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The Process of Mourning: Whitman and Dickinson's Diverging Configurations of Grief

Meghan Vesper '05

Peter M. Sacks considers the elegy as the process in which a poet works through his grief, what Freud referred to as "the work of mourning" (1). Two of America's greatest poets, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, respond very differently in their poetry to death and loss. In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman evokes five distinct stages of mourning: despair, a struggle between memory and healing, death, revelation, and finally, rebirth through song. In stark contrast, Dickinson responds to death with silence and paralyzed shock. She does not weep like Whitman in "The Lilac Elegy," and more importantly, never has a revelation that culminates in rebirth. Her process of mourning is difficult to define because she never despairs or seeks healing like Whitman. I will examine the absence of passionate grieving in her poems, focusing primarily on number 344 ("'Twas just this time, last year, I died") and number 372 ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes"). These two poems capture the most prominent stages of Dickinson's mourning process: death, increased sensory awareness, shock, and silence.

W. David Shaw poses a question that articulates the difference between Whitman's and Dickinson's grieving processes: does death of the old self cause the mourner to break-down or break-through his grief? He stipulates that transcending grief requires the poet to integrate his old self, the mourner, with his new self, the elegist (51). He argues that the transformation of the self is a necessary element in the confessional elegy, and compares it with how the end of an elegy evokes a sense of new beginning. This regenerative process draws upon the pastoral tradition and ancient vegetation rites, which I will discuss shortly. First, I propose that Whitman breaks-through his grief in order to fulfill the greater purpose of unifying America. Dickinson, on the other hand, never transcends the death of her old self. Her poems confront and examine death, but she never tries to lessen its finality with a higher truth. Instead, she considers death and inconsolable pain part of the natural human condition.

I propose that Dickinson's absence of desire, or a beloved, is one of the primary reasons she never weeps and overcomes her grief. This draws upon Henry Staten's argument that our desire for an absent beloved is often more passionate than the desire we feel in our beloved's presence (2). He claims that if a lover remains attached to his temporal beloved, he will be unable to overcome grief when the beloved dies (7). On the other hand, the loss of the beloved can be one step towards reaching absolute truth. This is true of Whitman in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

Losing what he desires, a unified America, deepens his grief of Lincoln's death. But it also stimulates Whitman's determination to rebuild American democracy, culminating in revelation and healing. Dickinson, on the other hand, does not have a beloved who inspires revelation. Her desire is to write poetry, and I will later examine how this does not provide her with the ability to transcend grief.

Before turning to Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," it is necessary to briefly consider the conventions of the pastoral elegy and the English elegy. Ellen Zetzel Lambert argues that the pastoral elegy provides a landscape to articulate and overcome loss that is more substantial than the "real" world (xiv). This landscape also allows poets to evoke the similarity between human loss and death in nature (xvii). According to Lambert, poets' derivation of consolation from nature's annual regeneration mirrors humans' capability to recover from loss. Although the elegist's loss may be permanent, nature's renewal provides the elegist with the comfort that he will recover from his grief. Likewise, Peter Sacks concludes that the English elegy's form and movement draws upon ancient vegetation rites of passage from death to rebirth (20). He also notes other conventions of the English elegy: questioning, the procession of mourners, images of the resurrection, the separation of mourning voices, and the acknowledgement of loss. These conventions provide a basic foundation for exploring how Whitman's and Dickinson's mourning processes conform and diverge from the English elegiac tradition.

According to Sacks, the American elegist refuses to conform with the English elegiac tradition in several critical ways. First, he argues that the American elegist does not use the traditional pastoral setting due to geographical difference and the determination to break from British traditions (313). David Baker further points out that the American West provides a new kind of consolation by representing the promised land (16). Natural landscape is prevalent in both Whitman's and Dickinson's poetry, and I will examine what kind of consolation it provides. Sacks also argues that American elegists are more unwilling to accept loss, drawing upon his theory that comfort is derived from compliance (313-314). He describes American elegies as "volatile" and "rebellious," quite appropriate descriptions of Whitman's and Dickinson's audacity and distaste for conformity. But as David Baker argues, the most striking achievement of Whitman's and Dickinson's elegies is how they reject the finality of death through the incorporation of the erotic (16).

Whitman's first gesture in "When Lilacs Last in the

Dooryard Bloom'd" is to establish a connection between his grief and nature. Springtime represents renewal in the pastoral tradition, and the lilacs are blooming as Whitman mourns Lincoln's death. The lilacs are perennials, which implies that every spring Whitman's sorrow will be revived with nature's rebirth:

I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

As Sacks notes, mourning becomes a seasonal event for Whitman, associated with spring (24). This first section is the prelude to Whitman's process of mourning. In section two, Whitman succumbs to despair and his sorrow becomes passionate. Whitman not only weeps, his primordial cry evokes language's insufficiency in capturing his crisis. This is the darkest part of Whitman's elegy and the first stage of his mourning process. The western star is falling, the night is black, and Whitman cries that his soul is trapped by a cloud that renders him powerless. Stephen John Mack proposes that Whitman physically loses his vision because he feels estranged from his social identity with Lincoln's death (125). His overwhelming sense of self-loss prevents him from singing, his usual source of healing (Aspiz, 5). For Whitman, Lincoln represented America's national identity and his death signifies permanent American disunity.

Whitman's yearning for a unified America shapes the expression of his grief. Anne Carson argues that loss is a necessary part of desire and involves a three part triangle: lover, beloved, and that which comes between (16). Here, Whitman is the lover, unified America is the beloved, and the death of Lincoln comes between them. Shortly, I will return to the significance of this triangle and how it enables Whitman to eventually overcome his grief.

Before Whitman follows the procession of Lincoln's coffin, he hears the hermit thrush singing alone in the swamp. This is a critical moment in Whitman's mourning process. He recognizes that the thrush is expressing his grief through song, which Whitman has been unable to do. He also realizes that singing is a physically painful but essential form of emotional release for the thrush: "Song of the bleeding throat, / Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know, / If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die". Here in section four, Whitman realizes that he must sing and accept loss in order to heal. This realization leads into the second part of Whitman's mourning process: the struggle between his memory of Lincoln and healing.

According to Shaw, the mourner's ability to heal must be threatened or delayed in order to study how he works

through his grief (51). This tension exists in sections four through fourteen as Whitman moves back and forth between watching Lincoln's coffin and listening to the thrush's song. Whitman's hesitation to join the thrush comprises the second part of his mourning process. As Sacks notes, a voice separate from the mourner's is often essential to the grieving process because it urges the elegist to accept his loss and redirect his affection (36). In one of his manuscripts, Whitman described the thrush as "the bird of the solemn woods & of nature pure and holy" (qtd. in Aspiz, 200).

During his second stage of mourning, it is important to pay attention to Whitman's physical movement and psychological changes. Whitman first follows the procession of Lincoln's coffin, but this physical journey does not provide him with any source of consolation. The coffin travels through the countryside, where spring flowers, grass, and apple trees are thriving: "Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass, / Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark brown fields uprisen". Whitman surrounds Lincoln's coffin with signs of rebirth, as in pastoral elegies, but Aspiz argues that spring's renewal is tainted (196). The violets are "spotting from the gray debris" which Aspiz associates with Whitman's later reference to the debris of dead soldiers' bodies. On the other hand, the violets growing from ashes also represent how something beautiful can be born from death. This is connected with Wordsworth's and Coleridge's argument that loss is part of the natural cycle of rebirth, and evidence of the perfect balance in nature (Mills-Court 160). This concept is important to Whitman because he believes that democracy should mirror nature's perfection.

In his journey through the city, Whitman does not find consolation in how the citizens come together to grieve. Whitman remains uncharacteristically silent; he does not even join the dirges of the mourners in the streets. Furthermore, the days and nights are darkened by clouds, and the only light he describes comes from torches and the windows of "dim lit churches". According to Lambert, this physical darkness, characteristic of post-Renaissance elegies, allows the mourner to explore the complexities and ambiguities of grief (188-189). In the pastoral elegy, on the other hand, the mourner grieves during the daytime when light offers insight and simplification (187). In Whitman's elegy, the city's darkness reflects that his mourning process is difficult, even confusing. Although Whitman fails to overcome his grief in the country or city, he does not turn to the thrush again for another three sections. The delay reflects his unwillingness to let go of his memories of Lincoln.

Whitman's hesitation is reflected in sections seven and eight, when he tries to alleviate the pain of loss by covering coffins with armfuls of flowers. They serve only as a temporary distraction. He gains a greater sense of urgency to join the thrush after he recalls his vision of the western star passing from the night. He tells the

thrush: "I hear your notes, I hear your call / But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me, the star my departing comrade holds and detains me". This is the climax of Whitman's elegy, the great moment of tension that Shaw believes is necessary before the mourner transforms into the elegist. Whitman must choose between holding onto his memories and grief for Lincoln or dedicating his affection towards a greater purpose. His attachment to the temporal, his memories of Lincoln, prevents him from going immediately to the swamp.

According to Sacks, questioning in an elegy is one critical way for the mourner to release his grief and redirect his attention from the deceased to the greater world (22). In section ten, Whitman cries, "Oh how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?". His following questions, how should he perfume Lincoln's grave and decorate the chamber walls, reflect his emotional progression from his earlier state of grieving. Whitman has not yet accepted Lincoln's death, but he is no longer in complete despair. He also realizes that all other parts of the world are moving forward in spring: the trees are filled with budding leaves and workmen are returning home. But Whitman still clings to his grief, though he recognizes the potential healing powers of the thrush's song. He cries: "O liquid and free and tender! / O wild and loose to my soul – O wondrous singer! You only I hear – yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,) / Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me".

Whitman is unable to pass from grief to the beginning stages of healing until he dies, the third stage in his process of mourning. Whitman's death is an essential stage because it physically removes him from the lilacs and the western star. In the swamp, he is able to psychologically detach himself from Lincoln's death. Aspiz describes the swamp as a place of metamorphosis where decay stimulates rebirth (201). Here, surrounded by physical signs of life and death, Whitman is finally able to hear the words of the thrush's carol.

The thrush's song celebrates death, describing it as a welcome and soothing presence. Aspiz argues that the thrush invites physical intimacy with death when he sings: "And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death, / And the body gratefully nestling close to thee" (201-202). This physical contact diminishes the fear of death, and also re-establishes unity between the body and the soul which was disrupted during Whitman's despair. The thrush's song is significant for another reason. In accordance with Sack's theory of the elegy's second voice, the thrush helps Whitman the mourner adjust to a new conception of his desires and his self (36). This leads to the fourth stage of Whitman's process of mourning: revelation.

Whitman's visions of the battlefield enable him to transcend his grief. His overwhelming sense of loss from Lincoln's death is surmounted by a stronger desire for America's unification. In relation to Carson's triangle, Whitman overcomes Lincoln's death, "that which comes

between", to aspire to new American unity, his beloved.

Whitman realizes that the dead no longer suffer; only those who survive suffer the pain of loss: "They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not, / The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd, / And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd." Whitman recognizes the common suffering of all survivors as his way to reunify America. In other words, Whitman makes death part of democracy. Mack argues that Whitman transcends his private grief by making it a public concern, a reflection of how mourning embodies the democratic and political function of memorializing Lincoln and the dead soldiers (116-118).

Staten argues that falling in love and knowing the self in a new way makes humans feel alive (70). In fact, he describes this process quite appropriately for Whitman: a feeling of electrification comes with the new sense of self. Whitman's hope for America's re-unification gives him the ability to regain his self and join the thrush's song. This is the last stage in Whitman's process of mourning: rebirth. He physically lets go of deaths' hands, the darkness of the night passes, and his memories of Lincoln – represented by the scent of the lilac – no longer encompass him: "Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves, / I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with the spring". In this last stage, Whitman the mourner transforms into Whitman the elegist, capable of looking back upon his memories of Lincoln without being consumed by grief.

Gregory Eiselein argues that Whitman's grieving process is cyclical, and he defines five stages which are similar to mine: despair, moment of acceptance, reconciliation, peaceful solace, and a return to painful memories (Mack, 130). But Eiselein's theory requires some clarification. When Whitman reaches his moment of revelation in the swamp, he moves permanently beyond debilitating grief. This does not mean that Whitman's grief disappears. In the last two lines of the elegy, Whitman clearly expresses that the thrush's song, the lilac, and the western star will always be a part of his soul. Rather, his vision of a new American democracy allow him to be reborn. His memories no longer evoke the same despair he felt as a mourner. His new self, the elegist, combines memories of loss with revelation of the promise of America's rebirth. As Aspiz states, Whitman's elegy is not about being "bowed down, and weeping hopeless tears, but of singing a commemorative hymn in which the voices of Nature join" (190).

According to W. David Shaw, an elegy is capable of becoming a lament that expresses grief over the loss of a world instead of the loss of only one person (158). This is true of Whitman's elegy. His sorrow about Lincoln's death represents his greater devastation concerning the divided country. Dickinson's poems about death, on the other hand, are narrower in scope and focus on the self. And most importantly, Dickinson lacks an erotic beloved that inspires rebirth and transcendence from the temporal world. Death

does not represent the end of consciousness for Dickinson, but she refuses to accept Christianity's concept of the eternal. She journeys "toward Eternity," but never actually reaches it. Dickinson's critical difference from Whitman's process of mourning is that her desire remains stationed in the temporal world. When she dies, she is never reborn. Her process of mourning involves four primary stages: death, heightened sensory awareness, shock, and silence.

In number 344 ("Twas just this time last year I died"), Dickinson describes her coffin's procession across the thriving fields of autumn – a physical journey that is similar to Lincoln's in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Despite this physical similarity, Dickinson's persona does not experience a psychological transformation like Whitman. In part, this is because death is the first stage of Dickinson's mourning process; in fact, a year has passed since she died. Unlike Whitman, she does not despair. Her tone is calm and subdued as she relates her journey. I will return to her absence of passionate grieving shortly. First, it is important to note how death does not signify an end to sensory awareness for Dickinson. This is true of a number of her death poems. For example, in number 448 ("I died for Beauty –") Dickinson's persona lies in her tomb and talks with a corpse in a nearby room. Even in death, part of Dickinson's conscience stays peculiarly alive. William Pratt argues that Dickinson "pursue[s] the physical experience of death to its uttermost limit, beyond human consciousness..." (57). Dickinson refuses to accept death as the end of existence; likewise, she refuses to grieve.

In number 344, Dickinson's heightened sensory awareness is the second stage of her mourning process. In her coffin, she hears the rustling of the corn and envisions the harvest:

I thought just how Red – Apples wedged
The Stubble's joints between –
And Carts went stopping round the fields
To take the Pumpkins in –

Dickinson's places her persona's death during autumn, not in springtime like Whitman's elegy. Harvest celebrates earth's natural abundance, but also foreshadows the death and decay of nature during winter. As Charles R. Anderson argues, Dickinson rejects the Romantic notion that nature is a source of healing (15). Instead, she uses the ending of autumn to represent death. Sacks also claims that a person grieves over the changing of a season because he is mourning a permanent loss of self (20). With the death of Dickinson's persona placed in this context, Dickinson suggests that the promise of natural regeneration cannot redeem human loss. Her rejection of the pastoral as a place of healing foreshadows modern elegists' refusal to accept the connection between human loss and natural regeneration.

After Dickinson imagines the yellow color of the corn, she expresses the wish to get out of her coffin: "And then, I

wanted to get out, / But something held my will". These lines do not evoke the same type of tension between memory and healing that Whitman experiences in "The Lilac Elegy." Unlike Whitman, Dickinson's persona does not seek healing from death; her desire is simply to be in physical control of her body again. But something prevents this, and Dickinson does not re-enter the temporal world. In the fourth and fifth stanzas, Dickinson contests Whitman's revelation in "The Lilac Elegy," the absence of pain in death. Here, Dickinson's persona is not "fully at rest" like the dead soldiers in Whitman's elegy. She worries that her family does not mourn her death and writes:

And would it blur the Christmas glee
My stocking hang too high
For any Santa Claus to reach
The altitude of me –

Dickinson places her stocking out of reach to denote a boundary between her dead persona and her family. This brings Dickinson to Berkeley's axiom of knowing, *esse est percipi*, which states that the dead only continue to exist when mourners are present (Shaw, 82). The fear of being forgotten by her family brings Dickinson's persona to the edge of despair: "But this sort, grieved myself, / And so, I thought the other way". Dickinson's persona immediately diverts her grief and refuses to mourn. Again, there is some similarity here with the modern elegy. Jahan Ramazani states that the modern elegist does not search for consolation or healing; rather, he wants to "re-open the wounds of loss"(xi). Although Dickinson does not revel in expressions of despair, her poems reflect contentment to remain dead.

In number 344, Dickinson's persona does not enter a prolonged state of shock, which is typically the third stage of her mourning process. She abruptly ends the poem with a dash, invoking her own silence and the fourth stage in her grieving process. Shaw argues that the dash in Dickinson's poems is a barrier that is impossible to cross, like death (122). Dickinson's grief remains private; she does not even include it in her writing. This is in stark contrast with how Whitman weeps and makes his grief public through song.

Anderson claims that Dickinson pays careful attention to the intensity of pain, its duration, and how it influences change (19). He argues that Dickinson's poems reflect how time is distorted by pain, and quotes one of Dickinson's letters: "to all except anguish, the mind soon adjusts." According to Anderson, pain makes time meaningless; it has no past, future, or eternity. Number 372 exemplifies how Dickinson's pain is followed by paralyzed shock, the third stage in her mourning process:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'
And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before?

Dickinson describes the nerves, heart, and feet as autonomous entities and Anderson notes the absence of a

unified persona (19). Their capitalization also implies distinction from each other. The nerves no longer send any sensory awareness; they are still, like rocks. The heart, representative of desire, is equally paralyzed and cannot even remember how long ago the pain began. Whitman never experiences such intangible passing of time in "The Lilac Elegy." Rather, he is in almost constant motion, passing from renewal to despair, and gaining a new perception of his self and America. In contrast, Dickinson's persona loses a sense of unity between her body and soul in death. By the second stanza, she has no conscious control of her body's physical movement: "The Feet, mechanical, go round – / A Wooden way".

Dickinson writes in a prose piece, "Anguish has but so many throes – then Unconsciousness seals it" (qtd. in Anderson, 23). This reflects how Dickinson fossilizes when she reaches the point of despair. In line ten, she writes: "This is the hour of Lead –", evoking a sense of permanence and oppressiveness. As Anderson notes, Dickinson's feeling after pain is actually the absence of awareness: "no feeling at all, only numb rigidness existing out of time and space" (26). Dickinson continues to evoke this dulled sense by comparing death to freezing. She emphasizes the slow passage of time by separating the heightened sense of cold, numbness, and death with dashes: "As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow – / First – Chill – then Stupor – then letting go –." As in number 344, Dickinson implies that death is not the end. The final dash leaves Dickinson's persona suspended between death and eternity.

Unlike Whitman's, Dickinson's poetry suggests that true healing is not possible. In number 550, ("I measure every Grief I meet") Dickinson implies that people can only pretend to be healed: "At length, renew their smile – / An imitation of a Light / that has so little Oil –". She never overcomes pain. Instead, Dickinson's grief becomes so overwhelming that she physically stops moving and is silent. According to Marsilio Ficino, "hidden and continual grief" is at the center of a person's life because he becomes attached to the temporal (qtd. in Staten, 2). But unlike Whitman, Dickinson never identifies the loss of a temporal beloved as the source of her pain. She does not have an erotic beloved as Whitman does; her greatest worldly attachment is her poetry. In fact, her desire to write does not fit within Anne Carson's triangle of "lover, beloved, and that which comes between." According to Carson, falling in love inspires the lover to perceive the world and the self in a new way (153). For Whitman, Lincoln's death inspires a new vision of American democracy and vocation: he will unify America through song and the common experience of death. Without a beloved, Dickinson's persona never transforms or aspires to an idealized world.

In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman's erotic desire for American American democratic unity allows him to complete his process of mourning in

American democratic unity allows him to complete his process of mourning in rebirth. His revelation in the swamp defies traditional conceptions of pain and death's finality. Whitman's passionate expressions of grief and his success in working through it are quite different from Dickinson's fragmented mourning process. I return to Shaw's question of whether death of the old self causes the mourner to break-down or break-through their grief. Despite Dickinson's tenacity, she responds to death with paralyzed shock, silence, and in number 372, a physical break-down of the body. But where Dickinson stops is critical to understanding her mourning process. The physical act of dying does not cause her fossilization; Dickinson's process of mourning ends as she journeys toward the eternal. Here is where Dickinson's and Whitman's processes of mourning converge, in the conviction of existence after death in this world.

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