Benito Cereno Study Guide

Summary

Melville's story "Benito Cereno" was originally published serially in three parts. There is some indication that he considered making it into a novel but was discouraged by his potential publisher. Melville drew much of his material from Amaso Delano's *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817); in fact, much of the court deposition material is transcribed exactly from the original.

The story is set in August of 1799 off the coast of Chile, where the "singularly undistrustful" captain of an American sealer, *Bachelor's Delight*, Amaso Delano, comes upon an erratically sailing ship that is flying no colors. Against the advice of his mate, Delano approaches the mysterious vessel in a longboat and discovers that she is the *San Dominick*, a Spanish merchant ship carrying slaves from Buenos Aires to Lima. Upon boarding her, Delano meets the captain, Benito Cereno, an invalid who tells Delano a tale of the disease and the bad sailing weather that has killed much of his crew.

Delano is puzzled by the lack of discipline on the ship, the mysterious actions of the crew and slaves, the oversolicitousness of the servant Babo, and the mercurial behavior of Don Benito, who switches from gentleness to harshness without warning. Delano studies the unusual mix of sailors and slaves on deck, sensing that all is not as it seems; however, he is unable to reach any reasonable conclusion about the situation.

Although he takes pride in his enlightened attitude toward the Africans on board, Delano's racist assumptions regarding the limited capabilities of blacks lead him to suspect that the Spaniard is plotting some evil. In general, Delano has no capacity to discern evil, and his ethical blindness, which parallels the pragmatic optimism of nineteenth century America, prevents Delano from perceiving the situation until the truth is thrust upon him. Like the lawyer in "Bartleby the Scrivener," Delano is an optimist who is indisposed to countenance evil; therefore, he repeatedly assures himself that his suspicions are illusory.

After resupplying the *San Dominick*, Delano prepares to depart and promises to tow the disabled ship to safe anchor next to the *Bachelor's Delight*. As Delano casts off, Don Benito leaps into the longboat, pursued by the knife-wielding Babo. For a moment, Delano believes that he is being attacked by Don Benito, but a "flash of revelation" makes the situation clear. He realizes that the slaves have rebelled, killed most of the Spaniards, and are plotting to capture Delano's ship in order to continue their journey to freedom. Their leader, Babo, is revealed to be a cunning and violent deceiver rather than the loyal servant that Delano had imagined him to be.

Delano overcomes Babo, rallies his crew, and manages to overwhelm the slaves who hold the *San Dominick*. The rebellious slaves are brought to trial, and the last portion of the story is a reconstruction of the court proceedings, retelling the narrative in cold, legalistic terms. Cereno is ruined by the experience. Delano's

efforts to console the Spaniard are futile, and Don Benito retires to a monastery, where he soon dies. Babo is executed, but his head, which is placed on a pole, still smiles in warning after death. The story shows that evil—dark metaphysical evil, an evil that cannot be repaired, meliorated, or ignored—is real in the world. Don Benito recognizes this, and the realization crushes him. Delano's optimism is tempered but not conquered by the experience.

The story uses color imagery to emphasize the idea that truth is difficult to interpret. White represents good, although, as in the case of the skeleton that the murderous slaves place on the *San Dominick*'s figurehead, good is sometimes in decay. Black represents evil, although the story also recognizes the correctness of the slaves' impulse toward freedom and disputes the stereotype of blacks as incompetent and happy-go-lucky. Gray is the other frequently used color in the story, and it represents the ambiguous mix of good and evil that faces humankind in the world.

Summary

Captain Amasa Delano anchors his ship, the *Bachelor's Delight*, in the harbor of St. Maria to take on water and food. The next day a Spanish ship, the *San Dominick*, also drifts into the harbor. Seeing the ragged state of the sails and the generally poor condition of the ship, Delano loads several baskets of fresh fish onto his whaleboat to present to the other vessel.

As soon as he steps on board, he is surrounded by blacks and whites lamenting their calamitous voyage marked by plague, hunger, thirst, and contrary winds. Moved by their story, Delano sends the whaleboat back for additional supplies while he remains to visit with the ship's captain, Benito Cereno. Because Delano knows the harbor and Cereno clearly does not, the American plans to act as pilot to lead the *San Dominick* safely to shore. He also intends to refit and refurbish the Spanish merchantman so that it can sail to its destination of Lima, Peru.

Throughout the daylong visit, Delano is repeatedly appalled by Cereno's behavior. The Spaniard never expresses gratitude for offers of help. He fails to maintain discipline, allowing crew members to fight, even to stab one another. However, be has ordered the docile Atufal to appear before him in chains every two hours until he begs forgiveness for some unnamed fault.

Delano is also troubled by Cereno's repeated private conferences with his constant black companion, Babo. The Spaniard and the black seem to be conspiring, and Delano derives no comfort from the tenor of Cereno's questions: How many men has the American on board? Is his ship well armed? Will all the men stay on board at night? Spanish sailors skulk about; a balustrade collapses, nearly plunging Delano into the ocean. Cereno's account of his voyage seems incredible—how could the *San Dominick* have taken months to travel the short distance the *Bachelor's Delight* traversed in only a few days?

Delano, however, dismisses his suspicions as unworthy, and his visit does seem likely to end uneventfully. After navigating the *San Dominick* into the harbor, he boards his whaleboat to return to his ship. At that moment, though, Cereno confirms Delano's fears. The Spaniard and his servant leap after him, followed by three Spanish sailors. Delano believes that they plan to murder him. The Americans overpower their assailants, only to discover that Cereno and the other whites have leapt into the water to escape the blacks, and that Babo has followed Cereno not to support an attack but to kill Cereno even at the cost of his own life.

At last Delano learns the true situation. On its way from Valparaiso to Callao, the *San Dominick* was seized by its cargo of slaves, who had been allowed to go about the decks unfettered. Led by Babo and Atufal, the blacks had killed all but a few Spaniards and ordered the rest to take the ship to Senegal. For their former owner, Don Alexandro Aranda, they reserved a particularly grisly fate. After murdering him, they removed all

the flesh from his bones—probably by cannibalism—and substituted the skeleton for the ship's original figurehead.

Like Delano, the Spanish had come to St. Maria for water but were surprised to meet another ship. Babo then instructed Cereno as to what to say and do, threatening him with instant death if he refused. Babo intended to seize the American ship, but instead the Americans recapture the *San Dominick* and help it reach Lima.

There, Cereno offers a full, official explanation and then retires to a monastery, a broken man. Three months later, he is dead, and he is buried in the church where the remains of Don Alexandro Aranda were deposited.

Additional Summary: Summary

Captain Amasa Delano is commander of an American ship called *Bachelor's Delight*, which is anchored in the harbor of St. Maria, on an island off the coast of southern Chile. While there, he sees a ship apparently in distress, and, thinking it carries a party of monks, he sets out in a whaleboat to board the vessel and supply it with food and water. When he comes aboard, he finds that the ship, the *San Dominick*, is a Spanish merchant ship carrying slaves. The crew is parched and moaning; the ship is filthy; the sails are rotten. Most deplorable of all, the captain, the young Don Benito Cereno, seems barely able to stand or to talk coherently. Aloof and indifferent, Cereno seems ill both physically (he coughs constantly) and mentally. He is attended by Babo, his devoted slave.

Delano sends the whaleboat back to his ship to get additional water, food, and extra sails for the *San Dominick*, while he remains aboard the desolate ship. He tries to talk to Cereno, but the captain's fainting fits keep interrupting the conversation. The Spaniard seems reserved and sour, in spite of Delano's attempts to assure the man that he is now out of danger. Delano finally assumes that Cereno is suffering from a severe mental disorder. The captain does, with great difficulty and after frequent private talks with Babo, manage to explain that the *San Dominick* was at sea for 190 days. They started out, Cereno explained, as a well-manned and smart vessel sailing from Buenos Aires to Lima but encountered several gales around Cape Horn, lost many officers and men, and then ran into dreadful calms and the ravages of plagues and scurvy. Most of the Spanish officers and all the passengers, including the slave owner, Don Alexandro Aranda, died of fever. Delano, who knew that the weather in recent months was not as extreme as Cereno described it, simply concludes that the Spanish officers were incompetent and did not take the proper precautions against disease. Cereno continually repeats that only the devotion of his slave, Babo, kept him alive.

Numerous other circumstances on the *San Dominick* begin to make the innocent Delano more suspicious. Although everything is in disorder and Cereno is obviously ill, he is dressed perfectly in a clean uniform. Six black men are sitting in the rigging holding hatchets, although Cereno says they are only cleaning them. Two are beating up a Spanish boy, but Cereno explains that this deed is simply a form of sport. The slaves are not in chains; Cereno claims they are so docile that they do not require chains. This notion pleases the humane Delano, although it also surprises him.

Every two hours, as they await the expected wind and the arrival of Delano's whaleboat, a large African man in chains is brought before Cereno, who will ask him if he, Cereno, can be forgiven. The man will answer, "No," and be led away. At one point, Delano begins to fear that Cereno and Babo are plotting against him, for they move away from him and whisper together. Cereno then asks Delano about his ship, requesting the number of men and the strength of arms aboard the *Bachelor's Delight*. Delano thinks they might be pirates.

Nevertheless, Delano joins Cereno and Babo in Cereno's cabin for dinner. Throughout the meal, Delano alternately gains and loses confidence in Cereno's story. He tries, while discussing a means of getting Cereno new sails, to get Babo to leave the room, but the man and the master are apparently inseparable. After dinner,

Babo, while shaving his master, cuts his cheek slightly despite the warning that was given. Babo leaves the room for a minute and returns with his own cheek cut in an imitation of his master's. Delano thinks this episode curious and sinister, but he finally decides that the man is so devoted to Cereno that he had punished himself for inadvertently cutting his master.

At last, Delano's whaleboat returns with more supplies. Delano, about to leave the *San Dominick*, promises to return with new sails the next day. When he invites Cereno to his own boat, he is surprised at the captain's curt refusal and his failure to escort the visitor to the rail. Delano is offended at the Spaniard's apparent lack of gratitude. As the whaleboat is about to leave, Cereno appears suddenly at the rail. He expresses his gratitude profusely and then, hastily, jumps into the whaleboat. At first Delano thinks that Cereno is about to kill him; then he sees Babo at the rail brandishing a knife. In a flash, he realizes that Babo and the other slaves were holding Cereno a captive. Delano takes Cereno back to the *Bachelor's Delight*. Later they pursue the fleeing slaves. The slaves, having no guns, are easily captured by the American ship and brought back to shore.

Cereno later explains that the slaves, having mutinied shortly after the ship set out, committed horrible atrocities and killed most of the Spaniards. They murdered the mate, Raneds, for a trifling offense and committed atrocities on the dead body of Don Alexandro Aranda, whose skeleton they placed on the masthead.

On his arrival in Lima, Cereno submits a long testimony, recounting all the cruelties the slaves committed. Babo is tried and hanged. Cereno feels enormously grateful to Delano, recalling the strange innocence that somehow kept the slaves from harming him, when they had the chance, aboard the *San Dominick*. Cereno plans to enter a monastery; however, broken in body and spirit, he dies three months after he completes his testimony.

Themes: Themes and Meanings

"Benito Cereno," like so many of Melville's other works, rejects the benevolent world view of the optimistic Transcendentalists, represented in the story by Captain Delano. Significantly, Delano comes from Massachusetts, the birthplace of Transcendentalism. Delano is charitable, well-meaning, compassionate, and trusts to the "ever-watchful Providence above." He is also a fool. Melville says as much at the beginning of the story when he describes the captain as rejecting the notion of "malign evil in man." The author then wonders whether "in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies . . . more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception."

The answer is no, as Delano repeatedly proves in the sequel. On board the *San Dominick* he sees repeated evidence that Cereno is not in control of the ship, yet he fails to draw the logical conclusion that if the Spaniard is not, the blacks must be. He notices that blacks abuse whites with impunity, that Babo uses the Spanish flag as a shaving towel, that at lunch Babo does not stand behind his supposed master but instead takes his station behind Delano, whence he can watch Cereno's every gesture. At one point a sailor tosses Delano an intricately wrought knot and urges him to "undo it, cut it, quick." Again Delano fails to understand the meaning of the scene; he does not equate the knot with the mystery aboard the ship.

Nor does Delano learn anything from his experience. Even at the end of the story, he believes that he is saved not by the actions of Cereno but by his own innocence and by Providence. He urges Cereno to forget what has passed and cannot understand why the Spaniard cannot share his happiness. "What has cast such a shadow upon you?" he asks naïvely. Cereno replies, "The negro." Though Cereno refuses to look at Babo after the rescue, he cannot ignore what Babo symbolizes. He has seen the heart of darkness that lurks in humanity, and that knowledge destroys him.

Characters: Characters Discussed

Amasa Delano

Amasa Delano (ah-MAH-soh deh-LAH-noh), an American sea captain. Off the coast of Chile, he sees a ship in distress and sets out with food and water for its company. He finds a Spanish merchantman carrying slaves. Ship and crew are in deplorable condition, and their captain suffers from what appear to be severe mental disorders. A series of strange and sinister events lead Captain Delano to the knowledge that the Spanish captain is a prisoner of the slaves. He is able to rescue the captive and take him ashore.

Don Benito Cereno

Don Benito Cereno (beh-NEE-toh seh-REH-noh), the captain of a Spanish slave ship. His human cargo mutinies and makes him a prisoner, forced to witness atrocities on and murders of the Spanish crew. After his rescue by Captain Delano, he gives testimony concerning the mutiny and dies broken in mind and spirit.

Babo

Babo (BAH-boh), a slave. He poses as the devoted servant of Captain Cereno and attempts to deceive Captain Delano concerning Cereno's true condition. Failing in this attempt, he is captured and hanged on Captain Cereno's testimony.

Don Alexandro Aranda

Don Alexandro Aranda (ah-RAHN-dah), owner of the cargo of the Spanish slave ship. He is killed and mutilated by the slaves.

Raneds

Raneds (RRAH-nehds), the slave ship's mate, murdered by the slaves.

Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

Originally serialized in *Putnam's Monthly* in 1855, *Benito Cereno* first appeared, slightly revised, in book form as the first story in Herman Melville's *Piazza Tales* in 1856. It was not reprinted until 1924, when interest in Melville's writings was revived. Since then, it has often been praised as not only one of Melville's best fictional works but also one of the finest short novels in American literature.

Benito Cereno is Melville's version of a true story he read in Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817). Melville freely adapts Delano's account to his own fictional purposes. The court depositions, which make up a considerable part of the latter half of *Benito Cereno*, have been shown to be close to those in Delano's account, though Melville omitted some of the court material. In contrast, the creation of atmosphere, the building of suspense, the development of the three main characters—Delano, Cereno, and Babo—and the extended use of symbolism are among Melville's chief contributions to the original story. Also, the thematically important conversation between Delano and Cereno at the end of *Benito Cereno* was added by Melville.

The remarkable third paragraph of *Benito Cereno* illustrates Melville's careful combining of atmospheric detail, color symbolism, and both dramatic and thematic foreshadowing. The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything grey. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells,

seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould. The sky seemed a grey surtout. Flights of troubled grey vapours among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

The description, with its repeated use of the color grey and the word "seemed," is important in setting the scene for a story the action of which will be, as seen through Delano's eyes, ambiguous and deceptive until the light of truth suddenly blazes upon the American captain's mind. Until that time, he will be seeing both action and character through a mist. The grey is symbolically significant also because Delano's clouded vision will cause him to misjudge both the whites and the blacks aboard the *San Dominick*. In the light of the final revelations of the story, the grey has a moral symbolism, too, perhaps for Melville and surely for the modern reader, since Cereno and Delano are not morally all good, nor is Babo all bad. The Spaniard is a slaver, and the American appears to condone the trade though he is not a part of it; the slave is certainly justified in seeking an escape from captivity for himself and his fellow slaves, though one cannot justify some of the atrocities consciously committed by Babo and his followers. The closing sentence of this mist-shrouded paragraph, "Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come," not only looks forward to the mystery that so long remains veiled but also anticipates the final words of the two captains, words that partly suggest the great difference in their characters. Delano says, "You are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?" Cereno replies, "The negro."

In reading *Benito Cereno*, one is caught up in the same mystery that Delano cannot penetrate, and one longs for a final release of the suspense, a solution to the strange puzzle. Melville's hold upon the reader until the flash of illumination in the climax is maintained by his use of Delano's consciousness as the lens through which scene, character, and action are viewed. The revelation is so long delayed because of Delano's being the kind of man he is. His heart is benevolent, but his mind is slow to perceive through the dragging hours from his boarding the *San Dominick* until he is finally shocked into recognition of the truth when Babo prepares to stab Cereno with the dagger concealed in his hair. Delano is alternately repelled by Cereno's manner or suspicious of his intentions and then inclined to acquit Cereno of seeming rudeness because of his frail health or condemn himself for his suspicions with the excuse that "the poor invalid scarcely knew what he was about."

Just as Melville may have intended to portray Delano as representing a type of American—good-hearted, friendly, and helpful but rather slow-witted and naïve—so he may have delineated Cereno as emblematic of eighteenth century Spanish aristocracy—proud, enfeebled, and, finally, troubled in conscience over such moral crimes as slave trading. To Delano, he first appears as "a gentlemanly, reserved-looking, and rather young man . . . dressed with singular richness, but bearing plain traces of recent sleepless cares and disquietudes." Later, Cereno's manner "conveyed a sort of sour and gloomy disdain [which] the American in charity ascribed to the harassing effects of sickness." Further observation leads Delano to conclude that Cereno's "singular alternations of courtesy and ill-breeding" are the result of either "innocent lunacy, or wicked imposture." He is finally undeceived and apologizes for having suspected villainy in Cereno toward the end of the danger-filled encounter with the slaves. Delano is lighthearted and eager to dismiss the affair when the danger is over and his suspicions have been erased. Cereno's mind, however, is of a different cast. He broods on the results in human experience of the confusing of appearance and reality. "[Y]ou were with me all day," he says to Delano, "stood with me, sat with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me, and yet, your last act was to clutch for a monster, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men. To such degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose. So far may ever the best man err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted."

The horrors resulting from the slave mutiny and the tensions and terror that follow Delano's kind offer to aid a ship in apparent distress leave an already ill man a dejected and broken one. The shadow of "the negro" is cast forever upon him. He retires to the monastery on the symbolically named Mount Agonia and, three months

later, is released from his sufferings, in death.

Babo, the third major character in *Benito Cereno*, is unforgettable, one of the first important black characters in American fiction (Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom had preceded him by only four years). He is one of the most striking of Melville's "masked" men who appear in his work from beginning to end, hiding their true selves behind the semblance they present to the world. Delano is completely deceived in his first sight of Babo with Cereno. "By his side stood a black of small stature, in whose rude face, as occasionally, like a shepherd's dog, he mutely turned it up into the Spaniard's, sorrow and affection were equally blended." His attentiveness makes him seem "less a servant than a devoted companion" to Cereno. Though he speaks little, his few brief speeches suggest the intelligence that enables him to lead the revolt on the *San Dominick*. He is capable of irony when Cereno explains that it is to Babo that he owes his preservation and that Babo pacifies "his more ignorant brethren, when at intervals tempted to murmurings." "Ah, master," he sighs, "what Babo has done was but duty." The remark is as masked as Babo's bowed face, and the American is so completely taken in that, "As master and man stood before him, the black upholding the white, Captain Delano could not but bethink him of the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other."

With its many ironies—an aristocratic Spanish slaver captured by his slaves, a murderous man posing as a faithful servant, a naïve American protected from violent death through his own innocence and uncovering villainy by accident—*Benito Cereno* may be read as a magnificently contrived parable of limited, rational, well-ordered humanity struggling against evil in the social and natural universe and achieving at least a partial victory.

Benito Cereno, Herman Melville: Introduction

"Benito Cereno" Herman Melville

The following entry presents criticism of Melville's short story, "Benito Cereno" (1855). See also Billy Budd Criticism, Pierre, or, The Ambiguities Criticism, and Redburn: His First Voyage Criticism.

Melville freely adapted "Benito Cereno," his highly-regarded and ironic tale of a slave mutiny at sea, from an episode in Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817). The work was originally serialized in *Putnam's Monthly* in 1855 and later revised and reprinted in Melville's *The Piazza Tales* the following year. Ostensibly a story of mystery on the high seas, "Benito Cereno" demonstrates Melville's subtle narrative manipulation of Delano's historical account of an 1805 slave uprising. In the story, Melville presents a naïve protagonist who stumbles upon the remnants of a violent rebellion, but fails to recognize the horrors that have occurred. Considered by critics to be one of Melville's finest stories for its symbolic richness and narrative complexity, "Benito Cereno" is additionally acknowledged for its skilled thematic depiction of human depravity and moral relativism.

Plot and Major Characters

"Benito Cereno" opens aboard the *Bachelor's Delight,* an American sealer and merchant ship anchored near a deserted island off the southern coast of Chile. Scanning the horizon, Amasa Delano, the vessel's captain, observes a strange ship apparently in need of aid. Delano boards his whaleboat, has some supplies loaded, and makes his way to the craft, a decaying Spanish merchant vessel called the *San Dominick.* Once onboard, Delano sees that the crew is in a dismal state and that the ship carries a number of black slaves, many of whom, much to Delano's surprise, are not shackled. He speaks with Don Benito Cereno, the ship's grave and sickly captain, who assures him that the slaves are docile. Sending his boat back for additional supplies and new sails, Delano remains on the *San Dominick* and attempts to discover from the tight-lipped Cereno what

has caused the currently bleak condition of his craft and crew. After some time, Cereno—who is constantly attended by Babo, his short Negro slave—explains that the *San Dominick* met with severe weather off Cape Horn and has endured bouts of sickness and scurvy that killed most of the Spanish crew and passengers, including Don Alexandro Aranda, the slave owner. Noting that the weather has been calm of late, Delano begins to suspect that the Spaniard may be mentally as well as physically ill. That evening, Delano dines with Cereno and Babo, and finds that he is unable to convince the Spaniard to send Babo out of the room. After dinner, Babo shaves the extremely nervous and agitated Cereno, nicking his check slightly with his blade. Later, Delano discovers that Babo has received a small cut on his check as well, which he claims was given him by Cereno. Delano's whaleboat returns and, as the American prepares to depart, Cereno, having previously refused to join him aboard the *Bachelor's Delight,* desperately springs into the waiting craft. A shocked Delano looks up to see Babo wielding a knife. Once back at Delano's ship, Cereno explains to Delano that the slaves had mutinied shortly after the *San Dominick* left port. The Americans then pursue the stolen vessel, subdue the mutineers, and set sail for Lima, where a trial is held. Babo is hanged, and Don Cereno enters a nearby monastery. He dies some three months after giving his court deposition.

Major Themes

Critics perceive in “Benito Cereno” Melville's principal concern to be with the problem of human savagery, and its specific manifestation in the institution of slavery. Scholars have forwarded a number of theories regarding this element of the tale, with most acknowledging that Melville's narrative, while complex and ambiguous, presents a critique of slavery and the systems of tyrannical oppression that lead men to commit horrible acts of depravity. A related strain in the story involves Melville's denigration of colonial expansionism and warns of the lurking dangers associated with the widespread American belief in Manifest Destiny during the mid nineteenth-century. Focusing on the figure of Amasa Delano, a number of commentators see in “Benito Cereno” Melville's complex use of narrative structure and his portrayal of the story's naïve and highly credulous protagonist, who is unable to comprehend the evils that Babo and his fellow slaves have performed upon their former captors. Commentators also see in the work a subtle critique of historical narrative as a medium of truth, given Delano's inability and unwillingness to perceive that a slave revolt has occurred aboard the *San Dominick* and that many of its original crew members have been slain. Thus, Melville's manipulation of Amasa Delano's historical *Narrative* as a text that purports itself as a factual account calls into question the notion of historical and indeed moral truth, as well as the ordinary separation between historical fact and fiction.

Critical Reception

Like most of Melville's writing, “Benito Cereno” was largely unappreciated during his lifetime and it was not until a thorough reassessment of his oeuvre was made in the early twentieth century that critics and readers began to take notice of the merits of this work. In the ensuing years, critics have praised Melville's manipulation of narrative form to create a compelling mystery that delves into the ambiguities of good and evil. Others have remarked upon the technical virtuosity of the tale, as well as Melville's skillful use of irony and the symbolic imagery of nature. Modern critics have continued to debate the matter of Melville's opinions on slavery as depicted in the story, though most concede that the author's intentions are far from racist. “Benito Cereno” is generally considered one of the most brilliantly realized pieces of short narrative fiction in nineteenth-century American literature.

Benito Cereno, Herman Melville: Principal Works

Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life. During a Four Months' Residence in a Valley of the Marquesas (novel) 1846

Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas (novel) 1847

Mardi: And a Voyage Thither (novel) 1849

Redburn: His First Voyage (novel) 1849

White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War (novel) 1850

Moby-Dick; or, The Whale (novel) 1851; also published as *The Whale* (novel) 1851

Pierre; or, The Ambiguities (novel) 1852

Israel Potter: His Fifty Years in Exile (novel) 1855

The Piazza Tales (short stories) 1856

The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade (novel) 1857

Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (poetry) 1866

Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land (poetry) 1876

John Marr and Other Sailors (poetry) 1888

Timoleon (poetry) 1891

Billy Budd and Other Prose Pieces (novel and short stories) 1924

Criticism: Allan Moore Emery (essay date 1984)

SOURCE: "'Benito Cereno' and Manifest Destiny," in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* Vol. 39, No. 1, June, 1984, pp. 48-68.

[*In the following essay, Emery examines Melville's critique of American expansionism in "Benito Cereno."*]

Like most authors of the first rank, Herman Melville has commonly been considered a devotee of the timeless, one who, especially in *Moby-Dick* (1851), sought ultimate answers to life's eternal questions. Only during the past two decades has Melville's "topicality" come to be recognized, as critics have underlined with increasing frequency his timely interest in racial prejudice and technological progress, in English slums and American naval abuses, in the *Somers* mutiny and the Civil War. Melville's "politics" have received particular attention. Alan Heimert was among the first to suggest that even *Moby-Dick* has its political side—its "symbolic" debt to the Compromise of 1850.[1] Lately, too, Michael Paul Rogin and James Duban have independently read the novel as an elaborate treatment of slavery and Manifest Destiny.[2] All three critics challenge the popular image of Melville as an author so enamored of cosmic generalities as to be essentially unconcerned with political issues. All place Melville's political involvement among his highest literary virtues.

By stressing this involvement, Heimert, Rogin, and Duban provide a valuable corrective to a venerable scholarly overemphasis. Yet one is led, I think, to question their primary piece of evidence—*Moby-Dick*—a work which does perhaps make some political statement, but only in the midst of numerous other statements on non-political subjects ranging from metaphysics to marine biology, from Manichaeanism to monomania.

Though unarguably "symbolic," *Moby-Dick* is not, in fact, particularly political: the *Pequod* may be the "Ship of State"[3]—but surely not often, and never for long. Moreover, if Melville's eclectic novel hints at his interest in slavery and Manifest Destiny, it more regularly reveals his preoccupation with nature and human nature and God. Even reinterpreted, then, with its "politics" laid bare, *Moby-Dick* merely reconfirms the stereotype, documenting Melville's relative disregard for politics and his liking for the "large."

The argument for Melville's politicalness should not be abandoned, however; it should simply rest on firmer ground: on "I and My Chimney" (1856), for example, a tale with both a powerful political point and a uniform political thrust,[4] and on "Benito Cereno" (1855), a story which not only comments (if rather generally) on the slavery question but also underlines, far more clearly than any other Melville work, the author's serious engagement with Manifest Destiny. If in *Mardi* (1849) and *Moby-Dick* he occasionally alluded to this subject with the air of a promising dabbler in politics,[5] in "Benito Cereno" he became a mature political analyst, devoting much of his authorial energy to portraying the mind-set of those many Americans who fancied themselves citizens of an "elect" nation, destined by Providence to govern the globe. If in *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* he occasionally descended from the universal masthead to the political deck, in "Benito Cereno" he firmly conjoined the two, producing in his treatment of Manifest Destiny, not, as before, a timeless tale with political asides, but a political tale with timeless implications.

Many critics have read "Benito Cereno" "politically," of course—as an attack, that is, on American slavery.[6] Yet despite the presence of slaves in Melville's story, slavery seems not to have been his primary political concern: he was apparently more interested in American expansionism.[7] The 1850s were years in which the slavery debate loomed large in America, but they were also active years for America's annexationists, who were either too busy glancing abroad to notice local friction or who sensed that a grandly patriotic foreign policy might lure Americans out of their separatist camps. During the 1850s national expansion was, in fact, as "topical" an issue as slavery—or so Melville appears to have believed. For if his tale examines the problem of slavery, it also examines—with considerably more care—the false claims and confidences of Manifest Destiny.[8]

Evidently Melville was particularly concerned by mid-century arguments for American intervention in Latin America, arguments contrasting the "energy," "libertarianism," and "efficiency" of Americans with the "weakness," "despotism," and "disorderliness" of the Spanish. Such arguments were available to Melville in a number of American periodicals, including *Putnam's Monthly Magazine,* to which he probably subscribed and in which "Benito Cereno" eventually appeared.[9] "Cuba," the lead article in the first number of *Putnam's* (January 1853), characterized the sole Spanish dependency left in the New World as suffering under a "despotic and even brutal" administration; annexation would allow America's liberty-loving "Saxons" to "assert political, religious, and commercial freedom" in the island. And though Cuba's recent economic progress seemed a sign of Spanish potency, it had actually stemmed from American "enterprise and energy," Americans being "an enlightened, progressive race; the Spaniards the extreme reverse." Indeed, America was a powerful and prosperous country, while Spain was "a weak nation, tottering toward ruin."[10] One year later another *Putnam's* article preached a similar message. The author of "Annexation" (February 1854) noted that the "weak Mexican and Spanish races" of Latin America were "a prey to anarchy and misrule" and suggested that America could offer these *misérables* the "advantages of stable government, of equal laws, of a flourishing and refined social life." Speaking for all Americans, he declared:

> As the inheritors of whatever is best in modern civilization, possessed of a political and social polity which we deem superior to every other, carrying with us wherever we go the living seeds of freedom, of intelligence, of religion; our advent every where, but particularly among the savage and stationary tribes who are nearest to us, must be a redemption and a blessing. South America and the islands of the sea ought to rise up to meet us at our coming, and the desert and the solitary places be glad that the hour for breaking their fatal enchantments, the hour of their emancipation, had arrived.[11]

Among many similar defenses of American expansion, the two *Putnam's* articles were perhaps the most accessible to Melville. Yet, whatever his particular sources may have been, “Benito Cereno” readily reveals his familiarity with the case for Latin American “emancipation.” Consider first this textual fact: whereas the original Amasa Delano described Cereno's *Tryal* as merely a “Spanish ship,” making no mention of her prior history or physical appearance,[12] Melville immediately assigns the *San Dominick* to the class of “superseded Acapulco treasure-ships, or retired frigates of the Spanish king's navy, which, like superannuated Italian palaces, still, under a decline of masters, preserved signs of former state.”[13] With its tattered tops, moldering forecastle, and “shield-like stern-piece, intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon” (pp. 114-15), the *San Dominick* might well symbolize a “tottering” Spain.[14] Moreover, “the Spanish king's officers” and “Lima viceroy's daughters” once trod the deck of the *San Dominick,* a vessel whose “proper figure-head” is “the image of Cristopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World” (pp. 176, 254). Thus perhaps that vessel stands, most particularly, for Spain's Western empire, an empire about to dissolve at the time of Delano's adventure (1799).[15]

If this be true, then Amasa Delano's “American” response to the *San Dominick* becomes equally significant. Reminiscent, for example, of American expansionist rhetoric are Delano's complaints regarding the disorderliness of Cereno's vessel—a “noisy confusion” (p. 128) recalling the “anarchy” found by expansionists in Latin America. Moreover, Delano takes a second expansionist tack when he attributes the confusion on the *San Dominick* to Cereno's impotence, his strengthless style of command.[16] Though no mention is made of such impotence in Melville's source, Melville's Delano observes at one point: “Had Benito Cereno been a man of greater energy, misrule would hardly have come to the present pass” (p. 122). Yet Delano's response to Cereno is rather complex, for while decrying the weakness of the Spanish captain, he also notes Cereno's tough treatment of Atufal and declares: “Ah, Don Benito, … for all the license you permit in some things, I fear lest, at bottom, you are a bitter hard master” (p. 224). Aboard Melville's floating symbol of Spanish empire, Delano finds, then, precisely what his expansionist descendants found in Latin America: a simultaneous pandemonium, enervation, and tyranny.

Incidentally, Delano also experiences “enchantment” aboard the *San Dominick* (pp. 118, 161, 178), a state of dreamy unreality unexperienced by the original Delano—and yet said by the author of “Annexation” to be characteristic of Latin America. Importantly, too, Delano plots to break this enchantment by taking firm control of Cereno's vessel, thus anticipating the interventionism of mid-century Americans. Straying again from his source, Melville unveils Delano's plan to provide Cereno with “three of his best seamen for temporary deck officers,” a project that later blossoms into a presumptuous scheme to withdraw command from Cereno (pp. 138, 165). And even after this scheme subsides, Delano jauntily resolves, without being asked, to “remain on board” the *San Dominick* and “play the pilot” (p. 193), a role Melville repeatedly assigns to Delano (pp. 220-22, 228) as the American adjoins the *San Dominick* to the *Bachelor's Delight,* achieving a kind of annexation. “I will get his ship in for him,” Delano boldly asserts beforehand, and Melville elaborates: “[Delano] urged his host to remain quietly where he was, since he (Captain Delano) would with pleasure take upon himself the responsibility of making the best use of the wind” (p. 219).[17] The historical reason for Melville's inclusion of such details (all missing from his source) begins to be plain. “With pleasure” would Melville's confident countrymen have similarly taken upon themselves the responsibility for a “spellbound” Spanish America.

Considerable textual evidence exists, then, of Melville's desire to explore the subject of American expansionism in “Benito Cereno.” Moreover, other evidence testifies to his negative views on this subject. Near the end of “Benito Cereno,” we learn, for example, that the climactic American invasion of the *San Dominick* is prompted not by any wish to “redeem” the oppressed but by a simple desire for material gain: “To encourage the sailors, they were told, that the Spanish captain considered his ship good as lost; that she and her cargo, including some gold and silver, were worth more than a thousand doubloons. Take her, and no small part should be theirs. The sailors replied with a shout.” Interestingly, too, the leader of the American expeditionary force, Delano's first mate, is said to have once been “a privateer's-man” (p. 241), a fact

unmentioned by Melville's source.[18] Nor should we overlook Melville's renaming of Delano's ship (originally the *Perseverance*) after the ship of an English buccaneer—or his allusion, by way of Delano's boat *Rover* (pp. 184-89), to certain "rovers" of the high seas.[19] The author of "Cuba" insisted that the majority of American expansionists felt merely an "honest, earnest sympathy" for the Cuban people; relatively few had "mercenary motives, than which nothing can be more utterly wicked and contemptible."[20] Aware, however, of America's chief reason for eyeing Cuba (and other lands of agricultural promise), Melville seemingly sought to depict Manifest Destiny as the rhetorical camouflage for a largely "piratical" enterprise.

Delano's embarrassing attempt to buy Babo (p. 168) points rather obviously to another authorial aim. As we have seen, supporters of Manifest Destiny cast America in the role of freedom's standard-bearer: for the prophets of *Putnam's,* America's mission was to "extend" democracy throughout the Western Hemisphere, to spread the "living seeds of freedom" among the subject peoples of the world.[21] Yet as prospective slaveowner, Delano scarcely extends democracy to blacks; indeed, when parrying Babo's final thrust, he physically "[grinds] the prostrate negro" (p. 236). Melville appears to suggest that the continuing allegiance of "emancipating" Americans to a Constitution condoning the ownership of persons was a bit incongruous.[22] Nor is it accidental that when Cereno and Delano finally cement their friendship in the presence of Babo, they do so by clasping hands "across the black's body" (p. 233).[23] Apparently Melville agreed with many abolitionists that the transfer of Cuba from Spanish into American hands would mean only a changing of the guard for Cuban slaves.

Melville's characterization of American expansionism as "mercenary" and nonlibertarian also serves a broader purpose: it invalidates the distinction, recurrent in the periodical literature of Melville's day, between American expansionism and the "corrupt" colonialism of European nations. Sensitive to the charge of imperialism, the author of "Cuba" carefully distinguished America's traditional practice of annexation from "the extension of empire by Conquest"; the author of "Annexation" met English objections to American meddling in the Caribbean by pointing to the predatory behavior of England herself and by contrasting the "open, generous, equitable international policy" of the United States with the "overreaching intrigue and secret diplomacy," the "sinister and iniquitous proceedings" of European states.[24] Yet the grim forcefulness of Delano's victorious seamen (pp. 242-46), combined with their rather ignoble motives, suggests that Melville found good reason to doubt the "special" ethics of American expansionism. Likewise troublesome is the imperiousness of Delano himself, who can cheerfully plot to remove Cereno from command of the *San Dominick* because he believes there is a significant "difference" between "the idea of Don Benito's darkly pre-ordaining Captain Delano's fate, and Captain Delano's lightly arranging Don Benito's" (p. 166). In fact, Delano's distinction is suspect. Certainly his own interventionism implies that Melville saw no great "difference" between the blithe scheming of well-meaning Americans and the "dark" machinations of old-style imperialists. To "assert political, religious, and commercial freedom" was still, after all, to assert.

The details of "Benito Cereno" suggest, however, that if Melville discovered similarities between American imperialism and imperialism in general, he was most conscious of America's mimicry of Spain. Though American expansionists emphasized their dissimilarity from the Spanish colonizers they intended to replace in Latin America, they were, of course, taking up precisely where the Spanish had left off, since the colonial ventures of Charles V and Philip II had marked the last serious attempt to impose a moral and political order upon the western hemisphere.[25] Yet another, more complex reason may also exist for Melville's underscoring of the Spanish-American parallel: in 1855 Protestant Americans would have been appalled by any comparison between themselves and a nation of "diabolical" Catholics. In fact, anti-Catholic sentiment peaked in America during the 1850s in conjunction with a rising Anglo-Saxonism and a "nativist" dislike for all things "foreign." Catholicism was condemned for its "totalitarian" church structure, its "authoritarian" methods, its popularity among the "Celtic" races of Southern Europe, and its "imperialistic" commitment to worldwide evangelism. Moreover, Spanish Catholicism, with its famous Inquisition, drew especially heavy fire, since it seemed best to exemplify the "wicked" principles and practices of Popery.[26] Nor were such views limited to the lunatic fringe. Anti-Catholicism demonstrated its fashionableness in 1854 and 1855, when the Know-Nothing Party

won a number of state and local elections, including important elections in Melville's home state of Massachusetts.[27]

Melville's awareness of mid-century America's preoccupation with Catholicism is suggested by Amasa Delano's repeated reference to abbots and friars, monks and monasteries—a reference significantly missing from Melville's source.[28] When Delano first approaches the *San Dominick* (a vessel whose name Melville changed, I think, partly in order to invoke a Spanish Inquisition founded by St. Domingo de Guzman and directed by his "Dominican" Order), the spectral ship looms "like a white-washed monastery after a thunder-storm, seen perched upon some dun cliff among the Pyrenees"; meanwhile, those on board recall "monks" in "dark cowls" and "Black Friars pacing the cloisters" (p. 113). Later, too, Cereno becomes for Delano a "hypochondriac abbot," while Babo is said to "look something like a begging friar of St. Francis" (pp. 123, 136). And later still, during Melville's shaving scene, the furnishings of Babo's barber shop also take on a religious significance as Delano's "Catholic" obsession again colors Melville's description:

> On one side was a claw-footed old table lashed to the deck; a thumbed missal on it, and over it a small, meagre crucifix attached to the bulk-head. Under the table lay a dented cutlass or two, with a hacked harpoon, among some melancholy old rigging, like a heap of poor friars' girdles. There were also two long, sharp-ribbed settees of Malacca cane, black with age, and uncomfortable to look at as inquisitors' racks, with a large, misshapen arm-chair, which, furnished with a rude barber's crotch at the back, working with a screw, seemed some grotesque engine of torment.

(pp. 197-98)

Neither Melville's shaving scene—nor his inquisitorial similes—appeared in his source. Apparently they too represent a "topical" allusion to Catholicism as envisioned by anxious Americans in 1855.

Yet, to grasp the ironic point of this allusion, we must consider Melville's shaving scene more closely. That scene is puzzling, partly, I suspect, because our stereotypes have gone awry: while Melville's figurative language suggests that an "Inquisition" of sorts is occurring, the Spaniard Cereno is not so much the sponsor as the victim of this inquisition. More importantly, though Babo is a capable torturer, one leading inquisitorial "part" remains to be filled. Where, we might ask, are the inquisitors? I quote from Melville's account of the episode:

> "And now, Don Amasa," [said Babo,] "please go on with your talk about the gale, and all that; master can hear, and, between times, master can answer."
>
> "Ah yes, these gales," said Captain Delano; "but the more I think of your voyage, Don Benito, the more I wonder, not at the gales … but at the disastrous interval following them. For here, by your account, have you been these two months and more getting from Cape Horn to St. Maria, a distance which I myself, with a good wind, have sailed in a few days. True, you had calms, and long ones, but to be becalmed for two months, that is, at least, unusual. Why, Don Benito, had almost any other gentleman told me such a story, I should have been half disposed to a little incredulity."
>
> Here an involuntary expression came over the Spaniard, … and whether it was the start he gave, or a sudden gawky roll of the hull in the calm, or a momentary unsteadiness of the servant's hand, however it was, just then the razor drew blood.

(pp. 204-5)

Babo's sadism may obscure the fact that there is but one questioner, one examiner, one true "inquisitor" on hand during Melville's shaving scene—and that is Amasa Delano. Indeed, Delano has been busily "inquiring" all day long, questioning Cereno as to "the particulars of the ship's misfortunes" (pp. 129-35, 142-45), pondering the captain's story (pp. 163-66), and double-checking details, first with a "Barcelona tar" (pp. 172-73), and later with Cereno himself (pp. 194-95). Indefatigably curious, Delano pumps Cereno even after his shave is complete (p. 215). The original Delano asked *no* questions of his host; Melville's protagonist persists in an interrogation which greatly aggravates the anguish of the Spanish captain. After seeing the painful effect of one of his obtuse queries, Delano remarks, "[Cereno] is like one flayed alive … ; where may one touch him without causing a shrink?" (p. 224).

As Melville's inquisitor, Delano wants more, however, than historical "particulars": he hopes to discover moral truth.[29] Who on the *San Dominick* is guilty and who is innocent? Who is evil and who is good? Those are Delano's real questions. Yet during his investigation, Delano learns a basic inquisitorial lesson—namely, that moral "answers" are exceedingly difficult to determine. As many critics have observed, Melville places an early emphasis on the ambiguity of the *San Dominick,* describing the "vapors partly mantling the hull, through which the far matin light from her cabin streamed equivocally enough," and noting both the "apparent uncertainty of her movements" and the natural grayness surrounding her arrival in Santa Maria bay (pp. 111, 112, 109-10). Later, too, Melville interprets his own symbolism, underlining the *moral* grayness of the *San Dominick.* A diligent inquisitor, Amasa Delano continually strives to hit moral bedrock. But baffled by contradictory evidences, he quickly loses all track of friend and foe, coming to wonder finally if Cereno, or Cereno's Spaniards, or Cereno and Babo, or Babo and Atufal, or Babo's Ashantees, or the whole amazing mass of humanity on board is most likely to murder him.[30]

To be sure, Delano occasionally abandons his indecision and draws moral conclusions, but then he is badly mistaken, not only in the case of Babo and Cereno (see below) but in other instances as well. Consecutive episodes depict his encounters with a Spanish sailor of haggard face, whose hand is "black with continually thrusting it into [a] tar-pot," and the aforementioned Barcelona tar, whose "weather-beaten visage" ill accords with his "furtive, diffident air."[31] Delano instantly assumes that the tainted hands of the first must be symbolic of vice: "If, indeed, there be any wickedness on board this ship," he thinks, "be sure that man there has fouled his hand in it" (pp. 171-72). And after badgering the Barcelonan, who is nervously unwilling to answer his questions, Delano decides that this man too must be ridden with guilt. Turning away, he declares, "How plainly … did that old whiskerando yonder betray a consciousness of ill desert" (pp. 173-74). Later we learn, however, that Delano's confidence was no proof of his perspicacity. Don Joaquin's hands were tarred strictly at the behest of Babo (p. 262); he was wholly innocent of wrongdoing. Moreover, the Barcelonan, subsequently seen at the tiller, was required to alter his expression before Delano in an effort to stay alive (p. 262). When that expression later changes, he is very nearly killed (pp. 221-22, 262).

Why does Delano, as inquisitor, go wrong so often? In part because of misery's effect on the examined. When first speaking of Don Joaquin, Melville, unlike Delano, refuses to make a moral judgment, saying, "Whether [Joaquin's] haggardness had aught to do with criminality, could not be determined; since, as intense heat and cold, though unlike, produce like sensations, so innocence and guilt …, through casual association with mental pain, … use one seal—a hacked one" (p. 171). In other words, signs of "mental pain" mask all evidence of virtue or depravity. This Delano does not realize; hence he is "operated upon," in the cases of Joaquin and the Barcelonan, "by certain general notions which, while disconnecting pain and abashment from virtue, invariably link them with vice" (p. 171). Problem number one, then: for an erring Delano, "haggardness" and "furtiveness" are always manifestations of guilt.

Yet Delano also has a second, more troubling perceptual difficulty: a tendency to let racial prejudice distort his vision of moral reality. Most obviously, white racism wrongly persuades him that Babo's blacks are too docile (pp. 149, 200, 220) to pose a threat; in addition, a subtle Anglo-Saxonism makes him foolishly suspect Cereno. In Melville's source the latter is everywhere dubbed "the Spanish captain";[32] in "Benito Cereno" he

becomes merely “the Spaniard” (pp. 120, 121, 122, et passim), the type for Delano of a dangerous and disagreeable race. Upon boarding the *San Dominick,* the American is quick to note Cereno's “national formality,” his “sour and gloomy disdain” (pp. 121, 125). And later he comes to fear “the secret vindictiveness of the morbidly sensitive Spaniard” (p. 150)—that is, not so much a rancor peculiar to Cereno as a nastiness typical of a nation. Diverging widely from his source,[33] Melville planted in Delano's mind the false fear that he is about to be victimized not by Babo and company but by an exemplary “dark Spaniard” (p. 165), a character drawn no less directly than the “affectionate African” from Delano's capacious bag of moral stereotypes.

Moreover, like many of the elements of “Benito Cereno,” Delano's prejudices are historically significant. If his image of blacks recalls the image promoted by certain white liberals during the 1850s,[34] his distrust of Cereno invokes a more traditional bias: Melville's mention of Guy Fawkes (p. 188) reminds us that Delanovian fears of “the Spaniard” had tenanted the minds of Anglo-Saxons since the days of the Gunpowder Plot. Melville may also have had more contemporary precedents in mind when prejudicing his protagonist against Cereno, for he likens Delano's first impression of the *San Dominick* to “that produced by … entering a strange house with strange inmates in a strange land,” and later records Delano's complaints regarding Cereno's “clumsy seamanship and faulty navigation” (pp. 117, 137-38). In 1854 *Putnam's* printed extracts from a travelogue entitled *Cosas de España,* whose author continually criticized the ways of Spain, objecting, for example, to Spanish rules for courtship, the Spanish custom of pig killing, Spanish stagecoaches, even the Spanish taste for garlic.[35] Like Delano, he found fault too with Spanish seamanship and navigation, citing “the thousand causes of delay incident to all Spanish expeditions,” and complaining when his own Spanish vessel sailed eastward toward Italy after leaving Marseilles, while on its way to Barcelona (due west).[36] Most importantly, the author glossed his title as follows: “An explanatory word, at the outset, respecting the *cosas de España.* They are the *strange things of Spain,* which being utterly incomprehensible by foreigners, are never even attempted to be explained to them by the natives.”[37] This remark might account for Melville's emphasis on the “strangeness” of the San Dominick, an emphasis heightened by a second adjectival barrage: “This is a strange craft; a strange history, too, and strange folks on board,” says Delano at one point. “As a nation,” he adds, “these Spaniards are all an odd set” (pp. 187, 188).

Yet such allusions, interesting as they are, remain tangential to “Benito Cereno.” For whatever specific prejudices Delano may display and whatever prevailing attitudes he may demonstrate, he has the same general failings as moral observer: an overeagerness to condemn the crestfallen and a bigotry that blunts his perception of truth. Nor do these failings lack “larger” significance, being faults as well of a Spanish Inquisition famous for prejudging the innocent and the abashed. Indeed, the fundamental reason for Melville's Catholic imagery, “inquisitorial” plot, and fallible protagonist is now revealed. If Delano is the author's masterful symbol of an American expansionism modeled upon Spain's, he is also Melville's ingenious way of suggesting that at a time when Protestant Americans viewed Spanish Catholicism as an extreme example of dogmatic imperialism, they were becoming involved in a close-minded crusade of their own. While priding themselves on their moral superiority and historical uniqueness, Delano's descendants were taking “immoral” cues from their own worst enemy.

This point leads to another, however, for by recognizing the unoriginality of American expansionism, Melville was not only able to identify its unattractive features but also to predict its nonsuccess. On one occasion Delano encounters a sailor resembling “an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon”; this individual throws an elaborate knot to Delano, demanding that he “undo it, cut it, quick” (pp. 181, 182).[38] Intricate and perplexing, the knot surely symbolizes the moral tangle of the *San Dominick,* that tangle which defeats a dim-witted Delano. Yet the knot also reminds us that Alexander the Great visited the temple of Ammon at the beginning of his military career, and finding there the Gordian knot, believed to be unravelable only by one who would conquer Asia, simply cut it with his sword and marched off to his first series of conquests. Offered to Delano, Melville's knot, then, symbolizes more than moral complexity. It suggests that Delano's mid-century successors were commencing not merely a species of “inquisition” but

also an “Alexandrian” quest for world dominion. More importantly, it also suggests that this quest was likely to fail, for rather than unraveling *or* cutting his own Gordian knot, a befuddled Delano simply hands it to an elderly Negro who drops it overboard (p. 183). Delano is obviously no Alexander; nor was America's imperialist future particularly bright.

And why not? Proponents of Manifest Destiny were confident, of course, that Anglo-Saxon “energy” would inevitably triumph where Celtic “feebleness” had failed. So does the “dynamic” Delano patronize the “weak” Cereno. Yet Melville subverts the Anglo-Saxon cause by comparing the Spanish captain to both “an invalid courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague” and “that timid King,” James the First of England (pp. 137, 206). These similes imply that Anglo-Saxons are as capable of “weakness” as anyone else—simply because weakness is a matter of individual personality and situation rather than a matter of race. Delano eventually learns, for example, that Cereno's “impotence” resulted not from his race but from his life-threatening predicament and the stresses he had undergone for a period of many weeks. Moreover, Delano's discovery is historically important: Melville's reference to the “retiring” Charles V (p. 126) extends his analysis of Cereno to a “decrepit” Spain, suffering, by 1855, not from racial enervation but from a profound fatigue caused by her protracted and ultimately futile attempt to conquer the world for Catholicism. In other words, if Spain, like Cereno, was “tottering” in 1855, that was chiefly because of her historical situation, one that might have “weakened” any nation, and one that might yet “tire” America herself.

For though mid-century Americans felt competent to end the “anarchy and misrule” prevalent in Cuba, Mexico, and other neighboring states, they failed to appreciate the moral and managerial difficulties involved—those very difficulties which had finally “exhausted” Spain. One obstacle to the establishment of “order” was human depravity, a general tendency to wrongdoing that Spanish Catholicism (and the Inquisition in particular) had sought in vain to subdue. Delano assumes that Cereno's ineffectualness has produced the confusion aboard his ship, but from reading Cereno's deposition, we conclude that the barbarity of man was more to blame: an evil (slavery) having been perpetrated on Babo's blacks, they brutally responded in kind. Melville apparently believed that any nation which presumed itself able to “govern” large segments of an unregenerate mankind was hopelessly naive. Apparently he also believed that Americans overlooked certain socioeconomic obstacles standing in the way of Latin American “redemption,” for he informs us that physical conditions on the *San Dominick* were another cause of the chaos on board, as thirst, for instance, heightened the restlessness of Babo's blacks (p. 251). Earlier Melville explained that “in armies, navies, cities, or families, in nature herself, nothing more relaxes good order than misery” (p. 122), a truth to be pondered by an America happily planning to “arrange” the affairs of Latin America's “miserable” masses. Summarizing his own case, Cereno eventually insists that “events have not been favorable to much order in my arrangements” (p. 199): the disarray of his vessel is to be blamed, that is, not on his failings as a commander but on the history of that vessel, a direful scenario of savagery and suffering. The related message for Melville's readers? Spain could not be held primarily responsible for the deteriorating condition of her empire. Moreover, a blithe America, determined to “stabilize” the western hemisphere, might be in for a surprise.

American expansionists, however, would have raised one final objection to Melville's dismal forecast, feeling sure that “elect” Americans, whether “energetic” or not, would surely outperform the disciples of the Antichrist. For just as Delano assumes that he is under the protection of “some one above” (p. 184), so did many nineteenth-century Americans feel themselves chosen by a God that had befriended their Puritan forefathers to exert a moral and political hegemony over the other peoples of the earth. Explaining America's election racially, the author of “Annexation” declared that “an instinct in the human soul, deeper than the wisdom of politics, more powerful than the sceptres of states, impels the [Teutonic] people on, to the accomplishment of that high destiny which Providence has plainly reserved for our race.”[39]

Yet in “Benito Cereno” Melville challenges the truth of such assertions by again invoking the example of Spain. In particular, he asks his compatriots to recall that Spanish Catholics once had an exceptionally firm faith in *their* heavenly commission—yet that faith was evidently misplaced. Cereno's deposition describes a

jewel, unmentioned in Melville's source, which is said to have been found on the body of Don Joaquin after his death at the hands of Delano's myopic Americans. Joaquin intended this jewel "for the shrine of our Lady of Mercy in Lima; a votive offering, beforehand prepared and guarded, to attest his gratitude, when he should have landed in Peru, his last destination, for the safe conclusion of his entire voyage from Spain" (p. 263). However, like the drowned Juan Robles, who dies "making acts of contrition" (p. 254), Joaquin seems a man whose "Popish" divinities have deserted him—in the same way as they seemed to desert those Spanish Catholics who were forced to watch their mighty moral and political edifice crumble into fragments during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, Melville suggests that what happened once might well happen again—this time to an overly assured America. As the author's final dialogue reveals, Delano's heirs had substituted a favorable "Providence" for Joaquin's "Lady of Mercy" and Cereno's "Prince of Heaven" (p. 266), but the facile assumption of divine patronage was the same; and however blessed Americans might feel in 1855, there would likely come a day when all blessings would end.

While a complacent America saw herself, then, as specially selected to succeed a weak nation cursed with an inferior religion, Melville viewed Spain's troubled history as eminently predictive of America's own. And while Americans saw themselves as riding the wave of history toward a moral and political millennium, Melville noted only their deplorable tendency to reduplicate the past. The author of "Cuba" closed by celebrating "the essential progress of mankind" and America's exemplary role in furthering that progress:

> The extension of empire by Conquest will soon be superseded by the irrepressible desire of states to become united to each other by the New Law of Annexation. This is already inspiring no inconsiderable proportion of the inhabitants of every nation on this continent to become an integral part of our own great Republic. The history of the future will be, in a continually increasing degree, a detail of the rapid operation of this principle [of Annexation], until the world shall be completely united and bound together by the tracks of its intercommunication, the combination of its interests, the sympathies of its intelligence, and the unity and oneness of its hopes; and the last triumph which is ordered by Providence, has realization in the dawn of that period when all the nations of the earth shall be as One People.[40]

For this author, American expansion into the Caribbean was but a phase in man's ineluctable movement toward the establishment of a political utopia; he illustrates the forward-looking optimism of Melville's contemporaries, who chose, with Amasa Delano, to "forget" (p. 267) a problematical past, viewing it as irrelevant to their own glorious future. To Melville, however, the course of human history seemed less pleasantly "progressive," more grimly repetitious; to him, "past, present, and future seemed one" (p. 236). "*Follow your leader,*" whisper Aranda's bleached bones to the American invader (p. 239). "Follow your leader!" shouts Delano's mate in reply (p. 244). Melville's countrymen might assert their moral superiority to the Spanish, but to Melville, eyeing American motives and methods, the imperialistic resemblance was clear. And Americans might also propose to evade the Spanish fate; but Melville saw a single destiny as "manifest" for America, and that was to follow the Spanish lead—to join at last the nonselect company of nations gone by.

Six years earlier, in *Mardi,* Melville had likewise lectured an overconfident America, disguising his views as those of an anonymous pamphleteer:

> "In these boisterous days, the lessons of history are almost discarded, as superseded by present experiences. And that while all Mardi's Present has grown out of its Past, it is becoming obsolete to refer to what has been. Yet, peradventure, the Past is an apostle.
>
> "The grand error of this age, sovereign-kings! is the general supposition, that the very special Diabolus is abroad; whereas, the very special Diabolus has been abroad ever since Mardi

began.

> "And the grand error of your nation, sovereign-kings! seems this:—The conceit that Mardi is now in the last scene of the last act of her drama; and that all preceding events were ordained, to bring about the catastrophe you believe to be at hand,—a universal and permanent Republic.
>
> "May it please you, those who hold to these things are fools, and not wise.
>
> "Time is made up of various ages; and each thinks its own a novelty. But imbedded in the walls of the pyramids, which outrun all chronologies, sculptured stones are found, belonging to yet older fabrics."[41]

At the considerable expense of Amasa Delano, "Benito Cereno" advances a similar thesis, eschewing all manner of millennial optimism while exposing both the "grand errors" of the contemporary American mind and the "diabolic" permanences of human history. Intensely topical and deeply political, the tale launches a powerful assault on the principal assumptions of Manifest Destiny. Yet in its profound awareness of past, present, and future, it also shares with the "largest" of Melville's works the merit of tragic timelessness.

Notes

1. See "*Moby-Dick* and American Political Symbolism," *American Quarterly,* 15 (1963), 498-534.
2. See Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983), pp. 102-51; and Duban, *Melville's Major Fiction: Politics, Theology, and Imagination* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 82-148.
3. See Heimert, "*Moby-Dick* and American Political Symbolism," pp. 499-502.
4. See Allan Moore Emery, "The Political Significance of Melville's Chimney," *New England Quarterly,* 55 (1982), 201-28.
5. For treatments of politics in *Mardi,* see Merrell R. Davis, *Melville's "Mardi": A Chartless Voyage,* Yale Studies in English, Vol. 119 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1952), pp. 156-59; and Duban, *Melville's Major Fiction,* pp. 11-30.
6. For example, see Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy,* pp. 208-20.
7. The subject of slavery arises "secondarily" in "Benito Cereno" as a result of Melville's concern with expansionism (see pp. 54-55) and his interest in human depravity. See also Allan Moore Emery, "The Topicality of Depravity in 'Benito Cereno,'" *American Literature,* 55 (1983), 316-31.
8. Among the many critics of "Benito Cereno," only Marvin Fisher has noted this emphasis; see his *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 111-13. See also Robert Lowell's stage version of "Benito Cereno" in *The Old Glory,* rev. ed. (New York: Farrar, 1968), pp. 139-214; though Lowell appreciates only a part of Melville's anti-expansionist message, his overall "reading" of "Benito Cereno" is admirably on target.
9. See Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 87.
10. See "Cuba," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine,* Jan. 1853, pp. 5, 10, 13-16. The author of "What Impression Do We, and Should We, Make Abroad?" *Putnam's,* Oct. 1853, pp. 345-54, similarly contrasted a "young, fresh, and surpassingly vigorous" United States with such "exhausted" nations as Spain (p. 350).
11. "Annexation," *Putnam's,* Feb. 1854, p. 191.
12. See Amasa Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World; together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery, in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands* (1817; rpt. New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 318, 322-23.

13. “Benito Cereno,” in *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), pp. 113-14; hereafter citations in my text are to this edition. Melville's tale originally appeared in the numbers of *Putnam's* for October, November, and December of 1855.
14. For discussion of the *San Dominick* as symbolic of Spain, see Stanley T. Williams, “‘Follow Your Leader’: Melville's ‘Benito Cereno,’” *Virginia Quarterly Review,* 23 (1947), 61-76; Richard Harter Fogle, “The Monk and the Bachelor: Melville's *Benito Cereno,*” *Tulane Studies in English,* 3 (1952), 155-78, rpt. in Fogle's *Melville's Shorter Tales* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1960), pp. 116-47; H. Bruce Franklin, “‘Apparent Symbol of Despotic Command’: Melville's *Benito Cereno,*” *New England Quarterly,* 34 (1961), 462-77, rpt. in Franklin's *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 136-50; and Fisher, *Going Under.*
15. Melville's use of Lima to typify this empire may have been encouraged by the author of “Lima and the Limanians,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine,* Oct. 1851, pp. 598-609, who viewed Lima's decline as symptomatic of Spain's (p. 598), and who wistfully recalled the glorious days of the viceroys (pp. 599, 608). Melville's early allusion in “Benito Cereno” to “a Lima intriguante's one sinister eye peering across the Plaza from the Indian loop-hole of her dusk *saya-y-manta*” (p. 111) and his later mention of Lima's “Plaza” and “Rimac bridge” (p. 270) further suggest he may have seen the “Lima” article, which contained accounts of both the *saya* and Lima's architectural features (pp. 602-5, 606-8). Melville's first mention of the *saya* (by name) occurs in *Pierre* (1852), which he was writing at the time the “Lima” article appeared; see *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities,* Vol. 7 of *The Writings of Herman Melville,* ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and Newberry Library, 1970), p. 149. Moreover, Melville's own “Town-Ho's Story” appeared in the same number of *Harper's* as the “Lima” article, making his familiarity with that number more likely. For Melville's acquaintance with *Harper's* (to which he subscribed), see Sealts, *Melville's Reading,* p. 64.
16. Delano's view may owe something to the author of “Lima and the Limanians,” who described Lima's Spanish Creoles as evincing “a look of premature age; as though the powers of nature were exhausted, and insufficient to develop a vigorous manhood” (p. 601). The nearby drawing of an “indolent” Peruvian (p. 600) might almost be a snapshot of Cereno.
17. Melville was at times a careful stylist. The parenthesis in this sentence slyly underlines Delano's “takeover” of the *San Dominick* while seeming only to clarify pronoun reference.
18. See Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels,* pp. 326-27.
19. The pirate Ambrose Cowley, cited as a Galapagos authority in Melville's “The Encantadas” (1854), was captain of the *Bachelor's Delight.* See *The Piazza Tales,* p. 329; and Robert Albrecht, “The Thematic Unity of Melville's ‘The Encantadas,’” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 14 (1972), 465*n.* In *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels* Delano's boat had no name (see pp. 323-25). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* “rover” was the standard euphemism for pirate throughout the nineteenth century. See, for example, the use of the term in Fenimore Cooper's *The Red Rover* (1828), which Melville reviewed for the *Literary World* in 1850 (Sealts, *Melville's Reading,* p. 53). The original Delano was accused of being a pirate by an ungrateful Cereno (*A Narrative of Voyages and Travels,* p. 329); this detail may have helped to inspire Melville's christenings.
20. “Cuba,” p. 13.
21. See “Cuba,” p. 15; and “Annexation,” p. 191. See also “What Impression Do We, and Should We, Make Abroad?” p. 345.
22. This suggestion also appears in *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither,* Vol. 3 of *The Writings of Herman Melville,* ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and Newberry Library, 1970), where hieroglyphics on the archway of Vivenza (an isle representing America) proclaim: “In this republican land all men are born free and equal. … except the tribe of Hamo” (pp. 512, 513).
23. Melville's source reports merely that Cereno gave Delano's hand “a hearty squeeze” (p. 324), no reference being made to Babo.

24. See “Cuba,” p. 16; and “Annexation,” pp. 184, 187, 191.
25. Many critics have opposed Delano as representative of the New World to Cereno as representative of the Old; yet only a handful have sensed that Melville meant an aspiring America and declining Spain to be compared as well as contrasted. See Margaret M. Vanderhaar, “A Re-Examination of ‘Benito Cereno,’” *American Literature,* 40 (1968), 179-91; Ray B. Browne, *Melville's Drive to Humanism* (Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue Univ. Studies, 1971), pp. 168-88; Joyce Adler, “Melville's *Benito Cereno*: Slavery and Violence in the Americas,” *Science and Society,* 38 (1974), 19-48, rpt. in Joyce Sparer Adler's *War in Melville's Imagination* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 88-110; Paul D. Johnson, “American Innocence and Guilt: Black-White Destiny in ‘Benito Cereno,’” *Phylon,* 36 (1975), 426-34; and Kermit Vanderbilt, “‘Benito Cereno’: Melville's Fable of Black Complicity,” *Southern Review,* 12 (1976), 311-22. According to these critics, Melville believed America was following the lead of Spain in refusing to extirpate slavery from the New World. Edgar A. Dryden and Marvin Fisher alone appreciate Melville's emphasis on the more general similarities between American and Spanish imperialism. See Dryden, *Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), pp. 199-209; and Fisher, *Going Under,* pp. 111-13.
26. The author of “Lima and the Limanians” made special mention of the Inquisition, lamenting the former use made in Lima of “racks, pillories, scourges, gags, thumbscrews, and other instruments of torture” (p. 608). The excesses of the Inquisition were also described in Giacinto Achilli's *Dealings with the Inquisition; or, Papal Rome, her Priests, and her Jesuits, with Important Disclosures* (New York: Harper, 1851), a work briefly reviewed in the *Literary World,* 24 May 1851, p. 417; and in *Harper's,* June 1851, p. 139. Sealts describes Melville's acquaintance with the *Literary World* in *Melville's Reading,* p. 75. For other evidence of American anti-Catholic feeling, see the jaundiced account of “The Holy Week at Rome” in *Harper's,* June, July, August 1854, pp. 20-32, 158-71, 317-27. See also “Should We Fear the Pope?” *Putnam's,* June 1855, pp. 650-59, though this article could not have influenced “Benito Cereno,” since it appeared after Melville's tale was composed; see Sealts, “The Chronology of Melville's Short Fiction, 1853-1856,” in *Pursuing Melville, 1940-1980* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 231.
27. See Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 380-436. Billington notes that the Massachusetts legislature elected in the fall of 1854 was “almost entirely” composed of Know-Nothings; the governor of the state was also a Party member (pp. 412-15). Melville's familiarity with the Know-Nothings is implied by his reference in “Benito Cereno” to the “silent signs, of some Freemason sort,” which pass at one point between Cereno and a Spanish sailor (p. 158); a *Putnam's* article of January 1855 had portrayed the Know-Nothings as the “secretive” heirs of Freemasonry. See “Secret Societies—The Know Nothings,” *Putnam's,* Jan. 1855, pp. 88-97.
28. For discussions of this allusive pattern, see Williams, “‘Follow Your Leader’”; Fogle, “The Monk and the Bachelor”; William Bysshe Stein, “The Moral Axis of ‘Benito Cereno,’” *Accent,* 15 (1955), 221-33; Franklin, “‘Apparent Symbol of Despotic Command’”; John Bernstein, “*Benito Cereno* and the Spanish Inquisition,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 16 (1962), 345-50; William T. Pilkington, “‘Benito Cereno’ and the American National Character,” *Discourse,* 8 (1965), 49-63; David D. Galloway, “Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*: An Anatomy,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 9 (1967), 239-52; Kingsley Widmer, “The Perplexity of Melville: *Benito Cereno,*” *Studies in Short Fiction,* 5 (1968), 225-38, rpt. in Widmer's *The Ways of Nihilism: A Study of Herman Melville's Short Novels* (Los Angeles: California State Colleges, 1970), pp. 59-90; Charles Nicol, “The Iconography of Evil and Ideal in ‘Benito Cereno,’” *American Transcendental Quarterly,* No. 7 (1970), pp. 25-31; Charles R. Metzger, “Melville's Saints: Allusion in *Benito Cereno,*” *ESQ,* 58 (1970), 88-90; Mason I. Lowance, Jr., “Veils and Illusion in *Benito Cereno,*” *Arizona Quarterly,* 26 (1970), 113-26; Bernard Rosenthal, “Melville's Island,” *Studies in Short Fiction,* 11 (1974), 1-9; R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 100-108; William B. Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction, 1853-1856* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia

Press, 1977), pp. 227-70; Thomas D. Zlatic, "'Benito Cereno': Melville's 'Back-Handed-Well-Knot,'" *Arizona Quarterly,* 34 (1978), 327-43; and Gloria Horsley-Meacham, "The Monastic Slaver: Images and Meaning in 'Benito Cereno,'" *New England Quarterly,* 56 (1983), 261-66. While offering provocative interpretations of Melville's imagery, these critics fail to consider the "topical" reasons for Melville's concern with Catholicism.

29. An exercise in the "inquisitorial" mode, "Benito Cereno" begins, in fact, with a moral investigation and ends with sworn testimonies, judicial findings, sentencing, and the administering of punishment.
30. For discussions of Melville's emphasis on moral ambiguity, see Rosalie Feltenstein, "Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *American Literature,* 19 (1947), 245-55; Fogle, "The Monk and the Bachelor"; Guy A. Cardwell, "Melville's Gray Story: Symbols and Meaning in 'Benito Cereno,'" *Bucknell Review,* 8 (1959), 154-67; Galloway, "Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*: An Anatomy"; Lowance, "Veils and Illusion in *Benito Cereno*"; Ruth B. Mandel, "The Two Mystery Stories in *Benito Cereno,*" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 14 (1973), 631-42; and Zlatic, "'Benito Cereno': Melville's 'Back-Handed-Well-Knot.'"
31. Neither episode appears in Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels.*
32. See Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels,* pp. 318, 319, 320, 323, et passim.
33. The original Delano was merely shocked by the Spaniard's lack of authority and miffed at his coldness; see *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels,* pp. 323-24.
34. See Emery's discussion of this subject in "The Topicality of Depravity in 'Benito Cereno,'" pp. 318-19.
35. See *Cosas de España; or, Going to Madrid via Barcelona* (New York: Redfield, 1855); and "Cosas de España," *Putnam's,* May 1854, pp. 482-93; June 1854, pp. 583-93; July 1854, pp. 14-21; and Nov. 1854, pp. 518-24. The author of both the articles and the book was John Milton Mackie, who remained anonymous to his readers. The first *Putnam's* excerpt appeared in a number of the magazine containing a portion of Melville's "Encantadas"; the final two excerpts shared *Putnam's* numbers with segments of *Israel Potter.* In his "Chronology of Melville's Short Fiction, 1853-1856," Sealts suggests that "Benito Cereno" was "probably composed during the winter of 1854-1855" (p. 401); thus Melville could have seen the *Putnam's* articles, but not Mackie's book, prior to the writing of his tale.
36. See "Cosas de España," *Putnam's,* May 1854, pp. 482-84.
37. "Cosas de España," *Putnam's,* May 1854, p. 483; the italics are Mackie's own.
38. The episode does not appear in Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels.*
39. "Annexation," p. 191.
40. "Cuba," p. 16.
41. *Mardi,* pp. 524-25. In *White-Jacket* (1850), on the other hand, Melville attacked the American navy's practice of flogging by insisting that a depraved past need furnish no precedent for an elect America. "The Past is dead," he wrote, "and has no resurrection; but the Future is endowed with such a life, that it lives to us even in anticipation. … We Americans are driven to a rejection of the maxims of the Past, seeing that, ere long, the van of the nations must, of right, belong to ourselves." Melville then waxed Hebraic: "We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. Seventy years ago we escaped from thrall; and, besides our first birth-right—embracing one continent of earth—God has given to us, for a future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans, that shall yet come and lie down under the shade of our ark, without bloody hands being lifted. God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls." See *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War,* Vol. 5 of *The Writings of Herman Melville,* ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and Newberry Library, 1970), pp. 150-51. Apparently, however, such views—eminently characteristic of Delano and his expansionist heirs—were a passing product of Melville's polemical urge, his revulsion at flogging and fervent desire for its abolition, rather than a symptom of his continuing confidence in American "specialness"; for both *Mardi* and *Benito Cereno* carefully contradict the thesis of the *White-Jacket* passage.

Criticism: Jon Hauss (essay date 1988)

SOURCE: “Masquerades of Language in Melville's *Benito Cereno,*” in *Arizona Quarterly,* Vol. 44, No. 2, Summer, 1988, pp. 5-21.

[*In the following essay, Hauss probes the link between language and political oppression in “Benito Cereno.”*]

> … the principle relic of faded grandeur was the ample oval of the shield-like stern-piece, intricately carved with the arms of Castille and Leon, medallioned about by groups of mythological or symbolical devices; uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked.[1]

This image, on the stern of the Spanish slave-ship in Melville's “Benito Cereno,” focuses the central subject of Melville's story—masquerade. At the same time, it embodies the story's central insights. Masquerades, constructed of various “mythological and symbolical devices,” are enacted to shield structures of social control. The stern-piece, “medallioned about” with such devices, is a large oval described as “shield-like.” The “devices” on the stern-piece revolve explicitly around an emblem of the Spanish state—the “arms of Castile and Leon.” But the masked figures on which this passage finally focuses broaden the context of masquerade to include all hierarchical struggles between oppressor and oppressed. The first figure, “in a mask,” holds “his foot on the prostrate neck” of the second figure, “likewise masked.”

Melville's story is filled with physical forms of masquerade—elaborate costumes and props, as well as theatrical gestures and fixed poses. But the central form of masquerade examined by, and ultimately dominating, the text is linguistic. Ostensibly organized as a mystery tale, so that the reader is enlisted in a search for the “true” story of the San Dominick, “Benito Cereno” ends, not by unravelling that story in some final form, but by entangling story after story, each a kind of masquerade, into a complex narrative knot. The languages that enmesh Melville's text are those of its principle characters—Babo, Delano, and Benito Cereno. Critics have attempted, in various ways, to strike through this mask of languages to some hidden truth within. But to do so is to strike past, and ignore, the story's greatest achievements. Ultimately, “Benito Cereno” communicates no truth beyond its linguistic masquerades, but a few truths about them.

Each is used to guard a social hierarchy. Babo's language takes two forms, both of which enact masquerades that guard a newly-won hierarchy of blacks over Spaniards. Delano's language enacts as masquerade that shields what he considers a cross-cultural hierarchy of whites over blacks. Cereno's language, like Babo's, enacts two masquerades, one of them impressed on him to guard black power, the other enacted for the Spanish court (which hegemonizes and sanctifies his words in the form of the “deposition”) to shield a hierarchy of Spaniards over blacks.

All these languages twist and interweave through Melville's narrative, as both its overwhelming substance, and central subject. As Carolyn Karcher has pointed out, “Benito Cereno” is not “primarily a dramatization of slave revolt.”[2] Melville's text dramatizes not revolt itself, but a series of linguistic masquerades subsequent to it. If the reader chooses, like the black who takes the old sailor's knot from Delano, to “[ferret] into it like a detective Customs House officer after smuggled laces” (76), he will be disappointed. With “some African word, equivalent to pshaw,” the black tosses the knot overboard. But the interwoven knot is interesting in itself.

William Charvatt's studies of Melville's relationship with the American reading public opened up a much-needed discussion of Melville's use of linguistic disguise and concealment—what I would call linguistic masquerade. Charvatt suggests that Melville followed Hawthorne's lead in using a language calculated—as

Melville described Hawthorne's prose—to "egregiously deceive the superficial skimmer of pages."[3]

Marvin Fisher carries Charvatt's conception of Melville's language into his discussion of "Benito Cereno." Fisher suggests that Melville "smuggled in" certain banned truths about the black slave under "the account of the consequences of a slave rebellion at sea."[4] Fisher says that, in "Benito Cereno," Melville communicates "an image of a negro leader," Babo, who is both "a militant spokesman for what are now called … Third World views"[5] and "the most fully developed example of manhood in the story."[6]

Both Charvatt and Fisher have rightly emphasized Melville's awareness of language's potential for masquerade. But I argue that linguistic masquerade so completely dominates "Benito Cereno"—as well as such other late works as "Bartleby, the Scrivener," and *The Confidence Man*—that no final truth is ever smuggled in beneath that masquerade. The figure of Babo, for example, is so thoroughly mediated by partisan languages that we can no more call him "the most fully developed example of manhood in the story," than we can call him, with Newton Arvin, "a monster out of Gothic fiction."[7]

In contrast to Fisher's optimism about hidden messages beneath the linguistic masquerades of Melville's story, Edgar A. Dryden has argued that the world of "Benito Cereno" is one "composed entirely of surfaces," the background for which is "blank."[8] Michael Rogin likewise sees in the story a grim preponderance of masquerade. Rogin says that "the visible and deepest subject of Melville's tale is the inability of its characters to break free."[9] I would like to extend Rogin's insight into the text's domination by masquerade to a discussion of the text's domination specifically by masquerades of language.

Babo first appears to the reader in the guise of a humble servant, speaking a language which Captain Delano considers, for the most part, appropriate to the slave's position. We later learn that Babo's language is a conscious masquerade, guarding the successful subversion of master-slave relations. But the deposition reveals that Babo's use of language in these scenes is preceded by another use of language, prior to Delano's appearance on the San Dominick. In these earlier scenes, Babo uses a language carefully selected and integrated with a symbolic device—the ship's skeleton figurehead—to create a complete masquerade consolidating black rule of the ship:

> to keep the seamen in subjection, he wanted to prepare a warning of what road they should be made to take did they … oppose him.

(106)

That warning is the skeleton of Don Aranda, attached as a new figurehead to the ship. The ship's former figurehead was an image of Christopher Columbus, emblem of Spanish colonial dominion and part of a whole system of "devices," including the Spanish flag, uniforms, swords and sashes, guarding the hierarchy of Spanish civilization. In place of this figurehead, Babo sets up an emblem which associates whiteness with death, and implicitly contrasts the enervation and impotence of whites with the palable vigor and virility of the new black leaders.

Babo interprets this emblem to the Spaniards with a peculiarly organized language. The first words credited to Babo during his rule of the San Dominick begin to weave this emblem into a kind of black state religion. Having brought Cereno to look on the skeleton for the first time,

> the negro Babo asked him whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's; … upon discovering his face, the negro Babo, coming close, said words to this effect: "Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader," pointing to the prow; … the same morning the negro Babo took by succession each Spaniard forward, and asked him whose skeleton that was, and

> whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's … each Spaniard covered his face; … then to each the negro Babo repeated the words in the first place said to the deponent.

(107)

I quote this passage at length to illustrate Babo's schematic, even ritualistic, use of language. H. Bruce Franklin notes the parallel between the San Dominick's blacks and the representatives of the Spanish Catholic Church.[10] The parallel is instructive in this context. Babo is using language to create, around a new icon, a new "faith." To inculcate this faith, Babo puts each Spaniard through what can only be called a catechism, haranguing them with a language which makes of their "whiteness" a symbol of their defeat. Babo's signification of whiteness becomes a mask which the Spaniards wear within his hierarchy. They are threatened with death, should they disturb that hierarchy by failing to "keep faith with the blacks"; and that threat is encapsulated in a metaphoric slogan. Babo scrawls the last words of his catechism, "Follow your leader," beneath the ship's skeleton figurehead.

Babo's emerging network of language and symbol must suddenly, however, be supplanted by another. Upon encountering the Bachelor's Delight in the harbour of Santa Maria, Babo "straightaway … ordered the figure on the bow to be covered with canvas … and had the decks a little set in order" (109). The "order" Babo revives at this point is the same that had previously enslaved him, though with a new meaning. He reinstitutes the masquerade of white superiority which the blacks have just undermined. Like the masquerade of the new "faith" which he must now conceal, this masquerade is composed of both physical and linguistic emblems. Babo uses "the device of presenting Atufal … as chained" (109). Cereno becomes a lavishly costumed actor under Babo's exacting direction, and Babo keeps him in proper trim, forever stooping to polish a buckle or straighten a sleeve. At the close of the famous shaving scene, Delano notes that Babo surveys Cereno as, "in toilet at least, the creature of his own tasteful hands" (87).

Delano does not notice, of course, that Cereno is Babo's "creature" in more than this respect. Babo controls, not only Cereno's costume, but his dialogue as well. Babo is careful to unite the costumes and stage-props of his masquerade with a controlled language—the "fictitious story, dictated to [Cereno] by Babo, and through [Cereno] imposed upon Captain Delano" (110). The deposition states that Babo "understands well the Spanish" (110). The curious phrasing blurs Babo's knowledge of the Spanish people with his knowledge of their language, indirectly equating social with linguistic structures. Babo extends his mastery of Spanish to a domination of its usage. Contriving and enforcing a usage that shields a revolutionary restructuring of Spanish society, Babo turns the Spaniards' own language against them.

Cereno is instructed "what story he was to tell on every occasion" (109). He is warned that if he utters "any word … that should give the least intimation of the past events or present state, [Babo] would instantly kill him" (109). Babo, and other blacks likewise versed in Spanish, are stationed about the ship as policemen of the "invented story." The Spaniards are imprisoned by it, since it precludes any speech which might liberate them by communicating their oppression to Delano. The Spaniards struggle persistently but hopelessly to circumvent the story. The deposition states that "attempts were made by the sailors … to convey hints to [Delano] of the true state of affairs; but … these attempts were ineffectual … owing to the devices" which Babo has arranged (112). When a Spanish ship-boy speaks "some chance word" of his hopes of release, he is struck with a knife (113). His word has ventured outside the enforced fiction to give voice to an emotion denied by the fiction.

In the scene of the intricate knot, the old sailor mutters to Delano

> in broken English,—the first heard in the ship,—something to this effect—"Undo it, cut it, quick." It was said lowly, but with such condensation of rapidity, that the long, slow words in Spanish, which had preceded and followed, almost operated as covers to the brief English

between.

(76)

The scene concretely embodies the theme of language as an imprisoning masquerade. In apparent desperation, the old sailor tries to sneak a banned language, English, between the “covers” of the enforced language, Spanish. His effort fails. Babo's “devices” present too many contradictions to his strange plea for the plea to be comprehensible. The sailor is dismissed as “simple-witted.” As we later learn, he is “made away with” for his attempt to speak another language than that enforced by the blacks.

When Delano steps aboard the San Dominick, he steps directly onto the stage of Babo's masquerade. Yet he feels at ease within it precisely insofar as the masquerade is controlled and comprehensive. Perhaps the most important thing to understand about Delano is his active search for masquerades that affirm his sense of proper hierarchy, and his willful confidence in them, once discovered. The narrative stresses the sense of artificiality with which the San Dominick is pervaded on Delano's approach. It seems “unreal,” a world of “strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep” (50). But while this appearance is distinctly unsettling to Delano, his unease centers more around the fact that no familiar masquerade yet dominates the stage than that these masquerades may be deceptive.

On the ship's first appearance in harbor, Delano searches through his glass to find the “colors” denoting the ship's origin. Aboard the ship, he peers through its “indiscriminate multitude” in search of one in the distinctive dress denoting command of the ship. He looks anxiously for both “costumes” and “gestures,” for appropriate clothing, as well as a stooping servility in the blacks and a proud bearing in the Spaniards. Far from striving to pierce through surface images, suspicious about what is underneath, Delano actively searches out familiar images to put his mind at rest.

His search is soon gratified by the appearance of a “gentlemanly, reserved-looking … man … dressed with singular richness,” Benito Cereno (51). At Cereno's side is Babo, wearing “nothing but wide trowsers” (57). The two proceed to perform for Delano the roles of master and servant, with desired effect:

> Captain Delano could not but bethink him of the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other. The scene was heightened by the contrast in dress, denoting their relative positions.

(57)

For Delano, of course, this is more than mere “spectacle.” Their gestures, costumes, and dialogue are the visible signs of a hierarchical truth.[11] Their dress does not disguise, but “denot[es] their relative positions”; their performance is the outward evidence of a hierarchy overseen finally, as is the chained figure of Atufal in a later passage, by “the ever-watchful Providence above” (97).

Delano curiously assumes that these costumes and gestures are controlled by superiors in the hierarchy. Thus, when he has noted both the lock on Atufal's chains and the key suspended from Cereno's neck, he smiles and remarks, “So, Don Benito—padlock and key—significant symbols truly” (63), imagining Cereno thereby meant to signify his power over the slave. Conversely, Delano is annoyed when Cereno seems inadequate to control the gestures of his slaves. When the Spanish ship-boy is slashed by a black, Delano remarks indignantly, “Had such a thing happened on board the Bachelor's Delight, instant punishment would have followed” (59).

Delano assumes that superiors should enjoy a similar control of language—of linguistic as well as physical symbols. Babo has done well, therefore, to put his story in the mouth of Cereno. Greeted, upon boarding the

ship, by “a clamorous throng of whites and blacks,” who pour out “as with one voice,” undifferentiated by race or class, a “common tale of suffering” (49), Delano “turned in quest of whomsoever it might be that commanded the ship” (51). Beyond what critics have identified as the American captain's condescension to the Spaniard's old world ways,[12] Delano approaches Cereno as a “brother captain,” (52) from whom “the best account” of the San Dominick “would, doubtless be given” (54). Delano's activities aboard the San Dominick consist largely, amid various interruptions, of his prodding Cereno for “further details” of the ship's story. Disappointingly, of course, Delano's chosen authority has a voice “like that of one with lungs half gone—hoarsely suppressed, a husky whisper” (52). Cereno seems “an undemonstrative invalid … apathetic and mute,” (53) leaving Delano, at one point, with the disquieting suspicion that Cereno possesses “little of command but the name” (59).

Babo, to Delano's mind, has no rightful involvement in the dialogue of captains. When Delano would discuss the San Dominick's finances with Cereno, he wants Babo to withdraw. Gesturing toward the black, he tells Cereno, “there is an interference with the full expression of what I have to say to you” (90). When Cereno responds that Babo is “in all things his confidant,” Delano feels “some little tinge of irritation.” Similarly, when Babo presumes to expound upon Atufal's kingship, Delano is “annoyed with these conversational familiarities” (63). In the various episodes in which Babo and Cereno move aside to confer privately, Delano is doubly irritated. Their whispered words escape his personal control, and the confidential manner of their conference undermines the distinction, affirmed by their dress, of “their relative positions.” Babo's familiarity with Cereno should remain explicitly “menial,” not “conversational.” Tellingly, Delano's first fond impression of Babo sees him gazing up at the Spaniard “mutely” (51).

If Babo wishes to speak, he should do so in a language authorized by his superiors. Ostensibly taking command of the ship to get it back in harbor, Delano stands on the poop-deck, “issuing his orders in his best Spanish” (92). Suddenly, he notices “a voice faithfully repeating” his words, rising from beneath him. It is Babo, “acting, under the pilot, his original part of captain of the slaves” by echoing Delano's words to the throng of blacks. Ignorant that the authority rests in Babo's voice, not his own, Delano finds the arrangement “valuable.” Delano's perception of the scene is a concise image of the relation to privileged language he expects Babo to have.

On the poop-deck, Delano assumes a captain's control of speech. But it is especially in the private language of Delano's mind that we see this white captain guarding a social hierarchy with words.

Typically, he labels the blacks as dull-minded menials, or as harmless or domesticated animals. In unguarded moments, Delano “start[s] at the occasional cymballing of the hatchet-polishers,” and passes them “with an apprehensive twitch in the calves of his legs” (58-59). But Delano's language soon recontains their threat. The hatchet-polishers become, on second glance, “so many organ-grinders”; the oakum-pickers, “bed-ridden old knitting-women” (69). Babo is “like a shepherd's dog” (51). The blacks squatting under the inverted long-boat are “a social circle of bats, sheltering in some friendly cave” (81). A black baby at its mother's breast is a “fawn” with hands “like two paws”; its mother, “a doe” (73). All the blacks aboard are Cereno's “flock of black sheep” (60).

Delano's words halt the blacks in static poses. Each degrading label works exactly like the word of reproof Delano utters, with “a half-mirthful, half-menacing gesture,” while he oversees the hauling-in of the water casks: “Instantly the blacks paused … each negro and negress suspended in his or her posture, exactly as the word had found them” (79). Delano's interior language works restlessly and continually to freeze the blacks in a subordinate “posture” within a white-dominated hierarchy, and to seal out all humanized images of the black. Hence, the “revelation” that comes to Delano amid the sudden chaos aboard his Rover, is finally anything but a revelation. It is a critical and terrifying moment for Delano, not because it reveals to him a new truth about the blacks, contradicting his animalistic masking of them, but because it threatens to do so, and thereby to bring the masquerade he has helped create crashing down around him.

The photographic image of Delano, standing erect “while [with] his right foot” grinding the prostrate Babo against the bottom of the Rover, implicitly recalls the emblem on the San Dominick's stern-piece (99). Delano's act ossifies the tumultuous moment into a static emblem. But this emblem reveals, if only to the reader, a fundamental truth about Delano's act: masks figure in it, concealing the features of the participants in a brute struggle for dominance. The “mask torn away” in this episode is immediately and violently forced back by Delano. The escaped blacks are “cawing crows escaped from the hand of the fowler” (100). Babo is “snakishly writhing” (99). The sword-wielding blacks have “red tongues” that loll “wolf-like, from their black mouths” (102). Animals still, they have merely gone from tame to wild.

Cereno's language, like Babo's, partakes of two distinct masquerades. The first is the “fictitious story” he must tell Delano. On the journey back to Lima, after the San Dominick has been recaptured, Cereno laments to Delano:

> … you were with me all day; stood with me, sat with me, talked with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me; and yet, your last act was to clutch for a monster, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men. To such degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose. So may even the best man err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted.

(115)

The titular character of Melville's story suffers personally a political oppression guarded by masquerade. Thus, his experience goes deeper than Delano's, partaking more of the story's central insights. Cereno experiences masquerade as masquerade, knowing the fictitiousness of Babo's story even as he tells it. Furthermore, Cereno discovers the tremendous power of “machinations and deceptions” to perpetuate oppression by masking oppressor and oppressed. Despite the long close contact of their day aboard the ship, Delano mistakes Cereno, “an innocent man,” for “a monster,” just as he had initially mistaken him for true commander of the ship.

Cereno's tone in this passage is distinctly self-pitying. He characterizes his masked condition as that of “the most pitiable of all men.” But he never enlarges his self-pity to a sympathy with other oppressed groups imprisoned by masquerades. His understanding of the slave condition, despite his enforced duplication of it, is not enhanced. After his ordeal, he persists in contrasting his own “innocent” torment with the “malign” activity of the blacks. Yet, despite these limitations, Cereno's experience reveals for the reader a truth about masquerade. The mute horror of that experience—in the barbering scene, to take a single example—is perhaps the most powerful emotional undercurrent of Melville's story. It vivifies, by extension, the torment of all masked figures “with the recesses of whose condition” we are unacquainted.

But Babo's is only one of the linguistic masquerades in which Cereno speaks. “Broken in body and mind” after his ordeal, Cereno musters the strength to speak against the blacks in the Spanish Court of Lima, where his words become the substance of the deposition. In “Mars Jeem's Nightmare,” a story by the 19th century black American author, Charles Chesnutt, a white slave-owner must live the “nightmare” of the slave condition for a day. Afterward, returned to the role of master, “Mars Jeems” can swap white men's jokes about “niggers” only cynically, and with a new sense of their meaning.[13] When Cereno redeems his position in Spanish society, however, he reaffirms, with his last publicly uttered words, the old language about blacks.

Cereno speaks for the deposition, where his words are stamped with the approval of both church and state. The deposition is ordered by “His Honor, Doctor Juan Martinez de Rozas, Councilor of the Royal Audience of this Kingdom … of whom he received the oath, which he took by God, our Lord, and a sign of the Cross” (103-104). Under these twin sanctions, the slave revolt is called “crime,” “atrocity,” and “wickedness.” The deposition sanctifies this evaluative language. Warwick Wadlington has pointed out, in addition, that the

names of characters in the deposition are preceded by formulaic labels. Delano is always "the generous captain Delano," while Babo is always "the negro Babo."[14] In Melville's story, "The 'Gees," the narrator expresses annoyance with his readers for not knowing exactly what he means when he talks about "'Gees"—his diminutive and ultimately dehumanizing term for a branch of Portuguese South Sea Islanders. The story is a prolonged attempt by the narrator to statically fix what a "'Gee" is, an "inferior race" with which the narrator is "very familiar."[15] The deposition uses the word "negro" in the same style, fixing people thus labelled in a static hierarchical pose.

But the partiality of the deposition is evident in more than its evaluative language. The document strikingly cuts short the historical perspective which the structure of Melville's tale initiates. After the deposition has been delivered, the narrator remarks that "the nature of this narrative … has more or less required that many things, instead of being set down in the order of their occurrence, should be retrospectively or irregularly given" (114). The reader begins to comprehend the significance of the San Dominick's "shadowy tableau," only through the history which the deposition provides. The narrative encourages a "retrospective glance" as a method of comprehending "shadowy" experience. Yet the retrospective glance of the deposition conspicuously halts at the moment of black revolt itself.

Given this limitation, the deposition can place black revolt as the first cause in the San Dominick's tragedy. It can thereby comprehend white violence strictly as backlash against initial black violence. Thus, the white's bloody recapture of the slave ship is understood as a backlash against the blacks' "ferocious piratical revolt." Aboard the Bachelor's Delight, a Spanish sailor stabs "a shackled negro, who, the same day, with another negro, had thrown him down and jumped upon him" (114). Even Babo's horrible end—dragged through the streets of Lima, hung, decapitated, his head displayed on a pike—is, as it were, aesthetically balanced, in the deposition, against his torture and murder of Don Aranda.

The black violence of the tale is never graced with a similar retrospective understanding. The deposition tells us that the "negro Jose, … without being commanded to do so by the negro Babo, … stabbed his master, Don Alexandro, after he had been dragged half-lifeless to the deck" (111); that the black Lecbe "struck, with a hatchet, Don Francisco Masa when … he was carrying him to throw overboard" (111); that "the negresses … would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing, the Spaniards slain by command of the negro Babo" (112). The deposition presents black violence starkly, as though it were gratuitous, with no attempt at either retrospective or intrinsic understanding.[16]

The Spanish boatswain, Juan Robles, thrown overboard to drown, "in the last words he uttered," begged "mass to be said for his soul to our Lady of Succor" (107). Cereno also directs his last publicly uttered words to a Spanish institution, the court sanctioned by church and state. Outside the court's linguistic masquerade, Cereno is mute. He either does not know, or will not find, words for his shattering experience. When Delano presses Cereno for an explanation of his mournfulness—"you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?"—Cereno answers only, "The negro" (116). With this word, the conversation between captains ends. Cereno has seen the tremendous unspoken potential of the blacks burst through the simplifications associated with the word "negro." Yet, with a glance of "foreboding" which hints that the word will be shattered again, Cereno will only utter the old label. After speaking in court, Cereno shuts himself up in "the monastery on Mount Agonia." Within the confines of that institution, "three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did indeed, follow his leader" (117). His experience of masquerade's function, still unspoken, is buried with him.

Babo's is also a "voiceless end," but with a different meaning. Though Spanish institutions claim Babo's body, he refuses to give his words to them. His "slight frame" yields to the "superior muscular strength" of Delano. But at the moment of capture, "Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to" (116). Babo seems to recognize beforehand the use his words would be put to by the Spanish court. The involvement of the black women in the revolt is established by the court "because the negroes have said it" (112). "The

negroes have … said," also, that the old Spanish sailor was murdered by blacks in the hold. The words of the blacks are incorporated into the language of the court, where they are used to convict the blacks. Babo had to subjugate the Spaniards before their language could be used for his own ends. Now that the Spaniards again control both the blacks and the language that imprisons them, Babo refuses to speak.

By the writing of "Benito Cereno," linguistic masquerade had become, not only the central problem of Melville's fiction, but the central subject and substance as well.[17] Beyond its surface masquerades, this "fictitious story" is finally as mute as are Cereno and Babo outside their masquerades. Yet the story communicates very clearly certain truths about the political function of linguistic masquerade.

Babo's language reveals a keen contrivance for political purposes. Both his masquerades use language to weave "symbolical devices" into comprehensive ideological masquerades. His ritualistic interpretation of the skeleton figurehead weaves that emblem into a masquerade guarding black rule. His "fictitious story" unites designated costumes and gestures into a masquerade with a similar purpose. In the first instance, we see a linguistic masquerade in its incipient evolution, concocted by a new master class to consolidate its power over a new oppressed. In the second, we see the traditional masquerade of Spanish dominance over slaves consciously employed as a fiction to imprison the Spaniards as it had previously imprisoned the blacks.

Delano's language reveals an active search for, an willful faith in, masquerades that guard a hierarchy of whites over blacks. In the interior, insidiously automatic, processes of language within Delano's mind, we see this white American captain appropriating to himself the privilege of naming, and thus hierarchically fixing, the people and situations that surround him. Delano assumes this right for every superior in a hierarchy he considers Providential. Cereno, to Delano's mind, has the right to control both the physical and linguistic trappings of all his subordinates. Inferiors such as the San Dominick's blacks have no separate right to language. They are to speak, if at all, only a language dictated to them by their white superiors.

Cereno's language reveals a conscious enactment of masquerade in the services of political oppression. The "fictitious story" guards his own oppression, while the deposition reinstitutes the oppression of blacks by Spaniards. Cereno's emotional torment within the first masquerade indicates the extremes of oppression guarded by masquerade. His enfeebled contribution to the masquerade of the deposition shows a declining Spanish nobility desperately reiterating the story of white dominance. The deposition reiterates this story both by fixing evaluative labels and by reorganizing history into a scenario that opposes black evil to Spanish right.

The stern-piece of the San Dominick images forth the central insights of "Benito Cereno." Linguistic masquerades consolidate political hierarchies. They function in Babo's consolidation of black power over the Spaniards, in Delano's imaginative consolidation of white power over blacks, and in the deposition's consolidation of Spanish power over slaves. In the technical peculiarities of all these masquerades, Melville dramatizes the functional realities of linguistic masquerade in a spectrum of forms.

Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno,* in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1987), p. 49.
2. Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980), p. 128.
3. William Charvatt, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* (Ohio State UP, 1968), p. 255.
4. Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850's* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1977), p. 107.
5. Fisher, p. 106.
6. Fisher, p. 109.

7. Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1950), p. 240.
8. Edgar A. Dryden, *Melville's Thematics of Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1968), p. 206.
9. Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 213.
10. H. Bruce Franklin, "*Benito Cereno*: The Ascetic's Agony," reprinted in *Melville's Benito Cereno: A Text for Guided Research,* ed. John P. Runden (Boston: Heath and Co., 1965), p. 113.
11. Dryden points out that the American's social background covertly assumes as much of a "'follow your leader' world" as does Cereno's. Dryden cites the fact that the leader of the American onslaught on the San Dominick shouts "Follow your leader!" (205) as he boards the ship. For all his outward avowal of "republican" principles, Delano clearly assumes a cross-cultural hierarchy of whites over blacks.
12. See, for example, Fisher, pp. 112-13.
13. Charles W. Chesnutt, "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," in *The Conjure Woman* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1969), pp. 94-99.
14. Warwick Wadlington, *The Confidence Game in American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), p. 128.
15. Herman Melville, "The 'Gees," in *The Piazza Tales,* pp. 346-47.
16. Sidney Kaplan has complained that Melville facilely assigns guilt to the blacks, without accounting for the prior guilt of white oppression. This criticism attributes to Melville himself an operation of linguistic masquerade which Melville is skillfully dramatizing: the deposition's reorganization of history to whitewash the whites. See Sidney Kaplan, "Herman Melville and the American National Sin: The Meaning of *Benito Cereno,*" in *The Journal of Negro History,* XLI (1956), pp. 311-38.
17. Two years previous to the publication of *Benito Cereno,* Melville published "Bartleby the Scrivener." Michael Gilmore's discussion of this story concludes that its "tragedy" is precisely the comprehensive masking off of its central character: "The turnkey at the Tombs calls Bartleby 'the silent man,' and Melville's point is that the class of group he represents does not speak—they have no voice—in the histories read and written by the middle class. They are not heard in texts just as they have been systematically eliminated from sight in the economy." See Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 142.

    In the same year he wrote *Benito Cereno,* Melville was completing *The Confidence Man,* a novel in which forms of masquerade are so dominant and impenetrable that the novel's central character—and whether a central character exists—is finally undecipherable.

Criticism: Gloria Horsley-Meacham (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: "Bull of the Nile: Symbol, History, and Racial Myth in 'Benito Cereno,'" in *The New England Quarterly,* Vol. LXIV, No. 2, June, 1991, pp. 225-42.

[*In the following essay, Horsley-Meacham argues that while "Benito Cereno" ostensibly upholds racial myths, it contains a subversively "egalitarian and humane" element.*]

Herman Melville seems an astute observer of African sensibilities when, in *Moby Dick,* his sharp-witted Daggoo inveighs against conventional associations with his color, declaring: "Who's afraid of black's afraid of me!"[1] Yet, in a later work, "Benito Cereno," a setting perfectly designed to explore Black ethos, Melville buries insight under layers of stereotypic symbol. As he "satanizes" his bondsmen, obscuring virtually every worthy trait ascribed to them in his source, Amasa Delano's *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels,* blackness becomes ever more fearsome. Though the tale examines, as Allan Moore Emery has recently asserted, "the malign potential in every man," the *San Dominick* Africans carry the weight of the burden.[2] They represent, in words Daggoo's foe applied to the race, "the undeniable dark side of mankind [and] devilish dark at that."[3]

Readers of Melville's works have learned to question such ostensible conformity to conventional beliefs. While Melville was, indeed, bound by the temper and caught up in the turbulence of his times, he was nonetheless an unorthodox thinker and an ingenious master of complexity who considered subterfuge the hallmark of "the great Art of Telling the Truth" in "this world of lies."[4] We do well, then, to search "Benito Cereno" thoroughly for any signs of hidden dissent.

Melville was writing at a time when history was being falsified to suit the ideological imperatives of the slavocracy. It was the epoch of the Africans' disinheritance, when earlier views of them as the progenitors of human civilization were discredited and the ancient splendor of the Nile Valley was attributed exclusively to Whites. In this context, we find Melville offering, "covertly, and by snatches," symbols of African grandeur, like the "bull of the Nile," a venerable god of Nilotic antiquity, to recover that stolen legacy and thereby address a highly inflammatory contemporary debate: the ethnic roots of Western civilization. Such boldness and breadth of vision in "Benito Cereno" have yet to be fully appreciated, even though critics have long argued over the story's racial stance.[5] Seen only "by cunning glimpses" and eclipsed by the familiar stereotypes, the Nilotic motif exemplifies the finest in Melville's truth-telling, for it signals not only what is clearly egalitarian and humane in an otherwise equivocal tale but also what is patently subversive. However much the tale conforms to racial myths, then, their subversion is ultimately the focus of Melville's penetrating exploration of the modern and most ancient relations between the Black world and the White.

I

In the 1850s, the spectre of widespread slave revolts loomed large for Melville and his countrymen. American expansionists were fueling fears that Spain was preparing to emancipate her slaves in Cuba.[6] The prospect of a sizeable free African population in close proximity to the American South precipitated the Africanization Scare,[7] which, during the fall of 1854 (probably only a few months before Melville began composing his tale),[8] culminated in the Ostend Manifesto. Co-authored by James Buchanan (then minister to Great Britain), the manifesto defended annexing Cuba to subdue the mounting threat of servile retribution. Under Spanish rule, the manifesto declared, the Africans would make Cuba a second San Domingo, "with all its attendant horrors to the white race"; ultimately "the flames would extend to … endanger or actually consume the fair fabric of our Union."[9]

Such events may have been uppermost in Melville's thoughts as he imagined the "Africanization" of the *San Dominick,* where, revealingly, the removal of the slaves' fetters by the Spanish master, Alexandro Aranda, endangers the unsuspecting American, Captain Amasa Delano. When Delano boards the Spanish slaver, he does not discern that the Africans have subdued their captors, in part because the former have staged an elaborate masquerade in which the obedient Babo acts as the ever devoted servant and the unyielding Atufal appears bound in chains. Even signs of slave disorder and the spectre of the ominous hatchet polishers, while troubling to Delano, do not alert him to the true state of affairs, for he is, above all, deluded by his own notion of Africans as genial inferiors. Only after the dramatic escape of Benito Cereno, the *San Dominick*'s captain, does the American finally see the fiendish Africans unmasked and the Whites engulfed in a torrent of horrors.

To be sure, there are no freedom fighters in "Benito Cereno." True to his source, Melville reveals that docility is not a trait natural to Africans but a mask devised to "put on ol' Massa"; however, at the same time, he suppresses the spirit and sensibility that Amasa Delano describes in his account of the rebels' strike for liberty and instead advances sinister stereotypes that evoke repressed racial fears. Melville's contrarieties—Sambo and savage—are the very polarities James Baldwin identifies in popular racial myth: there was no one more "pious" or "loyal" than Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom (hence the docile Sambo), but "there was, at the same time, no one … more faithless, or more vicious, and certainly no one more immoral."[10] It is this malevolent type that Melville uses to refashion the original account, specifically the Ashantee hatchet polisher, the quintessential savage brute. Amasa Delano's twelve mutineers "all raw and born on the coast of Senegal" (p. 828) are replaced in "Benito Cereno" by six rebel slaves "born among the Ashantees" (p. 104).[11] This

alteration of national origin is the vehicle for Melville's exploitation of the popular image of the Coromantyne, a term applied to Gold Coast dwellers, particularly the allegedly barbaric and warlike Ashantees.

An account of eighteenth-century slave uprisings in Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* singled out "the dangerous tempers" of the Coromantyne as the "root of the evil." Long enumerated efforts to curb the import of Gold Coast slaves, including a proposal in the Jamaica House of Assembly "laying an additional higher duty upon all Fatin, Akim, and Ashantee Negroes, and all others commonly called Coromantins."[12] The essence of this British view was evident more than fifty years later when American pro-slavery apologist Thomas Dew characterized the Coromantyne as "the most ferocious of the Africans in war," the instigators of slave insurgency, who possessed "all the savage ferocity of the North American Indian."[13]

This imagery informs Melville's portrayal of the Africans who "Indian-like" "hurtled their hatchets" (p. 101). By substituting hatchets for the daggers carried by the rebels in *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels,* Melville intensifies the horror of the Africans' acts. Surely a weapon more dreadful than a knife, the hatchet that strikes terror in Delano's heart brands the Ashantees as savages and, as such, the chief perpetrators of Babo's ruthless orders. In Melville's altered document, they assume the gruesome task of stripping Don Alexandro and preparing his skeleton "in a way … the deponent [Cereno] … so long as reason is left him, can never divulge" (p. 112). This unspeakable experience is perhaps the most sinister scene Melville devises to illustrate the Africans' brutish propensities, for he implies that Cereno, as one critic puts it, "in a diabolical communion with the Negro," unwittingly devoured his fellow Spaniard's flesh.[14]

Savagery is not, however, solely the province of the Ashantees; it defines the Black women as well. Likewise vicious tormentors, they are recast to invert Delano's romantic view of them as noble "Negresses." While the original account reports succinctly the influence the women exercised in effecting the master's death, Melville's deposition barbarizes them by stressing that they "would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing." Whereas Delano's noble "Negresses" sang melancholy songs "to excite the courage of the Negroes" (p. 835), Melville's diabolic females chant songs that are wildly "inflaming" (p. 112).

Babo's cruelty, of course, dominates "Benito Cereno," but the African valet stands apart, a seeming deviation from the savage stereotype. His malevolence, while inspiring bestial deeds, emanates largely from his intellect. As Melville concludes, Babo's "brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt" (p. 116). Although he is the ringleader of the uprising in Delano's historical account, Babo remains a minor figure. Melville, however, recasts him as the central strategist and a master of psychological torture: "Babo asked him [Cereno] whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's"; and again, "Babo, coming close, said … 'Keep faith with the blacks … or you shall … follow your leader'" (p. 107). The exceedingly clever Babo nonetheless in no sense undermines, as many have argued, Delano's judgment that the Black mind is limited, for movements and strategies attributed to any number of "the Negroes" in the source are transferred exclusively to "the Negro Babo" in Melville's deposition. Babo is the dictator of every course of action and inventor of every detail of the plot. Indeed, the "slight frame[d]" (p. 116) leader's distinction as the only Senegalese evokes another myth suggested by Long: "The ["delicate framed"] Negroes brought from Senegal are of better understanding than the rest, and fitter for … menial domestic services. They are good commanders over other Negroes."[15]

As the epitome of the rebellion, Babo transforms its historical objective. His declaration of purpose, consistent with the factual one—that he must kill his master because "he and his companions could not otherwise be sure of their liberty" (p. 106)—is overshadowed by references to his sinister character. Babo is a serpent which Delano perceives "writhing up from the boat's bottom"; his intelligence resides in a "hive of subtlety" (p. 116); he is full of "malign machinations and deceptions" (p. 115). Clearly, the human ingenuity demonstrated by the historical Babo—who, along with Atufal, acquired writing skills "though they were new" captives from Africa—is supplanted in "Benito Cereno" by demonic power. The original rebel's noble dream to be liberated from the ravages of enslavement is transformed into but another manifestation of the conventional association

of blackness with evil.

Although in the past some critics have argued that Melville's emblems of iniquity represent a retreat from his earlier egalitarianism, today most scholars draw upon the tale's ambiguities to prove that in truth it is an indictment of slavery and racism.[16] These “cunning glimpses” do not, however, diminish the overwhelming impression that Melville gives substance to his readers' worst racialist phantoms as they witness Cereno's nightmare. Factual materials in the source are painstakingly modified to substantiate the observations of Cereno—whom Melville features as a far more trustworthy figure than the original[17]—and no doubt is ever cast upon the Spanish captain's “accuracy of intellectual perception.” No view—not even that of the Africans—discredits their presentation as depraved beings.

So vivid is this spectre of Black malevolence that the tale inspires neither a moral imperative for abolition nor any serious consideration of Black aspirations. In fact, pro-slavery prejudices—which distinguish the “noble” cause of freedom fighters in Poland and revolutionary France from the Black insurgents' “hellish plots and massacres”[18]—are reinforced in “Benito Cereno,” while alternative views are suppressed. It may be that Melville had lost the hope that he expressed in *Mardi* that Africans would “find a way to loose their bonds without one drop of blood” and was now constrained by fear. Joyce Sparer Adler, in her discussion of Melville's apparent indifference towards the plight of Black people, his “neglect” of them “as human beings,” asserts that “fear alone proves a constricting and inhibiting pressure” and acts as a “rein” on the creative imagination.[19] Certainly, Melville stops short of delving into the African psyche; instead, he treats the slave only as a dreadful figment of White men's fantasies.

Yet, if “Benito Cereno” is a window into Melville's deepest concerns about servile rebellion and the possible artistic and ethical problems they posed, it is likewise a smoke screen. Melville did not believe that Africans were an inherently depraved or lesser people, and he had too broad a vision of the Black world and too great a commitment to “Telling the Truth” to remain mute in the face of a strident ethnocentrism. Indeed, drawing upon an ample fund of learned opinion about the African past, Melville devised a stratagem to challenge prevalent racist dogma—particularly what Toni Morrison calls the idea of whiteness as a “privileged place on the evolutionary ladder.” Only a few may have appreciated Melville's thrust, but it was nonetheless “dangerous, solitary, radical work. Especially then. Especially now.”[20]

II

It was most characteristic of Herman Melville to look back to the old world and, says Harry Levin, “embellish his human material with the patina of historic tradition.”[21] Melville's treatment of the African experience was no exception. In “Benito Cereno,” this looking back is, in fact, the stratagem used to subvert popular myths surrounding the pivotal issue of African identity. By adroitly selecting and arraying historical symbols, Melville ever so subtly reveals the “dark satyr” during the eras of his ascendancy. Clearly, Melville understood that the Europeans' “mastership over every dusky tribe” was not a constant in the course of human affairs. In “Benito Cereno” the figure “uppermost” upon the Castilian stern-piece points to the legacy of Moorish dominion in Spain.[22] This legacy, reinforced by Islamic references, enlarges and redefines the African, disclosing why Atufal, Babo's “right hand man,” “seemed a sentry and more.” Melville's symbolic allusions to Nile Valley resplendence also hint at the Africans' former “mastership” and, further, emphasize an intellectual capacity otherwise unacknowledged in the tale. In contrast to the demeaning stereotypes amassed in the story, these images of antiquity exalt the African as a vital force in Western culture.

An avid reader with an intense interest in the ancient world, Melville drew upon varied sources for his fictional reconstructions, but he displayed a marked preference for travel literature. “Stay-at-homes say travelers lie,” he wrote in defense of James Bruce's claim that the Abyssinians slice “live steak” from their cattle, “yet a voyage to Ethiopia would cure stay-at-homes of that; for few skeptics are travelers; fewer travelers liars.”[23] In Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790), the “Negro wooly-headed

Cushites" of ancient Ethiopia, builders of "that first seminary of learning," are described as "the most cultivated and instructed people in the world," who reigned "in the utmost luxury, liberty, and splendor."[24]

Other eighteenth-century travelers who perceived the Egyptians to be, like the Ethiopians, Negroid peoples must also have left their stamp on Melville. John Ledyard, cited in the second printing of "Benito Cereno" (*The Piazza Tales* [1856]), reported from Egypt that he believed the Copts (descendants of the ancient Egyptians) "to have been the origin of the Negro race."[25] The celebrated travelers Vivant Denon[26] and C. F. Volney called attention to the Negroid appearance not only of the "old Egyptian stock" but also of the ancient monuments. Volney explains that the features of the Sphinx, "precisely those of the Negro," led him to conclude that the Egyptians were "of the same species with all the natives of Africa." What the "pilgrim deist from the Seine" (as Melville called him in *Clarel*) proclaimed in *Travels Through Egypt and Syria* (1798) was ultimately to have a profound impact upon subsequent generations: "How are we astonished," Volney marveled, "when we reflect that to the race of Negroes, at present our slaves, and the objects of our extreme contempt, we owe our arts, sciences, and even the very use of speech."[27]

By the nineteenth century claims for the Africans' former superiority were echoed by a number of intellectuals and scholars.[28] James Cowles Prichard, the most influential British ethnologist during the first half of the century, suggested in *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (1813) that both ancient and modern testimony construed the "national configuration" of the Egyptians to be "nearly the Negro form, with wooly hair."[29] John Stuart Mill's bold reply to Thomas Carlyle's racist argument (both appearing in *Fraser's Magazine,* 1849-50) averred that "it was from Negroes [the original Egyptians] … that the Greeks learnt their first lesson in civilization; and to the records and traditions of these Negroes did the Greek philosophers … resort as a treasury of mysterious wisdom."[30] Alexander Hill Everett, editor of the *North American Review* (1830-35), was equally iconoclastic: "While Greece and Rome were yet barbarous, we find the light of learning … emanating … out of the midst of this very wooly haired, flat nosed, thick lipped, coal black race."[31] This view of the African as cultural progenitor was not always so enthusiastically espoused but was, nonetheless, so widely disseminated that it fueled the fierce debate raging in nineteenth-century America.

To counteract Volney's long-standing influence, which grew as abolitionists added his and other similar testimony to their arsenal of arguments, White supremacists in antebellum America mounted a sweeping campaign in defense of the slavocracy and the racist ideology that sustained it. A new ethnology was launched to repudiate the early Africans' attainments by proving "scientifically" that even then they were but servants of the sovereign Caucasians. Disputing Volney, the ethnologist Samuel G. Morton postulated in *Crania Americana* (1839) that the Sphinx was not an Egyptian deity but rather the "shrine" of a servile Negro population. In his next major work, *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844), Morton, basing his argument on purportedly valuable archeological findings, including six hundred human crania, argued that the original Egyptians and Nubians were Caucasians.[32] Popular Egyptologist George Gliddon, who supplied Morton with the mummies for this second study, later collaborated with Josiah C. Nott to produce the highly dogmatic *Types of Mankind* (1854). In this massive tome, which sold 3,500 copies in four months, pro-slavery Americans found exactly what they had been looking for: "History … when subjected to a strictly impartial examination … will not support that superannuated, but untenable, doctrine, that civilization originated in Ethiopia, and consequently among an African people, by whom it was brought down the Nile, to enlighten the less polished, therefore inferior, Caucasian … or, that we, who trace back to Egypt the origin of every art and science … have to thank the sable Negro."[33]

By mid-century, Volney's "Nigritian hypothesis" had fallen into disrepute after having been, as one writer for the *North American Review* reported, "seized upon with avidity in more recent times."[34] Of course, others, particularly strident abolitionists, continued to defend the Africans' primacy, but Morton and Gliddon's "American School of Ethnology" was destined to prevail.[35] In an uneasy slaveholding nation, the African Sphinx, like Herodotus' and Aeschylus' black-skinned Egyptians, Virgil's "swart Memnon," and Jonson's regal Black Ethiopians—"the first form'd dames of earth" and inventors of that "original doctrine of sculpture"

(hieroglyphics)—were profoundly disturbing images. The new ethnology, which sought to take "the whole question [of Nilotic ethnicity] out of the hands of the Greeks" and "unscientific tourists,"[36] would obscure, indeed efface, the meanings embedded within those images.

This astounding effort to transform history into a testimonial to White supremacy is contested in "Benito Cereno." Its rich tapestry of historical allusions restores a legacy that has been consigned to oblivion and subtly conveys the African and European's equal potential for greatness—and for degradation. Unlike his optimistic countryman Delano, Melville, as D. H. Lawrence avers, was convinced that his race and "his great white epoch" were "doomed";[37] more like Cereno, he saw that the fallen African was—as both reflection and premonition—his "shadow." In "venerable contrast" to the tumultuous savages, four aged Africans, oakum pickers, "their heads like black, doddered willow tops" (p. 50), are stoically "couched, sphinx-like," clearly figural representations of the once revered but now decayed Nilotic civilization. These oakum pickers—"relics" of a prior "faded grandeur"—are fitting harbingers of the demise of the West as they chant the "funeral march" while the "hearse-like" vessel—emblematic of the European world—"follows" its "leader."

A vivid image of Africa's cultural primacy surfaces as counterpoint to the new ethnology in the episode in which Delano dismisses what he had momentarily perceived as a possible conspiracy between Cereno and the slaves. Delano's reasoning—that the Blacks "were too stupid" and that a White would hardly "apostatize from his very species" (p. 75)—points directly, as Allan Emery has shown, to the doctrine of inherent Black inferiority and separate human origins (polygenesis) advanced in such works as *Types of Mankind.*[38] But the allusion to Greco-African cultural kinship immediately following reveals Melville's opposition to that view and his affirmation of the fundamental oneness of humankind. An aged sailor, looking "like an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon" (p. 76), invokes Alexander's sovereignty in Egypt. This reference, no doubt, had ethnological significance for Melville's contemporaries. Alexander's pilgrimage to the Egyptian god's shrine bore witness to what nineteenth-century defenders of Black potential so often claimed, that the Greeks' veneration for Egyptian and Ethiopian divinities was indisputable proof that the African was a major source of enlightenment in the Hellenic world. Lydia Maria Child, for one, had asserted, "The condition of this people in ancient times is very far from indicating intellectual or moral inferiority. … Even the proud Grecians evinced respect for Ethiopia, almost amounting to reverence, and derived from thence … their mythology," including the belief, expressed in the *Iliad,* that in deference, "all the gods made an annual visit to the Ethiopians."[39] For Melville, Alexander's visit to the oracle of Ammon, deemed "infallible" among the Greeks, was no less revealing. The Egyptian oracle, in fact, figured prominently in the mid-century ethnological debate. The assertion by the Greek historian Herodotus that the mythic doves that established the oracles of Ammon (in Africa) and of Dodona (in Greece) had been characterized as black to "signify … that the woman [founder] was an Egyptian" was widely cited—and hotly contested—as evidence of the stature of Black peoples in antiquity."[40]

This Greco-African background is key to unraveling the Gordian knot of the "ancient" sailor, whose mysterious preoccupation with the hemp links him with the "old knitting women," the oakum pickers. When Delano is enjoined to "undo it, cut it, quick" (p. 76) and, like Alexander, gain ascendancy as the oracle at Gordium prophesied, only the "ancients" comprehend the knot's significance, prompting "an elderly Negro," with a "knowing wink," to retrieve it. That this action is closely connected with the aged oakum pickers' preoccupation with the undoing of ropes—the undoing of White dominion—never occurs to Delano. Atufal creates a "slight stir" behind Delano, who, standing "knot in hand, knot in head," turns, looking back at the African's quiet, colossal presence. Delano relinquishes the object, grasping neither its legacy nor its hidden link with Atufal. Oblivious of the past and his own fixed racial concepts, Delano is unable to disentangle not only the elaborate slave plot but also the historic links between Africa and Greece the knot exemplifies as well. To "undo it," the American must fathom a definition of the Africans that accounts for their intellectual and cultural attributes, which Atufal, as another symbolic ancient, so majestically embodies.

Through “cunning glimpses” Atufal's kinship with the Nilotic world soon becomes as manifest as the Greek lineage of the Whites. Just as Delano, recipient of the Gordian knot, and Alexandro, namesake of the conqueror, are symbolic heirs of Alexander, Atufal, “monumentally fixed … like one of those sculptured porters of black marble guarding the porches of Egyptian tombs” (p. 92), epitomizes his ancestry. Moreover, the identification of Atufal with Egypt's sacred bull, Apis, another god to whom Alexander paid homage,[41] also raises the issue of African preeminence: “as if a child [the culturally neophyte White] should lead a bull of the Nile.” Thus, Melville disentangles the Gordian knot and opens the padlock on a “subjugated” Atufal; the captive African legacy is released to mock Cereno's dominion and the ideology of White supremacy. That the African is the cultural parent—the leader Cereno follows—is later stressed in the image of Babo as the Nubian sculptor, “finishing off a white statue-head” (p. 87), in effect giving shape to European civilization.

III

These divinities and demons, illustrious ancients and savage brutes, are the stuff of Melville's clever subterfuge. What seems to have aided his deception—what made his truth-telling so long inaccessible, his point of view so elusive—was his unarticulated ambivalence. Discordant feelings are evident in his treatment of Africans as the enlightened progenitors he believed they were and, under slavery, as the embittered avengers he feared they would become. Towards the fallen progenitor he showed little of the sympathy he lavished upon the tale's decadent European. For all his democratic ideals and his philosophical concerns about slavery, Melville, confronted with escalating threats of slave revolts at home and abroad, represented the captive African of his day as a menacing presence. Yet, Melville's apprehensions about that very real “power of blackness” did not arrest his pursuit of the white doe of truth, “forced to fly”[42] when menaced by a virulent, popular ethnocentrism.

Perhaps Melville saw in the ingeniously calculated destruction committed by the avenging “Hamans” the same intelligence and creative forces that, unfettered, enabled their forebears to fashion the ancient Nilotic splendor, the world of Ammon.[43] Certainly, it is these forebears in “Benito Cereno,” briefly shown entering upon the stage of history as inherent equals, who ultimately reveal Melville's egalitarianism and his artful defiance of the racial mythology that would disinherit them. As the Africans were ever more relentlessly portrayed as permanent inferiors, as they were being categorically denied every role they were ever said to have played in the grand drama of human achievement, Melville—master of the equivoque in his deference to popular taste—countered with a subterranean network of allusions to the age of African grandeur to make his readers aware, if only subliminally, that indeed “even blackness has its brilliancy.”[44]

Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or the Whale,* ed. Wayne C. Booth (New York: Holt, 1957), p. 172.
2. Allan Moore Emery, “The Topicality of Depravity in ‘Benito Cereno,’” *American Literature* 55 (October 1983): 316-31.
3. Melville, *Moby Dick,* p. 172.
4. Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” in *The Portable Melville,* ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Viking, 1952), p. 408.
5. For an overview, see Lea Bertani Vozar Newman, *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Herman Melville* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), pp. 130-36. Among the many critics of “Benito Cereno,” only Carolyn L. Karcher has discussed Melville's allusions to Africans' ancient heritage (*Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980], pp. 140-41).
6. See Allan Moore Emery, “‘Benito Cereno’ and Manifest Destiny,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 39 (June 1984): 48-68; Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire: 1853-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), pp. 32-36; and Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba: 1848-1855* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), pp. 44-45, 262-94.

7. Reforms in Cuba's labor system instituted in 1853 by Captain General Juan M. de la Pezuela, an opponent of the slave traffic, prompted speculations that Africans would be emancipated and, because of their numerical predominance, Cuba would be "Africanized." See C. Stanley Urban, "The Africanization of Cuba Scare, 1853-1855," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 37 (February 1957): 29-45.
8. See "Notes on 'Benito Cereno,'" in *"The Piazza Tales" and Other Prose Pieces (1839-1860),* ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1987).
9. Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History* (New York: Appleton, 1934), p. 335. Concern with large-scale slave uprisings was also voiced by opponents of annexation. In the House of Representatives, abolitionist Congressman Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio argued that the introduction of the "more enlightened" Southern slaves to Cuba (an anticipated outcome of annexation) would bring about Caribbean revolts followed by the eruption of the "suppressed volcanoes" in the Southern states, which would become "devastated by servile war." See *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* 7 January 1853.
10. James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 28.
11. Parenthetical citations to "Benito Cereno" and also to chapter 18 of Amaso Delano's *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels* (Boston, 1817) are from *The Piazza Tales.*
12. Edward Long, *History of Jamaica,* 3 vols. (1774; reprinted, New York: Arno, 1972), 2:445-71.
13. Chancellor Harper, Governor Hammond, Dr. Simms, and Professor Dew, *The Pro-Slavery Argument* (Charleston: Walker, Richards and Co., 1852), pp. 331, 464.
14. Barbara J. Baines, "Ritualized Cannibalism in 'Benito Cereno': Melville's 'Black-Letter' Texts," *ESQ* 30 (3d Quarter 1984): 166.
15. Long, *Jamaica,* 2:404.
16. Among those censuring Melville are Sidney Kaplan, "Herman Melville and the American National Sin," in *Images of the Negro in American Literature,* ed. Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 151-62; F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 508; and Margaret Y. Jackson, "Melville's Use of a Real Slave Mutiny in 'Benito Cereno,'" *CLA Journal* 4 (December 1960): 79-93. For an interesting response to Kaplan, see Allen Guttmann, "The Enduring Innocence of Captain Amasa Delano," in *Melville's "Benito Cereno": A Text for Guided Research,* ed. John P. Runden (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965), pp. 179-88. Those arguing that Melville was indicting slavery are Joyce Sparer Adler, *War in Melville's Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 1981), pp. 88-110; Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey, "The Death of Benito Cereno: A Reading of Herman Melville on Slavery," *Journal of Negro History* 67 (Winter 1982): 287-301; Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (New York: New York University Press, 1972), p. 222; Emery, "The Topicality of Depravity," pp. 316-31; and Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land,* pp. 127-43.
17. In the source, Don Benito is dishonest in his financial dealings with Delano. See "Melville's Source for 'Benito Cereno,'" in *The Piazza Tales,* p. 823.
18. Dew, *Pro-Slavery Argument,* p. 448.
19. Joyce Sparer Adler, "Melville and the Civil War," *New Letters* 40 (Winter 1973): 112. Adler maintains that Melville was fearful that an embittered South might renew hostilities.
20. Toni Morrison discusses Melville's interests in White racial ideology in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1989): 14-18.
21. Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (London: Faber, 1958), p. 206.
22. See my "Melville's Dark Satyr Unmasked," *English Language Notes* 23 (March 1986): 43-47.
23. Melville, *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither,* ed. Raymond M. Weaver (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), p. 245.

24. James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile,* 5 vols. (Edinburgh, 1790), 1:379, 386.
25. Jared Sparks, *The Life of John Ledyard, the American Traveller; Comprising Selections from his Journals and Correspondence* (Cambridge: Hilliard & Brown, 1828), p. 312.
26. Vivant Denon, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt … During the Campaigns of General Bonaparte,* 3 vols. (1803; reprinted, New York: Arno, 1973), 1:206, 269-70. Denon's work is considered a source for *Mardi* and *Moby Dick.* See Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein, *Melville's Orienda* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 129.
27. C. F. Volney, *Travels Through Egypt and Syria,* 2 vols. (New York: John Tiebout, 1798), 1:53-55. It may be that Melville encountered Volney's argument in Thomas Maurice's *Indian Antiquities,* 7 vols. (London, 1794), 2:352-53. Melville's use of this work is discussed in Howard P. Vincent's *The Trying-Out of Moby Dick* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), pp. 278-80, and H. Bruce Franklin's *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963). In James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D., including a Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides,* ed. John Wilson Crocker, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1831), 4:233, Melville must have also read about "Lord Monboddo's notion that the ancient Egyptians, with all their learning and all their arts, were not only black, but wooly-haired."
28. Nineteenth-century travelers continued to comment upon the African character of the Egyptian monuments. For contemporary accounts that Melville may well have read, see W. H. Bartlett, *The Nile Boat; or, Glimpses of the Land of Egypt* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1851), pp. 43-44, and other remarks in his *Forty Days in the Desert, on the Track of the Israelites* (London: Arthur Hall & Co., 1848); also Thomas Legh, *Narrative of a Journey in Egypt* (London: J. Murray, 1817), pp. 209-10. On Legh's consideration of Egyptian ethnicity, see "Legh's Voyage Up the Nile," *Edinburgh Review,* December 1816, p. 435. For a recent discussion of the ethnic identity of Egyptians as perceived throughout the ages, see Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 240-46.
29. James Cowles Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Man,* ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. (1813; reprinted, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 376-88.
30. Eugene R. August, ed., *Thomas Carlyle: The Nigger Question; John Stuart Mill: The Negro Question* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971), p. 47.
31. Alexander Hill Everett, *America: or a General Survey of the Political Situation of the Several Powers of the Western Continent* (Philadelphia: H. C. Carey & Lea, 1827), p. 213. For an extensive discussion of African primacy, see Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis, An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis; or, an Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations, and Religions,* 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1836). Widely used as a literary source book, this work has been found useful in explicating various aspects of Melville's fiction. See, e.g., John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 297; Franklin, *Wake of the Gods,* pp. 94-95.
32. Samuel G. Morton, *Crania Americana; or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America, to which is Prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839), and *Crania Aegyptiaca; or Observations on Egyptian Ethnography* (Philadelphia: John Pennington, 1844).
33. Josiah C. Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind; or Ethnological Researches, based upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and upon their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1854), p. 213.
34. "Morton's *Crania Americana,*" *North American Review,* July 1840, pp. 173-74. W. E. B. Du Bois, in *The World and Africa* (1946; rev. and enl. ed., New York: International Publishers, 1965), p. 118, points out that Volney, confronted with "such a barrage of denial from later men," subsequently recanted his position on Egyptian ethnicity.
35. On African antiquity in antislavery writings, see Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., "Ancient Africa and the Early Black American Historians, 1883-1915," *American Quarterly* 36 (Winter 1984): 691-92. On the American School of Ethnology, see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The*

Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914 (New York: Harper, 1971), pp. 74-75; and Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origin of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 129.

36. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind,* p. 218. And further: "Did archeological science now solely rely … upon the concurrent testimony of the early Greek writer, we should be compelled to conclude that the Egyptians … were literally *Negroes*" (p. 215).
37. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; New York: Viking, 1961), p. 160.
38. Emery, "The Topicality of Depravity," p. 328.
39. Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1836), p. 149.
40. See Prichard, *Physical History of Man,* p. 377; Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind,* p. 216; Higgins, *Anacalypsis,* 1:137, 434; Frederick Douglass, *The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered: An Address Before the Literary Societies of Western Reserve College at Commencement* (Rochester: Lee, Mann & Co., 1854), p. 24; and Frederick Freeman, *Africa's Redemption: The Salvation of our Country* (1852; reprinted, Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970), p. 28.
41. See "Anabasis of Alexander," in *Arrian,* trans. Iliff Robson (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1929), 3.225.
42. Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," p. 408.
43. In Melville's "Bell Tower," Haman, who like the African in "Benito Cereno" plots revenge while he serves, clearly suggests the biblical Ham, whose posterity was said to have been condemned to servitude, and its derivative Hamo, Melville's name in *Mardi* for the American slave (see Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850s* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977], pp. 98-99). Ham was thought to have been deified in Egypt under the name Jupiter Hammon (Ammon) (see Pierre Bayle, *An Historical and Critical Dictionary,* 4 vols. [London: C. Harper, 1710], p. 940). On Melville's familiarity with Bayle, see Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading: A Check-list of Books Owned and Borrowed* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 39.
44. Melville, *Moby Dick,* p. 408.

Criticism: John Haegert (essay date 1993)

SOURCE: "Voicing Slavery Through Silence: Narrative Mutiny in Melville's *Benito Cereno,*" in *Mosaic,* Vol. 26, No. 2, Spring, 1993, pp. 21-38.

[*In the following essay, Haegert studies the complex narrative structure of "Benito Cereno" and its relation to the work as anti-imperialist fiction.*]

If anything can be said to dominate our cultural and historical preoccupations of recent years, it is the need for greater reticence and restraint in portraying the "alien" life of others. This pervasive concern with reticence—with the need to listen to rather than to speak for the cultural experience of other peoples—has become a staple feature of such diverse and influential studies as Edward Said's *Orientalism,* Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures,* Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish,* Christopher Miller's *Blank Darkness* and Hayden White's *The Content of the Form.* In countering our inherited (and largely Eurocentric) notions of the East, for example, Said argues that our most important task just now is to overcome the latent imperialism of most Oriental studies, "to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a non-repressive and non-manipulative, perspective." The difficulty of such a task becomes apparent when Said goes on to observe that "one would have to rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power" (*Orientalism* 24).

The unusually vexed relation of knowledge and power, and of both to the reticence required by a truly "libertarian" view of other cultures, is one that bears directly on our understanding of "Benito Cereno" (1855),

Melville's fictionalized account of an historical slave-revolt on the high seas. Melville's novella is arguably one of the 19th-century's most searching explorations of America's "peculiar institution," but it is also a work which evidences obvious disdain for any univocal conclusions. To say this is not to accept that Melville's work is "about" irony, ambiguity, indeterminacy, or any other form of fictional open-endedness. As I intend to argue, the indeterminacy that characterizes "Benito Cereno" derives less from some inherently unstable property of language than from the author's own uneasiness in portraying an oppressed and voiceless other—a reticence reflected in his story's unique configuration as (what I will call) a "mutinous" text. What I think can be urged for Melville, then, is that for his own reasons and in his own way he anticipates a number of ideological concerns which pervade our current thinking about the narrative representation of other times, other cultures and other lives. In the present essay I propose to examine "Benito Cereno," both as an embodiment of Melville's antislavery sentiment and as a mutinous narrative structure, in an effort to see how structure and idea engage each other.

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More obviously than any other work by Melville, "Benito Cereno" is a narrative clotted with "complications"—interpretive gaps and anomalies which seem to defy any clear resolution. These extend, of course, from the atmospheric ambiguity generated by the opening description of the "gray" dawn off the coast of Chile, to the bewildering and often sinister-seeming conduct of Benito Cereno himself. To the extent that these complications derive from the limited point of view of Captain Delano, the putative protagonist, they serve to recall the reader's own experience with the story: in particular, his or her need to transform the text's original opacities into increments of meaning, units of significance that will then contribute to the story's hermeneutic clarity. As a way of focusing this readerly desire, Melville relies in "Benito Cereno" on one of the most melodramatic plot structures ever to be found in a serious work of fiction. Although the outline of the novella is generally well known, it may prove useful to summarize some of its essential moments—both to indicate the source of its vexing ambiguity and to emphasize the teleological hunger that propels its movement.

In August, 1799, while lying at anchor off St. Maria, a deserted island along the southern coast of Chile, Captain Amasa Delano, an American sealer captain from Massachusetts, glimpses in the distance the "shadowy" figure of another ship making its uncertain way toward the island harbor. Upon closer inspection, this vessel proves to be the Spanish merchantman *San Dominick,* a huge old slave-ship that has apparently been battered by gales and scurvy. After offering assistance to Don Benito, the ship's beleaguered captain, Delano is soon confronted by a series of disturbing "enigmas": not only, for example, is there an unusual number of slaves who are allowed to roam the ship at will, but Don Benito himself exhibits a strange "reserve" toward Delano that is clearly at odds with naval courtesy. Although Babo, Don Benito's ubiquitous and "faithful" African servant, provides repeated assurances that his master is simply "not himself" after their arduous journey around Cape Horn, Delano cannot shake the uneasy impression that the captain means to do him harm, that he may even intend a murderous assault upon his ship. Not until Delano leaves the *San Dominick* that evening is the mystery surrounding his reception finally cleared up. As he is about to depart, Don Benito suddenly leaps into the whaleboat with him—pursued by Babo wielding a dagger. Realizing at last that the slaves are in full revolt and that Babo is their leader, Delano registers the shocked "illumination" which many readers feel on first confronting Melville's work.

The first half of "Benito Cereno" culminates in the violent recapture of the insurgent slaves and the freeing of most of the remaining Spaniards. There follows an excerpted version of Don Benito's legal deposition in which the bloody events preceding Delano's visit, and the beginning of the narrative, are chronologically recalled. It is revealed, for example, that the slaves had not only seized the ship but had murdered many of the crew and all of the passengers—among them Cereno's friend and patron, the slaveowner Don Alexandro Aranda, whose skeleton Babo had hideously deployed as the *San Dominick*'s figurehead. By means of this judicial transcript, Melville's text purports to clarify the "true" sequence of events thus far hidden from both

Delano and the reader, events that in retrospect seem to illuminate many of his plot's most disturbing enigmas. For his various offenses against the Spanish crown Babo receives the full measure of colonial justice. In the novella's concluding paragraph the mute and rebellious slave is finally executed, after which his head—"that hive of subtlety" (223)—is impaled on a pole overlooking the recent grave of Benito Cereno himself.

At least on first reading, the plot of "Benito Cereno" seems motivated by a fairly orthodox ambition, and one typical of the narrative logic of most 19th-century fiction: to build toward a clarifying end that will reveal in retrospect the real significance of its earlier "complications." As if to emphasize the elemental nature of his narrative design, Melville relies heavily on what he himself deemed to be a demotic form of literary plotting. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne in 1851; "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not sell. Yet altogether write the *other* way I cannot" ("Letter" 1700). While it might seem presumptuous to specify the "what" and "that" of his complaint, it is reasonable to assume that "the *other* way" of writing includes such commercially successful forms as the sentimental novel, Gothic fiction, adventure narratives, melodramatic plots of all types and descriptions, as well as that preeminent genre of the 19th century, the detective story. Nevertheless, "Benito Cereno" abounds in precisely the sort of "overplotting" that we usually associate with these popular forms, and which Melville presumably disdained—at least after *Moby-Dick* (1851)—for his own more serious and exalted art.

Mainly for this reason the narrative has often inspired the closely related charges of racial insensitivity and melodramatic excess. In his influential survey of the "American Renaissance," for example, F. O. Matthiessen faulted "Benito Cereno" for its failure to address the issue of slavery that looms behind its supposed "embodiment of good in the pale Spanish captain and of evil in the mutinied African crew." While Matthiessen did not specifically reprove the work for its Gothic excesses—indeed he even praised it for being "pictorially and theatrically effective"—he nonetheless found its tragic plot, "for all its prolonged suspense, comparatively superficial" in relation to the historical tragedy that it sought to ignore (508). That there is a clear connection between this cultural neglect and Melville's sensational mode of narration in "Benito Cereno" was the central argument voiced by Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel.* Identifying the "innocent" but befuddled mind of Delano with that of his creator, Fiedler contended that Melville's insensitivity about black slavery arose in part from the highly "theatrical" nature of his narrative enterprise:

> Captain Amasa Delano fails to recognize the rebellion on a Spanish slave ship which he encounters, precisely because he is a good American. He is endowed, that is to say, with an "undistrustful good nature" and will not credit "the imputation of malign evil in man." … Though the fact of slavery out of which all the violence and deceit aboard the Spanish ship had been bred, remains a part of his own democratic world as well as Don Benito's aristocratic one, Amasa Delano is undismayed. … Indeed, Melville seems to share the bafflement of his American protagonist; a Northerner like Captain Delano, Melville finds the problem of slavery and the Negro a little exotic, a gothic horror in an almost theatrical sense of the word.

(400-01)

Gothic extravagance, exotic theatricality, melodramatic excess: these were the terms most frequently invoked by mid-20th-century critics in describing the plot of "Benito Cereno," a work not universally admired for its social conscience but one almost invariably felt to confirm (what Donald Pease calls) the Cold War view of Melville as a staunch defender of America's traditions of Adamic innocence and instinctive goodness. Significantly, the notion long held by Richard Chase, Harry Levin, R. W. B. Lewis and others that Delano is an American innocent confronting "a terror of blackness" in the "savagely vindictive slaves" (Matthiessen 508) has to a large degree depended on precisely those elements of plotting which earlier critics like Fiedler regarded as gratuitous or excessive. So long as "evil" in the text can be seen as a puzzle or a problem—an

interpretive anomaly external to the hero and subject to his "solution"—its pernicious effects may be countered and contained, perhaps even redirected toward some likely villain regarded as its source. Initially at least, this is exactly what Melville's highly melodramatic and suspenseful plot enables us to do; that is, it invites us to believe that we can, like Delano, master its "enigmatic events" *and* maintain our "innocent" or value-neutral stance in the process.

The self-exculpating or even self-congratulatory nature of this interpretive ideal accounts, I believe, for the curiously artificial cast of Melville's plot, some of whose elements are as contrived or as staged as Fiedler and others have suggested—though not for the reasons they suggested. Here let me cite two noteworthy examples, each illustrating a different mode of melodramatic excess typical of the narrative. When Delano first approaches the *San Dominick* to offer his assistance, he is immediately struck by her "battered and moldy condition."

> [T]he castellated forecastle seemed some ancient turret long ago taken by assault, and then left to decay. Toward the stern, two high-raised quarter galleries—the balustrades here and there covered with dry tindery sea moss—opening out from the unoccupied state cabin, whose deadlights, for all the mild weather, were hermetically closed and caulked—these tenantless balconies hung over the sea as if it were the grand Venetian canal. But the principal relic of faded grandeur was the ample oval of the shieldlike sternpiece, intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon medallioned about by groups of mythological or symbolical devices, uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked.

(144)

Needless to say, the "dark satyr" of the tale will ultimately prove to be not Don Benito (as Delano initially suspects) but the mutinous Babo, who all along manipulates appearances in order to "mask" his real intentions—although in another sense it is also Delano who fulfills the satyr's role, imposing his ideological hegemony on the "prostrate" slaves. Merely to mark this passage as an exemplary instance of Melvillean irony, however, is to overlook its more obvious, and more obviously theatrical, intent: to engage the reader in a melodramatic plot whose ultimate issues and concerns will be measured in terms of "tenantless balconies," "symbolical devices," and masked figures "writhing" in mysterious and deadly combat. What is most immediately striking about Delano's perception of the *San Dominick,* in other words, is not its ambiguity (or "undecidability") but its specular specificity and suspensefulness. Fairly bristling with Gothic emblems and portents—including its own version of the proverbial haunted castle in the form of an abandoned and decaying forecastle—the *San Dominick*'s physical appearance unfolds for Delano, and therefore for the reader, as a series of visual prolepses: promissory images suggesting an eventual understanding of her innermost secrets.

The second example occurs in Don Benito's legal deposition, a document which promises to resolve the unsettling ambiguities confronting Delano in the first half of the narrative. While on board the *San Dominick,* Delano has occasion to observe an enormous slave with "an iron collar about his neck, from which depended a chain thrice wound round his body, the terminating links padlocked together at a broad band of iron, his girdle" (159). This enchained giant, one Atufal by name, is a purported mutineer, brought before Don Benito to beg his pardon for some unspecified infraction. In the deposition, however, it is revealed that Atufal's mute subservience before his "master" is only another ruse contrived by Babo, an elaborate mime-show designed to intimidate Cereno and to reassure Delano that white authority still reigns supreme aboard the Spanish vessel. Thus, to Charles Martin and James Snead, the real story of Atufal's lock and chains emerges in the deposition as an explicit deconstruction of Delano's limited and highly prejudiced view of black behavior (240-41). If so, however, the deconstructive moment is hardly an efficient one. Affirming "that, among other devices, was the device of presenting Atufal, his [Babo's] right-hand man, as chained, though in a moment the chains could be

dropped," the deposition then goes on to assert, almost superfluously, "that in every particular [Babo] informed [Don Benito] what part he was expected to enact in every device, and what story he was to tell on every occasion, always threatening him with instant death if he varied in the least" (214).

The documentary passage is noteworthy not only for its "retrospective" clarity but for its expository excess. Although the deposition does indeed clarify Delano's encounter with Atufal, it does so only by making it a "problem" in the first place: that is, it transforms the symbolism of the chains into an interpretive "enigma" which the deposition then proceeds to illuminate and explain. One could easily imagine the deposition without this explicit, indeed over-explicit, account of Atufal's earlier appearance, in which case the wary reader would simply recollect it him/herself as an unstated instance of Babo's treachery and cunning. Yet in so assiduously recasting the scene as a semiotic ploy, a mutinous "device" designed to fool the "innocent" American, the deposition seeks to impress us with its undaunted rigor, its determination to repeat and dispel "every enigmatic of the day" confronting Delano aboard the *San Dominick.* Hence, once again, the curiously gratuitous and overplotted quality of "Benito Cereno" to which I have already alluded. Courting the reader's desire for authoritative clarity and closure—for a complete understanding of the text's earlier ambiguities—Melville's melodramatic plot offers us a surfeit of narrative details which are often in excess of any apparent need.

What each of these examples illustrates, the first proleptically and the second analeptically, is an element of critical "overstanding" which can be said to characterize our initial reaction to the story, a reaction shaped and motivated by Melville's unabashed use of melodramatic devices (masked relationships, disguised identities, menacing encounters, last-minute escapes, etc.) as a way of focusing and ordering his plot, thus creating the impression of a narrative mystery awaiting ultimate illumination. If, as Peter Brooks suggests, one of the primary motivations of melodrama is the author's desire to "say all" or to "tell all" (16), then it could be argued that the plot of "Benito Cereno" often imitates the reader's desire to "know all" in relation to the narrative's anticipated end. Throughout the tale there is a developing expectation that the darksome ambiguities confronting us in the first half of the narrative are merely provisional ones, the product of our uninformed "first reading," and that the authoritative "second reading" provided by the deposition will serve to dispel them in the end. As a result even those readers who have felt uncomfortable with the work's extravagantly melodramatic cast have usually expressed confidence in its ultimate coherence.

.....

Melville's reliance on melodrama in constructing "Benito Cereno" is closely allied to his use of another popular form, that of the detective story—perhaps the 19th-century's most vivid expression of the necessary "second reading" implicit in all narrative. Speaking of this apparently demotic genre and its paradigmatic usefulness in understanding fictional plots, Tzvetan Todorov describes the temporal structure of the classic "whodunit" as a deliberate—indeed unavoidable—conflation of two stories, the "absent" story of the crime and the belated story of the inquisition: in solving the crime the detective does not merely identify the culprit or the criminal, he also postulates a sequence of events leading up to the crime which is, and can only be, a later retracing of an earlier occurrence. In this way, Todorov suggests, the "paradoxical" structure of detective fiction might serve to elucidate the representational strategy of all narrative discourse, in particular its inevitable fusion of *fabula* (or story) and *sjužet* (or plot) as a way of organizing its fictional material (44-46).

In the undeniable sense that "Benito Cereno"'s plot consists of an elaborate series of retellings or retracings—Delano's bumbling attempt to interpret (and then reinterpret) the "enigmatic" events aboard the *San Dominick,* Don Benito's authorized or official version of the mutiny embodied in the deposition, even the reader's "retrospective" judgment of the story based on these two accounts—one might easily infer that the fundamental form of the work is that of a detective story *manqué*: not only is there a crime (and so presumably a criminal), there is also a series of "investigators" at work intent on discovering "what really happened" aboard the *San Dominick* before Don Benito's desperate leap into Delano's boat. Reinforcing this

notion of narrative belatedness or secondariness in “Benito Cereno” is the compositional history of the work itself. As Harold H. Scudder noted, Melville derived his 1855 narrative in part from an 1817 naval document written by the “real” Amasa Delano, a document historically recounting, among other things, a violent slave-revolt on the high seas. In his fictionalization of this event (as well as of the *Amistad* mutiny and the *Creole* affair described by Kaplan) Melville thus undertakes a task of detection or reconstruction even more arduous than that assigned to Todorov's detective. As author, he must construct a version of the crime that is not once but twice removed from its mortal matrix, whereby his version is constrained to be nothing more than a later retelling of an earlier text.

As a detective story, therefore, “Benito Cereno” clearly anticipates the belated structures and “absent” centers of such essentially modernist works as James's “The Figure in the Carpet,” Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* or even Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!,* whose ostensive aim is the detailed recollection and retelling of an earlier story or event from a later point of view. Like these other narratives of deferred transmission, Melville's text reveals a persistent slippage between the earlier or absent story (in this case, Babo's original takeover of the ship) and its putative retelling in the narrative, a slippage which is formally elaborated in the relation between Delano's story and the legal deposition which follows it. Insofar as Delano's perception of events in the first half of the narrative invites comparison to the reading of a text, we are thus reminded of our initial reading of “Benito Cereno”—a reading shaped to a significant degree by Melville's “immoderate” use of stereotypical plotting (“the *other* way” of writing) in the creation of his story. Judging from most recent reactions, however, Delano's reading or misreading of events aboard the *San Dominick* is one we have come to regard with considerable antagonism and contempt.

Although earlier discussions of Melville's narrative varied widely both in quality and focus, critics today generally agree that Delano's perception of the mutiny is a severely limited one, marred not only by a natural “innocence” bordering on stupidity but, even more centrally, by the institutionalized cruelty and inhumanity of slavery itself. Consigning Africans to their accustomed 18th-century role as valets, hairdressers or body servants—as perennial minstrels of white vanity—Delano cannot even conceive the possibility that a black man, let alone a black mind, could be sufficiently daring and adroit to wrest control of the vessel without leaving unmistakable evidence of his transgression. Babo succeeds so well in his treachery because he is both the mastermind and the master-mime of the *San Dominick*'s mutiny. As author of the slave-revolt, he is acutely aware of the racial stereotypes informing the American captain's understanding of non-Western, and especially African, behavior. In orchestrating the events of his visit, therefore, Babo is always careful to confirm Delano's “innocent” impression of white supremacy and black subservience; hence Don Benito, for example, is invariably displayed in full uniform, complete with imperial sword and scabbard, while the desultory and “undisciplined” slaves seem to hang on his every word.

Needless to say, in this extended pantomime of white authority, it is the viewer as much as the viewed who plays a vital role, and Delano exhibits every evidence of being an ideal audience for Babo's minstrelsy, if not of the “captive” kind represented by Don Benito himself. Observing an infant nursing at the breast of his slumbering mother, for example, Delano selectively ignores both the infant's fate and the mother's anguish under slavery. Instead, he derives from the scene a soothing image of “naked nature … [of] pure tenderness and love,” an image which prompts his further reduction of African womanhood: “He was gratified with [the other women's] manners: like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution, equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them. Unsophisticated as leopardesses, loving as doves. Ah! Thought Captain Delano, these perhaps are some of the very women whom Ledyard saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of” (173).

A multitude of other examples could easily be adduced. Cumulatively, they confirm the impression articulated by any number of recent critics: that Delano's compassion for Don Benito conceals, as its corollary, an unacknowledged bigotry toward blacks (Grejda); that his naive reading or misreading of the mutiny mirrors an unspoken need for mastery (Martin & Snead); that his much-vaunted innocence is less a matter of

providence, like Billy Budd's, than of privilege (Kavanagh)—especially a Eurocentric privilege which allows white males to represent enslaved black women as “leopardesses” and “doves.”

What is perhaps less obvious, and to a degree less comfortable, is the extent to which Delano's misreading of the mutiny mirrors our own first reading of the story, including many of the innocent “first readings” offered by earlier Melville critics. While it is no doubt true, as J. H. Kavanagh suggests, that any comprehensive account of “Benito Cereno” must ultimately strive to “situate” rather than “replicate” the hero's ideology, I think he overstates his case somewhat by insisting that our analysis of the work “must begin by breaking absolutely the seductive grip of identification between the reader and Amasa Delano” (360). Such extrication, while necessary, can be earned or achieved only in the unavoidably temporal course of our own reading, and rereading, of the story. In this dynamic process our initial “identification” with Delano depends as much, I think, on the formal patternings of the plot as on any supposed ideological affinity for the hero, even one based on the (now) discredited notion of his moral superiority and “singularly undistrustful good nature” (142).

As I have tried to demonstrate, the extravagantly melodramatic cast of Melville's narrative serves primarily to deflect us from the kinds of ideological questions so persuasively posed by Kavanagh and others—thereby inducing in the reader what we might call a Delano-like complacency toward the text's ultimate intentionalities. As a fictional account of an historical event, that is, “Benito Cereno” seems at first far more interested in recounting the lurid and sensational aspects of the mutiny—its elements of “theatrical” suspense and mystery—than in exploring its institutional and historical causes. Hence Melville's reiterated emphasis, in the first half of the narrative, on both the ambiguity and the incompleteness of his protagonist's perceptions; hence also the often confused and contradictory accounts offered by Delano of “his host's whole mysterious demeanor”: “The singular alternations of courtesy and ill-breeding in the Spanish captain were unaccountable, except on one of two suppositions—innocent lunacy, or wicked imposture” (162).

The unusually high incidence of such hermeneutic tension and confusion throughout the narrative, at times almost verging on paranoia, serves, I would argue, not merely to underline Delano's “innocent” imperviousness to the tragedy of slavery. On the level of plot, it also (and more immediately) serves to intensify our sense of the tale as a narrative puzzle or “enigma” requiring later exegesis. As a result, even Delano's intermittent impression of evil in the story—dim-witted and silly though it may seem in retrospect—is very much our own insofar as our confused first reading of the work is impelled by a basic desire to know “what really happened” aboard the *San Dominick,* if not exactly “whodunit.” However crude or unsophisticated such responses may seem, they derive naturally from our initial perception of the story as a mystery narrative—indeed as a work of detective fiction whose essential aim is to clarify the numerous contradictory “clues” confronting both Delano and ourselves in the course of our mutually imbricated readings.

Nor is it only Delano's naive and prejudiced point of view which accounts for this impression. Virtually the entire narrative is organized as an extended inquisition, in which the criminal elements involved are formally identified in the “authoritative” second reading supplied by the deposition. Like the naval account of Billy's execution at the end of *Billy Budd,* Don Benito's legal statement—transcribed later at the viceregal court in Lima—embodies an authorized or official version of the story, an interpretive overview that seems to transcend the distorting partialities of earlier accounts. More than that, however, the deposition also seeks to disinter the earlier or “absent” story of “Benito Cereno” that lies buried beneath Melville's hopelessly belated plotting of it. As such, the deposition offers itself to the reader as the hitherto unacknowledged *fabula* of the narrative's *sjužet,* disclosing in dry, factual detail and with due deliberation the true extent of Babo's treachery—as in this horrifying account of Don Alexandro's fate:

> [W]hen, at sunrise, the deponent coming on deck, the Negro Babo showed him a skeleton, which had been substituted for the ship's proper figurehead—the image of Christopher Colon,

> the discoverer of the New World; that the Negro Babo asked him whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's, that, upon discovering his face, the Negro Babo, coming close, said words to this effect: “Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader.”

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In such ways does the deposition propose not only to clarify Don Benito's “mysterious demeanor” but also to unravel the “enigmatic” sequencing of Melville's plot. The trouble with its legal representations, of course, is that they leave unanswered so many vexing questions raised earlier in the story—questions which the deposition seems anxious to elude, if not suppress altogether. For example, after Don Benito's narrow escape, the narrator unequivocally asserts that Delano's crew were told, “the more to encourage them” in their pursuit of the fleeing slaves, “that the Spanish captain considered his ship good as lost; that she and her cargo, including some gold and silver, were worth more than a thousand doubloons” (204). The obvious duplicity of this announcement is less important, perhaps, than the clear possibility, never disposed of by the text, that the one who utters it is none other than the “innocent” Delano himself!

Other anomalies press for consideration. If, as the deposition implies, the slaves are only abject mutineers, then why do they fight with such fierce determination, against overwhelming odds, without guns or supplies (and hence any real hope of winning), yet with a noteworthy courage and devotion to their cause unequalled in any earlier depiction of “the Negro” in American literature? Or again: given the deposition's insistence that the American sailors were singularly gallant and heroic in their selfless efforts to recapture the *San Dominick* (a representation already undercut by their apparent need for monetary “encouragement”), how do we then account for their excessive violence and brutality after the vessel has been taken? Despite the deposition's claim to objectivity, such questions continue to linger in our imagination, leaving an ominous residue of ambiguity which modern readers like Lawrance Thompson (passim) and Warner Berthoff (153) have considered to be the work's presiding purpose.

It is not merely ambiguity or incompleteness, however, which marks the various representations offered in the text. Further problematizing the authority of the legal deposition is an exclusionary logic which critics have hastened to underscore as *prima facie* evidence of its ideological bias: first, the “document” Melville includes from the courtroom proceedings is a series of “extracts” rather than a complete transcript—extracts selected, that is, from “among many others, for partial translation”; second, the extracts in question are only the transcribed testimony of Benito Cereno himself, including some “disclosures” originally held “dubious” because of his “not undisturbed” state of mind; third, and perhaps most revealing, the tribunal's final decision to accept as authoritative Don Benito's version of “the true history of the *San Dominick*'s voyage” (207) is made without once considering the Africans' point of view—indeed without once considering that the Africans even *have* a point of view. Thus, not unlike Delano's “innocent” first reading of the mutiny, the “authoritative” second reading furnished by the deposition collapses under its own ideological weight. As Brook Thomas suggests, “Rather than bringing us closer to the actual events, the legal point of view in one sense removes us even further from them” (29).

Evident throughout “Benito Cereno,” then, is a curious disparity usually overlooked by readers intent on discovering the latent ideological meanings of Melville's narrative. On the one hand, we have what purports to be a fictional plot motivated entirely by a need to know (and to tell) “what really happened,” a need arising from our innocent first reading of the work and stimulated by the narrator's reiterated reference to what Roland Barthes might call its “hermeneutic code”—its suspenseful sequencing as a narrative “enigma” (the word is Barthes's as well as Melville's) awaiting full disclosure and final revelation (Barthes 19). In the fulfillment of this need the story often takes on the demotic trappings of a mystery or a melodrama, infusing its enigmatic events with a purposiveness that seems not just authoritative but authoritarian. On the other hand, the fact that our subsequent readings of the story (including our rereading of the deposition) generate so

many other questions lying outside its hermeneutic code suggests that our deepest engagement with the text is in some sense an “unlawful” one, that is, an engagement motivated by issues and concerns not strictly “relevant” to its purported plot. The intricate interplay of authoritarian plot and unlicensed meanings in “Benito Cereno”—and Melville's conspiratorial awareness of it throughout the narrative—not only accounts for many of the novella's most disturbing ambiguities. It also brings us closer to the transgressive truth of the work that has thus far eluded most ideological readings.

.....

That indeterminacy abounds in “Benito Cereno” (and of course in Melville's other major fiction as well) is no longer news to anyone. Nor is it particularly surprising that an author who was himself so often marginalized in his private and professional life should feel sympathy for the oppressed and disinherited peoples of the earth. What requires further elaboration and emphasis, however, is the remarkable confluence, in “Benito Cereno,” of ideological critique and narrative open-endedness: a confluence precisely indicated in the ironic interplay of first and second readings outlined above. For it is not only ambiguity or silence which occupies Melville's narrative, nor simply the ideological blindness of his central characters. Far more fundamental to the work's subversive movement is a deep-seated suspicion of the dynamics of narrative itself. In this sense “Benito Cereno” is a work which challenges not only the authority of sea captains and judges, but even its own authority to speak for an enslaved other who has been denied any definitive voice in the world of the text. To explain what this means we need to consider once more Melville's parodic use of detective fiction in the construction of his plot.

One of the most frequently cited truisms in contemporary studies of detective fiction is that the detective is always an accomplice of the social world he protects against its criminals. Notwithstanding Todorov's insistence that the detective/narrator is generically “immune” to the influences affecting ordinary mortals (44), Melville's narrative stunningly anticipates the work of more recent theorists like D. A. Miller, who have found in 19th-century detective novels (such as Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*) abundant evidence of an ideological “surveillance,” of a “policing” power inherent in the nature of narrative itself. Neither completely innocent nor altogether disinterested, the detective is therefore one whose brilliant interventions and discoveries mark “an explicit bringing-under-surveillance of the entire world of the narrative” (Miller 35).

Applying this idea to Melville's text, we might say that the various “clues” of criminal conduct confronting Delano aboard the *San Dominick* are always indicative of an economic system (slavery) and an ideological overview (white authority) which he is sworn to protect against both internal disruption and external challenge. Even though he is therefore “wrong” to suspect Don Benito of conspiring with the slaves, he is also “right” in upholding the segregationist standards of his society. Hence the clues are never value-free in the sense that Todorov implies of contributing to a “purely formal architecture” (45) of initial puzzlement followed by analytic reprise which is the presumed legacy, he suggests, of works like Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express.* Instead, the mystifying clues confronting Delano in “Benito Cereno” derive from their ability to generate anxiety and disequilibrium in the detective himself, both in his immediate role as “surveillance-operative” and in his *ex officio* capacity as spokesman for “the entire [white] world of the narrative.”

Melville's acute (and acutely self-conscious) understanding of this dynamic accounts, I believe, for three of the most perplexing features of “Benito Cereno”: first, his choice of Delano as “protagonist” in the first half of the narrative; second, his refusal to confirm any version of the mutiny suggested by the text—including any hypothetical version constructed by the reader; and third, his consignment to silence of the narrative's two principal antagonists, Don Benito and Babo, who before their deaths “agree” to say nothing of what has passed between them. The evident anomalousness of Delano's role as central character is immediately apparent, of course, in the very title Melville gives to his fiction—a title which not only directs our attention to another character, Don Benito, but even suggests that this other character is more deserving of our attention

than Delano himself. To whom, then, does the narrative “belong”? Is it Delano's story or Don Benito's? Who is the “major” character, and who the “minor” one? That Babo is conspicuously excluded from any possibility of narrative “ownership” is, I would argue, one of the dominant worries of the work, if not its principal theme.

Nor is it only the title of the work which precipitates such questions. Delano's own character seems in many ways strangely unsuited to the prominence thrust upon him by the author. Though he is obviously at the center of the story, he is not at the heart of it: at least not to the extent that Don Benito and Babo are. Even assigning him the honorific standing of chief witness or detached observer in the narrative has its undeniable drawbacks; as a Jamesian consciousness, Delano is hardly one of those “on whom nothing is lost.” Indeed, as a detective-figure he is more aptly compared to the bumbling and officious Dr. Watson than to the sharp-minded Holmes. As for any claim he may have to moral ascendancy within the work, we have already had occasion to observe just how riddled with prejudice his American “innocence” really is. If he is not evil himself, then he is unquestionably implicated—both by choice and by circumstance—in the institutional evils which have shaped his ideology and that of his countrymen. In most ways, in short, Delano seems to be a thoroughly middling man and as unlikely a hero as one could hope to find in a story ostensibly devoted to the historical iniquities of slavery.

The problem with this view, however, is that the plot of “Benito Cereno” is “ostensibly” devoted to nothing of the kind. Rather than conducting a searching inquiry into the issue of slavery, Melville's narrative offers itself to the reader (at least on first reading, as we have seen) as a compendium of popular fiction, an array of formula plots designed to divert our attention—or even to repress it—from the potentially serious concerns underlying them. In terms of this plotting Delano is an ideal protagonist rather than a troublesome one. Young, vigorous, amiable and willing, he is a man of “singularly undistrustful good nature” and so an eminently qualified central character in a narrative fiction that seems part melodrama, part sea adventure, part mystery tale, part detective story—part any popular form that requires of its protagonist only a dedicated aversion to moral ambiguity and ideological complexity. Moreover, Delano is a sincere and capable spokesman for the coercive force and regulatory practices which impel much of the narrative. Whenever he is confronted with evidence that something is amiss aboard the *San Dominick,* for example, rather than acceding to his suspicions and acting on them, Delano chooses simply to suppress them; in the process he unfailingly asserts a cultural and racial hegemony which masks itself as a kind of natural law, even a theology of sorts: “Once again he smiled at the phantoms which had mocked him, and felt something like a tinge of remorse that, by harboring them even for a moment, he should by implication have betrayed an atheist doubt of the ever-watchful Providence” (199).

Simply to dismiss this musing as the self-centered prattling of a white imperialist, as so many critics have done, is to overlook the extent to which its “ideology of dominance” is systematically restaged in the rest of the narrative: not least by Don Benito's legal deposition, a document which dispenses its judgments with a quasi-scriptural solemnity, brooking no “atheist doubt” of its ultimate authority. Indeed, one could almost say of Delano that his role as protagonist in the story is increased rather than diminished by his numerous errors and misreadings. Because he is apparently wrong only about the identity of the criminal—and never about the nature of the crime—even his stupidity is enlisted in the cause of a “natural” and “providential” plot: the fortuitous rescue of a Spanish innocent by an American one from an unspeakably “savage” fate. It is only when we begin to question the representational authority of this plot that Delano's real limitations manifest themselves, and along with them the ideological blindnesses which his providential view inspires. Hence Melville's determinative title for his fiction not only signals a redirected emphasis upon Don Benito; it also alerts us to the arbitrariness, or even the tyranny, of a narrative plot which subordinates its fictional events to any unilateral point of view.

Such resistance to narrative's unilateral authority also underlies the notorious open-endedness of “Benito Cereno,” an open-endedness often taken to be a tacit rebuke of Delano's simplistic moralizing. It is that, of course; but in the repressed cultural context of the tale the instabilities of the ending acquire for Melville, I

think, a uniquely self-reflexive character. Written against the tradition of the effusive closure in sentimental fiction, the story's concluding segment enacts another arabesque or temporal detour in the narrative sequence—this despite Melville's presumed impatience with the unavoidably "retrospective" nature of his account. Recounting the "long, mild voyage to Lima" after the *San Dominick*'s recapture, this brief section is almost casually inserted between the courtroom deposition and the final paragraph describing Babo's execution and Don Benito's demise. In it the two captains are shown in relaxed and friendly concourse after their ordeal, "their fraternal unreserve in singular contrast with former withdrawments" (220). Yet their present interaction is not altogether different: despite Delano's repeated admonition to Don Benito to forget the past, there is evidence of a continuing rift between the two commanders—an unhealable breach caused not only by Delano's earlier apprehension of Don Benito as a "monster" (the term is Benito's), but by Don Benito's inability to forget what has happened.

The scene in question, one of the most moving and mysterious in all of Melville, centers on the one major character in the story who has had no "say" in its presentation: Babo. Noticing Benito's gloomy and choleric cast, Delano vainly attempts to lift his spirits by reminding him that he is "saved":

> "But these mild trade winds that now fan your cheek, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades."
>
> "With their steadfastness they but waft me to my tomb, senor," was the foreboding response.
>
> "You are saved," cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; "you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?"
>
> "The Negro."
>
> There was silence, while the moody man sat, slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle about him, as it were a pall.
>
> There was no more conversation that day.

(222)

A number of concerns command our attention here. Like Kurtz's bewildering reference to "the horror" in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (a work which Melville's story resonantly anticipates), Don Benito's ambiguous reference to "the Negro" seriously undermines the teleological integrity of the narrative preceding it. Thus, not unlike Marlow's frustrated effort to find a reason for Kurtz's defection, Melville's apparent attempt to bring his account of the mutiny to a complete and orderly close encounters an impasse: an interpretive "enigma" that refuses the call to coherence signalled by Delano's injunction to "forget."

That this resistance emanates entirely from Don Benito is thus doubly significant. Having had to play the "role" of a captain while being the "slave" of a slave has taken its lethal toll on him; and critics such as Kavanagh (374-76) are right to suggest that Don Benito's silence at the end indicates that he at least has some awareness that the institution of slavery is less a matter of law than of power—cruelly coercive and disproportionate power. Hence his ambiguous reference to "the Negro" serves also to disrupt and subvert the cover story that Delano, and much of the narrative with him, seems determined to perpetuate: that the *San Dominick* mutiny is from beginning to end only the account of a criminal offense committed by lawless savages against the enlightened leadership of the Spanish crown. Whether "the Negro" alludes to Babo in particular or the Africans in general is finally less important than the fact that the reference itself reminds us that there is another point of view never even represented in the tale.

Indeed, the deliberate suppression of this point of view, and the narrative's apparent failure to suppress it at the end, directs us to what is most distinctive about “Benito Cereno” as a literary form: namely, its status as a “mutinous” text whose deepest meanings emerge as the “lawless” and transgressive consequence of its formal plotting. To the extent that the story always generates more questions than it answers—to the extent, that is, that our first reading of the work is inevitably frustrated rather than fulfilled by our subsequent readings—“Benito Cereno” exhibits (we might say) an uneasy conscience about the very nature of narrative: especially narrative's apparently ineradicable need to impart an “authoritative” meaning to its most “irrelevant” or resistant details (Price 24-36). Dramatizing this authoritarian impulse of all narrative, Melville's novella also dramatizes the subversive and illicit movement of meanings not included in its teleological grip. As a result, his refusal to validate any single version of the mutiny—far from plunging us into further ambiguity—may actually alert us to an anti-imperialist perspective in the work which counters the repressive organization of its “intended” plot.

In what sense, however, is “Benito Cereno” an anti-imperialist fiction, and how can it be said to be one when its principal spokesman, Babo, is allowed no voice in the story—a muteness further emphasized by his implacable resolve not to say another word from the moment of his capture to the time of his death? Commenting on Babo's “mysterious silence,” Brook Thomas has observed: “Readers who see the text undercutting the proslavery perspectives within it cannot propose their own antislavery perspective as an impartial and complete account of the text, because their perspective is based solely on an absence [Babo's silence]” (32). Yet it is not only Babo's point of view which is absent in “Benito Cereno.” Virtually the entire narrative rests on an extended absence left by the gradually receding “facts” of the mutiny, facts that can only be recalled and reinterpreted in a continuing effort to “master” their true significance. Melville himself thematizes this point by emphasizing that the fictional events of his story took place more than fifty years before (in 1799), and that the legal account of them survives in the form of selected “extracts” translated from another language. Hence there is an undeniable aptness in his use of demotic elements throughout the narrative. In the sense that the original events of the mutiny come to us already contaminated by human handling, as it were, they are as much the product of borrowed or belated plotting as “Benito Cereno” itself.

To the degree that Melville's story is a belated narrative, however, it also serves to emphasize what Sartre's Roquentin calls the tyranny of the end implicit in all fictional plots (57-58)—especially imperialistic plots (like the ones authored by Delano) which tend to forget that the apparent priority of *fabula* to *sužet* is, as Barbara H. Smith suggests, only an illusory one, impelled by the interpreter's need to believe that there is an authoritative set of facts on which his own representations rest. Exposing this mimetic impulse for the policing operation that it really is, Melville's elaborately retrospective fiction reminds us—through its apparent failure to cohere—that its various perspectives on black behavior are more accurately seen, perhaps, as perspectives on white behavior: on white ways of enslaving and controlling the “savagely vindictive” other. In so doing “Benito Cereno” offers itself to its readers not as an authoritative text but as a mutinous one, a work whose illicit and uncontrollable meanings extend far beyond the discursive framework of its plot toward the kinds of cultural questions being raised today.

One such question is the “perturbing question of our relationship to others” addressed by Edward Said. “The difficulty with the question,” Said suggests, “is that there is no vantage *outside* the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and nonimperial powers, between different Others, a vantage that might allow one the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting free of the encumbering interests, emotions, and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves” (“Representing the Colonized” 216-17). Rephrasing Said somewhat, we might say that Melville's narrative is only too aware of the “unequal” powers and “encumbering interests” which separate Babo from his imperialist masters: white authority-figures who seek control of his body but also of his language—a language consigned by them to the “savage” periphery of more “civilized” tongues. In refusing to speak to his inquisitors, therefore, Babo does not simply create an “absence” in the reader's search for ideological determinacy. To the extent that this search can be conducted only within “the actualities of [unequal] relationships” between opposing others, his

silence signifies rather a final gesture of mutinous resistance: resistance not only against his colonial masters, but even against an imperialist author who would appropriate him further.

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Criticism: Terry J. Martin (essay date 1993)

SOURCE: “The Idea of Nature in *Benito Cereno,*” in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 30, No. 2, Spring, 1993, pp. 161-68.

[*In the following essay, Martin discusses the allegorical qualities of nature depicted in “Benito Cereno.”*]

Although many critics have analyzed specific natural images in Melville's “Benito Cereno,” no one has yet focused exclusively on the role of nature in the novella, nor looked fully at its problematic relation to Delano. Such an examination can both reveal much about Melville's artistry and enhance our understanding of the protagonist's special kind of self-delusion. Midway through the novella, Delano performs an act that is at once typical and revelatory of his ideology: overwhelmed by fears for his life and doubts about providence, he turns to nature for reassurance:

> As [Delano] saw the benign aspect of nature, taking her innocent repose in the evening, the screened sun in the quiet camp of the west shining out like the mild light from Abraham's tent—as charmed eye and ear took in all these, with the chained figure of the black, clenched jaw and hand relaxed.

(96-97)

The personal qualities that Delano attributes to nature (i.e., its “benign[ity]” and “innocen[ce]”), together with the religious associations that the sight evokes, reveal a kind of Emersonian belief in the transcendent goodness and moral providence of nature. It is, in other words, God's benignity that Delano sees suffused throughout the scene. Delano is not a thoroughgoing pantheist; he retains the idea of a personal God, noticeable especially when he later declares, “There is someone above” (77). Nevertheless, for Delano, just as for Emerson, this transcendent spirit is shadowed forth in phenomenal nature, and Delano would no doubt agree with Emerson that “particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts” (13). This belief in effect turns nature into a vast allegory of the divine spirit. For Delano, the mere appearance of benignity in nature warrants belief in the transcendent reality of benignity.

Delano turns to nature not only for reassurance but also for guidance and support. Nature seems for Delano to exhibit a direct interest in human affairs, in which it actively intervenes. Thus, even the most trivial occurrence, such as a pleasant tropical breeze, may convey a moral message to Delano. As Delano affirms to a despairing Cereno, “These mild Trades that now fan your cheek, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the Trades” (116). Delano assumes that if nature is constant in its beneficence, then Cereno's desperation must be essentially wrong and misguided. Nature seems to concur, and in Delano's estimation it openly rebukes Cereno for his moodiness:

> Meantime the sound of the parted waters came more and more gurglingly and merrily in at the windows; as reproaching him for his dark spleen; as telling him that, sulk as he might, and go mad with it, nature cared not a jot; since, whose fault was it, pray?

(95)

Delano even holds up nature as a model of human behavior. In his effort to persuade Cereno to forget the past, Delano points conclusively to the conduct of natural objects: “See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves” (116). If nature forgets the past, then no doubt man ought to do so too.

Delano's belief that nature possesses a transcendent moral order legitimates for him the interpretation of natural signs. To be sure, Delano's behavior is no different from that of most of his contemporaries when he interprets, for example, the color of skin according to this ideal order. If all things signify, then surely white, being the opposite of black, must entail different spiritual characteristics as well. Indeed, Delano has only to look to “nature” to find objective corroboration for his belief that whites are “by nature … the shrewder race” (75) and therefore naturally superior to blacks: the (apparent) dominance of the whites and servitude of the blacks on the *San Dominick* offers sufficient proof of Delano's premise. But Delano has also observed what he takes to be the evident inferiority even of free blacks at home. Blacks have presented themselves as “good-humor[ed],” “easy,” “cheerful,” and “harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune” (83). They are, he thinks, fit “for avocations about one's person,” like “natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction” (83). Furthermore, blacks are, in Delano's view, exempt “from the inflicted sourness of the morbid or cynical mind” (84). However, he also deems them essentially “stupid” (75), displaying the “docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors” (84). For Delano, skin color is simply the seal that providence uses to stamp inferior goods.

Of course, who knows what happens when the races are “unnaturally” mixed? Delano conjectures about the effect: “It were strange, indeed, and not very creditable to us white-skins, if a little of our blood mixed with the African's, should, far from improving the latter's quality, have the sad effect of pouring vitriolic acid into black broth; improving the hue, perhaps, but not the wholesomeness” (89). It will be seen from this that the racially crossed offspring are at a distinct disadvantage in Delano's world, in which natural signs correlate

with spiritual identity, because their identities are as uncertain as the effect of mingled magic potions. In fact, the mulatto represents a special semiotic problem for Delano precisely because the mulatto is neither black nor white and is hence unable to be interpreted with any degree of certainty. Delano is therefore even willing to consider the possibility that a mulatto with a regular European face is a devil (89). After all, a belief in the inherent allegorical qualities of matter requires that the mulatto be *something* less than white but greater than black, and devilishness at least presupposes intelligence gone astray.

For Delano, the meaning of human experience must likewise be understood in light of this allegory of divine providence, for no act can be seen apart from the divine justice that, in his eyes, actively dispenses reward and punishment in this world. Thus, his suspicion that there is a plot to kill him oddly brings about an examination of his own internal merit, as if murder could not have its root in external aggression, but rather must signify a priori some form of karmic retribution for the victim's own past transgression(s). He asks, “Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean. There is someone above” (77). The statement presupposes a direct empirical causality between human behavior and divine justice; with astonishing naïveté Delano assumes that God would never let anything happen to the innocent (i.e., to *himself*), unless he had done something to deserve it. It also reveals how Delano is able to see his continued survival and good fortune as objective verification of his own innocence rather than of his cleverly disguised but nonetheless aggressive will-to-power.[1]

Delano runs into problems, however, when the events that he witnesses often point with an almost irresistible logic to meanings that are incompatible with the existence of a benevolent providence. The whispered conversations between Babo and Benito, the nasty look of the Ashantee hatchet-polishers, the numerous signs communicated to him by the Spanish sailors, and the apparently ubiquitous presence of the imposing Atufal, along with many other equally disconcerting impressions, all suggest the existence of some sinister plot that the allegory of transcendental benignity forces him to deny. Ironically, even those spectacles that most deserve Delano's unqualified trust and sympathy, such as Benito's reduced and pathetic state, also serve to inspire the American with suspicion. In a momentary vision worthy of the completely duplicitous world of *The Confidence Man,* Delano reflects, “For even to the degree of simulating mortal disease, the craft of some tricksters had been known to attain. To think that, under the aspect of infantile weakness, the most savage energies might be couched—those velvets of the Spaniard but the silky paw to his fangs” (64-65). Thus, no sign, no matter how apparently innocent, carries any absolute guarantee of its legitimacy. Later, Delano recollects similar accounts that he has heard of the mortally deceptive tactics of Malay pirates and that “now, as stories … recurred” (68)—stories that have, nonetheless, a certain power and plausibility to them that cannot easily be dismissed, and that in effect challenge his own “story.”

As these examples suggest, Delano's allegorical system of understanding is not entirely self-sufficient. Although it structures and gives meaning to Delano's experience, it is also sustained by that experience—that is, it requires verification from and through his experience. It is in this way vulnerable to confutation. It is, at best, a precariously poised allegory that is in continual danger of being toppled by the logic of its tenor. And the need to read the clues around him serves to quicken the crisis of interpretation: how can he be sure that the world is not ordered according to some other allegory instead? As Delano affirms, there is in at least one sense “a difference between the idea of Don Benito's darkly pre-ordaining Captain Delano's fate, and Captain Delano's lightly arranging Don Benito's” (70); on that slender distinction rests the very nature of the world Delano inhabits.

Delano is not in fact able completely to dismiss the many indications of human evil throughout the story, but to admit them exacts a heavy price: as the evidence of earthly evil accumulates, so too grow his doubts about the supremacy of celestial goodness. Delano inadvertently reveals the extent of his apostasy when he repents of having too strongly doubted the good intentions of those on board the *San Dominick,* for to have given free rein to his fear, he discovers, is at once to have doubted the God that watches over him: “Once again he smiled at the phantoms which had mocked him, and felt something like a tinge of remorse, that, by harboring

them even for a moment, he should, by implication, have betrayed an almost *atheist* doubt of the ever-watchful Providence above" (97; my emphasis). Thus, Delano can only bolster his faith by denying his experience. This strategy may make both the world and himself seem better, but only at the risk of blurring the way both actually are.

Delano's very need for denial makes it evident that nature is not at all what he supposes it to be. Indeed, what Delano thinks is most "natural" or objectively self-evident is precisely what is least so. When, for example, he sees the black woman kissing the baby and speaks glowingly of "naked nature" (73) as if it were "the thing itself"—a natural essence unshaped by either human artifice or perception—he is most fully deceived. There is nothing either "pleasant" or "sociable" (75) about the scene, as Delano construes it. The woman is, for instance, fully a party to the plot against his life.[2] Moreover, the scene is not even natural in the sense in which Delano takes it to be. It is only after the woman discovers him staring at her that she takes up the child and kisses it, a sequence that rhetorically suggests that the act is not at all spontaneously motivated by the "maternal transports" (73) that Delano supposes, but is rather an entirely self-conscious artifice performed with the specific intent of placing him off his guard.

Moreover, in the world of "Benito Cereno," nature is not the transcendent source of clarity that Delano imagines, but rather the source of confusion and equivocation. Significantly, our first view of nature is as a fog in which there is a continual blurring and merging of boundaries, and in which nothing can be positively identified:

> Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. … The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapours among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

(46)

The passage serves as an analogue for the difficulty of interpretation by its evocation of grayness, of shadows, and of the inability to distinguish anything clearly. Fowl and vapors become inextricably mixed and confused. The description is indeed intended to blur the difference between them; the words "kith and kin"—with their hint of familial resemblance—and the exact syntactic repetition of the phrase "flights of troubled gray" both suggest a doubling that challenges cognitive differentiation. That Melville was employing this passage to question a certain set of epistemological assumptions is clear from its juxtaposition, for within such a background of complicated movements that become lost or fail to register, a hueless, uniform gray, and a reality that merges with, and finally becomes inseparable from, appearance, appears Captain Delano's surprise that the stranger "showed no colors" (46).[3]

Likewise, the morning light, which might be expected to bring clarity and illumination, merely streams "equivocally" (47) through the vapors. Other natural signs are equally equivocal. In one of the few departures from Delano's point of view, the narrative voice states, apropos of a haggard sailor, that "whether this haggardness had ought to do with criminality, could not be determined; since, as intense heat and cold, though unlike, produce like sensations, so innocence and guilt, when, through casual association with mental pain, stamping any visible impress, use one seal—a hacked one" (71-72). Thus, nature hides even what it has applied its seal to, and Don Benito warns that truth cannot be ascertained on the basis of phenomenal evidence alone: "Even the best man [may] err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted" (115). In the world of "Benito Cereno," one looks in vain for the natural sign that is not hopelessly equivocal.

Nature is, furthermore, not the source of order, but rather of entropy—of the inexorable decay and disintegration of order. The *San Dominick,* which has been peculiarly ravaged by natural forces that have all

but transformed it to a hearse, functions as a vivid symbol of the destructive power of nature. Everything on the *San Dominick* is, indeed, in the process of becoming something other than itself and thus presents to view a strange, almost monstrous hybrid of its original form and altered state. Nothing retains its original identity, and nowhere is this more richly suggestive than in the description of the ship's name, which points both to the ultimate fate not only of the ship but of human discourse itself: “Upon the tarnished headboards, near by, appeared, in stately capitals, once gilt, the ship's name SAN DOMINICK, each letter streakingly corroded with tricklings of copper-spike rust” (49). It is clearly only a matter of time until the letters dissolve completely into rust, and the sign itself is obliterated. Thus, far from being in any way the foundation of language, nature instead threatens it with utter dissolution. It is the death that constantly promises to undo the most significant assertions of human identity and language, much as it will abruptly rob of his most prized social rank the “invalid courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague” (58).

Finally, although Delano assumes that his words and ideas derive their ultimate authority from nature itself, that “nature” turns out to be itself a fabrication of the language that presumes to reproduce it. In a typical scene, Melville has Delano peering into the ocean and envisioning the scene in terms of something that it is not:

> He leaned against the carved balustrade, again looking off toward his boat; but found his eye falling upon the ribbon grass, trailing along the ship's water-line, straight as a border of green box, and parterres of seaweed, broad ovals and crescents, floating nigh and far, with what seemed long formal alleys between, crossing the terraces of swells, and sweeping round as if leading to the grottoes below. And overhanging all was the balustrade by his arm, which, partly stained with pitch and partly embossed with moss, seemed the charred ruin of some summer-house in a grand garden long running to waste.

(74)

The image of a garden is especially apt here since it was a classical symbol of order. What Delano sees is, however, merely an imaginary order significantly superimposed onto a chaos of water. The scene partakes of the enchantment that Delano temporarily falls prey to, and that in turn suggests the greater “enchantment” of Delano's entire life. Delano has, it will be recalled, a “*charmed* eye and ear” (96; my emphasis). He is, however, in this case quickly disenchanted when, forgetting that the rotting balustrade is, after all, only a rotting balustrade, he leans his weight on it and nearly topples into the sea. The scene dramatizes Delano's nearly fatal dependence on a “nature” without objective basis, and thereby reveals the radically transformative power of Delano's vision.

As we have seen, “Benito Cereno” dramatizes the vast distance between Delano's idealism and reality. Barry Philips has argued that “Emerson exhibited the same defects in his vision of the world and of providence as Delano displayed in his. In Amasa Delano, more than in any other of his major characters, Melville concentrated his contempt for the optimism of the American idealist” (191-92). This is true especially of Delano's view of nature. If Melville's Delano could have read *Moby-Dick,* he would have realized that nature is complex and multifaceted, and that one might just as easily (and legitimately!) allegorize the triumph of diabolism as of benignity in nature. The most eloquent spokesman for this view is Queequeg, who states, “… de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin” (*Moby-Dick* 257). Moreover, Melville makes clear that Delano's attribution of transcendental benignity to nature works in the same way as does his refusal to accept “the imputation of malign evil in man” (47): both, though apparent testimonials to an ennobling faith, are ultimately a means of ignoring evil—his own as well as others'. And to ignore evil is a dangerous thing to do, for whether it is in the wilderness without or the even murkier one within, the beast in the jungle eventually leaps.

Notes

1. Delano's “innocence” is belied by his assumption of the archetypal position of dominance modeled by the satyr in the medallioned sternpiece of the *San Dominick*—a position mirrored by Babo, whom Delano hypocritically regards as a “ferocious pirat[e]” (99). Delano is similarly implicated in evil by his association with images of piracy, such as in the name of his boat (which was the name of the ship of buccaneer William Ambrose Cowley) and the fact that the chief mate whom he sends to retake the *San Dominick* was himself formerly “a privateer's man” (101). Finally, although Delano, like Babo, kills no one with his own hands, he is nevertheless responsible for the deaths caused in retaking the ship, as well as for the atrocity of re-enslaving all of the blacks aboard the *San Dominick.* For especially lucid and well documented discussions of these and other dimensions of Delano's evil, see Kavanagh, Emery, and Zagarell.
2. Melville gives the black women the status of active participants in the rebellion by noting in the deposition that “all the negroes, though not in the first place knowing to the design of the revolt, when it was accomplished, approved it” (111). More importantly, he heightens the inflammatory role of the black women by noting that

   > the negresses used their utmost influence to have the deponent made away with; that, in the various acts of murder, they sang songs and danced—not gaily, but solemnly; and before the engagement with the boats, as well as during the action, they sang melancholy songs to the negroes, and that this melancholy tone was more inflaming than a different one would have been, and was so intended; that all this is believed, because the negroes have said it.

   (112)

   Both passages are absent from Melville's source.
3. Melville significantly attributes to Captain Delano what was observed by the crew in the original account. See Delano 75.

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Criticism: Dennis Pahl (essay date 1995)

SOURCE: "The Gaze of History in "Benito Cereno,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 32, No. 2, Spring, 1995, pp. 171-83.

[*In the following essay, Pahl explores the ways in which Melville's historical narrative in "Benito Cereno" represents "the illusion of moral truth."*]

> There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

—Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 256

> Historiography is as much a product of the passion of forgetting as it is the product of the passion of remembering.

—Shoshana Felman, *Testimony,* p. 214

Throughout the first segment of Melville's "Benito Cereno," we are as mystified about what is taking place aboard the Spanish cargo ship the *San Dominick* as is the American captain Amasa Delano, whose dominant perspective we are forced to follow. It is only later, in the legal deposition that constitutes the second segment of the narrative, that we finally discover the "true history of the *San Dominick*'s voyage" (103). Here we learn in detail about the hidden facts of the slave rebellion and the elaborate masquerade of "normalcy" that was, all along, taking place before Delano's (and our own) eyes. The deposition, in recounting such details, thus would appear to resolve all of the mysteries to which we have so far been witness. As the narrator comments at the beginning of the brief epilogue to the tale,

> If the Deposition have served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the *San Dominick*'s hull lies open to-day.

(114)

If the "complications" just mentioned are supposed to refer to the previously concealed facts of the events—that is, to what actually took place aboard the *San Dominick* during Delano's visit there—there can be little doubt that they are meant, likewise, to refer to the exact moral implications of those events. After all, is it not the purpose of this deposition, this "legal" narrative, to clear up those questions of innocence and guilt, of good and evil, that have so much troubled both Delano and the reader throughout the course of the narrative? Indeed, what else is Babo's "legal identity" (as established by the deposition [116]) but a clear testimony to his essential evil? And by the same token, is not Cereno, who was earlier suspected by Delano of possible wrongdoing or even of potential evil, now completely redeemed by this deposition? Does not this legal history, delivered by Cereno himself at the Lima court, serve just as effectively to demonstrate his own essential goodness?

It should perhaps not be surprising that what passes, in the form of the deposition, as the "true history" of the *San Dominick* affair includes not merely the hard facts of the case but also a certain moralization of those

facts: for it may well be in the nature of all history, or historical narrative, to function exactly in this fashion. As Hayden White has argued, “The demand for closure in history is a demand … for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama. Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator?” White goes on to claim that not only historical narrative but in fact *any* attempt to narrate reality adequately—such as might be discerned in some fictional discourses—must necessarily involve the representation of the moral under the aspect of the aesthetic. “Could we,” White finally asks, “ever narrativize without moralizing?” (22, 25).

Inasmuch as White is correct in assuming that narrativity as such necessitates a certain degree of moralizing, we might then conclude that the entire narrative of “Benito Cereno”—and not just the legal deposition alone—carries within it a specific moral dimension. Perhaps nothing so much supports this view as the way Melville's narrative has, during its long critical history, tended consistently to inspire lively debate as to its precise moral significance. As far back as his monumental study of the *American Renaissance,* for instance, F. O. Matthiessen strongly hinted at Melville's moral irresponsibility in depicting the *San Dominick*'s blacks as evil and “savagely vindictive”; thus Matthiessen charged Melville with “a failure to reckon with [the] fact” that “the Negroes were slaves and that evil had originally been done to them” (508).[1] More recent analyses (see Carlisle, Dryden, Karcher, Kavanagh), trying to justify Melville's aims and so keep them consistent with what is often perceived as a typical Melvillean radical politics, emphasize rather the text's deeply ironic stance toward Captain Delano who, along with Cereno, becomes the embodiment of white oppression. Thus, in these analyses, it is the white-controlled institution of slavery—and not the black mutineers—that becomes the real emblem of evil and barbarism within Melville's tale.

In a certain way, the critical-moral controversy as just described may be understood quite simply as a conflict between two alternative methods of interpretation, namely the opposition between a literal reading (where, to schematize the issue, “black” becomes the traditional symbol of evil and “white” stands for innocence) and an ironic reading (where those traditional valuations become reversed).[2] But while such readings obviously stand in sharp contrast to each other, we may wonder if they do not ultimately serve the same purpose, in the sense that they do nothing more than preserve intact those binary opposites of good and evil that Melville's works seem always at pains to put into question. Must the moral truth of Melville's text be painted in such black-and-white terms, or is the problem more complicated than this? Can Melville even be said to be taking a moral position in this narrative, or is he really making of any such position a problem—one that he is allowing the complications of his text to ponder?

To be sure, we should consider the possibility that “Benito Cereno” is less interested in propounding a certain moral message than in exploring, very self-consciously, the precise ways in which narrative, and especially historical narrative, goes about constructing the illusion of moral truth. How indeed, we might ask, does Melville's text become a kind of meditation on the meaning of history, and on history's ultimate desire to fashion moral, political, and epistemological truth?[3] Without at all denying what White sees as the inevitable moralizing effects of history, we should at the same time recognize that the “will” or “desire” within historical narrative to create moral truth cannot help but contain (as becomes evident in Melville) the very violences that would paradoxically call that truth into question. History, in this sense, thus reveals itself as radically conflicted in nature, characterized not by wholeness or organic unity but rather by ruptures, gaps, displacements. In “Benito Cereno” Melville illustrates a notion of history in fact very much similar to the sort of discontinuous and irruptive history that Michel Foucault discusses at length in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” Here history (guided by what Foucault calls, after Nietzsche, “genealogy”) aims not to discover a continuous past or “a forgotten identity, eager to be reborn, but a complex system of distinct and multiple elements, unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis”; moreover, historical consciousness, far from being neutral and devoid of passions, rather finds within itself “the will to knowledge: instinct, passion, the inquisitor's devotion, cruel subtlety, and malice. It discovers the violence of a position that sides against those who are happy in their ignorance, against the effective illusions by which humanity protects itself …”

(161-62). Such terms for understanding history become instructive for a reading of Melville's story as exemplary of the epistemic violence that incorporates itself within any historical narrative: for it will be precisely this violence that incorporates itself within those characters in the story who come to represent historical consciousness, or the gaze of history.

.....

Perhaps no one provides a better access to Melville's complicated view of historical consciousness than does the character of Captain Amasa Delano, through whose mind most of the narrative action is filtered. Delano's difficulty in reading the scenes he encounters may, as some critics claim, betray his "marked stupidity and foolishness" (see Carlisle 350); yet on another level one might understand this "blindness" more in terms of Delano's desire *not to see,* that is, to repress anything that might undermine the stability of the historical world with which he is most familiar (see Justman): the world that privileges his identity as "American," "captain," "white," and "civilized." For the captain of the *Bachelor's Delight,* the entrance of the *San Dominick* into the harbor off the coast of Chile poses a substantial threat to his otherwise safe, familiar world—not because the ship may at any moment launch a brutal attack, but rather because the ship remains strange and undefined. Seen as "a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep" (50), and carrying on its stern-piece an ambiguous symbol of physical combat ("a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" [49]), the ship becomes an ever-disturbing fact in Delano's general view of the world. Insisting on a black-and-white view of reality, Delano does not wait long to arrive—via a mixture of Emersonian optimism and Yankee pragmatism—at a moral determination of what he is witnessing. His ability to rationalize away his fears and to remain continuously hopeful proves indispensable to him as a way of maintaining his authority throughout the entire *San Dominick* ordeal; and yet, as we discover, it is just this manner of maintaining his authority that also reveals the sort of violences of which he, as an historical consciousness, is capable. Indeed, it is only through exerting a certain will to power that Delano will be able to assimilate the mysterious signs he sees, forcing them to become an integral part of his own system of truth, of his own "natural" view of the world, his own ideology.

Aligning himself with what he believes to be the strict laws of nature, Delano will romanticize all human events as conforming to a wholly "natural" order: hence signaling a desire to turn away from material history and, instead, embrace a kind of Emersonian idealism.[4] He initially believes, for instance, that the miserable conditions aboard the *San Dominick,* far from having any basis in social or political reality, could only have been caused by the sea's terrible storms and "obstinate" calms (69). For Delano misery is part of the universal law; as he believes: "In armies, in cities, in families, *in nature herself,* nothing more relaxes good order than misery" (51-52; emphasis added). Such naturalizing of events occurs as well in his repeated attempts to repress all potentially destabilizing aspects of the ship by transforming what he sees into purely domestic images. Thus he witnesses the death-ship as a kind of "summer-house" (74); and, in the deck cabin, site of an otherwise terrifying scene of Babo holding a blade to Cereno's neck, he imagines "the hall of some bachelor squire in the country" (82).

If Delano tries at every step to domesticate the *San Dominick,* even more so does he try to assimilate the strangeness of Benito Cereno. Like the ship itself, Cereno appears ghostly, "cadaverous" (94), without much to remark upon his status as an authority figure except his captain's title and uniform. It is only through these latter "signs"—the barest evidences of authority—that Delano can comprehend Cereno and thus locate him within a familiar world. But such signs offer Delano only the most provisional sense of order, inasmuch as they are constantly contradicted by the many enigmatic events around him, events whose main effect is to force Delano always to reinterpret the precise nature and intentions of his unpredictable Spanish host. Ever searching for a stable view of Cereno, Delano resembles the lawyer-narrator of "Bartleby the Scrivener," who, in trying to understand the inscrutable actions (or non-actions) of Bartleby, can do so only through the most rigorous methods of rationalization and acts of repression. In the same way that the lawyer finds "reasons" (by turns psychological, physical, and metaphysical) for Bartleby's preferences "not to" work, or move, or

respond with direct answers, Delano similarly attempts to impose on Cereno's behavior a set of values that allows him to make perfect sense—"natural" sense—of the seemingly inscrutable Spaniard.

In Delano's mind, it is at first the natural hardships endured at sea that make Cereno seem "half-lunatic" (52, 53). After vacillating in his opinions, Delano tries to reduce the problem of deciphering Cereno to a simple moral opposition: either Cereno represents "innocent lunacy, or wicked imposture" (64). But even here such reasoning becomes but another way for Delano to domesticate the whole question of Cereno. For in his very formulation regarding the Spaniard, Delano effectively obscures the more accurate understanding of the situation: that Cereno's behavior really points to a case of *innocent imposture* (forced as Cereno is to "play" his role of captain). No doubt for one who is inclined to see the world in black-and-white terms—in terms of good and evil—such a possibility would be too "unnatural" even to contemplate.

All this naturalization, or domestication, of the world around him serves Delano well as a way to construct a self that would have complete dominion over all those he considers Other.[5] Consistent with Delano's egocentric view of the world is his belief that, as John Samson puts it, ever since Columbus's voyage to the New World, "America signals the End Times of human history" (6). Indeed, as "the American" with a providential view of history, Delano feels that he represents the most enlightened form of humanity, far surpassing those cultures—African and European—that come to signify for him the unenlightened past. (Africans he equates with "Newfoundland dogs" (84) and "the very word Spaniard," to his mind, "has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it" [79]). It is perhaps not surprising that Delano's most frequently mentioned characteristic is his "good nature." For more than simply pointing to his cheerfully optimistic personality, this designation also suggests Delano's desire to view himself as being good *by nature,* hence as being morally superior. In Delano's mind there is little room for the belief that "goodness" is, as Nietzsche would argue, mainly a convenient term used to justify the present political order and thus to obscure the many violences upon which so-called "natural" or "divine" authority is always based.

Yet while Delano may try to reassure himself about the stability of what he discerns as his historically and morally advanced position, Melville's ironic text is constantly putting into question the very basis of Delano's authority, of his sense of historical self-identity. For evident throughout is a certain *otherness within* himself that he refuses to accept, let alone acknowledge. If Delano tries to separate himself as much as possible from the increasingly bizarre world he encounters, Melville's narrative nevertheless suggests ways in which Delano takes on the very aspects of that which he considers Other. Just as, for instance, the *San Dominick* is designated in Delano's mind as "the stranger," so too is Delano himself, not long after his arrival aboard the ship, referred to as a "stranger" (67, 94). Similarly, while Delano earlier locates Cereno's otherness in the Spaniard's primitive belief in superstitions, the American captain is himself shown to be likewise subject to so-called primitive thinking: he is reported to feel a "ghostly dread of Don Benito," believing that amid the many "phantoms" (68) he witnesses, Cereno is "the central hobgoblin of all" (69). And finally, if Cereno is, from Delano's point of view, often characterized as mentally unstable, we notice a similar kind of instability manifesting itself in the otherwise stable American: Delano is often depicted as bewildered, haunted, and "Lost in … mazes" of thought (75)—to the extent that at one moment he hallucinates that he is a "prisoner in some deserted chateau" (74).

No doubt an important cause of Delano's instability is the sudden sense that he can no longer trust in the usual signs that render his world both meaningful and orderly. As a literalist "incapable of satire or irony" (63), Delano reads the world as a perfectly stable system of signs that refer *naturally,* that confer upon the things of the world a purely natural identity. Thus the image of Cereno leaning on his slave—of a captain demonstrating his loss of mastery, his dependency on an Other—serves only to shatter the world of "significant symbols" (63) to which Delano is accustomed. It suggests instead a world of appearances, where all signs, while they are capable of being manipulated by a will to power, are nevertheless empty in themselves—as empty as the "artificially stiffened" scabbard that is supposed to hold Cereno's silver-mounted sword, the "apparent symbol of despotic command" (116). Without a world of naturally grounded signs to

rely upon, Delano is in jeopardy of losing his bearings, that is, of losing his sense of himself as a "center," as a "master" of his world.

The questioning of Delano's superior status, of his unique identity, is implied throughout by the narrator's inclination to use negatives to define the American captain. That Delano is, in turn, "singularly undistrustful" (47), "Not unbewildered" (75), "Not uninfluenced" (80) and "not unpleased" (82) seems to point to a systematic attempt on Melville's part to ironically undo Delano's sense of self-identity (the sense that he operates in a way totally separate from those others over whom he reigns). Like Bartleby's employer who would like to believe that his "safe" position bears no relation whatever to the exploited underclass in his office, Delano tries to deny the facts to which the images before him plainly attest: that the master's identity is inextricably bound up with that of the slave's, that "self" can be understood only in terms of its essential otherness, its "not-self." Thus the image of the incapacitated Cereno leaning on the slave Babo mirrors exactly the status of Delano's relationship to Others, a relationship of interdependency that would make the identity of master and slave, of self and other, no more easily discernible than that suggested by the ambiguous symbol carved on the ship's stern-piece. Only through the violence of repression—figured in the sailor's words to Delano regarding the knot, "Undo it, cut it, quick" (76)—can Delano return to his more comfortable belief in his "bachelor" autonomy and in his privileged position. In fact, it will be precisely by way of cutting the ship's cable (and finally having his crewmen attack the black slaves) that Delano will eventually be able to release himself from the strong bonds that tie him, knot-like, to the *San Dominick*—the ship that, in its ghostly appearance, is the very emblem of his otherness.[6]

Delano's inability, or refusal, to recognize his own otherness is suggested most significantly by his failure to account for the Other that most controls his view of the events—Babo. Unable to see Babo in any other way than as a loyal and submissive slave—as part of the "living freight" (54) on the ship—Delano thus has no idea of the extent to which Babo constitutes (and in so doing radically splits) his own historical consciousness. Is it not, after all, Babo who is responsible for constructing the very world that Delano observes? Unlike Delano who believes in the naturalness of signs, Babo is only too aware of the artifice of language and of how power really lies with those who control the social signs and who have the ability to make these signs *appear* absolutely natural. Disguising the present circumstances as well as the traces of the past, Babo devises everything from the "fictitious story" (110) that Cereno tells Delano (concerning the "natural" sufferings at sea) to the elaborate scheme to convert images of past and potential violence into scenes of supposed normalcy. The much-discussed shaving scene is one of Babo's more ingenious devices; for with the razor held strategically at Cereno's throat, the image of violence is kept perfectly hidden beneath the most domestic of scenes: a slave performing his daily duty for his master.

The art that goes into the staging of scenes aboard the *San Dominick* suggests in the figure of Babo someone who not only consciously controls Delano's gaze but also—despite his status as a slave—strangely mirrors Delano's own position of authority. For Babo is, in the present circumstances, but another historical consciousness trying (if more self-consciously) to organize the signs before him so as to allow for his eventual domination over others. Of course, in one sense Babo must be sympathetically viewed as an oppressed slave attempting to overturn what his white oppressors see as a "natural" social hierarchy; and in this respect, recent critics have defended Babo largely on the basis of his link to certain valiant slave rebellions in the antebellum South as well as in the West Indies around the time of Melville's writing (Karcher 137-43; Kavanagh 377). Yet while Melville no doubt understood and sympathized with the plight of the blacks under slavery (Karcher 11-19), it would be a mistake simply to reduce the blacks depicted in the story to a collective body of individuals unmarked by important differences among themselves. Indeed, the blacks here are anything but a faceless, homogeneous group; they are themselves broken down into their own order of masters and slaves, with Babo at the helm administering (but not directly taking part in) the violence perpetrated against the Spanish crew.[7] Commanding the other slaves with absolute rule, and manipulating most of the events Delano witnesses, Babo is thus cast as no less a self-possessed authority figure than is Delano. Cultured, cunning, and controlling, Babo, that "hive of subtlety" (116), is precisely the sort of central intelligence that carries on its

violent activity from afar. It is an intelligence that, like Delano's, gives the appearance of rationality when in fact that rationality is always already inscribed by a certain irrational violence. In their own ways, both Babo and Delano represent the Law with regard to their own respective "others" over whom they rule. And in the sense that they are two intelligences that in their own separate ways control *each other's* gaze, they come to constitute the Law for each other—that is, until one law prevails, violently, over the other.

.....

In "Benito Cereno" the conflict of competing gazes, competing laws, attempts to resolve itself in the last two segments of the text, the legal deposition and the brief epilogue—each of which may be said to try to "close the book" on the strange case of the *San Dominick.* Written in the objective-sounding language of the law, and sanctioned by both the church and state, the deposition represents the authoritative version of what occurred aboard the ship—it is supposed to be the true history.[8] But as critics have pointed out, the deposition's view of the events—its historical gaze—is hardly as objective and factual as it seems (see Karcher 135, Weiner 18). Like other histories, this one is skewed toward serving those in power, which is to say the Spanish-imperialist regime. For it is this regime that has much to gain by overseeing the court testimony and so making clear, with reasoning "both learned and natural" (103), that the Spanish masters are the primary victims in the case. Displaying the same kind of racial and cultural bias that Delano clearly exhibits, Cereno's deposition invariably characterizes the Africans as heartless murderers and the Spanish slave-drivers as virtuous Christians (thus rendering a black-and-white version of a more contradictory historical truth; see Hauss 17). If Babo, at the story's end, remains "voiceless," he is so not only because he has resigned himself to being captured and thus feels there is no use in talking if he can no longer "do deeds" (116), but because, more importantly, he has already been struck silent by another's discourse—a discourse that speaks *for* Babo and that, finally, imposes upon him a "legal identity."

While the deposition is supposed to offer closure by revealing the complete history of the *San Dominick* affair, the ending of Melville's text suggests quite otherwise. For what is the brief epilogue but an attempt to give an even more complete history, to fill in the gaps left by the previous segments of the text? And what of the epilogue itself? Does it not fulfill its function of making the history complete? Of course the irony here is that in trying to fill in the gaps of the history, the "retrospectively, or irregularly given" (114) epilogue serves only to undermine the chronological order of the narrative and so to reduce an otherwise total, seamless history to fragments.

To some extent the epilogue (being primarily concerned with the events just prior to Delano and Cereno's arrival at the Lima court) epitomizes the entire history in the way it tries to totalize events while at the same time revealing its own particular violences. Delano, as historical consciousness, illustrates the problem well. It is he who, at the end, once again offers his rational(izing), official perspective, believing as he does that the world operates according to natural laws and that these laws, temporarily upset, are now back in place: the "normal" order of the world, where masters and slaves are well defined, can happily continue on its natural course. Typical of Delano's attitude is his advice to the profoundly traumatized Cereno, who is still haunted by the recent events. "[T]he past is passed," says Delano, "Why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all …" (116). What Delano's comment reveals is not simply a blind optimism but rather a massive repression of the past events, or more specifically, an attempt to repress, or forget, the fact that the past is inextricably tied (knotted) to the present. The play on "past" and "passed" may indeed indicate that for Delano the past *is* the past—that the past constitutes an altogether separate identity, total unto itself: removed from his own present circumstances and from his own self-presence. It is only through such active forgetfulness—through the violence of repression—that Delano can continue to carry on his safe, privileged existence.

For Delano the past is, in a certain way, suggestive of the same kind of otherness that he attaches to Babo, whom Delano will not recognize for his part in making up Delano's own historical consciousness. And yet, if

there is ever a reminder of the past, it is the silent but powerful image at the end of the story of Babo's severed head "fixed on a pole in the Plaza [meeting], unabashed, the gaze of the whites …" (116). In one sense the image signals the American's triumph in the world over *other* cultures, or more broadly speaking, the triumph of the West over the so-called primitive, less historically advanced societies. But in another sense, inasmuch as Babo's head is said to oversee both Aranda's and Cereno's respective grave sites, the image also powerfully suggests that the gaze of the Other—the gaze of the past—cannot easily be denied. It is a disturbing image because, finally, it is indeterminate: at once a warning to the Other to keep in his place, and yet also a warning to the supposedly more "advanced" cultures that the enslaved Other cannot be completely repressed.[9] It is at once a reminder as well as a remainder of the violence upon which privilege and authority in the world are always based. Indeed, it alerts us not to the end of violence, the containment of violence within the confines of the law (and culture), but rather to the fact that the law is itself, as Foucault says,

> a calculated and relentless pleasure, the delight in the promised blood. … Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.

(151)

Those who, by the end of the story, are in control of the rules—namely Delano and the Spanish court—are thus intent on judging others strictly in accordance with what best enables them to maintain their own power.

For Delano and the court, the moral meaning of Babo's final image (as well as of all the events that took place on the *San Dominick*) could not be clearer. But for Melville, whose fictional recreation of the real Delano's history is but a meditation on history itself, the final image of Babo points to a more complicated notion of history—one that is neither black nor white, nor able to be reduced to a metaphysical statement about the ambiguous nature of evil.[10] Concerned as Melville is with both the material facts of history as well as with the material consequences of historical form, "Benito Cereno" gives ample testimony to Melville's interest in keeping a vigilant eye not only on the violences inherent in, and resulting from, the institution of slavery, but also on the epistemic violences inherent within any narrative construction of that institution's past. Precisely in his scrutiny of those forms and formulations of history that would help maintain such barbaric cultural practices, Melville demonstrates a desire to tell a different kind of history. It is one that, in revealing history's imposing gaps, its eloquent silences, and its counter-discourses, finally makes it possible for the Other (otherwise kept silent) to speak and for the *otherness of history* finally to emerge from its shadowy depths.

Notes

1. For similar views, see Kaplan, Fiedler, and Widmer.
2. For an interpretation of the story's black-white imagery as it pertains to the politics of race, see Nelson 109-30.
3. For a discussion of the way Melville's romances engage history by seeking to "penetrate and symbolically rework the social order," see Rogin 22.
4. For a discussion of the role of nature in "Benito Cereno," see Martin, who astutely points out that despite Delano's dependence on nature for reassurance and support, all natural signs in the story are "hopelessly equivocal" (166).
5. See Spivak, who argues: "No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self" (253). As we shall see, it is Delano's attempted domestication of Others that allows him to consolidate, and to ground, his imperialist self. That Melville's text sets out to undermine the stability of this self suggests one of the ways Melville tries to de-domesticate history.

6. Though Delano is cast mainly as an administrator, removed from the violent activity, occasionally his own brute self reveals itself: for example, during the scene of Babo's attack when Delano's foot begins to “ground the prostrate negro” (99). Later, the narrator refers to “the superior muscular strength” (116) of Delano, in contrast to the small stature of Babo.
7. That a social hierarchy exists among the blacks is suggested by the fact that there are, within the group, the Ashantee workers, who are commanded to do much of the killing; the old, venerable oakum-pickers; the ex-king Atufal; and the literate “ruler” Babo. The black women, more ambiguously situated, are relegated to domestic roles—caring for the young and singing songs—yet they also actively participate in the rebellion (see Martin 165n2). See Zagarell, who points out that “none of the characters, black or white, can genuinely resist the hierarchical social system …” (129)
8. For a discussion of how Melville's fictional forms both parallel and criticize the “legal formalism” that developed in the 1850s, see Rogin 158-60. See also Thomas 93-112. Cereno's legal narrative is of course ironized throughout with gaps in the form of textual elisions. Delano, who, as a dominant narrative perspective, becomes “the law” in the earlier segment, has his own authority undercut by *other* interpolated narrative voices. The third-person narrator's ironic voice and Cereno's “brokenly delivered” (56) story about his crew's sufferings at sea, which is dictated to him by Babo, both serve to fragment and decenter Delano's historical vision. As Weiner argues, the “disruption of narrative order tends to reveal the illusion of legal order” (27n12).
9. Babo's gaze bears a relationship to Bhabha's understanding of the “evil eye” in the context of postcolonial discourse: “The gaze of the evil eye alienates *both* the narratorial I of the slave and the surveillant eye of the Master. It unsettles any simplistic polarities or binarisms in identifying the exercise of power …” (196). For views of psychological and political repression in the story, see respectively Justman and Thomas, especially 112.
10. For a view of how Melville's story reinterprets the actual Delano's *Narrative,* see Weiner. Previous criticism, whether historical or formal in approach, often repeats the sort of unselfconscious moralizing we observe in Delano, thus resulting in a simplified, black-and-white reading of Melville's more problematic view of “the historical.” My intention throughout has been to see the story not as a moral allegory but as a critique of the reductive moralizing that occurs within historical narrative. Melville's meditation on historical form, far from evading the concerns of material culture, shows that history as the site of interpretive conflict cannot help but have serious implications for the material world.

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Criticism: William Bartley (essay date 1996)

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[*In the following essay, Bartley analyzes “Benito Cereno” as a portrayal of inverted tyranny.*]

> But how is it with the American slave? … He is said to be happy; happy men can speak. But ask the slave what is his condition—what his state of mind—what he thinks of enslavement? and you had as well addressed your inquiries to the *silent dead.* There comes no *voice* from the enslaved. We are left to gather his feelings by imagining what ours would be, were our souls in his soul's stead. (Frederick Douglass)[1]

> But with all this charming jollity and waggishness, the nigger has terrible capacities for revenge and hatred (which opportunity may develope, as in St. Domingo), and which ought to convince the skeptic that he is a man, not a baboon; and whenever our southern partners quit us, and begin to take care of their niggers themselves, they will learn that they are no joke. (*Putnam's Monthly,* 1855)[2]

I

The still lively disagreement over the dark, parabolic tale of “Benito Cereno” is occasioned by the still vexing interpretive problem it poses—the problem, that is, of how to read and evaluate Herman Melville's judgment of Babo, the leader of the slave revolt on board the Spanish slave transport the *San Dominick.* So, although students of American literature are familiar with the tale and are likely to recoil from yet another summary, there remains an urgent need to propose a kind of *factum* on which the contending parties might agree, but which I hope to fill out in ways that may ease this contention and, at the same time, bring us into closer contact with the tale's disturbing energy.

It is important to recall that Melville's tale of a slave revolt adapts and expands an incident recounted in a narrative by Amasa Delano, an American captain.[3] Melville introduces a number of significant changes, the most obviously relevant being the shift in point of view from the first-person narrative of the original to a third-person narrative which hovers exclusively over a fictional Delano. The most obviously relevant similarity to the original narrative is Melville's retention (with a number of highly significant modifications) of the court deposition of a historical Benito Cereno which Delano had appended to his account. I will return to these modifications later.

With these considerations in mind, I propose to trace the bare trajectory of Melville's story in the following way, as abstracted both from the third-person account of Delano's perceptions and from the deposition. Delano, the captain of an American sealer, the *Bachelor's Delight,* sights the *San Dominick* in evident distress off the coast of Chile. He boards the ship in order to supervise its relief and, remarkably, spends most of the day on board ship without realizing that a violent slave revolt has taken place—that the captain of the slave transport, Benito Cereno, and his surviving crew are under the control of the slaves, and that the late captain and owner of the slaves, Alexandro Aranda, has been gruesomely murdered. As part of a skillfully managed conspiracy among the slaves, Babo maintains control from behind his pose as personal servant and humble slave of Cereno, while Cereno is made to perform the role of the capricious master. Nevertheless, the success of Babo's well-contrived plan—which readers learn as they gradually move away from an anxious

involvement with Captain Delano's perplexity—depends upon Delano's profoundly culpable gullibility, for he cannot or will not penetrate the masquerade. He is described, in a famous observation, as "a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man."[4] Complicating this ingenuous benevolence is his unshakable racism. When he does impute conspiratorial and malign motives, for even *he* notices certain incongruities on the ship, he will suspect Cereno, a "horrible Spaniard" (BC, p. 77), before he will suspect African slaves. He simply cannot credit the slaves with a conspiratorial, vengeful, and accordingly, human intelligence—"they were," in his mind, "too stupid" (BC, p. 75). And so Captain Delano gradually emerges as a moral imbecile of a historically recognizable and culturally unexceptional type.

So durable, even willful, is this moral blindness that Delano does not see through the masquerade until Cereno jumps off the ship into Delano's boat when Delano finally departs. But not even then—for, at a critical moment, he bitterly concludes that Cereno is a pirate and a treacherous cutthroat, after all. His presumably loyal servant, Babo, jumps after Cereno, but only when Delano sees that Babo is out to kill Cereno do the scales fall from his eyes. The rebellion is put down; the slaves are recaptured. Defiantly silent, Babo is executed by the Spanish authorities in Lima on the basis of Cereno's corroborated testimony to the tribunal. Cereno himself is "broken in body and mind" and dies shortly after the trial (BC, p. 114).

Perhaps the most powerfully persistent but almost certainly mistaken view of Babo's role in the story is that he is an entirely positive image of a revolutionary conspirator, an African Spartacus, who heroically instigates and leads a ruthlessly violent but just rebellion. The conclusion traditionally drawn from this judgment is that Melville, in a strong abolitionist posture, endorses slave insurrection. Furthermore, according to this view, he satirically vilifies the racist complacencies of American whites, of whom Delano, a New Englander, is representative, along with the judicial process that brutally supports civil order as an absolute value. In the process, the two points of view—Delano's and that implied in the forensic statement of fact—undergo a sustained ironic subversion which emphasizes their respectively prepossessing and systematic blindnesses.[5]

Nevertheless, while affirming the tale's satirical and antislavery thrust, an equally persistent tradition of resistance to this view of Babo has expressed concern over the profoundly violent character of Babo's conduct of the rebellion and, more particularly, his disturbing relationship with Benito Cereno. These concerns find their source in an alertness to the equivocal and ironic densities of Melville's narrative, to what Robert Levine has recently called "a dynamic and threatening text." Its full sense, he argues, is lost to a critical point of view which has come to regard reading the story as "an exercise in certainty, in literary mastery, an occasion to offer pious denunciations of Delano and Cereno and fraternal embraces to Babo and his fellow conspirators."[6] Carolyn Karcher voices a representative concern. If Babo, as she says, is "on the whole a favorable portrayal of a black rebel, despite the fearsomeness with which he is tinged in his role as white America's nemesis," she nevertheless holds, even to the point of contradiction, that "moving as I find this glimpse, I do not believe one can honestly deduce from it an unequivocal endorsement [on Melville's part] of revolutionary violence as a means of ending slavery."[7] Karcher's abrupt objection acknowledges that Melville has raised the historical problem of the apparent incommensurability of revolutionary means and ends, a problem at the heart of the antebellum debate over slavery and at the heart of the story. The full historical particularity of this antebellum debate, in all its heated anxiousness, is thoroughly and skillfully absorbed into Levine's discussion of the story, and his judgment also yields an equivocal emphasis; while conceding that Babo is "properly vengeful," he observes that there is little to encourage "even the experienced reader to find *sole* community with [him]."[8]

The reservations about Babo expressed by Karcher and Levine point out the unstable distinction between concession and objection exposed by the story—a distinction so tenuous that other critics express their reservations about Babo less cautiously, and with, I believe, greater justice. For justice is, in this case, better served by overstatement than by cautious understatement. Hence, the full measure of what Levine could mean by "a dynamic and threatening text" is better taken by Allan Moore Emery, for whom Babo, far from being a

favorable portrayal of a rebel, becomes a "devilish symbol of *all* depravity."[9] George Dekker, placing due emphasis on the relationship between Babo and Cereno, brings us closer still to Babo's moral significance when he observes that "Cereno has had a glimpse, if not of pure evil, then at least an atavism so sinister, intelligent and profound, as to shatter forever his sense of what it is to be human."[10]

But, if justice is in a sense served by overstatement, it is still overstatement. The purpose of this article is to suggest a more measured positioning along the continuum between understatement and overstatement—between a critical diffidence and a critical tendency to demonize. Although there is a widely shared sense of something disturbing about Babo, the precise character of the moral phenomenon he represents has, in a significant way, eluded the commentators who appear to be the most disturbed by it. In all cases, there is an awareness of a boundary having been crossed without a satisfactorily articulated acknowledgment of how "white America's nemesis" has encroached upon that limit—without, that is, taking us much beyond the terrible violence that Babo initiates, and which by itself is insufficient to account for Cereno's spiritual collapse. If critics like Emery and Dekker bring us within more proximate range of Melville's likely intentions in the story than Karcher and Levine do, all four are, nevertheless, insufficiently guided by the decisive implications of Melville's narrative style, however oblique and riddling. There is a tempting authority in Dekker's eloquent discomfort, but such a response is characterized—no less than is Emery's judgment—by an abstracted and inauthentic alarm that gives scope to sentimental, even histrionic, reaches of feeling. Both critics are representative in this species of response. There is a territory of significance in the story approached but not occupied by their reflections. This territory excludes the Gothic simplifications of sinister atavism, of "pure evil," of "devilish symbol," and most especially, is a territory that Cereno gets more than a glimpse of.[11] Cereno *is* crushed by his encounter with Babo, but by a mere glimpse?

The truth is that Cereno is deeply involved with Babo. His will to live is destroyed, not, as Dekker suggests, "because the different certainties of his world as a Spanish gentleman have been pulled down and caricatured with ferocious irony," although Dekker is right in a very general and uninformative way.[12] Rather, it is because Cereno has been enslaved by Babo, a pattern that a slave's revenge might be expected to take, a psychological and historical plausibility which is fundamental to the appalling intensities of the story. Therewith, the ground of our concern shifts from the story's very real concern with the complexities of the problem of revolutionary means and ends to a more fundamental concern, one upon which any adequate perspective on this problem depends. What I mean is that, even if one acknowledges that the tale commands a profound allegiance to the slaves' cause—and the tale does command this allegiance—the story is finally, and not inconsistently, a study in tyranny. This hardly seems an exceptional claim, and I will shortly develop it further. Here I want to observe that this tyranny is enabled within a hypothetical scenario in which slave becomes master, in which the slave, now master, is susceptible to all the temptations and corruptions of having absolute dominion over another human being.[13] The story, then, concurs with that line of antislavery polemic which, besides emphasizing the devastating effects of slavery on the enslaved, emphasizes how it morally devastated masters. Charles Whipple, a representative spokesman, would argue that "[no] human being is fit to be trusted with absolute, irresponsible power. … If the best portion of our community were selected to hold and use such authority [as masters possessed] they would very soon be corrupted."[14]

As I hope to show, Melville universalizes this claim and deepens its implications in ways inconceivable to the benevolent and condescending racism of the abolitionist movement and perhaps even to a twentieth-century enlightenment.[15] One can argue that Melville has taken on the particular burden of the sympathetic imagination commanded by Frederick Douglass in offering a narrative hypothesis about how it could be with the slave.[16] This hypothesis accepts and dramatizes the obstacles that stand in the way of imaginative contact with him—and these obstacles are relevant whether we are speaking of Babo or Cereno. But far from anticipating a postmodern, hypersensitive skepticism concerning the "other," Melville believes, along with Douglass, that because "there comes no *voice* from the slave," we must "gather his feelings by imagining what ours would be, were our souls in his soul's stead."[17] And this means construing, through an act of the sympathetic imagination by author and reader, the quiet intrusion of contrary evidence that exceeds the grasp

of Captain Delano, who is incapable of such imaginative possession, but which also subverts the canons of relevance dictated by the judicial process which shape Cereno's account of the incident. If we are never privy to Babo's thoughts—if Babo offers "no revelatory soliloquies, like those of Iago or Milton's Satan or Ahab"[18]—we have in Babo the more telling evidence of a consciousness that privileges the efficacy of deeds over words, and whose deeds are eloquent in themselves, in the historically conventional extension of eloquence to action.[19] Here is the motive behind Babo's pointed refusal to speak after he is captured, all the while that his "aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (BC, p. 116). Melville recovers and reconstitutes the basis of the slave's humanity as it might emerge in action behind, on the margins of, and in spite of the points of view in the story that would vigorously suppress or deny it. In doing so, he offers a profoundly wrought realization and extension of the hypothesis that the slave "has terrible capacities for revenge and hatred" sufficient "to convince the skeptic that he is a man."

But for Melville the process of projecting such a frightening revenge yields a discovery that proves the most persuasive means for destroying the prepossessions of the personal and institutional points of view he recreates. This discovery—as dangerous to affirm as to deny—emerges from Melville's scenario in which the humanity denied the African by a racist mythology is redeemed by Babo's capacity for a tyranny of an exceptional kind, over body and soul. To specify what I mean by an exceptional tyranny, I invoke the notion developed by Simone Weil in her remarkable essay "The *Iliad,* Poem of Might." "Might," in its "elementary and coarse form," is simply the capacity to make "a thing of anybody who comes under its sway. When exercised to the full, it makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him a corpse." That is, it is "the might that kills outright."[20] However, Weil is interested in this crude form only for the service it performs as a foundation for a more prodigious form of might. She observes:

> How much more varied are its devices; how much more astonishing in its effects is that other which does not kill; or which delays killing. It must surely kill, or it will perhaps kill, or else it is only suspended above him whom it may at any moment destroy. This of all procedures is what turns a man to stone. From the power to transform him into a thing by killing him proceeds another power, and much more prodigious, that which makes a thing of him while he still lives. He is living, he has a soul, yet he is a thing. A strange being is that thing which has a soul, and a strange state of that soul. Who knows how often during each instant it must torture and destroy itself in order to conform? The soul was not made to dwell in a thing; and when forced to it, there is no part of that soul but suffers violence.[21]

Melville, as I hope to demonstrate, discovers on his own the full, dramatically conceivable implications of this insight in his conception of Babo. For Babo victimizes Cereno with an exercise of might in this more developed sense. Moreover, Babo does so with an appalling virtuosity, attesting to his capacity for ruthless force (for "might" in its crudest sense), combined with a subtle intelligence and a highly competent malice. If I am right here, perhaps we have a sounder basis for the eloquent definitiveness of judgment that critics of the story have reached for.

II

In order to establish Babo's use of might, one must first attend to the "quiet intrusion of contrary evidence" occasioned by the deposition. And this means that one must acknowledge the remarkable ways in which Cereno's account of the actions of the slaves and Babo resists and subverts the hostile confinement dictated by the formal intentions of the deposition. But the account not only resists and subverts: its forms unintentionally although eloquently enact the actions of the slaves. Babo himself can be said, through a subversive appropriation of his own, to co-opt a kind of discourse which promotes, in its very movement and texture, the weight and majesty that the administration of law claims for itself, even as it subserves the interests of an oppressive legal authority.[22] Babo's exercise of might, as we shall see, depends upon his ability to exploit the forms and procedures of that authority in the very act of overthrowing it.

This is not to overlook one of the profound ironies of the story—that the deposition affords the fullest expression of the attractive strength of the slaves' cause, and the clearest sense of their heroism. These perceptions depend, of course, on Cereno's testimony, but more decisively emerge from the stylistic forms of the deposition itself—the conventional prolixity and the relentlessly repetitive structural forms of professional legal discourse, which are superimposed on the raw material provided by Cereno. Cereno, now institutionally reduced to the role of mere deponent, disappears into the public movement of a judicial proceeding at which, moreover, he is not even physically present. A notable example of the deposition's power of enactment appears in that part of it which implicates the women slaves in the revolt and in the battle with the *Bachelor's Delight*:

> that the negresses, of age, were knowing to the revolt, and testified themselves satisfied at the death of their master, Don Alexandro; that, had the negroes not restrained them, they would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing, the Spaniards slain by the command of the negro Babo; that the negresses used their utmost influence to have the deponent made away with; that, in the various acts of murder, they sang songs and danced—not gaily, but solemnly; and before the engagement with the boats, as well as during the action, they sang melancholy songs to the negroes, and that this melancholy tone was more inflaming than a different one would have been, and was so intended.

(BC, p. 112)

These are the women whom Delano comically misrepresents as maternal animals, who, “unsophisticated as leopardesses” and “loving as doves,” are nevertheless “ready to die for their infants or to fight for them” in ways he cannot conceive (BC, p. 73). Here, the otherwise inert legalese of the deposition (and certainly the inertness of Melville's source) is suddenly and powerfully alive.[23] The measured movement of the string of subordinate clauses approaches the flexible and capacious strength of the epic hexameter as it rhythmically activates the poignantly solemn and vindictive determination of the women slaves, who take their part in the desperate and heroic communal enterprise. If the songs they sing are melancholy, they nevertheless inflame because they, in ritualistic concentration, rehearse a communal experience of suffering. Their purpose is less that of elegiac bards, as Douglas Anderson suggests, than of choric accompanists to an epic struggle of a people who want their freedom and who passionately want to go home.[24] Such is the energy that the legal process would extinguish. But as this human movement is powerfully realized within, and even because of, the oppressive civic ceremonial of the deposition itself, a darker irony emerges, a darker sense of the atrocious, even cannibalistic energy of the deposition's civic intent.

This stylistic dynamic gives an unforeseen aptness to Albert Camus's designation of Melville as the “Homer of the Pacific”—not only the Homer of the *Odyssey,* as he had in mind, but the Homer of the *Iliad* as well.[25] The story's connection with the *Iliad* seems no less active at the beginning of the deposition, which makes forensic identifications of the conspiring slaves, and in which, again, the forensic converges ironically with the epic:

> One, from about eighteen to nineteen years, named José, and this was the man that waited upon his master, Don Alexandro, and who speaks well the Spanish, having served him for four or five years; … a mulatto, named Francesco, the cabin steward, of a good person and voice, having sung in the Valparaiso churches, native of the province of Buenos Ayres, aged about thirty-five years. … A smart negro named Dago, who had been for many years a gravedigger among the Spaniards, aged forty-six years. … Four old negroes, born in Africa, from sixty to seventy, but sound, calkers by trade, whose names are as follows:—the first named Mure, and he was killed; … the second, Natu; the third, Yola, likewise killed; the fourth, Ghofan; and six full-grown negroes, aged from thirty to forty-five, all raw, and born among the Ashantees—Matiluqui, Yau, Lecbe, Mapenda, Yambaio, Akim; four of whom

> were killed; … a powerful negro named Atufal, who, being supposed to have been a chief in Africa, his owners set great store by him. … And a small negro of Senegal, but some years among the Spaniards, aged about thirty, which negro's name was Babo.

(BC, p. 104)

The passage, more specifically, invites comparison with the Catalogue of Ships in book 2 of the *Iliad.* Here—as in Homer—we have a catalogue of the principals, called forth as if in answer to a question like the one posed in book 2: "Who then of those were the chief men and the lords of the Danaans?"[26] Breaking from the loose, random enumeration of his source, Melville intervenes with a highly selective summary—extracted from a body of some fifty names, as we are informed in Melville's editorial note, and tightened by the visible editing out of intervening names. The result is a deliberately structured tableau. The measured movement is articulated by the patterned repetitions of epithet ("a small negro," "a powerful negro," "a smart negro," and so on), name, age, place of birth, and vocation. Ultimately, that movement has the effect of a ritualistic performance, announcing a calculated ordering and ranking of the chief insurgents and so enacting an essentially civic pageant poignantly founded in rebellious aspiration.

The movement begins with the first and least: Don Alexandro's youthful domestic servant, the category of slave who is putatively the most susceptible to the civilizing influence of his white masters and yet whose servility only flatters the master's false claim to distinction. He is pointedly degraded to the least degree of dignity. The placing of Francesco the mulatto a rung above him in the catalogue is an ironic hit at Delano, who in keeping with the habits of an enculturated racism, accords the mulatto a status superior to native-born Africans (BC, pp. 88-89), even though he is, in the deposition's phrase, the vengeful "creature and tool of the negro Babo" (BC, p. 111). Next in ascending rank are the oakum pickers, the venerable elders of the slave community whose place in a slowly emerging civic hierarchy is earned and defined by their seniority. They exert a rhythmically suasive, order-inducing authority over the conspiring slaves with "a continuous, low, monotonous chant; droning and druling away like so many gray-headed bagpipers playing a funeral march" (BC, p. 50). Their role registers sufficiently on Delano, who sees them as "monitorial constables to their countrymen" (BC, p. 55). Next are the Ashanti hatchet polishers, whose "cymballing" hatchets keep a rhythmic counterpoint with the oakum pickers. They are a kind of officer corps, Babo's "bravoes," armed and poised for battle. The penultimate figure is Atufal, a former king, now second in command. And finally the movement culminates with Babo, the former slave of slaves, now "the helm and keel of the revolt" (BC, p. 112).

If, however, the strong, ritualized rhythms work decisively to bind our allegiance to the slaves' cause, we also perceive that allegiance complicated and compromised as these ritualized rhythms give form to Babo's tyranny. As we learn from the deposition, Babo's tyranny is founded on his wielding of might in the elementary and coarse sense, that particular power which, in Weil's words, "makes a thing of anybody who comes under its sway" and "when exercised to the full … makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him into a corpse." We see Babo wielding might in its most spectacular form in his staging of the public execution of Alexandro Aranda. At best, this is a prudential display of violence meant to guarantee the slaves their freedom, serving that end, as Michel Foucault observes, as a "policy of terror." But at worst it serves equally "to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal," of "the unrestrained presence of the sovereign." The public execution, Foucault reminds us, "did not re-establish justice; it reactivated power." The atrocious excess of violence in the execution is not a "demonstration of why the laws are being enforced, but rather who were its enemies." The sovereign triumphs "over those whom he had reduced to impotence," to "a body effaced, reduced to dust and thrown to the winds." Thus, the law pursues "the body beyond possible pain"—as if to imply that the very limits of punishment have been defined and, even then, breached.[27]

All these intimations are rendered shockingly vivid in the deposition: Babo orders Aranda killed before him and the surviving Spaniards. Aranda's body disappears below deck and is apparently cannibalized, the white

skeleton at night riveted to the prow as the *San Dominick*'s new figurehead, displacing the figure of Christopher Columbus (a triumphant gesture that will appeal to a contemporary revisionism). Underneath it are mockingly scrawled in chalk the words *Seguid neustro jefe* (Follow your leader). To Cereno's repeated inquiries about Aranda's remains, Babo

> answered nothing till the fourth day, when at sunrise, the deponent coming on deck, the negro Babo showed him a skeleton, which had been substituted for the ship's proper figure-head, the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World; that the negro Babo asked him whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's; that, upon his covering his face, the negro Babo, coming close, said words to this effect: "Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader," pointing to the prow; … that same morning the negro Babo took by succession each Spaniard forward, and asked him whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's; that each Spaniard covered his face; that then to each negro Babo repeated the words in the first place said to the deponent; … that they (the Spaniards), being assembled aft, the negro Babo harangued them, saying that he had now done all; that the deponent (as navigator for the negroes) might pursue his course, warning him and all of them that they should, soul and body, go the way of Don Alexandro if he saw them (the Spaniards) speak or plot anything against them (the negroes)—a threat which was repeated every day.

(BC, pp. 107-8)

Once again, the stylistic inertness of the deposition becomes suddenly enlivened—this time with a terrible energy. The passage, entirely of Melville's creation, articulates, again with Foucault's useful keying of our perceptions, a veritable "liturgy of punishment and terrorization." The ordered, stately pace, measured by the repetitive gestures customary in a judicial proceeding, enacts a "meticulous ceremonial." Ironically, however, this enunciation of might is enfolded within the texture of Cereno's deposition, which is a part of the formal proceeding against Babo. Babo, in turn, is executed according to the meticulous ceremonial of might which identifies and eliminates the enemies of Spanish sovereignty: we recall that Babo is "dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule," where he meets "his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes," the head is "fixed on a pole in the Plaza" (BC, p. 116). In this action the two practices coincide and affirm each other, with the implication that the one assertion of sovereignty is no less—or no more—legitimate than the other. Each shares the same assumptions and structures, which give each assertion the same coherence.[28] These forms become the means of exactly depicting Babo's meticulous staging of Aranda's execution. But this outcome should not be surprising, for who could know better the institutional articulations or better feel the formal rhythms of power than a slave? Who could better sense their capacity for majestic terror, and who could be more utterly attuned to their absolute dissociation from natural justice?

Thus Babo, like the authority he overthrows, and in precise conformity with the forensic means he appropriates, proves a competent practitioner of might. Nevertheless, Babo's ambition reaches far beyond the aims that could be fulfilled by a prudential if ruthless violence, and for which he might still be defended. For this vengeful slave is as competently ruthless toward the soul as he is toward the body—a fact already crudely apparent in the terror that attends the exercise of might. I turn in the next section to examine the practice of an ultimate sense of might.

III

"Might" in this more prodigious form does not simply depend upon the capacity to kill but on the suffering that follows from holding this power in abeyance, from suspending it above the person whom it may at any moment destroy. "This of all procedures," we have noted Weil as saying, "is what turns a man to stone. From

the power to transform him into a thing by killing him proceeds another power, … that which makes a thing of him while he still lives. He is living, he has a soul, yet he is a thing." She observes, furthermore, that the victim of might is a thing which "aspires every moment to become a man, a woman, and never at any moment succeeds. This is a death drawn out the length of a life, a life that death has frozen long before extinguishing it."[29] These images of the living dead, of a soul frozen inside a corpse, gesture at the totality with which might silences the imprisoned soul. Frederick Douglass draws out their implications more explicitly when he says that the slave is like "the *silent dead.* There comes no *voice* from the enslaved." And further: "If there were no other fact descriptive of slavery, than that the slave is dumb, this alone would be sufficient to mark the slave system as a grand aggregation of human horrors."[30]

And so, as we try to construe the actions of Babo that haunt the margins of Delano's perceptions, we sense that Babo sees to this first: he silences Benito Cereno by making him a thing even as he spares his life. Babo achieves this by forcing Cereno, for the purpose of keeping the conspiracy intact, to act the role of capricious master for Delano. Accordingly, he is forced to dress, with a punctilious attention to detail that Delano notices, the part of a South American gentleman slaveholder, "however unsuitable for the time and place" and "however strangely surviving in the midst of all his afflictions." He wears "a loose Chili jacket of dark velvet; white small clothes and stockings, with silver buckles at the knee and instep; a high-crowned sombrero, of fine grass," as well as "a slender sword silver mounted, hung from a knot in his sash" (BC, p. 57). Another feature of the masquerade is that Cereno must make a show of subduing Atufal, the former king, kept in chains for an unspecified offense—appropriately a matter of indifference to the putatively capricious Cereno. Every two hours, so Delano is told, Atufal is brought before his imperious master to seek his pardon, but Atufal, in keeping with his "royal spirit," as Delano construes it, defiantly refuses to speak.

These familiar details emphasize how the silenced Cereno is trapped behind a public surface which, lineament by lineament, is disjoined from his private self. With all the terrible pressure of his unvoiced fear—and grief, for Aranda was his dear friend—Cereno is made to appear exactly what he is not, as, for example, the capricious slaveholder that the text never indicates he was. This forced imposture crosses the grain of every muscular striation and sinew. We take as grotesque understatement at the end of the story the report that "again and again it was repeated, how hard it had been to enact the part forced on the Spaniard by Babo" (BC, p. 114). The difficulty is intensified by Delano's obtuseness and by Cereno's concern for Delano's safety; indeed, Cereno's compassion is co-opted by the might that would destroy compassion. His fellow feeling guarantees his silence, just as it aggravates his suffering, and is even used toward achieving that end. One effect of this silencing of Cereno is something like the hysteria which Juliet Mitchell defines as the behavioral distortion that follows from a "simultaneous acceptance and refusal" of power.[31] An exact equilibrium between acceptance and refusal would seem to imply the perfect silence of paralysis, but with Cereno we see something more familiar but equally dreadful—the thwarted and disguised expression of protest. On the one hand, Cereno will sink into a cadaverous sullenness, indifference, apathy, a "dreary spiritlessness," "muteness," "vacancy," "motionlessness," and "remoteness." On the other hand, we see his desperate, unvoiced alertness rising toward the surface of expression but diffused as hectic animation—as, that is, a "grasping," "shrinking," "glaring," a recoiling "as if flayed alive," a "pausing," "starting," or "staring," accompanied by "lip biting," "flushing," and "paling." These manic oscillations answer well to Weil's description of the victim of might as a thing that aspires passionately and alertly at every moment to become a person again but that never at any moment succeeds. Thus, Cereno is helpless and Babo mocks this helplessness in numerous ways with an intense preoccupation irrelevant to the practicalities of rebellion. One example is the calculated humiliation by which the "silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command" proves "not, indeed, a sword but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty" (BC, p. 116).

Such a characterization of Babo becomes more plausible in the famous shaving scene where the very delicacy of his might quietly emerges and is all the more appalling for being so. Its occasion comes when Cereno forgets the lie he tells about running into storms around Cape Horn—"Cape Horn?—who spoke of Cape

Horn?"—as Delano, pressing for details of the ship's misfortunes, is having difficulty finding the story believable (BC, p. 81). In quick response to Cereno's lapse, moving to reimpose close, threatening surveillance on him, Babo says that it is time for his master's shave, according to Cereno's fictitious standing orders. Delano finds nothing unusual in this, another apparent sign of Cereno's caprice. The action of the scene begins with another assault on Delano's imperception when, for a moment, Babo brandishes the razor threateningly near Cereno's throat. Delano cannot "resist the vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white, a man at the block" (BC, p. 85). Nevertheless, Delano—noting Babo's "easy cheerfulness" and "smooth tact" and recalling his own conviction that "most negroes are natural valets and hairdressers"—is sufficiently reassured of Babo's docility as he observes his preparations to shave his master (BC, p. 83). Thus he misses the ironies of Babo's subsequent political theatrics. For example, Delano notes with perplexed amusement "an odd instance of the African love of bright colors and fine shows" in which Babo has pulled the royal standard of Spain out of a flag locker to use as a shaving apron (BC, p. 84). During the shaving, the bunting accidentally unfolds.[32] When Delano recognizes the flag of Spain, he remarks fatuously: "It's well it's only I, and not the King, that sees this," adding, as he turns to Babo, "'It's all one I suppose, so the colors be gay;' which playful remark did not fail somewhat to tickle the negro" (BC, p. 85). Babo, of course, is in perfect command of the situation, attuning his manner to Delano's racist expectations. Moreover, he takes pleasure in this command, availing himself of the perfect disguise for such pleasure. That this flag is chosen from among other banners is another gesture of humiliation—at best a petty one, but perhaps for that reason all the more contemptuous of Cereno. It mocks Cereno's silenced helplessness, compounded by Delano's inability to recognize it. This is itself another likely source of Babo's pleasure, even though Babo needed only to make his point to Cereno—which we can assume was his original intention, given that the flag's identity is at first concealed.

More significant, as Babo finishes up the shave, we see new intensities in his manner. First he massages Cereno's head with a vehemence that causes "the muscles of his face to twitch rather strangely"—a slightly Gothic and relatively clumsy touch on Melville's part. But there is nothing clumsy in what follows:

> His next operation was with comb, scissors and brush; going round and round, smoothing a curl here, clipping an unruly whisker-hair there, giving a graceful sweep to the temple-lock, with other impromptu touches evincing the hand of a master; while, like any resigned gentleman in barber's hands, Don Benito bore all, much less uneasily, at least, than he had done the razoring; indeed, he sat so pale and rigid now, that the negro seemed a Nubian sculptor finishing off a white statue-head.
>
> All being over at last, … the negro's warm breath blowing away any stray hair which might have lodged down his master's neck; collar and cravat readjusted; a speck of lint whisked off the velvet lapel; all this being done; backing off a little space, and pausing with an expression of subdued self-complacency, the servant for a moment surveyed his master, as, in toilet at least, the creature of his own tasteful hands.
>
> (BC, p. 87)

"Creature," drawing on its root sense of "create," is anything made, and so includes the familiar, associated senses of "one who is actuated by the will of another—an instrument, a puppet—one produced by, or owes its being solely to another being," or "a person subject to the will and influence of another."[33] Certainly by this point we are aware that Babo has made Cereno in these possessive, appropriative senses, through an artistically reductive enterprise that unfolds in the course of Babo's masquerade. But this passage discloses an extraordinary fulfillment of Babo's artistic capacity to fashion roles, a fulfillment horribly enabled by the tendency of Babo's artistry to approach the formal sensitivity, practical skill, and creative passion of the accomplished sculptor. If Babo emerges here as "a Nubian sculptor finishing off a white statue head," this has a far more ominous thematic significance than Karcher ascribes when she sees it as evoking the "artistry that

recalls an African heritage of civilization, rather than of barbarism"—and thus earning its presence in the story merely as a device to counteract a crude stereotype.[34] Instead, we can trace the convergence of that artistry with the ultimate form of might.

As a crucial point of contact in that convergence, Babo becomes a version of Pygmalion, a symbol with a wide currency in nineteenth-century American literature. And like Pygmalion, in at least one of the symbol's latent implications, Babo insists upon another human being's unconditional submission to the necessarily reductive confines of his own possessive conceptions and constructions, to the dictates of his own projected desires and hopes for the other.[35] In Babo's case, his insistence finds its fulfillment in a species of domination that takes the appropriate metaphorical form of both fashioning and imprisoning that person in stone. Adam Verver in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* wishes the same for his daughter Maggie, at least momentarily, inasmuch as he would like her to be "like some slight, slim draped 'antique' of the Vatican or Capitoline hills, late and refined, rare as a note and immortal as a link, … keeping still the quality, the perfect felicity of the statue." Thus, as Martha Nussbaum observes, he "denied her status as a separate, autonomous center of choice." He wishes "to collect and keep her always."[36] This is to wish for his own daughter a kind of death in life, although he does relinquish it in loving recognition of her integrity and autonomy.

The sort of victimization that is only threatened in the case of *The Golden Bowl* is fulfilled in *The Scarlet Letter,* where the dreadful efficacy of the Pygmalion motif is exposed. In her tyrannized solitude, Hester Prynne appears in a profound sense composed, even sculpted by a communal determination to reduce her into a symbol of sin. Thus she is denied that quality of recognition finally accorded Maggie Verver by her father. As a victim of scornfully reductive and ultimately possessive regard, Hester is an outstanding example of the life that death has frozen long before extinguishing it, of the victim of might figuratively trapped within stone. Her face, Nathaniel Hawthorne says, "showed a marble quietude" which "was like a mask; or rather, like the frozen calmness of a dead woman's features."[37] Only Pearl can intuit the riot of feeling within her silenced mother's "unquiet bosom," betraying in her own antic conduct a perception of emotion "which none could detect in the marble passiveness of Hester's brow."[38]

And so Babo puts the finishing touches on the public mask that he has fashioned for Cereno—a mask which, as we have seen, is the studied contradiction of everything that Cereno is and which now attains a perfected marble quietude. What perhaps distinguishes Babo from these other Pygmalion figures is the degree of calculated and energetic artistry he shows at the conclusion of the shaving scene: the graceful, impromptu, light touches of the comb, scissors, and brush, the soft warm breath lightly blowing on a stray hair, the nimble and deft strokes of the razor as if it were a sculptor's tool—these are all particulars exhibiting an attention to the smallest details with the most delicate means. No doubt these signs of intimate care and expertise answer to Babo's servile vocation and Delano's racist expectations. The African could even be allowed a certain pride in the craft of grooming—a suitable and clever disguise for keeping close surveillance on Cereno. But Babo's attentions serve more than the necessities of security, and Eric Sundquist surely comes up short when he terms them a "masquerade of devotion" and a "simulation of intimacy," remarking that Babo "in his delicate physical mannerisms and his verbal solicitude" merely "replicates the fawning care attributed to slaves in the propaganda of the master class."[39]

Indeed, Babo's preoccupation with Cereno merges with the intimate attention that one can show to a thing one has made. Examples of this intimate attention to small details recur throughout the story: rubbing out a spot on Cereno's velvet, adjusting a loose shoe buckle, placing a pillow, or smoothing the hair along the temples "as a nurse does a child." We also find it in Babo's attention to Atufal, who additionally invites comparison to a sculpted figure and who is no less the creature of Babo's tasteful hands. This is dimly sensed by Delano, who early on sees Atufal as "monumentally fixed at the threshold, like one of those sculptured porters of black marble guarding the porches of Egyptian tombs" (BC, p. 92). Within the context assembled so far, it emerges that Babo, himself the slave of Africans before he became the slave of whites, through his passionate efficiency in arranging, shaping, and attending to the finest details, from the neat appurtenances of Cereno's

dress to the ceremonious rhythms of a public execution, has not only firmly and vengefully displaced Atufal as leader of the revolt, which would be his royal due, but has artistically diminished him as well—has in effect monumentally fixed him—in the role fashioned for him to play in the conspiracy, that of a muted slave in chains, with his head bowed.[40]

In both cases, but especially in Cereno's, Babo's attentions exhibit a tenderness, a minuteness of passionate surveillance that overwhelms imposture.[41] The sincerity of such attention is again obtusely but reliably recognized by Delano, who notes in Babo the "anxious fidelity" of a "devoted companion." This is, furthermore, a persuasively intense devotion consistent not only with proprietary care but also with the hate which it finally defines.[42] Hawthorne has such consistency in mind in *The Scarlet Letter,* where he shows how love and hate blur together:

> It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry, whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom. Each, in its utmost development, supposes a high degree of intimacy and heart-knowledge; each renders one individual dependent for the food of his affections and spiritual life upon another; each leaves the passionate lover, or the no less passionate hater, forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his object. Philosophically considered, therefore, the two passions seem essentially the same, except that one happens to be seen in celestial radiance, and the other in a dusky and lurid glow. In the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister [Chillingworth and Dimmesdale]—mutual victims as they have been—may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love.[43]

Hate in this perspective can be an excessive need for another person while surely also figuring as a life-seeking impulse, a manifestation of the survival instinct, a desire too for a previously withheld recognition.[44] But unlike love, which seeks that fragile equipoise of desire and reciprocal respect, hate passionately requires the presence of the other in order to deplete it. That depletion is clearly achieved here through reductive enactment—the small, even petty attentions that articulate the delicately wrought contours of the attenuated image. As such, these attentions are the gestures of might, whose capacity to violate inversely correlates with their ostensibly light precision. Small wonder, then, that the moment Cereno tries to escape, Babo uselessly sacrifices everything to make the ultimate claim on his creature, to perform the final act of depletion—jumping overboard after Cereno in order to kill him, "his countenance lividly vindictive, expressing the centered purpose of his soul" (BC, p. 114).[45]

Weil points out how the *Iliad* beautifully works its way beyond the "empire of might" in those moments of grace when an intimacy between enemies, one born of enmity, seems to prepare the ground for loving recognition—as if an excessive need somehow intuits, at a crucial and unpredictable moment, how to retreat to a caring distance.[46] Such a moment occurs between Achilles, the slayer of Hector, and Priam, the father of Hector, slayer of Patroclus:

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Then Dardanian Priam began to admire Achilles;
How mighty and handsome he was: he had the look
          of a god.
And Dardanian Priam, in turn, was admired by
          Achilles,
Who gazed at his beautiful visage and drank in
          his words.(47)
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The extraordinary reciprocity here follows from a sudden recognition of a fellowship in loss which transcends the desire to avenge a son and a friend, the one enemy seeing the image of his own father, the other of his son as they look at each other. But "Benito Cereno" does not permit such moments of grace. Melville cannot imagine a ground lying beyond a continuous cycle of judicial violence; he can only imagine an impasse. His is

a world of perfected estrangement: Cereno, after his life is saved, can never again countenance the defiantly silent Babo. Cereno cannot look at him, cannot speak to him, cannot even appear at his trial to give testimony against him. Overwhelmed by his victimization, Cereno can never, in short, acknowledge Babo. And Delano remains ignorant of and forever remote from his own complicity with the two men.

A final implication remains. It perhaps leads us to a provisional if not stable resting place between the extremes of critical diffidence concerning Babo as a moral phenomenon and the critical tendency to demonize him. Few besides Melville had the imaginative courage to countenance another kind of impasse latent in antebellum America—an America, that is, in the shadow of the Fugitive Slave Law and the constitutional protection of slavery and an America haunted by the historical precedents of insurrection: San Domingo, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and the *Creole* and *Amistad* affairs.[48] The story presents two equally weighted appeals: on the one hand, the appalling relief provided by the rule of law in the form of a restored civil order which is the restoration of tyranny; on the other hand, the appeal of an insurrection justly motivated but dreadfully and tragically implicated in the tyranny it resists. Yet if Babo's paradigmatic evil is palpable, it nevertheless remains inseparable from this last, compelling image of his dignity in the aftermath of his execution: “The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites” (BC, p. 116). If this is the punitive pursuit of the body beyond all pain in the name of the sovereign, its coercive closure is breached by an emblematic demand for recognition. This demand is that of a tyrant insofar as Babo sought to dictate the terms of that recognition himself, but it is nevertheless powerfully defiant, defiant beyond the pain of death, toward those who would tyrannize him. Having reached this point we might describe our experience of Babo in the terms Stanley Cavell uses to describe his experience of Lear. It is the experience “of unplaceable blame, blame no one can be asked to bear and no one is in a position to level—like blaming heaven. That does not seem to me inappropriate as an experience of tragedy.”[49]

Notes

1. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom,* ed. William L. Andrews (Urbana and Chicago, 1987), p. 276. Emphasis in original.
2. “About Niggers,” *Putnam's Monthly* 6 (December 1855): 12. This anonymous piece appeared in the same issue as the third installment of “Benito Cereno.” The first and second installments appeared in the October and November issues, respectively.
3. Amasa Delano, *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres Comprising Three Voyages Around the World Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery in the Pacific and Oriental Islands* (Boston, 1817).
4. Harrison Hayford et al., eds., *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860* (Evanston, Ill., 1987), p. 47. Future references to “Benito Cereno” will be to this edition, noted as *BC* in the text, followed by page number.
5. For representative instances of this criticism, see Eleanor E. Simpson, “Melville and the Negro: From *Typee* to ‘Benito Cereno,’” *American Literature* 41 (1969): 19-38; Joyce Adler, “Melville's *Benito Cereno*: Slavery and Violence in the Americas,” *Science and Society* 36 (1974): 19-48; Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction in the American 1850's* (Baton Rouge, La., 1977); Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey, “The Death of Benito Cereno: A Reading of Herman Melville on Slavery,” *Journal of Negro History* 67 (1982): 287-301.
6. Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 166.
7. Carolyn Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge, La., 1980), p. 142. For useful discussions of the problem of revolutionary means and ends in an antislavery context, see John Demos, “The Antislavery Movement and the Problem of Violent ‘Means,’” *New England Quarterly* 36 (1964): 501-26; and Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, “Ends, Means, and Attitudes: Black-White Conflict in the Anti-slavery Movement,” *Civil War*

History 18 (1972): 117-28.

8. Levine, p. 289, n. 73. Italics are Levine's.
9. Allan Moore Emery, "The Topicality of Depravity in 'Benito Cereno,'" *American Literature* 55 (1983): 330-31. Italics are Emery's.
10. George Dekker, *The American Historical Romance* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 204.
11. The following exemplify the sort of overstatement that I have in mind. Stanley T. Williams, "'Follow your leader': Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *Virginia Quarterly Review* 23 (1947): 61-76 (Babo is a "motiveless" but malign baboon); William Stein, "The Moral Axis of 'Benito Cereno,'" *Accent* 15 (1955): 221-33 (Babo is an evil priest at a black mass); James E. Miller, Jr., *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville* (New York, 1962), p. 131 (Babo "enjoys evil itself alone"; "he 'relishes' murder"); Richard Harter Fogle, *Melville's Shorter Tales* (Norman, Okla., 1966), p. 142 ("He is everything untamed and demoniac"); Margaret M. Vanderhaar, "A Re-examination of 'Benito Cereno,'" *American Literature* 40 (1968): 183 (Babo is "a symbol of powerful incomprehensible evil").
12. Dekker, p. 203. For a related argument, see Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979), pp. 187-220.
13. See Charles Nicol, "The Iconography of Evil and Ideal in 'Benito Cereno,'" in *Studies in the Minor and Later Works of Melville,* ed. Raymona E. Hull (Hartford, 1970), pp. 25-31. Nicol does emphasize this point while overlooking the concretely realized complexities of this relationship. He sees that Babo is Cereno's "complete master," "guiding every move" but flattens this perception with a strikingly evasive or elusive judgment: "Babo is merely excessive, sinning and vengeful, not evil" (p. 28).
14. Charles K. Whipple, *The Family Relation, as Affected by Slavery* (Cincinnati, 1858), p. 23. See also Theodore Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839), p. 115: "Arbitrary power is to the mind what alcohol is to the body; it intoxicates. … It is perhaps the strongest human passion; and the more absolute its power, the stronger the desire for it; and the more it is desired, the more it is enjoyed."
15. See Simpson (n. 5 above), p. 34; and Howard Welsh, "The Politics of Race in 'Benito Cereno,'" *American Literature* 46 (1975): 556-66. Simpson shows how Delano's condescension mimics white abolitionists who perpetuated the stereotype of the constitutionally docile and cheerful Sambo. See also James Freeman Clarke, "Condition of the Free Coloured People of the United States," *Christian Examiner,* vol. 46, no. 264 (March 1859); William Ellery Channing, "The African Character," in *Anti-Slavery Picknick: A Collection of Speeches, Poems, Dialogues and Songs,* ed. John A. Collins (Boston, 1842), pp. 56-58; Charles Stuart, "On the Colored People of the United States," *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine,* vol. 2, no. 16 (October 1836). See also Dekker, p. 204, who actually refers to Babo as "the little black rebel."
16. Melville's familiarity with Douglass is, of course, likely, but undocumented. An anonymous review of Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* did appear in the November 1855 issue of *Putnam's,* which also contained the second installment of "Benito Cereno."
17. For an example of this hypersensitive skepticism, see Brook Thomas, *Cross-Examinations of Law and Literature: Cooper, Hawthorne, Stowe, and Melville* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 110-13. Because Babo is silent, Thomas despairs of the sort of exercise Douglass proposes. For a more deeply skeptical extension of Thomas's argument, see John Haegert, "Voicing Slavery through Silence: Narrative Mutiny in Melville's *Benito Cereno,*" *Mosaic* 26 (Spring 1993): 21-38.
18. Dekker, pp. 204-5.
19. Melville also makes this connection in *Billy Budd, Sailor.* For a discussion of this point, see William Bartley, "'Measured Forms' and Orphic Eloquence: The Style of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor,*" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 59 (1990): 516-34.
20. Simone Weil, "The *Iliad,* Poem of Might," in *The Simone Weil Reader,* ed. George Panichas (New York, 1977), pp. 153-54, 155.
21. Ibid., p. 155.

22. My approach in reading derives from a single remark by Fogle (n. 11 above): “In the deposition, Melville uses the stately phrases of legal formula to embody a vision of tragic life. Gradually, they take on deep cadences” (p. 146). See also Huntington Brown, *Prose Styles* (Minneapolis, 1966), pp. 90-124, for a discussion of “the indenture style.”
23. Compare the flatness of the corresponding passage in the original narrative: “that the negresses of age, were knowing to the revolt, and influenced the death of their master; who also used their influence to kill the deponent; that in the act of murder, and therefore before that of the engagement of the ship, they began to sing, and were singing a very melancholy song during the action, to excite the courage of the negroes” (Delano [n. 3 above], p. 341).
24. See Douglas Anderson, *A House Divided: Domesticity and Community in American Literature* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 135. My remarks here enlarge upon Anderson's observation that this passage displays the “tendency of Melville's imagination to prize the fusion of antagonistic influences.”
25. Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays,* trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York, 1969), p. 291.
26. Homer, *The Iliad,* trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1951), bk. 2, line 487.
27. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), pp. 48-50.
28. See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* ed. Donald R. Bouchard, trans. Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), pp. 150-51, who shares Melville's insight: “The law is a calculated and relentless pleasure, delight in the promised blood, which permits the perpetual instigation of new dominations and the staging of meticulously repeated scenes of violence.”
29. Weil, p. 158.
30. Douglass (n. 1 above), p. 277.
31. Juliet Mitchell, *Women, the Longest Revolution: Essays on Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London, 1984), p. 289. Hypochondria is repeatedly associated with Cereno, but a more accurate diagnosis in nineteenth-century terms is provided by Paul McCarthy, in *“The Twisted Mind”: Madness in Herman Melville's Fiction* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1990), pp. 106-7. According to James Prichard's *Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (London, 1835), a standard authority, Cereno has symptoms of “moral insanity,” a malady which includes elements of hypochondriasis and withdrawal states, as seen in Cereno's manic oscillations. Hysteria is, at least in terms of Mitchell's definition, a related if intensified phenomenon. See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985), pp. 200-202, for a discussion of the symptomatology of hysteria. The male hysteric was “an accepted clinical entity by the late nineteenth century” (p. 200).
32. For a discussion of the shaving scene as political theater, see Rogin (n. 12 above), p. 215, although Babo is more ambitious than Rogin suggests. For a similar and equally vulnerable discussion, see Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. 160, 163. He sees Babo as a “tormenting master artist” who conducts a “theatrical, even gaudily ostentatious political torment of the deposed master.”
33. This definition combines elements found in the *OED* and Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York, 1828).
34. Karcher (n. 7 above), p. 140.
35. For useful discussions of the nineteenth-century revival of the Pygmalion myth, see Carl Woodring, *Nature into Art: Cultural Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); and Joseph A. Kestner, *Mythology and Misogyny: The Social Discourse of Nineteenth-Century British Classical-Subject Painting* (Madison, Wis., 1989).
36. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (Harmondsworth, 1990), pp. 153-54. See Martha Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination,” in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy,* ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore, 1987), p. 173.
37. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 241.
38. Ibid., p. 243.

39. Sundquist, pp. 160-61.
40. That Melville might have been suggesting a visual correspondence between Babo's Atufal and Hiram Powers's famous statue *The Greek Slave* (1842) is not unlikely, given the statue's wide popularity in both the North and the South. For a discussion of the cultural significance of this statue in antebellum America, see Joy S. Kasson, "Narratives of the Female Body: *The Greek Slave,*" in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America,* ed. Shirley Samuels (New York, 1992), pp. 172-90. Kasson estimates that more than 100,000 Americans viewed it in the 1840s and 1850s. Powers's engraving of the statue enabled him to reach an even wider audience. In a passage cited by Kasson, Powers describes his as yet incomplete work to a benefactor: It "is of a young girl—nude, with her hands bound [in chains] and in such a position as to conceal a portion of the figure. … The feet also will be bound to a fixture and the face turned to one side, and downwards with an expression of modesty and Christian resignation" (quoted in Kasson, p. 174). The irony of the statue's popularity in the South as well as the North was not lost on *Punch* (20 [185]: 236), which, on the occasion of Powers's Crystal Palace exhibition in 1851, published an engraving which substituted an African-American woman slave for the Greek slave and entitled it "The Virginian Slave. Intended as a Companion to Powers' 'Greek Slave.'"
41. Compare Lydia Sigourney, *The Young Lady's Offering, or Gems of Poetry* (Boston, 1862), p. 10, discussed in Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1988), p. 197. There is an unsurprising likeness between Babo and the father in Sigourney's story, whose daughter is very much his creature. Having educated her, he exults with Pygmalion's pride: "Was it strange that I should gaze on the work of my own hands with ineffable delight?"
42. Are homoerotic intensities present here as well? If sexual domination is an aspect of having absolute power over another human being, as one line of abolitionist thinking claimed, the implication is difficult to dismiss especially in view of the eroticism of the Pygmalion motif. For a discussion of abolitionist views on the relationship between power and sexuality, see Ronald G. Walters, "The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism," *American Quarterly* 25 (1973): 177-201; and Karcher, p. 152.
43. Hawthorne, p. 272.
44. See David Holbrook, *The Masks of Hate: The Problem of False Solutions in the Culture of an Acquisitive Society* (Oxford, 1972), p. 36.
45. Compare Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot,* trans. David Magarshack (Harmondsworth, 1955). There is a striking concordance between Rogozhin and Babo which again raises the possibility of Babo's eroticism (see n. 40 above). Rogozhin murders Nastasya Filipovna in a possessive rage ("Aye, so I'd decided not to give her up on no account, lad, and to no one!" p. 612) with a "small knife" which like Babo's concealed knife (and his razor) is a sculptor's tool, which Rogozhin conceals in a book. That the knife is a sculptor's tool is reinforced by the observation that Nastasya Filipovna's foot, protruding from under a sheet, "seemed as though it were carved out of marble" (p. 610).
46. Weil (n. 20 above), pp. 180, 181.
47. Homer, *Iliad,* bk. 24, lines 629-33. See Weil, pp. 176, 506. This is the editor's translation of Weil's own rendering of the Greek.
48. See Sundquist (n. 32 above), pp. 135-82; and Karcher (n. 7 above), pp. 2-14. For a superb discussion of Melville's literary response to the antebellum political crisis over slavery, see Helen P. Trimpi, *Melville's Confidence Men and American Politics in the 1850's,* Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences (Hamden, Conn., 1987).
49. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 74.

Criticism: Henry Sussman (essay date 1996)

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[*In the following essay, Sussman interprets the sublime and ironic qualities of "Benito Cereno."*]

Still swept up in the whirlwind that emanates in the nineteenth century, twentieth-century readers share the predicament of Benjamin's Angelus Novus,[1] even on the threshold of a millennial hyperspace in which the spatial barriers once separating social and cultural anomalies have been obliterated. The wind blowing in from the nineteenth century is a powerful one, not only in the land- and seascapes that Wordsworth, the Shelleys, and Melville described and that Friedrich, Blake, Courbet, and Turner painted, but in the pull, the constructive and destructive force, that its intellectual systems continue to exert. We turn to the void of a new millenium as a projective scene for our discourse, yet nineteenth-century systems stay on our minds; they yet furnish a template for our productive thinking.

No text illustrates the logical, social, and textual concerns occupying nineteenth-century thinkers more powerfully than Herman Melville's *Piazza Tale,* "Benito Cereno." The tale of an American sea captain's visits aboard a Spanish merchant ship that has already surrendered to a slave insurrection resides on the interstice, the very hinge, between Kantian sublimity and Hegelian dialectics. In the same story we are treated to a seemingly explicit illustration of the Hegelian dialectic between mastery and slavery and to a meditation on the awe experienced by an exemplary (ruling-class) subject contemplating naval logistics and a human quandary of sublime proportions. The dialectic of mastery and subjection or the sublime could themselves alone exhaust any single reading of this text. It is no doubt an act of extreme cheek on my part that I could, in a few pages, combine both analyses; yet I do so, even at the price of some loose ends, in order to suggest the power with which Melville intuited and inscribed within the framework of his fiction the epistemological investigations of his epoch.

It is perfectly fitting that a tale exploring slavery and incorporating the structuralist intellectual frameworks of a uniquely systematic age should be strikingly economical. "Benito Cereno" offers us in fact two stories for the price of one. It is a twice-told story; or rather, a story and the appearance of a story. It chronicles the initiation of one Captain Amasa Delano into the duplicates and duplication of irony and deception. With detachment the Hegelian omniscient narrator carries on while Delano falls into and rescues himself from naïveté, credulity, good faith, and the debilitating effects of rationality. Delano, whose Hispanic name echoes the French *de loin* and carries as well the nuance of wool (Sp. *lana*), the innocence of Christ-figures and martyrs is, always already and from the outset, a straw-man and a sop. (We will return to the possible significances of his name.) The play between Delano's antics, even when they include discoveries, and the narrator's detached vision and commentary describes already the parameters of a heavily ironized situation.

The narrative structure of "Benito Cereno" is ironic, while its situation and revelations are sublime. The history of irony runs concurrent to the play of dialectics and the disclosure of the sublime.[2] Without the presupposition of an inherently and unalterably divided subjectivity, there would be no place for the stories of irony and sublimity. These two seemingly diametrical reactions, the former a belittling and the latter a secularized awe, are rooted in the same epistemological settings and impasses.[3] Melville's tale confronts us powerfully with the ironies of Delano's utterly rational naïveté and of Babo's tendentious victory over his master and mastery in general; its setting and tone owe much to the expansiveness of sublime conditions, in nature and thought. Melville honors dialectical thinking in the stunning reversals between mastery and subjection, truth and fiction, and objectivity and subjectivity that the tale stages. Yet these acts of logical and structural subversion would come to naught if the setting did not communicate oceanic awe and global economy and conflict. Without the setting of sublimity, I am arguing, whether projected outward in vast seascapes or inward as stunning revelations, psychological *coups de foudre,* the drama of irony would come to small potatoes.

The setting of “Benito Cereno” thus combines the magnificence (sublimity) and devaluation (irony) that intertwine and supplant each other at the locus of the psychological and intellectual borderline. The sea in Melville is the locus of the borderline,[4] the place where exemplary subjects lose their rational bearings, experience the dissolution of measure, and enter the economies of artistic production or philosophical speculation. Contempt and awe are the terminal points of Melville's sea voyages. In between, characters experience their emptiness as fullness; they enter a systolic alternation between filling and emptying. The fiction of voyagistic movement segments the emptying of apparent findings into distinct episodes. In *Pierre,* the apex of Melville's domestic fiction, there is the possibility for only one move, from the constrained rural life to an even more claustrophobic Manhattan. The arrest of movement in this text leaves the protagonist in a situation of inescapable, arrested duplicity. The imprisoning landscape of oedipal triangles that Melville paints for this novel is more horrific, in a psychological sense, than the standard Melvillian sea-dangers. It could be argued that seascapes are so compelling throughout Melville's fictive career in part because their wider scope allows for a repetitive rhythm of interpretations and debunkings, of sublime expansions of uncertainty that break out from within the constraints of dialectical precision.

There are, then, in this tale, epistemological plots that coincide with the narrated events; rhetorical moves that both buttress and undermine the sequence of thoughts and happenings; social allegories that expand into commentaries on the possibilities of knowing. Captain Amasa Delano grows as an interpreter at the same time that he revises his “take” on an anomalous naval situation; yet it is not clear that he definitively augments his “self-consciousness” or his detachment from the social compromises (*e.g.,* slavery) of his age. The status of the “truth” seems to fortify itself as the events' narration progresses from an initial “take” to an informed explanation to a legal disposition. The sublime murkiness of first conditions in the tale has, however, *ab origine* undermined the possibility of dialectical increments in certainty. The slave trade is among the story's social “givens.” The augmenting epistemological crisis that the text describes in spite of its progressive acts of clarification is indicative of the status of ethical certitude in a slavery-based economy.

Let's run through the tale as it was meant to be read in terms of the conventions of shorter fiction in the period when it was composed. That is to say, in our own first “take” on the story, let us (as Conrad would say) submit ourselves to its narrative sequence and to the train of developments in consciousness that is supposed to coincide with the narrative events.[5] But even here certain aspects of its hermeneutic and epistemological commentary make themselves materially known. Fully the first two-thirds of the novella concerns itself with the multifaceted (social, epistemological, moral) murkiness besetting a sea captain when he “steps aboard a boat.”[6] The conditions defining the captain's “consciousness,” knowledge, or existential state during this prepossessing prologue are characterized by the ambiguity of philosophical aporias in general and by Kantian antinomies in particular.[7] What gives this crucial initial segment any coherence it claims is Delano's attempts to interpret the status of Don Benito Cereno, captain of the renegade merchant ship. The anxiety that the disabled vessel causes Delano presents itself initially and superficially as an uncertainty regarding the power relations on board. Don Benito, the commanding officer, operates from a position of (possibly hypochondriacal) sickliness instead of from strength. His officers are largely out of the picture (or they are decorative corpses when we see them). As Delano's knowledge and consciousness emerge over the first two-thirds of the novella, he experiences a gnawing suspicion that Don Benito's underlings, slaves, particularly Babo, his personal servant, are more in control of the situation than he is.

The status of a ship under the control of its slaves *defines* for Melville the state of anxiety and horror in the mercantile world of Western Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century (this is the tale's temporal setting). “Normality” in this world consists of a set of (empirically located) paradoxes or antinomies gaining legitimacy from a control asserted by European powers whose societies are themselves structured by idealism. As it slowly and with considerable resistance dawns upon Delano that he has happened upon an utter dystopia, a setting in which all domestic European pretensions and hypocrisies have been declared null and void, the particularity of his (naval) situation expands itself into a general meditation, the intellectual conditions making the European civil order possible. It is no accident, then, at the end of this extended *précis* that Delano's

departure from the phantom vessel, the *San Dominick,* triggers the crisis that unmasks the actual power relations prevailing on board. The conclusion of the story embraces, in quick succession, the revelation of the heretical power relations that have prevailed since the outset of the story, and the setting aright of this deviance by the authority of European judicial authority. Melville frames all but a few of the novella's "final words" within the seemingly objective format of a trial transcript. The authoritative status of a legal document promises to resolve the story's disquieting ambiguities. Yet the tale's ironies and half-awarenesses persist beyond this documentary ending, suggesting that mercantilism and slavery have shaken Western truth and knowledge to their innermost parts. The two-thirds of the narrative that Melville devotes to Delano's uncertainties, anxieties, and *crises de conscience* renders any restoration of the old order, any retreat into idealized eighteenth-century notions of authority, utterly hopeless.

"Benito Cereno" stages the Kantian allegory available to literary characters in post-Cartesian works of fiction; that is, the novella dramatizes the opening up of a dimension of sublimity (either in the "internal" or "external" represented worlds) to a character hitherto under the constraints and assurances of rationality. Economically, the opening up of the sublime, whether depicted as revelation, madness, rapture, or political insurrection in the present case, corresponds to a compensation, a Derridean supplement, to an aspect of poverty elsewhere in "existence." The sublime, as I explain elsewhere,[8] may be defined as the vestige of awe carried over into a secular religion in an age that has witnessed the severe qualification, if not the death of God. As figments of original genius, post-Cartesian literary characters lead us to a certain wonder and awe that they are privileged to unearth in compensation for the constraints that they are fated to endure.[9] These constraints include physical deformity (Hoffmann's René Cardillac and Poe's Hopfrog); unrequited, and then requited desire (Goethe's Werther and Faust); banal domesticity (Flaubert's Madame Bovary); personal isolation (Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*); and "the subjective experience of emptiness" (Camus' Meursault). The expanded dimensionality of the sublime is a reward even where fatal. In a post-Cartesian episteme, this compensation, which is, in Heideggerian terms onto-theological even if not explicitly religious, is in turn passed on to the reader and cultivated society as a compensation for the constraints upon *their* hopes, desires, rages, and passions. The opening up of the sublime may kill, but then no one is going to escape the world alive anyway. These conditions for knowledge and existence were always already inscribed in the Cartesian dualism and division between soul and body. We associate Kant with the compensatory rapture of aesthetics because of the rigor and deliberation with which he elaborated the interplay between transcendent and empirical realms and because of his meticulous analyses of the beautiful and the sublime.

I can tell you already that Captain Amasa Delano, even though "Benito Cereno" ends with the ostensible clarification furnished by a legal document, is a close *confrère* and *semblable* to the characters mentioned immediately above and in many other literary sites in the confusion, derangement, and intensity that he experiences in trade for the closures surrounding his taking-off position. His "overall" experience corresponds to the Kantian allegory: empirical man desperately seeking revelation (secular, of course).

The tale is already primed for this allegory as it begins.[10] Delano enters a dimension of sublime expansion just after "He rose, dressed, and went on deck."

> The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

(*PT,* 46)

There are many respects in which the seascape Captain Amasa Delano enters immediately upon the domestic task of dressing himself is uncanny, but none is more compelling than the stillness and monochromatic indifference that have befallen the fluid element of the sea, an imprisonment by rigidity if not by incarceration. Delano's starting position is an expanding sublimity of non-articulation. The perceptual and cognitive markers that would furnish orientation through differences (in color, tone, position) are absent. Delano has entered a slough of indifference and incertitude. Elements persist, but deprived of their elementary dynamic qualities. The most uncanny image (and we may begin to conceptualize the psychoanalytical uncanny as a sublimity projected "inward") is that of leaden waves or sea swells, of an aquatic medium frozen still. These waves are also men of pleasure, swells, whose amoral pleasure violates the sea's cruciform rigidity (roods). A distinctly gray sky dons a "gray surtout," foreshadowing an important comparison that will be made between the costumes of the sickly nobleman, the title character, and Babo, his poorly attired manservant.

The first scene of the story is already prepared for revelations, for disturbances of the encompassing torpor that will really matter. The narrator remarks upon a general aura of oddity prevailing upon ships at sea. They harbor a speculative element; seem an unreal setting for "costumes, gestures, and faces" every bit as unreal (50). The ship is a privileged locus for the bolts of lightning and enchantment that shake sea captains from their complacency and that inspire writers figured as curious, speculative subjects:

> Both house and ship, the one by its walls and blinds, the other by its high bulwarks like ramparts—hoard from view their interiors till the last moment: but in the case of the ship there is this addition; that the living spectacle it contains, upon its sudden and complete disclosure, has, in contrast with the blank ocean which zones it, something of the effect of enchantment. The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which must directly receive back what it gave.

(50)

A ship is both a house and a naval vessel, satisfying both of Freud's major requirements for the uncanny. It is a temporary home or haven nonetheless pervaded by sublimity. The mood prevailing on board is unsettling, even if characterized as "enchantment." Captain Delano hovers between confidence, Melville's general term for remaining under the auspices of a functioning idealism, and premonitions of unchecked malevolence and death.[11] In the passage below, the narrator contrasts Delano's assurance with the imprisoning death of sarcophagi and with threats that pursue him with the silent intrusiveness of moss (a favored metaphor in Hawthorne).

> These natural sights somehow insensibly deepened his confidence and ease. At last he looked to see how his boat was getting on; but it was still pretty remote. …
>
> To change the scene, as well as to please himself with a leisurely observation of the coming boat, stepping over into the mizzen-chains, he clambered his way into the starboard quarter-gallery—one of those abandoned Venetian-looking water-balconies previously mentioned—retreats cut off from the deck. As his foot pressed the half-damp, half-dry sea-mosses matting the place, and a chance phantom cat's-paw—an islet of breeze, unheralded, unfollowed—as this ghostly cat's-paw came fanning his cheek; as his glance fell upon the row of small, round dead-lights—all closed like coppered eyes of the coffined—and the state-cabin door … now calked fast like a sarcophagus lid … and he bethought himself of the time, when that state-cabin and this state-balcony had heard the voices of the Spanish king's officers. …

> Trying to break one charm, he was but becharmed anew. Though upon the wide sea, he seemed in some far inland country; prisoner in some deserted château, left to stare at empty grounds, and peer out at vague roads, where never wagon or wayfarer passed.
>
> But these enchantments were a little disenchanted as his eye fell on the corroded main-chains.

(*PT,* 73-74)

The *San Dominick* is a former ship of state fallen into disrepair. Once a showcase (or show vessel) of national power and grandiosity, in its reduced condition it awakens in the American sea captain an aimless undulation between ongoing ideals and hypochondria, the latter in Melville's widest sense as the loss of confidence, the inability of (Western) idealism to repair breeches in positivity and positivism. Amasa Delano, an exemplary Kantian subject, enters a rhythm of falling in and out of charms and enchantments. The strangeness of the *San Dominick* fundamentally undermines his confidence, but then, lost in his thoughts, his equilibrium is, as if by magic, restored. His entry into a renegade vessel offers the compensations of sublime experience; but it poses the threat undergone by all Romantic heroes that sublimity cannot be cast aside when its rigors prove too demanding.

In light of this scene setting, it cannot come as too much of a surprise that Delano's chief interlocutor and object of interest, title-character Benito Cereno, is a veritable personification of sublime attributes. Don Benito Cereno is beset by the multifaceted but vague malaise that forms, for contemporary object-relations theorists, the presenting complaint for the narcissistic disturbances. His twitchiness also corresponds to late-nineteenth-century characterizations of neurasthenia.[12] The apparent absences in his consciousness, insofar as they can be inferred from behaviors, are of vast and sublime proportions. An aura of “cloudy languor” (*PT,* 52) hovers about the title character, a description not without significance in terms of the novella's initial atmospheric conditions:

> Still, Captain Delano was not without the idea, that had Benito Cereno been a man of greater energy, misrule would hardly have come to the present pass. But the debility, constitutional or induced by hardships, was too obvious to be overlooked. … His mind appeared unstrung, if not still more seriously affected. Shut up in these oaken walls, chained to one dull round of command, whose unconditionality cloyed him, like some hypochondriac abbot he moved slowly about, at times suddenly pausing, starting, or staring, biting his lip, biting his finger-nail, flushing, paling, twitching his beard, with other symptoms of an absent or moody mind. This distempered spirit was lodged, as before hinted, in as distempered a frame. … His voice was that of one with lungs half gone—hoarsely suppressed, a husky whisper. No wonder that … his private servant apprehensively followed him. Sometimes the negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him … less a servant than a devoted companion.

(52)

As in a painting by Caspar David Friedrich (*e.g., Morning in the Riesengebirge,* 1810-1811), the Romantic subject, the subject of Kantian sublimity, hovers at the precipice of an immense abyss that is, in many senses, too much for him.[13] The vacuity of the void without is mirrored in absences within—of composure, awareness, self-possession. Don Benito's voice is an emanation from the other world, not the expression of a particular subject rooted in a specific context, Heidegger's *Welt.*[14] His variegated hypochondriacal debility bespeaks terror at some aspect of the Transcendental, the Lacanian Real,[15] that has manifested itself to him. Within the framework of Melville's extended tale, Captain Amasa Delano serves as a medium of transmission by means of which this encounter with the inconceivable reaches *us,* the reading and thinking public.

So much for the Kantian framework to Melville's novella (Derrida would call it Kant's "frame").[16] Among Melville's splendid achievements in "Benito Cereno" is its encompassing, through literary dramatization, the major achievements of nineteenth-century systematic thought. Our bearings place us in a Hegelian world particularly when we confront the tendentious dimensions of "Benito Cereno." The story situates us on the fronts of multiple wars, whether between races, social classes, spheres of national influence (the Spanish, American, and Senegalese), modes of subjectivity (free individuality or slavery) or metaphysical attitudes ("confidence" as opposed to hypochondria). The compulsion with which antagonistic statuses supplant each other in "Benito Cereno" affirms the necessity of something like Hegelian dialectics during the epoch whose thinking it described and qualified.

The allegory of domination or control in the novella is a complicated one. The story's unsettling quality is not exhausted by the thought that, on one occasion or another, resistant and even imaginative and manipulative slaves were able to usurp control of a ship. More than control of one sea-vessel has been shaken when Don Benito, on the verge of Delano's departure, quakingly informs him, late in the story, that he is *not* free to disembark from his own ship and enter a free American vessel. At this moment, a quintessential social mask, the basis for public "false self," is cast aside.[17] A whole social system has been shaken to the roots, a system in which hypochondria is not merely the foible of certain neurotics, but in which it comprises the enabling legislation for a society founded on repression and exploitation. In "Benito Cereno" slavery is the most compelling instance of the repression keeping the ruling class in place, at the cost of a few displaced symptoms here and there for its members; but it is not the only architectural support to this system. While the novella is replete with illustrations of the "master/slave dialectic," no more graphic than in Babo's shaving his master, the full extent of its Hegelian infrastructure accounts for the repression keeping all hierarchical social orders "afloat," for the dissimulation that structures civil interactions, for the price that under classes pay, most often willingly, for preserving the peace in civil societies.

Melville brings to bear the dissimulation at the basis of the civil order upon the narrative performance of "Benito Cereno." At pivotal moments he effects a marvelous coordination between the thematic exploration of social violence and a performative acting out of narrative duplicity. With Conradian tact he infuses descriptive passages with rhetorical complexity and polemical import. The initial sketch of the *San Dominick* serves in this regard as a fine example.

> Whether the ship had a figure-head, or only a plain beak, was not quite certain, owing to canvas wrapped around that part, either to protect it while undergoing a refurbishing, or else decently to hide its decay. Rudely painted or chalked, as in a sailor freak, along the forward side of a sort of pedestal below the canvas, was the sentence, "*Seguid vuestro jefe,*" (follow your leader); while upon the tarnished headboards, near by, appeared, in stately capitals, once gilt, the ship's name, "San Dominick," each letter streakingly corroded with tricklings of copper-spike rust; while, like mourning weeds, dark festoons of sea-grass slimily swept to and fro over the name, with every hearse-like roll of the hull.

(*PT,* 49)

With a disingenuousness at the full reach of irony, the narrative introjects "Benito Cereno"'s vertiginous meditation on power and authority into the innocuous description of the ship's prow: at the outset, the narrative asks whether there is a figurehead on board or not. The ship's disrepair is a pretext for posing the tale's ultimate questions while the reader, with Delano as an intermediary, hovers between blindness and insight into its hidden laws and as yet inarticulate story. The tale makes Lacanian subjects of its protagonist and readers.[18] In the beginning, they are too unschooled in the semiology of subjection and resistance to make sense of the telltale signs. As in *The Confidence-Man,* this text begins with a motto, in whose evolving meaning the fate of the characters and the trajectory of reading is contained: "follow your leader," a simple command made exasperatingly difficult in a post-Cartesian world in which an identifiable Judeo-Christian

deity is in retreat, monarchical authority is under siege, and in a colonial setting where the chain of command—whether emanating in Spain or the United States—has been hopelessly attenuated and weakened. A sequence of plant images runs through the story—vegetables that insinuate themselves in loci of physical stress and strategic importance; for example, in the above passage, the sea-grass obscuring the ship's identity. The entire text may be read as a commentary on how exasperatingly difficult it has become, in such a world, to follow the simple command, "Seguid vuestro jefe." Compliance is arbitrary and intolerable (in a situation of competing multiple jurisdictions, who can take credit, exactly, for being "your leader"?); yet non-compliance brings about the horror that Captain Amasa Delano (and in a later tale, the Marlowe of "Heart of Darkness") transmits to the reading public and civil polity.

It is in such a situation of dialectical fluidity that Melville gives us a glance at the basic master-slave diad as it can be pictorially represented at the historical moment of his awareness. The icon of an erect white man accompanied by a lesser black man at his side, a black man of the stature of a domesticated dog, has a certain integrity of its own in Melville's writing. (It is invoked, for example, to describe the operator known as "Black Guinea" in *The Confidence-Man.*)

> The Spanish captain, a gentlemanly, reserved-looking, and rather young man to a stranger's eye, dressed with singular richness, but bearing plain traces of recent sleepless cares and disquietudes, stood passively by, leaning against the main-mast, at one moment casting a dreary, spiritless look upon his excited people, at the next an unhappy glance toward his visitor. By his side stood a black of small stature, in whose rude face, as occasionally, like a shepherd's dog, he mutely turned it up into the Spaniard's, sorrow and affection were equally blended.

(*PT,* 51)

Here is a vignette of the relation in which the dominant white man and his black servant stand. This is again the sickly white man, whose dyspepsia is an essential element in the system of dissimulations making the slavery-based civil order possible. The white man's vulnerability and need are fundamental pretexts in the perpetuation of this order; otherwise, why would slaves be necessary? By his side stands, or rather kneels, the black bondsman. The black owes his place in this system to the white man's need; yet his placement in it has been forced; his fidelity to the system is, by all premises of reason, divided.

The arbitrariness of the system bringing master together with slave lends the interaction between these classes a certain aura of unreality. There is a pronounced theatrical quality to Don Benito's staged interactions with Babo. The immediate context for this is, of course, the "horror" of usurped authority that both parties have an interest in hiding. Yet since the slave-system has implications for reaches of the civil order from which it is hidden (as German concentration camps affected civilian life in the cities from which *they* were separated), Don Benito and Babo's staged affirmations of brotherly love comment as well on civility in general during the epoch of mercantile slavery.

In the passage immediately below, Delano joins Don Benito in a professed admiration for the camaraderie and bonhomie of slavery. At the same time that Delano serves as a detached American observer to the situation, in certain respects he also functions as Benito Cereno's double in the story (both, for example, have linguistically Hispanic names). While Benito Cereno undergoes a trajectory of mental absences and recoveries, the American sea captain enters his own rhythm of anxieties and relaxations. Delano is the privileged internal audience in the story to the civil theater of slavery, the domestic drama of mutual compliance upon which its institutional continuity depends:

> Once more the faintness returned—his mind roved—but, recovering, he resumed:

> "But it is Babo here to whom, under God, I owe not only my own preservation, but likewise to him, chiefly, the merit is due, of pacifying his more ignorant brethren, when at intervals tempted to murmurings."
>
> "Ah, master," sighed the black, bowing his face, "don't speak of me; Babo is nothing; what Babo has done was but duty."
>
> "Faithful fellow!" cried Captain Delano. "Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him."
>
> As master and man stood before him, the black upholding the white, Captain Delano could not but bethink him of the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other. The scene was heightened by the contrast in dress. … Excepting when his occasional nervous contortions brought about disarray, there was a certain precision in his attire, curiously at variance with the unsightly disorder around; especially in the belittered Ghetto, forward of the main-mast, wholly occupied by the blacks.

(57)

This brief interlude, which invokes specifically the Hegelian dialectic of the master and the slave, transpires between the extremities of "fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other," that is, between feigned compliance and complicity at one extreme and the idealism that powers the progress made by (Western) societies and communities. Yet the public profession of need and appreciation by the master and fidelity by the slave is, precisely, a theater piece: it is described as a "scene." The feigned collaboration between master and bondsman in this scene is reminiscent of the forced amiability between Frank Goodman and Charley Noble late in *The Confidence-Man.* Deep in the bowels of this stage setting reside the blacks, in their "Ghetto."

The masquerade of slavery-based civility and urbanity draws upon a preexisting ideology for its legitimation and engenders a revised ideology of its own. While it is not ideology that rounds up slaves and shackles them in ships (historians estimate that fifteen percent of the individuals captured for slavery died in transit alone), ideology played a decisive role in making commercial practices palatable to the domestic population. In *The Confidence-Man* Melville demonstrates some attentiveness to rationalizations for Indian hunting disseminated on the home front. In this sense, the attitudes that Hegel betrays toward Africa and Africans in *The Philosophy of History* serve as an ideological backdrop to the events and conditions that Delano (and we) are left to interpret. Hegel's role in furnishing an ideological pretext in the endeavor of slavery is as duplicitous as Delano's in the story. Hegel *both* elaborates a schema for world history and progress in which Africa plays at most a supporting role *and* elaborates the formal and structural mechanisms in which power relations (whether between masters and slaves or syntheses and antitheses) are tenuous at best. On the one hand, Hegel consummates the tradition of Western thinking that rewards fidelity to idealism in its theological, scientific, and ontological dimensions.[19] Within this historical framework, the cultures of Egypt, Persia, and India are appropriable because they *anticipate* the ideological fidelity that powers both monotheistic religion and rigorous scientific method. On the other hand, this designation of an *interior* to the homeland faithful to Western idealism relegates the societies not meeting its specifications to the conceptual equivalent of a netherworld. Within the scenario of history as the History of the progressive unfolding of the Idea, the place of Africa is not a very esteemed one. "Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained—for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World—shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself—the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (*PH,* 91), writes Hegel in *The Philosophy of History* (1830-1831).[20]

Hegel consigns Africa to a history of eternal childhood, in which its single positive value is as a treasury of natural resources. Its imprisonment, and by implication, the enslavement of its peoples, is always already predetermined, by virtue of its irreversible withdrawal from the progressive realization of the Idea through the dynamics of self-reflexivity. In effect, argues Hegel, excision from the map of World Culture is just desserts for cultures rejecting the multifaceted gift constituted by progressive, self-originated idealism. Hegel not only places Africa at the margins of the map of World Culture: he accounts for the fate of its peoples:

> The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which necessarily accompanies our ideas, the category of Universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence. … The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all what we call feeling—if we would rightly comprehend him. There is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character.

(*PH,* 93)

Even allowing for the fact of the increasing schematic bent of Hegel's later writing, there is a remarkable dissonance between the categorical dismissal of Africa and Africans in the above passage and the dialectical complexity that challenges such generalizations, upon which Melville draws in his fictive meditation upon slavery. So horrified is Hegel by a presumed total absence of idealism in African culture that he would place African peoples beyond the pale of humanity. “Benito Cereno” stands astride the same extremities as the Hegelian discourse: on the one hand placing blanket dismissals in the narrative discourse; on the other entertaining the dialectical subtlety constituting the downfall of authority aboard the *San Dominick* and the puncturing of the American sea captain's *confidence.*

So too for the narrator of “Benito Cereno” is the African a child of nature, so ignorant as to bear the caste of the untouchable with relentless and natural good humor; a natural handmaiden or manservant.

> There is something in the negro which, in a most particular way, fits him for avocations about one's person. Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castinets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction. There is, too, a smooth tact about them in this employment, with a marvelous, noiseless, gliding briskness, not ungraceful in its way, singularly pleasing to behold, and still more so to be the manipulated subject of. And above all is the great gift of good-humor. Not the mere grin or laugh is here meant. Those were unsuitable. But a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune.
>
> When to this is added the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of bland attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors, one readily perceives why those hypochondriacs, Johnson and Byron—it may be something like the hypochondriac, Benito Cereno—took to their hearts, almost to the exclusion of the entire white race, their serving men, the negroes, Barber and Fletcher. …
>
> Among other things, he was amused with an odd instance of the African love of bright colors and fine shows, in the black's informally taking from the flag-locker a great piece of bunting of all hues, and lavishly tucking it under his master's chin for an apron.

(*PT,* 83-84)

In preparation for a shaving scene in which the full dynamics of the Hegelian master-slave interaction emerge, a bevy of clichés concerning Africans emerges: natural docility and humor, love of music and bright colors; endless generosity in the face of abuse and exploitation.

Melville's fictive exegesis of the institution and dynamics of slavery is divided between its domestic and mercantile/military theaters. Slavery engenders, on the home front, the hypocritical civility enabling (so-constituted) business to go on and confidence, public idealism, to maintain itself. Out in the "field" (the field of the emerging social sciences as well as that of the slave trade), explicit relations of dominance and power still prevail. In the rendition of the story that Hegelian thinking makes possible, the cosmopolitan hypocrisy of slavery reaches a climax in the scene where Babo shaves Benito Cereno, a moment when the narrative does not omit to register the title character's extreme anxiety. When the mask protecting this mutual hypocrisy is penetrated, that is, when Babo and cohorts restrict Don Benito disembarking from his own ship, the time has arrived for the (Western) power underlying the masquerade of slavery to assert itself. Let us remain cognizant of how little (Western) power it takes, even for an outnumbered Delano and a depleted Spanish crew, to subdue the resistant slaves:

> Setting down his basin, the negro searched among the razors, as for the sharpest, and having found it, gave it an additional edge by expertly strapping it on the firm, smooth, oily skin of his open palm; he then made a gesture as if to begin, but midway stood suspended for an instant, one hand elevating the razor, the other professionally dabbing among the bubbling suds on the Spaniard's lank neck. Not unaffected by the close sight of the gleaming steel, Don Benito nervously shuddered; his usual ghastliness was heightened by the lather, which lather, again, was intensified in hue by the contrasting sootiness of the negro's body. Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the two thus postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white a man at the block. …
>
> Again Don Benito faintly shuddered.
>
> "You must not shake so, master. See, Don Amasa, master always shakes when I shave him. And yet master knows I never yet have drawn blood, though it's true, if master will shake so, I may some of these times. Now master," he continued. "And now, Don Amasa, please go on with your talk about the gale, and all that; master can hear, and, between times, master can answer."

(84-85)

In this passage, the subtleties of a masterful literary meditation upon a situation and the institutions making it possible become evident. There is a wonderful counterpoint between the razor suspended in midair, suspended between its servile and aggressive potentials, and Don Benito's congenital (and well-founded) *Angst.* The gravity of the situation punctures the soft playfulness of the soap bubbles. Babo's soothing words have the same effect as the bubbles: they mark at the same time that they soften a severe, even deadly conflict. Babo has never drawn blood, he attests, but that could change at any moment. Henceforth, Delano has to consider quite seriously the possibility that "master and man, for some unknown purpose, were acting out, both in word and deed … some juggling play before him" (87).

The dramatic climax of the novella may be described as an unmasking of the uneasy social contract prevailing on board (a microcosm of slavery-based economies) coinciding with a sudden semiological clarification. The cat is let out of the bag as far as power relations are concerned when Benito Cereno blurts out, "This plotting pirate means murder!" (98), precipitating the scuffle that leads to Babo's demise. Yet a number of other meanings receive clarification at this revelatory moment as well. Indeed, one of Captain Delano's major roles

as an exemplary speculative and Kantian subject has been his encounter with gestures and other signs of dubious and possibly malevolent signification. Among these I would have to catalogue the inscription “Seguid vuestro jefe” (49, 99, 117); the “imperfect gesture” made by a Spanish sailor as he advanced toward the balcony (74, 79, 110); and above all, the uncanny percussive chorus of the oakum pickers, presumably in the act of cleaning their hatchets (50, 59, 79-80, 96).

It is precisely where the exemplary speculative subjects of Romanticism become exegetes of sign-systems that the seeds of Modernism, with its Saussurian insistence on the priority of signs over any significations they may “contain,” are planted. It is the achievement of Romantic theory to place the subject on two parallel but divergent paths: toward speculation, carrying the classical accoutrements of subjective metaphysics; and in the midst of a play of signs, a rigorous aesthetics, from which this baggage has been jettisoned. The modernist works that we remember for their distinctive style took their cue from this second pathway that Romanticism cleared.

The dramatic climax of the story coincides with a renunciation of “all but the last appearance of courtesy” on the imprisoned Spanish sea captain's part (94). The dropping of pretenses constitutes a consummation for the novella's Hegelian allegory:

> Glancing down at his feet, Captain Delano saw the freed hand of the servant aiming with a second dagger—a small one, before concealed in his wool—with this he was snakishly writhing up from the boat's bottom, at the heart of his master, his countenance lividly vindictive, expressing the centred purpose of his soul; while the Spaniard, half-choked, was vainly shrinking away, with husky words, incoherent to all but the Portuguese.
>
> That moment, across the long-benighted mind of Captain Delano, a flash of revelation swept, illuminating, in unanticipated clearness, his host's whole mysterious demeanor, with every enigmatic event of the day, as well as the entire past voyage of the *San Dominick.* He smote Babo's hand down, but his own heart smote him harder. With infinite pity he withdrew his hold from Don Benito. Not Captain Delano, but Don Benito, the black, had intended to stab.

(99)

The final sentence in this graphic description leaves the direct objects of its actions as well as its intended victim unclear. It may be that the black had really intended to stab Don Benito; but a singular syntax demonstrates that the black as well as the American could well have succumbed to a hateful wound. It takes no more than a slap from a white man's hand to quell a slave uprising. At the moment when relations of power become clear, an entire aesthetic configuration of signs and symbols falls into place. Indeed mystification, within the framework of this novella, is a function of a deliberate obscurantism regarding conditions of authority and power. This is Melville very much in synch with a certain polemic in Marx.[21]

Yet for the story to achieve its dramatic force, its horror (whether one of usurped power or impenetrable signs) must be depicted in terms intelligible to the hegemonic class.

> Both the black's hands were held, as, glancing up towards the *San Dominick,* Captain Delano, now with the scales dropped from his eyes, saw the negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt. Like delirious black dervishes, the six Ashantees danced on the poop. Prevented by their foes from springing into the water, the Spanish boys were hurrying up to the topmost spars, while such of the few Spanish sailors, not already in the sea, less alert, were descried, helplessly mixed in, on deck, with the blacks.

(*PT,* 99)

For *us,* reading in 1995, in the wake of Saussure and Kafka and Joyce and Stein and Barthes and Derrida and Riddel, a crisis in signification may be an adequate and ultimate horror for this novella. But Melville, writing at a certain time and for a specific readership, chose to paint the story's threat as a dance of crazed dervishes, with the winsome colonial boys in retreat. Yet the orientalist stage props do not obscure the fact that Melville has set his chief surrogate, Captain Amasa Delano, out on the treacherous double path on which the post-Cartesian subject negotiates the delirium of aesthetics while s/he bears the baggage of existence and metaphysics. The novella's Hegelian framework could *both* generate categories and generalizations so crude as to be laughable *and* account for the subtle dynamics of shifts in power, logic, and intellectual discrimination applying to the oppressed as well as the oppressors.

There is no more telling indication of the novella's semiological crisis, the manner in which it anticipates modernist aesthetics, than the play within its system of naming. I have already noted how the Hispanic surnames of Cereno and Delano mirror each other. Melville demonstrates in this text that irony does not rely upon a theatrics of subterfuge and debunking; the act of naming is complicated enough to open powerful registers of irony.

Like Hawthorne, Melville draws upon plays of naming as a significant fictive resource. He draws our attention to this fact, just as, in a wider sense, through Delano he makes us aware of suspicious conditions aboard the *San Dominick. Naming* can participate in a certain complicity just as individual agents do. Melville does not allow us to pass over the ironic potential in Don Benito's name in total ignorance:

> That strange ceremoniousness, too, at other times evinced, seemed not uncharacteristic of one playing a part above his real level. Benito Cereno—Don Benito Cereno—a sounding name. One, too, at that period, not unknown, in the surname, to supercargoes and sea captains trading along the Spanish Main, as belonging to one of the most enterprising and extensive mercantile families in all those provinces; several members of it having titles; a sort of Castilian Rothschild, with a noble brother, or cousin, in every great trading town of South America.

(64)

Not unlike the Joycean notion of "soundsense,"[22] Benito Cereno is possessed of "a sounding name." The narrative here gives us leave to read sense into sound, specifically, to register the "serenity" infused into Don Benito's name even if it is not orthographically evident. Within the sphere of romance languages, then, the name Benito Cereno translates into something like "the good, serene one." Given that the title character is too beleaguered to be serene and too debilitated to be good, this appellation is nothing if not an ironic one.

Yet it is into the American counterpart's name that Melville compresses, in the sense of the Freudian *Mischwort* or condensation, the greatest complexity and irony.[23]

> "What I, Amasa Delano—Jack of the Beach, as they called me when a lad—I, Amasa; the same that, duck-satchel in hand, used to paddle along the waterside to the school-house made from the old hulk—I, little Jack of the Beach, that used to go berrying with cousin Nat and the rest; I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard? Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano?"

(*PT,* 77)

Ironically, the brief swatch of text giving us the greatest insight into Delano's name is the only moment in the novella even approaching autobiographical reminiscence. At this single point in the narrative we are afforded a glimpse of the sailor as a young man. There was a “touch of the artist” about Amasa who, as a child, already encompassed a fictive double. Underlying the adult speculative navigator resides the artist as a young man. This point is brought home irrefutably by the brief exclamation, “I—Amasa.” A bit of play with this strange name—disjointing it—produces the phrase, “I am as a,” the very basis for the hypothetical individual, the person who lives in the possibilities of art rather than through the empirical facts. Amasa is also “a massa,” a Master. To be hypothetical about slavery, to see it but not to see it at the same time; not to be engaged in it as either the Master or the Slave, and therefore to be free to be indecisive about it—this is precisely the position of mastery on the home front. It is in this sense, as well as in others, that Amasa is also “a massa.”

The name Amasa Delano links, then, the play of the possible to the detachment of seeing *de loin,* from far away. Captain Delano is disquieted by the conditions and events he observes not only because of the double messages in the empirical data, but also because he, quintessentially, in name, is a hypothetical subject, a creature whose possibility defines his margin or range. This is the position, in modern-day psychoanalytical theory, of the “as if” personality, the subject whose narcissism predicates an endless deferral of self-definition.[24] Politically as well as fictively, Delano functions at most as a hypothesis.

The novella fatefully links two sea captains, one Spanish, the other North American. One cannot fulfill the good serenity in his name; the other realizes only too fully a hypothetical approach to some concrete problems: slavery, the exploitation implicit in mercantile economics. The story transpires between an impossible goodness and a detached hypothesis, two counterversions of idealism severed from the tangible conditions it otherwise might have amplified and reformed.

In at least two powerful senses, then, Melville's novella issues from the very crossroads of the nineteenth century. It serves as a fictive interface between predominant Kantian and Hegelian scenarios for intellection, interpretation, and subjectivity. And in its tendentious dimension, the minute attention it devotes to conditions of power and authority, it combines the speculative awareness of romantic literature and theory with the realistic depiction of social conditions that will become one characteristic feature of nineteenth-century European and U.S. fiction. “Benito Cereno” manages to place the Kantian scenario of the penetration of everyday, empirical constraints by the sublime, the aesthetic facet of the Transcendental, in contact with an exquisite Hegelian sensitivity to the reversals implicit in every situation of power, whether physical, logical, or political. The fictive investigation of slavery and its domestic ramifications that Melville undertakes in this novella is rigorous and far reaching. *Fidelity* is a charged term in the Melvillian lexicon. Melville's fidelity to his investigation enables “Benito Cereno” to chart a course *between* the metaphysics of romantic fiction and the social realism of, among others, Balzac, Crane, and Zola. (Needless to say, for the sake of its own comprehensibility, there is a powerful metaphysical element to nineteenth-century social realism.)

“Benito Cereno” may be described as the *between* that illuminates what falls on both sides of its wake. It arises *between* nineteenth-century speculative models, races, spheres of colonial influence, modes of economy (slavery and abolition), epochs of literary production, and theoretical bearings (metaphysics and language-oriented aesthetics). This *between* is an impasse at the same time that it is a fulcrum with access to enormous power. There is no way out of it. At most, any way out of it is a ruse, a dissimulation again harkening back to the epoch of irony, which persists from Plato to the postmodern indifference that disqualifies it by dissolving its constitutive differences between levels of knowledge.

Melville himself must resort to ruse in feigning a way out of “Benito Cereno”'s imprisoning (if not enslaving) system of intermediary locations. And his stratagem, in keeping with his epistemological moment, corresponds to a “flight into art,” giving aesthetics the final word, ascribing the ultimate indeterminacy to the freedoms and rights pertaining to the aesthetic enterprise. Do note that this way out is itself conditioned by features of education, social class, and the intended audience.

Into the network of his novella, Melville has incorporated representations of slavery, colonialism, oppression, and duplicity, images still remarkably powerful today. But his recourse, in closing off his fictive system, is to remind his readership that the text is a narrative, comprised of narratives by its characters. Explicit fictionality is both the pretext and the horizon for this literary work.

Early enough in the novella when he can still entertain doubts about the bizarre collation of facts confronting him, Delano can muse on the status of Benito Cereno's narrative.

> He recalled the Spaniard's manner while telling his story. There was a gloomy hesitancy and subterfuge about it. It was just the manner of one making up his tale for evil purposes, as he goes. But if that story was not true, what was the truth? That the ship had unlawfully come into the Spaniard's possession? But in many of its details … Don Benito's story had been corroborated not only by the wailing ejaculations of the indiscriminate multitude, white and black, but likewise—what seemed impossible to be counterfeit—by the very expression and play of every human feature, which Captain Delano saw. If Don Benito's story was, throughout, an invention, then every soul on board, down to the youngest negress, was his carefully drilled recruit in the plot; an incredible inference. And yet, if there was a ground for mistrusting his veracity, that inference was a legitimate one.

(*PT,* 68-69)

In this passage, Captain Delano weighs the advantages and costs of believing a story. To accept Don Benito's account of the unusual conditions on board is to swallow, on the side, some implausible attestations; but the alternative to this possibility amounts to not only a dismissal of certain explanations but a renunciation of civility itself. It would be uncivil, beyond the norms of domesticity, to reject, in the absence of incontrovertible evidence, the representations of a fellow officer and gentleman. Credulity is a civic virtue; this is the hinge linking the making and reading of fiction to the dynamics of public life. *Not* to accept Don Benito's account is to posit that “every soul on board, down to the youngest negress [the pecking order of statuses is telling here] was his carefully drilled recruit in the plot: an incredible inference” (69). Civic duty and fiction, then, demand diametrically opposed ideals. Critical awareness *demands* the skepticism constituting, in terms of interpersonal equanimity, bad faith.

“Benito Cereno” ends in the form of a transcript of a legal proceeding. Both the deliberation itself and its certified record should resolve the crises in knowledge and social conscience that the related events have initiated. It is possible for written documents to arrive at a more authentic draft of events and conditions than has previously been available; yet the form of the document, the choice of *genre* alone, does not silence the questions to which the web of social conditions and responses has given rise. In *The Confidence-Man* and elsewhere, Melville attests to the centrality of credulity as a civic value. At the end of “Benito Cereno” he offers his readership a legal transcript as a means of definitively establishing the facts, as a pretext for shelving any persistent doubts. Yet at the same time that he holds out to his readers this formal device for achieving resolution, he couches the tale's ending in a rhetoric of endless reversal.

Melville concludes “Benito Cereno” in the *form* of legalistic determination but in the *language* of interminable fictionality. He thus pits his literary medium *against* the forms or genres of certifiable knowledge. Rhetoric and form are at each other's throats as this extended tale brings itself to an end, perhaps explaining the indeterminacy that must serve as the text's excuse for an ending. Neither fiction nor “objective reportage” are exempt from censure and suspicion in this terminal battle of discursive modes. A legal transcript may bear witness to a slave uprising otherwise hidden from public view, but its exaggerated pretense to authority may impose closure on questions whose urgency derives precisely from a fictive presentation. Fictionality, on the other hand, may bring questions of sustained moral indeterminacy to public attention; yet the aestheticization of violence and repression may, as Melville indicates, domesticate and

legitimize these phenomena. Melville would appeal to overt fictionality and objective reportage in attempting to bring his tale to some satisfying conclusion, yet the compromises at play both in fictional allegory and in purportedly objective report aggravate the hermeneutic and moral indeterminacies.

It is in this context that the narrative, in reaching for its ending, adapts a rhetoric of deliberate fictionality at the same time that it would presume to limit the play of fiction through the assumption of non-fictive (*e.g.,* legalistic) discursive forms. “Hitherto the nature of this narrative, besides rendering the intricacies in the beginning unavoidable, has more or less required that many things, instead of being set down in the order of occurrence, should be retrospectively, or irregularly given; this last is the case with the following passages, which will conclude the account” (114).

Indeed, it is only with a sense of utter dissatisfaction that one can approach, or even speak of any *resolution* to “Benito Cereno.” The resolution of the plot consists in a hopeless standoff; this standoff may constitute the consummation, the final *Aufhebung,* of any comment the novella can render upon its age. It is possible to formulate the impasse that emerges from our final glimpses of Don Benito Cereno and Babo, the intractable slave, in several ways. We can think of Don Benito, the personification of European idealism, relegated to silence by the subversive agent who seduces and overturns him. Yet we are never afforded the possibility of viewing the insurrection from the perspective of those who initiated it. Babo is in effect elided from the legal transcript, disenfranchised from uttering an account of the events as they impacted upon the slave cargo. If silence reigns at the end of the novella, the silence of an endlessly repeated and hopeless argument, this is in part the silence reigning in a Western metaphysics long-primed for ghosts and marginal, threatening blackness, in part the silence of the disenfranchised.

> There was no more conversation that day.
>
> But if the Spaniard's melancholy sometimes ended in muteness upon topics like the above, there were others upon which he never spoke at all; on which, indeed, all his old reserves were piled. Pass over the worst, and, only to elucidate, let an item or two of these be cited. The dress, so precise and costly, worn by him on the day whose events have been narrated, had not willingly been put on. And that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not, indeed, a sword, but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty.

(116)

It is best if we depart from this interpretation of Melville's story—as a critical commentary on its age deploying both the major speculative systems and aesthetic liberties available to it—with the final substantial image that the author offers us. Don Benito and Babo—relegated to counterversions of definitive silence, exile from the discourse of social negotiation—complete their trajectories locked in a petrified gaze. Melville has afforded us access to this very gaze, upon a set of intractable human conditions. Even in death, Babo's decapitated head gazes upon a society that has accorded him a purgatorial status. Given the skew of the powerful social forces and counter-forces perpetuating an untenable status quo, his mute and vacuous stare, with its attentiveness beyond death, may constitute the most radical response available to him as a figment of the literary artifact.

> As for the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot—his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat. Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words. …

> Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of sublety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gazes of the whites; and across the Plaza looked toward St. Bartholomew's church, in whose vaults slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda: and across the Rimac bridge looked towards the monastery, on Mount Agonia without; where, three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader.

(116-17)

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), 257-58.
2. Irony is at once an ongoing (*i.e.,* ahistorical) and a historically specific aesthetic achieving prominence at moments of demonstrated sensitivity to differentiated levels of knowledge (configured spatially) in artifacts. Some of the current cutting-edge theoretical work on irony has been done by Paul de Man. See his *Blindness and Insight* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis, 1983), 208-28. The American Romantic epoch, whose major artifacts "Benito Cereno" joins, was conditioned by meditations on irony undertaken by the likes of Friedrich Schlegel, Hegel, and Soren Kierkegaard. Romantic deliberations on irony revolved around such issues as fragmentation and its aesthetic and metaphysical implications and the parallelism between linguistic play and sexual understandings. Kierkegaard, for example, finds close affinities between Socrates' disputational devices and the sexual and aesthetic issues of his own epistemological moment. For important source materials on irony, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute,* trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, 1988), and Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde and the Fragments,* trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, 1971). Also see Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony,* trans. Lee M. Capel (Bloomington, 1968), 85, 120-25, 155-56.
3. I wish to note here additionally only the parallelism between sublime (quantitative) expansion and ironic debunking and the aspect of borderline psychopathology designated "omnipotence and devaluation" by Otto Kernberg. There will be more on the derivation of the current rhetoric of borderlinity in note 4. The aesthetics of Romanticism serves as an instance of a cultural phenomenon dramatizing the sudden shifts between idealization and contempt observed by contemporary psychologists in patients diagnosed with narcissistic or borderline personality disorders. Clearly, there needs to be a contemporary literary translation of phenomena that clinicians can only situate in subject-based, personal, and, implicitly, moralistic spheres. For a powerful contemporary articulation of "omnipotence and devaluation" as a clinical phenomenon, see Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York, 1975), 33-39. For a preliminary attempt to translate into literary discourse the observations of contemporary subject-conditions made by Kernberg and other object-relations theorists, see Henry Sussman, *Psyche and Text: The Sublime and the Grandiose in Literature, Psychopathology, and Culture* (Albany, 1993), 45-92, 157-205.
4. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick,* ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, 1988), 3-7, 188-95, 411-14. In its widest parameters, the psychoanalytical discourse of the borderline continues a general reorientation by object-relations theory away from the vicissitudes of drives and their fulfillment or repression so pivotal to the Freudian universe and toward the interpersonal domain of human relations. This redirection received its first substantial articulation by Harry Stack Sullivan. Subsequent theorists in the field of object relations proper placed borderline phenomena within a context of human interactions characterized by, among other things: the persistence of fundamental narcissistic wounds (Heinz Kohut), sharply polarized values (Melanie Klein and Otto Kernberg), damaged attachments (John Bowlby), "false self" (D. W. Winnicott), and a notable dearth of psychological integration (Kohut) at the crux of a battery of defensive reactions and

life-strategies including projective fantasies, persistent acting out, and "the subjective experience of emptiness" (Otto Kernberg). Also see Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism,* 3-44, 69-151, 213-23.

5. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim,* ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (Boston, 1958), 153: "The way is to the destructive element submit yourself."
6. Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man,* ed. H. Bruce Franklin (Indianapolis, 1967), 3-9.
7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York, 1929), 257-75, 384-409, 436-58.
8. Sussman, *Psyche and Text,* 22-44.
9. For the concept of original genius, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* trans. J. H. Bernard (New York, 1951), 150-64, 189.
10. All citations of "Benito Cereno" refer to Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860,* ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, 1987), Vol. IX of Hayford, Parker, and Tanselle, eds., *The Writings of Herman Melville,* 9 vols. to date. Hereinafter cited in the text as *PT.*
11. For Melville's elaboration of the ideology of confidence, see *The Confidence-Man,* 8, 12, 40, 42-48, 67-72, 88-93, 164-79, 291-307. I have commented extensively on the literary and metaphysical dimensions of this ideology in *High Resolution: Critical Theory and the Problem of Literacy* (New York, 1989), 88-114.
12. See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Writings of Sigmund Freud,* trans. James Strachey (19 vols.; London, 1953-74), II, 85, 136-37; VI, 157.
13. See such paintings as *Morning in the Riesengebirge* (1810-11), *The Traveller over the Sea of Mist* (1818), and *The Frozen Ocean* (1823-24), all reproduced in *Caspar David Friedrich,* ed. Jorg Traeger (New York, 1976), 17, 22-23, 38-39.
14. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1975), 43-49, 60-64.
15. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1978), 42-79, 203-15, 279-80.
16. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, 1987), 17-24, 29-34, 61-82, 134-47.
17. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York, 1989), 14, 68, 87, 102. Also "The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship," in *Essential Papers on Object Relations,* ed. Peter Buckley (New York, 1986), 233-53.
18. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis,* 24-25, 45, 165, 169, 193.
19. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* trans. Talcott Parsons (London, 1991), 13-31.
20. Citations derive from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History,* trans. J. Sibree (New York, 1956), cited in the text as *PH.*
21. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* trans. Ben Fowlces (Vol. I), David Fernbach (Vols. II, III) (3 vols.; New York, 1977-81), I, 125-244, 709-72; II, 436-67; III, 170-99, 998-1016.
22. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York, 1986), 117, 121.
23. Freud, *The Standard Edition,* VIII, 18-21, 41-42, 163-71.
24. Helene Deutsch is responsible for coining this term. Annie Reich elaborates it and applies it to attachment in women in "Narcissistic Object Choice in Women," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association,* I (1953), 22-44, reprinted in Buckley, ed., *Essential Papers on Object Relations,* 297-317.

Benito Cereno, Herman Melville: Further Reading

CRITICISM

Bloch, Bernard B. “Babo and Babeuf: Melville's ‘Benito Cereno.’” In *Melville Society Extracts,* No. 96 (March 1994): 9-12.

Employs textual evidence related to naming and word play in “Benito Cereno” in order to argue that Melville presents an anti-slavery sentiment in the story.

Eaton, Mark A. “‘Lost in Their Mazes’: Framing Facts and Fictions in *Benito Cereno.*” In*Journal of Narrative Technique* 24, No. 3 (Fall 1994): 212-36.

Argues that “Benito Cereno” disputes the authority of historical narratives, citing narrative framing techniques and the story's mediation between literature and history.

Emery, Allan Moore. “The Topicality of Depravity in ‘Benito Cereno.’” In*American Literature* 55, No. 3 (October 1983): 316-31.

Contends that Melville's tale treats depravity as a human rather than a racial trait and that the story “should scarcely be charged with racism.”

Hattenhauer, Darryl. “‘Follow Your Leader’: Knowing One's Place in *Benito Cereno.*” In *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 45, Nos. 1-2 (1991): 7-17.

Studies the symbolism of space, position, and hierarchy in “Benito Cereno.”

Horsley-Meacham, Gloria. “The Monastic Slaver: Images and Meaning in ‘Benito Cereno.’” In *New England Quarterly* 56, No. 2 (June 1983): 261-66.

Considers Melville's use of the religious backgrounds and ecclesiastical imagery of racial oppression in “Benito Cereno.”

Jones, Gavin. “Dusky Comments of Silence: Language, Race, and Herman Melville's ‘Benito Cereno.’” In *Studies in Short Fiction* 32, No. 1 (Winter 1995): 39-50.

Perceives Melville's story to be culturally relativistic in its presentation of language as a means of undermining scientific racism.

Justman, Stewart. “Repression and Self in ‘Benito Cereno.’” In *Studies in Short Fiction* 15, No. 3 (Summer 1978): 301-6.

Explores Melville's portrayal of Delano's self-repression and solipsism in “Benito Cereno.”

Levine, Robert S. “‘Follow Your Leader’: Captains and Mutineers in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno.*” In *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville,* pp. 165-230. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Places “Benito Cereno” within the context of nineteenth-century anxiety concerning racial conspiracy and the possibilities of subversive rebellion.

McLamore, Richard V. “Narrative Self-Justification: Melville and Amasa Delano.” In *Studies in Short Fiction* 23, No. 1 (Spring 1995): 35-53.

Highlights Melville's attack in "Benito Cereno" on the idealized self-justifications and nationalistic prejudices present in Amasa Delano's Narrative.

Reiss, Benjamin D. "Madness and Mastery in Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" In *Criticism* 38, No. 1 (Winter 1996): 115-50.

Relates Melville's representation of the threats of race and insanity in "Benito Cereno" to the collective cultural confusion of mid-nineteenth century America.

Roundy, Nancy. "Present Shadows: Epistemology in Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" In *Arizona Quarterly* 34, No. 4 (1978): 344-50.

Reads "Benito Cereno" as a story about the difficulties of apprehending the truth.

Sale, Maggie Montesinos. "*Benito Cereno* (1855) and 'The Slumbering Volcano.'" In *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity,* pp. 146-72. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997.

Compares the ways in which "Benito Cereno" and Frederick Douglass's The Heroic Slave *enter the debates surrounding slave rebellion and U.S. national identity in the 1850s.*

Sanborn, Geoffrey. "Where's The Rest of Me?: The Melancholy Death of Benito Cereno." In *Arizona Quarterly* 52, No. 1 (Spring 1996): 59-93.

Focuses on the signification of human savagery associated with the skeleton of the murdered slave-owner Aranda in "Benito Cereno."

Schaub, Diana J. "Master and Man in Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" In *Poets, Princes, and Private Citizens: Literary Alternatives to Postmodern Politics,* edited by Joseph M. Knippenberg and Peter Augustine Lawler, pp. 41-62. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996.

Discusses "Benito Cereno" as a work that explores the nature of racism and the master-slave psychological dynamic.

Stuckey, Sterling and Joshua Leslie. "Aftermath: Captain Delano's Claim against Benito Cereno." In *Modern Philology* 85, No. 3 (February 1988): 265-87.

Reprints and analyzes documentary evidence by Amasa Delano as it relates to Melville's fictionalization of the 1805 slave rebellion at sea adapted in "Benito Cereno."

Sundquist, Eric J. "*Benito Cereno* and New World Slavery." In *Reconstructing American Literary History,* edited by Sacvan Bercovitch, pp. 93-122. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Investigates Melville's ironic revelation of the 1790s San Domingo slave revolt in "Benito Cereno" at a time when U.S. feelings of innocence concerning slavery in the Caribbean and Latin American were at their height.

Swann, Charles. "*Benito Cereno*: Melville's De(con)struction of the Southern Reader." In *Literature and History* 12, No. 1 (Spring 1986): 3-15.

Acknowledges the destabilizing irony in "Benito Cereno"—which some critics have used to argue that Melville's story is racist—but finds the narrative to be against slavery and racial iniquity.

Weiner, Susan. "'Benito Cereno' and the Failure of Law." In *Arizona Quarterly* 47, No. 2 (Summer 1991): 1-28.

Maintains that although slavery is central to "Benito Cereno," the story is principally about law and its inability to adequately produce change.

Welsh, Howard. "The Politics of Race in 'Benito Cereno.'" In *American Literature* 46, No. 4 (January 1975): 556-66.

Traces a pattern of political implication in "Benito Cereno" in which the end of slavery does not equally produce the end of inequality between races.

Zagarell, Sandra A. "Reenvisioning America: Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" In *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 30, No. 4 (1984): 245-59.

Claims that in "Benito Cereno" Melville challenges American feelings of national superiority.

Zlatic, Thomas D. "'Benito Cereno': Melville's 'Back-Handed-Well-Knot.'" In *Arizona Quarterly* 34, No. 4 (1978): 327-43.

Observes Melville's manipulation of narrative and perception in "Benito Cereno" in order to question his reader's belief in Delano as virtuous or charitable.

Additional coverage of Melville's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: *Authors & Artists for Young Adults,* Vol. 25; *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography, 1640-1865; Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vols. 3, 74; *DISCovering Authors; DISCovering Authors: British; DISCovering Authors: Canadian; DISCovering Authors Modules: Most-Studied Authors, Novelists; Short Story Criticism,* Vols. 1, 17; *Something about the Author,* Vol. 59; *World Literature Criticism, 1500 to the Present.*

Analysis: Style and Technique

Melville repeatedly uses irony to undercut the easy assumptions of Captain Delano. Observing Babo's constant attendance on Cereno, whom the black will not leave even for a moment, Delano comments, "Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him." Such envy is clearly out of place, but there is ironic truth in Delano's refusing to call Babo a slave, for Babo in fact is the master. Delano likens the ship to a monastery and the blacks to monks, analogies hardly appropriate to the situation. The American regards the black women as the pattern of docility, "pure tenderness and love"; later the reader learns that during the mutiny they were more vicious and bloodthirsty than the men.

Melville also employs irony to indicate that blackness is not a function of skin color. Babo demonstrates that blacks and whites are identical within when he mockingly shows the skeleton of Don Alexandro Aranda. To each of the Spaniards he puts the same question: Does not the whiteness of the bones prove that they belonged to a white man? The answer is no. Beneath the surface all people are alike, which means that all people are capable of the horrors committed aboard the *San Dominick*.

Ironic repetitions emphasize this idea. Babo's motto, "Follow your leader," is a warning to the Spaniards that if they refuse to comply with his orders they will share the fate of Don Alexandro. When the Americans recapture the *San Dominick*, the chief mate urges the sailors on with the cry, "Follow your leader!" When the blacks mutiny, they kill eighteen whites; in the recapture, "nearly a score of negroes were killed." Delano prevents Babo from stabbing the prostrate Cereno; later he stops the Spaniard Bartholomew Barlo (how close that name is to Babo's) from stabbing one of the chained blacks.

Even in death, irony rules. Don Joaquin hides a jewel to present at the shrine of Our Lady of Mercy in Lima as a gift of thanks for his safe passage. The jewel goes to the church, but only after Don Joaquin dies aboard ship. Babo warns Cereno that failure to obey will cause the captain to follow his leader, Don Alexandro, to death. When the *San Dominick* lands, Aranda's skeleton has been buried in St. Bartholomew's Church. Shortly thereafter, Cereno, too, is buried there and so does, indeed, follow his leader.

Kindness and Providence offer no protection against the blackness in humankind. Aranda was a kind master who allowed his slaves the freedom of the ship. His benevolence was his undoing, as it almost destroys Delano, who unwittingly guides Babo and his mutineers into a berth next to his own vulnerable ship. Though Delano emerges from his experience neither sadder nor wiser, the reader cannot be so untouched, for Melville has shown him the grimness of humanity's soul.

Analysis: Places Discussed

***Chile**

*Chile. South American country off whose coast the American whaling ship *Bachelor's Rest* encounters the Spanish slave ship *San Dominick*, whose slaves have mutinied and taken control, in the harbor of a small island. By setting his story in the southernmost extreme of the known world, Herman Melville dramatizes the racial tensions inherent in the southern United States during the same period. In an attempt to gain the confidence of Captain Amasa Delano of the *Bachelor's Rest*, the rebel slaves pretend still to be prisoners and slaves.

Babo, the ostensibly devoted slave of the *San Dominick*'s captain appears to behave as a quintessential "Uncle Tom," doing everything he can to meet his master's needs. The narrator's description of the slaves is of "natural valets and hairdressers" whose docility arises from the contentment of their limited minds. This is the same view of black slaves depicted in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was published a few years before Melville's story. However, in *Benito Cereno* Melville powerfully depicts this view of slaves as a fantasy, with the reality the oppressive violence and savagery of Babo and his allies, who have killed most of the Spanish crew.

In Melville's view, this is the pragmatic reality of the Southern Hemisphere's centuries-long involvement with slavery, and the effect upon slaveholders, represented by Benito Cereno, is that of oppressive pessimism, fatalism, and horror. This is Melville's view of the psychological reality of slaveholders in the American South. Even after being freed from the black rebels, Benito Cereno cannot function or regain equilibrium; when asked what has cast such a psychological shadow upon him, he replies simply, "the negro." A few months later, he is dead, having followed his leader as tragic victim of the historical burden of slavery. That is the reality of the Southern Hemisphere's slaves and slaveholders.

***Lima**

*Lima. Capital of Peru where the rebel slaves are tried after the *San Dominick* is recaptured. Once Babo leaps into Captain Delano's boat in pursuit of Benito Cereno, he is captured and the revolting slaves are defeated by

the crew of Delano's ship. The captured rebels are then taken to Peru for trial and, in the case of Babo, executed. Significantly located between the hemispheric extremes of southern Chile and Duxbury, Massachusetts, Lima, Peru, acts as a symbolic middle ground of justice and morality between the blind optimism and idealism of New England abolitionism and the horrific degradation of Southern Hemisphere slavery. Here, real spiritual awareness and assistance are available to those victimized by historical evils such as slavery, epitomized by a monk who devotes himself to attempting to help Benito Cereno recover. However, to the conservative and cynical Melville, even such justice, spirituality, and practical morality cannot overcome the destruction wrought by humanity's historical excesses. Thus, Peru's symbolic middle-ground justice can kill Babo, but it cannot save the doomed Benito Cereno, who can only follow his leader.

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Reference: Benito Cereno

Herman Melville's long story "Benito Cereno," which first appeared serially in the numbers of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* for October, November, and December 1855 and which reappeared in Melville's *The Piazza Tales* (1856), has come to be regarded not only as one of the author's most important works but as one of the most important American fictional works of the nineteenth century. The plot of the story is based on a real-life incident described in the published recollections of an American ship captain: Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817). In 1805 Delano encountered a Spanish slave ship, the *Tryal,* at the island of St. Maria, off the coast of Chile. Observing that the vessel was in a state of disrepair and that blacks onboard far outnumbered whites, Delano boarded the *Tryal* and conferred with its captain, Benito Cereno, who informed him that fierce storms were responsible for both the sad condition of the vessel and the small number of Spanish crewmen. After spending several hours with Cereno, who was closely accompanied at all times by a black servant, Delano left the ship to return to his own vessel, the *Perseverance.*

But as Delano was entering his longboat, the Spanish captain suddenly jumped into it, whereupon the blacks on the *Tryal* revealed themselves to have been secretly in control of the vessel while Delano was aboard. After learning from Cereno that the blacks had revolted against their Spanish masters and killed their owner and many of the Spanish crewmen, Delano offered his own crewmen a reward for taking the *Tryal,* which was subsequently captured. Some of the slaves were killed in the assault, and Delano had to protect those left alive from the vengeance of the Spaniards, including Cereno, who later accused Delano of being a "pirate" (Delano, p. 329) for attempting to lay claim to the vessel and its human cargo. Delano's narrative ends with transcripts of various "official documents" connected with the later trial of the surviving slaves, including the depositions of both Cereno and Delano and an account of the sentences meted out to the blacks by the Spanish authorities. The ringleaders of the revolt were to be hanged, after having their bodies dragged to the gibbet at the tails of mules. Their heads were then to be placed on poles and their bodies burned to ashes.

Melville's retelling of this grisly story consists of three parts: an extended account of Delano's initial visit to the Spanish ship, narrated in third person from Delano's unenlightened perspective; a greatly altered version of the deposition given by Benito Cereno at the trial; and an entirely fictional final conversation between Delano and Cereno, in which Delano admits that his failure to grasp the truth of his situation saved his life. In creating his story, Melville also changed the name of Cereno's and Delano's ships to the *San Dominick* and *Bachelor's Delight,* respectively; back-dated the episode to 1799; combined Mure, Cereno's servant, and Babo, the leader of the revolt, into a single character named Babo; greatly embellished the character of Delano (instilling in him, for example, the false fear that Cereno rather than Babo is plotting against him); invented several key incidents; eliminated the final wrangling between Cereno and Delano over the rights to the Spanish ship; and added a final, fictitious account of Cereno's death, portrayed as caused directly by the stresses of his experience. Attempting to encourage Cereno at the end of the story, Delano assures the Spanish captain that he is "saved" and asks what has cast such a "shadow" upon him? "The negro," replies Cereno, terminating the conversation ("Benito Cereno," p. 116).

Noting Melville's apparent linking of Babo with Iago, the villain of Shakespeare's *Othello* (who, like Babo, refuses to speak a word after he is convicted) and observing Melville's initial characterization of Delano as failing to appreciate the human capacity for "malign evil" (p. 47), the earliest interpreters of "Benito Cereno" saw the story as focusing primarily on that capacity. They viewed Babo and his black compatriots as Melville's symbols of human violence and cruelty, Cereno as a symbol of moral awareness, and Delano as a symbol of moral ignorance. This reading prompted criticism of the story in some quarters, as Melville was accused of manifesting an inattention to the moral complexities of his own literary materials when he ignored the fact that the "evil" Babo was the leader of slaves understandably seeking to obtain their freedom. Melville also was accused of showing a disturbing disregard for the topicality of his materials when, in a tale about slavery, he failed to treat the issue of most importance to Americans in 1855.

Later critics have clearly demonstrated, however, that in writing "Benito Cereno," Melville was neither ignoring moral complications nor evading contemporary issues. Though his tale underscores human depravity, it cites slavery as a key illustration, focusing as well on mid-century theories of America's "Manifest Destiny." Moreover, its emphasis on the human capacity for evil is itself a direct response to contemporary developments in American intellectual history.

"BENITO CERENO" AND SLAVERY

Melville's early mention of the *San Dominick*'s stern piece, "intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon" (p. 49), and later notation that the ship's original figurehead was an image of Christopher Columbus (details missing from his source) transform Cereno's vessel into a symbol of the Spanish Empire in the New World. They also remind readers that slavery was introduced into the Western Hemisphere by Columbus, acting for Spain. Melville's many references to Catholicism (including his early comparison of the figures seen moving on the *San Dominick* to the "Black Friars" [p. 48] of the Dominican order) similarly underscore

the role of both the Catholic Church and the Dominicans in sponsoring slavery in the New World. Finally, Melville's nearby comparison of Benito Cereno to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V invokes the Spanish monarch who, at the behest of the church, first approved the importation of African slaves into the Western Hemisphere.

Yet Melville does more in "Benito Cereno" than link the *San Dominick* and its captain to Spain's imperialism and sponsorship of slavery. He also reminds his readers that Spain's once mighty empire had been reduced to pitiful fragments by 1855. Near the outset of his story Melville calls attention to the *San Dominick*'s tattered tops and moldering forecastle, assigning the vessel to the class of "superseded Acapulco treasure-ships, or retired frigates of the Spanish king's navy, which . . . under a decline of masters, preserved signs of former state" (p. 48). Moreover, by comparing the "manner" of the "tottering" Benito Cereno to that of Charles V, "just previous to the anchoritish retirement of that monarch from the throne" (p. 53)nd thus reminding one that Charles eventually retired from his monarchical duties "broken in health and spirits" (Stirling, p. 80; noted in Franklin, "Apparent Symbol")elville makes Cereno a further symbol of a declining Spanish Empire. By way of his plot, Melville also reminds one that Spain's empire had declined largely because of a series of violent slave and anticolonial revolutions. Melville changed the name of Cereno's vessel to the *San Dominick* to invoke not merely the Dominican sponsors of slavery but also the violent slave revolt that occurred on the island of Santo Domingo in the late eighteenth century. He also backdated Delano's adventure to the 1790s, the years in which this revolt occurred, to make the Santo Domingo allusion more plain.

Having recalled the history of slave revolt in the Spanish territories, Melville goes on to underscore the potential for further rebellion, particularly in the United States. Melville's recognition that the problem of slavery was not limited to the Spanish territories is clear from the American Delano's offer to buy Babo from Cerenond from the fact that, when Babo jumps into Delano's boat at the end of the story, it is Delano who, in attempting to thwart Babo's purposes, "grind[s] the prostrate negro" (p. 99). Equally telling is Delano's confidence in the cheerful servility of slaves, a linchpin of the South's rationale for maintaining slavery. Melville's story clearly conveys his opinion that, like the Spanish variety, American slavery was an evil that liberty-loving human beings could be expected to resist.

To be sure, the blacks on the *San Dominick* commit violent acts. But Melville attributes these to the repressive bonds and brutalizing effects of slavery. Noting Melville's linking of Babo with Iago, one early critic insisted that the blacks on the *San Dominick* manifest a "motiveless malignity." Yet the deposition with which "Benito Cereno" ends states plainly that they decided to kill their owner Alexandro Aranda (who was onboard the vessel) and the other Spaniards so as to improve their chances of obtaining "liberty" in Africa (p. 106). Moreover, by reversing the normal dynamics of slavery, by making Babo in effect the merciless black "master" of the white Cereno, Melville highlights the potential for violence in the master-slave relationship, regardless of who is master and who slave. The tableau on the stern piece of the *San Dominick* underscores this point by portraying a "dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the neck of a prostrate figure, likewise masked" (p. 49). To be sure, Melville portrays Babo as amply "malign" and his fellow blacks as quite vindictive. Yet these depictions were meant to underscore for all Americans, including both southern slaveholders and northern liberals, the fact that slavery produced violence, not good-humored loyalty. In "Benito Cereno," Melville challenges both the happy image of slavery promoted by certain of its apologists and the docile image of slaves promoted by certain of its opponents. Through his account of Babo's masquerade, he characterizes the "contentment" of slaves as a charade, a veneer overlaying violence.

Some of Melville's critics have suggested that his emphasis on Aranda's relaxed policy toward his slaves (he allowed them to sleep on deck without fetters, believing they were "tractable" [p. 104]) and their brutal reaction to that policy might have encouraged southern slaveholders to view blacks as innately violent and to intensify their oppression of them. Yet Melville would hardly have endorsed such a response to his story, since he clearly sought in "Benito Cereno" not to portray blacks as violent by nature but to depict the violence induced by slavery in the enslavers and enslaved of any race. In his allegorical work *Mardi* (1849), Melville

characterized slavery as "a blot, foul as the crater-pool of hell" and predicted that, because of slavery, the southern savannas might one day "prove battle-fields" (pp. 533, 534). His views had obviously not changed when he wrote "Benito Cereno" in the summer of 1854. The blacks on the *San Dominick* are not portrayed as either sympathetic victims or noble freedom fighters. They are portrayed as the merciless perpetrators of heinous acts. Yet, speaking for Melville, Delano accurately observes at one point that slavery "breeds ugly passions in man" (p. 88). If Babo and his fellows are violent, slavery is to blame. If southern slaveholders were to intensify slavery, even more violence would result.

In the final conversation of "Benito Cereno," Cereno, having become all too aware of the black capacity for violence, attributes his gloom to "the negro." Melville, however, encourages one to look beyond the black violence on both Santo Domingo and the *San Dominick* to its source: the unnatural constraints of slavery. At the end of "Benito Cereno," Babo may be dead and his rebellion crushed, but his severed head continues to look sternly toward the graves of Aranda and Cereno. Melville's point is inescapable. So long as slavery exists, the potential for violence remains.

"BENITO CERENO" AND MANIFEST DESTINY

Besides grappling with the slavery question, Melville's tale also carefully treats the issue of Manifest Destinyarticularly mid-nineteenth-century arguments for American intervention in Latin America, which contrasted the energy, libertarianism, and efficiency of Americans with the supposed weakness, despotism, and disorderliness of the Spanish. "Cuba," an 1853 *Putnam's* article, insisted that Americans were "an enlightened, progressive race, the Spaniards the extreme reverse"; described America as a "powerful and prosperous country" and Spain as a "weak nation, tottering toward ruin"; characterized Cuba, the sole Spanish dependency left in the New World, as suffering under a "despotic and even brutal administration"; and insisted that annexation of Cuba would allow liberty-loving Americans to "assert political, religious, and commercial freedom" on the island (pp. 5, 10, 136).

In this memorable passage from "Benito Cereno," in which Babo deftly reminds Cereno of what will happen to him if he answers Delano's naive questions truthfully, Melville simultaneously underscores the violence inherent in the master-slave relationship, America's mimickry of an "inquisitorial" Spain, and the human capacity for viciousness. In a prefatory passage conveying Delano's attitude toward blacks and typifying the ironic strategy the author employs throughout "Benito Cereno," Melville presents a black stereotype that is directly challenged by the "barbarous" scene that follows. Missing from Delano's Narrative, *the scene is entirely Melville's creation:*

Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction. There is, too, a smooth tact about them in this employment, with a marvelous, noiseless, gliding briskness, not ungraceful in its way, singularly pleasing to behold, and still more so to be the manipulated subject of. And above all is the great gift of good humor. Not the mere grin or laugh is here meant. Those were unsuitable. But a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune. . . .

[Babo] searched among the razors, as for the sharpest, and having found it, gave it an additional edge by expertly stropping it. . . . He then made a gesture as if to begin, but midway stood suspended for an instant, one hand elevating the razor, the other professionally dabbling among the bubbling suds on the Spaniard's lank neck. Not unaffected by the close sight of the gleaming steel, Don Benito nervously shuddered. . . .

"Now, master," [Babo] said . . . , pressing the head gently further back into the crotch of the chair; "now master," and the steel glanced nigh the throat.

Again Don Benito faintly shuddered.

"You must not shake so, master.ee, Don Amasa, master always shakes when I shave him. And yet master knows I never yet have drawn blood, though it's true, if master will shake so, I may some of these times. . . . And now, Don Amasa, please go on with your talk about the gale, and all that, master can hear, and between times master can answer."

"Ah, yes, these gales," said Captain Delano; "but the more I think of your voyage, Don Benito, the more I wonder, not at the gales, terrible as they must have been, but at the disastrous interval following them. For here, by your account, have you been these two months and more getting from Cape Horn to St. Maria, a distance which I myself, with a good wind, have sailed in a few days. True, you had calms, and long ones, but to be becalmed for two months, that is, at least, unusual. Why, Don Benito, had almost any other gentleman told me such a story, I should have been half disposed to a little incredulity."

Here an involuntary expression came over the Spaniard . . . , and whether it was the start he gave or a sudden gawky roll of the hull in the calm, or a momentary unsteadiness of the servant's hand; however it was, just then the razor drew blood.

Melville, "Benito Cereno," pp. 836.

Melville's story provides a brilliant critique of such ideas. Amasa Delano, Melville's representative American, complains about the "noisy confusion" (p. 54) aboard the *San Dominick,* attributing this confusion to Cereno's impotence as a commander. Soon after, he also develops a plan to take control of the vessel, thus mirroring the thinking of expansionist Americans eager to replace a weakened Spain in the Caribbean. Yet Melville questions the motives of his "liberty-loving" contemporaries by characterizing American expansionism as mercenary. The author notes that Delano's sailors are persuaded to take the *San Dominick* by the promise of material reward. He also renamed Delano's ship the *Bachelor's Delight* after the ship of a famous English buccaneer and christened Delano's boat *Rover* so as to characterize Manifest Destiny as a kind of piracy. Meanwhile Delano's offer to buy Babo midway through the story underscores the nonlibertarian aspect of American expansionism, which was promoted with special energy by southerners eager to expand American slavery to the south.

By thus negatively characterizing Manifest Destiny, Melville sought, more broadly, to invalidate the distinction, crucial to American expansionists, between American expansionism and the colonialism of Spain. The author of "Annexation," another *Putnam's* article, distinguished American expansionism from "conquest," contrasting the "open, generous, equitable international policy" of the United States (p. 184) with the "sinister and iniquitous proceedings" of European states (p. 191). Delano can cheerfully plot to take over the *San Dominick* because he similarly believes there is a significant "difference" between "the idea of Don Benito's darkly pre-ordaining Captain Delano's fate, and Captain Delano's lightly arranging Don Benito's" (p. 70). Yet Melville's emphasis on Delano's blithe imperialism suggests that, in planning to invade Cuba and take control of the rest of Latin America, America was simply taking over where Spain had left off.

Melville's Catholic imagery may have been another way of emphasizing this point. In the mid-1850s Americans were particularly fearful of Catholicism, as the victories of the Know Nothing Party in 1854 and 1855 demonstrated. Moreover, when envisioning Catholicism, Americans tended to focus on the Spanish Inquisition, which typified for many the bigotry and authoritarianism of "popery." Yet in one of the most powerful scenes in "Benito Cereno," a scene replete with inquisitorial images in which Babo shaves Cereno, Delano actually functions as the inquisitor, pumping Cereno for information. He has in fact been "inquiring" all day long, attempting to distinguish good from evil on the *San Dominick.* Yet his biases have caused him to be as unreliable a judge of these matters as the Spanish inquisitors were thought to be. In particular, his brand of paternalistic white racism has wrongly persuaded him that Babo's blacks are too docile to pose a threat, while national prejudice has made him wrongly suspect the "dark Spaniard" Cereno. A blind and biased inquisitor, Delano is Melville's ingenious way of suggesting that at a time when Americans were especially

critical of Spanish Catholicism, they themselves were becoming involved not merely in an imperialist enterprise but in a dogmatic crusade.

In "Benito Cereno" Melville also suggests that both would be unsuccessful. When the confused Delano is thrown a mysterious knot by a Spanish sailor said to resemble "an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon" (p. 76), he is implicitly linked with Alexander the Great, who visited the temple of Ammon at the beginning of his military career and, finding there the Gordian knot, believed to be unravelable only by the one who would conquer Asia, simply cut the knot and marched off to his first series of conquests. Unable to unravel his own knot, Delano simply hands it to an elderly Negro, who drops it overboard. Clearly suggesting that Delano is no Alexander, the episode also suggests that Americans were far less likely than Alexander to successfully establish an empire. Delano believes that, as an energetic American, he can succeed where the "weak" Cereno has failed. But Melville calls Delano's confidence into question by comparing Cereno to "an invalid courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague" (p. 58), thus invoking an example of Anglo-Saxon weakness. Delano eventually realizes that Cereno's weakness has resulted mainly from his horrifying experiences and the stresses he has undergone for many weeks. And once America embarked on its own imperialist venture, it might well find itself similarly exhausted.

Delano also believes that, as a good-hearted American, he is under the protection of "some one above" (p. 77). So did many Americans feel that a providentially blessed America would succeed where Spanish Catholics had failed. Yet in "Benito Cereno," Melville calls such confidence into question by portraying as unfounded the similar confidence of Spain. The drowned Juan Robles, who dies "making acts of contrition" (p. 107), and the dead Don Joaquin (accidentally killed by Delano's Americans), who intended to present a jewel to "our Lady of Mercy in Lima" to "attest his gratitude . . . for the safe conclusion of his . . . voyage from Spain" (p. 113), seem to have been forsaken by their popish divinities. And Melville seems to have felt that, however blessed Americans might feel in 1855, their confidence in a divine sanction for American expansionism might well prove one day to have been misplaced.

Near the end of "Benito Cereno," Melville notes that Babo chalked the saying "Follow your leader" below the bones of the dead Aranda, lashed to the prow of the *San Dominick,* as a warning to the surviving Spanish sailors (p. 99). "Follow your leader," whisper these bones to the American sailors who invade the *San Dominick.* "Follow your leader!" shouts Delano's mate in reply (p. 102). By way of such details, Melville not only underscores the imperialist resemblance between America and Spain but also suggests that the destiny that seemed most "manifest" for America was eventually to join with Spain in the non-select company of failed colonial powers.

"BENITO CERENO" AND HUMAN DEPRAVITY

If the earliest critics of Melville's story were wrong to imply that, in writing it, he showed little interest in such contemporary issues as slavery and Manifest Destiny, they were right to suggest that he had a broader concern with human depravity. Moreover, this concern too stemmed from his awareness of contemporary American thinking.

Delano's oft-expressed (and obviously misguided) confidence in the "docility" (pp. 63, 84, 92), "cheerfulness" (p. 83), and "affection" (pp. 51, 52) of blacks is likely meant to represent, for instance, the optimistic view of certain northern abolitionists, including Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811896), who argued in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) that freeing slaves could not possibly induce violence since blacks were by nature so peaceful. Melville found many proofs to the contrary in Delano's *Narrative.* Yet in writing "Benito Cereno" he actually heightened the savagery of Babo's blacks, adding to the story, for example, the grim figurehead of Aranda's bones. By altering the date of Delano's adventure and changing the name of Cereno's vessel to the *San Dominick,* he also invoked a specific historical example of black violence. Finally, he also attributes to Delano's character a number of observations about black docility that are directly challenged by specific

disclosures in Cereno's deposition. Whereas Delano praises the Negro's abilities as "body-servant," for example (p. 52), the deposition notes that José, Aranda's personal attendant, brutally stabbed his master after the latter had been dragged to the deck. And whereas Melville, adopting Delano's perspective, describes blacks as "natural valets and hair-dressers" (p. 83), his shaving scene utterly demolishes that notion.

Melville emphasized the violence of Aranda's blacks not merely, then, to demonstrate the evil effects of slavery but also to counter the notion that blacks were less violent than other human beings. He did not, however, wish to portray them as more violent. In an important conversation with Cereno, Delano points to the "hybrid" Francesco, Cereno's mulatto steward, as likely proof that the mixing of white and black "bloods" produces a product superior to the "full-blooded" black (p. 88). Delano's remark and Melville's nearby references to both a "Nubian sculptor finishing off a white statue-head" (p. 87) and the "sculptured porters of black marble guarding the porches of Egyptian tombs" (p. 92) represent precise allusions to Josiah Nott (1804873) and George Gliddon's (1809857) *Types of Mankind,* a massive ethnological compendium published in 1854. Nott was a southerner determined to prove that the mental and moral deficiencies of the Negro could be demonstrated scientifically; Gliddon was a retired Egyptologist eager to buttress Nott's arguments by highlighting the antiquity of racial differences. Gliddon included reproductions of numerous Egyptian and Nubian paintings and sculptures; Nott insisted that "even a small trace of white blood in the negro improves him in . . . morality" (p. 68).

In "Benito Cereno" one later learns, however, that Francesco was no more moral than the "full-blooded" Babo. He was in fact a ringleader of revolt and a willing follower of Babo's brutal lead. Moreover, if Francesco's behavior calls Nott's theory of white moral superiority into question, so does the behavior of Cereno's Spaniards following the retaking of the *San Dominick.* Melville notes in the deposition that during the night following the recapture, these sailors brutally killed several Negroes who were "shackled to the ring-bolts on deck" (p. 114). The behavior of Delano's American sailors is no less brutal, for a number of Babo's blacks are "mangled" during the recapture, when the "sealing-spears and cutlasses" of the Americans cross the "hatchets and hand-spikes of their foes" (p. 102). Clearly if Babo's blacks are guilty of viciousness, both the Spanish and the American whites are all too willing to "follow their lead."

Melville further emphasizes the universal human capacity for violence by way of Delano's observation that the black women on the *San Dominick* manifest "pure tenderness and love" (p. 73)nd his accompanying recollection of the African explorer John Ledyard's high opinion of female morality. Ledyard's words were these: "Among all nations, . . . women . . . are the same kind, civil, obliging, humane, tender beings," "performing more good actions than [men]" ("American Travelers," p. 565). In the deposition, Cereno notes, however, that the black women on the *San Dominick* were "satisfied at the death of their master, Don Alexandro; that, had the negroes not restrained them, they would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing, the Spaniards slain by command of the negro Babo" (p. 112). Thus does Melville suggest that brutality is not foreign to any portion of humanity.

Melville made this point partly in response to both the pre-Darwinian evolutionists and their orthodox Christian opponents, who regularly emphasized the human moral capacity that was thought to clearly distinguish human beings from animals. The *Putnam's* reviewer of *Types of Mankind* insisted that "a man is a man all the world over, and nowhere a monkey or a hippopotamus." For this writer, man was "inconvertably separated from every other organism, by . . . his mind and his heart, which place[d] him . . . at the head of creation" ("Is Man One or Many?" pp. 5, 14). Yet by way of his emphasis on a universal human depravity, combined with his persistent use of animal imagery in describing human behavioris description, for example, of Negro women as "leopardesses," of Babo as "snakishly writhing up" from the bottom of Delano's boat, and of Delano's American marauders as "submerged sword-fish" menacing "shoals of black-fish" (pp. 73, 99, 102)elville implies that the gulf between men and beasts is far from vast.

By underscoring a general human depravity, he also responded to another issue in contemporary American thought. Fearing that Cereno and Babo might be conspiring against him, Delano comforts himself by asking, "Who ever heard of a white . . . so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes?" (p. 75). Melville apparently realized that *Types of Mankind* was one of many contributions to a mid-century argument regarding the "unity" of the human race. The English ethnologist James Prichard had portrayed the race as a single "species" in several books in the 1840s; he was opposed by Robert Knox in *The Races of Men,* published in 1850, and by Nott and Gliddon, who meant by "types" the various species into which humankind was divided. Readers of "Benito Cereno" had also seen two Scripture-based defenses of human unityIs Man One or Many?" and "Are All Men Descended from Adam?"n the *Putnam's* numbers for July 1854 and January 1855. Both articles suggested that human beings were united by a spiritual capacity denied to lesser creatures.

In "Benito Cereno," Melville unenthusiastically aligned himself with the "unity" party by suggesting that humankind was undeniably "one"n its disturbing capacity for "malign evil." In the conversation with which Melville's story ends, Delano blithely encourages Cereno to "forget" his horrifying experiences (p. 116), while Cereno tersely insists that he cannot. Clearly Melville wanted his readers not to forget the multiple brutalities depicted in "Benito Cereno": of slavery, of slave revolt, of men and women, blacks and whites, Spaniards and Americans. He was obviously aware that an overly intimate acquaintance with human depravity could be destructive of life and hopend that an unawareness of this trait could help one survive. Cereno dies of his experience while Delano survives his, partly because of his ability to ignore its gloomy implications. But an author who throughout his career endorsed the facing of grim realities clearly preferred the more informed perspective of Cereno.

See also Battle-Pieces; The Confidence-Man; Manifest Destiny; *Moby-Dick;* Nautical Literature; Slave Rebellions; Slavery; *Typee*

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