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RELIGST 12N: Perspectives on the Good Life

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Truth

Man's relationship with truth has always been complicated. The practice of revealing information through allegory and parables is prevalent in numerous religious and philosophical texts, such as the Bible and Plato's cave. In Poem 1263 (Tell all the truth but tell it slant-), Emily Dickinson explores the theme of truth, and the danger that exposure to 'objective truth' holds. Today we are bombarded by 'objective truth', the kind that might be reached through experimentation or the scientific method and the appreciation of questions that lie outside of this realm is thought by many to be dwindling. Poem 1263 examines the hazard of absolute truth, and the necessity of letting the truth 'dazzle gradually'. Many of the other thinkers we have encountered throughout 'Perspectives on the Good Life' seem to explore similar themes.

The recurring theme that Dickinson explores throughout the poem is the menace of sharp truths, as the 'superb surprise' of the truth would shine 'too bright for our infirm delight'. The juxtaposition of infirm and superb, might suggest that there is an inherent baseness of human existence that is washed out by the brilliance of truth. This concept is explored in another guise by Melville in *Billy Budd*, the eponymous Budd representing pure good, and his antithesis Claggart representing base evil. They are Melville's embodiments of the absolute, but Captain Vere is unable to see them as such, and mistakes the machinations of Claggart for the conniving of common man. As a result, Budd is destroyed, and Vere is haunted by this loss for the rest of his days and is irreparably altered. In these two characters, the truth dazzled too brightly (the truth of good and evil), and Vere was blinded. They annihilated each other, and while this outcome may have been inevitable, what Vere undergoes is self-inflicted. His lust for power forces his hand, and as he damns Budd to the yardarm, he damns himself. This dramatic resolution to the conflict between earthly man and unearthly truth is reminiscent of Poem 1263.

Another interpretation of the poem is that it preaches a relativistic philosophy - that for man, there are no absolute truths, as all things are subject to our interpretation and context as we experience them. As a mechanism for coping with the blinding light of truth, we construct context and couch reality in our own sensations. There are so many different techniques for reframing the Doors of Perception: meditation, drug use, sleep deprivation and dreaming all alter our sensory understanding of the world. Once the experience is over, how do we know that we are stepped back into 'true' reality? Chuang Tzu dreamt he was a butterfly, and could not decide whether when he woke he was a person, or a butterfly dreaming he was a person. The theme of relativism runs deep throughout the Chuang Tzu as we are told that all things are inseparably linked: "Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me." If we accept this to be true, then any attempt to attribute value to people or actions loses all meaning; all that exists is the dynamism of the universe, or the 'Dao'. Such a philosophy would by extension suggest that death is not preferable to life, and indeed within the Chuang Tzu, the traveller is mocked by a skull for lamenting its passing.

While Chuang Tzu may determine that attributing value is a fallacy, he lauds the sage's search for knowledge, and this ties into the undercurrent of spiritual elitism that runs throughout the text. The wisdom and the isolation of the sage come from his willingness to pursue understanding, without feeling responsible for their mechanism and their impact. By adopting this mentality it is possible to involve yourself in the machinations of life, without becoming chewed up and destroyed by the insolvable problems that are tied to the human condition. This approach is advocated in the Chuang Tzu when Confucius advises Yen Hui on how to effect political change, " You may go and play in his bird cage, but never be moved by fame. If he listens, then sing; if not, keep still. Have no gate, no opening, but make oneness your house and live with what cannot be avoided. Then you will be close to success." Such an understanding is reminiscent of the senator's daughter, who survives her career in healthcare by playing the system like a game, regardless of how high the stakes may be.

Such a choice is recurrent throughout the Chuang Tzu - only in casting aside your desire for success can you achieve your goals. Applying this thinking to the dilemma faced by Captain Vere, regardless of what fate he chose for Budd, he would have been capable of acting without

the crippling burden of guilt. Furthermore, if we apply this thinking to Melville's character of Bartleby, then his choices become less opaque - he moves with the Dao, but society is not built to tolerate such an attitude. Chuang Tzu would have not condemned or looked down on Bartleby, as he would recognise a similar attitude towards the transience of things. However, Bartleby may represent a chrysalis, understanding the 'unity of the ten thousands things', but numbed by his experience in the Dead Letter office, and yet to emerge as a being capable of interacting without investment. Bartleby chooses not to interact at all, but his fragile emotional state is revealed when he rejects the consolation of the lawyer, responding, "I know you ... and I want nothing to say to you". He has internalized the futility of ambition, but has yet to find the joy of 'Free and Easy Wandering' or mastery over a skill to grant him a sensation of unity with the oneness.

Du Fu seems to have walked a similar path to Bartleby, but has advanced somewhat - he is still what James might have termed "sick souled" but in 'Going from the Capital to Feng Xian' he explains how he "does have aims to live on rivers and lakes / there to see off my days, aloof and serene". He is still overwhelmed by the troubles of the world, burdened with the guilt of his son's death and filled with worry, the final couplet stating that "Reasons to be troubled are as great as South Mountain, / a chaos that no one can gasp". This mindset, like Bartleby's, may depict a more accurate picture of the world than Western 'healthy-mindedness', but is crippling unless one can also accept that outcome is beyond our control, and that staying in tune with the flow of things is how to avoid the relentless grind of existence. Du Fu struggles to let go of his desires and commitments.

The concept of Relativism is embraced in many of the pieces we have read. William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* encourages us to embrace personal religious vision, and casts aspersions over established religious doctrine when practiced without personal consolidation. James also writes of how 'healthy-mindedness' has become the prevalent worldview in the West, a system of refusing to contemplate the melancholy, and looking to constantly exude optimism. James does explain how "healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth." David Thoreau might

consider the healthy-minded, “the mass of men [who] lead lives of quiet desperation.” as they feel like they should constantly be uplifted by the world, but their bubble is constantly probed by the realities of existence.

William Blake life was beset by powerful religious experiences, beginning as a child, and following him to the grave. William Blake knew that everything he perceived was an image; Blake saw angels, and the angels were real because he saw them. This kind of understanding is only possible if relativism has been embraced - just because no one else saw his angels, did not make them any less real. As he explains in a letter to Thomas Butts, “Now I a fourfold vision see / And a fourfold vision is given to me” - fourfold vision is thought to refer to Blake’s creation of mental images and the metaphorical links between them. He prays that “May God us keep / From single vision and Newton’s sleep”, which encourages the reader to strive to create such interconnected imagery, and rejects the scientific objectivism of Newton. Blake had a process for conceptualizing and interpreting his ‘truth’, perhaps his mind was capable of constantly creating and exploring the ‘circuit’ that Poem 1263 makes reference to. Norman O. Brown, in his ‘apocalypse’ speech to Columbia, advocates for a similar interrogation of the world around us, and laments that Western education is no longer encouraging students to pursue answers to the unanswerable questions. To know that questions are unanswerable but to pursue them anyway - this is embracing a relativistic understanding of things.

The image that Dickinson chooses to start the second half of the poem, “As lightning to the children eased / With explanation kind” appears to be contradictory. Lightning is a powerful force of nature that cannot be explained away, but Dickinson writes that kind reasoning can diminish its mighty crack. This might tie back into the underlying theme of the poem that Dickinson’s readers are not equipped to receive harsh truths, or it could be another reference to the power of allegory in exploring unanswerable questions. The poem could go a long way towards explaining Dickinson’s style, and the style of many of the writers we have explored throughout the course. If “Success in circuit lies”, this ratifies the process that Dickinson, Chuang Tzu, Melville, and many others writers have employed - creating fables and allegory to ‘circle the truth’, to create subtlety and allowing the reader to fill the gaps. The human mind is not well equipped to receive truths that shatter our perception of reality - this is what Confucius

teaches to Yen Hui in the Chuang Tzu, and this seems to be the insinuation here. The only way to effect change in others is to become one with their way of understanding, and then incrementally lead them towards your truth, and Dickinson's poem appears to agree. The final couplet of the poem, "The truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind." fits nicely into this interpretation - we must ask and explore the unanswerable questions if the mysteries are to be revealed, but not chastise ourselves if they elude us.

Interpretation has infinite facets, but I do feel strong connections underlying many of our readings. The sources I've made reference to present far from a unified world view; our authors often contradict themselves. Even so, they all seem to have built a method for embracing the unanswerable, and some of found ways of overcoming the ensuing 'sick-souledness'. I hope that I have begun to build a framework for considering allegory and an appreciation for the gradual dazzling of truth.

Addendum:

As I explored the poem by Dickinson I found myself pulled in many different directions, wanting to respond to the debates we had in class. I struggled to prevent it from becoming fragmented; if I had more time I might go deeper in some topics (especially Relativism as an underlying theme in all of our readings - something I feel strongly about, but didn't feel that I could do justice to as a unified piece) and cut some other avenues.

I still struggle to write in the first person - I hope that my assertions don't come across as too brazen. When I write that Chuang Tzu believed this, or Dickinson thought that, I should say that I believe them to have thought these things. I intend on rereading lots of the material over break, and I'm sure some of these opinions will change.