The Verse Novel: A Modern American Poetic Genre

I

In a century of literary production in which "nothing is sacred, nothing forbidden," the vast array of poetic structures resulting from this apparent license has rendered genre analysis forbidding. Yet despite this variety and the decay of prescriptive norms for poetic production, critics rely too frequently on analyzing modern poems by means of historical genre definitions that define poems written in previous centuries but bear little resemblance to currently produced poems. These outmoded generic distinctions not only fail to provide adequate discriminations for generically defining modern poems but also hamper the very process of interpreting poems that they are meant to enhance. While the problem of genre analysis applies to all areas of modern poetry, I will limit myself here to an analysis of the problem only as it pertains to modern American long poems, and in particular what I perceive as a new type of American long poem, the verse novel, a genre that cannot be described by means of previous historical genre definitions, such as romance, epic, or chronicle.

Edward Stankiewicz returns to Aristotle's conception of three literary genres, epic, drama, and lyric, in his efforts to analyze modern poetry generically. He claims that the dividing feature of these genres is their differing narrative orientations:

Each of the three literary genres assigns a different role to the narrated event and to the speech event. The drama and the epic (including its modern variant the novel) can be characterized by the presence of two obligatory features: a narrated event (i.e., a story or a plot that evolves in time and moves ineluctably towards a resolution) and a narrator or speech event that advances and comments on the narrative and its protagonists. The difference between the two narrative genres lies in the presentation of the speech event. In the drama it is implemented through the speech and performance of the actors. . . . In the epic . . . the narrator and narrative form separate though tightly interlocking realms. . . . [T]he lyric does away with the use of a narrative and consequently with the role of a distinctive narrator. ("Linguistics" 171)

But we need to look closely at these points in order to understand their potential applicability to modern long poems. In placing drama and epic on one side of the
narrative/non-narrative dichotomy, Stankiewicz asserts that we need not have a narrator in order to have a narrated “speech event.” In drama we have a speech event presented by means of the dialogue and performance of actors without any narrator. And in modern fictional prose we also have what Seymour Chatman calls “non-narrated stories” (166-94; see Bialostosky, “Bakhtin”). Further, one can find instances of speech events presented from the point of view of a variety of narrators, such as William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying.

Despite Stankiewicz’s claim that we need, in addition to a narrated event, “a narrator or speech event that advances and comments,” we actually only need one or the other either to advance or comment, but not necessarily both. In non-narrated stories, as in drama, we have episodes in which the plot and/or theme is advanced (or retarded, for that matter) without there being any narrative commentary at all. If we employ Stankiewicz’s definition with this emendation, one can see the possibility for modern long poems presenting a story that evolves in time with speech events that advance the plot without having to have a single or definable narrator. Like modern prose fiction, modern poetic fictions may very well present a story that is narrated from multiple points of view by means of changing narrators, or is essentially non-narrated, letting the characters advance the “narrated event” through their own speech and actions. We need not assume that, if a poem is essentially “non-narrated,” it is a lyric regardless of its length.

While Stankiewicz’s definitions of the three overarching genres of literature should provide the critic with a means to investigate whether or not modern long poems utilize any or all of the narrative orientations of the three Aristotelian genres, many critics seem to fall into the trap that Stankiewicz himself succumbs to in an earlier essay. He tacitly assumes that surface structure and narrative structure are identical and that all modern forms proceed from a modernist philosophy:

The self-centered orientation of contemporary art and the renunciation of a unified point of view have led the modern poet to give up the sustained schemes of “classical” art and to reconcile himself to works with unstable reference. Thus he has settled for the construction of either small lyrical poems whose unity could be embraced in a single glance, or cycles of short poems, none of them complete, but spilling over into each other without reaching a point of rest. (“Centripetal” 229)

Since Stankiewicz assumes that the narrative properties of the individual sections determine the narrative orientation of the whole, he concludes that a poem fragmented into short sections can have no narrative structure and no distinctive narrator(s) (see Rosenthal and Gall for a similar definition; see Dickie for a counter definition). But such an assumption is proven false by any number of modern sequences. The concept of lyrical cycle adumbrated here, while useful for defining one type of poetic sequence, does not suffice to describe such significant sequential modern American long poems as Spoon River Anthology, The Waste Land, The Bridge, and Myths & Texts, which have plots that evolve in time and are advanced through either the types of narrators normally associated with prose fiction or the types of speech events normally associated with drama. Don Bialostosky in Making Tales suggests that rather than using Aristotle’s genres to
analyze modern poems, critics would do better to study Plato in whom “as in Wordsworth the distinction of lyric, narrative, and dramatic is one of ‘diction,’ that is, of who is represented as speaking” (13). While I find Bialostosky’s “poetics of speech,” based on Plato, Wordsworth, and Bakhtin, helpful for analyzing the “novelization” of modern poetry but insufficient for analyzing the differences between short and long poems and different types of long poems, I believe it does point to a more fruitful direction for poetic study than remaining limited to Aristotelian distinctions.

II

To develop much needed new genre definitions, we must turn to the dialogic method of Mikhail Bakhtin. By dialogical, Bakhtin means that every “utterance,” oral or written, takes place as an act of communication between speakers in a given cultural environment. The meaning of the utterance is jointly constructed by utterer and listener who in essence mutually interact for the duration of the interchange. As Gary Saul Morson summarizes it, “the decoder is also an encoder. . . . ‘[M]eaning’ does not belong to the speaker, but to the interaction between speaker and listener” (411). Also, as the poem is an utterance, its meaning(s) is shaped by the interaction of author, reader, and text within a specific cultural environment, and the meaning of the text alters as that environment alters (Bakhtin, Marxism 86; Formal 8; see Mukaróvský, Word 1-64 and Structure 89-128).

The utterance, then, contains within itself, as part of its shaping context, a recognition of the other and an anticipation of response (Morson 410). And this sense of the other affects the shaping of the poem through the author’s self-consciousness regarding the poem’s possible audiences. In traditional epics, the author assumes a single, shared identity of national consciousness, cultural values, and religious beliefs between author and readers. The author of the modern American long poem can assume virtually no identity between author and readers regarding any code of values or identity of national consciousness (see MacNiece 1-2). Rather, the author tends to be aware of the readers as others and must anticipate their possible responses to the uttered poem. Also “an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality” (Bakhtin, Dialogic 13); whereas in modern long poems the focus tends to be precisely on that “contemporary reality” that, while physically shared by author and reader, elicits differential responses and evaluations.

Further, literature exists only physically as a separate artifact. It exists semiotically as a relationship achieved through the presence of the physical text (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 97-98). In regard to this distinction between the literary work as artifact and dynamic semiotic relationship, Mukaróvský distinguishes between the work as a “material object” and as an “aesthetic object.” The former has a concrete existence as words on the page, or the stone on the pedestal; the latter is abstract and changes with changes in the perceiver’s consciousness—with the author being one of these perceivers—and the cultural con-
text of that perception: "aesthetic value does not concern the material work but rather the 'aesthetic object' which originates through the interpenetration of impulses arising from the material work and the living aesthetic tradition of the given art" (Structure 64). Text, reader, and world interact to constitute the "aesthetic object" from the "material object."

The words that comprise the material object and contribute to constituting the aesthetic object, the text, are invariably drawn from parole so that they carry the presence of the other, not only in terms of previous uses but also in terms of imputed values (see Haas 355). Bakhtin sees this historical loading of significance as existing in both daily and literary utterances, poetic and prosaic: "When the poet selects words, their combinations, and their compositional arrangement, he selects, combines, and arranges the evaluations lodged in them as well. . . . These existed before the poet took them, reevaluated them, and gave them new nuances" (Formal 123). The movement toward the rhythms and diction of daily speech, prominent in modern American poetry, marks a departure between the modern long poem and other historical long poem genres, which usually required stylized and elevated literary "language" as a part of their generic form, and were by definition sealed off from living parole (see Stewart 268-69; Titunik 182-83). In addition to the breakdown in traditional poetic prosody, the shift to open imitation of parole most apparently marks the transformation of poetry in the nineteenth century and continues into the twentieth. And precisely as poetry utilizes less and less the "dialects" of classical poetry, and more and more imitates the everyday dialects of parole, it moves closer to prose and becomes better able to utilize the narrative possibilities that have been developed in the novel. As Bakhtin observes, in arguing against the Formalist conception of "poetic language," "the novel is an artistic genre. Novelistic discourse is poetic discourse, but one that does not fit within the frame provided by the concept of poetic discourse as it now exists" (Dialogic 269).

Charles Hartman makes several valuable points in his study of free verse prosody in regard to this closer movement toward prose and toward the possibilities realized by the modern novel: "Both poetry and speech necessarily form the background of any poem. . . . Eliot had in part the same motive as Williams (and Browning and Wordsworth): to obtain greater apparent accuracy in imitating speech" (139). Unlike the medieval French romance or the blank verse epic, the modern long poem frequently varies its prosody to imitate more closely the nuances, rhythms, and idioms of daily speech. As it does so, it becomes more similar in "language" to the modern novel than to previous long poem genres, and increasingly reports the dialogue of its characters in their own "voices," both in terms of social dialects and rhythmic patterns. This specific feature of the narrated "speech event" draws many modern long poems closer to the genre of the modern novel and farther away from historial long poem genres. In the case of British poetry, it is apparent as Hartman suggests, and as Don Bialostosky has demonstrated in regard to Wordsworth, that novelization of language in poetry had begun by at least the beginning of the nineteenth century, appearing in shorter forms and parts of longer poems, and evolving towards a variety of novelized long poem genres (attempting to determine the exact origin
of the verse novel as a genre in British poetry, however, lies outside the scope of this study).

To think in words unavoidably involves being influenced by another’s viewpoint because the other already exists in the meanings attached to the words being used. The self-conscious speaker will be able to turn this presence to individual advantage in art. A writer can so wield the meanings of others present in the word as to disguise completely his or her own voice and to present not only a multiplicity of voices but also multiple voices within the utterance of a single word. As Michel Aucouturier explains, “for Bakhtin the constitutive ‘mode’ of the novel is not epic narration but dialogue; that is, the relation that is established, thanks to the essentially ‘dialogical’ nature of the novelistic word, among several autonomous discourses in respect to which the author himself takes the position of an interlocutor and not of a sovereign master” (238). But, contrary to Bakhtin’s emphasis, this concept of dialogue, or double-voiced discourse, increasingly applies to poetry as well as to modern prose. The advancement of the poetic fiction’s plot often occurs through dramatic action—dialogue, soliloquies, and character behavior—rather than through traditional narrative discourse (Hemingway’s style versus Hawthorne’s in the short story; Patricia Hampl’s “Resort” versus Wordsworth’s The Prelude in autobiographical long poems). Many passages, phrases, and words in poems characterized as literary allusions also act as double-voiced discourse in that they not only make explicit reference to extratextual utterances within the literary social horizon of author and reader but also serve as a comment on, or reply to, these other literary works. The bogus footnotes of Frost’s original version of “New Hampshire” provide an example of this type of dialogue in that they not only allude to The Waste Land but also make a satiric comment on Eliot’s use of footnotes (Hays).

Double-voiced discourse arises in literature through the combination of the words of the utterance always entering the text already loaded with meanings, and the appearance of polyphony, i.e., the presence of a variety of “languages” in a given text. The polyphonization of prose forms a crucial part of Bakhtin’s fascination with the carnivalesque in literature. Modern poetry has witnessed the permeation of verse with just such a similar polyphonization, with the penetration of classical diction by the language of the city square, by the dialects of the lower classes, and even by “anti-languages” (see Fowler). All of these enable the characters, narrators, and implied authors to express viewpoints independent from the authorial presence. The hero or narrator is able to become subject rather than object in the poem; able to speak in a double-voiced discourse through the multiple perspectives afforded by polyphonic discourse. Rather than a reinforcer of the kind of unified world outlook represented in classical epic or medieval lyric, the modern poem becomes a reinforcer of multiple viewpoints, none of which gain unassailed hegemony or absolute authority. Arthur K. Moore notes:

Medieval lyrics . . . usually appeal directly to approved social and religious sympathies and, by comparison with modern lyrics, require for validation very little interest in formal innovations or the special case of the speaker. Inasmuch as the values invoked admit of little question within the circle of the intended audience and of lit-
tle variation in attitude, the possibility of marked self-consciousness is precluded. (15)

*The Waste Land*, in contrast, is a Tower of Babel in which each separate story suggested by the opening lines of the poem constitutes a different dialect in dialogue with each of the others and in dialogue with the reader as well as the author. These lines present a series of miniature narratives, events occurring in time in a variety of voices, rendered both dramatically by characters speaking and descriptively by a first-person narrator. As a group, they adumbrate through their juxtaposition a thematic dimension of the poem’s overall plot. This polyphony prevents any single language or dialect from asserting itself as authoritative and thereby prevents any clearcut resolution enabling the poem to be defined as comedy, tragedy, or epic. Without such an ahistorical formal closure, the poem remains indeterminate, open-ended, everywhere self-conscious of the incompleteness of the present.

Bakhtin conceives of the polyphonic novel as having a hero who becomes subject and enters into dialogue with the author and the reader, rather than an object of authorial analysis or simply a spokesperson for the author’s completed monological worldview: “The consciousness of a character is given as someone else’s consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author’s consciousness” (*Problems* 7). The author can create such a subject-character by representing the character not as an observed personality but as an observing and commenting consciousness: “We see not who he is, but how he is conscious of himself” (49). The reader can experience such a visualization only if the author lets the character speak (53). And, although authors will no doubt inject their own voices, to some extent, in any literary work, they can prevent this incursion from overthrowing the dialogical character of the work’s polyphony by giving up the last word on each character to the character, as Edgar Lee Masters does in *Spoon River Anthology*. The plot of *Spoon River* gradually unfolds through the course of listening to all of its speakers tell their stories. And, while one may be able to determine many of the values with which Masters sympathizes, the ones with which he disagrees are often presented just as persuasively and eloquently (see Murphy, “Dialogical”; Braithwaite 118-19; Duffey 161-62; Wrenn and Wrenn 50-52).

Voices of utterances can be referred to as either homophonic or polyphonic. Homophonic voice means a single, uniform language throughout; polyphonic means multiple languages throughout. I will distinguish this dichotomy of homophonic/polyphonic from that of monological/dialogical, the latter being reserved for the distinction between authoritative and internally persuasive, or absolute and relative, utterances (see LaCapra 313-14). The imperative represents the simplest example of monological discourse; it elicits no reply except that of compliance. Whitman sought to overturn this conception of language in his writing of a new type of poem that was not epic, while many of the poets that followed him could not write in such an authoritative voice because they were neither willing to assume such a role nor did they believe in the unquestioned authority of the words they wielded, as in the cases of Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens. The
monological literary work is one in which the author's word controls the interpretation of the work, as in simplistic one-level allegory, or one in which all the characters speak only to represent the moral or political position of the author. The issue is not whether any work can succeed in being totally dialogical. It is whether or not modern poetry tends in the direction of the dialogical and the internally persuasive, in the direction of the "novel," or does it continue to remain monological and authoritative, speaking in a "poetic language" which does not doubt itself and does not allow any polyphony to encroach upon its borders.

I consider modern American poetry to be moving in the direction of the internally persuasive, the dialogical, and in the direction of the polyphonic, the double-voiced. Particularly, modern American long poems have become novelized. What does it mean to assert that poems have become novelized? Bakhtin makes a general statement on this point:

They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (Dialogic 6-7)

This does not mean that poems stop being poetry by becoming novelized, or that one discrete, utterly separate genre or prosody replaces another, but that the overarching genre of poetry gains revitalization through prose influences which promote the writing of new, developing poetic genres, one of these being the verse novel (see Dialogic 39). In other words, the novelization of modern American long poems frees them from the restraints of traditional, historical genre requirements no longer appropriate for the production of long poems. V. V. Ivanov refers to this new freedom as the "prosaization" of poetry in the twentieth century that enables the "advancing of dialogic relationships into the foreground," previously characteristic of artistic prose rather than poetry; dialogue is foregrounded in much modern poetry whereas in traditional poetry "a considerably larger role is played by the word which is direct and immediately oriented toward its object" (199-200). The reader becomes a participant in dialogue rather than merely a recipient of information.

Charles Hartman sees this novelization of poetry in terms of the breakdown of the dichotomy between works of literary art as either prose or poetry: "To those who sought room for new forms, the old opposition between prose and poetry, the latter defined narrowly as metrical verse, began to seem too confining. Why not instead take poetry or verse as one end, and prose as the other, of a continuous spectrum?" (45). Further, he sees this concept of a continuous spectrum as being closely linked with an attention to everyday speech:

The poet dissatisfied with the present state of poetic language always moves forward by moving back; but he can return either to earlier and more precise literary models, or to speech as he hears it. . . . As the virulence of attacks on free verse demonstrates, it represented a drastic revision of the contract between poet and reader. (143)
This new "contract" arose from the contract already established by the novel form with its increasing popularity (see Mukarovsky's "The Aesthetic Norm" [Structure 49-56]). For example, rather than seeing Pound's work in the Cantos as the effort to create a new epic, which requires a new epic contract between author and reader, one should see it as an effort to supplant the novel with a new novelized poetic form, one that can carry out the thematic tasks which the novel had taken over from poetry in the previous few centuries. Michael Andre Bernstein comments in The Tale of the Tribe "that poets like Pound, Williams, and Olson sought to recapture for verse the amplitude and inclusiveness of the novelist" (230). This is very similar to Robinson Jeffers' own remarks on writing verse narratives in his Foreword to The Selected Poetry (on the dialogical dimensions of Jeffers' long poems, see Murphy, "Reclaiming"):

It became evident to me that poetry—if it was to survive at all—must reclaim some of the power and reality that it was so hastily surrendering to prose. The modern French poetry of that time, and the most "modern" of the English poetry, seemed to me thoroughly defeatist, as if poetry were in terror of prose. (xiv)

While I consider it a valuable contribution to the analysis of modern poetry to recognize that much of it has become novelized, I do not think this provides as refined a set of distinctions as need be made. In particular, I think it still leaves unresolved the question of the generic forms of modern poetry. As part of trying to contribute to such a resolution, I think it important to define a particular type of poetic genre, the verse novel, and to distinguish it from other long poem genres. But as long as a genre is evolving, it is subject to modification and variation so that finalization remains conditional and relative. Bakhtin, however, does give us some direction for providing a conditional genre definition:

In the first place, the work is oriented toward the listener and perceiver, and toward the definite conditions of performance and perception. In the second place, the work is oriented in life, from within, one might say, by its thematic content. Every genre has its own orientation in life, with reference to its events, problems, etc. (Formal 130-31)

III

Unlike classical and medieval poems, whether epic, romance, or lyric, the modern long poem is written and printed for silent reading by an audience usually consisting of a single individual. This has a tremendous impact on prosody, but also an impact on internal continuity, verbal density, necessary repetition and redundancy, sight puns, homonymic reverberations, and presentation of the poem on the printed page. The long poem is written to be read under the same conditions as the reader will read a novel. Because of this condition for reading, long poems of the verse novel genre tend to have a lower level of prosodic repetition than their historical genre precursors; in particular, they have greater freedom to mix prosodies and utilize a variety of formal elements from other genres. One can see in this regard a development from the nineteenth to the twentieth century in terms of the relative internal prosodic consistency of long poems.
Earlier ones were written as if a single individual were speaking to another individual, as in the case of works by Whitman and Wordsworth. In contrast, modernist and postmodernist long poems are often either devoid of a unitary speaking voice, such as The Waste Land and William Carlos Williams' Paterson, or have a main narrator filtered through a fragmented narrative, such as Hart Crane's The Bridge and Gary Snyder's Myths & Texts. Verse novels also have less narrative redundancy than historical epics and romances in both phrasal repetition and informational repetition.

In addition, readers of the verse novel experience the reading conditions of the prose novel in the duration of the reading experience as well as the potential plot complexity and narrative density and compression afforded by a potential reading that allows rereading and interrupted reading. While many epics and romances clearly require a greater duration of reading or listening time than contemporary long poems, the complexity and density of the former tend to be different and the audience was trained for a different type of reception. The reader of a modern verse novel brings to that poem a text/reader contract based primarily on the expectations and conventions of modern prose reading in terms of redundancy level, plot complexity, and narrative structure. Eliot remarks that 'such changes as that from the epic poem composed to be recited to the epic poem composed to be read, or those which put an end to the popular ballad, are inseparable from social changes on a vast scale, such changes as have always taken place and always will' (Use 21). The change from earlier forms of verbalized reading, out loud to oneself or to a group, to the individual silent reading of the twentieth century is just such a change, particularly for poetry given the elimination of previously dominant prosodic restraints that arose in part from oral delivery and from the earlier type of reading.

Due to changes in mass literacy, educational emphasis on modern literature, cultural diversity, regional interests, special thematic interest groups, and other historical and social factors, authors of modern long poetic works have a much more diverse audience to interact with and more opportunity to limit that interactive audience than their poetic predecessors. A greater variety also exists in terms of the potential audiences that might be exposed to the poem in addition to the one(s) authorially intended. Although novels are far more widely read than poetry in the United States, authors of prose and verse share similar conditions in working out audience focus, deciding whether to interact with an audience having regional interest in the work or to interact with an audience of high culture. While it is clear that Eliot directs his poem toward a different audience than Jeffers, Crane toward a different one than Masters, none of their poems demonstrate the lack of authorial self-consciousness, the assumption of a sympathetic audience, or the confidence that there exists an unqualified and unqualifiable poetic language that one finds in earlier poetic genres and most traditional novels. The modern verse novel is a self-conscious genre, aware not only of historical poetic genres preceding it—which it may cannibalize as well as combat—but also of other contemporary genres as well as the cultural and ideological variety of its potential audiences. In regard to self-consciousness, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that The Waste Land and The Bridge have
far more in common with *Ulysses* and *Jacob’s Room* than with *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*.

Henryk Markiewicz notes: “The manifold and inalienable dialogism of language . . . may become either toned down or emphasized in literary utterances. It becomes toned down in the epic, lyric and drama (at least in its classical form), and emphasized in the novel” (447). Many modern long poems, like novels and in opposition to traditional epic and lyric genres, tend to emphasize the dialogism of language. Modern long poems exist as neither members of the lyric genre nor as members of the epic genre, but different individual poems draw from both of these genres for elements. Rather than being epic or lyric, many modern long poems are predominantly novelistic in terms of genre form.

This is not to deny the existence of sonnet cycles and lyrical sequences, but one needs to recognize the difference between them and long poems in terms of the relative degree of internal unity. Such cycles can be made into long poems through the incorporation of a rhetorical or narrative form underlying their surface structure. Plot, narration, and characterization are vital aspects for distinguishing the verse novel from other contemporary long poem genres. Regardless of its degree of continuity or discontinuity, its degree of narrative unity or plurality, or its variety of narrative personae, the modern verse novel has an underlying plot and a series of speech events that advance and/or comment on that plot’s characters, actions, and themes. One of the most fragmented of modern long poems, *The Waste Land*, presents a plot composed of a series of narrated events without a unifying narrator: a quest for a modern grail that will provide moral knowledge. That quest is presented through a series of narrated and non-narrated episodes with various characters, sometimes disembodied voices and sometimes vividly described individuals, and develops toward a gradually unfolding, but indeterminate, resolution. The poem’s fragments are tied together intrinsically through the contiguous relationships of thematically motivated episodes, much like an interlaced medieval romance (see Bloomfield 97-128; Todorov, *Poetics* 130-37). And they are tied together extrinsically through the implied monomyth archetypal pattern—a unifying pattern toward which Eliot directs the reader from the poem’s title through its added notes. As Terry Eagleton remarks, “behind the back of this ruptured, radically decentered poem runs an alternative text which is nothing less than the closed, coherent, authoritative discourse of the mythologies which frame it” (149-50). In brief, long poems with a plotted narrative can rightly be called verse novels; those without a plot would have to be considered members of other genres.

My emphasis here on plot as a constituent feature of the verse novel genre deviates from Bakhtin’s treatment of the novelistic prose genre in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. But in the case of poetry it is necessary to include plot in order to be able to distinguish the verse novel from other novelized poetic genres. These other genres not only include other kinds of long poems but also lyric, dramatic, and prose poems.

The foregoing treats the first part of Bakhtin’s concept of genre. In terms of thematic content, one also sees that modern long poems do not share any thema-
tic constants that would relegate them either to the realm of epic or lyric, nor even to the realm of romance. But what exactly constitutes theme?

The theme of the work is the theme of the whole utterance as a definite sociohistorical act. . .

Furthermore, it becomes clear that the forms of the whole, i.e., the genre forms, essentially determine the theme. It is not the sentence, the period, or their aggregate that implement the theme, but the novella, the novel, the lyric, the fairy tale—and these genre forms do not lend themselves to any syntactic definition. . . It follows that the thematic unity of the work is inseparable from its primary orientation in its environment, inseparable, that is to say, from the circumstances of place and time. (Bakhtin, Formal 132)

The themes of the modern American long poem can be determined only through an exhaustive analysis of individual poems. But even considering a limited variety of examples, it quickly becomes apparent that both the lyric approach and the personal epic approach do a deep disservice to the variety of themes presented, in particular those that concern themselves with issues of philosophy and politics. Unlike historical poetic genres, such as the national epic or medieval romance, one finds no limitation of theme in modern long poems. Certainly by the second half of the nineteenth century, poets such as Whitman and Robert Browning were articulating in verse subjects and themes previously discussed only in the low art of the serialized novel. Realism and Naturalism, as well as modern journalism, paved the way for the abolition of all taboos and restrictions on poetic content. The modern long poem has become capable of treating as wide a variety of themes as the modern novel.

IV

A large number of modern American long poems are best defined as forming part of a new poetic genre, the verse novel. In terms of length, the work must have a sustained duration and intensity of reading experience with line length a contributing but not determining factor of this. In terms of structure, it may have a variety of structural shapes from continuous narrative to fragmented sequence of units of varying lengths, but it must have an underlying plotted narrative involving characters and events occurring in time. This definition distinguishes it from the verse meditation/essay in terms of characters and subject matter. The meditation/essay is another genre of the modern American long poem, one that has strong affinities with its Renaissance and Restoration forebears—its differences from such earlier works would be a welcome study of genre in its own right. One can see this distinction in the long poems of Wallace Stevens. While “The Comedian as the Letter C” is a verse novel with a plotted continuous narrative, “The Man with the Blue Guitar” lacks a plot and is essentially a meditative poem. “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” illustrates the genre of the modern verse essay, which has as its foundation a rhetorical rather than narrative structure.
The verse novel is also structurally distinct from verse drama, whether such drama is meant to be staged or not, because this genre establishes a contract based on the norms of theatre drama. Edna St. Vincent Millay, for example, explicitly makes this distinction in her “Foreword” to *Conversation at Midnight*. The verse novel is also distinct from the dramatic monologue. Frost’s “New Hampshire,” while having nearly the same number of lines as *The Waste Land*, cannot be considered a verse novel, either in terms of plot, characterization, or duration of the reading experience. It is a dramatic monologue, but a dialogized one insofar as it enters into debate with *The Waste Land* and with elements of its contemporary audience.

No contemporary epics compare to the verse novel. Most poems that have been termed epics by either the poets themselves or reviewers are much more likely to be either poems of epic length but not epic material or focus, particularly in regard to national or religious values; or else they are really heroic poems. Roy Harvey Pearce’s distinctions along these lines in *The Continuity of American Poetry* are helpful in this regard (63-83). Frederick Turner claims that his long poem, *The New World*, is an epic, but given that it is set in the future, I would have to call it a particular kind of monological verse novel, one employing the mode of science fiction and the subject of romantic heroism. There are, however, many kinds of lyrical cycles and the distinction between such poem cycles and the verse novel is a matter of defining borders that must await further scrutiny. The key to differentiation here lies in a distinction of narrative foundation and interpenetration of thematic threads, particularly discernible in terms of the difference between dialogic interaction and monologic isolation between sections. I think there is indeed a poetic sequence genre, but it is not the all-embracing one that M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall attempt to define. Rather, it consists of a collection of sequential poems, thematically or typically linked but lacking the plot unity that ties poems such as *Spoon River Anthology* and *The Bridge* into tighter wholes. Good examples of such a sequence would be Muriel Rukeyser’s *Theory of Flight*, whose sections are linked only through the extended trope of “flight,” and Olga Broumas’ “Twelve Aspects of God,” which are linked through their thematic of a feminist revisioning of myth.

I do not want to insist that for a long poem to be a verse novel it must necessarily be both dialogical and polyphonic. It would seem to be the case, however, through brief reflection on the poems that appear to fit such a genre description, that the modern verse novel tends toward the polyphonic and the dialogical. The polyphonic is reflected not only through a variety of voices narrating parts of the poems but also through the polyphonic potential of reported speech. “The Comedian as the Letter C” is actually an exceptional case among verse novels in terms of the degree of its homophony, but even here different dialects may be discerned, although they appear only through the author’s “styilization” of the narrator’s and Crispin’s styles (Bakhtin, *Dialogic 40-51, 301-31*). At the same time, part of the dialogization of this poem results from Stevens’ care not to allow the dominant voice of the narrator that produces this homophonic tendency to become an authoritative, and thus monological, speaker. In contrast, Carl Sandburg’s use of the primary Whitmanian voice of *Leaves of Grass* to present
The People, Yes tends to render the depictions of that poem authoritative and hierarchically distanced rather than internally persuasive, because the Whitmanian voice is associated with a truthfulness, sincerity, and factual character that closes the poem off to doubt, debate, and reader challenge.

More significant than the polyphonic is the dialogical character of many verse novels. It is in this area of analysis, the dialogical quality resulting from a variety of forms of double-voicing, that Bakhtin’s method proves the most helpful in developing new readings of many modern long poems. From concerns with lyrical intensity, epic scope, or poetic language—the kinds of concerns that have hindered most full-length studies of The Bridge—critics can shift their attention to the action of the poem, its narrative development, and its dialogical interanimation through both intertextual and intratextual double-voicing. From focusing on isolated segments and stylistic elements, the critic can turn to focusing on the relationships of utterances and themes, speaking subjects and their practical and philosophical behavior. Such refocusing requires adaptive application of Bakhtin’s “translinguistics,” to use Tzvetan Todorov’s term (Mikhail 24-28, 82). The verse novel, like its prose counterpart, is very much alive, changing, and developing. As a result, critical conception of the genre must remain conditional, relative, and developing if it is to have any chance of keeping pace with the creative work it tries to define. And, while I have looked only for American examples, I am confident that examples from other national literatures can also be found, and, at least in the case of British literature, these may very well predate their American counterparts. Let me suggest that if we are to further our understanding of the dynamics of the modern long poem, in particular its verse novel genre, then we would do well to recognize that, if in the beginning we had the epic word, in the contemporary day we have the novelized utterance.

Works Cited


