

The Story of O

Perhaps no word—and here I use the term “word” tentatively—signals “lyric” or even “poetry” more than the “O” of lyric poetry does. When we read or hear “O” (as in “O wild West Wind”), we immediately know that we’re in for a trip through what Daniel Tiffany calls “the flowery sort of diction” that grows all over Poetry Land. Consider, for instance, John Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” the poem that Tiffany uses to illustrate the type of diction that underwrites the canonical lyric. Keats’s poem not only begins with an “O,” but it repeats that “O” at the start of its second stanza. And while disappearing from later stanzas, those initial Os nevertheless echo throughout the poem in half and slant rhymes with decidedly poetic words that, when arranged in order of appearance, read just like a little lyric poem in their own right: “alone,” “no,” “woe,” “rose,” “zone,” “moan,” “woe,” and “cold.”

Jonathan Culler has argued that, when keying and cuing the lyric apostrophe, the O of lyric expression might even become “the embodiment of poetic tradition and of the spirit of poesy.”¹ However, as Kim Addonizio correctly observes in her poem “Animals,” “It’s wrong to say O in poetry these days.”² O has so come to figure and represent the diction of canonical poetry that, nowadays, it’s a convention that’s hard

¹ Jonathan Culler, “Apostrophe,” *Diacritics* 7.4 (Winter 1977): 63.

² Kim Addonizio, “Animals,” *American Poetry Review* 48.06, <https://aprweb.org/poems/animals8>.

to make work in page-based verse. It sounds pretentious, amateur, and archaic, and it's embarrassing to modern ears for a variety of reasons that Culler and others have enumerated. Once common, O has become—for many people associated with the world of official verse culture—part of what might be described as the deadstock of the poetic tradition and perhaps even a sort of metaphorical “O sign,” the euphemism that doctors use to describe what the *OED* calls “the persistently gaping, open mouth of a patient who is asleep, or in a coma, dying, or dead.”

I come with good news, however. That O—and the promise of a shared language that that O might represent—is not asleep, in a coma, dying, or dead. In fact, it's very much alive in the world around us and shared by many more people than most poets and poetry critics linked to the academy realize. Restrained for years by the inadequate capture of homogenizing graphic forms that preserve O as either a trace of or prompt for vocalization, the lyric O has returned to its oral homeland in the form of popular music lyrics. No longer flattened by the silent page, it has been restored the volume, pitch, and duration that graphic forms have been unable to represent. It has been restored the individual speaker's voice. It has found in a whole range of musical and technological settings a realm of acoustic nuance and texture far beyond paper and ink.

The diction of the lyric tradition is all over popular music lyrics. Listen to the apostrophic O (“Oh, oh, oh / Sweet child o’ mine”) that Axl Rose sings in the famous Guns N’ Roses song. Or the strings of Os, Ohs, and Whoas that Beyoncé lets rip in “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It).” Or the “Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh” at the beginning of Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance.” Or the “Whoa-oh, we’re halfway there” in Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer.” I’m sure you can come up with more examples; my personal favorite vacillates between the O at the beginning of Nelly’s “Hot in Herre” and the fifty rhymes with O that—á la the half and slant rhymes of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”—make up Flo-Rida’s debut single “Low.” More than that, however, consider how many people listen to these lyric Os, how much money those Os help to rake in, how many forms they take, and how many soundtracks to peoples’ lives they help to create. They circulate globally in ways that Keats could only dream of. Their authors and performers are cultural celebrities and political mouthpieces. People like you and me make them part of our daily lives and—if we do karaoke—part of our weekend and recreational activities. These lyric Os go platinum, baby. It’s not just a language that poets share. It is, for better or worse, as close to a shared language as the world has got.

It is possible that the lyric O and its migration from graphic to acoustic media forms offers a bridge between the subject of diction and form, as well as an interesting

history in the relation between “high” and “popular” poetries, but those are questions beyond the scope of this response. If, as Tiffany argues, however, the study of diction is “a field that is hiding...in plain sight,” then listening and reading for that diction reveals another field hiding—and thriving—in plain sight as well, one that Tiffany hasn’t identified but one that might, all the same, alter our entire set of presuppositions about the place and power of poetry in the world today.