.

Latent in all these chapters, and explicit at the end, is the conviction that the long poem, far from exhibiting decline, continues to be vital, varied, and subject to the efforts and experiments of many of the foremost twentieth century American poets.

. . . . .

I want to express my indebtedness to those awarding me the University Fellowship which for the past two years has enabled me to pursue a larger and, I hope, more vital inquiry than would otherwise have been possible. I am also grateful to the members of my doctoral committee, Professors Karl Litzenberg and Edward Engelberg, of the Department of English, and Max Dufner, of the Department of German, who have been kind enough to read these chapters and suggest improvements. My debt of gratitude is greater to Professor Austin Warren, of the Department of English, for his guidance and supervision during composition and, more importantly, for his encouragement when I felt like one crying in the wilderness. But these persons will allow me to add that my greatest debt of all is owed to Ezra Pound, who will probably never know it, and who, perhaps, would not care.

Were these pages fit for print, I would dedicate them to my wife, who subsidized me.

CONTENTS

		Page
PREFACE		ii
Chapter		
I.	PROBLEMS OF THE MODERN LONG POEM	1
II.	UNITY AND STRUCTURE: ARCHITECTONICS	31
III.	THE POETIC LINE: DENSITY, CONTINUITY, AND FLEXIBILITY	67
IV.	MAGNITUDE AND SUBJECT: THE SEARCH FOR SIGNIFICANCE	108
V.	'KINDS' IN POETRY: THE LONG VERSUS THE SHORT POEM	144
AFTERWORD		194
APPENDIX		203
BIBLIOGRAPHY		205

Gloom and solemnity are entirely out of place in even the most rigorous study of an art originally intended to make glad the heart of man.

Ezra Pound.

CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEMS OF THE MODERN LONG POEM

The purpose of this initial chapter is to present the fundamental problems which must be faced in any attempt to describe and evaluate the nature of the contemporary long poem in American literature. The intention here is only to raise and group significant questions, not answer them. The long poem is one which can be tentatively defined as a "sustained effort," one which embodies comprehensive values, and one which proceeds beyond a single mood, emotion, or event. In magnitude the long poem, as here conceived, is the verse counterpart of the novel or novelette rather than the short story. To best contrast it with the short poem, only examples of over one thousand lines in length are used. The refinement of this working definition is one purpose of subsequent chapters.

In determining the basic questions to be raised, the approach has been to study reviews of representative contemporary long poems. Reviews of certain Victorian long poems are included to gain perspective.[1] Emphasis is placed,

[1]A fairly complete study has been made of the reviews of Tennyson's In Memoriam and the successive sections of Idylls of the King, all Robinson's long poems, all sections

not upon the work reviewed, but upon the reviewer's attitude toward the long poem, his own poetic assumptions, and his reflection of ideas of poetry characteristic of his time. Reviews, so ephemeral by nature, illustrate current literary assumptions and the spirit of an age in a way not characteristic of more formal discussion of authors and poems. It is through such almost unconscious illustration that questions concerning the long poem are best seen concretely rising from their immediate literary context. The gathering and grouping of the questions in succeeding sections of this chapter is mine; but they are originally posed, either explicitly or implicitly, by the reviewers. Beyond a general contrast between nineteenth and twentieth century attitudes toward the long poem, chronological sequence of reviews is not observed; they are rather grouped to emphasize enduring problems inherent in the form.[2]

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of Pound's Cantos, Benét's John Brown's Body, Crane's The Bridge, and MacLeish's Conquistador. To these have been added a few reviews of Browning's The Ring and the Book, Hardy's The Dynasts, and some of Jeffers' narratives. Certain essays, contemporary with the long poems they consider, are also used. The inclusion of reviews of nineteenth century British long poems results from the near non-existence of native reviews of American long poems. Many American journals simply reprint or abstract British reviews.

[2] By the very nature of the investigation, succeeding sections are largely a mosaic of quotation. In the interest of readability I have suppressed much direct reference, citing only major or widely representative attitudes in notes.

I.

Twentieth century authors do not compose long poems in the quantity or with the scope characteristic of their nineteenth century counterparts. Longfellow, Tennyson, Browning, Morris, and Swinburne all wrote long narratives; and Hardy at the turn of the century produced the epic-dramatic Dynasts. Each of these authors was considered by his contemporaries one of the major poets of his time. Yet, if one turns to twentieth century poets of major or middling reputation, he discovers the proportion of long poems to be less. Only Robinson, Jeffers, and Aiken consistently write long narratives; only Pound, by intention at least, is writing a poem of the widest scope; others, such as Eliot, Williams, Crane, and MacLeish, are known for a single extended effort; and still others--including many whose reputation is high--limit themselves almost exclusively to the short poem. This situation raises the preliminary problem of whether or not reviewers sense a decline in the long poem as a major artistic effort. Comments are few, primarily because the reviewer is concerned with the individual case rather than the species; but a fitfully expressed impression of decline, both numerically and in magnitude, does exist.

One might assume, viewing in retrospect the abundance of long poems written during the later nineteenth century, that such an awareness would be limited to reviewers of this century. Yet Henry Alford, in a review of Tennyson's Idylls,

unconsciously documenting the centuries-long drift from epic poem to poetic romance to novel-in-verse, feels it very doubtful that his or any succeeding age will tolerate the traditional epic, thus showing a possible narrowing of forms available to the long poem. Another writer, anonymously reviewing an earlier group of the Idylls, fears that as society advances narrative poetry, or even prose fiction, will decline. In his opinion the spirit of the age demands short, fugitive pieces; it is in a hurry and impatient with long poems. Yet the requirements of art, which craves space and material, are not to be met by such pieces. "The head upon a cameo may be beautiful," he asserts, drawing an analogy to a distinction between the minor and major poem, "but it cannot affect us as the statue of full length and full size."[3]

A few reviewers writing since the American "poetic renaissance," when the interest of poets begins to focus largely upon the short poem, exhibit a decided impression that the long poem is in decline. R. M. Lovett, reviewing John Brown's Body, feels that to many readers a long poem is simply impossible. And G. W. John, finding it difficult to sympathize with the "new" poetry, asserts that the stature of poetry depends upon the possibility of having long poems written and finding audiences. The reception of Tristram and John Brown's Body gives him cause for hesitant satisfaction

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[3]North American Review, XC (January, 1860), 1, 10. Most nineteenth century reviews are unsigned. Titles of reviews are omitted unless significant.

in the face of a poetry which produces nothing more than subtle and fugitive variations on the old lyric or elegiac or reflective themes. Finally, Allen Tate, reviewing one of Robinson's narratives, suggests he attempt lyrics only, since the age has no epos, myth, or code by which one can judge the actions of the characters in a long poem. Since terminal points of human conduct are obscure or non-existent, he concludes that a single and complete action is impossible and long poems thus doomed to failure.[4]

II.

What problems, then, do reviewers, faced with a possibly obsolescent form, raise regarding the nature of the long poem? One is that of unity. Reviewers of a given poem are often found arguing either for or against its presence; and this emphasizes an underlying disagreement or haziness of conception as to the nature of unity in the long poem.

The most spectacular example of the problem of unity is Pound's Cantos. In the face of a long poem now over forty years in the making, and confronted by an author asserting only that the grand design will emerge naturally in due time, perhaps reviewers of individual sections of the Cantos have a right to be bewildered--as they are. Of early reviewers, one prefers Pound's short poems to a jumble of Italian literature and art; another finds the obscure reveries of

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[4] New Republic, LXXVI (October 25, 1933), 313.

the inward gaze the only principle of coherence in the poem; and a third asserts its only unity lies in a strong personal flavor and repetition of technical devices. As more sections of the Cantos appear, reviewers attempt to deal with the design of the poem in terms of a fugal or thematic arrangement; but fewer and fewer try to justify the poem as a single entity. Randall Jarrell, for instance, feels the Cantos lacks both the connectedness and the concentration necessary to a work of art and calls it, not "a poem containing history" (Pound's definition of epic), but "a heap containing poetry, history, recollection, free associations, and obsessions."[5] Another reviewer claims the Cantos is not a single long poem at all but a continuation of the author's fragmentary output and wryly suggests that if the work were called "Collected Poems" no one would bother seeking a structure in it. Hugh Kenner is almost alone in continuing to claim form and coherence for the poem, basing his position on the adequacy of Pound's "ideogrammic method" as a unifying device.[6]

A parallel situation, showing the problem of unity in the long poem to be not a peculiarly modern one, is reflected in reviews of Tennyson's Idylls as additions to the poem make their appearance. Alford thinks that, since strict epic laws are no longer relevant, parts having in common a great central interest and bound by common assumptions and allusions (as the individual tales of the Idylls)

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[5]Yale Review, XLVI (Autumn, 1956), 105-106.

[6]Hudson Review, I (Winter, 1949), 583.

are sufficiently unified to be considered portions of a single poem. But others are confused to find each of the first four Idylls readable as a separate poem while just as obviously each of the second group of four Idylls is intended as part of a larger work. An anonymous reviewer, attacking Alford's view, finds the claim that the Idylls reveals a connected system of moral sentiments and religious doctrines no guarantee of unity. The Idylls, in his opinion, is based upon a plan unsuitable for larger constructions--heterogeneous in conception and divergent in centers of interest.

Thus both the Cantos and the Idylls raise in acute form the problem of unity in the long poem. Various reviewers assert various principles of unity, such as those of personality, tone, action, central interest, or thematic recurrence; and the several conflicting definitions and positions strongly imply the existence of several suitable types.

Closely linked with the problem of unity is that of structure; for structure is the arrangement of parts or sections to produce a unified effect. The two concepts normally occur together in the minds of the reviewers; and various types of structure are explicitly considered. The fundamental type, of course, is an action, or plot; and certain reviewers consider it basic to the long poem. Thus, Yvor Winters finds much of the value of a long poem closely related to the action; and Delmore Schwartz criticizes the

Cantos for lacking a "narrative framework such as sustains every long poem which has become a portion of the whole corpus of poetry."[7] Similarly, Amy Lowell, in connection with Robinson's Merlin, declares a "story-teller" must concern himself with manipulation of plot as well as with poetry or psychology. Plot is seen as the fundamental type of structure, providing the base upon which most drama, prose fiction, and narrative poetry (whether epic, romance, or verse novel) is built.

Other types of structure are found to exist. Winters lists five: narrative; scattered (where no progression occurs but there is a relation of parts through reference to a common theme); logical; psychological (where progression is non-logical and based upon association of ideas); and eclectic (where different types are used for different units, such as the line and stanza).[8] F. C. Flint, citing Winters, considers the psychological type of structure that most used by twentieth century poets. He goes on to judge Crane's Bridge a failure because it employs this type, whereas a poem of any scope requires for its core of meaning a system of ideas or attitudes and thus some kind of logical, rather than

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[7] Poetry, LI (March, 1938), 334.

[8] Quoted from F. C. Flint, "Metaphor in Contemporary Poetry," Symposium, I (July, 1930), 319-321. The original source is The Third American Caravan (New York: Macaulay, 1929), a volume absent from the University library.

associational, organization. Richard Blackmur, also referring to this type, finds it disheartening that the three most ambitious modern poems (as of 1935), The Waste Land, the Cantos, and The Bridge, all fail to hang together structurally.[9] Pound's poem exhibits this type of structure (called by him the "ideogrammic method" and related by Kenner to the Joycean epiphany) at its fullest, exhibiting both its strength and weakness.

Tate, similarly reviewing Crane's poem, while acknowledging its associational technique, finds the sections of the poem suffering from lack of a coherent plot, whether narrative or symbolic; and he consequently describes the work as a collection of lyrics rather than a single poem, with its only coherence that of mood, feeling, and tone. As such, the Bridge is an example of the "scattered" method of structure.

If Winters' term is not used pejoratively, Tennyson's In Memoriam is a second example. Victorian reviewers are unsure if the work contains a principle of unity other than that of tone and common theme and if its structure is sufficient to consider it a single poem. A less obvious example is The Ring and the Book, where the various monologues repeat the same story from varying points of view. One reviewer (who shall remain anonymous), entirely missing the point of Browning's structure, suggests the author ought to have digested the material and produced his own version.

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[9] Language as Gesture (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 301.

Still another type of structure considered by reviewers is the quasi-dramatic, stemming from Browning's use of the dramatic monologue and greatly elaborated as a technique by modern poets. The Ring and the Book is an early example of its use in a long poem. MacLeish's Conquistador is described by Tate as a "Browningesque monologue," in which a highly sophisticated variety of the chanson de geste replaces Browning's moral casuistry, and in which not one moment of action is objectively rendered.[10] The same poem is elsewhere called, not a narrative, but one of the best equivalents using modern poetic techniques. Such remarks document the development of this type from traditional narrative structure. It is employed regularly by Robinson in his dramatic narratives.

Other types of structure exist, notably the logical, which in the past has been most widely used in poems non-fictional in character (such as Pope's Essay on Man). But the examples given above are sufficient to show reviewers aware that several types of structure are employed by poets attempting to unify their long poems and that modern long poems display a widely-ranging experimentation with structure.

III.

Another problem, or cluster of problems, concerning the long poem finds its most explicit formulation in the

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[10] New Republic, LXXI (June 1, 1932), 77-78.

running debate, well illustrated by the reviews, over poetic obscurity--a debate which might better be viewed as a controversy over the proper fusion of the poetic ultimates of complexity and clarity. This is one of the points at which poetic ideas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries diverge most widely. Not that obscurity in itself is ever considered a virtue; but twentieth century reviewers differ from their predecessors over the degree of immediate clarity compatible with poetic feeling or response on the part of the reader. The dominant attitude seen in nineteenth century reviews nearly equates clarity with spontaneity. A later essay on the Idylls is typical of many earlier reviews in finding the best effusions of the poet's mind spontaneous. Spontaneity is the essence of poetry; obscurity, an unquestionable defect. The dominant conception of clarity is further defined by an anonymous reviewer's suggestion that a proper style avoids forcing the reader to turn back and hunt for the lost thread of thought. Another critic castigates the "contemporary notion" that a poem cannot be profound unless it is wholly or partly obscure.

The protests of the nineteenth century advocates of clarity are not only continued but augmented by their twentieth century successors in the face of new departures taken by modern poets. Christopher LaFarge asserts that an absence of clarity has driven contemporary poetry from the scale of the mural painting down to the size of the miniature in ivory. He criticizes the "code-language" used by poets, a

language comprehensible only to themselves, and finds it strange that so much exegesis is necessary to elucidate the work of living poets. Similarly, E. Davidson notes recent experimentation has left poetry with a singularly minute audience and that even the "intelligent" reader has deserted the art in its modern forms because it no longer moves him. And the reader, he complains, "has a right to expect to be moved by the poem--by the poem itself, not the reading of Babylonian tablets plus the poem."[11]

The two reviewers just cited are, if one is disposed to label, traditionalists writing in conservative literary journals. The magnitude of the problem is emphasized, however, by the fact that R. P. Blackmur, one of the best and most sympathetic critics of the newer poetry, essentially seconds their position. In the essay-review quoted in the previous section, he says the three most ambitious poems of this century fail, not only structurally, but also in intelligibility of language. The poems contain phrases, lines, and passages no amount of outside work can illumine. Yet, he concludes,

> the typical great poet is profoundly rational, integrating, and, excepting minor accidents of incapacity, a master of ultimate verbal clarity. Light, radiance, and wholeness remain the attributes of serious art. And the fact is disheartening because no time could have greater need than our own for rational art.[12]

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[11] Yale Review, XXIII (Autumn, 1933), 178.

[12] Language as Gesture, p. 301.

The reviewers' debate over obscurity and clarity may appear to have little bearing on the subject of the long poem. Its significance, however (apart from illustrating differing conceptions of poetics), lies in its raising the problem of continuity in the long poem and in its implicit questioning of the nature of the poetic line. There are various kinds of obscurity, naturally; but the kind troubling many of the reviewers is closely related to the problem of poetic "density." Some reviewers imply poetry can be too closely packed--the poetic line too dense--to function as poetry; while others intimate poetry can likewise be too thinly and loosely packed, with a line so lacking in intensity as to be termed "prosaic." This problem, present in the consideration of all poetry, becomes crucial by the very magnitude of the long poem.

Robert Hillyer, looking at Robinson's career in retrospect, shows awareness of the problem in criticizing his blank verse for a prosy quality and a lack of integrity within the single line. William Carlos Williams, in his own work greatly concerned with the poetic line, praises Pound's for having effected a revolution, adding that the earlier Cantos show what one can expect poetry as it appears on the page to become. John Crowe Ransom, reviewing the same section of the Cantos, is concerned with poetic density. Noting Pound's opinion that the ruling quality of poetry is condensation, he protests that density is not the only necessary quality. He criticizes Pound for condensing to the point where explicit relations and musical phrases are squeezed out and points to

the new Cantos as an example of writing dense but unpoetic. In a review of The Bridge, Malcolm Cowley encounters the same difficulty with Crane's earlier poems, finding them crowded with more images, symbols, perceptions, and implications, than any few stanzas can convey. In the nineteenth century, the "packed line" had similarly been considered the cause of obscurity in Browning's Sordello. "There is not a line of the poem which is not as full of matter as a line can be," a Victorian reviewer remarks; "there is too much of everything."

Many reviewers find Robinson's blank verse at the opposite extreme from the packed line. The verse of one of his earlier long poems is defined as little more than inverted prose chopped up into lines; and the line of his last poems receives similar comment. His style, in the opinion of another reviewer, is too contentedly prosaic to be an adequate vehicle for long poems. The line of Jeffers' narratives raises a similar difficulty.

Other reviewers realize the poetic line necessary to carry a long poem may differ from the lyric line. An anonymous critic of Tennyson's In Memoriam considers, not very profoundly, the various types of meter in terms of their possibilities for continuity and as vehicles for the long narrative poem. And in the modern period, Henry S. Canby praises Benét for a suavity of diction "dangerous in pure lyric but indispensible to a fine narrative poem." Another reviewer feels blank verse (the line traditionally used for

long poems) must be taken in fairly large quantities for its particular flavor to emerge, thus suggesting the existence of a line with virtues other than those of the packed line.

One problem a suitable poetic line must cope with, certain reviewers see, is "the inevitable levels of intensity" or "the exacting changes of mood" present in a long poem. Thus, LaFarge observes the line must be able to handle

> those prose poems, or passages of poetic prose . . . with which the inevitable conjunctions of the story are accomplished most economically, avoiding the deadly pitfalls of the poem that has no reason per se to be a poem beyond its arbitrary and necessary presence in a work that is cast into poetry.[13]

For the reviewer, Davidson, Robinson's blank verse line displays such properties. It has the unobtrusive flow and useful flexibility of prose in passages of exposition, yet can rise at need to a richly poetic elevation.

Pound, the great innovator, makes basic experiments with the poetic line. Where Robinson develops the blank verse line, at least in the eyes of some critics, into a rich and flexible instrument, Pound's contribution is to drop meter as the basis of the line in favor of construction in the sequence of the musical phrase. As with Robinson's critics, not everyone feels Pound's line is successful; but most reviewers who consider the problem at all see that for a long poem the line must be extremely flexible, capable of rising and falling with variations in emotional intensity.

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[13] Saturday Review of Literature, XXVII (August 5, 1944), 108.

In a cogent essay written shortly after the appearance of The Bridge and Conquistador (both of which he reviews), Howard Blake indicts the entire movement of twentieth century poetry in a manner relating it fundamentally to the problem of the poetic line. Blake's point is that

> the nineteenth century and the present day have named the lyrical in poetry as the one thing needful: to avoid the trite; to sustain the power of each line, in relation, not to other lines, but to itself, has been the formulated doctrine of modern poets.[14]

Blake maintains modern poets' emphasis of symbol and image, used to gain intensity of expression by excising direct statement and the prosaic, diverts attention from the section to the word. He asserts modern poets stress the peculiar beauties of individual lines and development of a communicative medium to the exclusion of considerations of architecture, idea, and intuitive truth. Blake's essay raises the question of the validity of the packed line as a vehicle for the long poem.

IV.

Tate's comment that the long poem is impossible for lack of a common set of assumptions in the modern world raises another fundamental problem, that of religious and philosophic belief. Without a system of belief, so the argument goes, the poet cannot sustain his powers at the pitch required by a subject of any magnitude, he dare not base a long poem upon

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[14] "Thoughts on Modern Poetry," Sewanee Review, XLIII (April, 1935), 190.

universals he is not sure exist, and, even if he did, he cannot hope for an audience sharing his system to the extent of that "willing suspension of disbelief" constituting poetic faith.

Modern reviewers are clearly aware of a connection between the disintegration of the classical-Christian system of belief and the poet's difficulty in writing a long poem. Even critics of Tennyson's and Browning's long poems often refer to the great contemporary conflict between faith and doubt or to the introspective, self-questioning, restless spirit of their age; though faith in the attainability of truth and beauty is still strong enough to forestall any linking of the problem of belief with the composition of long poems.

But reviews of twentieth century long poems show the problem of belief sufficiently acute to affect not only the mood of poetry but composition as well. Conrad Aiken finds an undercurrent of cynicism, despair, irony, and nihilism in poetry; while for Eda Lou Walton, the poets of the "Wasteland school," having chosen a philosophy of despair, are spiritually crippled. MacLeish's value as a contemporary, according to M. D. Zabel, derives partly from his having had to forge a spiritual doctrine in the absence of both inherited belief and social necessity. And for another reviewer, Robinson, too, is an admirable illustration of the disadvantages besetting the poet who must find his faith before he can express

it. The only remedy lies in uniting the efforts of the past and present in a living tradition.

Tate makes the connection between belief and the long poem with Crane's Bridge as well as with Robinson's narratives. The Bridge fails because it lacks "an objective pattern of ideas elaborate enough to carry it through an epic or heroic work."[15] And Crane's difficulty is that of modern poets generally, Tate feels; without a broad religious and philosophic system as base, both the poet and his audience find the significance of all moves made in a poem obscure.

The connection between the decay of the traditional system of belief and the successful long poem thus raises the question of what comprehensive values the long poem can be based upon. The problem of attaining a magnitude proper to the long poem is posed. As one Victorian reviewer puts it, "The first condition of a great poem is a widely and durably significant subject." A second, thinking primarily of epic or narrative poetry, asserts the great poem can only be based upon a great human action. And Blackmur, in the modern period, includes magnitude, relevance, and scope as basic qualities in the work of the great dead.

Reviewers are aware of efforts by certain modern poets to embody comprehensive and significant values in long poems despite the decay of belief. Crane's attempt to create a myth of America in The Bridge is recognized, though most critics find his basic idea too abstract and his vision

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[15] Hound and Horn, III (July, 1930), 581.

unsteady. Pound's Cantos again provides the prime example. While many reviewers question his success, few question the presence of comprehensive values in the poem. Pound is called the only poet of the century to attempt epic in the highest sense--that kind of poem in which all knowledge and all tradition are present. Richard Eberhart considers the poem unique in modern literature, having only admiration "for daring of such scope, for the amassing and reforming of such an interesting totality of matter, and for the full-blooded feel of dense work in a time of partial insights."[16]

But perhaps at no point do reviewers of the previous century differ more widely with those of the present than over what constitutes the significant subject. Thus, certain Victorian reviewers feel the poet's duty is "to watch what main currents draw the age," or to present in his works "a general picture of human life," or to express "moral beauty--without which there is no work of art." One anonymous critic of Tennyson thinks a function of the highest poetry is to minister to human needs by lofty example in comprehensive forms; while a second considers the poet's function is to give expression to the beautiful, which he equates with "that dumb Spirit of loveliness, and harmony, and truth" haunting the world. The highest poetry, while not expressly didactic, is always distinguishable by the dignity of its moral sentiments; and one reviewer says flatly, "All great poets are great teachers likewise."

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[16] Quarterly Review of Literature, V (#2, 1949), 185.

Auden's remark, that Tennyson was a fool to write poetry which would teach the Ideal, reveals the chasm between the conceptions of poetry in the two centuries. The divergence is further defined by Herbert S. Gorman, a perceptive reviewer of Robinson's Lancelot:

> To seek for a message in a poet is a gesture that has become outdated. The modern poet does not admit the title of prophet; he is an expositor, he proclaims life and himself. Analyst and disector, he turns more and more an implacably zealous eye on the soul. Poetry, from being a flaming torch in the dark places of the world, has partially translated itself into an acid. The poet presents, analyzes, weighs, and values. It is not the fashion to nourish an ethical unrest any longer. From a prophet he has become a commentator of the times.[17]

Or, as Louis O. Coxe says, revealing a possible reason for the lesser number of modern poems requiring a widely and durably significant subject, "The twentieth century has learned to dislike abstractions as the result of being badly treated by them." Finally, Eliot's bald early comment on the Cantos forms an apt antithesis to the Victorian attitude: "As for the meaning of the Cantos, that never worries me, and I do not believe that I care."[18]

A certain type of critic resents the view of the poet as skillful reporter of phenomena whose meaning he does not pretend to understand. "Naturalism has made us afraid of significance," Canby complains; "the isms have rotted out the purpose in literature." The modern poet, finding nature

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[17] New Republic, XXIII (July 28, 1920), 259.

[18] Dial, LXXXIV (January, 1928), 6.

apparently incoherent, consequently makes the grave mistake of showing only incoherence in his work. Critics of this school continue to insist upon the kind of comprehensive poetic values emphasized by Victorian poets and critics.

Other modern critics, however, become aware of a newly emerging function, or at least a new emphasis, for poetry. This is poetry as a unique way of seeing, as a form of knowledge, to counterbalance the decay of belief and to combat the new abstractions and specializations of a scientifically oriented world. Thus John Ciardi, favorably reviewing the "Rock Drill" section of the Cantos, stresses, in his definition of the great literary work, not the universals poetry has traditionally been concerned with embodying, but rather enlargement of the imagination through enriched perception:

> A book . . . becomes a good book when it creates a world one can enter credibly in imagination and a perception of a life one can live vicariously. A good book becomes a great book when that landscape achieves a magnitude and that life-perception a depth that not only satisfies the imagination but enlarges it beyond all expectation.[19]

Edith Sitwell earlier expresses a similar view in an essay on Pound by maintaining the modern artist gives one the great chance of exerting an individuality of seeing. Ransom, in The World's Body, also emphasizes the function of poetry as an alternative to science.

The connection of this new emphasis with the problem of belief and comprehensive values in the long poem is made

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[19] New York Times Book Review (June 24, 1956), 4.

by F. C. Flint in a combined review of The Bridge and essay on the contemporary use of metaphor.[20] Flint finds modern poetry built upon metaphor as the unit of perception and upon association of ideas as the unit of structure. Through metaphor the poet sees the object he is contemplating in a way different from the vision of the mind in a prose attitude. There is a resulting gain in intensity and precision of apprehension in his poetry, though the accompanying loss of immediate clarity requires a sustained attentiveness difficult for most readers. But since logical sequences and traditional imagery are neither flexible nor subtle enough to render accurately the nuances of contemporary perception, the poet is forced to develop this new way of seeing. In addition, because there is no universally accepted foundation of ideas, the poet desiring to present an articulate interpretation of life must also build his own system of ideas. Flint cites Crane as an example, typical in the modern period, of the poet unequal to the double task of learning to see in a new way and constructing a new system of comprehensive values.

Yet, though the poets' use of metaphor and the associational technique have failed to produce a successful poem of any magnitude so far, Flint feels this way of seeing may aid in some new synthesis of knowledge in the future. All descriptions of reality, including those of the sciences,

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[20] "Metaphor in Contemporary Poetry," Symposium, I (July, 1930), 310-335. The argument of this important article is summarized in the next two paragraphs.

are metaphoric because they are all selective in the elements they choose to describe reality; and during the present age, emphasis upon specialization has fragmented human vision into competing bodies of metaphor. Such exaggerated and warring sectionalism in thought is the chief contemporary malady. The poet as 'seer' (in the new sense), striking out new metaphors in his awareness of the various specialized systems of metaphor, can produce in the minds of attentive readers "a flexibility which aids them to grasp more of reality in a single net of apprehension," thus making a fundamental contribution toward a contemporary synthesis of belief. At such time, Flint implies, long poems will have a greater possibility of success.

V.

Still another problem raised by reviewers concerns the possibility of "kinds" in poetry (lyric, dramatic, and epic, for instance), and if such exist, whether or not there is a kind unique to the long poem. If verse drama is excluded as lying beyond the problem of the long poem, two kinds remain, fundamentally corresponding to the traditional divisions of lyric and epic (or rather, narrative, which is a more inclusive term for the same kind).

The issue had already been raised in the nineteenth century by Victorian reviewers in terms of subjective and objective poetry. In an age of external facts, says one,

poetry is objective, with epic and drama flourishing; but when life becomes more internal, with the great struggles occurring in the soul, then poetry is subjective.[21] He terms the Idylls essentially subjective since they subordinate everything to character, whereas in true epic, character is subordinated to events. A reviewer of The Ring and the Book finds earlier nineteenth century poetry dominated by the subjective poet, who sees the universe through the medium of his own idiosyncrasies and whose mind and heart strongly color his poetry. The reviewer praises Browning for reacting against this style with a poetry in which the author does not thrust himself forward to speak for the characters or to interpret them to his readers. His is objective poetry.

Blake, in the essay on modern poetry cited earlier, extends the concept of two divergent kinds of poetry on into the twentieth century. Characterizing lyric poetry as springing from a given personality, he claims both the nineteenth century and the present call the lyrical in poetry the one thing needful. The manifestos of "Amygism," by implication, voice the dogma that all poetry must be lyric poetry to be good. Noting a confusion between the lyric and epic kinds, he maintains the epic (and the traditional long poem in general) involve considerations of architecture and some outlined theory or idea of mankind.

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[21] North American Review, XC (January, 1860), 1.

Tate defines this kind of poetry more explicitly by saying an epic or heroic work requires an elaborate objective pattern of ideas--one outside the personality of the individual poet. Schwartz, reviewing Jeffers' Selected Poetry, also distinguishes between two kinds of poetry, the lyric as representation of emotion and the narrative as representation of human action. But it is Winters, of modern reviewers, who makes what is probably the clearest distinction between the two kinds. Lyric, he says, achieves its effect by concentration of expression and generalization of emotion ("that is, by the separation of the emotion from the personal history that gives rise to it in actual concrete experience"), whereas narrative (which he defines as an expression of "the inevitable accumulation of experience") can survive without concentration, or intensity of detail, provided the narrative logic is detailed and compelling.[22]

Such examples show twentieth century reviewers still aware of two general kinds of poetry. But earlier than this, by the time of Amy Lowell's criticisms of Robinson's poems, the rather useful Victorian distinction between subjective (or lyric) and objective (or narrative) poetry begins to blur. She simply uses the terms, "short," "semi-long," and "long" poem. Declaring Robinson to have completely mastered the technique of the first two, she chides him for failing to realize the different technique necessary in more

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[22] Poetry, XXXV (February, 1930), 282.

extended efforts. "Merlin as a series of intervals (particularly lyric intervals) is excellent. As a whole long poem it is inchoate and without direction or climax."[23] From about this time (Miss Lowell is only an example, not the cause), the terminology involving short poem and lyric, on the one hand, and long poem and epic or narrative, on the other, becomes confused. Due to contemporary developments in poetry, the terms are no longer synonymous and seem to be not even closely related.

The modern long poem--informally described by Marianne Moore as the capacious treatment of large themes which embody more than one climax and which require the subordination of distinct parts of the design to the whole[24]--takes various forms, or at least receives various labels. The long poem is diversely considered as epic, story, narrative, dramatic narrative, novel-in-verse, and philosophical poem; and in most of these designations reviewers implicitly preserve some semantic connection with the earlier terms of objective, or narrative, poetry.

But in other cases, specifically those of the long poems of Pound, Crane, and MacLeish, there is a significant confusion in terminology used by reviewers to describe the poems. Both lyric and epic labels are employed by various critics (and sometimes by the same critic) for the same

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[23] Dial, LXXII (February, 1922), 141.

[24] Dial, LXXVII (August, 1924), 170.

poem. Thus with the Cantos, so often the exemplar for problems raised by the long poem. Pound's talents are primarily lyric, in the opinion of several reviewers, and, as Jarrell says, certainly not narrative, expository, or didactic. One finds a lyric attitude, a personal frame, interposed between the poem and the reader. But other reviewers attempt to describe the poem as a new variation of epic, extending the definition, like Peter Russell, to include any long poem on a major subject or a poem in which all knowledge and all tradition are present. The structure of the Cantos is criticized for lacking a narrative framework; but, on the other hand, this apparent defect is also singled out as one of Pound's peculiar discoveries. As D. Davie says, his art aspires to the condition of music and his epic does without plot. "Plot, major form, or outline," John Berryman quotes Pound as saying, "should be left to authors who feel some inner need for the same."[25] Thus Miss Moore's early characterization of the Cantos as "the epic of the farings of a literary mind" has more than passing value, since it catches the peculiarly double nature of the poem, with its combination of subjective and objective kinds of poetry.

The Bridge is similarly viewed. Crane is called the only American poet with a rich lyrical feeling to attempt more than a personal synthesis; and his poem, or the group

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[25] Partisan Review, XVI (April, 1949), 394.

of poems making up The Bridge, is characterized as having a lyrical structure or as the lyric equivalent of epic.

Many reviewers find MacLeish's Conquistador significant as a successful example of this modern hybrid form. Horace Gregory considers the poem, not a narrative, but one of the best equivalents rendered by the modern poetic technique. Tate admires the poem particularly because MacLeish's use of Bernal Diaz as the center of interest solves "the great modern difficulty of presenting the objective detail of the conventional epic form." Not one moment of action in the entire poem, Tate notes, is objectively rendered. Eda Lou Walton also notices the fusion of kinds when she commends MacLeish for discovering a method whereby "poetry of statement can become a largely undramatic and almost purely lyrical instrument for conveying the story of emotion--this being what his narratives are." His emphasis of the lyrical is just enough, she feels, to prevent his being a dramatic story-teller but it does contribute to his ability to tell a tale in episodic moments of beauty.[26]

The preceding examples show certain modern poets attempting to develop a new species of long poem. With belief decaying, and with the resulting absence of an objective pattern of ideas traditionally so necessary to the extended poem, some poets apparently try to construct poems epic in magnitude out of lyric elements of structure, symbol,

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[26]Nation, CXXXVIII (January 10, 1934), 48.

and personal vision. "Maud" and "Song of Myself" illustrate earlier roots of the species. The mixed reception given these modern examples raises the question of the suitability of this kind of poetry for the long poem; and it again poses the basic question of whether or not the long poem is a unique poetic kind. Such poems also raise the large question of whether or not the conception and function of poetry have shifted in the modern period in a manner causing poetry to be described in terms of compression, intensity, symbol and metaphor, and non-logical structure--in terms of depth rather than breadth or magnitude, and thus in terms of fundamentally lyric rather than narrative categories.

VI.

The basic questions concerning the modern long poem posed by a study of the reviews are as follows: (1) What constitutes the unity of a long poem, and what types of structure exist to attain that unity? (2) What is the nature of the "line" proper to the long poem, particularly regarding density and continuity? (3) How does the long poem attain magnitude (and what factors inhibit such attainment), and upon what kind of significant subjects is it based? (4) Is the long poem a unique poetic "kind"?

A chapter will be devoted to each of these questions; and unlike the present chapter, which illustrates problems concerning the long poem rising from their immediate literary

context, succeeding chapters will treat the subject of the long poem primarily in critical and analytical terms.

CHAPTER TWO

UNITY AND STRUCTURE: ARCHITECTONICS

> All writing is built up of these three elements [phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia], plus 'architectonics' or 'the form of the whole.'
>
> Pound, Literary Essays.

What constitutes the unity of a long poem, and what types of structure exist to attain that unity? Certain reviewers were found disagreeing over the kind and degree of unity present in various long poems; while others, carrying the critical process a step further, considered kinds of structural means used to produce a unified effect, and at times attempted to evaluate the adequacy of those means. The present chapter, in dealing with the architectonics of the long poem, will consist of two major divisions. First, there will be a theoretical discussion of the problem, based primarily upon what two prominent poet-critics have had to say concerning the unity and structure of the long poem. This will be followed by a discussion, based upon comparison and analysis of specimens, of the kinds of unity and structure actually present in a wide selection of long poems written since the American poetic renaissance. An attempt will be made to evaluate both

the significance of these kinds in the development of the long poem and the success of the poems in which they appear.[1]

I.

The name of Edgar Allan Poe would appear to be strangely out of place in a discussion of the modern long poem; and yet it is in two of his now famous essays, "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) and "The Poetic Principle" (1850), that one first finds explicitly stated an intelligent attack on the long poem. Seen in retrospect, these essays seem about seventy years ahead of their time; and in many ways--in the emphasis upon meticulous craftsmanship, in the calculation of effect, and in the identification of poetry with intensity and concentration of expression--modern poets are the artistic heirs of Poe. His attitude toward the long poem is relevant because it articulates an implicit assumption underlying much current poetic practice.

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[1] It might be well to add a reminder here that the long poems cited in the previous chapter were representatives selected for the problems raised by those reviewing them. The "canon" of twentieth century long poems upon which these chapters draw is less exclusive and is composed of long poems by authors who were born or have lived in America. The basic criterion, naturally, is whether or not such poems contribute to the enjoyment and understanding of the modern long poem. The nationality--or the "internationality"--of the poet is secondary.

I might also repeat that the Victorian long poems appearing in Chapter One were included only as an aid in gaining perspective on twentieth century poetic, with which I shall also be very much concerned in succeeding chapters. Contemporary British long poems are excluded simply because of the sheer bulk of the subject.

Poe contends the concept, "long poem," is a contradiction in terms. What is called a long poem is in reality a succession of short poems, or rather, of brief poetical effects. He justifies his position by identifying the poetic with intensity of effect:

> I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags--fails--a revulsion ensues--and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.[2]

Poe's example, of course, is Paradise Lost, half of which he considers essentially prose. The work is "a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, inevitably, with corresponding depressions." This alternation, due to the great length of the work, deprives it of totality, or unity, of effect; and unity Poe calls a "vastly important artistic element," "that vital requisite in all works of Art." The length of a poem is thus automatically limited to a poetic effect which can be assimilated in a single sitting; and within this limit, the extent of a poem can be made to bear a mathematical relation to its merit: "The brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect." Thus, with the proviso that a certain duration is necessary to induce any effect at all, Poe holds that the more

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[2]"The Poetic Principle," The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: Morris, 1902), XIV, p. 226.

concentrated (here, "shorter" is essentially a synonym) a poem is the greater its poetic potential. It is at this point his view blends with that of much contemporary poetic. Poe concludes his attack on the long poem by stating that "the ultimate, aggregate, or absolute effect of even the best epic under the sun, is a nullity." It is clear to him that no very long poem can ever be popular again.

Poe, disgusted with an apparent emphasis upon bulk to the detriment of quality, undoubtedly was goaded to his extreme conclusions by the "epic mania" of his countrymen (he cites Joel Barlow's Columbiad as one example of misplaced effort). Yet his views are still valid enough to require rebuttal or interpretation; and they are certainly relevant to an age which likewise identifies the poetic with the concentrated, and the vast majority of whose most celebrated poetic productions are well within the limits of a single sitting.

The validity of Poe's attack on the unity of the long poem lies in two basic perceptions. First, he recognizes the psychological fact that even in the reader of greatest good will attention will wander after a time, and that in the reading of a long poem the "affairs of the world" necessarily intrude. (Both phenomena also occur in the reading of a novel, thus raising the problem of the unity of any extended work in verse or prose and emphasizing the extreme nature of Poe's position.) Second, his own experience with Paradise Lost makes him aware that the reading of

any long poem involves a series of poetical excitements inevitably alternating with corresponding depressions.

Remembering Eliot's statement, iterated in his later essays, that it is best to view a poet's criticism in the light of the kind of poetry he is trying to write (and Poe's interest is in the short poem), one can question, while still partially agreeing with, both of Poe's perceptions. Can the poem requiring more than one sitting have other elements, primarily the scope or breadth of artistically shaped material, which counterbalance or even overbalance the loss of Poe's particular kind of unity; and can such a poem have a wider ranging and perhaps higher unity (though inevitably less closely packed than Poe's kind) comprehending a much greater variety of elements? And again, does the admittedly inevitable fluctuation in intensity present in a long poem necessarily destroy its effect as a single poem?

Poe would have us be content with our fallen state, our intermittent span of attention, and short poems. But humanity still seems to require, if only as an ideal approximated once in an age, the work which attempts to fuse experience into a single "art-world." The few masterworks in the history of poetry have essentially done this; and they neither have Poe's kind of unity nor are they assimilable at a single sitting.[3]

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[3]"The very greatest poets, who are few in number, have all had something to say which could only be said in a long poem," T. S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 49. Subsequently referred to as On Poetry.

II.

The link between Poe's criticism of the long poem and modern poetic practice can be represented by Pound's letter to Eliot as The Waste Land was assuming final form. Here, Pound seems to be aware of the problems of the long poem raised by Poe and also to agree with him. In his inimitable epistolary manner, he declares,

> The thing now runs from 'April . . .' to 'shantih' without a break. That is 19 pages, and let us say the longest poem in the English langwidge. Don't try to bust all records by prolonging it three pages further.[4]

Yet both Pound and Eliot, the former in scattered statements and by his practice in the Cantos, and the latter in his later criticism (that collected in On Poetry and Poets) and in the Four Quartets, are confronted more directly with the long poem; and both move beyond the conception of the long poem represented by Poe and by the piece of early enthusiasm just quoted.

Though both poets, as a result of actual practice, are well qualified to speak about the long poem, it is primarily to the essays of Eliot one must turn for a body of critical theory on the subject.[5] And it is Eliot who, not

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[4] The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 234. Subsequently referred to as Letters.

[5] In reading the major critical works of both poets more or less concurrently, I have noticed that in a great many instances critical ideas made current by Eliot have their inception in the writings of Pound. At least, the

necessarily having Poe in mind, presents a more than adequate defense against the earlier critic's attack on the long poem.

In an early essay on Blake (1920) Eliot characterizes the longer poem as one in which "structure" is important, adding, "You cannot create a very large poem without introducing a more impersonal point of view, or splitting it up into various personalities."[6] Later, in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, Eliot holds the same position as Poe regarding the variations in intensity inherent in the long poem; but he considers this to be not merely a necessity but, in a good poem, an advantage:

> One does not expect a poem to be equally sustained throughout; and in some of the most successful long poems there is a relation of the more tense to the more relaxed passages, which is itself part of the pattern of beauty.[7]

It is in the essays and addresses collected in On Poetry and Poets, however, most of which were composed either

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germs often appear in Pound's work earlier than in Eliot's, though there undoubtedly has been a process of interaction. My point is that Pound's is the seminal mind, while credit has generally gone to Eliot. Pound, the innovator, has the original perception, but never stays to develop it critically; while Eliot, the developer, has the wit to articulate its wider significance. Both are necessary; and I am only attempting to draw attention to an apparent precedence.

[6] Selected Essays (3rd ed.; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 278.

[7] (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), p. 92. Naturally, the poet improves his poem by diminishing the proportion of the less intense or "prosaic" passages. If the proportion of the less intense material is too great, then the entire work is termed "prosaic" and fails as a poem.

during or after his experience in writing the Four Quartets, and which generally exhibit a much richer and more sustained critical intelligence than the earlier essays, that one finds a fuller consideration of the nature of the long poem. In "The Music of Poetry" Eliot develops his idea of the long poem as a form inherently containing various levels of intensity, adding to this the idea that the "prosaic" has a necessary and vital function in this kind of poem:

> In a poem of any length, there must be transitions between passages of greater and less intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole; and the passages of less intensity will be, in relation to the level on which the total poem operates, prosaic--so that, in the sense implied by that context, it may be said that no poet can write a poem of amplitude unless he is a master of the prosaic.
>
> (On Poetry, p. 32).

To this important statement, Eliot adds an equally important footnote:

> This is the complementary doctrine to that of the 'touchstone' line or passage of Matthew Arnold: this test of the greatness of a poet is the way he writes his less intense, but structurally vital, matter.

The two segments of this passage contain the core of Eliot's matured conception of the long poem. Unlike Poe, he finds the long poem capable of a unity transcending the individual "poetic" passages (those moments of greatest intensity), a unity in which the "poetic" and the "prosaic" are not only indissolubly joined but actually aid in intensifying the emotional rhythm of the whole poem, a unity in which a structure extending beyond the development to a

single climax of intensity is "vital." Eliot is aware of the importance of "architectonics" in the long poem.

Other essays in this volume add to the conception just presented. In his treatment of Kipling, Eliot, making a rough distinction between "poetry" and "verse" (applying the former term to the most intense parts of a poem and the latter to those parts "less intense, but structurally vital"), claims that a poet unable to write "verse" when verse is needed lacks that sense of structure required to make a poem of any length readable (On Poetry, p. 251). Similarly, in the long essay on Johnson, Eliot in developing his concept of structure tends to identify it with the use of varied kinds of writing and also with the "art of transition" between the levels of intensity in the long poem:

> For a more elaborate construction--and structure I hold to be an important element of poetic composition--a variety of talents--descriptive, narrative, and dramatic--are required.
>
> (On Poetry, p. 181).

Since Johnson was a purely meditative poet and lacked the gift of structure, he could not write a poem of more ample scope; whereas Goldsmith, equipped with the "variety of talents" just cited, was able to make use of them all in a long poem and, in addition, fuse them into a unity through his skill in proportioning the various kinds of writing and his concision in moving from one kind to another.

Finally, in "The Three Voices of Poetry," Eliot grapples with the problem of the kind of structure (called

"form" here) inherent in the long poem. As he states at the beginning of his essay, the first voice is that of the poet talking to himself or to no one, the second that of the poet addressing an audience, and the third that of the poet creating a dramatic character. Eliot later defines the second voice as the dominant one in epic (which for our purposes can be translated to "long poem"). Whereas with the first voice the "psychic material" tends to create its own form,

> in poetry of the second and in that of the third voice, the form is already to some extent given. However much it may be transformed before the poem is finished, it can be represented from the start by an outline or scenario. If I choose to tell a story, I must have some notion of the plot of the story I propose to tell; if I undertake satire, moralizing, or invective, there is already something given which I can recognize and which exists for others as well as myself. And if I set out to write a play, I start by an act of choice: I settle upon a particular emotional situation, out of which characters and a plot will emerge, and I can make a plain prose outline of the play in advance . . . (On Poetry, p. 101).

That is, the form or structure of the long poem (the kind of poem in which the second voice is dominant) is a skeleton determining the shape of the poem; it is capable of intellectual formulation or of "a plain prose outline" and is the result of a deliberate initial choice.

Eliot's contribution to the theory of the unity and structure of the long poem can be summarized as follows. The long poem is composed of varying levels of intensity which require the interweaving of the "prosaic" and the "poetic." It contains various kinds of writing (i.e., descriptive, narrative, dramatic, and so forth) rather than a single kind

and transition passages between the kinds. Its unity is such as to extend beyond the single climax of intensity or "poetic" passage. And this unity is largely dependent upon a kind of structure essentially "given" before the writing of the poem, the result of deliberate choice, and formulatable in a prose outline.

What is to be added to Eliot's conception of the long poem? Only one or two points are necessary, points which encroach upon the material of Chapter Five ("Is the long poem a unique poetic kind?") but which are necessary to differentiate between the long and the short poem. First, it is obvious that the "length" of a poem is a continuum which can vary, depending upon the poem, from Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (the title of which is almost as long as the poem) to The Divine Comedy. To make an arbitrary division somewhere in this continuum, such as defining the long poem as one over a thousand lines in length or one which in magnitude is the verse equivalent of the novel, is to falsify the almost imperceptible shadings of the spectrum of poetry. Yet, as the poetic examples become longer, one also discovers the growing presence of certain elements and the gradual loss of others. So that, if one temporarily drops out the middle of the continuum and arbitrarily defines the long poem as one over a thousand lines in length and the short poem as one less than a hundred lines in length, the perspective gained from the amputation brings their differences into greater prominence.

From this perspective, one can see that the unity of a long poem tends to be looser than that of the short poem. Encompassing, as it does, several climaxes or moments of intensity, it necessarily contains transition passages, or relatively prosaic moments, which tend to be less tightly articulated and less poetically sustained. These passages do not exist within the smaller compass of the short poem. On the other hand, what the long poem loses in the kind of unity inherent in the short poem, it gains from the added variety of its elements, without losing its own looser but more complex unity. Where the short poem essentially deals with a single moment of poetic intensity, the long poem deals with a series of such moments, building up a hierarchy or causal sequence of actions, emotions, ideas, and values. This is what makes a good long poem so much greater an artistic achievement than a good short poem--a greater variety of material is fused into a unity.

The pattern of relationships between the whole series of climaxes of intensity present in the long poem--the hierarchy or causal sequence of actions, emotions, ideas, and values--constitutes that element which the short poem, dealing as it does with only one of these moments of intensity, lacks. It is this constituent of the long poem to which Eliot refers when he uses the term, "structure"; and it is this concept of structure which Poe lacks when he considers the phrase, "a long poem," a contradiction in terms, or when he defines the long poem as merely a series of short poems interspersed with

prose. Structure, in this sense, is what Eliot describes as the "given" part of a long poem, that resulting from an initial act of choice and capable of prose formulation. Structure, in this sense, is an element common to the long poem, the play, and prose fiction--but absent from the short poem. In its traditional and most prevalent form, this kind of structure is, of course, called "plot."

III.

The first two sections of this chapter have dealt theoretically with the problem of the architectonics of the long poem. Using Poe's attack on the long poem and Eliot's criticism, an attempt has been made to isolate the particular kind of unity and structure inherent in the long poem. Remaining sections will include a description of the kinds of structure actually employed by modern American poets to unify their long poems, a consideration of the significance of the various kinds, and an evaluation of the quality of the long poems cited in terms of unity and structure. The method is that advocated by Pound in his ABC of Reading[8] (described there by his favorite anecdote of Agassiz and the fish) and used by him much earlier in The Spirit of Romance (1910). It has sometimes been considered the method of the "New" Criticism.

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[8](London: Routledge, 1934). "The proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one 'slide' or specimen with another" (p. 1). The anecdote follows this passage.

From the point of view of structure, modern American long poems fall into two distinct groups. On the one hand, there are those whose structure is based upon a plot or an action, and on the other, those which, while fulfilling the definition arrived at in the preceding section, lack a plot but are built upon some equivalent of equal complexity and articulation. The former group are modern representatives of the structure used in the great majority of long poems throughout the history of literature. They are verse narratives, poems the primary purpose of which is to tell a story to an audience; and their progenitors are the epic and the romance. The latter group comprises several varieties (which will be dealt with subsequently), depending upon what kind of plot-substitute is used; and examples appearing earlier in the history of literature are much less prevalent than those of the first group.

The poems based upon plot will be considered first. Their structure is "traditional," though the term must be used with reservations in an age which has seen the most wide-ranging poetic revolution in the history of literature in English, and which, consequently, tends to stress "innovation" and give a pejorative overtone to the antithetical term. The purest modern examples of this kind of structure used for verse narrative are Winfield Townley Scott's The Dark Sister (1958) and Louis O. Coxe's The Middle Passage (1960). Scott's poem is a Viking saga, a narrative of the tragedy of Freydis, Leif Ericson's half sister, who, through a lust for wealth and

power and in her desire to prove herself worthy of the Ericson name, brings disaster upon her expedition to the New World and finally upon herself. Coxe's narrative is also a sea story (reminding one, incidentally, of Conrad). It shows the process of moral degradation working in a talented New England youth as he is cut loose from traditional restraints and finds himself in a position of power on a ship taking part in the slave trade. Both poems have a straightforward, sequential plot structure operating on two levels, that of event and that of the accompanying psychological change in the protagonist.

The verse narratives of Robinson Jeffers are more familiar examples of plot structure, but they are less straightforward. Tamar (1924), for instance, has a structure less tightly knit than either of the preceding examples. It has a greater sweep but less concentration, including lyric and descriptive effects eschewed by the other two poets. There is an added symbolic dimension, which could intensify the story but which in actuality blurs the structure of the plot. The tormented Cauldwell family seem to be pawns moved here and there to convey an idea rather than individuals taking part in an action.

These three examples are illustrations of the structure of modern verse narrative in its simplest form (even the symbolic dimension of Jeffers' long poem is an added element which affects the quality of his narrative rather than its basic structure). They have been treated summarily

because they are meant primarily to establish a norm by which to measure the significance of structural experiments found in certain other long poems based upon plot. Familiarity with these examples makes clear that, from the aspect of structure, the terms used to criticize the kind of long poem based upon plot do not differ appreciably from those used for prose fiction. One must consider the unity and causal sequence of the action, characterization, setting and atmosphere, and so forth. Verse narrative and prose fiction are the varieties of literature in which "poetry" and "prose" most nearly approach one another; and it is interesting to note that certain modern long poems, while remaining within the limits of verse narrative, display structural experiments paralleling those of prose fiction.

Robinson's Tristram and Cavender's House and MacLeish's Conquistador all exhibit structural experiment to advantage. In Tristram (1927) Robinson attacks the problem of the "inevitable levels of intensity" inherent in the long poem by attempting to excise the "prosaic" or connecting passages of the plot and concentrate on the moments of emotional intensity. He does this by using a scene structure analogous to that of James's novels. Gaps occur between the scenes; and the transitional matter normally occurring there is presented by implication during the scenes, where it can be intensified by its presence in the emotion-producing situation forming the germ of each scene. Accounts connecting the appearance of a given character in various settings are often lacking, but the

intervening action is always made clear from the succeeding scene. There is no direct account of either the marriage of Tristram and Isolt of Brittany or of the abduction of Isolt of Ireland from Joyous Gard; both events only become apparent in their effect upon key characters in the scenes following.

Robinson also achieves greater intensity by making his poem highly dramatic. He not only renders the plot through scene structure but also makes the entire structure depend upon a series of interactions of character. The proportion of dialogue is unusually high; the story is disclosed through conversations suffused with the emotions of the characters involved in the action; and, since there are usually only two characters present at a time, the reader is made to feel their emotion more vividly through the intimacy of the situation. Because poetry is so fundamentally concerned with the articulation of emotion, Robinson's concentration upon situations eliciting the emotional climaxes of the story without allowing the thread of the plot to be lost raises his poem to a generally higher level of intensity than it otherwise would have had. It must be remembered that, unlike so many of Robinson's narratives, Tristram is not a dramatic monologue and is not the probing of the psychology of a single character. The structural problems here are different, and he deals with them admirably.

Cavender's House (1929), on the other hand, is quite unlike Tristram. It is the gradual revelation of a story through the medium of a single highly agitated and hallucinated

mind. The poem is a ghost story of the same subtle kind as The Turn of the Screw; and the suspense and atmosphere are so well maintained that only at the end of Robinson's poem does the reader realize he is intended to understand the action as having taken place within the guilt-ridden brain of Cavender. Having pushed his wife from a cliff because he suspected her of infidelity, Cavender is forced to live with the question of her guilt unanswered; and this drives him back to their home after many years to be confronted by her image projected from his brain. This plot is slowly unravelled as Cavender talks with and attempts to gain the truth from the figure of his wife. The structure of the poem is based upon the "stream-of-consciousness" technique; and Robinson's characteristically involved style, with its meanderings and circumlocutions, is well suited to this kind of structure. It is an interesting experiment, though the documentation of Cavender's mental processes is too extensive for the weight of the story and thus prevents the poem from being entirely successful.

A much inferior poem using the same kind of structure is Delmore Schwartz's Genesis (1943), though it must be said to the author's credit that he has refrained from publishing any more than Book I. Robert Penn Warren's Brother to Dragons (1953) can also be mentioned here, since it has certain traits in common with Cavender's House. While not employing the stream-of-consciousness technique, it does rely heavily upon the narrative device of suspense. Called

"a tale in verse and voices" and set in "no place" and "any time," the narrative consists of several bodiless voices which fade in and out of the action and gradually reveal the story of a repulsive crime as they discuss man's capacity for evil and attempt to untangle the web of responsibility for the crime.

Another example of experimentation within the limits of plot structure is MacLeish's Conquistador (1932). This poem owes a definite debt to Pound's Cantos, as a comparison of MacLeish's "Prologue" and "Canto I" will show; but the debt is not structural. MacLeish is narrating a story; but he is doing so through the mind, or more specifically, the memories, of a character. Unlike Coxe's The Middle Passage, which makes use of a narrator but leaves him anonymous and uncharacterized, and unlike Robinson's Cavender's House, where the immediate situation is a fiction of the protagonist's mind, Conquistador is based upon a sequence of objective events made significant by suffusing them with the emotions of the narrator. The "point of view" technique is of fundamental importance to the story; for it is in the character of Bernal Diaz rather than in the events of the conquest of Mexico that the ultimate value of the poem resides.

While Bernal narrates the events of the conquest in a relatively straightforward manner, the structural importance of MacLeish's experiment with point of view lies in his making the moments of intensity inherent in the long poem coincide with the emotional surges of Diaz's mind as he attempts to

relive and establish the emotional significance of lost (or at least, past) experience. Thus it is the first Book begins haltingly, with disconnected and incoherent phrases; and thus it periodically trails off with an unfinished sentence or a half-caught sensation. The aging human mind is seen in the act of recollection, grasping for broken images, warming to its subject as sensations return, and then losing the thread of discourse through fatigue or loss of memory. By this device, the structure of the poem is solidly fused with the character of the narrator.

IV.

The examples of modern long poems considered so far have been based upon a plot structure; and certain of them have displayed successful variations upon this structure. In the second major group of poems, those not based upon plot, three distinct varieties of structure occur: that based upon logical progression, that whose parts are variations upon a central theme or idea, and that of thematic recurrence.

The first variety is the logical; and Auden's New Year Letter (1940) is one of the few modern examples of literary quality. This kind of poem is based upon an argument, using premisses, reaching conclusions, and proceeding more or less by means of the syllogism. It is a discussion or analysis of a topic or a series of related topics.

Naturally, the quality of the poem results from how ably the topic is handled; but its structure is akin to that of philosophic argument. Thus, Auden's poem is a consideration of the general statement, "The situation of our time/Surrounds us like a baffling crime"; and the author wrestles with the problems of human destiny and responsibility in a discussion made vivid by the ironic contrast between the celebration of the new year (the official time of good intentions) and the European war just begun.

The progenitors of the New Year Letter are more abundant than those of the other varieties of poem not dependent upon plot. The verse essay and the verse epistle (to the latter of which Auden's poem belongs) are the kinds most fully developed earlier in the history of literature in English. The significant point to be made is that logical structure forms the base for a kind of poetry which is essentially "non-fictional" in nature, and to which terminology describing fictional literature (whether verse or prose) does not apply. Pope's is the name synonymous with mastery in this kind of poetry. It is a kind based upon what Eliot calls "eloquence" rather than upon metaphor, implication, or "suggestiveness." Eloquence is the quality of stating things well, of apt phrasing resulting from the movements of an intellectually agile mind; and the structure of this kind of poetry, in its non-fictional forms, follows those movements of the mind. It is a kind whose modern examples are rare because the experiments of most modern poets lie in a different

direction. Nevertheless, Auden's New Year Letter demonstrates the continuing possibility of achieving success in the non-fictional poem; it is quite capable of being placed without disadvantage beside similar poems of Pope. A less successful--because less cogently argued and less adroitly phrased--example of this kind of non-fictional poem and structure is Karl Shapiro's Essay on Rime (1945).

Poems of the second variety of non-plot structure exhibit a grouping of their parts about a central idea or theme. Their structure is the most tenuous of the various kinds found in the modern long poem; and it becomes almost a matter of taste rather than demonstration whether such poems can be considered a unity or whether, in fact, their parts form a series of separate short poems. This kind of structure is most vulnerable to Poe's attack on the long poem. Tennyson's In Memoriam is an earlier example (and reviewers were quite divided on the question of its unity). Sandburg's The People, Yes (1936) is the clearest example found among the canon of modern long poems. It, too, tends to lack a unifying factor any stronger or better articulated than the general idea, "the people." Most of the sections of this poem are in themselves so lacking in intensity that what should be a series of emotional peaks are themselves prosaic.

A less clear-cut example, but one of occasionally much higher caliber, is Hart Crane's The Bridge (1930). It is less clear-cut because the poem lies partly in the tradition of Pound's and Eliot's experiments with structure.

Perhaps not intended by its author as only a series of lyrics on a single theme, the poem amounts to this in actuality--hence its mention here rather than with the work of the other two poets. The Bridge attempts to create a myth of America by approaching the central idea from a series of different aspects (the sections of the poem) and by finding "bridges," parallels, or connecting links between past and present America. But, like so much of Whitman's poetry, the central idea is so abstract and the connection between the sections so tenuous, that the poem divides into the vague apprehension of an idea, on the one hand, and into a group of actually presented episodes, on the other. There is a gap somewhere in the hierarchy of values (or here, symbolic scenes) separating the unifying idea from the series of particulars in which that idea is supposed to be expressed. What Crane evidently tried to do, and what makes his poem structurally important, was present a central symbol through a series of passages of the highest ("lyric") intensity while completely excising all transitional matter. The connections were to be implicit in the juxtaposed episodes. Such a structure is possible; but Crane fails to make the unifying connections explicit enough within his sections. Structurally, the poem is poor; and it fails, from this aspect, because the idea is too large for the poem as it exists.

Benét's John Brown's Body (1928) is considered here out of its logical order in this chapter (since it is based upon a plot structure) because it contrasts with Crane's

poem in a way illuminating both. Benét tries to recreate the feel of the Civil War by interweaving the histories of characters of varying viewpoints and regions who are all swept along in its stream: Ellyat from New England, Wingate from the South, Breckenridge and Diefer from Kentucky and Pennsylvania, and the wandering Vilas family from the West. In addition to such fictional characters, there are interpretations of historical figures--the generals and statesmen; and to both of these groups of characters are added accounts of the battles and the general progress of the war. Unlike The Bridge, which has a definite central idea but which fails through lack of articulation, John Brown's Body has an abundance of episodes and particular themes which fail of fusion into a central idea. Benét's poem lacks a unifying conception or symbol to draw all its various scenes into focus. The flowering of an industrial civilization from the body of John Brown--if that is the theme of the poem--is not reflected in the actions of the individual characters; there is no over-all significance distilled from the welter of episodes; and the poem tends to remain a series of (at times, well written) discrete scenes. Benét's and Crane's poems both fail of unity through contrasting structural faults: the latter through insufficient elaboration of an idea, and the former through the absence of a unifying central idea implicit in the particulars.

V.

John Brown's Body, with its structure of interwoven episodes, also provides an apt transition for the consideration of the third variety of structure found in long poems based upon a plot substitute. Poems of this kind are based upon a structure of thematic recurrence; and the major examples are Pound's Cantos and Eliot's Four Quartets.[9] It is those poems substituting thematic recurrence for plot which, in the twentieth century, have made the most significant contribution to the problem of structure in the long poem. There seem to be no earlier examples of this kind of structure (though there are slight resemblances in Ovid's Metamorphoses); and Pound's Cantos alone, of modern poems, exhibits this technique in its purest and most extensive form.

As early as 1912 Pound was thinking about problems of unity and structure. In his "Credo," he says,

> I think there is a 'fluid' as well as a 'solid' content, that some poems may have form as a tree has form, some as water poured into a vase. That most symmetrical forms have certain uses. That a vast number of subjects cannot be precisely, and therefore not properly rendered in symmetrical forms.[10]

Within five years Pound had already begun experimenting with unsymmetrical form in the first sections of a poem he characterized in a letter as "L O N G, endless, leviathanic." By

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[9]Williams' Paterson also belongs to this group; as do some of Aiken's early long poems, which approach this kind of structure.

[10]Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 9. Subsequently referred to as Essays.

1928, with most of the first group of Cantos already completed and in print, he was more specific:

> Plot, major form, or outline should be left to authors who feel some inner need for the same; even let us say a very strong, unusual, unescapable need for these things; and to books where the said form, plot, etc., springs naturally from the matter treated.
> (Essays, pp. 397-398).

The structural unit Pound uses to build his unsymmetrical form is the ideogram. The ideogram is a presented picture of an idea or concept, illustrating the abstract by a concrete instance in which the abstraction is implicit but seen in action. The ideogram occurs with varying degrees of complexity, from what Pound defines as an "image" ("that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"), from the network of associations giving form to an individual canto, to the larger ideograms of the good society and the good man (the China and Adams Cantos), to the grand ideogram comprising Pound's vision of civilization--which I take to be the purport of the Cantos as a whole. Pound, incidentally, describes the ideogrammic method as a critical tool in the ABC of Reading and later attempts to use this type of structure in the prose context of Guide to Kulchur (1938).

The purpose of ideogrammic structure is to gain intensity by dropping all connecting or descriptive matter between the juxtaposed ideograms. Thus, at the level of the canto, his method can be exemplified by the sequence seen in Cantos XII-XVII. Here the rhythm moves from a picture of the moral degradation of the modern world to an illustration of social order in the Kung Canto, from the repulsive vision of

the Hell Cantos and the horrors of war to the lovely vision of Elysium, the realm to which the heroic dead, like Sigismundo, retire. These cantos gain intensity through contrast.

Canto LI (a variant of XLV, the Usury Canto) exemplifies the ideogrammic structure within the individual canto. The major portion of the canto consists of two parts: first, an indictment of usury, and second, an apparently unrelated disquisition on fly fishing. The connection the reader is to make lies in the contrast between usury (which "destroys the craftsman") and the loving care with which the fisherman describes the construction and use of his flies--where the craftsman is free from any thought of profit ("That hath the light of the doer"). The canto, returning to the first theme, closes with the descent of Geryon, who, with Usura, drags civilization toward Hell.

In the later Cantos, beginning with the Pisan sequence, the ideogrammic units are smaller, coming in a rapid, bewildering stream. The allusions become more cryptic and wider ranging, reaching an extreme seemingly bordering on the artless in Thrones. What Pound has been trying to do, and what he better succeeds in doing when his ideogrammic units are larger, is establish a series of scenes or "epiphanies" in the earlier cantos and then depend upon the vividness of his initial presentation to reproduce the significance of the entire scene when he makes some later reference to it in terms of a single key phrase. "Most Cantos have in them 'binding matter,'" Pound states in a letter, "lines holding

them into the whole poem." Thus, such phrases as "In the gloom the gold/Gathers the light about it" or "Til the stone eyes turn again seaward" form motifs, both meant to recall their original context and gather added overtones of meaning with each additional usage.[11]

Pound's constant allusions are also meant to serve this function. If the source of such references is known, the mere use of a key word or phrase elicits the context, reinforcing the current use of the allusion. This is what Pound defines as "logopoeia," a recalling of the earlier history of a word or phrase. It places a great burden upon the reader, depending naturally upon the extent of his own reading.[12]

Larger units of thematic recurrence appear. In a letter, Pound states that there are only three main structural planes in the poem, that its material can best be divided into "the permanent, the recurrent, the casual"

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[11]One of the best methods for studying the structure of the Cantos as a whole and in minute detail would be to trace the appearances of such motifs. Material toward this end has already been partially gathered in John H. Edwards and William Vasse, Jr., Annotated Index to the Cantos of Ezra Pound (2nd printing; Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1959).

[12]Much of the "logopoeia" in the Cantos is connected with Pound's use of other languages. Of these he says, "I believe that when finished, all foreign words in the Cantos, Gk., etc., will be underlinings, not necessary to the sense, in one way. I mean a complete sense will exist without them; it will be there in the American text, but the Greek, ideograms, etc., will indicate a duration from whence or since when. If you can find any briefer means of getting this repeat or resonance, tell papa, and I will try to employ it." (Letters, p. 418). Pound's use of "ideograms" here refers, not to the concept just described above, but to the Chinese language.

(Letters, pp. 320-321). A few years earlier, Pound, writing his father, had explained his idea of thematic recurrence--the structure of the poem as he then saw it. Admitting "the whole damn poem is rather obscure, especially in fragments," he adds,

> Have I ever given you outline of main scheme ::: or whatever it is?
> 1. Rather like, or unlike subject and response and counter subject in fugue.
> A. A. Live man goes down into world of Dead
> C. B. The 'repeat in history'
> B. C. The 'magic moment' or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidien into 'divine or permanent world.' Gods, etc.
> (Letters, pp. 284-285).

The descent to the dead and the recurrent theme of the voyage of discovery ("periplum") are symbolized particularly by Odysseus and first presented in Canto I. Examples of the "repeat in history" are seen in the equation of Actaeon with Vidal in Canto IV and of Helen of Troy with Eleanor of Acquitaine in Canto VII. Similarly, the metamorphosis, or the sudden awareness of the divine or permanent penetrating the sea of human experience, is first presented in Canto II, there exemplified by the Dionysus myth.

There is also a general rhythm of contrast between peaks of civilized action or expression in the past and the profound moral degradation of the present, which Pound attributes to the prevalence of the profit motive in the modern world. Finally, there is a historical rhythm to the poem. At the conclusion of "How to Read," Pound says, "Human lucidity appears to have approached several times a sort of

maximum, and then suffered a set-back"; and part of the structure of the Cantos is a documentation of this alternation.[13]

The very nature of Pound's unsymmetrical form, his use of the ideogram with its implicit connections, and his wide-ranging allusions, make criticism of the Cantos difficult. One must grant an author his choice of material and techniques but, in addition, attempt to evaluate his success with them. First, the Cantos can be described as moving in a single direction only if one speaks in the most general terms. The significance of the order of the poem's major segments (the successive sections published as separate volumes) is unclear. After the larger ideograms of the good society and the intelligent personality in Cantos LII-LXXI, for instance, the poem returns to the dissolution of the modern world in the Pisan sequence; or again, it begins to mount to a sort of "paradise" in the magnificent lyric cantos of Rock Drill, only to be followed by what may be a direct statement of principles governing the good society, but what seems more like a static tissue of quotation in Thrones.

The second fundamental criticism of the structure of the Cantos concerns the implicit nature of the connections

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[13]"All of which," Pound says regarding such structural explanation, "is mere matter for little Blackmurs and Harvud instructors unless I pull it off as reading matter, singing matter, shouting matter, the tale of the tribe" (Letters, p. 386).

between ideograms. The root of the difficulty lies in the reader's failure to understand exactly which association is meant. This is true of ideograms comprising all degrees of complexity, from the juxtaposition of allusions, to the sudden changes of scene within the canto, to the presence of episodes and characters which do not recur but which apparently form variants of the larger themes. The abundance of material embodied in the poem necessitates clearer indication of the direction of the poem and the significance of its components. Its meandering course (its "unsymmetrical form") seems to require a more explicit formulation of the relationships between the ideograms. Lacking this, its structure--at least in the early stages of understanding the poem--seems to disintegrate into a grouping of brilliant but unfused parts. Architectonics is the weakest point of the Cantos; its structure is looser than that of most other long poems considered here.

On the other hand, the Cantos can only provoke admiration for the variety of material brought into juxtaposition and partial fusion (variety is as much a component of art as unity). One must go far to discover another poem attempting the construction of such an elaborate "art-world." Few poems surpass the Cantos in magnitude; and to understand it in detail would be a kind of education in itself. In the essay cited earlier for his view on unsymmetrical form, Pound also makes the following comment:

> Art very possibly ought to be the supreme achievement, the 'accomplished'; but there is the other satisfactory effect, that of a man hurling himself at an indomitable chaos, and yanking and hauling as much of it as possible into some sort of order (or beauty), aware of it both as chaos and as potential.
> (Essays, p. 396).

Both the peculiar excitement and joy one finds in reading the Cantos are implicit in that statement (it also is a, perhaps unintended, commentary on both the success and failure of the poem as art). It may have been for some such reason Eliot called the Cantos the only modern long poem he could read with pleasure.

Eliot's Four Quartets forms the final example of thematic structure. Attempting much less than Pound's poem, it exhibits a much tighter unity; and in its lesser scope is a finer example of "achieved" form. In "The Music of Poetry," an address delivered about the time the poem was completed, Eliot states that rhythm and structure are the properties of music most nearly concerning the poet; and he proceeds to draw a parallel between the two arts in the use of thematic recurrence as a basis for structure:

> The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject matter.[14]

In "Dateline" Pound had maintained that "the man who formulates any forward reach of co-ordinating principle is the man who

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[14] On Poetry, p. 38. Conrad Aiken had arrived at a similar conclusion much earlier (1919) in terms of what he calls "symphonic form." His concept will be discussed in Chapter Five.

produces the demonstration." He many times has done this; but in the use of thematic recurrence as a structural base for a long poem, Eliot has transformed the principle and produced a new demonstration, the Four Quartets.

The theme of the Quartets is a consideration of how the individual human spirit can escape the effects of time through renunciation and love. The poem is an intensely personal one--not a philosophic probing of the concept of "Time," but rather a poetic meditation upon the significance of the individual life caught in its flux and faced with the disagreeable facts of aging and death. "Burnt Norton" immediately presents the possibility of escape from time into an intenser dimension of reality in the rose garden scene--a poetic rendering of the timeless moment through which the "still point of the turning world" is apprehended. But awareness of the timeless moment also makes "ridiculous the waste sad time/Stretching before and after." In the remaining three major sections of the poem, Eliot illustrates how the individual,-aware of the timeless, is reconciled to and finds significance in his necessary span in time. "East Coker" presents the rhythm of life with its inevitable movement toward decay and death ("O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark") but reverses the process through the paradoxical realization that "In my end is my beginning." "The Dry Salvages," using the metaphors of river and sea, presents human life as a voyage, the purpose of which is to "fare forward" with faith in the greater reality beyond life

manifested in the timeless moment in the rose garden. "Little Gidding" resolves the conflict between the dimensions of time and the timeless. The individual is reconciled to the present ("History is now and England") through his awareness that Love has devised the torment of the human condition, through his choice of the refining, purgative fire of humility and renunciation, through his awareness of the pattern given both his own life and that of history by the apprehension of the timeless moment, and through his faith that "All manner of thing shall be well" when the fire of purgation and the rose of desire blend in the vision of God.

That the four sections of the poem are intended as a unity is obvious from the final verse paragraph of "Little Gidding," where key phrases and images from the earlier movements are recapitulated to intensify the affirmation ending the poem. Similarly, the themes described above as forming the basis of each of the major movements also appear to varying degrees in each of the other movements. The major themes of decay and death, renunciation and humility, exploration, and the timeless moment of reality giving significance to life, all recur.[15] They are interwoven throughout the poem--stated, altered, elaborated, and resolved. This is what Eliot means when drawing an analogy to musical structure in the passage quoted above, he mentions the possibility of "contrapuntal arrangement of subject matter."

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[15]As does the theme of "the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings"--the specific problem of the writer caught in the flux of experience.

Likewise, there is the use of different kinds of writing as a structural technique (as in Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village"). In "Little Gidding," for instance, there is the use of description to set a scene in section I; there is the use of song in sections II and IV; there is dramatic presentation in the encounter between the two figures in the second part of section II; and there are passages of direct statement or philosophic meditation, as at the beginning of sections III and V. These kinds of writing alternate with one another; and such use of contrast (in Eliot's words) "bears some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments."

Finally, there is a similar structural technique of contrast in the various levels of intensity present in the poem. Again using "Little Gidding," one finds the norm of intensity for the poem in passages such as sections I and V. Sections II and IV tighten into the intensity of formal lyric; while the beginning of sections III and V drops to the relatively prosaic. The poem varies in intensity from the prosiness of direct statement to the lyric suggestiveness of song, exemplifying another portion of Eliot's statement, that "there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet."

The structure of the Four Quartets is far removed from that of The Waste Land, where Eliot was essentially using the ideogrammic structure developed by Pound in the

Cantos. Perhaps, as a fellow poet, Eliot was aware of the danger inherent in that kind of structure--the danger of losing the main movement of a poem through a not explicit enough rendering of the connections unifying a series of juxtaposed episodes or scenes. At any rate, in the Quartets he develops the structural technique of thematic recurrence away from the ideogram, bringing it closer to the kind of structure found in music; and in doing this, he is able to tighten the structure of his poem through formal repetition (the reader is always aware of its general movement), making its effect both intenser and more unified. Actually, the structure of Eliot's poem is less experimental--more traditional--than that of his own earlier poem or of the Cantos; and since valid poetry somehow arises from "a more than usual emotion combined with a more than usual order," the poem also illustrates the greater possibility of success inherent in the use of a symmetrical rather than an unsymmetrical form.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POETIC LINE:
DENSITY, CONTINUITY, FLEXIBILITY

> Dichten = condensare.
> Pound, ABC of Reading.
>
> In a poem 200 pages long . . .
> the first requirement is that the
> reader be able to proceed.
> Pound, Literary Essays.

A second problem concerns the nature of the "line" proper to the long poem, particularly in terms of its "density" and "continuity." The poetic "line," as used here, simply refers to the arrangement of the words on the page--the convention by which, at least until the modern poetic renaissance, a single line of type corresponds to a single line of poetry. Similarly, the term "continuity" refers to the ease of transition from one line to another as the poem is built into the larger units of paragraph and section. "Density" refers to the amount of meaning (intellectual, emotional, and revelatory) contained in the line. Pound, for instance, defines great literature as "language charged with meaning to the highest possible degree"; and the "packed" line is a common phenomenon of modern poetry.

This chapter will consider the nature of the line proper to the long poem, in its two major varieties, as well

as the effect of the modern revolution in poetic style upon the conception of the line. There will be a theoretical discussion of the line, based primarily upon remarks made by the poets themselves in writing about their craft, followed by analysis and evaluation of the kinds of line--in terms of density, continuity, and flexibility--employed in specific modern American long poems.

I.

Certain contemporary reviewers were seen to be in violent disagreement with the direction taken by twentieth century poetry. In sympathy with the values and techniques associated with nineteenth century poetic, they were unwilling or unable to understand the significance of new values and techniques in the poems of their contemporaries. They found the new poetry obscure, lacking in clarity, and emotionally unmoving--modern poetry was only a code-language used by a small clique of poets to communicate with one another. Their views illustrate a fundamental difference in values separating the partisans of the traditional and the experimental in modern poetry. From these divergent conceptions of poetic arise the two major kinds of line: the traditional metrical line and the modern line based primarily upon the sequence of the musical phrase.

The traditional line employed in long poems since the time of Chaucer has been the iambic pentameter, with or

without end-rhyme. The versatility of this meter is obvious since it has formed the vehicle for long poems in styles as different as those of Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, and Tennyson. Rhythmically, the pattern of this kind of line is regular, relatively rigid: there are five accented syllables per line and normally five unaccented syllables. The music of the line, again speaking in terms of rhythm, stems from the counterpoint set up between the pattern of metrical accents and the normal prose or speaking accents of the words used. The possibilities for metrical variation are thus limited to the manipulation of the two patterns of accent (though in earlier centuries, of course, this was never felt to be a restraint). Other poetic elements enrich the variety of the metrical line. There is the use of verbal music--rhyme, assonance, and alliteration--and of inversion for purposes of emphasis and variation. In addition, several styles of poetic diction--vocabularies felt to have a particular relevance to poetry--have been associated with this kind of line, occurring in a kind of alternation, as Eliot has seen, between an elaboration of the musical and verbal (dictional) qualities of poetry (Milton, for instance) and a return to the simplicities of speech (Wordsworth). This alternation, heretofore, has been within the rhythmic confines of the metrical line.[1]

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[1]This brief summary of the metrical line has not been made only to demolish it in terms of modern poetic; for the metrical line has certain desirable qualities which the modern line tends to lack. The summary does, however, form the point of departure for the attack made by certain modern poets on the metrical line.

II.

Pound, early in his career, attacks the older technique in what amounts to a sweeping denial of the English poetic tradition. "After Villon," he says, "and for several centuries, poetry can be considered as fioritura, as an efflorescence, almost an effervescence, and without any new roots."[2] Even in Marlowe and Shakespeare he finds an embroidery of language, a "talk about the matter, rather than presentation." Pound also strongly objects to the tendency to identify the metrical expression of ideas with poetry. "From the puritanical revolt to Swinburne, poetry had been merely the vehicle--yes, definitely . . . the ox-cart and post-chaise for transmitting thoughts poetic or otherwise" (a comment made long before the appearance of his own Thrones). He credits Yeats with stripping poetry of its rhetoric and transforming it into a pliable idiom, "a speech without inversions." The outlines of Pound's early program for poetry (c. 1911) are contained in the following pronouncement:

> As to Twentieth century poetry, and the poetry which I expect to see written during the next decade or so, it will I think, move against poppy-cock, it will be harder and saner, it will be . . . 'nearer the bone'. It will be as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, its interpretive power. . . . I mean it will not try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither.
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> (Essays, p. 12).

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[2] Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 28. Subsequently referred to as Essays.

The revolution in poetic which begins primarily with the verse and criticism of Pound and Eliot (and Yeats, whose work lies outside the scope of these chapters) is based upon the identification of poetry with speech [3] From this tenet most of the other characteristics of the modern idiom can be derived. In his essay on "The Music of Poetry" (1942), Eliot, speaking of the function of the poet, declares:

> At some periods, the task is to explore the musical possibilities of an established convention of the relation of the idiom of verse to that of speech; at other periods, the task is to catch up with the changes in thought and sensibility.[4]

He describes the poetic task of the previous two decades as having been the "search for a proper modern colloquial idiom" required by the need for a "refreshment of poetic diction" similar to that brought about by Wordsworth. Pound, writing a preface to the poems of Lionel Johnson, in which he distinguishes the aims of his own group from those of the older poet, also bases poetry upon speech: "Our aim is natural speech, the language as spoken. We desire the words of poetry to follow the natural order. We would write nothing that we might not say actually in life--under emotion" (Essays, p. 362).

One of the earliest formulations of the new poetic is found in Pound's Imagist principles of 1912:

> 1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.

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[3] And not upon identification of poetry with metaphor. Such identification is more characteristic of certain practitioners and critics of the modern short poem, and will be considered in Chapter Five.

[4] On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 35. Subsequently referred to as On Poetry.

> 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
> 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. (Essays, p. 3).

The first of these principles defines the key concept of "presentation." Instead of describing or generalizing upon, say, an emotion, as Pound felt the older poetry did all too often, the emotion is to be shown occurring in a concrete instance.[5] All conscious attempts to be poetic defeat their end, he says; it is rather "an intentness on the quality of the emotion to be conveyed" that makes for poetry. Pound's second Imagist principle reflects his desire for an economical use of words. He wants no "painted adjectives"; and it is from this principle he derives his definition of great literature as "maximum efficiency of expression."

The third Imagist principle defines the rhythmic quality of the modern line (as the first two had implied its verbal qualities--its diction). In another early essay, Pound argues that the movement of poetry is limited only by the nature of syllables and articulated sound, and by the laws of music, or melodic rhythm--not by a rigid metrical pattern:

> No one is so foolish as to suppose that a musician using 'four-four' time is compelled to use always four quarter notes in each bar, or in 'seven-eighths' time to use seven eighth notes uniformly in each bar. He may use one ½, one ¼ and one 1/8 rest, or any such

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[5] "Poetry," Ford Madox Ford, one of Pound's early masters, had said, "is a matter of rendering and not comment; you must not say 'I am so happy'; you must behave as if you were happy."

> combination as he may happen to choose or find fitting.
>
> To apply this musical truism to verse is to employ vers libre.
>
> (Essays, p. 93).

Later, Eliot describes the free verse movement in retrospect as a revolt against dead form; its enduring value lies, he maintains, in its "insistence upon the inner unity which is unique to every poem, against the outer unity which is typical" (On Poetry, p. 37). His comment remains an apt characterization of the modern "rhythmic" line.[6]

Pound and Eliot are the best known poet-propagandists of the modern technique in poetry; and yet it is from the letters and critical writings of William Carlos Williams that the fullest and most explicit rationale for the modern rhythmic line emerges. Williams' line, which he bases upon "relative measure" or "the variable foot," is a variant upon

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[6]The "modern" or "rhythmic" line is the term used in this chapter to describe the line composed in the "sequence of the musical phrase" as it appears in the long poems of Pound, Eliot, and Williams. Its unit is the phrase rather than the foot; its system of accent and its syntax are essentially those of prose; and its rhythms attempt to approximate the natural phrasing of the spoken language without recourse to inversion, rhetorical devices, or metrical regularity. Its basic difference from the metrical line lies in the variability of its line length and its lack of a system of counterpoint between a meter and the prose accents of the words. It differs from prose primarily in the greater regularity of its rhythms and line length. The rhythmic line seems to stem from the rhythms of free verse as they become necessarily repeated due to the sheer length of the long poem. That is, in an individual line varying from, say, five to twenty syllables, the number of different patterns of accented and unaccented syllables, though large, is finite. In a poem of over a thousand lines in length, these patterns reappear forming a "vehicle" for the long poem in the same sense that blank verse or the heroic couplet form metrical "vehicles" for the long poem. The rhythmic

Pound's kind of rhythmic line. But Williams disagrees heartily with Pound's use of rhythms. While, in an "age without mastery," the Cantos is a "pre-composition" for the new line Williams desires, and while Pound has lifted the modern line to a high level of accomplishment, he has turned aside from the main task, according to Williams, to teach it "classic dancing." Nevertheless, the poetic of both writers is very similar--with one important exception.

Unlike Pound, Williams bases his manner of writing poetry upon the "local." Thus, in an essay on Kenneth Burke, he says, "From the shapes of men's lives imparted by the places where they have experience, good writing springs." The classic is "the local fully realized, words marked by a place";[7] and the poem is defined in similar terms as "the lifting of the environment to expression." This lifting of the world of the senses to the level of the imagination and so giving it new currency, as Williams elsewhere phrases it (Essays, p. 213), is the artistic process by which the local attains universality:

> If I succeed in keeping myself objective enough, sensual enough, I can produce the factors, the concretions of materials by which others shall understand and so be led to use--that they may the better see, touch, taste, enjoy--their own world differing as it may from mine.
>
> (Essays, pp. 197-198).

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line is also referred to by poets as the "cadenced line"; but since the latter phrase can be confused with the use of "cadences" in prose, the former is perhaps better.

[7]Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 132. Subsequently referred to as Essays.

Since art, for Williams, springs from the local, and since the material of poetry is words,' the true poem must rise ("lifting the environment to expression") from local speech--both in its diction and rhythms. Williams' point is that American speech differs from English speech, having its own unique qualities and representing a different, new body of experience. It is in the mouths of the living that "language is changing and giving new means for expanded possibilities in literary expression." The seriousness with which Williams takes this principle of basing poetry upon speech as heard is displayed vividly in a letter to Kay Boyle. Complaining that he has written little poetry recently for lack of a proper form in which to cast it, Williams continues:

> Instead I have been watching speech in my own environment from which I continually expect to discover whatever of new is being reflected about the world. . . . I have been actively at work . . . in the flesh, watching how words match the act, especially how they come together. The result has been a few patches of metrical coherence which I don't as yet see how to use--but they seem to run to groups of lines.[8]

Such rhythms are the matrix for the revolutionary line envisioned by Williams.

Time and again, in essay and letter, Williams attacks both the traditional metrical line and free verse (his reference is invariably to Whitman). "No verse can be free," he asserts; "it must be governed by some measure, but not by the

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[8] The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams, ed. John C. Thirwall (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), pp. 129-130. Subsequently referred to as Letters.

old measure." He once goes so far as to confess his own verse interests him only insofar as it helps solve the problem of a modern line. Williams' answer is the relatively stable or "variable" foot:

> It seems to be that the "foot" being at the bottom of all prosody, the time has come when that must be recognized to have changed in nature. And it must be seen to have changed in its rhythmical powers of inclusion. It cannot be used any longer in its old-time rigidities.
>
> (Letters, p. 136).

Williams conceives of the line in a way unlike Pound; for he intends it to have (like the metrical line) a well-conceived form within which modification can exist. In practice (and this will be demonstrated in the analysis of the line in Paterson), Williams' lines are meant to be of generally equal duration though composed of varying numbers of accents and syllables--the "musical" duration of the line is his constant "form" within which the variations exist.

The verbal qualities of Williams' line are close to those of Pound's. Williams praises the Cantos for its treatment of the word as "reality" rather than as "symbol"; and, in a similar vein, he suggests to an aspiring poet that objects be described as if one were actually looking at them rather than merely thinking about them. "The true value," he says in the preface to an early volume of his poems, "is that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself. The associational or sentimental value is the false." Hence, for him the relative uselessness of the simile, since it draws attention to a relationship of an object with something

else and thus blurs that object's uniqueness. Williams, like Pound (in his first Imagist principle), wants to present the "thing" directly.

He also subscribes to the second Imagist principle. In his definition of the poem as "a small (or large) machine made of words," he emphasizes that no part can be redundant; there is a "perfect economy" (Essays, p. 256). Elsewhere Williams parallels Pound's definition of literature as "maximum efficiency of expression" by stating:

> Another characteristic of all art is its compactness. It is not, at its best, the mirror--which is far too ready a symbol. It is the life--but transmuted to another tighter form.
>
> The compactness implies restriction but does not mean loss of parts; it means compact, restricted to essentials. . . . The essence remains in the parts proper to life, in all their sensual reality.
>
> (Essays, p. 198).

The work of Williams, as well as that of Pound and Eliot, stands at the heart of the modern movement in poetry; and these elements of their poetic theory have been treated in relative detail, not only because the modern line rises directly from that theory, but also because it documents just how thorough-going the contemporary revolution has been. Modern poetry has produced a new poetic language, based upon speech and replacing an earlier language so dulled by usage as to have become a "literary" diction. It has extended the subject matter of poetry to cover the modern industrial world, including subjects not earlier thought properly "poetic." It has attempted to replace a tendency of earlier poetry toward generalization, description, and comment, by substituting the

technique of presentation, through which an object is caught in an image, or action, or otherwise apprehended concretely. It has developed a new kind of structure, the thematic or associational, to supplement the older varieties of logical or plot structure. It has exchanged the traditional syntax of poetry, with its inversions of phrasing, for modern prose syntax. And finally, it has developed a new rhythm, based upon the prose accents of words, freer and with a wider-ranging music than that of the metrical line. Speaking broadly, the revolution in modern poetry has caused a shift away from rhetoric and toward music and speech.

III.

From the preceding description of those elements in the poetic of Pound, Eliot, and Williams which result in the modern rhythmic line, it is obvious that both verbal and rhythmic qualities must be considered in any discussion of the line proper to the long poem. The two quotations from Pound which head this chapter pose the problem primarily in terms of verbal qualities. They raise the problem of obscurity; or, since "obscurity" is a pejorative term, they represent the apparently antithetical poetic values of density (or complexity) and clarity (or simplicity). The line of the long poem must be sufficiently intense to function as poetry (or the work might as well be cast in prose); and yet, by reason of the length of the poem, the line must be sufficiently

lucid for the reader to proceed to the poem's end without losing the thread of meaning.

The charge of obscurity was one of those made most frequently by reviewers against the long poems using the rhythmic line; and yet both Pound and Eliot are aware of the need for a proper fusion of intensity and clarity. Thus Pound, with reference to the earlier sections of the Cantos, says, "There is no intentional obscurity. There is condensation to maximum attainable. It is impossible to make the deep as quickly comprehensible as the shallow."[9] Eliot, in a parallel statement, observes, "We have come to expect poetry to be something very concentrated, something distilled" (On Poetry, p. 193). He had earlier stated that the modern long poem requires more in it for its length, a greater concentration, than our grandparents seemed to demand.[10]

Pound and Eliot are concerned with a proper intensity or complexity in poetry; but both poets are also aware of the need for clarity. "Complexity for its own sake is not a proper goal," Eliot asserts:

> Its purpose must be, first, the precise expression of finer shades of feeling and thought; second, the introduction of greater refinement and variety of music. When an author appears, in his love of the elaborate structure, to have lost the ability to say anything simply; when his addiction to pattern becomes such that he says things elaborately which should properly be said simply, and thus limits his range of expression,

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[9] The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), p. 418. Subsequently referred to as Letters.

[10] The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), p. 152.

> the process of complexity ceases to be quite healthy, and the writer is losing touch with the spoken language.
>
> (On Poetry, p. 59).

Eliot praises Virgil for his "direct, brief and startling simplicity when the occasion required it" (p. 63), and elsewhere notes that great poets can "teach us what to avoid, by showing us what great poetry can do without--how bare it can be" (p. 155). Pound likewise asserts that "One 'moves' the reader only by clarity" (Essays, p. 22).

In view of these statements, what is to be said of the verbal nature of the rhythmic line as opposed to the metrical line? First, the modern line, as seen in the long poems of Pound, Eliot, and Williams, does tend to be difficult, since the fundamental effort of these poets is to "charge them with meaning." Their attempts to condense and intensify--to make the line function as poetry--are often successful at the expense of clarity or intelligibility of language. The rhythmic line tends to err on the side of obscurity rather than excessive lucidity.[11] On the other hand, the traditional metrical line, used as a vehicle for the long poem, leans in the opposite direction. When unsuccessful, it tends to become so lucid as to be prosaic. While clear, it lacks intensity; and its regular pattern will sometimes lull the reader into accepting metrical prose

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[11] However, as I hope to make clear in the later treatment of the Cantos, Paterson, and the Four Quartets, the phrase, "the packed line," is a misnomer when applied to the long poem. The term is more applicable to a variety of the modern short poem.

statement for poetry. This characteristic of the traditional line is one against which contemporary poets in the tradition of Pound, Eliot, and Williams have reacted violently. Great poetry, as Blackmur says, manifests an "ultimate verbal clarity." Ultimate, not immediate. And in its verbal qualities, the line of the long poem, whether metrical or rhythmic, must somehow exhibit a fusion of intensity and simplicity to produce that final clarity. Needless to say, more than one solution to the problem is possible.

The epigraph above also poses a problem for the long poem closely related to obscurity, that of continuity. Pound, writing to Rouse concerning the latter's prose translation of the Odyssey, says:

> The first essential is the narrative movement, forward, not blocking the road as Chapman does. Everything that stops the reader must go, be cut out. And then everything that holds the mind, long after the reading, i.e., as much as is humanly possible, must be clamped back on . . .
>
> (Letters, p. 364).

The writer of a long poem must insure that "The main import is not sacrificed to detail." Chaucer's avoidance of this defect, incidentally, is the reason for Pound's pleasure in his poetry.[12] Eliot, too, comments on the problem of continuity by stating that the poet, at his best, is "writing transparently, so that our attention is directed to the object and not to the medium."

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[12]Pound says, "No one will ever gauge or measure English poetry until they know how much of it, how full a gamut of its qualities, is already THERE ON THE PAGE of Chaucer"; ABC of Reading (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1934), p. 102. Pp. 98-114 present a detailed discussion of Chaucer's importance.

A certain type of reading is presupposed by the style of much contemporary poetry, consonant with the seriousness with which the art is conceived.[13] Poetry so written precludes the possibility of initially reading a long poem straight through with anything like apprehension of its total meaning. The reader, because of the density of the rhythmic line, must often pause and reflect to understand the significance of a passage before he is able to proceed--and this is particularly true of modern long poems using thematic structure. By the sheer length of the long poem, a line too dense--too packed with meaning--runs the danger of losing the main narrative or thematic thread of meaning and of interrupting the larger fluctuations of emotion. Pound criticizes Chapman for plunging into "adjectival magnificence" and getting stuck; and yet the modern rhythmic line, for which he is primarily responsible, tends to have a similar difficulty with continuity through a too great density of meaning. Eliot's comment on Milton, that "the full beauty of his long periods can hardly be enjoyed while we are wrestling with the meaning as well," often applies to the modern line. Eliot goes on to praise Shakespeare and Dante, in contrast to Milton, because "there is no interruption between the surface that these poets present to you and the core" (On Poetry, pp. 143-144); and the lines of Pound, Eliot, and Williams, at their best, also display this fusion.

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[13] A seriousness seen in the poets' emphasis upon craftsmanship and in the doctrine of art as a unique way of apprehending reality, both of which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Four.

It is with regard to continuity that the metrical line, as used in several modern American long poems, is seen to greatest advantage. Whereas the density of the rhythmic line tends to impede the reader's progress, the set accentual pattern of the metrical line constitutes a built-in impetus forcing the reader forward. The meter is insistent enough to carry the reader through the relatively "relaxed" or prosaic passages which are often necessary in long poems, as Eliot has seen.[14] The rhythmic line, with its subtler music, seems to lack this insistence. In addition, the metrical line, by virtue of its regularity, tends to become a "vehicle" separable from the subject of the poem; and once the music of the vehicle is mastered (as with Robinson), the poet is free to concentrate upon his subject. That is, with the relatively set pattern of the metrical line, "transparent writing"--attention to the object rather than the medium, as Eliot phrases it--is easier. With the rhythmic line, on the other hand, the poet must try to suit the music of a particular passage to its meaning. As Pound states in his early "Credo": "I believe in an 'absolute rhythm,' a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed" (Essays, p. 9). One reason there are so few modern long poems based upon the rhythmic

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[14] I was struck by this power of meter when, after having been steeped in the reading of modern long poems, I turned back to Paradise Lost and The Prelude to try to gauge the density of the line in those poems. Rather long stretches in passages selected at random--judged by standards applied to contemporary poems--lack the intensity of poetry. Modern long poems fare not too badly when juxtaposed with those of the past.

line seems to be the failure, as yet, to completely solve the problem of continuity--through too great an emphasis upon condensation and for lack of an adequate substitute for the rhythmic insistence of the metrical line.

There is a final problem concerning the line of the long poem, that of its flexibility. In Chapter Two a conception of the structure of the long poem was developed based upon the various levels of intensity necessary in any extended work. One of Eliot's comments cited there bears repetition:

> In a poem of any length, there must be transitions between passages of a greater and less intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole; and the passages of less intensity will be, in relation to the level on which the total poem operates, prosaic . . . (On Poetry, p. 32).

Elsewhere in the same volume of essays, Eliot adds, "It is indeed necessary for any long poem, if it is to escape monotony, to be able to say homely things without bathos, as well as to take the highest flights without sounding exaggerated" (p. 74). The line of the long poem must be flexible enough to handle writing pitched at various levels, from the moments of greatest emotional intensity to those relatively prosaic in character. It must escape both bathos and inflation.

The long poem was also seen to be composed of various kinds of writing: "For a more elaborate construction . . . a variety of talents--descriptive, narrative, and dramatic--are required" (Eliot, On Poetry, p. 181). The line of the long poem must also be flexible enough to present extremes ranging from dialogue to lyric. Neither the metrical nor the rhythmic

line has an inherent superiority in conveying levels of intensity or the kinds of writing present in the long poem, though the latter's freer rhythms make a wider variety of music possible (particularly in the speech rhythms affecting dialogue). The main point to be made concerning the flexibility of the line is that, for a long poem, it cannot, whether metrical or rhythmic, be limited to the essentially "lyric" line of the short poem. Its purpose requires that it be capable of wider variation.

The problem of the line proper to the long poem, whether metrical or rhythmic, involves three factors: density, continuity, and flexibility. The line must display a sufficient average intensity to function as poetry while maintaining a proper tension between complexity and clarity; it must be readable, containing some impetus to force the reader's attention beyond the single line of verse to the larger sections of the poem; and it must be versatile enough to handle the levels of intensity and the kinds of writing inherent in the long poem.

IV.

Modern poetry has, on the whole, moved in the direction of speech; and this movement, resulting in development of the rhythmic line by one group of contemporary poets, has also produced a change in the traditional metrical line as used by other poets. The rhythmic qualities of this line

have been altered by the use of more unaccented syllables; and its verbal qualities have been changed to an even greater extent. Most of the poets considered here who employ the metrical line tend to base it, as Pound, Eliot, and Williams do the rhythmic line, upon speech. Earliest of these is Robinson. Both Pound and Williams give Whitman a grudging credit for having contributed to the modern poetic idiom by breaking up the rhythmic regularity of the traditional line. As much credit should go to Robinson (as far as the American tradition is concerned) for having exchanged rhetoric for speech as the basis for the verbal qualities of the line.

The line of Robinson's long poems is not so much dense as intricate. In the first place, its quality appears, not in the single verse, but in the larger scope of the verse paragraph; and secondly, its vividness arises from hurrying conversational rhythms overlapping the individual verses and from phrasing which reflects the meanderings, repetitions, and interjections of speech. A fine example occurs in Merlin (1917); Sir Lamorak is speaking to Sir Bedivere about Arthur:

> As for the King, I say the King, no doubt,
> Is angry, sorry, and all sorts of things,
> For Lancelot, and for his easy Queen,
> Whom he took knowing she'd thrown sparks already
> On that same piece of tinder, Lancelot,
> Who fetched her with him from Leodogran
> Because the King--God save poor human reason!--
> Would prove to Merlin, who knew everything
> Worth knowing in those days, that he was wrong.
> I'll drink now and be quiet,--but by God,
> I'll have to tell you, Brother Bedivere,
> Once more, to make you listen properly . . .[15]

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[15] Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: MacMillan, 1937), p. 245.

and so on. Writing such as this not only presents situation and character, it catches all the nuances of the speaker's voice. Robinson's line is dramatic; and the high proportion of dialogue or the frequent use of a narrator in his poems display this quality to best advantage.

A second major quality of Robinson's line is the absence of decoration. Robinson is not entirely emancipated from a vocabulary dulled by literary usage; yet his line does show (to use Eliot's words) how "bare" poetry can be. In the passage just quoted, for instance, there is only one image, that of Guinevere as spark and Lancelot as tinder, supplemented by the overtones of the word, "easy." The rest is direct statement made forceful by rhythm and phrasing. Robinson's line has the virtue of transparency: the reader's attention is focused upon what is being said rather than upon the author's skill in saying it. At its worst, his line is shallow or tedious when, lacking other embellishments, it loses the immediacy of speech or when it becomes too involved in the convolutions of thought; but at its best, as in the passage above, it combines clarity and compactness in what Pound calls "efficient writing."

One of the secrets of the poetic quality of Robinson's conversational line is a direct result of his basing poetry upon speech. This is what might be called "incremental repetition." An extreme example of this poetic device, which Robinson uses regularly in his verse paragraphs, is found in Tristram (1927). Isolt of Brittany has just told Gawaine

she suspects Tristram will not return to her after his voyage to Camelot; and he replies:

> "I can see only one thing to believe,"
> He said, believing almost he could see it,
> "And that is, he will come--as he must come.
> Why should he not come back again, for you?
> Who in this world would not come back, for you!
> God's life, dear lady, why should he not come back?"
> (Collected Poems, p. 660).

Incremental repetition is seen in the reversal of phrasing in the first two lines, the balancing within the third, and the repetition with variations in the final three. The device is significant because it mirrors the playing with words and phrases which can, and often does, take place in actual speech; and its effect, of course, is to reproduce the immediacy of the speaking voice. It can also present nuances of emotion--as witness the rising of Gawaine's agitation in the quotation above.

Finally, Robinson's line has the virtue of continuity. Part of this is due to the impetus of the metrical line; but verbal clarity and hurrying conversational rhythms also contribute to the effect. The forward movement of Robinson's line is, in fact, so insistent that it tends to cause the reader to slur over the individual verses and miss their full flavor. One reason for this is the length of Robinson's sentences--combined with the penchant of his speakers to comment upon their comments in mid-career (Sir Lamorak's initial sentence, for instance, takes up the first nine of the twelve verses quoted). The reader's desire to complete the meaning of the sentence unit hurries him over the individual verses. And

yet, in the best of Robinson's passages, the thread of meaning is not lost. He can, at times, compare favorably with Milton in the size of the verbal units (i.e., the verse paragraph) his art can handle without faltering.[16]

The long poems of Auden occupy a place apart in the spectrum of modern American poetry. The rhythmic qualities of Auden's line, as seen in his long poems, exhibit his interest in experimenting with earlier meters, while its verbal qualities stem from that conception of poetry based upon apt phrasing of logical thought. His work demonstrates that poetic technique need not be novel to be good (the verbal antecedents of his style lie in the eighteenth century). And yet, it is difficult to describe Auden's style because one of its most attractive qualities is its versatility. His two long poems, New Year Letter (1940) and The Age of Anxiety (1947), employ widely differing kinds of line.

The line of New Year Letter, as a whole the far better poem of the two, is based upon the tetrameter couplet. Auden constructs a highly successful poem out of what Williams would call the "old lumber" of rhyme, meter, generalization, and direct statement. While the poem is an argument cast as a verse letter, and thus woven out of comment and generalization,

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[16]The line of Louis O. Coxe's The Middle Passage (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1960) might also be mentioned here. It lies directly in this tradition of undecorated speech. It is even barer than Robinson's line and lacks the other poet's devices for variation; but it is nevertheless an efficient vehicle for Coxe's narrative.

its value as poetry rises from the vividness of its description and from the aptness of its phrasing (from "eloquence"), as in the following image of the skyscrapers:

> Blonde, naked, paralysed, alone,
> Like rebel angels turned to stone
> The secular cathedrals stand
> Upon their valuable land,
> Frozen forever in a lie,
> Determined always to deny
> That man is weak and has to die, . . .[17]

The shortness of the line, and the resulting rapidity with which the key sounds of the rhymes follow each other, reinforce the phrasing to produce a flavor of incisiveness and mental agility, which in turn contributes to the author's intention to persuade by disposing the reader favorably toward his argument.

In The Age of Anxiety Auden attempts a revivification of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line--with only rare success. The fault lies, not in the rhythmic, but in the verbal qualities of the line. The success of such a line depends heavily upon the nature of the words alliterated, since they automatically receive the stresses. Auden, attempting a task foreign to both modern and traditional (post-medieval) poetic sensibility, is forced to grope for words which at the same time alliterate and carry the burden of meaning in the line. The result is a strained vocabulary, often whimsical or obscure and sometimes degenerating to triviality or near-nonsense. Yet, once or twice Auden is able to demonstrate the

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[17]The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 309.

alliterative line's possibilities for flexible rhythms and varied verbal music, as in "The Dirge," which ends:

> Who will dust
> The cobwebbed kingdoms now?
> For our lawgiver lies below his people,
> Bigger bones of a better kind,
> Unwarped by their weight, as white limestone
> Under green grass,
> The grass that fades.[18]

A similar success, in meditative rather than lyric rhythms, is Rosetta's soliloquy at the end of "The Masque" (pp. 122-127).

Jeffers, as well as Robinson and Auden, bases the line of his long poems on the traditional metrical line. Yet his transformation of the archetype is greater than that of any other modern poet using this kind of line, except Winfield Townley Scott. Jeffers' line is normally of five stresses; but it is not divided into recognizable feet and can have a varying number of unaccented syllables between stresses. The words of the line take a normal prose accent; and the stresses fall according to the phrasal units of meaning within the line. A fine example of Jeffers' diction and rhythms, from Cawdor (1928), is the following:

> Pouring itself on fulfilment the eagle's passion
> Left life behind and flew at the sun, its father.
> The great unreal talons took peace for prey
> Exultantly, their death beyond death; stooped upward,
> and struck
> Peace like a white fawn in a dell of fire.[19]

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[18] The Age of Anxiety; A Baroque Eclogue (New York: Random House, 1947), p. 106.

[19] Cawdor and Other Poems (New York: Liveright, 1928), p. 117.

The fourth verse of this passage illustrates Jeffers' metric: the stresses of the line fall upon the second syllable of "exultantly," upon "death" (twice), upon the first syllable of "upward," and upon "struck." The seeming "looseness" of Jeffers' line stems from this consciously cultivated metric. It is almost a rhythmic prose engrafted upon a loose but regular pattern; and the flexibility of such a line, particularly for the conversational rhythms of dialogue, is obvious. An example, with the diction of the lines heightened by the intensity of the situation, occurs elsewhere in Cawdor. Fera, having failed to seduce Hood, defiantly describes the attempt to her husband, Hood's father:

> Then when I pressed him
> hard and set fire to his body: the heart and soul
> I never could reach, they were both stones: he took his
> hunter's knife in his hand, he made the pain
> Of the point in his flesh a servant against me. Into his
> thigh he drove it, he laughed and was lame, and triumphed,
> And limped into the darkness of death.
>
> (p. 110).

Jeffers' line normally does not show a great degree of density. His use of loose rhythms closely allied to those of prose, while increasing the flexibility of his line, also tends to make it "prosaic," too relaxed to produce the intensity necessary for poetry. If such rhythms are used, a heavy burden is placed upon the verbal qualities of the line; and Jeffers' is too often insufficiently vivid. His dialogue, for instance, while based upon flexible rhythms, exhibits a remoteness from the speaking voice which decreases its immediacy. The key to the generally prosaic nature of Jeffers' line seems to lie in his use of the too general word (coupled with the looseness of

his rhythms). Especially for those familiar with the modern poetic technique of "presentation," Jeffers' line lacks concreteness of meaning and image. One immediately notices in the first quotation the several grand abstractions: "fulfilment," "life," "death," and "peace." Too often the line lacks the articulation given by the vivid imagery of this passage; and when it does, the meaning evaporates either into a rhetorical cloud of words or into the tediousness of a too rhythmic prose masking itself as poetry. But when Jeffers' line is sufficiently concrete in moments of high intensity, he shows a mastery of the traditional grand style only rarely attained by other modern poets.

There is space here for only brief mention and a single quotation from Winfield Townley Scott's The Dark Sister (1958), primarily because its line, rhythmically, seems to be akin to that of Jeffers. It defies scanning; and yet it appears more regular than the rhythms of the line used by Pound, Eliot, and Williams. Scott's line is dense; and the presence of a metaphoric dimension in his narrative results in a line with relatively high poetic intensity. His descriptive passages are lyric; and his dialogue is pungent. The following quotation, displaying the intensity of Scott's line at its best, is a description of America at the time of the first Norse voyages:

> This Vinland
> Mixed in the shore-sands of its morning-side young Norse bones
> Their shrouding flesh fallen, all thinned to ghost,
> haunting their lost graves,

Singing of sweet dew on the printless grass
under the riding, riding sun;
No odor of man. The fields' wide silence against
the pines' keening,
And high and foreign the voices of dead Vikings bewildered
in the wind.
Lost graves and ghosts. Crossness named for Rome's
sign--the crucifix staked
Where arrow-struck Thorvold was buried--but the
sticks vanish and the grave;
The name and all the names slide into the surf
and drift off coast
Moorless and moving--sand-sunken, uncovered again--
strange--they shine like shields.[20]

The line of MacLeish's Conquistador (1932), quite unlike Scott's but equally successful, is a contemporary adaptation of terza rima, with the rhymes occurring on the final stressed syllable of each verse, and with extra unaccented syllables (never more than two between stresses) varying the rhythm. Rhythmically, MacLeish's line is as traditional in its meter as Robinson's blank verse line; its uniqueness lies in its verbal qualities.

Bernal Diaz, the narrator of the poem, through the appearance of a distorted history of New Spain composed by a comfortable priest with a "school-taught skip to his writing," is stung by its injustices into producing his own eye-witness account of those events: "That which I have myself seen and the fighting." Unlike Gomara, he cries, "I/ Fought in those battles! These were my own deeds!" Diaz' motive and stated purpose are important to understand, for MacLeish carefully moulds his line to fit the narrator of his poem. Diaz' "True History" is the forced effort of an old man, ill and about to

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[20]The Dark Sister (New York: New York U. Press, 1958), pp. 35-36.

die, at recollection and the recovery of lost sensation. Thus the first Book opens with his attempt to catch the thread of his story:

> November and warm in. . . .
> surf. . . .
> the dry winter:
>
> Palms ragged with sea-gust. . . .
> all careened with the
> Weed in the rusty chains and the keelsons splintered. . . .[21]

Sensations and images like these are the material from which the line used in Conquistador is formed. Bernal's recollections are the data of his five senses; and the line of the poem consequently is full of images, homely and usually quiet rather than startling, but always vivid and concrete. MacLeish presents the emotion-generating object, as filtered through the consciousness of the narrator, in the best Poundian manner:

> And the tall girls there were in the wind and the way of the
> Sun was under their knees and the way of the wind
> Like a hand over them: smoothing the scarves out: shaking an
>
> Odor of noon from their skirts like the odor at midday of
> Clean cloths to bleach on the water stones
> (And the butterfly opens his slow wings:) and their skin
> like the
>
> Rain's fragrance of water: . . .
>
> (Collected Poems, p. 302).

The line rarely departs from this level of sensation and image. It seldom carries a burden of conceptual thought--there is no lesson or philosophy of history in the narration--simply because Bernal does not have that kind of character. He is, or

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[21] Collected Poems; 1917-1952 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), p. 249.

was, a soldier; and his reflections on the events in New Spain appear as actions, sights, sounds, and smells. And since he was a soldier, the line with which he is made to narrate his story is simple in vocabulary, direct in phrasing, and consciously repetitive in syntax. It is not a very flexible line--it does not present the possibility for a wide range of expression; but, for the reasons just given, it was not meant to be. It has one purpose--to suit the character of Bernal Diaz by presenting sensation recollected in adversity--and this purpose it serves admirably.

The line used by Hart Crane in The Bridge (1930) also lies in the metrical tradition. Except for section III ("Cutty Sark") and small portions of section VII ("The Tunnel"), which are rhythmic, the line of the poem is cast into a variety of recognizable metrical forms. The kinds of writing in the poem are similarly varied, ranging from colloquial speech, to formal lyric, to something approaching incantation.

Yet, with all its variety, the line of The Bridge is primarily an example of what the line of the long poem should not be. At its best, it is extremely dense; it is highly charged with meanings and overtones--as in the final section of the poem, "Atlantis":

> O Thou steeled Cognizance whose leap commits
> The agile precincts of the lark's return;
> Within whose lariat sweep encinctured sing
> In single chrysalis the many twain,--
> Of stars Thou art the stitch and stallion glow
> And like an organ, Thou, with sound of doom--
> Sight, sound and flesh Thou leadest from time's realm
> As love strikes clear direction for the helm.[22]

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[22]The Collected Poems of Hart Crane, ed. Waldo Frank (New York: Liveright, 1933), p. 57.

As Chaucer would probably observe, Crane here is "enditing high style"; and it comes as a shock to realize the vehicle used is blank verse (the rhymes in the stanzas comprising this section are random). The apostrophe to Brooklyn Bridge is a fine example of Crane's rhetoric; and it does have a meaning, though the referents of some of the words are obscure. While in fairness to Crane it must be said that this stanza forms a portion of the culminating movement to his poem, the fact remains that such a line makes a poem of any length impossible. This is a valid criticism of The Bridge as a whole, despite its varied rhythms and language, because the majority of the passages in the poem have the metaphoric density of that just quoted.

Crane's line is an example of the "packed" line, or what might be called the "lyric" line characteristic of one variety of the modern short poem. Such a line is not irrelevant to the purposes of the long poem; for it can be, and often is, used for those moments of greatest intensity found in the emotional fluctuations of the long poem (as in Jeffers' description of the eagle, above). A rich meaning slowly emerges from Crane's apostrophe, but only with repeated readings; and this is but one stanza from a single section of his poem. To project this tortuous process over the entirety of a book-length poem is to realize how little continuity of meaning and emotion the packed line can give. Attention, as the reviewer Blake saw, is diverted from the section to the verse; and one has only to ask what relation

the various sections of Crane's poem bear to each other, to the theme of "America," and to the symbol of the bridge (with the resulting difficulty of answering this question) to discover how the larger meanings of the poem are lost in the lesser. The packed line is much better suited to the lesser scope of the short poem where repeated readings are possible without loss of over-all meaning; and the impressiveness with which this line has been used in modern short poems has operated to the detriment of the modern long poem, since readers have by and large become geared to its density and intensity and consequently tend to expect it in the long poem, where, as most modern poets who have written long poems realize, it is not functional.

V.

Of the three major long poems based upon varieties of the rhythmic line, Eliot's Four Quartets (1943) can be considered first. In Chapter Two Eliot's manipulation of the kinds of writing and the levels of intensity in his poem was seen to enhance its poetic quality through variation and contrast. Eliot's line, as a consequence of the structure he uses, is highly flexible, ranging from bald logical statement (as in the seemingly unpropitious first ten verses of "Burnt Norton"), through conversation and description, to clear but reverberating symbolic statement (as in the final passage of "Little Gidding"). Its range of intensity can

be illustrated by the passage following the formal lyric in section II of "East Coker," where the verses rise from the prosaic opening sentence to end with the symbolic statement, "The dancers are all gone under the hill."

The presence of several levels of intensity in the Quartets raises the question of the density of Eliot's line. Eliot's poetry here is essentially a poetry of statement, generalization, and description--it is not a poetry based on the technique of presentation, as is found in the Cantos, Paterson, or in much of Eliot's own Waste Land. Eliot, in his essay on "The Music of Poetry," states:

> Not all words, obviously, are equally rich and well-connected; it is part of the business of the poet to dispose the richer among the poorer, at the right points, and we cannot afford to load a poem too heavily with the former--for it is only at certain moments that a word can be made to insinuate the whole history of a language and a civilization. This is an 'allusiveness' which is not the fashion or eccentricity of a peculiar type of poetry; but an allusiveness which is in the nature of words, and which is equally the concern of every kind of poet.
>
> (On Poetry, p. 33).

The key phrase here is "a word can be made to insinuate the whole history of a language and a civilization"; for, what gives Eliot's line its high degree of poetic intensity is the use of such key words ("rose," "fire," "sea," "dark"--to name only a few) much in the manner of themes in a musical composition (and the title of the poem is Four Quartets). Such key words--symbols--are presented in one context and then reappear in a different context, which adds an entirely new dimension to their meaning. Reverberations are set up between the

various uses of the key word and its contexts. Thus, the key word, "fire," in "Little Gidding," is first presented as a fire of torment in the air raid scene (section II), then metamorphosed into the fire of religious purgation (section IV); and both are finally, paradoxically, blended with each other and with the rose of desire and love in the ultimate vision of God which ends the poem. It is this "allusiveness" inherent in words, coupled with Eliot's realization that the richer words must be disposed among the poorer ("and we cannot afford to load a poem too heavily with the former," as Crane does), that enable him to create a majestic, reverberating poetry from essentially direct statement and from simple, often abstract or very general, words.

Eliot's line is not the "packed" line; for it does not divert attention from the section to the individual verse. It does have a density of meaning which would be dangerous in a poem of much greater length (it is the shortest of the long poems considered here); but it also displays a continuity stemming from the simplicity of its diction and from the quietness of its imagery (unlike the startling, but impeding, images of Crane's Bridge, for instance). The continuity of Eliot's line is sufficient for the relatively short length of the poem; and this brevity is necessary because, while the reader is able to read it through continuously, there is such a wealth of meaning generated by the interweaving of key words--through Eliot's technique of orchestrating meanings--that one must return again and again to the poem to begin to

appreciate its scope. Eliot's line has that fusion of intensity and clarity which merits the designation "classic."

Pound's line in the Cantos is quite unlike Eliot's later line, though the two had a common beginning. It has less immediate clarity, looser rhythms, and a wider range of flexibility than Eliot's. The last of these is one of the finest qualities of Pound's line. In both rhythmic and verbal qualities it ranges from prose to the intensity of lyric, from conversation to image, without departing too far from speech: from what one might "say actually in life--under emotion." The fusion of this simplicity with a lyric intensity is seen in the song of somber exaltation (Canto 90) accompanying the spirit's rise toward the Castalian fountain, which forms the locus for the "paradiso" of the poem:

> from under the rubble heap
> m'elevasti
> from the dulled edge beyond pain
> m'elevasti
> out of Erebus, the deep-lying
> from the wind under the earth,
> m'elevasti
> from the dulled air and the dust,
> m'elevasti
> by the great flight,
> m'elevasti,
> Isis Kuanon
> from the cusp of the moon
> m'elevasti[23]

With this can be contrasted Pound's use of colloquial speech and conversational rhythms in the description of one of Sigismundo's campaigns (Cantos IX):

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[23]Section: Rock-Drill; 85-95 de los cantares (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 66.

> And he set up the bombards in muck down by Vada
> where nobody else could have set 'em
> and he took the wood out of the bombs
> and made 'em of two scoops of metal
> And the jobs getting smaller and smaller
> Until he signed on with Siena . . .[24]

The two quotations display the extreme versatility of Pound's rhythmic line, which, never departing far from speech and verbal simplicity, enables him to bring a greater diversity of material to bear on his theme than any other modern poet.

The mention of simplicity, when Pound's meaning is so often difficult to follow and his line apparently so discontinuous, raises the question of the suitability of this term for the poem. The fine passage opening the Pisan sequence (Canto LXXIV) illustrates that unique combination of lucidity and obscurity which inhere in Pound's line:

> The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's
> bent shoulders
> Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,
> Thus Ben and la Clara a Milano
> by the heels at Milano
> That maggots shd/ eat the dead bullock
> DIGENES, διγενές, but the twice crucified
> where in history will you find it?
> yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper,
> with a bang not with a whimper,
> To build the city of Dioce whose terraces are the
> colour of stars.
> (Cantos, p. 451).

Each verse (or group of two verses) is composed of simple words, lucid in themselves; the obscurity of the passage lies in its allusiveness. When one discovers that the dream refers to the new social order in Italy, that Manes is the Persian

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[24] The Cantos of Ezra Pound (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 41.

prophet with whom Mussolini is being identified, that the Possum is Eliot, and that the remainder of this verse refers to Eliot's "Hollow Men" with its refrain of "This is the way the world ends"--when these referents behind the words are clear, then the passage becomes an intensely moving commentary on the dissolution of Pound's world.

Pound's line is allusive in the same way that Milton's is, though its range of allusion is much wider.[25] It is the rapid juxtaposition of such bewilderingly various, often highly topical, allusions which often makes his line so unintelligible and which is continually interrupting the flow of meaning and emotion in the poem. Pound's line does lack continuity (as does Crane's)--yet not because it is the "packed" line. Its obscurity stems from its allusiveness; but once the references are traced and understood, this same initial obscurity is what helps provide the high charge of poetic intensity in his line. If one is willing to undertake the effort of clarifying the allusions (and a poet is not required to write down to his audience), larger and larger segments of the Cantos become clear, the careful interweaving of motifs up through the most recent sections of the poem (much in the manner of Eliot's use of key words in the

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[25]There is another parallel to Milton, which makes the passage even more moving. Pound's situation here is similar to that of Milton in the Restoration. Pound, too, in his own (to us) quixotic way, was attempting to build "the city of Dioce" on earth, only to see it crumble about his ears.

Quartets) becomes more apparent, and the general movement of the poem begins to unfold.

Pound's line provides less immediate clarity than that found in any other long poem considered here; yet it also carries in it the possibilities for a poetic intensity of meaning--for anyone sensitive to the tremendous variety of material for which it is the vehicle (and this is what places the poem in a higher category of achievement than The Bridge)--ultimately surpassing even that found in the Quartets. The Cantos catches an entire world; and the reader's effort at understanding should be somehow commensurate with the poem's scope.

The final example of the modern line occurs in Paterson (1951; Book Five, 1958). The verbal qualities of Williams' line rise primarily from his conception of the "local"; while its rhythmic qualities stem from his conception of the "variable" foot. In a letter to Richard Eberhart, written just after the completion of the first four Books of Paterson, Williams illustrates what he means by his variable foot or relative measure. He sets down the following verses:

(1) The smell of the heat is boxwood
(2) when rousing us
(3) a movement of the air
(4) stirs our thoughts
(5) that had no life in them
(6) to a life, a life in which . . .
(Letters, p. 326).

He tells Eberhart to count a single beat to each numeral, adding that over the whole poem such phrasing gives a pattern to the meter which can be felt as a new measure. "It gives resources

to the ear which result in a language which we hear spoken about us every day." Williams' "single beat" refers to time duration; and this is the constant giving the pattern of regularity underlying the varying number of accents and syllables within the phrase. The longer the phrase, the more rapid the reading; the shorter, the slower--or, more significantly, the longer the silences surrounding it. As so often with Pound's line, the typography aids intonation and phrasing (in the example above the numerals 1-3 and 4-6 each represent a single full "line"). Williams' relative measure is more regular than Pound's kind of rhythmic line but has a much greater capability for variation than the traditional metrical line. It is, in fact, an attempt at fusion of the two.

In another letter, Williams states that the passage prompting his "solution to the problem of modern verse," as he calls it, occurs in Book II of Paterson. It contains the following verses:

> With evening, love wakens
> though its shadows
> which are alive by reason
> of the sun shining--
> grow sleepy now and drop away
> from desire
> Love without shadows stirs now
> beginning to waken
> as night
> advances.[26]

The passage is a particularly fine example of Williams' manipulation of the pace of his phrasing and the silences

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[26] Paterson (New York: New Directions, 1951), pp. 96-97.

between the phrases. The marked retardation in the second sentence is admirable and is primarily a result of the shortening of the "foot" (phrase) within the regular pattern of duration set by the initial phrase of the quotation.

Another passage illustrates the verbal qualities of Williams' line--his emphasis upon the uniqueness of the "thing itself." The full line here has four units, more regular but shorter than in the example quoted above:

> An iron dog, eyes
> aflame in a flame-filled corridor. A drunkenness
> of flames. So be it. A bottle, mauled
> by the flames, belly-bent with laughter:
> yellow, green. So be it--of drunkenness
> survived, in guffaws of flame. All fire afire!
> (p. 142).

The iron dog and the bottle, commonplace objects not particularly amenable to poetry, are vividly presented--first seen for themselves and then for their participation in the exultation produced by fire sweeping the stale and the rigid from the world. Williams' line is less metaphoric than either Pound's or Eliot's; it follows speech rhythms more closely, its vocabulary is less assuming, and its images rise from a homelier, more mundane sphere. At its best, it transmutes the "local"--the world within reach of the five senses in daily life, as Williams expresses it--to the intensity of poetry.

Williams' line is extremely lucid, composed of simple elements; and yet it too is obscure and tends to lack continuity. Its obscurity rises from the same source as that found in the lines of Pound and Eliot--the referent behind

the word; and the thread of meaning and emotion in Paterson is even more difficult to retain because, based as it is upon thematic structure, there is no "binding matter," no use of key words or phrases as in Eliot's and Pound's poems, to aid the reader in fusing the individual passage with the larger scope of the poem. Thus, the line of Paterson, for all its simplicity of diction, its richness of rhythm, and its vividness of presentation, has even less continuity than the line found in either the Cantos or the Quartets.

Indeed, the basic problem exhibited by all three major poems based on the rhythmic line is one of continuity. The line used in all three is obviously capable of a great degree of poetic intensity--of a high density of meaning; it is, in each case, capable of great flexibility in handling the levels of intensity present in the long poem through the variety of its rhythms; but in each case it is based upon the presupposition of successive readings of the poem. Great poetry obviously is not to be digested in a single reading; nevertheless, it does present enough immediate clarity (at least judged by earlier examples in the tradition of literature in English) as to urge the reader to return to the poem. Pound, Eliot, and Williams, in their effort to charge their lines--and thus their poems--with meaning, come dangerously close to losing that minimum of immediate clarity necessary for the reader to proceed to the end of the poem with that sufficient apprehension of its worth which makes him want to reread it again and again.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAGNITUDE AND SUBJECT:

THE SEARCH FOR SIGNIFICANCE

> Any radical change in poetic form is likely to
> be the symptom of some very much deeper change
> in society and the individual.
> Eliot, The Use of Poetry.

> By nineteen twenty the thin ice of belief
> Had cracked and given way. The figure-skater
> Of rime had sunk beneath the lake, and art
> Took on a deep and submarine aspect.
> Shapiro, Essay on Rime.

I.

How does the long poem attain magnitude and, in particular, what kinds of subject are chosen by poets to provide a significance commensurate with the length of their poems? Structure and line are both formal problems of ordering and intensification, matters of technique. Magnitude, on the other hand, is primarily a matter of the depth and scope--the significance--of that in the poet's experience which he feels merits ordering and intensification. It concerns his subject or theme, whether this be an action, a personality, or a system of ideas and attitudes; and it derives from the complex of values, drawn from experience, which requires the elaboration

of structure and the flexibility of line discussed in the previous two chapters.

Marianne Moore described the long poem as a capacious treatment of large themes--those embodying more than one climax and requiring the subordination of distinct parts of the design to the whole. And a Victorian reviewer had asserted the first condition of a long poem is a widely and durably significant subject. The "capacious treatment of large themes" or the "widely and durably significant subject" are what provide the long poem (as opposed to the short) with its peculiar magnitude. Whereas the short poem represents a single peak of intensity or a moment of experience (whether stemming from an incident, idea, emotion, or image), the long poem embodies both a greater diversity of the elements of experience and a fuller articulation of the rhythms and patterns uniting those elements. In fact, the theme or subject of long poems of the widest scope--like those of Homer, Dante, Milton, or Pound--is such that these poems form an entire "art-world"; they become the poet's "vision of reality"; and they somehow reflect a majority of those values which make human experience significant. The human desire for significance drawn from such complexity of detail and for coherence on such a scale is the perennial justification for the long poem.

Since its magnitude requires that it render the larger themes of human experience--the current reaches of consciousness--the modern long poem forms an excellent mirror for the reflection of the modern temper. But more importantly, the

modern temper helps determine the kinds of comprehensive values underlying the contemporary long poem: it determines the poet's choice of a significant subject. Since the American poetic renaissance, one of the most difficult problems facing poets has been the discovery of coherent themes of sufficient magnitude to justify treatment in long form. And those themes which are embodied in long poems, far from rendering received values, reflect a widespread search for significance and value.

This chapter will explore some of the factors inhibiting the attainment of magnitude as well as the characteristic kind of significant subject chosen for existing long poems. There will be a consideration of the decay of belief; of current conceptions regarding the function of the poet as custodian of language and poetry as a form of knowledge; and of the effects of the current re-examination of these functions upon the magnitude and kind of subject found in the long poem. These discussions will again be based primarily upon critical statements of poets who have written long poems and will be followed by an examination of the poems themselves in these terms.

II.

The fundamental factor conditioning the modern temper is the decay of the traditional system of values and belief. The synthesis attained by fusing the theological and ethical

values of Christianity with the artistic and political values of the Greco-Roman world has largely disintegrated in the twentieth century. And if the Renaissance in one sense was a liberation, it also began the process of fragmentation which now characterizes the contemporary world. Religion, in particular, as a vital force in modern society, has been replaced by Science; and the universal language is no longer Latin, but mathematics. Since the struggle between faith and doubt first became acute during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the balance has dipped steadily in favor of doubt, until now a commitment to the former system of belief and values, like Eliot's or Auden's, is a rather startling phenomenon. The cumulative effect of movements signified by the names of Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein has overwhelmed the traditional system. This radical transformation can be viewed either as fortunate or unfortunate, as a matter merely of change or as a matter of downright decay. Important here is the variety of attitudes exhibited by writers of long poems toward this situation. If artists are the antennae of the race, as Pound claims, modern poets will be aware of these profound changes. Few fail to be deeply affected by the decay of the old values.

Tate has declared the long poem impossible in the modern period because the age has no epos, myth, or code to unify the action of such a poem. His thesis is disproved by the several long poems already considered; yet his awareness of the decline in belief is widely reflected in critical

comments by writers of those very long poems. Eliot's is the first name to occur in this connection. In a statement in "The Social Function of Poetry" presupposing a dissolution of traditional values in the contemporary world, Eliot declares:

> Much has been said everywhere about the decline of religious belief; not so much notice has been taken of the decline of religious sensibility. The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God and man as they did. A belief in which you no longer believe is something which to some extent you can still understand; but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless.[1]

One of the wider significances of Eliot's poetry, and of the Four Quartets in particular, is his attempt to prevent such loss in the religious portion of the spectrum of human feeling.

In "What is a Classic?" Eliot connects this restriction of religious sensibility, which he finds increasingly characteristic of English poetry from the eighteenth century on, with an inevitable growth of provinciality resulting from loss of belief--"the provinciality which indicates the disintegration of Christendom, the decay of a common belief and a common culture." The modern age is one of uncertainty, one bewildered by new sciences, and one in which little can be taken for granted as common beliefs, assumptions, and background for all readers of poetry. Eliot's view echoes Donne's cry: "And new Philosophy calls all in doubt." At the beginning of his career, Eliot had felt the past had deceived modern man and

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[1] On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 25. Subsequently referred to as On Poetry.

one might as well accept the worthless present; and though he was later to find renewed meaning in the values of the past, for him, change remains closely identified with decay.[2]

Williams, the third of that triumvirate whose names are inextricably linked in contemporary American poetic history, also testifies to the disintegration of belief. "Our lives," he says, "have lost all that in the past we had to measure them by, except outmoded standards that are meaningless to us." And he adds elsewhere, "With the industrial revolution, and steadily since then, a new spirit--a new Zeitgeist has possessed the world, and as a consequence new values have replaced the old, aristocratic concepts." But, unlike Eliot and Pound, Williams does not equate the changes sweeping the modern world with its dissolution. He finds new values taking the place of the older; he accepts the daily world about him. His delight in his immediate environment--an attitude at the heart of his poetic--is one of the points at which he differs most from Eliot and Pound.

The problem of the decay of the old and the search for the new, however, appears most vividly in the criticism of two other poets, neither of whom is a member of the dominant "modernist" movement in poetry. The first, another of the

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[2]Pound's attitude toward the problem of belief is similar. In Guide to Kulchur (London: Owen, 1938), he makes a characteristic comment: "'Belief' as the pious once used the term is alien to our age" (p. 26). His work rests on this assumption, which necessitates what he calls a "new Paideuma"--a new synthesis of values.

saeculum mirabile born in the 1870s and 1880s, is Conrad Aiken. Like Robinson and Jeffers, also peripheral figures if one's conception of poetry is based only on the values of the dominant movement, Aiken consistently writes long poems. He is also a practical critic, a reviewer; and the selection of his reviews, along with several more theoretical essays, collected in A Reviewer's ABC display him as one of the most sensitive of modern poet-critics.[3] Aiken is far from being a "traditionalist" poet--it was he who carried the manuscript of Eliot's "Prufrock" to Europe and ultimately to Pound and it was he who, three decades earlier than Eliot's **Quartets** and "The Music of Poetry," was exploring the possibilities of "symphonic form" in several long poems (now collected as The Divine Pilgrim) and in a review of his own work in 1919. His insistence upon the musical and suggestive qualities of language (the "iridescent word" so anathema to Pound) separates him from the "modernist" movement and causes his work to be less well-known than it might be.

As a young man, Aiken says in the preface to his ABC, he was probing "the roots of things" in the light of the new psychology and "adumbrating a possible post-Darwinian weltanschauung." Later in the book (in "The Future of Poetry," 1931), he aptly catches the mood of most modern poets faced by the decay of old values--though he himself goes on, like Williams and others, to accept the modern world and install the poet at its center:

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[3]One need only cite his excellent review of The Waste Land in 1923 (pp. 176-181 of the ABC).

> We are complex creatures living in a kind of chaos. We live and die by question. What certainties we are born with do not survive us; our faiths are doubtful, our doubts are almost of necessity faiths. If we are good animals, we are courageous in this world of flux, and immensely enjoy it; we can learn, if we are intelligent and sensitive, to enjoy even our suffering. And it is the poet, in this situation, from whom we can learn most. It is he who is equipped to dive with full consciousness into this splendid Gehenna. We do not want him any longer to prettify, whether it be a sunset or a flower or a man's sense of evil. What we want from him is intensity, both in the analytic and affective parts of language; a complete honesty in seeing life as a kaleidoscopic series of incandescent instants--sometimes apparently meaningless, sometimes profound; that he should be religious, without religion; skeptic, without dogma; and should have tasted truth in all its inconsistencies of form.[4]

It was from this perspective that Aiken, a few years earlier, had considered the effect decay of belief had had on the long poem. Reviewing Eliot's poetry in 1927, he says,

> It has been often enough, perhaps too often said, of late, that the almost fatal difficulty which confronts the poet nowadays is the difficulty of finding a theme which might be worth his power. If he be potentially a "major" poet, this difficulty is thought to be particularly formidable, if not actually crippling; . . .
>
> (ABC, p. 182).

Eliot is partly responsible for this view, Aiken claims, through his essay on Blake in The Sacred Wood. There Eliot had called Blake a potential major poet who failed because he lacked a prepared or traditional cosmology or mythology sufficient to release his great imaginative power. Aiken disagrees. Admitting a tradition of some sort can greatly aid a poet, he urges an alternative view: the great poet is one who can find, at any given moment, a theme sufficient for the proper exercise

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[4] A Reviewer's ABC; Collected Criticism of Conrad Aiken, ed. Rufus A. Blanshard (New York: Meridian, 1958), p. 82. Subsequently referred to as ABC.

of his strength. He is thus skeptical of the "wail" of contemporary criticism that poetry can find nothing to cling to; and, for him, Pound and Eliot--the latter conspicuously sharing the feeling that there are no "large" themes for the poet--are typical victims of this view. Aiken, far from being dismayed by decay of traditional values, finds in the search for new values an exhilarating challenge.

The position of Karl Shapiro, a member of that "middle generation" of modern American poets obscured by its elders, is similar to Aiken's. His recent collection of essays, In Defense of Ignorance,[5] is a savage and sometimes rather incoherent attack on the poetry of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and Auden--poets whom he groups together as "culture poets." In their search for values to replace those decaying, these poets have become propagandists for various cultural substitutes for religion, to the detriment of their poetry and, through their wide influence, to that of poetry in general. Their poems are too literary, too rationalistic, too much the vehicle of opinion; they lack a free flow of emotion.

The assumption underlying Shapiro's recent book is explicit in his earlier long poem, the Essay on Rime (1945). This too had been a challenge to the prevailing style of poetry (and perhaps a lack of support for this challenge during the fifteen intervening years is what makes the tone of the later essays so insistent). One of the three sections

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[5]New York: Random House, 1960. Subsequently referred to as In Defense.

of the Essay is devoted to "The Confusion in Belief"; and Shapiro's major point, like Aiken's (who termed the poem a "watershed of modern criticism), is that the dissolution of traditional values need not be inimical to poetry. Indeed, one of the fundamental symptoms of the "sickness" of modern poetry, in Shapiro's eyes, is the poets' tenet that belief is "the tap-root of art." "Thus," he says,

> not the failure in belief disturbs
> Our rime, but our concern, anxiety
> And anguished desperation at this failure.[6]

Shapiro concludes that, while man is a believing being, a lack of faith does not preclude the success of the civilized, the secular, and even the profane in art (vs. 1499-1504). Current confusion arises primarily from equating the poet's belief with his imagination (as Aiken thought Eliot did in the latter's note on Blake); whereas the true poet can imagine his own "art-world," with its own values, apart from a community of belief.

These comments of the poets show their deep concern over the effect decay of the traditional system of values has had on the writing of poetry. Some (especially Williams, Aiken, and Shapiro) deplore this effect, accepting the vitality of the modern world and assuming emerging values are sufficient to replace those decaying; but all acknowledge the relevance of the struggle for, and variety of, belief to poetry. With the decay of religion and the rise of science, modern poets

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[6] Essay on Rime (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1945), vs. 1542-44.

have been forced into a re-examination of basic values. In particular, they have had to re-examine the functions of the poet and of poetry.

III.

One of the major effects of the decay of belief, and the resulting re-examination of the function of poetry, is a distrust of general ideas or universals. "The Twentieth century," Louis O. Coxe said, "has learned to dislike abstractions as the result of being badly treated by them." For many modern poets the effect of this dislike has been the exiling of ideas from poetry. Thus, Eliot says general ideas are now considered to be the province of prose.[7] It is this attitude which helps make the reaction of modern poets toward Victorian literature so violent, since much of the poetry of that age had attempted to deal with experience in terms of such general ideas. Pound goes further than Eliot. "From the Elizabethans to Swinburne," he says, "through all that vast hiatus, English poetry had been the bear-garden of doctrinaires. It had been the 'vehicle' of opinion." And Williams similarly declares that writing, to be most useful to humanity, must stay art and not attempt to be "science, philosophy, history, the humanities, or anything else it has been made to carry in the past."

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[7] The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), p. 152. Subsequently referred to as The Use of Poetry.

In conjunction with their exiling of ideas from poetry, Pound, Eliot, and Williams develop an almost "mystical" conception of language. The poet's duty toward society lies neither in direct social action, nor in the advocation of certain views or attitudes, nor even in the poetic expression of general or significant ideas, but rather in keeping the means of expression--the language--vital and accurate. Adherents of this view find a rather awe-inspiring power for good or evil in language; and it is through his custodianship of the means of expression that the modern poet finds his niche in society.

Thus Pound, in "How to Read," considers the function of literature in the state and concludes its value lies in maintaining precision and clarity of thought. Literature, he vehemently asserts, is not meant to persuade or coerce acceptance of any given opinion. Rather, it

> has to do with the clarity and vigour of 'any and every' thought and opinion. It has to do with maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself. . . . the individual cannot think and communicate his thought, the governor and legislator cannot act effectively or frame his laws, without words, and the solidity and validity of these words is in the care of the damned and despised litterati. When their work goes rotten--by that I do not mean when they express indecorous thoughts--but when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the wnole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot.[8]

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[8] Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 21.

The almost awesome power of the Word is clear in the dire results predicted for society should the "litterati" fail in precise application of word to thing. It is this conception of the poet's duty, coupled with Pound's observation that a civilization was built on Homer, which led Shapiro to remark, with amusement and perception, that Pound was trying to save civilization with a poem.

Eliot shares Pound's conception of the power of language. He finds a chaos of language one of the many kinds of disorder besetting the modern world and asserts that responsibility for preservation of language lies with the poets. In "The Social Function of Poetry," he says:

> We may say that the duty of the poet, as poet, is only indirectly to his people: his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve. In expressing what other people feel he is also changing the feeling by making it more conscious; he is making people more aware of what they feel already, and therefore teaching them something about themselves.
>
> (On Poetry, p. 20).

The poet is not merely more conscious than other people but, through his individuality, is able to discover new variations of sensibility which others can appropriate. By virtue of his ability to express these variations, he develops and enriches his language. "Unless we have those few men," Eliot concludes--and here again the dedication to language becomes almost mystical--"who combine an exceptional

sensibility with an exceptional power over words, our own ability, not merely to express, but even to feel any but the crudest emotions, will degenerate" (p. 21).[9]

Williams, too, in his own more enthusiastic but less systematic way, holds the view of the modern poet as custodian of language. "It's the words," he exclaims at one point, "the words we need to get back to, words washed clean." He, too, wants a regeneration of the processes of clean thinking and feeling. His part in developing this conception of language is important because his comments most explicitly connect it with problems of magnitude and values in the long poem.[10] Reviewing Pound's first thirty Cantos, Williams suggests where the locus of values in a poem should reside:

> It is in the minutiae--in the minute organization of the words and their relationships in a composition that the seriousness and value of a work of writing exist--not in the sentiments, ideas, schemes portrayed.[11]

He elsewhere boldly asserts that a poet who begins to devote himself to the subject matter of his poems has reached the end of his poetic means. And the attitude reaches extreme and

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[9]The specter in "Little Gidding" says:

> ". . . our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
> To purify the dialect of the tribe
> And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight, . . ."
> (p. 141).

[10]The connection is also inherent in Eliot's early statement that the meaning of Pound's Cantos did not particularly interest him.

[11]Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 109. Subsequently referred to as Essays.

rather startling expression in a letter written during the composition of Paterson: "Almost everything I do is of no more interest to me than the technical addition it makes toward the discovery of a workable metric in the new mode.[12]

The point is that, due to the dissolution of traditional belief and values, the distrust of abstractions and the resultant exiling of general ideas from poetry, and the development of the conception of poet as custodian of language, many contemporary poets, among them the most influential, have come to concentrate their efforts on the technical values of poetry. Viewing the primary duty of the poet to be toward his language, these poets have striven to manipulate language, to develop it as a communicative medium, not to the exclusion, but often to the detriment, of the "human" values or the significance inherent in the subject matter receiving ordering and intensification.

A second tendency concerns the function of poetry. Poetry is viewed as a form of knowledge or as a unique way of apprehending reality and given an epistemological emphasis. This view is also a consequence of the decay of belief. The distrust of traditional universals was seen leading to the exiling of general ideas from poetry, and resulted in the enhanced importance of technique. This same uncertainty, with only a slight shift in emphasis, becomes a distrust of

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[12] The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams, ed. John C. Thirwall (New York: MacDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 287. Subsequently referred to as Letters.

abstraction--and of modern science, in particular. Consequently, poetry is emphasized as a means of knowledge alternative or supplementary to that of modern science. Unlike science, its knowledge is intuitive, rising from the non- or super-rational element in human experience; and its truths are subjective, emotional, extra-logical.

This is the conception of poetry which, in the eyes of modern poets, gives it stature in a world of dissolving values. As a form of knowledge, it is associated both with discovery and with refreshment of perception. Williams, for instance, observes in a letter that "The nascent instincts are the feelers into new territory."[13] Their large importance in the modern world, he implies, results from the relative uselessness of deductive reasoning at a time when men--and the poet in particular--are seeking the basic values to deduce from.

Aiken shares this attitude in his description of poets as "the advance guard who explore or invent new hinterlands, which the rest of mankind adopts and validates as it can and will." And in "The Future of Poetry," he elaborates the function of poetry as discovery of new knowledge:

> Poetry has always kept easily abreast with the utmost man can do in extending the horizon of his consciousness, whether outward or inward. It has always been the most flexible, the most comprehensive, the most far-seeing, and hence the most successful, of the modes by which he has accepted the new in experience, realized it, and adjusted himself to it.

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[13]A comment similar to Pound's "Artists are the antennae of the race."

. . .

> But if poetry is to accomplish this, in any age, it must think: it must embody the full consciousness of man at that given moment. It can not afford to lag behind the explorations of knowledge, whether of the inner or outer worlds: these it is its business to absorb and transmute.
>
> (ABC, p. 80).

Poetry must be co-terminous with the limits of human consciousness; and in accomplishing its purpose it must help explore and assimilate the novel in experience.

Poetry as a form of knowledge is also central to Eliot's mature definition of its function. In "The Social Function of Poetry," he observes certain common elements in the various kinds of poetry:

> There is always the communication of some new experience, or some fresh understanding of the familiar, or the expression of something we have experienced but have no words for, which enlarges our consciousness or refines our sensibility.
>
> (On Poetry, p. 18).

There is a kind of poetry which attempts to extend the confines of the human consciousness and to report of things unknown. "The poet," as he says elsewhere, "is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist."

Finally, in the earlier Use of Poetry, Eliot had cast his definition in a form relating poetry more directly to a way of seeing. It

> may effect revolutions in sensibility such as are periodically needed; may help to break up the conventional modes of perception and valuation which are perpetually forming, and make people see the world afresh, or some new part of it.
>
> (p. 155).

Here explicitly (and it is implicit in the later definition) is a conception of poetry relating it to the refreshment of perception and valuation.

In this view Eliot has strange allies. Williams, one with little but antagonism for Eliot, also conceives of poetry as the revivification of experience. Thus, in an essay on a minor poet, Williams praises Charles Henri Ford's use of certain techniques because they

> revive the senses and force them to re-see, re-hear, re-taste, re-smell and generally revalue all that it was believed had been seen, heard, and smelled and generally valued. By this means poetry has always put a finger upon reality.
>
> (Essays, p. 235).

In the collection of observations called "What is Not Poetry," Shapiro similarly asserts, "Poetry is a way of seeing things, not a way of saying things." What the poet sees, he explains, is not the "imaginary" but what others have forgotten how to see--he strips away the veils covering the world and shows us his reality (In Defense, p. 274).

Poetry as a form of knowledge thus has two major functions. In enlarging consciousness and refining sensibility, it, on the one hand, discovers, probes, and articulates new experience, and on the other, it refreshes and revivifies old or habitual experience. In contrast to the procedure of modern science, which moves by logical means from the individual to the general and from the concrete to the abstract, poetry seeks to intuitively apprehend and represent human experience in its concreteness and variety, discovering

significance, not by abstracting elements common to a series of particulars, but by displaying their uniqueness as individuals in the common human environment.[14] It is this conception of poetry, as a form of knowledge alternative and supplementary to science, which gives it a serious and necessary position in the modern world--and which justifies the close and prolonged study required to understand it.

IV.

One effect of the decay of belief, and the consequent distrust of universals, is a reduction in the number of long poems attempted in the modern period. The prevalence of the doctrine that "long form" is difficult or impossible in the modern period has already been demonstrated. Absence of a settled system of values and a community of belief is thought to inhibit attainment of the magnitude necessary for a long poem, since no one adhering to this doctrine is certain any longer just what constitutes the subject significant enough for "capacious" treatment. This is particularly true of anyone sharing Pound's and Eliot's initial revulsion toward the modern world. It is even more true of those who also share the technical goals of these two poets. Of the several long poems considered here, only those of Pound and Eliot--with

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[14] This must have been the distinction that Ransom had in mind when he gave his first major critical work the title of The World's Body. His criticism will become relevant in Chapter Five in connection with the problem of the long versus the short poem.

Williams' Paterson an important third--are based primarily upon the "modernist" technique, though the poetry employing this technique is considered the dominant influence today. The large majority of modern long poems--by Robinson, Jeffers, Aiken, Auden, and others--attain magnitude through means other than those used by Pound, Eliot, and Williams. It thus seems quite possible to conclude that most modern poets laboring under the double burden of having to reconstruct a new system of values as well as regenerate the means of poetic expression feel unequal to the task of ordering and intensifying experience on the scale required by the nature of the long poem.

The double burden of the modern poet is reflected in the two conceptions--of poet as custodian of language and poetry as a form of knowledge--developed to cope with that burden. While neither doctrine need necessarily inhibit the attainment of magnitude, both in practice tend to do just this. The exiling of ideas from poetry plays a great part in the development of both conceptions; and yet it is the larger configurations--the patterning and systemization--of such ideas, now felt to be discredited, which give older long poems their magnitude and significance. Modern poets turn from such ideas toward the development of their medium, on the one hand, and toward the development of perception, on the other. The emphasis begins to fall, perhaps not consciously or by intention, upon the component rather than upon the whole, or that whole becomes a thing of lesser magnitude.

Thus, the conception of the poet as custodian of language gives rise to the revolution in poetic technique; and the new emphasis can be seen in Pound's dicta requiring precision of expression, exact presentation, and concentration of effect, or in Williams' similar pronouncements that there are no ideas except in things and that an object's value lies in its uniqueness rather than in its relationships with other objects. Such tenets force the poet holding them to concentrate his attention on the smaller (not necessarily "lesser") components of poetry, such as the image, the phrase, the rhythm, the individual verse, or the individual perception. The result is poetry of greater intricacy and subtlety, of finer nuances of meaning, and of lesser scope. This is hardly detrimental to poetry--except as it affects its magnitude. The attempt to recreate poetic language is so complete, and is undertaken with such intensity, that it seems next to impossible to make that recreation successful for an extended period. That Pound, Eliot, and Williams <u>have</u> essentially succeeded in this attempt is--far from being a contradiction of this judgment--a tribute to their capability as poets. Of all who share the goals of their technical revolution, they alone have succeeded on a large scale. Even then, Eliot's poem is barely over a thousand lines in length; Pound's has been half a century in the making; and all three present the reader with great difficulties in following the larger configurations of meaning.

If the conception of poet as custodian of language, with its resulting emphasis of technique, tends to inhibit poets from constructing in long form, a parallel inhibition results from the conception of poetry as a way of seeing. In the Essay on Rime, Shapiro asks,

> Finally how
> Has poetry as the vision of the soul
> Descended to the poetry of sensation,
> And that translated to the perceptive kind,
> Evolved into the poetry of ideas?
> (vs. 1895-99).

While one quarrels with the final verse, Shapiro does describe the results of this conception of poetry. Much modern poetry is perceptual and sensational, since as 'seer' (in the new sense) the poet attempts to discover the new in experience and to refresh the old. Emphasis falls on the smaller components of experience--the individual perceptions, sensations, and insights. With traditional ideas discredited, the poet moves behind or below them to the level of perception--to the raw data of experience--from which all ideas are generalized or abstracted. The aim implicit in the attempt is formation of a new pattern of generalizations (to eventually become a system of belief, perhaps, or at least a "working model" giving significance to the contemporary world) based upon new perceptions.

But most modern poets are still essentially in the stage of reviewing the data of perception; the larger configurations, apart from personal syntheses, have not yet appeared; and it is somewhere among these larger configurations

of human experience that the poet must discover the widely and durably significant subject required by the magnitude of the long poem. As Aiken saw, the great poet, faced with such conditions, builds and articulates his own synthesis--and the contemporary period has at least one candidate for such eminence--but, on the whole, modern poets continue to grope for significance.

V.

The two factors inhibiting construction of long poems also cause a shift in the kind of values one can expect to find in existing long poems. On the one hand, the revolution in technique produces an emphasis on "formal" values, which tend to become ends in themselves (a tendency seen in its extreme form in the comments of Williams). But more importantly, there is a shift in the locus of "human" values. The movement is away from general ideas toward perceptions and from traditionally accepted significance to a search for significance. This search does, in fact, itself become the basic kind of "value" giving significance to the majority of contemporary long poems, including those by poets whose conception of poetry differs widely from that held by the instigators of the modern poetic revolution. The kinds of significant subject found in these poems fall into two large categories, depending upon whether or not some system of belief is important to the poem.

Of the poets whose long poems rest upon some system of belief, the most obvious is Eliot. His solution to the problem is a return to the traditional system of values; and, in fact, his important poems through the years have exhibited the stages of his progress from the Unreal City toward the Eternal City. The Four Quartets is a probing, in the characteristically contemporary introspective way, of the relationship of the individual consciousness to time and the timeless; the poem is one of faith and acceptance elaborated in terms of Christian values. In this poem Eliot has not changed his conception of the modern world as one in a process of dissolution. In "East Coker," he says:

> There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
> And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
> That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
> For us, there is only the trying.[15]

But he has, since The Waste Land, found means to transcend it by his choice of the religious solution. There is no "problem" of belief at the end of "Little Gidding":

> And all shall be well and
> All manner of thing shall be well
> When the tongues of flame are in-folded
> Into the crowned knot of fire
> And the fire and the rose are one.
> (p. 145).

Following Eliot in this solution is one whose poetic technique lies at the opposite extreme. Auden's New Year Letter and The Age of Anxiety are both somber anatomies of the

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[15] The Complete Poems and Plays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 128.

chaotic contemporary world. The earlier poem displays a tone bordering on resignation or despair:

> We know no fuss or pain or lying
> Can stop the moribund from dying,
> That all the special tasks begun
> By the Renaissance have been done.[16]

But in the later poem, the choice of Christian values, only latent in New Year Letter, is clear. Resolution comes through Christian love and the mercy of God, whom Auden calls

> That Always-Opposite which is the whole subject
> Of our not-knowing, yet from no necessity
> Condescended to exist and to suffer death
> And, scorned on a scaffold, ensconced in His life
> The human household.[17]

We are still God's children, Auden concludes, who, in our "mad unbelief," "wait unawares for His world to come."

Both Auden and Eliot eventually find the modern world comprehensible in terms of the traditional system of belief. It is significant, however, that out of the more than thirty long poems forming the present "canon" (and written by some eighteen authors), only three are based upon a Christian perspective. The remainder find significance outside this system of values.

One poet whose several long poems depend upon a system of belief not traditional is Jeffers. Like Robinson, he is chary of critical comments about poetry--which is unfortunate, since both he and Robinson are poets whose criticism could

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[16] The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 301.

[17] The Age of Anxiety; A Baroque Eclogue (New York: Random House, 1947), p. 137.

help give perspective to the dominant movement initiated by Pound. He does write an occasional preface, however; and in one (to the Modern Library edition of his early poems) he dissociates himself from the entire "modernist" school. Contemporary poets, he says, following Mallarmé, attempt to divorce poetry from reason and ideas and bring it nearer music. In the movement led by Pound, every advance requires the elimination of some aspect of reality.[18] In a similar foreword to the Selected Poetry (1938), Jeffers adds that poetry must reclaim substance and sense, physical and psychological reality. This realization, he says,

> led me to write narrative poetry, and to draw subjects from contemporary life; to present aspects of life that modern poetry had generally avoided; and to attempt the expression of philosophic and scientific ideas in verse. It was not in my mind to open new fields of poetry, but only to reclaim old freedom.[19]

Jeffers consciously attempts to base his poems on "philosophic and scientific ideas"--those ideas exiled by the majority of modern poets--and their systemization results in his philosophy of "inhumanism." In the long perspective of time, and in a universe whose values lie outside the human species, mankind is unimportant. Voicing an attitude implicit in his long poems, Jeffers concludes the short poem, "Orca," with these somber words:

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[18]Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems (New York: Random House, 1935), pp. viii-ix.

[19]The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers (New York: Random House, 1938), p. xiv.

> The earth is a star, its human element
> Is what darkens it. War is evil, the peace will be evil,
> cruelty is evil; death is not evil. But the breed of man
> Has been queer from the start. It looks like a botched
> experiment that has run wild and ought to be stopped.[20]

The tormented characters of Jeffers' narratives--Tamar's family, the Gores, the household of Cawdor--writhe in the throes of their passions for a time and then vanish, leaving the world unaffected by their intensity.

Pound is another example of the personal synthesis; but in this case the synthesis and the poem are one. The Cantos is not only his vision of reality but also his program for a new, secular synthesis of belief valid, in Pound's eyes, for the entire Western world. Like Kung in Canto XIII, Pound can say:

> 'The blossoms of the apricot
> blow from the east to the west,
> 'And I have tried to keep them from falling.'[21]

This is perhaps the main reason for the evangelical, pedagogic, hortatory tone of the poem. And while Pound's tendency in the later cantos to cite chapter and verse becomes a blemish in the poem, the conception underlying those citations is central to its purpose. Pound, in constructing his blueprint for civilization, turns to the past for documents and patterns of achievement which are still valid for the modern world. Hence his use of translations and quotations, his "biographies" of historical personalities, and his histories of eras in

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[20] The Double Axe and Other Poems (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 144.

[21] The Cantos of Ezra Pound (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 64.

which, as he once said, civilization achieves a sort of maximum before receiving a setback. He attempts to exhibit within the broad confines of his poem the lucid moments of a mad world. His sensibility, like Eliot's, hurt by the dissolution of the modern world, he contrasts in his poem the best of the past with the worst of the present; and his attack on that dissolution is savage in the context of his references to the first World War and poignantly personal in that of the second.

The large configurations of the poem force a return, though in metamorphosed form, of the general ideas Pound had helped alienate from poetry. They are seen in the ideograms, through which the general idea is presented in some concrete instance; and by this technique Pound tries to exhibit these ideas "going into action"--affecting the course of civilization. His method presents difficulties for the reader, who must discover just which general idea or value the specific ideogram refers to. In eschewing logical, "symmetrical" presentation of his system of values, Pound makes the larger configurations of the poem difficult to apprehend, with the result that most readers find it only a patchwork and even the sympathetic are at pains to discover the coherence of its theme.

In his definition of the epic as a poem including history, Pound adds characteristically, "I don't see that anyone save a sap-head can now think he knows any history until he understands economics." While this emphasis has tangled him in current political activity, economics,

particularly as seen in the theme of usury, lies near the heart of the Cantos. If one recalls how large the concept of "capitalism" looms in modern society and ideology, one must also realize that Pound, in examining the profit-motive, is probing values central to the development of Western civilization since the Renaissance. Of modern poets, Pound is the only one to attempt a new synthesis of values on such a scale.[22]

The single important long poem written in the "modernist" technique but not based on a system of belief is Williams' Paterson. It is an excellent example of both the doctrines of poet as custodian of language and of poetry as a way of seeing. For the poem, according to Williams, represents "a search for the redeeming language by which a man's premature death . . . might have been prevented" (Letters, p. xiv). The predicament of modern men lies in their inability to express what they feel:

> The language, the language
> fails them
> They do not know the words
> or have not
> the courage to use them .
> --girls from
> families that have decayed and

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[22]Before proceeding to the rather large number of poems not depending upon such a system, it might be well to mention the poems of three authors who have probably but one characteristic in common. The poets are Crane, Benét, and Sandburg; and their search for significance lies alike in the exploration of what might be termed specifically "American" experience. Each tries to discover an "Idea" of, or symbol for, America--Crane in the development of modern industrial America from its past, Benét in the Civil War, and Sandburg in the lives of the unassuming people comprising the bulk of the nation.

taken to the hills: no words.
They may look at the torrent in
their minds
and it is foreign to them. .[23]

The poem also exhibits the modern shift in the locus of values from ideas to the data of perception. Its values are closely connected with the formation of a new means of expressing human experience--a new language--rising from a re-examination of its components. The welter of experience as it engulfs consciousness--symbolized in the poem by the undifferentiated roar of the waterfall--must be ordered and articulated by the poet. Hence the importance of the passage concluding Book III:

The past above, the future below
and the present pouring down: the roar,
the roar of the present, a speech--
is, of necessity, my sole concern .
(p. 172).

The poet--any individual--for survival must "comb out the language--or succumb."

One looks for ideas and generalizations in Williams least of all; his emphasis upon "no ideas but in things" and upon the uniqueness of the individual object forbid that. The fundamental significance of the poem thus lies in the refreshment of the senses, in the attempt to "see" and express anew, not in what is roughly called its "prose" meaning. Consequently, the values inherent in <u>what</u> is seen anew are secondary, the relationships among Williams' series of unique objects are often obscure, and the over-all pattern of value in the poem is

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[23] <u>Paterson</u> (New York: New Directions, 1951), pp. 20-21.

almost inapprehensible. The "significant subject" of Paterson is one to which a system of belief is irrelevant.

This final point concerning Williams' poem is important because Paterson exhibits in extreme form a tendency prevalent in the long poems of a good many modern poets. This tendency is, in the absence of a system of belief or a community of ideas, to explore a "significant subject" not requiring the sharing of any ultimate point of view by poet and reader. In practice, the result is, if not exactly an examination of the processes of perception as in Paterson, a minute probing of consciousness. Rather than writing from the perspective of some belief, the poet is merely "on the side of his character"; and he exhibits the character (whether himself or another) without judging him. The probing of consciousness is, in effect, a turning from the outer to the inner world; and the search for significance takes place within the individual personality, where problems related to a community of belief are peripheral to character, poet, and reader alike.

Eliot, in his definition of poetry, stresses that kind concerned with the exploration of emotions at the edge of verbal expression and with the rendering of fine nuances of meaning. To a large degree writers of modern long poems emphasize this explorative function of poetry; and their poems are, as a result, highly introspective in nature--they probe the stream of consciousness. The point is important since the poets referred to here include the majority of those one might characterize as the more traditional modern poets--

Robinson, Aiken, MacLeish, Schwartz, Warren, Coxe (and even Scott and Auden to a lesser degree). Jeffers is the only major exception. These poets (and this is the present sense of "traditional") write essentially narrative poems; and their work reveals a major shift in the nature of the traditional narrative poem.

The shift is from plot to characterization, from the rendering of an action to the exploration of a consciousness. The preponderance of meaning now inheres, not in the external action, but in the activity of the mind and in the springs of its attitudes and actions. Causal sequence--plot--becomes secondary to the process of progressive illumination; and the passage of time is subordinated to enrichment of the texture of consciousness. The fundamental "action" of the poem is the slow revelation of significance within the personality; and the process can be conceived of, not as the linear movement characterizing time and external action, but as a circling descent--a boring--into the core of a given state or level of human consciousness. In most modern narrative poems, the reader looks outward from inside; instead of "viewing" the character or characters, one stands beside him or them viewing the world. This is the significant effect decay of belief and the doctrine of poetry as a form of knowledge have had on even the narrative poem during the contemporary period.

The introspective nature of modern narrative is evident in the poems of Robinson. He is the first poet in the American tradition to explore psychological narrative, as he was the first to base poetry upon speech--two innovations of significance for the stature of a poet usually termed fully "traditional." His probing of consciousness and his emphasis of the inner world are seen in clear perspective if his narratives are contrasted, on the one hand, with those of Jeffers, and on the other, with the earlier narrative treatments of Arthurian themes by Malory and Tennyson.

Cavender's House, in particular, exhibits this shift from action to consciousness: an external action has taken place, and it does form the structural thread of the poem, but that action only becomes apparent or important in its relation to the movements of Cavender's mind. Thus his wife's specter, conjured by his own brain, reveals the entire episode as the product of a single diseased consciousness:

> You have had me saying
> Her language to you out of time and tune,
> And out of order most incongruously;
> You have had life and death together so long
> To play for you their most unholy music,
> That you have not an ear left for another;
> You are a living dissonance yourself,
> And you have made of grief and desperation
> Something of Laramie that had her voice.[24]

Most of Robinson's long narratives, excepting the Arthurian poems, where action looms slightly larger, have this

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[24]Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: MacMillan, 1937), p. 1003.

emphasis. His characters do not so much act as react; and their reaction stems usually from some form of violence or, perhaps more importantly, of failure. If Pound can be said to explore the profit motive, which America shares with the Western world, Robinson similarly explores the American penchant for worldly success.

The shift in the search for a significant subject from external action to the individual consciousness is seen in other modern narrative poems. Thus, in MacLeish's Conquistador the expedition to Mexico becomes significant only in its effect upon Diaz (as Tate said, "Not one moment of action is objectively rendered"). Through its probing of the elements of experience in the form of sensations and perceptions, the poem is closely related to Paterson. Aiken's Punch (1921) exhibits a similar exploration of consciousness on the part of that author. There Aiken probes the personalities of several characters as they are caught in the same series of events. In the various movements of his poem, he introduces the technique of the shifting "point of view"--a device also central to Warren's Brother to Dragons. Aiken similarly probes the frontiers of consciousness in his Preludes for Memnon (1931). Not a narrative, the poem exhibits a lyric "I" attempting to discover the significance of its inner world. In a similar manner, the adventures of the exploring "I" become a stream-of-consciousness autobiography in Schwartz's Genesis, where the personality seeks significance in its own past history.

Such introspection is widely prevalent in the poetry of the modern period, characteristic not only of the narratives just mentioned but also of Eliot's Quartets and Auden's long poems. And this introspection, as might be expected in an age without settled belief, is often--even largely--somber. Whether in the probing of consciousness apart from belief or in the elaboration of some given system, the terms in which the search for significance takes place are often negative: there is the dissolution of society in Pound, Eliot, and Auden; the irrelevance of mankind in Jeffers; failure and violence in Robinson; guilt and degeneration in Warren and Coxe.

Optimism is hardly relevant to the "significant subjects" used for modern long poems; and the "large themes" usually reflect the darker side of reality. When the tone of these poems is not downright savage or pessimistic, it is often elegiac (Conquistador) or tragic (The Dark Sister) and is pervasively reflective. Most of the poems explore values rather than affirm them; and such affirmation and acceptance as exist (particularly in the poems of Eliot and Auden) are attained only with difficulty. Crane fails tragically in his attempt. Perhaps only to Williams and Aiken does the contemporary world present an exciting challenge; and they too are aware of the underside of experience.

The writer whose long poems are unaffected by either the decay of belief or the new poetic (technical) emphases resulting from that decay is very rare: the story-teller in verse, who, a serious poet like Van Doren (as in The Mayfield

Deer; rev. ed., 1959), tells a tale primarily for entertainment and the joy of the telling, and for whose narrative the decay of belief and the probing of consciousness are alike irrelevant, is almost non-existent. Modern poetry, seen from the perspective of the long poem, is in its nature and aims--in its intense and largely somber search for value and significance--a poetry of high seriousness.

CHAPTER FIVE

'KINDS' IN POETRY:

THE LONG VERSUS THE SHORT POEM

> [Short poems:] . . . those in which a man has been able to put only a part of his mind, if it is a mind of any size.
> Eliot, On Poetry.

In addition to posing questions concerning the structure, line, and magnitude of the long poem, reviewers raised the problem of 'kinds' in poetry. Certain nineteenth century reviewers used the terms, "subjective" and "objective"; others, in both centuries, employed such labels as "lyric," "epic," "dramatic," "narrative," "novel-in-verse," and "romance," to describe parts or wholes of specific long poems. In addition, shortly after the American poetic renaissance, still others (for the most part, those committed to the values of the "revolution" and generally poets, like Amy Lowell) began to speak of, simply, the "short" and the "long" poem. From this blurring of terminology rises the question which forms the starting point for the present chapter: Is the long poem a unique poetic kind?

The purpose of the chapter will be to contrast the long and the short poem; and four basic topics will be discussed. The first is the theoretical difference between the

long and short poem; the second is the difference between the two in terms of historical 'kinds' and as seen from a perspective of the "modes" through which experience is rendered into literature; the third is the change in the nature of the contemporary long poem; and the fourth is the inimical effect a certain conception of poetry and a certain style of contemporary short poem have had upon an adequate appreciation of the long poem. One of the wider objectives of this study--explicit here for the first time--is to defend the long poem as a vital and enduring literary form and to help make its proper appreciation possible.[1]

I.

Is the long poem a unique poetic kind? The answer to the question, phrased in this manner, is largely negative. For, the scope of poetry is such that it forms a continuum ranging from the "haikku"-like lyrics of the Imagists to the Homeric epics. Poems like Robinson's "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C," or Frost's "Death of the Hired Man" (or either of his masques) occupy an intermediate position in this continuum.

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[1] A personal reference can emphasize the current situation. In speaking with acquaintances about the modern American long poem, I found most thinking in terms of poems ten to twenty pages long. Poe's conception of poetry seems to be widely held today. I suspect in previous centuries the concept of the long poem would have produced associations more in terms of the Idylls, The Prelude, or Paradise Lost.

Amy Lowell would have had to use her rather clumsy term, "semi-long" poem, for them. Such poems have been excluded because they blur the differences present in poems of, say, a page in length as opposed to those of over a thousand lines.

The length of a given poem, its place in the continuum, depends ultimately upon the complexity of its theme; and this depends in turn both upon the number and variety of components to be unified and the detail with which those components are articulated. Tate's "Aeneas at Washington," for example, with its juxtaposition of three major civilizations and its long perspective of time, contains the germ of a theme which could have been developed as a long, even "epic," poem. But this was not his purpose; he chose to let the poem have its effect through the single scene and the single character, both molded to produce the final flash of insight in the climactic line: "I thought of Troy, what we had built her for." Are not Pound's Cantos, lying at the opposite end of the continuum of poetry, an elaboration in long form of a rather similar theme? But unlike Tate's poem, where emotion is released and meaning unified by the climactic insight, Pound's depends upon the cumulative effect of a great variety of components. Tate's poem impresses by its incisiveness, Pound's by its abundance and momentum. Each exhibits the virtues of its kind; and both can be kept in mind during the remarks which follow as examples of the short and the long poem.

The difficulty of contrasting the two lies in describing their differences while recognizing both as unities. The long poem does order and intensify a greater amount of material (that raw experience which is metamorphosed into art); and one can thus ask what constitutes the material of the short, as opposed to the long, poem. While terminology is inexact simply because poetry is ultimately a continuum, the material for the short poem is most likely to be a scene or a character sketch (often accompanied by observation or meditation), a mood or emotion, a flash of insight, an incongruity, or even one or more images or metaphors. But whatever the nature of the material for the short poem, and however far that material may range within its limited compass (Tate's poem, for instance, presents a great expanse of time), that material is finally focused upon or crystallized within the single moment, mood, or insight. In terms of form (as opposed to material), the short poem is ordered to build to a single climax or moment of intensity. Seen from the perspective of those many events and ideas which, over a lifetime, give significance and direction to the individual personality--seen from the broad rhythms of human experience--the short poem is discontinuous. It presents a "quantum" of significant experience. Williams' remark concerning the short story also applies to the short poem: "It seems to me to be a good medium for nailing down a single conviction. Emotionally."[2]

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[2] "A Beginning on the Short Story (Notes)," Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 295.

The long poem, unlike the short, presents a multiplicity of episodes or of characters (usually including their development or change) and a complex of insights and emotions. In addition, the nature of its theme is such as to require changes of scene, mood, and topic. In fact (and this is why long poems can be grouped under one concept rather than under such diverse labels as "narrative," "epic," "meditation," or "verse epistle"), poems so apparently different in nature as Tristram, the Four Quartets, and New Year Letter all present a series of such actions, events, emotions, ideas, or points of view. The long poem invariably involves the element of sequence or hierarchy, the first term being more applicable to its narrative form (Robinson) and the second to its thematic or non-fictional form (Eliot or Auden). Similarly, in terms of formal ordering of material, the long poem presents not one but a series of moments of intensity. Its theme is of such complexity as to require a system of climaxes; and the manner in which these climaxes are patterned or related constitutes the peculiar structure of the long poem.

The large theme of the long poem requires some sort of sequential or hierarchic structure to give a "connectedness" to the series of climaxes, thus unifying the separate movements of the poem. It is within this framework that levels of intensity become a necessary element of the long poem, as Eliot[3] and, to a lesser extent, Aiken, have seen.

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[3]Eliot's concept of necessary levels of intensity in the long poem is apparently derived from Coleridge. In

At the very least, there must be a rhythm of contrast between the climax of one movement and preparation for the climax of the succeeding movement. A series of climaxes cannot exist without purposely less intense passages to set them off. The long poem presents horizons of experience where the mountains with their interconnecting valleys are seen--the landscape is continuous. It is in this sense the long poem reflects the larger patterns of human experience. The short poem presents a single peak. In some long poems the rhythm of contrast necessitating levels of intensity is produced by a change of scene (Tristram) or through a change of topic (the Cantos). In the Quartets the rhythm is presented through a deliberate use of different kinds of writing--narrative, dramatic, meditative, lyric.[4]

In addition to requiring some form of connectedness, the complexity of the large theme is such as to force a proportioning of its component parts. Each must be subordinate to the architectonics of the whole. On the one hand, this requires some sufficiently apparent disposition of the parts to preserve the unity and intelligibility of the whole. The

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the celebrated Chapter XIV of Biographia Literaria, he states: "Whatever specific import we attach to the word, poetry, there will be found involved in it, as a necessary consequence, that a poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be, all poetry. Yet if an harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved in keeping with the poetry."

[4]The principle in all these cases is analogous to Shakespeare's use of "comic relief" in the fabric of his plays.

Cantos and Paterson are least compelling in this respect; and even Eliot's poem, though much shorter, presents a similar difficulty through the remarkable density of its texture. On the other hand, the subordination of part to whole also forces a regulation of the characteristics of the line, in terms of density, continuity, and flexibility, so that the relationship of the immediate movement to the total poem is not lost. The more complex and comprehensive the theme, the greater the urgency toward transparency of medium. The brevity of the short poem seems not to require such a constant relating of part to whole. This is because, no matter how intricately worked, the short poem, through the lesser variety of its components and the more restricted nature of its theme, presents less total meaning to be harmonized. It is a different thing to lose one's way half through the Quartets than at a similar point in a sonnet.

Finally, the nature of the components of the long and the short poem differs. Those elements which tend to form the essence of the latter become subordinate parts of the former. The scene, insight, or mood constituting the short poem becomes one of a pattern of scenes, insights, and moods in the long poem. This is even more obviously true of those short poems developed from a single metaphor or image. Such poetic devices are even subordinate within given sections of the long poem, though they often form patterns of imagery which add to its meaning. Indeed, where one or a series of images will often carry the essential

meaning of a short poem, the total meaning of the long poem is conveyed, not only through its metaphoric dimension, but also through direct statement, narrative, or dramatic presentation of scenes and actions. Such components--and those of verbal and imagistic patterning, in particular--have a structural finality in the short poem which they lack in the long poem, where they become parts of a greater and more complex whole. In "A Beginning on the Short Story (Notes)," Williams also draws a distinction between the novel and the short story which fits the difference between the long and short poem equally well. The first is many related things, he says; the second, one.

II.

Though poetry is a continuum, it has, historically, regularly been cast into definite forms, with the subdivision of these forms at different times extending to the level of genres. One reason for the inexact use of terms like "lyric" and "narrative," or "subjective" and "objective," to describe modern long poems is that genre theory is inoperative in contemporary poetry. However, the modern long poem can be viewed from the historical perspective of literary 'kinds,' if not of genres; and one can again ask, Is the long poem a unique literary kind? Again the answer is ultimately, No; but the asking can be productive of results.

Literature is the ordering and intensification of significant experience by means of language. Pound, for instance, defines it as "language charged with meaning"; and Eliot, in the definition appearing in "Poetry and Drama," states, "It is a function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it."[5] Both the concepts of "charging" and "ordering," on the one hand, and the reflecting of "life," on the other, are necessary components in the definition of literature. If the experience which forms the material of literature is not ordered and intensified, the result is likely to be an inartistic mirroring of raw data, an undifferentiated "slice of life." Similarly, if the experience comprising the material fails to include values important to human life, no matter how intricate the ordering and intensification, the result tends to lack "significance."

There appear to be three fundamental, perhaps irreducible, ways, or <u>modes</u>, by which significant experience can be rendered into language. These modes seem irreducible because they correspond to the three basic ways by which consciousness can apprehend experience. That is, one can see a thing happen to someone else, one can hear about it, or one can experience it directly oneself. From these three fundamental ways of apprehending experience stem the three fundamental modes of representing experience--the dramatic, the narrative, and the lyric. There are no other ways.

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[5] <u>On Poetry and Poets</u> (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 86. Subsequently referred to as <u>On Poetry</u>.

Basically, the dramatic mode consists in the imitation of experience (as on a stage); the narrative mode in the relation (telling) of experience; and the lyric mode in the presentation of experience as if it were happening directly to a "self." Literature of the dramatic mode (in its pure form) is intended to be seen and heard, though it may be read; impersonation is fundamental to its representation of experience. The narrative mode, historically identified with the telling of a story, is fundamentally the relation (narration) of some sequence, usually of events, though it can also include "non-fictional" material by viewing such as the relation of a logical sequence of ideas. The element of causal sequence through time ("plot," historically) is common to both the dramatic and narrative modes.

The lyric mode tends to render the experience of a moment; compared with the other two modes, it is both plotless and discontinuous. Through the close identification of the experience with a "self," the lyric mode presents the most immediate rendering of experience, the lyric "I" tending to become identified with either the author or the reader, or both. In the lyric mode there is no stage or narrator interposed between the work and its viewer or reader to objectify the experience and emphasize that it is happening to someone else. The three modes are often blended in a piece of literature--usually, in more extended works.

One inescapable conclusion derived from viewing literature in terms of modes (and this is the reason for speaking of "literature" rather than "poetry" in the present context) is that the dramatic, narrative, and lyric modes do not correspond to the terms, "drama," "prose," and "poetry." Theoretically, the same experience could be represented in any of the modes. In addition, the dramatic mode can be conveyed in either a prose or a verse medium, as can the narrative mode, either in the form of prose fiction (the novel or short story) or of the long poem (historically, the epic, romance, or novel-in-verse). The lyric mode, on the other hand (in terms of the complete literary work as opposed to a component), is confined to a verse medium. That is, while drama is closely limited to the dramatic mode, prose is not similarly confined to the narrative mode, and, most important for our purposes, poetry is not synonymous with the lyric mode. The implicit confinement of poetry to the lyric mode on the part of some critics is a curse of contemporary poetic theory. This point will be elaborated subsequently.

Because of the inexact relationships between the two sets of terms, it seems best to view literature in terms of modes, which represent more fundamental and less ambiguous categories than do "drama," "prose," and "poetry" (with all their species). The concept of modes avoids the poetry-prose dilemma, viewing both (the first in the sense of "verse") as alternative media by which material in any of the modes can be conveyed. In addition, the concept of modes continues to

be valid for describing contemporary literature in a way that earlier genre terminology, based more directly on the poetry-prose antithesis, is not. For instance, the epic, metrical romance, novel-in-verse, prose romance, and novel are all temporary or local forms of the narrative mode. There are modern long poems, however, which do not correspond to any of the verse species just mentioned and yet bear a direct, describable relationship to the narrative mode.

A striking instance of the contemporary validity of the concept of modes (in this case limited to poetry) occurs in the criticism of Eliot. As he is the only one of the poet-critics considered in these chapters to present a detailed conception of "structure" in his essays (though he must share this distinction to some extent with Aiken), so he alone considers at length the problem of kinds in poetry. In "The Social Function of Poetry" (1945), Eliot describes certain purposes for which poetry has been used in the past, adding, "These definite uses of poetry gave poetry a framework which made possible the attainment of perfection in particular kinds" (On Poetry, p. 16). Here, he is thinking primarily in terms of genres; and his purpose is to demonstrate that the poet's duty lies, not in developing particular kinds of poetry for specific uses, but rather in preserving and enriching his native language.

But in "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953), Eliot moves from the more traditional consideration of literature in terms of genres to the concept of modes; and his discussion

will help clarify the nature of those modes. He begins his essay with the definition of the three voices; and their correspondence to the lyric, narrative, and dramatic modes, respectively, is obvious:

> The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself--or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.
> (On Poetry, p. 89).

Poetry of the first voice is not primarily an attempt to communicate with anyone. Citing Gottfried Benn with approval, Eliot says the poet writing in the first voice begins with an "inert embryo" or "creative germ":

> He has something germinating in him for which he must find words; but he cannot know what words he wants until he has found the words; he cannot identify this embryo until it has been transformed into an arrangement of the right words in the right order. When you have the words for it, the 'thing' for which the words had to be found has disappeared, replaced by a poem. What you start with is nothing so definite as an emotion, in any ordinary sense; it is still more certainly not an idea. . . . In a poem which is neither didactic nor narrative, and not animated by any other social purpose, the poet may be concerned solely with expressing in verse--using all his resources of words, with their history, their connotations, their music--this obscure impulse. He does not know what he has to say until he has said it; and in the effort to say it he is not concerned with making people understand anything.
> (On Poetry, pp. 97-98).

The first voice--the lyric mode--stems from this obscure impulse. It is not directly identifiable with what is loosely called "lyric poetry," a term for which Eliot expresses dissatisfaction. Rather, to use his words, "It is

obviously the lyric in the sense of a poem 'directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and sentiments.'" Eliot's own preference is for the term, "meditative verse"; but in either case, the first voice and the lyric mode are one.

The second voice, Eliot says, is

> most often and most clearly heard in poetry that is not of the theatre: in all poetry, certainly, that has a conscious social purpose--poetry intended to amuse or to instruct, poetry that tells a story, poetry that preaches or points a moral, or satire which is a form of preaching. For what is the point of a story without an audience, . . . The voice of the poet addressing other people is the dominant voice of epic, though not the only voice. In Homer, for instance, there is heard also, from time to time, the dramatic voice: there are moments when we hear, not Homer telling us what a hero said, but the voice of the hero himself. . . . But the epic is essentially a tale told to an audience, while drama is essentially an action exhibited to an audience.
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> (On Poetry, p. 96).

The crucial connection between the second voice and the long poem is particularly evident in the references to the epic (including Eliot's awareness of the presence of more than one voice), especially when the epic is seen as a temporary form of the narrative mode.[6]

At one point Eliot mentions a great difference, an "abyss," separating poetry of the first voice from that of

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[6]In discussing the third voice, Eliot parenthetically reveals the key concept in the contemporary definition of poetry, an identification pervasive among modern poets and shared alike by writers of long or short poems. Poetry, he says, resides in "the language at those dramatic moments when it reaches intensity" (p. 92). Intensity is the key word; and he uses the term to describe a kind of literature written in long form. This identification will become important subsequently.

the third. His reason for the difference fundamentally relates the second and third voices, the narrative and dramatic modes, and as fundamentally differentiates both from the lyric mode, or first voice:

> I suggest that between the three kinds of poetry to which my three voices correspond there is a certain difference of process. In the poem in which the first voice, that of the poet talking to himself, dominates, the 'psychic material' tends to create its own form--the eventual form will be to a greater or less degree the form for that one poem and for no other. . . . But in poetry of the second and in that of the third voice, the form is already to some extent given. However much it may be transformed before the poem is finished, it can be represented from the start by an outline or scenario. If I choose to tell a story, I must have some notion of the plot of the story I propose to tell; if I undertake satire, moralizing, or invective, there is already something given which I can recognize and which exists for others as well as myself. And if I set out to write a play, I start by an act of choice: I settle upon a particular emotional situation, out of which characters and a plot will emerge, and I can make a plain prose outline of the play in advance--however much that outline may be altered before the play is finished, by the way in which the characters develop. (On Poetry, pp. 100-101).

What Eliot subsequently calls "the frame . . . within which the author has elected to work" is basic to long form in general, that is, to both of the closely allied narrative and dramatic modes. The lyric mode, Eliot's first voice, tends to lack such a deliberately chosen, formulatable framework.

III.

Reviewers, occupied with specific long poems rather than general theory, used their terminology with less nicety than a critic like Eliot. Not concerned with drama, they

placed two broad kinds of poetry in opposition. During the Victorian period the distinction between "subjective" and "objective" poetry was current; while several twentieth century reviewers spoke in terms of "lyric" and "narrative" poetry. Of the latter, Blake attacked contemporary emphasis of lyric--poetry springing from a given personality--to the detriment of epic, which requires considerations of architecture and some outlined theory or idea of mankind. Schwartz distinguished lyric, as representation of emotion, from narrative, as representation of human action. Winters similarly opposed the two kinds. Lyric, he said, achieves its effect through generalization of emotion and concentration of expression; whereas narrative can survive without concentration or intensity of detail if the narrative logic is detailed and compelling. Jeffers was to state elsewhere, positing that poetry must be impassioned, that the lyric poet finds the feeling in himself, while "the maker of narrative or dramatic poetry must cause the persons of his imagination to feel passionately." "He must do this," Jeffers adds, "by involving them in some story or other, a sequence of emotion-producing events."[7]

Aiken, too, refers to kinds in poetry in certain of the reviews collected in A Reviewer's ABC. In an essay on D. H. Lawrence, he speaks of "subjective" and "objective"

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[7]In his Foreword to Lawrence C. Powell's Robinson Jeffers: The Man and His Work (rev. ed.; Pasadena: San Pasqual Press, 1940), p. xvi.

poets. The latter are those who employ "affective terms--symbolisms of theme and form--which are universally significant and intelligible"; while the former employ terms significant and intelligible only to themselves. Both are impossibilities as defined, Aiken hastens to add. His purpose, however, is to emphasize the extremes of the two broad categories (roughly corresponding to lyric and narrative) by which poets can be described.[8]

In a review of St. John Perse, Aiken similarly describes two methods of writing poetry, that by "whole meaning" and that by "association." The poet using the first method, like Eliot, "finds his beginning in his end":

> His idea or theme or meaning lies complete before him, complete even to the overtones and undertones, in advance of his putting a single word on paper. What remains for him to do is to explore the logical implications of the theme, and the feeling-tone with which or from which it starts; and this is of course the actual writing of the poem. During this, with its unforeseeable adventures to right or left, he maintains a strict liaison with the strong outline of the theme, and, only in closest accordance with that, rejects or selects from among the insistent offerings of conscious and unconscious alike.
>
> (ABC, p. 321).

The other method is improvisatory. "The idea or theme, or more often, the image-plus-feeling, with which the poet starts, is the opposite of complete, for it is without beginning or end, offers no dynamic frame." The poet simply proceeds from one association to the next. The best poet,

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[8] A Reviewer's ABC; Collected Criticism of Conrad Aiken (New York: Meridian, 1958), p. 258. Subsequently referred to as ABC.

according to Aiken, is able to fuse the two methods in his poetry, uniting the "arid power" of the first with the "more reckless riches" of the second. There is an obvious connection between Aiken's improvisatory method and Eliot's first voice, on the one hand, and between the method of whole meaning and the second voice, on the other.

It is now possible to harmonize the various and confusing terms used by reviewers attempting to describe kinds in poetry. The "subjective" of Victorian reviewers (and of Aiken), the "lyric" of several twentieth century reviewers, the "first voice" of Eliot, and the "improvisatory" method of Aiken, all bear a direct relation to the lyric mode. Similarly, "objective," "narrative," the "second voice," and the method of "whole meaning," all relate to the narrative mode. Still other terms, "epic," "romance," and "novel-in-verse," were earlier seen belonging to this same mode. The concept of modes unifies the terminology. It also--if one here excludes the pure form of the dramatic mode, the play--emphasizes what reviewers and poets with their differing terms were attempting to express, the presence of two broad divisions ('kinds') within the continuum of poetry.

While the lyric and narrative modes are much more inclusive categories than those of the short or long poem, the short poem does, in fact, belong to the former mode and the long poem to the latter. The scene, flash of insight, mood, or emotion constituting the material of the short poem is a crystallization of the "obscure impulse" of Eliot's

first voice--the lyric mode--or of the "image-plus-feeling" of Aiken's improvisatory method. Building to a single peak, or moment, of intensity, the short poem corresponds to the plotless nature of the lyric mode, its form molded by the flow of the poet's emotion. Its intensity similarly bears close relation to the subjective immediacy of the lyric mode. Tate, reviewing one of Robinson's narratives, expresses the general connection between the lyric mode and the short poem. "Mr. Robinson's genius is primarily lyrical," he says; "he seldom achieves a success in a poem where the idea exceeds the span of a single emotion.[9]

Similarly, the long poem corresponds closely with the narrative mode, particularly in the direct relationship between the series of climaxes inherent in the former and the plot-structure of the latter. Both depend upon some sort of sequential or hierarchic patterning. Such patterning is absent in the short poem (the lyric mode), where, as Eliot saw, the psychic material tends to create its own form, a form essentially unique to the resulting poem. Thus it can be said (speaking in terms of the whole poem rather than a component) that lyric is the mode for <u>short form</u> and narrative the mode for <u>long form</u> in poetry.

The fact that contemporary poetry can be described in terms of the concept of modes should be emphasized. While the nature of both the short and the long poem has shifted in

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[9]<u>Collected Essays</u> (Denver: Allan Swallow, 1960), p. 362.

the modern period, the former continues to belong to the lyric mode. The modern short poem is usually neither song-like nor spontaneous (though Williams' short poems form a partial exception); but these are not primary characteristics of the lyric mode. The definition of this mode centers upon the rendering of experience as if it were occurring directly to a "self," most often a self identifiable with the poet. In the modern period there has been a revulsion against such direct ("romantic") expression of subjective emotion and against identification of the lyric "I" with the poet. While the short poem is still fundamentally subjective, the lyric "I" is now often shifted to a persona (as in the Aeneas of Tate's poem)--the emotion or insight crystallizes about what Eliot calls an "objective correlative." Such a persona, or correlative, focuses the poet's emotion upon an object other than himself; and a coloring of the dramatic mode suffuses the poem. This added element can easily be traced back through Robinson's short poems and Pound's Personae to the dramatic monologues of Tennyson and Browning. In terms of the concept of modes, the modern short poem is to a great degree a "dramatic lyric."[10]

IV.

The modern long poem, like the short, has changed in nature. Reviewers, in addition to displaying a confused

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[10]Emphasis upon poetry as speech rather than song also contributes to the characteristic nature of the contemporary short poem.

terminology, characterized certain long poems in terms of both the lyric and the narrative modes. In Pound's Cantos, for instance, a lyric attitude--a personal frame--was said to be interposed between the poem and the reader. But the same poem was also called a new variation of epic. It was likewise both damned and praised for its lack of a traditional narrative framework. And while Marianne Moore's apt description of the poem as "the epic of the farings of a literary mind" caught this apparent blending of lyric and narrative modes, the Cantos was certainly not to be described in terms of the traditional "narrative" poem. A similar confusion was present in comments made on The Bridge and Conquistador.

The resolution to the reviewers' confusion lies in the fact that literature in the narrative mode is not limited to what is called the narrative poem. The latter is, indeed, the major historical form of this mode (first, with regard to fictional literature, as epic). In addition, the narrative mode was formerly almost exclusively conveyed through the medium of verse. By the twentieth century, however, its medium had largely been shifted to prose (the novel, in terms of fiction). But whether conveyed through verse or prose, whether in the form of the long poem or the novel, the narrative mode is the most comprehensive of the modes. Capable of even longer form than the allied dramatic mode (since it need not be staged), the narrative mode can utilize both of the other modes as components within its larger framework.

The same is thus true of the long poem. Eliot, in his reference to Homer while describing the second voice, is obviously aware of the presence of the dramatic mode in the long poem. And reviewers similarly attest to the presence of the lyric mode in certain contemporary long poems. With the apparent displacement of the traditional narrative poem by the novel, many contemporary long poems exhibit an experimentation with elements from the other two modes within the general framework of the narrative mode, as well as an exploration of new structural forms of this mode. The latter activity has produced various kinds of long poem not based upon plot, the traditional structure of the narrative mode. The most important of these is the thematic--the structure of the long poems of Pound, Eliot, Williams, and, to a lesser extent, Aiken.

The narrative mode (like the dramatic, in this respect) requires an extended form, a series of climaxes; but the pattern of these climaxes can take either a sequential or hierarchic form. Sequential structure is essentially a patterning of actions or events through time in terms of causation; there is a linear development in the poem. It is that kind of structure best suited for, and used in, the narrative poem, both traditionally and as seen in contemporary examples like those of Robinson and Jeffers.

But where sequential structure is essentially external, an ordering imposed by the nature of the plot itself (by the "narrative logic," as Winters calls it), hierarchic structure

is more internal or subjective--the ordering of the material is imposed by the mind of the author. This is true whether the hierarchic pattern is essentially logical (non-fictional), as in Auden's New Year Letter, or thematic, as with the poems of Pound, Eliot, and Williams. In none of these examples is the poem based upon a causal sequence; and, while subordinate portions of, say, the Cantos are obviously cast in terms of plot, such actions represent themes which themselves are ordered by the author into a hierarchy of meaning. The most recent development in the narrative mode, for poetry, lies in the use of such hierarchically patterned, thematic structure.[11]

Aiken explains thematic structure in detail; and his term, "symphonic form," allowing for individual differences, applies to the poems of Pound, Eliot, and Williams as well. Like Eliot, Aiken confesses "a strong bias towards an architectural structure in poetry analogous to that of music." His symphonic form, seen in poems composed mainly from 1915 to 1920 and later revised and collected as The Divine Pilgrim

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[11]Even the contemporary narrative poem has undergone a lesser shift. Poems of this variety, with their tendency toward a minute probing of the roots of consciousness, have emphasized characterization rather than plot; and the causal sequence, which continues to form the structure of the poem, is relegated to the background. Robinson's Tristram displays this changed emphasis to such a degree that Aiken found it a failure. "Robinson avoids 'action' as he would avoid the plague," Aiken complains; while his heroes think and feel inordinately, they fail to act (ABC, p. 345). Tate similarly noted that no part of Conquistador was "objectively rendered." MacLeish, of course, filters the action of his poem through the consciousness of his narrator. Both reviewers use criteria applicable to the traditional narrative poem to criticize authors attempting something a little different.

(1949), is the result. "What I had from the outset been somewhat doubtfully hankering for," he says,

> was some way of getting contrapuntal effects in poetry--the effects of contrasting and conflicting tones and themes, a kind of underlying simultaneity in dissimilarity. It seemed to me that by using a large medium, dividing it into several main parts, and subdividing these parts into short movements in various veins and forms, this was rendered possible. (ABC, pp. 127-128).

The similarity to the structure of Eliot's Quartets is obvious. Aiken continues:

> For such symphonic effects one employs what one might term emotion-mass with just as deliberate a regard for its position in the total design as one would employ a variation of form. One should regard this or that emotional theme as a musical unit having such-and-such a tone quality, and use it only when that particular tone-quality is wanted. (p. 129).

Here the parallel is not only to Eliot's interweaving of symbols in the Quartets but also to Pound's interweaving of both motif and allusion in the Cantos.

The various motifs, or subordinate themes, form a keyboard; and various chords of association are struck by juxtaposing them, through harmony and contrast, in varying patterns throughout the poem. Aiken's own emphasis is upon producing overtones of hint and suggestion; he wishes not so much to present an idea as to use its resonance. In this he sets himself apart from Pound and Eliot, who attempt to present concrete instances rather than a shimmer of overtones--though both procedures are merely varieties of the implicational method. The rather nebulous character of

Aiken's own use of this procedure can be seen in his Preludes for Memnon.

Aiken is fully aware of the danger inherent in the thematic method--one not entirely escaped by any of the three poets (and even less by Williams in Paterson). There is the danger, he concludes,

> that one's use of implication will go too far, and that one will cheat the natural human appetite for something solid and palpable. . . . One must provide for one's symphony a sufficiently powerful and pervasive underlying idea--and, above all, make it sufficiently apparent.
>
> (p. 130).

It is for this very lack that Aiken later criticizes Paterson. He finds the poem, compared to Eliot's Quartets, diffuse and uncompressed. Despite material that is probably "locally or personally relevant," the poem, like Crane's Bridge (the comparison is Aiken's), lacks conceptual cables strong enough to fuse such material into a unity, with the result that it tends to fall into separate, if beautiful, parts (ABC, p. 386). In the opinion of most critics, the same is true of the Cantos.

Aiken also explains the basically hierarchic nature of thematic structure. He posits certain basic motifs (a, b, c) and combines these themes in various manners (abc, acb, bca). The sum of the latter combinations forms the first movement (A) of the poem. Succeeding movements are formed from similar combinations of new motifs, perhaps blended with those of the first movement. Aiken's example demonstrates how the hierarchic structure differs from the

sequential. In the former, meaning is built up in blocks of interwoven motifs in an almost pyramidal manner. The analogy is spatial. In the traditional sequential pattern of the narrative poem, the analogy to the development of the structure is linear. Here, a causes b, which in turn causes c--and so on. This is why sequential structure can be considered essentially objective and hierarchic essentially subjective: though the author employing sequential structure chooses his original theme, the causal sequence must have a certain inevitability for it to be believable, whereas the author employing thematic structure (or logical structure) can place his motifs as he wishes in the poem.

For this reason, the axiom of an inevitable ordering of parts in a poem, applicable to sequential structure (the narrative poem) because of the causal process inherent in that structure, is relevant to a much less degree when thematic structure is used. With this kind of structure, the author can place, interweave, and repeat his chosen themes as he wishes, provided they are unified at the end of the poem. This is important to realize, not only because it demonstrates again how wide a departure certain modern poets have made from tradition, but also because the resulting poems necessitate an expansion of critical principles for proper appreciation.

Aiken, in his discriminating review of The Waste Land, uses the principle of an inevitable ordering of parts to criticize the poem. In this context he is correct; but both

Pound and Eliot have improved upon the rather amorphous, proto-thematic structure of The Waste Land in their later long poems, particularly through the use of repetition, either of key word, motif, or symbol. With this qualification, Aiken's view of the structural values of The Waste Land reflects a juster critical attitude toward thematic structure than that based upon the principle of an inevitable ordering of parts.

Aiken terms the poem "a series of brilliant, brief, unrelated or dimly related pictures by which a consciousness empties itself of its characteristic contents" (and this is true of neither the Cantos nor the Quartets). But he adds that, if one perceives this, one also finds

> though the dropping out of any one picture would not in the least affect the logic or "meaning" of the whole, it would seriously detract from the value of the portrait. . . . These things are not important parts of an important or careful intellectual pattern; but they are important parts of an important emotional ensemble.
>
> (ABC, pp. 180-181).

Similarly, excision of specific motifs in either the Cantos or the Quartets would probably not affect the basic import of these poems. It would, however, affect the richness--the emotional density--of the total meaning as it builds and reverberates through each.

A second significant shift in the nature of the contemporary long poem, observable in both sequential and hierarchic varieties of structure, results from exploration of dramatic and lyric elements within the general framework of

the narrative mode. It stems primarily from the attempt to excise prosaic material from the long poem.

Most modern poets share the assumption that poetry is somehow synonymous with intensity. Writers of long poems, however, are also aware that such poems--those in the narrative mode--require a patterning of the several climaxes, or moments of intensity, inherent in long form. As a result, many seek to reduce the proportion of material connecting or preparing for the various climaxes and concentrate on the climaxes themselves.[12] These authors are not unaware of the problem of comparative levels of intensity in the long poem; they simply deal with it by making normally prosaic material implicit in the climaxes, thus raising the poem's average level of intensity.

In Robinson's poems excision of interconnecting material results in a scene structure composed of a series of emotion-producing events. Tristram, for instance, begins abruptly with the interview between Isolt of Brittany and her father; and the setting and direction of the plot emerge only in the ensuing dialogue. The scene then shifts to Cornwall and the marriage of King Mark with Isolt of Ireland; but this event, of major importance to the plot, is presented only implicitly through its effect on Tristram and the other characters in the long scene on the parapet. What Winters calls the "narrative logic" is made implicit in the situations of high emotional intensity. The alteration of narrative

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[12]Pound's equation (dichten = condensare) will be recalled.

technique is apparent if one compares Robinson's narratives with the more traditional structure of Jeffers'.

Such excision is even more obvious in a thematically structured poem like the Cantos, where Pound often presents a scene or evokes an emotion which has only the most implicit connection with the immediate context or with the general theme it embodies. The themes of the initial canto of Pound's poem--the voyage of discovery through uncharted seas and the descent to the world of the dead to gain further knowledge of life--only begin to be perceived after reading most of the poem. The passage from the Odyssey, used symbolically by Pound, is presented with no immediate clue as to its special meaning in the Cantos. The same is true of Canto II, where the significance of the sea as a symbol for the flux of experience, within which permanence must be discovered, becomes apparent only later. To have stated the frame of reference for these two scenes directly, would, for Pound, have been to include unnecessary prosaic material. Unlike Milton's "Of Mans First Disobedience, . . . Sing Heav'nly Muse," Pound does not begin by stating his argument.

In the case of both Robinson and Pound, the effect is toward a direct presentation of the climax, whether the moment of intensity stems from emotion inherent in a situation or rises from an evocative use of words. Such presentation can result in a dramatic climax (where, as Eliot saw, the language can be bare and the medium transparent) or in a lyric climax, through the intensity of the evocation. In both cases,

the over-all structure upon which the poem is based becomes implicit in those moments when the idea or situation reaches a properly "poetic" intensity. Both reflect the modern tendency to develop elements of the dramatic and lyric modes within the general framework of the narrative mode; and it is this shift toward a greater intensity and immediacy, using the technique of direct presentation, which caused confusion among reviewers attempting to describe long poems like the Cantos.

V.

If failure to understand the changed nature of the modern long poem can limit its appreciation, the same is true to a much greater degree of the current fashion for one variety of short poem. The situation has resulted primarily from efforts of academic critics rather than poets--who are free to write short or long poems as the spirit moves them. However, since the best testimony on poetry comes from those producing it, Ransom's criticism will be used as an instance illustrating that conception of poetry inimical to the long poem. His formal definition of the poem can encompass that in the narrative mode; nevertheless, he comes dangerously close to a distorted conception of poetry.

All the poet-critics whose remarks have helped form the critical foundation of these chapters (Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Aiken) identify poetry with intensity ("charging

language with meaning"). Ransom shares this view (as in his identification of the moment of intensity with "the Epiphany of Beauty," which "uses up the whole of poetry").[13] The divergence between the poet-critics just mentioned and the school represented by Ransom appears in the tendency of the latter to limit poetry to metaphor. Ransom's full description of the poem does include a concept of structure like that required by the nature of the long poem. The poem has a "trinitarian" existence, composed of the three levels of structure, texture, and metric.[14] There are the plot or argument, the poetic language, and the meters. But--and for this reason Ransom's criticism can be used to illustrate this point of view--he tends to equate the texture, or poetic language, entirely with metaphor.

The identification of poetry with metaphor has a very respectable origin. It stems from the attempt to differentiate poetry, as a form of knowledge, from science.[15] Ransom's own testimony on this subject occurs in The World's Body (1938), where he says, "As science more and more completely reduces the world to its types and forms, art, replying, must invest it again with body."[16] This is an admirable defense

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[13] Poems and Essays (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 184. Subsequently referred to as Poems and Essays.

[14] Poems and Essays, pp. 79, 99-101. A more formal definition occurs in The New Criticism (Norfolk: New Directions, 1941), p. 268.

[15] The importance of the problem for modern poets was seen in Chapter Four.

[16] (New York: Scribner, 1938), p. 198n.

of art; but his particular conclusions lead him toward the limitation of poetry to metaphor. Elsewhere in the same volume he defines poetry as "knowledge by images, reporting the fulness or particularity of nature" (p. 158). And in The New Criticism (1941), he maintains the most important element of the poem is the irrelevancy, "the free detail," of the textural level; this metaphorical level is to arrest the attention, stop the flow of the poem, and be interesting for itself (p. 187). Such a view is incompatible with a proper conception of the continuity necessary to long form.

Ransom's alternation between the broader and the more limited conceptions of poetry continues to appear in "The Concrete Universal: Observations on the Understanding of Poetry" (1955), the most recent statement of his critical viewpoint.[17] Following Kant, he equates his term, "Universal," with the "idea" of the poem--what it is about. To be poetry this idea must receive some sort of embodiment, the artistic process of concretion. At one point (p. 175), Ransom does think of metaphor as simply the basis of one kind of style, that in which the Universal becomes entirely translated into one or more natural images, leaving no "abstract language of the understanding" (he also calls this the "metaphysical" style). But elsewhere he emphasizes metaphor as the "poetic" element of poetry. "Metaphor," Ransom urges, best describes for the modern period "the way of the imagination in giving

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[17] Poems and Essays, pp. 159-185.

objective or Concrete existence to the homeless moral Universal" (pp. 180-181). Citing scholars like Richards and Wimsatt in support, he concludes his identification of poetry with metaphor:

> To say "metaphor" tirelessly, with brutal repetition, is one militant way of defending nature as the element to which the Universal is referred, and therefore the element to which poetry has to look. I think the defenders of poetry would not mind saying that they are not prepared to abandon nature, because that would be the abandonment of metaphor, which in turn would mean the abandonment of poetry; . . .
>
> (p. 181).

Ransom's other, more adequate conception of poetry causes him, at the end of the essay, to qualify this extreme statement. He registers a reservation concerning his identification of the poem with "the Epiphany of Beauty" and with metaphor. Kant's description of poetry (and his own), he says, is that of

> a poetic phrase, or passage, or of a short poem; it is the description of a lyrical effect . . . or of a moment of illumination; it is the soul of poetry caught briefly, but completely and characteristically.
>
> (p. 184).

Ransom's reservation, which he finds "a little embarrassing, and after all not exactly trifling," is a direct negation of the identification of poetry with metaphor, and, indeed, is a confirmation of one of the major points in this chapter--that the lyric mode is the mode of the short poem or of the individual peak of intensity in the long poem.

The following passage largely restores the adequacy of Ransom's conception of the poem:

> And yet--what are we to say about long poems? about philosophical poems, or epics, or poetic narratives, or poetic dramas? It cannot often be that the action focuses upon a single metaphorical or metaphysical moment. The chances are, overwhelmingly, that the moral Universal in such cases is a considerable and organized sequence of intellectual ideas, or of historical events, embodied for action and working themselves out; or, it is just possible, not clearly embodied, and only talking themselves out; and the best we can hope for, as Kantians, is that there are many happy metaphorical transformations, or little poetries, in the course of the poem, and perhaps a conclusion suited to the faith of the poet. This order of poetry will be much more put together, or synthetic, than the lyric, and more capable, indeed more demanding, of being separated by analysis into its primary parts. A different thing.
>
> (pp. 184-185).

Here, Ransom demonstrates his awareness of the conception of structure inherent in the long poem ("a considerable and organized sequence of intellectual ideas, or of historical events") and, more importantly, the concept of modes in poetry (the more synthetic "order" of poetry--the narrative mode--which he distinguishes from the lyric, "a different thing"). It is only to be regretted that he continues to use phrases like "many happy metaphorical transformations" or "little poetries within the course of the poem"--an emphasis which works against an adequate conception of the long poem as a <u>whole</u> rather than a series of lyric intervals.

Ransom himself links the conception limiting poetry to metaphor with the name of a particular academic critic; and the connection illustrates how this limited conception of poetry, with its emphasis of a particular kind of poem to the detriment of others, has infiltrated poetic taste by

means of the classroom.[18] The critic is Cleanth Brooks; and Ransom makes his attribution in "Why Critics Don't Go Mad":

> For Brooks the poem exists in its metaphors. The rest of it he does not particularly remark. He goes straight to the metaphors, thinking it is they which work the miracle that is poetry; and naturally he elects for special notice the most unlikely ones. Hence paradox and irony, of which he is so fond. (Poems and Essays, p. 148).

Brooks, says Ransom, "does not want the poem to have a formal shape, but simply to unfold its own metaphorical energy." Though sympathizing with Brooks's general position, Ransom argues against him.

Such identifications of Brooks, as well as his claim that the "metaphysical" style of poets like Ransom and Tate has brought about the greatest critical revolution in the history of English poetry, cause Aiken at one point to exclaim, "That is a schoolmaster's vision, with a vengeance" (ABC, p. 101). The point is that the source of this peculiarly limiting definition of poetry lies more with the academic community than with those who have actually written a significant body of poetry, though poet-critics like Ransom have,

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[18] Perhaps this is the most appropriate place to mention another obstacle to an adequate conception of poetry--the anthology. F. O. Matthiessen, in his Introduction to The Oxford Book of American Verse (New York, 1950), expresses succinctly the point I wish to make: "One of the effects of anthologies upon popular taste has been to overemphasize the lyric at the expense of all other genres, to the point of establishing in unreflective minds the notion that the short lyric is the chief surviving poetic form" (p. ix). This attitude has assuredly infiltrated supposedly reflective minds.

perhaps unintentionally, helped through their near-alliance.[19] None of the poets who have written long poems defines poetry in terms of metaphor. Pound and Williams, in particular, are actually "anti-metaphor"; they strive to present "the thing itself."

VI.

If the conception of poetry illustrated by Ransom's criticism is inimical to an adequate appreciation of the long poem (and the final conclusions will be drawn subsequently), what kind of poem furthers this limited conception? The short poem with the "packed" line. This is a legitimate variety of poem, one brought to a high level of excellence in the twentieth century; and its very excellence seems to have elicited from certain of the more schoolmasterly critics an admiration causing them to conceive of poetry in its terms alone.

An admirable example of this kind of poem, one not having previous associations with any poetic style or critical viewpoint, is by the recent Pulitzer Prize winner, W. D. Snodgrass:

> He fed them generously who were his flocks,
> Picked, shatterbrained, for food. Passed as a goat
> Among his sheep, I cast off. Though hurled rocks
> And prayers, deranged by torment tossed our boat,

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[19]Pound, too, may have contributed to such a conception during his Imagist phase. Early in his career, he was writing only short poems, many in terms of a single controlling image.

I could not silence, somehow, this defiant
Mind. From my fist into the frothed wake ran
The white eye's gluten of the living giant
I had escaped, by trickery, as no man.

Unseen where all seem stone blind, pure disguise
Has brought me home alone to No Man's land
To look at nothing I dare recognize.
My dead blind guide, you lead me here to claim
Still waters that will never wash my hand,
To kneel by my old face and know my name.[20]

The poem, one of estrangement and reconciliation, is densely charged with meaning. There is a deft and intricate handling of purposed ambiguities, as in the negations, the play upon the meanings of "blindness," and in the variations upon "no man" (no man, Odysseus, No Man's Land, and the "I" are all closely connected). The poem reverberates with such analogies without dissipating the mounting surge of emotion crystallized in the graveyard scene of the sestet. It is intricately contrived, in the best sense of that word. It has levels of meaning and a dense metaphorical dimension. It is, in short, an excellent example of the contemporary decorative style (with no pejorative overtones implicit in the term), a style to which the terms, "metaphysical," "lapidary," or "polyphonic," can also be applied.

It is obvious that the density of meaning in a poem in this style, while appropriate for the moment of intensity comprising the short poem or for a moment of intensity in the larger pattern of the long poem, were it to constitute

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[20] Heart's Needle (New York: Knopf, 1960), p. 6. The poem is titled with the inscription "metis . . . ou tis," in Greek characters, and is dedicated "For R. M. Powell."

the average level of intensity in a long poem, would make that poem unreadable. The mind would be lost in the wealth of reverberations. Eliot's Quartets is the nearest approach to this style in long form ("lapidary" and "polyphonic" are terms relevant to the poem); and it is difficult reading. Poems in the decorative style are eminently explicable; they are best suited to detailed exegesis. Hence their popularity with professors. This style is dominant in the contemporary short poem. Significantly, poets committed to it do not write long poems; the quality of "intricate and teasing wroughtness" (the phrase is Aiken's) necessary for excellence seems to preclude success in long form.

The danger inherent in the decorative style is that the emotional core of the poem will be manipulated to death. At its worst, the poem in this style becomes Shapiro's "academic poem":

> To use the critical jargon, the academic poem can be recognized by its Objective Form, objective form being anything from jamming the text, the use of concealed metaphor, involved stanzaic form, "personae," to anything else that prevents direct expression of feeling.[21]

Aiken had earlier registered a similar protest against abuses of the style:

> Everywhere in this poetry the emphasis is on manipulatory dexterity, on ingenuity, on cerebral trick and clever word-play, on a dry manner, in short, which prefers the safer ambush of irony and satire to the more dangerous "open" warfare which is involved when the poet faces the world more directly, more instinctively, more emotionally. . . . That a poem should be

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[21] In Defense of Ignorance (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 130.

> simple, sensuous, and passionate--passionate, above all things!--is for them not merely inconceivable, it is disgusting.
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> (ABC, p. 100).

In both examples the terms used apply closely to Snodgrass' poem, with the exception--which makes the difference between success and failure--that the emotional charge of his poem does carry it as poetry. Its emotional core has not, in Shapiro's words, been "filtered through the screen of wit until it is unrecognizable as feeling." The two poets just cited, protesting against a style carried too far, imply the possibility of others.

The following poems illustrate two closely related styles, or what might, for present purposes, best be considered as two varieties of a single style. The first:

To Waken an Old Lady

Old age is
a flight of small
cheeping birds
skimming
bare trees
above a snow glaze.
Gaining and failing
they are buffeted
by a dark wind--
But what?
On harsh weedstalks
the flock has rested,
the snow
is covered with broken
seedhusks
and the wind tempered
by a shrill
piping of plenty.

And the second:

Karma

Christmas was in the air and all was well
With him, but for a few confusing flaws
In divers of God's images. Because
A friend of his would neither buy nor sell,
Was he to answer for the axe that fell?
He pondered; and the reason for it was,
Partly, a slowly freezing Santa Claus
Upon the corner, with his beard and bell.

Acknowledging an improvident surprise,
He magnified a fancy that he wished
The friend whom he had wrecked were here again.
Not sure of that, he found a compromise;
And from the fulness of his heart he fished
A dime for Jesus who had died for men.

The first of these poems is by Williams and the second by Robinson.[22] Both are contemporary examples of the non-decorative style. The first is effective through the utter simplicity, almost spontaneity, with which language is used, and the second through the incisiveness with which the portrait is sketched. Neither is highly metaphoric. The language of both, rather, approaches that of speech, the first use resulting in a "lyric" effect and the second in a "dramatic." The thread of meaning in both moves directly and uninterruptedly from beginning to end. Neither has levels of meaning; neither gives an impression of "intricate and teasing wroughtness." Both can be characterized by terms like "simplicity," "immediacy," "directness," "clarity." Both, that is, exhibit a transparency of medium; unlike Snodgrass, both poets are, in

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[22]Williams' poem appears in The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 200; Robinson's in Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Macmillan, 1937), p. 871. Both adhere to the description of the short poem and the lyric mode given earlier.

Eliot's words, "writing transparently, so that our attention is directed to the object and not to the medium."

The contrast between the decorative and non-decorative styles is explicit in one of Aiken's early essays:

> There are two great tendencies in poetry--two kinds of poetic value. . . . In one of them the emphasis is on the externals--on form, style, color, texture, with the intention of producing a sensorial effect as brilliant as possible; in the other the emphasis is on the content, and the style is made secondary, a transparent glass through which one may most perfectly see.
> (ABC, p. 40).

Aiken connects the first of these tendencies with lyric poetry and the second with philosophical or narrative poetry; and in doing so, he specifically identifies the "transparent"--non-decorative--style with poems in the narrative mode.

VII.

The problem of styles is related to that of the qualities of line (density, continuity, and flexibility) proper to the long poem. The poems of Williams and Robinson not only demonstrate that even the short poem can be "poetic" apart from metaphorical density and suggestive language, but also illustrate in brief that ruling quality of style which the extent of the long poem necessitates. "In any poem of length," Pound says, "the first essential is the narrative flow." These two poems, by their virtue of transparency, show how the forward momentum necessary to long form can be attained without sacrificing a sufficiently poetic intensity of language.

Similarly, in illustrating how "bare" poetry can be, they also show that there are kinds of climaxes, or peaks of intensity, other than that seen in Snodgrass' poem. The climax can be purely dramatic, one of situation or action, and such transparency of medium--such a stark or simple use of words as appears in these poems--can actually intensify the poetic effect in a way Snodgrass' use of language cannot. The style of the long poem must be such that the line is flexible enough to carry these various kinds of climaxes. It must also be flexible enough to convey both the various levels of intensity and the various kinds of writing inherent in the long poem.

Because of the wide range of flexibility required of it (unlike the short poem, where the "psychic material" creates its own unique form), the line of the long poem becomes an almost separable vehicle: it must be put to many uses and yet retain a certain characteristic nature. Its vehicular nature can be seen in Robinson's development of blank verse as a medium, which he masters sufficiently to be able to concentrate upon the events and characters constituting his story. When compared to the short poem, even Pound's rhythmic line assumes the nature of a vehicle. It is much more regularized (though not metered), due to the length of his poem, than the free verse medium of the short poems from which it stems. The same tends to be true of the line in Paterson and the Quartets.

The narrative and dramatic modes closely parallel each other by virtue of their common element of structure. Both are long form modes. For this reason, Eliot's comments on the dramatic mode are relevant by analogy to poems in the narrative mode. "We have come to expect poetry," he had once said, "to be something very concentrated, something distilled." A different situation obtains, however, in verse drama. The play requires a highly transparent medium; it must be composed in the non-decorative style.

Discussing the technique of play-writing, Eliot says:

> But another, and important, cause of improvement is the gradual purging out of poetical ornament. This, perhaps, is the most painful part of the labour, so far as the versification goes, of the modern poet who tries to write a play in verse. The course of improvement is towards a greater and greater starkness. The beautiful line for its own sake is a luxury dangerous even for the poet who has made himself a virtuoso of the technique of the theatre. What is necessary is a beauty which shall not be in the line or the isolable passage, but woven into the dramatic texture itself; so that you can hardly say whether the lines give grandeur to the drama, or whether it is the drama which turns the words into poetry.
>
> (On Poetry, p. 260).

The purging of poetical ornament, a greater starkness, a beauty not in the line or isolable passage--these are the key phrases. They all emphasize the importance of transparency and dramatic relevance in the line of verse drama. Eliot sees that in verse drama--and hence in both long form modes--there is an over-all architectural quality to which each line and passage must be relevant. Like Pound, he is aware that long form necessitates a style in which the main import is not sacrificed to detail.

Eliot's remark, coupled with the previous discussion of decorative and non-decorative styles, illustrates a gradation among the three modes in terms of immediate communication of meaning. The necessity for immediate clarity is greatest in the pure dramatic mode--the staged play--where the thread of meaning must be directly and continuously apprehensible. There is no opportunity for the viewer to have a scene redone (and he can reread poetry in the other modes) or to pause in order to reflect upon the significance of a scene.

At the opposite pole, in terms of immediate communication of meaning, is the poem in the lyric mode. The short poem can be reread, its individual lines returned to and fitted into the unifying pattern with successive readings. Because of the lesser scope of short form, the lines can be packed with a dense charge of meaning and can be intricately worked, if the poet so chooses. The only requirement is an ultimate clarity.

On the other hand, the poem in the narrative mode--the long poem--occupies an intermediate position with regard to immediate clarity (a position utilizing the virtues of both the dramatic and lyric modes). The long poem requires less immediate clarity than the play simply because it can be read. It must, however, exhibit a much greater degree of such clarity than is possible in the short poem because its extended length necessitates a readily apprehensible relation of part to whole--the dramatic relevance noted by Eliot. The qualities of its line, its style, must be such that it can

cope with the wide range of effects required by the large theme--the moments of intensity, whether lyric or dramatic, the levels of intensity, and the kinds of writing inherent in an extended subject, whether descriptive, meditative, dramatic, or lyric. It must be able, at moments of intensity, to achieve a density of meaning like that of the short poem but at the same time be flexible enough to unify the less intense interconnecting material with the rest of the poem, giving continuity to the whole. These qualities, inherent in the Williams and Robinson poems as they are not in the Snodgrass poem, show that the line of the long poem must stem essentially from the non-decorative style.

VIII.

Critics basing their conception of poetry primarily upon metaphor or deriving it from poems in the contemporary decorative style are unable to appreciate those qualities of the long poem, and the range of effects (many of them non-metaphoric) possible and necessary, which stem from the virtues of the non-decorative style. Through their championship of a limited conception of poetry and a single variety of poem, they limit their awareness of the range of effects poetry is capable of conveying. In particular, through their concentration upon the kind of style with the dense charge of meaning in each line and upon the kind of poem which builds upon a single peak of intensity, they, like Poe, can only

conceive of the long poem as a series of "poems" connected by metered prose. Thinking that the "poetic" is in every case synonymous with the "poem," they limit poetry to the lyric mode.

Eliot answers those holding this position. In "What is Minor Poetry?" he suggests the wide currency of this view:

> When we talk about Poetry, with a capital P, we are apt to think only of the more intense emotion or the more magical phrase: nevertheless there are a great many casements in poetry which are not magic, and which do not open on the foam of perilous seas, but are perfectly good windows for all that.
>
> (On Poetry, p. 49).

His answer appears in "Poetry and Drama." He is speaking in terms of the dramatic mode; but the close analogy of this mode with the narrative will be recalled. Thus, where Eliot uses the phrase, "dramatic situation," we can substitute "situation" (or "climax") of any kind:

> But if our verse is to have so wide a range that it can say anything that has to be said, it follows that it will not be 'poetry' all the time. It will only be 'poetry' when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all.
>
> It is indeed necessary for any long poem, if it is to escape monotony, to be able to say homely things without bathos, as well as to take the highest flights without sounding exaggerated.
>
> (On Poetry, p. 74).

The long poem, by virtue of the wide range of experience it attempts to represent, must utilize a style with possibilities for such inclusiveness of expression. The packed line of the short poem in the decorative style is an excellent instrument for conveying the moment of intensity; but it is incapable of the flexibility and range which the narrative mode requires.

The long poem is purposely and inevitably not "poetic" in every part (though it must exhibit an average level of intensity sufficient for the whole to be successful as poetry). Eliot says:

> One does not expect a poem to be equally sustained throughout; and in some of the most successful long poems there is a relation of the more tense to the more relaxed passages, which is in itself part of the pattern of beauty.[23]

The kind of writing comprising the "more relaxed" passages is what Eliot calls verse ("And the poet who could not write 'verse' when verse was needed, would be without that sense of structure which is required to make a poem of any length readable."). The magnitude of the large theme requires structuring and levels of intensity, which in turn necessitate the presence of both verse and poetry. The line of the long poem must be such--its style such--that it can convey both and still give an impression of unity and continuity to the poem.

Verse, in a short poem, is an imperfection. The short poem, by definition, catches the single moment of intensity; it is built about the single climax. But the moment of intensity is just that which is peculiarly the "poetic." Thus, the short poem, because the nature of its material is intense and because it focuses upon the intense, can be, and usually is in successful examples, all "poetry." The short poem is coterminous with the "poetic." There is

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[23]The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), p. 92.

no place for verse in it. But in the long poem, only the sequence or hierarchy of climaxes is essentially "poetic," and the less intense material unifying, proportioning, and patterning those climaxes is comprised of verse. The vehicular nature of verse, out of which the "poetic" must naturally flower, is more obvious. In the long poem (in either the dramatic or the narrative mode--that is, in long form in general) the "poetic" and the "poem" are not synonymous.

Critics basing their conception of poetry upon the short poem--where the "poetic" and the "poem" are synonymous--forget this. They thus consider the verse portions necessary to long form as an imperfection in that form too, and can thus only conceive of the long poem in terms of its several "poetries." Aiken once said the poet sees life "as a kaleidoscopic series of incandescent instants." The critic who derives his conception of poetry from the short poem limits poetry to separate representations of those "incandescent instants"; his view does not allow for the concept of series, which connects those instants and forms the larger, more comprehensive patterns of human experience. He conceives of poetry as limited to the lyric mode, to short form, where the intensity of the moment can be, and often is, conveyed in metaphorical terms (though the poems of Williams and Robinson show that even in the lyric mode this is not the only method of representation). Such a critic does not realize that, though specific genres are inoperative in contemporary poetry, broad kinds do exist. Basing poetry in

general upon metaphor and the packed line as standards of excellence, he slights the narrative mode, where such elements are either secondary or momentary. He has no adequate conception of long form.

And only in long form can the larger sequences and patterns of experience--those aspects of human life which make it most significant--in all their complexity and interconnection, be represented. If literature is the ordering and intensification of significant experience by means of language, it is the long poem, of the two large poetic 'kinds'--and not the short--which alone can represent those larger significances.

It is this, ultimately, which makes a single good long poem a greater achievement than a series of the best short poems: the poet writing in long form must come to terms with the problems of a more comprehensive mode. He must be able to form a significant extended structure; he must be able to write verse as well as poetry; he must be able to convey different kinds of material and different kinds of effects--lyric, narrative, dramatic, meditative; he must be able to place the complex parts of an extensive whole in proper relation; and finally, he must have, not only a complex theme, but also a sustained vision and continuous poetic capability extending far beyond the moment of intensity and the single insight.

Most poets fail to a degree in this kind of poem. The pity is that, through the current critical fashion for metaphor and the decorative style, their work is judged by standards alien to their mode of poetry.

AFTERWORD

> The truth is that these forty years have provided a quite extraordinary rankness and richness and variety of poetic invention, with an immense range--perhaps as great as any found in English poetry--of temper, form, and diction.
>
> Aiken, ABC.

I.

Is Aiken's remark true of the twentieth century American long poem? Yes. The "cannon" of long poems used here consists of about thirty examples (this number including only a few poems each of Robinson, Jeffers, and Aiken) written by some seventeen or eighteen authors easily recognized in the gallery of modern poets. The results of a periplus, a "voyage of discovery," as Pound uses the term, through these poems show just such variety.

Which of these poems are most significant? Eliot, in his Introduction to Pound's Literary Essays, calls that poet's criticism the "least dispensable" of any appearing in the modern period. Although Eliot's own criticism is ultimately better, his remark is certainly true of Pound's poem. The Cantos is imperfect--its structure unsymmetrical, its unity diffuse, and its form distorted at times by Pound's convictions or idiosyncrasies. And yet, though part may be dispensable,

it displays a greater range of experience than any other modern American long poem.

The Cantos is the kind of poem which most modern criticism, with its emphasis upon the severe unity and intricate working of short form, is least able to judge. Its value lies in the massive scope of the art-world it portrays and in the prodigal variety of its episodes. And because, in addition, it embodies most of the attitudes and techniques characterizing the modern movement, it stands as the major monument to the contemporary poetic revolution. This poem, as well as Pound's indefatigable championship of art and artists, justifies calling the present literary period--it was Eliot somewhere said it--the Age of Pound.

Eliot's Quartets ranks close to the Cantos in achievement, exhibiting a more careful working of a lesser variety of material. It has a tighter unity and is more carefully structured than Pound's poem. Eliot, lacking Pound's inventiveness and fertility of imagination, has a finer sense of proportion and control; his poem is better sustained than Pound's. The Quartets exhibits that kind of excellence particularly admired by persons unable to appreciate the abundance of the Cantos.

Williams' Paterson is another poem ranking near the height of modern achievement. Though it presents extreme difficulties of intelligibility, Williams' experiments (and successes) with the rhythms of the line, the data of perception, and the non-decorative style merit placing it with the

preceding two. Paterson conveys the excitement and immediacy of the senses at their most perceptive; the environment--life lived from day to day--is lifted to expression.

In the work of these three poets is seen the culmination of the contemporary poetic revolution as it affects the long poem. Their poems exhibit new concepts of structure, rhythm, and diction, new techniques for the transformation of experience into poetry, new values and perceptions--or old ones, their significance renewed in terms of the modern world. The Cantos, the Quartets, and Paterson demonstrate that modern poetry remains, in Aiken's phrase, "commensurate with the limits of human experience." They are not meant to yield any but a minor portion of their meaning in a single reading. But this is only to say that, like all work laying claim to greatness, their value endures.

Somewhat below these poems in level of excellence should appear one of Robinson's narratives, perhaps Merlin. Robinson's long poems, unfortunately, tend to repeat each other; and, in this sense, his range of imagination is narrow. Yet at least one must stand here to indicate his achievement in developing the long poem within its traditional form. His poems exhibit parallels to contemporary advances in prose fiction, both in the use of scene structure and in the psychological exploration of character and consciousness. They are also based upon the diction and rhythms of speech and employ a more transparent medium than perhaps any other modern long poems. Though quite apart from the main stream

of modern poetic development, Robinson is responsible for certain innovations uncharacteristic of a poet completely 'traditional.' He is surely 'half-emancipated.'

It is difficult to weigh in one balance poets whose attitudes toward poetry are as different as those of Pound, Eliot, and Williams, on the one hand, and Robinson, on the other; and yet each has achieved an excellence in long form which has helped determine the nature of the modern long poem.

II.

Has the long poem "declined" in the twentieth century as a major literary form? Though the obvious variety awaiting the reader of long poems might seem to belie such a statement, more than one poet, critic, or reviewer has hinted the form is moribund. A periplus does not support such somber predictions. It does show many modern poets less willing to work in long form than their predecessors. Poets like Stevens, Frost, Cummings, Tate, and Ransom do not write long poems (though the first two, at least, half-extend themselves in "semi-long" poems). These are poets whose work is sufficiently distinguished to help determine the form and temper of modern poetry; and yet their poetry is not characteristically in long form.

But on the other hand, poets like Robinson, Aiken, Jeffers, and even Auden, to a lesser extent, do regularly

write long poems. To their number can be added the persistent Pound by virtue of the regularity with which sections of the Cantos have appeared since the Twenties. Many other modern poets--Eliot, Williams, MacLeish, and Crane among them--have attacked the problems of long form at least once. From Robinson to Crane, this list is hardly less--indeed, more--distinguished than the first. More poets than one at first realizes--and these to an even greater degree determining the form and temper of modern poetry--have chosen to confront themselves with the difficult requirements of the narrative mode. A numerical "decline" when seen from the perspective of past centuries? Yes. But not a decline either of poets' interest in the form or in its vitality and variety. Certain minds fail to see the difference. Consonant with current poetic (and in Eliot's words), we merely expect more from a long poem, for its length, than our grandparents did.

This false impression of "decline" has flourished, on the one hand, through several inhibitions limiting composition of long poems. Some poets feel the novel has displaced the long poem, that prose has become the medium for the narrative mode--the mode for unstaged long form. Even Pound and Eliot have contributed to this assumption through their dictum that what can be said in prose should be left to prose. Others have similarly contributed by advocating a conception of poetry, held by Poe in the previous century, which limits it to the short flight.

A second inhibition results from the poets' preoccupation with technique. In their attempts to gain the intensity--the "charge of meaning"--which for most of them is poetry, modern poets seek to condense or concentrate their lines; and the procedure often results in the intricate working of short form--upon success in the contemporary decorative style.

A third inhibition stems from the assumption that decay of traditional belief precludes the writing of long poems, since such poems depend upon some system of ideas for their total structure and since any such comprehensive system, common to writer and reader alike, is inoperative in the modern world. Not all poets are equally influenced by these inhibitions. Were they, there would be few long poems. But they do explain why some contemporary poets avoid composition in long form.

On the other hand, the false impression of "decline" is reinforced by a view similarly limiting appreciation of the long poem. If the poet is in part responsible for such an impression, the attitude of his audience also contributes. A considerable part of this audience tends to define poetry in terms of the lyric mode. The "poetic" is essentially equated with the "poem." Such a view of poetry cannot deal with the concept of long form; and only in long form can the more comprehensive values which give both life and art significance be rendered with any complexity or in any detail.

Faced with the requirements of the more comprehensive narrative mode, poets actually writing long poems invariably reject this limited and limiting conception of poetry. For this reason, their comments are particularly valuable in developing criteria which allow the long poem to be judged on its own terms.

If the long poem as a major literary form has hardly declined, its nature has certainly been transformed. The kind of material formerly conveyed by the traditional narrative poem is now variously rendered. Part is cast in the form of prose fiction. Part is conveyed by several short poems rather than a single long poem, poems often philosophic or meditative and displaying a consistent weltanschauung. Stevens is perhaps the clearest example in American poetry. Another portion becomes the contemporary philosophic or meditative long poem--one not based on plot--such as those written by Pound, Eliot, and Williams in thematic form or that by Auden (New Year Letter) in "non-fictional," logical form. A fourth is conveyed by the modern narrative poem, the most direct descendant of the traditional narrative.

Poems of the last two categories, taken together, constitute the modern "long poem"; and it is the first of these, the philosophic or meditative poem not based on plot, which illustrates the changed--or enlarged--nature of the long poem in the contemporary period. The appearance of the thematically structured poem is the most recent and most significant development for poetry in the narrative mode.

Its presence necessitates broadening the definition of the long poem beyond the "sequence of emotion-producing events" characterizing the traditional narrative poem. A definition, as well as other critical terminology (the concept of modes, in particular), is required presenting a consistent approach to, and encompassing, both contemporary varieties. For this reason, Marianne Moore's description is highly relevant; and it can stand, in terms of a close paraphrase, as a more accurate definition of the long poem: "The long poem is the capacious treatment of large themes in verse, themes which embody more than one climax and which require the subordination of distinct parts to the design of the whole." The definition is primarily structural; and structure is that single element most clearly determining the nature of the long poem.

III.

Poe, with the "epic mania" plaguing his time, was probably right to develop the conception of poetry he did; but in twentieth century American poetry--or at least in the critic's and reader's view of it--the pendulum of fashion has swung to the opposite extreme. The primacy of the long poem needs to be restored in a period where the excellence of the short poem has obscured the different excellence of the long and where poetry has largely become equated with the lyric mode. A periplus through modern American long

poems supports the conviction that the long poem remains the most comprehensive form of poetry and that success in long form constitutes the height of poetic achievement. One can turn to the contemporary long poem, as one is accustomed to turn to its predecessors, for enduring pleasure and enlightenment, and on such a "voyage of discovery," as in the study of all vital literature, find joy in the sailing.

APPENDIX

THE "CANON" OF LONG POEMS

1915	Captain Craig (rev. ed.; Robinson)
1917	Cantos, 1-3 (Pound) Merlin (Robinson)
1920	Lancelot (Robinson)
1921	Punch (Aiken)
1923	The Pilgrimage of Festus (Aiken)
1924	The Man Who Died Twice (Robinson) Tamar (Jeffers)
1925	Cantos, 1-16 (Pound)
1927	Tristram (Robinson) The Women at Point Sur (Jeffers) The Tall Men (Davidson)
1928	Cantos, 17-27 (Pound) Cawdor (Jeffers) John Brown's Body (Benét)
1929	Cavender's House (Robinson)
1930	Cantos, 1-30 (Pound) The Bridge (Crane)
1931	Preludes for Memnon (Aiken) Jonathan Gentry (Van Doren)
1932	Conquistador (MacLeish)
1933	Give Your Heart to the Hawks (Jeffers)
1934	Cantos, 31-41 (Pound)
1936	The People, Yes (Sandburg)

1937	Cantos, 42-51 (Pound)
1938	Coriolanus and his Mother (Schwartz)
1940	Cantos, 52-71 (Pound) New Year Letter (Auden)
1943	Four Quartets (Eliot) Genesis (Schwartz)
1945	Essay on Rime (Shapiro)
1947	The Age of Anxiety (Auden)
1948	Cantos, 74-84 (Pound) The Double Axe (Jeffers)
1951	Paterson, I-IV (Williams)
1953	Brother to Dragons (Warren)
1956	Cantos, 85-95 (Pound)
1958	Paterson, V (Williams) The Dark Sister (Scott)
1959	Cantos, 96-109 (Pound) The Mayfield Deer (rev. ed.; Van Doren)
1960	The Middle Passage (Coxe)
1961	Horatio (Plutzik)

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