

The Discourse of Secular Prophecy:  
Nietzsche, Whitman, Stevens, Jung, Dick

Draft

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The modern liberal-democratic state is based on a deontological concept of justice that aims to be independent of any substantive doctrine about ultimate matters, such as the nature of the good life or the salvation of the soul. John Rawls, for example, assumes that citizens while citizens will have unconditional commitments to comprehensive worldviews, they can exercise these commitments reasonably – that is, each can agree that his or her worldview must not be coercively imposed on others. Each comprehensive worldview will find different sorts of motives to opt for “reasonableness” in this sense, but so long as there is an “overlapping consensus” among them not to force one’s worldview on others, a state that remains aloof from worldviews as such, dedicated only to ensuring that the basic institutions of a society are fair, can flourish.

Other liberal thinkers have suggested similar solutions to the problem of how to have *both* a state that is impartial with respect to worldviews *and* a culture that fosters commitment to meaningful projects of redemption, salvation, individuation, and perfection. Following Rawls’s idea of public reason or civility – that the citizens of a liberal polity can agree to put cases for public policy by means of arguments that are intelligible independently of the terms of any one comprehensive worldview – Jürgen Habermas imagines that the evolving consensus achieved through rational public debate will gradually displace the authority previously exercised by the religious traditions. For Richard Rorty, a liberal-democratic ideal of progress towards full participation in the society by all of its members is all that we need in the way of politics; while in private we rely on aesthetic self-fashioning to develop the contingent identities that for moderns take the place of traditional religious devotion.

The difficulty with all such “solutions” is that our comprehensive worldviews adjust to the procedural rationality of the public sphere all-too-successfully, to the point where they are no longer able to elicit and sustain unconditional commitments. Willy-nilly, the force of comprehensive worldviews is weakened when they are rendered merely ironic, contingent, private, or in a word, “reasonable.” The foreground culture of public reason threatens to swallow up the background culture of comprehensive worldviews. When that happens, we see two very different but paradoxically related outcomes: nihilism, in which no one can commit themselves unconditionally to anything, and fanaticism, an unreasonable dedication to a comprehensive worldview, sometimes violent, and in any case almost always with the idea that the state ought to implement the worldview, coercively if necessary.

I have no new solution to the problem of how to combine a state based on a deontological concept of justice with a culture of robust unconditional commitments. I want to begin facing up to the problem, however, by exploring what I call the discourse

of secular prophecy, among whose exemplars I include Walt Whitman, Friedrich Nietzsche, Wallace Stevens, and Carl Jung. Based on Martin Heidegger's analysis of *Befindlichkeit* or "attunement," and especially his exemplification of attunement in the paradigm case of mood (*Stimmung*), I argue that taking prophetic discourse seriously in a secular age involves taking moods (and what they reveal) seriously: as revelations of what it means to be rather than mere projections of subjective states of mind onto objects. The works of Whitman, Nietzsche, Stevens, and Jung, among others, can teach us a great deal about how this may be achieved.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger analyzes human existence as taking a stand on what it means to be by using things and relating to others in order to actualize some possible mode of life.<sup>1</sup> This picture implies that individual human beings (what Heidegger calls *Dasein*, the being for whom being is an issue) have always already found themselves in a world, disclosed to them as an intelligible totality of things, enterprises and activities, and other persons. Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which individuals find themselves oriented in the world and connected to things and persons: *understanding* and *attunement*. Understanding consists in the practical know-how by means of which we cope in familiar ways with familiar things and persons. Attunement, on the other hand, is an overall orientation to or perspective on the world that shapes and colors the way in which things are disclosed as a whole.

Such an orientation is entailed by the idea of a being that takes a stand on what it means to be, but for Heidegger this does not imply viewing that stand as the product of the exercise of free will by an autonomous subject. On the contrary, Heidegger's main example of attunement is *mood*, and he emphasizes that we do not choose our moods. We are, as Heidegger puts it, "delivered over" to moods, or "thrown" into them. In a mood of fear, everything shows up as ominous and any sudden sound or movement causes alarm; in a joyful mood, everything appears as hopeful and celebratory. Moreover, moods are not merely private mental states. There are such things as the mood of a party, a city, a nation, and even an era.

Modern psychology tends to trivialize moods, regarding them as merely internal feelings projected onto external things by the subject, or as the effect of neurological processes that are meaningless in themselves. But Heidegger insists that things as disclosed by moods are as real and substantial as things disclosed in any other way. In extreme cases, a mood can suddenly seize you and disclose the world to you in a hitherto unknown way. In the ancient world, before moods were turned into mere subjective states of mind, they were often thought of as caused by the gods, and thus as possessing the power to radically transform human beings, whether in the way of a blessing or a curse.

From what has been said, the nature of the gods' saving power should now be clear: it is always possible to be thrown into a mood that will transform one's way of being in the world in a way that can be expressed (for example, in an artwork) and to

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<sup>1</sup> I owe my basic orientation to Heidegger to Hubert Dreyfus and Richard Rorty.

which others may attune themselves. Attributing a radically transformed way of being in the world to a god is merely a way of taking moods and their expression seriously, as potentially authoritative guides to conduct and judgment. And the manner in which we may rediscover prophetic discourse in a secular age should also be clear, namely by identifying powerful and persuasive instances in which the disclosure of reality by means of moods, rather than being dismissed as merely subjective, strikes us as authoritative while also remaining recognizably secular and modern in whichever senses of these terms we wish to conserve.

Indeed, once we frame the problem in this way, a wide range of creative expression from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – what we might call the literature of secular prophecy – comes immediately into view. I think in particular of Walt Whitman and Friedrich Nietzsche in the former, and Wallace Stevens and James Merrill in the latter – and one may freely multiply examples. And I wonder further what Carl Jung’s *Liber Novus* might contribute to this emerging canon.

Let’s begin with Nietzsche. From the point of view of secular prophecy, the interest of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85) lies not only in its content, but in the experiences that led Nietzsche to write it and the authority he attributed to those experiences. In the first place, Nietzsche ascribes the origin of the “basic conception” of *Zarathustra* (namely, the thought of eternal recurrence), not to detached rational reflection but to feelings evoked in him by a particular landscape in south-eastern Switzerland:

That day I was walking through the woods by Lake Silvaplana; I stopped at a powerful pyramidal block of stone not far from Surlei. The thought [of eternal recurrence] came to me there.<sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche goes on to describe the writing of the first part of *Zarathustra*, in Rapallo, Italy, as an event that occurred *to* him, not the production of something consciously controlled *by* him:

In the mornings I would climb the magnificent road to Zoagli uphill in a southerly direction, looking out over pine trees and far out to sea. In the afternoons ... I would walk around the whole Bay of Santa Margherita as far as Portofino.... It was on these two paths that the whole first part of *Zarathustra* came to me, and above all Zarathustra himself, as a type; or rather, *he took over me there*.<sup>3</sup>

In *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche he speaks of having “found” the second and third parts of *Zarathustra* in Sils-Maria and Nice, respectively, and that in each case, a mere “[t]en days were sufficient” to write these complex and layered works.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Write Such Good Books: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Write Such Good Books: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” 1.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Write Such Good Books: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” 4.

Given the radically transformative effect *Zarathustra* had on its author's attitude and outlook on life, it is highly significant that Nietzsche describes how he came to write it in terms of being taken over or overtaken by visions, drives, and moods utterly beyond his conscious control. As he put it:

Retaining only the smallest remnant of superstition one can still hardly reject the idea of being a mere incarnation, a mere mouthpiece, a mere medium. The concept of revelation, in the sense that suddenly and with indescribable certainty and subtlety something becomes *visible* and audible, something that shakes one to the depths and bowls one over, simply describes the fact of the matter.... A rapture whose enormous tension discharges itself now and again in floods of tears.... Everything happens involuntarily in the highest degree, yet in a tempestuous feeling of freedom, of being unconditioned, of power, of divinity....<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, the authority exercised over Nietzsche by the ideas expressed in *Zarathustra* had everything to do with how those ideas originated, namely through a self-transfiguring divine visitation in the form of a mood of unprecedented intensity.

What, then, of the content of *Zarathustra*? There are, of course, the doctrines of the death of God and the will to power, but Zarathustra himself ultimately loses interest in these themes in favor of the prospect, which he eventually achieves, of an ultimate and unconditional affirmation of life. The high points of *Zarathustra* are like those familiar to students of the *philosophia perennis*: they are moments of *coincidentia oppositorum* such as Zarathustra's marriage to Life in the form of Eternity at the end of the Third Part; his definitive overcoming of the resentful Socratic desire to "correct existence" when he experiences the perfection of the world just as it is, in the middle of the Fourth Part; and finally "The Drunken Song," which closes the Fourth Part:

Did you ever say Yes to a single joy? Oh, my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe as well. All things are chained together, entwined, in love –  
 – if you ever wanted one time a second time, if you ever said "You please me, happiness! Quick! Moment!" then you wanted it *all* back!  
 – All anew, all eternally, all chained together, entwined, in love, oh then you *loved* the world –<sup>6</sup>

Zarathustra's affirmation of all of life by means of the unconditional affirmation of a single moment of life reflects a mood of the greatest possible intensity – what he calls a "deep joy" that liberates and makes free, but which corresponds to a "deep eternity" that provides weight, seriousness, and authority.

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<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Write Such Good Books: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*," 3.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Fourth and Last Part, "The Drunken Song," 10.

The religiosity animating such moments as these in *Zarathustra* is unmistakable, but it is a sense of a divine presence that is very far removed from what Nietzsche castigated as “monotontheism”:

O Heaven above me, so pure! So high! That is what your pureness means to me,  
that there is no eternal reason-spider and –spider-web: –  
– that for me you are a dance-floor for divine accidents, that for me you are a  
Gods’ table for divine dice and dice-throwers! –<sup>7</sup>

Instead of invoking a god that governs and guarantees the intelligibility of everything, Zarathustra divinizes the chaotic character of reality and presents as candidates for sainthood those mortals capable of finding meaning in the chaos, personified by a being he addresses as “Lord Contingency.”

If there are any twentieth-century candidates for sainthood in the cult of Lord Contingency, Wallace Stevens would surely be among the most plausible. In “Connoisseur of Chaos,” Stevens mocks academic conventions of clarity and demonstration while simultaneously distinguishing and identifying the two poles of order and disorder.<sup>8</sup>

A. A violent order is a disorder; and  
B. A great disorder is an order. These  
Two things are one. (Pages of illustrations.)

Order that is achieved at the cost of too great an abstraction from the chaotic character of reality does violence to the latter, and so, in its way, only adds to the disorder. On the other hand, a sufficiently impressive disorder amounts to a form of order – all that is required to see it as such is a slight change of perspective.

The speaker’s rather hasty assertion of identity – “These / Two things are one” – is itself an attempt to impose the form of unity on a figure of thought that is too dynamic to be so easily contained. As the poem continues, order and disorder further appear, disappear, and exchange places with one another in a way that resists a final resolution:

After all the pretty contrast of life and death  
Proves that these opposite things partake of one,  
At least that was the theory, when bishops’ books  
Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that.  
The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind....

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Third Part, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (Library of America, 1997), pp. 194-195.

But the speaker's mocking attitude towards the now incredible figures of unity on offer in the "bishops' books" does not indicate an inability to affirm the world. "[R]elation appears," he observes,

A small relation expanding like the shade  
Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill.

If analytical thought is necessarily corrosive, there are other means of affirmation available to "[t]he pensive man," namely aesthetic means, drawn, in this case, from nature:

The pensive man . . . He sees that eagle float  
For which the intricate Alps are a single nest.

A change of perspective from analytical thought to holistic vision grants the pensive man a vision of unity, and for that moment at least the mood of ironic self-consciousness dissolves to make room for unreserved affirmation. As for the authority Stevens granted such transfiguring moods and perspectives, it is attested in the introduction to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," addressed to the mysterious source of imagination itself: "And for what, except for you, do I feel love?"<sup>9</sup>

Finally, consider Walt Whitman's contribution to the canon of secular prophecy. For Whitman, democracy itself is, or must become, a religion, founded on an unconditional affirmation of life expressed in a poetic diction compelling enough to unite first a nation, and then a planet. By making the average man and woman almost preternaturally "vital," American democracy engenders a solidarity that cannot be achieved by conventional political means. Its basis is a common desire for, and the not uncommon achievement of, material prosperity, but that alone is insufficient. Whitman hoped that he was not only writing great poetry, but establishing himself as an American Literatus who would displace both the priests of the ancients and the politicians of the moderns, subjecting America (and through it, the world) to nothing less than a poetic administration.

The work of the Literatus – presumably *Leaves of Grass*, which Jorge Luis Borges characterized as the only successful attempt to write a Book of Books – would raise the enjoyment of vitality to the level of a *participation mystique* that focuses a shared appreciation of life as vitality and growth, much like Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power. If epic poetry relates the actions of a hero in a tale of national significance, and lyric poetry is a song of personal expression, then Whitman's poetry seeks to establish an epic hero by means of a lyrical "I." This "I" relates the transformation of a person or persona – "Walt Whitman, American, one of the roughs" – into Walt Whitman the vitalizing "kosmos," that is, Everyman *and* the American Literatus or, in effect, a kind of God-Man. Whitman's Kosmological I is the subject of an experience that matters

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<sup>9</sup> *Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 329.

to every human being, and Whitman the “rough” initiates the reader into this *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* by speaking plainly of the experience in the language of his day.

For Heidegger, expressions of transfiguring, world-disclosing moods can become authoritative in the form of works that gather the concerns of a people who look to them for guidance and argue with one another over what they mean. The achievements of Nietzsche, Stevens, and Whitman (and perhaps Jung and Dick) suggest that we do not lack for figures willing to put themselves forward as candidates for that position. One thing, in any case, should be clear. Bringing prophecy back into the discourse of secular modernity will take the form of re-establishing the authority of moods, ceasing to trivialize them as mere psychological projections or, worse, as symptoms of neurological dysfunction, and welcoming them as divine presences that transform the individuals delivered over to them and inspire works with the potential to serve as paradigms for a culture.

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