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WHITMAN'S ADDRESSES TO HIS AUDIENCE

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*

In the seventh section of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman interrupts the ecstatic descriptions of the harbor scene with which the bulk of the piece is concerned to turn directly to his poem's future audience and pose some rather unnerving questions:

Who was to know 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?

Too little attention has been paid, I think, to unsettling moments like this one, moments which recur throughout Whitman's early poems. In his early work, Whitman has exorbitant designs on us; and he attributes preternaturally active powers both to his poems and to the figure of the poet who stands at their center. Neither Whitman's relation to his intensely imagined audience nor the status he claims for the poet and his productions can be adequately understood, I believe, unless we examine those moments in which Whitman addresses us directly, suggesting his immediate, personal presence. In what follows, I want to try to open up some of the imaginative urgency these moments possess, and to suggest what is at stake in them for Whitman; to describe the exorbitant powers they work to make credible; but also to show how tenuous those powers finally are, how much they are haunted by an odd sense of peculiar poverty.

We can best see what Whitman hopes to accomplish in his addresses to us, I think, by setting them quickly in the context of the typical imaginative landscape of his early poems; these are continually at work re-defining what we might mean by the poet's body, by Whitman's presence. Whitman seems to have read his Emerson with a peculiar and rather staggering literalism. In "The Poet," Emerson prophesied a figure who

stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis, perceives that thought in multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature.

Whitman, in his early poems, tries not merely to follow the flowing or metamorphosis with his eyes, but to turn his own presence into the flow itself—to make his own re-imagined body the site in which the “path or circuit of things through forms” takes place.

Evident in his frequent declarations that he assumes one identity with whatever he sees, and also in the catalogues which seek to enact this blending of the poet with all he names, these rather grand ambitions provide the context in which Whitman’s addresses to us can best be understood. These announcements, conversely, being this exorbitant vision of the poet’s body to oddly convincing fruition. Despite Whitman’s penchant for the sweeping and doctrinaire pronouncement, the particular “truth” the poet of the early work will tell us will be less important than how he will claim to be able to tell it: directly and personally to each of us, whoever and wherever we may be, and whenever we may live. Such assertions are a regular feature of Whitman’s apostrophes. An address to us in “Crossing Brooklyn’s Ferry”’s third section, for example, makes such claims altogether explicit, declaring them without the sly reticence of the slightly teasing questions with which I began. And as Whitman speaks to us directly, these claims achieve a rather disconcerting credibility:

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.

The elusive presence here declared is Whitman’s most convincing version of the poet’s power: it seems indeed to act directly upon us in a way that poetry ought not to be able to, overflowing the boundaries of the poem through which it appears. Speaking from its own particular time and place, this figure seems also to transcend it, projecting itself

through intervals of time, as well as space, it thereby works to annul. It can announce 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,” 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. It will seem indeed to make the poet’s body the agent of Emerson’s flow or metamorphosis, a force which weaves through all finite forms, immersing separate persons and objects in its unifying flood.

Whitman announces this emanating presence at crucial points throughout “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

I project myself a moment to tell you—also I return.
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, and place
avails not.

Appearing liberally in Whitman’s other early poems as well, such declarations are at once improbable and oddly compelling. We can begin to account for their peculiar force, I think, by appeal to the notion of performative utterances, speech-acts which make something true simply by declaring it. In the proclamations just quoted, that is, 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. Whitman’s performative aspirations, it should be evident, are rather grand. Rather than simply altering somebody’s social status, as do the performatives examined by the language-philosopher J.L. Austin—“I now,” for example, “pronounce you man and wife”—the declarations I have been quoting seem to produce an actual presence simply by speaking.

The peculiar imaginative pressure exerted by these outlandish performatives 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* Whitman works to make us think we 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 in such moments 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 actual body hovers above us:

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

Made credible by the voice we seem to hear, this remarkable body is modeled on the voice as well. 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. An oral announcement, Walter Ong reminds us, "exists only when it is going out of existence," only in a particular moment. 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, moreover, no longer stands over against us, discrete and separate from ourselves. It seems instead to overcome the very multiplicity and independence of persons. Whitman is everywhere edgy and anxious concerning those encounters through which particular, limited people ordinarily come in contact with and grow close to one another; one key imaginative benefit of the presence his apostrophes concoct is that it by-passes such reciprocal and chancy relations, subjecting us to an intimacy at once cataclysmic and yet, it would seem, wholly assured. Having become as invisible as the voice

which announces and projects its presence, this form no longer seems to be confined within those bounding surfaces by means of which ordinary bodies come into contact with each other. Indeed it can flow not only around us, but also, Whitman declares, within us:

Now I am curious . . .
. . . what is more subtle than this . . .
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you.

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

In Whitman's early work this 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 indeed 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?

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, and by the identification of the poet's body with an endlessly emanating voice which these apostrophes imply. By means of this identification, I've tried to suggest, the poet seems to slough off his particular, limited body,

becoming instead a force which flows through space and time and annuls them, assuming an invisible form which pours itself into us, dissolving our separateness and subjecting us to the poet's irresistible will. Yet the status of this figure, who seems to project himself simply by speaking, will turn out to be disconcertingly tenuous; and his apparent ability to re-produce or give birth to himself, which seems to make him wholly self-contained and utterly independent of other people, will in fact depend on *us* for its very operation.

We can begin to sense these difficulties as we turn to Whitman's troubled consideration of his poetry's own mode. Given the crucial role played by Whitman's appeal to the voice in his redefinition of the poet's body, a line later deleted from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"'s eighth section, for example, may manage to strike us as outrageous without quite being surprising. We may there find Whitman carefully circumscribing the sort of encounter which we are to imagine as taking place between ourselves and our poet, dangerous consequences:

What the push of reading could not start is started by me
personally, is it not?

Similar suggestions abound in Whitman's early poems, all working to undermine our notion that the poet and his words persist only in the form of a text we are reading. These pronouncements almost always 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

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.

Writing, as opposed to speaking, does not present the poet himself; 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 Whitman's imaginative universe, among other reasons, because they trade in inert representations rather than effecting the magical emanation of the poet's presence.

But we might profitably puzzle a bit longer over the role played by writing in Whitman's poems. For despite his utterly negative characterizations of writing and his attempts to present the powers of the voice and the defects of writing as a simple opposition, the role of writing in *Leaves of Grass* is hardly the merely threatening one Whitman's disclaimers seek to imply. Indeed, though Whitman outrageously insists that his poems make no use of writing, all the powers attributed to the poet's voice in fact perfect themselves by means of his book. 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 constant insistence that he projects himself to us by speaking makes 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. Actual voices project themselves from bodies which remain finite and bounded. In Whitman's book, however, there is no body, but only the haunting illusion of an unlocatable voice. 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 writing perfects the powers of the poet's voice and body, but only as the representation of what they are declared to be. Like all writing, his poems cannot exercise an actual, active force which impinges upon us directly, but can only allude to or represent such force. All the extended diatribes against writing and representation which weave their way through Whitman's work 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.

Whitman's insistence that his poems are spoken rather than written is ultimately forced to confront a truism: *Leaves of Grass*, after all, is a book, however strenuously Whitman may work to make us hear a voice emerging from it. But it is perhaps less important to an understanding of Whitman to record this truism than to acknowledge how deeply the poet is committed to warding it off. For these evasions let us see how completely Whitman's mystic presence depends on his wily confusions of voice and writing. Conversely, to pay attention to the unacknowledged but indispensable role of writing in Whitman's work is at once to note how tenuous the poet's proclamations of omnipotence are, to see how much they depend, in fact, on all they are meant to efface or transform.

The implications of this odd intertwining of writing and the voice in Whitman's work might be pursued in more theoretical terms; over such a discussion Jacques Derrida, with his meditations on the relation between speech and text, ideal presence and representation, might preside. But I want instead to close by returning to some of Whitman's local pronouncements and looking at them more closely. I hope in this way to suggest how urgently Whitman's work is itself pressured by troubling equivocations concerning its mode, hovering over them furtively but obsessively; and thus perhaps to open up the odd combination of exuberance and pathos, of grandeur and peculiar poverty, which I think 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.

The utterly tenuous nature of this possibility not only reveals itself in the poet's outlandish, explicit denials that his poems make use of writing: it also hovers in his most strongly affecting written declarations, troubling them and lending them a mobile, divided tone. The ambiguity of these declarations, 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. 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 circumstances 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 to us, 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," the performative force depends on Whitman's typical conflation of word and object, of speech and actual presence, a conflation made credible by our sense of voice:

This is the press of a bashful hand, *this* the float and odor
of hair,
This the touch of my lips to yours, *this* the murmur of
yearning

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 declaration and the presence it suggests or tropes, but cannot produce. Whitman's tentative idiom here in part expresses the typical furtiveness of his desire; but it suggests as well the tenuous nature of the poet's claims to produce his presence simply by naming it—the longing of this language to be more than language.

Naming a presence they will never be able to produce, these declarations also exercise a paradoxical, and ultimately impoverishing, effect on the "you" to whom the poet claims to speak. There are, of course, tremendous imaginative benefits to the illogical sort of addressee Whitman's apostrophes concoct. Announcing themselves as a voice but diffusing themselves through writing, these pronouncements conjure a "you" simultaneously intimate and universal: as unique as the single addressee the intimate tone implies, yet as numerous as the audience reached by his text:

O camerado close! O you and me at last, and us two only.
(*"Starting from Paumanok"*)

A certain assurance accrues to the figure who has mastered such a sleight-of-hand, the assurance of the man with countless lovers. Such assurance often lends the poet's overtures an air of relaxed confidence, and a slightly teasing, flirtatious quality, virtually unique to Whitman:

This hour I tell things in confidence,
I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you. (*"Song of Myself"*)

This declaration indeed makes its very trick of mode the occasion for its flirtatious innuendo: Whitman's election of "you," a selection made from a field of "everybody," is a seductive gesture which turns on the magical transformation of the text which everyone may read into the tender and intimate voice which addresses a single, chosen partner.

Such flirtatious gestures are already rather remarkably sophisticated in their manipulation of tone and of the curious possibilities of Whitman's fictive mode. Yet the assured, seductive quality which turns on this metamorphosis of writing into speech has its sadder underside. It suggests itself as we sense the poet's voice falling back into the writing from which these accents emerge: for writing drains this "you" of its specificity and renders poignant the intimate tone of the implied speaking voice. The anonymity of this generic "you" indeed hovers within these announcements, for all their more confident and winsome qualities: it leaves the poet face to face with his book, imagining a lover he has not only never seen, but has turned into the faceless features of his audience of readers.

Whitman's conjuring tricks with the mode of his poems serve to effect an assured and imperial relation with an endless audience of intimates and lovers; yet the writing which permits such feats not only reminds us that this figure is a trope, but suggests that even this trope of a presence depends on us for its very existence. Writing thus returns this poet and his poems to the very world of particular, contingent relations they seek to efface. Said to be diffused by a voice, the protagonist's ideal form is resurrected only as we read his text; we create the imperial figure the voice seems to announce, the presence which seems to produce itself through an act of parthenogenesis.

Though Whitman works insistently to deny such dependence, we may hear it in the undertones which haunt the poet's declarations; but only, as it were, as we remove ourselves from the sphere defined by his voice and its emanation. We may sense the poet's need for us in *"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,"* despite what he declares, though it lurks far behind the leading tone:

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

The imperial figure who dominates the early poems begins to dissolve as we think about reading these lines. For we may then *hear* a somewhat subdued but finally urgent entreaty here—a plea for our assent, our cooperation in this scene by virtue of which the poet may perhaps become the trope of what he declares himself already literally to be—the omnipotent figure capable of such a transfiguring act.

We may sense the poet's dependence on us, as well, as we re-read these lines from *"Song of Myself"*:

This hour I tell things in confidence,
I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.

Whitman's mythic voice speaks always in a space which it has rendered near, and to those compelled into the circle of its intimacy; but it speaks in a text which disperses that space again, to other people toward whom its words may echo, but whom it can never master or subsume.

