THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF TIMELESSNESS:
A LINGUISTIC INVESTIGATION OF
LEAVES OF GRASS *

1.0 That Whitman's idiolect is characterized by an expansion of the sentence seems a trivial point to make. The inclusiveness of his catalogues, their openness and expansiveness, is self-evident: I will not attempt simply to defend the presence of these linguistic features in the poems. Instead, this paper is an attempt at analyzing Walt Whitman's « utterance » (as the poet himself called *Leaves of Grass*) within a linguistic framework. I hope to show how pervasive — not just limited to the lexicon, as most critics hold— was Whitman's experimentation with language: *he manipulated language at its very core — the syntactical structure.*

I have identified in *Leaves of Grass*[1] (*LG* from now on) a corpus of utterances in which the idiolect of the poems shows in full its idiosyncrasies (its deviance) in respect to the parent language. This does not entail that all the utterances of *LG* will conform to the model that I propose: some of them however do. I have chosen utterances that deviate from linguistic norms because I wish to test what a linguistic approach can do for the study of literature, especially in the case of a text that openly experiments with language; moreover, I believe that the particular deviant syntactic pattern in some of the poems in *LG* is not only as significant as any other aspect of the poems, but also crucial to an understanding of *LG* as a whole.

1. All citations to *LG* in this paper will be to the « Authoritative Texts » edition, edited by SCULLEY BRADLEY and HAROLD W. BLODGETT, (New York, W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1973).

A linguistic description of an utterance must add to the critic's empirical intuition of it: the goal of linguistics is, on one hand, to account for the intuitions of the native speakers of a given language. On the other hand, linguistics must give to these intuitions names and scope:

One way in which poetic language differs from ordinary language... is that a poet's deployment of his language's transformational apparatus, its syntactic patterns, not only reflects cognitive preferences, a way of seeing the world; perhaps, more importantly, it reflects the fundamental principles of artistic design by which the poet orders the world that is the poem. If we can discover the strategies by which a poet manipulates these patterns, we will gain a deeper insight into the poem's inner form and aesthetic centre. *Poetic design dictates linguistic strategy, for the poet; for the critic, the discovery of poetic design begins with the discovery of linguistic strategy*[2].

1.1 To think of time—of all that retrospection,
To think of to-day, and the ages continued henceforward.
. . . .
A reminiscence of the vulgar fate,
A frequent sample of the life and death of workmen,
Each after his kind.
. . . .
Thumb extended, finger uplifted, apron, cape, gloves, strap,
    wet-weather clothes, whip carefully chosen,
Boss, spotter, starter, hostler, somebody loafing on you,
    loafing on somebody, headway, man before and man behind,
Good day's work, bad day's work, pet stock, mean stock,
    first out, last out, turning-in at night,
To think that these are so much and so nigh to other drivers,
    and he there takes no interest in them.
       (« To Think of Time », 11. 1-2, 33-35, 49-52; pp. 434-436).

---

2. DONALD C. FREEMAN, « The Strategy of Fusion: Dylan Thomas's Syntax », in *Style and Structure in Literature*, ed. ROGER FOWLER, (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 20. Emphasis mine.

The samples from *LG* (of which the above is one) that are under study in this paper *are not formally-complete sentences* [3], even though we would expect them to be, since the sequences of symbols are comprised between capitalized letters and periods. The notion of syntax embedded in these utterances does not coincide with the notion of syntax that the reader uses in his everyday linguistic behavior, and brings to the text. We know what the words — taken one by one — mean, but the mapping of the meaning that those words compound together is rather complicated, if possible at all.

It can be argued that any act of reading and interpretation of a given piece of language requires a certain amount of decoding that is proportional to the manipulation of the language of the text: when we read an unknown text, we ignore the particular idiolect, the idiosyncratic ways in which familiar terms and conventional rules of our language have been put to use. The case of these utterances of *LG* is quite different: the poet has claimed a poetic license that some critics [4] consider rare, and difficult for the reader, since he has altered the basic structural kernel of English in many of his poems.

This syntactical characteristic is in itself worth studying [5]. However, the « ungrammatical » utterances from *LG* are

3. There is a difference in the way linguists use the terms « utterance », and « sentence ». Utterance refers to actual samples of speech, the evidence that forms the corpus of data from which linguists abstract phrase structure and transformational rules and construct sentences. Sentences have a more abstract and formal status. My use of the two terms tends to coincide with this; sometimes, however, they may be used almost as synonyms, mainly for the sake of avoiding repetitions.

4. GEOFFREY LEECH, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, (London, Longmans, 1969), pp. 44-45. RAYMOND CHAPMAN, *Linguistics and Literature*, (Totowa, N.J., Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1973), p. 14.

5. My paper may also account for an aspect of *LG* that has been neglected so far, as Edmund Reiss points out in his, « Whitman's Poetic Grammar: Style and Meaning in 'Children of Adam' », in *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 12 (Fall 1971), 32-41.

significant also in a more specific way: I believe that they represent the ultimate stage in the process of syntactical expansion as a « mimetic » rendering of the universe. In the utterances that are under discussion here, Whitman's process of inclusion and expansion has reached the limit where it turns itself into a process of fragmentation and isolation.

The paper will, first, explain briefly the notion of syntax and linguistic competence that I have applied to the text of *LG* (2.0); second, categorize the three ways in which expansion of syntax is achieved in *LG* (2.1; 2.2; 2.3); third, discuss the relationship between ungrammatical sentences and the competence of the reader (3.0); and, finally, attempt to assign some meaning to these utterances (4.0).

2.0 A complete exposition of the theories of syntax that linguists have elaborated is beyond the scope of this paper[6]. I will only explain the notion of syntax that is used in the course of this paper.

Syntax can be defined as the grammar (or rules of how words pattern) that the speaker of a language learns in the process of language acquisition. All linguists agree as to the existence of these rules: they disagree on the metalanguage they use in defining them. Post-Saussurian linguists hold that what enables speakers to speak is an abstract knowledge of the structure of the language (*langue* for Saussure, *competence* for Chomsky), not just simply mnemonic catalogues of names and stock phrases.

By comparing utterances of speakers, linguists have concluded that this knowledge, that underlies every speech act of every speaker, is, for the English language, of the form:

6. JOHN LYONS, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969). JOHN LYONS, (ed.), *New Horizons in Linguistics*, (Penguin Books, 1970). NOAM CHOMSKY, *Syntactic Structures*, (The Hague, Mouton, 1957). NOAM CHOMSKY, *Cartesian Linguistics*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1966). VICTORIA FROMKIN and ROBERT RODMAN, *An Introduction to Language*, (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1974).

$$S \rightarrow NP + VP$$
$$VP \rightarrow Vb + NP$$

where S is sentence, NP, noun phrase, VP, verb phrase, and Vb, Verb. A complete outline of the syntactical rules of English would include all the possible and optional realizations that these abstract categories can take[7].

This set of phrase structure rules generates any and all English sentences: any sentence, to be in English, and to be understood in the English speech-community, must obey them. From this abstract (deep) structure, by way of lexical selections, transformational rules, and phonological rules, we reach the surface of our linguistic behavior, which may (or may not) contain a range of optional items, but that *must* contain at least a NP and a VP.

From the point of view of the structure of the language, the sentence is the primary and only level of analysis. Sentences are all alike in respect to their syntagmatic relationships: they can be constituted in several ways, but if they belong to the same language at all, they will all hide an identical deep structure under the varying garments of their surfaces.

The statement $S \rightarrow NP + VP$, then, which describes the competence of English speakers, is a statement about the pact — the social pact — to which speakers must adhere when they talk and write, if understanding and meaningful communication are to ensue from the linguistic interaction. This statement, however, does not restrict our freedom; we may decide to talk according to another *langue*, or to keep quiet, or to make a word-salad. But we would not normally expect or require immediate understanding from our listeners or readers. Sentences generated by $S \rightarrow NP + VP$ provide the listeners or readers with the optimal conditions for understanding and understandibility.

---

7. NOAM CHOMSKY, *Syntactic Structures*, Appendix II.

Language is a demanding social institution: it allows its speakers a certain range of freedom to develop subrules, personal idiolects, dialects, varieties, but it demands, for its own survival as a social institution, a respectful adherence to its core rules. Languages, as Benjamin Whorf pointed out, are strictly conservative and resistant to change in their grammatical patterns; they reward their speakers' obeisance with the possibility of expression and communication.

2.1 The first way in which an expansion of the syntax is achieved in *LG*, is non-deviant from the structure rules of English. For example:

I hear the workman singing and the farmer's wife singing,
I hear in the distance the sounds of children and of animals
        early in the day,
I hear emulous shouts of Australians pursuing the wild horse,
I hear the Spanish dance with castanets in the chestnut
        shade, to the rebeck and guitar,
I hear continual echoes from the Thames,
I hear fierce French liberty songs...
. . . .
I see a great round wonder rolling through space,
I see diminute farms, hamlets, ruins, graveyards, jails,
        factories, palaces, hovels, huts of barbarians, tents
        of nomads upon the surface,
I see the shaded part on one side where the sleepers are
        sleeping, and the sunlit part on the other side,
I see the curious rapid change of the light and shade,
I see distant lands, as real and near to the inhabitants of
        them as my land is to me.
                                        (« Salut Au Monde », pp. 138-139)

The rules of English, in fact, are recursive and allow [8]:

_____

8. Cf. VICTORIA FROMKIN, pp. 148-151 for a complete exposition of recursive rules of the English language. Cf. also LYONS, *Introduction*, p. 221.

$$S \rightarrow S \text{ (and S) } *$$
$$S \rightarrow NP + VP$$
$$VP \rightarrow Verb + NP$$
$$NP \rightarrow NP \left(\left\{ \begin{array}{c} and \\ or \end{array} \right\} NP \right)^*$$

where S is sentence, NP, Noun Phrase, VP, verb phrase and * means a theoretically infinite number. This option to expand the sentence is available to all speakers of the language. However, not all speakers will use this option as intensively in their idiolect as Whitman uses it in *LG*[9].

2.2 In this second grouping I have included all the cases in which Walt Whitman expands his sentences by lessening their grammaticalness[10]. This category represents an intermediate stage between well-formed (2.1) and « ungrammatical » (2.3) sentences.

Some utterances in this group show a disregard for the conventional value of punctuation. For example:

The choppers heard not, the camp shantites echoed not,
the quick-ear'd teamsters and chain and jack-screw men
    heard not,

9. Utterances of this sort in *LG* include: « Starting from Paumanok » (25.212-228; 27.253-265); « Song of Myself » (32.66-74; 36.154-166; 41-44. 264-329); « From Pent-up Aching Rivers » (91-93); « I Sing the Body Electric » (100-101.128-162); « In Paths Untrodden » (112-113); « Salut Au Monde » (137-148). Here and in subsequent notes the reader is referred first to page numbers and, then, to line numbers in each poem. If no line number is given, reference is made to the entire poem.

10. Utterances in this category include: « Song of Myself » (55. 570-575; 61-65.716-797; 70-71. 929-944; 75-76. 1026-2053); « Spontaneous Me » (103-105); « Our Old Feuillage » (171-176); « Song of the Redwood Tree » (207.20-23; 210. 99-101); « A Song for Occupations » (212.33-35); « With Antecedents » (240.33-35); « Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking » (246-247. 1-22); « As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life » (256.57-71); « When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd » (332-333.81-88); « As Consequent » (356-357. 1-22); « The Return of the Heroes » (362. 95-104); « Laws for Creation » (386.1-5); « Song at Sunset » (494-495. 1-21).

As the wood-spirits came from their haunts of a thousand years
    to join the refrain,
But in my soul I plainly heard.

Murmuring out of its myriad leaves,
Down from its lofty top rising two hundred feet high,
Out of its stalwart trunk and limbs, out of its foot-thick bark,
That chant of the seasons and time, chant not of the past only
    but the future.

                (« Song of the Redwood-Tree », pp. 206-207)

The second stanza may depend from the verb in the first
one; however, it has been separated from the verb by a
period and a blank space.

In some instances the syntax is disorganized: there is
no verb that can accomodate and rank the string of nouns,
as in this case:

Come now I will not be tantalized, you conceive too much of
    articulation,
Do you not know O speech how the buds beneath you are folded?
Waiting in gloom, protected by frost,
The dirt receding before my prophetical screams,
I underlying causes to balance them at last,
My knowledge my live parts, it keeping tally with the meaning
    of all things,
Happiness, (which whoever hears me let him or her set out in
    search of this day).

                (« Song of Myself », p. 55)

2.3 The third way in which Walt Whitman achieves
expansion of syntax in *LG* is by means of utterances which
are « ungrammatical », or of lowest - order - grammaticalness,
i.e. they are not generated by the phrase structure rules
of English. In these sentences, the deviance from the
syntactical code of the English language centers, in all cases [11],

11. « Beginners » (9.); « Me Imperturbe » (11); « Starting from
Paumanok » (17. 40-44; 26-27. 246-250); « Song of Myself » (29-30. 21-29;
35.139-144; 51.477-478; 52.497-500; 52-53.508-518; 67.860-862; 76-77.1063-

around the verb: as I will explain in paragraphs 3.0 and
4.0, Walt Whitman « deletes » that foundation of the sentence
which is the verb, as in « Me Imperturbe »,

Me imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature,
Master of all or mistress of all, aplomb in the midst of
       irrational things,
Imbued as they, passive, receptive, silent as they,
Finding my occupation, poverty, notoriety, foibles, crimes,
       less important than I thought,
Me toward the Mexican sea, or in the Mannahatta or the
       Tennessee, or far north or inland,
A river man, or a man of the woods, or of any farm-life of
       these States or of the coast, or the lakes or Kanada,
Me wherever my life is lived, O to be self-balanced for
       contingencies,
To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents,
       rebuffs, as the threes and animals do.

                                                    (p. 11)

1069; 77.1070-1074; 77-78.1086-1095); « Salut Au Monde » (147.195-198);
« Crossing Brooklyn Ferry » (160.6-12); « Our Old Feuillage » (171-176);
« Song of the Broad Axe » (184.1-9; 185-188.25-93); « Song of the
Redwood Tree » (206.1-5; 209-210.83-94); « A Song for Occupations »
(216-218.103-132); « Myself and Mine » (236-237.1-9); « With Antecedents »
(240.1-15); « Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking » (247-248.23-31; 251.
130-143); « The World Below the Brine » (260); « Songs for All Seas,
All Ships » (261-262.1-14); « Patrolling Barnegat » (263); « Thoughts »
(270); « The Dalliance of the Eagle » (273-274); « First of Songs for a
Prelude » (280-282.21-58); « As Consequent » (357.6-21); « By Blue Ontario's
Shore » (343-345.65-106); « The Return of the Heroes » (362.97-104);
« Old Ireland » (366.1-7); « Out from Behind the Mask» (382.1-15);
« Laws for Creation » (386.1-3); « Thought » (388); « Kosmos » (392-393);
« Italian Music in Dakota » (401.1-12); « The Prairie States » (402);
« Passage to India » (411.1-9); «To Think of Time » (434-437.1-63);
« Thought » (453.1-8); « Thou Mother with Equal Brood » (457.39-46);
« Thoughts » (479); « From Far Dakota's Canons » (483.1-8); « Thoughts »
(493-494,16-33); « Mannahatta » (507); « Paumanok » (507); « A Carol
Closing Sixty-nine » (508-509); « A Font of Type » (509); « The Wallabaout
Martyrs » (510-511); « America » (511); « Out of May's Shows Selected »
(512); « Halcyon Days » (513); « To Get the Final Lilt of Songs » (521-
522); « Life » (524-525); « The U.S. to Old World Critics » (526-527);
« My 71st Year » (541); « Apparitions » (541); « The Rounded Catalogue
Divine Complete » (554); « LoG's Purport » (555.1-5).

or as in stanza 17 of « Starting from Paumanok »,

Expanding and swift, henceforth,
Elements, breeds, adjustments, turbulent, quick and audacious,
A world primal again, vistas of glory incessant and branching,
A new race dominating previous ones and grander far, with
        new contests,
New politics, new literatures and religions, new inventions
        and arts.

These, my voice announcing—I will sleep no more but arise,
You oceans that have been calm within me! how I feel you,
        fathomless, stirring, preparing unprecedented waves and
        storms.

<div align="right">(pp. 26-27)</div>

3.0 What the examples in 2.3 (cf. footnote 11) have in common is a syntax that does not conform to our conventions of competence: these utterances are semi-sentences [12] of a very special sort. Linguists agree that since we can better understand sentences of higher-order grammaticalness, semi-sentences can be approached in terms of their well-formed parts. However, the quality of ungrammaticalness of these sentences—their well-formed parts being so elusive, and the missing parts of the sentences so crucial—is such that the meaning can be recovered only by constructing a new grammar.

Even Chomsky's well known case of a semi-sentence,

* Colorless green ideas sleep furiously

---

12. Cf. on semi-sentences NOAM CHOMSKY, « Degrees of Grammaticalness », in *The Structure of Language. Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, eds. JERRY A. FODOR and JERROLD J. KATZ, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 384-398. Cf. also SOL SAPORTA, « The Application of Linguistics to the Study of Poetic Language », in *Style and Language*, ed. THOMAS A. SEBEOK, (New York, Technology Press of M.I.T. and John Wiley, Inc. 1960), and NILS ERIK ENKVISTS, *Linguistic Stylistics*, (The Hague, Mouton, 1973), pp. 98-109.

can be generated by the phrase structure rules of English. We are dealing here with a case of semantic deviation. The well—formedness of the syntax allows the reader to postulate at least a non-sensical meaning: « Ideas that share contradictory properties are doing something impossible ».

The same can be said of this sentence from « I Sing the Body Electric » (p. 98):

(For before the war I often go to the slave mart and watch the sale).

This is a sentence of higher-order-grammaticalness, which our competence can grasp, once we postulate its absurdity for human categories of time. In fact, the rules of syntagmatic relationships are observed: the message is complete in all its parts. The speaker has obeyed the competence injunction as to how to say what he has to say. However, what he has to say seems to embody a semantic impossibility. « Before » and the tense of the verb are irreconcileable [13]. « War » is not a lexical item whose meaning imports a cyclical implication; war cannot be forecast like rain or the coming of tomorrow. In order to be able to say « before the war », the speaker must have seen at least the beginning if not the end of the given war. Therefore, conventions of time and expressions of time in the language do not allow him to transport his action in the present, to a time that he knows already to be past.

What is happening in this sentence from « I Sing the Body Electric » is central to my discussion of syntax, verbs and time in LG. We can safely assume that Walt Whitman was fluent enough in English (cf. all the well-formed parts of LG) to recognize the semantic impossibility of this sentence. What this sentence does is to qualify the speaker or persona of the poem as capable of doing an impossible

13. WILLIAM DIVER, « The Chronology System of the English Verb », Word 19 (August 1963), 141-191.

act: retrieving time past and living it as a present—an action unknown to humankind. The persona is either presenting himself as a God or denying the one-way linearity of time, by converting it into a spacelike dimension in which men can move freely back and forth. The matter-of-fact tone, the incidental (parenthetical) quality of the remark suggest that the line is doing both: thus humanizing a notion of time that only a hypothetical God can possess.

But in order to be able to verbalize such a concept in the terms available in English (and in most languages) the speaker has to verbalize the very categories of time that he seeks to eliminate. One can negate these categories and say that for St. Augustine's God no present, past or future exist, thereby acknowledging, in the same utterance, that they exist in human experience. The very language used requires a complete communicative intention to produce a verb and hence a tense specification. In order to express the persona's transcendence of human boundaries in time, these boundaries have to be signalled; the very language signals that the persona is operating a willful suspension of disbelief, that he is seeking to will his ignorance of time.

The parts of the poems listed in 2.2 and 2.3 (cf. also footnotes 10 and 11) show that the text of *LG* experiments with language in such a way as to do away altogether with this specification of time, by deleting the verb. Only by postulating an optional transformational rule of a very special sort, which modifies the phrase structure rules of English, can these utterances be related to the competence of the English speech-community, and to the other sentences of *LG*:

1) deep structure $S \rightarrow NP + VP$

2) transformational rule $Vb \Rightarrow \emptyset$

3) surface structure $S \rightarrow NP + \emptyset$

where $\emptyset$ is an unaffixed element that has not received expression in the actual physical realization of the sentence. The verb has been deleted.

The transformational rule (T-rule, from now on) is a construct; it does not come from my competence in English, since there is no such rule in my linguistic inventory. I posit the rule theoretically in order to account for my (our) intuitions of the ungrammaticalness of such utterances, in order to rescue them from the range of « mistakes », consider them as a purposeful manipulation of the syntax, and place them in some relationship with the competence of the English-speaking community (and to the rest of the sentences in *LG*). The rule that I have postulated also enables me to speak theoretically about all such sentences and to explore their structure as implying a proposition, a hypothesis about the world, related to the conventional proposition $S \rightarrow NP + VP$, by way of the innovative move defined as the T-rule $Vb \Rightarrow \emptyset$, or verb deletion.

Sentences of the form $S \rightarrow NP + \emptyset$, then are grammatically incomplete and also contextually incomplete. To be sure, many utterances occur in common speech that are grammatically incomplete but contextually complete. « John », for example, is a complete sentence if it follows a question as to the identity of a person. The NP sentence is defined, in this case, as an elliptical utterance. Incomplete utterances also occur that result from mistakes; ambiguity, however, can be eliminated by speaker/listener interaction. The context of speech includes other clues to meaning: the so-called suprasegmental elements [14] such as intonation, presence of reference, gestures and other systems of signs that can help disambiguate incomplete utterances.

Even though Walt Whitman himself defined his language as « speech », nonetheless we cannot avoid experience it as written, and the context of a written text does not include the suprasegmental and non-verbal clues to speech. Even when a poem is read aloud, the clues are not stipulated by the text (as in a drama script), but they must be supplied

14. LYONS, p. 63.

by the reader: they are not an aid to interpretation, rather the outcome of an interpretative act.

When semi-sentences occur in written texts and they cannot be categorized as elliptical, linguistic conventions allow the reader to dismiss them as mistakes or poor performances, to penalize the writer, as in the case of classes of English Composition. In the case of such utterances in a poem, they must be made meaningful: the postulation of the T-rule allows this possibility, by highlighting the portion of the sentence that has been deleted, the verb. These sentences must, therefore, be read *not as if* they contain the part that they do not contain; they must be read *differentially*, i.e. in terms of their deviance from our competence; though, at the same time, we must respect the intentionality of the poet who encoded them in such a fashion, if they are to be understood at all.

The choice of the examples that follow from *LG* has been dictated mainly by the logic of my argument concerning verbs and temporality, with a full awareness of the partial randomness of such choices, but also of the relevancy of the dimension of time in *all* the poems of *LG*.

A reminiscence of the vulgar fate,
A frequent sample of the life and death of workmen,
Each after his kind.

Cold dash of waves at the ferry wharf, posh and ice in the river,
    half-frozen mud in the streets,
A gray discouraged sky overhead, the short last daylight of
    December,
A hearse and stages, the funeral of an old Broadway stage-driver,
    the cortege mostly drivers.

                        (« To Think of Time », p. 436)

« To Think of Time » [15] provides us with a clue as

_____

15. I like to think of the process of accretion of *LG*, which many critics define as organic growth, as a process of embedding of poems within a larger unit. Theoretically a sentence could be of infinite length, due to the recursive and embedding rules of English. It is beyond the

to the meaning of the syntactical pattern $S \rightarrow NP + \emptyset$. In fact, no ungrammatical sentences occur after line 63, the end of section 5—quite interestingly the middle point of the poem. Section 6 opens:

What will be will be well, for what is is well,
To take interest is well, and not to take interest shall be well.

The domestic joys, the daily housework or business, the building
    of houses, are not phantasms, they have weight, form,
    location,
Farms, profits, crops, markets, wages, government, are none of
    them phantasms,
The difference between sin and goodness is no delusion,
The earth is not an echo, man and his life and all the things of
    his life are well-consider'd.

You are not thrown to the winds, you gather certainly and
    safely around yourself,
Yourself! yourself! yourself, for ever and ever! (pp. 436-437)

It is interesting to note that in this second part of the poem words reappear that had been used in the syntactically deviant first half of the poem. It is not a question of subject-matter that elicits sentences $S \rightarrow NP$

scope of this paper to collate and compare different versions of poems in *LG*, to examine their syntactical manipulation diachronically. The fact that these manipulations occurred reinforces the assumption that the sentences under examination are not the result of accident. Research in this direction could yield very interesting results.

I briefly examine here a variant of « To Think of Time ». The poem was a part of the 1855 *LG*, where the first strophe appeared as:

To THINK OF TIME... TO THINK THROUGH THE RETROSPECTION,
To think of today... and the ages continued henceforward.
Have you guessed you yourself would not continue? Have you
    dreaded those earth-beetles?
Have you feared the future would be nothing to you?

The poem was untitled in the 1855 edition. It assumed its present title in the 1871 *LG*. In the 1891 *LG* the opening of the poem had changed to:

To think of time—of all that retrospection,
To think of to-day, and the ages continued henceforward.
Have you guess'd you yourself would not continue?...

A slight change has occurred, which stresses by virtue of the blank space, the separation of the semi-sentence from the context.

+ $\emptyset$, rather some intrinsic characteristic of the verb. The « profits », « the markets », and « the government » reappear now in the context of perfectly well-formed sentences, after the reassuring statement that « what will be will be well ». Time future has in store our own death (the funeral in the first half of the poem), but a death that is not final. The time that we have not yet experienced will not change our experience into phantasms; the artifacts produced by human labor will outlive us and render us immortal.

The abrupt change in the syntactical pattern (the reappearance of verbs) in the context of that statement paradoxically suggests that time must not and cannot be eluded if the poet wants to talk about time as a non-destructive agent. Its elision is more dangerous (even if it is a more accurate rendering of the poet's transcendentalist vision of the world) because it separates the poem from any meaningful interpretation by the future audience—the act that makes his cultural artifact, the poem, immortal.

The law of the past cannot be eluded,
The law of the present and future cannot be eluded,
The law of the living cannot be eluded, it is eternal... (p. 438).

In fact, the deletion of the verb abolishes, together with the notion of time and action, the notion of actor and subject of the sentence, and therefore any transferral of action from a subject to a direct or indirect object (any predication):

Thoughts.
Of public opinion,
Of a calm and cool fiat sooner or later, (how impassive! how
    certain and final!)
Of the President with pale face asking secretly to himself,
    What will the people say at last?
Of the frivolous Judge—of the corrupt Congressman, Governor,
    Mayor—of such as these standing helpless and exposed...
                                                                (pp. 479-480)

or

Me Imperturbe.

Me imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature,
Master of all or mistress of all, aplomb in the midst of
    irrational things,
Imbued as they, passive, receptive, silent as they,
Finding my occupation, poverty, notoriety, foibles, crimes,
    less important than I thought,
Me toward the Mexican sea, or in the Mannahatta or the
    Tennessee, or far north or inland,
A river man, or a man of the woods, or of any farm-life of these
    States or of the coast, or the lakes of Kanada,
Me wherever my life is lived, O to be self-balanced for
    contingencies,
To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs,
    as the trees and animals do. (p. 11)

The first poem is composed of a string of prepositional phrases that depend from a NP (the title) that has been deleted from each line and separated by a period in the title. It can be argued that an action of thinking can be retrieved from the noun (which is indeed true of many nouns) and postulated in the deep structure; however, we would not be able to assign a subject to the action, nor to inflect the verb for tense and person. In any English sentence the Vb is that part that relates two different NPs; the Vb is the hinge of that relationship, that ranks one NP as subject and the other as either direct or indirect object. Once the Vb is deleted, no ranking of subject(s) is possible. $S \rightarrow NP + \emptyset$ is a linguistic realm of paratactical elements (lined up at best, unrelated at worst), between and among which no explicit and understandable connections are made.

    Me Imperturbe is a case in point: the syntax, deprived of verbs, mimes the passivity wished for by the poet, the verbals indicate more a state than an action, and the logical subject (what our linguistic expectations and conventions would indicate as the logical actor of the sentence)

has been deprived of the grammatical status of subject of the utterance—the « I » has become the accusative « Me ». Our competence demands, instead, that we necessarily articulate a set of explicit relationships, that we make the connections. By means of his new, expanded syntax Walt Whitman structures his « simulacrum » of the world in a radically new way.

4.0

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours
    of the day,
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated,
    every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings
    on the walk in the street and the passage over the river,
The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.
                        (« Crossing Brooklyn Ferry », p. 160)

The state of the world in these sentences suggests a state of attained transcendence, in which no subject/object ranking is operative or possible («glories strung like beads»); the « well-join'd scheme » is reached through a disintegration of identities, in space (I am whatever surrounds me) and in time (no change in substance will occur in time); the stanza above nearly replicates such a state.

It is Whitman's preoccupation with time and space that elicits the first and longest catalogue of *LG* and a type of syntax that has not entirely done away with the Vb:

Space and Time! now I see it is true, what I guess'd at,
What I guess'd when I loaf'd on the grass.
What I guess'd while I lay alone in my bed,
And again as I walk'd the beach under the paling stars of the
    morning.

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,
I am afoot with my vision.
By the city's quadrangular houses—in log huts, camping with
    lumbermen,
Along the ruts of the turnpike, along the dry gulch and rivulet
    bed,
Weeding my onion-patch or hoeing rows of carrots and parsnips,
    crossing savannas, trailing in forests,
Prospecting, gold-digging, girdling the trees of a new purchase,
Scorch'd ankle-deep by the hot sand, hauling my boat down the
    shallow river,
Where the panther walks to and fro on a limb overhead, where
    the buck turn furiously at the hunter,
Where the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock,
    where the otter is feeding on fish,
Where the alligator in his tough pimples sleeps by the bayou...

                              (« Song of Myself », p. 61)

The strings of phrases are held together by the appearance at the end of the catalogue (which is four pages long) of the first person and a verb: « I tread day and night such roads ». But the subject and the verb organize the long list at best formally. The verb seems to appear only as a concession to formal grammar, or as a way of bringing together all those elements, *at one stroke,* under the control of the « I », contemporaneously. The catalogue spatializes time; the « I » can cover an enormous stretch of space in the same verse. Catalogues of this form are just one step away from the abolition of time.

$S \to NP + \emptyset$ is the transcendental utterance; since the imaginative and literary act is for Walt Whitman a sacred act, a reenactment of creation[16], the poet must reproduce the « true » state of affairs of the world; the

16. Cf. Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism. Style and Vision in the American Renaissance,* (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell Univ. Press, 1973), p. 18.

abolition of time, as an illogical and unreal category within the transcendental model of the world, becomes almost a necessity. The innovative syntactical pattern makes harsh demands upon the reader, but the reader (the implied reader) makes demands upon the poet in turn.

Whoever you are holding me now in hand,
Without one thing all will be useless,
      I give you fair warning before you attempt me further,
I am not what you supposed, but far different.

Who is he that would become my follower?
Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections?

The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive,
You would have to give up all else, I alone would expect to be
      your sole and exclusive standard,
Your novitiate would even then be long and exhausting...
      (« Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand », p. 115)

The reader has to adopt a new competence for the poems, and expect occasional radical departures from conventional linguistic habits; he will then see, through the new grid offered by the poet, a new world in which movement is neither possible nor necessary, in which time is not threatening, death not final, equality of status and substance achieved. In turn, he will be validating by his acceptance the very premises of the poems. But in such a state of achieved transcendence what need is there for communication, since no ignorance and no differences are possible? As it is stated in *Me Imperturbe*, the state of perfect, animal-like passivity entails also silence: « Imbued as they, passive, receptive, silent as they... ». The poet needs the category of time in order to deny it and to prophesy its irrelevance:

What will be will be well, for what is is well,
To take interest is well, and not to take interest shall be well.
      (« To Think of Time », p. 437)

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so
    many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a
    crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the
    bright flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the
    swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the
    thickstemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

               (« Crossing Brooklyn Ferry », pp. 160-161)

In this section of « Crossing Brooklyn Berry » the poet has transported the present tense of section 1, into the past, after having abolished verbs and tense specification in the first stanza of section 2, and having spoken in the future tense about the actions of others which are dealt with in the present tense in section 3.

Given our linguistic conventions, only a prophecy of transcendence of categories of time and space is possible; the only meaningful statements about transcendence are those that defer it into the future, by prophesying it, and denying the category of time, which is acknowledged by virtue of the very structure of the utterance. And LG provides the readers with the experience of this deferral: the never-ending catalogues, the difficulty of putting full-stops at the ends of sentences, the suspension provided by the ungrammatical sentences, the involvement required of future audiences (both to validate the poem and the poet's identity through them).

See, projected through time,
For me an audience interminable.
               (« Starting from Paumanok », p. 16)

The primary curb on linguistic innovations is the need to build a solid bridge with those future audiences. Time specifications may not be totally logical and adequate, but must be respected solely by virtue of our social and linguistic pact. Time specifications, moreover, import inflection in tense and person: they rest ultimately on an assertion of identity on the part of the speaker. The danger of Whitman's particular linguistic innovation consists in its undermining the identity of the poet[17]. In speech,

time is reinforced by firmly entrenched linguistic habits, which reflect the peculiar connections of time and persons, both as conscious beings and... as rational agents... We cannot achieve complete non-egocentricity in our characterization either of time and space... The essential egocentricity of time is reflected in the ineliminability of tenses...[18]

In *An American Primer* Walt Whitman writes:

The Real Grammar will be that which declares itself a nucleus of the spirits of the laws, with liberty to all to carry out the spirit of the laws, even by violating them, if necessary. — The English language is grandly lawless like the race who use [sic] it—or, rather, breaks out of the little laws to enter truly the higher ones.

It is so instinct with that which underlies laws, and the purports of laws, it refuses all petty interruptions in its way[19].

The statement constitutes a declaration of individual freedom from any social (linguistic) constraint. But linguistic

17. For the problem of time and identity cf. HANS MEYERHOFF, *Time in Literature*, (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1955). Cf. also chapter 3 of FRED CARLISLE, *The Uncertain Self. Walt Whitman Drama of Identity*, (Michigan State Univ. Press, 1973).

18. JOHN LUCAS, *A Treatise on Time and Space*, (London, Methuen, 1973), p. 280.

19. HORACE TRAUBEL, *An American Primer by Walt Whitman with Facsimiles of the Original Manuscript*, (Boston, Small Maynerd & Co., 1904), p. 6.

constraints alone allow the individual to produce meaningful (and communicative) utterances: this hint of paradox must not have escaped Walt Whitman, either. His revolutionary linguistic project reveals the antisocial premises on which it partially rests. The language of *LG* moves between two poles: on the one hand, self-centered, prophetic utterances, and on the other, utterances that try to escape from isolation, by transcending time and space (the agents of isolation) into a non-differentiated world of oneness, that denies individualized forms.

« Between the non-identity of pure fluidity and the fixity involved in all definitions—in words or in life—the American writer moves, and knows he moves »[20]. And the American writers to whom Tanner refers here seem to be dealing with the problem that Whitman had deferred into the future for resolution, because of the structure of its very premises: the crucial (*but false*) opposition between language (which implies definition, boundary, restriction) and the flow that allows freedom.

Can [the American writer] find a freedom which is not a jelly, and can he establish an identity which is not a prison?... Can he find a stylistic freedom which is not simply a meaningless incoherence, and can he find a stylistic form which will not trap him inside the existing forms of previous literature?[21]

The randomness of Walt Whitman's most radical linguistic innovation is the ultimate attempt to escape the so-called prison of definition and social constraint. The occurrence of what I have called a T-rule, in fact, does not seem to be

20. TONY TANNER, *City of Words*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1971), p. 18. Tanner's introduction places Whitman in the context of this opposition, basic to the understanding of American literary and intellectual history. Also useful in illuminating the relationship between Transcendentalism, the problem of definition of the self, and style is Tony Tanner's *The Reign of Wonder*, (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965).

21. TANNER, *City of Words*, p. 19.

rule-governed. It is not elicited by a specific topic: it occurs throughout the several editions of *LG* and outlives revisions by the poet; not all the poems that deal specifically with time contain such ungrammatical sentences.

The randomness of Whitman's violations of the « Laws of Grammar » suggests an awareness that such utterances could turn against him. Whitman was using both types of sentence (or rather a spectrum of sentences that range from well-formedness to lower-order grammaticalness) indifferently, and in so doing was trying to escape the « prison » of codification on the part of the reader, the *rigor mortis* of a definition, while simultaneously calling for a new series of interpretative acts. The limit of any linguistic innovation is established by the codification produced by a non-random, patterned innovation: it ceases to be new and produces a new code—a new « prison ».

I know I am solid and sound,
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.
I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's
    compass,
I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a
    burnt stick at night.

(« Song of Myself », p. 48)

PAOLA LUDOVICI