

Benito Cereno Lecture

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Prologue

Good evening, and welcome especially to all of the visiting parents tonight. As a prologue to this lecture, I thought I would open with a short anecdote from my own wandering life. In my first job out of college, I took a job as a junior high school English and science teacher at a Catholic school in the poorest neighborhood in Dallas. Like a well-meaning ship's captain, I thought that I might venture out to foreign territory and extend a helping hand to my mainly Spanish-speaking neighbors. It will probably be no surprise to learn that the adventure was somewhat disastrous at first. I very much misread the situation on board and my own capabilities to handle the situation. Among other things that contributed to my misreading were my own good intentions. My own ideologies, my own stereotypes, my own well-meaning theories about life very much got in the way. Like one of the main characters in our story, Amaso Delano, I thought that my congenial attitude could always save the day. After all, I was the noble one who was offering his hand to those less fortunate than himself. As I quickly learned, a hospitable approach was far from enough. My classroom at times degenerated into chaos and my usually calm self degenerated into bouts of screaming and breaking rulers across desks. Clearly something would have to change.

Over time, I began to decipher the Spanish curse words scrawled across the board and to uncover my own presuppositions about race and class and how one overcomes odds. Yet I reached a point, in which I was recurrently ill, I was going through far too many rulers, and I found myself at an impasse with how to handle students who had struggles at home that I could not even imagine. In one particularly messy family, the grandmother called me before the Parish Council because I had a tendency, in a school that was 85% Hispanic to send Hispanic

students, including her grandson, to detention. The Council threw out the complaint, but I was devastated by the implication that I might be a racist. Shortly thereafter I witnessed a quite disturbing moment in which I entered my classroom to find my students hurling extremely offensive insults at the black students outside, walking to the nearby public school. I broke down at that instant and in some kind of cataclysm of inspiration launched into an impassioned speech for a charitable approach to one another, no matter our race or ethnicity. My class sat in stunned silence, but something odd and, in some ways inexplicable, happened. In the words of Melville, the “scales dropped from [my] eyes” and, for an instant, I actually saw the humans before me as suffering souls dealing with struggles beyond my comprehension.

The next day in all of my classes we had dramatic group discussions of race and respecting one another. I forbade certain forms of speech. I instituted a stricter routine. I began to read the situations before me very differently. Believe it or not, the effect was dramatic and enduring. The Spanish slang and racial slurs ceased. Behavior improved markedly. In a classroom where previously mutiny had always seemed a possibility, captain and crew reached some kind of mutual understanding. Looking back on that year, I still do not feel like I really understand what it must be like to grow up as a non-white person in inner city Dallas, but I did learn to read my own life and my own prejudices differently and to see the possibility of human connection and communication beyond the paralysis of class and race.

I. Introduction

Herman Melville published the novella “Benito Cereno” in *Putnam’s Monthly* in the fall of 1855. The story is based on an actual slave revolt on a Spanish merchant ship called the *Tyral* in 1805, but Melville changed the name of the ship to the *San Dominick* and the date of the events onboard to 1799. This lecture will examine “Benito Cereno” as a subtle construction of Melville’s design that challenges the way we read both the world and the written word before us.

The novella places on trial a number of preconceptions about the ways that we judge others and, in things said and unsaid, ultimately explores the limits of all communication. My basic claim is that Melville places before the reader a difficult story and asks us to examine the ways in which we misread a situation and ultimately one another. He challenges us to admit our own prejudices and our own ignorance and, in so doing, to open up the possibility for genuine recognition of one another as suffering beings.

The word “suffering” appears at least twenty times in the novella, alongside words like distress and affliction, applied to all on board the Spanish ship. When the American captain first boards the ship, he is greeted with tales of woe: “[I]n one language, and as with one voice, all poured out a common tale of suffering” (Melville, p. 147). Dolorous words follow the Spanish captain in particular, as he is labeled “disabled” or “afflicted” or called an “invalid” throughout the story. Meanwhile, the narrator associates the American visitor with more benign adjectives like “humane” and “benevolent” and calls him full of “charity” and “compassion.” And yet, this well-meaning character disastrously misses the actual source of the suffering before him, and, on reflection, also causes further hardship for the Spaniard. How does such a situation unfold?

Toward the end of “Benito Cereno,” Melville includes the transcript of a deposition that the Spanish court in Lima, Peru had undertaken in response to the events on the San Dominick. He closes the transcript with the following, “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 today” (Melville, p. 223). At this point, most mesmerized readers are asking themselves: the key to what; what lock has been flung open? (Kaplan 1, p. 311)

Pondering a puzzle that is difficult to read, one then immediately thinks about Melville as a writer, and specifically as a writer of fiction. As such, he seems increasingly preoccupied with the impediments, within us and without, that stymie our ability to communicate the most important things to one another. One impediment to reading Melville's writing might be our tendency to make him something he was not. He was neither a political columnist nor the founder of a school of literary criticism nor a religious activist nor simply a chronicler for the Northeastern fishing and whaling industry. He was, and is for us, a storyteller of the most profound sort, who once declared, "It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie" (Melville, *The Confidence Man*, quoted in Kavanagh, p. 352). The world for us as readers in this enigmatic tale is fraught with the very obstacles to communication that Melville hopes to illuminate. This investigation will unfold with a closer look at each of the three main characters in the novella--the American Amaso Delano, the Spaniard Benito Cereno, and the African Babo--and close with a look at Melville's presence as a writer, who through his perplexing narrator, places these characters before us.

But first, for those of you who have not read the story, or for those seniors who will succumb to the temptations of prank night next spring, here is a short summary. Warning, as they say, spoiler alert. The centerpiece of the story is an aborted slave rebellion on a Spanish merchant ship called the San Dominick in 1799. Its narrative structure, however, leaves the reader in the dark about the rebellion, until late in the novella. Instead, our third person narrator follows the naïve American ship captain, Amaso Delano, who encounters the flailing Spanish ship as it approaches a South American port looking for supplies. Delano boards the ailing ship alone. For Delano's benefit, the Spanish captain Benito Cereno and his much-reduced crew pretend that they are still ruling the ship, while in fact the leader of the revolt, a physically small but incredibly devious man named Babo, is actually pulling the strings behind the scenes. Delano completely falls for the act, finding Cereno's somewhat odd behavior rude and insulting and at times suspecting the Spaniard of plotting to take his own ship. Only a desperate

leap by Cereno onto Delano's departing ship makes Delano realize what is happening. The Spanish captain vaults onto the American ship and calls out frantically, followed immediately by a frenzied Babo. Delano at first thinks Cereno is attacking, but seeing a dagger in Babo's hand, recognizes in an instant that the black man is after Cereno and disarms the rebel. The Americans promptly take the Spanish ship by sheer force. The story then includes the aforementioned deposition, mainly as reported by Cereno at the trial, followed by a strange retrospective review of the last conversation between the two captains before they separated.

II. Amaso Delano

Let's first take a look at the American captain, who one might think would be a hero of this story. The novella itself seems to challenge us to make judgments about Delano. In our initial introduction to the commander from Massachusetts, we meet a man surprised to see, through the gray before him, an odd vessel displaying no flags or colors:

Considering the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot, and the sort of stories at that day associated with those seas, Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms anyway involving the imputation of malign evil in man. Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine" (Melville, pp. 144-145).

From the very opening page of the tale, the good American is up for review.

This challenge, reflected in the overall structure of the tale, highlights the ways in which the entire story serves as a trial. In this one passage, the "wise" are left to determine matters of trust, intellect, and benevolence and how one detects the "malign evil" in humanity. Having finished the story, the reader likely has formed an opinion of Delano's quickness and probably would agree that the story satirizes Delano, and by extension other well-meaning Americans like him. But

what exactly is satirized here (Kaplan 2, p. 17, Putzel, pp. 195-196)? Delano exhibits an inability to see Babo's malignity, but he also misses Babo's dignity. I would like to argue that Melville's emphasis on the barriers to communication and the ways in which we misjudge one another become problems because they do not allow us to truly see one another. We miss each other's humanity.

The story, nonetheless, makes Delano's mistakes and missteps to some extent understandable. He misreads the situation on the San Dominick, in large part, because it is a difficult situation to read. At any moment, it is not clear who is playing what role at what time. As readers of a story about Delano, we also have a difficult time assessing his actions. For those of you who have had me as a tutor and who have made the mistake of the excessive use of the parenthetical, this next comment might surprise you. Herman Melville is very aware of the power of parentheses. In four rather odd places in the story, he attempts to clarify the pronoun "he" with the parenthetical (Captain Delano). Sure, when one risks having an unclear referent for your pronoun, another favorite grading topic of mine, it is good to offer your readers some kind of indication. Yet, in these passages, the parentheses have an intriguing effect. They prompt the reader to consider that the pronoun referent is not clear, and perhaps the meaning of the sentence could apply to more than one of the characters. Melville's use of parentheses helps to cleverly highlight how difficult it is to tell whom we are talking about in many of these situations.

To just look at one example, early on in the story, Delano has decided to ask Captain Cereno for more details about the struggles on the San Dominick: The best account would, doubtless, be given by the captain. Yet at first the visitor was loath to ask it, unwilling to provoke some distant rebuff. But, plucking up courage, he at last accosted Don Benito, renewing the expression of his benevolent interest, adding that he (Captain Delano) but know the particulars of the ship's misfortunes, he would, perhaps be better able in the end to relieve them. (Melville, p. 153).

Note first, the assumption that a captain would doubtless give the best account of the situation and second, the unclear status of the person—Cereno or Delano—who would best be able to relieve the ship's misfortunes.

This simple parenthetical hints at one of the major obstacles to effective reading and communication that Melville highlights in this story. As observers of a situation, we tend to evaluate others within certain categories related to their status as either masters or servants. The words master, slave, captain, and servant appear even more frequently than the words indicating suffering in this tale. Delano, in particular, focuses on Cereno as a captain, constantly evaluating the Spaniard's ability as a captain and finding it wanting. This ongoing assessment of Cereno in the category of both master and invalid, in association with Delano's evaluation of the Negroes as servants, appears to blind the American to what is actually going on. He is so fixated on his own status as a captain, that he can only imagine himself as parenthetically standing in Cereno's place as a captain. He literally cannot see Cereno as someone forced to be a servant.

This inability to see the state of forced servitude, and the suffering that such a state entails, of course applies to the blacks on board as well. Perhaps the most striking insight into Delano's mindset occurs in a passage in which the narrator tells us how Delano sees his relationship with the Negro. It begins with the narrator musing about the "good humor" of the Negro combined with "the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind" (Melville, pp. 186-187). It continues:

But if there be that in the Negro which exempts him from the inflicted sourness of the morbid or cynical mind, how in his most prepossessing aspects, must he appear to a benevolent one? When at ease with respect to exterior things, Captain Delano's nature was not only benign but familiarly and humorously so. At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door watching some free man of color at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor, invariably he was on chatty and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact,

like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men took to Newfoundland dogs. (Melville, p. 187)

To me, this passage can only be read ironically. It turns out, as the satire unfolds, that Delano is in mortal danger because he sees blacks as “dogs”, and Babo’s mind is as “limited” as Delano’s is “benevolent.”

Another illustration of Delano’s purportedly benevolent but quite possibly limited mind lies in the way he reads the behavior of his Spanish counterpart. At one point, Delano’s paranoia about a plot against him and his own ship reaches its peak. Because he cannot even imagine black slaves leading a revolt, he targets all of his suspicion at Cereno. Because, in his mind, the categories of master and slave are also conflated with racial categories, he completely misses the agonized suffering of his host. He wonders if the strange behaviors of the other whites on board are because those whites are trying to warn him about some kind of plot of Cereno’s:

The whites . . . by nature, were the shrewder race . . . But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be in any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguings in against it with Negroes? (Melville, p. 177)

In this passage, we see Delano’s megalomania, his paranoia and the way in which his condescending racism causes him to misconstrue all of the evidence (Kavanagh, p. 364). We also get a glimpse of the way in which Melville works on us as readers. While reading this passage, we tend to get caught up in our own judgments of Delano and the unbelievable things just said. We might never know if Melville himself is such a renegade as to be in league with the Negroes, but we are shocked to find such a passage come out of the mind of a benevolent Northern liberal. Such shock seems very purposeful.

In another striking moment, a massive former African king, draped in a padlock and chains, appears before Cereno, Babo, and Delano. After prompting

by Babo, Cereno tells Delano that the large black man before them, named Atufal, comes before him every two hours, like a human clock. Cereno, in turn, awaits for Atufal to declare allegiance to the Spaniard's authority: "'Answer,' said Don Benito, still averting his glance 'say but the one word, pardon, and your chains shall be off.' Upon this, the black slowly raising both arms, let them lifelessly fall, his links clanking, his head bowed; as much as to say, 'No, I am content'" (Melville, p. 162). Delano buys the story wholesale, even thinking ill of the apparently capricious Spaniard who at times appears terribly weak and at other times seems downright tyrannical. Shortly thereafter, Delano, who we are told is "a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony" (Melville, p. 163), unwittingly delivers one of the more ironic, almost ridiculous lines in the tale, when he summarizes the scene, "So, Don Benito--padlock and key-- significant symbols truly" (Melville, p. 163). The narrator lets us know that Delano thinks he is making a profound statement on masters and slaves, but we later come to know that, ironically, the entire situation had been a fiction. Atufal was brought before Cereno to remind the Spaniard who was really in control. Once again, a key and a lock are presented that, like the deposition, hint at puzzles very difficult to pin down.

Delano remains puzzled because he sees the Negro in every possible stereotype available to him except for the way the individuals before him actually are. In just one of numerous examples, he catches a glimpse of a sleeping black woman on the upper deck, near the side of the ship:

His attention had been drawn to a slumbering Negress, partly disclosed through the lacework of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, crosswise with its dam's; its hands, like two paws, clambering upon her; its mouth and nose ineffectually rooting to get at the mark; and meantime giving a vexatious half-grunt, blending with the composed snore of the Negress. (Melville, pp. 174-175).

Delano's preoccupation with the Negresses as primitives nursing their children stands in striking contrast to their later revelation in the deposition as encouraging torture through their melancholy singing (Feltenstein, p. 254).

Ultimately, Delano cannot see the Negro in anything but a passive role. Whether choosing to see a devoted servant, a victimized savage or an exotic primitive, Delano cannot possibly see the Negro as a true rebel (Yellin, p. 685) nor as one forced to bear the most inhuman suffering. Just to offer one more example:

There is something in the Negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person. Most Negroes are natural valets and hairdressers, taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with 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. (Melville, p. 186)

He cannot even conceive of the Negro as a tormented being intelligent, clever and deceptive enough to pull off both a slave revolt and an elaborate cover-up. The pleasant, incapable of irony and satire, well-meaning, hard charging, man-of-action, beacon-for-the-world, good old Protestant American may not be up to the task before him, especially if that task involves the ugliness of the American sin of slavery.

III. Benito Cereno

So does the well-mannered, well-dressed, aristocratic, Old World, Catholic representative of the Empire that once ruled, at least on paper, more of the earth's surface than any other people in human history fare much better? Not really. The Spanish captain, and the namesake of the story, our hero/antihero Benito Cereno also struggles tremendously. His steps and missteps are also on trial. At least initially, in one very fundamental way, he does not differ at all from

Delano: he also misreads the Negroes on board his ship. He follows the suggestion of his friend, the slave-owner Aranda, who said that the slaves were so docile that they did not need chains. Aranda later is killed by those rebelling slaves and his bones placed on display on the bow of the ship, underneath which every Spanish soldier had to swear allegiance to the slaves or meet the punishment to “follow your leader” (Melville, p. 214).

Cereno, nevertheless, suffers much more overtly than Delano, and his role as captain over a slave ship hangs over him in ways most terrifying, especially once we think back on the story after the revolt has been revealed and violently subdued. We now see his awkwardness and apparent rudeness as manifestations of terror. Truly, as Delano muses about Cereno at one point, “Ah this slavery breeds ugly passions in man. Poor fellow!” (Melville, p. 191).

Perhaps the most terrifying moment of all in the tale, especially in retrospect, is the infamous barber scene roughly in the middle of the novella. In some ways, the scene is set up to remind the reader of the Spanish Inquisition. A Spaniard, named Benito, which in Spanish can mean Benedictine, on board a ship that looks like “a whitewashed monastery,” “nothing less than a shipload of monks” with “Black Friars pacing the cloisters” (Melville, p. 146) lives and sleeps in a room set up like the “cluttered hall of some eccentric bachelor squire in the country” (Melville, p. 185). At one side “was a claw-footed old table lashed to the deck, a thumbed missal on it, and over it, a small, meager crucifix attached to the bulkhead.” In the center, “[t]here were also two long, sharp-ribbed settees of Malacca cane, black with age, and uncomfortable to look at as inquisitor’s racks, with a large, misshapen armchair, which, furnished with a rude barber’s crotch at the back, working with a screw, seemed some grotesque engine of torment” (Melville, p. 185). It is in this room that Babo invites Delano to chat with his “master,” while he, Babo, shaves Cereno as the Spaniard sits in the “engine of torment.” The ever-unsuspecting Delano accepts the invitation and proceeds to stand by, idiotically asking questions, while Babo wields a blade at the throat of Cereno.

The trembling Spanish captain tries to keep himself together and answer Delano's questions in a manner that will please his razor-brandishing "servant." As the questions proceed, Delano doubts certain details of Cereno's story and says so out loud. In response:

"An involuntary expression came over the Spaniard, similar to that just before on the deck, and whether it was the start he gave, or a sudden gawky role of the hull in the calm, or a momentary unsteadiness of the servant's hand, however it was, just then the razor drew blood, spots of which stained the creamy lather under the throat; immediately the black barber drew back his steel, and, remaining in his professional attitude, back to Captain Delano and face to Don Benito, held up the trickling razor, saying, with a sort of half humorous sorrow, "See, master--you shook so--here's Babo's first blood." (Melville, p. 189)

Especially in retrospect, hardly a more harrowing scene in American literature can be imagined.

Yet, like the parenthetical quotations mentioned early in this lecture, who or what exactly is on trial and who or what is acting as inquisitor are never quite clear. One might see the entire story as an inquisition-like trial of Cereno, with Babo as inquisitor. But given the ways in which Delano seems to be such a clueless bystander in this scene one wonders if Delano's behavior is not also on trial (Putzel, p. 204). You could argue that Delano is actually the main subject of Babo's trial, as the devious rebel leader gathers information on how much the visiting American does or does not realize about what has occurred on board the San Dominick. On the other hand, as the one asking the questions of the already tormented Cereno, Delano could be seen as a torturer, either wittingly or unwittingly, adding to the punishment of the trapped captain draped, maliciously by Babo, in the Spanish flag (pp. 58-59).

An author who can utilize these details in such a disturbing way intrigues me. The entire process of having a trial seems on trial, with all of the reader's expectations about who is good and who is evil up for grabs. As a reader, we become, at times the berated Spaniard, subject to questions we do not wish to

answer, at times the well-meaning American blindly asking hurtful questions, and at times the cunning African, gathering information while we let others do the questioning. And throughout it all, we might be so caught up in determining who is good and who is evil that we miss the suffering souls before us.

The original source material for “Benito Cereno,” discovered in 1928 by the scholar Harold Scudder, is a memoir by an actual New England mariner named Amaso Delano. In Delano’s original memoir, the only reference to shaving has to do with white brutality toward the end of the story. In his autobiographical account, Delano reports how he had stopped further brutality by his men as they were recapturing the *Tyrul*. He had stumbled upon a cabin in which whites had “shaved,” that is skinned, portions of the blacks’ backs and thighs (Leslie, p. 297). In “Benito Cereno,” placing the razor in Babo’s hand is another brilliant move on Melville’s part. The black man holds the blade, pretending to serve the white man, while another white man interrogates the purported master. The queasy angst that one gets when reading this scene, comes, in part, from the disorienting subversion of our expectations. We cannot even tell who is interrogating whom, who is serving whom, who is shaving whom.

The invention of this specific shaving scene by Melville perhaps stems from a more literary inspiration for the writer. In the second part of Cervantes’ novel, *Don Quixote*, a book that was very influential to Melville, the wayward knight and his squire are about to eat dinner at the palace of the Duke and Duchess. Maidservants of the household approach Don Quixote with a washing basin and decide to play a joke on their guest. They promptly proceed to lather up the beard and face of the gaunt lover of chivalric tales, letting him sit, covered in soapsuds for a while. In effect, they mock him by pretending to serve him. In order that the joke might go unnoticed, the Duke decides to play along with the servants’ prank and has them lather his beard as well. This episode, in which servants learn from the cruelty of their masters and invent cruelties of their own, also shows a host playing along with some theatrics invented by his underlings and mocking his guest along the way. The parallels with “Benito Cereno” are

intriguing, not the least of which are the ways we lose sight of the suffering before us.

Even in the midst of such powerful scenes, though, we do not get quite as much access to Cereno as a character as we get to Delano. We only see Cereno through the narrator, heavily influenced by the musings of Delano. We only hear from him on the boat in extremely constrained language, Babo always at his side. He only truly speaks for himself as recorded in the court deposition. Nonetheless, here the language of the deposition places limits on the type of communication possible. Cereno must speak the flat, emotionless language of a courtroom. We might hope that such language would be somehow more satisfying, somehow closer to “what actually happened,” but reading this deposition hardly leaves one fully satisfied. Recall the opening quotation of the talk. The deposition might provide some kind of key, but it is hard enough to find the lock. The only times we hear from Cereno in a more frank manner are during his desperate leap onto Delano’s boat and in the final conversation between him and Delano. We will discuss both of these moments a little later in the talk.

Given Cereno’s obscurity, we tend to make an assessment of him based on some kind of category in which we place him. Perhaps we see him as representing a faltering Spain, or maybe a Southern slaveholder. Whatever choices we make, Cereno’s place within the tale always remains a bit obscured. We as readers must make leaps of judgment to try and assess his character. As mentioned earlier, even at the deposition, where his testimony becomes the centerpiece, he must adopt a formal legal language, restricting his account to focus on events and timetables and numbers of the dead. His inner turmoil, his presumed agony at the loss of his friends, his struggle to come to terms with his loss of control, none of these can be conveyed. The only glimpse we get of this inner conflict is his refusal to identify Babo at the trial. For some silent reason, he cannot point to Babo as the culprit. Who is the culprit in his mind remains unsaid. Cereno’s most profound silence comes at the very end of the novella, when he meets his wordless end. Wasting away, he retires to a monastery

(Kavanagh, p. 376), presumably to sit in silence with his incommunicable suffering. At the end of this novella, speech seems futile, and we are only told, in enigmatic Melvillian fashion, that Cereno, “three months after being dismissed by the court . . . borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader” (Melville, p. 226).

IV. Babo

By far, nevertheless, the most obscure of the major characters in the novella is Babo. This section of the talk will be the shortest because there is the least amount with which to work. (Hang in there. We are more than halfway done.) In many ways, like Cereno, Babo is silent, and the reader is forced to make inferences about him as a character. He too meets his voiceless end. We can only read him as the artist behind the scenes and as the actor on stage, who plays the role of the docile servant that Delano so admires.

In order to try and see Babo a little more carefully, let us look at a couple pieces of evidence available to us in the tale. Only small gestures serve as a guide deeper into Babo, like his exchanging the skeleton of Aranda, his former slave master, for the image of Christopher Columbus on the forward bow (Franklin, p. 472). Here is a man fully aware of symbolism and the links between Columbus’ discovery of the Americas for Spain and the massive African slave trade that soon develops. Similarly, in the shaving scene recounted above, Babo’s playing on the stereotype of the loyal servant, while draping his “master” in the Spanish flag, reveals a man capable of the most profound irony and subversion. His contrast with Delano, the same Delano who called the black mind inferior, is remarkable. Recall the remark that Delano made earlier regarding Cereno: “Ah this slavery breeds ugly passions in man. Poor fellow!” (Melville, p. 191). Certainly, this comment applies to Cereno, as Delano apparently intended. Yet, it also applies more importantly to Babo (Welsh, p. 562). Man, black and white, is deeply flawed in Melville’s account. Slavery’s despicable shadow affects both master and slave. These moments, nonetheless, point toward a Babo who is affected by slavery but who acts in the most cunning and intriguing ways to overthrow his

oppressors. Such a portrayal, it seems to me, gives Babo a dignity that is missing in Delano's account.

Even through the silence surrounding Babo, Melville manages to highlight for the reader the humanity of a character, like all blacks in America at the time, not allowed to speak directly for himself. One of the ways in which Melville succeeds in this endeavor is in his escape of the traps presented by the normal categories available. Unlike many of us as readers, who tend to want to place people into easy-to-understand formulas, Melville creates a largely silent character who exploits the stereotype of the dutiful servant for an audience while crafting a completely different story behind the scenes. Melville does not replace the stereotype of the Negro as primitive for the stereotype of Negro as hero, as free spirit. He instead presents multiple stereotypes, usually through the eyes of Delano and lets readers make their own decisions (Simpson, p. 38). Babo materializes, with each new revelation, as a human being capable of complexity, intelligence and boldness, and, like many of us, as a silent sufferer.

One way in which we glimpse Babo through all of the stereotypes, through all of the masks, is as an artist. During the barber scene described above, Delano, for a little while, imagines that the entire interview before him is some piece of theater:

To Captain Delano's imagination, now again not wholly at rest, there was something so hollow in the Spaniard's manner, with apparently some reciprocal hollowness in the servant's dusky comment of silence, that the idea flashed across him that possibly master and man for some unknown purpose, were acting out, both in word and deed, nay, to the very tremor of Don Benito's limbs, some juggling play before him. (Melville, p. 190)

A little later on in that same scene, Delano entertains the possibility "that the Negro seemed a Nubian sculptor finishing off a white statue head" (Melville, p. 191). We realize in retrospect that he was controlling every aspect of the ship except "playing the pilot." He needs Cereno to pilot the ship, and with Delano's arrival, to act the part of commander. Even in his mastery over Cereno, though, Babo remains constrained by much larger forces. He controls everything but "the

state machinery and the uses of statecraft” (Leslie, p. 298). These massive forces are levied against Babo and his fellow black man. His lasting legacy, it comes out, is his role as schemer and storyteller.

Late in the novella, Cereno conveys how it had been to be a cast member in Babo’s theatrical story, “Again and again it was repeated how hard it had been to enact the part forced on the Spaniard by Babo” (Melville, p. 223). The characters in a story, in any story, are indeed subject to the forceful imposition of the story’s author. The two characters in Melville’s story, though, both meet their silent end, and in Melville’s closing to the novella, it is Babo whose silence is celebrated for its subtlety, not Cereno’s:

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 subtlety, 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. (Melville, p. 226)

As a reader, many possible reactions come to mind, but the image of Babo’s subtle head meeting the gaze of whites, whites, likely both relieved and scared, but who never see him as a human being, certainly lingers.

V. Herman Melville

Thinking of Babo as artist brings us to a consideration of the artist behind the story itself, Herman Melville. The parallels between the silent leader of the slave revolt and the silent author putting a story, a ship’s worth of stories, and a trial, including a deposition, before our eyes are striking. In this section of the talk, I would like to concentrate on three main devices that Melville uses to add to the subtlety of this story: 1) his playing with time and the reliance on retrospection, 2) his use of the deposition transcripts, and 3) his odd third person narrator.

Consider just one major change involving time that Melville makes to the tale: moving it from the date of the actual event, 1805, to 1799. By placing the tale in the 18th century, Melville associates it with one of the more momentous eras in human history. It reenters the century of great revolutions, of rising tensions between the New World and the Old, and the peak of the African slave trade (Kavanagh, p. 361).

In the midst of the novella, Melville makes numerous comments about the problem of time, especially as it relates to judging unfolding events. At the most dramatic juncture in the plot, when Cereno jumps onto Delano's boat and the slave rebellion is revealed, the narrator intones, "All this, with what proceeded and what followed, occurred with such involutions of rapidity that past, present, and future seemed one" (Melville, p. 203). Melville might have created a frustrating, baffling tale that readers experience in profoundly different ways, but he suggests that there are timeless moments in which truth can be revealed. He even says so explicitly in the critical instant in which Delano finally realizes that Babo is the criminal and not Cereno, when Delano sees the black man leap toward the Spaniard, dagger in hand: "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" (Melville, p. 204). In a story awash with references to grayness and ambiguity and miscommunication, Melville still offers flashes of insight into the most important things. Delano, for a moment, sees the long journey of torment that the voyage of the San Dominick has been.

One of Melville's most powerful moves in the construction of this story is moving the last conversation between Delano and Cereno to after the deposition. He announces the significance of this manipulation just before describing the conversation and just after completing the deposition and declaring it the "key" to the events on the San Dominick. He offers this prelude: "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 . . .” (Melville, p. 223). By playing with time in this manner, he disrupts the finality of the sentence uttered in the deposition. He also undercuts the ability of the deposition to serve as the final word on the matter. It may serve as the key, but to what remains unclear.

This final conversation itself underlines how ambiguous the scenario really is. The discussion closes with Delano attempting to get Cereno to move on, in good American fashion, and forget the recent past:

“But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.”

“Because they have no memory,” [Cereno] dejectedly replied; “because they are not human.” (Melville, p. 225)

Such a conversation, invented by Melville, heightens the contrast between the Spaniard and the American, and reveals how tenuous Delano’s hold on what has just happened might be. For humans to ever learn from one another, they require shared memories, moments of lived communication. Melville’s disruption of time and his reliance on retrospection in the very construction of the tale highlight ways in which he acts as a writer of fiction and not a historian or political columnist (Sundquist, pp. 84-85). He acknowledges the power of fiction to escape chronology, if only briefly, and provide a glimpse into the timeless.

As the conversation goes on, the strained connection between the two captains reaches its lowest point. Even now in safety, a rebellion quashed, Cereno is forlorn and morose. Delano, exulting in the victory and celebrating the glories of nature, cannot understand Cereno’s melancholy. The contrast between the two is brought into relief: the advocate of good works meets the man of faith; hope in the future collides with the revenge of the past; the vision of nature as

beneficent counters the fear of nature as death; and a youthful nation's optimism confronts Old World guilt (Putzel, p. 201). Both men invoke divine providence during this conversation but to very different effect. Exasperated, Delano finally pleads with the Spaniard:

“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 if it were a pall.

There was no more conversation that day. (Melville, p. 225)

This enigmatic closing of the conversation, of all dialog in the novella, eclipses the deposition as the final key and lock to understand. Who or what does the Negro represent? Besides the simple answer “Babo,” we are probably tempted to think of categories that we associate with darkness like evil and malignity, and Melville tempts us to do just that. But Cereno sits in suffering silence and cannot even accuse Babo of a crime at the trial. He departs immediately for a monastery, where he apparently dies of sorrow, or simply gives up on life. I would like to suggest that the Negro that casts a shadow on Cereno is an image of the suffering that oppresses all of us, especially in our various roles as masters and servants. As a forced servant, the Negro slave has endured the most unimaginable of suffering. In their revolt on board the *San Dominick*, Babo and his compatriots inflict torture upon their former masters. Oppression begets oppression and suffering begets suffering. Cereno at least finds one silent way to end that cycle and recognize the anguish before him.

We might tend to hear Cereno's story less vibrantly or see his suffering less clearly because of the second device that Melville uses so effectively: his incorporation of the deposition into the story. As a writer of fiction, Melville embeds legalistic transcripts within a more obvious literary tale. As readers, we are captivated by the literary portions and likely read the legal proceedings less carefully. Yet, typically, courtly pronouncements get the societal status of being the “final word” on the right and wrong or good and evil on some particular matter. In pre-Civil War America, in particular, many hoped that legal means

could be found to solve the slavery problem. Melville's fictional tale highlights the more profound tensions beneath any possible legal solution. Within forced servitude lies the untold suffering of numerous souls. Within any rebellious response to that forced servitude, new, unimaginable sufferings could erupt.

Take just one literary example placed next to a more legalistic one from the story. Near the beginning of the novella, we get a description of the Spanish ship that Delano is surveying for the first time. In noting its disrepair, his eyes come upon its remarkable fading stern-piece: "But the principle relic of faded grandeur was the ample oval of the shield-like stern-piece, 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" (Melville, p. 147). In one short poetic image, we see a satyr, a mythological companion of Dionysius, grinding another masked figure under his foot. In a sense the entire dilemma of the tale is encapsulated in this act of oppression in which we cannot see the faces of who is oppressing whom. In addition, the word satyr itself is related to the verb to satirize, hinting at the subversive nature of the act of satire and irony, those skills that Delano so conspicuously lacks. That same Delano, later in the tale, disarms the dagger-borne Babo and "ground the prostrate Negro" with his left foot and for the first time in that immediate moment sees the Negro with "mask torn away" (Melville, p. 204).

The language of the deposition rings dully in our ears compared to such vivid imagery. During one portion of Cereno's testimony, he explicitly outlines the difficulties in communication that hampered the events of that fateful day. In a display of graciousness toward Captain Delano's blindness to their suffering, he reports:

That during the presence of Captain Amaso Delano on board, some attempts were made by the sailors, and one by Hermenegildo Gandix, to convey hints to him of the true state of affairs, but that these attempts were ineffectual, owing to fear of incurring death, and, furthermore, owing to devices which offered

contradictions to the true state of affairs, as well as owing to the generosity and piety of Amaso Delano incapable of sounding such wickedness. (Melville, p. 221)

In a short passage, we also see a summary of the events of that day: the suffering state of the Spanish sailors fearing death, the cunning ploys of the rebels and their subjects, and the limited mind of the American who saw himself in particular categories of benignity. Yet, we are likely to miss this revelation amidst the legal formality. We might even miss other startling details in the deposition, like the fact that Cereno indicates that he only jumps on board the American ship to save Delano and that Delano's blithe cheerfulness while visiting had inadvertently gotten another Spaniard killed. Perhaps fiction offers a window into the suffering of the world that a trial might miss.

All of these changes unfold under the control of Melville's curious third person narrator. The story has a quasi-stream-of-consciousness feel because of this narrator, yet, in retrospect, it seems very carefully constructed. The narrator pulls in the reader as representing the subjective viewpoint of Amaso Delano. It is only his thoughts that the narrator ever provides. Yet, it is still a position of distance, challenging the reader to view Delano as an object (Kavanagh, p. 358).

This narrator adds to the disturbing effect that the tale has on readers. Many of the most upsetting stereotypes offered, though meant to give us insight into Delano's mind, come directly from the narrator. This technique leaves the reader wondering, does Melville think these things, too? Why he would offer such offensive stereotypes, especially about race? It seems to me that he uses them to expose, in all of its messiness, the real dilemma of an America on the cusp of cataclysm. That messiness includes a number of difficult to reconcile realities: a) the likelihood that settling the problem of slavery, even in 1855 is already "past all speech"; b) the painful truth that stuck between the vocal Northern abolitionists and the Southern slaveholders were black men and women who literally had no voice; and c) the fact that rebellion, which appeared to be the only option left, is itself ugly, violent, and deadly. Melville the writer offers his

lock and key to these painful realities in the form of this tale of a rebellion at sea, transformed by his frustrating, perplexing narrator.

I think that Melville purposely does not choose a first person narrator here, because it would imply that we could actually get into the head of another. Instead, we get a third person narrator who makes us *feel* as if we are inside the head of Delano. This apparent position of knowing is more akin to the actual experience of a human life. Such a narrator highlights the impediments to communication, even for a writer. Like Babo, Melville never quite gets to speak as himself. He crafts a tale that each of his characters is forced to play along with, and hopes that we will read the tale in the way he intended. Yet, he knows quite well that we will read it more likely in ways that say more about our own preferences and perspectives, especially when it comes to questions of race and governance, questions involving how we see or do not see each other as human beings. So, he plays on those stereotypes prevalent in his own time period, wary of both the Northern abolitionist (Amasa Delano) and the Southern slaveholder (Benito Cereno).

All judging and judgment, whether at a deposition or when assessing any new situation, relies on the stories we are told and that we tell ourselves. In the tale, Babo dictates a story to Cereno and his crew; Melville, through his narrator, dictates a story to us as readers (Sundquist, pp. 90-91). I would like to offer a closing parenthetical that Melville does not use in the novella but one that he implies. Babo (Melville) is a storyteller who dictates a story to his characters. Melville (Babo) acts largely behind the scenes, hoping to inculcate particular responses in his audience, especially responses that might divert his audience from his true intentions.

VI. Conclusion

How can we not miss the suffering souls in front of us? How can we surmount the barriers to communication that we all face? Perhaps we cannot. In

an odd way, nevertheless, Melville seems to offer some optimism. Even as one whose works did not gain the reception he hoped for and who acutely saw the rising tensions between North and South, he still continued to write. He appears, more than others, to have acutely felt the competing dangers of slavery and mutiny coming to a climax in pre-Civil War America. He also saw how those dangers could apparently not be mitigated by political or legal speech. Yet, he kept putting literary speech to the page. Certainly his writing, in “Benito Cereno” at least, is filled with ambiguity and, as I have argued, warnings about the ways in which we see situations filtered through our own categories of master and slave, white and black. Yet, he still wrote. Perhaps he hoped for a future in which his stereotypes, his silences, his masks would take on new meanings (Lee, p. 514). Perhaps he hoped to find future readers, maybe us, who would look for, and crave, honest speech.

In that final conversation between the two captains, Cereno gently scolds Delano for so misreading the situation on the San Dominick:

[Y]ou were with me all day; stood with me; sat 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 even the best men err in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted. But you were forced to it, and you were in time undeceived. Would that, in both respects, it was so ever, and with all men.” (Melville, pp. 224-225)

Maybe, this hope to be undeceived remains for Melville as well.

Epilogue

Unfortunately, alongside the hope, it seems as if the difficulties of judgment and communication and blindness to the affliction before us still remain. Even with our first black President, we are still scared and hampered by stereotypes when it comes to discussions of race and governance. Certain words and examples are too loaded or too out of date. Melville would likely argue that we, of course, could never fully escape stereotypes and uncomfortable words. Yet, he would challenge us to be mindful of our particular blind spots and to

acknowledge the limitations of speech. He would ask us to recognize the wretchedness that at times afflicts every one of us.

Returning to the story that opened this talk, when I announced to my junior high classes, late in the year, that I would be leaving the school, a number of students cried, but intriguingly, it was disproportionately the white students. I remember in particular one little girl in my sixth-grade homeroom who was practically inconsolable. I ended up sitting with her after school in silence, waiting for her parents to arrive. Other students walked by and stared. Like *Benito Cereno*, questions of race and class still hung over us. Clearly, the racial divide had not been eradicated, and I wonder to this day how much I helped any of those children. Yet, like Melville, I am glad that I tried to face the divides before us. The moment is passed, and only the memories of misreading and occasional connection remain. For an instant or two, I was at least able to see these children as subject to tribulations that they could not put into words.

What about this moment? Have I passed any opportunity for further speech? Should I continue? To borrow a phrase from another puzzling Melville character, *Bartleby the Scrivener*: “I would prefer not to.”

Thank you.

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