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"That Hive of Subtlety": "Benito Cereno" as Critique of Ideology

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> It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie.
> —Melville, *The Confidence Man*

IT is worth remembering that critical approval of Herman Melville was belated and sporadic. Until well into the twentieth century, the dominant appraisal of Melville was set by scholars like Parrington, who found him to be a minor figure on the whole—a writer who happened to achieve an eccentric tour de force in *Moby Dick,* while groping his way from frivolous South-Sea romances to fragmented and barely comprehensible cynicism in works like *Pierre.*[1] Only after World War II did the short fiction of the 1852–56 period gain widespread critical acceptance, and then only with sharp disagreement over the relative success of the various stories. In a comment on *Pierre,* one of Melville's contemporary reviewers explicitly addressed the sore point in the post-*Moby Dick* fiction:

> We can afford Melville full license to do what he likes with "Omoo" and its inhabitants: it is only when he presumes to thrust his tragic *Fantocinni* upon us, as representatives of our own race, that we feel compelled to turn our critical Aegis upon him and freeze him into

cism, this view forces the critical reader to take full responsibility for understanding as carefully as possible how his/her work contributes to reproducing or challenging a dominant ideology, for consciously operating the appropriate theoretical and rhetorical strategy to intervene in that profoundly political, unceasing, and unavoidable struggle over the meaning of words, and of those peculiarly effective word-systems we call literary texts.

In this reading of "Benito Cereno," everything hinges on the character of that irony which is the text's internal construction of a distance from a dominant ideology. The analysis of "Benito Cereno" must begin by breaking absolutely the seductive grip of "identification" between the reader and Amasa Delano, a grip not even loosened by the seemingly negative judgments of the American Captain carried in phrases like "moral simplicity" and "weak-wittedness."[23] Indeed, such a language remains perfectly consistent with Delano's own form of self-understanding—as pretense of critique that actually absolves him of all responsibility. Criticism must not meander unwittingly in the metaphysical fog of Delano's internal discourse, but must dispel it. A criticism that takes the grammar of Delano's ideological self-consciousness as its own is bound to reproduce his strategy of evasion through perplexity. Thus, one must insist that the "gap" which the text installs as its ironic critical distance from Delano cannot be interrogated solely as an epistemological problem of knowledge and ignorance, but must also be sharply posed in terms of an active responsibility within a set of social relations.

One should not have to belabor the text's careful internal historical framing of events. We can surely read as significant the text's setting of this story of a rebellion in 1799, a period flush with the triumphant victories of the American and French Revolutions, a period whose "momentousness," as Melville elsewhere remarks, is unexceeded "by any other era of which there is record."[24] These victories promised the establishment of a new social and political order whose ideological promise of "liberty, equality, fraternity" (or "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness") was held out as the rational, democratic replacement for the decadence and superstition of feudal societies, as the "rectification of the Old World's hereditary wrongs"[25]—of

which no country provided a more regressive example than Spain. The tension between the American and Spanish captains is heavily laden with these contrasts, as is made explicit in Delano's condescending, moralizing judgment of the "Spanish spite" that he thinks impels Cereno to punish Babo: "Ah," Delano sighs, "this slavery breeds ugly passions in man.—Poor fellow!"[26]

And this story was written, of course, in 1855, at a time when the hypocrisy of precisely that liberal democratic ideology had just been challenged (in Europe if not in America) by the revolutions of 1848—at a time, therefore, when the violent and repressive tendencies of liberal ideology itself were now visible (including even the restoration of monarchist political forms for the purposes of bourgeois reaction). In the United States at this time, the commercial and legal institution of chattel slavery that still served as a material underpinning of capitalist democracy was coming under direct attack in incidents like the *Amistad* rebellion—incidents that shook Northerners as well as Southerners.[27]

This is the frame in which one must read Captain Delano's inability to understand what he sees aboard the *San Dominick*. It is in this frame that one must register the deep, bitter irony with which the narration follows the intricate contours of Delano's mind, a mind the text describes as itself "incapable of satire or irony" (p.75). There is no such thing as "ideology in general," and this text does not take as its object just any ideology, but the specific form of bourgeois ideology exuding from the social relations of the most "advanced" sectors of the most "progressive" bourgeois society. At stake in this text is not the "problem of evil" as figured in the blacks, nor the problem of precapitalist forms of social relations as figured in Cereno and Aranda, but the problem of ideology as figured in Delano; at stake is how a man like Delano—neither a decadent aristocrat, nor even a Southern slaveholding American, but precisely a "Northerner" from the most radical and abolitionist of states (Massachusetts)—can think of himself as liberal, progressive, and charitable while staring in the face of his own racism, paranoia, and authoritarianism. At issue in "Benito Cereno" is how, for a man immersed in Delano's ideology, a belief in one's own "goodness" and "moral simplicity" is not just "naiveté," but a necessary condition for the violent, sometimes vicious, defense of privilege, power, and self-image.

Such deliberately sharp conclusions can be supported by a careful reading of how the text's ironic narration superimposes what Delano thinks and says over what he *does*. It is a mistake—it is *the* mistake—to read this text for the ambiguous knowledge it gives at any moment of "events aboard the San Dominick"; one must rather read the text for the unambiguous knowledge it gives at every moment about Delano's ideological construction of, and self-insertion into, that situation. The text becomes eminently readable once we assume *that* as what it intends to communicate. As is generally recognized, the ironic stance toward Delano is quickly and firmly established with his initial reaction to the sight of the *San Dominick:*

> To Captain Delano's surprise, the stranger, viewed through the glass, showed no colors; though to do so was the custom among peaceful seamen of all nations. . . . Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful nature, not liable . . . to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine. [P. 55]

The ironic distance established here from Delano's perceptions is more extreme than one would expect from a character with whom the text supposedly "identifies" more strongly than others, whose "bafflement" Melville "seems to share." With the last sentence of this paragraph, the text makes Delano an object of criticism bordering on derision, saying definitely, if indirectly, that he is stupid. Nor is the moral virtue of his "undistrustful good nature" unambiguously ratified by the text. Many critics take this phrase at face value as the text's explicit definition of Delano's "problem," but I should claim that the sentence can be read with the "whether" governing the clause about a "benevolent heart," as well as that concerning Delano's "intellectual perception," leaving it uncertain "whether . . . such a trait implies . . . a benevolent heart."[28] Thus, the *écriture* of the text begins on this first page of the story as a complicated discourse of formal *politesse* and deference to Delano, a discourse that actually squirrels away—conceals *and* preserves—radically negative judgments about him. The reader might "feel" that s/he has read something positive about Delano in this sentence ("benevolent heart"), but the one characterization most clearly

communicated is: "Delano is thick-headed." This characteristically Melvillean prose makes the text "difficult" for many readers and "flawed" for many critics, but it is not some kind of fault that can be dispensed with; it is a necessary condition of a textual production that distantiates an ideology within the discourse of that ideology itself.

Indeed, criticism has at times pondered Delano's "bafflement" with an *esprit de sérieux* similar to his, often ignoring passages where the text is unmistakably *comic,* dissolving Delano's sense of self-importance by making him a butt of its humor. In the scene, for example, where the "not unbewildered" Delano falls through the *San Dominick*'s railing, a reader with the least pictorial imagination might find it difficult to keep from laughing *at* Delano:

> As with some eagerness he bent forward . . . the balustrade gave way before him like charcoal. Had he not clutched an outreaching rope he would have fallen into the sea. The crash, though feeble, and the fall, though hollow, of the rotten fragments, must have been overheard. He glanced up. With sober curiosity peering down upon him was one of the old oakum-pickers. [P. 89]

And in the scene when an old sailor surreptitiously hands Delano a knotted rope, the text characterizes Delano's reaction with withering irony: "For a moment, knot in hand, and knot in head, Captain Delano stood mute" (p. 91). A critical reading should treat Delano's "bafflement" as he cannot treat the knot: "Undo it. Cut it. Quick." Otherwise, like him, it will prevent itself from seeing what *is* serious: in this instance, the fact that the old man's life is at stake.[29]

Given this kind of textual ridicule, which occurs as Delano cogitates on Cereno's puzzling behavior, it would seem consistent to find the text framing his imaginings of Cereno with equally severe irony. And, indeed, in his rumination the reader finds a Delano shifting in a schizophrenic pattern from a belief that everyone is conspiring to kill him to a satisfied certainty that everyone loves him too much to do him any harm. The following passage can be read as a kind of case study in megalomania, paranoia, and racism:

> From something suddenly suggested by the man's air, the mad idea now darted into Captain Delano's mind, that Don Benito's plea of indisposition, in withdrawing below, was but a pretense: that he was engaged there maturing his plot, of which the sailor by some means

> gaining an inkling had a mind to warn the stranger against; incited, it may be, by gratitude for a kind word on first boarding the ship. Was it from foreseeing some possible interference like this, that Don Benito had, beforehand, given such bad character of his sailors, while praising the negroes; though, indeed, the former seemed as docile as the latter the contrary? The whites, too, by nature, were the shrewder race. A man with some evil design, would he not be likely to speak well of that stupidity which was blind to his depravity, and malign that intelligence from which it might not be hidden? Not unlikely, perhaps. But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes? These difficulties recalled former ones. Lost in their maze, Captain Delano . . . had now regained the deck. [Pp. 89–90]

With this passage, one can give a truly "symptomatic" reading of Delano:[30] megalomania—Delano feels that he is at the center of everyone's attention, not because of what he has done or might do, but because of what he *is;* thus, Delano thinks that the lowly sailor risks his own life to save Delano out of "gratitude for a kind word"; paranoia—everyone, under the control of the mirror-image figure of authority (Cereno), is plotting against him, plotting to take away *his* power; racism—Delano puts every possible construction on the evidence before him except the correct and most obvious one, and this possibility he refuses to consider because the blacks are "too stupid."

Delano's misrecognition here exemplifies the "overdetermination of the real by the imaginary" in ideology.[31] There is a real enough sense in which Delano is the center of everyone's attention and in mortal danger, but this sense is not congruent with the "reality" he "perceives." Delano "sees" as "real" only the situation that conforms to his imaginary struggle with his sole "equal" in rank, race, class, power, and therefore (for Delano) intelligence—Cereno. Cereno functions as a kind of mirror for Delano in the text: the similarity of their names, and their tendency always to confront each other face-to-face suggest Cereno's "imag-inary" status. The puzzle of Cereno, then, becomes the puzzle of what Delano sees in his own mirror, how it reflects his own image back to him; and Delano sees many disturbing things: arbitrary cruelty, decadence, weak-mindedness, etc. But most disturbing, he sees his own ultimate vulnerability, an image that seems to be dissolving before his eyes—a nightmare image for Delano indeed. Delano wants

Cereno to be a mirror in which his own image of power and security is confirmed and justified, and when Cereno fails to play that role appropriately, Delano then "sees" him as a figure of evil, plotting against Delano's own power.

The character of Delano, then, can be read as a textual figure of an ideology in crisis. For Delano, the crux of the problem is to reconstruct a confirming "reality" of power and authority—the "natural" authority of racial superiors (whites), and the political authority of social superiors (Captains, "gentlemen"). The whole scene aboard the *San Dominick* appears as unsettlingly "unreal" to Delano because it presents an image of social power relations that lacks the appropriate materials for any "reality" he can construct. Thus, Delano's anxieties center on loss of control—either his possible loss of the *Bachelor's Delight,* or his perception of Cereno's loss of control of the *San Dominick;* what most confuses Delano about the scene aboard the *San Dominick* is the absence of the network of repressive practices and apparatuses that would ratify his own heavily imaginary sense of himself and of reality, that would reproduce the ideology (the "lived relation to the real") which would make his world *look* as it should:

> At bottom it was Don Benito's reserve which displeased him. . . . So that to have beheld this undemonstrative invalid gliding about, apathetic and mute, no landsman could have dreamed that in him was lodged a dictatorship beyond which, while at sea, there was no earthly appeal. . . .
>
> . . . Some prominent breaches, not only of discipline but of decency, were observed. These Captain Delano could not but ascribe, in the main, to the absence of those subordinate deck-officers to whom, along with higher duties, is intrusted what may be styled the police department of a populous ship. [Pp. 63–64][32]

What most calms Delano, then, is the image of restored authority, an image that alternates between the megalomaniac project of restoring the "weak" Cereno to his command, and the paranoid project of heading off the "evil" Cereno's plot against Delano's own command. The text makes explicit Delano's imaginary version of aid to the foreigner as counterplot:

> Evidently, for the present, the man [Cereno] was not fit to be intrusted with the ship. On some benevolent plea withdrawing the command from him, Captain Delano would yet have to send her to Conception, in charge of his second mate. . . .

> Such were the American's thoughts. They were tranquilizing. There was a difference between the idea of Don Benito's darkly pre-ordaining Captain Delano's fate, and Captain Delano's lightly arranging Don Benito's. [P. 83]

In this story about the suppression of a revolt off the coast of Chile, can modern criticism read the text as sharing Delano's self-serving idea of this "difference"? We shall see how Delano goes about "lightly arranging" the fate of the *San Dominick.*

Given the text's consistently critical and ironic "fixing" of Delano, notions of "moral simplicity," or of a "bafflement . . . Melville seems to share" with his "good American" protagonist about "the problem of slavery and the Negro" seem entirely inadequate to describe how the text presents a Delano who muses thus:

> There is something about the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person. Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castinets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction. There is, too, a smooth tact about them in this employment, with a marvellous, noiseless, gliding briskness, not ungraceful in its way, singularly pleasing to behold, and still more so to be the manipulated subject of. And above all is the great gift of good-humor. Not the mere grin or laugh is here meant. Those were unsuitable. But a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune.
>
> When to this is added the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors, one readily perceives why those hypochondriacs, Johnson and Byron—it may be, something like the hypochondriac Benito Cereno—took to their hearts, almost to the exclusion of the entire white race, their serving men, the negroes, Barber and Fletcher. But if there be that in the negro which exempts him from the inflicted sourness of the morbid or cynical mind, how, in his most prepossessing aspects, must he appear to a benevolent one? Captain Delano's nature was not only benign, but familiarly and humorously so. At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color at work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor, invariably he was on chatty and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men with a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs. [Pp. 99–100]

The text certainly "knows" what is going on here.[33] The critical reader knows, even if s/he did not on *first* reading, that

Delano is himself the "manipulated subject of" a rebellious black man threatening to slit his captive white master's throat. With this assumption, it is impossible to read this text as identifying with Delano's ideological perception of the blacks; it is impossible not to read this text as fixing for a scathing ironic gaze the preconscious mind-set of a character whose ignorance of his own mortal danger derives precisely from his assumption that blacks can be treated and *seen* as "Newfoundland dogs." Nor, again, is there any reason to assume that more irony falls on the way an ideological discourse constructs Babo's "limited mind" than on the way it constructs Delano's "benevolent one." The text, furthermore, painstakingly frames in this scene, as sharing the attitudes of paternalism and condescension toward blacks, two pillars of English literary culture—Johnson and Byron. This scene, then, unites in a unique literary tableau the Spanish aristocrat, the liberal-minded American Yankee, and the Tory and "revolutionary" literati—diverse instantiations of general and literary ideologies—under the sign of shared delusions about "inferior" people, about servitude, power, and the security of privilege.[34] All of these men remain unable, literally, to *see* the reality of the hatred and incipient rebellion that stares them in the face because ideology constructs for them a "reality" upon which their eyes (and their "I"s) can rest with comfort, finding a reassuring reflection of their own essential innocence and self-satisfaction.

It would be no less ideologically "skewed" to read this scene in any other way, and certainly to read it as anything like a symptom of "Melville's failure to reckon with the injustice of slavery within the limits of the narrative [which] makes its tragedy . . . comparatively superficial."[35] "Benito Cereno" can be read this way only from within an ideology similar to that signified by the text's evocation of Johnson, Byron, and Amasa Delano; the text can be read this way, that is, only from within a lived relation to a literary "real" that would limit the range of possible meanings for this text of a "great American author" in the same way as Delano's ideology limited his perception of the possible meanings of "Don Benito's" actions aboard the *San Dominick*—an ideology that would make it impossible to conceive that Melville's text might be so radically "in complicity with the blacks." Such a discourse finds in every possible meaning of this text ratification of its own image of the world, of literature, and of itself: either Melville is to be slapped on the

wrist for being a little racist and corrected with a moderate dose of liberal humanism, or he is to be congratulated for showing us once again (what all "great literature" shows us) that evil and ambiguity are everywhere, if only we would see them, and that the only (regrettably imperfect) choice an intelligent person can make is for the "benevolent" and "genial" mind itself. Such a critical ideology hardly imagines that this text might be read "with" the blacks, nor even that it might be read irrevocably *against* the "good American," let alone that reading it might rudely force the reader to choose between accepting or refusing Delano's ideological "lived relation to the real," "undistrustful good nature" and all. In my view, Melville's narrative gives the reader just this choice, just this opportunity, with a force equal to that of any modern theoretical critique of ideology.

Lest the reader register the paternalism of Delano's ideology as referring only to "inferior" *races,* the text describes Delano's thrill at the sight of his own sailors approaching in the small boat:

> The sensation here experienced, after at first relieving his uneasiness, with unforeseen efficacy soon began to remove it. The less distant sight of that well-known boat—showing it, not as before, half-blended with the haze, but with outline defined, so that its individuality, like a man's, was manifest; that boat, *Rover* by name, which, though now in strange seas, had often pressed the beach of Captain Delano's home, and brought to its threshold for repairs, had familiarly lain there, as a Newfoundland dog; the sight of that household boat evoked a thousand trustful associations, which, contrasted with previous suspicions, filled him not only with lightsome confidence, but somehow with half humorous self-reproaches at his former lack of it. [Pp. 91–92]

Ideology is precisely that network of "a thousand trustful associations" upon which Delano seizes with glee at the sight of his boat. The boat and the associations it evokes are singularly comforting reminders of the relationships of power and authority that encode the social universe of a man like Delano, and secure his position as "master," this time over social inferiors of his own race but of a different class, to be treated as well with the condescension and paternalism normally reserved for a "Newfoundland dog." And the simple textual movement of the set-off adjectival phrase, "like a man's," indicates with subtle but definite emphasis that, for someone immersed in Delano's ideology, every man's individuality functions as a re-

minder of his own power. Indeed, so inflated is Delano with the impending verification of the natural social order promised by the arrival of "his men," that he virtually dissolves in regression, assuring himself that nobody can hurt him because he is innocent (Who accuses him? Of what?) and God watches over him:

> "What I, Amasa Delano—Jack of the Beach, as they called me when a lad—I, Amasa . . . to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate ship by a horrible Spaniard? Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean. There is someone above. Fie, Fie, Jack of the Beach! you are a child indeed; a child of the second childhood, old boy; you are beginning to dote and drule, I'm afraid." [P. 92]

When a text has a character warning himself that he is "beginning to dote and drule," the critical reader might legitimately read the ironic distance signified as insufficiently measured by notions of "naiveté," or "undistrustful good nature." And when the text, a few sentences later, puts in Delano's head the words: "Ha! glancing towards the boat; there *Rover;* good dog; a white bone in her mouth. A pretty big bone though, seems to me," one can easily read an association between Delano's image of the surf seen as a "bone" in the mouth of his boat and the image of the skeleton affixed to the prow of the *San Dominick*—a bone on which this ideology will have to choke. Captain Delano of the *Bachelor's Delight* seems to have a "good nature" much like that of those other Melvillean bachelors:

> For these men of wealth, pain and trouble simply do not exist: the thing called pain, the bugbear called trouble—those two legends seemed preposterous to their bachelor imaginations. How could men of liberal sense, ripe scholarship in the world, and capacious philosophical and convivial understandings—how could they suffer themselves to be imposed upon by such monkish fables? Pain! Trouble! As well talk of Catholic miracles. No such thing.—Pass the sherry, sir.—Pooh, pooh! Can't be![36]

If ideology is a kind of preconscious grid that prestructures all experience (and any idea) in a form tending to validate those held within the ideology, a certain Yankee bourgeois ideology confirms precisely this social self-perception as "men of liberal sense." It has been something of an ironic fate for "Benito Cereno" that its simultaneous internalization of and distantiation from this ideology have allowed critical readings to mistake

for their object, rather than ideology, the "problem of the blacks" or "the problem of evil"—thereby "drowning criticism in compassion" (p. 69) and presenting this text as safe for all "men of liberal sense." Take the following excerpt from a criticism that sincerely tries to account for the text's ironic distance from Delano's attitude toward the blacks:

> The fascinating enigma of *Benito Cereno* revolves around the question of what Melville intended his blacks to be. . . .
>
> *Benito Cereno* is neither an abolitionist tract nor a condemnation of the Negro race. Evil and ferocity are not confined to the blacks; heroism and virtue are not the exclusive trait of the whites. Both blacks and whites are part of the humanity whose dark side Melville will not deny. Babo is part man, part beast. . . . But the white man, who ironically espouses a religion of . . . brotherhood, is also a beast. Who can say where the blame rests for the carnage unleashed aboard the flaming coffin? The untamed and daemonic forces rampant on the *San Dominick* characterize . . . all of mankind.[37]

By taking as its starting point that Melville's text is about "his" blacks rather than "about" ideology because "of" ideology, this reading follows the road of good intentions into a certain humanist ideological cul-de-sac. We can almost see Delano and his confreres of "liberal sense and ripe scholarship" nodding with approval at hearing that everyone has a dark side and a light side, is half-man and half-beast, and we can hear the whispered "Not me!" in response to the comforting rhetorical query: "Who can say where the blame rests?" For "men of liberal sense" the "carnage" and "daemonic forces" that provide the conditions of their own social possibility remain unspoken problems in a moralizing discourse about the problem of the blacks or the problem of evil.

But "Benito Cereno" tenaciously refuses to let Delano's ideological "set" off its ironic hook. In fact, the text explicitly images Delano's ideological sense of his own innocence as not just naiveté (not just a mistake based on that innocence!), but as the condition of a deliberate, unnecessary, and massively lethal violence. Such a sharp assertion can be ratified in that textual moment when, after realizing that he has been fooled to the last minute and beyond by the blacks' manipulation of his ideology, Delano orders his men to attack the *San Dominick* and recover control from the rebellious slaves:

> Upon inquiring of Don Benito what firearms they had on board the *San Dominick,* Captain Delano was answered that they had none that could be used; because, in the earlier stages of the mutiny, a cabin-passenger, since dead, had secretly put out of order the locks of what few muskets there were. But with all his remaining strength, Don Benito entreated the American not to give chase, either with ship or boat; for . . . in the case of a present assault, nothing but a total massacre of the whites could be looked for. But, regarding this warning as coming from one whose spirit had been crushed by misery, the American did not give up his design.
>
> The boats were got ready and armed. . . .
>
> The officers . . . for reasons connected with their interests and those of the voyage, and a duty owing to the owners, strongly objected against their commander's going. Weighing their remonstrances a moment, Captain Delano felt bound to remain; appointing his chief mate—an athletic and resolute man, who had been a privateer's-man—to head the party. The more to encourage the sailors, they were told, that the Spanish captain considered this ship good as lost; that she and her cargo, including some gold and silver, were worth more than a thousand doubloons. Take her, and no small part should be theirs. The sailors replied with a shout. [P. 120][38]

This passage gives the reader some definite textual characterizations of Delano. 1) Delano knows that the blacks are effectively unarmed *and* that they are unaware of this disadvantage, since the firearms have been "secretly put out of order." (Indeed, heroism is "not the exclusive trait of the whites.") 2) Delano is unconcerned about the possible mass slaughter of blacks *and* whites, and insists on pursuing his scheme forcibly to restore the "real" in its proper image of order, despite the impassioned plea ("with all his remaining strength") of Cereno, who has the only semblance of "real" interest in recapturing the *San Dominick.* Delano, because of his class-political position as the representative of the interests of the officers and owners as a whole,[39] piously refrains from going, and sends to lead the charge his chief mate, an ex-pirate (the kind of subordinate whom men like Delano often keep around to do their "police" work). 3) Again, the simple textual movement of a phrase set off by commas—"they were told"—establishes subtly but definitely that Delano lies to his own men, provoking their greed in order to encourage their participation in a deadly expedition in which they have absolutely no real interest. "They were told," "the more to encourage them," that the *San*

Dominick contained gold and silver, but the text gives two inventories of the ship's cargo, and in neither is there any mention of this inspirational gold and silver.[40] The communicative intention here, what the text "lets the reader know," is not that there *was* gold, but that Delano *said* there was and why he said it. The text here again communicates that Delano's discourse is the "subject" of its own, that his ideology—his politically and unconsciously overdetermined "lived relation to the real," as enacted in word and deed—is the "object" taken as its "problem."

Delano's ideology reveals at the core of its innocence and "whiteness," a skeletal infrastructure that is death and violence. Not only does the *San Dominick* have "death for the figurehead, in a human skeleton; chalky comment on the chalked words below, *'Follow Your Leader'*" (p. 119), it also has death for its savior—death in the form of a live whiteness sent by Delano through the agency of his first mate. If the reader but recall the text's rendering of Delano's early spontaneous perception of the blacks:

> There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love, thought Captain Delano, well pleased.
>
> This incident prompted him to remark the other negresses more particularly than before. He was gratified with their manners: like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution; equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them. Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves. Ah! thought Captain Delano. . . . [P. 87]

—if the reader but *read* Delano's pleasure and gratification at this "primitive" tenderness and strength, under the text's rendering of the following scene of attack on the *San Dominick,* then "Benito Cereno" will register all its scathing ironic effect, irrevocably displaying the cruelty and hypocrisy of Delano's "lived relation to the real." This scene, at once lyrical and cynical in its evocation of the desperate but futile struggle of the blacks, and the text in which it is set, can be read as achieving at least one aspect of authorial intention with unanticipated force, presenting "another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie":

> With creaking masts, she came heavily round to the wind; the prow slowly swinging into view of the boats, its skeleton gleaming in the horizontal moonlight, and casting a gigantic ribbed shadow

upon the water. One extended arm of the ghost seemed beckoning the whites to avenge it.

"Follow your leader!" cried the mate; and, one on each bow, the boats boarded. Sealing spears and cutlasses crossed hatchets and handspikes. Huddled among the longboat amidships, the negresses raised a wailing chant, whose chorus was the clash of the steel.

For a time, the attack wavered; the negroes wedging themselves to beat it back; the half-repelled sailors, as yet unable to gain a footing, fighting as troopers in the saddle, one leg sideways flung over the bulwarks, and one without, plying their cutlasses like carters' whips. But in vain. They were almost overborne, when, rallying themselves into a squad as one man, with a huzza, they sprang inboard, where, entangled, they involuntarily separated again. For a few breaths' space, there was a vague, muffled, inner sound, as of submerged sword-fish rushing hither and thither through shoals of black-fish. Soon, in a reunited band, and joined by the Spanish seamen, the whites came to the surface, irresistibly driving the negroes toward the stern. But a barricade of casks and sacks, from side to side, had been thrown up by the mainmast. Here the negroes faced about, and though scorning peace or truce, yet fain would have had respite. But, without pause, overleaping the barrier, the unflagging sailors again closed. Exhausted, the blacks now fought in despair. Their red tongues lolled, wolf-like, from their black mouths. But the pale sailors' teeth were set; not a word was spoken; and, in five minutes more, the ship was won. [P. 122][41]

This rendering of the personal courage of black men and women is a remarkable achievement in American literature for any year, let alone 1855. Even the white sailors' courage stands as an implicit indictment of Delano, the absent author of this senseless slaughter, who can rely on others to enforce his peculiar sense of justice. And the simple textual movement of "as troopers in the saddle" and "like carters' whips" marks this text as, indeed, no mere "abolitionist tract" but a resonant gloss on the history of a civilization. In a characteristic Melvillean trope, the scene closes where the literary ends, in a space where words cannot be spoken.[42]

Certainly, Melville's text gives us the blacks as uncompromising in their use of force, deception (but not self-deception), and courage to resist enslavement; then it gives us Delano (not "the whites")[43] as ruthless in his use of violence, deception, and the manipulation of the greed and courage of others to annihilate any challenge to his self-deceiving "reality" of power, authority, and superiority. And if one is to choose how to "read" this carefully specified situation (as the reader must, and does), it is of no help for criticism to translate the text into a metaphysics

of light versus dark, or man versus beast, terms whose only possible function is to make a choice seem impossible by offering ambivalence as the only possible choice.

Delano's violent repression of the blacks, against Cereno's own entreaties, seeks to reconstruct that comforting order of things in which other men take their proper relation to him, a relation like that of "Newfoundland dogs." Delano wants to believe—wants really to *see*—this order, not as "constructed" by his own egotistical and violent practices, but as "justified" by his own essential innocence. Cereno's deposition, forming a separate part of the narrative, serves only to underscore Delano's bad faith. Repeating the phrase "the noble Captain Amasa Delano" evokes a ritual courtroom litany that the critical reader should take less as a sincere expression of Cereno's respect than an ironic designation of the Yankee trader as the kind of "gentleman" whom the decadent Spanish aristocracy recognizes as one of its own. And Delano's assertion of a moral distance from the actions of his subordinates, in stopping "with his own hand" sailors' attempts to kill "shackled negroes," must be understood in relation to his responsibility for instigating the slaughter. For Delano, the American, the sense of his own innocence and good will serves as a precondition for the forcible maintenance of political and social relations that support his privilege. In the ideological discourse of a man like Delano, of the "civilization" that produces such men, the use of armed force must never be understood for what it is (the social equivalent of the oppressive feudal violence of aristocrats and slaveowners), but as a mistake resulting from an excess of goodness, a mistake to be abolished from memory and history as quickly as possible.

But Cereno, the European, knows better. And while Delano restores the order of this world, with his own "good nature" as its imaginary linchpin, Cereno finds himself unable to continue in self-deception, unable to ignore that death-dealing which is the real linchpin of the social order, unable, it seems, even to exist as he was before. In the last section of the narrative, we find a final, telling exchange between Cereno and Delano. Both now possess full knowledge of the events aboard the *San Dominick,* but only one has been dislodged from his ideological lived relation to a specular, self-justifying "real." The American's desperate, insane plea for the saving power of his own innocence and closeness to Providence now rings especially hollow against the Spaniard's polite but definite charge of respon-

sibility, and against Cereno's own profound self-transformation, even self-dissolution:

> ". . . you have saved my life, Don Benito, more than I yours; saved it, too, against my knowledge and will."
>
> "Nay, my friend," rejoined the Spaniard, courteous even to the point of religion, "God charmed your life, but you saved mine. To think of some of the things you did—those smilings and chattings, rash pointings and gesturings. For less than these, they slew my mate, Raneds; but you had the Prince of Heaven's safe conduct."
>
> "Yes, all is owing to Providence, I know: but the temper of my mind that morning was more than commonly pleasant, while the sight of so much suffering, more apparent than real, added to my good-nature, compassion, and charity, happily interweaving the three. Had it been otherwise, doubtless, as you hint, some of my interferences might have ended unhappily enough. . . . Only at the end, did my suspicions get the better of me, and you know how wide of the mark they then proved."
>
> "Wide, indeed," said Don Benito sadly; "you were with me all day; stood with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me; and yet, your last act was to clutch for a monster, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men. To such degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose. So far may even the best men err in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted." [Pp. 138–39][44]

Cereno, "courteous even to the point of religion," speaks in a discourse informed by the ironic nuance of the text. He speaks of Delano's protection by "the Prince of Heaven": the reader might easily infer that the text means Christ, but is not Christ a King?[45] And what was Delano's "last act"? When he lashed out at Cereno, was that the *last* time he lashed out at "the most pitiable of all men," the kind of man "with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted"? Does the text here mean Christ or Satan, Aristocrat or Slave? The phrases speak for themselves, but the reader must decide what they say. The textual ambiguity cannot be resolved by peering into the blinding light of the words themselves, but only in that shadow cast upon them by an unspoken relation to an ideology.

So Cereno, in the shadow of ideology, wastes away and dies, knowing without illusion what he was and is, but unable to communicate why "the negro" still haunts him, and why it might come back to haunt the Yankee himself. "Slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle about him, as if it were a pall," Cereno falls deadly silent: "There was no more conversation that day" (p. 139). Again, the text marks a space where

words must end. Cereno remains unable to speak of the empty inscriptions of his rank and command—the ceremonial dress, sword, and scabbard he was forced to don for Delano; he refuses to confirm Babo's identity as the accused.[46] Having been made to occupy the position of the slave—having been forced to choke on the ideology of the master—Cereno, like Babo, stands mute, knowing the futility of speech in the face of an infinite, closed ideological discourse whose only pronouncement can be, whose every pronouncement is, death. In death, Babo's decapitated gaze forms a circuit of silent communication with Cereno and Aranda, a circuit of complicity in which each acknowledges the shared burden of death, violence, and oppression—a circuit from which Amasa Delano is excluded not, as he might like to believe, because he is any better or any more innocent than they are, but only because he thinks that he is. And in the final scene of the text, the characters fall on either side of a divide, not of race or even of slavery, but of ideology—of the ability to continue living within social relations whose precondition is the discourse of self-deception:

> Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew's church, in whose vaults slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda; and across the Rimac bridge looked towards the monastery, on Mount Agonia without; where, three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader. [P. 140]

The text here is not quite "frozen into silence," but has written its way into that final, "voiceless" space where words no longer rule. This laden silence is a characteristic Melvillean ending, invoking a sense of futile defiance in the face of an ideological, "literary" discursivity that often, like the following, pronounces the text's decapitation in order to immortalize, universalize, and enshrine it as an object of specular fascination for a dominant "lived relation to the real":

> The primary theme of "Benito Cereno," determined by Melville's emphasis, is Delano's struggle to comprehend the action. . . . At the end two conclusions are made about the meaning of the facts: first, that reality is a mystery and hard to read, and second, that evil is real and must be reckoned with. To which should perhaps be added, there are some evils that are cureless and some

> mysteries insoluble to man. . . . The mystery of "Benito Cereno" is a mystery of evil, contrived by an evil will [Babo's]. . . .
>
> Delano has one vital disability. . . . He does not understand "of what humanity is capable." Beyond this, the problem is real. It is the creation of a complex and malignant mind [Babo's], a "hive of subtlety," which has deliberately contrived its confusions.[47]

Such a reading ignores all the incisive ideological effect of a text that evokes with ironic precision the first triumphal period of bourgeois revolutionary ideals, even while written as the bankruptcy of those ideals is being seriously challenged by popular struggles. Such a reading can only dilute the power of a text that, written on the eve of a civil war over slavery, speaks beyond even the issue of slavery to racial oppression as a constant shadow within general questions of political and social relations—questions to which even the "Northerner" is blind. Such a reading dispels all the formal tension of a work that strains implicitly to articulate a radical, devastating critique of an ideology that it is constrained explicitly to enter. Indeed, such a reading, with its "reality is a mystery" and "evil is real," marks "Benito Cereno's" passage into the court of a "literary" ideological apparatus—its self-anticipated fate, for which it prepared its own ambiguous silences.

But our historical and ideological conjecture allows us to restore the strong voice of this text's irony. We can encourage it to give, not cringing witness against itself, but compelling testimony, that its prosecutors, who for the moment must listen, do not want to hear—namely, that the "mystery" of violence and social oppression can only be disclosed through analysis and dissolution of that even more complex and malignant "hive of subtlety" which deliberately contrives its own confusions: the ideology of men like the "good American," Amasa Delano.

Notes

1. Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, vol. 2, *The Romantic Revolution in America* (New York: Harcourt, 1930), pp. 258–67.

2. George Washington Peck, in *Melville: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Watson G. Branch (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 316–17, 321.

3. Between 1863 and 1887, for example, an average of twenty-three copies of *Moby Dick* were sold in the United States each year; after the first Melville "revival" (centering on *Moby Dick*), between 1921 and 1947, the book sold more than one million copies. See H. Hetherington, *Melville's Reviewers: British and American, 1846–1971* (Chapel Hill: