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"We Must Get Rid of Slavery, or We Must Get Rid of Freedom." Self, Other, and Emancipation in Antebellum America

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Abstract: Antebellum American literature, like the country itself, was a heterogeny of Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and political prose culminating in the national narrative. Authors during this time struggled with the issue of slavery and their works reflected varying degrees of disdain for it and its treatment of slaves that were the direct representation of the Other. Prominent writers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman used their prose and poetry to speak out about a nation cleaved in two. These two sides could not agree on how to move forward and this struggle was in fact a mirror image of the binary idea of the Self and the Other. If the Self was the white male, the Other was the slave or Native American who was outside of the antebellum norm. Emerson encouraged an equality and self-reliance that would reverse the power structure of the time. Hawthorne used veiled allegories to suggest that the nation´s slavery problem would rectify itself in time. Melville preached about capitalism and Christian hypocrisy while Whitman used his poetry to aesthetically envision a truly inclusive democratic antebellum America. These authors were pioneers in the humanism of literature that was meant to inspire the nation to achieve its potential and ensure that every voice would be heard. However, antebellum human rights were not fully realized and slavery dehumanized the Other leading to a nation divided and eventually civil war.

At the heart of Transcendentalism is the belief in the individual's ability to be spiritually self-reliant through the examination of human nature (Bennett and Royle 136). Furthermore, this realization of the Self cannot be fully achieved without also analyzing its relationship to the Other. According to Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, writers of romantic literature tackled this subject of basic human rights by focusing the reader's attention on the issue of slavery and using criticism, allegory, and narrative writing to convince them that the abolition of slavery was the best

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course of action (Bennett and Royle 136). Specifically, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman, who were associated with the literary movements of Transcendentalism and Romanticism in antebellum America, wrote texts that dealt with the Self and the Other and emancipation in different ways. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson argued that one should rely on the Self above all things and reject society and its two values, conformity and consistency, because one could not truly evolve and develop when adhering to these two societal norms that devalued the Other. Hawthorne´s romance, *The Scarlet Letter*, used a female character in the midst of a Puritan society to demonstrate the idea of the Self and the Other in conflict with progress and principle. In "Bartleby the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno," Melville used Bartleby, on the one hand, as a symbol of the Other of society that was contrasted by the narrator's own selfishness and, on the other hand, Captain Delano, whose naivety reflected the ignorance of the Self in relationship to the Other on a chattel slave ship. Finally, Whitman used his poem *Song of Myself* as a means of illustrating the importance of inclusion and his vision of a true democracy where the Self and the Other were equal and worthy of democracy like blades of grass in a field that was the nation. These four authors uniquely defined the concept of the Self and the Other to allegorically prescribe to antebellum American society a way to move beyond slavery towards freedom and a self-reliant future founded on the ideal that all men were created equal.

Emerson's American Religion

Emerson introduced a new type of American religion in his essay, "Self-reliance" and called upon the nation to reject conformity and consistency because antebellum America could not

transcend beyond its past moral transgressions while slavery still existed and exploited the Other (Emerson 24-25). Emerson's Self, the individual, had no place in conventional society but needed to rely on its own devices to truly move toward the goal of a new nation founded on equality. His essay encouraged the nation to move forward from the past to create a society that would not repeat its previous mistakes but create something stronger and more independent (Emerson 35). He spoke of the Other, who was an outsider but unique, in a society that compelled a homogenous throng of drones. Therefore, being true to one's Self, as Emerson put it, was to reject the conventionalism society had to offer and live life according to one's own nature, "A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions" (Emerson 22). In Emerson's view, one should honor the outsiders of society by providing them with the opportunities to succeed and not just give charity to buy a place in heaven, "Their works are done as an apology or extenuation of their living in the world…Their virtues are penances. I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is for itself and not for a spectacle…I cannot consent to pay for a privilege where I have intrinsic right" (Emerson 22-23).

Thus, Emerson's America could only be truly for all mankind once its members started to live as individuals to create a new future that would be stronger and void of past mistakes from previous nations. Furthermore, from his perspective, the Self was resilient and did not conform to society but could think independently because of faith that his own nature would make him embrace the role of the Other and live as an individual (Emerson 21).

Cornel West discusses this version of the Emersonian self in his book *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, quoting Philip Nicoloff, who labeled him a "typical nineteenth-century North Atlantic 'mild racist'" (West 28). As West explains, this is due to Emerson's own concept

of human personality, which was perceived through the lenses of a white man revealing his concept of the races as a hierarchical scale (West 30). This revelation can be problematic for a scholar of Emerson when navigating through his texts using the foundation of racial equality. How can he speak out about slavery when it seems that he considers slaves and others to be beneath him in a racial hierarchy? The answer has to do with his version of the Self demonstrating that Emerson is, according to West, "neither a liberal nor a conservative and certainly not a socialist or even a civic republican" (West 40), but instead "a petit bourgeois libertarian, with at times anarchist tendencies and limited yet genuine democratic sentiments" (West 40). In other words, Emerson was preaching to fellow whites about progress for a class of men who were included in his vision of the Self. He lived in a world far removed from the Other of society. However, this did not overshadow his strong anti-slavery sentiments and certainly his powerful speeches were rooted in what Cornel West has coined as a form of American religion (West 41). West further elaborates that Emerson was disenchanted with the politics of antebellum America and this moral transgression meant going against custom, law and tradition. Furthermore, the only sin for Emerson was limitation, or in other words, conformity and consistency (West 17).

Emerson believed in the Self and private integrity above all else, since it was the nation's only recourse against the government and its shortcomings with the slavery issue. Because its laws were immoral, he asserted that only individual citizens could restore the loss of morality from this struggle of a divided nation, "The health of any democratic government depends upon the virtue of the individual citizen, for when the government has become corrupt only the rectitude of the citizens can restore what it has lost or abandoned" (Packer 561). As part of the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson gave a speech entitled "American Slavery" and spoke about how the American people needed to rise up and reject the unjust events of the time that would culminate in

the civil war. In this way, he confirmed his beliefs that every individual or Self must be a sound decision-maker by using their own moral compass to realize that slavery was an evil that had to be stopped in order for the nation to be able to live up to its own expectations of the equality of all men (Packer 562). In fact, Emerson spoke out about slavery at the Concord meeting on May 26, 1856, "I do not see how a barbarous community and a civilized community can constitute one state. I think we must get rid of slavery, or we must get rid of freedom" (Packer 562). Thus, Emerson used the platform of Transcendentalism to speak out against slavery and encourage individuality to combat the homogeneity of the nation that hid behind a racist past to give freedom to the Other in American antebellum society. To sum up, Emerson like his counterparts mentioned, was empathetic to the Other and encouraged Americans to take responsibility for their part in this antebellum ethics battle on behalf of humanity (Bennett and Royle 134).

Hawthorne's Philosophy of Human Nature

Meanwhile, Hawthorne's romanticist take on how to solve the slavery issue differed from his fellow transcendentalist Emerson, "He recognized slavery as potentially divisive: he did not favor slavery; he urged only that nothing be done about it" (Arac 150). The author described slavery in the autobiographical work *Life of Franklin Pierce* as a problem that divine providence would not allow to continue since humans could not stop it by their own accord; instead, it would vanish into thin air as if it were simply a bad dream (Arac 150). *The Scarlet Letter* used an abundance of symbols to weave a story centered on a character, Hester Prynne, a woman carrying shame and pronounced an outcast in Puritan society. Hawthorne was able to use Hester to illustrate both the

Self and the Other. His Transcendentalist novel was meant to metaphorically criticize antebellum America's hypocrisy in its dealings with abolition and the growth of a nation that was divided. He used Hester to personify the Other, since she was an outsider in her own community due to her sin of adultery. It is possible to read the evolving interpretation of the letter "A" on Hester's chest as Hawthorne's complex criticism of the current situation, "She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (Hawthorne 249).

Moreover, the letter "A" subplot could be seen to represent the constitution that, in the author's view, should not be tampered with, particularly regarding Hester's attachment to her sin in letter form. In Hawthorne's view, the Constitution was anti-slavery and needed no revision but would guide the nation to a better future (Arac 154). Arac discusses this idea further when he compares Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* to *Life of Franklin Pierce* by highlighting a "tension between motion and regulation" that causes a contradiction between progress and stability (Arac 153). Likewise, there is a contradiction between passion and principle that is a motif used throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. Passion and progress can be read to represent the urge to change and abolish slavery while stability and principle suggest a conservative view of letting nature take its course (Arac 154). This in turn follows the transcendentalist ideal that providence and human nature will rectify the problem. Continuing to ignore the problem of a nation divided, however, did nothing to prevent the very war that Hawthorne was so against and the Constitution that he was in support of offered little or no rights to the Other of antebellum society.

Moreover, Laura Doyle discusses the idea of Hawthorne using Hester Prynne as a representation of the Native American Other and a conduit for the author to comment on

colonization (Doyle 262). She quotes Renée Bergland's statement according to which each of the three main characters is transformed into a Native American and furthermore argues that they are brought "into association with an Indian presence that at least temporarily enhances their quests for freedom—religious, scientific, or sexual" (Doyle 264). In regards to the self-motif, Doyle suggests that the last image of the female protagonist returning can be understood as a manifestation of Hawthorne himself (Doyle 267), who narrates the colonization of America by his Puritan ancestors and effectively connects it to the turmoil of his own situation at the time he wrote the narrative, "Hawthorne makes a 'native' woman's interior freedom the veiled vessel of Anglo-Atlantic colonization" (Doyle 268). Ultimately, colonization has its price and the victims have been the Other as represented not only in the slaves but in Hawthorne's Native Americans, who were its direct victims in the struggle for antebellum American democracy.

Melville's Antebellum Ethics

Herman Melville wrote "Bartleby the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" to provide unique perspectives of Transcendentalism in the midst of antebellum America and comment on the nation's struggles with racial and social inequality. He used the character Bartleby to represent the Other and the narrator represented the Self transforming the narrative from metaphysical to ethical in nature through the use of the sympathetic narrator and the stoic Bartleby (Arac 215). In fact, Melville hinted at a philosophy inspired by John Locke in his work by using his narrator as a means of illustrating the social power structure of class struggle and how it was a type of wage slavery (Lee 120). Bartleby was foreign to the narrator due to his passive resistance, free will and lack of

common sense and the narrator had to come to grips with the knowledge that there are others in society with a voice. In this way, Bartleby took away the narrator's power over him and showed him the flaws in society due to its inequality (Lee 120). There was a true struggle between these two characters that represented the duality of society: the idealism of Transcendentalism's free will and the reality of capitalism's greed. The narrator felt justification for his actions due to his Christianity and charitable acts as expressed in Emerson's essay and, likewise, Melville revealed a hidden hypocrisy in society. In order to help others one cannot just feign sympathy through charitable acts but must live a life that reflects self-awareness and awareness of the Other, represented by Bartleby. The narrator struggled with wanting to help but could not reach the level of sacrifice required to truly transform himself into a self-reliant individual. His *faux* concern for his charity case and preference for capitalism was revealed in his abandonment of Bartleby in the end, "Pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death. Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" (Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener" 71).

Furthermore, Melville's ethical dilemmas on the Self and the Other in "Bartleby" are expounded upon by Elizabeth Barnes, who points out that "sympathy itself may have a dangerous effect on the sympathizer's sense of self" (Barnes 235). She argues that Melville's comment on sympathy in his narrative, "Bartleby," is in fact his way of showing how nineteenth-century America was engrossed in the business of wedding capitalism to Christianity for the purpose of self-interest (Barnes 237). She iterates how the author provides a view of Christian love as a power struggle between the Self who is the giver of charity and the Other who is the receiver and this exchange is a threat to the emphasizer's sense of self, "Written in 1853, 'Bartleby' challenges the normative view of sympathy as an affective bridge between privileged and oppressed, an idea that

informs not only public discussions of class divisions in antebellum America but also public debates over slavery (Barnes 241). As Barnes points out, Melville is in fact wrapped up in the class struggles of antebellum America, narrating his version of the power play between the Self as the capitalistic Wall Street tycoon and the Other as the white working-class man (Barnes 247).

When faced with the question of chattel slavery, Melville tackled the subject in "Benito Cereno" in a veiled literary manner that was most likely influenced by current historical events of the time, such as the fugitive slave act. Robert K. Wallace discusses the relationship between Melville, his father-in-law, chief justice Lemuel Shaw and Frederick Douglass, a famous fugitive slave. Judge Shaw and Douglass were on "opposing sides of the discourse over race and slavery until the Civil War. Melville occupied the deadly space between these two men" (Wallace 40). He characterized "Benito Cereno" as a brutal stage for the shared humanity of Americans, Spaniards, and Africans that is nothing if not complex (Wallace 62). One can see a common thread in these two texts by Melville that touches on the theme of capitalism's destructive nature, symbolized by "Bartleby"'s narrator and in the ownership of slaves in "Benito" as a veiled attempt by the author to narrate the strangling of democracy and Christian ideals in antebellum America. Melville often quoted scripture and subtle Biblical references are mentioned by both Barnes and Steven Mailloux, who argues that, "Melville condemned those nominal Christians who so dramatically contradicted the lessons of Jesus, especially those expressed in his Sermon on the Mount…Melville publicly identified with the victims of oppression and adopted the rhetoric of the Christian reformer in defending those who needed defending" (Mailloux 170).

Mailloux, however, describes the text as having a "negative political theology" but also ambiguous, leaving the reader ill-equipped to survey the slave mutiny aboard the *San Dominick*. In other words, "Benito Cereno" was Melville's theological and political criticism of lawmakers

of the time who, in his view, lacked the ethical concern for the oppressed or the Other in society due to an overwhelming greed and abundance of "theologico-politico-social schemes" (Mailloux 174). Moreover, when mutiny broke out and the captives turned on the captors, it proved that they still had no power, no voice in the matter of democracy, which was the underlying and unspoken problem Melville saw in antebellum America, "The voice of the people does not exist when it is too diverse to be represented, when the people suppress the other people" (Lee 147). Furthermore, he criticized the republican theory that suggests that the problem existed not only in the national slavery crisis but in the human condition itself (Lee 148).

Whitman's Democratic Vision

One can read an author like Walt Whitman and perceive a sense of hope when compared to Melville's satirical lens. In a poetic and sympathetic way, Whitman painted the picture of the Self and the Other in a juxtaposition of his hopeful democratic vision. Although subtle, Whitman's perceived purpose of his antebellum poetry was to express his fear of the nation being ripped apart but also purvey a level of wishful thinking (Killingsworth 25). He broke down the power structure of the Self and the Other by allegorizing human nature as a blade of grass while employing a heightened sexual undertone to express his own vision of a democratic union that included literally all walks of life from low to high, "Whitman figuratively strips the heart bare…associates it with the language of nearly pornographic sensuality, transforming the dominant sentimentalism of his age with material intensity" (Killingsworth 32-33). This eclectic poet used unconventional poetic devices to invent his vision of the Self and the Other that was body, mind, and spirit and went

beyond race, gender, and class. In this way Whitman perceived a vision of a nation that would thrive on its diversity and strive for equality, "Throughout the poem, boundaries between self and others—boundaries of time, place, language, identity and social distinction—dissolve as the poet unfolds visions of personal, political, and metaphysical union" (Killingsworth 28). Furthermore, Peter J. Bellis elaborates on Whitman's unconventional poetic line and unusual punctuation which has been replaced with longer lines connected by ellipses and surmises that this reflects the poet's own political positions, "*Leaves of Grass* enacts in language—and impels its reader toward—a democratic reconstruction of America itself" (Bellis 70).

Song of Myself used pronouns to deconstruct the Self, showing the delicate human condition reflected in the nation's turmoil over the slavery issue. His consistent use of "I" and "myself" placed him on the same level as the Other, "It is a uniform hieroglyphic… / Growing among black folks as among white, / Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the / same, I receive them the same" (Whitman 9). This points back to Bellis's arguments on Whitman's ability to reconstruct the national, gender and individual identity of America (Bellis 73). *Leaves of Grass* represented a climactic phase for the national narrative and it conceptualized the struggles of the antebellum nation that was struggling with ethnic, gender, and class conflicts (Killingsworth 27). Bellis surmises that *Song of Myself* deconstructs the idea of the Whitmanesque self and equalizes it to the Other, thus making the poem a democratic act of inclusion where each line could represent each class or race of people in antebellum America that was the poet's "vision of democratic collectivity and community" (Bellis 101). Additionally, Ivy G. Wilson articulates how the poet uses the technique of catalogs to conceptualize his poetic theory of "organic compacts" to actualize the concept of a "social contract most often associated with John Locke…pushing it to its conceptual limits where an American social order could be maintained without the surrendering of

any rights (Wilson 92).” To sum up, Whitman used his poetry as a political commentary on the identity of antebellum America that needed to be like *Song of Myself*, a catalog of phrases in harmony and lacking social hierarchy.

Conclusion

Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman were raised voices in antebellum America crying out in different manners for a nation to free itself from the bonds of oppression. Through the works discussed in this essay, readers were offered the valuable lesson of the power struggle of humanity through narratives that depicted the Self and the Other of society. This interpretation of the intersection of the Self and the Other has been crucial to the morality of a nation such as America, for whose childlike innocence Emerson pleaded. In Hawthorne’s allegory, America should break free from the past to build itself upon the virtues of strength in character in order to ensure that the two sides come to a mutually beneficial understanding in time. Melville’s Bartleby, who stayed true to himself even to the bitter end, taught the lesson of the hypocrisy of Christianity and capitalism; on the other hand, “Benito Cereno” provided the stark reality of the struggle between the Self and the Other as reflected in its representation of the slave trade. Finally, Whitman’s *Song of Myself* was a groundbreaking introspection of the Self and the Other that revealed his fears that a nation would be cleaved in two by discrimination.

Through reading these works, one can clearly see the battle between the Self and the Other that was at the core of Transcendentalism and Romanticism. If the individual was self-reliant and needed only to look to nature for answers, then surely every American had this ability and all would

be considered equal or no better than the Other. However, as history proved, the human condition was far too complex and civil war was inevitable for a nation that is still struggling to this day to define its identity. One major problem with the identity process has been due to the fact that the voice of the Other was left to the shadows. Ivy G. Wilson has examined this theme and provides some perspectives on antebellum America from the view of the Other. He draws attention to the fact that the slaves—and even the free African Americans—were limited not only by the antebellum norms but also by the Constitution itself and these voices of Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman could not truly speak about the Other because they were hindered by their own limited view of the Self as seen through the lenses of a white man (Wilson 4). In fact, as previously mentioned, Hawthorne believed the Constitution to be adequate. The problem could be characterized as an inadequate perspective and in order to truly achieve democracy the voice of the Other must be adequately considered and counted and although these four authors are admired as opponents of slavery, their voices were not fully equipped to handle the task.

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