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Elevated Consciousness in the Solidarity of the Imprisoned State

In the Romantic idea of transcendence, a heightened consciousness is attained by sympathy with nature or oneness with the divine. In Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick,* a suspicion toward the absolute divine in its intention and its sympathies problematize the potential for a complete transcendent state. In the subjective world Melville constructs, it seems the divine itself will only work to destroy those reaching for transcendence. It is this shared experience of the world’s subjectivity that leads Ishmael to a sympathy that at least works to elevate his consciousness. Melville fills the novel with characters truly imprisoned in order to emphasize how such a shared state of little hope can lead to solidarity and sympathy. Further, he humanizes the non-human in order to display his own diminished version of transcendent sympathy with nature. In *Moby Dick,* elevation of consciousness occurs not from divine sympathy but only from sympathy created by a realization of the shared imprisoned state among all mortals.

Melville displays a disenfranchisement with the idea of divine transcendence. He displays this counter position directly and even mockingly in Chapter 35: “The Masthead.” Summarizing the ideals of the “young Platonists,” he heeds warning to their attempts at dreamy contemplation of divine oneness while in an ascended state, represented by a post at the masthead of a ship. “But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your hand or foot an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror” (Melville 136). In this passage the post of the lookout is not representative of ascended position for reaching transcendence but of a subjugated state in which the vortex of reality is ready to assault the individual, if said individual loses sense of physical self.

Melville early on promotes an awareness of physical self with the novels main sympathizer, Ishmael. In the first chapter Ishmael describes himself in a melancholy state. His feelings of subjugation are displayed by constant bodily images (Hayford 663). In a subjugated position, Ishmael is assaulted on all sides leading to an overbearing sensation of physical self. “I begin to grow hazy about the eyes, and begin to be over conscious of my lungs…” (Melville 20). This awareness of the imprisoned, physical self leads to sympathy, making Ishmael now conscious of the similar status of others: both their shared imprisonment and their physical need.

This solidarity of sympathy is showcased in the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg. In Chapter 3, “The Spouter-Inn,” a great deal of text is used to address Ishmael’s fear of the incoming “savage” named Queequeg that he must share a bed with. “Lord save me, thinks I, that must be the harpooner, the infernal head peddler” (Melville 33). The chapter ends though with the beginnings of a friendship, and even a night of successful rest for Ishmael while lying within the same bed as Queequeg. Here the solidarity of their situation creates a friendship between the two even in the context of their vast cultural distance.

The sympathy found does not only lie in their parallel predicament. Melville points to the physical to further create solidarity for the two characters. ”Upon waking next morning about daylight, I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner” (Melville 36). This physical experience elevates their friendship even further as Ishmael points to a growing preference to Queequeg. The sympathy found in the physical goes also into the idea of physical need. In his essay “Loomings: Yarns and Figures in the Fabric,” Harrison Hayford, listing examples of Melville’s motif of food, notes, “Another [display of solidarity] occurs when Ishmael and Queequeg eat their chowders under the dominating eye of the shrewish Mrs. Hussey, who is scolding a man as the eating scene begins and who takes away Queequeg’s harpoon as it ends” (663). In this somewhat comical example, Ishmael and Queequeg are once again sympathizers in their imprisonment by a greater force, Mrs. Hussey, as well as in their physical, human need to eat.

This same physical need of food also creates sympathy between man and the non-human later in *Moby Dick*. In Chapter 64, “Stubb’s Supper,” Stubb feels the need to eat from the flesh of the Whale. Ordering the cook to prepare him a whale steak, he later chastises the man for not preparing the meal to his liking. Stubb feigns a sort of blasphemy toward the way the steak should have been prepared. “‘You must go home and be born over again; you don’t know how to cook a whale-steak yet.’” (Melville 239). This sermon-like lecture on the proper preparation of a whale steak leads Stubb to have the cook give a sermon to the sharks, who like Stubb, are fulfilling a physical need by viciously eating from the whale carcass. This sermon of acting in a more conscientious or Christian way is completely lost on the sharks, and after Stubb admits to sympathy with the sharks’ behavior, the cook remedies his sermon. “‘Cussed fellow-critters! Kick up de damndest row as ever you can; fill your dam’ bellies ‘till dey bust – and den die” (Melville 239). In this passage, the characters mock the idea of an ascended policy as a unifying idea and instead sympathize with the veracious appetite of the sharks.

Running parallel to this sermon of the sharks, is the scene in Chapter 9, “The Sermon.” In this scene, Ishmael is witness to a Christian sermon of the story of Jonah and the whale by a father Mapple. In his essay “The Universal Thump: Jehovah’s Winter World,” Robert Zoellner points to Ishmael’s unique response:

“It signals the failure of the last attempt Ishmael will make to achieve intellectual repose through the orthodox Christian explanation of the Leviathanism of the cosmos, a Leviathanism which Ishmael sees as a constitutive element of all external nature, in the ocean, the land, the mountains, and even the stars (57: 231-33). Father Mapple’s sermon

has if anything probably intensified-rather then meliorated-those hypos which drove Ishmael to the Whaleman’s Chapel in the first place. Nor is

there anything mysterious about how the intended words of consolation

and delight, which Father Mapple delivers, could fall with such leaden coldness upon Ishmael’s heart.” (Zoellner 59)

I agree with the idea that Ishmael’s cold response toward the sermon is an indication of dissatisfaction toward orthodox Christian beliefs. It is evident though, that Ishmael’s distaste for the sermon lies not in its understanding of the divine as a singular being, but more so because of its belief of a sympathetic divine that will, if sought, furnish the soul. It is the nature of the following chapter that runs against the idea of a sympathetic divinity. The chapter appropriately named “A Bosom Friend,” displays a sympathetic satisfaction received when Ishmael, out of solidarity, decides to assist Queequeg in his pagan ritual. “And what is the will of God? - to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man do to me-*that* is the will of God (Melville 57).” In these chapters, Ishmael finds no satisfaction in the Christian, or even transcendental idea, that the divine in sympathy will answer the hypos that has lead him toward sea. Like Stubb, the Cook, and the sharks, he finds the divine dissatisfying and reaches instead for solidarity with his “Bosom Friend.”

This thread of solidarity is carried on through Melville’s choice of the members of the crew inhabiting the *Pequod*. Like Queequeg, a great deal of the crew are emphasized as non-Christian and all together foreign to Ishmael. In his essay “Selfhood and Others,” Paul Brodtkorb Jr. points to the physical realties that blazingly enforce this idea. Markings such as tattoos implicate the savage personification behind some of these characters. “Such men are not afraid of death; they face it as part of nature; for Queequeg, it is no more then a trifle” (Brodtkorb 670). To such men, slippage into solidarity comes much more simply. They accept their fates as that of a natural order and do not question it, seeing their gods as a mere part of that natural order, such as Queequeg casually pocketing his god, Yojo. Perhaps it is this lack of grandeur involving the divine that leads to Ishmael’s deep respect of Queequeg. When he returns from the Christian sermon dissatisfied and bothered, Queequeg is at the hotel calmly carving into his figure, Yojo (Melville 54). Queequeg’s ability to ease the status of divine, allowing him to experience it more casually and accessibly, leads him to solidarity with the divine, a state much closer to transcendence. Much like Queequeg, the rest of the “savage” element of the crew seems to have some sympathy with their divine, hinted by an ability of prophesy, such as Fedallah’s knowledge that only hemp could kill Ahab (Brodtkorb 670). Melville emphasizes the wide gap between Ishmael and the savage characters within his crew. This distance emphasizes the empowerment given by a focus on solidarity rather than on Prometheanism.

Melville points toward a solidarity that can be found with the unceremonious and non-divisive divine elements of nature. In his essay, “‘Fraternal Congenerity’: the Humanizing of Leviathan,” Zoellner discusses how Melville humanizes the divine image of the whale, and how in sympathy some characters display mental ascendance. Zoellner first notes a symbolic piece that Melville uses to establish the humanity of the whale. He states that Melville uses the smoking pipe to first show connections between man and whale. Pointing to an instance of Ishmael looking upon a whale, in which instead of a description of excitement, the whale is seen to be as a content human smoking on his pipe (Melville 230). The essay notes the chapter depicting the chase of this particular whale repeatedly uses imagery of Stubb smoking his pipe as he commands his boat, as well as of the whale itself blowing white smoke. At the killing of the whale, Zoellner notes Stubb seems to have a conscious understanding of the pipe metaphor stating, “Yes; both pipes smoked out.” as he ashes his own pipe into the sea (Melville 233).

Zoellner furthers the idea of the humanized leviathan by pulling from Chapter 81: ‘The Pequod meets the Virgin.” In this chapter, the Pequod hunts down a whale that is crippled and sick. “Old and tired, dyspeptic and flatulent, jaundiced and short of breath: this is hardly the whale of transcendental indomitability” (Zoellner 171). The essay points to the way in which the idea of the whale as divine is diminished by its physical traits. In its sickness and capture, it is imprisoned by a subjective world as are the human characters of *Moby Dick.* “So I have seen a bird with clipped wing, making affrighted broken circles in the air, vainly striving to escape the piratical hawks” (Melville 279).

Finally the essay uses the following chapter to illustrate Ishmael’s new sympathy found in the sickly whale. The chapter, ‘The Honor and Glory of the Whaling,” is in context of the previous hunt, a jest at the heroic appeal. “For though the creature encountered by that valiant whaleman of old is vaguely representative of a griffin like shape, and though the battle is depicted on land…(Melville 285)” Melville uses exemplification of many of these ‘stretches’ of legend in order to prove the anti-thesis of this story. Ishmael does not find solace in the idea of the glory of whaling but only finds a heightened conscience upon the sympathy he feels feel for the crippled whale, a subjugated and imprisoned creature like himself.

In *Moby Dick,* transcendence is not found through spiritual connection to a divine power. Any divine power is found to only discourage transcendence placing those who seek it in an imprisoned status. Instead, Herman Melville points to a more minor transcendence found in sympathy with the presence and physical aspects of fellow man and creature. Imprisoned together by a vortexual world, these figures in *Moby Dick* are found to gain sympathy for one another and at least transcend to a state of tolerability. In Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick,* transcendence is found in solidarity among those aware of the commonality of the imprisoned status.

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