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One Nation, Two Voices: Whitman, Dickinson and the Combined Call of American Poet and Prophet

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The poet has always occupied a very unique place in society. As an artistic observer, the poet's primary job is to provide an alternative perspective of his or her world. To be truly successful, however, the poet must also articulate this new perspective using language and form that makes it accessible and relevant to both present and future generations. These aspects of the poet's role are addressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essays "Nature" and "The Poet." In these works, Emerson discusses his belief that all generations have a particular perspective and expression of the world and are therefore in need of their own distinctive voice; that voice, he claims, is the voice of the poet.

The poetic voice Emerson describes in these works is often connected to American Romantic poet Walt Whitman, whose poetry possesses the qualities and addresses the topics Emerson outlines in his essays. It is interesting to note, however, that Emerson's work has not as frequently been applied to Whitman's contemporary Emily Dickinson whose poems, even though published after her death and therefore much later than Whitman's, also display a similar combination of social critique and spiritual vigor. Despite their apparent differences in poetic form, it is clear through the revolutionary nature of their styles and the thematic overlaps that occur across their work that both Dickinson and Whitman satisfy Emerson's definition of the successful poet.

Emerson's call for and description of the poetic voice, however, have even stronger implications for these poets when examined with a larger scholastic lens. Claims within "Nature" and "The Poet" strike strong similarities with the work of theologian Walter Brueggemann, whose focus lies primarily in the prophetic tradition. Specifically in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann provides a definition of prophetic voice that closely mirrors Emerson's claims about the poet. Based on these connections that exist between Emerson and Brueggemann, therefore, I believe both Whitman and Dickinson can be read as prophets. Their poetic voices carry tones of strong social critique as well as a vision of newness, all of which are expressed in the characteristic vivid poetry of prophetic ministry.

I. A Unified Call: Emerson's Poet and Brueggemann's Prophet

The similarities between Emerson and Brueggemann begin with their definitions of *call*. Both scholars see the call for the poet and prophet as based in an overarching social need, a need that can only be satisfied by the

distinctive voice they describe. In "Nature," Emerson issues his first call for the poet to his 19th century peers:

[w]hy should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?... There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship. (903)

Emerson's call draws upon many aspects of human experience -- art, scholarship, history, faith, geography, politics -- to illustrate how widespread the scope of the poet truly is. Based on this call, the poet is not limited by established stratifications of social order. In fact, later in his essay Emerson states that such social ordering results in the corruption of human beings and of language, obscuring the community's vision of and access to truth. Through his or her words, then, the poet must "pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things; so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it, is a man in alliance with truth and God" ("Nature" 913).

Furthermore, Emerson states that the poet, while presenting a countercultural message, cannot have a singular, self-contained identity. In other words, to be truly effective the poet cannot be entirely other from his or her community. Emerson describes the poet as representative; he or she "stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth but of the commonwealth" ("The Poet" 985). This particular aspect of Emerson's call requires that the poet is one who can balance a multitude of human experiences "without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest to receive and to impart" ("The Poet" 985-986).

Similar to Emerson, Brueggemann's call for the prophetic voice originates from his observation that society has strayed from a path of truth and pure experience and must be put back on track. He states that the dominant consciousness "has been claimed by false fields of perception and idolatrous systems of language and rhetoric" (*The Prophetic Imagination* 1). These "idolatrous systems" Brueggemann refers to are the same as Emerson's "rotten diction"; they are the oppressive ideologies and constructs that emerge from the dominant consciousness. In order to overcome and dismantle these constructs, Brueggemann explains that the prophet must be a child of tradition, one who has taken it seriously in the shaping of his or her own field of perception and system of language, who is so at home in that memory that the points of contact and incongruity...in culture can be discerned and articulated with proper urgency. (*The Prophetic Imagination* 2)

This tradition to which Brueggemann refers is based in the Biblical Exodus narrative that affirms God as an advocate for social liberation. Just as

Emerson requires the poet to encompass the entirety of human understanding despite cultural expectations, so Brueggemann sees the prophet as one who can look through social institutions and identify the free nature of God as opposed to "the static God of order" (*The Prophetic Imagination* 8).

While the idea of recognizing and proclaiming the true nature of God may seem more abstract than Emerson's focus on generational distinctions, Brueggemann is very specific about how the prophet achieves this feat. He describes the duty of the prophet as two-fold; he or she must "criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness" and "energize persons and communities by [the] promise of another time and situation toward which the community...may move" (*The Prophetic Imagination* 3). These tasks require the prophet to be simultaneously conscious of the current situation and of an arriving future not yet realized. Brueggemann's emphasis on social criticism and communal energizing, therefore, again reflects Emerson's description of the poet as one who is fully involved with but not a simple product of his or her community. For both Emerson and Brueggemann, the voice they call for has the ability to observe, explain and dismantle dysfunctional social structures to expose a greater truth.

It is important to note here that within their particular calls Emerson and Brueggemann point to different sources of this truth that the prophet must reintroduce to society; Emerson identifies Nature as the primary inspiration of the poetic voice, and Brueggemann names the Exodus narrative and Mosaic tradition as the prophetic foundations. For Emerson, ultimate success for the poet is spreading the enlightenment achieved through communion with Nature while the goal of Brueggemann's prophet is the "formation of a new social community to match the vision of God's freedom" (*The Prophetic Imagination* 7). Even though these perspectives seem to lead in separate directions, Emerson and Brueggemann are in fact referring to the same concept. Both Emerson and Brueggemann are calling for a voice that breaks through the dominant consciousness and exposes some type of existence free from societal constraints. The final and perhaps most important shared feature of these calls, therefore, is the requirement of prophets to use their understanding of truth to give their community awareness of and access to the freedom society has obstructed for so long.

II. Artful Observers: Social Criticism in Whitman and Dickinson

The search for truth and the recognition that existing social systems are not conducive to experiencing this truth are substantial themes within Whitman and Dickinson's poetry. Both poets criticize aspects of 19th century American culture that result in the oppression of certain people based on gender, socio-economic status and religious belief to make it "clear that things are not as they should be, not as they were promised, and not as they must be and will be" (*The Prophetic Imagination* 12). Through these powerful, countercultural lines, Whitman and Dickinson effectively meet Emerson and Brueggemann's requirement that the prophetic voice "turns the

world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession” (“The Poet” 991).

Much of Whitman’s poetry is dedicated to breaking down the barriers of various social constructs. As a poet who identified himself as a representation of the average American, Whitman focused a great deal on the constitutional rhetoric of freedom, liberty and equality. This emphasis is seen quite clearly in parts 21 and 24 of “Song of Myself”. In these sections, Whitman presents strong challenges to the established social structures of sexism, classism and religion which he saw as obstructing the creation of an unified community. In Part 21, Whitman states, “I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,/ And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man” (lines 425-426). These lines clearly reject the dominant patriarchal ideology of Whitman’s time. By relating himself to a woman and claiming that women are equal to men, Whitman is posing a direct challenge to traditional sexist thought in his society. A similar critique appears in Part 24: “Whoever degrades another degrades me,/ And whatever is done or said returns at last to me” (lines 503-504). Here, Whitman extends his empathy to any and all members of society. In both of these excerpts, Whitman expresses the interconnectedness of human experience. Instead of adhering to the strict gender binary and class system of his time, Whitman claims that all people, regardless of social status, are on an equal plain.

Whitman also criticizes problematic ideologies of dominant organized religion within the poem. In particular he voices objections to the practice of dualism, the belief that body and soul are in strict separation; the body is viewed as sinful and unclean and the soul is considered sacred and transcendent. He claims in Part 21:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first, I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue. (lines 422-424)

Here Whitman asserts that body and soul are equal, unified and can be represented by one poetic voice. He strengthens this point by juxtaposing heaven and hell and proclaiming his ability to represent both of these seemingly oppositional concepts. Additionally, the idea of increasing the pleasure of heaven and translating the pains of hell questions the entire binary system the church has established between body and soul, sin and salvation. Whitman’s criticism of dualism is also developed in Part 24 where he states:

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,

This head more than churches, bibles and all the creeds.
(lines 522-526)

In these lines, he asserts again the sacredness of the human body as higher than objects and rituals of organized religion. Further, Whitman’s use of Christian terms such as churches, bibles and creeds makes his critique of dualism even more specific; it is clear that he is talking about the dominant Christian church in America and not other minority religions present in society.

These critiques of organized religion are echoed in Dickinson’s “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church”. In the first two lines of this poem, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -/ I keep it, staying at Home -”, Dickinson also challenges the traditional notion that sacred space is restricted to the church grounds. Unlike Whitman, however, Dickinson does not elevate the human body as a means of worship. Instead she offers the familiar and comfortable spaces of one’s home as an alternative to formal, restrictive church quarters. Dickinson’s final stanza highlights the dangers of worshipping in such a place. She writes:

God preaches, a noted Clergyman -
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -
I’m going, all along. (lines 9-12)

These lines claim that if people limit their worship to the strict boundaries of church space and structured services they will overlook, or even entirely miss, experiences of grace during their life. By specifically stating that God’s sermon is “never long”, Dickinson is drawing a contrast between experiences of God’s true, free ministry and that of the ordered church. For Dickinson, heaven is revealed “all along” her lifetime and not just during her time within the church walls.

III. The Image of Change: The Poets’ Prophetic Energizing

The next job of the prophet is to use his or her social criticisms to inspire and energize the community towards social change. This energizing is crucial because the dominant culture the prophet critiques “is a wearied culture, nearly unable to be seriously energized to new promises from God,” or new revelations of truth (*The Prophetic Imagination* 4). In order to energize a community, the poet and prophet must have a “better perception...[that] sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form” (“The Poet” 991). The goal of energizing, therefore, is to express this perspective in such a way as to motivate present and future generations toward the newness and higher form they wish to attain.

In his poems “I Sing the Body Electric” and “Song of the Open Road,” Whitman uses the physical sensations of touch and open nature as energizing themes. Even within the titles of the poems, the significance of these two experiences is made quite clear. Whitman begins “I Sing the Body

Electric" by expressing the ability of physical touch to empower individuals and build community. He writes, "The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,/ They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,/ And dis corrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul" (lines 2-4). In these lines Whitman claims that a shared embrace can not only foster community through physical connection but also can serve as a catalyst for better communication, moral improvement and spiritual renewal. Also, the description of this community as a group of armies implies a shared objective and strategy. Based on the surrounding lines, this goal seems to be the unification and shared experience of the community that is achieved through physical closeness.

Whitman's assertion that the body can serve as an energizing force also connects with his criticisms of dualism. Later in the poem he observes, "There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well" (line 50). By directly linking physical experiences to spiritual ones, Whitman is again breaking down the Church's separation of body and soul and furthering his efforts to energize his readers towards positive change. This body-soul connection continues in his poem "Song of the Open Road". While describing a journey through the wilderness, Whitman pauses to reflect: "The efflux of the soul is happiness, here is happiness,/ I think it pervades the open air, waiting at all times,/ Now it flows unto us, we are rightly charged" (lines 105-107). In these lines, the physical sensations of nature invigorate the body and the soul to a pure experience of happiness.

This happiness Whitman describes, however, is not a solitary emotion. In the final stanza of the poem, Whitman explicitly calls for the reader to join him in this community bound by shared experience:

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live? (lines 220-224)

Whitman's approach to energizing, although based in physical sensation, is truly geared toward community building. He asks not just to be touched, but offers himself up to the reader in return; Whitman dedicates himself to the task to inspiring others to experience touch and nature to their fullest extents.

While Whitman's energizing comes primarily from close camaraderie and physical proximity, Dickinson relies on more intangible experiences to motivate society towards alternative consciousness. In her poem "This World is not conclusion" Dickinson describes the tension between science and faith in such a way as to inspire her readers to transcend binary thinking. She writes:

This World is not conclusion -
A Species stands beyond -

Invisible, as Music -
But positive, as Sound -/
It beckons, and it baffles. (lines 2-5)

The opening lines of this poem makes some significant claims. First, Dickinson declaratively states that the world we know is not ultimately reality. This claim, even though at first unsettling, is effective at energizing because it opens up infinite other realities to experience, explore and understand. Dickinson continues this inspiration by referencing a "Species...beyond." Her description of this species as both invisible and positive connotes a majestic and mysterious quality, again energizing the reader or audience with the idea of possibility and newness. Finally, the species Dickinson describes actually calls to the readers itself, leading them forward into an unrealized, ever-arriving future.

Later in the poem, Dickinson further intrigues the reader towards an engaged spirituality by describing faith as a clumsy yet resilient character; "Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -" (line 13). This personification of the social construct she has previously criticized allows Dickinson to continue to point out the flaws of organized religion without discrediting the merits of faith itself. In other words, she is able to give her readers hope for a new kind of faith that can interact with science and other influences without the threat of negation or failure. Her readers, then, are energized to seek alternative, innovative approaches to thought and belief.

IV. Creating Alternative Consciousness: Whitman, Dickinson and Paradox

Although not explicitly stated, the ability to identify and express paradox is also inherent in Emerson and Brueggemann's calls. Both scholars list different extremes of human experience and expect the voice they call for to freely navigate among these polarities. Further, the prophet must not only articulate these paradoxical experiences but also understand how to live within them; he or she has to know how these extremes and the gray area between them exist in harmony. For example, the poet and prophet, while possessing great knowledge and understanding, always "knows well that it is not his; that it is as strange and beautiful to him as to you" ("The Poet" 998). In other words, he or she can have both the knowledge of paradox and the awareness that such knowledge is a gift and not a possession. Through such processes, the poet and prophet creates what Brueggemann refers to as alternative consciousness.

Both Whitman and Dickinson demonstrate the skills of expressing and existing in paradox within their poems. Throughout much of his work Whitman utilizes his characteristic catalogue to describe the infinite variations held within our world. In "Song of Myself", he juxtaposes prostitutes and Presidents, sin and salvation, birth and death, and many other seemingly oppositional pairings to illustrate the interconnectedness between all aspects of society and human experience. Whitman also addresses philosophical and religious uses of paradox in "Song of the Open Road".

Line 174 of the poem reads, "To see no possession but you may possess it, enjoying all without labor or purchase, abstracting the feast yet not abstracting one particle of it" (line 174). Instead of focusing on the physical aspects of human experience as her often does, Whitman here draws from more abstract sources such as Christian and Taoist philosophy to evoke the spiritual gains of accepting and understanding paradox. Finally, Whitman's understanding and even admiration of paradox is perhaps most explicitly stated in Part 51 of "Song of Myself". Here, he uses his own voice as the embodiment of paradoxical experience. He proclaims: "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well, I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (lines 1324-1326). In these lines Whitman makes it clear that not only does he understand the presence and importance of paradox in society but also that he accepts paradox as a fundamental part of himself.

Dickinson also demonstrates a deep understanding of paradox throughout her poetry. For example, her piece "Much Madness is divinest Sense" is entirely devoted to the exploration and explanation of paradox, and despite its short length, the poem provides a profound message about the paradoxical nature of society and human experience within it. Her opening lines describe this paradox with sharp brevity: "Much Madness is divinest Sense -/ To a discerning Eye -/ Much Sense - the Starkest Madness -" (lines 1-3). These few lines voice a strong aversion to dominant society's definition of sanity. She identifies what the majority considers sensible behavior as "Starkest Madness" while affirming the alternative perspectives as "divinest Sense."

A shift occurs in the last lines, however, from a discussion of ideologies to commentary on how these ideologies are applied to the social treatment of individuals. Dickinson observes, "Assent - and you are sane -/ Demur - you're straightway dangerous -/ And handled with a Chain -" (lines 5-7). These lines clearly show Dickinson's critique of dominant society's persecution of those who are other and stand outside the majority's rule. The detail of the chain in the last line in particular implies a great deal of force that must be resisted in order for an individual of alternative mind to maintain his or her agency. There is, then, a more painful, personal sense of struggle here than in the earlier lines of the poem. It is important to notice, though, that even here Dickinson does not critique the paradox itself. Rather, she seems content with these opposites and remains confident that an alternative consciousness is the clearer path to truth.

V. Visions of Hope, Paths to Liberation

The ultimate goal of the poet and prophet through the practices of social criticism, communal energizing and alternative consciousness building is to instill hope. All of these actions work towards redirecting society on a path towards some ultimate truth, whether that take the form of communion with nature or a connection with the free God. Once such communion or connection is made, then liberation from the dominant culture is possible. By

observing and articulating oppressive social structures, energizing their readers to explore new thoughts and experiences, and constantly constructing and presenting alternative perspectives of our world, Whitman and Dickinson serve as two examples of the compelling prophetic voice that can lead communities to this type of liberation. As Emerson states, "poets are thus liberating Gods... They are free and they make free" ("The Poet" 995).

Whitman and Dickinson's role as prophets, therefore, is not limited to the time in which they lived. The prophetic voice is concerned with "addressing, in season and out of season, the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient, of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated" (*The Prophetic Imagination* 3). In other words, no matter the specific age in which they are speaking or the particular cultural issues they address, the work of poets such as Whitman and Dickinson remains relevant in any time of social struggle.

In the closing paragraphs of "The Poet", Emerson describes the cultural climate in which Whitman and Dickinson lived, wrote and prophesied:

On the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying. The inaccessibleness of every thought but that we are in, is wonderful.... Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene. (995)

Emerson's diagnosis of American society in the late 1800s remains eerily applicable to our 21st century experiences. We are in an age of failing economic systems, illogical wars, legally sanctioned prejudice and unjust cultural domination, an age longing for alternative consciousness and hope for change. These social similarities make it possible for the works of Whitman and Dickinson to continue to help us see our own faults, empower our emerging strengths and lead us in making new, hopeful perspectives for a future that, without the prophet's voice, could not be expressed.

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3. Vision of the Poet as Liberator

The ultimate goal of the poet and prophet through the practices of social criticism, confrontational organizing and alternative consciousness building is to mobilize. All of these actions work towards redressing society on a path towards some ultimate truth, whether it all take the form of communion with nature or a communion with the true God. Once such communion or connection is made, then liberation from the dominant culture is possible. By