

“SHADOWS PRESENT, FORE-SHADOWING  
DEEPER SHADOWS TO COME”: PROPHECY,  
POWER, AND PROGRESS IN HERMAN MELVILLE’S  
“BENITO CERENO”

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## CHAPTER I

### “SHADOWS PRESENT, FORE-SHADOWING DEEPER SHADOWS TO COME”: PROPHECY, POWER, AND PROGRESS IN HERMAN MELVILLE’S “BENITO CERENO”

From the outset, Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1855) offers a portentous spectacle of shadows as the *Bachelor’s Delight’s* first mate warns Captain Delano of “a strange sail”<sup>1</sup> entering the bay of the “small, desert, uninhabited island” off the Southern coast of Chili where they have anchored for water. Signs in the sky magnify the dread of a morning “peculiar to that coast” (35); “Flights of troubled gray fowl” and “troubled gray vapors” skimming “low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms” (36) foreshadow unknown dangers ahead. Yet, the signs do not bother Delano; moreover, not even “the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot,” the fact that the approaching ship “showed no colors . . . as was the custom among peaceful seaman of all nations,” nor “the sort of stories, at that day, associated with those seas” alarm the captain, who is, according to the narrator, “a person of 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” (36). Throughout the course of “Benito Cereno,” Delano’s naïveté keeps him from recognizing that the social order, as he imagines it, is inverted.

In “Benito Cereno,” the reader accompanies Delano through a third-person account of mysterious events, during which the naïve Captain’s initial feelings of surprise (at the approach of the colorless ship) develop into uneasiness after he boards the *San Dominick*. The conditions on board the ship, which should indicate to him that the slaves are in control, clash with his optimistic outlook as well as his assumption of the slaves’ essential inferiority, creating a profound dissonance that propels Delano into a paranoid and fearful state. Ultimately when Delano realizes that his belief system has failed him, fear and paranoia give way to violent rage, and Delano proceeds to restore his idea of order. For most of the account, the narrator limits the reader’s perspective to Delano’s point of view, so that the rising tension and sense of mystery baffle the reader as Delano fumbles his way toward the story’s violent climax. But as the events unravel, three court depositions release the reader from Delano’s perspective, revealing the deep shadows of greed and duplicity cast by Delano’s idea of order.

Delano’s perspective is a central to the narrative advancement of “Benito Cereno;” even so, other facets of the text warrant close attention. After a discussion of exactly how “Benito Cereno” illustrates dialectics in literature, history, and society, this essay will examine Babo’s role in the revolt to determine how the interplay among Babo, Cereno, and Delano invite the reader to recognize not only the failure of Delano’s worldview but also his (and possibly the reader’s) complicity in the exploitation of the

slaves. After considering Babo, we will move on to a close examination of Delano paying particular attention to his motivations and, again, on how his character embodies an American (particularly Northern) ethos of his time.

A reading of “Benito Cereno” must recognize that Melville borrows much of the text from the eighteenth chapter of Amasa Delano’s *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World, Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands*. In theory, Delano would choose to present himself as the hero of his own story—a noble servant of truth and justice; and, indeed, because of his naiveté, Delano can consider himself in no other terms. However, with very minimal manipulation of the text, Melville traces the ways in which Delano’s “undistrustful good nature” serves as a mystification, disguising the greed, cruelty, and capacity for injustice lurking just beneath the surface of his character. As Jean Fagan Yellin points out in “Black Masks: Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno,’” the story “projects a shifting triad of figures, envisioned in the distant past as American, Spaniard and African; but more familiarly recognized by *Putnam’s* readers as Yankee, Slaveholder and Negro” (682). Over the course of “Benito Cereno,” each of these characters struggles to attain and maintain dominance over one or both of the others, bringing to the story a dialectic structure in which the “Negro” overthrows the “Slaveholder” only to be cast down by the “Yankee.” The dialectic structure raises the question: what theory of dialectics can be applied to “Benito Cereno,” and to what end? The dialectic also raises questions of power, specific to the text of “Benito Cereno.” How does the slave revolt (Babo’s role in particular) work to subvert prevalent assumptions of black inferiority for the reader, yet enable Babo

to utilize those same assumptions to maintain dominance (if only for a short time) over Delano? Moreover, what techniques does Babo employ to achieve his aim? And finally, what is the reader to make of Delano, and by extension, the possibilities of an America that he and his compatriots continue to dominate?

Because “Benito Cereno” depicts a struggle between masters and slaves, Joseph Young appropriately identifies the text’s connection to Hegelian dialectics, pointing specifically to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), in which the slave, figuratively inscribed within the ontology of ‘the other,’ is the cowardly paradigmatic opposite of the audacious master” (94). According to Young, “Benito Cereno” subverts the assumption of white supremacy inherent in Hegel’s dialectics, primarily by presenting Babo as capable of outwitting his white masters, what Young describes as, “a reversal of the racialization of history,” the title and main theme of Young’s essay. At the same time, Young contends, “when given two possible impressions of reality, Delano is unable to cast off a false image of the world” (106). Thus, Delano cannot truly be master, further underscoring Babo’s role as heroic slave<sup>2</sup>.

However, it is worth considering whether “Benito Cereno” actually presents a more Kantian concept of Western thought, history, and politics in its juxtaposition of the two remarkable characters, Babo and Delano, rather than simply subverting historical white supremacy, as Young argues. In “An answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” Kant writes, “A revolution may well put an end to rapacious or power-seeking oppression, but it will never produce a true reform in ways of thinking. Instead, new prejudices, like the ones they replaced, will serve as a leash to control the great unthinking masses” (55), a statement that speaks to J. N. Findlay’s distinction—in his



foreword to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*—between Kant's and Hegel's respective positions. To Kant the progress of knowledge is relentless, “a new appearance of absolute truth taking the former's place” (xiv) while Hegel “assumes that this progress *must* have a final term, a state where knowledge need no longer transcend or correct itself” (xiv). Kant's comment on revolution provides a wonderful backdrop for thinking about “Benito Cereno,” particularly for considering Babo's role in the revolt and the techniques he uses to subjugate and retain authority over the Spanish sailors, implementing what Michel Foucault refers to in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* as “the political technology of the body” (26). At the same time, Kant's vision of the mutability of truth over time becomes clear in Delano's role in the narrative: As he struggles to comprehend reality aboard the *San Dominick* a parade of ideas that he perceives to be true culminate in a final “truth” dictated by the law (of Lima, rather than any locale that has outlawed slavery) and negotiated by the artillery and manpower of his *Bachelor's Delight*, each of which history will make relics, replaced by newer and more efficient weapons and technology.

As a chronicle of a slave revolt, “Benito Cereno” affirms the verity of Kant's attitude toward revolution—there is no true reform within its pages. But as a text born out of two distinct historical moments (the late-eighteenth century, around the time of the Haitian revolution, and the mid-nineteenth century, in the decade running up to the Civil War), “Benito Cereno” illustrates Kant's hope for social change over time by providing a snapshot of an era dominated by white supremacist and quasi-proslavery attitudes, the antecedent of the contemporary social climate, which finds slavery abhorrent. Thus, in Kant's political philosophy, we find prospects of emancipation and progress in history,

which speak to the call to action (or recognition) found in “Benito Cereno.” Concerning the possibility of establishing an ideal government, in “The Contest of Faculties” Kant writes: “Even without the mind of a seer, I now maintain that I can predict from the aspects and signs of our times that the human race will achieve this end, and that it will henceforth progressively improve without any more total reversals” (184). Kant is optimistic that human society can become increasingly just and civil; he simply privileges evolutions over revolutions. That being so, reading “Benito Cereno” in light of Kant’s political writings offers a more progressive alternative than Hegelian dialectics. If “Benito Cereno” speaks to Hegelian dialectics it is, as Young argues, to subvert its white supremacist assumptions and to undermine Hegel’s apology for slavery. However, “Benito Cereno” is a tale of “Shadows present, fore-shadowing deeper shadows to come” (36). There is, thankfully, no final term in its prophecy. In that respect, considering “Benito Cereno” as a chapter in a never-ending progression of history allows the reader a moment to consider where society has been, where it is, and where it might be headed.

Turning to questions of Babo’s role in the revolt, scholars have argued that, although the events lead to his execution, he emerges as the triumphant figure in “Benito Cereno.” The story ends with Babo’s “head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the plaza” (107), and from this vantage point, his head “met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites” (107). Even though Babo’s head is the intended object of “the gaze,” through a subtle turn of language he remains an active subject in the narrative; his head “met” the gaze rather than passively being gazed upon, an act of agency that could be regarded as a metaphysical triumph. As Max Putzel points out, “that head stares down the whole vista of Christian civilization, Medieval and American, in implacable accusation” (194).

Babo's power to subvert the social order of slavery, to inspire terror in the hearts of slave-owners, and to fuel subsequent slave revolts outlives his physical body, an iconic power that invests in him a Messianic quality.

Reflecting on Messianic symbolism in *Benito Cereno*, H. Bruce Franklin observes “[t]hat there are several shadowy hints that the relationship between Cereno and Babo is like that between Christ and Judas” (475). Franklin finds a double for Christ in Cereno. His comparison hinges upon a conversation between Cereno and Delano that takes place while they are sailing to Lima after Delano puts down the slave revolt. In the passage, Cereno remarks, “you were with me all day; stood with me, sat with me, talked with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me” (106). As Franklin observes, Cereno’s words to Delano echo Christ’s words to his disciples after his resurrection. Although he attributes the heroism to Cereno rather than Babo, Franklin’s work opened the floor for discussion of religious symbols in “*Benito Cereno*.”

In response to Franklin, Kermit Vanderbilt suggests that it is “with superbly pious presumption” that “Cereno implicitly likens *himself* [italics mine] to the risen Christ” (75) and points out that Babo is “on the way to court judgment and subsequent martyrdom” and “is denied more than thrice by [Cereno] his erstwhile apostle” (74), reasoning that Babo, not Cereno, is the Messianic figure in the text. Vanderbilt’s analogy points to an undeniable parallel between Babo and Jesus Christ: each is a capital criminal, tortured to death, and displayed publicly. Yet, historically, it is clear that public executions do little to disrupt the momentum of political movements; often, as the executed leaders become martyrs, these executions fuel the revolutionary fervor.

In tracing the historical shift in punishment from severity to leniency, Michel Foucault writes, “Protests against the public executions proliferated in the second half of the eighteenth century” (73). The protests to which Foucault refers originated “among philosophers and theoreticians of law; among lawyers and *parlementaires*; in popular petitions and among the legislators of the assemblies” (73). According to Foucault, public execution had become “dangerous in that it provided a support for a confrontation between the violence of the king and the violence of the people. It was as if the sovereign power did not see, in this emulation of atrocity, a challenge that it itself threw down and which might one day be taken up” (73). And the challenge was taken up in France during the second half of the eighteenth century, as a new form of government, government by social contract, began to replace autocratic rule by a sovereign king. But it is not a desire to attain ideals of liberty or freedom that ignites the conflict between oppressors and oppressed; it is, as Foucault points out, the violence of that oppression. Similarly, the slave revolt in “Benito Cereno” is a reaction against the cruelty of the slave-master class. As Margaret Vanderhaar points out, “it was the Spaniards who perpetrated the first evil of enslaving the blacks. Following their lead, the blacks revolted and held the whites in control by terror” (189). As in European revolutions, the violence of the *San Dominick* slave revolt reenacts the cruelty the slaves faced in thrall to their masters. Indeed, as Kant has said of revolutions, there has yet to be a “true reform in ways of thinking” (55). Babo implements the same political technologies of the body applied to him and his compatriots to exercise power over his former captors—when the time is right.

Babo's role in the slave revolt defies the contemporary popular imagination of the slave's capacity for autonomy, subverting prevalent assumptions of their essential inferiority for the reader. It is quite clear in "Benito Cereno" that the *San Dominick* revolt is not the product of Cereno's ineffectiveness as a captain. More importantly, it is not simply an uprising of malcontent slaves who seize the opportunity of greater numbers in the midst of providential circumstances—a storm and a fever that reduces the number of Spanish sailors—to overthrow their captors. In fact, with the exception of Atufal who is presented to Delano in chains, the slaves are not even physically restrained until the end of the narrative<sup>3</sup>: "all the negroes slept upon deck, as is customary in this navigation, and none wore fetters" (94). But still, though unrestrained, the slaves wait until seven days into the voyage to take control of the ship. The reason for this delay can be ascertained from a passage from Cereno's deposition:

the negro, José . . . was the one who communicated the information to the negro Babo, about the state of things in the cabin, before the revolt... in the preceding midnights, he used to come from his berth... to the deck where the ring-leader and his associates were, and had secret conversations with the negro Babo. (101)

The slaves spend the first seven days of the voyage gathering information critical to the successful execution of their revolt: knowledge, or more importantly, the way that Babo utilizes knowledge insures his success.

The seven days Babo spends gathering information illustrate Foucault's exploration of power/ knowledge in a couple of ways. To begin with, Babo develops a

body of knowledge of the *San Dominick's* crew; they are the objects of his scientific study. Babo must not only to subjugate the crew, but he must also insure that they remain productive members of the ship's society. Because Babo and his associates do not possess knowledge of sailing, they must retain aspects of the power structure already in place on board the ship. It would be suicidal for them to throw all of the Spanish overboard. As *passengers*, the slaves are dependent upon the sailors and officers to see to the day-to-day operation of sailing the ship. Although they have superior numbers and an apparently unimpeded path to control of the ship, Babo and the slaves must study the situation carefully, taking care not to interfere with the power structure aboard the *San Dominick* to the point that it breaks down completely, inviting the possibility of a slow death by starvation at sea.

Babo and his followers' appreciation of the delicate balance of power becomes even more clear in light of the passages in Cereno's deposition that reveal the care that they take in exercising their power once they have taken control of the crew. Cereno tells the court, "Babo asked him whether there were in those seas any negro countries where they might be carried" (94). Taking control of the *San Dominick* is not the slaves' ultimate goal; their revolution is a means to an end. According to this passage, they desire to return to their homelands, free from the cruelties of slavery. When Cereno tells Babo that there are no "negro" countries within sailing distance, Babo orders him to take them to Senegal, Babo's home country. Babo's request to undertake the transatlantic crossing back to Africa gives Cereno a reasonable opening to turn the ship toward the coast and possible intervention by other Europeans.

At this point, the day after the mutiny, Cereno engages in an intricate struggle for power with Babo. When Babo threatens “to kill all the whites if they were not, at all events carried to Senegal” (94), Cereno responds that, “what was wanting most for the voyage was water” and convinces Babo that they should “proceed on their course” to which Babo agrees. The success of Cereno’s dangerous game of cat and mouse hinges upon his “hoping to meet some Spanish or foreign vessel that would save them” (95). After some time, Babo, who distrusts Cereno and suspects that his design is a trap, presses the issue and once again threatens “to kill all the whites the very moment he should perceive any city, town, or settlement of any kind” (95). Cereno steers the *San Dominick* toward the island of Santa Maria, hoping “on the passage or near the island itself, they could find any vessel that should favor them, or whether he could escape from it in a boat to the neighboring Arauco” (95). Ultimately, Cereno’s course of action leads to the encounter with the *Bachelor’s Delight* at Santa Maria, but not until the end of a seventy-three day voyage that reduces the ship and the passengers to the tattered and broken state in which Delano finds them.

Although providence does not spark the revolt, it would seem as if it were Providence, in the form of the wind, that causes the voyage to Santa Maria to drag on for weeks, cutting off the their escape to Senegal, ending their revolt: “the wind, which had breezed up a little during the night, was now extremely light and baffling” (37); “the wind, light though it was, having shifted, had headed the vessel of” (37); and finally, “they had narrowly escaped shipwreck; then, for days together, they had lain tranced *without wind*; their provisions were low; their water next to none; their lips that moment were baked” (39, italics mine). The meticulous attention given to the providential

circumstances culminating in the slaves' encounter with Delano at Santa Maria, which leads to their return to bondage, actually reinforces the level of careful calculation that the slaves' struggle toward freedom requires. Providence is not the enemy; the real obstacle is Cereno, who uses the lack of wind to explain why he does not do as Babo commands and to disguise the fact that he subtly maintains dominance over Babo and the slaves because he commands the ship, the technology necessary to carry out the voyage Babo would like to undertake.

In his deposition, Cereno states that "Babo and Atufal held conferences daily, in which they discussed what was necessary for their design of returning to Senegal, whether they were to kill the Spaniards, and particularly the deponent [Cereno]" (95). At first, Babo gives rational reasons for killing the Spaniards that the slaves choose to kill:

Babo came to the place where the deponent [Cereno] was, and told him that he had determined to kill his [Babo's] master, Don Alexandro Aranda, both because he and his companions could not otherwise be sure of their liberty, and that, to keep the seamen in subjection, he wanted to prepare a warning of what road they should be made to take did they or any of them oppose him. (95)

The warning Babo speaks of in this passage eventually manifests as Aranda's de-fleshed skeleton above the chalked subscript: "follow your leader" (88). The slaves attempt to legitimize their legal power by removing their *owner* from the scenario; at the same time, they reinforce their power aboard the *San Dominick* by providing evidence that their threats to kill the whites are not idle.



After parading each of the Spanish Sailors past the remains of Aranda, Babo threatens “them, saying that he had now done all; that the deponent (as navigator for the negroes) might pursue his course, warning him and all of them that they should, soul and body, go the way of Don Alexandro if he saw them (the Spaniards) speak or plot anything against them (the negroes)” (97). To Foucault, the “soul” that Babo refers to might be interpreted as “the soul represented in Christian theology . . . born in sin and subject to punishment” (29), but it might be better understood as “born . . . out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint” (29). To address his immediate concern, controlling the Spanish sailors’ attitudes and actions, Babo evokes the concept of the soul, capitalizing on a political technology of power, already in place in the sailors’ idiolects. By claiming power over the sailor’s souls, Babo redefines their existing identities, replacing concepts such as God, Country, and Captain with Babo, the Negro. If as Foucault suggests, “The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body” (30) then Babo does not build a new prison for the sailors; he simply becomes warden of the old one.

As Cereno’s deposition unfolds, he presents the slaves’ motives for killing as more ruthless and less rational as his struggle with Babo plays out. To prevent them from throwing the cook overboard, Cereno:

agreed to draw up a paper, signed by the deponent [Cereno] and the sailors who could write, as also by the negro Babo, for himself and all the blacks, in which the deponent obliged himself to carry them to Senegal, and they not to kill anymore, and he formally to make over to them the ship, with the cargo. (97)

Mark Anderson points out that “This paper signing scheme shows, first, how Babo of necessity adopted the strategy of the oppressor” (74) but also claims that “it mocks the law conceptually and existentially by unmasking it [the contract] as an instrument of *realpolitik*. The law’s only meaning derives from the prerogatives of the power of enforcement” (74). Considering that the social contract is very much in the spirit of European revolutions of the same period, there is a strain of irony in its application in this instance. Certainly, Babo and Cereno each have an end that he wants to accomplish by signing the agreement: Cereno, who suggests the agreement, states that he is “endeavoring not to omit any means to preserve the lives of the whites” (97); Babo hopes to extend his authority over the ship’s remaining crew. However, both Babo and Cereno are quite cognizant of the validity of the document also summed up by Anderson: “The law’s only meaning derives from the prerogatives of the power of enforcement” (74) as evidenced by Babo’s actions the next day: “the more surely to guard against the sailor’s escape, the negro Babo commanded all the boats be destroyed but the long boat, which was unseaworthy” (97). Babo understands the futility of making the agreement; he wants only to escape the cruelty of slavery, not to enter into a new social contract with his captors.

Significantly, Babo and Atufal are already conversant with European technologies of power. They are literate. Although his discussion often focuses on the contrast of white/black symbolism in the texts, Max Putzel makes the critical observation that, “Babo . . . could write and therefore (like Atufal) signed the agreement” (196). Clearly, Babo and Atufal, have spent time with Europeans (or Americans) and their application of European political technologies of the body to control the Spanish sailors goes beyond

simple mimicry, or adopting the oppressor's ways; they are, in every way, equally capable of oppressing, as their oppressors.

Ironically, they go too far. By breaching the meaningless agreement Babo seals the fate of the slaves:

for a chance gesture which they deemed suspicious—though it was harmless—made by the mate, Raneds, to the deponent, in the act of handling a quadrant, they killed him; but that for this they afterwards were sorry, the mate being the only remaining navigator on board, except the deponent. (98)

This gross miscalculation in exercising power, not providence in the form of the wind, brings the slaves' revolt to its violent end. In underscoring the meaninglessness of the contract with Cereno, they kill the only person who could, in fact, navigate the path to their freedom. By their own hand, in emulating the terror of their masters, Babo and the slaves set in motion the chain of events leading to the arrival of Captain Delano and the *Bachelor's Delight*.

The details of Babo's rise to power certainly subvert prevalent assumptions of black inferiority, but the question remains: how does he utilize those same assumptions to control the situation when Delano arrives? In simplest terms, Babo maintains power through an elaborate ruse, scripted according to an accurate anticipation of Delano's idiosyncrasies. Because of his white-supremacist worldview, his dull perception of the awesome power Babo wields baffles him. The disorder he observes aboard the *San Dominick* causes him to question whether Cereno is fit for command, rather than whether

Babo is *in* command. Because much of the narrative limits the reader to the narrow field of Delano's perspective, his ruminations on these dilemmas warrant careful consideration. Like other travelers of the day, Delano has become familiar with the popular theories of race found in other travelers' writing, which often blur the line between traveler's fancy and scientific discourse<sup>4</sup>. As he comes to gradually understand that the slaves are quite capable of more than he imagines, Delano turns to these theories to justify taking over the *San Dominick* and, ultimately, to soothe his guilt in profiting from the misfortunes of the ship's passengers. Throughout the story, Delano seeks only to confirm a concept of order in which *he* is Captain.

When Delano Boards the *San Dominick*, he notices that some things are amiss: "Climbing the side, the visitor [Delano] was at once surrounded by a clamorous throng of whites and blacks, but the latter outnumbering the former more than could have been expected" (39). In "A New Reading of Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" Nicolas Canaday points out that blacks, not whites, occupy the spaces on the ship usually reserved for the officers (52): "four elderly grizzled negroes . . . were couched sphynx-like, one on the starboard cat-head, another on the larboard, and the remaining pair face to face on the opposite bulwarks above the main-chains" (39). On the elevated poop, above the quarterdeck—the very seat of command—Delano notices "the cross-legged figures of six other blacks; each with a rusty hatchet in his hand" (40). But still, he ignores the fact that the "four oakum-pickers" are literally controlling the crowd surrounding him. He notices that the six blacks on the poop are, in fact, silently sharpening their hatchets and that "at intervals . . . two by two they sideways clashed their hatchets together, with a barbarous din" (40), but all of this he dismisses as "the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry

with pastime” (40), an example of an assessment he might have read in other travel writings of the time<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, Delano is in immediate danger of being murdered by people whom he believes are inferior to him and, therefore, do not have the ability to murder him. As the day wears on, Delano continues to apply the master’s lens to everyone and everything he encounters aboard the *San Dominick*, particularly Benito Cereno and Babo.

When Delano encounters Cereno, “a gentlemanly, reserved-looking, and rather young man to a stranger’s eye, dressed with a singular richness” (40), he does not doubt that Cereno’s authority is completely intact. Delano’s illusion is confirmed by the presence of Babo, “a black of small stature, in whose rude face, as occasionally, like a shepherd’s dog, he mutely turned it up into the Spaniard’s, sorrow and affection were equally blended” (41). In the relationship between Cereno and Babo, Delano finds the order that has eluded him since his arrival on the ship; Cereno and Babo are in their place: the well-dressed white man, utterly adored by his silent, black servant. But before long, Delano begins to notice what he considers to be weaknesses in Cereno’s character, “tending to heighten his first impressions” (41) that things are out of place aboard the *San Dominick*.

Delano’s re-examination of Benito Cereno takes on the tone of scientific or medical discourse, beginning with an assessment of Cereno’s mental state: “His mind appeared unstrung, if not more seriously affected” (41). Delano notices several nervous habits that he reads as “symptoms of an absent or moody mind” (41). He immediately equates Cereno’s mental state with his physical state, “This distempered spirit was lodged, as before hinted, in as distempered a frame” noting that Cereno “seemed never to

have been robust” and that, “A tendency to some pulmonary complaint appeared to have been lately confirmed” (41). As his fellow sea captain, Delano perceives Cereno’s diminished physicality as mark of weakness in the culture of sea captains—his body, mind, and spirit are too weak for the job. Delano’s assessment that Cereno is an invalid in both mind and body contributes to his eventual conclusion that Cereno is unfit for command and must be relieved of it. As the fittest white man—and already a captain in his own right—Delano has determined, empirically, that he is, indeed, the only real captain on board the *San Dominick*.

Having determined that Cereno’s mind, body, and authority have diminished through “long-continued suffering” (41), Delano proceeds to complete his assessment of Babo:

Sometimes the Negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him; performing these and similar offices with the affectionate zeal which transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial; and which has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body servant in the world; one, too, whom a master need be on no stiffly superiors terms with, but may treat with familiar trust; less a servant than a devoted companion. (41-42)

The term, “body servant” carries peculiar significance, calling to mind body-servants from Melville’s earlier works. Like Babo who, in the preceding passage, “gave his master his arm” (41), Kory-Kory often carries Tommo on his back when Tommo suffers from a mysterious, sporadic leg pain in *Typee*. In *Moby-Dick*, Pip reminds Ahab, ““ye

have not a whole body, sir; do ye but use me for your one lost leg; only tread upon me, sir; I ask no more, so I remain a part of ye” (466). In each of these examples, the body-servant offers his body to the disabled master as a sort of living prosthetic, an arrangement that blurs the boundaries between slave and master, forming a relationship within which the master is dependent upon the slave for mobility, personal care, and in a sense, the completion of his character.

The implications of the interdependent relationship between master and body-servant play out differently in each of the three Melville narratives. In *Typee*, Tommo readily accepts Kory-Kory in the role of “trustworthy body-servant” (81), but as the narrative unfolds, Kory-Kory’s duty of carrying Tommo from place to place limits the places that Tommo can go. When Tommo’s condition improves, and he can walk again; Kory-Kory accompanies him everywhere but continues to limit the places that he can go. In his role as body-servant, Kory-Kory also serves as an effective jailor. However, in *Moby-Dick* Pip and Ahab provide a sharp contrast to Tommo and Kory-Kory. Ahab recognizes the threat that accepting Pip’s proposal poses to his free will, ““If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab’s purpose keels up in him”” and rejects Pip’s offer, ““I tell thee no; it cannot be.”” Furthermore, Ahab refutes Pip’s conjecture that Ahab is not whole: “Listen, and thou wilt hear my ivory foot upon the deck, and still know that I am there” (466). Yet, there remains an interconnectedness between Pip and Ahab; in ““Who Ain’t a Slave?”: *Moby Dick* and the Slave Narrative Tradition,” William Decker points out that Pip “becomes emblematic of ‘suffering man’ and Ahab the tyrant demonstrates his capacity for such democratic gestures as clasping hands with the lowest of his crew, in whom, at this point, he does see reflections of himself” (46). Perhaps his ability to

empathize with Pip (thus, all human suffering) provides the clearest backdrop of Ahab's humanity, against which his tragedy unfolds. Decker further observes that Pip's "one chance, as he see it, lies in his role as black body servant to a dismembered white man" (47). Exactly the same could be said of Babo upon the arrival of Delano.

The relationship between Cereno and Babo amalgamates significant aspects of these Melvillean prototypes. Like Tommo, Cereno is a prisoner; however, Cereno is painfully aware that he is Babo's captive; Tommo can never really be sure. As body servants, Pip and Babo complete their masters, Ahab and Cereno. Ahab's lost leg compromises his ability to complete his quest for the white whale, a lack for which Pip offers to compensate. As Cereno's arm, Babo compensates for the lack of authority caused by Cereno's debilitated physical and mental state; however, unlike Ahab, Cereno does not have the option of rejecting Babo's services because he is, in fact, Babo's prisoner, not his master. Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey have pointed out the potential for slavery to enslave the master class that is suggested by this passage, "For Melville," they write, "in *Benito Cereno*, slavery is a psychic and mental crutch for the master class" (298). Given the influence his romanticized concept of the body-servant has over Delano (he offers to buy Babo), it is not surprising that he cannot see the true relationship between Babo and Cereno. The agency scholars have attributed to Delano—the fool, who misreads myriad obvious signs around him—would be more accurately assigned to Babo—who plays the fool to play the fool, Delano. Delano simply sees what one in his position is supposed to see, and he reacts exactly as Babo anticipates.

Delano believes that blacks are inferior and servile by nature, and believing this pacifies him in a situation that is beyond his comprehension. He regards the inordinate



amount of power that Babo exercises aboard the *San Dominick* as obligatory to his role of body-servant acting as his invalid master's metaphorical arm:

Whatever special orders were necessary, their delivery was delegated to his body-servant, who in turn transferred them to their ultimate destination, through runners, alert Spanish boys or slave boys, like pages or pilot-fish within easy call continually hovering around Don Benito. (42-43)

Because Delano fails to realize that Babo is capable of commanding the ship, he cannot see that Babo is at the center of the mechanism controlling the ship; he is the one who is, indeed, in Foucauldian terms “the subject who knows” (27-28). Because Cereno wears “[t]he dress so precise and costly” and carries “that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command,” Delano believes that Cereno is the center, the subject—those around him, the objects of his knowledge—when, in fact, all on board the *San Dominick* are ruled by Babo.

Even after we have examined Babo's role in the revolt, paying close attention to ways in which he subverts prevalent assumptions of white supremacy for Melville's 1855 readers as well as how he uses those same assumptions to manage Delano while he is on board the *San Dominick*, the fact remains that Delano succeeds in taking over the *San Dominick*. As a chronicle of Delano's *success*, “Benito Cereno” reaches into the penumbra of the deepest shadows of its prophetic vision, and concealed in that shadow, Delano, the Yankee hero, a person of “undistrustful good nature” is always, already overcome by greed.

Utterly blinded by dogmatic white supremacy, Delano finds the situation aboard the *San Dominick* unsatisfactory and begins a course of action that will eventually play out as a brutal take-over of the ship. To understand Delano's reasoning, it is useful to turn again to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault writes, "In a system of discipline, the child is more individualized than the adult, the patient more than the healthy man, the madman and delinquent more than the Normal and non-delinquent" (193). Delano's perception that Cereno is "an invalid" and his assessment of Babo as a proto-typical body-servant lead him to view them both as "docile bodies" ones "that may be subjected used, transformed and improved" (136). Thus Babo, Cereno, the starving, tattered passengers, and the *San Dominick* (the unfitness of which Delano observes throughout the day) all demand that Delano use, transform, and improve them. He must take them over. However, Delano must work within the confines of the social order to carry out his intention to take over the ship and contain the cultural others who—aside from Cereno and the *San Dominick's* crew—do, in fact, want to kill him.

At first, Delano positions himself as benevolent, as a savior:

Captain Delano having heard out his [Cereno's] story, not only engaged, as in the first place, to see Don Benito and his people supplied in their immediate bodily needs, but, also, now further promised to assist him in procuring a large permanent supply of water, as well as some sails and rigging. (47)

Margaret Vanderhaar argues that Delano wants "sincerely to help the distressed ships passengers and captain" but that "he is capable only of ministering to their material

wants—for food and water, sails and rigging, a navigator” citing this passage as evidence that “he [Delano] is charitable” (185). However, Delano offers to provide more than just a navigator: “he would spare three of his best seamen for temporary deck officers; so that without delay the ship might proceed to Conception, there fully to refit for Lima, her destined port” (48). By filling the vacuum of power created by the “absence of subordinate deck-officers to whom... is entrusted what may be styled the police department of a populous ship” (43) with his own officers, Delano begins to re-order the fragile social hierarchy aboard the *San Dominick*, positioning himself at the top of the new order.

Mark Anderson goes even further to reject the idea that Delano’s actions are genuinely charitable or generous. Anderson steps outside of the world of Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” supporting his argument with references to the historical “legal actions Delano felt compelled to take against Cereno after the uprising ordeal had been concluded” (65). He also cites “relevant ‘missing’ depositions, those Delano chose not to include” (66) in his *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*. Moreover, Anderson points out that in the missing depositions, published by Sterling Stuckey and Joshua Leslie in 1988, “Cereno refers to Delano as a ‘monster,’ and contends that the American’s alleged generosity constituted nothing more than a ‘crooked scheme’” (66). Delano has much to gain monetarily from his encounter with the *San Dominick* and Anderson emphasizes that, “For Delano, the monetary reward for his ‘generous’ and ‘humane’ behavior provided the proof of his goodness... the money is clearly of great import to Delano” (72). Anderson’s comment also begs the question of “goodness” according to whom? In Delano’s decidedly Anglo-American, protestant idea of goodness, the good are rewarded

for their works. Unfortunately Delano's monetary reward proceeds from the suffering and degradation of others.

Monetary gain plays a direct role in Melville's narrative when Delano dispatches a group of sailors from the *Bachelor's Delight* to take the *San Dominick* by force: "To more encourage the sailors, they were told, that the Spanish captain considered his ship as good as lost; that she and her cargo, including some gold and silver, were worth more than a thousand doubloons. Take her, and no small part should be theirs" (89). Initially, the encounter with the *San Dominick* provides an opportunity for Delano, as an American and as a Northerner, to perform an act of charity and kindness, confirming the benevolent self-assessment that he offers throughout "Benito Cereno," but the *value* of the *San Dominick's* cargo is more easily measured in gold than by its humanity, which Delano fails to recognize. The final piece of evidence for Delano's greed comes from the hand of the historical Amasa Delano himself.

In his *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, Delano leaves the reader with a final letter addressed "To Don Juan Stoughton Esq. his Catholic Majesty's Consul, Residing in Boston" (141). In the letter, after the appropriate prostrations to Stoughton's office, Delano thanks the Don for "the gold medal bearing his Catholic majesty's likeness" (141). The medal—reminiscent of "the Doubloon," the central symbol of greed, Ahab's madness, and control of "the unthinking masses" in *Moby Dick*—may be only a token, but carries with it all the weight of the symbol from Melville's earlier work. It is "the navel" around which the eighteenth chapter of Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels* arranges itself and resolves. To Delano, accepting such an insignificant token as a gold medal with such humility and grace is proof of his "undistrustful good nature" and

noble intentions. However, in that moment, the *San Dominick* and her unfortunate passengers becomes the gold medal, symbolic of the money taken for their betrayal.

Whether looking back on Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels* as Melville was in writing "Benito Cereno," or reading "Benito Cereno" as readers have since 1855, it remains a tale of "shadows present fore-shadowing deeper shadows to come."

Tragically, individuals (such as the powerful Captain Delano) assume, without question, their own goodness, the unwavering truth of their beliefs, and the justice of their oppressive laws—even when evidence to the contrary presents itself. "Benito Cereno" delivers a grim prophecy indeed if it reflects a final term in Hegelian dialectics, "a state where knowledge need no longer transcend or correct itself" (Hegel, xiv), abandoning the reader in a society in which the racialization has been (for a moment) reversed, as Young argues, but a society that is, nonetheless, shepherded by Delano, who can divine some humanity in "these mild trades [winds] that now fan your [Cereno's] cheek" (106), yet fails to recognize when real humanity, not its abstraction, needs his most careful consideration. However, as Kant declares in his "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," "*The greatest problem for the human species, the solution of which nature compels him to seek, is that of attaining a civil society which can administer justice universally*" (45). As a chapter in history, "Benito Cereno" chronicles a single moment in the progress toward a more civil society, and, ideally, that society itself will be but a moment in the progress toward an even more perfect union.

## Notes

1. All quotations from “Benito Cereno” come from *Benito Cereno*. Ed. Wyn Kelley. Boston: Bedford, 2008.
2. Young discusses Madison Washington of Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” as a character who also reverses the racialization of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic.
3. Margaret Vanderhaar points out that the unrestrained slaves who kill their trusting masters provide evidence to some scholars that Melville moves away from the “uncompromising democracy” of his earlier work, but to Vanderhaar, one of the lessons to be learned from “Benito Cereno” is that “might makes right” (188).
4. Max Putzel observes that although Delano had little or no classical education, he did a fine job of educating himself. At times, Delano’s inner monologue comparing what he has heard or read about slaves with what he observes on the *San Dominick* calls to mind Gatsinzi Basaninyenzi’s discussion of the impact that racist ethnographies have on travelers and their writing in central Africa in the mid-to late-nineteenth century. Basaninyenzi’s article reveals not only the impact that these racist ethnographies had in their time, but also how they cause horrifying problems to this very day, for example, the bloody conflict between the Tutsi and Hutu in Uganda.
5. Drawing on the work of Newton Arvin, who identifies Mungo Park as a writer with whom Melville would have been conversant as a youth, Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey compare particular instances (like this one) from Park’s writings with Delano’s assumptions about the slaves aboard the *San Dominick*.

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Findings and Conclusions:

Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" subverts nineteenth-century racist ideology by attributing a capacity for agency and intellect to Babo and the slaves that the prevalent white-supremacist doctrine denies them. In the narrative, Captain Delano fails to recognize that the slaves have taken over the *San Dominick* because his fundamentally racist world-view leads him to assume that slaves are incapable of overthrowing their masters. However, Delano's willful ignorance, born out of greed and ambition, serves as justification for entering into a subtle and complex power struggle with Babo and Cereno for control of the *San Dominick*. Considered through a Kantian lens, Delano's rise to power demonstrates a dialectic pattern in the narrative, establishing "Benito Cereno" as a brief chapter in the never-ending progression of history, allowing the reader a moment to consider where society has been, where it is, and where it might be headed.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: William M. Decker

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