



# WHITMAN AND DICKINSON ON NATURE AND THE SELF

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Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson were two of the most influential and well-regarded American poets of the 19th century, and their poetry was essential in establishing a distinct national literary style for the United States. Both poets could be considered individualistic, their poetry focusing largely on the self, and the experiences of oneself as lived and filtered through their *self*; both are also considered part of the Romantic movement, with highly symbolic poetry and usually being subjective. However, those similar poets couldn't be more distinct, Walt Whitman has a grandiose writing, for him, the poetic "I", the *self*, is everything, everything is made from that *self*, and will eventually return to it, everything that exists is made to be experienced and admired by the *self*; Dickinson, on the other hand, is much more modest, her writing consists of more personal happenings, usually in a much sadder tone than the one Whitman writes in, she talks about death, loneliness, disease and depression in a somber way, quieter than the oft-boasting Whitman. This essay aims to compare those two poets on how they deal with topics such as the self, the human experience, nature, and their general writing styles; on Whitman, I will focus solely on *Song of Myself*.

When dealing with nature, Walt Whitman seems, at the same time, both a romantic and a scientist, in fact Joseph Beaver went so far as to call him "the first [American] to embody modern scientific concepts in a poetic manner" (Beaver, 1974); on the other hand, he espouses frequently a sort of mysticism in *Song of Myself*; especially in the sense of unity the poet writes about, at the first verses of the poem he writes:

*"And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.  
[...]  
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil,  
this air"*  
(Whitman, 1892)

That sense of unity expands to everything, from the most grand, such as nature and humanity, to the mundane:

*"Whatever interests the rest interests me, politics, wars,  
markets,  
newspapers, schools,  
The mayor and councils, banks, tariffs, steamships,  
factories,  
stocks, stores, real estate and personal estate."*  
(Whitman, 1892)

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Whitman could then be considered a transcendentalist in the sense of seeing the divine and mystic in the everyday life, the things that are close to us, but unlike most in that school, his experiences seem less derived from God, and more from individual experience, one which is revealed from a sort of insight, coming from within the person, not a divine revelation:

*Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin  
of all poems,  
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are  
millions of suns left.)  
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,  
nor look  
through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in  
books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things  
from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.*  
(Whitman, 1892)

Dickinson, on the other hand, treats nature mostly on more personal and individualized ways, the experiences of the self of her poems with nature also tend to be significantly more negative than that of Whitman's, in the poem *There's a certain Slant of light*, she describes the sunlight of winter as oppressive, bringing despair and reminders of death:

*"There's a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons -  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes -  
[...]  
When it comes, the Landscape listens -  
Shadows - hold their breath -  
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance  
On the look of Death -"*  
(Dickinson, 1862)

Compare with Whitman, who mentions winter twice in *Song of Myself*:

*Seasons pursuing each other the plougher ploughs, the  
mower mows,  
and the winter-grain falls in the ground;  
[...]  
Where winter wolves bark amid wastes of snow and  
icicled trees*  
(Whitman, 1892)

On the former verse, Whitman talks about agriculture, when the farmer sows the ground in the winter, a productive activity, that brings food, and therefore sustenance. The latter one is a place the narrator talks about visiting and exploring, the winter here is neutral, simply referring to where the wolves live. Furthermore, while Whitman usually talks in very grandiose terms about nature and the world, on Dickinson's poetry there is an element of nature being uncaring and mundane, on her poem *I heard a Fly buzz*, the final moments of the narrator get interrupted by the buzzing of a fly, the only sound being made in the room, and breaking a moment that is usually treated with the utmost reverence:

[...]  
*I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away  
What portion of me be  
Assignable - and then it was  
There interposed a Fly -*

*With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -  
Between the light - and me -  
[...]*  
(Dickinson, 1863)

Dickinson also seems to treat nature as somewhat alien and essentially different from humanity, as beautiful, but not belonging on the same place as humans, as if nature almost rejects them. In the poem *These are the days when Birds come back*, a divided narrator on one hand sees nature as deceptive, and on the other begs for nature to let them partake on the beauty of it all:

[...]  
*These are the days when skies resume  
The old - old sophistries of June -  
A blue and gold mistake.*

*Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee -  
Almost thy plausibility  
Induces my belief.*

[...]  
*Oh Sacrament of summer days,  
Oh Last Communion in the Haze -  
Permit a child to join.*

*Thy sacred emblems to partake -  
They consecrated bread to take  
And thine immortal wine!*  
(Dickinson, 1890)

And one of the poems where this communion with nature is achieved, or at least an illusion of it, is *I taste a liquor never brewed*, where the narrator gets “drunk” on the reveling with nature, as Agnieszka Salska (1985) wrote: “The human intruder insists on participating in nature’s mood, but only succeeds in becoming nature’s clown– ‘the little Tippler / Leaning against the Sun,’ as a variant reading puts it, a comic figure, very much like the village drunkard, leaning against the lamp-post”, this reading suggests either an impossibility of actual communion, with the drunkenness of the character being comical and even pitiable; on the other hand, one could read this as nature intoxicating humanity in a good way, the achieving of a communion with nature taking us out of the realm of society and logic, and into a world of feelings and oneness, closer to Whitman’s view, “the little Tippler / Leaning against the Sun” would represent, thus, the achieving of a divine light or truth; in either case, however, it is very perceptible that for Dickinson, nature doesn’t belong with humanity, at best the communion is achieved through inebriation and leaving behind our senses, and at worst, unachievable, with merely an illusion of it brought about by said inebriation.

Another markedly stark difference between the poets, is their ways of treating the self; Dickinson’s poetry offers a duality of mind and heart of the self, hers *The Mind lives on the Heart*, illustrates this idea well:

*The Mind lives on the Heart*  
*Like any Parasite—*  
*If that is full of Meat*  
*The Mind is fat.*

*But if the Heart omit*  
*Emaciate the Wit—*  
*The Aliment of it*  
*So absolute.*  
 (Dickinson, 1876)

Furthermore, this division seems to be of “mind and heart”, of intellect and consciousness versus affection and instinct:

*Me from Myself— to banish —*  
*Had I Art —*  
*Impregnable my Fortress*  
*Unto All Heart —*

*But since Myself— assault Me —*  
*How have I peace*  
*Except by subjugating*

*Consciousness?*  
 (Dickinson, 1884)

On the poem above we can also see an idea of consciousness being a burden, for it brings also misery and sadness; on the other hand, it seems consciousness also tethers the individual to the world, preventing them from dying, and in her poems that deal with death, it’s the end of consciousness that symbolizes the death of the narrator, as seen on the final verses of *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*:

*And then a Plank in Reason, broke,*  
*And I dropped down, and down -*  
*And hit a World, at every plunge,*  
*And Finished knowing - then -*  
 (Dickinson, 1862)

Whitman’s self, conversely, is much broader, one could even go so far as to call it all-encompassing, the oneness present throughout the poem is an intrinsic part of the self expressed in *Song of Myself*:

*And what I assume you shall assume,*  
*For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*  
 [...] *Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.*  
*Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen*  
 (Whitman, 1892)

Furthermore, the whole poem is about liberation, so that whoever reads it can be free from everything, Whitman makes it clear he doesn’t want to lead anybody to any conclusions, but free them from the burden of dogma, so they can find their own conclusions:

*No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,*  
*I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,*  
*I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,*  
*But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,*  
*My left hand hooking you round the waist,*  
*My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road.*  
*Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,*  
*You must travel it for yourself.*  
 (Whitman, 1892)

While for Whitman the liberation of the self is achieved through a sense of unity with everything and everyone, for Dickinson, that same liberation can

be achieved by oneself, through the mind, instead of letting it trap you, you should use it to free yourself:

*No Rack can torture me –  
My Soul – at Liberty –  
Behind this mortal Bone  
There knits a bolder One –  
[...]  
Except Thyself may be  
Thine Enemy –  
Captivity is Consciousness –  
So's Liberty.*  
(Dickinson, 1890)

On the grand scheme of things, the main difference between the two poets seems to be the scope of their poetry: while Whitman's is grandiose and all-encompassing with its themes and style, Dickinson's is more personal, dealing with individual happenings. We can also see how Whitman tends to be more positive with his poetry, invoking usually uplifting themes in *Song of Myself* and talking to the reader in hopeful ways, of freedom, oneness and pure delight of nature; Dickinson, meanwhile, is significantly darker in her poetry, with frequent themes of death, pain, and depression, although still some rays of hope and positivity shine through her poetry such as seen in the last example I brought. In sum, both poets are firmly humanistic, in the sense of focusing on experiences as felt and thought by humans, and highly symbolic and philosophic in their writings, rightfully cementing them in the canon of American, English-language and, I would say, world poetry.

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