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The Eternal One: Transcendental Philosophy in *Moby Dick* and *Benito Cereno*

Transcendentalism began a couple decades after the turn of the 19th century. This movement anticipated the new technologies that would arise from the Industrial Revolution would result in alienation, anomie, and loss of connection to nature. The transcendental philosophers addressed topics of introspection and worldly connections through nature as ways for individuals to find fulfillment, peace, and spiritual connectivity. Melville explores how the individual relates to the self, society, and natural world in *Moby Dick* and *Benito Cereno*. Written in 1851 and 1855 respectively, they coincide with both the Industrial Revolution, of which Melville was cynical, and the transcendental movement, in which Melville was involved. Unlike his peer transcendentalists, Melville includes societal aspects in his work in order to explore how individuals' philosophies affect their interactions with the surrounding world. In creating microcosms of American society on the ships present in *Moby Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, Melville shows how transcendental philosophy introduces issues that are present in the American Dream of the 20th century through the individual's relationship with the self, their environment, spirituality, and society.

Though the term "American Dream" was coined almost an entire century after the transcendentalist movement began, the idea of self is central to both. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance* in the 1850s and the rugged individualism promoted by Herbert Hoover in the 1930s all focus on the self as a singular, lone entity. The emphasis placed on self-reliance in

Transcendentalism could be a precursor to the individualism seen in the 20th century notion of the American dream. Many transcendentalists did not value society, seeing conforming to society as giving up self-reliance and one's own self (Emerson). Nonconformity would strengthen self-reliance and identity, whereas society would inhibit this individual growth. Melville seems to suggest something else entirely, insinuating that the individual's relationship with society is important to being a fully self-actualized being. He creates sea-borne microcosms to show how individuals interact with society: "Two of the surest critical propositions about Melville are that his prevailing theme is the problem of moral evil and that his prevailing narrative vehicle is the ship-microcosm" (Rosenberry 604). Society is created on these ships through a variety of individuals who are of different races, religions, and societal backgrounds. They represent various groups that makeup American society. Though this society is created on a confined space that forces interactions between crewmates, both Captain Ahab and Captain Amasa Delano are distant from the other members of the crew, which distances themselves from society.

Though originally supported by the crew, Captain Ahab's lack of connection to both the natural world and his deeper self affect the way he interacts with society. He is obsessed, not only with the whale, but with himself: "Ahab's ego is such that he cannot accept the existence of anything stronger than himself" (Wooden 153). He is an egomaniac but does not practice introspection in spite of his self-obsessing, instead remaining in a state of self-worship in spite of his mortal flaws. He does not recognize that the whale is merely an animal and projects his own emotions onto the whale: "all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*" (Melville *Moby Dick* 156). The whale, as pointed out by Starbuck, is simply a whale, yet Ahab gives it a personality, meaning, and purpose. He projects his own feelings of rage or hatred onto the whale, and cannot turn his own fiery gaze inward to view his

own true self. Perhaps his detachment from his inner self is what drives him mad: “The intense concentration of self in the middle of such heartless immensity, my God!” (Melville *Moby Dick* 321). Though this passage occurs when Pip is left alone in the ocean, it can relate to Ahab metaphorically. He has no connection to anyone other than himself and, even then, any ‘intense concentration of self’ results in projections of hatred onto the whale or frenzied egomania.

Ahab’s desires are contrasted with transcendental ideals; the whale exemplifies his disconnection and hatred of nature, while his egomania represents lack of introspection and disconnection with the self.

In order to ease the intense, lonely inward reflections that must occur in the face of unyielding nature, Melville emphasizes the connection between the individual and society, which Ahab is unable to attain. Ahab is detached from humanity, seemingly rejecting personal connections with anyone other than Pip. Ahab only connects because they are unlike in some ways, in that both are disconnected from themselves and society, making them crazy:

[T]he self is cut loose to separate identity from the communal body that breeds it. And as meanings, public and private, have their indecipherable link so the isolate self is connected to others by those invisible ties for which all the lines in the novel, in lieu of that original cord, so insistently yearn. (Cameron 580)

He finds companionship in Pip because both are mad, but in contrasting ways that provide some sense of balance. Pip comes out of his period of deep introspection at sea with wisdom and a sense of connection to the external world, in spite of his insanity. Ahab cannot face introspection, which leaves him mad but not wise. His lack of connectivity and care for the crew is witnessed in his search for the whale. His quest will ultimately take all lives, save one, and be utterly pointless: “Only through numberless perils to the very point when we started” (Melville *Moby*

*Dick* 196). Ahab needlessly endangers the crew for his own selfish desires, which result in failure. His disconnection from the crew shows his disconnection from society. He rejects all of the aspects that make up community and society; he rejects religion and God, and seems unable to empathize with his crew. Though he forms some type of bond with Pip and creates a sense of brotherhood with rousing speeches, he disregards the crew's priorities, needs, and lives. Ahab becomes nihilistic in rejecting societal based institutions, such as religion and God, further distancing himself from transcendental ideals of spirituality and optimism.

Unlike Ahab's nihilistic attitude, Delano is idealistic and represents the optimism of many transcendental philosophers. Delano's personality is described as being unquestioning in regard to the innate goodness of human nature:

Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated excitement, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. (Melville *Benito Cereno*)

He cannot make proper judgements because he thinks too idealistically; he is disconnected from the realities of his society. He sees only goodness in man and cannot see the true nature of humanity, thus distancing himself from actually understanding both himself and his society. This is seen in his interactions with Babo, who, until the ruse is revealed, is seen as subservient and loyal to Cereno (Melville *Benito Cereno*). Delano's idealism and unwillingness to see Truth, the transcendental notion of universal truth, ultimately leads to delusion: "Delano can only bolster his faith by denying his experience. This strategy may make both the world and himself seem better but only at the risk of blurring the way both actually are" (Martin 164). Since he views the

world through a veil of optimism, he cannot accept the negative aspects of the world and loses touch with reality. This optimism can be witnessed in many of Melville's peer transcendentalists' writings, regarding both human and earthly nature, yet Melville suggests this inherent optimism is a detriment and unreality.

Though Delano seems representative of transcendental ideals at first due to his connectivity with the natural world, he fails in following Melville's realist version of Transcendentalism. Delano has a naive and innocent connection with nature, since he sees only the holy and benign in his surroundings:

As he saw the benign aspect of nature, taking her innocent repose in the evening, the screened sun in the quiet camp of the west shining out like the mild light from Abraham's tent—as charmed eye and ear took in all these, with the chained figure of the black, clenched jaw and hand relaxed. (Melville *Benito Cereno*)

He believes that since nature has calmed, he, too can forget his own worries, yet this is not the case as he is still in danger on the mutinied ship. He takes signs from nature to be Providence and that Providence will act righteously and just. However, nature can be cruel and unforgiving, just as man can, and realizing this brings doubt into Delano's philosophy: "Delano is not in fact able completely to dismiss the many indications of human evil throughout the story, but to admit them exacts a heavy price: as the evidence of earthly evil accumulates, so too grow his doubts about the supremacy of celestial goodness" (Martin 164). Since Delano's spirituality had been so rooted in his optimistic views, his faith wavers once faced with something that contradicts his views of the world. He cannot accept his quasi-transcendental notions about God when he is faced with something other than the ideal. Melville draws a parallel between Delano and his peer transcendentalists regarding nature: "Emerson exhibited the same defects in his vision of the

world and of providence as Delano displayed in his. In Amasa Delano, more than in any other of his major characters, Melville concentrated his contempt for the optimism of the American idealist” (Phillips 191-92). Though Melville regards Transcendentalism positively, he recognizes faults with certain aspects of transcendental writings. Emerson believed that man and nature were innately good, just as Delano does, yet Melville reveals that these views are naive and often incorrect, shown when the ruse of the mutiny is revealed or when nature is not benign. Melville spans an array of characters in his work, some that attempt to practice transcendental ideals and others that wholeheartedly reject them, yet Ishmael is the only character in these two works that wholly embraces and practices Transcendentalism.

Unlike the two captains, Ishmael is cognizant of nature, in that he educates himself regarding the scientific and biological aspects of it, observes it, and feels connected spiritually to it. In true transcendentalist form, he recognizes how individual parts of nature contribute to the transcendental Oversoul as outlined by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay *The Over-Soul*: “We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.” Ishmael recognizes this in his many observations made while aboard the *Pequod*. He is in touch with his surroundings and recognizes the inner-workings of greater things. In Ishmael’s scientific descriptions of whales, he is always sure to explain how everything works together to form a whole:

But as if this vast local power in the tendinous tail were not enough, the whole bulk of the leviathan is knit over with a warp and woof of muscular fibres and filaments, which, passing on either side the loins and running down into the flukes,

insensibly blend with them, and largely contribute to their might. (Melville *Moby Dick* 294)

He begins with a somewhat small part of the whale, yet explains its importance to the overall workings of the animal. He emphasizes how these details combine to form a powerful, singular whole. This is also present in how many of the chapters are anatomies, presenting topics that are broken down into smaller parts, like Chapter 32: Cetology or in the various chapters where he breaks down the anatomy of the whale, as seen in Chapter 104: The Fossil Whale. Ishmael describes things that make up a whole, as each different species of whale creates a genus or how each bone or feature helps create an entire whale. Each and every part of the whole is important, just as every aspect of man and nature are important in forming the Oversoul.

Unlike Delano or Ahab, Ishmael has a deep connection to nature. Ishmael observes nature in its both its beauty and sublime or deadly aspects:

[A]t last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Wickliff's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over. (Melville *Moby Dick* 136)

He sees nature for what it truly is: beautiful, elusive, and intense. He gives himself entirely to the notion of transcendence, losing himself in his thoughts about nature and the Oversoul. In nature,

he sees spirituality and Truth, where Ahab rejects nature and God entirely and where Delano accepts unquestioningly. Through the pantheistic spirituality that connects all things, Ishmael further exemplifies the transcendental notion of interconnectivity, which continues in his interaction with the crew. Each member of the crew is part of a whole, just as an individual is part of a society.

Not only does Ishmael see the interconnectivity of nature, he recognizes interconnection between individuals that form society. His first connection made with another individual is during his time spent with Queequeg: "I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world" (Melville *Moby Dick* 56). In finding solidarity, Ishmael is able to face the harshness of the external world. Through Ishmael, Melville reveals the importance societal relationships play in order to alleviate alienation and connect to the Oversoul. This relationship with others is further explored once Ishmael has boarded the *Pequod*: "let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness" (Melville *Moby Dick* 323). The squeezing of the milk and sperm represents eroticism, sexual reproduction, and new life. The squeezing action encompasses the individuals, contributing to the notion of interconnectivity through their squeezing together. In a way, Ishmael is finding new life in the society that is forming on the *Pequod*. Perhaps if the crew's journey had not been led by a crazed egomaniac, they would have flourished as a community and society: "As Ishmael tries to (re)decipher the significance of the many figures, shadings, and surfaces he encountered on the *Pequod*'s last voyage, his retrospective narrative reimagines community as a product of potentiality" (Hustis 30). He recognizes the importance individuals play in a grand scheme and sees that, potentially, community could have been a result had the social climate and



circumstances been different. In having Ishmael be the only survivor at the novel's end, perhaps Melville is suggesting that society plays an important role often overlooked in Transcendentalism, in that it can help alleviate alienation when strong bonds are built.

Although transcendentalism and the American Dream are from two different centuries, the two notions are quite similar in their simplest terms. Although the American Dream espouses individualism, "The nation's motto "e pluribus unum" conveys the ideal of a unity of the majority" (Setzer 5). The phrase 'one from many,' suggests that, though the individual is important, the whole of society is of equal importance. In both the American Dream and transcendentalism, the idea of connecting to society is lost or overlooked. Transcendental philosophers view interactions with society as negative and American culture pits individuals against each other through a competitive economic system while exhorting mottos of rugged individualism and self-reliance to its citizens. By following the transcendentalist philosophy set forth by Melville, the individual can retain their own identity and views while connecting to society and the natural world. In a way, society acts as a buffer to the harshness of the natural world, due to the interconnectivity of individuals which creates a sense of security.

In practicing the transcendental philosophy according to Melville, the individual will overcome alienation and disconnection through introspection, building interpersonal relationships, and finding spirituality in nature. Combining these notions results in a greater connection to the transcendental Oversoul as defined by Emerson. Delano and Ahab are unable to follow transcendental ideals due their respective optimism and nihilism, whereas Ishmael finds success in his transcendental philosophy. Aspects of Transcendentalism can be seen in the American Dream of the 20th century in its emphasis on the individual. Melville's version of transcendentalism presents a solution to the problems surrounding alienation while also possibly

providing an answer to the questions surrounding how an individual should interact with society that arise from the notion of the American Dream.

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