

Apostrophe and the Rhetoric of Renaissance Lyric

I

IN WHAT HAS BECOME A CLASSIC of deconstructive criticism, Jonathan Culler claimed that apostrophe is the fundamental trope of lyric poems—the rhetorical figure that before all others takes us to the heart of their literary presence and endeavor.¹ Culler consciously limited his account to the post-Enlightenment lyric. The purpose of this essay is to ask whether lyric poems of the English Renaissance are as amenable to his account as those of the romantic and modern poets he discusses. And if (as I think) they are not, then what can the different uses of apostrophe in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poems tell us about them and their rhetorical practices?

Culler begins by observing that critics tend not to acknowledge the apostrophes that initiate, as if jump-starting, some of the most famous lyrics in English: Blake's "The Sick Rose" ("O rose, thou art sick!"), Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" ("O wild west wind, thou breath of autumn's being"), Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" ("Thou still unravished bride of quietness"). What explains this avoidance, he claims, is that apostrophes are embarrassing. Resisting this embarrassment and practicing, perhaps, a certain critical shamelessness, Culler seeks out the extravagance of apostrophe in poets ranging from Blake and Wordsworth to Rilke and Yeats. Each example complicates his account of both the uses of apostrophe and (necessarily, he suggests) the nature of lyric poetry. Hence his readings

ABSTRACT Romantic models dominate our conception of lyric poetry. This essay questions the pertinence of these models to the Renaissance lyric by reading that poetry in the light of Jonathan Culler's classic account of the romantic lyric in his *Pursuit of Signs* (1981). Culler famously argues that the definitive trope of lyric is apostrophe, in which first-person speakers address pointedly fictive personifications, such as a sick rose or the west wind, in order to emphasize subjective voicing over objective perception. As Culler helps us see, apostrophes are surprisingly important in Renaissance as well as romantic lyric. But the apostrophes of Renaissance lyric characteristically portray first-person speakers as writing in real time and space to "empirical listeners." What makes Renaissance lyric distinctive is its persistently *social* mode of address. Through readings of apostrophic poetry by Waller, Donne, King, Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare, the essay calls for criticism of the lyric that pays closer attention to the differences among historically diverse lyric cultures. **REPRESENTATIONS** 122. Spring 2013 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 1–22. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2013.122.1.1.

produce striking and suggestive arguments about matters central to any theory of lyric—the question of what happens in a poem, the nature of “lyric time,” subjectivity, and the status of the first-person speaker. He brings these topics together by distinguishing “two forces in poetry, the narrative and apostrophic” (149) and argues that apostrophe’s resistance to, even transcendence of, the forces of time is of the essence of such poems as Shelley’s “Adonais” and Yeats’s “Among School Children.” “Apostrophe resists narrative,” he concludes, “because its *now* is not a moment in a temporal sequence but a *now* of discourse, of writing” (152). This leads to his final and perhaps most fundamental point. He asks why, if apostrophe produces powerful effects of transmuting “the temporal into the eternal, life into art,” critics avoid discussing it. “Apostrophe must be repressed precisely because this high calling of poetry must not be seen to depend on a trope, an *O*” (152). This hint of the scandal of deconstruction—that the powers of poetry, once thought to express our full humanity, are the effects of possibly empty rhetoric—leads to a distinction that is crucial to the whole essay. From the outset, Culler objects that critics “transform apostrophe into description” (136): they attempt to “naturalize the figure” (138) by referring it to some prior or external reality. On the contrary, he says, “the very brazenness with which apostrophe declares its strangeness is crucial. . . . Apostrophe is not the representation of an event; if it works, it produces a fictive, discursive event” (152–53). Having cited Auden’s famous dictum, “Poetry makes nothing happen” (140), Culler recuperates it by embracing its potential emptiness.

Culler’s argument has been brilliantly extended in Barbara Johnson’s “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” and it has prompted some critiques and reservations by interpreters of romantic poetry.² But why should it matter to students of Renaissance lyric? Mainly because in this and other essays Culler means to displace and move beyond the modernist account of lyric represented by Eliot, Empson, Leavis, and the American New Critics. The poetry of Shakespeare’s plays (though not, usually, of the sonnets) and of seventeenth-century poets from Donne to Marvell was crucial to these critics. It was in the name of the so-called metaphysical poets that Eliot, in a few immensely influential essays, proposed to revise the romantic idea of poetry and undo some of its fundamental assumptions. Unlike some postmodernists, who simply dismiss or caricature the New Critics, Culler is an appreciative analyst of their criticism. But in seeking to move beyond it, neither he nor anyone else has offered a revisionary account of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry from which it claimed to derive its authority. The problem is not that these older poets are not read, esteemed, and taught: some of them, like Wyatt and Herbert, have never been more highly regarded. But the interpretations and

advocacy of teachers, critics, and scholars have been rather scattered, *ad hominem*, and *ad occasionem*. General accounts of lyric poetry, like Culler's, take their bearings from romantic and modern poets. The present essay asks whether Culler's account of apostrophe, which is meant to provide a post-modernist theory of lyric, can help us reground our understanding of earlier poetry, so as to enable what we at present lack—a formalist criticism that is coherent and alert to critiques of its modernist forebears.

Like Culler's essay, this one is going to proceed by analyzing specific examples. But I want to begin with the general question of defining apostrophe, or saying what count as examples of it. Culler himself puts aside "the complex problems of definition and delimitation . . . in order to focus on cases which will be apostrophic by any definition" (137). He has at least twice been accused of being rather too hasty in this gesture. The focus of both critiques is his slipping away from Quintilian's treatment of apostrophe, with which he begins but whose meanings and assumptions (so the counterargument runs) he ignores. Apostrophe literally means a turning away, and Quintilian defines it as a "diversion of our words to address some person other than the judge."³ He treats it as one among many devices that seek to give an argument "greater point and vehemence" (4.1.63). Culler notes this, but goes on to say that apostrophe "is different in that it makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit or situation of communication itself" (135). Both Culler's critics consider this move illegitimate. J. Douglas Kneale argues that apostrophe, in classical and Renaissance rhetoric, always depends on the presence of an original listener; in the words of a sixteenth-century handbook, it is "a turning of your speech to some new person."⁴ By not following the lead of older rhetoricians, who "include a diversion of speech as part of their understanding of the figure" (146), Culler, in Kneale's account, blurs the boundaries between apostrophe, exclamation (*exclamatio* or *ecphonesis*), and personification (*prosopopoeia*). Hence it is wrong to say that Blake's "O Rose, thou art sick!" or Shelley's "O wild West Wind" are "apostrophic by any definition." Rather, these are exclamatory and personifying examples of the direct address that is so taken for granted in classical rhetoric that it has no specific name. "This structure of address, this explicit directing of voice, is crucially different from the movement of apostrophe, the redirecting of voice" (148). Culler's other antagonist, L. M. Findlay, goes over the same material and makes a similar argument: "Apostrophe [in Quintilian] is . . . clearly understood to include diverting the attention of one and the same audience; that is, as a turn within a single 'circuit or situation of communication.'" This "plays down the difference between apostrophe and other figures," as is clear when "Quintilian specifies the connections between apostrophe and various figures of speech."⁵

Kneale and Findlay give accurate accounts of Quintilian, but I want to defend Culler's leap of interpretation and his conflating, from the perspective of traditional rhetoric, different tropes and figures. His apparent looseness is consequential only if one assumes that rhetorical devices and systems do not change historically. Of course the superficial signs of *exclamatio*, say, or anaphora, or even something as complex as metaphor can remain the same over time. But the uses of various tropes and figures, not to mention their valencies and interconnections, depend on the systems of rhetoric and poetics that underlie them. Even the meaning of the devices themselves can change. In Quintilian, the main meaning of *prosopopoeia* is impersonation. The orator can "display the inner thoughts of our adversaries as if they were talking with themselves" or "put words of advice, reproach, complaint, praise or pity into the mouths of appropriate persons" (9.2.30). The same term, one of the few that remains relatively familiar, is now understood to mean personification, the representation of inanimate objects or phenomena as having human attributes. The shift in meaning has its own history (both notions of the figure can be found in Renaissance rhetorics), but Culler would say that personification is what matters in post-Enlightenment poetry. He further argues that in this poetry plausible animation is achieved by the rhetoric of apostrophe. (He cites to great effect Lamartine's line, "Objets inanimés, avez-vous donc une âme?") You may think he exaggerates this dynamic, but it is not enough to invoke the distinction drawn in older rhetorics between *prosopopoeia* and other figures. As for the broader point that apostrophe is a diversion of speech and not the originating address, a sufficient theoretical answer is given by Barbara Johnson:

Apostrophe in the sense in which I will be using it involves the direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker. . . . Apostrophe is thus both direct and indirect: based etymologically on the notion of turning aside, of digressing from straight speech, it manipulates the I/thou structure of direct address in an indirect, fictionalized way. (185)

This makes clear what Culler means by troping the circuit of connection. Instead of turning aside from one's main or initial addressee, romantic apostrophe makes the initial address metaphoric—specifically representing as capable of response an object or phenomenon that is not.

The final defense of Culler is that his account of romantic apostrophe is productive when one turns to the poems themselves. "The Sick Rose" (which he cites but does not discuss at length) provides a nice test of his argument:

O Rose, thou art sick!
 The invisible worm
 That flies in the night,
 In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

One can easily convert this to third-person discourse. Note that although the rewritten poem still begins with an exclamation, personification depends on the original apostrophe.

Oh the rose it is sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out its bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does its life destroy.

Why does eliminating the apostrophe make such a difference to this poem? For one thing, it is difficult to say what state of affairs is represented by the rewritten version. Has it become a gardener's lament? If the invisible worm is not a botanical scourge, what do we conceive it and its love to be? Culler and I take it for granted that these questions do not arise in the poem Blake wrote, but the issue is how one accounts for the poem's success. An analysis by one of the great modernist critics, F. R. Leavis, shows why Culler wants to put pressure on older modes of interpretation. Leavis says that "The Sick Rose" shows Blake's habit of "seeing elements of our inner experience as clearly defined objects"; he praises the clarity and directness of its vision without overemphasizing (as modernist critics often did) elements of physical description and presence. "Bed of crimson joy," he points out, appeals to more than our sense of sight and touch.⁶ "We feel ourselves 'bedding down' in the Rose, and there is also a suggestion of a secret heart, . . . the focus of life, down there at the core of the closely clustered and enclosing petals." Hence the invisible worm, "offering its shock of contrast to the warm security of love, . . . conveys the ungovernable otherness of the dark forces of the psyche." Leavis praises "The Sick Rose" in terms similar to those in which modernist critics, he among them, praise the seventeenth-century poems they esteem. He admires the concreteness with which it presents matters of the inner life—both expressing their urgency and seeing them for what they are. "The presence of 'thought,'" he says, "goes with the focused and pregnant strength, the concentration of significant feeling" (229).

Culler would question whether "The Sick Rose" exemplifies objective vision. Leavis says: "We hesitate to call the Rose a symbol, because 'symbol' is

apt to imply something very different from the immediacy with which Blake sees, feels and states in terms of his image—the inevitableness with which the Rose presents itself to him as the focus of his ‘observation’” (228). Culler would point out that there is no sense in which the rose presents itself to the poet; on the contrary, it is the energy with which the poet calls the rose into being that conveys the “inevitableness” of its presence. “To apostrophize,” Culler says, “is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire” (139). It is Blake’s speaker who imagines that the rose is a “bed of crimson joy.” This phrase makes no sense for the rose itself, not even if it is personified; as Leavis’s paraphrase shows, it is rather the invader’s imagining of erotic experience. It is the speaker—such is the force of the apostrophe—who is finding out the heart of this flower and who enacts a “dark, secret love.” If we do not say that he *is* the invisible worm, we can say that the invisible worm is believable, can be said to exist, only on his say-so. Among other things, one feels an intimate connection between “the howling storm” and the speaker’s vocalization.

“The Sick Rose” helps us understand a further element in Culler’s critique of modernist practices and values. Leavis wants to contrast “The Sick Rose” with more self-indulgent romantic poems, so he says that “its intensity is not one of emotional insistence; . . . there is no atmosphere of feeling and no I” (227). But a first person is implicit in and indeed constituted by the initial apostrophe, and there is surely some kind of insistence in this poem. It conveys—amazingly, for so short a poem—a sense of prophetic revelation. But what is revealed? Certainly not what a rose is in itself (whatever that might be) nor even, as Leavis says, what it might be thought to stand for as a symbol. If the poem reveals “the dark forces of the psyche,” it can only do so, Culler would argue, because it also reveals the poet making a poem of the rose. (With this acknowledgment, implicit in its procedures, it overcomes the potential embarrassment of strong apostrophizing.) In discussing Blake’s earlier and more conventional poem, “To Spring,” Culler says, it “evokes not a love for an empirical season of the year, so much as an intense feeling for the act of addressing this season” (139). Substitute “rose” for “season” and I think this applies to “The Sick Rose.” For all its startling originality, it is centrally concerned with reconstruing a familiar image.

This image occurs in many Renaissance lyrics, and the question is whether Culler’s kind of analysis applies to them. Here is a poem, by Edmund Waller, that was once as famous as Blake’s:

Go, lovely rose!
 Tell her that wastes her time and me
 That now she knows
 When I resemble her to thee,
 How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,
And shuns to have her graces spied,
That hadst thou sprung
In deserts where no men abide,
Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth
Of beauty from the light retired;
Bid her come forth,
Suffer herself to be desired,
And not blush so to be admired.

Then die, that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee;
How small a part of time they share,
That are so wondrous sweet and fair!

Why is this poem so different from Blake's? We can adopt one of Culler's methods and observe that it begins with "Go," rather than "O." This is not a trivial observation, for what Culler calls "the pure *O* of undifferentiated voicing" (142) is central to his account. Even though Waller addresses the rose, it would seem odd to say that he wills it into being and endows it with powers of speech and locomotion. Just as Blake's opening words indicate the prophetically defining nature of his poem, so Waller's first stanza shows the social character of his song. It is a love offering, both admiring and admonitory, a compliment and a warning. The rose replicates the verbal artifact, in that it is both the gift sent and a means of sending a message, as we say, to the lady. This is not to say that apostrophizing the rose is an idle device. By deflecting his address from the lady to the flower who resembles her, the speaker makes the various arguments against virginity less insistent and thus gives an air of graciousness and innocent desire to his pointed wit. Suppose the third stanza were rewritten in the following way:

Small is the worth
Of beauty from the light retired;
Now then, come forth,
Suffer yourself to be desired,
And do not blush to be admired.

This is what the rose is supposed to say to the lady, but when the speaker says it directly to her, it sounds like haranguing. Unlike Blake's address to the rose, Waller's decreases the intensity of the speaker's involvement. He has a kind of social relation to the flower he sends—he is dependent on it as his emissary—and this sense of the situation leaves room for the lady, in

her turn, to respond in a social manner. There is room to allow “suffer herself to be desired” to refer to her social presence—that is, what is desired is that she come forth—and to turn one possible implication of the rose’s red color, that it represents virginal blushing, into a more worldly suggestion, that the lady emulate the flower in being admired for her natural hue.

On the basis of these two rose poems, we could make the following general argument. It is essential to Culler’s argument that apostrophe animates what is (recognized as) inanimate (139); hence his account limits itself to the post-Enlightenment lyric. By contrast, Renaissance lyrics are characteristically addressed to what Culler calls “empirical listeners”—or, alternatively, to beings (like God) who are conceived as real. In Waller’s poem, the apostrophe is a turning away from the conceived auditor, the lady, to the rose, which is not thereby animated, but rather has a metonymic relation to both speaker and addressee. It also has a metaphoric relation to the lady. Where the romantic poet provides the breath of life that makes the flower resemble a human being, the seventeenth-century poet takes the likenesses (from the red color to attractive loveliness to mortality) as aspects of reality, and his mode of address is therefore easier and cooler. One understands why Cleanth Brooks, in a courteous polemic against nineteenth-century poetics, used rose poems contemporary with Waller’s to argue that “witty poets [can] use the effect of frivolous ingenuity as a means to a serious intensity.”⁷ If Culler asks us to acknowledge the extravagance of romantic apostrophe, we in our turn might call attention to the milder forcefulness of Renaissance examples—the apostrophe in the couplet of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 30 (“But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restored, and sorrows end”); the beginning of Herbert’s “Virtue” (“Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright”); or the turn from representing Cromwell in the third person to addressing him, at the end of Marvell’s “Horatian Ode.”

II

But we should respond to Culler in a more fundamental way. There are harder cases than poems addressed to real persons or to fictional mistresses or to God. What about invocations of muses or addresses to abstract forces or entities—Donne’s “Death be not proud,” for example, or Shakespeare’s “Devouring Time, blunt though the lion’s paws” (Sonnet 19)? In these two poems, there is clearly a relation between strong voicing and personification. Let us imagine Culler turning his attention to Shakespeare’s sonnet:

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
 And make the earth devour her own sweet brood,
 Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
 And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood,
 Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleet'st,
 And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
 To the wide world and all her fading sweets:
 But I forbid thee one most heinous crime,
 O carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow,
 Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen;
 Him in thy course untainted do allow
 For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.
 Yet do thy worst, old Time: despite thy wrong,
 My love shall in my verse ever live young.

This is not one of the great sonnets, for reasons noted by Helen Vendler at the beginning of her commentary—"the disproportionate imaginative efforts in the octave and sestet" and the difficulty of accepting wrinkles in a young man's brow as time's "most heinous crime." "The murderous vitality of the opening quatrain," Vendler suggests, "issues . . . from the Shakespeare of the tragedies, while the rest of the poem lies more equably . . . in the elegiac mode."⁸ As is her practice throughout her commentary, Vendler then proceeds to make the best case she can for the poem, mainly by straightening out its line of thought. "In a sense, the speaker has already, in thought, enumerated the ordinary crimes of Time's *swift[ness]* voiced in the second quatrain *before* he bursts out with the first quatrain, which represents the second, worse level of crime, crime *contra Naturam*" (125). If we thus understand the thought of the octave, we can see the point of the sestet: if Time can denature the lion and tiger and destroy the supposedly immortal phoenix, it can threaten the Platonic form of "beauty's pattern," and this, not fleshly wrinkles, would be its "heinous crime."

What would Culler say of this account? It would seem to show that even so remarkable a critic as Vendler goes out of her way, by reordering the first two quatrains, to ignore an initial apostrophe and turn it into description. The poem, Culler might say, depends on the vigor of its opening lines (compare Vendler on their "murderous vitality"), which in turn depends on the series of imperatives to Time. He might then draw attention to line 8—"But I forbid thee one most heinous crime"—as a quintessentially embarrassing apostrophe. Vendler of course recognizes this: at the end of her discussion, she refers to "the almost blustering bravado" of this line and the first quatrain. But Culler would argue that an account of the sonnet must more fully acknowledge the relation between its apostrophizing and its lyric force.

Though I hardly think Vendler is here guilty of a critical crime, much less a heinous one, I would agree that Culler's imperative—never ignore

apostrophes—is important in reading this poem. And yet I do not think it answers to his account of lyric apostrophizing. To see this, let us bring in one of the most productive of Vendler’s ideas about lyric—that in reading a lyric, one assumes the role of its first-person speaker. Looking back on his essay, on the occasion of its republication, Culler himself adjusted it in this direction. He had originally started from John Stuart Mill’s dictum (endorsed by Northrop Frye) that “the lyric is not heard but overheard” (137). Now he calls upon us to recognize that “lyrics, unlike novels, are also spoken by the reader. . . . We are not simply overhearing the speech of another, whom we strive to identify from this speech, but are ourselves trying out, trying on this speech.”⁹ The central question, then, is: what kind of speaker does an apostrophizing lyricist, or the reader who takes on his character, become? Culler’s answer to this question is that the apostrophizing voice not only seeks to animate an external world but also to “dramatize its calling, to summon images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetical and prophetic voice.” Taking Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” as his example and invoking Whitman along the way, Culler says that in sustaining apostrophic discourse, “the speaker produces the poetic event and is constituted as poetical spirit” (142). “Apostrophe,” he concludes, “is perhaps always an indirect invocation of the muse” (143).

Despite his claim that “my love shall in my verse ever live young,” Shakespeare’s apostrophizing speaker has a different character from Culler’s Romantic lyricist. Throughout the octave, not only in the second quatrain, he speaks as a man who knows the effects of time in the world of nature and its creatures. It is perhaps misleading to call its first effects *contra Naturam*. Aged lions will have blunted claws, and aged tigers will lose their teeth; animals and humans will return to the earth, and the mythical phoenix is not immortal, *tout court*, but is reborn from the ashes of its self-immolation. This is a very inadequate account of the first quatrain, but it does give us a perspective on the relationship between apostrophe and its poetic force. It is not the case that personification itself, which here represents time’s effects as violent actions, depends on direct address. Other sonnets personify Time while representing its devastations in the third person. Sonnet 64, for example, begins:

When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced
 The rich proud cost of outworn buried age,
 When sometime lofty towers I see down razed,
 And brass eternal slave to mortal rage.
 (ll. 1–4)

“Time’s fell hand” is made plausible not by apostrophe, but by the ambiguous agency of “down razed” and “mortal rage,” which support the personification

of time by recognizing that human actions are responsible for its effects. The lyric speaker appears here as someone who meditates on time, who will say, toward the end of the poem, “Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare.” How shall we define the character of the speaker who says, “Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion’s paws”? We can begin by specifying the mood of this and the other verbs in lines 1–4. They sound like commands, but Vendler’s calling them “concessions” (“Go ahead and do even these extraordinary things”) is supported by the tone of lines 5–6. In the first case, the speaker claims to have power over the forces of time; in the second, he defies them. In either case, by addressing time in this way he represents himself as its heroic antagonist; his extravagance (to follow Culler) is representing Time as the ultimate enemy. This is a role in which the speaker of this group of sonnets has a considerable stake. Sonnet 15, which begins as a meditation (“When I consider everything that grows”), concludes: “And all at war with Time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I ingraft you new.” As if picking up this metaphor, Sonnet 16 begins (addressing the young man): “But wherefore do not you a mightier way / Make war upon this bloody tyrant Time?”

We can now see two ways in which Sonnet 19 does not answer to Culler’s account. First, apostrophe does not have a unique or even unusual importance in Renaissance *prosopopeia*. Second, when it occurs, it does not ipso facto (seek to) establish the speaker as a poet. This might be the case when the speaker invokes a muse, but the beginning of Sonnet 19 suggests human roles—a warrior, a commander, even a monarch (compare Sonnets 29, 87, 114)—that are metaphoric for his activity in writing. Conversely, the non-human addressees of Renaissance lyric are not brought to (poetic) life on the terms suggested by the polarity of inanimate and animate. Rather, they are humanized by entering into plausible relations with the roles assumed by lyric speakers. Both the degree of humanization and its plausibility are a matter of rhetorical tact and performance. “Go, lovely rose” succeeds by the justness with which it plays off metonymy and personification. “But I forbid thee one most heinous crime” is rhetorically empty, because the roles that suggestively coalesced in the first quatrain come apart: the speaker suddenly assumes complete, quasi-monarchical authority over his previously formidable antagonist.

A final example, from this same group of sonnets, will show the intimate relationship between voice and figuration.

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer’s lease hath all too short a date;
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

the empty “O” of prophetic invocation. In Shakespeare, the same sound produces an ironizing pun (“ow’st”), but the play of meanings is not between the spiritual and physical, nor does it draw attention to vocalizing and its potential emptiness. Rather its irony involves conflicting referential senses (“own” and “owe”), which encode the ontological and moral questions about human self-possession that run through the sonnets to the young man.

Having repeatedly drawn attention to presumably solid realities that underlie the usages of Renaissance lyric, I want to make clear that they are as vulnerable to the instabilities of rhetoric as post-Enlightenment lyrics. In some of the greatest sonnets, Shakespearean asseveration courts absurdity: “If this be error and upon me proved, / I never lived and no man ever loved” (Sonnet 116). Sonnet 18 scales down its extravagance by the modulations of its couplet, but it nevertheless opens up alternative meanings and perspectives that it stabilizes or contains to whatever degree your critical tastes incline you. Shall we say that the young man is a creature of extraordinary, perhaps more than human, beauty and worth? Or is he made (that is, represented as) such by the intensity of his lover’s feelings? (This is a familiar dilemma in sonnets from Petrarch on; exploring it is a main literary motive of Shakespeare’s sonnet project.) Or shall we say that the high rhetoric of the lines we have examined aggrandizes not the addressee but the maker himself of these “eternal lines”? The greatness of the sonnets lies in the way they open up such questions and set them in unresolved, though nevertheless coherent, relations to each other.

III

Culler emphasizes prophetic invocation, but does not confine his argument to instances of it. One of his romantic proof texts, Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” has the quieter, more meditative tone that I have associated with Renaissance examples: “Thou still unravished bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time.” This is not a prophetic *O*, summoning into life, but the apostrophe is just as consequential. The human address makes plausible the personification of “bride,” and the calm tone of voice, so unlike Blake and Shelley, endows it/her with attributes—“unravished” and “of quietness”—that answer to the speaker’s feelings. Compare the opening lines of Henry King’s “Exequy,” a seventeenth-century “sound-alike” that addresses a similar object:

Accept thou Shrine of my Dead Saint,
Instead of Dirges this Complaint,
And for sweet flowres to crowne thy Hearse
Receive a strew of weeping verse

From thy griev'd Friend: whome Thou mightst see
Quite melted into Teares for Thee.

(ll. 1–6)

To make it eligible for the mild personification of “accept,” the beloved’s shrine does not require the kind of breathing into life that makes the Grecian urn a metaphoric “unravished bride” and then a “foster-child of silence.” The relation of “thou Shrine of my Dead Saint” to the speaker is metonymic, even if he is only present in thought at his wife’s tomb. Hence the easy transition to directly addressing his wife—ambiguously in “thy Hearse” (the framework over a coffin, so that this phrase could still address the “shrine” that contains the remains of the “saint”) and unambiguously in the last line, “Quite melted into Teares for Thee.”

This metonymic relation—that is, of something represented as contiguous to the speaker—is characteristic of apostrophes in Renaissance lyric. Obvious examples are Wyatt’s “My lute awake,” Donne’s “Busy old fool, unruly sun,” and Herbert’s “Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright.” But metonymic address is not confined to putatively real situations (Donne’s speaker awakened by the sun) or props (Wyatt’s lute). Marvell’s “Fair Quiet, have I found thee here?” (“The Garden,” stanza 2) may sound like one of Culler’s romantic examples, but its lyric plausibility comes from the speaker’s situation, as the ensuing lines bring out: “Mistaken long, I sought you then / In busy companies of men.” One whole category of lyric personifications—human faculties or emotions—are not addressed as abstractions brought to life by the apostrophizing poet (compare Wordsworth’s “Ode to Duty”) but are conceived to be in a metonymic relation to the speaker, as part of his/her being. Sidney’s “Desire, though thou my old companion art” (*Astrophil and Stella* 72) exemplifies and thematizes this relation.

We shall see, at the end of this essay, why metonymic addresses appear so often in Renaissance lyric. But heeding Culler’s imperative, we should first ask what is the effect of the metonymic address that initiates King’s “Exequy.” Though direct address to the beloved emerges readily, as if naturally, the poem does not claim her (fictional) presence. On the contrary, the next line after the ones just quoted begins by addressing her as “Dear Losse.” Equally striking, when we think of Culler’s argument, is that even with its mild personification, the opening apostrophe does not seek to overcome the inanimate character of a shrine. Rather, its literal sense—a casket or tomb enclosing the remains of a saint or other highly valued person—underpins the rhetorical usages that follow. After “Dear Losse,” the speaker next addresses his dead wife as “Lov’d Clay” (l. 11). This locution tilts the representation of a shrine (an object of devotion made of earthly materials) toward an expression of grief, an emotional dilemma that

is fully stated later: “And ’twixt mee and my Soules deare wish / The Earth now interposed is” (ll. 35–36). Yet in a sense this is not a new reality. Death simply makes drastic the awareness that any human is “loved clay.” From this recognition emerges the metaphor of the beloved as the speaker’s “sun,” which is not due here to the fiat of Petrarchan convention. It first appears when the speaker says “Thou hast Benighted mee” (l. 23): that is, it is bound, and perhaps even generated, by the conditions of earthly existence, and it brings with it a series of conceits that convey the mourner’s entrapment in time. We will not pause to admire the brilliance of this passage (ll. 21–38), a famous example of “metaphysical wit.” What is pertinent to our concerns is that the poem is not done with apostrophe. In the next passage (ll. 39–60), the speaker’s desire to be free of earthly time leads him to acknowledge, still addressing his wife, that they can be present to each other only after the Last Judgment:

That fitt of Fire
 Once off, our Bodyes shall aspire
 To our Soules blisse: Then wee shall rise,
 And view our selves with cleerer eyes
 In that calme Region, where no Night
 Can hide us from each others sight.
 Mean time, thou hast Hir Earth: Much good
 May my harme doe thee.

(ll. 55–62)

This striking shift is a genuine apostrophe, a turning aside from one listener to address another. Insofar as it personifies earth (more distinctly than the first line personified “thou shrine”) it recalls Culler’s account. Yet apostrophe here is not a trope of transcendence; it is rather a reality check, literally bringing the still-human speaker back to earth. The next lines are correspondingly sober. They start from the recognition that “it stood / With Heavens will I might not call / Hir longer mine” (ll. 63–64), and twice says—once elaborately, once plainly—“I give thee what I could not keep” (l. 68). This address does not feel at all charged or arbitrary, but at just this point some serious personification appears:

Be kind to Hir: and prethee look
 Thou write into thy Doomsday book
 Each parcell of this Rarity
 Which in thy Caskett shrin’d doth ly.

(ll. 69–72)

Earth itself now supersedes any artifact as the “shrine of my dead saint.” This is less another sobering awareness than a conceit that enhances imaginative

life. The personifying apostrophe brings out a double suggestion in “thy Caskett”—not only that the earth itself is a casket, but it is also the proud possessor of one. Evidently, the poem has not yet done with strong apostrophizing:

See that thou make thy reck'ning streight,
And yeeld Hir back againe by weight.
For thou must Auditt on thy trust
Each Grane and Atome of this Dust,
As thou wilt answer Him that leant,
Not gave thee, my deare Monument.
(ll. 73–78)

Earth is addressed as if it were a recording angel. One might say that the poem's promise of eventual reunion with the beloved depends on a belief not only in the salvation of souls but also in the resurrection of the body. But even if the personifying fiction is thus grounded in reality, what right does the human lover have to speak this way? The extravagance of conceit and address here, familiar enough in seventeenth-century poetry, might seem a preromantic example of the embarrassment of apostrophe.

Yet the end of the passage is not at all extravagant. In the final couplet, a form of self-address emerges from the fictive adjurations of the earth. When we hear these lines as self-admonition, they both bring the passage full circle (repeating in “leant” the recognition that his wife was not his to possess or keep) and at the same time register an important change. Rather than expressing “a most free and bounteous grief” (l. 67), they suggest the resolution that comes from understanding that the end (in both senses) of life is beyond the grave. As the poem continues, we see that this is a pivotal moment:

So close the ground, and 'bout hir shade
Black Curtaines draw, My Bride is lay'd.
Sleep on my Love in thy cold bed
Never to be disquieted.
My last Good-night! Thou wilt not wake
Till I Thy Fate shall overtake:
Till age, or grief, or sicknes must
Marry my Body to that Dust
It so much loves.
(ll. 79–87)

Though the imperatives continue, we cannot imagine that the first couplet is addressed to the earth: it has the force of a command to the speaker himself or, more vaguely, to others in attendance (an “exequy” is a funeral ceremony). In either case, it shows that he accepts the finality of his bride's burial. “Mean time, thou hast Hir Earth” thus proves, in the end, to be a

metonymic address. From this turning point proceeds the final third of the poem, in which, as Charles Altieri says, the speaker “find[s] a mode of address capable of granting that she is dead without giving up on the specificity and intimacy of his love.”¹⁰ This achieved tone, as Altieri calls it, is evident in the last three lines just quoted. Calling his beloved “dust” is a new recognition: it first appears in addressing the earth (l. 76), and is different from “Lov’d Clay,” which ambiguously includes her living form. The lines are so resonant and moving, because, as formulated, they express not only desire for reunion but also the desire for death itself, as if in a seventeenth-century *ars moriendi*. An equally significant change in the poem appears in the preceding line, “Till I Thy Fate shall overtake.” The agency here attributed to the speaker is different from his self-representations and implicit roles in the first half of the poem. The speaker who first calls himself “quite melted into tears for thee” (l. 6) remains passive and suffering for the next forty lines. By the same token, the conceits that are developed from “Thou hast benighted me” (l. 23) all attribute agency to the metaphoric sun. After “I Thy Fate shall overtake,” both the metaphor it hints at and the speaker’s implicit agency control the rest of the poem:

Stay for mee there: I will not faile
 To meet Thee in that hollow Vale.
 And think not much of my delay,
 I am already on the way,
 And follow Thee with all the speed
 Desire can make, or Sorrows breed.
 (ll. 89–94)

These moving lines are matched in the final comparison of his life to a journey toward death, when the speaker takes on the role (familiar in both Stoic and Christian thought) of a true soldier:

But hark! My Pulse like a soft Drum
 Beates my Approach; Tells Thee I come;
 And slowe howe’re my Marches bee,
 I shall at last sitt downe by Thee.
 (ll. 111–14)

I hope this is a convincing account of the long passage that begins with the address to earth, but we still have not made it clear why apostrophe is essential to it. Altieri speaks of King’s “concern for the dynamics of address” and suggests that the poem’s achievement is due to the bride’s “continual dialogical presence in his imagination” (97). This is so just overall that it may seem niggling to point out that her “continual dialogical presence” is interrupted by the turn to another addressee in “Mean time, thou hast Hir Earth.” Still, this is what happens in the poem, and we should ask why. In

some ways, the willing surrender of what was only lent (compare “with a most free and bounteous grief”) and the adjuration to preserve the dust of the deceased could be addressed to God himself. But this poem is committed to the continuity, not the giving over, of human love, and it is therefore crucial to invoke a being, however fictive, more like the speaker himself. Hence the earth appears first as a rival (“Much good / May my harme doe thee”) to whom the speaker must surrender his claims, and then, in lines initiated by a fresh address (“Be kind to Hir”), as a recording angel. I would understand this second, bolder usage in the following way: The earth, so addressed, serves as a self-image, one consonant with reality as King understood it, that enables the human speaker to continue to value his physical beloved as individuated and precious, even in the form of the dust to which she has returned. Culler’s principle seems applicable here: “The vocative of apostrophe is a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps to constitute him” (142). Yet self-constitution in this poem is quite different from Culler’s post-Enlightenment examples. He cites the end of Rilke’s ninth *Duino Elegy*:

Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: unsichtbar
in uns erstehn?—Ist es dein Traum nicht,
einmal unsichtbar zu sein?

[Earth, isn’t this what you want? an invisible
rearing in us? Is it not your dream
to be one day invisible?]

“Addressing Earth,” Culler says, “the poem embraces the apostrophic fiction: that the things of earth function as *thous* when addressed. If they are subjects, they seek, like all subjects, to transcend a purely material condition, they aspire to transcendence” (145). The relations between transcendence and material condition are wholly different in a seventeenth-century poet. King’s speaker seeks not to overcome but to reconceive his material situation in the face of his losses and desires. He addresses the earth not as inanimate object but in imagined roles analogous to those often assumed by lyric speakers themselves. In the economy of Renaissance apostrophe, we might say, personification precedes, rather than is the consequence of, an address to what is inanimate.

IV

Although this essay is a critique of Culler, I hope I have made clear how much it is indebted to him. In one sense its upshot is an invitation to practical criticism—to consider the many apostrophizing lyrics of the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the light of the questions he raises. But a more general conclusion is possible, and it should answer two questions. Why are metonymic apostrophes characteristic of Renaissance lyrics? And what is the relation between these and the tendency of first-person speakers to assume or hint at various specifiable roles? The first question is readily answered, at least in part. A great many Renaissance lyrics are occasional in a strict sense, utterances in real situations and circumstances. Funeral elegies, like King's "Exequy," are a main group of such poems, but there are many others—dedications, prefatory poems, epithalamia, political poems. Other lyrics concern what we might call generically real situations. Waller's "Go, lovely rose" does not speak within a situation as specifiable as that of Marvell's "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland," but its tone and gestures suggest a relation within a social world, like many of Wyatt's love poems and some sonnet sequences, such as *Astrophil and Stella*. In these rhetorical conditions, metonymic address is to be expected. The desire whom Sidney's *Astrophil* calls "my old companion" is not only an intimate of his inner being but, as emerges in the sonnet's sestet, a feeling that must be "banished" from manifesting itself socially (that is, in *Astrophil's* bearing) in *Stella's* presence.

These principles of situation, address, and self-representation extend beyond obvious and clear examples. Take the opening lines of Spenser's *Epithalamion*:

Ye learned sisters which have oftentimes
 beene to me ayding, others to adorne:
 Whom ye thought worthy of your gracefull rymes
 (ll. 1–3)

Even for a classicizing, preromantic poet, the muses would seem to be purely fictive and metaphoric, therefore not likely objects of metonymic address. Yet the speaker's representation of his relation to the muses has a doubly metonymic aspect. In the first place, they are far from being figures of pure poetry of the sort Culler means when he says, "Apostrophe is perhaps always an indirect invocation of the muse" (143). The muses Spenser addresses have aided the poet in his social role, adorning others—the Queen, for example, in *The Faerie Queene*, or the aristocrats to whom he dedicated other poems (though *Prothalamion*, the poem that most fully answers to his self-representation here, had not yet been written). Moreover, the third line is ambiguous in a way that evokes another metonymic representation. Does the "whom" of the relative clause refer to those the poet "adorns" or to himself, as the one who deploys "gracefull rymes"? In the latter case, the line has a hint of a common Elizabethan locution, "my muse," as, most famously, in the first sonnet of *Astrophil and Stella*:

Thus great with child to speake, and helplesse in my throwes,
Biting my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,
Foole, said my Muse to me, looke in thy heart and write.
(ll. 12–14)

The syntax of the sentence brings out the fact that “my Muse” is a self-representation: from a grammatical standpoint, the expected beginning of the last line is something like, “Foole, said I to my self.” “My Muse” thus has the same kind of metonymic relation to one’s self as will, reason, desire, and other elements of one’s inner being. The pertinence of “my Muse” to *Epithalamion*’s opening invocation emerges in the lines that follow those just quoted:

That even the greatest did not greatly scorne
To heare theyr names sung in your simple layes.
(ll. 4–5)

It would seem odd to call the lays of the learned sisters “simple,” were it not that we already feel the presence of the speaker, doubly dependent on the great ones he praises and on whatever powers enable him to speak well. We can accept the attribution of his own simplicity to the goddesses of song, because behind “your simple layes” we sense the presence of “my simple layes.” It is perhaps pertinent that Spenser’s best-known poetic persona was the shepherd Colin Clout.

Epithalamion is a telling counterexample to one of Culler’s most interesting observations. To show the fundamental opposition between apostrophic poetry and narrative, he says:

The fact that apostrophe involves a drama of “the one mind’s” modifications more than a relationship between an *I* and a *you* emerges with special clarity in poems with multiple apostrophes. Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode,” for example, brings together in a single unreal space “Thou child of joy,” “ye blessed creatures,” “ye birds,” and “ye fountains, meadows, hills, and groves.” Brought together by apostrophes, they function as nodes or concretizations of stages in a drama of mind. (148)

By contrast, *Epithalamion*—an occasional poem, like others of its genre—purports to exist in real space (for example, the church where the wedding takes place and the bedchamber that is the scene of the final stanzas) and real time (there are twenty-four stanzas, corresponding to the hours of the wedding day, and the sun sets in the stanza/hour it would have on the date of the poet’s marriage). Hence even though the poet often addresses fictive beings—the Muses, various local nymphs, the three Graces—they serve as attendants in putatively real actions, like dressing the bride and bringing her forth from her chamber. By the same token, they merge easily with “real”

addressees like “ye fresh boyes that tend upon her groome” (l. 112) and “ye merchants daughters” (l. 166). Like others of its genre, Spenser’s epithalamion represents a specifiable progress through the wedding day, and thus would seem to undo the opposition between apostrophic poetry and narrative.

Our second question is: what kind of connection is there between apostrophes in Renaissance lyrics and the tendency of their speakers to assume identifiable roles? Some connection certainly seems to exist. When the speaker of King’s “Exequy” asks “the shrine of my dead saint” to accept “instead of dirges this complaint,” he indicates that the poem belongs to one genre (the one in which love loss is expressed) and not to another (one appropriate in a real funeral ceremony). In identifying what kind of poem this is, he identifies himself as a certain kind of speaker. But I am not sure we can argue for the intimate connection Culler finds between the very act of apostrophizing and poetic self-constitution in post-Enlightenment lyrics. Sometimes there is a sufficiently direct connection between (metonymic) apostrophe and self-identification, and it need not always be as explicit as King’s “thy griev’d Friend.” It is not difficult to assign a social character or fictional role to the speaker of “Go, lovely rose” or “Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion’s paws.” But the speaker of Herbert’s “Virtue,” a very apostrophic poem, is less easy to pin down from his tone of voice or mode of address, even though he explicitly identifies himself as the maker of the poem when he says, “My music shows ye have your closes [musical termination as well as end generally].” Or consider the different poetic characters implied by some initial apostrophes in Donne’s Holy Sonnets. “Spit in my face, ye Jews” takes on, in a way consistent with meditative practices, the character of someone present at the Crucifixion or even, momentarily, of Christ himself. “At the round earth’s imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets angels” speaks, whether it is in the tongue of men or of angels and again as in religious meditation, as if calling forth the Last Judgment. (“Blow” here would seem to be a Cullerian invocation, with the “o” sound self-reflexively naming the poet’s utterance, but compare its specificity of role in a conceived situation with the pure emptiness, if I can call it that, of Shelley’s “O wild west wind, thou breath of autumn’s being.”)¹¹ On the other hand, it seems somewhat artificial to pin down the speaker of “Death be not proud” as a resolved Christian soul, or the speaker of “Batter my heart, three-personed God” as a desperate, heart-hardened sinner. In these two cases, it seems better to fall back on the general rule of allowing the speaker’s character to emerge as one imaginatively performs the poem.

The important point is that taking on the role of the first-person speaker is different in reading Renaissance lyrics than in reading romantic or post-romantic lyrics. *How* different is, of course, the crucial question. If this essay

is on the right track, our general accounts of lyric poetry, like our interpretations of individual poems, should be alert to the way the poetics of lyric vary from culture to culture. The tension between “historical” and “critical” interpretations of literary works is of long standing, and I suppose this essay might be thought to accuse Culler of lacking historical awareness. In fact, in confining his account to post-Enlightenment lyrics, he shows quite sufficient historical awareness. What I would claim is that extending the questions he raises to earlier lyrics brings out the way reading these poems entails adjusting our notions about their workings and appeal—in short, their rhetoric. One of the most valuable emphases of deconstructive criticism, handsomely exemplified by Culler’s essay, has been to expand our ideas of rhetoric and to insist on the inherently rhetorical character of literary expression. Our next task, as students of lyric, may be to abandon the search for a unified field theory of so protean a form and to identify and explore the various rhetorics of lyric, as they manifest themselves in the literary cultures of different times and places.

Notes

1. Jonathan D. Culler, “Apostrophe,” in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY, 1981).
2. Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986).
3. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 9.2.38, in *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols. (London, 1922), 2:41.
4. J. Douglas Kneale, “Wordsworth, Milton, and a Question of Genre,” *Modern Philology* 109, no. 2 (November 2011): 208n35.
5. L. M. Findlay, “Culler and Byron on Apostrophe and Lyric Time,” *Studies in Romanticism* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1985): 338.
6. F. R. Leavis, “Judgment and Analysis: Notes in the Analysis of Poetry,” in *A Selection from Scrutiny* (Cambridge, 1968), 2:227, 229.
7. Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1939), 20.
8. Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 124.
9. Jonathan D. Culler, “Preface to the Augmented Edition,” in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ, 2001), xv.
10. Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca, 2003), 104.
11. On these two sonnets, see Louis Lohr Martz, *Poetry of Meditation: A Study of English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, 1962), 49–52.