



Addressing the Inanimate: Apostrophic Address in W.S. Graham's "Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch"

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Abstract

In this paper, I evaluate the viability of the traditional form and definition of apostrophic address in lyric poetry, which involves an address by a speaker to an entity which should be incapable of a response. I provide a detailed close-reading of W.S. Graham's "Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch" as an example of an instance when this typical definition of apostrophe breaks down by providing the inanimate addressee sentient qualities, in that the inanimate addressee responds to the speaker of the poem. Scholars have considered at length the implications of an unresponsive addressee, but I argue that instances in poetry where the inanimate addressee responds to the speaker expand the boundaries of what the apostrophe is capable of by moving away from the subjective and private connotations attached to apostrophic address towards an objective and public account or critique of the thematic qualities expressed in the piece. By addressing previous scholarly interpretations of the apostrophe, and providing an example of an apostrophic address which does not conform to the typical definition, this paper provides a necessary intervention into the scholarly literature concerning the apostrophic address which has not previously been considered.

The traditional form of apostrophic address in lyric poetry incorporates a speaker who addresses a person or object from which a response is either impossible or highly unanticipated; what Jonathan Culler refers to as an "invocation of impossible addressees" (*Theory of the Lyric* 187) and Barbara Johnson defines as a "direct address to an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker" (Johnson 31). In constructing a piece with this format, the poet is able to emphasize the importance of the inanimate addressee, the reader's response, and the emotional output of the speaker. The addressee becomes a vehicle through which the poet can incorporate further detail in constructing and analyzing the possible implications and defining characteristics of the lyric address. In this sense, the apostrophe accomplishes something other forms of address are unable to in that the addressee becomes particularly important in analyzing the thematic qualities of a particular poem, representing some motivational aspect driving the speaker to

address this particular person or object. In “Apostrophe,” Jonathan Culler describes their function as “intensifiers, as images of invested passion,” which “make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces” (“Apostrophe” 60-61). What is of particular interest in this description is the transformation of the potential to respond that Culler acknowledges, to an actual response, and the implications contained therein. In apostrophic address, the addressee represents the speaker’s attempt to identify the “universe as a world of sentient forces” (“Apostrophe” 61), but in many cases, these sentient forces remain silent. Scholars have addressed the apostrophe as a poetic form in which an *unresponsive* addressee is the focal point, but there is something to be said of situations in which the inanimate being or object *responds* in some capacity to the speaker. I argue that this response from an inanimate being or object complicates the current conception of apostrophe by marking a decided turn away from the subjective and private introspection typical of apostrophe, to an objective account of the themes the poem relates, and forces the speaker, and, consequently, the reader to observe an objective critique of the speaker and the poem’s thematic qualities.

W.S. Graham’s “Lines on Roger Hilton’s Watch” reflects both of these situations, which distort and complicate the function of the apostrophe and demand consideration of the apostrophe as an objective poetic form in addition to its established subjective form. In utilizing an object that typically would be unable to respond to the speaker and giving it a speaking part in the piece, the poet opens the possibility for an actual dialogue between the object (which in Graham’s poem I argue is a projection of the speaker on the object) and the speaker, which intensifies emotion, and forces the speaker to employ objective reason in regards to the content of the poem or these emotions through introspection. Through an analysis of this poem and of the traditional function of apostrophe, it will be made clear that the inanimate response in apostrophe is a driving force behind these aspects that complicates the structure of the conventional triangulated address and alters the relationship between the speaker and the addressee by creating a possibility for discourse between the two entities that must be considered objectively.

By providing a response to the speaker in the case of apostrophe, Graham complicates what Culler refers to in *Theory of the Lyric* as the triangulated address, or the “address to the reader by means of address to something or someone else” (*Theory of the Lyric* 186). In this model, the speaker addresses the audience indirectly through the addressee of the poem and, thus, the triangular effect, but it remains necessary to elucidate the meaning and reason for poetry in which the speaker begins as one entity, then shifts to another inanimate entity that was initially the addressee. When the poet assigns sentient qualities to the inanimate addressee, this model becomes something more than what Barbara Johnson describes in “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion” as a manipulation of the “I/Thou structure of *direct* address in an indirect, fictionalized way” (Johnson 30). She argues that this manipulation is an attempt by the poet to constitute himself or herself as the addressee; essentially the poet is saying “be thou me” (Johnson 31). In Graham’s poem, this manipulation of structure becomes a method by which

thematic information is related back to the speaker through use of the animated addressee, and consequently, this information is related more effectively to the reader. Johnson says of the inanimate entity:

The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic. Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness. (Johnson 30)

The traditional form of address in which the addressee remains inanimate emphasizes the importance of the reader in the poem by focusing on the attempt to elicit a response from the reader where a response from the addressee is not possible. In Graham's poem, this response from the reader does not disappear, but the emphasis reverts to the speaker and a more objective and public reading becomes possible through a projection of thought on the inanimate. The conflict between the subjective or inter-subjective nature of poetry is discussed at length in Scott Brewster's book, *Lyric*. Brewster outlines a distinction between subjective and inter-subjective poetry; inter-subjective is the form which allows for a more public reading and interpretation. He says of apostrophe that because the addressee is inanimate, "[t]he reader is both recipient and instigator of the act of address, and only she or he can perform the act it describes and demands: it asks the reader to *do something*" (Brewster 40). Thus, apostrophe is traditionally inter-subjective. Graham's poem complicates the importance of the reader by not only asking for the involvement of the reader, but revealing the importance of analyzing the object that is directly addressed. The response from the inanimate makes both the speaker and the addressee "recipient and instigator" (Brewster 40), while not eliminating the reader's position. To restrict the addressee from being a direct participant is to corroborate the mute responsiveness that Johnson describes and limits the functionality of the apostrophe.

The existence of apostrophic poetry where Johnson's idea of 'mute responsiveness' is directly contradicted by a responsive addressee demands further analysis of what apostrophe is and how it functions. The inter-subjective model of apostrophe in which the inanimate remains inanimate and the emphasis remains on the reader is, therefore, more complicated than the current conception of how apostrophic address functions. By having the inanimate object respond where it is unexpected, or implausible by way of what is being addressed, the speaker seems to draw the poem back to a subjective and private form in which the emphasis is placed on the introspective nature of the speaker, but this in turn opens the possibility of objective reasoning based on the response from the sentient inanimate object, which provides the unexpected, striking, and objective account to the speaker. In "Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered," J. Douglas Kneale argues that apostrophe is "literally a turning away, an aversion," from one addressee to "an invoked listener" (Kneale 144), but in cases where the inanimate object responds to the speaker, this invoked listener is actually representative of another aspect of the speaker. The inanimate response has a direct effect on the readers of the poem; they do not become absent from the triangular effect, but are

given an objective view through which to analyze the speaker. In doing so, the poet allows for a more transparent view of the themes and content of their work in the readers' analysis. Through the projection of sentient qualities onto an inanimate object, the speaker opens a discourse; a discourse between outward and intensified emotion and an inner-dialogue, which is representative of an objective account that the reader should take away as part of the thematic qualities expressed. As will be shown with Graham's poem, the objective account and its reversion provides an intensity of emotion that is arguably unparalleled in other forms of apostrophic address, which forces the speaker to account for actions objectively and provides an outline for how the reader should interpret the speaker's account.

This can be thought of as introspection through the act of projecting one's inner-dialogue. Analyzing the form, language, and tone of W.S. Graham's "Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch" exhibits this breakdown that is possible in apostrophic address. The poem, in which the speaker meditates on the nature of time in relation to a lost friend, takes the form of apostrophe by having the speaker address the watch of his late friend, Hilton. The inanimate watch, then, is the "invoked listener" (Kneale 144), and also will come to represent the "movement of voice" (Kneale 142) that makes objectivity possible. The opening stanza sets up the relationship of the speaker and Hilton, while also juxtaposing the positive elements of this relationship with the negative effects of time. The poem opens with the speaker describing the watch: "I was given [it] because / I loved him and we had / Terrible times together" (Graham 1-3). By utilizing the enjambment of lines two and three, Graham emphasizes that even the love between the two is at the mercy of time, of which sometimes were terrible. This juxtaposition of what would normally be taken as a positive reminiscence, the life of one's friend, and the terrible times they had together immediately intimates the notion of time being the reason for the speaker's rumination on both the times of their friend and time itself. The poem has set up the tone that will pervade the following stanzas until the introspection becomes possible, which causes the speaker's despondency to dissipate by objectively considering the effects of time. The second stanza further elucidates the speaker's contemplation of time through a direct address to the watch:

O tarnished ticking time
 Piece with your bent hand,
 You must be used to being
 Looked at suddenly
 In the middle of the night
 When he switched the light on
 Beside his bed. I hope
 You told him the best time
 When he lifted you up
 To meet the Hilton gaze. (Graham 4-13)

The enjambment of lines four and five makes it clear that the speaker, by addressing the watch, is not only concerned with the loss of Hilton, but also with the nature of time and time as the representative of all things that remain

inescapable. The separation of “time” and “piece” makes this possible. The speaker addresses both “tarnished ticking time” (Graham 4), and the time-piece or watch. By directly addressing the watch, it becomes possible to indirectly address time; an example of Johnson’s description of apostrophe as a manipulation of the I/Thou structure of address. In the following lines, the speaker conjures the image of Hilton checking his watch in the night, a seemingly innocuous task, but in the context of the poem, it builds on the negative tone that the speaker has created. The speaker says to the watch that he hopes it “told him the best time” (Graham 11), but the speaker conjures the dreary image of waking in the night and checking the time. The scene the speaker utilizes to express the sentiment of wanting Hilton to have had the best of times that his watch, or time, could allow is at odds with his desire to have seen a *good* time, which is expressed by providing a scene in which little joy is to be had. Any number of other scenarios could have been utilized, but by using this particular scene which is not typically thought of as joyful, the speaker has provided further evidence of being in a state of despondency, and the tone of the poem is not one of light-hearted reminiscence. At this point, the poem remains steadfastly in the realm of typical apostrophe as defined by Johnson and Culler, but as will be shown, this structure is manipulated in order to provide objectivity to a traditionally subjective poetic form.

The following two stanzas reveal the speaker’s position as overwhelmingly stuck in the times that have presumably, because of the poem’s tone, been better than the time the speaker currently occupies, the first of which compares the speaker’s relationship to the watch in reference to its time as Hilton’s watch. The speaker describes the “verdigris” (Graham 16) of the watch, but contrasts this inevitable state of decay with the fact that he at least keeps it wound. The speaker interestingly complicates the state of decay in this stanza by outlining a desire to sustain the forward movement of time. The watch inevitably has signs of wear from age, but at least it gets wound. The vocabulary that Graham has utilized punctuates the desire to rewind time or at least sustain time as long as possible. The winding of the watch represents the speaker’s desire to rewind time to a period in which the speaker is not in such a state of affairs as the scene of the poem. It is clear that the watch is showing signs of wear, as has Hilton and the speaker, but line seventeen outlines the desire to hinder the inevitable flow of time. The line reads: “At least I keep you wound” (Graham 17). This line is again indicative of the tone established throughout this section of the poem, but the importance of winding the watch also acts as an antecedent to the pivotal moment of winding the watch later, which represents the turning point when objective reason through the act of introspection has occurred. Lines eighteen and nineteen close this stanza with further reminiscence on the past and the relationship of time to the relationship of the speaker and Hilton. The speaker says to the watch, “I keep you wound / And put my ear to you / To hear Botallack tick” (Graham 17-19). Botallack, a village in England, is presumably the place in which the watch spent its time with Hilton and it can be further inferred that this may be the place where they had “terrible times together” (Graham 3). For the speaker to address

Botallack is to imply that they are still stuck in this time and place which is not representative of their current positions in life. The desire to hear Botallack tick is indicative of their preference to that time and place, rather than their current situation. The following stanza reads:

You realize your master
Has relinquished you
And gone to lie under
The ground at St. Just. (Graham 20-23)

This stanza continues the comparison between Hilton and the speaker. The importance of the comparison in this stanza lies in the use of the word *relinquish* in relation to Hilton giving up his watch and going to lie under St. Just. *Relinquish* is typically used to describe a situation where something is given up willingly, rather than out of necessity or force. Hilton has voluntarily given up his watch to the speaker. Death, though typically not a voluntary *action*, still holds the possibility of being *met* voluntarily. The implication of Hilton having relinquished his watch provides evidence for the fact that his state of mind at death was one in which he had reconciled the inevitability of death and the forward progression that time must make. His giving up the watch is representative of his giving up on or coming to terms with the fight against time; a decision that the speaker has yet to understand. The speaker is still subjectively considering time; he views time subjectively and cannot reconcile time's objectivity to his desire to impede its progression. Therefore, his address to the watch is unable to provide any objective account to his ruminations on time, but by the end of the poem, the watch will provide this objectivity in the form of a reconciliation towards the fight against the progression of time.

The crucial moment where Graham's poem takes a decidedly strong turn from typical forms of apostrophe and begins this realization starts with line twenty seven and continues through line forty. The speaker of the poem shifts from the previous speaker to the watch itself, thus introducing the objective reasoning that is possible by making the inanimate addressee speak; of the original speaker, the watch states:

He switches the light on
To find a cigarette
And pours himself a Teachers.
He picks me up and holds me
Near his lonely face
To see my hands. He thinks
He is not being watched. (Graham 27-33)

This shift conforms to what Culler describes as the vocative of apostrophe, which is "a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps to constitute him" ("Apostrophe" 63). With this in mind, the reader can infer that the relationship of the speaker to the watch is one in which the speaker has projected personal inner thoughts to the watch in order to establish the constituting relationship for which Culler has argued.

By constituting the speaker as the watch, Graham has made it possible for both to represent two aspects or parts of one whole speaker. This is supported by Iran Nazargahi's interpretation of Graham's poetry in his essay "'Somewhere our belonging particles / Believe in us.' A Study of Absentist Language in the Poetry of W.S. Graham." The voice of the speaker as a projection is an example of what Nazargahi argues is Graham attempting to "fight against the limitations of language, and the removal of the barriers of communication;" in doing this, he "tries to extend the range of the ability of the poet's language" (Nazargahi 11). By extending the range of the poet not only to the speaker, but to an inanimate object as well, Graham makes it possible to break what is arguably one of the most formidable barriers to communication: the barriers that one builds in one's own interpretation of personal actions. This moment in the poem marks the point where the speaker has begun to engage in an introspection that allows for the dialogue to be interpreted as the speaker abstracting for the sake of objectively understanding personal mood, dilemma, and relationship with the way time functions.

The watch is literally incapable of knowing the speaker's actions; therefore, in making the watch anthropomorphic, Graham provides the possibility of a reading in which the watch becomes the inner dialogue the speaker uses to reflect on the situation, as opposed to the outward emotion typically expressed in apostrophic address. Lines twenty-seven through twenty-nine describe the scene in which the speaker finds himself. It is "the dead of night" (Graham 26), and the speaker is presumably alone. He has a drink and a cigarette, and looks at the watch. If this is read as a projection of the speaker's thoughts on the watch, the interpretation of this stanza would be that the speaker objectively recognizes his own "lonely face" (Graham 31), and to think that "[they] are not being watched" (Graham 33) can be interpreted as the original speaker conveying the idea that their despondent countenance is not being watched by other aspects of the psychological make-up in the face of Hilton's death. Furthermore, when the speaker holds the watch to his face, the watch emphasizes that it is the hands the speaker wishes to see. This can obviously be read as his wanting to know the time, the purpose the watch serves practically, but if this is the only reason, it is plausible that the actual time would be provided or more emphasis would be placed on the actual time. Instead, the focus is on the hands of the watch, rather than the literal time of night. The hands of the watch are in constant motion, which emulates the progression of time by rotating endlessly around each inevitable hour. Given the context of the poem, it is clear that Graham focuses on this particular aspect of the watch in order to further convey the issue the speaker has with the forward progression of time, and his address to the watch elucidates this concern.

The next stanza follows the same format with the watch as the speaker and it states of the original speaker:

The images of his dream
Are still about his face
As he spits and tries not
To remember where he was. (Graham 34-37)

To continue this interpretation of the poem as the speaker representing both voices, the first two lines would be interpreted not as the speaker's face looking to an outside viewer as if still somewhat asleep, but as the images of the dreams still running through the mind after waking up. The final line is reminiscent of earlier themes in which the speaker struggles with the nature of time. The speaker wishes not to remember where he was; to reminisce allows for the possibility of neglecting the forward nature of time, and this final line of the stanza begins the turning point in which the speaker experiences this realization. It is possible to read the next stanza from the point of view of either the watch or the original speaker. If it is taken to be the original speaker, then he metaphorically states, "I am only a watch / And pray time hastes away / I think I am running down" (Graham 38-40). This stanza provides the final evidence for the sentient quality of the watch being a projection from the speaker, which allows for the objective rumination on the progression of time. Line thirty-eight provides the objective realization for the speaker that he is comparable to the watch, which serves only one purpose: to track the forward progression of time. This inevitability characterizes all things, and for this reason the speaker hopes that time hastes away, or continues forward as the natural progression that he must make. If, as has been argued, the speaker has reverted back to the original speaker in this stanza, then the speaker's contemplation of the watch accounts for the realization that the speaker comes to in the following stanza. If this is the case, then "I am only a watch" (Graham 38) is to say that the speaker is only as capable of escaping time as the watch is, and therefore palpably feels that they are both running down. The speaker must be wound, like the watch, as the final stanza will elucidate; he is running down, but decides to fight this despondency and move forward, as must the watch.

In order to provide the final piece of evidence for this transformation, the poem clearly reverts back to the original speaker who closes the poem by saying:

Watch, it is time I wound
 You up again. I am
 Very much not your dear
 Last master but we had
 Terrible times together. (Graham 41-45)

The first line acts as a response to the final line of the preceding stanza. The opening word "Watch" being set off from the rest of the line with a comma makes it act as an exclamation, as if the speaker is now directly addressing not only the watch, but the nature of time itself, himself, and the reader invoking these entities as aspects of Culler's triangulated address where speaker, addressee, and reader are all witnesses to the objective revelation. The speaker is essentially saying to these entities, "watch as I realize what I must do." By placing the enjambment of line forty one and forty two before the word *you*, Graham sets the speaker up as being wound again as the watch must be; "it is time I wound" (Graham 41) represents the rejuvenating aspect of winding the watch that the speaker will also take part in metaphorically, and is also indicative of what

William Waters refers to as the distinction between the monologic and dialogic aspect of lyric address in his book *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*. He argues against the notion of lyric address as a strictly "monologic genre" (Waters 3), in that it entails something of a dialogue because "'you' tends to hail" (Waters 15). Graham's poem is indicative of this dialogic aspect of lyric address in that his poem directly employs the dialogue between two entities that Waters posits is a particular aspect of lyric address. The dialogic aspect of Graham's poem blurs the line of distinction between speaker and addressee that is typically clear in apostrophic address, and reveals the experimentation inherent in Graham's use of a sentient inanimate addressee. The final three lines of the stanza relate this realization back to the watch's former master and the speaker's friend, Hilton. In doing so, the speaker connects the progression of time to the progression of the friend's time. The inevitability of time's progression becomes a parallel to the inevitable loss, and provides the speaker with an opportunity to reconcile his own necessity in moving forward with time. This forward progression of both the speaker and the watch concludes the speaker's intimations of fear and despondency in the face of the inevitable; because of the dialogue that has opened, the speaker recognizes what must take place and no longer fears the progression that must unfold.

The objective realization that the speaker comes to is only possible through the breakdown of the traditionally accepted definition of apostrophe as an address to an unresponsive entity. When the speaker projects his emotions on the watch, the watch becomes the vehicle that revitalizes and provides the objective view of time that is necessary for the speaker's transformation and forward progression. Without the aid of the watch, this would remain impossible. Graham complicates what an apostrophe is by formatting his poem in a way that makes this possible. He makes the apostrophic address a momentous occasion of emotion, in that the speaker is able to overcome these barriers through the intensity of the occasion and emotions it elicits. This intensity of emotion is a well-documented aspect of the functionality of apostrophe, but Graham's poem takes this intensity to a level that may not previously have been considered critically or even possible without the intensity of introspection that his poem provides in projecting the speaker's voice into the addressee. Graham has stretched the limitations of language to allow for this by recognizing the implication of giving inanimate objects sentient qualities. It is more than just a recognition of the power of addressing these objects; it becomes possible to accomplish more meaningful elucidations when the objects in question are able to provide another, and possibly counter, point of view from the original speaker within the poem. The speaker in "Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch" is unable to move past or reconcile reality until forced to do so by projecting reasonable and objective thoughts on an inanimate object that acts as a vehicle for them to engage in a public discourse about the speaker's situation. As Nazargahi observes, "language for Graham is 'words,' 'things,' and 'implements'" (Nazargahi 18). Given this description of Graham's language, it is clear why Graham provided language to an inanimate

object; language transgresses words, language can be objects, and in doing this, he has enabled himself to call into question what is possible with the apostrophic address. By extending language beyond the scope of sentient beings, Graham pushes the limits of the functionality of the apostrophe. Apostrophe is not only capable of providing ventriloquism to inanimate objects as Johnson observes, but can also animate those objects to more clearly relate the content and thematic qualities of the poem in consideration, and because of this, content and theme may become more apparent to the reader or critic.

Several questions concerning the functionality of apostrophic address remain pertinent; primarily, whether or not poems such as Graham's should actually be considered forms of apostrophic address. If Graham's poem should be considered an apostrophe, then the implications affecting the nature of apostrophe must be addressed, and if not, then something must be done about poems in which an inanimate object speaks. As mentioned earlier, Johnson defines apostrophe as such:

Apostrophe. . . . involves the direct address to 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 way. (Johnson 31)

By this definition, and in relation to other forms of address, I have argued that Graham's "Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch" remains an apostrophic address. By utilizing the form that he does and allowing the inanimate a speaking part in the poem, he expands on what the apostrophe is capable of and explores the implications of why a poet may address an inanimate object. As stated previously, apostrophe seeks to emphasize the reader's reaction to a poem by restricting the ability of the addressee to respond or interact with the speaker in a meaningful way, but in Graham's poem, this is accomplished by allowing just what apostrophe typically restricts. In doing so, Graham animates those entities that Waters argues readers and critics alike understand "are beyond the reach of communication" (Waters 51), but it is this exploitation of what is unexpected that allows Graham the immediacy of conveying crucial information via the dialogue that opens, and allows Graham to represent objective reasoning by way of introspection.

In the analysis provided for "Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch," it has been argued that the speaking part of the inanimate object is a projection from the original speaker. This projection allows for Graham to represent the objective reasoning aspect of the mind of the speaker as the watch in the poem. In constructing the poem in this way, Graham has utilized an aspect of apostrophe that allows for crucial information to be conveyed to the speaker by analyzing the ways in which the speaker understands the thematic significance of the particular object that is addressed, and consequently, the reader is conveyed this information as well. This complication to Culler's triangulated model of address works in support of the significance of apostrophic address. Graham's transformation of the functionality of apostrophe should enhance the view of apostrophe that Culler argues critics see as a "minor embarrassment" ("Apostrophe" 59). By using apostrophe in a way

that transforms a poetic form where dialogue should not be possible or expected, and making it the driving force behind the delivery of the poems overall thematic significance, Graham has expanded the meaning of apostrophe and its capabilities. The introspection that he forces on the speaker in many ways embodies exactly what it is that defines apostrophe; it is an intensifier of emotion, an attempt to make sentient beings out of inanimate entities, and a way of delivering speech that should remain monologic, but is capable of much more. Graham's "Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch" is exemplary of a new and exciting form of apostrophic address. By emphasizing the speaker, and the relationship with the responsive inanimate object, the apostrophe becomes a means by which the speaker, and the reader, must directly and objectively view the world that surrounds them.

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