

# AMERICAN “APOSTROPH”: WALT WHITMAN’S APOSTROPHIC O

KATHRYN BRIGGER KRUGER



“IT IS UNLIKELY that any modern poet has used the ancient trope of the apostrophe as often as Walt Whitman,” writes David Baldwin in “Whitman’s Use of the Apostrophe”—a scholarly note that traces Whitman’s various uses of the apostrophe in the 1891–92 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>1</sup> Although Baldwin fixes his attention solely on the 1891–92 *Leaves*, Whitman relied on the trope of the apostrophe consistently throughout his poetry career—a fact that many scholars have already noted. J. Mark Smith’s “Apostrophe, or the Lyric Art of Turning Away” analyzes Whitman’s apostrophic incantation in the poem, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.”<sup>2</sup> Chanita Goodblatt’s “Walt Whitman and Uri Zvi Greenberg: Voice and Dialogue, Apostrophe and Discourse” compares Whitman’s apostrophic address to that of the Israeli poet.<sup>3</sup> Frank D. Casale’s *Bloom’s How to Write about Walt Whitman* operates under the assumption that the trope of the apostrophe is a hallmark of Whitman’s writing style.<sup>4</sup> William Waters has identified Whitman as the “most insistent of all poets when it comes to hailing the reader.”<sup>5</sup> And, speech-act critics like C. Carroll Hollis<sup>6</sup> and Tenney Nathanson have pursued the rhetorical and theoretical implications of Whitman’s poetry, and, as they observe, the apostrophe is one such device to which Whitman often returns predominantly in his pre-Civil War editions of *Leaves of Grass*. As Nathanson argues, “The notion that Whitman’s apostrophes seem to generate a familiarity between poet and audience not usually attained by the written word has rightly become a truism of Whitman criticism.”<sup>7</sup>

Where scholars heretofore have identified Whitman’s apostrophic instincts, few have sought to explain the impetus behind them and fewer still have analyzed Whitman’s apostrophization vis-à-vis his most obvious apostrophic exploration: his aptly-titled poem, “Apostroph.” This poem from the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* includes, out of its 65 lines of free verse, a prolific 102 instances of the O apos-

trophe.<sup>8</sup> Although Whitman's direct address to the reader (i.e., the readerly "you") has widely been categorized as apostrophization, I am interested in the specific figure of the apostrophic O as it appears in Whitman's pre-Civil War poetry and especially as it functions in this "Apostroph" poem. That is, I seek to offer an explanation for Whitman's forceful connection between apostrophization and the O sound-symbol as he makes their relationship constitutively apparent in the 1860 *Leaves*.<sup>9</sup> It is my contention that Whitman's use of the apostrophe in the immediate foreground of the Civil War is neither a rhetorical accident nor simply a poetic cliché, for where Whitman invokes the trope of the apostrophic O—a visual symbol of wholeness in its circularity—he optatively envisions and prefigures a unitive and democratic future in the face of his nation's dividing crisis. Further, Whitman's apostrophic intonations contain within themselves the many aspects of the apostrophe as it has appeared throughout the ages. Not simply operating within the domain of rhetorical persuasion, debate, oration, lecture, religious incantation, song, nature, or primordial human sound, Whitman's apostrophization operates in all of these modes simultaneously and without distinction or negation, as this essay seeks to illustrate.

Thus, I argue that Whitman's apostrophic invocations—particularly exhortations preceded by and through the declamatory O—endorse urgent epideictic messages in the years immediately preceding the Civil War while also carrying with them the hallmarks of lyrical address. Far from offering a poetry of insincerity or solipsism—the accusations often waged against lyricism and apostrophization<sup>10</sup>—Whitman's poetic impulse sought to capture the spirit of his young nation and to defend the experiment of American democracy, and it is through the trope of the apostrophe that he (perhaps naively) rallied, championed, and exhorted his American audience toward that "national spirit" about which he so often wrote.<sup>11</sup> Further, Whitman's use of the apostrophic O elevates the trope of the apostrophe beyond rhetorical and lyrical modes of expression and into a political if not religious domain of optative hopefulness for American unity, democratic fullness, and national cohesion in the ensuing threat of national fragmentation.

Whitman in the years before the Civil War believed in the power of his poetry to alter his readers' consciousnesses and to enact unitive powers in alignment with his democratic instincts. Hollis confirms this idealism in Whitman's antebellum poetry when he argues that Whitman writes the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* in "one form of expression (prophetic utterance in the American idiom)."<sup>12</sup> And yet, critics such as Hollis and Mark Bauerlein contend that Whitman's post-bellum poetry abandons his idealistic ambitions as evidenced by his shift from an epideictic and/or oratorical mode of poetic experimentation to a more lyrical posture in his poetry composed in the years after the war. Hollis observes that Whitman's revised post-war poetry becomes "less concerned with imagined direct contact with the audience; there is no 'you' in the added lines."<sup>13</sup> Bauerlein also detects a stylistic change in Whitman's poetry from before and after the war: "Is [Whitman] to persist in his Orphic mission, continue to seek a language of union, compose a hundred visions and revisions in the hope of canonizing himself and America . . . ?"<sup>14</sup> Both of these critics detect a stylistic distinction between Whitman's "oratorical impulse" in the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* and his lyrical experimentalism in the editions thereafter. I argue throughout this essay, however, that Whitman's apostrophic O carries a rhetorical, epideictic, and lyrical expressivism that Hollis disallows and compartmentalizes as mutually exclusive modes of communication. As Whitman writes in the Emersonian optative mood<sup>15</sup> in the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*, he employs the apostrophic O to convey this subjunctive hopefulness however much that mood is challenged in the years after the Civil War.

Such critical resistance to theorize the epideictic and lyrical aspects of Whitman's apostrophic O might be attributed to poet W. H. Auden's famous contention from his poem, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," that, "Poetry makes nothing happen"—a statement that downplays the role of poetry in public discourse and one that Auden defended throughout his career as a poet.<sup>16</sup> Further, Jonathan Culler describes the discomfort that the apostrophe invokes:

Apostrophes are embarrassing, and criticism of the lyric has systematically avoided both the topic of apostrophe and actual apostrophes—translating apostrophes into description. One can argue that this embarrassment is linked to the obviousness that apostrophe is a figure, an empty O, for which one can scarcely make cognitive or transcendental claims of the sort that are routinely made for metaphor: it is embarrassing for the high callings of lyric to depend on, or even be linked closely with, this sort of figure.<sup>17</sup>

Culler specifically cites the ephemeral and empty nature of Whitman's apostrophic tendencies:

[Whitman] makes himself a poetic presence through an image of voice, and nothing figures voice better than the pure O of undifferentiated voicing: "the spontaneous impulse of a powerfully moved soul." A phrase like "O wild West Wind" evokes poetic presence because the wind becomes a *thou* only in relation to a poetic act, only in the moment when poetic voice constitutes itself.<sup>18</sup>

That lyric poetry is dependent on an archaic declamatory such as the apostrophic O—an "empty O" as Culler describes it—often renders the lyric outdated because of the artificiality and insincerity that the apostrophe suggests and that critics correspondingly seek to evade. Culler writes, "If we think of what the vocative represents in this process we can see why apostrophe should be embarrassing. It is the pure embodiment of poetic pretention: of the subject's claim that in his verse he is not merely an empirical poet, a writer of verse, but the embodiment of poetic tradition and of the spirit of poesy."<sup>19</sup> To connect the use of the apostrophe with poetic pretension is a harsh indictment against those poets who employ the apostrophic device, but what differentiates Whitman from such accusations of pretension is his awareness and unabashed embrace of the vocative powers of his poetry and of his role as a democratic poetry. The declamatory, "I celebrate myself," for example, is anything but a modest proclamation of poetic arrival; Whitman makes no pretense of poetic discretion or false humility; and *Leaves of Grass* carries this positive self-assessment through to its very end. It is precisely Whitman's excessive use of the apostrophe, his unapologetic grandiosity in scale and scope, and his exclamatory cataloguing effects that make his poetry evade the shortcomings of lyrical apostrophic address that Culler identifies.

Culler's description of the trope of the apostrophe as "embarrassing" or as a figuration of emptiness does not necessarily imply a failure of the apostrophic trope but rather suggests the rhetorical forcefulness that the apostrophe contains or invokes in its far-reaching objective to reach beyond language to convey a transcendent hopefulness. Culler writes, "[T]o apostrophize is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire. In these terms the function of apostrophe would be to make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces: forces which can be asked to act or refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually behave."<sup>20</sup> To reshape the universe through apostrophic lyricism is a lofty if not impossible ambition, yet Culler argues that therein lies the potency of the apostrophic invocation. For Culler, the apostrophe carries within it a new kind of temporality that evades linearity and instead invokes a "time of discourse" that is the "set of all moments at which writing can say 'now'."<sup>21</sup> This "now" that the apostrophe summons resists narrative and instead enacts an optative character of poetic possibility—the uniting of a divided nation as in Whitman's pre-Civil War poetry or in the converging of the human spirit with the wind as in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind."<sup>22</sup>

Whitman's use of the apostrophe runs counter to traditional definitions of apostrophization insofar as Whitman employs the apostrophic trope both for poetic effect *and* as a means of eloquent address. The two need not be mutually exclusive despite Hollis's statement that "As [Whitman] turned to writing lyrical poetry and, after the Civil War, to an altogether different kind of prophetic writing he turned away from the oral foundation of his art."<sup>23</sup> Instead, Whitman disrupts the binary that Hollis assumes and that John Stuart Mill first enumerated when he separated eloquence from poetry:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling. But if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the

exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief or move them to passion or to action.

All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike Mill's contention that the defining characteristic of poetry lies in the "poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener" in its soliloquized delivery, Whitman's poetic address displays a *hyperconsciousness* of a listening subject. Mill's bifurcation of poetry and eloquence hinges on the role of the audience vis-à-vis these two antitheses: where eloquence supposes an audience, poetry ignores it. Always mindful of his reading audience Whitman throughout *Leaves of Grass* seeks to rectify the division if not eliminate the distance between poetry and eloquence that Mill enunciated. By making his project both a practice of poetic address and a project of epideictic urgency, Whitman defies Mill's definition of lyric poetry by elevating poetry's status to a purposeful and persuasive mode of public discourse that seeks visceral connection with an audience rather than a purposeful ignorance of it.

David S. Reynolds argues that Whitman's 1860 *Leaves of Grass* operates in this optative mode of willing the country into a reconciled state that Culler refers to as the "now" or "time of discourse": "I will,' [Whitman] constantly tells us. I will make sure states' rights are perfectly balanced by comity between the states. I will write words that undermine an incompetent president. I will curse disunionists."<sup>25</sup> Here also, Reynolds recognizes how Whitman's "Apostroph" disavows a strict separation between eloquence and poetry: instead, Whitman consistently attempts to reach out to his reader via apostrophic declamatories to the readerly "you" and via epideictic exhortations toward national unity.

*Whitman's Fertile O: "O brood continental!"*

Some critics have identified in Whitman a colonizing voice that seeks to subsume and obscure his readerly subject with his own vocative lyricism and poetic presence.<sup>26</sup> Hollis observes that "Whitman want-

ed to motivate his audience to accept the democratic challenge, but could only do so by adopting a somewhat autocratic attitude.”<sup>27</sup> Pablo Neruda identified Whitman as the “first totalitarian poet” owing to his intention “to impose on others his own total and wide-ranging vision of the relationships of men and nations.”<sup>28</sup> Are Whitman’s apostrophic invocations inclusionary, reciprocal, and epideictic, or are they emblematic of erasure, effacement, and sublimation of his readerly audience? Neruda, however, differentiates Whitman’s “totalitarian” poetry from a colonizing impulse: where colonial projects consistently “have left a legacy of centuries of silence” and “slay fertility” while “stultify[ing] the power of creation,”<sup>29</sup> Neruda argues that Whitman invokes revolution and liberation via song or lyricism rather via bloodshed. Whitman’s poetry offers a vocative expression of democracy that colonialist projects would rather silence. Had Whitman indeed operated from a colonizing impulse, he would not have apostrophized such generative and reproductive themes as his “Apostroph” and *Leaves of Grass* poetry emphasize. Whitman’s poetics neither obscure nor prevent his audience from participation in a democratic paradigm; instead he invokes his audience toward a reader-poet convergence of immediate agency—the “now” of apostrophic discourse about which Culler theorizes.

As Neruda suggests, Whitman’s poetry is fecund whereas colonial projects “slay fertility.” In Whitman’s “Apostroph” poem, nearly every line begins with the archaic and declamatory O: “O mater! O fils! / O brood continental!” (105). In these beginning lines, Whitman follows his first apostrophic O with the Latin word for mother (*mater*) and immediately conjures the fertility of the female womb in the figuration of the declamatory O. Whitman’s second O prefigures the French word for son or sons (*le fils*; *les fils*) so that, like the Romance languages themselves, the Latinate mother gives rise to her French offspring, which in turn generate Whitman’s apostrophized “brood continental.” The apostrophes in these opening lines resonate full of reproductive implications of a mother, a son, and an entire brood of continental possibilities—quite the opposite of an empty O. Rather than offering a trope of apostrophic barrenness, Whitman imbues his apostrophic Os with generative and reconcilable possibility. Here

also, Whitman's apostrophized mother and son, absent of a seminal father figure, resemble a Christological model of incarnation: for where Whitman apostrophizes the *mater*, it is the breath of the omniscient poet that impregnates her womb and gives rise to the duplicating Os throughout the poem. The trope of the apostrophe seems to reproduce itself into its own continental brood when, out of the 65 poetic lines, the apostrophic O figure appears in 102 different instances in this one poem alone. When Whitman writes, "O copious! O hitherto unequalled!" (107), he refers to the apostrophic abundance his lyric poetry produces and conveys, and in so doing he defies the indictments of solipsistic emptiness waged against the lyric poets who preceded him who often employed the trope of the apostrophe in their first-person poetry.

Just as Whitman intimates the sexual, reproductive implications of the trope of the apostrophe, Jennifer Moxley has recently argued that "the poetic O" echoes the ecphronesis associated with sexual activity. Moxley theorizes that such apostrophic outbursts function as a form of "nonlinguistic human sound often associated with sexual arousal and orgasm," and she further contends that the apostrophe, in its association with sexual and linguistic orality, places the reader "in an uncomfortable proximity to the sound of the body's dissolution, and by analogy, death."<sup>30</sup> It is certain that Whitman's apostrophization evinces the "orality of both sexuality and language" that Moxley identifies, but Whitman's "poetic O" is filled with a "radical receptivity" toward a reproductive future rather than the annihilating apostrophization that Moxley articulates.<sup>31</sup> I suggest here, instead, that Whitman's apostrophic incantations invoke a procreative, active, and solvent union made up of generations of "poets to come" (108)<sup>32</sup>—a procreativity that Moxley's O(rality) necessarily obviates in its passivity, infecundity, and dissolving impotency. Whitman's apostrophe envisions a dissolution of boundaries (but not a dissolution of spirit that leads unto death, as Moxley argues) so that all might be unified under his apostrophic and *life*-giving spell of democratic wholeness.<sup>33</sup>

*Whitman's Epideictic O: "O for mightier broods of orators, artists,  
and singers!"*

The ancient Roman rhetorician, Quintilian, defined the term "apostrophe" in the following way:

Apostrophe also, which consists in the diversion of our address from the judge, is wonderfully stirring, whether we attack our adversary as in the passage, "What was that sword of yours doing, Tubero, in the field of Pharsalus?" or turn to make some invocation such as, "For I appeal to you, hills and groves of Alba," or to entreaty that will bring odium on our opponents, as in the cry "O Porcian and Sempronian laws." But the term apostrophe is also applied to utterances that divert the attention of the hearer from the question before them.<sup>34</sup>

According to Quintilian, the speaker's apostrophic aside turns the focus of the speech away from the arbiter of the debate, the judge, and towards the audience in an attempt to attack an opponent; to appeal to other listeners' reason and/or sentiment; or to distract or divert the arbiter/judge from a piece of evidence or testimony. Quintilian's definition of the apostrophe as an act of turning away from the judge and towards the audience fits the etymological implications of *apo-strophein* where the Greek preposition *apo* means "away" and the Greek verb *strophein* is translated as "to turn." Therefore *apo-strophein* literally is rendered as an act of turning away.

Unlike Mill, Quintilian placed the trope of the apostrophe squarely in the mode of public discourse, and Whitman's "Apostroph" poem reclaims this ancient usage of the apostrophe especially when Whitman writes, "To promulgate real things! to journey through all The States! / O creation! O to-day! O laws! O unmitigated adoration! / O for mightier broods of orators, artists, and singers!" (107). Here Whitman's orator-speaker seeks to "promulgate real things"—and not apostrophically induced fictions or unrealities—via political discourse. Whitman's invocation of "real things" parallels Culler's contention that apostrophization is the attempt to bend "inanimate objects" according to poetic desire in the "now" of apostrophic discourse that is achieved best through the mode of apostrophic lyric. In "Apostroph" Whitman appeals to public performers—"orators, artists, and singers"—as equal partners in epideictic discourse. In Whitman, there is

never a separation between poets and politicians, between “bearded roughs” and “bards” (105); between the self, God, and the collective human race (“O yourself! O God! O divine average! [105]); instead, Whitman conjures a cosmological communion between all sentient creatures, non-sentient creation, and the divine creator; and between all forms of poetic, epideictic, and spiritual address.

Given Quintilian’s first-century definition of apostrophe as a mode of public discourse we may justifiably view Whitman’s apostrophic tendencies as a revivification of ancient rhetorical persuasion especially when considering that the first language Whitman’s apostrophic O generates is the Latin of Quintilian’s rhetorical speech. Whitman enacts the ancient trope of the apostrophe by conjuring orators of the past (“O days by-gone! Enthusiasts! Antecedents!” [107]; “O voices of greater orators! I pause—I listen for you!” [108]), but he also expands his apostrophic application to an entirely new set of American circumstances in his contemporary antebellum milieu (“O present! I return while yet I may to you!” [108]). But more than appealing to the past and returning to the present moment, Whitman projects his apostrophic ambitions into the unforeseen future: “O race of the future!” (105); “O shapes arising! shapes of the future centuries!” (106); “O what is now being sent forward thousands of years to come!” (107); “O centuries, centuries yet ahead!” (107); “New history! New heroes! I project you!”; “O poets to come, I depend upon you!” (108). Whitman’s temporal considerations conflate the past, present, and future into a *kairos* of time that defies the linearity of chronologism: “O all, all inseparable—ages, ages, ages!” (106). We see also how Whitman indiscriminately conjures orators and poets so that they are one and the same in direct opposition to Mill’s antithetical positioning of eloquence and poetry. Indeed, Whitman uses the apostrophe as a device toward eloquence *and* poetry; as a form of epideictic, aesthetic, *and* political purpose; and as a means toward communion with his intended readerly audience rather than a “turning away” from such reciprocal discourse.

Baldwin, however, contrasts Whitman’s use of the apostrophe to Quintilian’s early definition of the ancient trope: “We would not expect to find Whitman using apostrophe this way, as a weapon in

debate, and we do not. Rather, as in ‘Melt, melt away ye armies’ he is reaching out with such emotions as encouragement, yearning, hope, or love.”<sup>35</sup> And yet, I argue that Whitman’s poem “Apostroph” *does* indeed operate as a “weapon of debate” in the Quintilian mode. Just as Quintilian offers as his first example of apostrophic address a reference to Tubero’s sword as a means to attack an adversary (“What was that sword of yours doing, Tubero, in the field of Pharsalus?”),<sup>36</sup> Whitman’s “Apostroph” offers a sword in the form of a verbal curse: “O a curse on him that would dissever this Union for any reason whatever!” (106). Reynolds too insists that this line “repeats the attack on disunionists” that is apparent throughout the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>37</sup> Whitman’s “Apostroph” certainly offers a strong indictment against disunionist causes. The idea of a severed nation haunts Whitman’s “Apostroph” poem; he repeats the word “dissever” again when he writes, “O Libertad! O compact! O union impossible to dissever!” (107). Whitman ardently exhorts unity to those who would seek to divide his country. By stacking his apostrophic Os one on top of another, and by repeatedly pairing the “O” with the possibility of a “dissevered” “union”, Whitman offers as a healing salve the linguistic and semantic powers of the circular symbol of unity/union found in the apostrophic O.

*Whitman’s Lyrical Birdsong: “O what I, here, preparing, warble for!”*

Whitman’s double-edged sword of apostrophic address is irrefutable when he imperatively writes, “O arouse! the dawn-bird’s throat sounds shrill! Do you not hear the cock crowing?” (105) and “O you sailors! O ships! Make quick preparation! / O from his masterful sweep, the warning cry of the eagle!” (106). Hollis suggests that the song elements of Whitman’s lyrical poetry prove distracting and diffusive: “Prophets, orators, public speakers, lyceum lecturers, are not really *singers*, and to inject this extra element is to diffuse the direct force, the audience contact, and the rapport of the original.”<sup>38</sup> Yet, Whitman’s repeated apostrophizing of birds and the “shrill” “crowing” and “warning cry” offered by the dawn-bird, the cock, and the eagle, respectively, makes his “Apostroph” poem at once a rallying war call—an epideictic verbal

sword—against disunionist causes *and* a lyrical birdsong of figurative wholeness.

W. R. Johnson writes in *The Idea of Lyric* that the “truest paradigm for western lyric”<sup>39</sup> is its public, occasional, and musical (that is, the lyre) function: “What mattered was the performance of the poem.... In this sense, what we must bear in mind is that this was not so much a musical poetry (in our sense of the word *musical*) as a performed poetry, a poetry with music.”<sup>40</sup> Whitman does not include the lyre *per se* in his “Apostroph” poem, but the continuous warbling of birds, singers, and natural and man-made sounds certainly creates a backdrop of musicality that conjures the earliest form of lyric poetry vis-à-vis its musical function. Whitman apostrophically invokes the “hum of mighty products”; the “shrill” of the “dawn-bird’s throat”; the “crowing” of the cock; “the mournful notes” and “low, oft-repeated shriek of the diver, the long-lived loon” (105); “the warning cry of the eagle” (106); and the song that “the mocking-bird sings” (107). When Whitman writes, “O for native songs! carpenter’s, boatman’s, ploughman’s songs! shoemaker’s songs!” (107), he offers democratic, epideictic, and lyrical agency to the eloquence of the orator, the poetry of the artist, the song of the native singer, and the work of the laborer. It is as though Whitman makes himself a primordial singer-creator through his apostrophic incantation: “O what I, here, preparing, warble for!” (107).

The larger cluster of poems, “Chants Democratic and Native American” in which the poem “Apostroph” appears as the introductory poem, references in its very title the musical elements of religious, meditative, or ritualistic “chants.” Whitman’s repetitive use of the O sound-symbol—not unlike the O Antiphons of Christian liturgical chanting<sup>41</sup>—corresponds with Christian invocations of an omnipresent and omnipotent God however much he widens the definition of divinity: “O yourself! O God! O divine average!” (105). Moreover, Whitman perhaps even invokes the indigenous chanting of the Native American in his apostrophic O-chanting: “O native power only! O beauty!” (105); “O for native songs!” (107). Whitman’s apostrophe conjures and enacts the public and private impulses of religious and/or communal song directed toward individual enlightenment, universal

salvation, or subjunctive reconciliation of past, present, and future.

*Whitman's Double-Negative and Neo-lingual O: "O purged lumine!"*

Gregory Eiselein notes, "Whitman celebrates democratic America with a nationalistic fervor that can at times sound shrill, especially given the approaching crisis—the bloody, four-year-long Civil War that threatened to dissolve the United States."<sup>42</sup> With the "Apostroph" poem, Whitman extols himself as the nation's preeminent prophet-poet ("I am come to be your born poet!" [107]; "I am your poet, because I am part of you" [107]; "O prophetic! O vision staggered with weight of light!" [107]), all while uniting himself in poetic dependence on poets of the future: "O poets to come, I depend upon you!" (108). As part of Whitman's role as poet-prophet, he positions himself as the nation's defender of democracy: "O I believe there is nothing real but America and freedom! / O to sternly reject all except Democracy!" (106). Here, he simultaneously invokes belief and disbelief ("O I believe" and "O to sternly reject"), and it is through the paradoxical doubling of the apostrophized credo and the apostrophized rejection that Whitman envisions a fusion between the ideas of "America," "freedom," and "Democracy," however tenuous this project might be. Whitman represents this tenuousness through a series of double-negative grammatical constructions throughout the poem that function rhetorically in the mode of the litotes: "Do you not hear?" (105); "there is nothing real but" (106); "to sternly reject all except" (106); "impossible to dissever" (107). Although Whitman indeed asserts a "nationalistic fervor" and a bold use of apostrophic incantation, his repeated use of the double negative highlights the mimetic tension between the ideal of American democracy and the complicated reality of antebellum American politics, especially given the ongoing presence of slavery and the increasing mistreatment of Native American populations. As Hollis argues, "[T]he only way to describe a negative-free society (with all that that implies) is with negatives."<sup>43</sup> Whitman's poetic lines offer a complicated yet affirmative proclamation of American freedom while negating everything that impedes such democratic completion. It is the apostrophic O that reconciles Whitman's double-negative

rhetoric with his lyrical hopefulness toward national cohesion that he envisions and prophecies.

Whitman encourages his fellow Americans (his readers) to follow his prophetic advice so as to avoid the impending crisis of war that seems all but inevitable in this 1860 historical context. Whitman advocates for neither Northern nor Southern sensibilities but rather for a unifying wholeness that defies such geographical boundaries: “O space boundless!” (105); “O feuillage! O North!” (106); “O South! O longings for my dear home!” (107); “O vast preparations for These States!” (107); “to journey through all The States!” (107). One way that Whitman appeals to national unity, ironically, is through the allusion to concerns further abroad. Why, in a poem that conjures national American unity does Whitman repeatedly deploy foreign languages and references to nations and peoples other than the United States and its citizens? Indeed, as we have seen, Whitman’s first apostrophe conjures the Latin *mater*; Whitman apostrophizes the French words *fil*s and *feuillage* (foliage); he extols the Spanish word for freedom, “O Libertad!” (107); when connecting the North with the South, he apostrophizes the Mississippi River which drains into the Gulf of Mexico (“O the slope drained by the Mexican sea!” [106]); and he offers the neologism *lumine* (“O purged lumine!” [108]). Whitman thereby introduces a new vocabulary to usher in his imagined future of unity while simultaneously purging the past of its complicated reality. In all of these instances, Whitman’s hopes for a unified America depend on foreign reinforcements, but they also convey the universal ideals of liberty and freedom regardless of nationality or language. Whitman’s emphatic and redundant use of the apostrophic O, then, expands beyond regional identities, national boundaries, and individual languages. Whitman’s poly- or neo-lingualism enhances the universality that his apostrophic incantations inspire. Further, these multiple languages represent the ongoing diversity of the American citizenry.<sup>44</sup>

*Apostrophic Conclusions: "New history! New heroes! I project you!"*

"Apostroph" positions Whitman as an epideictic commentator, a lyrical poet, and a champion of democracy amidst the nation's defining crisis ("O voices of greater orators!" [108]), as an apostrophized warbling bird of primordial origin ("O what I, here, preparing, warble for!" [107]), as the face of the working-class-slouch-cum-bardic-poet ("O you bearded roughs! O bards!" [105]), and a figuration of the corporeal body of his young nation ("O muscle and pluck forever for me!" [106]). Although Whitman metonymically makes himself the mouthpiece of democratic unity throughout his 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, the defining hallmark of Whitman's poetry is his epideictic appeals to action, to immediacy, and the "now of discourse" that apostrophization enacts. Through his poetry, Whitman seeks to establish immediate contact between writer and reader so that his lyric poetry "revolves around, or thinks about, the contact that it is (or is not) making with the person to whom it is speaking . . . [to] suggest a way of talking about poetry as a form of contact."<sup>45</sup> Throughout his *Leaves of Grass* editions, Whitman imagines the spaces where he might reach beyond the pages of the leaves of his books to touch his readers and to establish epideictic reciprocity. Whitman's "Apostroph" subjunctively invokes physical contact between reader and poet when he writes, "O you States! Cities! defiant of all outside authority! I spring at once into your arms! you I most love!" (108). Here, Whitman conflates the apostrophized "you" of the reader with the apostrophized "States! Cities!" that make up the United States in its entirety so that the reader is both a solitary subject and the collective consciousness of the American nation into whose arms he springs and whom he ardently loves. Whitman decidedly does not turn his back on his readerly audience, but, quite to the contrary, he goes so far as to jump into his readers' hands, arms, laps, or even bed sheets, as when he euphemistically references the "wet paper"<sup>46</sup> between reader and poet in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*:

Come closer to me,  
 Push close my lovers and take the best I possess,  
 Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess.  
 This is unfinished business with me....how is it with you!  
 I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us.<sup>47</sup>

Whitman consistently implores his readers through the medium of his poetry to seek physical contact beyond mere poetic discourse. And it is through the trope of the apostrophe that Whitman is able to reconcile the seeming futility of his poetic project and the ambitious hopes he envisions toward democratic fullness and reader-writer reciprocity.

The act of apostrophizing projects the lyrical agency into an unknowable and unseen future so that the lyric operates both as a form of contemporary discourse and as a means to communicate across spatial and temporal distances so that the past is in communication with the present and with the future.<sup>48</sup> Whitman's optative mode very much operates in this projective register; by attempting to will something radically into being, be it the wholeness of his nation or the hope of a peaceful and reconciled futurity, Whitman invokes the "shapes of the future centuries" (106) and the "centuries, centuries yet ahead" (107) into the "thousands of years to come!" (107). "New history! New heroes!" Whitman writes, "I project you!" (108). As such, Whitman's "discourse of now" carries with it the seemingly impossible conflation of past, present, and future in a *kairos* of apostrophic discursivity.

Throughout Whitman's poetry there is always a slippage of boundaries and an abundance of contradictions. He invokes the seemingly outdated form of the apostrophe in order to speak to an unknowable future. He combines ancient rhetorical practices and forges a new brand of American apostrophic lyricism. He uses poetic language to forge physical contact. He invokes religious incantation while speaking to a secular and national crisis of fragmentation. And he makes that which is personal and private into that which is also public and performative. Whitman achieves these contradictory purposes through the trope of the apostrophe insofar as his O declamations hinge these disparate elements together into a cohesive unity prefigured by the circularity of the apostrophic O. Whitman's apostrophic O, therefore, operates as a visual and rhetorical figure of wholeness that fully embodies his optative wishes for a reconciled, generative, and united American futurity.

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*  
kathrynkruger@post.harvard.edu

## NOTES

Special thanks to Seanna Sumalee Oakley, Kenneth M. Price, Ed Folsom, Elizabeth M. Lorang, Melissa McCoy, Megan Peabody, Beverley Park Rilett, and Vanessa Steinroetter.

1 David Baldwin, "Whitman's Use of Apostrophe," *Walt Whitman Review* 28 (March 1982), 34.

2 J. Mark Smith, "Apostrophe, or the Lyric Art of Turning Away," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49 (2007), 411-437.

3 Chanita Goodblatt, "Walt Whitman and Uri Zvi Greenberg: Voice and Dialogue, Apostrophe and Discourse," *Prooftexts* 13 (1993), 237-251.

4 Frank D. Casale contends, "Whitman frequently uses the poetic device of apostrophe, or direct address of an abstract figure or, as is often the case with Whitman, the reader" (*Bloom's How to Write about Walt Whitman* [New York: Infobase, 2009], 95).

5 William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 7.

6 See C. Carroll Hollis, *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); and "'Tallying, Vocalizing All': Discourse Markers in *Leaves of Grass*," in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 61-67.

7 Tenney Nathanson, *Whitman's Presence: Body, Voice and Writing in Leaves of Grass* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992), 12.

8 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860-61). Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)). All parentheses in this essay refer to this edition.

9 The word O is most usually used in poetry to signal an apostrophic invocation and carries with it an archaic quality that hearkens to both epideictic and lyrical definitions of apostrophization. An apostrophe is defined as a "rhetorical figure in which the speaker addresses a dead or absent person, or an abstraction or inanimate object" (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. Chris Baldick, 3rd ed. [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 22).

10 See Jonathan Culler's "Apostrophe," *Diacritics* 7 (Winter 1977), 65-66.

11 The prose postscript that Whitman attached to the end of the 1891-92 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, an essay entitled, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," concludes with the assessment that "really great poetry is always (like the Homeric or Biblical canticles) the result of a national spirit, and not the privilege of a polish'd and select few" (438).

12 Hollis 55.

13 Ibid.

14 Mark Bauerlein, *Whitman and the American Idiom* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 119.

15 Ralph Waldo Emerson, in a lecture originally delivered at the Masonic Temple, Boston (January 1842), asserts, “Our American literature and spiritual history are, we confess, in the optative mood” (*Nature: Addresses, and Lectures* [Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe, 1849], 331).

16 W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” in *Another Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), 107-110.

17 Culler, “Reading Lyric,” *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985), 99.

18 Culler, “Apostrophe” 63.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid. 61.

21 Ibid. 66.

22 Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind” (1819), in *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems* (London: C. and J. Ollier, 1820), 188-192 ([archive.org/details/prometheusunbound00shelrich](http://archive.org/details/prometheusunbound00shelrich)).

23 Hollis 52.

24 John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” *The Crayon* 7 (April 1860), 95.

25 David S. Reynolds, “‘Affection shall solve every one of the problems of freedom’: Calamus Love and the Antebellum Political Crisis,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73 (2010), 633.

26 Whitman’s colonizing or imperialistic rhetoric has been the subject of scholarship in such works as Betsy Erkkila’s *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Walter Grünzweig’s “Noble Ethics and Loving Aggressiveness: The Imperial Walt Whitman,” in *An American Empire: Expansionist Cultures and Policies, 1881-1917*, ed. Serge Ricard (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1990), 151-165; and David Simpson’s “Destiny Made Manifest: The Styles of Whitman’s Poetry,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 177-196.

27 Hollis 100.

28 Pablo Neruda, “We Live in a Whitmanesque Age (A Speech to P.E.N.),” 1972, in *Walt Whitman’s Song of Myself: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (New York: Routledge, 2005), 94.

29 Ibid. 95.

30 Jennifer Moxley, “A Deeper, Older O: The Older (Sex) Tradition (in Poetry),”

in *Active Romanticism: The Radical Impulse in Nineteenth-Century and Contemporary Poetic Practice*, ed. Julie Carr and Jeffrey C. Robinson (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015), 86, 70.

31 Ibid. 86.

32 Ed Folsom suggests that this phrase, “poets to come,” indicates a “poetry of arousal” as though Whitman’s poetic lines might “generate the democratic poetry that is to come” (see *Translating “Poets to Come”: An Introduction*, 2012, available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*).

33 Here I am reminded of Nathanson’s connection between Whitman’s apostrophization and the spellbinding effect of Whitman’s incantatory poetry: “The vision of word magic, projected most powerfully in the direct addresses to us that engender the poet’s presence, is a crucial determinant of the imaginative space of Whitman’s work” (9).

34 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* [The Institutes of Oratory] (c. 95), vol. 3, bk. 9, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), 397.

35 Baldwin 34.

36 Quintilian 397.

37 Reynolds, “Affection” 633.

38 Hollis 54.

39 W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 200.

40 Ibid. 27-28.

41 See Oliver Treanor, *Seven Bells to Bethlehem: The O Antiphons* (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing, 1995). Mindful of the Judeo-Christian influence on his poetry, Whitman referred to his 1860 *Leaves of Grass* as his “Great Construction of the New Bible” (*Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier [New York: New York University Press, 1984], 1:353); and he arranged his poems, clusters, and numbered line groups in his 1860 *Leaves* in ways reminiscent of the Bible with its various books, chapters, and numbered verses.

42 See Gregory Eiselein, “*Leaves of Grass*, 1860 edition,” in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 362-365. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

43 Hollis 141.

44 Whitman’s native New York City was and continues to be a city of immigrants; in 1860, New York’s metropolitan population totaled 813,669 people, almost half of them immigrants, many of whom spoke in languages other than American English. See M. Wynn Thomas, “New York City,” in *Walt Whitman: An*

*Encyclopedia*, ed. J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 459-462. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

45 Waters 1.

46 Whitman invokes a double entendre here since the “wet paper” suggests sexual liaisons while also accurately describing a process of printing (Kenneth M. Price, “‘I pass so poorly with paper and types’: The Making and Remaking of Walt Whitman in a Digital Age,” The Chancellor’s [University of] Nebraska Lecture, Lincoln, April 2009).

47 Waters 51.

48 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Walt Whitman, 1855). Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.