The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America

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And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day. For they are impudent children and stiffhearted. I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God. And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear (for they are a rebellious house,) yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them.

—Ezekiel 2:1—5

Then spake the priests and the prophets unto the princes and to all the people, saying, This man is worthy to die; for he hath prophesied against this city, as ye have heard with your ears. Then spake Jeremiah unto all the princes and to all the people, saying, The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city all the words that ye have heard. Therefore now amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God; and the Lord will repent him of the evil that he hath pronounced against you. As for me, behold, I am in your hand: do with me as seemeth good and meet unto you.

—Jeremiah 26:11—14

*Ethos* stands at the center of this study, as it should. The reception of any truths, the perception of the legitimacy of any crisis, depends on a sense of the authenticity of the speaker’s commitment. Kenneth Burke would have recognized here a problem of motive, particularly that moment at which motive intersects with authority. Authorship must, in the case of the prophet, rest with God. The unity of *ethos* and *logos* comes about in the prophet’s definition as servant to the message. I. A. Richards’s idea that “to
be sincere is to act, feel and think in accordance with 'one's true nature' is illuminating in this context. The prophet's sincerity derives from the abolition of personal motive, from abnegation, so that "one's true nature" becomes synonymous with the divine message and one's pathos with the divine pathos.

Eugene Debs was, by most accounts, successful in presenting a compelling sincerity to his audiences. Historical appraisals of him are unanimous in their assessment of his significance. Sidney Lens claims that, in his time, "Debs was the most idolized labor leader America had produced." Described by Charles Madison as "one of the best platform speakers of his time," Debs was, by most accounts, "a speaker in the great tradition of American public speaking." Charles Lomas calls him "the most popular and effective orator" of the radical leaders of the day, and Bert Cochran states flatly, "There is no question that he [Debs] was the most popular and effective socialist figure ever to appear in America." One of the few figures formidable enough to warrant individual mention in a broad survey of America in the Gilded Age, Debs is described by Richard L. McCormick as "an indigenous American radical" and "a brilliant orator." Though Ronald Lee and James Andrews are inclined to see in such assessments evidence of Debs's latter-day rehabilitation by liberal historians, these encomia are based on and are completely consonant with those heard in Debs's own time. However he may have failed as a reformer and politician, the record does not indicate that Debs's ethos was ever in need of rehabilitation.

Eugene Debs and the Crisis of the New World

The crisis Debs addressed was the cataclysmic emergence of the modern world through the process we dispassionately label industrialism. In the fifty years following the Civil War, the United States was transformed from a preindustrial society of individual artisans, craftsmen, and yeoman farmers into the world's preeminent industrial power. The change was pervasive; it left virtually no aspect of American life untouched, and its unrelenting newness was the source of "profound social and economic dislocations." Robert Wiebe has termed fin de siècle America "a society without a core"; it lacked the "national centers of authority and information" that might have given order to the changing world; there was no national community to replace the local communities that had been uprooted.
Herbert Gutman, this failure of coherence is best described as a failure of culture, the confrontation of obsolescent values with the conditions of the new society; Richard Hofstadter called it the failure of "the agrarian myth." As an ideal, the agrarian myth, which was as much the property of urban dwellers as rural folk, celebrated the purity, virtue, and independence of the yeoman farmer, the American par excellence. It was a moral compass that, as the population tended increasingly to concentrate itself in the cities and in industrial occupations, provided increasingly deviant readings. Edward Bellamy, in his enormously influential utopian novel Looking Backward, wrote of his time: "Pale and watery gleams, from skies thickly veiled by doubt and dread, alone lighted up the chaos of the earth."

For most, the primary communal experience in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century America was a product of its industrial paternity, work. Those who gathered in the new and expanding urban centers were there on the promise of jobs. Great masses of people found a new common status in the label "worker" or "laborer." Industrial production required high degrees of uniformity in the behavior of workers: factories were run on scheduled shifts; workers were regulated by the time clock; the work itself was highly routinized; the once independent worker was, in Debs's military metaphor, "recruited into regiments, battalions and armies" with the work "subdivided and specialized." New techniques of scientific management, based on a behavioristic psychology, were less concerned with the individual worker than with productive efficiency; workers were viewed as activity, that is, as machines. "Why he's a factory hand—a hand, mind you, and he gets a dollar and a quarter a day when the factory is running. . . . Just a hand! A human factory hand!" exclaimed Debs in a characteristic metonymy borrowed from Dickens's Hard Times. "Think of a hand with a soul in it! . . . The working hand is what is needed for the capitalist's tool and so the human must be reduced to a hand. No head, no heart, no soul—simply a hand." The requirements of industrial production posed a threat both to those who had grown up aspiring to realize the agrarian myth and celebrating the self-reliant individual and to the traditional work habits of European artisans. In the American dialectic between freedom and responsibility, industrialism touted responsibility exclusively; autonomy was eclipsed by discipline.

Debs and his fellow radicals set themselves against this inevitable march of progress. They were profoundly conservative in that they sought to restore the values that had characterized America's past. They were, at the same time, profoundly liberal in their exploitation of the individualistic and
egalitarian side of America's traditions. They appealed, in Hofstadter's phrase, to an "ethos of responsibility" against which they posited a venerable devil from the radical arsenal, the specter of slavery. As Debs bluntly phrased it,

Since you have looked yourself over thoroughly, you realize by this time that, as a workingman, you have been supporting, through your craft unions and through your ballots, a social system that is the negation of your manhood.

The capitalist for whom you work doesn't have to go out and look for you; you have to look for him and you belong to him just as completely as if he had a title to your body; as if you were his chattel slave.

He doesn't own you under the law, but he does under the fact.22

Debs and the Trumpet of Judgment

Debs's portrait of the modern worker was one of weakness, servility, and dependence; the laborer under capitalism was a supplicant, not a man. Addressing his auditors in the second person plural, Debs was not merely making an analysis, he was passing judgment. One may imagine on the occasion of this speech in Chicago in 1905, Debs emphasizing his judgment with what the Los Angeles Herald termed his "ever-lifted indicting forefinger."23 His prose is derisive in the extreme; he taunted the workers with their impotence: witness his references to ownership, chattel slavery, petitioning, considerations. In a 1920 campaign flyer, Debs declared, "Plain talk is assuredly needed, and I'm going to say what I think if I don't get a vote. . . . A few, a very few there are who think and act like men and women, but the overwhelming majority of us only imitate like monkeys and follow like sheep."24

The failure of manhood, virtue, was a favorite theme with Debs, one that he shared with other reformers of his day who were concerned with the decline of the individual.25 In his "Declaration of Revolt," Debs wrote, "This appeal we now make in behalf of a working class reduced to slavery. Their rights have been violated, their organizations tied hand and foot, their press muzzled, their officials imprisoned, and their liberties all but destroyed. To submit to such outrages in a republic would be the basest cowardice and the rankest treason." Debs called for an assertion of virtue against self-abasement: "In the name of American manhood and womanhood, our self-respect, our fidelity to principle and our love of justice."26 He always emphasized that the sufferings of the working class were a
product of its own moral failings; he was comparatively uninterested in vilifying the capitalists. Though such excoriation may have been unpleasant for Debs's audiences to accept, it did contain the assurance that the power to change conditions was within their grasp.

At stake in Debs's judgment of the working class are two "charismatic terms"\(^{27}\) that figured prominently in the rhetorics of the American Revolution and of Wendell Phillips: "freedom" and "slavery." In a new and unsettled set of social and economic relationships, Debs sought to restore moral clarity by defining new roles in terms of the old values; he attempted to replace indecision and confusion with the stark Manichaean oppositions of a perfectly ordered world. "Liberty is not a word of modern coinage," Debs told one of his audiences. "Liberty and slavery are primal words, like good and evil, right and wrong; they are opposites and coexistent."\(^{28}\) Capitalists claimed that labor was a free agent with the capacity to drive its own bargains in the marketplace. Looking to the moral examples of the past, however, Debs found man under capitalism to be small and mean in comparison; he believed labor under capitalism renounced all independence and sold itself into slavery. "In capitalist society," claimed Debs, "the working man is not, in fact, a man at all; as a wage-worker, he is simply merchandise; he is bought in the open market the same as hair, hides, slat, or any other form of merchandise. The very terminology of the capitalist system proves that he is not a man in any sense of that term."\(^{29}\)

Debs's antidote for slavery was self-assertion, a display of virtue. He never allowed the worker to escape responsibility for his or her condition; he consistently provided examples of those who had refused to capitulate to a degrading system. In an article on the Pullman strike, he wrote of the American Railway Union members, "They determined not to pollute their hands and dishonor their manhood by handling Pullman cars and contributing to the suffering and sorrow of their brethren and their wives and babies. And rather than do this they laid down their tools in a body, sacrificed their situations and submitted to persecution, exile and the blacklist; to idleness, poverty, crusts and rags, and I shall love and honor these moral heroes to my latest breath."\(^{30}\) Debs made it clear that there were things that were more to be valued than material comfort; there were conditions under which it was better not to have a job. He was concerned with the state of men's souls, their honor, and he made it clear that this could only be compromised to the degree that the worker allowed it to be. As long as the worker preserved the ability to say no, he was not yet a slave.

Debs's language reveals its sources. It echoes Wendell Phillips and the
American Revolutionaries. By the late nineteenth century, there was a well-established and revered radical tradition in America. Whatever their status had been in their own day, history had made heroes of some of America’s great protesters, and they formed an American canon, a basis for appeal to an American community. In celebrating their memories, Americans sought an identity and a set of common values. Eugene Debs was fully cognizant of this tradition and sought to identify with it as, for example, in his identification of labor’s struggle with the ideals of the American Revolution.31

But it was not enough to ally with a successful doctrine—the capitalists, too, sought to identify themselves with the fulfillment of the American dream. Debs also drew a parallel between himself and the Revolutionaries in their role as rebels standing against the tide of public opinion. He had to discover what Nick Salvatore has called the “dual aspect in his culture’s tradition: the American Revolution was not a static event, embossed in marble and praised each July. Its essential meaning demanded a prophetic call to each succeeding generation to renew and reinterpret that heritage.”32 Debs called for a renascence of Revolutionary virtue:

Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Paine and their compeers were the rebels of their day. When they began to chafe under the rule of a foreign king and to sow the seed of resistance among the colonists they were opposed by the people and denounced by the press. . . . But they had the moral courage to be true to their convictions, to stand erect and defy all the forces of reaction and detraction; and that is why their names shine in history and why the great respectable majority of their day sleep in forgotten graves.33

Debs praised the leaders of the Revolution, not for the system of government they left us or for the brilliance of their vision, but because they were men. They exemplified those values of courage, conviction, and self-assurance that Debs found lacking in the contemporary worker. “Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Paine and their compeers” were Debs’s measure of what his audiences should aspire to be.

From the martyrology of a young but vigorous civil religion, from the Bible, and from Marxism, Debs derived his self-evident truths. As with the American Revolutionaries and the radical abolitionists, there is an apparent paradox in holding as self-evident something that the majority of one’s fellow citizens fail to see. But as Aileen Kraditor suggests, “When Debs and others proclaimed that the truth was so plain that a child could see it, they were not contradicting their claim to superior knowledge. They were
expressing the absolute certainty and clear perception possessed by anyone who looked at society from the standpoint of Truth." 34 As Debs expressed it, "The rank and file of all unions, barring their ignorance, are all right. The working class as a whole is all right. Many of them are misguided, and stand in the light of their own interest." 35 The radical leader, like the prophet, resolves the ambivalence observed by Debs of the working class. The radical leader sees clearly the covenant and understands its consequences; it is not an obscure knowledge, but it is stringent in its demands.

There is a story that, some fifty years after receiving from a teacher a Bible with the inscription "Read and Obey," Debs retorted, "I never did either," but even a cursory reading of his speeches reveals the duplicity of his brave defiance. 36 His material abounds with biblical allusions and analogies, some developed to a degree indicating more than casual familiarity with his source. In a letter to Mr. Ed H. Evinger, dated August 29, 1895, for example, Debs spends eight paragraphs comparing his imprisonment for activities associated with the Pullman strike to Daniel's defiance of Darius. 37 Consistent with his emphasis on persons, the example of Christ played an important role in Debs's rhetoric, a theme to be examined at greater length in the following section.

Biblical communism, celebration of work, condemnations of usury, and other ideas cardinal to a Judeo-Christian culture also provided Debs with a hermeneutic frame for reading Marxist theories of materialist history and analyses of the class struggle. Indeed, there is a pronounced tendency in his discourse to make Marxist materialism continuous with the Christian ethic. The intentions of its creators notwithstanding, Marxism lends itself to such conceptions, 38 and Debs freely mixed the language of the Bible and the language of class conflict: "The hordes of hell are all against us, but the hosts of justice are on our side," he exclaimed. "We can win and must. Comrades, I am counting on you, each of you, as if our very lives were at stake—and they are." 39 Explaining how he became a socialist, Debs said, "I was to be baptized in socialism in the roar of conflict and I thank the gods for reserving to this fitful occasion the fiat, 'Let there be light!' —the light that streams in steady radiance upon the broad way to the socialist republic." 40

Viewed as religion or as Marxist science, Debs's philosophy suggests those truths that, in the earlier examination of the rhetoric of the American Revolution, were termed apodeictic. Rhetorically, such truths are in the realm of demonstration or showing with all the attendant metaphors of wakefulness and sight. For Debs, failure to view society as he did was not a
matter of disagreement, it was a failure of vision: "The interests of the millions of wage workers are identical, regardless of nationality, creed or sex, and if they will only open their eyes to this simple, self-evident fact, the greatest obstacle will have been overcome and the day of victory will draw near." 41 "It is our conviction that no workingman can clearly understand what Socialism means without becoming and remaining a Socialist," he declared. "It is simply impossible for him to be anything else and the only reason that all workingmen are not Socialists is that they do not know what it means." 42 "Can you not see it?" he queried on another occasion. "If not, I advise you to consult an oculist. There is certainly something the matter with your vision." 43 Referring to the fallacy of craft unions, Debs said, "The workingman, if his eyes are open, is bound to see that this kind of unionism is a curse and not a benefit to the working class." 44 "It is so simple that a child can see it. Why can't you?" Debs asked later in the same speech. "You can if you will think for yourselves and see for yourselves." 45

Girded by the righteousness of absolute truth and the example of his radical forebears, Debs assumed an uncompromising, "unreasonable," rhetorical posture that scorned hedging and trimming as the weakness of the faithless and the misguided where a strict orthodoxy was what was needed: "There is but one thing you have to be concerned about, and that is that you keep foursquare with the principles of the international Socialist movement. It is only when you begin to compromise that trouble begins," he told his audience in the famous "Canton Speech." Then, in an allusion to Patrick Henry's "I know not what course others may take," he continued, "So far as I am concerned, it does not matter what others may say, or think, or do, as long as I am sure that I am right with myself and the cause." 46 On another occasion he echoed William Lloyd Garrison's "I will be as harsh as truth" as he assured his audience, "I shall be as candid as may be expected from a Socialist agitator." 47 Like Phillips before him, Debs rejected "the crooked and disreputable methods of ward-heeling and politicians" 48 in favor of "preserving inviolate the principles which quickened it [the Socialist Party] into life and now give it vitality and force," moving it forward "with dauntless determination to the goal of economic freedom." 49 In one of his most direct statements of his conception of his mission, Debs said,

Time will tell and I can wait. I am not courting your flattery nor evading your blame. I am seeking no office; aspiring to no honors; have no personal ax to grind. But I have something to say to you and shall look straight into
your eyes while saying it. I shall speak the truth—as I see it—no more and no less, in kindness and without malice or resentment.

I should tell you what I think you ought to know though all of you turned against me and despised me.50

In these quotations is the fulfillment of Debs's criticism of the worker. He contrasts the servile attitude of the faithless to the temerity of radical heroes of the past and by speaking in the voice of Henry and Garrison, he seeks recognition of his own heroic stature. Debs presented himself as a model for the worker to emulate, a man of superior virtue claiming kinship to earlier radicals, committed to sacred principles, willing to suffer the consequences of his faith. It is an attitude of incalculable self-righteousness, one that cannot be supported without some claim to an extraordinary vision, a sacred calling. The stance taken by Debs, unless made to appear as the subordination of self to some higher cause, must be the most insufferable egotism.

_The Construction of a Legend_

The sketch of the prophetic _ethos_ offered in chapter 3 argues that the office of the prophet must have its roots in an extraordinary (re)birth or conversion. With Debs, we find a highly developed conversion myth surrounding the Pullman strike and its aftermath. Debs's description of the Pullman strike contains the following extraordinary vision, comparable to the visions of the Old Testament prophets: "At this juncture there was delivered, from wholly unexpected quarters, a swift succession of blows that blinded me for an instant and then opened wide my eyes—and in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the _class struggle was revealed._"51 Following the Pullman strike, during a time of his removal from society, his sentence in Woodstock Jail, Debs claimed to have come to an understanding of socialism, an understanding that clarified his earlier vision and gave his subsequent crusade a consistency and direction it had heretofore lacked.52 Of the experience at Woodstock Debs said,

It was here that socialism gradually laid hold of me in its own irresistible fashion . . . the writings of Kautsky were so clear and conclusive that I readily grasped not merely his argument, but also caught the spirit of his socialist utterance—and I thank him and all who helped me out of darkness into light. . . .
It was at this time, when the first glimmerings of socialism were begin-
ning to penetrate, that Victor L. Berger—and I have loved him ever since—
came to Woodstock, as if a providential instrument, and delivered the first
impassioned message of socialism I had ever heard—the very first to set the
“wires humming in my system.”

The metaphors are highly visual, as are the accounts of calling related by
most of the Old Testament prophets. The vision is an extraordinary one,
and Debs insinuates that it overwhelmed him, the helpless receiver: it “laid
hold of me in its own irresistible fashion.” The vision also involves an
infection of spirit and passion, creating a new person, and the transition
from darkness into light suggests the newness of life after the conversion. In
his account of Woodstock, Debs presents a classic account of consecration.

Charisma must be recognized to be validated. The supernatural quality
of the conversion, the rebirth, the vision, must be conceded before the
ethos can bear the weight of witness. The anointed figure must be able to
inspire discipleship or his ability to make claims on the sacred is severely
limited. There must be a community for whom the possibility of prophecy
exists. Among Debs’s followers, the Woodstock conversion myth was
widely perpetuated. In Eugene Victor Debs: A Tribute, August Claessens
offered the following account:

Debs came out of Woodstock a considerably changed man. Victor Berger
visited Gene during his stay, talked with him, gave him books by Karl Marx,
Karl Kautsky and others. Gene’s eyes saw a new light. The whole economic
struggle and political situation took on a new meaning for him. Gene
emerged from Woodstock like a butterfly from its cocoon.

Louis Kopelin, in a booklet published by the Appeal to Reason press, called
Woodstock Debs’s “political awakening,” and a later piece of hagiography
said of the Woodstock experience, “But the Debs who emerged from jail
was not the same man who had gone in. A new idea—that of socialism—
was beginning to take hold of him.” Upton Sinclair, including in his
novel The Jungle a cameo of a Debs speech, wrote of Debs that he “came
out of his cell a ruined man; but also he came out a Socialist.” Each of
these accounts stresses the ideas of death and rebirth, profound discontinuity
between life before and life after, the newness of the man, his transforma-
tion emerging “like a butterfly from its cocoon.” In a special edition of the
National Rip-Saw, Kate Richards O’Hare quoted the same segment of
Debs’s own account quoted above and added the following comment by
Debs’s wife, Katherine Metzel Debs:
Victor Berger and Gene both say that Victor made a Socialist out of Gene, but really I am sure they are both mistaken. Berger didn't make a Socialist out of Gene; he just uncovered the Socialist that was already there. It was not books and pamphlets that made Gene a Socialist; God did that. Gene was just like me and millions of other people; he was a Socialist and didn't know it. Victor Berger just helped him to find himself, that was all. 

Although Katherine Debs is the only one to invoke explicitly considerations of divine intervention, it is clearly implied in the other accounts. An experience so radically discontinuous with the sensory experiences of everyday life always carries implications of the sacred. Debs's friend Stephen Marion Reynolds, in a biographical preface to a collection of Debs's writings and speeches, gave him a place with the "poets and orators, the true advocates that speak for the people, seem to see from some high mountain a vision in the lonely hours, when their eyes are unbound, the Deity passing by, leaving commands to be obeyed." 

Like so much else concerning Debs, the nature of his call to serve and to suffer is largely a mythological reconstruction. As part of his overall purpose, Nick Salvatore dissects the conversion myth and replaces it with a detailed picture of Debs's tortuous and often faltering path to his mission. But the concern here is less with the historical Debs than with the rhetorically constructed one, and from this perspective it is clear that the conversion myth played an important role in the Debs ethos. Although Debs, like Amos, claimed not to be a prophet, the language of the following vision unmistakably has its roots in Old Testament prophecy:

Cheerless indeed would be the contemplation of such sanguinary scenes were the light of socialism not breaking upon mankind. The skies of the East are even now aglow with the dawn; its coming is heralded by the dispelling of shadows, of darkness and gloom. From the first tremulous scintillation that gilds the horizon to the sublime march to meridian splendor the light increases till in mighty flood it pours upon the world.

From out of the midnight of superstition, ignorance and slavery the disenthraling, emancipating sun is rising. I am not gifted with prophetic vision, and yet I see the shadows vanishing. I behold near and far prostrate men lifting their bowed forms from the dust. I see thrones in the grasp of decay; despots relaxing their hold upon scepters, and shackles falling, not only from the limbs, but from the souls of men.

Debs understood clearly the claims he was making to supranormal vision. He denies the gift of charisma, yet he sees something more than is seen by
the human eye. Through a linguistic association, he sought to assume the mantle of the prophetic ethos or the prophetic pathos, for in prophecy they seem to merge into one. Debs sought to represent himself as a participant in the divine, a bearer of charism. As Salvatore has noted,

As he first explored new interpretations of familiar themes, Debs discovered that his culture's Protestant religious imagery was particularly suited to both his emerging new message and to his public personality. In the patriarchs of the Old Testament and in the angry Christ of the New, Debs found a prophetic model that legitimized his critique and demanded no apologies for frank, even harsh, pronouncements. In the process he touched for the first time his powerful charismatic appeal with audiences.62

Whatever the advantages and opportunities afforded by the charismatic appeal, it cannot be understood as an unalloyed gift. In order to be effective, charism must be perceived in its burdensome aspect. The rhetorical image Debs nurtured was one, not of pride, but of service. He presented himself as one who had been sacrificed to serve the needs of others. "He who has dared to voice the protest of the oppressed and downtrodden, has had to pay the penalty, all the way from Jesus Christ to Fred Warren.... I am in revolt against capitalism because I love my fellow men, and if I am opposing you it is for what I believe to be your good, and though you spat upon me with contempt I would still oppose you to the extent of my power."63 Here Debs explicitly associates himself with those who were tortured and tormented in the service of their fellowman. The willingness to suffer the insult of being spat upon is the most extreme servility and recalls the example of Christ. The martyr theme is an important one in Debs's rhetoric. Ray Ginger claims that the idea was "featured in every Debs speech for twenty years."64

The ideas of suffering and sacrifice take several different forms in Debs's rhetoric. The most obvious are his accounts of his own privations on behalf of the cause. In an article entitled "Serving the Labor Movement," Debs responded to a decision by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen not to invite him to address their convention:

For twenty years I was a member of the organization represented by that convention. When I joined it I paid the admission fee of half the charter members, who had not the money of their own to pay. Five years later, when I was city clerk of Terre Haute and the brotherhood was bankrupt, deeply in debt and its magazine threatened with suspension, I was called upon to take
charge and I did so. I secured the entire debt with indorsed notes and spent most of my salary as city clerk in redeeming the organization from bankruptcy. The first two years all my spare hours, late in the night, every night in the week, I gave freely to my task and I paid out more for clerical assistance than the paltry salary amounted to.\textsuperscript{65}

In 1902, in “How I Became a Socialist,” he was similarly unabashed in recording his sacrifices at the altar of labor:

For eighteen hours at a stretch I was glued to my desk reeling off the answers to my many correspondents. Day and night were one. Sleep was time wasted and often, when all oblivious of her presence in the still small hours my mother’s hand turned off the light, I went to bed under protest.

My grip was always packed; and I was darting in all directions. To tramp through a railroad yard in the rain, snow or sleet half the night, or till daybreak, to be ordered out of the roundhouse for being an “agitator,” or put off a train, sometimes passenger, more often freight, while attempting to deadhead over the division, were all in the program, and served to whet the appetite to conquer.\textsuperscript{66}

Debs’s indulgent, sometimes mawkish prose served to inflate the extent of his sufferings to heroic proportions; it also served to confirm his manhood and to make him a model for those workers whose manhood had failed them. Debs presented himself as an embodiment of strength and courage in the face of adversity. More important, in his selflessness, he became everyman, the possibility inherent in everyman, a cynosure.

The inflation of his sacrifices allowed Debs a second vehicle for the expression of his passion—identification with a martyred canon. Debs’s concern with past martyrs was second only to that of the Roman Catholic Church, and he summoned their specters large before his audiences. Jesus Christ, Joan of Arc, Elijah Lovejoy, and John Brown all gave their lives for a cause, and Debs brought them together as part of a continuous tradition.\textsuperscript{67}

The celebration of martyrs was important for an appeal so heavily based on ethos; they served as realizations of virtue, the historical vindication of those who had suffered for a cause. In “The Issue,” Debs put it this way:

Do you know, my friends, it is so easy to agree with the ignorant majority. It is so easy to make the people applaud an empty platitude. It takes some courage to face that beast called the Majority, and tell him the truth to his teeth! Some men do so and accept the consequences of their acts as becomes men, and they live in history—every one of them. I have said so often, and
I wish to repeat it on this occasion, that mankind have always crowned their oppressors, and they have as uniformly crucified their saviors, and this has been true all along the highway of the centuries.\textsuperscript{68} 

In many eulogies to contemporary labor martyrs, Debs attempted to link them to this sacred tradition, to claim for them that conduct that “becomes men,” to make of them paragons of virtue.\textsuperscript{69} More important for our purposes is the fact that, by implication, Debs also attempted to link himself to this tradition, thus his attentions to the suffering of others also served to draw attention to his own sacrifices. After praising “Old John Brown” for his “example of moral courage of single-hearted devotion to an ideal for all men and for all ages,” Debs asked, “Who shall be the John Brown of Wage-Slavery?” It was no one if not Debs himself.\textsuperscript{70}

Debs did not have to await history’s verdict on his own life. In 1908, a story consuming nearly the entire first page of the second section of the \textit{Terre Haute Tribune} began and ended with the observation that “a prophet is not without honor save in his own country.”\textsuperscript{71} Such encomia were common. “The man that comes crying a message in the wilderness and pointing to the inevitable farther heights to which humanity must ascend, meets misunderstanding, insult and rejection,” wrote Stephen Reynolds, “but he is ‘The Darling of Tomorrow,’ when the heights are reached and the risen races run to mark the fields of battle with the pathetic monuments of regret and grief.”\textsuperscript{72} John Spargo compared Debs to Joan of Arc listening to “unseen voices, . . . seeing visions where other men saw only a black void. . . . He obeyed the voices,” wrote Spargo. “He spoke in the Assembly of the Law-makers—spoke for Labor and against Labor’s wrongs. He spoke for the Dumb, for the Doomed and Damned. He spoke their protest and their curse. He spoke for Childhood and for Motherhood—spoke for the Makers of Laws. And when he spoke they answered with the howl of the Beast.”\textsuperscript{73} After Debs’s imprisonment in 1919, Ruth Le Prade wrote a particularly worshipful piece entitled simply “The Martyrdom.” In her essay, Le Prade calls forth some of Debs’s favorite revered saints: “Jeanne d’Arc;” Christ, Socrates, and John Brown. Of Debs’s entry into prison, she wrote, “Such is the spirit God gives to his chosen ones, fearlessly they stand and speak the Truth; they tremble not at the scourge, the gaol, the cross; and when the hour comes, they walk unto the doom man has prepared for them, with a \textit{smile}?\textsuperscript{74} Of course the idolatry did not end with Debs’s death. A 1935 publication of the Socialist Party concerning Debs’s resistance
to the First World War carried an advertisement for a twenty-minute “nonflammable” film with the title *Eugene V. Debs—Labor’s Martyr*.75

Debs’s third vehicle for proclaiming his martyrdom lay in the rhetoric of acting out, a characteristic of prophetic discourse. It is widely noted that Debs was a kindly and generous man, and stories of him giving away watches, overcoats, money, not to mention his time and concern, are legion.76 His most dramatic sacrifices were his two prison sentences, the first after the failure of the so-called “Pullman strike” in 1895 and the second, in 1919–21, for his dissent against U. S. involvement in the First World War. In describing the significance of Debs’s jail term after the Pullman strike, Salvatore provides some insight into the function of the Debs myth in general. When Debs emerged from Woodstock Jail, the veneration he enjoyed was not the veneration of a successful strike leader; the strike had been an unqualified failure, and Debs’s American Railway Union was in ruin. What Debs had become, according to Salvatore, was “a national symbol”: “Due to his recent activities, Debs served to focus and, after a fashion, to direct the anger many Americans felt. In turn, he also drew a strength from this role that largely accounts for his appeal over the coming three decades.”77

It is probably inevitable, given the strong themes of martyrdom in his rhetoric and his public acts of sacrifice that Debs should have been compared to Christ—the passion of Christ, as noted earlier, being the quintessential passion myth in Western thought. Salvatore finds the first overt comparison in a statement by J. A. Wayland, a close friend of Debs and the publisher of the *Appeal to Reason*, after Debs’s release from Woodstock Jail. But as Salvatore notes, although it was the first such comparison, “it certainly would not be the last; . . . for Debs, as for many of his followers, only a thin line remained between the man and the symbol.”78 It was the author of *Elmer Gantry* who wrote to Upton Sinclair that Debs was the “Christ spirit,”79 while on another occasion Lewis merely proclaimed Debs a saint.80 A 1921 letter to Debs from Harriet Curry, daughter of Debs’s purported lover Mabel Curry, begins “Dearest Gene—Mother says I am to call you this instead of the “Mister” [.] At first it seemed disrespectful or something, until I reflected that I wouldn’t think of saying ‘Mr. Jesus,’ were I to meet him!”81 That same year Kate Richards O’Hare, under the heading “Gesthemane,” wrote, “For forty years Gene Debs served the working class of the United States as Jesus of Nazareth served the working class of Judea. Priest, architect and builder he renewed the faith in men that
had been crushed by poverty and social injustice." "Like Christ," wrote Louis Kopelin, "'the common people heard him gladly.'" Walter Hurt was able to write without a trace of irony: "Of Debs it may advisedly be said that no other man in history so approximates the attributes of Jesus of Nazareth. In his all-understanding, all-forgiving, all-suffering nature Debs closely resembles the reputed character of the divine Proletaire Palestine." As a final example, there is the widely reported incident from a Debs speech at Carnegie Hall in 1908, where a woman suddenly leapt up and proclaimed, "There he is, there he is! Gene Debs, not the missing link but the living link between God and man. . . . Here is the God consciousness come down to earth." The comparison between Debs and Christ was nourished by Debs's rhetoric and his deeds for the rest of his career. It therefore provides a context from which to view his trial and conviction for violation of the Espionage Act. The comparisons are almost painfully patent, and one suspects, calculatedly so. Debs had no witnesses in his defense, did not contest the prosecution's account of the speech in question, only their definition of it, denied his ability to retract what he had said, and resigned himself to the possibility that he might "be consigned, perhaps to the end of my life, in a felon's cell." In his "Address to the Jury," he reflected on his fate:

> When great changes occur in history, when great principles are involved, as a rule the majority are wrong. The minority are usually right. In every age there have been a few heroic souls who have been in advance of their time, who have been misunderstood, maligned, persecuted, sometimes put to death. Long after their martyrdom monuments were erected to them and garlands woven for their graves.

Like Christ, Debs was found guilty. His "Statement to the Court," delivered at his sentencing, opens with what are probably his most quoted lines:

> Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living being, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.

As a final parallel, Debs forgave his betraying Judas.

Debs was sixty-three years old when he entered prison, but he was probably perceived as older. Since as early as 1904, Debs had not been in good health. His schedule had been one "of exhausting, almost orgiastic
speaking tours followed by weeks of collapse in bed," to use Irving Howe's description. The evidence suggests that, however much Debs resented being thought of or referred to as an old man, he was, in fact, perceived and referred to that way. At Debs's trial, remarking on his address to the jury, one of the Justice Department agents reportedly said to a member of the press: "You've got to hand it to the old man. He came through clean."

The year of Debs's imprisonment, Upton Sinclair wrote, "The United States has an old man in prison in the Federal Penitentiary of Atlanta. The government regards this old man as a common felon, and treats him as such; shaves his head, puts a prison suit upon him, feeds him upon prison food, and locks him in a steel-barred cell fourteen consecutive hours out of each twenty-four." Debs's age and his apparent frailty served to make him appear harmless and to magnify his suffering. His presidential campaign in 1920 served to spotlight further the fact of his imprisonment. Campaign posters and buttons depict a gaunt, drawn visage in prison attire standing before bars with the inscription, "For President, Convict No. 9653."

With his imprisonment for the second time, the Debs legend achieved a predictable denouement; Debs became Christ crucified. Witter Bynner, a poet currently enjoying renewed attention, wrote the following verse which is typical of much of the sentiment expressed at the time:

9653

(TO E. V. D.)
Nine six five three,
Numbers heard in heaven,
Numbers whispered breathlessly,
Mystical as seven,
Numbers lifted among stars
To acclaim and hail
Another heart behind the bars,
Another God in jail,
Tragic in their symmetry,
Crucified and risen,
Nine six five three,
From Atlanta Prison.

The comparison, like much of the rhetoric which inspired it, was, of course, hyperbolic. Debs did not lose his life for his beliefs as had Christ and many of the rest of Debs's martyred canon, and, although no one would deny that his times in prison were times of real suffering for him, it is true that Debs, by his own admission, "was never personally mistreated"
while in prison: “On the other hand, during my prison years I was treated uniformly with a peculiar personal kindliness by my fellow prisoners, and not infrequently by officials.” In fact, in light of historical accounts, Debs’s denial that any special favors were ever accorded him seems disingenuous.

Of course, to Debs’s disciples it made no difference that his claims to Christhood were greatly exaggerated; they embraced him as their Messiah. As Walter Hurst wrote, “Debs is also intrinsically a hero. None can be a hero or a martyr by design, any more than one can design one’s own birth. And it is not necessary to die in order to be either. To insist otherwise were tantamount to declaring that death makes the poet. The fact is that heroism and martyrdom consist in the process of living, and death ends them just as it extinguishes genius.”

But to the vast majority of workers for whom Debs claimed to suffer, the image was not persuasive. Most Americans at the turn of the century failed to see industrial employ as slavery, so they could not see Debs as their savior. Progressive reformers like Theodore Roosevelt achieved great popularity precisely because their temperate ideas on reform were viewed as mitigating the appeal of radical programs like socialism. As Samuel Hays has put it, “Twentieth-century Americans slowly learned how to live with a new industrial system that they could not and did not choose to destroy.”

**Saint Gene**

We have names for such people as Debs appears to have been: those who devote themselves to flailing at invincible enemies we call quixotic, and those who voluntarily bring suffering upon themselves we term masochistic; both terms suggest pathological states. No one in his right mind would choose inevitable failure or suffering, we contend, but it is precisely the element of choice that Debs wished to deny through his suffering. Presenting himself as a prophetic figure, Debs spoke the language of commitment and duty.

“If I have criticized, if I have condemned, it is because I believed it to be my duty,” said Debs to the jury in 1918. In the Canton speech, he told his audience that the social movement “has taught me how to serve—a lesson to me of priceless value . . . to realize that, regardless of nationality, race, creed, color or sex, every man, every woman who toils, who renders useful service, every member of the working class without
exception, is my comrade, my brother and sister—and that to serve them
and their cause is the highest duty of my life.” 101 Consistently in his
speeches accepting his party’s nomination for office, Debs spoke of it as a
duty that had been imposed on him: “I can simply say that obedient to
your call I respond. Responsive to your command I am here. I shall serve
you to the limit of my capacity.” 102 Debs’s expressed reluctance to assume
the burdens of duty is offset by his resignation to duty: “Personally I did
not wish the nomination. It came to me unsought. It came as summons to
service and not as a personal honor.” 103 “The wrongs in labor I knew from
having experienced them, and the irresistible appeal of these wrongs to be
righted determined my destiny,” he claimed. “The high ambition and
controlling purpose in my life has been the education, organization and
emancipation of the working class. I began to speak and write for them for
the same reason. In this there was no altruism, no self-sacrifice, only duty. I
could not have done otherwise.” 104 Especially in the line regarding the
“controlling purpose” of his life, Debs reflects the idea that he was born (or
reborn) to serve the cause; amidst the chaos of the industrial revolution in
America, Debs’s life had meaning.

Debs saw himself as immersed in the suffering of the working class, and
he viewed himself as a providential instrument for the relief of that suffer-
ing. When serving as an instrument of divine will, the speaker disappears—in
Debs’s words, he is reduced to a tongue. There is no longer a self-
interested ego to engage in subterfuge. The subjective element claims to
have absented itself. The message claims to be pure object, sacred Truth. 105
Furthermore, it is the same truth the audience would see if they were not
blinded. So to the extent that the Truth concerns the suffering of those in
the audience, the speaker becomes representative of them in their true state.
It is, in Northrop Frye’s description, “the total empathy between poet and
audience which arises when the poet is not so much a teacher of his
audience or a spokesman for them, as both at once.” 106 Insofar as Debs was
not blind and was consecrated, he was in extremis, but insofar as he repre-
sented the true state of the working class, he was in a sense a manifestation
of the will of that class. As Debs himself put it, “The working man is the
only man in whose presence I take off my hat. As I salute him, I honor
myself.” 107 “I am simply the tongue of the working class, making this
appeal from the working class to the working class.” His art of oratory, he
maintained, came from consecrating himself to a great cause. “I simply had
to speak and make people understand.” 108 In another speech, he phrased
the sentiment this way: “The Socialist movement is of the working class
itself; it is from the injustice perpetrated upon, and the misery suffered by this class that the movement sprang, and it is to this class it makes it appeal. It is the voice of awakened labor arousing itself to action.”

As a charismatic leader, Debs also attempted to extend the divine imperative to the movement he led. It is significant that he so often spoke of the “mission” or the “historic mission” of the Socialist Party. As Kraditor has noted, “The concept of mission implies that the purpose of an organization is not determined by its members.” This means that the purpose of the movement cannot be invented or determined by the participants, but must be discovered. In other words, the purpose of the movement is not of the participants; it is not reducible to terms of human will; it is separate, sacred; there is a general calling present of which Debs is only an example. Debs had no doubt that in the socialist movement the workingman would find his “true place, and though he be reduced to rags, and tormented with hunger pangs, he will bear it all and more, for he is battling for a principle, he has been consecrate to a cause and he cannot turn back.” In the socialist movement there was a call to duty for the workingmen of America and the world.

Duty is the inescapable refrain in Debs’s rhetoric. Like Martin Luther, Debs agitated; he could do no other; it was an example of manly self-assertion. Debs tried to ensure that every time the workingman closed his eyes to his duty he would see the image of Debs bearing the cross of labor. As a suffering servant he transcended the role of the individual speaker; he became universal, symbolic. And religious symbols have their power, according to Mircea Eliade, in that they convey their message even when no longer consciously understood in every part. “For a symbol speaks to the whole human being and not only to the intelligence.”

In conceiving Debs as symbol, we appreciate the importance of the myth that he helped to foster. Debs’s suffering stood as both a measure and a manifestation of the strength of his faith. It was also intended to serve, as with the discourse of the Old Testament prophets, as a pathetic antidote to the prevailing a-pathos. Ignoring requirements for detailed, workable proposals, Debs, through his public suffering, sought to make that suffering real to America and to make it the center of debate. A New Orleans reporter once tried to make sense out of the contradictory impressions garnered in attending a Debs speech. On the one hand, the reporter noted that the full audience “listened with intensity and applauded with passion,” but on the other hand, he also sensed that there were few converts to socialism in the room when the speech was over. He wrote, “It was not so
much that they cared for what he said, but that they cared that he cared for them—if this does not confuse the point.”  

Debs’s rhetoric was a rhetoric of sympathy, an idea associated with the rhetorical theory of Adam Smith, a product of the same time and the same school of thought as George Campbell. And while it is unlikely that Debs ever studied Smith or Campbell, he did take as his models those orators who had been shaped by the writings of the Scottish Common Sense philosophers of the late eighteenth century, orators like Wendell Phillips and Robert Ingersoll. Debs entered the twentieth century with the rhetorical conventions of the nineteenth.

Today, Debs’s speeches seem somewhat quaint, a bit naive. Irving Howe has termed them “wilted flowers from the garden of nineteenth-century eloquence.”  As a suffering servant, Debs produced a highly personal, highly ethical rhetoric, a rhetoric unabashed at its own pathos, a rhetoric often at odds with what Richard Gregg has noted is “the idealized kind of problem discussion we like to see on the public stage.”  Gregg sees in much of this discourse an expressive function, an assertion of the self. But we are years removed from Debs’s world of high collars and straw hats for summer, perhaps too far removed to consider seriously his claim of selflessness; our cynicism smiles at the idea that Debs would suffer as the representative of a class. We deny the altruism in favor of an a fortiori ulterior motive. In his own time, however, Debs’s sincerity was almost unquestioned. Even those who could not accept the programs praised the ethos. Stephen Reynolds wrote of the situation in Terre Haute that “many here would like to hang his ideas, but the man, the strong personality, the gentleness and cordiality of his greeting when he meets his neighbors and fellow-citizens, disarm all prejudice.”  On the occasion of Debs’s death, an article in the Terre Haute Post related the following anecdote:

The late Anton Hulman, senior, founder of the Hulman company, one of the largest wholesale grocery concerns in Indiana, was attending a meeting of coffee growers in New York. One morning at one of the sessions a coffee wholesaler mentioned the fact that Debs was in jail in Chicago for his part in the Pullman railroad strike.

“That is where he ought to be,” said this man. “Such a wild-eyed menace ought to be hanged.”

Hulman was on his feet in an instant and in his quiet way said:

“I have known Gene Debs since he was a tiny boy. I was a lifelong friend of his father and no better man did I ever know. I think if you knew Eugene Debs as I know him you would neither say that he ought to be in jail nor
that he ought to be hanged. I do not agree with all that Gene Debs says or thinks. But I would trust him with every dollar I had.”

The acceptance of the Debs ethos and the simultaneous rejection of his social vision was a characteristic response among Debs’s opponents. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has noted that “Men and women loved Debs even when they hated his doctrines. His sweetness of temper, his generosity and kindliness, his sensitivity to pain and suffering, his perfect sincerity, his warm, sad smile and his candid gray eyes were irresistible.” Walter Hurt, eschewing hero worship in the socialist ranks, nonetheless recognized that the value of Debs’s personality to the socialist movement was “inestimable”: “He is a loadstone of popularity that attracts to Socialism thousands whom its philosophy would at first repel.”

The Debs legend does not stand careful scrutiny—no mortal life could sustain the weight of adulation that Debs’s admirers have lavished on him—but to ask this is to misunderstand the function and value of the legend. However fragile and desperate for reassurance the man behind the myth, he projected an image that was strong and generous; the emphasis on the ethical side of persuasion renewed a confidence in the capacity of the individual human being to shape his world. Like his radical predecessors, Debs was concerned with possibilities, but his reforms always had a human scale. Walter Hurt tied Debs to the vanishing tradition of Emerson when he wrote, “‘Self-trust,’ says Emerson, ‘is the essence of heroism.’ Debs believes in himself because he believes in mankind, of which he is a part.”

There is a very real sense, of course, in which it was already too late; the agrarian myth with all its overtones of self-reliance simply failed to reflect the realities of the modern world. The year after Debs’s death in 1926, John Dewey published The Public and Its Problems in which he wrote, “The Great Society created by steam and electricity may be a society, but it is no community. The invasion of the community by the new and relatively impersonal and mechanical modes of combined human behavior is the outstanding fact of modern life.” Debs’s insistence on virtue, looking backward as it did to the melodramatic language of Balzac, Dickens, and Hugo, all of whom Debs adored, could not compel assent in the world of This Side of Paradise. To say, however, that Debs was too late or that he opposed the inevitable does not make his effort less laudable or the ideals he held less desirable. Debs attempted to revivify a myth that had helped create community in America, and in doing so he attempted to give
Dewey's lost public a common voice. Of course, Debs did not understand his crusade as a reactionary one; for him the values he espoused were universal and eternal.

One measure of the appeal of Debs's atavism is the degree to which the Debs legacy has survived even today. In 1955, on the centennial of Debs's birth, Norman Thomas wrote, "One of the purposes of a centennial celebration of Gene Debs' birth is to remind ourselves of a unique human being, one of those rare spirits whose life on earth was an outstanding blessing to his fellows by reason of what he was as well as by reason of what he did." More recently, David A. Shannon wrote,

Dead for half a century, Debs continues to be the nation's foremost radical hero, the most popular leader of a Marxist movement, the Left's most beloved personality. Neither his successor as leader of the Socialist Party, Norman Thomas, nor any of the Communist leaders since World War I, nor the often colorful and sometimes bizarre characters of the New Left of the 1960's and early 1970's even approach Debs as a radical heroic figure.

Nelson Algren gave Debs a place alongside Theodore Dreiser and John Peter Altgeld as one of "the great Lincolnian liberals, the ones who stuck out their stubborn necks in the ceaseless battle between the rights of Owners and the rights of Man, the stiff-necked wonders who could be broken but couldn't be bent." As late as 1976, the Socialist Party was still prominently billing itself as "the party of Eugene Debs"; the Eugene V. Debs local of the United Steelworkers, a local for builders at the Pullman railroad car plant and one of the early locals in the CIO organization, was until 1985, three years after the closing of the plant, a living tribute to Debs and his vision of industrial unionism—workers standing up for themselves. Radio station WEVD in New York City continues to broadcast programming in Yiddish and in the languages of recent immigrant groups, serving populations very much like those Debs sought to serve in his lifetime, and the Eugene V. Debs Foundation, which purchased the Debs home in Terre Haute in 1962 and has restored it as a library and memorial, is dedicated to perpetuating Debs's vision.

Debs had an appreciation for the adoration of posterity; his emphasis on the afterlife of martyrs in the memories of the people attests to this and there is no question but that Debs hoped to be honored in the same way, to have "monuments built" and "garlands woven" for his grave rather than face the mortality of the "respectable but forgotten" grave of anonymity. Louis Untermeyer suggested that Debs's garland would be a crown of
thorns, and Debs would surely have taken comfort in the words of Isaiah, often read as a prognostication of Christ:

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. . . . He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.