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# Rhetoric, Elocution, and Voice in Leaves of Grass: A Study in Affiliation

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## **Abstract**

Provides an explanation for Whitman's use of sequences of dots to break up lines internally in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* by arguing that Whitman was using a standard convention of nineteenth-century oratory—the Rhetorical Pause—and goes on to integrate this insight with a substantial reading of the first edition emphasizing the poem's radical effort to present the poet engaged in an oratorical performance; uses ideas from nineteenth-century orators including Samuel Kirkland and Dr. James Rush, as well as contemporary language theorists including Derrida.

# RHETORIC, ELOCUTION, AND VOICE IN *LEAVES OF GRASS* : A Study in Affiliation<sup>1</sup>

C. CARROLL HOLLIS

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IN THE FIRST EDITION of *Leaves of Grass*, the opening long poem (later called "Song of Myself") is divided in un-numbered sections. For what is now listed as Section 42, there are these opening lines:

. . . . A call in the midst of the crowd,  
My own voice, orotund sweeping and final.

The sentence poses two interpretive problems, answers to which may provide a new approach to Whitman's art: why does the first line begin with four dots? why would the poet, or his persona, describe his voice as orotund?

The 1855 Preface and all twelve poems of this first edition contain 2, 3, and 4 dots scattered in no perceptible order, although no line of poetry ever ends or, except for the line above, begins in this fashion. These dots have been a great mystery for Whitman scholars, for they are clearly not ellipses, parentheses, or dashes, nor caesuras in any traditional sense, nor is there any apparent loss to reader understanding if they are removed. It seems pointless to detail my own and other scholars' mistaken guesses as to their origin and purpose, although it is now clear that we were looking for clues in the wrong places. Where we should have been looking was at the many texts and guides to elocution, rhetorical grammar, and oratory in early nineteenth-century America.

One of these texts by Samuel Kirkham has this pertinent definition:

A RHETORICAL PAUSE is one not dependent on the grammatical construction of a sentence, but a pause made merely to enable the speaker to pronounce a preceding or a succeeding word or phrase in a peculiar tone, or with uncommon force. The shortest Rhetorical Pause is indicated by *two dots*, thus (. .); a longer pause, by *three dots*, (. . .); and a pause still longer, by *four*, (. . . .).<sup>2</sup>

Below that paragraph, in smaller print, there is this elementary and long forgotten clarification:

When justly made, rhetorical pauses tend greatly to heighten the effect of a passage. They may, in general, be better regulated by good taste, than by any set of rules.

*Example.*- "Alexander wept." "The great and invincible Alexander . . wept at the fate of Darius."

*Remark.* - No *grammatical* pause is allowable between a nominative and its verb, unless they are separated by an intervening adjunct of considerable length or importance. Hence, in the sentence, "Alexander wept," no pause is required between the nominative and the verb; but,

#### RULE I

When the nominative has an adjunct *prefixed* and the verb, an adjunct *affixed*, a pause is necessary between them; as, "*The great and invincible Alexander . . . wept at the fate of Darius.*"

*Remark.* - If the unpractised student be made to understand, that, in this last example, the phrases in *Italicks*, constitute the *adjuncts*, he will readily perceive the importance and the application of the Rule.

This passage is given fully to show how directly the instruction is given. It is simple, indeed elemental, and for a self-educated would-be public speaker and/or poet it provides direct easy-to-follow advice. The full title of Kirkham's text adds "Designed for the Use of Schools and Private Learners," and Walter Whitman was clearly one of those private learners. Whether he read this text, or another like it, is immaterial, for Kirkham did not invent these rules but was formulating principles from traditional rhetorical theory and practice. It might well be the text Whitman used, however, for Kirkham's confident, even jaunty, Preface ends with a tribute to and thanks for help received from Dr. James Rush, and there are references to Rush's famous book, *Philosophy of the Human Voice*, throughout this text. Whitman had other indebtedness to Rush, as we shall see, and one book may have led to the other.

But to return to Kirkham's text. After the precept quoted above, he gives further clarification, explaining that "the proper *length* of every pause, depends entirely on the structure of the passage, and the nature of the sentiments enunciated" (p. 139). He concludes his remarks with this clear differentiation between grammar and rhetoric:

Grammatical pauses have respect to the utterance of language in such a manner as merely to make the meaning *intelligible*; but rhetorical pauses contemplate something *more*: when happily and skillfully applied, their effect is to heighten the beauty and meaning and increase the force of the sentiments delivered. [pp. 139-140]

Kirkham's point is clear enough, but my point here is that we, as readers far removed from a rhetorical tradition of which Whitman was still a part, are confused by a device that was meant to insure that appropriate oral force would be applied. But now that the origin of the dot-device is made clear, may we make the inference that Whitman shaped these lines for oral delivery? Or, inasmuch as he quickly dropped the device (perhaps because he found it more confusing than helpful to the few readers of that 1855 edition), is this minor discovery of its origin of any import, beyond the fact that he once thought of reading *Leaves* aloud?

For over a generation (since *Verbal Icon*, 1954) we have guarded ourselves against "the intentional fallacy," but what do we do with an intention that has

been hidden for over a century? One inescapable implication is that *Leaves* had a speech base and a rhetorical intention in a far more direct and literal sense than we have heretofore realized, with a consequent imperative for a large-scale reassessment of our first native poet. Such a re-examination would entail a line by line analysis to measure the individual and cumulative effect of each rhetorical pause, as well as of any other rhetorical device Whitman may have drawn from Kirkham or comparable rhetoricians of the period. Also important to such a project would be the reevaluation of various biographical clues, early notebooks, and marginalia, which have long been more or less available in the Feinberg, Harned, Trent, and other manuscript collections, but which have now been edited, and made easily available through the ongoing New York University project.

No such full-scale re-examination is possible here, but we can certainly look at what Whitman may have deduced from the *Essay on Elocution* and from that shape certain hypotheses (or challenges) for that larger investigation to verify. To finish on Rhetorical Pauses, Kirkham adds:

An EMPHATICK PAUSE is a rhetorical pause, occurring either immediately before, or after, some striking thought is uttered, to which thought the speaker wishes to direct the special attention of his hearers. [p. 141]

Whitman uses all of these rhetorical pauses but predominantly this last, the emphatic. We have no way of knowing what particular tonal affects expressed with what degree of force he had in mind, but here are some examples. First, from the Preface of 1855:

The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors . . . They shall be kosmos . . . without monopoly or secrecy . . . glad to pass any thing to any one . . . hungry for equals night and day. They shall not be careful of riches and privilege . . . they shall be riches and privilege . . . they shall perceive who the most affluent man is. The most affluent man is he that confronts all the shows he sees by equivalents out of the stronger wealth of himself. The American bard shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests nor love most nor truth most nor the soul most nor the body most . . . and not be for the eastern states more than the western or the northern states more than the southern.<sup>3</sup>

This Preface has often been compared with Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, with some justification for they both propose a new kind of poetry. Wordsworth, however, was writing for the second edition, and his Preface is a clear, measured, and convincing explanation of poetry already published. It is, in current literary parlance, a major critical essay. But Whitman's statement had no title, no signature, no defense of the poetry it precedes, and is hardly an essay at all. It seems less an introduction to its subsequent poetic and/or rhetorical acts than part of the act itself. It doesn't explain, but it certainly does declaim; it is less an explanation than an exhorta-

tion. Indeed that is why it was so easy for him in 1856 to milk it for key lines in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” “Song of Prudence” and other poems.<sup>4</sup>

In the quoted paragraph, the seven uses of the dot-device could, if this were merely a prose paragraph, be properly replaced with commas or other conventional marks of punctuation. Perhaps, then, they were his way of attaining an informality, as we use dashes in hurried notes to our friends. But there are plenty of dashes anyway (see the third paragraph of the Preface). There are indications of great hurry in the composition and/or printing of this Preface: such blunders as the small “k” for “kosmos,” the “secresy” misspelling, the lack of commas in the “nor . . . most” sequence, the missing capital letters for regions of the country. All of which highlights the intended and proper placement of the dots in the light of Kirkham’s precepts. If Whitman differs, it is for the few occasions when he extends the rhetorical pause to seven (p. 717, l. 220), five (p. 720, l. 334), six (p. 721, l. 363), eight (p. 724, l. 442), and seven again (p. 728, l. 593). Kirkham scoffs at fixing time spans for these various pauses, but other rhetorical texts fix one second per dot as the intended length.<sup>5</sup> Whitman would seem to have some such scheme in mind, although the sevens and eights would certainly put a strain on an audience, if not on the speaker.

There are 77 of the dot-devices in the 1855 Preface and hundreds more in the 88 pages of oratorical-poetry to follow. Once we adjust our perceptual patterns to think of the lines as also a speech, the rhetorical pauses do make sense. Indeed much more than sense, for with them we are now clued-in to the role we as audience are supposed to assume. Even the four dots that start the passage quoted at the beginning of this article are justified by their context. Most readers of this journal are likely to have a facsimile of the First Edition nearby, so let me explain by demonstration.

The section ahead of “. . . A call in the midst of the crowd, / My own voice, orotund sweeping and final.” is a thirty-line “catalog” (as Whitman himself called these sections), of which I wish to quote the first four, then picking up two others along the way, then skipping to the last seven of the catalog, and finally giving the remainder of the passage:<sup>6</sup>

Magnifying and applying come I,  
Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,  
The most they offer for mankind and eternity less than a spirt of  
my own seminal wet,  
Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah and laying them  
away, [ll. 1020–23]

Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself . . .  
bestowing them freely on each man and woman I see, [l. 1031]

Not objecting to special revelations . . . considering a curl of  
smoke or a hair on the back of my hand as curious as any  
revelation; [l. 1034]

The bull and the bug never worshipped half enough,  
Dung and dirt more admirable than was dreamed,  
The supernatural of no account . . . myself waiting my time to  
be one of the supremes,  
The day getting ready for me when I shall do as much good as the  
best, and be as prodigious,  
Guessing when I am it will not tickle me much to receive puffs  
out of pulpit or print;  
By my life-lumps! becoming already a creator!  
Putting myself here and now to the ambushed womb of the shadows! [ll. 1043-49]

. . . A call in the midst of the crowd,  
My own voice, orotund sweeping and final. [ll. 1050-51]

Come my children,  
Come my boys and girls, and my women and household and intimates,  
Now the performer launches his nerve . . . he has passed his  
prelude on the reeds within. [ll. 1052-54]

Easily written loosefingered chords! I feel the thrum of their  
climax and close. [l. 1055]

My head evolves on my neck,  
Music rolls, but not from the organ . . . folks are around me, but  
they are no household of mine. [ll. 1056-57]

This is the bold, intentionally shocking outcry of the poet-prophet-priest of democracy, dismissing the older religions as meaningless in one mocking phrase after another (ll. 1020-23), declaring and sharing the hidden divinity in all life (ll. 1031, 1034), opening himself to voice that divinity (ll. 1043-49), announcing that voice (ll. 1050-51), the prophetic call (ll. 1052-54), the human/divine physiology of the voice itself (ll. 1054-55) that separates him from the audience around him (ll. 1056-57). These and many other lines were changed somewhat after the Civil War when Whitman dropped his platform-stance, with most of the changes tending to reduce or to diffuse the direct thrust of our most bizarre prophetic voice. But notice the rhetorical pause in l. 1031, where the first half of the line adds one more participial phrase to eight preceding such phrases modifying the "I" of l. 1020. The pause is to make certain that it is now recognized clearly that he shares these thoughts with "each man and woman I see," thus justifying and fulfilling the demand for "American bards" in the passage cited earlier from the Preface. The four-dot pause in l. 1034 is rhetorically necessary to give the listener a chance to think of any "special revelations" he may remember (whether biblical or Joan of Arc or Millerite or Mormon) before he hears the scornful diminisher that concludes the line, with its neat touch of metonymic detail.<sup>7</sup> When the dots are replaced by a comma (as later occurred) the participial phrase becomes just another in a series, and its poetic and/or rhetorical effect is correspondingly reduced.

At l. 1045 the four dots break the series of declarative statements started two lines above. The bull, bug, dung, and supernatural are paralleled to complete the naturalization of religion. But then out of this passive realization may come the prophetic-endowing afflatus. The rhetorical pause is needed to make the “waiting my time” a period related to the oncoming awareness. It is not, however, a time of prayerful obeisance, or humble deference to some outside supernatural spirit, but a confident, even assertive, recognition of our own divinity. In the last two lines of the catalog, then, the self-created prophet of this new world anticipates no sciomantic echoing of “Thou Shalt Not’s.” Rather, the expectation is for some confident answer to the mystery of life. And this, of course, is what the rest of the poem provides, for the “voice” takes on prophetic power and understanding and encouragement in the 286 lines of the poem that follow. The turning point in the poem, then, is at ll. 1050–55, when the voice speaks through the democratic poet-prophet. Notice how these crucial lines are made distinct, not only by the separate spacing of the printed page but by the extra period of silence (the four dots) to highlight the epiphany that is now being announced.

The lines that round out the quoted passage are related to the second focus of this paper, James Rush, his *Philosophy of the Human Voice*, and the impact through *Leaves of Grass* on American poetry. But to clarify these final lines themselves in relation to the earlier lines of the quotation: the “Come my children” of ll. 1052–53 is the initial cry of the now self-created prophet. With the opening of l. 1054, I assume the prophet is still talking to surrounding listeners, assuring them he is now speaking with higher or more profound authority than before. The rhetorical pause separates the voice (in the sense of words being said) from the vocal apparatus which he now announces he has mastered. Accordingly, the “reeds” would be the vocal cords, and the four dots separate the first part of the line, which is still part of his opening cry, from the second part, which seems to be a claim that he has trained for prophetic utterance to follow.

The beautifully structured l. 1055 is a pre-Derridaean challenge to the critic, if not to the original reader and listener. Derrida has protested the privileged role given to speech over writing, tracing the opposition between oral speech and written language back to Socrates and Plato, up to Saussure, through Lacan, over Austin and Searle, and behind Althusser and Machery, but in a strange way he has had Whitman on his side. The point of this key line comes out of that profound paradox that no speech can become literature. The triumph of speech is the physical immediacy of its utterance which dies even as it is heard. As Richard Murphy said years ago, “Unless there is some recording there can be no permanence; the speech cannot become literature.”<sup>8</sup> The great artistic act of Whitman’s, then, was to record (that is, to write out) the speech he never gave.

But to complete the commentary on the passage under discussion, in

1. 1055 Whitman is intentionally combining (actually conflating) spoken and written language. Whether the spelling of “chords” was a mistake or a brilliant maneuver is impossible to determine for this is the only pun of this sort and he doesn’t use “vocal cords” anywhere else. There are other key puns, however (as “leaves” instead of “blades” of grass, so he can pun on the poems and pages of his book), so we may assume this one was planned. What Whitman means is that the voice of the poetry is the true voice of the prophet. The last two lines make clear that he, in his prophetic role, is *in* the crowd but not *of* it.

If his voice is “orotund sweeping and final” what are we to impute to the poet/prophet by *orotund*? The “sweeping and final” would imply the scope and finality of what is encompassed in his prophetic purview, but *orotund*—that is, “pompous and bombastic”? Whitman often mocks himself (“Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . I contain multitudes.”), but certainly not here. Actually the word has a specific and special place in American speech history, and Whitman’s use of it ties him into a major chapter in American cultural life that has not been fully comprehended.

I do not mean that speech historians do not know that *orotund* was given significance by Dr. James Rush in *The Philosophy of the Human Voice*, for it was from those scholars I first heard about him. Rather, it is ourselves, literary scholars, who have not been sufficiently attentive to affiliation, as Edward Said has defined it, and so have not explored the relation of speech to Jacksonian America and the relation of both to Whitman. Since the materials for this larger understanding may not be readily available to Whitman scholars, let me summarize briefly. The early sections of Mary Margaret Robb’s history of oral interpretation, published in 1941, explain the “Influence of English Elocutionists: 1760–1827” (pp. 19–69) and “Dr. Rush and the Scientific Method: 1827–1870” (pp. 73–122).<sup>9</sup> The first section points out the major English influence here of the Mechanical School (led by John Walker) and the Natural School (of which Thomas Sheridan was the leader). These Englishmen had large reputations in America, and Whitman read them both as well as other rhetoricians, as William Finkel discovered.<sup>10</sup> Robb’s second section explains why and how the Jacksonian period was also the golden age of oratory. The pioneer voice scholar, Dr. James Rush (son of Dr. Benjamin Rush) was not a great speaker, nor an educator, but a medical researcher whose interest originally centered on the physical origins of speech. In recognition of the major importance of public speaking in a democratic nation, he put together his discoveries in *The Philosophy of the Human Voice* (1827, with many subsequent editions).

This book became the dominant influence in the many American revisions of Walker, Sheridan, and other English rhetorical imports, as Robb demonstrates conclusively. Rush and his somewhat strange career have been

further examined by Lester Hale.<sup>11</sup> The originality of Rush's work and the vigorous, even combative, quality of his mind have finally led to the three-volume reprinting of his writings, a major service to the history of American thought. The most significant recent consideration of Rush, by Mary Strine, is important to the history and understanding of Jacksonianism, but unbeknownst to her it also provided a clue to the form and style of the original *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>12</sup>

Strine points out that membership in the "natural aristocracy" was potentially available to all white citizens during the period. Cultural performance (not money, class, profession, or inheritance) was the major sign of sociocultural status. So much is generally recognized by historians, but she goes on to explain that the "various forms that cultural performance assumed were unified around the spoken word. Speech, both as social process and cultural product, became the quintessential expressive instrument for shaping and refining national identity." Her sources—Daniel Boorstin, Russel Nye, Walter Ong—are well known, and other historians could give support. She says, "Whether because of its existential vitality or its inherent expressive elasticity, public speaking . . . became a primary way of *doing democracy*, of actualizing egalitarian principles and allowing sociopolitical leadership to evolve naturally with the public forum of cultural performance" (p. 512).

Accordingly, speech training (in practical speaking exercises as well as in rhetoric) became a key part of the national educational system. In the modification of the English system, Rush was the key figure, both Robb and Strine agree, and such contemporary texts that I have used, with their acknowledgments to or plagiarism of Rush, would substantiate the claim. Neither scholar quotes Rush sufficiently (perhaps because in writing to and for speech historians they could assume a familiarity which I, and perhaps many literary scholars, lack) to support directly the claim I wish to make for the Whitman influence.

Rush explains why he redefines the key word *orotund* (the occasional odd spelling in what follows is intentional, for in addition to improving American speech he hoped to make our orthography more logical):

. . . On the basis of the Latin phrase, I have constructed the term *Orotund*; to designate that assemblage of attributes which constitutes the highest character of the speaking voice.

By the *Orotund*, or adjectively the *Orotund* voice, I mean a natural, or improved manner of uttering the elements with a fulness, clearness, smoothness, and if I may make the word, a subsonorous vocality; rarely heard in ordinary speech, and never found in its highest excellence, except after long and careful cultivation.<sup>13</sup>

It is to this new meaning Rush gave to *orotund* that Whitman gives allegiance. Rush takes seven pages to explain the physiology of the *orotund*, the need to exercise the voice properly, and concludes with these final observations:

*Fifth.* The orotund, from the discipline of cultivation, is more under command than the common voice; and is consequently more efficient and precise in the production of long quantity; in varying the degrees of force; in executing the tremulous scale; and in fulfilling all the other purposes of expressive intonation.

*Sixth.* It is the only kind of voice appropriate to the master-style of epic and dramatic reading. By it alone, the actor consummates an outward sign of the grandeur and energy of his thôt and pasion. Employed in what will presently be described as the Diatonic Melody, the impressive authority and dignified elegance of this voice, excede as measurably the meaner sounds of ordinary discourse, as the superlative pictures of the poet, and the broad wisdom of the sage, respectively transcend the poor originals of life and all their wretched policies. It is the only voice capable of fulfilling the solemnity of the church-service, and the majesty of Shakespeare and Milton. [p. 154]

This is not to say that Whitman, following Rush, would (if he were actually speaking) use the orotund voice only and always in his poetry. There are two other “states or conditions of the mind.” The “Thõtive” for which “an unobtrusive vocality; a moderate degree of force; and a short syllabic quantity” would be appropriate. The “Pasionative” which calls for “a striking and varied vocality; abruptness; with high degrees and expressive forms of force.” It is not difficult to imagine Whitman using these two also, the Thõtive for the catalogs, narrative inserts; the Pasionative for “Impasioned; expressive; earnestly interogative; declamatory; rhetorical; contemptuous; derisive; and the conventional terms for every vehement pasion” (p. 165). It is, however, only the orotund voice to which Whitman as well as Rush draw attention, for that was the new discovery for America. That the “orotund” also provided the appropriate tone and voice for a democratic prophet seems to have been Whitman’s discovery alone.

Strine and Robb are, understandably, not concerned with poetry (except as the elocutionist might read the poetry of others), for the creation of poetry, especially in the romantic period, was far removed from the public forum. Strine makes particular, and indeed striking, use of this disjunction. Having quoted the now famous paragraph from M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp*,<sup>14</sup> she draws the appropriate inference:

With the expanding acceptance of the organic metaphor arose an increasingly vivid sense of the exclusivity of poetic activity, of poetic vision as qualitatively superior to normal perception, and the poet as different from or separate from other men. The implications of this transformation in the perceived relationship between art and the social order were far ranging, eventuating in popular notions of the necessary self-imposed isolation, or at least partial dissociation, of the poet-seer from the cruder body-politic so as to preserve the integrity and coherence of organic poetic vision. Understandably, such categorical dislocation of poetic activity from the larger social process placed a disquieting strain on the democratizing spirit of early nineteenth century American culture. [p. 520]

This is so inescapably true (but for Whitman, as we shall see) that one can even show that the apparent exceptions are not really so at all.

Yes, Bryant was for labor unions, extending the franchise, and protecting free speech, but in editorials not in poetry. Emerson, near the end of the period, was an eloquent supporter of John Brown, but in the poetry he excuses himself: "I cannot leave / My honied thought / For the priest's cant, / Or the statesman's rant. // If I refuse / My study for their politiqué, / Which at best is trick, / The angry Muse / Puts confusion in my brain." Thoreau was an even more eloquent supporter of John Brown, but not in significant literature. "Civil Disobedience" was a great social issue, but of our day, not his. His brilliant statement, if read at all in 1849, was not important enough for him or anyone else to pursue. His poetry is like Poe's only in being non-political. Longfellow wrote the "Arsenal at Springfield" with the gentle hope that the organ-like cannon barrels will some day be silenced when men accept Christ's Peace. Lowell in his "Present Crisis" would "Not attempt the Future's portal with the Past's blood-rusted key," but did take part in the public concern about the Mexican War with his Biglow Papers, First Series. Yet after the death of his liberal-minded and socially conscious wife in 1853, he too changed his tune. Holmes might be claimed a limited participant in the public affairs of the country with the stirring and successful "Old Ironsides," but there was no follow-up in his remaining sixty-four years. Only Whittier may be said to have fused his art with his concerns for social justice, but his abolition poems seem to have been read chiefly by the converted. When he finally got accepted by the *Atlantic* in the late 1850s, he contributed poems such as "Skipper Ireson's Ride" and "Telling the Bees." My listing here is not meant to be captious, nor to denigrate these men for not being "in the middle of things." Rather it is to show how correct Strine is in reminding us that poetry had little involvement with the "democratizing spirit of early nineteenth century American culture" (p. 520).

Strine goes further in developing Rush's hitherto unrecognized cultural service in correcting the "categorical dislocation of poetic activity from the larger social process." Although Rush "acknowledges the natural superiority of poetic genius," he is committed to bringing the great poets (he stresses particularly Shakespeare and Milton) to the people by trained speakers. Thus, "he restores transcendent coalescent insights exclusively associated with private poetic practice to an essential social function by transposing the focus of aesthetic value from poetic creativity per se to its embodiment in vocal expression." So, in reference to Abrams's figure, "expressive vocal quality [the orotund] becomes both mirror and lamp of aesthetic productivity, and literary meaning actualized through speech performance is thereby returned to public life" (p. 520). Accordingly "an essential integrative function for the systematically trained oral reader" is that of "expressive mediator between the privileged realm of poetic genius and the public forum of popular culture" (p. 521).

I appreciate Professor Strine's perceptive statement that the "expressive

vocal quality [the orotund] becomes both mirror and lamp," for she thus establishes the parameters that apply, I believe, even more to Whitman. His extravagant goal was to do it all: create, with pencil and paper, in the silence of his bedroom-study, then recreate orally, with full orotund authority, "sweeping and final," for the people. That he never did recite the poems of these early editions is beside the point—or is if it can be shown that he intended to. But first we need to fix the context, both for Whitman and for the state of poetry, at that time.

In the years between his return from New Orleans (1848) and the publication of the first edition, what was the out-of-work editor doing? With his father and brothers he was in house-building for speculation, but mostly, as his younger brother George recalled, he was in his room writing those "barrels of lectures." Whitman biographers note this one telling clue for this seven-year mystery period, but few have followed the clue and examined for lecture carry-overs the one major product of those preparatory years, the poems of the first and second editions. Jean Catel (1930) and F. O. Matthiessen (1940) recognized the oral element in the early poetry;<sup>15</sup> R. M. Bucke, Clifton Furness, Thomas Harned, and Emory Holloway edited unpublished materials that reveal it;<sup>16</sup> but what is needed is a reformulation of the persona in *Leaves of Grass* (through the 1860 edition) as a *speaking* as well as *writing* figure. He is sometimes shouting, sometimes querying, sometimes conversing, sometimes confiding, but always speaking to *you*, you alone or in a crowd, as listening or as reading audience.

If we read Whitman's early poetry, preferably in its original form, the signs of discourse are everywhere apparent. Of course all poetry is a form of discourse, to be sure, but the poetry created since the beginning of the Romantic Movement never draws attention to the speaking situation as does *Leaves of Grass*. Rather, the great change in poetry that began at the end of the eighteenth century was part of the vast change in every other art, as well as in philosophy, political theory, class structure, economics. The inferences for poetry have been explained in Abrams's *Mirror and the Lamp*, already mentioned, to which, for Jacksonian America, should be added his "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age."<sup>17</sup>

But it is Donald Wesling in *Chances of Rhyme*<sup>18</sup> who demonstrates most convincingly that from 1795 on there was a rejection of that traditional poetic rhetoric which had reached its apogee in Pope: "Historically, rhetoric as a collective and prescriptive mode came crashing down, and with it the weight of thousands of years of literary precedent, . . . At the Romantic watershed, for the first time rhetoric is consciously seen as in contradictory connection with what is regarded as poetic" (pp. 2-3). To the extent that poetic rhetoric was seen as an artificial imposition of language devices that inevitably delimited the direct personal expression of the sincere feeling person, this contention is entirely true. Wesling takes rhyme as "the boldest form of

rhetoric” (p. 5), hence his title, and demonstrates its elusive course with great skill and sensitivity. Whitman, in the 1855 Preface specifically and in practice in the early poetry, is clearly against rhyme, meter, and all other manifestations of traditional poetic artifice, but the way he went about his revolt was by incorporating a different brand of rhetoric.

There is no art without device, without control, without design, plan, strategy, or artfulness in the full sense. What Whitman did was to adopt and adapt oratorical rhetoric (not used in poetry before, except in drama, à la Anthony over the dead Caesear) to make or to shape this country’s first contribution to world poetry. It is not oratorical discourse solely, for he incorporates other public-speaking practices drawn from sermons, revivals, temperance lectures, lyceums, abolition talks, political speeches, and assorted exhortations of a reform-minded generation. All these he had heard, yet it was not the subject matter but the speaking manner that he imitated.

In a collection of Whitman’s notebooks recently edited by Edward Grier,<sup>19</sup> there are many notations by Whitman to himself about his work, including what he called “germ ideas” or “spinal ideas” for poems, ideas for his “lectures,” warnings to himself about what to do and what not to do in his work. These notebooks are undated, but from internal evidence they are all early. Here are five notes from the Feinberg Collection, printed as closely as possible to their original appearance:

From an 1857 Notebook, No. 43:

Poem of Prophecies -

There shall be

(containing prophecies - of all that will probably be in  
fifty, a hundred, two hundred, &c years hence -

---

doctrinaire - theorist

---

Strong conviction

not to volunteer, interfere, or ask questions -

---

Always reality - no “funning” - no wit - no <sup>ornament</sup>“~~imagination~~”

Then follows No. 44:

~~Poem of (after death)~~



The elliptical style for orations

operas

I will be the originator      the inventor

---

That the extasy of the pythia, the oracles - the divine rage, afflatus  
- that of Christ hercules &c are just as eligible now



These notebook entries and work-sheet notes were written shortly before or after the first edition. They, and a great many others like them, have that curious mixture of sudden thoughts scribbled down hastily so they won't be forgotten, plus warnings to himself. In No. 43, note the "There shall be—" entry about prophecies for a poem never completed. But do prophets make notes to themselves, speculating about other prophecies? No, prophets do not, but poets who want to sound like prophets might certainly do so. The "strong conviction" bit would seem to be a guideline for the prophetic role he wanted to adopt in public as well as in the poetry. At the end of the note, I often wonder why he thought it necessary to warn himself about *wit*, for as these notes show and the poetry confirms he had nothing to worry about.

In No. 44, note how he goes from a thought about a possible poem to a comment about oratory, quite as though the two were related in his mind. Aside from the strangely confident assertion that he is about to become the inventor of a new style of oratory, there is the valuable professional insight of the poet as craftsman (not the prophet) that the prophetic style is possible in his own day. The No. 2 entry seems to be the beginning of a speech and/or poem about America written around the apparent insert. The point he makes in that insert, between what he wants to do and what he thinks a "tame literary statement" would sound like, is a clue to the challenging, assertive, personal style of the early poems. Note No. 3 would support Esther Shepard's contention years ago in *Walt Whitman's Pose* (1938) that he got his style from George Sand, but these Notebooks show over and over again that there is no single source. The last note is so strong in its direct demand to himself about his vocal style that it is difficult to believe that he never did read aloud those early poems. But the first poem we know he presented publicly was the "Song of the Exposition" in 1871, and that was a totally different sort of poem altogether and was met with very limited success.

Indeed it seems difficult to deny that the early poems are written with oral delivery in mind.<sup>20</sup> He even "stretches" the record in his opening paragraph of the 1856 open letter to Emerson: "In poems *or in speeches* I say the word or two that has got to be said, adhere to the body, step with the countless common footsteps, and remind every man and woman of something" (p. 733, my emphasis). Quite aside from the dot-device for rhetorical pauses, there are the lines themselves, each a rhetorical unit or gathering of small units. We retain something of that extra and necessary pause in reading in the time it takes us to lift our eyes at the end of a line and then re-locate our focus for the beginning of the next line. There is no *enjambement* in the early poetry. Each line is a separate speech unit, but even so must relate to what follows. Thus another characteristic rhetorical device, *anaphora*, is a hallmark of the early editions. From an 1855 facsimile, I quote the first half of the second page to show the near flamboyant rhetorical flourish with which he attempts to capture and hold audience (listeners as well as—or even more

than—readers) attention. I have italicized the *anaphora* (the repetition of word or phrase at the beginning), *epistrophe* (at the end), and assorted other repetitions that give these eighteen lines their oral and rhetorical abundance:

*Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?*  
*Have you practiced so long to learn to read?*  
*Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?*

*Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,*  
*You shall possess the good of the earth and sun . . . there are millions of suns left,*  
*You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . . nor look through the eyes of the*  
*dead . . . nor feed on the spectres in books,*  
*You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,*  
*You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.*

*I have heard what the talkers were talking . . . the talk of the*  
*beginning and the end,*  
*But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.*

*There was never any more inception than there is now,*  
*Nor any more youth or age than there is now,*  
*And will never be any more perfection than there is now,*  
*Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.*

*Urge and urge and urge,*  
*Always the procreant urge of the world.*

*Out of the dimness opposite equals advance . . . Always substance and increase,*  
*Always a knit of identity . . . always distinction . . . always a breed of life. [ll. 22–39]*

There are 115 italicized words in the 209 words of this passage: 55 per cent. To state it another way, every other word is used to parallel or reciprocate (by repetition or pointed contrast) some preceding or subsequent word. To say it still another way, for every word that advances the thought, another word enhances the thought. It is a pleasing device, even contagious. The passage is strongly parallelistic, which is in fact why it was chosen. But it is by no means exceptional, although a safer estimate for the three early editions would be about 33 per cent.

Even that percentage may seem excessive to some. Roland Barthes would indeed have dismissed this passage, not in terms of poetry vs. prose, as was once a common critical rejection, but on the grounds of his disjunction of the *lisible* (generally translated as *readable*) and *scriptible* (that is, *writeable*) texts. Among the attributes of the *readable* is its redundancy, although such texts are also authoritarian, serious, “closed,” and structured. Because of that redundancy (and the other attributes) it enforces its meaning on the audience, thus making the reader (or hearer?) a consumer of the text. By contrast, for the *writeable* text, without redundancy *et al.*, the reader is the producer,

which to Barthes is where the true enjoyment of literature is to be found. Admittedly, redundancy has its faults, but it is a delight when it is played with such rhetorical skill as Whitman does here. The repetitive devices (especially when the lines are read aloud) provide an absorbing spell, helping us to focus on each individual item of the series, but also carrying us along with rising and falling excitement as we encounter different phases of his thought. In addition to the redundant parallelism, there are also: rhetorical questions (ll. 22–24); the invitation and/or command of l. 25 (“Stop this day and night with me . . .”); the dot-devices; the conscious opposition to insist on the hearer or reader making his own judgment (ll. 26–28); the strong negative contrast of l. 31, the “But . . . not . . .”; the skillful balancing of the near sound-alikes, “inception” and “perfection” in l. 32 and l. 34; the unusual *symploce* (both *anaphora* and *epistrophe* in the same line) at l. 33 and l. 35; the emphasis, gained by repetition of *urge* (ll. 36–37), on a healthier notion of sexuality; the shrewd juxtaposition of apparent antinomies, i.e., “opposite equals,” at l. 38, with the implied rejection of the conventional subordination of women; and the careful spreading out of the “always” phrases to conclude the passage. Note the logical correctness but the rhetorical (and poetical?) loss when he changed these last two lines for the final version:

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and  
 increase, always sex,  
 Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life.

Of course he never dropped the rhetorical patterning completely, or he might have written:

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance,  
 Always substance and increase, sex, a knit of identity, distinction, a breed of life.

What we are looking at in that last “made-up” example is the consequence of taking something out of an oral context and putting it into a written context. In writing, after the first *always*, any others in the sentence are redundant, extraneous. Should one forget, when he gets to *distinction*, how the series had been qualified, he can always look back if he is reading—but if he is listening he must either interrupt the speaker to ask or be silent and lose that information and perhaps the sequence of the thought. The *always* repetition, then, is not only a rhythmical and patterning device in the speaking situation but a cohesive element. It would be very informative in estimating the poetic returns of this situation to take a good text on cohesion, say M. A. K. Halliday and R. Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (1976), run down the list of cohesive devices, check their use and extra-use in the early poems, and compare that use with what might be found in the late poems, when Whitman had only the reader in mind.

Perhaps enough has been demonstrated to show that the original *Leaves of Grass* was composed with many features of oral delivery and oratorical rhetoric as shaping influences on its planning, organization, and style. But inasmuch as there is no evidence that Whitman ever attempted such an oratorical feat as giving "Song of Myself" on stage or platform, the question is not that he became a poet because he had failed as an orator. There is enough evidence to indicate that he wanted to do both but did not have the self-possession, self-confidence, the necessary ability to think on his feet—in short, the nerve to do so. It might be thought that he never received the opportunity, but that cannot be considered seriously. In that open time (had he had the boldness and audacity the poem professes) he could easily have made the opportunities. The record indicates that he was still hoping and planning, right up to the third edition of 1860, to speak out. But with that engagement with Thayer & Eldridge, his first commercial publisher, he finally seems to have accepted the printed page as his dominant means of communication, with consequent changes in his style thereafter.

Be that as it may, there seems to be no question but that Whitman wanted his *orotund voice* to be heard, both actually and figuratively. There is no accurate evidence as to the quality of Whitman's voice, but even if his voice was better than Webster's, it is difficult to gauge our loss. In the literal sense, *voice* is a physical matter, perhaps as likely to be off-putting as helpful. Our concern need not be in the actual sound of the poet's voice but in the communication of the persona, his subjectivity, his message. With his written language, especially with its clues for pacing, emphasis, and expression, trained readers may try for the orotund for our benefit, although most of us will imagine the voice as we read. Donald Wesling comes at this problem in a different, more perspicacious, fashion in his "Difficulties of the Bardic: Literature and the Human Voice."<sup>21</sup>

The parameters are established (p. 75): "Our two most intelligent accounts of voice, those of Jacques Derrida on writing and absence and of Walter J. Ong on orality and presence, have not been compared, even though their work on absence and presence is the clearest expression of the opposing positions we have." Wesling finds a space between these opposing theorists, via the rhetorical notion "tone of voice" which establishes and controls "the relationship between writer and reader" (p. 79). His examples—Frost's "Provide, Provide" in support, and Ashbery's *Litany (As We Know)* against—are well taken and remind us that we too must make judgments about Whitman. Not about whether there is Voice, for sometimes there is nothing else but, but whether the "tone of voice" may become too strong or explicit so that "we end up with an excessive adherence to vocal realism." It is a two-way street, to be sure, and different readers will react differently. To take an obvious example from many years of teaching *Leaves of Grass*, I have found the greatest block beginning students have is the predominance of the first person, the ever-present "I."

Robert Beloof in his *Performing Voice in Literature*<sup>22</sup> happens to be referring to Tristram Shandy, but his point fits here: “Nothing is more irritating to a reader than to become aware that the narrator thinks he is a fine fellow and can’t help saying so. One might go so far as to put it as axiomatic that, when the narrator is the main character, relating events concerning principally himself, the reader must be allowed to feel some sense of superiority. Perhaps it would be truer to say that the main character in such a situation must display certain personality limitations which the reader is able to discern and evaluate” (p. 323). Beloof goes on to mention Tristram’s self-centered garrulity, which we accept because of his good intentions and whimsicality, but in *Leaves of Grass* it is necessary to guide students through “Song of Myself” very carefully or a similar opposition develops.

But that tremendous poem has a very great role in *Leaves of Grass* just because of its key rhetorical function. Much longer than any twenty-five later poems put together, it is directed to providing the *ethos*<sup>23</sup> for the speaker and is thus essential to everything that follows. The self-created persona must “blow his own horn,” for there is no one else to do it. Once that is explained (and occasionally explained again) and it is seen that “I celebrate myself” so that “what I assume you shall assume” because “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,” things begin to fall in place. The many graphic scenes and their challenging lines are easily captured once the focus is corrected. But all readers create their own relation with the speaking poet, and the evaluation of the poem will be modified by the “tone of voice,” not only as the poet projects it but as the reader perceives it.

What have we then? A new clarification for the origin of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman wrote the 1855 Preface and the poems of the first edition for a double audience, listeners as well as readers. If it is claimed that the oral features are only skillfully contrived artistry intended to make the prophet-persona more convincing, then why the two, three, and four dots, which make the first edition confusing? But the protest is important, for it demonstrates clearly that we have all recognized the *speaking* persona as central to the artistic success of *Leaves*—it is just that we do not want to take him for real. But why not? There certainly has never been any question about the origin of Emerson’s Essays in his lectures,<sup>24</sup> and we do not wince at their obvious didactic intent. Whatever the original audience’s reaction, we do not read “The American Scholar” to be better scholars, nor the “Divinity School Address” to be better ministers—nor do we read *Leaves of Grass* to be better Americans. We read those poems to enjoy imaginatively the created vision of life they provide. As such, our understanding of Whitman’s affiliation with Jacksonian America, with its rhetoric and elocution, and with the expressive force of its orotund voice, will help us understand how our greatest American poem came to be.

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## NOTES

1 Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Recent American 'Left' Literary Criticism," *boundary 2*, 8 (Fall 1979), 27, ". . . affiliation is what enables a text to maintain itself as a text and this is covered by a range of circumstances: status of the author, historical moment, conditions of publications, diffusion and reception, values drawn upon, values and ideas assumed, a framework of consensually held tacit assumptions, presumed background, and so on and on. In the second place, affiliation is to study and recreate the bonds between texts and the world, bonds which specialization and the institutions of literature have all but completely effaced. Every text is an act of the will to some extent, but what has not been very much studied is the degree to which—and the specific cultural space by which—texts are made permissible. To recreate the affiliative network is therefore to make visible, to give materiality back to, the strands holding the text to society, the author and the culture that produce it. In the third place, affiliation releases a text from its isolation and imposes upon the scholar or critic the presentational problem of historically re-creating or re-constructing the possibilities out of which the text arose." (I am indebted to Professor Mary S. Strine whose article, cited later, alerted me to Edward Said's important statement.)

2 Samuel Kirkham, *An Essay on Elocution, Second Edition* (Baltimore, 1834), "Chapter V, Of Time and Rhetorical Pauses," p. 138.

3 The text in *Leaves of Grass*, edited by Sculley Bradley and Harold Blodgett (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1973), is fully accurate and this citation is from p. 720, ll. 315–335. Unless otherwise indicated, later references are from this text.

4 The California poet, printer, and scholar William Everson recognized that the whole Preface was of a piece and made a poem of it. His special printing and the line arrangement, which follows the rhetorical patterns of the early poems, make his volume an unusual testimony to the poetic-rhetoric of Whitman's first period. See *American Bard: By Walt Whitman. The Original Preface to Leaves of Grass Arranged in Verse* by William Everson (New York: Viking Press, 1982).

5 Prof. C. P. Bronson, *Elocution, or Mental and Vocal Philosophy* (Louisville, Ky., 1845, Fortieth Thousand), pp. 85, 92, 108, 112–113.

6 First Edition, pp. 46–47. A special feature of this printing was the extra-wide page, which permitted all but the longest lines to appear without carry-overs. Whitman scholars have often remarked on this feature as an attractive aesthetic measure, but it was actually a functional device so that rhetorical units would not be split. For those without a facsimile, who may wish to check Whitman's later, but not necessarily better, handling of this part of "Song of Myself," the handiest reference is the Bradley and Blodgett edition, pp. 75–76.

7 Metonymy and synecdoche are approved by Aristotle (and rhetoricians thereafter) as valuable to the rhetor; by contrast, metaphor is best for poetry. The rationale of this disjunction is well explained by William I. Brandt, *The Rhetoric of Argumentation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), pp. 141–145. In contrasting the two tropes, Brandt says (p. 144): "This sort of metonymy is chiefly a vivifying figure; it often brings a kind of immediacy and vitality to discourse. However, it is ordinarily simple in its effect. The metaphor particularly . . . tend[s] to complicate a line of thought. . . . Discourse is opened up and slowed down by them. The metonymy, on the other hand, lies directly on the line of discourse . . . [and] brings concreteness to that discourse." Whitman's poetry matches this disjunction, the early poetry being strongly metonymic, the late poetry metaphoric.

8 Richard Murphy, "The Speech as Literary Genre," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 44 (April, 1958), 117–127. From the many references to this article, I assume it is the classic statement.

The part I quote is from p. 119. Professor Murphy added further clarification in his "Problems in Speech Texts" in *Papers in Rhetoric and Poetic*, ed. Donald Bryant (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1965), pp. 70–86.

9 Mary Margaret Robb, *Oral Interpretation of Literature in American Colleges and Universities* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1941).

10 William Finkel, "Walt Whitman's Manuscript Notes on Oratory," *American Literature*, 22 (1950), 29–53.

11 Lester I. Hale, "Dr. James Rush," in Karl R. Wallace, ed., *History of Speech Education in America* (New York: Appleton, Crofts, 1954), pp. 219–237.

12 Mary S. Strine, "Performance Theory as Science: The Formative Impact of Dr. James Rush's *The Philosophy of the Human Voice*," in *Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 509–527.

13 James Rush, *The Philosophy of the Human Voice*, Vol. I of *Collected Works of James Rush* (Weston, Mass.: M & S Press, 1974), p. 147.

14 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), p. 69.

15 Jean Catel, *Rhythme et Langage dans la 1<sup>re</sup> Edition des "Leaves of Grass"* (Paris: Rieder, 1930); F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940).

16 Richard M. Bucke, ed., *Notes and Fragments, Complete Writings of Walt Whitman* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1902), vol. 9; Clifton J. Furness, ed., *Walt Whitman's Workshop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928); Thomas Harned, ed., "Walt Whitman and Oratory," *Complete Writings of Walt Whitman* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1902), vol. 8; Emory Holloway, *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1921), vol. 1.

17 M. H. Abrams, "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" in Northrop Frye, ed., *Romanticism Reconsidered* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 26–72.

18 Donald Wesling, *The Chances of Rhyme: Device and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

19 Edward Grier, ed., *Walt Whitman: Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 6 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1984). I have not been able to obtain these volumes, so I have used my own copies of the originals in the Feinberg Collection. I have wanted to present them as closely as possible to Whitman's original holograph to show the strange mixture, almost a fusion, in his mind of poetry and public speech—sometimes, indeed, they apparently seem to him different forms (oral/written) of the same thing.

20 The only occasion I am aware of at which *Leaves of Grass* was read aloud was a four-hour television group-performance at Webster College, St. Louis. See "Four Hours and Forty-Eight Voices: Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* on Television," *Oral English*, I (Summer, 1972), 7–8. Also, Jean DeSales Bertram, *The Oral Experience of Literature* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1967), provides a basic, somewhat elemental, approach with many good examples. A central feature of this book is the treatment of "Out of the Cradle . . ." for its oral features (pp. 55–69). This is, however, a lyric poem, not what I call a platform-poem, and so does not have the speaker stance that Whitman adopts for most of the early poems.

If his early poetry was to be presented directly, what are the inferences? We are so limited by our involvement in that eximious group that reads poetry that it jars the mind to think of a crowd of common citizens in some Lyceum Hall responding to the poems of the first edition. What audience did Whitman have in mind? His wish to be an American Bard in a much more

real and literal sense than we have heretofore realized bespeaks a self-confidence that was never tested, but also a level of confidence in the American public difficult to comprehend.

21 Donald Wesling, "Difficulties of the Bardic: Literature and the Human Voice," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1981), 69–81.

22 Robert Beloof, *The Performing Voice in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966).

23 There are traditional rhetorical features in any *ethos* situation, most of which are found in "Song of Myself." But a special problem in this poem is that the persona must necessarily complicate his *ethos*-presentation by talking about himself as prophet and also being prophetic. This puzzling, yet fascinating, double role of the personal, talking about himself (a sort of meta-prophecy) and enacting his prophetic function is not found in any other poem (or speech!) to my knowledge. The passage quoted at the beginning of this paper, and the context for it presented a few pages further on, form just one of a number in this major poem.

24 See David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), particularly the concluding section, "The Voices of the Essays: First Series," pp. 174–184.