

interpretation

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Melville's "Benito Cereno": Civilization, Barbarism, and Race

WILLIAM D. RICHARDSON
Georgia State University

INTRODUCTION

Melville's "Benito Cereno," a tale of a shipboard slave rebellion, has an obvious political theme: the clash between modern civilization and barbarism. Within the context of this theme, Melville addresses some of the most fundamental political problems confronting man—problems involving the tensions between conventional and natural inequality; between the preservation of existing political orders and revolution; between the demands of a secular state and those of a state captivated by religion; between democracy and aristocracy; between the requirements of justice and those of the law; and, finally, between the dictates of reason and those of unreasoning forces such as prejudice—particularly racial prejudice.¹

The subtle way in which Melville treats the civilization–barbarism theme may explain why many reviewers of "Benito Cereno" fail to perceive either the number and complexity of the political problems addressed in the work or Melville's teachings about them.² In addressing these problems, particularly that of racial prejudice, Melville approaches them on two different levels. On the surface of the work, he seems to be speaking to the ordinary citizen of America—the white, Northern or Southern man of commerce who is the product of modern political philosophy's overwhelming sway in America. This citizen reader of "Benito Cereno" derives a simple meaning from the tale: slave uprisings are unquestionably wrong and their participants, accordingly, inevitably must succumb to such superior white men of commerce as Captain Amasa Delano. In this view, Delano is the tale's hero; he embodies those qualities which the average American citizen admires: hard work, Protestantism, bravery, loyalty,

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1. A thoughtful discussion of some related themes in *Billy Budd* may be found in Thomas J. Scorza, "Technology, Philosophy, and Political Virtue: The Case of Billy Budd, Sailor," *Interpretation*, 5, No. 1 (Summer 1975), 91–107. Also see Scorza, *In the Time Before Steamships: Billy Budd, the Limits of Politics, and Modernity* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1979).

2. For example, see Rosalie Feltenstein, "Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *American Literature*, 19 (1947), pp. 245ff.; F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford, 1941), p. 508; and especially Hugh W. Hetherington, *Melville's Reviewers: British and American, 1846–1891* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1961), pp. 248–55.

honesty, frugality, and a sense of justice. This citizen perspective of "Benito Cereno" largely explains why the tale evoked such encomiums as "thrilling" and "powerful" from reviewers who were themselves average citizens addressing like audiences.

However, the very art for which Melville is praised (writing a good short story) is also responsible for veiling another meaning of the tale—one which is sympathetic to portions of what I have termed the "citizen perspective," but antipathetic to much of it. This other, deeper meaning reveals itself only through the most painstaking attention to Melville's use of symbolism, contradiction, and structure. It is veiled partly because its teaching does not support the citizen perspective addressed on the tale's surface and, for that reason, it could be dangerous to and subversive of the American regime. Another reason the deeper meaning remains veiled is related to but nonetheless separate from the first: Melville seeks to address and teach those individuals who possess the capacity of mind to unravel the hidden meaning, a dedication to the pursuit of truth, and the strength of character requisite to a proper understanding and use of the veiled teaching. It would appear that those to whom this knowledge would be most appropriate would be either statesmen or the teachers of statesmen. Consequently, this hidden meaning hereafter will be referred to as the "statesman perspective." Before one can attempt to understand this statesman perspective, however, it is necessary that one comprehend the simple or citizen perspective as fully as possible. The surmounting of this preliminary obstacle is facilitated by an understanding of the political environment of the 1850s.³

In brief, the United States of that period was being severely buffeted by the controversy over admitting sections of the territories as either slave or free states.⁴ As a consequence of the various recurring disagreements over this issue, many citizens coalesced into two violently opposed camps: the abolitionists, composed primarily of Northerners from regions (such as Massachusetts) that no longer derived much or any commercial benefit from slavery, and the pro-slavery faction, composed largely, but certainly not exclusively, of Southern slave-owners who obviously had a large investment in slaves. Another part of the American citizenry was uncommitted to either extreme but was nonetheless affected by the turbulence produced by the contending factions. It was these citizens occupying an uncertain middle ground that each of the two extreme

3. "Benito Cereno" originally appeared in the October, November, and December 1855 issues of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*. Shortly thereafter, Melville incorporated it into a collection of his shorter stories entitled *The Piazza Tales*. A strong suggestion of Melville's estimate of the merit of "Benito Cereno" is found in the fact that he originally intended to call his collection "*Benito Cereno*" and *Other Sketches*. See *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 178–79; hereafter cited as *Letters*.

4. For a discussion of this controversy, see Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1973), especially pp. 41–62.

factions sought either to win to their respective positions or, failing that, to manipulate to their partisan advantage.

As a result of this factional conflict, the political climate was such that a prudent man would have been ill-advised to attempt to reason with his fellow citizens about, for example, the merits of the black slaves; and only a fool would have been so bold as to speak openly to whites about black equality or, worse, about black superiority. Similarly, discussion about the justice or injustice of slavery was also likely to deprive one of an attentive audience. A reasonable man who desired to teach his fellow citizens had to have the ability to manipulate the contending passions of the moment in such a way that he could get and keep the attention of his intended audience; that accomplished, the skillful teacher could then carefully attempt to dampen those passions in such a way as to permit reason to state its case.

To understand both the way in which Melville attempts to present his teaching in these volatile times, as well as that teaching itself, it is necessary to be meticulous in one's reading of "Benito Cereno." This effort is enhanced to a considerable extent by the knowledge that the tale is woven around a published account of an actual event which occurred in 1805. The initial entrance into the mysteries of "Benito Cereno," therefore, lies outside its text in part of a work by the real-life Captain Amasa Delano entitled *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels*.⁵ On their surfaces, Delano's autobiographical account and Melville's "Benito Cereno" seem very similar. For example, both versions have narrative sections which are bolstered by depositions from courts of law, some of the names in both tales are identical, and the main story-lines are very similar. These similarities, however, in no way detract either from Melville's stature as an author and teacher or from the greatness of "Benito Cereno." Melville obviously came upon Delano's account and was intrigued by what it said (and could be made to say) about man. The real-life Delano, the hero of his own tale and a main character in Melville's, certainly appears to have been blind to the lessons Melville saw in the autobiographical account. For Melville, the real-life incident contained the necessary ingredients to reveal man more starkly than any purely fictional account ever could.⁶

The real usefulness of Delano's account becomes apparent when one looks at the differences, rather than the similarities, between the two narratives. In other words, in those places where Melville chose not to follow Delano's account but instead deviated from it, the reader is justified in assuming that he

5. See Chapter 18 of Captain A. Delano's *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*. This chapter is reproduced in *A Benito Cereno Handbook*, ed. Seymour L. Gross (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 1965), pp. 71-98.

6. In the "Agatha Letter" to Hawthorne, Melville discusses the advantages of having "a skeleton of actual reality to build about with fullness and veins and beauty." (Melville to Hawthorne, August 13, 1852 in *Letters*, p. 157.)

attached some importance to those deviations. Close attention to these alterations reveals some interesting things. For instance, one of the most obvious changes Melville makes in Delano's account involves the dating of the events: Delano contended that, up until the time he encountered it, the rebellious slave-transporter had been at sea from December 20, 1804, until February 20, 1805, a period of 62 days. In Melville's tale, however, the slave-transporter is at sea from May 20, 1799, until its meeting with the American ship on August 17, 1799, a period of 89 days. With this manipulation of the dates, Melville brings several things into focus for the reader. First of all, when one considers the immediate subject matter of the tale—blacks rebelling against their enslavement by whites—this change to the year 1799 assumes considerable importance, for that year was the midpoint of the French Revolution and its famous struggle in the name of the rights of man. The year is also significant in that it was the midpoint of the American Constitution's 20-year ban on the prohibition of slavery⁷—a ban which permitted, and to an extent increased, the enslavement and transportation of black slaves aboard vessels such as that depicted in "Benito Cereno." Lastly and most significantly, if one calculates the midpoint between May 20th, the date the slave-transporter left port, and August 17th, the date of its fateful meeting with Delano, a startling discovery is made: the center of the 89-day voyage falls on July 4th. Thus, on the day that whites throughout America were celebrating their liberation from the comparatively mild tyranny of Great Britain, the blacks on board the slave-transporter were not only free from the tyranny of the whites, but were also exercising self-government.

The final important change Melville makes in Delano's account that will concern us at the moment is a "rechristening" of the two ships involved. The American ship's name is changed from the *Perseverance* to the *Bachelor's Delight*. The new name may be intended to convey a sense of Delano's character. The American captain is portrayed as a fastidious bachelor who delights in "the comfortable family of a crew" on board his orderly ship.⁸ In terms of the rebellion that occurs aboard the slave-transporter, the change of its name from the *Trval* to the *San Dominick* seems to be laden with much more significance. For instance, there is an island off the southern shore of the United States which bears the same name as the slave-ship in Melville's tale. This island of Santo Domingo was the first land of the New World discovered by Christopher Columbus. (Fittingly, Melville makes this discoverer serve as the

7. Constitution of the United States of America, Article I, Section 9.

8. *Bachelor's Delight* also may have reference to more erotic matters. In one of his collections, Melville groups together two of his shorter stories, "The Tartarus of Maids" and "The Paradise of Bachelors." The former is resplendent with sexual innuendoes, while the latter concerns the opposite, namely, an implied denial of certain desires in favor of attention to things of the mind. In a sense, these two stories portray the two extremes of bachelorhood: dissipation through indulgence in bodily pleasures and, conversely, a subjugation of the desires to the rule of reason in pursuit of some higher end.

figurehead of the *San Dominick*.) It was also on this island that the Spanish first introduced slavery into the Western Hemisphere, in 1493. Lastly, this island was the scene of devastating and—to the whites in neighboring America—fearsome slave rebellions from the late 1790s until the mid-1800s.⁹ That the significance of the name *San Dominick* should have been recognizable by the average citizen of the 1850s can be surmised from the fact that mention of these slave rebellions was not uncommon in the popular press; there is even mention of them in one of the same issues of the monthly magazine in which "Benito Cereno" initially appeared.¹⁰

THE CITIZEN PERSPECTIVE

The first thing that strikes the reader's eye in any work is the title. In the case of "Benito Cereno," the title is unusual, one could even say strange. How does one pronounce it? What does it mean? It turns out to be a Spanish name, specifically, the name of one of the three main characters in the tale. It translates as "Pallid Benedictine (monk)." One who has read the story may be inclined to ask why the author did not give it a good American title, such as "Captain Delano." After all, the American captain appears to be the good-hearted, courageous hero. (Would a reader of the 1850s even have bothered to wonder why the tale was not named after the apparent antihero, Babo?) As we will see, the strangeness of the title is indicative of the tale itself, for neither it nor any of its main characters are really what they seem to be.

Unlike the title, the text of "Benito Cereno" is in English. It is divided into two main parts: a long narrative of the dramatic action and a relatively short deposition before a viceregal court by Benito Cereno, the captain of the *San Dominick*. A close examination of each of these parts, however, reveals some interesting things. First of all, it is not entirely correct to state that there are only two main parts; actually, the deposition is situated so as to sever the narrative into two unequal parts. Consequently, it could be said that "Benito Cereno" is composed of three parts: a long narrative describing events from the time of the *San Dominick*'s meeting with Delano's ship, the *Bachelor's Delight*, until the latter's crew retakes it; the deposition; and a short narrative describ-

9. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1943), pp. 96ff.

10. The author of an article crudely entitled "About Niggers" blatantly parodies the uprising on Santo Domingo in order to expose the ridiculousness of the white masters' reactions to that revolt. (See *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, December 1855, p. 609.) The fact that this author could parody the uprisings suggests that he believed his readers would readily understand that the island of Santo Domingo was the subject. That knowledge of Santo Domingo was commonplace among literate Americans of the 1850s also can be inferred from the fact that in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the widely popular antislavery novel written in 1851, the island is briefly mentioned almost casually in the course of a discussion about how slaves should be treated. (See Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [New York: Airmount, 1967], p. 252.)

ing, among other things, a conversation between Delano and Benito Cereno enroute to Conception after the Spaniard's rescue. Chronologically, most of this final narrative belongs with the first part, for it relates events which occurred prior to the deposition. (Only its final two paragraphs describe events occurring subsequent to the deposition.)

The first long narrative can be readily subdivided into two very unequal parts: Delano's actions prior to boarding the *San Dominick* (pp. 109–16) and after boarding it (pp. 116–234). This extensive last portion then can be subdivided further according to the seven cycles of suspicion Delano experiences while on board the *San Dominick*: first cycle (pp. 116–40), second cycle (pp. 140–54), third cycle (pp. 154–66), fourth cycle (pp. 166–84), fifth cycle (pp. 185–89), sixth cycle (pp. 189–208), and seventh cycle (pp. 208–32). (The remaining 16 pages of the narrative detail Delano's discovery of the rebellion, the whites' recapture of the *San Dominick*, and the journey to the viceregal court.) This subdivision reveals a series of interrelated suspicions in which each suspicion, building upon those which precede it, is progressively more alarming (and nearer to the "truth"). Interestingly, the central cycle (pp. 166–84), which is also one of the shortest, concerns an intriguing Gordian-like knot tossed to Delano by Luys Galgo, an old knotmaker. In the midst of rapidly spoken words of Spanish, Galgo utters the only words of English heard on board the *San Dominick* on August 17th; clearly and unmistakably he urges Delano, who is perplexedly holding the knot, to "Undo it, cut it, quick."¹¹

Subdividing the main narrative in this manner does not alter its most distinctive feature; it still reveals little to the first-time reader that is not also being revealed to Delano. Thus, while presented in the past tense, the narrative slowly takes the reader through the same labyrinth confronting (and generally confounding) the American. As with Delano, the reader's opinions, passions, prejudices, and reason are alternately both hindrances to and vehicles for a true understanding of the events occurring on board the *San Dominick*. In this sense, the narrative presents the tale from the perspective of an American citizen, that is, it corresponds more closely with reality than does the deposition, and, in a limited sense, it is analogous to the sources from which the citizen-reader would normally receive his information about events which he has not witnessed. It is through such sources—newspapers, eyewitness accounts, biographies, hearsay—that his opinions and prejudices are either reinforced, left unchanged, or altered. From the surface or citizen perspective of "Benito Cereno," Captain Amasa Delano readily can be seen to be the tale's hero, for it is through his actions that the *San Dominick* is both put in a position to be rescued (by means of his Good Samaritan act of piloting it to an anchorage) and then actually rescued by means of the Americans' ingenuity, weaponry, and courage. It is also from the citizen perspective that one might be inclined

11. Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," in *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), p. 182. (Unless there is additional explanatory material, subsequent references to "Benito Cereno" will be incorporated into the text.)

to praise lavishly the defeat and punishment of the treacherous blacks. The fact that Delano remains unaffected in both body and mind by his experiences may merely indicate the American's superior strength of character; in the manner of Theseus, he can journey (albeit unwittingly) into the maw of Hades and emerge unscathed.

Delano's suspicions while aboard the *San Dominick* could be described as the reactions of a typical good-hearted American; such men normally do not expect nefarious treacheries at the hands of other white men, and they certainly do not expect them from docile black slaves. However, it is sufficiently reassuring to the citizen-reader to know that, once the American is made aware of duplicity and wrong-doing, he is more than equal to the task of setting matters right.

THE STATESMAN PERSPECTIVE

In addition to the citizen perspective, "Benito Cereno" also has a deeper meaning—one which I have termed "the statesman perspective." At this deeper level, Melville attempts to impart an important political teaching. It is at the level of the statesman perspective that the reader confronts the main theme of "Benito Cereno": the confrontation between modern civilization and barbarism as played out by the blacks and whites on board the *San Dominick* and in the Lima courtroom. To understand this theme properly, we must examine the tale from its beginning with great care. That this may be the way in which Melville expected—even required—the work to be approached seems to be indicated by the narrator's remark at the conclusion of the deposition:

[T]he 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 . . . (p. 264).

The dramatic action in "Benito Cereno" concerning the relations between men of different colors is presaged by a conspicuous absence or at least a muddying of colors in the opening paragraphs:

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* (pp. 109–10, italics added).

Even the *San Dominick*, upon entering the harbor, displays no colors.¹² The only exceptions to this scene are the white noddy ("strange fowl") somnambulism-

12. Later on, in one of the few departures from the prevailing lack of color, the reader sees Babo using the predominately red and white ensign of Spain as a barber's bib for Benito. Shortly thereafter, the ensign's redness is matched by Benito's blood (pp. 203, 205).

tically perched in the *San Dominick's* rigging, and the black figures at its portholes (who appear to be "Black Friars" to the approaching Delano). Even these vivid examples of the extremes of white and black, however, seem to blend together in the overall picture to form a veil of gray.

My examination of the relations between men of different races will be patterned after Melville's treatment of the main characters in "Benito Cereno"; that is, I first will discuss Delano, then Benito, and, finally, Babo. Aside from these men, there are only two other characters—the Spanish knotmaker and Delano's mate—who actually speak in the narrative. The order in which the various characters will be treated also reflects the number of speeches each of them makes.¹³ Babo stands out in this treatment both because he is the only black man to speak directly and because he speaks so little in comparison to Delano and Benito Cereno.

THE STATESMAN PERSPECTIVE: CAPTAIN AMASA DELANO

Captain Delano, a "good sailor" who heads a "comfortable family of a crew" (p. 128), has been castigated for proving "to be amazingly stupid aboard the *San Dominick*."¹⁴ Admittedly, Delano does fail to perceive the reality behind the charade Babo, the slave leader, causes to be acted out before him. However, an important point to be made about Delano's obtuseness is that once he steps on board the *San Dominick*, he is removed from all of his familiar guideposts. The *San Dominick* is strange to the American in many ways. Aside from its lack of any identifying ensign, there is the slovenly and—to Delano, who is used to the orderliness of his sealer—disturbing physical neglect of the ship. The strangeness is heightened by the conditions on board, which produce "something of the effect of enchantment. The ship seems unreal."¹⁵ Amasa Delano is cast adrift; as a man whose actions are directed by his expectations and whose expectations are governed by that which he has experienced, he flounders when the actions of other men do not closely conform to his own past experiences.¹⁶ Thus, when his mind is swimming with strange suspicions, Delano continually seeks some standard, some familiar object, by which to judge them. The most obvious example of this involves *Rover*, his household whaleboat. When Delano's anxieties about the situation on board the *San Dominick* force him to confront the possibility that what seems to be true may not be true at all, the sight of *Rover*, as reliable and predictable as a Newfound-

13. Delano speaks 59 times, Benito 54, and Babo 16. Comparatively, the knotmaker speaks only three times and the mate once.

14. J. Hagopian, *Insight I: Analyses of American Literature* (Hirschgraben-Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 1964), p. 152.

15. "Benito Cereno," p. 118. Similar references to the "aura" of enchantment aboard the *San Dominick* are found on pp. 161, 177, 178, 231, and 266.

16. In essence, Delano is a man forced from the Cave. (Cf. Plato, *Republic* 514a–517c.)

land dog, serves to calm him and to dispel his unsettling thoughts.¹⁷ When threatened by the strange, Delano's recourse is to reject it and to take confident refuge in the familiar.

That Delano is not stupid can be seen readily by his actions once the strange or "seeming" finally conforms to the familiar or "being." When, with the assistance of a Portuguese sailor manning the oars of *Rover*, the "scales drop from his eyes" (p. 238) and he is able to see Babo and the other blacks as mutineers, Delano takes immediate and decisive action. The American is, first and foremost, a man of action. His extensive experience as a sea captain enables him to use known nature; he confronts the previously experienced terrors of the sea courageously and skillfully. This is his world. When Benito continues to be dejected after having been saved, Delano, in urging him not to "moralize" about the past, refers to known nature, his "Warm friends, steadfast friends . . . the trades."¹⁸

Delano's knowledge of and faith in the predictable, useful ways of nature (along with his corresponding ignorance of the natures of men) befit a modern American. Delano is a representative of a regime which is unsurpassed in its production of wealth, technology, and all manner of things which tend to make man's life on earth easier. This image of Delano as a representative of modernity is depicted in "Benito Cereno" in at least two important ways.

First, of course, there is Delano's occupation: he is preeminently a commercial man who engages in that activity which alone is capable of procuring for a nation the necessary wealth that enables other citizens to pursue such time-consuming and expensive enterprises as technological development. Delano displays both the fruits of his occupation (as when he twice has excess provisions brought to the *San Dominick*) and the moneymaking art which is that occupation's chief concern (as when he arranges for payment from Benito Cereno for all of those provisions which the reader initially may have assumed were being provided free by a Good Samaritan).

Second, the technological superiority of the Americans is displayed to the reader. The knowledge of nature which enabled technological marvels to be produced was not gained merely by diligent observation of nature's ways; in Francis Bacon's apt word, nature obviously was "vexed" at some point into revealing her secrets. Thus, when it finally comes to a battle between the less civilized (or less modern) Africans and the Americans, the former are armed only with hatchets (which, incidentally, they procured from the whites), while the latter possess the great equalizers, cannons and muskets. Consequently, the whites are able to lay back out of any considerable danger and relentlessly direct accurate fire at the blacks massed on the *San Dominick's* stern. Once the

17. "Benito Cereno," pp. 179, 183-84, 185-86, and 188-89.

18. "Benito Cereno," p. 268. That these "friends" of Delano's may have been less than "Warm" and "steadfast"—that they may even have been uncaring and unfeeling—is suggested by the previous statement that "nature cared not a jot" about men's troubles (p. 227).

blacks have been considerably reduced in both arms and numbers, the whites board and eventually overcome them. (It is one of the paradoxes of the confrontation between the civilized whites and the barbaric blacks that the combination of commerce and technological progress which here results in the blacks' reenslavement also ultimately made it politically feasible to move for the abolition of that institution. Machines eventually rendered slave labor uneconomical, inefficient, and then undesirable.)

A more subtle presentation of what may be referred to as the art versus nature aspect of black-white relations aboard the *San Dominick* involves Delano's boat, *Rover*. On the second and central of the three roundtrips *Rover* makes between the *Bachelor's Delight* and the *San Dominick*, there is a revealing incident concerning the distribution of its cargo of foodstuffs. Before Cereno stops him, Delano intends to dispense only fish, water (the "republican element"), and pumpkins to the blacks, while reserving the soft bread, cider, and sugar exclusively for the whites. In other words, the blacks are to be limited to those goods which are wholly the product of nature while the whites feast on those goods which are produced by man's art (pp. 189-92).

In essence, the crucial difference between the blacks and the whites (and that which most distinguishes the less civilized from the more civilized men in the modern world) involves the blacks' ignorance of art or the useful sciences.¹⁹ Babo, for example, may know well the art of ruling men, but this knowledge ultimately proves insufficient when he is confronted by Delano who, while deficient in his knowledge of men, nevertheless possesses a sufficient knowledge of the useful sciences to vanquish the blacks.²⁰

The matter of Delano's ignorance of the natures and ways of men (and, hence, of the art of ruling them) is, of course, one of the principal criticisms of him. This ignorance is detailed in one of the narrator's early descriptions of the American:

Captain Delano's surprise [at the actions of the strange ship] 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, any way 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 (p. 110).

Delano's good nature (that is, his willingness to excuse, overlook, forgive, and, in general, put the best face on the unexpected actions of real or imag-

19. Consider the discussion of both the piloting art and the comparison of "knowledge itself" with a "particular kind of knowledge" in *Republic* 341c and 438d, respectively.

20. The blacks' ignorance of these useful sciences is also depicted in the killing of the mate, Raneds, when he was in the act of taking a navigational fix (p. 255). That murder, inspired by superstitious ignorance, had the effect of assuring the preservation of Benito Cereno, for he was "the only remaining navigator on board . . ." (p. 255).

ined inferiors²¹) makes him ill-suited to decipher the true motives behind men's actions. Because he is not by nature suspicious, Delano is unable to combat malignity until it confronts him face-to-face. Only then is he able belatedly to react: only then do his abilities as a man of action save him from harm. Undoubtedly, if malignity ever failed to identify itself openly when it confronted him, Delano would succumb to it. For example, Babo's original plan was to make Benito Cereno "captain of [the] two ships" (p. 258) by killing Delano during a stealthy, nighttime attack on the *Bachelor's Delight*. Had this plan not been thwarted by Benito's flight, a peacefully slumbering Amasa Delano would have been easily overcome by Babo's men. (Given Melville's familiarity with the Bible,²² he must have been aware of the irony in the fact that Delano's biblical namesake, Amasa, met his bloody death at the hands of the treacherous Zoab as a direct result of his own trusting nature.²³)

The subject of the relations between white and black men in "Benito Cereno" can be opened more fully by examining the way in which Delano perceives the blacks on board the *San Dominick*. In Delano's initial encounter with Benito and Babo, the narrator describes the black's face as showing "occasionally, like a shepherd's dog, . . . sorrow and affection . . . equally blended" as he mutely looked up at the Spaniard (p. 120). Later, the narrator relates that, "like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (p. 201).

There is only one other thing in "Benito Cereno" that is compared to a dog, and that is the previously mentioned *Rover*—an inanimate object which, as such, is totally obedient to Delano's will. In animating his household boat (by giving it a dog's name and by describing it as a "good dog" with "a white bone in her mouth") and in dehumanizing the negroes (by minimizing or rejecting their exercise of their own wills), Delano is depicted as a "commander" who is both confident that his will is able to predominate and most content when it does so. In fact, Delano is so taken with the apparent loyalty and complete subservience of Babo that he lightly offers to buy him from Benito Cereno (p. 168). (Delano probably believes that such an acquisition would be an admirable complement to *Rover*.)

Even if one assumes that this offer was only the spontaneous and exuberant expression of what Delano believed to be the highest compliment he could bestow on Babo (that is, a desire to own such a fine slave), one must admit that it raises serious questions about Delano's view of slavery. While it is true

21. In Delano's eyes, Babo is certainly an inferior, for his conventional label of "slave" brands him as such. Benito, the ineffectual invalid, is treated with respect by Delano, but it is his office to which the respect is given; Delano's manner towards Benito himself is tinged with pity.

22. See William Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought: An Essay in Interpretation* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1943).

23. II Samuel 20:9-12.

that the American is the only character in the work who openly expresses some disapproval of slavery (pp. 210–11). This fact is belied by the captain's other words and actions. For instance, when the blacks' rebellion is finally revealed to him, what does Delano do? Does this democratic man, a representative of a regime founded upon the recognition of man's natural rights, rejoice at or even acquiesce to the blacks' freedom? No! Entirely on his own initiative—even against the advice of Benito Cereno, the blacks' probable "owner"—Delano undertakes forcefully to reenslave them. His motivation for this action is not entirely clear, but it may be related to the fact that, in addition to being a democrat, he is also a law-abiding commercial man. However, in urging his crew to recapture the *San Dominick*, Delano does not mention that the blacks have unlawfully broken their bonds or that they have terrorized the whites on board the ship. Rather, Delano tells them that Benito Cereno has given the ship up for lost and that, if they recapture it, great riches will be divided among all of them. Delano does not speak to his crew's reason or to their sense of justice, but to their basest passion: greed. In this sense, it is in the Americans' self-interest to reenslave the blacks (who, after all, are valuable commodities). But beyond the immediate question of the possible gain to be gotten as a consequence of the blacks' return to bondage, there is the matter of Delano's apparent lack of reflection on the whole subject of the justice or injustice of slavery. Evidently convinced that what is conventional is unalterable, he seems to accept slavery's existence much as he accepts the existence of the trades: both are "natural" occurrences to be accepted and used accordingly. There are two major episodes which support this view: Delano's distribution of the supplies and his thoughts on negro inferiority.

When *Rover*—laden with water, pumpkins, bread, cider, and sugar—returns to the *San Dominick* the second time, Delano begins the previously mentioned unequal distribution of the provisions (p. 192). It is possible, of course, that the "benevolent" Delano is only conforming to what he believes to be proper conduct on board a slave ship. However, when the incident is viewed in conjunction with the narrator's earlier comments, one can conclude that Delano readily accepts as natural the conventional inferiority of the blacks. When Delano, wrestling with his fourth suspicion about a conspiracy, fears that Benito Cereno might be aligned with the negroes, the narrator remarks:

The whites, too, by nature, were the shrewder race. A man with some evil design, would he not be likely to speak well of that stupidity which was blind to his depravity, and malign that intelligence from which it might not be hidden? Not unlikely, perhaps. But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be 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 leaguering in against it with negroes?²⁴

24. "Benito Cereno," p. 180. The narrator's deft mingling of what may be his own views with those of Delano presents the reader with some difficult problems. First, who is the narrator? He is

No explicit evidence is given that Delano, an American Protestant from a northern state, has had previous contact with black slaves; his prior associations with blacks seem to have been limited to free men of color. These free men, however, are depicted as being actually or potentially subservient to Delano's will. The reader is told of the black sailor serving under Delano's direct command and the black free man working or playing under his "benign" gaze (p. 201). Prior to his experiences with Babo ("This is an uncommonly intelligent fellow of yours, Don Benito" [p. 215]), Delano probably had no contact with intelligent, (secretly) willful black men. The thought that blacks, like whites, could have both the capability and the desire shrewdly to force their own wills on others is totally outside of Delano's experience and, hence, knowledge. He knows white men to be capable of deceit; consequently, his recurring suspicions center on Benito Cereno. And he is willing to allow for the possibility that mulattoes, particularly those having "regular European face[s]," might be equally dangerous, though he attributes this to the fact that they have white blood (p. 212).

Delano's ready acceptance of the conventional view of blacks, a consequence of his lack of experience with them, plays a major part in deluding him as to the reality on board the *San Dominick*. He sees the blacks in their accustomed role: subservient to the will of the whites. The few instances of black willfulness or misbehavior—the attack on the cabin-boy, the stomping of the white sailor, the abrupt, menacing silence that suddenly ensues when Delano half-jokingly threatens the jostling blacks—are dismissed as being the consequences of Benito Cereno's inadequacies as a commander and of the miseries suffered because of the calm. Those occurrences fail to jar Delano out of his preconceptions about what he believes to be the natural order of things, namely, whites ruling blacks.

This aspect of Delano's character is related to his understanding of the nature of man—an understanding that perhaps stands most clearly revealed in one of his solitary musings about some characteristics of barbarous people:

His attention had been drawn to a slumbering negress, partly disclosed through the lacework of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under

never identified. Is he Melville speaking his own mind? Among other reasons, the contradictions between some of the narrator's views and the teaching of the tale strongly argue against such a simplistic identification. The narrator's views about blacks (for example, pp. 180 and 199–200) are not that unusual; one might reasonably expect them to be uttered by a typical American of the 1850s. From this perspective, it might be more plausible to see the narrator as an intelligent representative type of that era. Secondly, both the narrator's deceptiveness in mingling his views with Delano's and the similarity of his views with those of the American suggest the possibility that the treatment of Delano may be open to question. If the narrator is being less than candid about Delano, if he is withholding or altering information about the American, the reader will be hampered in his quest for Delano's "true character." It may be, of course, that one of the reasons for the narrator's substitution of his own views for Delano's is to illustrate the pitfalls of tales that are retold. The reteller (in this case, the narrator) may well filter the "facts" through the medium of his own opinions before presenting them to his audience.

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.

The uncommon vigor of the child at length roused the mother. She started up, at a distance facing Captain Delano. But as if not at all concerned at the attitude in which she had been caught, delightedly she caught the child up, with maternal transports, covering it with kisses.

There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love, thought Captain Delano, well pleased.

This incident prompted him to remark the other negresses more particularly than before. He was gratified with their 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 leoparresses; loving as doves ²⁵

This tranquil portrait of the unenlightened "noble savage" in a state of nature is certainly attractive to Delano.²⁶ The peacefulness of the scene is modified, however, by its animal imagery; "doe," "fawn," "dam," "paws," "rooting," "half-grunt," "leopardesses," and "doves." It is important to note that while roughly one-half of these words represent innocence, the other one-half represent savagery. Melville's use of this double-edged imagery suggests his awareness of a duality in nature that Delano does not seem to perceive. The fawn, doe, and dove all represent innocence; however, they are incapable of savagery (or at least effective savagery) even if their lives or the lives of their offspring are at stake. The leopardess, on the other hand, is not helpless in the face of danger; her savagery probably can match that of the fiercest predator. Among her own kind, though, the leopardess can be as "loving as [a] dove."²⁷

Melville's attribution of this dual nature to the "uncivilized [black] women" suggests a questioning of whether human beings possessing this dual or balanced nature can or will survive in "civilization," that is, in the world of white, Christian, Western man. To judge from almost all of the white men portrayed in "Benito Cereno," there is an imbalance between savagery and innocence in their world. Benito Cereno, the physically and spiritually debilitated

25. "Benito Cereno," pp. 174-75 (italics added). These passages are strongly reminiscent of portions of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*. Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), especially pp. 117 and 137.

26. Appropriately, the phrase "there's naked nature" contains the work's central reference to "nature."

27. The savage side of the negresses is revealed by Benito in his deposition. He claims that they "used their utmost influence to have [him] 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" (p. 261).

Spaniard, is forced to masquerade (none too effectively) as a man of power and authority. As we will see, Benito is neither the embodiment of dove-like innocence nor, on the other hand, is he capable of animal savagery. Captain Delano might be said to possess a more nearly balanced nature; however, the predominance of his innocence (in the form of an inability to perceive veiled evil) argues against this view.

One of the few exceptions among the whites is the helmsman, who is described as a "centaur" (that is, one who is half-human and half-beast) and a "grizzly bear" casting "sheep's eyes" (pp. 172-73, 221). These characterizations, coupled with the brief description of his actions while he is being observed by Delano and several of the blacks, suggest that he may indeed possess a balanced nature. He is not a sheep masquerading as a bear, but the reverse. (It is noteworthy that this disguised bear is one of the three whites killed by the attacking sailors during the retaking of the *San Dominick* [p. 244].)

The most prominent example of one who might seem to exhibit an appropriately balanced nature in white civilization is black Babo. Neither his savagery nor the artful innocence with which he covers it can be denied. However, as we will see, it is this veil of feigned innocence which lends considerable credence to the argument that Babo's nature is in fact grossly unbalanced. He is too much savagery and too little true innocence. Nevertheless, Babo's eventual defeat by Delano should not be taken as overwhelming evidence that his nature is not a substantial asset to a black slave in white civilization. But for Benito's impulsive and desperate leap into Delano's boat, Babo probably would have triumphed over the Americans as well.

THE STATESMAN PERSPECTIVE: BENITO CERENO

That Melville attached considerable importance to the character of Benito Cereno can be inferred from several factors. First, of course, is the fact that the work bears his name. Additionally, of the three main characters, the name of this Spanish captain is the only one that Melville has not taken directly from his main source, the real Captain Amasa Delano's narrative.²⁸ Melville alters the name from Bonito Sereno ("Blessed Serenity") to Benito Cereno ("Pallid Benedictine [monk]"). In one sense, it may be that Melville took ironic delight in the original name's meaning, for this Spaniard was hardly characterized by "blessed serenity."²⁹ However, the change to a name having a decidedly Catholic cast is particularly revealing in that it serves to emphasize the religious differences of the three main characters: Captain Amasa Delano hails from Duxbury, Massachusetts, a seafaring town of practical, Protestant Americans; Benito Cereno is a member of an old Catholic Spanish aristocracy; and

28. See Amasa Delano in Gross, p. 80.

29. See Hagopian, p. 151.

Babo, like almost all the other blacks, is evidently a pagan. It is interesting to note that Benito's and Babo's respective religions are the only ones actually practiced in the tale.³⁰ (This, of course, causes Delano and his religion to stand out. Thus, it is the representative of modernity, the American, who has the least association with religious practices. It is also this representative who, in confronting his suspicions on board the *San Dominick*, dismisses them as "superstitions.")

The importance of the linkage of Catholicism with the Spaniard, Benito Cereno, points to another of the major problems treated in the tale, namely, the captivity of a state by a religion. The references to Spain's Charles V in "Benito Cereno" suggest that decay and enervation are related to unfortunate alliances between the political and religious spheres or, perhaps more accurately, conquests of the political sphere by the religious sphere (p. 126). Charles V assumes a position of some prominence due to the fact that he is the only Spaniard among the three actual political rulers mentioned in the tale. (There is substantial textual evidence which supports the suggestion that an 1851 article on Charles V which appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* served Melville as a second source—alongside Delano's *Narrative*—for "Benito Cereno."³¹) The parallels between Emperor Charles V of Spain, who renounced his earthly rule in order to retire to a monastery, and Don Benito Cereno of Chili, who also turned from the world of men to a monastery, are striking. For example, Charles V, after abdicating, decided to reside at a monastery in the Pyrenees.³² Amasa Delano, in approaching the *San Dominick*, thinks it a "whitewashed monastery after a thunderstorm, seen perched upon some dun cliff among the Pyrenees" (p. 113). Charles V, afflicted with debilitating physical weakness, was forced to travel to the monastery "in a litter, and often suffering great pain."³³ Benito Cereno likewise was forced to a litter on which he was carried from the Spanish viceregal courtroom—the symbol of the political world—to the monastery on Mount Agonia (p. 270).

Benito Cereno, the "Pallid Benedictine [monk]," thus could be equated

30. In his deposition, Benito describes how his boatswain, "who knew how to swim, kept the longest above water, making acts of contrition, and, in the last words he uttered, charged this deponent to cause mass to be said for his soul to our Lady of Succour" (p. 254). In the narrative, we read of the blacks having worshipped the beckoning, open sea (p. 240).

31. See William Stirling, "The Cloister-Life of Emperor Charles V.," *Fraser's Magazine*, April and May 1851, pp. 367–80 and 528–45. A discussion of Stirling's work as a source for "Benito Cereno" is found in H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1963), pp. 136–52. However, Hershel Parker, in "'Benito Cereno' and Cloister-Life: A Re-Scrutiny of a 'Source,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 9 (1972), 221–32, argues that Melville may not have drawn upon Stirling's article as a source.

32. Almost from its inception, Charles' reign as the Holy Roman Emperor was beset by strife between the emerging Protestant sect led by Luther and his own Roman Catholic Church. Tormented by gout and his failures to achieve reconciliation between the Protestants and the Catholics by political or military means, Charles abdicated after renouncing his claims to the crowns of various nations during 1555–56. See *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1974 ed.

33. Stirling, p. 370.

with Charles V, the ruler who so delighted "in conversing with the Benedictines."³⁴ By directing attention to the earthly demise of Charles V's great empire, Melville may be emphasizing the way in which religious conflict—or, rather, political involvement in religious conflict—can be decidedly destructive of the possibility of earthly happiness.

This point is ironically made in the gruesome disposition of the corpse of Aranda, the slaves' master. After having had Aranda dragged, half-dead, to the main-deck, Babo witnesses the completion of his murder (p. 253). Overruling the other blacks, Babo mysteriously causes the body to be taken below, after which:

nothing more was seen of it . . . for three days [On] the fourth day at sunrise, the deponent [Benito Cereno] 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 [T]he negro Babo . . . 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" (pp. 253–54).

Melville here arranges a chilling parody of the Resurrection of Christ. However, instead of a flesh, blood, and bones Christ arising from interment, Melville produces only the bones, signifying the emaciated state of Catholic Spain.

There is also considerable significance in the replacement of the original figurehead of Christopher Colon with Aranda-Christ's skeleton. It is Christopher ("Christ-bearer") Colon—"the discoverer of the New World"—who symbolizes innovation, courage, acquisitiveness, and, above all, glory.³⁵ These are precisely the qualities that are considered unimportant or secondary—even undesirable—by the Roman Catholic religion which "captured" Spain. Spain's image of greatness and potential (represented by Christopher Colon) is thus fittingly replaced by one which starkly deemphasizes the physical things of this world.

Aside from the religious symbolism found in the character of Benito Cereno and his ship, the *San Dominick*, the reader is confronted by a considerable enigma in attempting to understand Benito the man. For one thing, the narrator does not directly comment on Benito's innermost thoughts and motivations as he does on Delano's. Additionally, Benito's speeches—with two notable exceptions (pp. 265–66, 267)—are uniformly short and frequently unfinished. Coupled with his real physical dependency on Babo, these things suggest to the reader that the character of Benito Cereno is somehow incomplete.

What is explicitly known about Benito Cereno is that he is a twenty-nine-year-old member of a well-respected, Spanish seafaring family (p. 153). We also know that before the mutiny, he captained a slave-transporter; in all prob-

34. Stirling, p. 543.

35. Melville's references to "New-Found-Land" dogs may be a play on an aspect of this: it is the man from the New Found Land, Delano, who saves those from the Old Land.

ability, he had been so engaged for some time prior to the embarkation of Babo and the other blacks.³⁶

We are given a description of Benito's attire, which is in stark contrast with his physical condition (p. 136). The contrast is duly noted by Delano during his second suspicion and, in another use of graphic animal imagery, the narrator comments on Delano's thoughts:

But the Spaniard was a pale invalid. Never mind. 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 (pp. 153–54).

In reality, of course, Benito Cereno is devoid of "savage energies." Delano, adrift again, is portrayed as being drastically misled by Benito Cereno's appearance. Benito is no centaur or bear casting sheep's eyes; rather, he is a sheep cumbrously masquerading as a bear. His impotence is highlighted by his sword, the empty scabbard of which is later suggestively revealed to have been "artificially stiffened" (p. 269).

In one suspicion (which he never entirely dismisses), Delano, in pondering Benito's debilitated condition, is said by the narrator to think that:

[T]he young captain had not got into command at the hawse-hole, but the cabin-window; and if so, why wonder at incompetence, in youth, sickness, and gentility united? (p. 138).

That Melville intended for Benito Cereno to be seen as a man originally unfit or poorly suited to command can be inferred from the selective use that is made of the words "command" and "commander." Only Delano and Babo are ever portrayed as actually issuing commands (pp. 220–21, 251, 253–55, 260–61). On those few occasions when Benito Cereno feebly hazards giving an order, he does so only at the silent, menacing behest of Babo (pp. 147, 224). It is highly ironic, then, that Delano believes Benito Cereno to be one of those "paper captains" who "has little of command but the name."³⁷

Implicit in this interpretation, of course, is the view that Benito Cereno, unlike Babo and possibly Delano, is not born leader who rules because of a common recognition of his natural superiority. Evidence for this view may be

36. In his deposition, Benito Cereno notes that the blacks, "as is *customary in this navigation*" slept on deck (p. 250, italics added). He also states that because Aranda "told him that they were all tractable . . . none wore fetters." If Aranda believed this, he obviously would not bring fetters with him. However, after the uprising, the blacks were shackled (pp. 246 and 263). Delano, captain of a sealer, probably would not have had such items on the *Bachelor's Delight*, conceivably, the chains were secured from the *San Dominick*, which had them on board from previous voyages.

37. "Benito Cereno," p. 141. The irony is heightened when it is later revealed that Benito does, indeed, hold his office by a paper grant—the result of a written agreement with Babo (p. 255).

found in the division of the work itself. The first three-fourths of the narrative is devoted to a presentation of Babo's control of the situation. His "rival" in this matter (which is not a charade—Babo's control is quite real) is Delano, who narrowly succeeds in discovering and crushing the rebellion. It is Delano, a man of action, who conquers Babo, a leader par excellence, and recovers Benito Cereno's "command" for him. The last quarter of the work is primarily devoted to a selective presentation of legal evidence (Benito's deposition) from a court of law. Even here, the word of Benito Cereno is momentarily doubted (p. 247).

The statement of Benito before the viceregal court at Lima differs from the narrative which precedes it in several ways. In the case of the narrative, we are confronted with a narrator who recounts events which have already occurred—events to which he may or may not have been a witness. Here the reader is, at the very least, two stages removed from the actual events: he is reading an account of events distanced from him both by time and by the selective medium of the narrator. In the case of the deposition, however, the reader is even further removed from the actual events. First, the events described have already occurred and, hence, are not directly verifiable by the reader. Second, the deposition is one man's version of those events. Third, that man's version is transcribed for the court by a notary. Fourth, because that man's version was taken down in Spanish, it was necessary for the narrator to translate it into English. Finally, the document is selectively extracted and presented (not necessarily sequentially) by the narrator.

The deposition, then, is more removed from that reality which it purports to describe than is the narrative. Despite (or because of) the distancing involved in the deposition, the narrator advises that it may serve as the "key" to the narrative. This claim comes after the deposition has dispassionately revealed instances of some of the most horrendous, inhuman, and pitiful actions men have ever committed against their fellow men. On the basis of this document—a statement devoid of the human passions and sentiments which animate the actions of most men—a court of law is presumed to be able to reach a reasoned judgment on the most passion-laden questions men can ever confront, namely, should certain men be enslaved and should certain men live or die? Thus, in order for ordinary men—men like Benito Cereno and the judges of the Lima court—to enter into the philosopher's realm of reason, all elements not properly belonging to that realm (for example, passion and spirit) have to be forcefully dampened and excluded from it. This is a task, however, that is not only exceedingly difficult for ordinary human beings to accomplish, but one that may produce inappropriate solutions for the political community's fundamental problems. In other words, there may be cases in which unadulterated reason cannot (or should not) be achieved by men. There also may be cases which deserve—even demand—more than reason. The matter of the enslavement of human beings goes against reason, but reason (if one is to judge by

slavery's longevity) often goes unheeded and, hence, is insufficient to overcome slavery. One thing that is needed is an alliance of reason with a noble passion that cries out against slavery in terms that cannot fail to affect most men. Melville's implication, therefore, would seem to be that the problem of slavery cannot be properly decided by the law; its ultimate resolution lies in the political realm, where the passions, opinions, and prejudices of the citizenry largely dictate what is and is not feasible.

The matter of the deposition's omissions seems to bear on this problem of the proper forum for the resolution of political questions. By means of being quite selective in presenting one man's version of what transpired prior to the point at which the narrative began, Melville may be attempting to emphasize the extremely limited nature of legal proceedings. For instance, there is a real possibility that Benito Cereno may be as selective as the narrator is in telling his story; in short, he (as well as the narrator) may be lying. By the very nature of legal proceedings, the volume and the number of sources of information which the court will accept are limited. From this narrow range of information, however, a court of law frequently makes decisions which have the most profound consequences for the political community—the place where opinions, passions, prejudices, and spiritedness generally have a say equal to, if not greater than, that of reason.

What we do know about the courtroom—and the law it represents—is that it is the origin of Benito Cereno's authority. The court's authority is distinguished from that of Babo only in the sense that it is further removed from its foundation: force. Babo and the other blacks were enslaved by force and their enslavement was maintained by authority of the law. Babo uses force to discard his bondage and, in turn, to enslave the whites. In a sense, Benito's and Babo's paper agreement constitutes the imposition of law: Babo agrees to sheath his sword in return for the whites' acquiescence to his will (p. 255). In both cases of enslavement, force is the source of one race's rule over the other.

The court is also representative of the world where paper titles (of which Benito's family has several [p. 153]) are dispensed and upheld; it is here that Benito Cereno's version of what transpired on board the *San Dominick* is finally accepted and here that punishment is meted out to those who transgressed against the law. Consequently, it is here that one must consider the question of justice, that is, in which case—that of Babo's revolt or that of the court's punishment—is justice done? An argument can be made that the blacks' savagery is merely retaliatory; that it is the swift punishment of the perpetrators of an enormous wrong—enslavement—that had been and was still being inflicted upon them. In regard to some of the excesses that occurred during the uprising, one could argue that, while not excusable, they are reflections of the possibility that great evils sometimes may require the commission of even greater evils if the initial ones are to be overcome. Thus, the slaves believed

that they had to kill Aranda in order to ensure that their liberty would have more permanence (p. 252). Since there is no question that, up until the time of the revolt, the blacks, by being enslaved, had been grievously wronged, and that the whites on board the *San Dominick* were, to various degrees, the perpetrators of that wrong, the slaves' initial revolt may be seen as the imposition of a form of expedient, absolute justice.

The ultimate return to "legal justice"—the imposition of punishment after a set and ponderous procedure of ascertaining guilt—might be seen as a necessary response to the excesses occurring during the revolt.³⁸ Alternatively, it could be seen as an abrogation of absolute justice and a reimposition of the unjust rule of the whites. Some support for this latter view can be found in the fact that the only accounts of the revolt given to the court are provided by white men, particularly by Benito Cereno (pp. 247–48).

The reader does not know what Benito's view on the enslavement of black men was prior to the revolt. As previously mentioned, however, he participated in the slave trade by captaining a slave-transporter. Since Benito Cereno had come from a wealthy family (p. 153) and undoubtedly had not been compelled to participate in the slave trade by economic necessity, any moral reservations he may have had about that occupation were insufficient to prevent him from becoming involved in it. This fact alone should suffice to cast doubt on the simplistic view that Benito Cereno "belongs to [the] group of good, harmless men and women."³⁹

At the conclusion of the narrative, the reader sees that Benito Cereno, despite having been liberated from the rebels, continues to suffer from a physical and spiritual collapse so complete that he is unable even to bear the sight of his former master, Babo (pp. 239, 269). After his rescue of Benito, Delano cries, "[Y]ou are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?" The Spaniard mournfully replies, "The negro" (p. 268). This response could be interpreted to mean that Benito has finally discerned what Delano has not, namely, that the enslavement of either race is wrong. Both Benito and Babo have now experienced what Delano has not: freedom and enslavement. They have seen both sides and have lived to tell of their experiences. One problem, however, is that neither one of them really does tell. Babo becomes completely mute upon being reenslaved. While Benito, on the other hand, renders a statement of the events when he is liberated, he expresses neither approval nor disapproval of slavery. Benito's silence—his failure to make a passionate outcry against slavery—may be the result of the horrors he has experienced as a slave of the blacks: "—Oh, my God! rather than pass through what I have, with joy I would have hailed the most terrible gales; but—" (p. 132).

38. This view is similar to that advanced by Abraham Lincoln in the Lyceum Speech of January 27, 1838. Cf. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy Basler (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), I, pp. 108–15.

39. Feltenstein, p. 252.

One could also see Benito Cereno's response to Babo as an indication that he is still subjugated, that he remains in awe of the black's will. Benito Cereno has real cause to fear the black, for his experiences have convinced him that the negroes are capable of inflicting great harm in order to win their freedom. The shadow of the negro looms so large over Benito and the other (presumably unsuspecting) whites that Benito withdraws not only from the slave trade, but also from the world; accompanied by the monk Infelez (Unhappy), he enters a monastery on Mt. Agonia (Agony), where, after three months of suffering, he dies (p. 270).

THE STATESMAN PERSPECTIVE: BABO

Babo has been preemptorily dismissed by one commentator who contends that, "as his name suggests [Babo] is just an animal, a mutinous baboon. . ."⁴⁰ While it is true that the name may have connotations of barbarism, it is also true that Melville deliberately enlarges the role that the real Babo played in the revolt to the point where every act, every atrocity of the rebellion is now directly attributable to the "negro Babo."⁴¹ Benito Cereno's deposition even states that it was by Babo's command that the Ashantee Yan "prepar[ed]" the skeleton of Don Alexandro Aranda "in a way . . . so long as reason is left him, [he] can never divulge" (p. 260).

There does, therefore, seem to be some support for this view. What, then, does the careful reader do with the fact that it is Babo who formulates and orchestrates the incredible charade in which the whites are made to appear to be still in control and the blacks to be in loose captivity? This charade is accomplished, furthermore, with a cast of negroes ranging from the rawest savages (the Ashantees) to venerable patriarchs (Dago and the oakum-pickers) and an ex-king (Atufal). Additionally, it requires the willing or unwilling connivance of the whites, some of whom (for example, Don Joaquin and Luys Galgo) are men of intelligence and courage. Finally, the planning and preparation for the complex deception were done within the two or three hour period of time between the *San Dominick's* entrance into the harbor of St. Maria and Delano's coming on board. The qualities of intellect and leadership required to stage this charade successfully are not those one would associate with "just an animal." Babo, "that hive of subtlety," is neither a baboon nor an ordinary human being.

It has also been remarked that Babo is "hatred for the happiness of hatred, evil for the sake of evil."⁴² Babo's previously discussed veiled savagery lends

40. Stanley T. Williams, "'Follow Your Leader': Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 23 (1947), 73.

41. Cf. Delano in Gross, pp. 83-89.

42. Williams, p. 75.

some support to this view. He could even be seen as Satan incarnate.⁴³ The question then becomes, Why is he evil? I have already suggested that Babo is inflicting retaliatory evil, which may require the use of an even greater evil than that which it seeks to overcome. This is a considerable part of Babo's role, but, as with Babo himself, there are more subtleties involved.

One way of commencing an examination of Babo is to observe the similarities between the character of Babo and that of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Both of these characters—white Iago with black Othello and black Babo with white Benito—are exceedingly private individuals who, through their great duplicity, bring important political figures to ruin.⁴⁴ Babo, occupying the humble office of a valet, deceitfully overcomes, manipulates, and eventually destroys the supreme political leader of the *San Dominick*—Benito Cereno, the commander of the ship. Iago, playing the part of a faithful counselor, is ultimately responsible for the destruction of Othello's love for Desdemona, Desdemona herself, Othello's position in Venice, and finally Othello himself. Both of these weavers of evil stubbornly refuse to utter a single word when their crimes are discovered and they are captured:⁴⁵

[Iago] works like a confidence man; only the quality intrinsic to the one he tempts enables him to succeed. He is a faithful mirror of all around him; he adapts himself to those with whom he speaks. In a sense, we would not know the other characters in the play without Iago. We would see them only as they appear in ordinary life, without penetrating the masks that conceal their real natures. Iago alone lets us know from the outset those weaknesses in others that would otherwise stand unrevealed until the crises of their lives. Iago shows the hidden necessity in men, the things they care about most; he has a diabolic insight.⁴⁶

Like Iago, Babo acts as a mirror, reflecting back both to Delano and to the reader what each wants to see.

It is slavery itself, however, which must bear some of the responsibility for Babo's own acquiescence to and, finally, participation in the brutish treat-

43 One of the most remarkable ironies in Melville's tale is the way in which the pagan Babo, on board the namesake of the Dominicans' patron saint, plays the part of Satan to its fullest, inflicting inhuman tortures on the Spanish Catholics in a manner reminiscent of the Dominicans' tortures of pagans and heretics. This irony reaches its height when Babo "tortures" Benito Cereno in the cuddy, which is furnished with reminders of the Inquisitions (pp. 197–98). The Inquisitions, although later expanded to include trials of political as well as religious heretics, originally were directed against followers of the various Manichaeic sects. These sects were composed of believers in a fundamental duality of good and evil in the world. For them Satan was a coruler of men with Christ.

44 I owe recognition of the similarities between Babo and Iago to Arthur L. Vogelbeck, "Shakespeare and Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *Modern Language Notes*, 67 (1952), 113–16.

45 Cf. "Benito Cereno," p. 269, and William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Alvin Kernan (New York: New American Library, 1963), v.ii.300.

46 Allan Bloom, "Cosmopolitan Man and the Political Community: *Othello*," in Allan Bloom with Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), p. 39. Portions of the following discussion owe much to Bloom's treatment of Iago.

ment of the whites once they are enslaved by the blacks. To understand this, one must ask what it is that enables one group to identify, label, and treat another group as inferior. The answer lies in the former group's recognition of real or imagined dissimilarity between itself and the other group. In order to treat one another as equals, it is necessary that both groups readily be perceived to be alike in certain crucial ways. Thus, sentient men distinguish themselves from sentient animals by acknowledging such things as the latter's lack of reason and speech. Consequently, men neither extend the same rights to brutes as they do to their fellow men nor do they recognize any duties to them.⁴⁷

When the Christian Western world reintroduced slavery, it concentrated on enslaving some men who would always be physically distinguishable from their masters. In so doing, it drastically affected both the character of slavery itself and the consequences which ultimately would follow from that institution for the Christian West. The ease with which one could perceive unlikeness between the black slaves and the white masters is one explanation why many whites could consider the blacks to be inferiors and to act on that perception.⁴⁸ This same perceived unlikeness, undoubtedly augmented by the remembrance of past inhuman actions by the whites, may explain some of the blacks' inhumanity to the whites when the roles of master and slave are reversed. It might even be said that the whites' previous treatment of the blacks as less than men limited their own claims to humane treatment when the blacks became the masters.⁴⁹

Slavery has convinced Babo of the malignity of white men; consequently, he exhibits no qualms about using horrendous means to control them. By forcing everyone on board the *San Dominick* to appear to be what they are not (that is, black free men to appear to be slaves and white slaves to appear to be free men), Babo hopes to use them in order to advance his own purposes. Babo has only one none-too-realizable desire: to reach Senegal or some other free negro state. Of course, it may be that Babo uses this goal as a means of securing the ready compliance of the other blacks. Some of Babo's actions—his failure to order the *San Dominick* to flee when Delano's ship is first sighted; his suicidal leap into Delano's boat—suggest that one of his main goals was to punish whites for their parts in or acquiescence to the evil of slavery. Thus, when the ostensible goal of reaching Senegal is denied him by

47. For a discussion of the connection between a recognition of likeness and the extension of rights, see Joseph Cropsey, "The Right of Foreign Aid," in his *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 191–94.

48. Consider the equation of Babo with a shepherd's dog and Delano's naive perception of blacks as relatively care-free (and, hence, thought-free), happy-go-lucky individuals. See "Benito Cereno," pp. 120 and 199–201.

49. We are not told of any inhumane actions inflicted by the whites on the blacks prior to the revolt. However, judging by the whites' actions once they are again the masters, the reader is left with no doubts as to the whites' ability to act brutishly. See "Benito Cereno," p. 263.

Benito Cereno's flight, Babo abandons the other rebels in order to seek "the centred purpose of his soul" (p. 237): the destruction of Benito Cereno, the principal representative of white malignity toward blacks aboard the *San Dominick*, in body as well as in spirit.

That Babo ultimately is captured and fails to reach Senegal may have been inevitable. His knowledge as well as his deeds now make him unfit to dwell with other men in a political community. What I have referred to as his dual (and unbalanced) nature is an incongruous combination of the lowest and the highest attributes of man, either alone of which would be sufficient reason to exclude him from that community. After his capture, of course, Babo chooses to exclude himself by remaining mute. Deprived of the opportunity to seek redress through his deeds, Babo refuses to seek it through words.⁵⁰ His muteness, therefore, may be the result of a recognition on his part that no amount of persuasive speech could move the white man to act justly toward the black man. Consequently, force may be the blacks' only recourse. (It is interesting to note that Benito Cereno reacts in a similar manner when he is totally subject to the rule of the blacks: his "muteness" is consistent with the conduct of a man who has little reason to expect that words will alter his captors' treatment of him [pp. 126–27].)

There are other facets to the character of Babo which deserve some attention. Of particular interest is the manner in which Babo establishes a degree of order among the blacks and whites on board the *San Dominick*. He appoints four elderly caulkers who sit picking oakum while overseeing the deck and attempting, with words, to maintain discipline (pp. 118–19, 257). Additionally, he stations six "raw" Ashantee warriors at an equal height above the deck and sets them to polishing hatchets (pp. 119, 257). The result is a combina-

50. In a sense, Babo's muteness in the face of the white man's injustice is a confirmation of his unfitness for civil society. Aristotle states that "speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities." See *Politics* 1253a12–18.

There is also another possible explanation of Babo's muteness. Montaigne, an author with whom Melville was reasonably familiar (see Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading* [Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966], p. 80), wrote an interesting essay entitled "Of Cannibals" (see Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, *Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1957], pp. 150–59), which bears on the civilization–barbarism issue. Montaigne describes how certain South American savages, when captured, would refuse to acknowledge defeat or to give evidence of fear. Babo's muteness might be construed as such defiance. Additionally, Montaigne relates that the conquerors eventually would cannibalize their captives in order to exhibit the utmost contempt for them. The cannibalization of Aranda by the black savages certainly might be perceived as an instance of such contempt.

It is appropriate to note that Melville's first novel, *Typee*, treats the civilization–barbarism issue within the context of a white sailor living among cannibals. For a thoughtful interpretation of this work, see Thomas J. Scorza, "Tragedy in the State of Nature: Melville's *Typee*," *Interpretation*, 8, No. 1 (January 1979), 103–20.

tion of persuasion and force: if the caulkers should prove insufficient (as they eventually did), the warriors could be unleashed.⁵¹ The omnipresent threat of force—which Delano continually feels (pp. 139–40, 143)—underscores the previous discussion about its being the foundation upon which both the whites and the blacks successively rule one another.⁵²

That this arrangement of the oakum-pickers and the hatchet-polishers is not entirely satisfactory is apparent from the disruptions that occur (for example, the knifing of the cabin-boy and the stomping of the sailor). These events are not overlooked by a reproachful Delano (pp. 124, 140–41, 167). The problem is that the threat of force is directed only against the whites; the blacks have only the admonitions of the oakum-pickers and a recognition of the desperation of their situation to deter them. The passions of the moment can and do overcome these restraints, with the inevitable results that Delano witnesses. Of course, the separation of the elements of persuasion and force may be a reflection of the confidence that Babo has in his fellow blacks. If so, the fact that the disruptions were comparatively few in number during Delano's twelve hours or so on board would seem to indicate that this confidence was not entirely misplaced.

However, when one looks at the excesses of the blacks during the revolt and for days afterwards, as well as at the tumult on board the *San Dominick* when Babo abandons it, it is possible to see that the self-control of many of the blacks is negligible. Of course, one should not wonder at this fact in men who (aside from Atufal) have probably never known self-rule in their lives. The blacks' unsuitability for self-rule only serves to make Babo's failure to provide an effective police force all the more remarkable. This failure recalls Fleece's enforced sermon to the sharks in *Moby Dick*:

Your woraciousness, fellow-critters, I don't blame ye so much for; dat is natur, and can't be helped; but to govern dat wicked natur, dat is de pint. You is sharks, sartin; but if you govern de shark in you, why den you be angel; for all angel is not'ing more dan de shark well governed. ⁵³

That order is maintained at all may be due primarily to the fact that Babo is a natural leader. His leadership is so complete that even the ex-king of his own country acquiesces to his will (even though Babo, by his own claim, was a slave in that same land).⁵⁴ Atufal, the magnificently proportioned giant garbed in false chains who evokes the awe of the sight-loving Delano, proves to be only the lieutenant of the small-statured, wily Babo.⁵⁵ Melville's continual em-

51. Compare with Socrates' enforced detention by Polemarchus' slave (*Republic* 327b).

52. See pp. 62–63 of this article.

53. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick: An Authoritative Text: Reviews and Letters by Melville; Analogues and Sources; Criticism*, ed. Harrison Hanford and Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), p. 251.

54. The narrator describes Atufal as Babo's "countryman" (p. 147). It is also carefully stated that Babo is a native of Senegal (pp. 249–50).

55. Again, there is abundant irony in Delano's good-humored references to the sight-loving Africans; it is Delano who is easily seduced by sights (pp. 192, 204).

phasis on the misleading nature of appearance as opposed to reality takes on added import here. This disparity is easily seen in the image of the humble, faithful slave and his "bitter hard" but feeble master. This image assumes ironic proportions in a scene where Benito, unbeknownst to Delano, is being menacingly shaved by Babo. According to the narrator, Delano believes he sees the slave "evinced the hand of a master" while calmly making Benito "the creature of his own tasteful hands" (p. 209). Babo, of course, *is* the master and Benito the slave; up until the moment Benito escaped, Babo, the "Nubian sculptor," readily could have "finish[ed] . . . off [the] pale and rigid white statute-head" at any time. As this situation symbolically indicates, Babo holds in his hands the greatest earthly power over everyone on board the *San Dominick*—that of life and death. In short, Babo is a tyrant. In him, not in Benito, is "lodged a dictatorship beyond which, while at sea, there was no earthly appeal" (p. 126).

The irony in Benito's apparent dictatorship and Babo's actual one is deftly developed in his memorable shaving scene. With few exceptions, up until this point the narrator generally has confined himself to comments about Delano's state of mind; here, however, he seems to interject some of his own views about blacks. The manner in which he does so, however, appears intended to leave the impression that the expressed views are Delano's. The deception is plausible because the narrator's views do not seem to be out of character for the American. The narrator states that:

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 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 blind 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. 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? (pp. 199–200).

When viewed from the perspective of what is really happening in the shaving scene—Babo is completely in control and is secretly terrorizing Benito—the irony of the narrator's comments is almost overwhelming. Babo is very far from being an "indisputable inferior"; contrary to the narrator's statement, Babo is proof that whatever is "in the negro," it is not something which "exempts him from the inflicted sourness of the morbid or cynical mind."

Melville's portrait of Babo is a study in contrasts: master and slave, feared tyrant and worshipping subject, evil-doer and savior. At the very least, Babo's possession of tyrannical power suggests the possibility that such power eventually may (have to) be used against the whites who would reenslave the blacks. This dire prospect brings to mind Yoomy's speech in *Mardi*, which contains forebodings of retaliatory evil:

Pray, heaven! they may yet find a way to loose their bonds without one drop of blood. But hear me, Oro! were there no other way, and should their masters not relent, all honest hearts must cheer this tribe of Hamo on; though they cut their chains with blades thrice edged, and gory to the haft! 'Tis right to fight for freedom, whoever be the thrall.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

The interaction of Babo, Benito Cereno, and Amasa Delano is imbued by Melville with a sense of fatalism. Each character has an opportunity to avoid the course of action he ultimately follows; each one brusquely rejects any other alternative. Benito Cereno could have prevented the uprising altogether by insisting that the slaves wear fetters, as would seem to have been "customary." Instead, he serenely accepts his friend's word that the one hundred and sixty blacks (who outnumber the whites by nearly four to one) are tractable (p. 250). Babo could have accepted the counsel of his former king, Atufal, and immediately sailed away from St. Maria after the American ship was sighted in the harbor (p. 256). In so doing, he would have avoided contact with Delano and the *Bachelor's Delight*, and he might have succeeded in reaching Senegal. Delano could have heeded the worried advice of his mate and refrained from offering his personal assistance to the *San Dominick* (p. 112).

Melville seems to have intended to leave the reader with the foreboding that the clash between whites and blacks, masters and slaves (or apparent masters and apparent slaves) is unavoidable. The image of an inevitable linkage—one that is in some ways mutually supportive as well as potentially destructive—is vividly apparent in the leave-taking scene at the *San Dominick's* gangway:

And so, still presenting himself as a crutch, and walking between the two captains, he [Babo] advanced with them towards the gangway: while still, as if full of kindly contrition, Don Benito would not let go the hand of Captain Delano, but retained it in his, across the black's body.⁵⁷

56. Herman Melville, *Mardi and a Voyage Thither*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1970), p. 533.

57. "Benito Cereno," p. 233. In the context, the implication seems to be that the two captains are being "braced up" by the black. Taken a step further, one could see the black's supporting role as symbolic of the crucial part slaves played in the development of the Spanish-American and American regimes.

The relations between the races on board the *San Dominick* all occur within the enveloping embrace of slavery. It is in the role of masters that members of each race are the most inhuman to each other. Thus, on the part of the blacks, we are told of horrifying actions taken against the subdued whites: trussed, wounded Spaniards are hurled alive into the sea; noblemen are hacked to death in their beds; one white man is presumably cannibalized. The conduct of the whites, once they are again the masters, is distinguishable only by degree: after having inflicted the most hideous wounds on the blacks with long-edged sealing spears, the whites shackle them to the ship's deck, where they evidently languish, for no mention is made of medical treatment; while shackled, several of the blacks are brutally murdered by vengeful whites.⁵⁸ The cause of this inhuman treatment of fellow human beings is perhaps best summed up in a statement Captain Delano makes in the wake of the earlier shaving scene: "Ah, this slavery breeds ugly passions in man" (pp. 210–11).

As for the rebellion itself, its end may seem to have been foreordained when Delano, after first Benito Cereno and then Babo leap into the boat, appears to imitate the *San Dominick's* stern-piece:⁵⁹

At this juncture, the left hand of Captain Delano, on one side, again clutched the half-reclined Don Benito, heedless that he was in a speechless faint, while his right foot, on the other side, ground the prostrate negro; and his right arm pressed for added speed on the after[-]oar, his eye bent forward, encouraging his men to their utmost (pp. 236–37).

However, there are several discrepancies between the scene in the boat and that depicted on the stern-piece. The most obvious one is that, up until the penultimate moment, Delano is unable to distinguish the conqueror from the conquered, for he pins both Benito Cereno and Babo to the boat's bottom. He is convinced that both master and slave are allied against him. Additionally, the stern-piece's victorious figure is described as being "dark": both Delano and Benito are members of the "pale" white race. The suggestion that Delano's victory may be illusory (like his perceptions on board the *San Dominick*) is fortified when one considers the "satyr." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, satyrs are "one of a class of woodland gods or demons, in form partly human and partly bestial, supposed to be companions of Bacchus" (italics added).

I have already discussed how Melville uses animal imagery to emphasize the duality of man's nature. In this portrait of a victorious satyr, he adds an

58. "Benito Cereno," pp. 253, 260, and 262–64. The actions of the freed blacks and whites toward each other perhaps should be seen in the light of Delano's earlier reflection that there "are peculiar natures on whom prolonged physical suffering seems to cancel every social instinct of kindness" (p. 125). Two questions immediately suggest themselves: What are those peculiar natures? And, would Delano's responses to the blacks (and to the whites) have been different had he been a newly-freed slave?

59. "[U]ppermost and central of which [stern-piece] was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked." "Benito Cereno," p. 115.

ironic element. Consider the image of one of these supposedly lustful, playful followers of Bacchus triumphing over a formidable opponent in a physical conflict. Then turn to the narrator's description of the negro as one having "the great gift of good-humor . . . a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune" (p. 200). According to the stern-piece and the reality aboard the *San Dominick*, the carefree satyr and the cheerful negro are not what they seem to be. The "masked . . . dark satyr" is Babo, who, unmasked (and perhaps knowing to whom the ultimate victory belongs), later "met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" after being beheaded (p. 270).