

FOLLOWING YOU:
SECOND PERSON IN WALT WHITMAN'S
"AS I EBB'D WITH THE OCEAN OF LIFE"

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Yes my brother I know,
The rest might not, but I have treasur'd every note,
For more than once dimly down to the beach gliding,
Silent, avoiding the moonbeams, blending myself with the shadows,
Recalling now the obscure shapes, the echoes, the sounds and
 sights after their sorts,
The white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing,
I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,
Listen'd long and long.

Listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes,
Following you my brother.
—Whitman, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"¹

1

One of the most important rhetorical strategies that Walt Whitman picks up from the Bible and from the oratory of sermons is surely the use of the second-person "you." "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not covet," say the Old Testament Commandments, reaching across the page and up through the ages to instruct their readers. In the secular sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson, there's the same feint of direct address to the listener, in this case not giving laws and rules of conduct from above but delivering equally serious advice. You must change your life, or at least change the way you think about your life, its freedoms, and your potential. Thus, for example, in "Self-Reliance":

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place that divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connexion of events.

Again:

Insist on yourself; never imitate.

And at the end of the essay:

Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.²

Of course, Whitman learns and borrows more than rhetorical strategies from Emerson; his poems, as many critics have demonstrated, embody and transform the substance of Emerson's philosophy. But in this essay I want to explore the different ways Whitman puts the second person "you" to work—to zoom in, as it were, on that apparently innocuous little pronoun and follow where it leads.³ Any survey of *Leaves of Grass* quickly reveals how very many "yous" appear in the poems, with possibly the thickest density in the ode-like "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," where the speaker engages in a prolonged one-way conversation not only with East River, sun, and gulls, but with readers and ferry-riders of the imagined future. Where Emerson addresses his advice to a "live" listening and reading audience, Whitman, in "Crossing" and elsewhere, makes it plain that he's addressing humans who do not yet exist. "I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born," he explains in section 7 of "Crossing" (132), claiming in this simple trope a time-traveler's freedom.

But the second person takes other forms as well in Whitman's poetry, some of these forms overlapping with one another. Like Emerson, Whitman is bossy: he does not simply address his imagined listeners but instructs them—and us—via imperative verbs. Many of these imperatives occur in the best-known, best-loved parts of "Song of Myself," and because they are so enmeshed in literary and popular culture, they are familiar even to first-time Whitman readers:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems (30)
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another (79)

This patient instructional voice—stop, search, keep encouraged—sounds throughout Whitman’s work, seldom insisting on a mode of behavior but instead taking the form of an invitation: come with me, follow in my footsteps, join me in the imagined here and now.

In other poems, Whitman uses second person in an even more idiosyncratic way, creating a kind of rhetorical chaos. Here, the apparently straightforward trope of apostrophe simply loses its stability. Instead of addressing one thing, person, or idea (ocean, reader, soul), the speaker addresses multiple things in a cacophony of apostrophizing: we can hardly keep track of what the pronoun “you” refers to, what the sign signifies.⁴ Instead of creating an imagined companion of, say, the ocean, the speaker addresses everything in second person; there’s not a thing that is not a “you.”

Finally, I want to look at the strangest second person of all—the moments in some of Whitman’s poems when instead of using the second-person pronoun “you,” and almost in its place, he conjures up in his mind’s eye a ghostly second person split off from himself and standing at a distance, but nevertheless still himself in a new guise. In these painful moments, the second person is not addressed; in fact, “you” disappears, and in its place appears a voiceless vision, neither from the past nor from the future, ungrounded in space as well as time. This figure might be called the interior second person; rhetorically, it’s a form of prosopopoeia, and it ties into the other forms of “you” that I am following.

All readers of Whitman have favorite “you” passages, but for the purpose of this essay, I’ll follow in detail Whitman’s second *Sea-Drift* poem, “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” with glances, too, at the better-known opening ode of the series, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” These poems, written in a burst of creativity and a likely spell of depression and uneasiness⁵ in the late 1850s, illustrate in their quiet dramatic action the different types of second person I have outlined. In “Out of the Cradle,” Whitman uses forms of the word “you” 27 times in its 182 lines, not counting multiple indirect references to a “you” implied in invocations (“*Low-hanging moon!*” “*O rising stars!*”) or the use of imperative verbs (“*Soothe! soothe! soothe!*”). Both the speaker and the “he-bird,” who serves as a speaker-within-a

speaker in this poem, apostrophize celestial bodies, surroundings on Long Island, and abstract ideas; both call out to beloved others. I have borrowed the title of this essay and even its exploratory mode and mission from one such apostrophe midway through the poem. Here, the speaker, who appears to have merged with his childhood self, dramatizes for us how he used to listen as a child to the song of the bird, and claims that “now” (that devilish word in lyric poetry), years later, he is “recalling” the way he once listened, “translating the notes” into language and “Following you my brother” (198).

In “As I Ebb’d,” the instances of “you” and “your” rises to a total of 29 (in a poem less than half the length of “Out of the Cradle”—just 71 lines), again not counting many forms of indirect address. The apparently simple task of following the “you” leads readers into a kind of mental maze, even if the setting—a beach along Long Island—and the situation—a walk along this beach—remain clear and unremarkable. The poem’s story, too, is not hard to recap: it tells a tale of imaginative crisis and recovery in the mode of the British Romantic odes with which Whitman was acquainted: Keats’s “To Autumn” and “Ode to a Nightingale,” for example, or Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.”

These odes and others by Whitman’s British precursors have been helpful touchstones for me as I think about Whitman’s own ode-like *Sea-Drift* poems. Keats and Shelley, too, play with second person in complicated ways, addressing seasons, birds, wind, and former selves. But my focus here will be on their American younger brother and the particular strategies he uses to convey the states of imaginative empowerment and defeat that occupy him throughout his meditative odes. I am interested, too, in the instruction Whitman gives to his multiple audiences: his role as the creator of metaphysical drama, on the one hand, and pragmatic provider of guidance, on the other.

2

The speaker in Whitman’s “Ebb’d” is in motion, at least at the beginning of the poem. This speaker-in-motion is hardly remarkable, so customary it is for Whitman’s spokespersons to be on the move. In

many of his poems the speaker strolls as he muses; he takes to the open road on his visionary tour of the United States; as a child he goes “forth every day” (282); and as a voyeur he glides ghost-like through the minds and bodies of “sleepers” (325). The joys of being outside in the open air, day or night, taking in sounds and sights—these joys that occupy Whitman the man spill over into his poems to become a motif, a signature of his writing. In the newly rediscovered series of newspaper advice articles from 1858, “Mose Velsor” promotes exercise and sunshine as the key to “manly health”;⁶ Whitman follows his own advice not only in his daily life but also in his poetics.

So Whitman (Whitman’s speaker, but the distinction always strikes me as fussily academic) strolls, or to use his own set of verbs, he wends, walks, muses, gazes; he walks indeed for “miles” (202). The motion of the body, as on all good solitary walks, falls in with the motion of his mind. And the motion has a direct bearing on the muted kind of apostrophe that he uses in these first 17 lines. That is, Whitman peoples his walk; in his solitude “late in the autumn day,” he creates companions out of the features of the landscape: principally Long Island itself which he addresses by one of its old Native American names—a kind of private nickname that he uses for his birthplace throughout his poetry: “you Paumanok.” Used in this simple way, apostrophe nevertheless accomplishes several things at once. It gives the speaker a quasi-human companion, an old friend who has been there since his childhood, a quiet alter ego, a firm footing for his walk. Remove the “you,” and the island is demoted from listener to place.

The second person familiarizes the place—“you Paumanok”—and familiarity is a concept Whitman wants us to notice in this first section. These are “shores I know,” as he tells us twice, and strolling along them inspires a familiar pattern of thought: he begins to seek correspondences between himself and what he sees around him. Paumanok, as spirit-companion, reminds him of “the old thought of likenesses.” The speaker in section 1 seeks matches and pairings between his state of mind and the things that offer themselves to his senses in the external world of the shore. He has done this before on earlier walks, including on the walk he recalls taking as a boy in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” companion piece to “Ebb’d”; the

search for “likenesses” is an “old thought,” a familiar way of thinking about things.

But apostrophe can, paradoxically, do just the opposite of familiarize, and this doubleness, this paradox, is built right into the figure of speech. This claim seems far-fetched, but a comparison between “The Sleepers” (325-332), which does not use apostrophe until near the end of its 184 lines, and “Ebb’d” points up the difference. In the earlier poem, the speaker’s night wandering, his “Stepping with light feet, swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping,” takes him so close to the dreaming figures he sees in his vision that he merges with them: “And I become,” he declares, “the other dreamers” (326).

Apostrophe wards off such visionary merging. In naming Paumanok as “you,” Whitman separates the place from his own consciousness; he acknowledges its difference, the way the child entering the mirror stage recognizes a difference between himself or herself and others. Every use of “you” in speech as well as writing makes this acknowledgement, even when the speaker is addressing his own soul or being. “You” may establish connection, even intimacy, but it also confirms distance and otherness.

Section 1 of “Ebb’d” fits with other poems in which the speaker takes us to places we can find on a map and visit for ourselves. These are places Whitman knows from experience and that give him pleasure—the streets of Manhattan, the deck of the East River ferry, the seashore. Apostrophe in the rhetorical representation of these places on the map confirms the sense of groundedness and mental safety. “You Paumanok” keeps him company and helps him see things he had missed before, including the sand and drift brought in by the tide—the little bits of rock and seaweed and “debris” that become, somewhat to his surprise and ours, the real focus of the poem. The subject of the opening apostrophe, that is, remains to a large extent incidental. “You Paumanok” is not central to this ode in the way the bird, “you my brother,” is central to “Out of the Cradle,” nor in the way you-Autumn or you-West-Wind are central to Keats’s and Shelley’s odes.

Apostrophe of the straightforward kind disappears in the second numbered section of “Ebb’d.” This section describes the first of a

two-stage crisis of confidence, moments during which the speaker's purpose in life is pulled out from under him. It is the low point of the speaker's stroll; forward motion along the beach comes to a halt. The dreamlike mode of this section differs from the mode of the others, where the island grounds the speaker in a geographical place. In sections 1, 3, and 4, we can imagine being on the beach watching the tide and spindrift with Whitman; but that sense of physical grounding just about disappears in section 2. Having arrived at a kind of underworld, the speaker finds the utterly familiar seashore unfamiliar, a place the speaker should know but instead "[knows] not." There's a dramatic confrontation, a shake-down, with a shadowy figure appearing at a distance to deride and demolish the speaker's life work. The very unusual thing—in a poet whose writing is often unusual—is that the speaker identifies this distant figure as "the real Me" with a capital M, as if the word were a proper name:

. . . before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold,
altogether unreach'd (202)

If this figure is "more real" than the speaker himself (the author of "arrogant poems"), then it would follow logically that the speaker might attempt to hail and reach this Me, whose capital letter confers an ontological status equal, in effect, to the status of the speaker, the capital I. That is, when the speaker says that the real Me is "yet untouch'd," we may conclude that he would like to touch him but simply has not yet been able to do so.

We are disabused of this conclusion immediately, though. This real Me, rather than an "authentic self" (as some readers have assumed it to be)⁷ who might give the less-than-real Me insights and advice, turns out to be a kind of mime, inviting the "baffled, balk'd" speaker to watch a wordless demonstration. "Me" bows in mock deference and laughs at "every word" the speaker has written. Rhetorically, one could call the real Me an illustration of prosopopoeia, yet that term does not fit entirely: the real Me does not personify anything, really, unless it's possible to personify oneself; and it does not speak. The real Me communicates instead in nonverbal signs: he "[points] in

silence to [the speaker/poet's] songs, and then to the sand beneath" (202). The "point" is clear: the speaker has accomplished nothing. Whitman's dream vision of himself as another person constitutes a kind of reverse apostrophe: he, the speaker, becomes "you" to the real Me, the person signed and spoken to in all but words. The real Me addresses, albeit silently, the poet's "songs," using the second person not to make a comrade of the speaker who observes and tries to hear him, but (in the alternate modality of apostrophe) to distance, alienate, and accuse.

In section 3, apostrophe reappears with a vengeance. The ocean has appeared early in the poem, personified as a "fierce old mother" (a familiar figure in Whitman's poetry) and described physically as the source of "ripples" in which he is wading. "Oceans" now return as an addressee (in plural), whose likeness to himself he emphasizes:

You oceans both, I close with you,
We murmur alike reproachfully rolling sands and drift, knowing not why,
These little shreds indeed standing for you and me and all. (203)

Whether he is claiming metaphysical "closeness" with oceans or instead wants us to see the speaker "closing" with oceans as a wrestler might close with a fierce opponent, Whitman uses apostrophe to make a radical claim. By using the plural "oceans," he refers to both the water next to which he has been walking and the metaphor ("ocean of life") he has established in his title⁸; by using the pronoun "we" for the first time in the poem, he elevates himself from companion or listener to co-creative power; and, in the last flourish of the three-line apostrophe, he subsumes the trio—oceans, his human self, and drift—into a single thing. The apostrophe creates a kind of mad algebra equation: Oceans = I = we = sand = everything in the world ("all") This apostrophe, having been carried to its logical limit, leads to several others: first a return to the island—

You friable shore with trails of debris,
You fish-shaped island . . . (203)

—and then to apostrophes-within-apostrophes. "You" the "friable

shore” transforms into you “my father”; “you” the ocean, 12 lines later becomes “you fierce old mother.” The images of what M. Jimmie Killingsworth calls “island-father” and “ocean-mother” hang suspended between place and person, but the familial “likenesses” have been consolidated. As he walks along the shore, he occupies the place where (as many readers have noticed) the two parental powers meet and overlap.⁹

Although the identity of the “you” switches back and forth, the spotlight lingers on the island-as-father long enough for the island to undergo near-Ovidian metamorphosis, the island becoming a human body, or almost: it/he has a “breast,” can be clung to and held firm; can be turned to as a parent who holds ultimate answers; and can be beseeched for a kiss from its/his “lips.” The drama of the poem is wonderfully Whitmanian here, deadly serious and absurdly exaggerated at the same time. The speaker moves with the petulance of a child and the monomania of an unrequited son or lover—and with the desperation, too, of a seeker after the truth who knows the truth cannot be spoken. This mental mood, so different from the low-key but “electric” confidence of the opening walk on the beach, is signaled less by choice of words than by rhetorical mode. Ocean and island are apostrophized insistently, accompanied by a frenzied invocation to the island-father-muse, delivered in imperative verbs: “kiss me,” “touch me,” “breathe to me . . . the secret”—the secret that you know so well and that you owe it to me to pass along (203). (In the companion poem, “Out of the Cradle,” the ocean-mother does reveal the secret in her hissing of the word “death.” No such luck here, where the father island remains silent and the mother ocean just keeps murmuring to herself.)

In the last section of the poem, the speaker’s frenzy evaporates. It’s simply gone. Somehow in the gap from numbered section 3 to 4, the crisis has passed; the speaker reappears back on his feet. But while the mood has changed, the rhetorical mode carries over across the gap between sections. That is, Whitman ends section 3 with a string of imperatives (“kiss me,” and so forth) and begins section 4 with a continuation of this string:

Ebb, ocean of life . . .

Cease not your moaning . . .

Endlessly cry for your castaways, but fear not, deny not me,

Rustle not up so hoarse and angry against my feet . . . (203)

Gone is the father: the speaker addresses the ocean, less to invoke “the fierce old mother’s” help than to suggest to her what to do, and the urgency has fallen right out of the lines: the speaker no longer demands the impossible secret nor senses that a secret is being withheld. There’s ebb and there’s returning flow; the sea will never stop moaning and murmuring. And why, he seems to ask, should we expect it to change? All the same, he seeks a *détente*, as if he and the elements have been at war. If you won’t reveal the “secret of the murmuring I envy,” at least let us co-exist. Let me “touch you or gather from you” without being mocked or rejected. The “nots” pile up in this series of imperatives, changing the mood from an accusatory invocation (addressed to the island-father who will not speak) to respectful recognition of forces that will always be superior to and apart from himself: please “rustle not.” The speaker does not shout; he negotiates.

All along, in all four sections of “Ebb’d,” Whitman has made the link between the speaker and the odds and ends that have been washed onto the beach. He names and renames these things many times, far more often than he renames Paumanok (“you fish-shaped island”) or the ocean (“you fierce old mother”). Yet, curiously, he never addresses the “debris” as “you.” The drift remains outside of the poem’s insistent apostrophizing. In section 1, the fragments of sand and seaweed simply distract him as he gazes off at the southern horizon. “Seiz’d by the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot,” he looks down “fascinated . . . to follow those slender windrows”:

Chaff, straw, splinters of wood, weeds, and the sea-gluten,

Scum, scales from shining rocks, leaves of salt-lettuce, left by the tide (202)

The eight nouns in this list do not simply rename the “slender windrows”; they distinguish their various shapes and textures, as if each one were a treasure laid out along “trails” that beckon him “to follow.” In section 2, by contrast, the link between speaker and the lovely drift is

less one of fascination than of horror. He complains that this lifeless stuff on the beach is all he amounts to:

I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd up drift,
A few sands and dead leaves to gather (203)

In section 3, the stuff on the shore gets a new litany of names, less specific than in the opening lines: “sands and drift,” “little shreds,” “trails of debris,” and “what is underfoot.” These things belong, he says, to both him and the island, but they never become a “you” in the way that Paumanok does.

And finally, in section 4, we hear the chorus of names again, with new variations, emphasizing that the debris on the beach is not just “dead” but dead *and decomposing*. The “debris” is renamed at least a dozen times in these 20 lines, with the first renamings the most radically different from what has come before:

Me and mine, loose windrows, little corpses,
Froth, snowy white, and bubbles, (203)

The image of white “froth” and “corpses” is followed by the parenthetical two lines that editors cut from the poem when it was first published in 1860¹⁰—lines that use the “little corpses” to make the poem’s central point “at last”:

(See, from my dead lips the ooze exuding at last,
See, the prismatic colors glistening and rolling,) (203-204)

The parenthetical lines suggest one possible reason that Whitman’s speaker may have for not addressing the “little corpses” as “you”: he sees them as identical to his material self—his moods, his words, his legacy, and particularly his body as it returns to dust. Yet this hardly can account for the rhetorical choice, as elsewhere Whitman finds it second nature (so to speak) to address himself and to transform his surroundings into companions, listeners, and (as in the case of the “real Me”) demonic judges. Breaking the usual pattern, Whitman’s “drift” enters the poem in lists and mini-catalogues, standing outside

of the charmed circle of objects in the world that can be drawn upon poetically, that will succumb to the speaker's will and populate his drama. The "chaff, straw, splinters of wood" (and so forth) remain stubbornly material. While their names suggest a range of different judgments the speaker makes about himself ("debris" and "chaff" on the one hand; "a briny tear" or "limp blossom" on the other), even as emblems they remain outside of the world of powerful presences (ocean, island) with which the speaker contends.

We are not meant to skip over the lips that "ooze" in the startling parenthetical, the revelation tucked away as if it were an aside. Quite the contrary. In any pursuit of the "you," these lines are critical. For here there is apostrophe, though the addressee is unspecified. "See," he enjoins us, presumably his readers "ages hence," pulling those with the power of imaginative insight to join him. The imperative "see" marks the moment when, almost casually, we the readers are invited into the scene, asked to peer not at the beach or ocean but at the speaker's decomposing body. The moment repeats in a more graphic way the trope at the end of "Song of Myself," when we readers of the future, addressed as "you," are enjoined to look for Walt "under [our] boot-soles" (78). In that earlier passage we are not shown what, aside from "dirt" and "grass," we might see under our boot-soles. By contrast, here the body is shadowed forth. And more: the speaker's consciousness is subtly doubled. He stands on the beach asking us to look down with him, but he is also down on the beach, laid out as spectacle.

This moment of perspectival confusion is quite wonderful. For one thing, it takes a glum equation from sections 2 and 3—I am nothing but "wash'd-up drift"—and transforms it into something visceral and ultimate. The sounds coming from his living mouth are reduced to "ooze" but the ooze glistens with "prismatic colors" of white light; it rolls in synchrony with the ocean he has admitted to envying hopelessly just a few lines earlier.

The spectacle of the body represented by synecdoche ("dead lips") pulls together other hints of the body, notably the island-father's breast and lips. But more important, and most difficult to tease out, this image of peering at one's future decomposing self illustrates another use of

second person, one that has appeared before in the poem's dream-crisis, and one that will soon end the poem. In the line just before the graphic parenthetical, a watcher has entered the scene, a "phantom looking down where we lead, and following me and mine" (203). The speaker upon whom the phantom looks down is "gather[ing]" things from the beach in the way that one might collect shells—engaged, that is, in a kind of metaphysical beachcombing. He has alluded to such beachcombing before, in section 2, where he described himself as gathering "dead leaves" from the beach—presumably the dead "leaves of grass" of his poems. But the "phantom looking down" is new. Wait! we readers say to ourselves: we thought the speaker was the one looking down; indeed he has been looking down since line 8 of the poem, when his attention was "seiz'd" by the sight of the drift under his feet. All at once, we see two of him, phantom looking down on beachcomber, and soon afterward beachcomber looking down on dead body. We have a right to be puzzled.

"Ebb'd" ends with a return to the phantom "you"—the you looking down from above—in a flourish of apostrophes:

We, capricious, brought hither we know not whence, spread out before you,
 You up there walking or sitting,
 Whoever you are, we too lie in drifts at your feet. (204)

In that sleight of hand that happens whenever a poet uses forms of the pronoun "you" (as he does four times in this coda to his poem), the referent also becomes the person reading the poem. Like the deictically specified phantom—"this phantom"—who otherwise has no form or body, we readers are also "up there walking or sitting" with the poem's words "spread out before [us]." We are "up there" just as the speaker himself, as he has so painstakingly spelled out to us, is both "up there walking" and yet also "spread out" on the shore amidst the drift and debris. As Whitman admits, he's being "capricious" (204) in his play with perspective: this is Whitman's signature proleptic "you," his play across the page and across time.

Following Whitman's "you," then, is not simply following him in a circle. Or rather, a circle is too simple a geometric form to describe the path along which we have been led. A Mobius strip—a strip of paper twisted once whose two ends are pasted together—appears to be a two-dimensional object: like the paper it is made from, it has two distinct sides. Yet if you trace a line across its length, from one glued seam to the other, the traced line meets and rejoins itself. In a mind-bending way, the two dimensions become one.

In my exploration of Whitman's "you," I find myself tracing that line along a Mobius strip. Whitman's "capricious" play with the second person could be seen as solipsism: every "you" is really "I," the controlling consciousness. Some readers might instead see this play as Whitman's idiosyncratic trope of merging himself with the persons and objects he sees; such merging, after all, is one of Whitman's speaker's preferred activities throughout *Leaves of Grass*. But the second-person play in "Ebb'd" remains distinct from these things.

A good explanation for what happens in the last lines of "Ebb'd" can be found in Jonathan Culler's intricately argued essay titled simply "Apostrophe" from four decades ago.¹¹ In the last paragraphs of this essay, Culler talks about an example of apostrophe from a fragment of an unpublished poem attributed to Keats. Keats (or whoever may have written the fragment) holds out "a living hand" to those of us reading the poem: "see, here it is—/ I hold it towards you." The fragment makes a rhetorical move similar to the one at the end of Whitman's "Ebb'd," in which "You, whoever you are" is offered the speaker's body reduced to sands and drift "spread out at your feet." Culler's point, which also pertains here, is that the poet understands the "mystification" created by this fictional offering (of a hand, of sea drift) but neither he nor the reader can resist falling for it; we don't "smile ironically" at the offer made by the poet, as Culler argues, but instead we "embrace" the fiction (69). And this odd willingness to imagine being addressed "in real time," as it were, characterizes all lyric poetry, in which narrative may contend with apostrophe, but apostrophe wins. "Apostrophe resists narrative," in Culler's words,

“because its *now* is not a moment in a temporal sequence but a *now* of discourse, of writing” (68). Another way of putting this point might be to say that time is the lyric’s Möbius strip: we start out thinking that there are two dimensions, two separate times—the past of events in the poem and the present in the reading of it—but apostrophe collapses the distinction, making one loop of time that folds back on itself.

Culler’s work on apostrophe is clear, incisive, and clever, and it helps establish something I also believe to be true: that apostrophe is the key rhetorical figure of the lyric poem, and is its powerhouse—and that the use of you, which characterizes the lyric, plays exceedingly strange games with the mind of the reader. At the end of his essay, Culler notes that there’s room for further thought; he does not pretend to offer the final word. Instead, he acknowledges that the strangely mystifying “effect [that] the lyric seeks”—its fictional connection to the time of the reader—is “one whose successes should be celebrated and explained” (69).

Taking up “this living hand” held out by the critic himself, I look back to what I see as distinctive and different about the way Whitman uses second person, particularly in his use of the proleptic apostrophe. For the fact is that Whitman is much more inclined to use “you” to refer explicitly to the reader than are Keats and Shelley, whose odes have been my touchstones. Whitman is future focused. He “mystifies,” to use Culler’s term, whenever there’s a good opening to do so, more often than not using the proleptic “you” to end his poems in an expansive gesture, opening up to others the experience he has just described as having had himself, and shifting his verbs into the future tense. Imagining the future, or rather, plunging himself into the future in a kind of celebratory way, is more than a writing strategy (though it is that, too); it is a way of recovering from the nightmare truth that no one’s work, particularly his own “dead leaves,” in fact amounts to much in the long run. It is also a way of recovering from the sadness of solitude.

So Whitman ends “Ebb’d” with a recuperative final act, not with an act of humility, resignation, or near-despair.¹² He does not conclude that he is meaningless “debris,” or feel humbled by his encounter with

the demonic real Me; instead he pulls himself together by turning to the imagined future in which “the flow will return” and You will be accompanying Me as we together look down at our future selves spread out in little minerals and atoms of matter. The future, rather than scaring him to death, offers the speaker psychic relief, both in “Out of the Cradle” where “Death” is the very concept that inspires and reassures him, and here in “Ebb’d” where becoming “drift” turns out to be better than he had first anticipated. In some ways, Whitman’s strategy is to reverse the valence of what he has imagined to be true, or what others think to be true; as he tells us in “Song of Myself,” death is “luckier” than we think it is. Here, he rejoices in a simple insight: we come from the ocean and we return again as mere matter “out of fathomless workings fermented and thrown” (204).

In these ways, Whitman puts his stamp on the mode of poetry he has been following; he remakes the British ode into an American one, and he remakes apostrophe so that it serves his needs as a writer and a person susceptible (as we all are) to doubt and self-recrimination. Part of this re-making, however, involves keeping hold of a narrative thread, of reminding readers that there’s a namable place and a story, even a drama, which we are asked to follow. “Apostrophe resists narrative,” Culler argues, but in “Ebb’d,” narrative pushes back. Just as Whitman patiently follows the windrows along the beach, we follow him in a three-part drama—stroll, crisis, and recuperation—enacted on a particular beach and on a particular autumn evening.

4

Whitman’s fondness for second person extends beyond his poems into his day work as a journalist. As we learn from Zachary Turpin’s wonderfully informative Introduction to “Manly Health and Training”—thirteen optimistic, multi-faceted, partially plagiarized self-help articles that Whitman published in the *New York Atlas* and that Turpin discovered using archival detective work—Whitman wrote these articles in 1858, at the same time he was writing his two opening “Sea-Drift” poems, “Out of the Cradle” and “As I Ebb’d.” As Turpin explains, the psychological tumult that Whitman was going through

in those years seems to inform the crisis moments in “Ebb’d” when the speaker feels his work has been rejected and belittled.¹³

But the *Atlas* articles are buoyant in comparison to the *Sea-Drift* poems; they redirect Whitman’s depression well, channeling it into advice to others. Even “Loathed Melancholy” (270), one of the ills that Whitman fears his readers too often succumb to, has a cure similar to the cures he offers for other ailments: “Up in the morning early!” and later, “Up and away!” (188, 289). The body must be tended to, must be kept in motion, must be taken for “brisk walks” morning and night, bathed in cold water, and fed the most sustaining foods, and all this attention must be paid to the body so that the thinking parts remain vital. If you suffer from “the blues,” he advises, you must seek “a generative and altogether physical cure” (276).

From the beginning, the pseudonymous Mose Velsor addresses and instructs his readers using second person; the first words of the series are “To you” and the needs and aspirations of the “excellent reader” are kept in sight throughout. The conventional, journalistic use of second person, of course, differs from the way Walt Whitman uses second person in his seashore odes—a difference clearly dictated by genre. Self-help, the genre to which these articles would surely belong if published these days, works best when the writer creates the illusion that he or she is speaking individually to the person seeking advice; “you” is a way of suggesting that the advice has been tailored for a particular reader’s needs and that “you” are wise enough to make use of it. Yet Whitman’s approach to “Manly Health” is neither manipulative nor cynical: he has a stake in the advice he gives and wants to believe in his own earnest heartiness that it will work. Too much time indoors makes a person weak, “pallid,” and miserable: this thread runs consistently through the thirteen articles. And while he has borrowed liberally from other sources—sometimes verbatim, as Turpin explains—this repeated piece of advice seems authentically Whitman’s own.

To Whitman, motion—walking, wending, gliding, merging, and following—is “generative”; ideas arrive when the body is in motion; they flee, as they fled in “Ebb’d,” when the speaker stops in his tracks (as in sections two and three), first captivated by the miming Me, and

the next minute throwing himself onto the breast of the island-father. In both parts of the crisis, the speaker stands still, deeply enthralled by his own fantasies: first his fantasy of perdition by mockery, and next his fantastical return to childhood as if the past will give him the answer he seeks. As if diagnosing these very ills in *Manly Health*, Whitman explains to his *Atlas* readers that we threaten our ability to live well and fully when we give in to “too much brain action and fretting” (296). The second person “you” has been replaced here by the expansive first-person plural, so that the writer can include himself in the category of Americans who need to change our ways:

We Americans altogether, all classes, *think too much, and too morbidly*—brood, meditate, become sickly with our own pallid fancies, allowing them to swarm upon us by day and by night (297).

This impatience with over-thinking has some relevance to “As I Ebb’d.” For there are two ways of reading Whitman’s walk along the beach: first, and most obviously, as a melancholy, meditative ode in the tradition of “To Autumn”—a study of interior life and the struggle of the mind to keep from being “swarmed” and silenced by fear or disappointment. The poem can also be read, though, is as a kind of guide: a dramatic enactment of what to do when you descend so far into the uncanny underworld of *thought* that you become alienated even from yourself—when you split off into a second person who fools you into thinking he has more authority (familial, spiritual, or political) than you do. This paralysis happens when you fail to “trust yourself,” in Emerson’s words from fifteen years earlier, forgetting that “every heart vibrates to that iron string.” The paralysis also happens when you simply stop moving.

Read in context with the advice of “Manly Health,” Whitman’s meditative evening stroll in “Ebb’d” as well as his childhood’s morning stroll in “Out of the Cradle,” suggest how to recover from moments of despair and imaginative blankness: Follow your brother, the he-bird, and imagine what his message might be; join me as I follow the “trails of debris” along the shore. Push through self-doubt even when it is disguised to look like authority; and keep in mind that all of us emerge

“we know not whence” from out of the mother ocean, and then return to this ocean again, eventually to wash up in chaff and froth on the shore. Hold fast to that material truth and do not shy from it.

5

When my advanced undergraduate students read *Leaves of Grass* in a seminar a few years ago, many of them were reading Walt Whitman for the first time. They came quickly to like the generous, outspoken persona they discovered in his poems. They liked his expansive vision of the United States. They reveled in the thinly disguised homoerotic moments in his poems; they rejoiced at his exuberance in celebrating bodily pleasures; and they rejoiced, too, in his honest confessions of despair. What they appreciated most was the hand he held out to them, often using this very metaphor. They had never read a poet who to this extent made them part of the enterprise of the poem itself, rather than relegating them to the role of bystander. They liked being named and recognized across time and space as “you”—“whoever you are.” To them, that phrase read as a gesture not of uncertainty but of inclusion: everyone is welcome in the universe I am creating “at your feet.”

When they read Whitman, that is, they were enjoying the artifice and “mystification” that both they and Whitman know is going on in his use of second person, the “capricious” play with time and narrative perspective. They were also, as one student confessed to me in as many words, attending to the hints he offers on how to make it through the day—how to live. When, whoever we are, we follow his you, we feel encouraged to step into our readerly role, to “embrace the fiction,” as Jonathan Culler usefully explains, of a living connection with him. And we are also encouraged to get out of the classroom, to look up at the stars and down at the sand, to indulge and celebrate the body’s wild needs and coming death—and thus to read his poems as the best sort of literary advice.

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NOTES

1 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891–92), 198. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org). All references to Whitman’s poetry are from this edition.

2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in Nina Baym and Robert Levine, eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. B, 8th edition (New York: Norton, 2012), 270, 284, and 286. For a fuller discussion of Whitman’s attraction to oratory, see David S. Reynolds’ *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Random House, 1995), 166–175.

3 In *Whitman’s Drama of Consensus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), Kerry Larson calls attention to “the intensely apostrophic character of [Whitman’s] writing—its manifest delight in acts of summoning, commanding, exhorting, cajoling, and other forms of address” (xxii). Larson focuses primarily on Whitman’s use of “you” to address his readers, and argues that Whitman’s poetry represents a complex “contractual exchange” and “quest for consensus” with these diverse readers (6, 11).

More recent critics have discovered political and cultural meanings implicit in Whitman’s use of apostrophe. In “American ‘Apostroph’: Walt Whitman’s Apostrophic O,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 34 (Summer 2016), 35–54, Kathryn Brigger Kruger reviews earlier studies of apostrophe in lyric poetry as a prelude to her argument; she finds that Whitman blends many different “modes” of apostrophe to make a case “for American unity, democratic fullness, and national cohesion” on the brink of the Civil War (36). In his essay “Counting from One to A Million: Whitman’s Engagement with Large Numbers,” *WWQR* 34 (Fall 2016), 146–168, Ed Folsom explains that “Whitman loved apostrophes in the double sense of that word”: as a rhetorical mode and as a contraction (159). “Whitman built his poetry,” says Folsom, “on the apostrophe, the faith that he could address readers—*us*, in the twenty-first century—who were not there when he wrote and published his poems” (159). Whitman also routinely uses a “contraction-apostrophe” to replace the “e,” for example, in past tense verbs. The resulting contractions can be meaningful, Folsom argues, as they may create “suggestive homonym[s]” and call attention to exactly what has been left out (160). The millions of dead Civil War soldiers may be “summ’d” (summed, counted), but they cannot be “summ’d” (summoned) up again, “except by an apostrophe to the dead” (160).

4 In “Apostrophe, or the Lyric Art of Turning Away,” J. Mark Smith makes the important point that the pronouns “I” and “you” are both essentially ambiguous, or what he calls “formally empty.” The “I” changes according to who is reciting or reading the poem, and the “you” is “cipher-like” because the person or thing addressed is “unreachable” (415). Smith uses Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” as an example of what he calls “triadic” apostrophe, with its

complex interplay of three speakers and listeners: bird, ocean, and boy (416). See *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49 (Winter 2007), 411-437.

5 Zachary Turpin, "Introduction to Walt Whitman's 'Manly Health and Training,'" *WWQR* 33 (Winter/Spring 2016), 150-151.

6 Velsor, Mose [Walt Whitman], "Manly Health and Training, With Off-Hand Hints Toward Their Conditions," ed. Zachary Turpin, *WWQR* 33 (Winter/Spring 2016), 184-310.

7 See R. W. French, "From Major to Minor: A Reading of 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life,'" *WWQR* 7 (Fall 1989), 68-78. French claims "Whitman sees his authentic self – 'the real Me' – standing off in the distance, mocking the poet who wrote all those 'arrogant poems'" (70).

8 In "From Major to Minor," French takes "You oceans both" to refer to "the ocean of life as well as the 'fierce old mother'" (126). In Chapter 4, "The Island Poet and the Sacred Shore," Killingsworth pairs "Ebb'd" with "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in a close reading that illuminates Whitman's intense attachment to place (123-131).

9 M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 123. The expressions "island-mother" and "ocean-father" are drawn from Killingsworth's reading of "As I Ebb'd" (123-127).

10 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 212 n. 6.

11 Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe," *Diacritics* 7 (Winter 1977), 59-69.

12 Readers understand the mood of the last section of "Ebb'd" in quite different ways. R. W. French, for example, argues that the poem creates a "bleak world," and that readers must "recognize its bleakness and not diminish it by reading other Whitman poems into it" (74). In a reading more closely aligned with my own, M. Jimmie Killingsworth sees a muted "spiritual lift at the end of the poem" as the poet "[accepts] uncertainty and the possibility of insignificance." Whitman "emerges from the poem chastened but realigned," Killingsworth argues, "the electric self reconnected in the charged space between island-father and ocean-mother" (127).

13 Turpin, "Introduction," 151. Also see the discussion of these years in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 378-381.