



The Rhyme of the Left Margin

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THE RHYME OF THE LEFT MARGIN

GEOFFREY G. O'BRIEN

MY TOPIC is the left margin, that space of reinauguration that has traditionally been emphasized, perhaps almost by default, when a poet deliberately refrains from using traditional right margin resources such as rhyme or even meter which, though everywhere in the line, finds its identity only when completed at line's end. I'll be looking at Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" for what it can tell us about left-margin activation, and its relation to an abstention from other poetic forms and figures. I want to talk about the left margin not merely because it's crucial in this poem (and most other Whitman poems) but because, as the site of an intense repetition, it actually doesn't indicate an abstention from right-margin resources so much as a reproduction of their effects by other means and in a new location. This matters to me as both a practitioner and reader for two reasons: 1) because we seem to be living in a time in which most of those right-margin forms feel unavailable—overfreighted with bad histories or standing as nostalgic, falsifying pattern-consolations for the abyssal complexity and damage of everyday life; and 2) because even if rhyme and meter are currently nearly vitiated, I think their effects must be produced by other means; otherwise poetry suffers an actual loss of system complexity rather than simply enjoying a permutation of method. Poetry can ecstatically or soberly give up any form, but when it gives up Form I'm not sure it's still a genre.

The original title of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" was "Sun-Down Poem." The present title, which dates from 1860, preserves in occulted fashion the therelessness of literary signs and scenes so palpable in the original; all titles, however deictic or world-building, imply the word "Poem" after them and so establish literary space at space's expense, an immaterial commons in which we read not of things but of dispositions towards the thingly. But in changing the title to "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" Whitman also announces the literarity of place in more round-

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This essay inaugurates a new occasional series that invites prominent poets to investigate Whitman's poetics. Geoffrey G. O'Brien teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of three books of poetry: *The Guns and Flags Project* (2002), *Green and Gray* (2007), and *Metropole* (2011). O'Brien's next collection, *People on Sunday*, will be published by Wave in 2013. "The Rhyme of the Left Margin" is based on a talk delivered in the "Poem Present" Series at the University of Chicago in 2009.*

about fashion, through a serious pun on both crossing and ferrying. It's a poem that records a difficulty with figure, specifically with metaphor, and evidences a desire to abstain almost entirely from it, to cross metaphor's ferrying, to thwart its conceptual crossings of terms. In "Specimen Days" Whitman said of ferries, "I have always had a passion for ferries; to me they afford inimitable, streaming, never-failing, living poems." What ferries apparently do is afford a certain kind of poem via a certain kind of motion—"streaming" as a metonymic motion across a local space or at least a selected, representative perceptual inventory of that space, a catalogic in which each set member—tide, wake, barge, flag, foundry—contributes to the dissolution of actual place but in so doing convenes a commons not only immaterial but atemporal or transhistorical, allowing access to a placeless place at any time. In other words, Whitman will prefer metonymic streaming to metaphorical crossing in this poem because he thinks deictic indications of an unvisitable place allow others—readers, future travelers—a better entry to this commons than the private or idiosyncratic transmutations of metaphor.

But what does that have to do with the left margin? It's simply the site of another important *-phor*: anaphora. Instead of a metaphor's ferrying-across we have in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" anaphora's constant vertical stream of carrying-back, so that each line participant in anaphoresis is a kind of motion that carries with it the threat and ecstasy of getting nowhere, of getting to get nowhere again and again and leave that thereless there again. Further, anaphora doesn't only emphasize both a vertical patterning of line beginnings but the horizontal motion of reading across the lines in order to get back to the next emphatic re-beginning. So that a metonymic motion across the possible inventory of things seen in a specific time and place, say Brooklyn in the 1850s, while standing motionless on a moving boat, is attended by an emphasized motion across the material space of the page and the line in order to return to more such streaming motions. One crosses a line that tells of a crossing but, just as the poem's title fantasizes that the crossing is eternal, one ends up at the beginning again. The form has the potential for infinite extension but is dependent on a persistent return to its launch, what John Ashbery will later call "the mooring of starting out." This is Whitman's idea of time travel, a literary passage through no place that by getting nowhere gets everywhen—the poem as time machine with both abstention from metaphor and an attention to anaphora as the controls. As section 3 begins "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence." And "just" to prove it, anaphora breaks out at the beginning of section 4, a series of *Justs* repeating enough times in succession that we hear them not only as a way of conjuring likeness or kinship across persons without eradicating difference ("Just as you

look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd"), but also as an assertion of the justness or justice of that way of seeing seeing. Men and women are iterably linked across generations by their iterable access to a passage over and through the details of world. Put another way, the only way to turn the unpredictable substitutions of metaphor into a public good is by using metonymy. As the eye roves across boats, and up or down their masts and pipes, it establishes an untransfigured (though radically selected) list of those details that theoretically any other person could also perform. It produces, in other words, a substitutability of person by indicating perceptual surfaces while refusing to substitute one thing for another.

And again, to go back to section 2 for a second, we can see the canniness of Whitman's resolutely linking metonymy to anaphora, in the section in which the form is first introduced. Just as metonymy tells the parts without transforming them, so anaphora, as the brute repetition of identity, of a term, does not substitute, it accretes, it emphasizes, it varies across each local lineal environment, but it doesn't replace itself. In other words, it makes a crowd of exchangeable yet serial terms. And here in the second section we get a cascade of definite articles fronting a crowd of parts which then gives way to a crowd of literal "Others"—an orchestrated hand-off from the definite to the indefinite that is also a drama of form's migration from the right margin to the left. After 5 lines beginning with "The," introducing nearly metaphorically the metonymic aspirations of the poem, its telling of "glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings," the sixth line adumbrates the next anaphoric chain by starting "The others" and, after asserting a "tie" between temporally isolated others, the stanza ends with that very word "others" on the right margin only to have the poem "cross" the whitespace to find the same word waiting for it on the left, where it will, just like "The," serve as a formal device for introducing the available sites of percepts of place, what Bertrand Russell would later call "sensibilia," or "unsensed sense-data"; the anaphora will then model the substitutability of persons capable of pursuing those percepts. "Other" is Whitman's pronoun for both the person substituted out and the person substituted in, everyone is that other; crossing is the verb for that just and never completed substitution of persons, and the ferry, both place and boat, figure and sign, the streaming, never-failing poem, is the insubstantial commons of perception where such substitutions can transpire. Whitman then is not himself representative, he is merely if incantatorily indicative, on the left margin of a line that will continue after him and which preceded him, but also able to "Stop somewhere waiting for you" by sending his bodiless form through time.

We also see in this section anaphora's substitution of one term for another within a continuity of pattern. The poem streams through a left-

margin emphasis while moving from “The” to “Other.” Much like the good substitutability of person the poem prefers to metaphor’s private transmutations of figure, substitution can happen as long as it’s linked to metonymy or anaphora. You can use a simile if it’s to describe the “glories like beads” of multiple “seeings and hearings” and you can see that episodality of attention as a figure for anaphora as well. Perhaps we could even say that for Whitman anaphora is the visual figure for a democracy of perception and metonymy the narration of that democracy.

Which would explain another key moment in the poem where good substitutions of various kinds happen via an abstention from explicit metaphor and an emphasis on anaphora. In Section 3, after the series of *Justs* comes a line beginning with “I,” which speaks of crossing “the river of old.” Then we get a new vertical river of anaphora where each anaphoric term not only repeats very few times before giving way to the next, but we also encounter a powerful expansion of what can count as anaphora, because, as we move from *Watched* to three *Saws* in a row to “Had my eyes dazzled” to four *Look’d*s in a row back to *Saw* twice before resolving back to the familiar *The*, we move from an anaphora of term to an anaphora of class, in which synonyms for visual tellings (cf. “seeings”) have their time and place, tell the selected metonymies of “parts of bodies” and “white sails” and “rigging,” and then let other words tell other parts of the witnessable scene. It’s as though anaphora’s internal logic led to synonymy, as each term’s new context morphs into an ability to replace the vision-term entirely while maintaining a kinship, a “tie” as Whitman might put it, with the others. Even the lines that don’t participate in even mild anaphora, whose first words are not repetends, seem part of it retroactively: *I* as the site of iterable observation and *Watched* as potential anaphor and “Had my eyes dazzled” as phrasal substitution for any of the other repetends of vision.

Beyond these good substitutions, term for term, and term for class, and the “flags of all nations” rather than any one of them, there is also a figuring of the poet that verges on metaphor, that dares the reader to metaphorize him and dares him not to, and thus is worth looking at briefly. When the poet looks “at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water” he is tempting us to make of him a Jesus, that master-figure for substitution, or that other one, a monarch. But in either case, the figure is only a reflection and the halo simply centrifugal spokes of light pointing along other vectors of vision to other great or small parts of the scene, and the crown a dissolving crown, as protean and inconstant as the water’s surface in the “white wake left by the passage.” Whitman is a lowercase christ rather than the Christ, a king only insofar as he’s able to see himself as other, as reflection, at a distance that “avails not” not because it is instantly crossable,

but because there is a metonymic method of crossing it that makes it permanently available to any person to revisit and there be crowned as the king of the others, of which she herself is one.

I want to move now to the last section of the poem, where we experience a further expansion of anaphora, from an anaphora of class or synonymy to an anaphora of mood. This section begins with a set of imperatives that are perhaps the least imperious in all of literature. From “Flow on river!” to “Live, old life!” all of the instructions are pyrrhic, all of the commands are already being followed. It is for me a mark of the poem’s formal power and ambitions that one doesn’t instantly experience as absurd “Live, old life” or any of the other demands that the world keep doing what it is already doing. The softness of the anaphora, a repetition of grammatical mood rather than term, echoes the softness of the enjoinders, in the service of yet more metonymic and deictic presentation of place, and the dissolution and reconstitution of that place as literature. For Whitman, such faint linking and such muted commands distinguish his form from the imperious Eucharist of metaphor, which tells a thing to suddenly be another rather than lovingly telling its parts and their shading off into the next available object or person. In the last section of this poem, the poet commands the space he’s brought under description to be itself, so that it can wait, untransfigured, for anybody else to experience. Even the authority of a lowercase *jesus* is told to go but only told to go by being what it was, light: “Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one’s head, in the sunlit water!” These spokes, a fine play on speaking as well as a direction to move radially into everywhere else, only diverge rather than suffer expulsion, and leave the poet’s head in the water only as, just as, they would leave anyone else’s, and remain attached to that from which they diverge.

Then, with these commands all followed because already underway, the anaphora shudders, and falls forward into a line become clear apostrophe: “Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are”. The line also indicates another consequence of this new class of anaphora, that it has been engaging in an activity verging on pathetic fallacy, on the lending of agency to the features of place. But is that metaphor here? Not exactly. I would describe it instead as the instantiation of a commons, the filling of space with potential persons. Because there is no place in literary language, Whitman here actually addresses the crowds of ferrygoers and readers who might encounter a river mid-flow and an old life living itself. Here, the pathetic fallacy doubles as, or finds its verity in, the identification of the future persons who will witness similar seeings and hearings and who are therefore already, in Whitman’s now, inside the things they will see later, all of this functioning also as an assertion of the continuity, the beadedness of such perceptual encounters with the world. Commanding appearance is simply to indicate potential experience and

to indicate potential experience is to suggest or at least fantasize the good substitutability of the others who could have their eyes be dazzled by it. At this point there is no difference between pathetic fallacy and metonymy, because there are no things, there is just the poem as the commons of potential relations between all its parts, great and small.

Now, after staging the breakdown of an anaphora of apparent pathetic fallacy, the poem can permit itself any figure, as though it refused to fetishize any one formal procedure for inviting the reader to enter its time machine. It tells its own methods to disperse and arrives at one of its most famous phrases, which happens to be an unabashed metaphor. After the penultimate stanza ends in the brief reestablishment of an anaphora of pyrrhic command, on the line “Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting,” the poem arrives at the line whose right margin offers an undeniable metaphor: “You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers”. The obvious antecedent of these ministers is the “objects” of the line above it, so this phrase is guilty of participating in apostrophe, pathetic fallacy, you name it. But the figure is as strange as it is conventional—how can a minister be “dumb”?—like and unlike the “blind mouths” of the bad clergy in Milton’s “Lycidas,” another poem of water and roving, peripatetic form, these beautiful ministers make a figure that is difficult to cognize yet easy to comprehend. They are dumb because they are objects but they are ministers because they are in the poem. Just as light can be “spokes” around a head, objects can speak, can only speak, when in the poem, where all things are not what they are, are not even appearances that could indicate what they are. They are only poetic signs, which are also dumb but which can speak, and the place where persons can meet and share their Just-Ases with each other.

And just like the physical facts of world which wait without any agency for people to perceive them, the “sensibilia” or “unsensed sense-data” of a place, so too do the poetic signs that dissolve that world in the act of referring to it wait. They wait to issue the soft command to read them, to do what you are already doing, and they do this under the title “Sun-Down Poem” and through a renaming, and revisions across the editions, the generations, of *Leaves of Grass*, in a kind of immortality that depends on having no body but staying in the earthly heaven of text, on a boat that is no metaphor, permanently crossing between two shores. And there *are* two shores reached at the end of the poem but they are sounds not places, and they sound only the poetic sign while it talks of offering metonymy rather than whole place. In a repetition free of both anaphora and metaphor, the last two lines say “furnish your parts” enough times, twice, that we can cross from *furnish* to *your* until we hear the “shore” formed in the crossing and the open “your” inside it.