

The Know-Nothing Party in Melville's Late Fictions and Antebellum Culture

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Literary life in New York and Boston in the 1850s was steeped in the politics of pre-Civil War America. While few political issues were recognized above the din of chattel slavery, the systemic poverty plaguing northern free-laborers and the inequities inherent in laissez-faire capitalism were prominent concerns, as the *New York Tribune* published the first of hundreds of articles by Karl Marx in 1851 (the same year that *Moby-Dick* was published), and the *Tribune* continued publishing Marx and Engels through 1862, the second year of the American Civil War.¹ Amidst intense labor unrest in the North, and the ever-escalating and destabilizing discourse around chattel slavery, the Know-Nothing Party—a strongly anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, Anglo-Saxon political party—dominated the 1854 election cycle. The phrase “know nothing” refers to the response members of the party were instructed to give when questioned about their racism and xenophobia.²

Nowhere was the Know-Nothing ticket more successful than in Massachusetts, Melville's home state. In fact, “They carried virtually the entire Massachusetts legislature and elected all of that state's Congressmen” as well as the governorship (Foner 237-38). Melville, witnessing the ascension of the Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts, infected Amasa Delano, the protagonist of his novella *Benito Cereno* (1855), as well as the unnamed narrator of “The Piazza” (1856), with these same politics. Both tales are told by narrators whose vision is

compromised in large part by their Know-Nothing beliefs. That Melville was aware of and depicting Know Nothing politics in his later fictions is made obvious in his final novel *The Confidence-Man* (1857) when an alarmist character states, “I shrewdly suspect him [...] for one of those Jesuit emissaries prowling all over our country” (142). Robert Levine in his *Conspiracy and Romance* (1989) states, “Although the alarmist admits that his warnings lack empirical evidence, he justifies his countersubversive practices with a series of maxims: ‘suspect first and know next. True knowledge comes but by suspicion or revelation.’ That’s my maxim” (225). Levine asserts that “like Melville’s alarmist [in *The Confidence-Man*], the Know-Nothings claimed to have identified the conspiratorial forces undermining the stability of America’s cities. [They argued] that their homogenous and hierarchical organization would eventually restore the order and deference [...] to the State” (225). As one Know-Nothing political broadside proclaimed: “All Catholics and all persons who favor the Catholic Church are [...] vile imposters, liars, villains, and cowardly cutthroats.” Melville inverts such hate speech so that it is Delano who is the “vile imposter [...] and cutthroat,” due to his anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and racist politics. Further, it is his capitalistic beliefs that compel him to murder the Africans seeking self-determination and liberty as they were “worth more than a thousand doubloons” (*Benito* 101).



The Know-Nothing Party—a radicalized, nativist, Anglo-Saxon wing of the disintegrated Whig Party—refused to take a stance on slavery as they sought to “save the Union by diverting public attention from slavery to immigration” (Foner 239). In the press, Know-Nothings argued that abolitionists “had much better use the zeal you are spending on this matter, in providing a way to keeping out foreign immigrants” (“Remarkable Scene” 1855). In addition, “a southern Know-Nothing leader wrote [...] of the utter necessity of avoiding ‘that dangerous rock of slavery’ if the party was to survive as a national institution” (Foner 239). Through this fundamental deceit, Know Nothings won a series of resounding victories

across the nation during the 1854 elections in the decade preceding the Civil War.

The Know Nothings, according to their 1855 platform, sought to repeal "all Naturalization Laws," while urging "More stringent & effective Emigration Laws," "the sending back of all foreign paupers," and "Hostility to all Papal influences" ("American Party" 1). The Know-Nothing platform was decidedly nationalistic and xenophobic as they were referred to in the press as "thugs, orphan killers, brass knuckles, midnight assassins, widow makers, rowdies, bullies, plug uglies, house burners, dark-lantern ballot box breakers" (Long 52). The disturbing political divide can be glimpsed in a Know-Nothing editorial from the period, where the writer took aim at the nation's Catholic immigrants as the source for "the horrible excesses, the pampered idleness, fed and supported by the honest labor of others, [...] their knavish hypocrisy, and beastly licentiousness [...] that render the monasteries odious to the honest and toiling multitude" (R. 1855). To the Know-Nothing conspiratorial thinking, Catholic immigrants posed the greatest threat to the nation as "the doctrine of the Catholic church is in direct opposition to the principles of republicanism that has aroused in the American people a sense of danger" (qtd Gienapp 96).

Massachusetts Governor Henry Gardner, in his 1855 address, preached "Americanizing America" (Gardner 7). His means of "Americanizing America" was debasing immigrants as the primary source of the nation's social evils, stating that "nearly four-fifths of the beggary, two-thirds of the pauperism, and [...] three-fifths of the crimes spring from our foreign population [...], more than half the prisons and almshouses [...], the police and the cost of administering criminal justice, are for foreigners" (5). As the nativist politics, which thrived on the demonization of immigrants, spread across the nation from Boston to San Francisco, conspiracy theories centered on Catholic immigrants fueled hate speech and mob violence across the nation. One political broadside proclaimed, "All Catholics and all persons who favor the Catholic Church are [...] vile imposters, liars, villains, and cowardly cutthroats. A TRUE AMERICAN" (qtd Cook 37).

The electoral success of the nativist agenda encouraged anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant violence as nativists rioted, attacked polling places and burned Catholic churches. In 1854, Know Nothings tarred and feathered a Jesuit priest and burned a Catholic church in Bath, Maine. In fact, “Know-Nothing mobs destroyed Catholic churches at Manchester and Dorchester, New Hampshire; at Bath, Maine; and at Newark, New Jersey, and, besides burning a number of houses, killed a large number of Irish and German Catholics, at Louisville” (Birkhaeuser 726 n). In Cincinnati, “On election day fighting broke out between immigrants and nativists, and the next night a Know Nothing mob attacked the German section of the city. The rioting left several men dead. In addition, Know Nothings destroyed ballots in two German wards to prevent them from being tallied” (Gienapp 196-97). The Know Nothings, according to Gienapp, “successfully exploited resentment against Catholics, immigrants, and politicians” (109). As the Whigs imploded around their anti-slavery stance, and the newly emergent Republican Party struggled to build an effective anti-slavery platform, for one election cycle the fear of immigrants allowed the Know-Nothing Party to outperform their conservative counterparts. By 1855, “the Know-Nothings, not the rival Republicans, were the major anti-Democratic party in the Middle Atlantic states and California [...] where the Republicans did become the major anti-Democratic party, they did so partly because they merged with the Know Nothings” (Holt 158). “Equally important,” Holt argues, “Know Nothingism spread into the slave states,” as a stunning realignment of the body politic left many political insiders to predict that Know Nothings “not the Republicans, would become the next major party” (Holt 158). Further, Daniel Ullmann “declared that because of its attempt to straddle or ignore the slavery issue, the American party had ‘gradually melted away’” (Foner 241).

Meanwhile, political insiders like Abraham Lincoln voiced concern about the movement. In a letter dated 24 August 1855 and addressed to Joshua F. Speed, Lincoln wrote,

I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? [...] Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be

pretty rapid. As a nation, we begin by declaring that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, except negroes.' When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics.' When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy. (Lincoln 323)

U.S. Senator Samuel Seward took a similar stance. According to Foner, "Seward believed that nativism was incompatible with the essential principles of democracy, [...] but the Know-Nothings rejected this principle by attempting 'to exclude a large and considerable portion of the members of state from participation of the conduct of its affairs'" (Foner 235). Charles Francis Adams, the grandson of John Adams, wrote in a private letter that the "essence of the secret obligations which bind these men together [...] [was] productive of nothing but fraud, corruption, and treachery" (qtd Mulkern 63). "Nativist politics," according to Elliot Gorn, "succeeded by holding divergent social groups together through anti-immigrant symbolism; appeals to ethnic hatreds allowed men whose livelihoods depended on winning elections to sidestep the more complex and politically dangerous divisions of class" (397). This was no small political feat as systemic poverty and labor strife so threatened northern politicians and capitalists that they met the rise of labor unions and workers' strikes with vitriol: "let them tell their Employers that they will withhold their labor until they can be fairly paid for it,—and we have at once the most dismal jeremiads over the radicalism that threatens society and renders property insecure" ("Rights of Labor" 2).

The evidences of suffering laborers in the North were ubiquitous as report after report acknowledged that "the seaboard cities are full of unemployed and depressed laborers" ("Work and Wages" 2). The socio-economic forces pushed "many a respectable artisan, many an honest and

industrious laborer, many an indefatigable needlewoman [...] [into] absolute beggary” (“Relief of the Poor” 2). Politicians and ideologues refused to question “the great Truth of the age [...] Free Trade,” (“Letters” 2) even as the unregulated economy was prone to panics, overproduction, and gluts in labor that often resulted in reduced wages, while the price of rent and goods skyrocketed. In a *New-York Daily Times* article on 14 April 1852 a reporter observes: “Very many persons who look with great complacency upon combinations of capitalists to keep up the prices of land, of flour, of money, and of other necessities and conveniences of life, are shocked at any similar endeavor on the part of those whose labor is their only dependence, and who are often forced into competition sharper and more fatal to them than Capitalists can conceive” (“Rights of Labor” 2). In fact, “Wall-street commends their shrewdness and takes no account of the increased rents which the poor are compelled to pay, or of the consequent suffering their families are forced to undergo” (2). The social effects resulted in a number of disturbing social ills, including the fact that in “the Winter of 1854-55 [the] accessions to the ranks of prostitution were more frequent than for years” as many “rushed voluntarily to the streets, preferring, a shameful life, with the chance, as they professed, of reclamation, to death by starvation and exposure” (“Prostitution in New-York” 3). Men and women laborers in the free-labor North were “literally starving, [after] laboring industriously from twelve to fifteen hours per day” (“Topics” 4). As laborers starved, they organized.⁴ The more they organized, the more politicians sought to divide the workers: nativist versus immigrant, Protestant versus Catholic, black versus white, Southern versus Northern, rural versus urban, artisan versus unskilled. In fact, when free-trade capitalism was criticized, ideologues responded by comparing the northern economic system with the “atheistical iniquity” of slavery, as they sought myriad means of concealing the devastation laissez-faire capitalism was wreaking on the northern operative (Melville, “Battle Pieces” 244). When comparisons to slavery began to fail, Know Nothings chose to scapegoat “the scum of the cast-off population of Europe” (qtd Spann 76). As Michael Holt notes, “there was a sharp

recession during the last half of 1854 and the first third of 1855, precisely the time when Know Nothing membership soared [...] and it seems reasonable that unemployed or poorly paid workingmen who faced higher prices vented their wrath on immigrants whom they blamed for their economic woes" (160).

Exploitation of religious, ethnic, and regional divisions within the working class was critical for the rise of Know-Nothing candidates and the further dispossession of the laborer. Once in charge of the Massachusetts legislature where "the combined opposition constituted barely one percent," the Know Nothings' corruption and lack of experience became apparent (Haynes 178). The "pay roll, owing to the increased pay voted to the members" skyrocketed. "Indeed, the most prominent characteristic of this legislature was extravagance—extravagance in money matters, but not less also in word and in deed [...]. Nine-tenths of the members were utter novices at lawmaking; yet conceit and arrogance were by no means lacking. To this leaderless crowd was given unchecked power" (185). Meanwhile, many well-intentioned voters regretted their support, including Ralph Waldo Emerson whom Melville specifically targets in "The Piazza."



In a fascinating dialogue between the narrator and Marianna in Melville's final short story, "The Piazza," the two characters converse in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts on a host of topics, including: her complete isolation, her orphan status, how she and "her brother, only seventeen, had come hither, a long way from the other side, to cut wood and burn coal," how her brother subsequently worked himself to death, her "dull woman's work," the sorry state of her cabin, her restlessness and the narrator's attempts to assuage her suffering through romantic suggestions of nature as medicinal ("Piazza" 9, 12).³

In the conversation between Marianna and the narrator, Melville writes through Transcendentalist and Romantic discourses (anticipating the cultural need of literary Realism), and strengthens the link between these nineteenth-century genres and their social blindness. Marianna

states: “Sir, the sun *gilds* not this roof [...], it first scorches, and then rots. An old house [i]n winter no fox could den in” (10). Marianna, frustrated that the narrator insists her roof is “gilded” when in fact it is rotted and leaky, asks the narrator, “Did you not see it?” (10). Near the conversation’s end, the poor orphan points to the narrator’s house and wishes she “could but once get to yonder house, and but look upon whoever the happy being is that lives there,” as it would cure her of her weariness (12). Marianna, now pointing at the narrator’s house, complains “don’t you mark it? the only house in sight” (9). The narrator is slow in recognizing his “own abode” (9). Marianna’s frustrations with the narrator are due to the fact she is speaking with one of those “Platonists [whose] vision is imperfect; [he is] short-sighted; what use, then, to strain the visual nerve [as he has] left [his] opera-glasses at home” (*Moby-Dick* 159). The narrator struggles to register the material reality right before his eyes.

In her last words to the narrator, Marianna echoes the philosopher Socrates—as she recognizes that all human perspectives are limited—and says, “A foolish thought: why do I think it? Is it that I live so lonesome, and know nothing?” (“Piazza” 12). The well-to-do narrator responds with the slogan of the Know-Nothing Party: “I, too, know nothing, and therefore cannot answer” (12). As Know-Nothings were sworn to secrecy, the conversation comes to an abrupt halt as the narrator refuses to acknowledge that it was, in fact, his house, and he leaves the poor orphan girl to her almost certain fate of starvation. He is literally an “orphan killer” who later, due to “the shock of recognition,” becomes “haunted by Marianna’s face, and many as real a story” (Long 52; Melville “Mosses” 249; “Piazza” 12). The narrator’s subsequent retreat to his own house where he exclaims, “how far from me the weary face behind it,” reveals the resulting heartlessness, for Melville, that Transcendentalism, landscape aesthetics, and Know Nothingism enacted (12). Meanwhile, Marianna, referencing Socrates, demonstrates that “the instinct of the poor is wiser than we think,” while exposing the imaginary, yet cruel, absurdities on which the Know-Nothing narrator bases his judgments (“Poor Man” 296). Indeed, the privileging of illusion over truth allows the

Know-Nothing agenda to proliferate and grow strong as false representations circulate through the body politic.

To this end, the narrator participates in the fantasy-laden vision Romantics were apt to inscribe on the world. Emerson writes, "a favorite spot in the hills or the woods, which they can people with the fair and worthy creation of the fancy" so that the romanticized and imagined forms appear "so vivid, that these for the time shall seem real, and society the illusion," results, for Melville, in "gross and astonishing errors & illusions," while promoting a form of social "blindness [that] proceeds from a defect in the region of the heart" ("Transcendentalist" 348; Melville *Marginalia* of Emerson's "The Poet" 24, 25). Under these "astonishing errors & illusions," spurious political ideologies—that frame the "noble poor" as vice-ridden paupers—proliferate ("Poor Man's" 294). Indeed, the illusions of the narrator undergo a series of shifts as "the glad mountain girl" becomes a "lonesome" orphan, and her "palanquin" is reduced to "an old house [that] is rotting" (6; 8; 12; 10). Under these "astonishing errors & illusions," the working poor are left "like the last column of some ruined temple" ("Bartleby" 33). Indeed, the poor orphan girl is left wishing she "could rest like him," referring to her dead brother (12). Sadly, the reality of her brother's working himself to death gathering coal to further the machinations of empire goes completely unregistered as he is buried in "some sequestered grave, [where] sprang vagrant raspberry bushes—willful assertors of their right of way" (8). His hard work and sacrifice vanish amidst the fantastical imagery, further allowing false narratives and stereotyping to function around the nation's "noble poor" ("Poor Man's" 294). Ultimately, the socio-political divisions that define the tale take effect, and our Know-Nothing narrator—whose predilections for the Picturesque, Romanticism, and Transcendentalism make him vulnerable to conspiratorial and demagogic politics that are divorced from reality—embraces social nihilism; or, to use Melville's terminology, he experiences a complete loss of "fellow feeling" ("Bartleby" 16). The carriers of a world view disconnected from reality and dependent upon stereotypes are shown to

be heartless because their understanding of society is thoroughly mediated and divorced from lived experience.

During the narrator's walk, Melville references literary figures and persons who, misreading the world, are led unwittingly toward misperception, despair, and tragedy: Wordsworth (British Romanticism), Don Quixote (chivalric romance), Emerson (Transcendentalism) and, finally, the Know Nothings. For example, the narrator's reference to "Simplon pass" invokes "the very place where Wordsworth found his naïve expectations of the sublime shattered by an apocalyptic reality" (4; Armand 85).⁵ In addition, the narrator admires Don Quixote as "the sagest sage that ever lived" although the knight-errant "so deeply did he steep his imagination in the belief that all the fanciful stuff that he read was true, that to his mind no history in the world was more authentic" (6; Cervantes 32). Indeed, Don Quixote's "brain dried up and he lost his wits," even mistaking "a barber's basin" for a knight's helmet (Cervantes 32). The loss of Quixote's wits is mirrored by the narrator's inability to register reality.

In "The Piazza," the narrator's fantasy-laden vision versus Marianna's more realistic depictions of her material poverty is further illuminated in Melville's analysis of the statue of Plato in Melville's essay "Statues in Rome," which he delivered on his 1857-58 lecture tour. Melville writes: "The first view of Plato surprises one" as "engaged in the deep researches of philosophy as he was, we certainly should expect no fastidiousness in his appearance [...]. Yet such is the fact, for the long flowing locks of that *aristocratic transcendentalist*" suggest "he might have composed his works [...] as Louis XIV mused over documents while he smelled his Cologne bottle" (401). The "aristocratic transcendentalist" demonstrates how Romantic and Transcendentalist discourse, for Melville, are nineteenth-century media consumed by the élites who distort reality so thoroughly that the practitioners cannot see the social ills that are right in front of them.

The inability to distinguish fantasy from reality directly informs the narrator's and Marianna's differing views of nature. Near the story's beginning the narrator, who has been sitting upon the ground to enjoy his

picturesque imaginings of nature, develops a "sly ear-ache" that serves as the prompt to "build the piazza in the first place" ("Piazza" 2; Armand 76). When the episode of the earache is compared with a letter Melville wrote to Hawthorne dated 1 July 1852, it becomes clear that Melville is critiquing the bourgeois idea of man's transcendence through a metaphysical correspondence with nature, and how this "transcendence" divorces the narrator from lived experience as well as the material reality that surrounds him. In the letter Melville writes,

In reading some of Goethe's sayings, so worshipped by his votaries, I came across this, "*Live in the all.*" That is to say, your separate identity is but a wretched one,—good; but get out of yourself, spread and expand yourself, and bring to yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the woods, that are felt in the planets Saturn and Venus, and the Fixed Stars. What nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. "My dear boy," Goethe says to him, "you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must *live in the all*, and then you will be happy!" (*Correspondence* 193-94)

Melville's experiences with nature were radically different from those of most of his fellow authors. Indeed, the bankruptcy and sudden death of Melville's father when he was but a boy, resulted in the whaler-ship, with its floggings and desperate scenes of "chewed boats, and the sinking limbs of torn comrades," poignantly becoming Melville's "Yale College and [his] Harvard" (*Moby-Dick* 184, 112). Melville had not wandered the woods around Walden Pond, or experienced Niagara Falls "just as [he] had seen it in a picture" (Fuller 8). For Melville, the correspondences with Nature are but a figment of the bourgeois imagination, yet another form of mediation that actually severs the adherent from the more hostile aspects of nature, renders them particularly gullible to other narratives divorced from reality, and, exposes them to a host of unforeseen risks.⁶ Additionally, the bourgeoisie is made blind to the socio-political realities causing such sharp class divisions and

widespread suffering that define antebellum society. Melville sought means of representation that exposed the suffering antebellum aesthetics and political discourses sought to obscure.

Further, Melville's critique of romantic conceptions of nature engages Emerson—"this Plato who talks thro' his nose"—directly in the passage "he builded better than he knew," which is taken from Emerson's poem "The Problem" (Melville *Correspondence* 122; "Piazza" 1).⁷ In his reading of Emerson's "The Poet," Melville diagnoses the cultural blindness at work in his writings as he repeatedly marks passages concerned with Transcendentalism and social blindness. Emerson writes:

we use defects and deformities to a sacred purpose, so expressing our sense that the evils of the world are such only to the evil eye [...] as it is [...] detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet [...] re-attaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight,—disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. (20)

Melville asks in the marginal comments of his copy of Emerson's *Essays*: "If Mr Emerson travelling in Egypt should find the plague-spot come out on him—would he consider that [...] an evil sight or not? And if evil, would his eye be evil because it seemed evil to his eye?" (Melville *Marginalia* 20-21). Melville connects this mediation and cultural blindness with Emerson's Transcendentalism and links them all to the rise of the Know Nothings' nativist politics of the period.

In fact, Emerson, who had taken many noble political positions in his time, including writing a letter to President Martin Van Buren in 1838 over the removal of the Cherokee people from their native lands, originally supported the Know Nothings. It was a decision, to his credit, he later recanted in an anti-slavery lecture he delivered on 26 January 1855. Regretting his earlier support of the Know Nothings, Emerson said, "We were clear that the old parties could not lead us. They were plainly bankrupt. Those political machineries and politicians were discarded; we will have none of them. Yes, but shall we therefore abdicate our reason? I

employed false guides and they misled me. Shall I therefore put my head in a bag?" (*Later Lectures* 6). Emerson concluded, "The old parties found no respect, but were turned out by an immense joke. Yes, but to persist in a joke like this! I don't like very well joking with edged tools; and there is no knife so sharp as legislation" (6). As illusion is made sacred, for Melville, sign and signified no longer correspond, facts are loosed and adherents "abdicate reason," "employ false guides," and are "misled" (Emerson, *Later Lectures* 6; qtd Haynes 187). During this time of political distortions, distractions and fabrications, the nation was, in a mere election cycle, headed for the carnage that would be the American Civil War.



In his celebrated novella, *Benito Cereno*, Melville gives us a captain with "a good, blithe heart," whose "conscience is clean," and yet he mistrusts Jews and Catholics, treats Africans as animals, and ultimately commits mass murder for a few dollars more (84, 77). Delano, "a man of such *native* simplicity," and a hypocritical practitioner of "republican impartiality" can neither interpret the world, nor understand the tyranny of his rule (*Benito* 63 italics added; 80).⁸ Robert Levine in *Conspiracy and Romance* argues that "At the very least Melville's narrative strategies in *Benito Cereno* play with a trope of Know-Nothingism: Central to the enactive unfolding of the novella is an effort to link the reader and Delano as a community of captain-like 'know nothings' yearning for a return to the hierarchical order" where the "whole earth may be called the *Fatherland* of the Anglo-Saxon. He is a native of every clime—a messenger of heaven to every corner of this planet" (Levine 225; qtd Horsman 74). In fact, the Yankee captain sees the slave ship as a "transatlantic emigrant ship," and he sees the slaves, much like an anti-Catholic bigot, as "Black Friars" (*Benito* 54; 48). Delano makes little distinction between enslaved Africans and Catholic emigrants. A similar conflation was made by a Know Nothing, in an editorial from February 1855, where he argued that Catholics were "abject slaves and bigoted devotees," while in Melville's tale, Babo is compared with a "begging friar of St. Francis" (R. 2; *Benito* 57). Delano, who viewed blacks "as little

troublesome as crates and bales,” assumed they posed no threat (54). However, Delano was outmaneuvered in large part because his “republican impartiality,” and its constant companion Anglo-Saxon “superiority,” thoroughly limited the “accuracy of [his] intellectual perception” (75, 80, 47).

Delano’s Know-Nothing republicanism—its propensity to posit the flaw in the oppressed, as well as his desire for profit, and, especially, his nativist and racist bigotry—rendered Delano so blind to Babo’s agency that many scholars ask: “How can he be so stupid?” (Elmer “Babo’s Razor” 54). Delano is unable to understand that the San Dominick is in the midst of a slave revolt due, in large part, to Delano’s racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Catholicism—all strands of prejudice that Melville diagnoses as encoded into Delano’s Know Nothingism. Delano, unable to interpret the ongoing revolt due to relying on anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic stereotypes, worries that the Catholic captain was conspiring to murder him. Delano wondered: “was the Spaniard less hardened than the Jew, who refrained not from supping at the board of him whom the same night he meant to betray?” (96). In another scene, the narrator states that “like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (84). To this end, Delano continually associates the slaves with docility, servitude, and animals.

The Know Nothings’ belief “that only white American men possessed the capacity to practice democracy,” further hinders Delano’s ability to see what is right in front of him (Bolt 303). Indeed, Delano cannot understand that Babo—an African slave—was governing every action that occurred before his eyes with “the sharpest” razor, “a sharpen[ed] hatchet,” as well as “hatchets and knives” (Benito 77, 85, 99). Indeed, Babo had successfully captured the Spanish ship, murdered most of the Spanish officers, and was now holding the Spanish captain hostage in a complex charade where the African rebel uses Delano’s anti-Catholic bigotry and racism to repeatedly outwit him. Delano is so severely impaired because his nativist and racist beliefs make it difficult for him

to distinguish between the real and unreal, especially where the agency of the slaves and Spanish captain are concerned. One instance of Delano's inability to register reality occurs when Delano wonders if the Spanish vessel, the San Dominick, is of "a piratical character" (68). Additional evidence that Delano's prejudice renders him a literal Know-Nothing is dramatized when the narrator observes, "Eyeing Don Benito's small, yellow hands, he easily inferred that the young captain had not got into command at the hawse-hole but the cabin-window, and if so, why wonder at incompetence, in youth, sickness, and aristocracy united? Such was his democratic conclusion" (*Benito* 58). Once again Delano's deep-seated prejudices cause "deceptions [to] impose. So far may even the best men err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted" (115).

Delano's encounter with the San Dominick off the coast of South America demonstrates both the reach and sphere of influence of the racist ideology as well as the devastation it causes.⁹ Delano, "commanding a large sealer and general trader," is a soldier in America's capitalist campaign for empire, which "was to be hastened by commercial penetration of the most distant regions of the earth. The commercial endeavors of a superior people were confidently expected to transform the world while bringing unprecedented power and prosperity to the United States" (*Benito* 47; Horsman 297). Melville seizes and writes through this economic expansionist discourse by placing his Know-Nothing captain at "the souther[n]most civilized port of Chili and South America" (Melville *Benito* 56). For example, in a 9 September 1852 article in the *New-York Daily Times* titled "The Science of Manifest Destiny," the reporter advocates for "the Manifest Predestination" of "world-wide republicanism," where the "influence of republican example may be strengthened and enforced by the direct application of power [...] whether employed by grapeshot, or as round dollars" (2). Speaking specifically to the need of "democratic institutions [...] in South America" the author, relying on the racist idea that only white men are able to participate in the administering of government, concludes that "Everywhere, beyond our own borders, on this

Western hemisphere, do we see the need of the steady, ballasting traits of Anglo-Saxonism” (“Science” 2).

The sinister doctrine of Anglo-Saxon “superiority” was a common view seen in newspapers and fiction. Indeed, Harriet Beecher Stowe asserts that “[to] the Anglo-Saxon race has been intrusted the destinies of the world, during its pioneer period of struggle and conflict. To that mission its stern, inflexible, energetic elements, were well adapted” (*Uncle Tom’s* 442). In the *New-York Daily Times* for 20 April 1854 a similar point of view to Delano’s was written by a man who described himself as “The African’s Friend.” The writer saw “the African [as] aesthetic in his character. Attachment, gratitude, fidelity, loyalty, are his characteristics” (“American Slavery” 3). Delano, too, observes this classic “Uncle Tom” behavior in the “simple-hearted attachment” of Babo, as well as in “the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity” (*Benito* 64; 57). These racist stereotypes prevent Delano, like the narrator of “The Piazza,” from comprehending what is right in front of him. Further substantiating Delano’s racist view, common among those who counted themselves the “African’s Friend,” is the scene where Babo shaves Cereno and cuts him with a razor to force Cereno to continue to pretend the ship is in a state of distress rather than amidst an ongoing slave revolt. Meanwhile, Delano recognizes the insult to Spanish rule in the use of the Spanish flag as a barber’s cloth, but does not understand that Babo has choreographed the whole scene so that he can hold a razor to Cereno’s neck as he exploits Delano’s racism. Where Delano believes Babo to be “the most pleasing body-servant in the world,” Babo is holding Cereno hostage by the razor’s edge (*Benito* 52). Melville writes, “‘The castle and the lion,’ exclaimed Captain Delano—‘why, Don Benito, this is the flag of Spain you use here. It’s well it’s only I, and not the King, that sees this,’ he added with a smile” (*Benito* 85). Delano further says that “‘it’s all one, I suppose, so the colours be gay,’ which playful remark did not fail somewhat to tickle the Negro” (85). Unable to register Babo’s desecration of the Spanish flag as evidence of his violent will to freedom, Delano instead interprets the bloody scene as a result “of the African love of bright

colours and fine shows" (*Benito* 84). As Know Nothings minimized the issue of slavery, so, too, did Delano; and it nearly cost him his ship and his life. Where Babo is holding Cereno hostage as he recounts the false tale of distress to Delano, the Yankee captain replies, "Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him" (*Benito* 57). Babo proves that he is the intellectual superior to both Delano and Cereno as the complex plot goes undetected under the ignorance, racism, and greed of Delano.

Babo's struggle for independence fails, not due to intellectual deficiencies, but to a lack of physical strength. Melville writes, "As for the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt," the tribunal "held dubious for both learned and natural reasons. The tribunal inclined to the opinion that the deponent [Benito Cereno] [...] raved of some things which could never have happened" (116, 103). Afterward, "subsequent depositions of the surviving sailors, bearing out the revelations of their captain in several of the strangest particulars, gave credence to the rest" (103). In this regard, the fact that Babo is a "full-blooded African" who "in his own land was only a poor slave; a black man's slave," is a detail of critical import when establishing Melville's challenge to nearly every ideological assumption of the period, including those held by the Know Nothings (*Benito* 88; 62). Meanwhile, Delano's political bigotry is so ingrained, and the deceptions promoted so widespread, that the court needed no interference; it could not recognize Babo's cunning either.¹⁰

In addition to being bamboozled through his own bigotry, Delano's perception of reality is further compromised by capitalist ideology, a major feature of nearly every northern political ideology, including Know Nothingism. Capitalism's distorting effects can be seen in Delano's reaction to the hatchet polishers. When Delano first boards the *San Dominick*, the principal deceit is achieved when Delano is put at ease because of the African hatchet-polishers' apparent industry—the core capitalistic virtue. The polishers serve many functions in the text as they not only cow Cereno into compliance, but they also communicated with the other Africans while orchestrating their complex charade of a ship in distress. Indeed, on three different occasions Delano admires the

“industry” of the hatchet polishers. These are the only three times in the text where the word “industry” appears, as Melville clearly puts pressure on this point (50, 92, 96). In one such episode, Delano misperceives their intent as “the six hatchet-polishers neither spoke to others, nor breathed a whisper among themselves, but sat intent upon their task, except at intervals, when, with the peculiar love in Negroes of uniting *industry* with pastime, two-and-two they sideways clashed their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din” (50; italics added). Delano’s belief in labor as a form of social control is exploited in this critical deception. Contrary to Delano’s misreading, they were not “uniting *industry* with pastime” but were in fact “uniting deceit and defence; the six Ashantees [...] [were] stationed on the break of the poop, as if to clean certain hatchets [...] but in reality to use them, and distribute them at need” (109). Illustrating Emerson’s earlier metaphor where “there is no knife so sharp as legislation,” the coordinated actions of the hatchet-polishers are misread by Delano as he does not believe them capable of self-government (6). In Delano’s bigoted thinking they are only in need of “stern superior officers” (*Benito* 54).

The core virtue, the wellspring of capitalist ideology, is the concept of labor. Labor, in theory, allows for the perception of the self-determining subject: it “reforms” the able-bodied poor, who were perceived as a threat to the stability of the state. According to Delano, to maintain social order a captain must “keep all your blacks employed, especially the younger ones, no matter at what useless task” (59). Thus, the core deception on which Delano’s worldview rested is industry and its assurance of control. For Delano, there was “no sadder sight than a[n aristocratic] commander who has little of command but the name,” and it is “the low, buzzing whistle and industrious hum of the hatchet-polishers” that set him at ease as his “clenched jaw and hand relaxed” (59, 97, 96). Production was not the goal as much as it was a stable racialist hierarchy with Delano firmly fixed at the top.

Delano again “smiled at the phantoms which had mocked him, and felt something like a tinge of remorse, that, by indulging them even for a moment, he should, by implication, have betrayed an almost atheistic

doubt of the ever-watchful Providence above" (97). Delano's "atheistic doubt" was because he momentarily doubted the order that his racist ideological illusions promoted; and he traces this racist hierarchy to his Protestant God.

Delano's "good nature, compassion, and charity," as well as his ersatz Christianity, all veil the fact that he "is a money-making animal, which [...] too often interferes with his benevolence" (*Benito* 115, *Moby-Dick* 412). His love of "the pecuniary part of the business," coupled with his xenophobia and racism, and absorbed into his Know-Nothing republicanism, ultimately compel Delano toward violence, dominion, and murder, all while he imagines himself to be acting with a "benevolent heart" (90, 47). Delano's pursuit of money results in an upside-down reality where the Yankee captain, who hails from the heart of abolitionist country, "Duxbury, in Massachusetts," encounters a microcosm of slave society seeking freedom and justice, which Delano replaces with a tyranny just as racist and even more brutal (46). Perhaps the most shocking detail of the novella that mocks Know Nothings in positions of power is that Delano's ship, the Bachelor's Delight, is also the name of a notorious, seventeenth-century pirate ship.¹¹ Where Delano sees the San Dominick as "piratical [in] character," it is he who, in fact, is a common pirate, who commits murder for the ship's "cargo" (68, 101). Meanwhile Babo—a violent revolutionary—is misread by Delano as having "features more regular than King George's of England," when, in fact, he is a sort of "George Washington cannibalistically developed" (*Benito* 89; *Moby-Dick* 50). Indeed, Delano's singular concern for profit, his racism, and his will to violence are made legitimate only because he is sailing under the American flag.

To Delano's conspiratorial, racist thinking, where he "suspects first and knows next," it was the blacks who "were too stupid" to organize a revolt (*Benito* 75). However, we learn that it was Delano who was too stupid to recognize the revolt because of his racism. Delano is literally a Know Nothing who has built his understanding of the social world on bigoted stereotypes. The result, for Melville, is a complete disconnect in which the ideologue cannot even process, much less interpret, the

disturbing consequences wreaked on Native, African, and laboring-class peoples. Indeed, in *Benito Cereno* the Africans are all murdered or executed under the dictates of the law, as Delano and his crew seek not justice, but instead monetary reward. Meanwhile, the title character Cereno ultimately goes mad at the horror of a sentient and intelligent slave being treated as a mere commodity, which haunts him to his grave. By contrast, Delano, who was singularly interested in conducting “the pecuniary part of the business” and buoyed by his complete immersion in his Know-Nothing beliefs and capitalist values, goes unfazed by the tragedies that occurred (90, 115).

In the final conversation between Delano and Cereno, the Yankee captain asks, “Why moralize upon it? Forget it,” as he has apparently learned nothing from the tragic episode (*Benito* 116). The reasons for moralizing are many, but primarily Melville sounds a dire warning that the young nation is following in the imperial wake of the corrupt and waning Spanish empire. More than one hundred and fifty years later, post-George Floyd and in the midst of Black Lives Matter, America still refuses to moralize on race when America, and America’s adversaries, have long known that “a house divided against itself, cannot stand” (Lincoln 462). Tragically, these continued racist and nativist divisions continue to provide pathways for demagogues to high office.¹² In fact, the antebellum racist hierarchy and nativist politics, having survived the Civil War, resurface in protean forms and in differing decades, donning differing “pasteboard masks”: the rise and breach of the KKK during Reconstruction and beyond, spectacle lynching at the turn of the twentieth century, the Jim Crow racial caste system that spanned from the 1870s to 1965, the Dixiecrats, or, in Melville’s time the Native American Party or, as they’re more commonly known, the Know Nothings (*Moby-Dick* 164). Sadly, these unaddressed divisions continue to provide pathways for demagogues to high office. Meanwhile, back in 1856, as the nativist politics receded in the American political imagination, for a time, the United States lurched toward “Weird John Brown,” “Hearing Sumter’s cannon roar,” and the more than a million casualties of the American Civil War (Melville *Battle-Pieces* 11, 20).

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Notes

¹ For an in-depth analysis of labor strife in the Free Labor North during the 1850s see Douglass Madison Furrh, "The Freedom to Starve: Melville, Marx, and the Trans-Atlantic Political Discourse of the Starving Laborer," *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring 2018), 29-64.

² The Know Nothing Party had a long and furtive history. It began in secretive societies known collectively as the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner. The Party morphed into the Native American Party and then became the American Party. Finally, the secretive order became known as the Know Nothing Party as its members, when asked, were supposed to respond with, "I know nothing." In "The Know Nothings," *The Weekly Herald*, 10 June 1854 the reporter observes, "Native Americanism [...] recently emerged into new life under a new name. The appellation of the rejuvenated combination is Know Nothingism [...]. We believe those who belong to it justify the name, because it is making of mystery a sort of merit, and because it enables them to deny all that may be imputed to them."

³ For an in-depth analysis of the role of Picturesque, Romantic, and Transcendental imagery by eliding past imperial episodes, forced labor, and extreme poverty in "The Piazza," see Douglass Madison Furrh, "Nineteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Unmasking of Poverty in Melville's 'The Piazza,'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring 2018), 105-24.

⁴ In the 1840s and '50s there is ample evidence of early attempts by labor to organize in response to ruthless practices to drive wages below the starvation point. Barbara Foley, quoting a number of sources, writes, "A burst of strikes hit the city's bookbinding, upholstering, shoemaking, and tailoring shops; at the peak of what turned out to be a successful five-week strike, the tailors mounted a torchlight procession two thousand strong, led by two musical bands and men carrying the republican banners of old." In 1849, "striking Hudson River Railroad workers attacked and killed several scabs; by 1850 there was continual conflict between police and bands of striking tailors, culminating in the August 1850 demonstrations in which two tailors were killed" (qtd Foley 90).

⁵ Barton Levi St. Armand, in “Melville, Malaise, and Mannerism,” convincingly argues that Melville’s “The Piazza” is in conversation with Ruskin’s *The Poetry of Architecture*. One day Ruskin came upon a cottage in an idyllic setting and hiked up the hill to inspect it more closely. However, upon meeting the young woman who lived in abject poverty, his picturesque image was shattered to such an extent that “it changed his entire metaphysical outlook, confirming his loss of Christian faith, which in turn led to a despairing social radicalism and a final, debilitating bout with madness” (1986, 88). Ruskin’s personal fate and his radicalization due to such an encounter hints at the role aesthetics played in facilitating class blindness and its accompanying political perspective.

⁶ The romanticizing of landscapes allowed the bourgeoisie to view the fresh snows that blanketed a rugged “top most cliff” as a “new-dropped lamb, its earliest fleece” (“Piazza” 3). Such similes, it should be noted, were an invention of an imagination that had never ventured to such altitudes and climatic extremes. Also consider the chapter titled “The Mast Head” in *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael observes, “But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!” (159).

⁷ See Newman, *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Herman Melville*, where she identifies that the passage “‘he builded better than he knew,’ is a line from [Emerson’s] poem ‘The Problem’” (1986, 310).

⁸ As noted by Brian Farmer and a host of other scholars, during the 1856 elections the “Know-Nothings would cooperate with the Republicans [...] beginning of an eventual collapse into the sectionalism of the Republican Party” (2008, 159). In *Benito Cereno*, Melville links the two conservative ideologies in the character of Amasa Delano.

⁹ Consider W.E.B. Du Bois’ assertion concerning American power abroad, where he writes in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “One class is spiritually descended from Toussaint the Savior, through Gabriel, Vesey, and Turner,

and they represent the attitude of revolt and revenge; they hate the white South blindly and distrust the white race generally, and [...] think that the Negro's only hope lies in emigration beyond the borders of the United States. And yet, by the irony of fate, nothing has more effectually made this programme seem hopeless than the recent course of the United States toward weaker and darker peoples in the West Indies, Hawaii, and the Philippines,—for where in the world may we go and be safe from lying and brute force?" (40).

¹⁰ Consider the fate of the Scottsboro boys and the need for a fair trial. See James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013).

¹¹ I am indebted to Lori Estep, a former student, who located this fact in a research assignment.

¹² The demagogue, according to Lincoln, "thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen." And when a demagogue rises, Lincoln warns that "it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent, to successfully frustrate his designs" (Lyceum 114).

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