

# Stirrings Still

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# **“Isolatooes All”: The American Struggle Against Meaninglessness in the Long Nineteenth Century**

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*Erik Grayson*

A *Wounded Deer* – leaps highest –  
I’ve heard the Hunter tell –  
‘Tis but the Ecstasy of *death* –  
And then the Break is still!  
-Emily Dickenson, “A wounded deer  
leaps highest”

Out – out are the lights – out all!  
And over each quivering form,  
The curtain, a funeral pall,  
Comes down with the rush of a storm,  
And the angels, all pallid and wan,  
Uprising, unveiling, affirm  
That the play is the tragedy, ‘Man,’  
And its hero the Conqueror Worm.  
-Edgar Allan Poe, “The Conqueror  
Worm” (from “Ligia”)

In his essay “Existentialism and Psychotherapy,” theologian Paul Tillich refers to the nineteenth century as a “revolutionary” period in the development of existentialism (5). Indeed, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are in many ways defined by their revolutionary character. Inheriting its emphasis on reason from the preceding Age of Reason, the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century inspired both the American and French Revolutions and helped bring about the Industrial Revolution. With the ascent of Reason came the rise of empiricism and, as scientific rational inquiry systematically sought to answer the mysteries of life, the

stability of the Christian hegemony dissolved. As physicists explained the unseen forces of the universe, naturalists like Cuvier and Lamarck paved the way for Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. With *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, Reason had brought humanity to a very disturbing precipice: a chasm separated the unseen, unproven Judeo-Christian God from the rationally delineated, scientifically-charted world in which we exist. For Søren Kierkegaard and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a leap of faith helped bridge Reason and God. For others, however, a gloomy agnosticism would permeate all aspects of life. Lacking the proof of the supernatural and unable to disprove Darwin's disturbing theories, nineteenth century man had to find a way to live with the possibility of his ultimate meaninglessness, a puny speck in the chaotic sea of blind chance.

To an extent, Romanticism sought to address these concerns. As a reaction against the Enlightenment, Romanticism rejected the systematizing of the natural world and celebrated mutability (though, presumably, not of the Darwinian sort), disorder, and uncertainty. The history of philosophy, however, is written upon a palimpsest and no new movement can successfully eradicate the ideas of previous generations, leaving a ghostly reminder of "rejected" ideas to haunt the thinkers striving to move beyond them. Thus, as Alfred Cobban observes, "[t]he Nature of the romanticists is simply an emotionalized version of the Reason of the *philosophes*" (136). In other words, once divested of its romantic garb, the unfathomable and uncertain Nature celebrated by the Romantics as a glorious alternative to empiricism, reveals itself to be the very Reason they sought to escape.

Caught between the desire for the subjectively transcendent Unknown touted by the Romantics and the need for objective, tangible proof inspired by the Enlightenment, yet unable to fully obtain either, the individual in the nineteenth century encountered a "crisis of meaning." He still wanted God, but lacking evidence, his reason would not permit him to believe. For Richard Boyd Hauck, "[a] man's

awareness of total absurdity depends upon the failure of his intellect to discover that rightness and meaning which his inner sense suspects” (4). In other words, the “crisis of meaning” Albert Camus identifies as the absurd stems directly from the individual’s inability to reconcile his or her subjective “romantic” truths with those universal principles the reason requires.

Against this backdrop, Herman Melville emerges as perhaps the first major figure in a long line of American writers to dramatize the absurd struggle. Both Ahab and Ishmael find the world to be somehow discordant with their conceptions of “rightness.” In a sense, Ahab’s hatred of the white whale in *Moby-Dick* reveals the captain’s sense of injustice at living in an absurd world. His anger belies his inner belief that the disorder of the universe is somehow wrong: he should not have lost his leg. Like the captain of the Rachel who calmly accepts his own amputation, Ishmael understands that chaos reigns. Like Ahab, however, his internal desire for the structure of naval life implies that he resists that disorder. The fates of Ahab and Ishmael, then, amount to Melville’s interpretation of the absurd struggle.

Rejecting the “formal structures” Ishmael seeks, the Transcendentalists valued autonomy above all other considerations. However, where “the universe was sustained by something deeper, more fundamental, than the laws of chemical, biological and physical reaction...*idealism*,” the Transcendentalists rejected God as “an evasion, a setting aside of the question of reality” (Geldard 4). In fact, God “was an abdication of reason, that gift of the Enlightenment, which fed both materialist and idealist in different ways” (4). Of course, as Cobban notes, Nature essentially amounts to “the laws of chemical, biological and physical reaction,” and even Emerson eventually granted the possibility that this was the case. Still, the Transcendentalists found a solution to godless, meaningless existence: they found beauty in an ugly reality and “lived deliberately”—and *ideally*—as Thoreau would have it, with a titivated Nature, the embodiment of those very “laws” they imagined *were not* Nature.

Stephen Crane and Jack London also turn to nature to comprehend the human condition, but as Earle Labor observes, this nature is decidedly not that of the Transcendentalists:

The spirit of the wilderness is not, to be sure, the same spirit that hovers benevolently over Leatherstocking's forest—nor was it meant to be. It is the awesome naturalistic genie invoked by Darwin and Haeckel, and celebrated by Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser as well as by London. Under its domain men are no more than 'specks and motes, moving with weak cunning and little wisdom amidst the play and interplay of the great blind elements and forces. (33)

Despite the sheer horror such an environment induces in Crane's characters, London locates self-actualization in atavism. Embracing those selfsame "laws of chemical, biological and physical reaction," London's dog-hero Buck achieves the sheer ecstasy of being and, in a very real sense, *becomes* nature.

Finally, Ernest Hemingway courts death to achieve the same ecstasy of life as Buck. For Hemingway, like Buck, life has meaning only insofar as it is not death. Where Buck strives to become one with life and nature, Hemingway's bullfighting heroes deliberately invoke the forces of nature in order to heighten their sense of live in—and in spite of—the natural world. By inviting death to strike at him in the form of a charging bull, Pedro Romero inverts London's atavistic equation of life with nature. Here, the bull (nature) brings annihilation to the individual. By controlling the forces of nature, Hemingway's hero disengages himself from the unthinking forces of nature and manipulates death. In doing so, he gains a measure of control over his existence and enables himself to create meaning for himself.

## **I. *Moby-Dick*: Isolatoes in the Void**

In his meditations on whiteness in Chapter 42 of *Moby-Dick, Or The Whale* (1851), Ishmael characterizes the color as “a dumb blankness, full of meaning” (206). Like the “noiseless” scrivener who only opens his “white attenuated mouth” when “blankly declin[ing]” to perform clerical work in “Bartleby,” white objects possess a disarmingly silent nature, unwilling or incapable of yielding insight into the mysteries they enclose (28, 35, 26). As “the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind,” Ishmael concludes, the color white visually signifies “the heartless voids and immensities of the universe” (206). Furthermore, in describing the hue as the “colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink,” Ishmael significantly associates the color with the spiritual void left by the steady disintegration of religious faith during the age of scientific inquiry (207).

Tellingly, Captain Ahab, the man for whom *Moby-Dick* embodies “the monumental white shroud” that, like the cosmetics applied by the harlot “whose allurements cover nothing but the charnelhouse within,” prevents man from perceiving a disturbing reality, is estranged from the Christian worldview he once held (207). “Though nominally included in the census of Christendom,” Ishmael informs the reader, Ahab “was still an alien to it.” (165). In other words, Ahab, like Ishmael, is an “*Isolato*,” a neologism Ishmael uses to denote individuals “not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own” (134; emphasis Melville’s). Significantly, it is Ahab’s status as an *Isolato* that provides the key to understanding Melville’s novel as a response to the possibility that human life exists in a world utterly devoid of meaning.

Early in *Moby-Dick*, the reader accompanies Ishmael aboard the *Pequod* as the young man enlists himself for a three-year stint as a low-level member of the ship’s crew. Somewhat surprised by the fact that the boat’s captain does not involve himself in the selection of his crew, Ishmael solicits information about Ahab from one of the *Pequod*’s two principal owners. Captain Peleg responds to Ishmael’s inquiry by recalling his own experiences with Ahab “as mate years

ago” and assures the uneasy young man that the unseen captain is “a good man...something like me” (97-98). Not long after the conversation onboard the Pequod, however, as Ishmael strolls along the streets of Nantucket with Queequeg, a “shabbily appareled” man vaguely hints to the pair that they ought not to ship aboard a craft captained by Ahab (108). Implying that the captain’s mental state is unstable, the man frightens Ishmael who, in turn, informs the man that Peleg had mentioned to him that Ahab had temporarily gone insane as a result of a painful whaling accident in which his leg was severed from his body, but that the captain would “be all right again before long” (109). Although Ishmael acknowledges that Ahab is “sick,” he expresses his conviction that Peleg’s assessment of Ahab as mentally sound is sufficient evidence for him to believe that the stranger is either “damaged in the head” or “a humbug” (109). The discrepancy between the “official” account of Ahab’s fitness as captain—as provided by the Pequod’s owner—and that of the vague “popular” account—provided by the strange old mariner, Elijah, who insists something changed in Ahab following the amputation of his leg—highlights the significance of the captain’s injury, the event which rendered the man both a cripple and an isolato.

Ishmael notes that Ahab’s monomaniacal pursuit of Moby-Dick—the symptom rather than the substance of the mental illness to which Elijah alludes—precipitated the man’s transformation from a “good” captain into a “sick” one. It was only after the pain of Ahab’s “agonizing bodily laceration” that he was able to reflect upon the accident and, Ishmael suggests, the captain’s “torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad” (195). According to Albert Camus,<sup>1</sup> reflecting upon such confrontations with one’s mortality can be “the first sign of

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<sup>1</sup> Camus’s admiration for Herman Melville is widely acknowledged by scholars of both authors. Oliver Todd, in *Camus: A Life*, makes frequent mention of the French writer’s firm belief that *Moby-Dick* is a novel of the absurd *par excellence*.

the absurd,” a situation where “the chain of daily gestures is broken,” revealing “the insane character of daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering” to the individual (13, 19). It is during such moments—often violently unexpected instances like that of Ahab—that “[t]he primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across the millennia...we have understood in it solely the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand” (14). Indeed, when Starbuck questions Ahab’s sanity, accusing the captain of seeking revenge on “a dumb brute,” Ahab informs the first mate that his rage is *not* simply a desire to avenge his injury, but rather a fury arising out of his understanding of the human condition:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond...I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice in sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (175-76)

Easily one of the most dissected and discussed passages in *Moby-Dick*, Ahab’s “pasteboard mask” analogy is arguably the single most important passage in the entire novel. In it, Ahab clearly expresses an acute sense of existential angst. Ahab’s contradicting sense that “some unknown but still reasoning thing” lurks behind the false reality enveloping human existence and fear that “there’s naught beyond” the mask reveals the inner struggle the individual faces when confronted with the possibility of the absurd. The white whale becomes Ahab’s focus because he cannot know whether a

deity quite different from the “familiar and infinitely ingenious craftsman and benevolent father” of Christendom or the pure chance of chaos is at the root of his—and all humanity’s—suffering (Burrow 17). Since Ahab can neither address an unseen and apparently unreachable god nor throttle nothingness, he must create an arbitrary signifier for the apparent maliciousness of the universe and elevate it to the status of signified in order to cope with his emotions. Thus, “the whale’s white hump” provides a tangible target for “the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (195). *Moby-Dick*, whose color connotes a “heartless void,” has become the void.

Given Ahab’s explanation of *Moby-Dick*’s meaning, the title of the book assumes a new significance. If *Moby Dick* the whale *is* the uncertainty of human existence, as Ahab suggests, *Moby-Dick* the novel can be read as an existential parable. In fact, as Richard Boyd Hauck observes, “[s]ince Ahab’s tragedy necessarily involves the death of all the mariners but Ishmael, one must go on to say that the condition of all the crew, who are to be taken as all the world, is the same as his whether they know it or not” (100). To this end, Melville weaves several approaches to the existential predicament Ahab perceives into the larger tapestry of the narrative. Of these, the paradoxical creative-destructive monomania of Ahab and Ishmael’s search for externally-imposed social structure are the most interesting. Though differing in their approaches to meaninglessness, both Ahab and Ishmael fail in their respective plights, leaving readers with the bleak understanding that neither the pursuit of revenge nor the reliance upon external structure can alleviate the spiritual illness one may develop when confronting the absurdity of the human condition.

Captain Ahab’s plight is fundamentally flawed. In the act of creating a “practically assailable” embodiment of “all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil” in *Moby-Dick*, the reality of the situation will inevitably prevent the mariner from attaining any sense of solace (195). After all, Ahab’s anxiety originates in his perception of the fragility of

life and the senselessness of human suffering in the face of an indifferent, if not hostile world. As Starbuck angrily observes, Ahab's desire to kill Moby-Dick, if successful, will only result in the death of the "dumb thing" the captain admits is nothing more than a "pasteboard mask" he himself has placed over the void he despises (175). Killing the whale, the reader perceives, will be just that. Ahab will slaughter Moby-Dick, but Moby-Dick is only an unusually strong, smart, and persistent sperm whale. The whale's demise will not enable Ahab to return to the prelapsarian frame of mind he had been in prior to his confrontation with the absurd. The realization that there very well may be nothing behind the forces of nature which constantly threaten to end human life will remain with Ahab after Moby-Dick enters the void he represents. The fact that Moby-Dick smashes the Pequod's hull and kills the entire crew except Ishmael only heightens the tragedy of Ahab's story by highlighting the absurdity of metaphysical creations such as the captain's. Melville seems to suggest that the "wall" of human reality is both invisible and impenetrable. By creating a tangible surrogate for the "naught beyond" the wall in Moby-Dick, Ahab forgets the barrier and crashes right into it. In the end, it would seem, the violent pursuit of that unreachable "naught beyond" simply hastens the moment when life becomes "naught."

The reader's first glimpse of Ishmael is one of a severely depressed young man fighting the urge to commit suicide:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially when my hypos get such an upper hand of me...then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. (21)

Among other details, we are able to infer that Ishmael has found himself in the throes of depression often enough to

have developed a method for “driving off the spleen” and that he chooses life over death by substituting life at sea for suicide on land (21). Given the novel’s concern with humanity’s anxiety in the face of potential meaninglessness, one possible interpretation of Ishmael’s melancholy is that he suffers from the sense of alienation often associated with the recognition of the absurd. Indeed, Melville’s narrator immediately aligns himself with the figure of the exile by introducing himself as “Ishmael”<sup>2</sup> in the first line of the novel, a name evoking the biblical Ishmael of whom it was prophesized that “he will be a wild man; his hand *will be* against every man’s hand against him” (Gen. 16:12). Not surprisingly, Ishmael reveals that he has grown weary of the “civilized hypocrisies” which had estranged him from the society of others in the “wolfish world” (69). Ishmael’s lupine adjective implies the young man senses that the world is rapacious and malicious. Like Ahab, then, Ishmael perceives a fundamentally hostile force lurking behind our sense of reality, which is most likely the cause of his malaise.

When this “spleen” of Ishmael’s brings him to the verge of suicide, one might argue, he confronts the absurd (21). For Camus, “[j]udging whether or not life is worth living” forces the individual to consider the value of life in the face of annihilation in much the same way a violent episode like Ahab’s “dismasting” does (3). Thus, when Ishmael opts to board the Pequod in order to flee land in lieu of using the “pistol and ball” to end his life, the narrator of *Moby-Dick* has made it clear that he wishes to live in the face of absurdity (21). Among the reasons Ishmael cites for deciding to set sail is his belief that life aboard a whaling ship will structure his

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<sup>2</sup> The often-quoted opening line of the novel, “Call me Ishmael,” is ambiguous enough for some readers to wonder whether or not the narrator *is* really named Ishmael. Had the narrator begun his narrative with “My name is Ishmael,” such doubts would not be possible. If, indeed, the appellation has been selected by the narrator as a sobriquet, this would add a layer of distance between the reader and the narrator as well as suggest the possibility that the narrator essentially asks the reader to identify him as “the exile.”

life in a reassuring way. Ishmael makes brief mention of a phenomenon he calls “the universal thump,” a phrase he uses to describe the misfortune that every living being “either in a physical or metaphysical point of view” suffers during their lives (24). As a condition of human existence, then, suffering must be accepted as inevitable. However, while the “thump” may come at any time to anyone, Ishmael has found a way to control his suffering: he goes to sea as “a simple sailor” because the officers “order [him] about” and “make him jump from spar to spar like a grasshopper” (23-24). For Ishmael, although such controlled “thumping” is “unpleasant,” he can anticipate it in a way quite impossible for an individual suffering sporadically at the hands of chaos (24).

Furthermore, setting sail enables the Isolato to escape loneliness by entering into a community of like-minded men: the sailors “were nearly all Islanders on the Pequod, *Isolatoes* too” (134). Indeed, nearly every man aboard the Pequod is quite literally Ishmael’s “mate.” Whereas Ishmael’s “splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against” the world when ashore, the close quarters and common goals among the crew of the Pequod enable Ishmael to minimize the severity of his alienation. In fact, the once bitter young man, when engaged in the time-consuming labor of liquefying congealed spermaceti with several of his shipmates, is overcome by “an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling” (417). Likewise, Queequeg’s kind demeanor has a “soothing” effect on Ishmael, whose inability to connect with most people ashore intensified his existential anxiety (69). Ultimately, however, Ishmael learns that he cannot escape from the ever-alienating meaninglessness of Melville’s world. Although he boards the Pequod in part to contain the suffering caused by the chaotic world around him and though Ishmael “clove to Queequeg like a barnacle” for protection,<sup>3</sup> the

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Queequeg *does* indeed play a role in Ishmael’s survival, albeit quite inadvertently; the former’s coffin serves as a life-preserving buoy for the latter, though even that can be interpreted as a random event.

destruction Ahab brings to the Pequod obliterates any sense of security the young man could have hoped to salvage. In the end, Ishmael becomes “another orphan,” rescued two days after the utter annihilation of his structured world by a ship searching for someone else (561). The harrowing image of Ishmael floating adrift for two days in the vast emptiness of the ocean only serves to emphasize what may be the darkest message in Melville’s book: we are all Isolatoes, floating on coffins in the “deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature” and saved or destroyed by blind chance (171).

## II. Transcendentalism: Seeking Meaning in Nature

In a lecture given by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1858, America’s first public intellectual figure spoke eloquently on the possibility that the immortal soul of Christianity—and, by extension, the meaning bestowed upon humanity by a Creator—may very well not exist:

You do not degrade man by saying, Spirit is only finer body; nor exalt him by saying Matter is phenomenal merely. . . . You will observe that it makes no difference herein whether you call yourself materialist or spiritualist. If there be but one substance or reality, and that is body, and it has the quality of creating the sublime astronomy, of converting itself into brain, and geometry, and reason; if it can reason in Newton, and sing in Homer and Shakespeare, and love and serve as saints and angels, then I have no objection to transfer to body all my wonder and allegiance. (*Lectures* 97-98)

In fact, if “all is made of one piece,” Emerson argues in “Fate,” then “plaintiff and defendant, friend and enemy, animal and plant, food and eater are of one kind” as well (*PE* 373). In other words, Emerson seems to suggest, such a worldview rejects the still-popular notion of a divinely-

created *scala naturae*. Significantly, rather than despair at the possibility of absurdity, Emerson chooses to apotheosize Nature by transferring “wonder and allegiance” from the unproven realm of religious speculation to the concrete corporeal realm of matter. Like Ahab, Emerson has located a tangible representation of an abstraction, though the latter has a much more positive response to the necessity of such embodiment. Whereas Ahab seethes with existential rage, Emerson inquires “[w]hy should we be afraid of Nature, which is no other than ‘philosophy and theology embodied’ . . . Why should we fear to be crushed by savage elements, we who are made up of the same elements?” (PE 374).

Of course, it should be noted, Emerson’s conceptions of philosophy and theology differ a great deal from those of his contemporaries. A philosopher, for Emerson does not rely too heavily upon the inherited philosophical tradition: “Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for a scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings” (PE 57). Indeed, “The American Scholar,” the address from which the above is taken, abounds with many such statements, revealing what Harold Fromm terms Emerson’s “derog[ation of] intellectuals’ reliance upon tradition. . . books, formalities, and secondhand ideas instead of on creative intelligence operating upon the actual world of nature” (73). “God,” however, in Emerson’s vocabulary is not equivalent to the Judeo-Christian God. Instead, “Emerson’s god,” as noted Emerson biographer Lawrence Buell observes, “is an immanent god, an indwelling property of human personhood and physical nature, not located in some otherworldly realm” (qtd. in Fromm 73). In other words, Emerson’s God is also Emerson’s Nature, as delineated in the essay of that name: both “all which is NOT ME<sup>4</sup>, that is both

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<sup>4</sup> This “not me” is adopted from Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, where it appears as a translation of the German term for everything other than the self. It should be noted that the self is strictly the internal self, either consciousness or a “soul.” It is perhaps even closer to the

nature and art, all other men and my own body” as well as “essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf” (*PE* 8). Given Emerson’s aforementioned later acknowledgement of the possibility of a purely material human existence (the “savage elements” we fear), Nature may be said to include even the “me” the author removes from the sphere of Nature in his famous treatise.

Thus, the Nature of the American Transcendentalists—despite the quasi-religious nature often bestowed upon it—may simply be another term for “existence,” that is, everything that is not the void. If God is to be equated with Nature, then, He cannot be the anthropomorphic God of the Judeo-Christian tradition because He would exist outside and independent of Creation, which is precisely what Nature is. This, of course, undermines faith in “the superintending providence of God in the natural world; and the unique and privileged position of the human race as the centre and *raison d’être* of the creation” (Burrow 15). Without a God to endow life with meaning, all institutions founded upon a universal “right” or “proper” mode of being are necessarily arbitrary. If humanity is meaningless, so are its laws, customs, and beliefs. However, where Darwinists might perceive “a bleak and soulless nature,” Emerson and the Transcendentalists found beauty and immense opportunity for the cultivation of the self (Burrow 13). One of the most impressive treatises to emerge out of the American Transcendentalist movement, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, elegantly documents the writer’s justifications for and satisfaction from developing a self-focused life lived in accordance with the laws of Nature.

In the eighteen years between Emerson’s self-funded publication of *Nature* in 1836 and Ticknor & Fields’s first printing of *Walden* in August 1854, the appeal of American Transcendentalism had gone from a surging intellectual wave to an ebbing spiritual tide. Still, as Carl Bode observes,

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“Not I” of Samuel Beckett, though perhaps without the anxiety associated with it.

Thoreau “read [Emerson’s text] with closest attention” throughout the duration of the movement’s prime (*PT* 258). While Thoreau did adopt a good many principles derived from Emerson’s non-theistic “new religion” of Nature-worship in which the “God” figure was “christened the Over-Soul<sup>5</sup>,” Thoreau created a work quite his own in *Walden* (Cowley xxiv). Given Emerson’s own later acknowledgement that his earlier conceptions of existence are not incompatible with the possibility that “there be but one substance or reality, and that is body, and it has the quality of creating the sublime astronomy, of converting itself into brain, and geometry, and reason,” Harold Fromm argues, thoughtful disciples of Emerson’s “new religion” likely came to some understanding of the world in which “the Oversoul is biochemistry is evolution is spirit is ethics is human nature” (94). In other words, Emersonians like Henry David Thoreau probably suspected, on some level, that all existence is the same material, given different appellations. Thus, *Walden* may be read as Thoreau’s affirmative—and decidedly subjective—approach to life in a world where everything that *is* is mere material set against the backdrop of its binary opposition, nothingness.

Calling *Walden* a “phenomenological manifesto,” Rupin W. Desai highlights Thoreau’s philosophical affinity with Edmund Husserl (31). Although Husserl’s “transcendental phenomenology” differs from Heideggerian “existential phenomenology,” it is important to note the former’s preoccupation *does* anticipate existential concerns with the human condition and the meaning (or meaninglessness) of human existence.<sup>6</sup> One may find it even

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<sup>5</sup> There are many, many interpretations of Emerson’s concept, though most commentators seem to agree on a general understanding of the term as the spiritual essence in which all souls are a part, thereby constituting an entity transcending individual consciousness.

<sup>6</sup> Despite Heidegger’s “existential” departure from Husserl’s phenomenology, the phrases “existential phenomenology” and “transcendental phenomenology” are somewhat misleading; Husserl is an acknowledged forerunner of both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and

more useful, however, to view Thoreau's phenomenology in a Sartrean context<sup>7</sup>. Inheriting a skepticism towards the hegemonic values embraced by a Judeo-Christian society from Emerson, Thoreau concerns himself with the sort of authentic existence Sartre promotes in his masterwork. Seeking to avoid the *mauvais foi* of living as one is not, Thoreau moves to Walden Pond in order to separate himself from the corrupting social expectations of a successful life and discover his subjectively authentic existence.

When Emerson discusses "the first defect of historical Christianity," he asserts that the faith of the Christian masses has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion" because "it is not the doctrine of the soul" Christianity teaches, but rather a "noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus" (*PE* 78-79). In other words, Emerson accuses organized religion of systematically distorting and obfuscating the noematic elements underlying faith in such a way as to mislead the individual's noetic response. The result, of course, is religious doctrine that leads believers away from truth (that which, in the case Emerson cites, Jesus represents and teaches) into idolatry (the worship of human Jesus). Likewise, Emerson attacks the orthodoxy of American intellectual life in "The American Scholar" by characterizing the scholar as conforming in thought to an ossified conception of the world. By blindly imbibing "accepted dogmas," the learned person "looks backward and not forward" (*PE* 56). The "genius," according to Emerson, "looks forward" in the direction of truth (*PE* 56). Given Emerson's assertions "that imitation is suicide" and "to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius" in "Self-Reliance," one may interpret Emerson's words as

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Hannah Arendt as well as Heidegger, who was himself a student of Husserl.

<sup>7</sup> Sartre's magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, subtitled "A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology," is widely considered to be the principal text of modern atheistic existentialism.

implying that individual consciousness is the only truth one can hope to attain, that life consists entirely of the subjective reality of self-directed inquiry and choice (*PE* 138). Furthermore, Emerson argues, “[n]othing can bring you peace but yourself,” articulating an anxiety that plagues the individual unable to realize “the triumph of principles” he or she has discovered to be his or her own individually-discovered subjective “truth” (*PE* 164).

Emerson’s ideas clearly influenced those of Thoreau when the latter decided to move to *Walden*. Echoing Emerson’s reason for self-reliance and rejecting the concept Jean-Paul Sartre would later term *mauvais foi*, Thoreau sets about establishing an existence founded upon the a firm belief in “being-for-myself” rather than “being-for-others” (Sartre 100). Identifying himself as “a sojourner in civilized life,” Thoreau immediately separates himself from society in the reader’s mind (258). By describing himself in terms of a traveler, Thoreau foregrounds the impermanence of his place in civilized Concord. He is, Thoreau tells us, a stranger among us, a person who is both here (in Concord) and not here. He is, in fact, a proud *Isolato*. Declaring that he has never met a person who “has lived sincerely,” Thoreau abandons the “fool’s life” of success as defined by the society in which he lives, to (259, 261):

live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I have not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary, I wanted to live deep. . .to put rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness out of it. (343-44)

Significantly, Thoreau identifies “what was not life” as a mode of living. Similar to Sartre’s “mode of *being what I am*

*not*,” an inauthentic existence lived as “*who I have to be*,” Thoreau recognizes the difference between internally authentic and socially-constructed lives (103, 102, emphasis in the original). For Sartre, the individual often feels an “obligation” to “dance the dance of a grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavor to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor...Society demands that he limit himself to his function” (102). Likewise, Thoreau sees “young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools,” individuals “condemned” by social expectations to be farmers and landowners (260). Furthermore, since “[a]ll men want, not something to *do with*, but something to *do*, or rather something to *be*”, Thoreau observes, most people seem predisposed towards this sort of inauthentic existence (278, emphasis Thoreau’s). As such, the condemned “have got to live a man’s life, pushing all these things before them” while their true existence is “smothered under its load” (260). In other words, the individual lives “a man’s life” rather than “his life.” As a result, such “men labor under a mistake...a seeming fate, commonly called necessity” and live in “blind obedience” to the “facetious cares and superfluously coarse labors” their vocationally “assigned” life demands (261). Similar to Ishmael’s rhetorical “who ain’t a slave?” in *Moby-Dick*, Thoreau’s comments belie an understanding of the human condition where virtually everyone succumbs to some external force or expectation (24). However, where Ishmael uses the notion to justify his decision to look to a life in whaling in order to receive his “thump,” Thoreau finds the possibility for freedom. In “Economy,” Thoreau laments the fact that modern life leaves the individual with “no time to be anything but a machine,” but provides a solution to the quandary: ignore the demands of society and focus on the demands of life (261). Just as Camus’s absurd man understands that “the mechanical aspect” of humanity is simply a “meaningless pantomime,” it would seem, Thoreau locates “man’s own inhumanity” in the social norms he rejects (15).

Thoreau recognizes that much of what humanity regards as necessary “are rather,” in Sartre’s words, “mere *presentations*” or gestures made by the individual for the benefit of others (105). Sartre continues, explaining that “it should be noted, as Husserl clearly understood, that my consciousness appears originally to the Other as an absence” (105). Thus, the individual’s actions or words form an impression of the individual in the Other’s consciousness that may very well be entirely different from that sense of self the individual perceives as true. In a sense, then, when Thoreau observes men “pushing all these things before them,” he recognizes that individuals often place social expectations in front of the self and, it may be inferred, allow their superfluous “duties” to define themselves for others. If, as Sartre claims, “[t]he Other’s consciousness is what it is not,” or “non-being.” (105, emphasis in the original). Bearing in mind Thoreau’s desire to not “to live what was not life,” we may interpret his deliberate move to Walden Pond as an affirmative existential decision to live life without the false presentations that would render him “a passive object among other objects” (Sartre 100).

Like Emerson before him and Sartre after, Thoreau understands that acceptance of “lives of quiet desperation” is “confirmed desperation” (263). Rather than accept the desperation of conforming to social norms, then, Thoreau heads to the woods to eradicate the need for such desperation. He acknowledges that “[n]o way of thinking or doing, however ancient can be trusted without proof” and that what “in silence passes as true today may turn out to be falsehood tomorrow” (264). In other words, the rules of the external world cannot be trusted; individual inquiry alone must provide the evidence upon which a belief is founded. Rejecting the “fable” of Christian law and refusing to wear the “golden or silver fetters” that bind men who accept “the life of civilized people [as] an *institution*,” Thoreau scoffs at the idea of expending “the better part of one’s life” to secure a glorified “box” in which to live (283, 271, 308, 284). Likewise, since “we are led oftener by the love of novelty and

a regard for the opinions of men in procuring [clothing], than by a true utility,” Thoreau asserts that there is “greater anxiety. . .to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience” (276-77). However, “[w]hen the soldier is hit by a cannonball,” Thoreau muses, “rags are as becoming as purple” (281). In other words, without a life to “retain the vital heat of,” clothing is utterly meaningless (276).

The “mainspring” of all such unnecessary trimmings, Thoreau argues, “is vanity” (312). As a result, Thoreau concludes, when seeking to establish a life, complete with a home and career, men and women “are needlessly poor all their lives because they think they must have such a one as their neighbors have” (290). Significantly, such people are not only poor in a pecuniary sense, but also in a spiritual sense: they “spend” their lives in such a way that the majority of their labor “goes toward its tomb only” (312). If all “such trifling” is meaningless, Thoreau seems to imply, all such effort spent to procure it is also meaningless (313). Just as the theoretical soldier’s clothing becomes meaningless upon his death, so too becomes the adornments with which we dress our lives. Life—especially individual life—is the only meaningful aspect of existence and Thoreau seeks to maximize it by shedding the “accumulated dross” of social obligations and vanity (270). Thus, with his “experiment of living,” Thoreau no longer plays the “expensive game” of life but “earnestly *live[s]* it from beginning to end by refusing to be the sort of slave Melville’s Ishmael imagines to be the only mode of existence (305). Referencing Charles Darwin and turning to Nature to determine precisely what would sustain the “*animal heat*” of his life, Thoreau proved that the “trifling cost” of a comfortable life of “leisure and independence and health” as well as “a comfortable house” in which to enjoy that life “as long as [he] chose to occupy it” could be had for a minimal amount of day labor (268, 269, 315). Thus, for the individual suffering under the stress of conforming to meaningless routine, Thoreau provides a Sartrean solution: “be what one is” rather than what one is expected to be (Sartre

215). Only then will the individual achieve Emerson's "triumph of principles," for "[n]othing can bring you peace but yourself" (*PE* 164).

### **III. Crane, London, and the "Abominable Injustice" of an Indifferent Nature**

When Emerson and Thoreau pulled the pasteboard mask off of Melville's "inscrutable thing," they uncovered Nature (175). The glasses through which they viewed Nature, however, colored their discovery perhaps unreasonably rosy. For Emerson, the apotheosized Nature "satisfies the soul purely by its loveliness" and "each moment of the year has its own beauty" (*PE* 14-15). In Thoreau's estimation, Nature is universally "benevolent":

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself? (389)

What Emerson and Thoreau do not realize is precisely what Starbuck wishes to convey to Ahab: Nature is neither a wicked foe nor a benevolent force. Nature, like existence, simply is. In the wake of Darwin's articulation of evolutionary theory, "the knowledge of whole species swept away to make room for others, often slightly different, had begun to strain belief in a benign creator even before *The Origin*, while the fact of such colossal waste made nature seem implacable rather than benevolent" (Burrow 22-23). In other words, Emerson and Thoreau could choose to love their

own role in the grand sweep of Nature and Ahab could seethe over every ounce of the world's oceans, but Nature would remain flatly indifferent to them all.

It is the indifference of the universe, of Nature that terrifies man most. Stephen Crane vividly depicts such situations in both "The Open Boat" and *The Red Badge of Courage*. In the former, a man identified only by his vocational position as "the correspondent" finds himself trapped on a small dinghy with three other men, unable to reach the sanctuary of shore. At one point, he wonders to himself, "[i]f I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate the sand and trees?" (138). In response to the correspondent's desperate question, the story's narrator shares his reflections on the situation:

During this dismal night, it may be remarked that a man would conclude that it really was the intention of the seven mad gods to drown him, despite the abominable injustice of it. For it was certainly an abominable injustice to drown a man who had worked so hard, so hard. The man felt it would be a crime most unnatural. Other people had drowned at sea since galleys swarmed with painted sails, but still— (139)

Significantly, the narrator mentions the "abominable injustice" of death for a man who has worked "so hard, so hard" but specifies that "[t]he man felt it would be a crime most unnatural." By switching from the omniscient to the subjective perspective, the narrator implies that it is the correspondent—not he—who views the "abominable" death as unnatural and suggests the very disturbing possibility that such a death *is* natural. When he acknowledges that others have perished in the same fashion he fears he soon will, the correspondent strains to find a reason why his death would be an unjust exception, trailing off with "but still—" The silence into which the correspondent's thoughts dissolve eloquently

expresses the horrible conclusion the man has arrived at. Tellingly, the narrator continues

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with jeers.

Then, if there be no tangible thing to hoot he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands supplicant, saying “Yes, but I love myself.” (139)

In other words, man *could* create a personification of the indifferent void enveloping his existence, but he would end up with a Moby-Dick or a deified Nature, but neither the harpoon of his anger nor the pleas of the supplicant would hit their mark because the mark is with bricks and the temple in their nonexistence. In the end, all that remains is the individual’s recurring mantra of “I love myself” pulsing echoless out of the void. For Thoreau and Emerson, this is enough. For the correspondent, it merely amplifies the terror of the “abominable injustice” of death.

In a similar vein, shortly after Henry Fleming flees a battle in panic in *The Red Badge of Courage*, he finds himself in a serene forest clearing. Fleming interprets the insects “making rhythmical noises” and the “lighthearted wing” of a bird as evidence of Nature’s benevolence:

Off was the rumble of death. It seemed that Nature had no ears.

This landscape gave him assurance. A fair field holding life. It was the religion of peace. It would die if its timid eyes were compelled to see blood. He conceived Nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy (42)

The silence broken only by the drone of the insects soothes Fleming, who views the quiet Edenic spot as proof that “the rumble of death” is an unnatural, human construction. Such life-holding beauty, Fleming imagines, would reject the tragedy of death with the same vehemence with which water refuses to mingle with oil. Not long after Henry comes to this conclusion, he is “horror-stricken” by the sight of

a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changes to the dull hue of yellow to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip.

The youth gave a shriek as he confronted the thing. (43)

The horror Henry experiences may well be the same feeling that overwhelms the correspondent. Nature was not benevolent at all; her indifference to war and human suffering are cast into stark relief by the ants crawling about the dead man’s face. Recognizing that the man—without the warmth of life—is a “thing,” Henry flees the scene to return to the war-torn world he had abandoned, leaving a “sad silence” where he had so recently seen beauty. Like the bird who pleasantly chirps *Poo-tee-weet* among the smoldering rubble of Dresden in the wake of the massive Allied firebombing in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the crawling ants confirm the terrible reality of the correspondent’s understanding that life goes on, flowing around “abominable injustice” as a river slides over a rock.

Like Stephen Crane, Jack London conceives of nature as “cold, austere, and inviolable; man, puny and insignificant” (Labor 31). Like Emerson and Thoreau, London turns to Nature for a solution to the White Silence of the Northland,

but in quite a different way. In *The Call of the Wild*, Buck lives among the “long grape arbors, green pastures, orchards, and berry patches” that constitute the “great demesne” of Judge Miller’s home “in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley” (4). Like Ahab, Buck experiences a violent revelation of the “primitive hostility of the world” when he is kidnapped and beaten into submission:

Straight at the man he launched his one hundred and forty pounds of fury, surcharged with the pent passion of two days and nights. In midair, just as his jaws were about to close on the man, he received a shock that checked his body and brought his teeth together...A dozen times he charged, and as often the club broke the charge and smashed him down. (6-7)

This moment represents Buck’s existential “awakening,” the moment Camus claims the absurd being begins “to distinguish between what is true from what is false” (16). Just as Emerson and Thoreau came to understand that the social conventions people believe to be universal are, in fact, quite subjective, the club teaches Buck that the comfortable existence he had enjoyed in the Santa Clara Valley was simply a mode of existence guided by socially-constructed principles built atop a more “natural” truth:

He was beaten (he knew that); but he was not broken. He saw, once and for all, that he stood no chance against a man with a club. He had learned the lesson, and in all his after life he never forgot it. The club was a revelation. It was his introduction to the reign of primitive law, and he met the introduction halfway. The facts of life took on a fiercer aspect; and while he faced that aspect uncowed, he faced it with all the latent cunning of his nature aroused. (8)

In other words, having been “suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of all things primordial,” Buck encounters “the law of club and fang” (10).

Significantly, while Buck accepts the “universal thump” the club embodies, he would not be “broken” by it. In other words, like Camus’s Sisyphus, Buck accepts his fate while refusing to let it define him. In the Northland, Buck learns, there “was neither peace, nor rest, nor a moment’s safety. . .no fair play. Once down, that was the end of you” (11). Set against a vast icy backdrop of the endless “white plain” and “uncharted vastness” of the Yukon, Buck’s new environs seem to be “the heartless void” Ishmael envisions the color white to embody in *Moby-Dick* (Melville 206, London 67). In fact, Earle Labor describes London’s Yukon as “a place of frightening purity and implicity; although a place of moral and spiritual purgation, it provides neither warmth nor security. It is a region to escape FROM—not TO. Nature here is inimical to life. Man may find a certain serenity in the arctic wastes, but it is the blank serenity of death” (33). In this blank environment, Buck must realize that nature is flatly “indifferent’ in that [it] neither helps nor actively hinders man in this creature’s petty enterprises, nor do these enterprises appreciably alter the wilderness.” (Labor 32).

Stemming from “the underlying assumption of the purposelessness of the physical world,” the “law of the club and fang” is a decidedly Darwinistic principle (Burrow 43). The law of the club and fang teaches Buck that morality is “a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence” (17). Whereas Buck would not steal food in the Santa Clara Valley, the law of the club and fang dictates that “the clamor of his stomach” should outweigh any moral conviction (17). Likewise, Buck learns, “[h]e must master or be mastered. . .Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten” in a world devoid of morality (56). In stark contrast to Emerson and Thoreau who also espouse the belief that an authentic existence consists of life lived in accordance with one’s internal nature, Buck’s nature dictates that he adopt a bloody atavism in order to achieve a sense of satisfaction. As the “stirring of old instincts” come to Buck “out of the depths of Time,” the dog gains a new strength and understanding of the world as “the memories of his ancestors become habits” (28,

56, 36). Finding himself drawn to predatory behavior, Buck attains a happiness hitherto unknown to him:

There is an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and beyond which life cannot rise. And such is the paradox of living, this ecstasy comes when one is most alive, and it comes as a complete forgetfulness that one is alive. This ecstasy, this forgetfulness of living, comes to the artist, caught up and out of himself in a sheet of flame; it comes to the soldier, war-mad on a stricken field and refusing quarter; and it came to Buck, leading the pack, sounding the old wolf cry, straining after the food that was alive and that fled swiftly before him through the moonlight. He was sounding the deeps of his nature, and of the parts of his nature that were deeper than he, going back into the womb of Time. He was mastered by the sheer surging of life, the tidal wave of being, the perfect joy of each separate muscle, joint, and sinew in that it was everything that was not death, that it was aglow and rampant, expressing itself in movement, flying exultantly under the stars and over the face of dead matter that did not move. (29)

Clearly, Buck finds a reason to live in adhering to his nature. Importantly, the purity of Buck's existence occurs when he has shed all vestiges of civilization to revel in unadulterated instinct. Echoing Thoreau's decision to live life according to his own nature as opposed to "what was not life," London describes instinctual living as "everything that was not death." Furthermore, the "parts of [Buck's] nature that were deeper than he, going back into the womb of Time" bear a striking resemblance to Emerson's Over-Soul. In other words, London seems to suggest, living in accordance to one's instincts is akin to the Transcendentalists' preoccupation with authentic self-reliant existence. Indeed, in the "uncharted vastness" of the Northland, "where no men

were” and where “there was no sign of life,” the individual has no choice but to live according to his or her own nature (67). London’s Northland is quite literally devoid of life, save for the same “dumb brutes” threatening to dismast the Ahabs of Melville’s universe and the snowflakes promising to settle on a corpse with the same indifference with which the ants crawl about the face of Crane’s dead soldier. Buck’s instinct, then, serves the function of Emerson’s Over-Soul in a world where Nature is divested of the benevolent shroud bestowed upon her by the Transcendentalists. If the forces of Nature blindly strike life into nonexistence, following instinct enables the individual to live by becoming one with that force. Buck will eat, rather than be eaten; he will kill, rather than be killed, and in so doing, he keeps a step ahead of the ever-approaching void.

#### **IV. *The Sun Also Rises*: Hemingway’s Hard-Boiled Solution**

Martin Heidegger asserts that *das Sein zum Tode*, or “the Being towards death” unites the concepts of being and time. The human being, in Heidegger’s estimation, is the only living entity capable of anticipating its own death. The consciousness of one’s temporality, if acknowledged by the individual, effectively renders everyday existence (*die Alltäglichkeit*) meaningless and secures “correct access” to the authentic nature of oneself (Heidegger 57). In other words, the confrontation with mortality frees the authentic individual from the illusory blinders of life and allows him or her to truly comprehend the essence of existence. As such, “it is necessary to continue to experience death and violence” to reap the benefits of authentic self-knowledge for the duration of a lifetime (Killinger 25). As Camus explains, keeping the reality of mortality perpetually in sight, is:

...keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is above all contemplating it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical

positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. (54)

In other words, Camus's "revolt" is the joyous affirmation of life despite the menacing encroachment of the void. As such, every moment a person chooses to live, he or she rebels against the absurd. One manifestation of such revolt, then, is the act of bringing oneself to the brink of annihilation only to defy the void at the last moment. Not surprisingly, death is a major theme throughout Hemingway's writing.

As Thomas Cash Jr. notes, in all of modern literature:

...it would be difficult to find an author who has written of death as often and as consistently as Hemingway. At one time or another he has described the death of ants, salamanders, grasshoppers, and fish; how hyenas die, how to kill *kudu*, the proper way to execute horses, how bulls are slain, how soldiers die, death in Italy, in Cuba, in Africa and in Spain, death in childbirth and death by suicide, death alone and death in a group; selfish death, sacrificing death, and graceful death. (qtd. in Killinger 18)

Clearly, death appears with disarming frequency in much of Ernest Hemingway's work, but it is the life-affirming confrontation with death critics such as Cash overlook. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway voices an affinity for the Castilian people, describing a worldview very similar to that of Heidegger's:

...life is something that comes before death. Some one with English blood has written: "Life is real; life is earnest, and the grave is not its goal." And where did they bury him? And what became of the reality and earnestness? The people of Castille have great common sense. They could not produce a poet

who would write a line like that. They know death is the unescapable reality; that it transcends all modern comforts and that with it you don't need a bathtub in every American home, nor, when you have it, do you need a radio. They think a great deal about death and...they take an intelligent interest in death and when they see it being given, avoided, refused and accepted in the afternoon for a nominal price of admission they pay their money and go to the bull ring... (266)

This brief passage from Hemingway's treatise on bullfighting demonstrates the emphasis on death Cash concerns himself with, but also reveals a more specific interest in the attitudes one holds towards death similar to those of Martin Heidegger. Hemingway explains that when he was struggling to find a "true" way to write fiction, he sought the death of the bullring:

The only place where you could see life and death, *i.e.*, violent death now that the wars were over, was in the bull ring and I wanted very much to go to Spain where I could study it. I was trying to learn to write, commencing with the simplest things, and one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental is violent death. (2)

In fact, as Hemingway continues, he chose to sit in the *barrera* to "see danger and learn to appreciate it" (2). The fact that Hemingway uses the "fundamental" truths exposed by bullfighting to inspire his writing proves enlightening. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, Hemingway explains that "nothing makes you feel better" than writing (*Letters* 474). Seven years later, in a letter to Malcolm Cowley, Hemingway elaborates on this sentiment, writing, "Do you suffer when you write? I don't at all. Suffer like a bastard when [I] don't write, or just before, and feel empty and fucked afterwards. But never feel as good as while writing...it is more fun than anything else"

(*Letters* 604-05). Such opinions are not limited to Hemingway's non-fiction writing, either. In "On Writing," the excised stream-of-consciousness ending to "Big Two-Hearted River," printed in *The Nick Adams Stories*, Nick explains that writing "was really more fun than anything. That was really why you did it...It was simply the greatest pleasure...He felt almost holy about it" (*NAS* 238-39). As the greatest feeling in life occurs during the act of writing, Hemingway's pursuit of death as the motivation for his craft corresponds with the concept that encountering death affirms the value of life.

A closer examination of the bullfight motif reveals the reasons for such exhilaration. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway explains the popularity of Belmonte:

Belmonte's great attraction is working close to the bull. In bull-fighting they speak of the terrain of the bull and the terrain of the bull-fighter. As long as a bull-fighter stays in his own terrain he is comparatively safe. Each time he enters into the terrain of the bull he is in great danger. Belmonte, in his best days, worked always in the terrain of the bull. This way he gave the sensation of coming tragedy. People went to the corrida to see Belmonte, to be given tragic sensation, and perhaps to see the death of Belmonte. (217-18)

Earlier, Jake praises Pedro Romero for a similar approach to bullfighting. Pedro's technique involves "holding the purity of line through the maximum of exposure," a stance which allows the bull to charge directly at the matador (172). When Brett asks Pedro why he kills bulls in such a fashion, the matador replies, "So they don't kill me" (190). In other words, Pedro risks his life every afternoon to reassert control over his life. He kills the bulls to survive and endangers himself to heighten the sensation. The true aficionado, as Jake and Montoya explain, attends bullfights specifically to experience the life-and-death tragedy between skilled matador and angry beast. Importantly, the cathartic emotions of the bullfight evolve into the *joie de vivre* of Barcelona's week-long fiesta.

The fiesta, in other words, represents the large-scale reaffirmation of life and illustrates one of Hemingway's solutions to the despondency of nihilism.

## **V. Concluding Remarks**

In the approximately eighty years between the publication of Thoreau's *Nature* and the appearance of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, American writers have addressed and revisited the potential meaninglessness of existence. The fact that so many approaches to this existential anxiety over meaning have yielded so many responses suggests that the problem is an insoluble one. True, there are solutions, but no solution. Reason cannot bring us to that elusive truth and so we are left Isolatoes, condemned to find our own meaning. We can fight nature or we can embrace Nature; we can kill or be killed, we can set sail for distant shores, but we must always be prepared to find ourselves adrift, clinging to the same fragile buoy Stephen Crane's correspondent finds himself floating atop. It's entirely up to us to find a way to shore, swimming with or against the tide, reaching safety or, like Ahab, crashing into the rocks.

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# Listening in the Dark: The Inadequacy of Language to Express the Real in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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...Friday raised his face to the stars, closed his eyes, and, obedient to his master, began to hum in a low voice. I listened but could make out no tune. Crusoe tapped my knee. 'The voice of man,' he said. I failed to understand his meaning; but he raised a finger to his lips to still me. In the dark we listened to Friday's humming.

-J.M. Coetzee, *Foe*

As a novel that is constructed as narrative layered on narrative, *Foe* relies heavily on language to create levels of meaning. Simultaneously, it questions the validity of language as a tool to truly express and understand experiential concepts. Although language allows the novel's characters to communicate with one another, not all of these characters demonstrate the same level of understanding of or interest in signifiers. Also, Friday and Susan Barton are both entrapped by language. Susan, who demonstrates her limited power throughout the novel, also shows a skewed comprehension of how language should be and is used. Because *Foe* never validates any one type of use of language, and because it shows the ability of signifiers and labels to enslave people, the novel suggests that "the voice of man" is more significant than what man says. Those who rely heavily on speech and on writing cannot understand Friday's history, his thought processes,

or his wishes or desires, but this non-linguistic character expresses no dismay at his seeming inability to communicate his ideas to others. Because Friday remains speechless, perhaps by choice, Susan, the slave of discourse, is relegated to a life in which she makes fruitless efforts to communicate with him; he remains, to her, incomprehensible, and she, over-reliant on words, can do nothing but wonder “in the dark.”

Susan Barton identifies Friday as having no grasp of language, and she also thinks the same of herself. Although the book is composed mostly of Susan’s own words, they are written at the behest of another. Feeling incapable of writing her own story, she enlists the help of Foe to do so. Additionally, Susan initially had had no intention of setting the story in writing at all. This whole enterprise has been suggested to her by Captain Smith, who also has taken the liberty of renaming Susan Barton as Mrs. Cruso. The new name is symbolic of the focus of Susan’s life when she returns to England. Although she had hoped, upon her return to her homeland, to be free of the vestiges of island life, Susan becomes engrossed in the preservation of the story of the island and of its occupants, the obscure yet dominating Cruso and the mute and mysterious Friday. Susan’s narrative is a history of male domination. The worlds in which she finds herself are already controlled by men by the time she enters them, and Susan is subjected to a type of Lacanian “master’s discourse” (Fink 131) into which she tries to initiate herself by adopting the linguistic behaviors that are expected of her. Cruso stifles Susan’s use of language, Captain Smith changes her self-perception by labeling Susan as the wife of the man with whose story she is pregnant, and Foe both decides what story Susan will tell and molds the way in which she tells it. Always existing in situations in which she perceives herself to be the novice, Susan models her own identity after others’ expectations of her, changing her own identity to match the

verbal expressions of others' ideas of what she should be. In a show of her ultimate acceptance of the symbolic authority to which she succumbs, Susan attempts to indoctrinate Friday into the symbolic mode via verbal communication. Her efforts to teach Friday are not rewarded, as he will not communicate with her on her level.

Although the novel works as a system of narratives within narratives, Crusoe, according to Susan, invites her to question the validity of language labels: ““I ask you to remember, not every man who bears the mark of the castaway is a castaway at heart”” (33). The reader (and perhaps Susan) is left to wonder who imposes the mark of castaway, and whether it is ever sensible to apply a linguistic label to something that cannot properly be described by words. However, having entered the world of discourse and the symbolic order, one is, according to Kaja Silverman, “reduced to the status of a signifier in the field of the other” (166). Using a system of signifiers, and beginning use of this system after it has already been developed by others, requires the participant to accept the rules and the judgment that those more well-versed in the system impose upon him.

Nevertheless, Susan confronts the very problem of linguistic meaning, undertaking to narrate her own story to a writer. Paul Williams suggests: “Inside the dome of the narrative, Susan looks out and sees the letters M.J. on a trunk, which are, perhaps, the inverted initials of another author's name illustrating that authors Foe and Coetzee stand outside this narrative” (36-37). Like these “outside” writers, Susan also tries to remain outside the narrative. She envisions the story as that of Crusoe and Friday—she is merely the observer and the recorder. However, because the story will be ultimately written by another, she loses control over the narrative and becomes a character. Although she thinks of herself as an informant to Foe about the lifestyle of Crusoe and Friday on the island, she

becomes, to Foe, the central figure in the narrative. Still, in her obsession to render the story to Foe, she feels entrapped within the narrative. Feeling that she is no longer properly Susan Barton, she asks: ““What life do I live but that of Cruso’s widow?”” (99). Having been renamed Mrs. Cruso, Susan has adopted this persona; her only story worth telling, in her estimation, is that of her “husband,” and she is left to care for their “child” Friday and to be the custodian of the story. She conceives of her mission as executing the will of Cruso: “...it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island” (45). However, from Susan’s description of Cruso, it seems as though he was not actually concerned about the “story” of his experience on the island. Having made no effort to record his experiences, and bearing an aversion to communication except when necessary, what Cruso actually left behind is an experience of life on the island, a life that was not dependent upon words. In order to render the story, Susan must translate experience into words; this was not apparently Cruso’s intention. In order to fit in with the expectations that Captain Smith and Foe have of her as Mrs. Cruso and as a story-bearer, she must translate an experiential phenomenon into a linguistic one, undoubtedly losing something significant in the translation.

A woman who has been “rescued” from a tropical location by a boatload of white men and transported across the Atlantic Ocean, understandably identifies with enslaved people. Although she wished to be brought back to England from the island, Susan wished to be brought back to England as herself and to resume her former life. However, after her passage across the ocean, it becomes clear that Susan will now lead a life in which she is relegated to an entirely new life, and that she is chained to her name and the accompanying story. Talking to Friday after their return to England, she muses: “““Sometimes I believe it is I who have become the slave””” (87). Susan

has become not only the slave to Friday and to caring for him but also to communicating the story that she is compelled to tell. Having Friday with her is a constant reminder of her time on the island; her sense of responsibility to him, which reminds her of the story, prevents her from pursuing her freedom. In a letter addressed to Foe, Susan writes: ““Here I wait for you to appear, or for the book to be written that will set me free of Cruso and Friday”” (66). The story has power over Susan, holding her captive. Friday also wields power over her, and his power is greater than that of the story; the story is a linguistic construction, which Susan creates according to what she perceives to be the specifications of others, while Friday is a real reminder of her time on the island and of an incomprehensible way of life.

Susan’s relationship with Friday is complicated, or possibly rendered nonexistent, by their lack of communication with each other. She longs to communicate, but Friday does not reciprocate. The moments during which she thinks that he approaches communication are those during which she is happiest. Although she attempts communication through speech, music, and writing, Susan is never successful. Although it may seem that Friday is incapable of communicating because of a deficiency, it is at least equally likely that he declines to communicate by choice. As readers of her story, which is filtered through Coetzee, our perceptions of Friday are always colored by Susan’s descriptions of him. Like Susan, we rely on language for understanding. Like the reader, dependent upon words, Susan is dependent upon the whole system of language in order to gain some sort of legitimacy in England, so that her story can be understood by others. Therefore, Susan and the readers may view someone who does not speak as deficient. However, because he does not speak, Friday has a certain type of power; he has secrets about his past and does not

communicate his experience. His silence leaves not only Susan but also the reader wondering about him. Because so much of her story hinges on Friday, and because her story would be incredible to anyone who did not at least see the presence of Friday, Friday, although and because he ignores Susan's efforts at communication, maintains power over her. In order to write the story that she thinks needs to be written, she must ascertain information from Friday; additionally, in order to fulfill her need for companionship, she must be able to converse with Friday. By denying her this necessary communication, he shows the impotence of her efforts. Aleid Fokkema describes Susan's language as "powerless" to communicate with Friday (175); such a reading implies that although it seems that Susan, the practical one who attends to the pair's physical needs for sustenance, is in control, Friday's lack of communication manipulates her and affects and controls her thoughts.

While Friday limits Susan's story by refusing to contribute to it, Foe limits it by imposing his own shape upon it. As Foe sees it, Susan's story has "five parts" (117). By imposing linguistic control on the actual events of island life, Foe restructures, into the form of a story, Susan's perception of her own life. Also, by presuming to instruct Susan as to which parts of her life to translate into language, Foe implements control over Susan's self-perception. At first, in her fervor to tell the story of the castaway Cruso, Susan tells Foe, who wants to hear of Susan's earlier life: "'Bahia is not part of my story...but let me tell you whatever I can'" (114). Throughout most of the book, Susan believes that her story is Cruso's story. She is the sole living person who can (or will) tell the story, the telling of which is the only way that, Susan thinks, Cruso and Friday will not have lived and died in ignominy. In adopting this story as her own and only story, Susan neglects herself; she is incredulous that anyone would want to hear a story that concerns her and her quest, and that it is

possible to see the Cruso and Friday plot as only a small part of Susan's story. Because she is limited by language and allows those who use language to have power over her, Susan submits to the power of language, over which she has no control. Trying to use language as a tool to communicate with Friday and to purge herself of the story of Cruso, Susan succeeds only in allowing her self-perception to be influenced by the language-master Foe.

As a novice storyteller, Susan subjects herself to those who actually control the implications of linguistic communication. Fokkema writes: "The paradox of being a subject constituted in language is, in Barton's case, that her desire to exist in language and take possession of her own personal history leads to a loss of a sense of self, and ultimately, in the world outside this particular text, to her complete suppression" (174). Foe, whose task it is to write stories that an audience will want to read, recognizes that Susan's story is more compelling than Cruso's story, and "...Foe insists that the story be about Susan. She is Desire, the ingredient or catalyst needed to make the island story live" (Williams 35). Perhaps Susan puts aside her own story so that she will not remember that her original goal of finding her daughter was unachieved. By focusing only on the island story, Susan, the only "castaway" who wanted to return to England, can be figured as a successful heroine because she does actually return to England. Her desire, throughout her travels, shifts from finding her daughter to simply returning home alive. When she does return home, she knows that she will not locate her daughter and that her goal of returning home has already been met. She must have something that drives her: perhaps this is why she chooses the goal of telling the story of Cruso. This, however, is her first linguistic goal; her other goals were purely experiential and rather primal. After her seclusion from human society, Susan has decided that she must be accepted into a system of communication in which she

cannot be isolated. In order to do this, however, she must submit to the control of the system and to that of its representatives. Early in the novel, Susan muses: “When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. Is that the fate of all storytellers?” (51). Her own story here is ignored; she thinks that her story is that of Cruso, in which she sees herself as a mere observer. By the end of the book, Susan finally admits: “But my life did not begin in the waves. There was a life before the water which stretched back to my desolate searchings in Brazil, thence to the years when my daughter was still with me, and so on back to the day I was born. All of which makes up a story I do not choose to tell...I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire” (131). Susan, here, asserts her own personhood and acknowledges the validity of her existence as a separate entity. Additionally, she indicates that she no longer feels enslaved to the story that she previously felt compelled to tell. She is free from the power of Cruso’s story once she remembers that she also has her own story, which stretches back to the day that she was born, before she was capable of linguistic expression—this admission allows Susan’s story to be experiential, rather than linguistic.

Susan herself expresses doubt about the ability of language to express true meaning. In one of her unread letters to Foe, she muses: “Does it surprise you as much as it does me, this correspondence between things as they are and the pictures we have of them in our minds?” (65). The mental “pictures” of things are often not simply pictures, but are images with verbal associations. Even an imagined image is a signifier for the thing that actually exists outside the mind. Being creatures who rely on signifiers to understand concepts, speakers and listeners are subject to

the shortcomings of language. Silverman points out that one of these limitations is that “language isolates the subject from the real, confining it forever to the realm of signification” (166). Susan, then, in adopting language as her *modus operandi*, shuts out the possibility of understanding concepts that are too vast to be expressed in words.

Throughout the novel, the parallels between the behavior of Susan and Friday suggest, as does the dream sequence at the end of the book, that verbal communication is neither the only nor the most effective mode of experience. Susan’s behavior on the island, where she feels quite out of place and miserable, is not unlike the behavior of Friday that she describes later: “sometimes I would find myself sitting on the bare earth with my hands over my eyes, rocking back and forth and moaning to myself, and would not know how I had got there. When Friday set food before me I took it with dirty fingers and bolted it like a dog. I squatted in the garden, heedless of who saw me” (35). In this passage, Friday is figured as superior to Susan, who describes herself in bestial terms. On the island, Susan abandons language and regresses to a lower state of being. Later in the novel, when Friday, in a foreign land, performs actions that show his disconnection with the world, these actions (dancing in a circle and playing the flute) show a connection with something else. Friday never eats ravenously or behaves like an animal. Also, when she is on the island, Susan “made a cap with flaps to tie over [her] ears; [she] wore this and sometimes closed [her] ears with plugs too, to shut out the sound of the wind. So [she] became deaf, as Friday was mute; what difference did it make on an island where no one spoke?” (35). This attitude could be similar to that of Friday, and by bringing Friday into this description of her state, Susan invites the reader to imagine how Friday fits into the linguistic landscape. To Friday, who seems to ignore language, any

human language sounds like little more than “wind” and he could be equally dismayed by language’s constant interruption of his thoughts. When, out of desperation, Susan performs Friday’s “dance,” she experiences a realization that ““there is after all design in our lives, and if we wait long enough we are bound to see that design unfolding”” (103). This is Susan at her least nihilistic. By performing an action instead of being tied to words, Susan is free to grasp concepts that supersede words. Her experience of this realization allows for the possibility that Friday also dances in such a fashion to rise above earthly concerns; perhaps he chooses to avoid language so that his access to the real will not be interrupted by inadequate symbols. Barbara Hall suggests that Susan’s and Friday’s identification with each other through dancing does not “imply mutual understanding. Instead, it may be a loss of identity following the convergence of two individuals into one” (18). While it is not necessarily the case that Friday and Susan become one, it is reasonable to assert that they have a common experience, even if they do not experience it together. Therefore, they can achieve an understanding of each other’s experience of the same phenomenon—and this only possible communication between the two characters occurs without the use of language, but in a revelatory and almost mystical experience.

Although Friday does not use language much, he can understand some signifiers. He can act upon certain linguistic commands that Crusoe has taught him, but he does not use any form of language to communicate his own thoughts to others. He understands his “master” and the discourse of his master, but he does not attempt to imitate Crusoe’s mode of communication. Were Friday attempting to fit in with his master, he would initiate himself into the system of discourse, communicating with others using some sort of symbols and signs. His understanding of communication and his failure to attempt to use it,

however, suggests that Friday's concerns are beyond linguistic expression. Hall explains the type of language deficiency that she believes Friday to exhibit:

Roman Jackson claims that such an incapacity to understand is caused by a defect in categorizing facts to form knowledge. This defect he calls aphasia, characterized by an incapacity to manipulate language through the activity of substitution and a tendency to rely on metonym. The aphasic cannot use words unless the objects to which the words refer are immediately present. 'Language thus loses its central characteristics of detachability from context...' Jackson suggests that this disorder is "properly a loss of metalanguage." (18-19)

Hall also asserts:

...the only words Friday can understand seem to signal that his means of communication are limited as an animal's. William D. Gairdner writes: "Animal 'language' is communication, but it is not language; nor is it reflective. Animals can encode, transmit, and decode signs or signals that have unambiguous meanings. But they cannot deal with symbols which do have ambiguous meanings nor can they create meter-language and no animals have ever created a grammar." (18)

Although these observations about Friday's language use are accurate, they do not consider that Friday's mindset might be post-linguistic; perhaps Friday can create meaning or has access to a real meaning that makes the triflings of grammar and vocabulary seem to be of miniscule importance. Susan, totally committed to linguistic enterprise, senses the power that Friday, through his unwillingness to use language wields over her. She writes: "bitterly I began to recognize that it might not be mere dullness that kept him shut up in himself, nor the accident

of the loss of his tongue, nor even an incapacity to distinguish speech from babbling, but a disdain for intercourse with me” (98). Susan acknowledges that Friday might understand words and their meanings and that he might be reluctant to speak with her, not because he has a physical impediment but instead because he has no desire to communicate with her. This causes despair for Susan, who sees caring for Friday as her duty.

In addition to allowing that Friday could have some sort of linguistic power if he wanted to, Susan notes that it appears to her that there are dimensions of Friday’s character that are linked to transcendent experiences, in which language is too insignificant to have a part. Susan cites: “This casting of petals [as] the first sign [she] had that a spirit or soul—call it what you will—stirred beneath that dull and unpleasing exterior” (31). Friday’s ritualized spreading of petals over the water in a cove of the island suggests that Friday has a concept of abstract meaning. There is no indication that he believes that sprinkling the petals over the water will produce a concrete result; he seems to do this for its symbolic value, perhaps in memory of a person or event. Additionally, Susan’s observation of Friday’s dancing in England brings her to the realization that he may think abstractly. She recounts: “I shiver as I watch Friday dancing in the kitchen, with his robes whirling about him and the wig flapping on his head, and his eyes shut and his thoughts far away, not on the island, you may be sure, not on the pleasures of digging and carrying, but on the time, before, when he was a savage among savages” (94-95). Here, Susan recognizes that an action that Friday takes in the present can remind him of something that happened in the past. Therefore, he is able to think abstractly and to remember events and their resulting effects on him. While Susan might be mistaken about what Friday thinks when he dances, for perhaps he experiences realizations of joy as she later does when she

dances in this fashion, she is certain that his “thoughts [are] far away”—that he is thinking about something outside himself and not directly related to his current experience. In his transcendent experiences, Friday, supposed to be enslaved by his inability to communicate, provides a contrast with Susan, who is truly a slave to language and to the symbolic order.

Susan’s attempts to induct Friday with her into the world of symbolic meaning is of no avail because Susan, unlike Friday, is incapable of understanding that there are things greater than linguistic communication. As Patricia Greenblatt suggests, Friday’s existence, although it does not involve language, is not necessarily any less significant than the lives of those who do speak (44). However, when rescued by the crew of the *John Hobart*, Susan pleads the case of Friday as a person who has not yet attained the goal of leading a linguistic life:

“He is a Negro slave, his name is Friday, and he is fled among the crags above the north shore. Nothing you say will persuade him to yield himself up, for he has no understanding of words or power of speech. It will cost you great effort to take him. Nevertheless, I beseech you to send your men ashore again; inasmuch as Friday is a slave and a child, it is our duty to care for him in all things, and not to abandon him to a solitude worse than death.”  
(39)

In this passage, there are two seeming contradictions regarding Susan’s understanding of Friday’s linguistic ability. First, she introduces his existence to the men by telling them his name, which to a person who does not use language should be insignificant. If Friday truly does not understand language, his name is meaningless to him, and inasmuch as he is not to be communicated with, his proper name is also not of much use to those who would deal with him. Second, while Susan admits the “power of speech,”

she also says that language has no sway over Friday. If he is able to resist speech, he must have a source of power that is greater than it. Third, Susan wishes to avoid leaving Friday in solitude. However, even after he returns to England with Susan and the ship's crew, he remains in solitude, in a sense, because he does not communicate with those around him. What to Susan may be "a solitude worse than death" may be no punishment at all for Friday, since he seems to be happiest when he is alone and absorbed in thoughts outside himself. Hall believes that much of the importance of language lies in the fact that it is "the bridge between self and world, inner and outer lives, and consciousness and nature" (19). For Friday, though, these connections that language can create seem to be either unimportant or achieved via methods other than language. Although Friday does not communicate with other persons about his ideas, he does seem to commune with a deep part of himself or with someone or something larger than himself and than those around him. For the type of communication that Friday practices, language is unnecessary.

Because of her efforts to earn a place in the world of language, Susan blocks herself from learning the truth that she really wants to know: Friday's non-linguistic story. She would be unable, without words, to understand the events that have taken place in Friday's life, but ascending to Friday's spiritual level would allow Susan to have a sense of his mindset and to gain enlightenment. However, as Williams points out: "She is locked in a world of books trying to find her way into a real world of the 'other', of the slave Friday and his past history" (34). For Susan, it is more difficult to access Friday's world than it is to access the world of books and language. Susan's description of and commentary on Friday's humming provides the reader with an awareness of Susan's own limitations:

“Friday raised his face to the stars, closed his eyes, and, obedient to his master, began to hum in a low voice. I listened but could make out no tune. Cruso tapped my knee. “The voice of man,” he said. I failed to understand his meaning; but he raised a finger to his lips to still me. In the dark we listened to Friday’s humming. At last Friday paused. ‘Is Friday an imbecile incapable of speech?’ I asked. ‘Is that what you mean to tell me?’ (For, I repeat, I found Friday in all matters a dull fellow.)” (22)

Susan never does demonstrate an understanding of Cruso’s meaning in calling Friday’s humming “the voice of man.” It is the voice of man, uninhibited by convention of pattern of music or language. The primordial voice of man is also wordless—the addition of words is a later invention. Edward Spurr writes: ““No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached”” (qtd. in Hall 19). Friday’s lack of attaching labels to the abstract concepts about which he is humming, then, is perhaps an indication of a more universal understanding that does not limit itself to a specific cultural definition of concepts. Perhaps Cruso understands what Friday really means by his humming; Susan clearly does not. She is searching for a meaning that can be found in words or in her conventional ideas of music; Friday’s music is more primal, but in being primal, is archetypal and universal, hitting on truths that the perceptive ear should recognize as “the voice of man.” Friday’s nighttime serenade left Susan and (so she thinks) Cruso “in the dark” both literally and figuratively. If she could not understand the meaning of Friday’s humming, Susan was missing out on the enlightenment being offered her. At a moment in the novel that even in Susan’s description seems so profound, she breaks up the meaning

that is beginning to be created by asking questions, significantly questions about language. Using language to interrupt a real experience, Susan further illustrates her ignorance by providing the reader, at that moment, with a commentary about Friday's dullness. It seems that Susan is merely not paying attention to what is going on around her; already, before her rescue and her attempts at becoming a storyteller, she is showing her predilection for trifling matters, rather than for Friday's deeper and more real experiences.

Although Susan holds up language and its use as a value, she, as language's most avid supporter, becomes at times a victim of its shortcomings. She critically muses about Crusoe: "Growing old on his island kingdom with no one to say him nay had so narrowed his horizon—when the horizon all around us was so vast and majestic!—that he had come to be persuaded he knew all there was to know about the world" (13). Susan herself exhibits similar gnostic tendencies: once she believes herself to be a storyteller and the master of the language that Friday cannot understand, she believes him to be inferior and "dull" (22). The signifiers to which Susan tethers herself blind her to true meaning that the non-linguistic Friday can see. Although language can impose restrictions upon a person, preventing him from communicating effectively with others, a lack of language "may lead to a more direct connection to the world itself (the world beyond the word) or to a deeper reality" (Hall 22). A lack of language, then, is not necessarily a sign of inferior intellect, but may be an indication of deeper spirituality or thought processes. Aleid Fokkema explains:

Helene Cixous, arguing from a Lacanian perspective, believes that representational character serves to repress the unconscious and to keep the subject in its limited place. She offers the political argument that representational character produces

manners of reflection and identification for the reading subject, which involve the subject's entering the symbolic order. Written character is already embedded within that order, and the reader's identification occurs at the expense of repressing the imaginary order. (170)

Susan's attempted induction into the symbolic affects not only herself and Friday but also the readers, whom she draws into her linguistic rendering of her tale. She intends to tell her story to Foe so that he can, through a book, tell others. Anyone who hears the story of Crusoe and the island, then, will hear a story, linguistically constructed; it will no longer be the original experience that Crusoe had on the island, but a verbal rendition thereof. While this linguistic type of understanding of the story would hold back the imaginary qualities of life on the island, it would also not convey the real experience, because the use of language limits the experience to expression in linguistic terms.

Susan ascribes to language creative powers, when these powers more properly belong in the realms of the imaginary and the real. Susan projects, onto the girl who seeks Susan as her mother, Susan's own quality: she calls the girl "“father-born”" (91). While the girl is actually searching for her mother and for bond with a mother who is complete in herself, Susan is actually seeking to be "father-born," abandoning her own past experiences in order both to associate herself solely with the men whom she has encountered and to become creative like these men by using language. Susan does not recognize the formulaic nature of linguistic discourse. She does not realize that her greatest creativity occurred before she attached herself to male pursuits of language, when she traveled the world searching for her daughter, a creation more valuable than her linguistic enterprise. Kaja Silverman writes: "language mediates all other signifiers...the subject participates in

signification only after the acquisition of language” (165). However, it is perhaps too simplistic to say that one must pass through language to achieve a higher level of operation. It would seem that Susan believes Friday to be incapable of abstract thought because he does not communicate, but she does think that he has the ability to think abstractly. She desires that he speak, and that he submit to the limitations that language world impose, is so that she might understand his thoughts. While Silverman’s idea suggests that abstract thought and association of symbols with concepts comes after the acquisition of language, it is possible that a person can think about higher concepts and be pulled down to a lower level by language in order to express his ideas. Perhaps, by attempting to communicate with Friday Susan is trying to create in him a new person; however, using language cannot create, but can only retell, as is made obvious by the storytelling within storytelling of this novel. Her entire enterprise is doomed to failure; as Williams aptly asks, “How can she find the story of silence by using words, consciousness, language or even a novel?” (34). Language has its limits, and because of her curiosity about things that supersede words, Susan continually attempts to push through the limits of language and into transcendent understanding; she only achieves this when she abandons language and seeks meaning.

The dream sequence of the final chapter of *Foe* may be representative of the world in which Friday’s consciousness has always been. The underwater scene “is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday” (157). In this place, words disappear not because no one can hear and understand them, but because they “diffuse.” Things never diffuse into something smaller or lesser than themselves, so it is logical to assume that words, in this

“home of Friday,” become dissolved in something that is more significant than themselves, and that that something is absolute meaning. Additionally, bodies’ actions are not their own signs, but bodies themselves are; this suggests that there is something universal and complete about the bodies that means something. Actions are no longer necessary because the bodies exist in a state of transcendent truth, which words do not have the capacity to describe. Susan and the captain who are described as able to speak elsewhere in the novel are, in this dream sequence, dead; they cannot be alive because they cannot function without their symbols. In “a place where bodies are their own signs,” those who constantly attempt to refashion themselves in their own eyes and in the eyes of others by using words cannot exist. Friday’s constancy and unchanging nature exude from his body:

His mouth opens. From inside comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (157)

In this scene, Friday’s self-expression is similar to his humming early in the novel; both instances are characterized by darkness and by purity of flow. His humming is an uninterrupted and incomprehensible sound, and his humming leaves his audience “in the dark” (22). The stream that emanates from his being in the dream sequence is cleansing, all-encompassing, and leaves the reader in the dark; it closes our mysterious narrator’s eyes, as the stream “beats against [the narrator’s] eyelids.” Neither imagery of sight nor of sound can explain the stream whose source is in Friday; consequently, we must abandon written and spoken language in an attempt to

picture the scene that is inadequately described to us. An appropriate ending for a book whose characters and narrative technique question the validity of language, the final pages force us to realize the inadequacies of linguistic enterprise in the comprehension of innovative and abstract concepts. The only person in this final scene who can instruct us is Friday, and he does so without words.

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## **Reviews of *East Europe Reads Nietzsche and Sharp Cut: Harold Pinter's Screenplays and the Artistic Process***

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*Hedwig Irene Gorski*

As the United States continues to strengthen its national alliances in the newly democratic nations of Eastern and new Central Europe, a collection such as East Europe Reads Nietzsche, published by East European Monographs, Boulder, 1998, offers another overlook of the region besides its socialist past without excluding a comparative approach to socialist theorists such as Georg Lukács. The editors Alice Freifeld, Peter Bergmann, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal remind us that despite the turn-of-the-century and postwar bans on Nietzschean philosophy, the region now acknowledges Friedrich Nietzsche as the “prime catalyst of early modernism in East Europe.” Most of the essayists help to reverse the popular association of Nietzsche to the fascist propaganda exploiting his philosophy. They accomplish this by providing a thorough discussion of less-familiar Nietzsche readings.

Two of the contributors, Béla Egyed and Endre Kiss, are professors of philosophy; whereas, the remainder of the essayists' expertise covers history, aesthetics, and Slavic literature. Freifeld's essay opens the collection with an informative background discussion about how Nietzscheanism and anti-Nietzscheanism were used by intellectuals and successive younger generations in their changing socio-political cultures. The discussion provides a fertile field for her presentation of Lukács, “the Marxist Mandarin of Budapest,” and his path to Marx as a journey away from his youthful infatuation with Nietzsche. After 1989 and the fall of communism, an increase of Nietzsche

translations and lectures coincided with the repudiation of leftist ideas causing Lukács's downfall. Connections between existentialism and a modernism interrupted by Stalin with the postmodern sensibility in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet nations--some currently ascribed to Central Europe--seem to both de-politicize and de-historicize Nietzsche.

Bergman's "Nietzsche and the Christ Among Nations" discusses Poland and its messianic complex, which arose out of Polish Romanticism and failed revolutionary struggles to regain statehood during the nineteenth-century partitions. For me, Bergmann's is one of the most absorbing discussions in an excellent collection. This is because too little has been written about the triumphant pivotal roles Poland played in the two major ideological conflicts that define the twentieth century: anti-fascism and anti-communism. It is fascinating how Polish history fulfilled the metaphor of its national myth, that is: Poland as the sacrificial lamb leading to global redemption against fascist barbarism; then, again in 1989, Poland as the savior of democratic ideals beginning a domino effect that disintegrated Soviet communism. Nietzsche claimed Polish ancestry writing in his autobiography Ecce Homo, Bergmann reminds us, that his noble Polish blood gave rise to the "aristocratic radicalism" of the "good European" linking Polishness to how modernists understood him and to how he portrayed himself.

Andrzej Walicki's essay continues a Polish connection offering a cultural context situating Nietzsche, "the most widely-discussed thinker in Poland," in a period from the end of positivism in the 1890s and through Poland's modernist expression of decadence until 1918, when Poland's victory of statehood intensified nationalism. Egyed makes a case for Hungary as another martyred state in which Nietzsche became an overwhelming cultural presence.

Other essayists discuss Nietzsche's early reception and influences upon poets as well as philosophers and theorists in the Czech regions, Bulgaria, and Romania during the ebb and flow of the Stalinist period's subsumation of modernism. The collection ends with a translation from German of Renate Reschke's, "Nietzsche in the German Democratic Republic (1982-1989)" which the author characterizes as a surreal, traumatic, and haunting presence, then absence. These tantalizing descriptors originate from the metaphors used to describe a mouth-less painting of Nietzsche that inspired Reschke and which seems apropos to the disappearing and recurring resonance of Nietzsche's philosophy in Eastern and Central Europe.

One glaring omission from this pertinent and fascinating rehabilitation of Nietzsche could be a discussion about Ukraine with its own passionate literary and cultural legacy. The problem with this collection--the lack of Ukrainian scholarship as a separate entity from Russian concerns--is unfortunately not unique. So much of what the world knows as Russian culture, art, and literature is, in fact, Ukrainian. Perhaps the much deserved interest in this 246-page monograph distributed by Columbia University Press, New York, will produce newer and more extensive collections that enlighten us about the Slavic nations in a new Europe. East Europe Reads Nietzsche (ISBN 0-88033-413-4) can be purchased on the Columbia University Press website <<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup>>.

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Steven H. Gale's Sharp Cut: Harold Pinter's Screenplays and the Artistic Process, published by The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2003, provides a well-researched analysis of Pinter's work for cinema by the

major scholar of Pinter drama. Unlike David Mamet, who was greatly influenced by Pinter's spare stage drama and who also made a successful transition from stage to screen, Pinter never directed a film nor wrote an original screenplay. Pinter's skills are in adaptations of novels and plays for filming. Much of Gale's discussion interestingly focuses upon the playwright's "unequaled" ability to "refocus the work, transforming it into a screenplay that is more powerful and more effective than the original." Screenplays suffer under the collaborative filmmaking process and may undergo drastic revision during shooting; nevertheless, Pinter views his screenplays as works of art, Gale informs us, that can be published as literature. Gale's expertise combined with thorough research of the extensive Pinter archives results in the first study to provide full scholarly attention to the published and unpublished screenplays. The archives reveal that Pinter relates his screenplays to writing the stage dramas, and that Pinter's writing for television and radio were not necessarily secondary endeavors.

Each of Pinter's twenty-six screenplays, some unfilmed, are analyzed with a clever chronological approach. Gale provides a comprehensive explanation, scene by scene, of The Servant, Pinter's first screenplay, as the basis to establish a standard by which to observe the playwright's evolving creative process. Rather than writing technically for cinema experts, Gale explicates how Pinter adjusts meanings from the source works to suit the film medium in order to better address readers with more expertise in drama than the source novels or cinema. In The Servant, an adaptation of Somerset Maugham's 1948 novella, Pinter replaces the morality theme of latent homosexuality causing domination of a male servant over his male employer with a more existential approach toward the theme of subservience and domination. Comparisons to source works include film adaptations of Pinter's own stage

plays. By doing this, Gale has the ability to look at film adaptation as an author's chronological afterthought.

The relationship between two characters in Pinter's stage play The Caretaker intensifies in the film version based on Pinter's adaptation. When asked why he never wrote an original screenplay, Pinter replied that his initial ideas locate themselves on stage. Pinter admits that the 1964 film version, The Caretaker (The Guest) more fully realizes the play due to the camera's superior ability in conveying the "the bond" between Aston and Mick. Gale deftly analyzes how the camera fluidly moves in spatial reality to achieve this with comparisons to the limitations of the proscenium arch. Some of Gale's analyses theorize the differences between the flat portrayals of the real world in film sets versus the static stage sets isolated but in three dimensions, and how these factors affect differences in audience reception.

The level of artistry in a screenplay never guarantees that, first, the film will be made, and second, that the audience will want to see it. Pinter's notion that screenplays should be "publishable" whether or not they are made into movies is contrary to the film industry's attitude that screenplays provide, as Gale describes it, a "mere skeleton for technological exploitation." His published but unfilmed script, The Proust Screenplay (Remembrance of Things Past), has been described as the best adaptation of a major work and, is itself, a work of "genius" as good as Pinter's best theater pieces. Nevertheless, along with King Lear and a few others, The Proust Screenplay remains available only as text. A testament to Pinter's salability is the comparatively high number of his scripts which have been filmed and, further, which have been made into movies that utilized the original screenplay almost in total, statistics about which Pinter has some pride. Pinter removed his name from only one production that distorted and failed his screenplay, Gale

reports in an interesting chapter titled “Bits and Pieces” that relays information from his personal conversations with the playwright about the film industry.

Gale provides substantial appendixes for quick reference listing the scripts, films, and awards received. These are supplemented by extensive notes, works cited, and selected bibliography pages for readers wishing to expand their studies of the Pinter canon. The book offers close to five hundred pages introducing new ways to study the process and aesthetic of a complex post-war dramatist spanning his half-century career. Sharp Cut (ISBN 0-8131-2244-9) can be purchased on the website <<http://www.kentuckypress.com>>.

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