

# Whitman's Presence : Apostrophe, Voice, and Text in Leaves of Grass

TENNEY NATHANSON

Glendower : I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

Hotspur : Why so can I, or so can any man, but will they come  
when you do call for them ?

— Henry IV, Part I, III, i

Like many of Whitman's poems, the major new piece in his 1856 edition, "Crossing Brooklyn ferry," is studded with declarations as different reconcile with one another as they are exorbitant. Whitman's penchant for the grand pronouncement, which may strike us as embarrassing, can be troubling as well, since the doctrine thus exuberantly propounded is often difficult to parse into comprehensible form. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a case in point. Here, we may find rapturous praises of sexuality and the life of the ordinary body, side by side with descriptions of that life which are altogether more tormented. These, in turn, are set against the odd and confusing image of incarnation itself as a rather violent act which creates the body only by "striking" it from a "float forever held in solution" (62)<sup>1</sup> We may find our poet celebrating those moments in which "glories" may be "strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings" (9), but also the more elusive declaration that the objects glimpsed in the midst of such flux somehow 'furnish (their) parts toward eternity" (131). He praises transience and commands it to continue: "Flow on, river ! Flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide !" (101). Yet he also declares to the objects of the harbor scene that he and others like him have the power to abrogate all such change: "We descend upon you and all things, we arrest you all."<sup>2</sup>

Much Whitman criticism has been occupied with the daunting task of working such exuberant but barely compatible declarations into some manageable doctrinal arrangement. We may find various expositors of

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"—determined to set the poet's propositional house-of-cards in order — making paraphrasable sense of the poem by confining their attention to some few of its pronouncements while resolutely ignoring others. Thus Edwin Miller calls the poem "a hedonistic statement of faith" and "a sustained hymn to joy—the joy of the sensuous body"; "a serene meditation on mutability," content to be "part of the flux it depicts."<sup>3</sup> Yet for James Miller, the poem offers a profound "insight into the world of spiritual unity"; the poem's "recognition of the existence of a transcendent spirituality," he says, is its true center.<sup>4</sup>

Both readings, I think, suggest the dangers of applying such doctrinal terms to early Whitman, foundering on the grand assertions he blithely strews about him as he moves through his poem. The poem itself, I shall try to show, makes altogether more mobile and idiosyncratic use of the terms on which such criticism fastens, catching up the poet's declarations into the illogical but convincing imaginative space in which the tensions among them are subsumed.

For sprinkled among Whitman's pronouncements concerning the harbor scene and his infrequent evocation of some float held in solution beyond it, we may find suggestions of a more unnerving order. They are all phrased as apostrophes, addressed directly to us. "Who was to know," our poet asks us in the seventh section of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

what should come home to me ?

Who knows but I am enjoying this ?

Who knows but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me ? (89-91)

A similar suggestion, in the poem's third section, is made in less equivocal terms :

It avails not, neither time or place - distance avails not.

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,

I project myself, also I return - I am with you, and know how it is.  
(20-21)

These apostrophes possess an imaginative urgency unsurpassed in Whitman's work : and the presence they seem to conjure up is perhaps his finest and most disconcerting invention. It is evoked repeatedly in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," appearing liberally in his other early poems as

well. This elusive form is Whitman's most convincing trope of the poet's imperial power : it seems to act directly upon us in a way that poetry ought not be able to. If Whitman's early work bears on us in a manner not ordinarily associated with poetry, the peculiar force it manages to exert is indeed very largely due to this presence the poet's apostrophes announce. This force, in turn, depends on the sense of voice' of present speech, which makes this presence credible—a sense of voice on which Whitman repeatedly insists. Despite his penchant for the doctrinaire pronouncement, the particular "truth" the poet of the early work will tell us will thus be less important than how he will claim to be able to tell it : directly and personally to each of us, wherever and whenever we may be, and whenever we may live.

Such claims, of course, will eventually provoke our scrutiny. The relation of the poet's voice to the text in which it appears is a central and by no means simple feature of Whitman's poetry, suggesting that his grandest trope of power is a trope of pathos and desire as well : there is unavoidable irony in the fact that the poet's direct addresses to us appear in a book, and Whitman himself will worry this problem ceaselessly, denying it or wishing it away. I want, further on, to attend to such awkward difficulties. But first, we should let the poet's voice and presence work on us as Whitman meant them to. Their effects, to say the least, are extreme.

For insofar as the presence announced by the poet's apostrophes can be rendered convincing, Whitman's odd imaginative space is necessarily implied, its conflation of ordinary logical oppositions already accomplished. "Body" and "soul," for example, can no longer comfortably be defined through mutual opposition. At once too vaporous and elusive to be thought of as an ordinary body, yet claiming to impinge on us in the here and now of our actual world with too much quirky specificity to be thought of as a soul, this presence works to efface the very distinction between the material and the ideal from which those terms ordinarily take their meanings. It also elides the distinction between the transitory and the eternal. Speaking from its own particular time and place, this presence seems also to transcend it, projecting itself through intervals of time, as well as space, it thereby works to annul. It can pronounce itself to be "here" and mean everywhere ; it can say it speaks "now" and mean forever. It can also suggest that it comes "personally to you now" (227), as the poet declares in "Starting from Paumanok," and be speaking at once

to everyone ; it exerts a peculiar, centripetal pressure on the individual identities of those it reaches.

This invention has especially unnerved those critics intent on seeing Whitman's poetry as expounding some more stable idea of order than such an elusive form implies. "This suggestion of the poet's physical presence," James Miller remarks with some loss of composure, "perhaps meant to shock us with its novelty, is surely intended to imply the immanence of spiritual union."<sup>5</sup> Reducing the poem's strangest and most moving assertion to an allegorical status which makes it both banal and trivial, he goes on to describe "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in doctrinal terms which would adequately characterize only a later and much lesser mode.<sup>6</sup>

Edwin Miller, intent on viewing the poem as a celebration of the sensuous body, consigns the addresses to us which evoke the protagonist's rather more magical form to a marginal status : they are a kind of touching addendum to the poem's essential burden. By means of them, he suggests, Whitman's own ecstatic hedonism is passed on to others.<sup>7</sup>

The presence announced by Whitman's apostrophes, though, is difficult to regard as simply the emissary of a message concerning healthy bodies : it violates the very laws and limitations to which ordinary bodies are subject. Whitman is indeed intent, as Quentin Anderson points out, on redefining what we might mean by a body ; and in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," as elsewhere in his early work, the presence suggested by the poet's apostrophes is Whitman's principal means of this redefinition, obliquely compelling all other versions of the protagonist toward its contours. For the poet of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a much edgier celebrant of the body than Edwin Miller suggests. Most of the poem's long sixth section describes the experience undergone by the inhabitant of an ordinary body, a particular person whose interactions with other, independent individuals are neither calm nor assured. These descriptions are heardly sanguine :

It is not you alone who know what it is to be evil,  
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,  
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,  
Blabbed, blushed, resented, lied, stole, grudged,  
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,  
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, a solitary committer, a  
coward, a malignant person,  
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,

The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,

Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting (69-77)

Miller remarks of this passage only that "the vices of the protagonist establish his ordinariness and his accessibility."<sup>8</sup> The increasing turbulence of these lines, though, records a torment which refuses such placid disposition. That turbulence is mitigated here only by the speaker's supposed relation to what he describes: these lines claim to record a past experience, and the supersession of the kind of life they record is crucial to the poem.<sup>9</sup>

The tormented catalogues of this section are in fact followed immediately by one of the poet's direct address to us. Projecting himself through time, he thereby attains that peculiar vantage from which the difficult experiences just described may be said to be in the past. The particular, limited individual full of ordinary human needs and desires also disappears, replaced by that form whose way of acting on us, we shall see, is of an entirely different order:

Bloser yet I approach you,

What thought you have of me, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance,

I considered long and seriously of you before you were born. (86-88)

Similar declarations, employing phrases which come in their repetition to seem formulaic, recur at crucial points throughout the poem:

I project myself a moment to tell you—also I return.<sup>10</sup>

What is it, then, between us? What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not—distance avails not. (54-56)

These declarations are at once improbable and oddly compelling. We can begin to account for their peculiar force, I think, by appeal to J. L. Austin's notion of performative utterances.<sup>11</sup> In the proclamations just quoted, language no longer quite seems to function as mere description. To term these utterances statements, reports of an already existing fact, accounts for none of the slightly spooky feeling they provoke. For the speaker's invisible presence seems to rise up and hover near us precisely as we hear these words. Though it might be suggested that he must

have been here already—we simply didn't realize it until he told us so—I think we feel instead that those very words which announce the speaker's presence also and at once produce it.

Performative utterances, Austin tells us, make something true by virtue of declaring it—"I now," for example, "pronounce you man and wife." They operate, as this single example should suggest and as Austin is careful to stipulate, only in circumstances sanctioned by custom; they may "make something true" only within a cultural matrix of codified institutions and practices.<sup>12</sup>

Whitman's performative aspirations, it should be evident, are altogether more grand. Rather than simply altering somebody's social status, the declarations I have been quoting seem to produce an actual presence by speaking. These proclamations of the poet's presence are indeed the most successful instances of a magical performative power regularly imputed to utterance in both Whitman's poems and tracts on language—a power approaching that of God in Genesis, the power to call things out of the void and produce their presence by speaking their names: "See! steamers steaming through my poems!" (253), Whitman declares in "Starting from Paumanok,"

See, in my poems, old and new cities, solid, vast, inland, with paved streets, with iron and stone edifices, and ceaseless vehicles, and commerce (258)

"(I) have distanced what is behind me for good reasons," he proclaims more programmatically in "Song of Myself," "And call any thing close again when I desire it" (672-73). Whitman's posthumously published "The Primer of Words" is largely engaged in propounding a systematic if quirky theory of words and names which serves to justify such performative aspirations.<sup>13</sup>

The poet's declarations of his personal presence, though, attain a peculiar credibility often lacking in his other performatives. The imaginative pressure exerted by these announcements derives, I think, from Whitman's illogical but effective appeal to our experience of ordinary voices. For if we direct our attention to the evident mode of these declarations—to the voice we seem to hear—they reduce to a tautology: what is declared is the speaker's presence; but the very fact that we seem to hear this declaration already implies that someone must be present to make it. Whitman's appeal to our experience of voices is as canny as it is effective: for the poet's utterance seems to compress all space and time into the modest intervals which actual voices can traverse.

Produced by Whitman's slippery appeal to our sense of voices, this presence is to be thought of as no mere trick of words. Thus Whitman suggests, in a passage I already cited, that an acutal body hovers above us :

Who knows but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me ? (91)

Made credible by the voice we seem to hear, this body is modeled on the voice as well. It is thus not quite sufficient to suggest, as does Ivan Marki, that Whitman carefully shapes a seemingly oral idiom because this idiom will conjure up an "intimate experience of the poet's person."<sup>14</sup> For the person suggested by the voice and modeled on its apparant traits is no ordinary one--he is altogether remarkable.

Like the voice which announces its presence, this body seems to move through spatial intervals without resistance or delay. It domesticates the space it so effortlessly traverses, making everywhere feel like "here."

It also short-circuits temporal distinctions. This body occupies its own particular present, yet also the future inhabited by its auditors. An oral announcement, Walter Ong reminds us, "exists only when it is going out of existence," only in a particular moment.<sup>15</sup> Whitman's apostrophes, by playing on this fact, seem to produce a body for which all moments are one ; time is pressured toward eternity as simply as our protagonist tells us he is with us "now".

This body also seems to overcome the disturbing multiplicity and independence of persons described in the poem's sixth section. As invisible as the voice which announces and projects its presence, it no longer stands over against us, discrete and separate from ourselves. No longer confined within those bounding surfaces by means of which ordinary bodies appear and come into contact with each other, it can flow not only around us, but also within us :

Now I am curious (.....)

(.....) what is more subtle than this (.....)

Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you.<sup>16</sup>

It works to annul the very difference between persons, already implying the peculiar sort of world in which, as Whitman declares in "Song of Myself," "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (3)

This figure very largely produces the illogical sort of space and time which Whitman celebrates in the poem's more overtly visionary pronouncements concerning the harbor scene. That scene, it is true, is pressured toward similar contours by the poem's grand catalogues as well. Their

elaborate patterns of grammatical suspension and repetition create an insistently centripetal space and time which seem to collapse inward toward the poet. And their careful avoidance of finite predicates renders a scene devoid of independent actions which language would merely depict or represent, instead presenting a passive landscape upon which the poet's words seem to act or exercise performative force. But the emanating presence produced by the poet's addresses to us is Whitman's most convincing means of creating a space and time, and an object world, which have been wholly subsumed by the poet. It makes credible his most exorbitant declarations :

Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting ! (125)  
We descend upon you and all things, we arrest you all <sup>17</sup>  
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves  
from us,  
We use you, and do not cast you aside--we plant you permanently  
within us. (128-29)

This body evoked by the voice is conjured up in many of Whitman's other early poems as well, working effects similar to those produced in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." So an invisible but earthy presence arises as the poet directly addresses us in "Starting from Paumanok" :

O Death ! O for all that, I am yet of you, unseen, this hour, with  
irrepressible love,  
Walking New England, a friend, a traveller,  
Splashing my bare feet in the edge of the summer ripples, on  
Paumanok's sands (212-14)

In "Song of Myself", speech or the poem are indeed declared to *be* the poet's presence and body :

This is the press of a bashful hand.....this is the float and odor  
of hair,  
This is the touch of my lips to yours this is the murmur of  
yearning (378-79)

Such declarations are comprehensible only in light of Whitman's repeated conflation of the poet's body with the voice which announces and seems to produce his presence.

In Whitman's early work such a form comes to preside loosely over other, more local versions of the poet's body, obliquely and illogically compelling the particular figure we see toward the dissolving contours Whitman's apostrophes suggest. The body Whitman celebrates in his



early work has almost always been endowed with the traits of the voice or breath, or of the liquid and vapor with which these are associated. Seeming to effect his endless re-birth through a kind of parthenogenesis, this figure defined by the voice is virtually godlike. If he nonetheless takes trouble to reveal his powers and convey his visionary understanding to us, he does so, it would seem, simply so we may share his marvellous secret.

The tone of Whitman's apostrophes works to confirm just such a generous sense of his motives. These addresses sound for the most part self-confident and forceful, as the poet sweeps aside all possible demurs. At other times, they tease us toward acquiescence with a gently taunting quality :

What is it, then, between us ? What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us ? (54-55)

Though the tone of such appeals serves to blur our recognition of the fact, an extravagant economy has nonetheless been set in motion by these apostrophes and their way of working on us. It may be glimpsed in a brief, atypical aside in the fourth section of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", an aside which sounds, in comparison with its surroundings, both tentative and wistful. Directly preceded and followed by the sort of self-confident apostrophes I have been describing, this passage consists principally of declarations made from the strange "present" produced by such announcements ; but, atypically, it is not addressed to us :

I loved well those cities,

I loved well the stately and rapid river,

The man and women I saw were all near to me,

Others the same--others who look back on me, because I looked forward to them,

The time will come, though I stop here today and tonight. (50-53)

This economy, these lines make clear, turns on a series of related substitutions or displacements. First, an actual present moment has been, or, will be, relinquished in favor of an envisioned moment, a moment which the poet may here describe in the present tense only with some noticeable strain. Second, a finite figure, lodged in a particular body and caught in a particular place and time, all of which are made to sound temporary and provisional, looks forward rather wistfully to that moment in which we will "presently", as it were, hover in his vaporous form, joining those others engaged in "looking back on" the particular man who here seems so uncomfortable and out of place. Finally, the men

and women aboard the ferry have been, or will be, replaced in the protagonist's attention by his endless audience.

Here, however, the expansiveness and generosity which typify the poet's direct addresses to that audience, suggesting that his relations with us have a wholly altruistic character, are not in evidence. Instead, the poet acknowledges that he has struck a bargain and made a careful investment :

Others the same—others who look back on me, *because* I looked forward to them

The specifically envisioned repayment of attention here briefly foregrounded lies at the heart of all Whitman's transactions with his intensely imagined future audience. That the poet is striking an imaginative bargain with futurity is confirmed by his later resort to an overtly economic metaphor to describe his relation to us :

What thought you have of me, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance (87)

The benefit of this investment derives from the peculiar "you" with whom the bargain has been struck, a "you" whose paradoxical contours arise precisely through such apostrophes as this one—a "you" made to seem both immediate and totally inclusive. The poet, Whitman's tone implies, is near "you", and "you", are near him: yet "you" are, or is, everyone. If "you" pay as much attention to him as he does to "you", then his stores have indeed been laid in wisely: his rate of return is directly proportionate to the size of his audience.

Yet if we come back from this later line to the poem's fourth section, we can note not only the possible advantage of such an imagined bargain, but also its tenuous status and the consequent vulnerability of the figure who envisions it. For our poet here hovers suspended, in two different forms, between what the poem invites us to call his past present and his future present, and perhaps either was or will be, but is not "now" quite near anyone. The awkwardness of the syntax and the tentative tone make us aware of how dependent this figure is, for all his powers, on the concluding of his bargain, the participation of his audience in this oxymoronic moment of "looking (back and forward) on."

This precarious economy, though, slips out of sight whenever our poet addresses us directly. For his apostrophes seem to produce the eternal moment he here envisions with such difficulty; and they imply a 'presence

which can diffuse itself by simply speaking, a figure which is master of the very encounter and scene on which the poet here seems to depend.

A line later deleted from the eighth section of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" may therefore manage to strike us as outrageous without quite being surprising. For the economy glimpsed in Whitman's aside suggests itself more generally in his work in terms of the unsettling problem of the poetry's own mode. We may thus find Whitman carefully circumscribing the sort of encounter which we are to imagine as taking place between ourselves and our poet. The crucial, later-deleted line is the final one, which, as it were, wards off a misunderstanding which might have dangerous consequences :

We understand, then, do we not ?

What I promised without mentioning it, have you not accepted ?

What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplished, is it not ?

What the push of reading could not start is started by me personally, is it not ? (98-100)

Another, similar suggestion persists in all versions of the poem, also working to undermine our notion that the protagonist and his words persist only in the form of a text we are reading :

Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be looking upon you ! (112)

These pronouncements regularly risk provoking the very disbelief they urge us to suspend. In "So Long !", for example, Whitman proclaims :

Camerado ! This is no book,

Who touches this, touches a man (53-54)<sup>18</sup>

Such declarations are startling and insistent enough to suggest that Whitman's supreme fiction is perhaps the myth of his poetry's own mode. They are matched by admissions that the poet's magical way of acting on us would be threatened by this seemingly accidental and avoidable possibility that his utterance might be entrapped in a text or book. So in an early version of "A Song for Occupations" the poet declares :

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.

I pass so poorly with paper and types . . . I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls.<sup>19</sup>

Writing, of course, does not attest to the poet's presence : it repeats words spoken in another place and time, and offers us only the

representations of speech and the personal presence speech implies. Texts do not project writers to readers, creating a mythical place and moment which abrogate space and time. Writing and reading must be ruled out of the poet's imaginative universe, among other reasons, because they fail to effect such a magical emanation.

But we might profitably puzzle a bit longer over the properties of writing as characterized by Whitman. We should note not only the differences he spells out between writing and the voice, but also the odder intertwining of the traits assigned to writing and the powers ascribed to the poet's utterance, an intertwining which Whitman obliquely suggests but also seeks to discredit. This intertwining will reduce itself, at last, to a truism: *Leaves of Grass*, after all, is a book, however strenuously Whitman may work to make us hear a voice emerging from it. This truism, though, is less important than Whitman's tortuous evasions, which suggest both how deeply committed he is to his trope of voice, and how complex the relation of that voice is to the writing which, at first, seems simply to threaten it.<sup>20</sup>

Texts, of course, do possess considerable powers of diffusion of duplication. But the mere representations produced by writing, Whitman often stresses, lack the active powers of living things, and more especially of the living presence to which the poet's voice attests, a presence everywhere busy touching us, pouring itself and its words into us, or blowing its rejuvenating breath into our parched interiors. Thus Whitman repeatedly denigrates representations, reminding us of their inertia. In such characterizations, writing becomes a crucial metonymy for representations in all their guises. So in "A Song for Occupations," he teasingly reminds us of the limitations of writing and representations by lending ironic credence to an impossibility:

When the script preaches instead of the preacher (.....)

When I can touch the body of books, by night or by day, and when they touch my body back again ( ...)

I intend to reach them my hand, and make as much of them as I do of men and women like you. (145, 147, 151) <sup>21</sup>

Even such dismissive characterization are sometimes couched in tropes which suggest an odd imaginative urgency. Thus books and writing are associated not merely with inertia, but with death - a death from which the poet of *Leaves of Grass* would somehow miraculously escape: "And in libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead," Whitman declares in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand":

But just possibly with you on a high hill ( ...)

Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you (16, 17, 19)

But such denigrations of writing, even at their most urgent, are less revealing than another aspect of Whitman's extended invective against this mode. Sometimes faulted because it lacks the powers of the voice, writing is elsewhere inveighed against because it manages to exert an exorbitant force which ought not to belong to it, which captivates us despite its supposedly illusory or illicit character:

In such diatribes, Whitman focuses with particular urgency on writing's power of repetition. Sometimes viewed as simply impotent, the repetitions effected by writing are then seen as pernicious. Whitman's already odd trope of writing as not merely inert but dead, in such characterizations, grows truly startling. For writing comes to exercise a kind of necromantic power: the illusory repetition of speech worked by texts is figured as ghostly or vampiric. Bewitched by those no longer alive, the living do their work, as Whitman suggest in his 1856 Preface, "pressing the noses of dead books upon themselves and upon their country"<sup>22</sup> In Whitman's rather grisly anthropomorphism here, texts weigh on us like corpses. And if he declares in "Scng of Myself" that, in reading books' we feed on the merely spectral—"nor look through the eyes of the dead... nor feed on the spectres in books" (35)—these spectral presences, which repeat themselves only by virtue of our perverse cooperation, seem to feed on us as well, exercising a power that is truly ghoulish.

Whitman elsewhere accords such bewitching capacities to all manner of representations. Images, of course, are eminently detachable from what they represent, bearing an inherent capacity for duplication which living things do not possess. In Whitman's more urgent imagining, they also divert our attention from the natural objects of which they should serve to remind us, but whose places they seem always eager to usurp. In "Respondez"! a vitriolic diatribe against a culture perversely infatuated with representations, the seductive power of books is a crucial instance of this fetishism of the image:

Let nothing but love—songs, pictures, statues, elegant works, be permitted to exist upon the earth! (... )

Let shadows be furnished with genitals! Let substances be deprived of their genitals! (... )

Let books take the place of trees, animals rivers, clouds!  
(40, 51, 59,)<sup>23</sup>

Whitman sometimes accords representations an even more startling power, a power of which those ominously-equipped shadows already give some hint. He will suggest, for example, that models of the human form can affect the physiology of babies about to be born, the powers of the representation not simply bewitching our attention, but insinuating themselves into the very act of procreation. Attractive statues will help produce attractive babies, while caricatures will lead to human deformities :

Exaggerations will be revenged in human physiology Clean and vigorous children are jettied and conceived only in those communities where the models of natural forms are public very day. (1855 Preface)<sup>24</sup>

And I say that clean-shaped children can be jettied and conceived only where natural forms prevail in public, and the human face and form are never caricatured( "Says", 12) <sup>25</sup>

The power Whitman ascribes to texts and representations in such invectives suggests a reaction which is very nearly phobic. We may account for the urgency of such imaginings, I think, by noting that in these passages the powers attributed, in perverse form, to writing and representations have an uncomfortable affinity to those supposedly quite different powers exercised by the poet's voice and presence. Like the poet's presence, texts and representations may reproduce themselves endlessly. More magically, in Whitman's exorbitant imagery, they may impinge directly on the world of living creatures with remarkable force, a force approaching that accorded to the poet's presence and his performative powers. These similarities, and more especially the fact that Whitman not only admits but exaggerates the powers of writing and representations, may suggest that the appearance of the poet's voice in a text is neither incidental nor wholly damaging. But his insistence on the perverse or illicit character of those powers serves to ward off, as it were, a fatal confusion to which we might otherwise fall prey : not a confusion, exactly, between writing and ordinary voices, or between representations and ordinary presences - such a confusion is neither likely nor damaging to the poet's project - but between writing and the poet's mythic voice, between representations and his perfectly iterable presence. For these supposedly wholly different entities are uncomfortably near to virtual identity.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of this disturbing relation is the fact that, while Whitman insistently disavows the role of writing in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," all the powers attributed to the poet's voice in fact

perfect themselves through writing. The poet's voice does not, as Whitman would have it, appear in a text by accident or incidentally. It achieves its mythic power, exceeding the capacities of ordinary voices, precisely by helping itself to the resources of a writing it must deny.

The point, I suppose, is an obvious one ; but it bears a bit of spelling-out-since Whitman's insistence that he projects himself to us simply by speaking works to make it hard to see.

Actual voices, of course, have limited powers of diffusion. But the voice which augments itself with writing can produce itself everywhere, announcing itself wherever it finds a reader, coming to occupy a location which is wholly ambiguous. The strangely spaceless space of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" arises largely through this textual circumstance.

The apparant ability of Whitman's mythic voice to diffuse itself through time arises more obviously through recourse to a text : only the voice which has helped itself to writing speaks eternally.

The vaporous body which may fuse or pour itself into us is also created through Whitman's canny manipulation of a text. Actual voices, of course, project themselves from bodies which remain finite and bounded. In Whitman's text, however, there is no body, but only the haunting illusion of an unlocatable voice. Paradoxically, the voice we seem to hear as we read, unencumbered with an actual body, may therefore define an implicit body wholly modeled on its own characteristics. The presence who addresses us in Whitman's poems comes into being only through the text, which effaces a particular body in order to effect its resurrection in idealized form.

Despite such benefits, writing must nevertheless be ruled out of the imaginative universe of Whitman's early work. For it perfects the powers of the poet's voice and body, but only as the obverse of what they are declared to be : it produces not an actual presence but a representation, the trope of a presence, or the presence of a trope. All Whitman's diatribes against writing serve finally to spell this out, consigning the poet's magical form to the very status from which appeals to the voice work to exempt it.

The recognition thus persistently evaded by Whitman's trope of voice is, as I noted earlier, in some literal sense nothing but a truism. But it is less important to an understanding of Whitman to record this truism than to acknowledge and lend adequate weight to the fact of how deeply the poet is committed to warding it off.

Repeatedly in his early work, Whitman indeed attempts to legitimize the presence modeled on the voice as well as the performative powers this presence seems to dispose, by means of a grand and preposterous reversal or crossing of categories which very largely structures his imaginative universe. As unlikely as it is insistent, this reversal seeks to name language itself as the key to presence, and to explain away whatever violates the ideality language suggests by terming it merely phenomenal. In a crucial displacement, Whitman regularly assigns the term "representation" to objects as they ordinarily appear, standing over against the poet and foiling his attempts at mestery; in Whitman's characterization, such objects fail to manifest themselves fully—they merely "indicate" what they are, as the poet puts it in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," remaining veiled behind their opaque surfaces. Whitman's trope of the actor condemned to play "the same old role" (84), in the ferry poem, exerts a similar pressure on our conception of the relation between selves and their ordinary bodies. Words or names, by contrast, are declared not to be arbitrary representations or designations of objects, but to possess an intrinsic, organic connection to their otherwise inaccessible interiors or essences. Such organic names do not merely comprehend, but exercise mastery over the things they name. This performative power, programmatically declared in "The Primer of Words," is mimed in the poet's grandest catalogues. In Whitman's imaginative reversal, the terms representation and presence, as these are more usually employed to describe the relation between words and things, have thus changed their places, obscuring the operation which brings the poet's ideal forms into being: the world has become the mere sign of itself; the sign, by contrast, produces *the world itself*.<sup>26</sup>

The presence announced by the poet's apostrophes, who transcends the limited body mired in space and time which poorly represents him, is at once Whitman's most exorbitant and convincing instance of this reversal. "I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes," the poet declares in "Song of the Open Road": "We convince by our presence" (138-39). But this imperial figure becomes what Whitman will be willing to mean by a presence precisely by virtue of being what we would term a representation. The very notion of a perfected presence, of a self devoid of all compromising contingency and particularity who will redeem change and dispersion, arises through the iterability of representation, a movement perfected in Whitman's apostrophes and the curious, Möbius-strip-like repetitions these effect:<sup>27</sup> Whitman's trope of voice, in such a



context, may be seen as working to make this reversal credible : exercising all the powers of representations, the figure produced by the voice, our experience of ordinary voices implies, is nonetheless a literal, living presence. Writing, conversely, undoes this grand reversal, naming the sign as sign, the poet's presence as a representation.

We may thus locate the poet's transfiguring presence, and the imaginative economy which produces him, within the tradition both traced and displaced in the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida's meditations on the uncomfortable intertwining of ideal presence and representation, of the "thing itself" divorced from its accidents and the sign in its iterability, can help us name both the pattern of Whitman's ambitions and the overdetermined structures that make those ambitions endlessly elusive. It is just such an unstable economy that I have so far attempted to describe.

Such a generalized conclusion, though, would make the mistake of skewering Whitman's work on an imaginative structure that inhabits the poetry, but does not of course quite determine or account for its local movements. Rather than coming to rest with the truism that Whitman's work can never quite perform what it claims to, we need instead to follow the play of possibility and impossibility through his poetry, tracing the poet's shifting stances toward his own dilemmas and difficulties. For Whitman's poems do not merely illustrate his claims concerning performative speech and the poet's presence, but repeatedly re-enact and re-inflect them ; the poet's voice and presence exist for us as a meditation on their own possibility, a meditation always shadowed by the finally unrealizable status of the poet's claims.

This complex play of possibility and impossibility, Jonathan Culler suggests, is at work in all lyric apostrophe.<sup>28</sup> For apostrophe, Culler argues, always marks the lyric's desire to transcend a merely representational mode : it both enacts and calls into question the vatic pretensions of lyric speech. This astute description of the ambitions at work in apostrophe is especially important for a consideration of Whitman's addresses to his audience. Culler's account can help us to see Whitman's exorbitant claims as oddly exemplary : for lyric apostrophe, he notes, typically aims to "substitute a temporality of discourse for a referential temporality," working to produce "a play of presence governed not by time but by poetic power."<sup>29</sup> Culler also insists on the scandalous quality such of ambitions, a scandal that helps explain the embarrassing provoked by Whitman's claims to dispose us simply by addressing us. But most

important, Culler goes on to suggest that such moments of apostrophic speech are characteristically *about* the very scandal they perpetrate and the embarrassment they provoke: they are the crucial site in which the lyric stages its own ambitions. So Culler invites us to attend to "the complex play of mystification and demystification at work in the neutralization of time through reference to the temporality of writing."<sup>30</sup> His account thus warns us against considering the embarrassment of apostrophe as a sign of the lyric poet's supposed naivete: for he argues that the very scandal of such moments forces us "to read apostrophe as sign of a fiction which knows its own fictive nature."<sup>31</sup> Yet at the same time, he insists, apostrophes trouble us because they strain against the very distinction they also necessarily recall: they put into play the boundaries between the real and the fictive, provocatively denying the disjunction they also rediscover.

This scandalous quality of apostrophe is of course crucial to Whitman's addresses to us. For our poet, as we have seen, repeatedly insists that he hovers near us as we consider his creation; he claims to escape the confines of the very works that have produced him. The provocative quality of such gestures, Culler reminds us, is hardly an index of naive self-mystification: Whitman's apostrophes are a complex site in which the poet's claims for language are always both asserted and called into question; in which what Derrida names logocentrism or the myth of the sign is at once enacted and inscribed. Our task is thus to accent this play of mystification and demystification in Whitman's addresses to us appropriately: granted that such moments are not merely mystified, we need to ask what sort of stake they have in the mystifications they set in motion, and how they encounter whatever works to demystify them.

There are of course no final answers to such questions: for Whitman re-stages this central scene in his poetry endlessly, inflecting it differently not only in different poems but at different points in his career. But in his early editions, Whitman characteristically confronts demystification with anxiety and melancholy; such responses are a kind of counterpoint to the expansive, self-confident exuberance with which the poet's presence is typically proclaimed, suggesting the importance of a canny but precarious movement of self-mystification in his work. For Whitman's poems are pressured repeatedly by doubts about the working of their language, hovering over such equivocations furtively but obsessively. Exploring such problems as Whitman's trope of mode and the peculiar status of the poet's presence, we may thus perhaps recover the odd combination of exuberance

and pathos, of grandeur and peculiar poverty, which defines this poet. For Whitman's imaginative project depends largely on his making credible a tenuous and barely conceivable mode of communication—a mode which would convey the poet's actual presence to us as easily as representations are disseminated by ordinary writing.<sup>32</sup>

The utterly tenuous nature of this possibility not only reveals itself in Whitman's outlandish, explicit denials that his poems make use of writing; it also hovers in his most strongly affecting local pronouncements, troubling them and lending them a mobile, divided tone. The ambiguity of such pronouncements, which for all their grandeur and seeming self-assurance are also full of wit and wistfulness, at times suggesting a pathos approaching despair, is crucial to Whitman's greatness: it saves him from being the merely programmatic poet—however grand and visionary—he has sometimes been said to be.<sup>33</sup> No poet perhaps makes greater claims for the performative powers of language than Whitman; yet his best poems are full of moments in which the bravado of his declarations passes over very delicately into a more quizzical and vexed awareness. The pathos which haunts such declarations almost always turns on the rarely acknowledged but scarcely negligible circumstance that the poems, while they declare themselves as present utterance, in fact are written. Focusing on the role played by writing in Whitman's declarations, we may glimpse language and the poet falling back into the very world of ordinary, limited persons they seek to transfigure, inscribing their own performative gestures in a space they do not command and cannot redeem.

At their best, these declarations hover quite movingly between performance and desire. So in an address to us from "Song of Myself" which I quoted earlier, the performative force depends on Whitman's typically exorbitant conflation of word and object, of language and actual presence, a conflation made credible by our sense of voice:

This is the press of a bashful hand .. this is the float and odor of hair,

This is the touch of my lips to yours . ...this is the murmur of yearning (378-79)

But we may hear a certain pathos here as well, arising as we sense the distance between these words and what they name, between the pronouncement and the presence it suggests or tropes, but cannot produce.

