

LEXICAL REPETITION IN AMERICAN POETRY*

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The man-hero is not the exceptional mon-
ster,
But he that of repetition is most master.

Wallace Stevens

Many of the most quoted lines in American poetry share a common quality: they are verses repeated within a poem. Indeed, such commonplaces as 'Good fences make good neighbors' or 'Nevermore' or 'The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream' or 'And miles to go before I sleep' are all lines repeated in their respective poems. Repetition, of course, is a common mnemonic device and thus it is understandable that these lines should lodge themselves in the public domain, where poetry rarely ventures. Such repetitions of words, phrases, or clauses, moreover, are often the central element in the poem, either reiterating the primary image or thought, or linking the stanzas together, like musical phrases in a sonata. In some cases, the repetition itself raises a poem to greatness, as in Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", in which the repetition of the final line accounts for the suggestive mystery and aural appeal of this short poem, the most explicated and recited poem in American literature.

Each poet has a characteristic style of repetition. Ginsberg's oft-repeated, chanting phrases in "Howl" or in "Kaddish", Eliot's constant whirling vortexes around the still point in "Burnt Norton", or Plath's ubiquitous reiterations are patterns that lead us to the poet's meaning. Consideration of the repetitions will aid a reader in understanding a poem and the poet. This paper will discuss several American poets, and in particular refer to *Harmonium* (1923), the first book by Wallace Stevens.

* The prefatory poem, a contribution to intertextual literature, a playgiarism poem, consists of lines *repeated* in their respective poems. I read this new poem with lines speaking to each other here in their original tone.

Critics of Stevens continue to fall into two main groups: those such as Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom who find the primary Stevens in his later, longer poems, and others who find Stevens' first book to be his best. These latter critics, such as Yvor Winters, argue that the later Stevens became trapped in his own hedonistic imagery and strayed from poetry into obscure philosophical musings. It is certainly true that Stevens' complex style, rich and varied imagery, and lack of narrative or dramatic development have made the long poems particularly difficult. Stevens, though, was not consciously seeking obscurity but thought that poems must be read emotionally or imaginatively rather than logically or rationally. His poems do not follow a logical development, and for a poet who is so often praised (or condemned) as a philosopher, he does not follow a carefully developed linear structure. One way to approach Stevens is from the repetitions; for example, *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937) is a series of circular meditations on the notion of 'things as they are', a phrase repeated seventeen times in the poem. Stevens' long poems constantly revolve around certain images and phrases, a process that he himself describes in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1947):

One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round
And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,

A curious quality in Stevens' work, from beginning to end, has been this use of repetitions, in many forms. Examining this pattern in his early poems will assist the reader in the longer poems.

To facilitate this analysis I have categorized the use of repetition into six patterns, focusing on how each division functions in a poem:

- 1) Frame: Repetition at the beginning and ending of poem.
- 2) Refrain: Repetition at the end of a stanza or section.
- 3) Lining: repetition throughout a poem to link passages.
- 4) Thematic: Repetition of central argument or thesis.
- 5) Closure: Repetition at the end of poem.
- 6) Reiteration: Successive repetition of word or phrase.

Some poems may employ more than one pattern, and some longer poems may not be easily categorized into one pattern. In *Harmonium* at least twenty-six poems use some form of the above repetitions.

One of the most common techniques of repetition in *Harmonium* is the frame, where the same line (or, once, even a stanza) is repeated at the beginning and ending of six poems. In general, such a pattern in Stevens and other poets follows, necessarily, a similar dialectical development. The first line presents a thesis statement or a point of reflection; the poem becomes a mediation upon or illustration of the initial statement and by the end of the

poem, returning where it has begun, we come to a fuller understanding of this line. Stevens' "The Worms at Heaven's Gate" offers a macabre, comic treatment of this pattern. The opening line 'Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbador', has a slight hint of procession and ceremony, possibly even of resurrection. This line, at the beginning, is concluded by 'within our bellies, we her chariot'. Taken with the title, always an integral part of a Stevens' poem, we realize that the deceased escapes the grave only by the feasting of the worms, a sort of digestive resurrection. In the next lines the worms 'consume an eye...finger after finger...the genius of the cheek'. Then Stevens includes his own ellipsis, suggesting the completion of this dining process, and concludes with the opening line, 'Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbador'. This last supper (for the eaten) reveals Stevens' view, expressed throughout his poetry, that religion is one of the fictions of life. Here, what begins as pomp and celebration quickly turns to an ironic undercutting of traditional religious views, with a comic irony typical of *Harmonium*.

With a completely different tone, "Lunar Paraphrase" begins and ends with 'The moon is the mother of pathos and pity'. The ten lines within this frame, a contemplation of the world through the light of the moon (in Stevens of the imagination), illustrate the tone and sense of this line. Three scenes, all introduced with subordinate 'when' clauses, depict the feeling of the wearier end of November, of fallen leaves, and sleepers dreaming in the quieting darkness. The poem marks the onset of winter, sleep, night, and dreams – it is at this time that 'The moon is the mother of pathos and pity'. The inner contents elaborate and mediate upon the frame statement. At the conclusion we have a more complete understanding of the sympathetic power of the moon in the time of darkness and cold.

Frost's well-known sonnet "Acquainted with the Night" bears striking resemblance in structure and imagery to Stevens' "Lunar Paraphrase". Its Eliotic images present a darker vision than Stevens, and it is an even more explicit example of the meditational nature of a frame poem. The opening 'I have been one acquainted with the night' is, as so much of Frost, intriguingly understated. 'Acquainted' suggests an ambiguity in the narrator's relationship with the night; the reader wonders at the depth of this acquaintance. Within the frame the images of isolation detail this relationship, and interestingly, in terms of repetition, all seven sentences of the poem begin with 'I have...'

I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.
I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes unwilling to explain.

At the end of the poem – in the midst of his night ramblings – the narrator sees the moon, but unlike the sympathy of Stevens' moon there is a cool neutrality, 'And further still at an unearthly height (One luminary clock against the sky) Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right'. This rare urban poem of Frost expresses the 'terrifying' quality that Lionel Trilling found in his reading of the poet. The images delineate his acquaintance with the night, a relationship that can never be consummated by the living and one for which acquaintanceship would suffice.

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes, another example of the frame poem, slightly modified, begins:

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood
in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The middle four lines present the history of four rivers, a history of the Negro himself – bathing in the Euphrates when dawns were young, sleeping by the Congo, raising pyramids above the Nile, and finally hearing the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans. These lines portray the long history and suffering of the Negro race, and at the conclusion of even this short poem, we gain a sense of the eternal spirit of the African people. Significantly, Hughes substitutes 'dusky' for the second line of the frame at the end, a colorful paraphrasis of his theme:

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Perhaps the oldest tradition of repetition, with a long use in ballads, is the refrain, a form that is still used today. Poe, in *The Philosophy of Composition*, the overdetermined explanation of the writing of "The Raven", claims that the first word of the poem was the refrain 'Nevermore'. Poe observes that the refrain has been the most universally employed of artistic methods but 'saw it to be in a primitive condition'. He continues:

As commonly used, the *refrain*, or burden, not only is limited to lyric verse, but depends for its impression upon the force of monotone – both in sound and thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity – of repetition. I resolved to diversify, and so heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continuously varied that of thought: that to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation of the application of the *refrain* – the refrain itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried.

This variation of application can be achieved, Poe continues, by letting the refrain be spoken by a bird in response to a narrator who questions first in a commonplace manner, then in a superstitious frenzy, and finally in sorrow

and despair. Whatever one may think of Poe as the scientific critic or logical poet, nonetheless the success of "The Raven" depends on the unified effect of a short poem (the only kind, Poe says) about the death of a beautiful woman, heightened by the frequent repetition of the refrain 'Nevermore', a word that can nevermore be spoken in English without an allusive echo to "The Raven".

The refrain continues to survive even in this century of open forms. One of Stevens' most anthologized poems, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream", makes ironic use of the refrain, the popularity of this poem is in large part due to the yoking of comic and serious in the refrain. In the first stanza the roller of big cigars, the muscular one, is called to whip in kitchen cups concupiscent curds, while wenches dawdle and boys bring flowers in last month's newspapers. This scene is concluded with a rhymed couplet that in itself expresses the tone of the poem: 'Let be be finale of seem. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream'. The complex thought of the penultimate line is joined to the simple pronouncement of the joys of ice-cream. In the second stanza, upstairs in the bedroom, the deceased lies in bed covered with a sheet, and 'If her horny feet protrude, / They come to show how cold she is, and numb'. The poem concludes with another rhymed couplet: 'Let the lamp affix its beam. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream'. Again, a startling aphorism, casting a bright light on reality, on things as they are he would later say, and followed with the delicious nonsense of ice-cream, a line among the most quoted in American poetry.

The refrain of an eight line poem by Frost, "The Pasture", the introductory poem he chose for his collected works, expresses an essential quality of the poet. The two four line stanzas offer two scenes, the first of the narrator going out to clean the pasture spring, to rake the leaves away, and to wait to watch the water clear. The spring image, quite naturally, represents a source of poetic inspiration and creation. These three pentameter lines are concluded with the octasyllabic refrain, 'I shan't be gone long. – You come too'. In the second stanza the narrator goes out to fetch the little calf that totters when the mother licks it with her tongue, concluding with the same invitation to join him. Curiously, the calf may be the poet himself, who wrote in an early letter to Louis Untermeyer, his lifelong friend and correspondent, 'The poet in me died nearly ten years ago. Fortunately, he had run through several phases, four to be exact, all well-defined before he went. The calf I was in the nineties I merely take to market. I am become my own salesman'. Frost here reveals, what has since been shown to be true, that many of his poems were written early in his career and were slowly 'fetched' from his journals for revision and publication. In this poem the New England diction and the informal invitation of the refrain typify Frost.

The most complex and variable pattern is the linking. By this I mean more than the occasionally restated phrase, but rather the conscious repetition of lines to link together passage, much as repeated phrases in music continually develop a theme. This is, of course, a pattern common to all poets and could be further sub-divided, but it is particularly significant to Stevens, whose longer poems often revolve around one repeated phrase. The thirty-six line "Domination of Black" is a model of the structure of Stevens' longer poems, in which the repetition of 'Like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind' is both the central image and the phrase that intertwines the three stanzas. This phrase plays upon the word 'turning', which means both the motion of the leaves in the wind and falling to the ground, and also the leaves changing color in the fall. The turning leaves appear in the first stanza:

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.

These external recollections intrude upon the reveries of the narrator; the fire and the room repeat the outside world, producing an hypnotic effect. This relative calm is abruptly broken with the memory of the cry of the peacocks and the color of the heavy hemlocks: 'Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks / Came striding. / And I remembered the cry of the peacocks'. These images are repeated ('turned') in the next two stanzas, and this last line also functions as a refrain. In the longer second stanza these turning images continue to break down the distinction between inner / outer, subjective / objective, then / now, as everything turns in the narrator's mind. In a convolution of images at the end of the stanza, the narrator asks.

Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

In the final stanza, for a brief moment the narrator escapes the turning room, only to find the whirling planets: 'Out of the window, / I saw how the planets gathered / Like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind'. Again a sense of fear sweeps over the narrator and he remembers the cry of the

peacocks. This poem is usually cited as one of the bleaker ones from *Harmonium*, but the warmth of the fire and the reminiscing mood, though dark, counterbalance this dread. The shrill cry of the peacock is a final jolt, but what goes round comes round; the fear of night and winter is also cyclical.

"Sea Surface Full of Clouds", an impressionistic poem in five sections each with six stanzas of tercets, is Stevens' most repetitive poem. In technique it most closely resembles Monet's paintings of Rouen cathedral, the same scene painted many times in different light. Difficult to summarize, the poem presents five different moods of the same scene from a yacht at sea off the coast of Tehuantepec. The scene is the same but the mood varies; each section is a repetition of the other, with only certain qualifying words altered to create another atmosphere. A comparison of a few lines from sections III and IV will illustrate Stevens' method:

In that November off Tehuantepec,
The slopping of the sea grew still one night
And a pale silver patterned on the deck
And made one think of porcelain chocolate
And pied umbrellas...

.....

In that November off Tehuantepec
The night-long slopping of the sea grew still.
A mellow morning dozed upon the deck
And made one think of musky chocolate
And frail umbrellas...

This poem, praised by earlier critics, has not fared so well in the hands of recent scholars, who can find no progression or deconstructive crossings to analyze. The lush language and sounds are like the broad, colorful strokes of the impressionist's paintbrush, and it is representative of Stevens' repetitive man-hero.

Another method of repetition, based not, as the previous examples, on its place in the poem, is the thematic. Such a repetition is usually part of a debate explicitly argued in the poem. An excellent example is Frost's "Mending Wall", which repeats both sides of the argument on the value of a stone wall separating the narrator's property from his neighbor's. Most people recall the neighbor's argument that 'Good fences make good neighbors', a sentiment he repeats as they undertake together their spring ritual of repairing the worn, winter wall. This poem is usually read as a criticism of the neighbor's desire to reconstruct the useless wall that seems to serve no purpose except to divide an apple orchard from a pine grove. Other critics note that it is the narrator himself who lets his neighbor know when it is time to mend the wall. Frost presents an equal treatment of both parties in the debate; further, the repetition of 'Good fences make good neighbors', one of which ends the poem, is balanced by the repeated line of 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall',

one of which begins the poem. It is, of course, the gentle irony and characterization that make this a favorite poem, but the two repetitions emphasize the debate and underscore Frost's even-handed approach.

Another example of thematic repetition is in Stevens' blank verse masterpiece, "Sunday Morning", generally considered his best poem and called by Yvor Winters 'probably the greatest American poem of the twentieth century'. It is, argue most readers, a criticism of traditional Christianity, with a 'boisterous devotion to the sun' and praise of enduring 'April's green'. In this somewhat one-sided debate, an older woman accepts the poet's praise of the comforts of the sun, saying in the opening of section IV, "I am content when wakened birds, / Before they fly, test the reality / of misty fields, by their sweet questionings". The woman, though, fearing death continues, 'But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields / Return no more, where, then, is paradise?' The whole of section V continues this topic:

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss".
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths,
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
Whispered a little out of tenderness,
She makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

'Death is the mother of beauty' is the only line repeated in the poem, and I would read the poem more as a meditation on the effect of the idea of death on the imagination. In this respect the poem is similar to Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", in which the sea whispers that delicious word 'death, death, death death', a word that marks the birth of the poet in the young boy, chanting a thousand songs. In section VI Stevens expands his critique of imperishable bliss, arguing that change is necessary; in a paradise without change ripe fruit would never fall, and rivers would never find the sea, concluding this section with the theme:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

Read in such manner the focus of the poem shifts from the failings of religion to a paean of the creative imagination, a process that is linked with the

knowledge of death, as he says in a later poem, 'being / Includes death and the imagination'.

Closure, repetition at the end of a poem, though not common, is, as in the case of "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening", certainly effective. The repetition of the final line, 'And miles to go before I sleep', has been described by various critics as scintillating, stunning, somnolent. This simple, suggestive poem is bewilderingly short for the length of criticism it has fostered. Frost was amused by the various interpretations of this poem, noting that all he wanted to do was hurry home before the snow was too deep. Though it is perfect in sound, imagery, and craftsmanship, it is the final repetition – phrases in a major and minor key, or the weary chant of the driver, or an echo from the woods – that has raised this poem to its immortal status and produced the most quoted line in American poetry:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

The final pattern we will consider, a common one, is reiteration – the successive repetition of a word or phrase. We have already noted the famous line from Whitman in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", which repeats the word death four times and then five times in the same stanza, the word 'delicious' and 'final, superior to all'. From the beginning of this beautiful poem, which in one way may be read as a detective narrative or a mystery lyric, in search of the missing word ('O give me the clew!'), Whitman hints at this word of death, 'the word stronger and more delicious than any'. Indeed this poem, if not all of Whitman, focuses on death and the transcendence of death through art. In "Out of the Cradle" the young boy on the sea shore learns about death, a knowledge that awakens the poet in him:

My own songs awaked from that hour,
And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
(Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments, bending aside),
The sea whisper'd me.

Psychologically, reiteration is the most interesting of all forms of repetition. Here in a ritual chant and search for the meaning of death, Whitman writes a poem of incantatory magic, where death becomes life and love and poetry.

Another revealing poem of reiteration is Poe's "Bells", not a favorite of critics because of its seeming lack of textual complexity. However, the excessive (even for Poe) assonance, alliteration, and rhyme and the frequent reiteration of the word 'bells' make his poem popular at public readings. The four stanzas portray stages of human growth, from the sledge bells of youth,

then golden-notes of wedding bells, loud alarum bells of war, and finally the tolling of death bells. The second within each stanza capture the stages of life and the constant repetition of bells, bells, bells, bells suggest much of sensory extravagance found elsewhere in Poe.

Each poet has a characteristic style of repetition. Sylvia Plath, for example, frequently uses reiteration in a distinctive manner. *Ariel*, a posthumous publication quickly written before her death, contains many reiterations; twenty-three of the forty poems have at least one example. Taking, at random, a few of these repetitions from various poems is itself revealing:

- my fear, my fear, my fear
- that kill, that kill, that kill
- I am exhausted, I am exhausted
- talk, talk, talk
- dark, dark
- You do not do, you do not do
- beware. Beware.

Besides this painful vocabulary is the logic or style of the repetition. Many seem like an echo or momentary pause in the writing, a sort of quick breath before continuing. "Daddy", her most famous poem, has eight different reiterations. Whatever the psychology of repetition, they become haunting in Plath's poetry and are an important stylistic mark of her writing.

We have seen a variety of repetitive patterns in Stevens, but the most common is the linking. Reading Stevens' longer poems will be aided by letting the repetitions become the center of reflection. This constant repetition is related to his aesthetics, as he says in his book of essays, *The Necessary Angel*: 'It is not too extravagant to think of resemblance and of repetition of resemblance as a source of the ideal'. His poems do not have a beginning and ending rather they are concentric circles of thought and images, turning and spinning around themselves, in an ever increasing circumference.

REPEATED POETRY

Wild Nights – Wild Nights
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore".
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Caw caw caw Lord Lord Lord
Mumbo – Jumbo will hoo-doo you,
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, boom.

Bells, bells, bells, bells, bells –
Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring,
The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream

Shantih shantih shantih
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
There will be time

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
Twit twit twit
O O O O
Jug jug jug jug jug jug

Born-again, born-again! Imagination
Ascending descending, wending to earth.
I – I Me – Me
You – You We – We

I grow old... I grow old...
Lord, I am not worthy
This is the way the world ends
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Because I do not hope to turn again
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Do I dare? Do I dare?
Let us go

I shan't be gone long. – You come too.
Beware
Beware
Things as they are
You do not do, you do not do
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
Loved, loved, loved, loved

Death, death, death, death, death,
The leaves cry
Death is the mother of beauty
Do not weep.
War is kind.
What a grand time was the war!
My, My My!

Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw
Something there is that doesn't love a wall.
"Good fences make good neighbors".

Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
And the tide rises, the tide falls.

caw caw
is
that all, is
that all

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.
Lord Lord
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.