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ENGL 103A

6 June 2023

Whitman's Sociability and the Tapestry of the American Project

The nineteenth century saw the birth of Transcendentalism, which expressed the inner goodness of people and nature and the power of the self. The writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman both express Transcendentalist ideals in their own ways. In “The Poet” by Ralph Waldo Emerson, he explores the purpose of the poet in society, their embodiment of Transcendentalist values, and the power of symbols and poetry on the world. In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman posits that all humans are connected through the common experience of life. “The Poet” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” both demonstrate the enduring significance of Transcendentalist philosophy. Whitman's sociability complements Emerson's solitude and self-reliance, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals and the potential for genuine connections to enhance individuality and self-understanding, which in turn empowers individuals to contribute to the communal American project.

Emerson reiterates the foundational ideas of Transcendentalism in “The Poet”: the beauty of nature and the self and the importance of self-efficacy and self-reliance. In discussing the poet's role, he says that

[t]he poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre. For the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe.

Therefore the poet is not any permissive potentate, but is emperor in his own right
(Emerson).

The poet being “the sayer” underlines that the poet’s role in society is to provide insight and meaning to things in life and nature, giving them the unique power to enunciate these ideas to others. Being “the namer” expresses Emerson’s belief that the poet can assign meaning and significance to things through language, implying that the poet has the power to create, shape, and define reality through their diction. The poet being “the representation of beauty” not only highlights the innate beauty found in nature and the self but also implies that the poet serves as the nexus between people and the aesthetic aspects of life, exhibiting and expressing the innate beauty in things and giving life and meaning to them. Emerson then reiterates that “the world [...] is from the beginning beautiful” while reiterating the Transcendentalist distrust of a higher deity. By saying that the poet is not a “permissive potentate,” Emerson gives power to the poet through monarchical diction, with the choice of “sovereign” and “emperor,” giving them agency to tap into their inner vision through their power as representations of beauty. They should break free from tradition and convention, writing as strong, decisive emperors as opposed to “permissive potentates.” All of this culminates in Emerson underlining the power of the self and relying on the self to create truly remarkable things in the form of poetry. Through the role of the poet, Emerson echoes the ideals of Transcendentalism, namely self-reliance.

Whitman contemplates the connection between individuals across time and space, establishing the concept of shared humanity. He questions

What is it then between us?

What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not — distance avails not, place avails not
 I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
 I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it,
 I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
 In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,
 In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon me
 (Whitman, lines 54-61)

By questioning “What is it then between us,” Whitman questions the perceived divisions that separate people as individuals, dismissing their significance. He answers the rhetorical question two lines later, separating his response with a line break and asserting that “Whatever it is, it avails not,” emphasizing his belief that external factors have no real consequence in comparison to shared humanity. Whitman continues his answer by repeating the words “I too,” which further grounds the universality of human experiences and emotions across space and time. This assertion, in conjunction with the many past tense verbs that follow the phrase, have a timeless effect; indeed, Whitman grounds his experience in time as something that was experienced and will continue to be experienced into the future. His vivid depiction of bustling city life in Manhattan, as well as the other shared experiences of life, build on the Transcendentalist focus on the beauty of nature, and propose that if as a society, Americans cannot find commonalities among each other, then they should look to nature as a basis for the shared experiences of humanity. Like Emerson, who promoted poets to break free from the mold of convention and tradition, Whitman invites the reader to transcend the preconceived notion that life is an individual and disjointed experience for every person. Furthermore, Manhattan, as a symbol of urbanization and progress, represents the American project and the country’s aspirations.

Whitman's referencing of his own experiences on the island implies that his own personal journey is tied to the larger American experiment, and so too are the experiences of those that follow him and experience those same things and more. By breaking free of the belief that life is a discrete experience for every individual, Whitman proposes that as a society bonded by its shared experiences, the American project can become much more aligned and united in how it proceeds.

However, the communal spirit of shared experiences that Whitman proposes still serves as an extension of the self-efficacy found in his Transcendentalist peers. The lines "I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution, / I too had receiv'd identity by my body, / That I was I knew was of my body, and I should be I knew I should be of my body" (Whitman, lines 62-64) reaffirm Whitman's belief that his sense of self is derived from his own physical being and that he is a unique and significant part of the tapestry of human experience. Thus, Whitman promotes self-efficacy by emphasizing everyone's individual agency to shape their identities and experiences. By asserting one's independence and pursuing one's own aspirations, people contribute to the collective progress of the American project and society. Thus, the Transcendentalist ideal of the power of the self serves as one piece of the greater tapestry that is the human experience, and by contributing one's unique perspective to that experience, the rest of humanity (specifically America) can improve and grow more and more intricate.

Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" builds upon the work of Emerson and other Transcendentalists, extending the latter's ideas of the self and self-reliance and transcending them to a deeper connection among human beings across space and time, suggesting that these connections can garner greater self-reliance and self-efficacy. By looking past the external factors that can limit humanity and understanding the raw, universal emotions that all humans

share, humanity as a society can progress along much further. As Whitman implies, every individual plays a role in the greater American project, and by pursuing oneself as a project and bettering oneself, America improves simultaneously as well. Every person's connection to this tapestry fosters a sense of community and belonging among every individual, regardless of the many superficial factors that seem to serve as barriers. Almost every human across the generations has felt the luxury of the sensation of the rising sun, or the feeling of being among others similar to them. The connection to these experiences has the potential to bridge divides and foster cooperation among Americans, transcending the barriers of race and class, leading to a more responsible and egalitarian society. If more people can embrace this mentality, then perhaps the country can grow more compassionate, and there will be less war and conflict and more of a general understanding that as a society, each individual can work to make America, and the human tapestry, a better place.

Works Cited

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