

WALT WHITMAN, THE APOSTLE

MICHAEL D. SOWDER

WALT WHITMAN WROTE IN the midst of what I want to call an antebellum culture of conversion, a Christian culture of religious preaching and writing, which descended from the Second Great Awakening and sought the reformation of individual subjects through the reproduction of conversion experiences. The goal of these practices, as suggested by the *Christian Spectator* in 1847, was nothing less than “the complete moral regeneration of the world.” Undoubtedly, Whitman wrote, to a significant degree, in opposition to this culture and to conventional religions of all kinds, famously declaring in his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, “There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done.”¹ Horace Traubel reports how Whitman frequently asserted that “the day of the preacher is past. . . . ‘I don’t . . . expect anything of the preachers.’”² But Whitman made such statements not as a nineteenth-century atheist but as a poet-prophet intending to assume the role of preacher and priest: “The priest departs, the divine literatus comes” (932). And as he declared his intention to “inaugurate a religion” and write “the new Bible” and “evangel-poem of comrades and of love,” his new theology in the end replicated as many features of Christian and evangelical culture as it repudiated (179-180).³ True, his new religion was hardly Christ-centered, and it promoted beliefs about the body, sexuality, democracy, equality, and human and social perfection that starkly opposed orthodox and liberal versions of Protestantism (though ideas like his did appear in some radical offshoots of the 1850s). Yet, in seeking to displace conventional religions, he appropriated and relied upon many of their cultural and rhetorical practices. This reliance resulted in what I find to be one of the most important, yet inadequately investigated, features of his poetry: its design to work like a preacherly performance and to produce conversions in his readers, affectively charged moments of religious experience by which reading subjects would be reborn into Whitman’s image of a new American personality.⁴ With rhetorical strategies borrowed from preachers, Whitman, like the evangelist, would produce conversions and thus redeem the nation.

Conversion seems at first an unlikely model to bring to a reading of Whitman’s poetry because conversion always begins in an act of *negation*—a turning of the self away from the self and the sinful world.

Whitman's poetry, in contrast, seems everywhere to affirm the self and the world, to ratify the notion that "men and women and all that concerns them are unspeakably perfect miracles" (1855 preface), that "there is in fact no evil" ("Starting from Paumanok"), and that "It is not chaos or death . . . it is form and union and plan . . . it is eternal life . . . it is happiness" (1855 version of "Song of Myself") (16, 180, 87). His new religion is carved in relief against a Protestant culture that foregrounded sin, renunciation, and a rejection of the self and the world. Like a proto-Nietzschean, he denounces the evangelist's *contemptus mundi*. Rather than warn about the wages of sin, he goes to the riverbank, undresses, and admires himself, inviting us to admire him, too. Yet, even though affirmation seems the dominant tone of the poetry, appearing on every page, if not in every line, a certain burden of tension can be felt beneath those affirmations, resulting from the poetry's persistent desire to reform.

From his earliest stories and temperance novel, *Franklin Evans* (1842), to *Democratic Vistas* and the death-bed edition, Whitman's writing was impelled by reformist impulses. A desire to reform something is a desire to change it, to transform it, and to transform something, as we know from Hegel, is to *negate* it. Alexander Kojève explains how in Hegel's view action achieves satisfaction only through negation, by the destruction or transformation of the desired object: "to satisfy hunger, for example, the food must be destroyed or, in any case, transformed."⁵ And far from leaving the given as it is, "action destroys it; if not in its being, at least in its given form."⁶ But negating action is not purely destructive, for if it destroys an objective reality, it creates in its place a "subjective reality": "The being that eats, for example, creates and preserves its own, by the 'transformation' of an alien reality into its own reality, by the 'assimilation,' the 'internalization' of a 'foreign,' 'external reality.'"⁷ Kojève's examples of negation as eating and devouring carry particular relevance for my reading of Whitman's poetry below. For now, I would simply note that the negating impulse is all the stronger in a desire to *reform*, for such a desire already presupposes a flaw, imperfection, or lack in the thing to be transformed. Some kind of imperfection, something in need of a healing reformation, something akin to sin seems to worm its way back into the poetry despite Whitman's best efforts to keep it out. Stated differently, the affirmations of the subjects *Leaves of Grass* celebrates—the self, the reader, and America—represent already redeemed versions of themselves, whose redeemed condition depends upon prior, unacknowledged negations. The poetry seeks less to affirm than to transform and convert, and the negation at the heart of conversion is the absent presence I want to illuminate.

Whitman's admiration for language and rhetoric that converts its readers and listeners can be seen clearly in two essays he wrote about religious preaching, essays that show the profound influence preaching

had over him. In "Father Taylor (and Oratory)," an essay included in *November Boughs*, he reminisces fondly about hearing the religious preaching of the Methodist evangelist Edward Taylor (original for *Moby Dick's* Father Mapple) and compares Taylor's preaching to that of the radical Quaker preacher Elias Hicks: "Both had the same inner, apparently inexhaustible, fund of latent volcanic passion—the same tenderness, blended with a curious remorseless firmness, as of some surgeon operating on a belov'd patient" (1145). In this metaphorical operation, the listener does not direct his or her own spiritual healing (or interpretation of spiritual truth) but lies prostrate, as though etherized upon a table, unconscious beneath the minister-surgeon's rhetorical instruments. Somewhat surprisingly, violent figures appear frequently in Whitman's writings about oratory. In his essay on Hicks, America's other "essentially perfect orator," he again writes about preaching in terms of an overwhelming force, a "magnetic stream of natural eloquence, before which all minds and natures, all emotions [. . .] yielded entirely without exception [. . .] not argumentative or intellectual, but so penetrating" (1143, 1234). Although these essays appeared late in his life, his earliest manuscripts reveal similar preoccupations. Notes from the 1840s envision "the place of the orator . . . [as] an agonistic arena. There he wrestles and contends with them—he suffers, sweats, undergoes his great toil and exstasy. Perhaps it is a greater battle than any fought for by contending forces on land and sea."⁸ Later in the same manuscript he remarks how "[m]en witness the prodigies of oratory, when they are themselves the victims of its power."⁹ And beginning a lecture tour in 1879, commemorating the death of Lincoln, he imagines himself going "up and down the land [. . .] seeking *whom I may devour*, with lectures, and reading of my own poems" (emphasis added).¹⁰

Whitman's musings in these essays about oratory have important implications for the poetry. It is well known that he dreamed of being an orator early in his career but abandoned the ambition, evidently upon realizing that he lacked the voice or talent for it. C. Carroll Hollis and others have demonstrated how his failure as an orator impelled him to attempt to reproduce in his "second-person poetry" the powerful effects he witnessed in oratory, and scholars as early as Thomas Harned have noted how lines from his early drafts for lectures were transferred unchanged into the poems.¹¹ But what the scholarship on Whitman and oratory, old and new, most frequently fails to emphasize is that the oratory Whitman admired and modeled was *religious* oratory. Taylor and Hicks, not Webster and Clay, met his ideal of the "essentially perfect orator," and the effects they sought to produce were conversions.¹²

The metaphors Whitman uses to describe their oratory—surgery, penetration, agon, war, victimization, and devouring—suggest a fascination with rhetoric that does not simply celebrate or affirm but overwhelms, conquers, and negates. The figure of a minister operating like a

“good physician” draws upon a long tradition of Christian texts on preaching as good medicine, beginning at least with Augustine.¹³ The image of Father Taylor as a surgeon “operating on a belov’d patient,” moreover, incisively describes the kind of conversion-inducing sermons evangelists sought to produce, sermons that could generate a rebirth in their listeners by inscribing the Word upon their hearts. The benevolent violence of oratory suggested to Whitman the benevolent violence of surgery, which in turn evokes the benevolent violence of conversion, often described as an ecstatic rending of the subject, a slaying out of which a new self is born. At revivals and camp-meetings during the antebellum period—in the Second Great Awakening and its aftermath—sometimes hundreds fell prostrate on the ground, some in anguish, others in ecstasy, all under the spell of the minister’s overpowering rhetoric. Describing the effects of one fiery sermon, a camp-meeting participant wrote: “In the midst of this Sermon the Spirit of God fell upon the Assembly with great Power, and rode forth with Majesty upon the Word of Truth. In a Minutes Time the People were seemingly as much affected as if a thousand Arrows had been shot in among them.”¹⁴ Charles Grandison Finney, one of the most famous of antebellum revivalists, remarked after one successful meeting: “If I had had a sword in my hand, I could not have cut them down . . . as fast as they fell.” Indeed, the metaphor of slaying and being slain is almost the *sin qua non* of such writings. And Whitman’s image of his lectures and poems “devouring” his listeners similarly recalls the image common in conversion narratives of being “swallowed up in God.”¹⁵

In this essay, I will focus on one element of Whitman’s conversion-inducing poetry: the element of negation at work in the celebration of his own conversion, and how that element reappears in even the boldest affirmations in the poems. The central purpose of testifying about one’s own conversion in the evangelical tradition is to inspire new conversions in others. Jonathan Edwards wrote that “There is no one thing I know of which God has made such a means of promoting his work among us, as the news of others’ conversions.”¹⁶ Whitman’s conversion is famously recounted and performed in Sections 4 and 5 of “Song of Myself.” Section four initiates the event first by enumerating and then negating all the details of his ordinary, everyday life: “People I meet [. . .] The latest news [. . .] My dinner, dress, associates, looks, business, compliments, dues [. . .] / The sickness of one of my folks—or of myself . . . or ill-doing or . . . loss or lack of money . . . or depressions or exaltations” (29-30). These, he says, “are not the Me myself” (30). The “Me myself,” a redeemed figure, is, instead, something apart—“Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am” (30). With a pun on God’s tautological theophany to Moses, this “what I am” hovers “amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,” and “[l]ooks

down" (30). The details that constituted an ordinary, everyday, historical life are negated and transformed into this God-like, gazing Self. And after this preparatory cleansing, the poem proceeds immediately into Section 5, the reenactment of the conversion scene proper. The fact that Section 5 is narrated in the past tense makes clear that the Self that is affirmed and celebrated in the present tense throughout the poem is an already redeemed Self. Interestingly, the scene begins with a statement of belief, "I believe in you, my soul," and then reenacts the benevolently violent overwhelming of the self by the Soul, drawing upon the same metaphorical vocabulary as his essays on preaching: the stunning, the emotional overwhelming, the prostration, cutting, penetration (here, with the surgical tongue), and devouring by what Whitman will later call the "fluid and *swallowing* soul" (30, 63, emphases added). The scene reenacts the conversion of an unregenerate self detailed in Section 4 of the poem—call him "Walter Whitman"—into "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" (50).

If, as I am asserting, these sections reveal an act of negation that underwrites the affirmations of the poem, then traces of that negating impulse ought to appear throughout the poem; and, indeed, they do. Let us look briefly at what is perhaps the most emphatic moment of affirmation in "Song of Myself"—its opening lines. Can we catch there the shadow of a negating turn? The brilliant, epiphanic tenor of the affirmation at the beginning of the poem results to a great extent from the way it has been prepared for by the 1855 preface. In the preface, we are told to be prepared for a momentous event—the coming of "the greatest poet," one who will be not only a great artist, but a vatic figure of divine power, a religious teacher who shall "indicate" for folks "the path between reality and their souls" (10). Something like Blake's depictions of the Deity and the apotheosized "what I am" of Section 4 appears in the preface's descriptions of this poet: "High up out of reach he stands turning a concentrated light . . . he turns the pivot with his finger" (9). Indeed, the relationship the preface as a whole bears to the poem resembles the Biblical pattern of prophesy and fulfillment. Yet taken as prophesy, the preface speaks in a curious way about the future. Like most prophesy heralding the coming of a great figure, it speaks of this poet in the third-person. And as would be expected, it often uses future tenses and the subjunctive mood. But the predominant tense of the preface is the present tense—a kind of proleptic present that indicates that the coming of the greatest poet is so imminent that future tenses are inadequate to describe him.¹⁷ For example, the first time the preface mentions the poet, it uses the predictive infinitive: "The American poets *are to enclose* old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard *is to be* commensurate with a people" (6-7, emphasis added).

But the language slips back into the simple present: "To him the other continents *arrive* as contributions . . . he *gives* them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit *responds* to his country's spirit . . . he *incarnates* its geography and natural life" (7, emphasis added), and the majority of the preface continues thereafter in this proleptic present, for, as the preface itself tells us, the greatest poet stands "where the future becomes present" (13). In the preface, then, we wait as on a threshold.

After this extended foretelling, the poem itself opens in a sudden shift of person, tense, and mood into the first-person, singular, simple present indicative, and in type twice as large as that of the preface the poet declares:

I CELEBRATE myself

With the future, subjunctive, and proleptic present cast aside, the "greatest poet" becomes "I" in a simple present of perfection, his prophesy fulfilled. The verb "celebrate" emphasizes the radical affirmation of the present. It signals the difference between Whitman's new religion and Christianity. This voice does not cower guiltily hoping for a better world, but celebrates a self and a world that is present—bodily, materially, now. A spear of grass then becomes a subject worthy of extended contemplation and the symbolic center of a poem of epic dimensions.

Yet even as we have stepped through the threshold of prophesy into the brilliance of presence, even here in the first line, startling in its exuberant affirmation, we find traces of another celebration, which constellate into a negative image recessed behind the positive. "Celebrate" has a deeply-layered etymology. In addition to the colloquial meaning of commemorating, as in celebrating a birthday, originally it meant "To perform publicly . . . (a religious ceremony)," as in, to "celebrate . . . the Mass," or, "to consecrate by religious rites" (*OED*). Religious rites and ceremonies frequently commemorate a completed event (a harvest, the return of a god), but often, and more importantly, they also perform ritual transformations and conversions. In the Catholic tradition, for example, a priest "celebrates" the Mass by converting bread into Christ's body, matter into spirit, flesh into Word. Similarly, when a minister "celebrates" a wedding, he or she transforms the status of two persons.¹⁸ And one "celebrates" a contract by performing its contractual obligations—as, for example, by building a house—again pointing to actions that transform the world in accordance with an idea, here, a promise. "Celebrate," then, not only signifies commemorating but also transforming, completing, perfecting. And so when Whitman says, "I celebrate myself," he celebrates in the sense of publicly rejoicing in himself, again, the way one celebrates a birthday, but he also celebrates himself in the sense of ritually transforming a version of himself ("Walter

Whitman”) into something fulfilled, complete, redeemed: “Walt Whitman,” our rough, American kosmos.

In the second line, however, the poem falls back away from the sense of a perfect present: “And what I assume, you shall assume.” After having abandoned the preparation of the preface, having dispensed with traditional epic openings, those invocations and preparatory prayers, and begun the celebration in earnest with the arrival of the god-like poet himself, suddenly we hear a suggestion that the whole project may be ontologically at risk. The line suggests that the celebration will take place within a rhetoric of assumptions. “And what I assume, you shall assume” describes an as-yet-unrealized condition. Will we assume that “men and women and all that concerns them are unspeakable, perfect miracles,” and that “there is in fact no evil”? Shuttled back outside of the doors of the celebration, we are back in the uncertain alleyways of the suppositional, the future, the proleptic. If the poem celebrates assumed identities or assumed realities, it does something other than simply affirm *what is*. “To assume” also means “to consume”—evoking again the devouring impulse of Whitman’s “swallowing soul.” And should we remember that “assumption” once signified a reception into heaven, foreshadowing the apotheosis of the self into “what I am” in Section 4? If the subjects of the poem—I, you, and America—will be subject to an assumption, we will be converted into more sublime conditions, another hint that our host is up to hierophantic play, planning not only to throw a party for the pleasure of making a joyful noise, but to perform the serious work of transformation—that is, conversion. Our minister-surgeon-poet comes not only to commend our good health, perhaps, but to perform some reconstructive surgery.

The third line also tends to keep us outside the doors of the celebration. In “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” both “belonging” and “as good” fall just short of supporting the commemorative meaning of “celebrate,” and reaffirm instead its transformative meanings. The poet might have said more definitively, though with inferior rhythm, “For every atom belongs to me and also belongs to you,” but the participle, “belonging,” keeps our possession just out of reach. It does not quite state what is. And the almost, but not quite, equalizing qualifier, “as good,” falls just short of affirming an equality between the poet’s and the reader’s possession. “Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” again describes a condition just outside of present fact. So after the poem’s spectacular opening, which abandoned prophesy and preparation for the affirmation and celebration of perfect presence, the poem as quickly retreats from this presence, as though that vision were too bright to gaze long upon. As he says later in “Song of Myself”: A “touch . . . is about as much as I can stand” (55).

That the rhetoric of *Leaves of Grass* seeks to produce conversions in Whitman's readers he openly admits in the sly poem, "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now In Hand," from the *Calamus* sequence. There, he makes clear the negation at the heart of the celebration. Echoing Christ's admonition to his disciples, he warns that to follow him, "You would have to give up all else"; "the whole past theory of your life [. . .] would have to be abandon'd" (270). As conversion requires more than an assent to religious beliefs and rituals, demanding a fundamental unraveling of a narrative of identity, so Whitman's conversion requires the abandonment of "the whole past theory of your life." And once this self-abandonment is complete, the greatest poet, as the greatest lover, will intercede to fill the empty space opened by that self-negation to become your "sole and exclusive standard" (270) and engender in you the birth of a new American personality.

The University of Michigan

NOTES

1 *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 24. Subsequent references to this edition will appear by page number in parentheses in the text. Ellipses within brackets are mine.

2 *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, ed. Horace Traubel (Boston: Maynard, 1906), 1:120.

3 *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 1:352.

4 Whitman states in *Democratic Vistas* that "We must entirely recast the types of highest personality" (968).

5 Alexander Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 4.

6 Kojève, 4.

7 Kojève, 4.

8 Quoted in Thomas B. Harned, "Walt Whitman and Oratory," *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, ed. Richard M. Bueke et al. (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1902), 5:245.

9 Harned, 5:256.

10 *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963-1964), 2:682.

11 Kerry Larson, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 7. My thinking on this topic began with and has been continually stimulated by the work of Kerry Larson. See also C. Carroll Hollis, *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), and Harned, 5:256.

12 As a Quaker, Hicks's views on redemption and sanctification were far different from the Methodist Father Taylor's. Hicks believed in a gradual awakening of the inner voice rather than in crisis conversions. Nevertheless, his memoir includes a description of his own dramatic conversion along with other examples of sudden religious experiences. His belief in the efficacy of preaching to produce individual transformations is apparent in his life-long intinerancy preaching throughout New England and the Middle Atlantic states. See Elias Hicks, *Journal of the Life and Religious Labours of Elias Hicks, written by himself* (New York, 1832); Bliss Forbush, *Elias Hicks: Quaker Liberal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956).

13 Stanley Fish traces the history of this metaphor in *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

14 Quoted by Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 32.

15 Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 137-139. Containing an exemplary conversion narrative, Edwards's *Life of Brainerd* was republished numerous times as one of the most popular evangelical texts of the antebellum period. See Joseph A. Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995): "[T]he canonization of Brainerd and the transformation of the *Life of Brainerd* into an American religious classic were yet additional aspects of the cultural work of the Second Great Awakening that included the revitalization of Edwards as a religious authority" (69).

16 Jonathan Edwards, "A Narrative of Surprising Conversions," *Select Works of Jonathan Edwards* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 1:39-40.

17 Without referring to it as an instance of prolepsis, Chaviva M. Hosek noticed something of this effect of the use of the present tense in the preface in "The Rhetoric of Whitman's 1855 *Preface to Leaves of Grass*," *Walt Whitman Review* 25 (1979), 163-173.

18 The popular, contemporary ritual of a wedding couple lighting a candle together and then extinguishing their individual candles achieves its emotional resonance as much or more from the act of extinguishing than the act of lighting, and thus emphasizes the negation inherent in the birth of the new.