

Interpretation

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- 3 *Matthew S. Brogdon* “Who Would Be Free, Themselves Must Strike the Blow”: Revolt and Rhetoric in Douglass’s *Heroic Slave* and Melville’s *Benito Cereno*
- 25 *Ariel Helfer* Socrates’s Political Legacy: Xenophon’s Socratic Characters in *Hellenica* I and II
- 49 *Lorraine Smith Pangle* The Radicalness of Strauss’s *On Tyranny*
- 67 *David Polansky & Daniel Schillinger* With Steel or Poison: Machiavelli on Conspiracy
- 87 *Ingrid Ashida* **Book Reviews:** *Persian Letters* by Montesquieu
- 93 *Kevin J. Burns* *Legacies of Losing in American Politics* by Jeffrey Tulis and Nicole Mellow
- 97 *Peter Busch* *Montesquieu and the Despotic Ideas of Europe* by Vickie B. Sullivan
- 103 *Rodrigo Chacón* *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* by Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro
- 109 *Bernard J. Dobski* *Shakespeare’s Thought: Unobserved Details and Unsuspected Depths in Thirteen Plays* by David Lowenthal
- 119 *Elizabeth C’ de Baca Eastman* *The Woman Question in Plato’s “Republic”* by Mary Townsend
- 125 *Michael P. Foley* *The Fragility of Consciousness: Faith, Reason, and the Human Good* by Frederick Lawrence
- 129 *Raymond Hain* *The New Testament: A Translation* by David Bentley Hart
- 135 *Thomas R. Pope* *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* by Brian A. Smith
- 141 *Lewis Hoss* **Doubting Progress: Two Reviews**
147 *Eno Trimçev* *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and Its Critics* by Matthew W. Slaboch

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Inquiries ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798

email interpretation@baylor.edu

**“Who Would Be Free, Themselves Must Strike the Blow”:
Revolt and Rhetoric in Douglass’s
Heroic Slave and Melville’s *Benito Cereno***

MATTHEW S. BROGDON

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO

Matthew.Brogdon@utsa.edu

Abstract: This essay considers two works of fiction to assess the merits of private violence as a responsible form of political action. Frederick Douglass’s *Heroic Slave* holds up a slave named Madison Washington, the leader of the successful uprising on the slave ship *Creole*, as an exemplar of the responsible use of violence. Herman Melville’s better-known *Benito Cereno* recounts the aftermath of a similar uprising on a Spanish slave-ship. But Melville’s story, while sympathetic to the plight of the oppressed, suggests that efforts to combat oppression through private violence are potentially tragic. Douglass’s acceptance of violent revolt as a means of liberation and progress rests on his assumption that rhetorical leadership can effectively constrain the passions. By contrast, Melville’s work challenges the assumption that, even in a just cause, private violence can be employed with this sort of dignified self-restraint or validate the claim of the oppressed to their natural rights.

This essay treats Frederick Douglass’s *Heroic Slave* and Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* as specimens of American political thought, utilizing them to assess the merits of private violence—that is, violence employed by one not acting on behalf of the state—as a responsible form of political action.¹ Published in 1853, Douglass’s tale recounts and greatly embellishes the 1841 slave uprising on the schooner *Creole*, holding up the leader of the revolt, a slave named Madison Washington, as an exemplar of the responsible use

¹ I am indebted to the many students with whom I have read these texts in my courses and to a number of colleagues for their helpful comments and suggestions, including Mary Mathie, Diana Schaub, Steve Amberg, Brad Thayer, Tim McCarty, and the journal’s anonymous reviewers.

of violence.² Herman Melville's better-known *Benito Cereno*, published two years later, recounts the aftermath of a similar slave uprising on a Spanish ship. However, Melville's story, while sympathetic to the plight of the oppressed, suggests that efforts to combat oppression through private violence are essentially tragic.

The point of difference between Douglass and Melville is not merely about the efficacy and propriety of violence as a means of liberation. It is, more fundamentally, about the role of persuasive oratory as a necessary precondition for the responsible and disciplined use of violence. Douglass's acceptance of violent revolt as a means of liberation rests on his assumption that rhetorical leadership can effectively constrain the passions. By contrast, Melville's work powerfully challenges the assumption that, even in a just cause, private violence is susceptible to this sort of dignified self-restraint and sufficient to win recognition for the natural rights of the oppressed from their oppressors.

While I place Melville's tale in dialogue with Douglass's *Heroic Slave*, I am not advancing the historical claim that Melville conceived of *Benito Cereno* as a response to Douglass. There is no direct evidence from Melville's utterances that indicates such an intent, but it is possible and even likely that he would have encountered Douglass's novella given the literary attention they paid to each other throughout the early 1850s. Melville had encountered Douglass's work, particularly the *Narrative*, in the 1840s and it seems to have exerted some influence on his own writing.³ Douglass had in turn reprinted passages from Melville's works and featured reviews of them in his own paper, the *North Star*.⁴ Later, in 1855, *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* featured a positive review of Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in the same issue with one of the installments of Melville's *Benito Cereno*.⁵ As Robert K. Wallace notes, "Douglass and Melville moved in physical proximity between 1840 and 1850 and in mutual awareness between 1847 and 1855."⁶

² Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003), 219–46 (hereafter cited in the text as *HS*).

³ John Ernest, "Revolutionary Fictions and Activist Labor: Looking for Douglass and Melville Together," in *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 19–38; William Gleason, "Volcanoes and Meteors: Douglass, Melville, and the Poetics of Insurrection," in *ibid.*, 110–33; Sterling Stuckey, "Cheer and Gloom: Douglass and Melville on Slave Dance and Music," in *ibid.*, 69–87.

⁴ For example, *The North Star* reprinted "Tattooing" from *Typee*, June 2, 1848.

⁵ *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, November 1855, 547, 467–71.

⁶ Robert K. Wallace, *Douglass and Melville: Anchored Together in Neighborly Style* (New Bedford,

Of particular salience is their common concern with the political and moral problems attending the enforcement of the fugitive slave law. Melville's father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, played a formative role in the way these questions played out in public discourse and in the careers of Melville and Douglass. As chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court from 1830 to 1860, Shaw at first earned an antislavery reputation for seizing on every opportunity to manumit slaves brought voluntarily by their masters into Massachusetts, thus laying the foundation for what became known as “liberty laws” in the free states. Then, in the 1840s and 1850s, Shaw found himself at odds with abolitionists over his strict adherence to the dictates of the federal fugitive slave laws. Douglass's role as a prominent abolitionist had its origin during the 1842 controversy over the rendition of George Latimer under the fugitive slave law, a case over which Shaw presided and in which Melville later took a retrospective interest. For the most part, Douglass invested his time in leading public rallies and giving speeches during the Latimer affair, but on at least one occasion William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* (which closely covered the controversy) published his remarks on behalf of Latimer alongside a defense of Shaw's judicial duty to enforce the fugitive slave law irrespective of his personal convictions. A decade later, after Melville and Douglass had gained a mutual awareness of one another, Shaw would again prove a linkage between them when he sent Thomas Sims of Boston back to slavery in Georgia under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Douglass's paper covered the case extensively and Douglass himself featured it in his vocal opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act, while Melville increasingly embedded the conflict between natural justice and positive law in his novels.⁷ Shaw's insistence on the judicial duty to administer positive law faithfully even when in conflict with natural justice gave rise to a central debate in American constitutionalism that, according to Robert Cover and William Weicek, finds its most profound treatment in *Billy Budd*.⁸ While the physical proximity, mutual awareness, and common concerns of Douglass and Melville are insufficient grounds for treating them as being self-consciously in dialogue with each other, these considerations do at least strengthen the rationale for treating them together where

MA: Spinner Publications, 2005), 3.

⁷ Robert K. Wallace, “Fugitive Justice: Douglass, Shaw, and Melville,” in Levine and Otter, *Douglass and Melville*, 50–51, 60–61.

⁸ Robert M. Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 1–7; William Weicek, “Lawyers, Abolitionists, and the Problem of Unjust Laws,” in *Antislavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists*, ed. Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 234–35.

the particular works in question share so similar a subject matter as do the *Heroic Slave* and *Benito Cereno*.

The remainder of the essay proceeds in three sections. I first set the scene with a brief account of slave uprisings in the United States and its neighboring territories. This discussion imparts some of the background knowledge that Douglass and Melville would have taken for granted in their antebellum audience. I then turn in successive sections to consider Douglass's and Melville's tales.

SLAVE UPRISING

The works under consideration here are based to varying degrees on actual slave uprisings at sea that had, as part of a long-running series of slave revolts in the United States and Haiti, captured public attention, prodding the American conscience and stoking public anxiety over the fate of slaves and slaveholders. A brief account of these violent episodes will furnish some context for the ensuing treatment of Melville's and Douglass's fictionalized accounts.

Two slave revolts in particular loomed large in the public mind. The Haitian Revolution began in 1791 in the French colony of Sainte-Domingue and eventually produced the independent Republic of Haiti after a thirteen-year struggle. For much of that time, the revolution proceeded under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave. While it was successful considered in terms of its political result, the protracted conflict rivaled the brutality of the French Revolution. While the scenes of the Haitian Revolution lingered long in the American imagination, it would be overshadowed by Nat Turner's revolt in Southampton, Virginia, in 1831. Turner's three-day rampage began with four accomplices and grew to a force of seventy or more. Convinced that, like Moses and Joshua, he was carrying out a divine command, Turner's band went from house to house, murdering every white person they could find, without regard to age or sex. His own chilling account of the killing spree, dictated to his lawyer, describes the methodical braining of defenseless families in their beds and of infants in their cribs. The fifty-seven victims even included ten children they encountered playing in a schoolyard and the elderly woman supervising them.⁹

Slave uprisings at sea were of particular interest, for they tended to incite diplomatic controversies between slaveholding and free nations and

⁹ *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, reprinted in *The Long Walk to Freedom: Runaway Slave Narratives*, ed. Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (Boston: Beacon, 2012), 125–42.

protracted legal disputes arising from the ambivalence of international law toward slavery. The 1840s witnessed two cases pertinent to our own present examination, the cases of *La Amistad* and of the *Creole*. The uprising on the schooner *La Amistad* in 1839 and the ensuing legal battle are likely familiar to readers from the 1997 film of the same name. The uprising involved Mende captives, originally from Sierra Leone. *La Amistad* was carrying fifty-three of these captives from the slave market in Havana to the plantation on which they were to work. Though shackled, the captives were permitted to move about the vessel, as it was not equipped with slave berths. Some of the men found a rusty file in the hold, where roughly half of them were stowed, and used it to break their bonds. A number of the men then took the ship by force under the leadership of Singbe Pieh, popularly referred to as Joseph Cinque, slaying the captain and several of the crew with the machete-like knives used for cutting sugar cane. Under threat of death, the Spanish owners agreed to navigate the ship back to Africa, but in fact proceeded to sail up the east coast of the United States until a revenue cutter, the USS *Washington*, interdicted the *Amistad* off the coast of Long Island and hauled it into New London, Connecticut. The surviving Spanish crew laid claim to the slaves and other cargo on the ground that they were engaged in the domestic Spanish slave trade, arguing that the Mende captives had in fact been born in Cuba and not kidnapped from Africa. In 1841, the Supreme Court sided with the Mende captives and their abolitionist supporters, including John Quincy Adams who had argued their case before the Court. In an opinion written by Justice Joseph Story, the Court declared them free persons “upon the eternal principles of justice and international law.”¹⁰

The uprising on the *Creole* a few months later provoked even greater public controversy, including a diplomatic dispute with the British authorities.¹¹ On October 25, 1841, the *Creole* departed Richmond with a cargo of

¹⁰ Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 193–95.

¹¹ The relevant historical documents are contained in a report to Congress from Secretary of State Daniel Webster: U.S. Congress, Senate, *Correspondence in relation to the mutiny on board the Brig Creole*, January 20, 1842, 27th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1842, S. Doc. 51. The ensuing account is taken from these documents and from Arthur T. Downey, *The Creole Affair: The Slave Rebellion That Led the U.S. and Great Britain to the Brink of War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 9–16. For other scholarly accounts of the uprising, see Howard Jones, “The Peculiar Institution and National Honor: The Case of the *Creole* Slave Revolt,” *Civil War History* 21 (1975): 28–33; George Hendrick and Willene Hendrick, *The Creole Mutiny: A Tale of a Revolt aboard a Slave Ship* (Chicago: Dee, 2003); Edward D. Jervy and C. Harold Huber, “The *Creole* Affair,” *Journal of Negro History* 65 (1980): 196–211; Walter Johnson, “White Lies: Human Property and Domestic Slavery aboard the Slave Ship *Creole*,” *Atlantic Studies* 5 (2008): 237–63.

tobacco and slaves bound for New Orleans. Among the 135 slaves was one Madison Washington, listed in the manifest as a twenty-two-year-old black male standing five feet, nine and a half inches tall. He had escaped to Canada some years earlier and, after residing there for a time, returned to rescue his wife from the Virginia plantation where she remained in bondage. After his capture, he was “sold South” for the New Orleans slave market as part of the great redistribution of slaves from the mid-Atlantic states to the vast new plantations in the deep South. Washington served as head cook for the slaves and was, along with a number of helpers, responsible for cooking and distributing their meals, a task that furnished him with the opportunity to converse freely and plan an uprising without suspicion. The slaves were not shackled and were apparently permitted to walk freely about the ship during the day. At night, the ship’s rules confined the women, who made up about a third of the slaves, to the aft hold and the men to the forward hold. The vessel carried sixteen whites. The *Creole’s* captain, Robert Ensor, brought along his wife, his four-year-old daughter, and his fifteen-year-old niece. The crew consisted of First Mate Zepheniah Gifford, Second Mate Lucius Stevens, and six additional sailors. To these were added four passengers, two of whom represented one of the slave owners and two of whom were trading their services aboard the ship in exchange for passage.

On the night of November 7, the ship hove to off the coast of Florida and lay in calm waters about two hundred miles to the northeast of Miami. The first mate, Gifford, was on watch when one of the crew spotted a male slave entering the women’s quarters in the aft hold. Gifford sent William Merritt, one of the passengers who had agreed to serve as guard in exchange for passage, to investigate. When Merritt discovered Madison Washington and chastised him for being there against the ship’s rules, Washington sprang from the aft hold and charged forward, shaking off Gifford and Merritt and shouting to the other male slaves: “We have commenced boys, and must go through; rush boys, rush aft; we have got them now.” The ensuing struggle involved nineteen of the male slaves, armed with knives, clubs, and a pistol they had smuggled on board, under the leadership of Washington and another man named Ben Johnstone—or, in some of the depositions, Ben Blacksmith. The crew and passengers offered some armed resistance, but were quickly subdued. John Hewell, a passenger representing the interests of one of the slave owners, was the only fatality. When he emerged from the hold with a musket, the mutineers stabbed him repeatedly and later threw his corpse overboard. Captain Ensor suffered a number of serious stab wounds in the scuffle, but survived by climbing into the rigging along with Gifford

and Lucius Stevens, the second mate. Washington and Johnstone demanded that the surviving crew sail the *Creole* to Liberia, but were dissuaded from doing so when told the ship lacked adequate provisions for such a long journey. They then insisted on sailing to a British port, having heard stories of the British emancipating slaves from wrecked ships in the Bahamas. Merritt and the mates advised sailing to Nassau, where they arrived on the morning of November 9.

A pilot boat met the *Creole* to guide her through the narrow channel formed by Hog Island (now Paradise Island) and Nassau Harbor. The pilot crew that boarded the *Creole* consisted of free blacks who confidently (but without any real authority) informed its anxious passengers that they were in British waters and should consider themselves free. When the harbormaster arrived in his own boat to inspect the *Creole*, the first mate, Gifford, informed him that the ship had been mutinied and returned with him to Nassau where he sought out the American consul, who in turn demanded that the British authorities confine the slaves on board the *Creole*. The British authorities on the island subsequently took the nineteen mutineers into custody and, after some days, permitted the remaining slaves to disembark and melt into the island's community. Contrary to American demands, the British ultimately released the nineteen mutineers as well. The intrastate slave trade was still legal, unlike the international slave trade, and the uprising thus constituted mutiny. Nevertheless, the mutiny was not a violation of British law because it had not occurred in British waters nor on a British vessel, nor involved any British persons. The mutineers were therefore liable to prosecution only under US law. As there was not at the time an extradition treaty between the United States and Great Britain, the nineteen were released and faded, as had their peers, into Bahamian society.

THE HEROIC SLAVE

Douglass's novella about the slave uprising on the *Creole* is his only work of fiction, written as a contribution to a gift-book sponsored by the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society to raise funds for Douglass's newspaper.¹² The volume featured a number of distinguished contributors, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Seward, Charles Sumner, William Goodell, John G. Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Horace Greeley, and Lewis Tappan. Douglass carefully chose the protagonist of his story and structured the

¹² Julia Griffiths, ed., *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston: Jewett, 1853).

narrative to advance the cause of slave revolt in the American South. While seemingly straightforward, Douglass's account of Madison Washington's saga is a multilayered narrative. Its complexity reflects both Douglass's own waning ambivalence toward violence as a means of political reform and the distinct concerns of his potential audience. That audience variously consisted of runaway slaves, free blacks, moderate white northerners, pacifist and militant abolitionists alike, and even the slaveholders among whom he enjoyed a growing infamy on account of his autobiographical *Narrative*.

The novella may appropriately be termed historical fiction. While it follows in large part the historical trajectory of Madison Washington's life, it embellishes considerably in certain respects. Its most important episodes are heavily laden with speeches from Washington, which had to be fabricated. We do know from descriptions of Washington and his exploits that he (like Douglass) was reputed to be an articulate and compelling speaker, but there are no records of the discourses of the kind that stand at the center of the *Heroic Slave*. With respect to the uprising on the *Creole*, the diplomatic and legal controversies that resulted from it produced a thorough documentary record, of which I have given a brief account in the preceding section and from which Douglass's tale departs liberally. We will have occasion to note these departures in the course of the discussion.

In the first of the novella's four scenes, set six years prior to the uprising on the *Creole*, the reader encounters Washington in the midst of a soliloquy on the wretchedness of his condition and the prospect of escape from the Virginia plantation where he is enslaved. Resolving to possess himself of "liberty, the inalienable birth-right of every man," Washington undergoes a transformation familiar from Douglass's own autobiographies. Douglass writes, "At that moment he was free, at least in spirit. The future gleamed bright before him, and his fetters lay broken at his feet." More importantly, though Washington speaks only for himself, a northern traveler named Listwell overhears the moving soliloquy from concealment and undergoes a quiet conversion. "From this hour I am an abolitionist," he silently declares to himself, and professes his resolve to "atone for my past indifference" (*HS* 221–23). The reader is thus aware from the outset of the profoundly persuasive effect that Madison Washington's rhetoric has on his hearers.

In the novella's second scene, set five years later, Listwell is surprised to find Madison Washington on his own doorstep in Ohio, a fugitive on his way to Canada where he can "nestle in the mane of the British lion, protected by the mighty paw from the talons and the beak of the American eagle" (*HS* 233).

For his part, the travel-worn Washington is shocked to find that this stranger recognizes him and even more so to find that he is credited with Listwell’s conversion to abolitionism. Having sheltered there and then departed, the reader learns via a letter to Listwell that Washington is safe in Canada.

A year later, the third scene finds Listwell again traveling in Virginia, where he has yet another providential encounter with Washington, who is now in chains and on his way to the slave market in Richmond. He is to be sold into the deep South, his ultimate destination the New Orleans slave market. Listwell is struck dumb to find his friend in irons in the Old Dominion rather than free in Canada. But we soon discover that Washington has hazarded (and lost) his own freedom in an attempt to liberate the wife he had been forced to leave behind in his earlier escape. The rescue attempt has ended with her death and his capture. Unable to purchase his friend’s freedom, Listwell slips Washington three files, which, in Douglass’s tale, Washington will use to break his own bonds and those of his nineteen accomplices (*HS* 240–41). Douglass is here borrowing from the narrative of the *Amistad* uprising, since, as we see from the documentary record, no such extraordinary measure was necessary, as the slaves aboard the *Creole* were not shackled.

Unlike the first three scenes, where the reader witnesses the encounters between Listwell and Washington through the voice of the narrator, the fourth conveys the circumstances of the slaves’ uprising on the *Creole* through a retrospective dialogue between Tom Grant, who had been the *Creole*’s mate, and another sailor named Jack Williams in a “marine coffee-house” full of incredulous southerners at Richmond. Williams impugns Grant’s manhood for having failed to put down the uprising, on the ground that black men are cowards and easily subdued. Grant denies that this theory of black cowardice “will stand the test of salt water,” where there is no government ready at hand to put down with alacrity the least outburst of black courage and “every breeze speaks of courage and liberty” (*HS* 242). While the disparity in the races may stand “as a general rule,” Madison Washington’s conduct was at least “cause to admit that there are exceptions to this general rule. The leader of the mutiny was just as shrewd a fellow as I ever met in my life, and was as well fitted to lead in a dangerous enterprise as any one white man in ten thousand” (*HS* 244). To support his contention, Grant testifies to Washington’s intelligence, articulate mode of speech, dignified bearing, courage and physical prowess in combat, mercy in victory, and composure in a storm. Grant dwells particularly on Washington’s conduct after the slaves had taken the ship. Claiming to have been unconscious for much of the struggle, grant

recalls waking on deck to find the crew in the rigging and Washington at the helm. Indignant at finding a “black murderer” in command, he admonished the crew to come down and retake the ship “or die in the attempt.” Yet Washington’s “strong, black arm” repelled his advance “as though [he] had been a boy of twelve.” Washington followed this demonstration of strength with inspiring oratory:

Sir, your life is in my hands. I could have killed you a dozen times over during this last half hour, and could kill you now. You call me a black murderer. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY, not malice, is the motive for this night’s work. I have done no more to those dead men yonder, than they would have done to me in like circumstances. We have struck for our freedom, and if a true man’s heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed. We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so were they.

Grant declared to his drinking companions that this speech “disarmed” him. “I forgot his blackness in the dignity of his manner, and the eloquence of his speech. It seemed as if the souls of both the great dead (whose names he bore) had entered him.” After guaranteeing the safety of the surviving crew on the condition that they assist in sailing the ship to Nassau, Washington mans the helm through a tremendous squall, through which “our brig rolled and creaked as if every bolt would be started, and every thread of oakum would be pressed out of the seams.” The white sailors (Grant excepted, of course) clung to the ship, refusing from terror to man the pumps. But Washington “stood firmly at the helm, his keen eye fixed upon the binnacle. He was not indifferent to the dreadful hurricane; yet he met it with the equanimity of an old sailor.” More to the point, again Washington’s eloquence confirmed his deeds as those of a great man. As the storm subsides, he utters to Grant, “Mr. Mate, you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free.” This utterance provokes Grant’s final assessment of Washington’s character. “I confess, gentlemen, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise. Our difference of color was the only ground for difference of action. It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior.” Because of Washington’s restraint in sparing the lives of the white sailors and his courage in the face of the storm, Grant sees in his conduct not only physical courage, but its connection to the American tradition of natural rights and their vindication through manly resistance

to tyranny (HS 245–47). Grant’s grudging admission of Washington’s equality with, even superiority to, himself does not extend to a general negation of the inequality of the races, but it was a significant argument to put into the mouth of a white sailor in a Virginia tavern in the 1840s. The same may be said of Grant’s public denunciation of the interstate slave trade, which he denominates a “disgrace and scandal to Old Virginia,” and of his resolution “never to set my foot on the deck of a slave ship, either as officer, or common sailor again,” both of which earn derision as “Garrisonian” from his interlocutors (HS 243).

Douglass finds in Madison Washington the ideal protagonist. His display of courage in returning from Canada to rescue his wife and of nobility in eschewing vengeance as a motive made him a sympathetic figure. His moderation in the use of violence made him more palatable than Nat Turner. He was an American, unlike those aboard the *Amistad*. His small revolt met a happy end, a rare outcome for slave revolts. And his name aided the central analogy with the “principles of 1776.” From the outset, Douglass frames Madison Washington as deserving of inclusion in the pantheon of Virginian statesmen, who “love liberty as well as did Patrick Henry—who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson—and who fought for it with a valor as high, and arms as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence” (HS 220).

The Heroic Slave is not the first instance of Douglass’s reliance on Madison Washington as an exemplar. In an 1849 speech, he had made extensive use of the narrative to rebut the renewed efforts of the American Colonization Society. Though the immediate audience of the speech was an assembly of free black men, he addressed himself quite explicitly to slaveholders and advocates of colonization. Or, rather, he modeled for those free men of color how they ought to respond to slaveholders and colonizers. “The slaveholders are sleeping on slumbering volcanoes, if they did but know it.” There could be no bloodless answer to the slave question but emancipation. Black men had a claim on American soil as their own. They would not be banished from it and the continuation of their bondage was as dangerous as it was oppressive. “The cry of the slave goes up to heaven to God, and unless the American people shall break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free, that spirit in man which abhors chains, and will not be restrained by them, will lead those sable arms

that have long been engaged in cultivating, beautifying, and adorning the South, to spread death and devastation there.”¹³

The slumbering volcano argument, that slaveholders are in great peril of a bloody insurrection, was a familiar one. Even Garrison, the pacifist apostle of moral suasion, had relied on such warnings to impress on his audience the urgency of immediate emancipation. But Douglass went beyond mere apocalyptic warning to positively endorse the prospect.

I want them to know that at least one coloured man in the Union, peace man though he is, would greet with joy the glad news should it come here tomorrow, that an insurrection had broken out in the Southern states. I want them to know that a black man cherishes that sentiment—that one of the fugitive slaves holds it and that it is not impossible that some other black men may have occasion at some time or other, to put this theory into practice. Sir, I want to alarm the slaveholders, and not to alarm them by mere declamation or by mere bold assertions, but to show them that there is really danger in persisting in the crime of continuing slavery in this land. I want them to know that there are some Madison Washingtons in this country.¹⁴

As Larry Reynolds has pointed out, Douglass’s sanguine view of slave uprising was an exceptional departure from the Christian pacifism that marked both his earlier association with the Garrisonians and his postwar insistence on patient political reform. Even the failure of Reconstruction and the growing cancer of lynching was not enough to dislodge his rejection of violent revolt as a means of combating injustice. It is essential to understand that violent revolt here refers to violence on a large scale to remedy the injustice of an institution or entrenched practice, as opposed to discrete instances of forceful self-defense against immediate threats to oneself. Douglass consistently admitted the right of self-defense against immediate threats of bodily harm while generally rejecting the use of violence on a large scale as a means of progress. His departure from this general aversion to large-scale violence was warranted, in Douglass’s mind, by the close analogy between slaveholding and kidnapping, which permitted violent resistance on a large scale to be justified as self-defense. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 greatly strengthened the analogy by depriving free blacks of any effective legal protection from the threat of enslavement under the auspices of lawful fugitive slave rendition. Madison Washington furnished Douglass

¹³ “Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano: An Address Delivered in New York,” April 23, 1849, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 151–53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

with an exemplar of black resistance that reconciled the need for violent self-assertion in the face of such systemic oppression with the maintenance of the moral and legal order that is central to human dignity.¹⁵

Washington’s example, at least as reimaged in the novella, also fits neatly with Douglass’s broader political philosophy. As Peter Myers has recently reminded us, Douglass was a devotee of natural rights liberalism. He begins from the familiar premise that liberty is “the presumptive property of all human beings, unearned by any specific achievement.” Yet, “natural rights could not exist as a common human possession absent their active effortful affirmation by those denied their exercise.” In sum, “Douglass affirmed at once the presumptive validity of all human beings’ title to natural rights and the moral imperative for tyranny’s victims actively to validate their title to those rights.”¹⁶

In this way, Douglass turns resistance into a virtue. The enjoyment of liberty requires recognition of one’s full humanity. And for the oppressed this means the assertion of one’s humanity through struggle.¹⁷ This is why, in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published just two years after *The Heroic Slave*, the central episode that marks the end of bondage is not his escape from slavery. It is instead the first instance of his having resolved never again to suffer a beating like a beast. Titled “The Last Flogging,” this crucial chapter recounts Douglass’s successful resistance to the efforts of the slave breaker Edward Covey, to whom he had been loaned, to beat him. “I was a changed being after that fight. I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a FREEMAN.” “I had reached the point, at which I was *not afraid to die*. This spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, while I remained a slave in *form*.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Larry J. Reynolds, *Righteous Violence: Revolution, Slavery, and the American Renaissance* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), chap. 3. See also Leslie Friedman Goldstein, “Violence as an Instrument for Social Change: The Views of Frederick Douglass,” *Journal of Negro History* 61, no. 1 (1967): 61–72.

¹⁶ C. Peter Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 63.

¹⁷ Some readers may find the Hegelian dimensions of Douglass’s account thought provoking, particularly as it tracks the struggle for recognition in the master-slave dialectic, though this is a line of inquiry the present article does not pursue. It does not appear that Douglass directly encountered Hegelian thought until reading Feuerbach later in life, but for a reinterpretation of his earlier thought utilizing Hegelian ideas, see Margaret Kohn, “Frederick Douglass’s Master-Slave Dialectic,” *Journal of Politics* 67, no. 2 (2005): 497–514.

¹⁸ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, ed.

The centrality of self-assertion, as opposed to mere moral suasion or political agitation, to successful abolitionism formed an essential point in Douglass's urging violent resistance in response to fugitive slave rendition. With growing indignation, he penned the following brief editorial in his own newspaper in 1854: "A good revolver, a steady hand, and a determination to shoot down any man attempting to kidnap. Let every colored man make up his mind to this, and live by it, and if needs be, die by it. This will put an end to kidnapping and to slaveholding, too. We blush to our very soul when we are told that a negro is so mean and cowardly that he prefers to live under the slave driver's whip—to the loss of life for liberty. Oh! that we had a little more of the manly indifference to death, which characterized the Heroes of the American Revolution."¹⁹

There is an apparent tension between this view of courageous, or manly, resistance and natural rights liberalism. Taken by itself, early modern liberalism is grounded in a fear of death, an avoidance of threats to one's security. Rational individuals consent to forgo natural freedom in order to secure their life, liberty, and property. By contrast, Douglass repeatedly suggests that genuine liberty lies in a "manly indifference to death." He became a "freeman in fact," not when his life, liberty, and property were secure, but when he "was not afraid to die." Yet I would argue that, in this, Douglass's thought is indicative of a qualified liberalism that he shares with the American founders. That generation received an education that was liberal and modern in its philosophical dimensions, but leavened with exposure to the histories of Plutarch, Livy, and Thucydides. Their philosophical convictions were grounded in natural rights liberalism, but their historical exemplars were marked by a commitment to virtue, honor, and greatness. The product, vivid in Douglass's thought, is a liberal political philosophy that prescribes the limited ends of the regime married to a classical republican political morality that demands virtue in the citizen and the statesman.²⁰ This is to say nothing of the Christian morality that so powerfully governed private life and public attitudes that Tocqueville was moved to

Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 286.

¹⁹ "A Good Revolver," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 9, 1854, reprinted in *Witness for Freedom: African American Voices on Race, Slavery, and Emancipation*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 184.

²⁰ Nicholas Buccola has similarly advanced the argument that Douglass's liberalism is wisely attentive to the indispensable role of social responsibility in preserving liberty. See Nicholas Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

ascribe to it the character of a political institution of the American democracy, notwithstanding Christianity’s lack of formal political power.²¹

Because Douglass conceives it as a virtue—a display of one’s full humanity and a practical argument for one’s fitness for ordered liberty—resistance also has to take a dignified form. It is not rage or the loss of control, but righteous violence employed with a proper end in mind. As Myers has noted, a measure of prudence is here implied. Resistance should be effective. It is not violence for its own sake. As Douglass noted in his defense of the mob that had killed an agent of the federal government in Boston to free a fugitive slave, “he who takes pleasure in human slaughter is very properly looked on as a moral monster.”²² Douglass consistently justified violent resistance to fugitive slave rendition as self-defense against kidnapping. He was always careful to draw an analogy with the Revolution.

This is why Madison Washington’s example is of great significance. His courageous resistance is coupled with a noble commitment to justice and mercy. In Douglass’s account, Washington is careful to avoid unnecessary killing. As he tells Grant, when he recovers consciousness to find Washington in control of the vessel and denounces him as a black murderer, “I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY, not malice, is the motive for this night’s work.... We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so were they” (*HS* 245). There is, of course, a certain ambiguity here. The analogy does not express certainty that the revolutionary generation was justified in resorting to bloodshed, only that if they were justified then so are the slaves. The necessary inference is that the real slavery from which the slaves aboard the *Creole*, and by extension all of America’s slaves, seek liberation is far greater than the tyranny from which the revolutionary fathers sought liberation.

Douglass’s narrative also reveals the ground of agreement that remained between Douglass and the Garrisonians. He, like Garrison, believes in moral suasion, but avers that it can only be effective when the black man has demonstrated his manhood through resistance, through “manly indifference to death.” He had taken to heart Lord Byron’s refrain, with which he opens the final section of *The Heroic Slave*, where the uprising on the *Creole* is recounted by the surviving ship’s mate: “Hereditary bondsmen! Know ye

²¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.2.9.

²² “Is It Right to Kill a Kidnapper?,” in Foner and Taylor, *Frederick Douglass: His Speeches and Writings*, 277.

not who would be free, themselves must strike the blow? By their right arms the conquest must be wrought.”²³

The great success of Washington’s revolt is confirmed not so much in the fact of his having secured his own freedom and that of the other 134 enslaved persons aboard the *Creole*, but in his having won recognition of his full humanity from the crew of the slave ship. That a white sailor like Grant, whom he had bested, would take up the cause of his heroism puts proof to Lord Byron’s admonition. The liberation of the slaves aboard the *Creole* might well have been accomplished through mere violence. But the recognition of black equality could only be secured by heroism—violence meted out in accordance with virtue and eschewing cruelty.

An important message for the northern abolitionist lies in this narrative as well. Contrast the material aid furnished by Listwell, which required that he conceal his abolitionism, with the vocal advocacy of the mate. Listwell’s advocacy of black equality, had he chosen to give voice to it, would have fallen on deaf ears in a Virginia tavern, disdained as the ignorant views of a meddling northerner. But Grant, having met Madison as adversary, could not be so easily dismissed. Abolitionists were indispensable material support, but their sermons could win few southern converts. Black men’s deeds, on the other hand, would win them a hearing for their claim to natural rights. This very same rationale drove Douglass’s energetic efforts to secure black enlistments in the Union army during the Civil War, his two sons among them.²⁴ This also helps bridge the gap between Douglass’s militant outlook in the 1850s and his later emphasis on self-elevation in the Reconstruction era.²⁵

In Douglass’s narrative, persuasive oratory is a necessary precondition for the responsible and disciplined use of violence. Douglass’s acceptance of violent revolt as a means of liberation and progress rests on his assumption that rhetorical leadership, coupled with great deeds, can effectively constrain the passions. He assumes that an able rhetor can appeal to the dignity and decency of the revolutionary, combating the thirst for vengeance and preventing atrocity. Madison Washington persuades the white moderate to adopt abolitionism, the captive slave to exercise dignified restraint in the use

²³ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, in *Selected Poetry of Lord Byron*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (New York: Modern Library, 2002), Canto 2.76.

²⁴ See, e.g., “Men of Color, to Arms!,” March 23, 1863; “Why Should a Colored Man Enlist?,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, April 1863, in Foner and Taylor, *Speeches and Writings*, 525–30.

²⁵ See, e.g., Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, March 8, 1853; “What the Black Man Wants,” speech at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Boston, April 1865.

of violence, and the terrified white sailors to trust their lives to his mercy. Absent these rhetorical feats, the revolt aboard the *Creole* either could not happen or would amount to an act of mere vengeance.

BENITO CERENO

Published in 1855, two years after the appearance of Douglass’s novella, Melville’s *Benito Cereno* arguably provides a starkly different view of slave revolt.²⁶ Melville’s work powerfully challenges the assumption that, even in a just cause, private violence can be employed with this sort of dignified self-restraint and win recognition for the oppressed from their oppressors. A story that seems to have no clear protagonist, Melville’s tale holds up for our scrutiny Babo, a diminutive but cunning slave who leads the revolt on the Spanish slave ship *San Dominick* (a ship that, like the South, has all the decaying grandeur of the old world). Babo adeptly inspires fear in his former captors, but not confidence or trust. His ability to control the other slaves and manipulate the whites bespeaks intelligence and great rhetorical ability. But the race prejudice that forms the context of his actions makes the sort of open heroism displayed by Madison Washington impossible. Relying on, rather than combating, the desire for vengeance among his fellow captives, he uses measured brutality to terrify the ship’s captain and remaining crew into aiding him, the most vivid instance being the display of the slain slave-owner’s skeleton on the prow of the ship as a reminder to the Spaniards of their constant peril.

An American merchant vessel captained by the New Englander Amasa Delano discovers the Spanish ship. Babo, posing as the devoted manservant to the terrified Spanish captain, cunningly deceives the American into believing that the *San Dominick* has fallen prey to misfortune and lost its crew to illness, which the naive New Englander, “a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony,” is more than willing to believe (BC 52). Delano’s naive assumptions about Babo as the typical loyal servant prove false. Standing in for the moderate northerner—the Unionist—Delano misperceives his situation. His prejudice leads him to see Babo’s submission as natural and his devotion to the frail Spanish captain as an endearing virtue.

This is nowhere more vivid than in the celebrated shaving scene, an image thick with meaning. At one point, Delano finds himself in the cabin,

²⁶ Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, ed. Wyn Kelley (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BC*.

where Babo prepares to shave Don Benito. Seated in an improvised barber's chair that "seemed some grotesque engine of torment" and unceremoniously draped in the Spanish flag, Don Benito appears "a man at the block" and Babo "a headsman." Yet Delano sets his mind at ease, musing, "Most Negros are natural valets and hairdresser." Their "smooth tact" with the implements and their "great gift of good humor" make their avocations about the person "singularly pleasing to behold and still more so to be the manipulated subject of." To this is added "the docility arising from the contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors," which for Delano explains the peculiar interactions between his host and Babo. His prejudices even lead him to explain away the "terrified aspect" of Don Benito when Babo draws "barber's blood" from his neck as Delano notes with some incredulity that no vessel ought, as Benito had claimed of his own, to have been becalmed for two months in waters where Delano had found fair winds. Babo's not so subtle threat was clear enough to the terrified slaveholder, sitting with his head upon the block, but is lost upon the willfully blind New Englander (*BC* 72–76).

Correspondingly, Delano can only see self-assertion in Babo (or, by extension, any black man) as a vice, as an unnatural arrogation of equal dignity and natural rights. Of course, we must ask, would Delano see Madison Washington's actions as any more heroic? The truth, concealed by Melville from the reader (who thus shares in Delano's naiveté), is that Cereno's seeming security in fact papers over the real terror and peril in which the slaveholder lives.²⁷ As Diana Schaub observes, the narrative of *Benito Cereno* "captures the curious character of antebellum politics: the South, beneath its empty posturing, desperate and in effect held hostage to slavery; the North, by turns generous and suspicious, duped into complicity of sorts; and in between, the undiscovered quantity of black power."²⁸ Delano's (and the unwary reader's) prejudice makes him a gullible mark for Babo's ruse and at the same time makes it impossible for him to see Babo's heroism once the true situation on the *San Dominick* is clear.

Babo anticipates this prejudice and prudently chooses deception over open self-assertion in dealing with the inquisitive American captain, a strategy

²⁷ Susan McWilliams, "The Tragedy in American Political Thought," *American Political Thought* 3, no. 1 (2014): 137–45.

²⁸ Diana Schaub, "Master and Man in Melville's *Benito Cereno*," in *Poets, Princes, and Private Citizens: Literary Alternatives to Postmodern Politics*, ed. Joseph M. Knippenberg and Peter Augustine Lawler (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 57.

perhaps more likely to succeed in the instant case but one that also obscures his heroism. It promises more success in winning bodily freedom but less in winning recognition of black equality. This is not to say that Babo's conduct is anything less than heroic or indeed in any manner evil. Nor does Melville present him as such. Quite the contrary. As Catherine Zuckert argues, “By organizing not only the rebellion against their former masters but also a certain degree of order on the *San Dominick*, Babo had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he and his race were neither the innocent combination of animal ferocity and affection Delano imagined nor the devils and cannibals Cereno believed savagely murdered his friend [and their former master, whose skeleton now hung upon the ship's prow]. They were rational beings who were willing to risk their lives in order to gain their freedom. They had shown themselves in fact to be capable of self-rule.”²⁹ The intractability of racism does not so much negate Babo's heroism as conceal it beneath a veneer of necessary brutality, which makes the full recognition of his humanity all the less likely.

That Babo grasps the tragic aspect of his plight is manifest in his refusal to speak in his own defense from the time of his capture until his eventual trial before Peruvian authorities. The meaning of this silence is apparent even to Amasa Delano, who later remarks in remembrance of the moment that Babo pursued the fleeing Benito Cereno into the Americans' boat, “Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say: since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words” (*BC* 107). “Babo was not able to convince any of his white oppressors of his humanity by demonstrating it in action; how can or could he possibly do so with speech?”³⁰

This reading of *Benito Cereno* suggests that Douglass's narrative falls short of showing the reality of the peril that slavery represents for the South and thus the rest of the Union. Perhaps Melville achieves what Douglass promised in his slumbering volcano speech, but conceals in *Heroic Slave*: the slumbering volcano, when it erupts, is not likely to be dignified and self-controlled, but full of rage and vengeance. And even if it were self-controlled, as Babo's conduct is for all its seeming brutality, the prejudice that meets black self-assertion is deeply rooted and resistant even to clear evidence. Douglass is, on this account, perhaps too sanguine about the persuasive potential of heroic deeds and rhetorical leadership. Douglass's account of the *Creole* uprising is too tame to teach either slaves or slaveholders the real peril of

²⁹ Catherine H. Zuckert, “Leadership—Natural and Conventional—in Melville's *Benito Cereno*,” *Interpretation* 26, no. 2 (1998): 250.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

resorting to violence. Douglass would reconcile the northern abolitionist and the antislavery moderate to violent resistance by appealing to the example of 1776 and the success of the *Creole* uprising. Melville, however, would caution northern Democrats and white moderates about the danger of closing their eyes to the instability and explosiveness of the South's decaying system of racial caste. As Delano reflects during his stay aboard the Spanish slaver, calculating the possibility of a "piratical" subterfuge involving hidden Spanish sailors in the hold waiting to spring forth as they prepared to come alongside his own New England vessel, "Upon gaining that vicinity, might not the *San Dominick*, like a slumbering volcano, suddenly let loose energies now hid?" (BC 58). Moreover, he would caution militant abolitionists and free black advocates of slave revolt against a course so likely to implicate them in atrocity or, even assuming an uprising conducted in a civilized fashion, against the distant hope that persuasive oratory and heroic deeds will win them honor or recognition from their countrymen.

At the same time, it is important to note that there are elements of Melville's narrative that suggest the prospects for violent self-assertion are not altogether dismal. Over against the concern that violence is inconsistent with dignified self-restraint, we have seen that Babo shows considerable restraint in carrying out his fictional role as Don Benito's servant and persuades the other blacks to stick to their assigned roles. He even retains his dignity after his capture, refusing either to beg for his life or to lash out in futile resistance. Like the great Atufal, the chained character in Babo's production whom Delano had admired for his "royal" demeanor (BC 51-52), Babo will not give his captors the satisfaction of prostrating himself. Melville pays subtle tribute to his dignity when he depicts Babo's head on the spike in Lima where "unabashed, he met the gaze of the whites" (BC 107). This dignity stands in contrast to the cowardice evident in Don Benito's inability even to look at Babo during his trial. One imagines that some in Melville's audience would see this contrast as the result of psychological torture, but a reader more sympathetic to the plight of the slaves would see in it shame on Don Benito's part and dignity (Douglass would say self-respect) on Babo's. As he tells Amasa Delano, "the Negro" has cast a shadow upon him, and he does not have the strength of mind or of character to recover (BC 107). If, as is commonly assumed, Melville intends to analogize the decaying aristocracy of the *San Dominick* and of Don Benito with the decaying racial caste system of the South, then the slave's prospects of walking away with dignity and self-respect are better than the slaveholder's.

Additionally, we should consider Babo's example from the perspective of rhetorical leadership. While he does not deliver eloquent speeches in the heroic style of Madison Washington, Babo does put on a dramatic production for Amasa Delano that has a poetic character. He conceives of a character not only for himself to play, but also for others, planning and directing beforehand their speeches and actions. It was highly persuasive. When he first boards the ship, Delano entertains the notion that the story of the *San Dominick's* misfortunes is a subterfuge by Don Benito. But he dismisses the notion precisely on the ground that such a well-orchestrated ruse is preposterous. “If Don Benito's story was, throughout, an invention, then every soul on board, down to the youngest negress, was his carefully drilled recruit in the plot: an incredible inference” (BC 58). It never occurs to him that the diminutive and seemingly servile Babo has done just this with the help of the thrice-shackled giant Atufal. The plot unravels only because of Don Benito's desperate action, not because of any penetration or perceptiveness on Delano's part. It is plausible to see in this Melville's hope that poetic speech, like his own, might persuade his reader to see the real peril of the slave question and the humanity of the enslaved through the mist and fog of sectionalism and race prejudice.³¹

CONCLUSION

The advocate of violent self-assertion could find in Melville's tale a three-fold warning regarding the perils of violence, the inadequacy of persuasive rhetoric, and the shortcomings of the would-be liberator's audience. The use of violence by private persons is potentially perilous because the passions it evokes in those who resort to it—vengeance and hatred—are difficult to restrain, perhaps uncontrollable. The resort to violence thus necessarily risks involvement in atrocity. This seems to be the case because persuasive rhetoric is not an adequate remedy for the noxious passions aroused by the resort to violence. Even assuming the efficacy of rhetorical leadership as a constraint on the use of violence, the audience of this violent self-assertion by the oppressed—at least in the context of American slavery and the system of racial caste—will see in it only a demonstration of that animal rage that their prejudices teach them are natural to their inferiors. In either case, violent self-assertion is an essentially tragic course of action. Far from securing a recognition of the equal rights of a fellow man—much less a fellow

³¹ I am indebted to one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for the substance of this observation.

American—private violence potentially deepens and confirms the prejudices of the oppressor and the inferior status of the oppressed.

Perhaps most important is the common ground between Douglass and Melville. Both of their accounts impress on their readers a great moral seriousness about the use of violence. Though in his own speeches Douglass was reluctant to condemn any act of self-assertion by an enslaved person—even to the point of overlooking the atrocities of Nat Turner—his own carefully selected model for effective slave revolt argued for violence constrained by a strict regard for the moral standards of a civilized society. Madison Washington's example will not countenance bloodletting as an act of vengeance or excuse brutality on the ground of holy rage. Both the motive and the means of a violent act must comport with the self-respect and moral rectitude of a free and honorable person. The successful insurrectionist must act in such a way as to win not merely physical freedom but admiration from honorable men. Their conduct is itself a vindication of their equal title to natural rights. Douglass insists that black men's words, brigaded with their deeds, can change minds. That was the import of Douglass's autobiographies and lectures, and of his prescient advocacy of black enlistments in the Union Army. Man is perhaps beholden to passions and prejudices, but any advocate of republican self-government must aver that he is not slave to them. Reason and conscience have a claim on him as well. And, Douglass contends, nothing argues quite so eloquently for the proposition that black men share in reason and conscience as the honorable use of violence in defense of themselves and their neighbors. While for Melville the use of private violence is potentially tragic, for Douglass it may be essential, at least in the exceptional context of American slavery.