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The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America. James Darsey. New York: New York Press, 1997. 279 pp. James Darsey's *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* is an ambitious book, both in terms of the argument being made and the amount of material being covered. At its core, the book is an argument for a re-thinking of the American political tradition more generally and a re-valuation of gay rights activism such that both would take more seriously the “prophetic” voice that has contributed so much to the really radical and productive rhetorics in this country. Much of the book centers on this question of different rhetorics, contrasting two different version of American political talk. The first, which is well known, well-celebrated, and well-established in the educational curriculum in this country, is a way of speaking predicated on certain Enlightenment ideals of freedom and agency. These ideas, so the story goes, influenced America's founding fathers, found their embodiment in the U. S. constitution, and are the reasons we have universal education and advanced citizenship. This sort of political rhetoric, which Darsey associates closely with the early Whig party rhetoric, celebrates the capacity of individual agents to think and to act without requiring belief in some higher power guiding them. Reason, in effect, becomes its own guiding light. The second discourse, which remains both less known and less celebrated, is a rhetoric predicated on a “prophetic tradition,” one that continues to look to the power of absolutes beyond the confines of individual rationality. Darsey examines how Old Testament prophets, for example, called upon the Truth of Yahweh to demonstrate the rightness of their actions and to respond to the wrongs being perpetrated. Part of the prophetic message consists of noting that sometimes the reasons for acting, the inspiration for doing, are not easily reproduced as the product

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of individual rationality: “ Contrary to the assumptions of traditional Graeco-Roman rhetorical theory, prophecy shatters the unity of rhetoric. Inventio and actio are not the products of the same agent. Prophecy is in a significant respect a performance from a script.” ¹ The prophetic tradition usually rears its head more obviously in times of crisis or wrong-doing, either through a return to moral values or a rebuke. When society goes off-course, the prophet is there to set it back on course: “ The prophet is an accuser and judge; he is called into being when the law has been violated, a critical time.” ² Again, this implies that the prophetic voice sounds a different call than that of Enlightenment rhetoric; the prophet invokes while the Enlightenment debates. The liberal imaginary of the Enlightenment has an obvious and important place in American politics, according to Darsey, but the prophetic tradition has and continues to serve as a corrective to the limits of these Enlightenment discourses. Indeed, as Darsey explains, “ a view of the American tradition that sees only its mundane and businesslike side, that stresses its origins in the Enlightenment, might be accused of stressing Locke to the exclusion of Calvin, thus providing a confusing and inelegant view of its shape. Our preference for Matthew Arnold's Hellenic ideal risks obscuring the Hebraic side of our culture.” ³ For our sense of American history to be complete, more attention is needed regarding our own prophets. The book attempts to do just this, looking at figures from the American revolution, Wendell Phillips the Abolitionist, socialist activist Eugene Debs, anti-communist Joseph McCarthy, and the founder of the John Birch Society, Robert Welch. This is an impressive array of names, and it would be beyond the scope of this review to rehearse all of Darsey's investigation. But this review would fall short if it failed to note that not all of

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these treatments are done with the same sense of competence. The discussion of Joseph McCarthy, for example, relies on other scholar's assessments far more than does the discussion of Eugene Debs. In addition, glaring omissions in the list of American prophets call into question the selection process. Where are the important feminists, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton? Where are the sustained discussion of obviously prophetic voices from the civil rights era, like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X? These individuals are mentioned, but it seems puzzling that they would be left out of the conversation. While this reviewer would never suggest bias on the part of Dr. Darsey, it does seem like some very important prophetic voices for women and African Americans have been given less attention than they deserve, given the topic of the book. That being said, the book scores highly on many levels and Darsey offers a number of lessons regarding the prophetic voice in American political discourse. First, Darsey suggests that “Whatever the motives of the prophet, his value lies in his reception, the quality of the ethos presented to his auditors. Charisma, we are reminded, is only validated when recognized; it is a social phenomenon.”⁴ For scholars, then, one of the tasks is to determine why some individuals can inhabit the prophetic voice as well as they do given their particular historical and social context. Second, Darsey suggests that the prophetic voice offers the true ground for radicalism in American politics: “The radical, like the prophet, is dedicated, the proclaimer of a divine and sacred principle. The radical bears witness. Here is the root, if you will, of radical rhetoric and of prophecy as a particular form of it: a commitment to an absolute sacred truth.”⁵ This belief in an absolute and higher level of truth differs substantially from the more contingent forms of truth found in much liberal, Enlightenment discourse.

Finally, it is particularly interesting to read this book now, nearly fourteen years after its initial publication. Given the book's emphasis on the religious aspect of prophetic voice, one sees quickly how prescient was its analysis for the rise of the religious voter in the 2000 and 2004 election. In many ways, whatever one's political leanings, it is relatively easy to identify that “ what the contemporary right has in common with the prophetic tradition is the impulse to order. The rigid, formal characteristics of prophetic discourse create sense out of confusion.”⁶ And while the religious voter has given way to the Tea Party, the emphasis on creating order out of chaos remains. Given this insight into the decade that followed its publication, the book deserves much praise and recommendation, whatever its limitations.