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A Journey Through Time and Text: Apostrophe, Literary Memory, and the Human Search for Meaning

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of apostrophe as a central aesthetic and narrative device across Saul Bellow's "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," Henry James's The Aspern Papers, and Bellow's Humboldt's Gift. Through a comparative literary approach, the article highlights how Bellow draws on James's narrative strategies while advancing his distinct exploration of artistic leftover, identity, and existential dilemmas. Apostrophe operates in three transformative phases within these texts: reconciling with the past through nostalgia, enabling self-creation through forward-looking renewal, and establishing meta-literary connections that bridge writers, characters, and readers. In "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," Clarence Feiler's quest for Gonzaga's manuscripts reflects a nostalgic longing for coherence in a fragmented identity, mirroring the tensions in James's The Aspern Papers. This nostalgic engagement evolves in Humboldt's Gift, where Charlie Citrine reimagines apostrophe as a dynamic act of self-renewal and creativity. By linking these works through their shared aesthetic concerns, the study reveals Bellow's literary progression and his nuanced engagement with themes of memory, power, and the enduring challenges of artistic and personal hangover.

Keywords: *Apostrophe, Literary Aesthetics, Artistic Legacy, Identity, Henry James and Saul Bellow.*

Introduction

This analysis examines the aesthetic and literary depths of Saul Bellow's "The Gonzaga Manuscripts." This pivotal yet underexplored work bridges the existential inquiries of Bellow's earlier novels with the mature exploration of identity, power, and artistic legacy seen in his later writings. Published in 1954, "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" transcends a surface-level literary pursuit, as Clarence Feiler's journey to retrieve the manuscripts of the fictional poet Manuel Gonzaga becomes a profound exploration of self-discovery, aestheticism, and existential questioning in a fragmented modern world.

Clarence's bond to Gonzaga's poetry is intensely personal, reflecting his reliance on art as a guide through life's uncertainties. He remarks, "I felt right away…that I was in touch with a poet who could show me how to go on, and what attitude to take towards life" (Bellow, 1954, p. 113). This aligns Clarence with other iconic Bellow protagonists, such as Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King*, who cries, "Who—who was I?" (*Henderson the Rain King*, p. 77), and Joseph in *Dangling Man*, who asks, "How should a good man live; what ought he to do?" (*Dangling Man*, p. 34). Through these recurring inquiries, Bellow's characters embody a struggle to define themselves while uncovering the essence of human existence.

Gonzaga's poetry, particularly the poem *Confession*, serves as a catalyst for Clarence's introspection and transformation. It leads him to the realization: "We lose everything by trying to become everything. This was the most valuable lesson of my life" (Bellow, "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," 1996, p. 113). This insight underscores the opposition between ambition and identity, a central theme in Bellow's works, and frames the narrative within a broader aesthetic exploration. Gonzaga's inheritance emerges as both an inspiration and a void, compelling Clarence to confront the absences within himself, while reflecting on the redemptive and aesthetic power of art. Bellow's characteristic wit and psychological depth imbue the narrative, transforming Clarence's pursuit into a meditation on aestheticism, absence, and apostrophe. The manuscripts themselves become symbolic of unattainable ideals, their absence echoing the voids in

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Clarence's identity. In one particularly evocative scene, Clarence imagines dialogues with Gonzaga upon discovering a volume by the poet in a bookstore.

He reflects:

"What a man this Gonzaga was—what a personality! On the very first page was an early version of a poem he has always admired, the one that began:

Let me hear a sound

Truly not my own;

The voice of another,

Truly other….

The book engrossed him entirely until eleven o'clock. With a sort of hungry emotion, he sat at a café table and read it from cover to cover. It was beautiful. He thanked God for having sent the Republican refugee who had given him the idea of coming to Spain (119).

This passage underscores the transformative impact of Gonzaga's poetry on Clarence's psyche, as he yearns for a voice "truly not [his] own." It reflects his desire to transcend personal boundaries and connect with another's artistic world. Through Gonzaga's aesthetic vision, Clarence discovers a beacon of emotional renewal and intellectual guidance, highlighting the role of art as a redemptive force.

Bellow's deep admiration for Spain, a country he saw as a nexus of cultural and historical richness, profoundly informs this narrative. His experiences in Spain inspired three notable works: the nonfiction essay *Spanish Letter*, the short story "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," and a segment in *Humboldt's Gift*, where Charlie Citrine visits Madrid. Spain's evocative landscapes and cultural heritage provide the backdrop for Bellow's introspective protagonists as they embark on idealistic and spiritual quests. These journeys, marked by moments of self-reflection, humiliation, and growth, take on a distinctly quixotic quality, tying the narrative's aesthetic concerns to Spain's literary and historical resonance (Gordon, 2017).

Clearly, Clarence's journey is much more than an academic pursuit of manuscripts. It symbolizes a profound effort to reconcile his fragmented identity through aesthetic and existential frameworks. Gonzaga's words and philosophy provide Clarence with a structure to reconstruct his personal narrative, transforming his journey into both an intellectual exploration and a deeply personal voyage of renewal.

This study contextualizes "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" within a comparative framework, examining its link to Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) and Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888). In *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow extends his reflections on relic and artistic influence through Citrine's engagement with Von Humboldt Fleisher's ideals. Similarly, *The Aspern Papers* captures Venice's literary and historical atmosphere, resonating with Bellow's portrayal of Spain. James's essay *The Grand Canal* describes Venice's "long, gay, shabby, spotty perspective," linking it to Byron's time in the Mocenigo palaces (James, 1992, p. 48). The association points out how place, memory, and aestheticism intersect in both James's and Bellow's works.

James's novella, inspired by an anecdote about Captain Silsbee's quest for Shelley and Byron's letters, explores literary obsession and relic within the evocative setting of Venice (Hoeveler, 2008). The novella's themes of memory and the ethical complexities of preserving literary "afterlives" parallel Bellow's exploration of artistic legacy in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts." Contemporary scholarship, including Anesko's *Monopolizing the Master* (2012) and Rowe's *The Other Henry James* (2000), highlights James's nuanced engagement with identity and absence, enriching the dialogue between the two authors.

By situating "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" alongside *The Aspern Papers* and *Humboldt's Gift*, this study illuminates Bellow's evolving treatment of aestheticism, literary bequest, and existential quests. Clarence

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Feiler's pursuit of Gonzaga's works symbolizes a broader search for meaning and identity, bridging traditional literary concerns with modernist and postmodernist themes. Through this comparative lens, Bellow's narratives emerge as profound meditations on art, power, and the complexities of existence.

Moreover**,** this comparative study highlights how *The Aspern Papers* informs the nostalgic engagement with literary leftover in *"The Gonzaga Manuscripts"* , as both works explore themes of absence, memory, and identity through their protagonists' attempts to recover lost artifacts. However, while *The Aspern Papers* captures the moral ambiguities and limitations of longing for the past, "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" "deepens this engagement by presenting absence as a reflection of personal fragmentation. This exploration culminates in *Humboldt's Gift*, where Bellow reimagines apostrophe as a forward-looking and transformative device. By transitioning from static nostalgia to dynamic self-creation, Bellow advances the aesthetic and philosophical potential of apostrophe, illustrating its capacity to bridge absence and presence, memory and renewal, and the personal and universal. This progression underscores the evolving role of apostrophe in steering creative heritage and the existential dilemmas of modern life.

Literature Review and Background

Navigating Absence: Memory, Legacy, and the Aesthetics of Obsession

Saul Bellow's "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" centers on Clarence Feiler, a young and idealistic academic whose quest to retrieve the lost manuscripts of Manuel Gonzaga becomes a deeply symbolic journey into the past. This journey is shaped significantly by the omniscient narrator, who offers both empathetic insight into Clarence's struggles and critical commentary on the absurdity of his romanticized mission. While this dual narrative stance distinguishes "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," it also invites meaningful comparison with Henry James's The Aspern Papers, a novella that explores a similarly obsessive pursuit of literary artifacts. Unlike Bellow's narrator, who balances irony with empathy, James's first-person narrator exhibits moral ambiguity, offering a striking contrast in how the two works explore literary obsession, absence, memory, and the human need for relationships.

Clarence's journey to Spain in search of Gonzaga's manuscripts transcends academic curiosity, evolving into a personal quest for identity and existential clarity. The analysis of Bellow's characters navigating existential dilemmas aligns with Daniel Fuchs's discussion of Bellow's modernist engagement with fragmented realities and "souls" navigating cultural struggles (Fuchs, 1974, p. 67). Fuchs describes how Bellow's protagonists often bear intense emotions through an arena of cultural and intellectual challenges, where survival depends equally on their feelings and thoughts. This duality resonates with Clarence's journey, accentuating his struggle to reconcile idealism with the dissonance of real-world complexities. The manuscripts he seeks transcend their status as mere literary artifacts; they become symbolic extensions of his inner conflict. Representing both memory and absence, they evoke a romanticized past while highlighting the gaps and unfulfilled aspirations in his present. These gaps mirror modern existential challenges, such as the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world. The manuscripts, as artifacts, frame Clarence's quest as a pursuit of literary heritage and as an attempt to route the rigidity between aspiration and reality, offering a profound commentary on the interplay between personal longing and collective cultural memory.

His reverence for Gonzaga is evident in a conversation with Miss Ungar, where he reflects on the transformative power of literature:

"To understand what he did, you have to think first of modern literature as a sort of grand council... considering what mankind should do next, how we should fill our mortal time, what we should feel, what we should see... and all the rest" (Bellow, 1954, p. 122).

This perception of literature as a surrogate for moral and spiritual certainty highlights Clarence's stress between idealism and ontological uncertainty. Despite his belief in literature's potential to guide humanity, Clarence acknowledges its limited impact, remarking, "It has never done much good," a sentiment that underscores his internal conflict. Judith Newman situates this dynamic within the framework of the "fatal

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gift," where literary inheritances become obligations fraught with tension and reciprocity (Newman, 2023, p. 76). This concept, rooted in anthropological notions of gift exchange, positions Gonzaga's manuscripts as both a source of inspiration and a burden for Clarence.

Gonzaga's rejection of artistic egotism further underscores the manuscripts' role in liberating Clarence from grandiosity. During another conversation with Miss Ungar, Clarence quotes Gonzaga: "Many feel they must say it all, whereas all has been said, unsaid, resaid so many times... we are merely adding our voices. Adding them when moved by the spirit. Then and then only" (Bellow, 1954, p. 121).

This humility imbues Gonzaga's work with an aesthetic resonance that transcends time, aligning with Bellow's broader exploration of literature's capacity to connect past and present. Through the omniscient narrator's critical lens, the reader gains a deeper understanding of Clarence's evolving self-awareness. The narrator observes: "He was in Madrid not to perform an act of cultural piety but to do a decent and necessary thing, namely, bring the testimony of a great man before the world. Which certainly could use it" (Bellow, 1954, p. 114).

This insight captures Clarence's noble yet flawed mission, illustrating how his journey transcends academic ambition to embody a broader human struggle for meaning and connection. However, the narrator's use of irony and humor highlights Clarence's idealistic limitations. During social gatherings, for instance, his impassioned accounts of Gonzaga fail to resonate with Guzman's indifferent guests, emphasizing Clarence's isolation and the fragility of his quest.

Newman's concept of the "fatal gift" further illuminates the pressure inherent in literary inheritances, likening Gonzaga's manuscripts to the uranium mine shares in "Leaving the Yellow House." Such inheritances, Newman explains, are imbued with tension and obligation, compelling recipients to navigate the weight of legacy (Newman, 2023, p. 76). This theme echoes Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence,* which describes how creative originality emerges through a "misreading" or reinterpretation of a precursor's work, akin to Freudian familial struggles (Bloom, n.d.; Hollander, 1973). The manuscripts symbolize a bequest that challenges Clarence to reconcile his idealism with the realities of intellectual and existential burdens.

Additionally, the gift economy, as defined by Cheal, highlights exchanges governed by implicit reciprocity and cultural norms rather than explicit transactions (Cheal, 1988). Clarence's inheritance of Gonzaga's heritage reflects this dynamic, creating a self-sustaining system fraught with rigidity. Rachel Kranton's notion of reciprocal exchange further underscores how such inheritances compel individuals to lead complex webs of ties and originality (Kranton, 1996). Through Gonzaga's manuscripts, Clarence grapples with the dual forces of inspiration and obligation, embodying the broader human struggle to find coherence and meaning in the face of an inherited past. The manuscripts serve as both a source of creative energy and a weighty reminder of the expectations tied to remnant, mirroring the friction between personal aspiration and societal responsibility. Clarence's journey reflects the universal challenge of reconciling the richness of inherited cultural artifacts with the need to forge a unique, authentic identity in the modern world. This dynamic interplay between presence and absence becomes a powerful lens through which identity and obsession are shaped, as seen in *The Aspern Papers*. James presents a compelling paradox in the character of the narrator, often referred to as "the researcher." This figure is driven by an obsession with uncovering the tangible traces of a celebrated past, embodied in Aspern's letters. Yet, his fixation is rooted in absence—what remains unseen, unrevealed, or unattainable. The narrator's relentless pursuit of the letters reflects a deeper existential need to define himself through proximity to greatness, highlighting how absence not only fuels obsession but also shapes identity. His quest parallels Clarence's in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," as both grapple with the opposition between reverence for a romanticized past and the often harsh realities of their own ambitions. The interaction between presence and absence becomes a defining force, revealing how what is missing can exert as much influence on the human psyche as what is present.

His fervent devotion to Jeffrey Aspern as a near-divine figure—"Aspern is a god to me, and many people will go to extreme lengths to appease their god" (Chapter 1)—is juxtaposed with his willingness to employ deception and manipulation to achieve his goals. Michael Anesko's insights into the posthumous struggles

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over James's bequest illuminate the broader cultural obsession with preserving literary artifacts, echoing the moral ambiguities present in James's characters (Anesko, 2012, pp. 1–17).

Unlike Clarence, whose pursuit of Gonzaga's manuscripts reflects a sincere yearning for artistic and existential guidance, James's narrator adopts a more pragmatic and morally ambiguous approach. His willingness to manipulate Tita Bordereau underscores a calculated determination that contrasts with Clarence's vulnerability. John Carlos Rowe interprets James's work as a critique of societal anxieties, including power dynamics and gender roles, deepening the understanding of the narrator's moral compromises (Rowe, 2000, p. 121). Tita's evolution from a passive figure to a strategic participant complicates the researcher's quest, highlighting the interplay of absence and agency.

The thematic exploration of absence introduces the literary device of apostrophe, where characters address absent or imagined figures. Barbara Johnson describes apostrophe as "a form of ventriloquism," projecting voice and life onto the addressee to create a sense of presence (Johnson, 1986, pp. 29–47). Clarence's longing for Gonzaga and James's narrator's obsession with Aspern reflect their attempts to anchor themselves in the past, using apostrophe to confront their fragmented identities. This chemistry between literary gift and personal struggle deepens our understanding of how characters navigate the dichotomy between idealized aspirations and the constraints of reality.

The aesthetic of literary remnant in both works reveals the strain between idealized aspirations and the limitations of reality. Michael André Bernstein's observation that Bellow's characters captivate through their "obsessive, reflective eloquence" enriches the portrayal of Clarence's internal struggles (Bernstein, 1995, p. 89). This eloquence, coupled with Gonzaga's unpretentiousness, accentuates the duality of literary ambition as both transformative and limiting. Clarence's pursuit of Gonzaga's manuscripts exemplifies this dichotomy, as his aspirations elevate his creative vision while also confining him to the shadow of a revered past. Similarly, Bakhtin's concept of "time-space immediacy" highlights how the emotional and temporal proximity of literary artifacts can bridge the gap between the historical and the personal, allowing characters to engage with an imagined ideal even as they contend with the imperfections of their present. These clashes create a framework for understanding the unconscious apostrophic gestures in both works, where the act of addressing the absent past shapes identity, fosters reflection, and propels the characters toward a deeper confrontation with their own limitations.

Similarly, the "unconscious apostrophe" in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" reflects Bellow's engagement with James's literary tradition. Clarence's fixation on Gonzaga's manuscripts echoes James's narrator's pursuit of Aspern's letters, suggesting an implicit dialogue between the two works. By invoking James's themes of absence and memory, Bellow deepens his exploration of literary relic and the human desire to connect with the past.

Literature, Apostrophe, and the Writer-Reader Relationship: Aesthetic and Theoretical Foundations

The interplay between the absent writer and the present novice or reader in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," *Humboldt's Gift*, and *The Aspern Papers* stresses the transformative aesthetic and intellectual resonance of apostrophe. Across these works, the literary heritage of the absent writer serves as both an artistic inspiration and a medium for shaping identity, aspirations, and ethical dilemmas. Apostrophe, traditionally a rhetorical figure addressing the absent or abstract, evolves into a dynamic meta-literary device, bridging past and present while connecting aesthetics with existential inquiry.

Apostrophe's aesthetic significance lies in its ability to animate absence, transforming it into an emotionally resonant and intellectually generative force. As previously discussed, Barbara Johnson views apostrophe as a tool to animate absence, while Jonathan Culler highlights its role in bridging temporal and spatial divides (Johnson, 1986; Culler, 2000). These insights illuminate apostrophe's potential to transcend its rhetorical origins, reframing absence as a source of aesthetic inspiration and self-discovery. By aligning the artistic and philosophical dimensions of apostrophe, these works foreground literature's power to connect personal struggles with universal themes of memory, inheritance, and renewal.

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In *Humboldt's Gift*, Von Humboldt Fleisher exemplifies the absent writer whose artistic ideals profoundly shape Charlie Citrine's identity and creative vision. Citrine reflects, "Humboldt was supposed to be an instrument of this revival. This mission or vocation was reflected in his face—the hope of new beauty, the promise, the secret of beauty" (*Humboldt's Gift*, p. 17). Humboldt's unpublished works and artistic ethos act as both inspiration and constraint, with his absence haunting Citrine not as a literal ghost but as an aesthetic ideal. The narrator observes, "The absence of Humboldt was more present than his life had ever been" (*Humboldt's Gift*, p. 6). This friction between inheritance and limitation underscores the aesthetic duality of apostrophe, as Citrine navigates the redemptive possibilities and burdens of engaging with Humboldt's ideals.

Similarly, *The Aspern Papers* investigates the aesthetic obsession of preserving artistic relics. The narrator's pursuit of Aspern's letters reflects a desire to connect with an idealized literary genius, casting the letters as "sacred relics" embodying artistic authority. T.S. Eliot's insight that literary tradition functions as a "living entity" resonates here, as the narrator attempts to preserve Aspern's aesthetic remnant while inhabiting its transformative power (Eliot, 1975, pp. 37–44). However, Juliana Bordereau's resistance disrupts this pursuit, exposing the ethical dilemmas of appropriating another's creative heritage. Her defiance forces the narrator to confront the limits of possession, emphasizing that true engagement with the aesthetic bequest requires reverence and reflection rather than exploitation.

These works position apostrophe as an aesthetic channel that transcends individual narratives, fostering collective engagement with absence, creativity, and transformation. Citrine's forward-looking dialogue with Humboldt's ideals and the narrator's fraught pursuit of Aspern's letters demonstrate how apostrophe connects characters to their artistic past, reshapes their present, and inspires their futures. The aesthetic interplay of void and connection underscores literature's dual role as an introspective and transformative medium.

In "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," Clarence Feiler's relationship with Gonzaga's poetry illustrates the novice's reliance on the absent writer to construct his artistic identity. However, unlike Citrine, Clarence idealizes Gonzaga without critically engaging with his legacy. The narrator observes how Clarence envisions the manuscripts as a mirror for his fragmented sense of self, offering a temporary aesthetic escape from existential drift. This passive engagement highlights the risks of aesthetic fixation without reinterpretation, leaving Clarence unable to reconcile Gonzaga's influence with his individuality.

By contrast, the protagonists in *Humboldt's Gift* and *The Aspern Papers* demonstrate the transformative potential of literature when paired with reflective engagement. Citrine ultimately reinterprets Humboldt's ideals rather than merely preserving them, acknowledging, "Humboldt's words were brilliant, but they were also tied to a time and place that no longer existed. The challenge wasn't to preserve them but to carry their essence forward" (*Humboldt's Gift*, p. 6). This realization aligns with Edward Said's distinction between "origin" and "beginning," where the latter involves a deliberate act of aesthetic and intellectual meaning-making that transcends the past (Said, 1985, pp. 5–10).

Similarly, in *The Aspern Papers*, the narrator's pursuit of Aspern's letters is framed by Jacques Derrida's concept of archive fever, illustrating the obsession with preserving and engaging with artistic memory. The narrator's fixation on Aspern's leftover reflects the aesthetic tension between memory, absence, and power (Derrida, 1995, pp. 9–63). Juliana Bordereau's resistance becomes an aesthetic counterpoint to the narrator's entitlement, emphasizing the need for reflective engagement with tradition.

Azar Nafisi's reflections on literature as resistance further enrich this discussion. Nafisi's clandestine literary gatherings, where novels like *Lolita* became tools for challenging oppressive norms, highlight how literature fosters individual and collective freedom. These discussions transformed reading into an aesthetic and subversive act, aligning with Citrine's and the narrator's attempts to navigate their identities and artistic missions (Nafisi, 2003).

Viewed collectively, "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," *Humboldt's Gift*, and *The Aspern Papers* engage in an aesthetic dialogue about the ethical dimensions of literary inheritance. Harold Bloom's exploration of the

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"anxiety of influence" elucidates how literary predecessors shape successors, compelling them to direct the gap between admiration and innovation (Bloom, 1973, p. 15). These narratives illustrate how engaging with an aesthetic legacy demands not only reverence but also reflection and reinterpretation.

Through the lens of apostrophe, these works reaffirm the aesthetic and transformative power of literature. They bridge temporal and spatial divides, offering profound meditations on identity, creativity, and the ethical challenges of engaging with artistic traditions. By incorporating insights from Johnson, Culler, Derrida, Said, and Nafisi, this analysis underscores the role of literature as an aesthetic and cultural medium for personal and collective transformation.

These cultural and literary influences ultimately converge in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," where Bellow seamlessly intertwines James's exploration of absence and heritage with his own introspective narrative style. This fusion not only enriches the thematic depth of the work but also sets the stage for *Humboldt's Gift*, where Bellow redefines apostrophe as a tool for creative renewal. Through this progression, Bellow emerges as a literary innovator, transforming traditional motifs into dynamic elements of artistic and cultural expression.

Results and Discussion

A Journey Forward: Humboldt's Gift and the Aesthetics of Existential Struggles

Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* offers a transformative exploration of existential and artistic struggles, presenting apostrophe as a forward-looking aesthetic act of creativity rather than a lament for the past. Through the character of Charlie Citrine, Bellow redefines the function of apostrophe, moving beyond static nostalgia and into the realm of dynamic self-renewal. This journey marks a critical evolution in Bellow's literary exploration of identity, absence, and artistic legacy, building on the themes introduced in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" and Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*. Together, these works chart an artistic trajectory that emphasizes how literary and aesthetic engagement shapes the human experience.

In *Humboldt's Gift*, apostrophe evolves from being a backward-facing invocation of absence, as seen in *The Aspern Papers* and "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," into a tool for creative transformation. Unlike James's narrator, who is obsessed with reclaiming Jeffrey Aspern's letters, or Clarence Feiler, whose longing for Gonzaga's manuscripts reflects an inability to escape the past, Citrine embraces agency and possibility. This transformation is encapsulated in Citrine's assertion: "Mankind must recover its imaginative powers, recover living thought and real being, no longer accept these insults to the soul and do it soon" (*Humboldt's Gift*, p. 250). Here, Bellow situates imagination as a central aesthetic and existential force, essential for countering the fragmentation and monotony of modern life.

Unlike James's narrator or Feiler, who remain tethered to relics of the past, Citrine reframes absence as a generative aesthetic force. He reflects, "The deeper implication was that real life flowed between here and there. Real life was a relationship between here and there" (*Humboldt's Gift*, p. 460). This perspective contrasts sharply with the static longing for coherence that defines Feiler and James's narrator. Citrine envisions life as fluid and relational, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between past and present, loss and restoration, and thought and action.

Citrine also resists passivity and nostalgia, transforming the cultural ethos that shaped him into a source of strength. He states: "I had been brought up to detest self-pity. It was part of my American training to be energetic, and positive, and a thriving system, and an achiever" (*Humboldt's Gift*, p. 408).

This rejection of stasis reflects Bellow's broader aesthetic project, which integrates philosophical reflection with the creative potential of literature. Citrine's forward-facing perspective illustrates how apostrophe, as a narrative and aesthetic device, enables characters to transcend loss and construct meaning.

However, Citrine does not shy away from confronting modernity's challenges. His sardonic observation, "Ninety per cent of life is a nightmare, do you think I am going to get it rounded up to a hundred per cent?"

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reflects his acknowledgment of life's inherent difficulties. This awareness informs his critique of technological progress, which he argues amplifies monotony and deepens existential voids: "As we approach, through technology, the phase of instantaneous realization… the problem of boredom can only become more intense" (*Humboldt's Gift*, p. 460). Citrine's response is a call to embrace creativity and intensity, poignantly captured in his declaration: "If life is not intoxicating, it's nothing. Here it's burn or rot."

This rigidity between vibrancy and limitation defines Citrine's aesthetic and existential journey, which contrasts with the retrospective obsessions of James's narrator and Feiler. While *The Aspern Papers* and "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" present apostrophe as a backward-facing device tied to longing, *Humboldt's Gift* reimagines it as a forward-facing act of renewal.

In James's *The Aspern Papers*, the narrator reveres Aspern as a near-divine figure, declaring, "Aspern is a god to me, and many people will go to extreme lengths to appease their god" (Chapter 1). However, his reverence is undermined by his manipulative tactics, such as exploiting Tita Bordereau's vulnerability to gain access to the letters. This moral ambiguity highlights the limitations of apostrophe as a device for reconciling absence. Similarly, Clarence's longing for Gonzaga's manuscripts in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" reflects a fixation on external artifacts as symbols of coherence in a fragmented world. He clings to "fragments of a world Clarence longed to restore", revealing his inability to detach from the past or envision a future.

In contrast, Citrine redefines apostrophe as a mechanism for self-creation. Reflecting on Humboldt's ideals, he states: "Humboldt's words were brilliant, but they were also tied to a time and place that no longer existed. The challenge wasn't to preserve them but to carry their essence forward" (*Humboldt's Gift*, p. 6). This insight is reminiscent of Edward Said's distinction between "origin" and "beginning," where the latter represents a human act of aesthetic and intentional meaning-making that transcends historical constraints (Said, 1985, pp. 5–10). Citrine's engagement with Humboldt's residue becomes a forward-looking dialogue, emphasizing creativity and agency over static reverence.

Reframing Apostrophe as a Dynamic Aesthetic Device

Apostrophe's transformation in *Humboldt's Gift* marks a significant progression in Bellow's exploration of absence and identity. Jacques Derrida's concept of *archive fever* provides a theoretical lens to examine this shift, as Citrine's invocation of Humboldt moves beyond the archival obsession seen in James's narrator and Feiler. Instead of longing for the past, Citrine uses apostrophe to construct meaning in the present, engaging with Humboldt's ideals as a dynamic force for creative and intellectual renewal (Derrida, 1995, pp. 9–63).

Moreover, apostrophe in *Humboldt's Gift* functions as a bridge between artistic ideals and existential realities. Humboldt himself embodies the difference between these forces, lamenting, "the more it, the less we." While Humboldt succumbs to this pressure, Citrine transcends it, reframing modernity's existential dilemmas—"boredom is an instrument of social control… seasoned with terror and with death"—through the lens of creative agency. Apostrophe, thus, evolves from a static invocation of absence into a dynamic process of self-assertion, allowing Citrine to navigate the complexities of a fragmented modern world.

This evolution in apostrophe reflects broader philosophical and aesthetic shifts in Bellow's work. While *The Aspern Papers* and "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" highlight the limitations of longing and nostalgia, *Humboldt's Gift* offers a transformative alternative. By redefining apostrophe as a forward-facing act of creation, Bellow positions literature as a medium for navigating absence and constructing identity, affirming its enduring aesthetic and existential relevance.

Narrative Perspective and Sympathy in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts": The Role of the Third-Person Omniscient Narrator

In "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," Bellow employs a third-person omniscient narrator, enabling a richly layered exploration of Clarence Feiler's internal conflicts and external realities. This perspective, rooted in

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the narrative traditions of 19th-century fiction by authors such as Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, and George Eliot (Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 2005, 442), bridges classic aesthetic storytelling with modernist introspection. By balancing empathy with irony, the narrator provides an intricate portrayal of Clarence's existential longing and naïve idealism.

The omniscient narrator allows readers intimate access to Clarence's thoughts while critically evaluating his actions. For instance, Clarence's journey to Guzman del Nido's house, driven by his romanticized vision of Gonzaga's inherited, ends in rain, indifferent stares from strangers, and a deepening sense of futility. This juxtaposition shows the crack between Clarence's lofty aspirations and the indifferent realities surrounding him. The narrative tone oscillates between sympathy for Clarence's vulnerabilities and irony toward his misguided devotion, emphasizing the aesthetic stakes of his journey.

Clarence's quixotic quest to restore Gonzaga's inherited poetry reveals the limitations of his idealism. Gonzaga's close associates dismiss the poet's importance, reflecting the pervasive materialism of the modern world. For example, del Nido questions the need for poetry, while another acquaintance misunderstands Clarence's intentions, assuming he seeks mining stock. Even Gonzaga himself embodies a pessimistic philosophy, warning, "We lose everything by trying to become everything." These encounters underscore Clarence's struggle to reconcile aesthetic aspirations with a world that values practicality over cultural idealism.

The narrator's approach aligns with Bellow's broader literary strategy, as noted by Ruth R. Wisse, who observes that Bellow's omniscient narrator circumnavigates the conflict between artistic ideals and societal disinterest (Wisse, 2001). This dyad situates Clarence within a cultural discourse where art serves as both a transformative force and a reflection of human vulnerability. The nuanced portrayal of Clarence's journey emphasizes the enduring aesthetic pull between ambition and disillusionment.

When contrasted with James's *The Aspern Papers*, Bellow's use of omniscient narration reveals a stark narrative divergence. James's narrator, self-serving and morally ambiguous, manipulates Juliana and Tita Bordereau to gain access to Aspern's letters, rationalizing his duplicity with claims of artistic homage: "Aspern is a god to me, and many people will go to extreme lengths to appease their god" (Chapter 1). This unreliable narration contrasts sharply with the authoritative perspective in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," where the omniscient narrator illuminates Clarence's idealism and comments on his flaws. This contrast highlights Bellow's commitment to aesthetic and ethical depth, enriching the narrative's engagement with themes of aspiration and identity. Similarly, in *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow employs omniscient narration to study Citrine's reflections on his artistic struggles and relationship with Von Humboldt Fleisher. Unlike Clarence, who remains inert in his engagement with Gonzaga's legacy, Citrine evolves through introspection and self-renewal. This contrast emphasizes the narrative and aesthetic progression from "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" to *Humboldt's Gift*, as Bellow moves from exploring static longing to dynamic self-creation.

The omniscient narrator in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" juxtaposes Clarence's aspirations with external realities, revealing the persistent strain between hope and disillusionment. By blending sympathy and irony, Bellow situates Clarence's journey within a broader cultural and philosophical framework, emphasizing the aesthetic potential of art to navigate existential challenges. This narrative strategy deepens the story's exploration of identity, power, and absence, affirming Bellow's place within the broader literary tradition of aesthetic and existential inquiry.

The exploration of absence through apostrophe in *The Aspern Papers* and "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" finds its ultimate transformation in *Humboldt's Gift*, where apostrophe transcends mere nostalgia and becomes a forward-looking and creative force. This evolution marks a significant turning point in Bellow's artistic journey, as he moves from static longing to an embrace of renewal and cultural engagement. In doing so, Bellow not only refines his narrative techniques but also broadens the scope of his literary vision, illustrating a maturation that blends personal introspection with a profound commitment to the vitality of human creativity.

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Conclusion: Aesthetic Dimensions and the Evolution of Apostrophe

The discussion highlights the interconnectedness of these texts, positioning "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" as a thematic and narrative bridge. By linking James's *The Aspern Papers* with Bellow's broader exploration of existential and aesthetic concerns, this comparative analysis demonstrates how literature grapples with enduring questions of absence, identity, and bequest. This approach offers a richer understanding of these works, displaying Bellow's contribution as a pivotal element in modern literary studies and illustrating how his narratives deepen the dialogue between tradition and innovation.

This study positions "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" as a narrative bridge linking the literary past of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* with the forward-looking existential concerns of Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*. Through Feiler's symbolic journey, Bellow inspects themes of apostrophe, identity, power, and artistic legacy. The absence of guiding figures or ideals compels characters to confront their fragmented selves, navigating a world shaped by cultural dissonance and personal vulnerability. Each occurrence of apostrophe within these works introduces a distinct phase: reconciliation with the past through nostalgia, forward-facing transformation through self-creation, and meta-literary bonds that connect writers, characters, and readers in a shared aesthetic and existential act.

In *The Aspern Papers*, James presents apostrophe as a mechanism for reconciling with the past. Aspern's letters embody an idealized literary authority, and the narrator's obsessive pursuit of these "sacred relics" reflects his longing to align with Aspern's genius. Juliana Bordereau's resistance disrupts this longing, revealing the tension between reverence and exploitation. The narrator's moral ambiguity emphasizes the paradox of longing for permanence in a transient world. This nostalgic phase of apostrophe underlines the complexities of memory and the moral challenges of engaging with artistic heritage.

In "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," Bellow deepens this exploration by presenting absence as a reflection of Feiler's fragmented identity. Gonzaga's manuscripts are not merely relics but symbols of Clarence's desire to restore coherence to his fractured self. The omniscient narrative voice, blending sympathy with irony, captures Clarence's yearning while critiquing its futility. This nostalgic phase of apostrophe reveals the crack between longing for the past and the impossibility of reclaiming it, situating Clarence's journey as an aesthetic and existential struggle.

In *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow reimagines apostrophe as a forward-looking act of self-creation and renewal. Unlike Clarence or James's narrator, Charlie Citrine uses Humboldt's absence as a catalyst for constructing a meaningful future. Humboldt's ideals—"the hope of new beauty, the promise, the secret of beauty"—inspire Citrine to transcend the past and engage with creative renewal. His reflections, such as "boredom is an instrument of social control… seasoned with terror and with death," transform absence into a source of imaginative agency, reframing it as a generative force rather than a void. This shift illustrates how apostrophe evolves into a transformative tool for navigating the tensions of modernity.

Apostrophe in *Humboldt's Gift* also functions as a meta-literary device, connecting the voices of writers, characters, and readers. Humboldt's unpublished works transcend the narrative, prompting broader reflections on artistic gift and existential dilemmas. Barbara Johnson's insight that apostrophe "animates the absent" and Jonathan Culler's emphasis on its ability to "collapse temporal and spatial barriers" underscore this dynamic, as Bellow fosters a collective space of introspection and inspiration. By reinterpreting apostrophe as a forward-looking mechanism, *Humboldt's Gift* marks a pivotal evolution in Bellow's aesthetic and philosophical engagement with absence and identity.

Daniel Fuchs aptly describes Bellow as "a novelist of intellect" whose characters carry the "weight of seriousness" that merges intellect and emotion into an inseparable whole (Fuchs, 1974, p. 68). This perspective highlights how Bellow's protagonists, like Citrine and Clarence, grapple with their fragmented identities through a lens that is both deeply personal and aesthetically profound. Unlike modernist writers focused on action, Bellow aligns with the Russian literary tradition of seeing characters as "souls" whose struggles unfold as deeply emotional and intellectual journeys.

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Through the phases of reconciliation, transformation, and meta-literary connection, Bellow expands the thematic and aesthetic possibilities of apostrophe. Clarence's static longing in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" evolves into Citrine's dynamic self-creation in *Humboldt's Gift*, illustrating a progression from nostalgic reverence to active renewal. Meanwhile, the meta-literary dimension underscores how absence transcends individual narratives, fostering collective engagement with creativity and transformation. This comparative analysis affirms the role of "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" as a cornerstone in Bellow's oeuvre and a vital contribution to literature's exploration of power, identity, and the narrative act. Apostrophe, as both a literary and meta-literary device, reveals the enduring dispute between memory and innovation, affirming literature's transformative potential to navigate the universal human search for meaning and connection.

This study's insights extend beyond Bellow's and James's works, emphasizing the broader relevance of apostrophe as a transformative literary device. Apostrophe's ability to bind absence and presence, past and present, and tradition and innovation highlights its potential to shape narratives across genres and historical contexts. In connecting aesthetics with existential inquiry, Bellow and James demonstrate how literature serves as a medium for addressing humanity's most profound struggles.

As John Burnside eloquently observes, Bellow was a modern master deeply rooted in the tradition of the novel, drawing inspiration from practitioners like Stendhal, Conrad, Dickens, and Flaubert. His work transcended literary trends, focusing instead on the essence of human experience. Burnside captures Bellow's lasting residue succinctly: "The only obituary he requires is Saul Bellow: novelist" (Burnside, 2005). This insight reinforces the aesthetic and intellectual depth that defines Bellow's narratives, ensuring their relevance in the ever-evolving conversation about literature's role in understanding the human condition.

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