Thoreau, leguin, and moral obligations

Experience, Human Nature

Written as an allegory for slavery and the way it affects the people who employ it, Ursula Le Guin's " The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" questions just how much of an impact living in a society has on one's willingness to act in ways different from what they would do in an individual context. It is the story of a prosperous utopian village where every citizen lives a life of bliss and freedom except for one individual: a child who must be kept imprisoned and mistreated in order to sustain the happiness of everyone else. To Henry David Thoreau, the author of " Resistance to Civil Government" and " A Plea for Captain John Brown" and a major proponent of individual morality and judgment, the citizens of Omelas are no different from Americans who continue to live in a society where slavery is legal, since they both inhabit a world where their happiness and success is built upon a foundation of abusive and immoral treatment toward some sort underclass. In addition, he would commend those people who chose to leave Omelas for resisting a malevolent state, but would also ask more of them than to just ignore the injustice going on there. To Thoreau, the only aspect in which the people of Omelas would be considered " good" citizens is the fact that they follow the cruel instructions of their society to their exact specifications. They are the Skhlarian type of " good" citizens (cf. the philosophical works of Judith Skhlar), the kind that follow all of the rules of their state regardless of their morality or personal feelings toward them. With this type of people, " there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense"; they have " put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones, and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well" (Thoreau, " Resistance" 66). At some point, every citizen of Omelas is

exposed to the horrible truth of the village: namely, that all of its prosperity is dependent upon the misery of a single child. Their initial horror reflects a sort of innate human revulsion to seeing others suffer: No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, and impotence despite all of the explanations. They would like to do something for the child (Le Guin, 422). Those feelings of horror, however, are quickly squeezed out of them by the corrupting influence of their civilization. Instead of seeing the blatant wrong in front of them, they instead try to dredge up a justification for keeping a child in a state of misery and squalor by emphasizing the necessity of his suffering to their prosperity. Were he to encounter the Omelasians and hear this argument, Thoreau would label it as hogwash and denounce them for trying to alleviate their guilt by acknowledging that what they’re doing is wrong and then not actually doing anything to fix the problem, as if just being aware of the injustice is enough. This idea — that the only step a people needs to take in order to alleviate their conscience is to “ feel bad” about it — is the very same one he saw in his fellow Northerners and abolitionists and lashed out against, saying: There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 69). For Thoreau, the innate lack of momentum that organized society generates in its members is its biggest danger since society has the power to

repress fundamental human morals and restrict the willingness of the people to take action against policies or actions they dislike for fear that “ the remedy would be worse than the evil” (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 73). Indeed, it is this dread over the consequences of what may happen — “ that their happiness, the beauty of their city… even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery” — that the citizens of Omelas use an excuse to keep from doing anything to rectify the situation. Thoreau would instead flip this argument on its head and claim that their reluctance to change is not about some threat of disaster that will befall them if the child is set free; rather, it’s about the fact that the prosperity and happiness they have has conditioned them to enjoy and be comfortable with the way their society functions: “ the rich man… is always sold to the institution that makes him rich” (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 77). He believes that there is a correlation between the wealth of a state and its morality: “ absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects” (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 77). To Thoreau’s thinking, the inhabitants of Omelas are not good citizens because the evil of their civilization as a whole has impressed itself upon its individual members, eroding away their basic human revulsion toward enslavement and mistreatment and installing in its place a love of material and societal affluence that makes them feel as though their happiness is more valuable than one child’s suffering. Despite the suppressive effect that their way of life has had on their values, there are still some individuals in Omelas who, when exposed to the truth of what their world is based on, make the decision to walk away from their perfect little

town: At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or a woman much older falls silent for a day or two, then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman (Le Guin, 422). It is necessary for them to leave because they are suffering from a sort of emotional pain stemming from their association with such an immoral situation, one that Thoreau likens to a “ sort of bloodshed” that occurs “ when the conscience is wounded” and through which “ a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death” (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 77). These are the few brave souls who, like Thoreau, “ cannot recognize that organization as my government which is the slave’s government also” (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 67). He would acknowledge those who depart Omelas for places unknown as fellow resistants and would admire their methods for being similar to his own, since he considers withdrawal to be one form of resistance to a way of life that one views as immoral: “ it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support” (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 71). Those leaving Omelas are doing so because they simply cannot reconcile what they’ve seen with how they’re supposed to live like all the others have, and so they want absolutely nothing further to do with that kind of state. They do not expect to change anything through their departure, and they probably do not have any interest in actually liberating the child from his wretched

lifestyle — they just cannot tolerate giving their implicit approval to the abuse by continuing to live in the village. Although he would encourage such behavior, saying that “ it is not a man’s duty as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong” (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 77), a true Thoreauvian dissident would find it within him- or herself to stand up for the principles that they believe in, just as John Brown did against slavery in Kansas. “ I do not wish to kill nor to be killed,” Thoreau writes, “ but I can foresee circumstances in which both things would be by me unavoidable” (Thoreau, “ Plea” 133). For Thoreau, there is something romantic in the struggle against oppression: because he does see society as having a corrupting and retarding influence upon individual morals, it is therefore a noble cause to actively work against it. That is why he is so full of praise for someone like John Brown, who has shaken off the malaise of organized civilization and is taking an active stand against slavery. Such a man should be glorified for his passion and commitment to justice instead of being mocked for them by the newspapers since “ truth is his inspirer” and his speech is a “ Sharps’ rifle of infinitely surer and longer range” (Thoreau, “ Plea” 127). However, he is also a realist, and he knows that not everyone will be able to make the kind of impact that John Brown had. Thoreau acknowledges that prejudice supported on a state-wide level is simply too massive for any one individual to defeat on his own, so it isn’t an individual’s responsibility to actively go out and defeat the evil in question. Rather, refusing to have anything to do with it is sufficient: As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man’s life will be gone. I have other

affairs to attend to. I came into this world not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, good or bad. A man has not every thing to do, but something; and because he cannot do everything, it is not necessary that he do some thing wrong (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 74). More importantly, Thoreau also believes that people “ should be men first and subjects afterwards” (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 65) and should therefore act for the reasons that they feel are best. He does lavish extra praise on those who do choose to rise up and do something about an issue that offends, saying that “ for once the Sharps’ rifles and revolvers were employed in a righteous cause” and that he wishes that “ the tools were in the hands of one who could use them” (Thoreau, “ Plea” 133). He among all people would understand that the people of Omelas were making the decision they thought was right — namely, to abstain from their civilization — since it was he who wrote that his “ primary obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any times what I think is right” (Thoreau, “ Resistance” 65), but he would also wish that their moral outrage would manifest itself further in some sort of direct political action against the policy of torture that made them decide to leave their homes in the first place. Living as he did in a world where slavery existed and even flourished, Thoreau dared to contradict the accepted values of society and speak out against the wickedness and hypocrisy of a free country keeping millions of human beings in chains. His steadfast commitment to individualism and the incredible belief he had in his cause gave him the courage to do what he thought was justified, and to preach to others to follow his lead by abandon and in some cases actively opposing any government that they thought was wicked. The

city of Omelas would be one such example of a civilization that he would call on people to forsake and fight against. Its material prosperity had converted its populace to the thinking that it was acceptable to mistreat and abuse in order to selfishly preserve their own well-being. To his mind, he would be full of praise for their willingness to leave their state, but he would also remind them that fighting against such an immoral and hypocritical entity is even nobler.