

"Self" in Whitman and Dickinson

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Lionel Stevenson, Professor of English at Duke University, has taught at the University of California, Arizona State College, and the University of Southern California, and has been Visiting Lecturer at Oxford University. His other distinguished books on the English novel include *Ordeal of George Meredith*, *Showman of Vanity Fair*, and *The English Novel: A Panorama*.

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"Self" in Whitman and Dickinson

Frequently paired in American literature survey courses, Whitman and Dickinson are disconcertingly hard to connect. Indeed, professorial contextualists might here find especial cause to rejoice in a critical position which denies the relevance of efforts to connect. But, if only owing to classroom logistics, I suspect that many who teach literature courses organized within an essentially chronological scheme must perforce contemplate the means by which obviously comparable writers are to be aligned and differentiated.

Both Whitman and Dickinson, even by nineteenth century standards, are conspicuous for the centrality of self to the substance and method of their poetry. That is, unlike more conventional representatives of the American Renaissance, Whitman and Dickinson appear to place the expressive demands of the self before even the gentlest claims of what may be called the public audience for poetry. Both are consequently poets of marked individuality in style and theme.

In formulating his conception of the self, Whitman seems to have been considerably impressed with the need for spiritual unity of a heterogeneous people who were passing through a phase of great material expansion. And in line with his notion that man is a progressive form, the temporal manifestation of a *life force* that is undergoing constant change, Whitman felt that the requisite next step was a fusion of the American experience. Whitman set himself the task of poetically representing this synthesis, which necessarily called into play a mystical conception of the self, inasmuch as a synthesis or fusion of such dimensions is inconceivable within natural experience.

Whitman manages this fusion through his conception of the self as the temporalized aspect of a spiritual unity whose manifestations run the gamut of existence. And emphasizing, as he does, this equation of the part with the whole, *i.e.*, the essential sameness of things, it is possible for Whitman to project himself into all times, places and persons; to absorb all attitudes and meanings, all praise and blame, guilt and innocence. This conception of the self as vitally related to all stages of existence no less than to contemporary existence is mystical because Whitman handles the generalized self, the agent of his spiritual synthesis, not as an idea but as experience. Whitman has taken an essentially inexpressible belief in the universe as a spiritual community (a realm beyond contradiction and paradox) and by means of a mystical belief in the ability of the self to fuse with all life and matter (which sometimes takes the material form of empathy) has attempted to create the experience of a collective American spirit which presents to the reader the complete self-absorption of a genuine vision.

Emily Dickinson, on the other hand,

represents a conception of the self that is at once more limited and more rational than Whitman's. For the comprehensive catholicity of Whitman's self, Emily Dickinson substitutes one that is specifically feminine, mid-nineteenth century, New Englandish, and Christian. It should also be noted that just as Whitman's conception of the self was stimulated by what he understood to be a growing crisis in American culture, so was Emily Dickinson's individuality shaped and encouraged by her ultimate dissatisfaction with the New England tradition of moral Calvinism. This weakening of Emily Dickinson's formal theology helped to produce a conception of the self that was largely incompatible with Christian mysticism. She usually draws a fairly precise distinction between the alive self and the dead self, which vitiates the traditional impact of Christian death and salvation as mystical experience, *e.g.*, death made life through the God made man; so that she is able to handle death, salvation, eternity, etc., as ideas rather than experience. This conception of the self's finite mortality (*cf.* "New Feet Within My Garden Go" and "The Chariot") enables her to treat serious themes with a certain playfulness and detachment. Unlike Whitman, she is able to feel the sense of death and pain without merging with them or accepting them.

In other words, her conception of the self as relatively free of the past ("In a Library") and in solitary opposition to majority behavior ("Much Madness is Divinest Sense") and as representing this sharp cleavage between life and death (in conjunction with a vague sort of eternity) endows her poetry with a problematic "as if" quality that is far removed from the empathic certainty of Whitman's poetry. And it is this quality that allows Emily Dickinson to approach a complicated theme like death with far greater variety of treatment and tone than Whitman — who merely identifies with and embraces it — is able to muster. Emily Dickinson's rather limiting conception of the self places her in the position of discovering most knowledge to be tentative. As a direct consequence, many of her poems lack the kind of disturbing finality we find in Whitman who attended to experience rather than ideas or knowledge.

The value of Emily Dickinson's characterization of the self would seem to reside in her ability to derive a richer complexity from the dramatic presentation of her sympathy with "The Wife," "The Grass," seasonal change, etc., than the mystical empathy to which Whitman's conception of the self committed him would appear to have allowed.

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