

Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno": An American Narrative of the "Slumbering Volcano"¹

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I

Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno"² was published without signature in the *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*³ in 1855 in three installments from October through December, and was included in *Piazza Tales*, a collection of stories, published in the next year—this time, with his name, and with slight revision. The story appeared in the most critical time of American slavery, the mid-eighteen-fifties. In 1854, a year before the story was first printed, the Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act that led to what is called "bleeding Kansas," involving vehement skirmishes between Northern abolitionists and proslavery Southerners. The Dred-Scott Decision of 1857, which virtually denied the liberation of slaves in the North, followed it, and partly caused John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and his consequent execution in 1859. It was indeed the time just before the Civil War when many Americans felt dark shadows spreading over their nation.

Their forebodings were most explicitly expressed by the discourse of a slave revolt. Harriet Beecher Stowe hints a world-wide revolutionary trend at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). As if reacting to the titular "docile" hero of this antislavery novel, Frederick Douglass creates an insurrectionary hero in his only fiction, "The Heroic Slave" (1853), that deals with the mutiny aboard the *Creole* (1841); its leader, Madison Washington, was well known among Americans along with Cinqué, the central figure of the revolt on the *Amistad* (1839), for the trials of these mutinies on the sea had concluded only about a decade before and had been reported repeatedly in periodicals⁴. In responding probably to the image of fighting slaves as well as to the voice of slave narratives and other abolitionist discourses,

Stowe also created a black rebel in *Dred* (1856) modeled on Denmark Vesey, another rebellious figure familiar to her contemporary Americans. It was in this atmosphere that Melville's "Benito Cereno" was written and published. As some critics suggest, it was a product of the era, often referred to as "the slave revolt panic of the mid-fifties"⁵.

II

As far as Melville's fiction is concerned, it may not be too much to say that almost every work of his contains certain commentaries on slavery⁶. *Redburn* (1849), for instance, compares the protagonist's wretched life as a common sailor to that of a slave: "Miserable dog's life is this of the sea! commanded like a slave, and set to work like an ass! vulgar and brutal men lording it over me, as if I were an African in Alabama"(119). Melville also inserts a story of "the middle passage" told by a sailor named Jackson, who once served in Portuguese slavers, in order to impress the reader with the historical fact of how brutally Africans were treated on the ship when carried across the Atlantic: "the slaves were stowed, heel and point, like logs, and the suffocated and dead were unmanacled, and weeded out from the living every morning, before washing down the decks" (107).

White Jacket published in the following year depicts the horrors of flogging on a U.S. naval vessel, which, no doubt, alludes to the slavery in the South; watching a mulatto whipped on the ship, the protagonist utters to himself, "Poor mulatto! ... one of an oppressed race, they degrade you like a hound. Thank God! I am a white. Yet I had seen whites also scourged; for, black or white, all my shipmates were liable to that. ... Still, there is something in us, somehow, that, in the most degraded condition, we snatch at a chance to deceive ourselves into a fancied superiority to others, whom we suppose lower in the scale than ourselves" (348). This perception of "a fancied superiority" whites are likely to hold to non-whites develops into Ishmael's profound meditation on "whiteness" in *Moby-Dick* (1851), in which he tries to invalidate the long-established racial or cultural scale, by blurring the hierarchical difference in images attached to whiteness and blackness.

Melville thus seems to have questioned the racialism spread in America of his day throughout his career as a writer. As the author who had already completed *Moby-Dick*, a masterpiece of American literature, he possibly knew well that not

only nature, but slavery as well, could be a theme peculiar to the national literature. Yet "Benito Cereno" is his very first, and only, fiction that takes up slavery as its central subject. Surprisingly to modern scholars of Melville, however, this story of slave uprising had not been discussed in terms of slavery for more than a century after its publication. It had received no special attention but as "a good sea-tale" (Kaplan, "American National Sin" 332-33; Scudder 502) until 1928 when Harold Scudder announced its source book, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817) written by Asama Delano, especially the eighteenth chapter which tells of the slave insurrection on board a Spanish ship in 1805. Although Scudder seems to underscore Melville's "plagiarism," his discovery initiated the rise of criticism of the story and gave Melvillian scholars a precious chance to examine how his imagination builds a piece of art out of raw materials.

The early full-scale criticisms seem to focus on the analysis of symbols, as in the study by F. O. Matthiessen who read "Benito Cereno" as a story of good and evil (Altschuler 296; Emery, "Topicality" 303-04; Delbanco 231), and regarded the issue of slavery as minor (Adler 88-89; Feltenstein 254)⁷. As Allan Emery maintains, Melville's "topicality" began to be perceived only after the 1960s when civil rights movement became active ("Manifest Destiny" 48-49). It is because of this long neglect of the slavery issue in the "Benito Cereno" criticism that Robert Levine, for example, still had to say, in the late 1890s, "*Benito Cereno* now seems an obviously central literary meditation on the problem of slavery in antebellum culture" (165).

This belated study of the slavery issue in "Benito Cereno" is also partly due to the narrative strategy Melville employs for his fiction. Since the story is narrated for the most part through the perspective of Amasa Delano, what he sees, asserts, speculates, or doubts, cannot assure the reader about what is really going on. "Benito Cereno" is, in fact, another Melvillian story of deceptive appearance. The *San Donimick* commanded by a Spanish captain, Benito Cereno, is actually sea-jacked and directed by the mutinous slaves, and the docility of Babo who serves his master Benito is a mere mask of "malign machinations and deceptions" (101)⁸. And the American captain Amasa Delano from Massachusetts, who offers a generous help to release the Spanish from the predicament, proves to be another white prisoner of the dreadful plot. Here, the issue of class (captain / officer / sailor / servant) is so subtly entwined with that of race (American / Spanish; white / black) and of the slavery institution (master / slave) that it is extremely hard to determine where the author

stands; a careless reader might even suspect Melville's racism.

As is already pointed out, the primary difficulty in interpreting the story lies in the narration. Because the action of "Benito Cereno" is unfolded almost exclusively from the viewpoint of Delano, a good-natured American of (upper-)middle class with limited perception, just like the narrator of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," and because Benito cannot speak his own ideas but the words invented by Babo, the story comes close to a Poesque detective tale and the burden of decoding the mystery is placed on the reader as well as on Delano; the former is impelled to re-read it to realize how ingeniously each piece of description is woven into the whole composition while the latter vacillates between uneasy suspicion of some evil plot and benign trustfulness. What is tested here, therefore, is Delano's—and the reader's—epistemological range. "Benito Cereno" is, in a sense, a dramatization of Delano's failure to see through the veil of Babo's fiction.

III

From the beginning of the story, Delano's inability to see through the truth is symbolized by the mist that makes both the sky and the sea gray and impenetrable (Sale 153). In the morning when the strange sail appeared off the harbor of St. Maria where his sealer, the *Batchelor's Delight*, had safely anchored the day before, "[everything] was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea ... seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray foul, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters" (35). Not only do the "gray vapors" impair Delano's sight, but also cause his ambiguous misgivings and foreshadow what is to follow when he gets on board the *San Dominick*: "Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come" (35).

Delano's limited perception, to be sure, is the direct result of the play well manipulated by Babo, but a close reading of the story reveals that it is also due to Delano's own preconceptions: 1) his sense of authority as a captain, 2) Anglo-Saxonism latent deep in his mind, and 3) his belief in America's expansion he unconsciously combines with racism and anti-Catholicism. These factors do not work separately but are intertwined with each other. What bewilders or disturbs Delano as a ship-commander most on board the Spanish slaver is apparent lack of

authority. Taking notice of "the noisy indocility of the blacks in general" and "the sullen inefficiency of the whites" (40), he concludes that what the *San Dominick* needs is "stern superior officers" (43). As Benito winks at the incident in which one of the black boys struck a white Spanish boy on the head with a knife, saying, "it was merely the sport of the lad" (47), Delano declares that, if it had happened on his ship, the black boy would have had immediate punishment (probably of flogging⁹), and advises the Spanish captain to keep all the slaves, especially young ones, employed, never to leave them idle. He even suspects that Benito is "one of those paper captains" and declares that there is "no sadder sight than a commander who has little of command but the name" (47). Although, witnessing the apparent disorder on the *San Dominick*, Delano at times considers the influence of long suffering from want of water and provisions, because "[in] armies, navies, cities, or families, in nature herself, nothing more relaxes good order than misery" (40), he ascribes in the end the "misrule" to Benito's lack of power as a sea captain; despite all the "fair" considerations, he cannot deny the idea that, if Benito Cereno had been "a man of greater energy, misrule would hardly have come to the present pass" (40). His firm trust in "good order" preserved by hierarchical power thus prevents Delano from probing further the cause of the surface disorder before his eyes.

Delano, on the other hand, prides himself on being a respectable citizen of the Republic and offers to distribute, instead of the Spanish captain, the water and food his men have carried to the *San Dominick*. He, "with republican impartiality," doles out the water to "the oldest white no better than the youngest black" (67). His republican spirit, however, is soon shadowed by his sense of class and race; he attempts to give Benito "extra allowance" and to reserve "the less wilted pumpkins" for the captain and "the soft bread, sugar, and bottled cider" only for whites (67). Yet he is unaware of his own contradiction and believes himself to be democratic as well as charitable. And he cannot control his inner displeasure with Benito who does not show due gratitude for his help.

While underestimating the Spaniard, Delano highly values the black slave Babo, who performs his duties to his enfeebled master with "that affectionate zeal which transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial" (40). To the captain of a sealer whose primary purpose is to make as much profit as possible, Babo's industrial service looks quite desirable. However, it is evident that the satisfaction Delano feels in the black slave comes less from his incessant devotion

to the offices than from his submissive attitude toward the white master. He admits later that he likes “negroes” when their presumably innate cheerfulness is combined with “the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indispensable inferiors” (71). He recalls that he had often enjoyed, at home, watching a free black playing or working, and that, on a voyage, he would always be “on chatty, and half-gamesome terms” with a black sailor. But his “weakness for negroes” is not based on philanthropic love, but on affection that a man inevitably feels for “Newfoundland dogs” (71).

It is, indeed, Delano’s unconscious racism that hampers his power to deduce a solution out of the given hints. There are occasions when he suspects some “wicked” imposture, but his suspicion always falls upon Benito, and never upon Babo, because the blacks are “too stupid” to be capable of any “evil design” (63). Thus the dreadful shaving scene, in which the Spaniard’s life is entirely at the mercy of the slave with a sharp razor in his hand, draws warm feelings toward the black out of the obtuse American in spite of the initial picture of “a headsman ... and a man at the block” (72) he conjures up. In case of the mulatto, however, Delano’s racial thought undergoes a drastic change even to the extent which he openly declares that a mulatto can be a “devil” (75) for the superior blood of the white race mixed with the African’s brings no improvement but detrimental effect to the latter¹⁰. But the hybrid steward, Francesco, passes Delano’s strict examination as a good mulatto exactly because of his “continual smiles” and excessive “genuflexion” (75).

Delano’s racism is related with the “black animality” as we have seen in his association of negroes with Newfoundland dogs. It becomes more conspicuous when he gazes at a black mother sleeping in the shade with a suckling:



Anthony Imbert. Wrapper illustration for “Life in Philadelphia” (ca. 1829-30). Elise Lemire, “‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’: Amalgamation Discourses and the Race Riots of 1838 in Poe’s Philadelphia,” in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy & Liliane Weissberg (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), p. 187.

His attention had been drawn to a slumbering negress, partly disclosed through the lace-work of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, crosswise with its dam's; its hands, like two paws, clambering upon her; its mouth and nose ineffectually rooting to get at the mark; and meantime giving a vexatious half-grunt, blending with the composed snore of the negress. (60; emphasis added)

Delano enjoys the scene as "a pleasant sort of sunny sight" (60), being momentarily released from his indefinable anxieties caused by strange behaviors of the Spanish. Yet it cannot be denied that he unconsciously takes sexual pleasure in seeing the carelessly exposed body ("youthful limbs" and "lapped breasts") of the young slumbering woman. The animal images that fill this passage reveal not only his racist view of the black but also the deceptive discourse that transfigures his act of "peeping" into something natural like a man's affection for animals (a doe and a fawn). Unaware of his own racist and sexist views, he further enjoys the tableau of the black mother and her baby as she awakes and delightedly caresses her baby with kisses:

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. (61; emphasis added)

The animal image of a slave Delano conjures up in the two passages cited above is no more than a stereotypical one most white Americans projected upon the blacks in the 1850s when "Benito Cereno" was published. The idea of racial inferiority of the black was not only common among the mass of Americans, but was being verified from the aspect of man's cranium. Josiah Nott's *Types of Mankind* published in 1854 was one of the most influential works to consolidate the racial differences as scientific facts by means of measuring the size and shape of human skulls¹¹. Defining the black as inferior race, closer to brutes than to men, was connected with the

theory of men's plural origins and it provided proslavery apologists with grounds for the negro slavery.

Reactionary to this was a theory of race as one. Thomas Smyth, for instance, supported the idea of man's common origin in his *The Unity of the Races* (1850) (Emery, "Topicality" 314). Many antislavery magazine articles of the mid-fifties followed this to refute the pluralists who often compared blacks to wild animals¹². The *Harper's Monthly Magazine* which Melville subscribed printed in 1855 "Is the Human Race One or Many?" (September) and "Are We One or Many?" (October) to question Nott's idea (Emery, "Topicality" 314). The *Putnam's* also published similar articles like "Is Man One or Many?" in 1854, "Are We One or Many?" in January 1855. And the December issue of the same year in which the last installment of "Benito Cereno" was printed contains "About Niggers" whose author asserts strongly that a negro is not an ape, but a man (Sale 152; McCall 60).

It is very probable that Melville was familiar with this kind of racial discussion, and the animal image Delano attaches to the slave reflects the commonplace black image of his day. By showing how Delano's conceptions of the black prove to be wrong, he challenges those of his readers: Babo was in reality an intelligent man whose head, a "hive of subtlety" (102), composed the whole plot; graceful and smiling Francesco proved to be a callous man who suggested even poisoning Delano, and the black women, who looked like the most loving existence, showed vengeful sadism by encouraging their men to kill the whites¹³.

IV

Delano's racial prejudice is not limited to the black, but is directed toward the Spanish as well. Although the story is set in the end of the eighteenth century¹⁴, it undoubtedly reflects the 1850s when America had already succeeded in the annexation of Texas (1845) and had won victory in the ensuing Mexican War (1846-48) by which she acquired a new broad land in the West extending to the Pacific Coast. The story of an American mercantile ship rescuing / capturing a Spanish vessel drifting on the Pacific—the former exploring for treasure of the ocean, and the latter loaded with slaves and other valuables—seems, then, to connote the era of America's national expansion. Allan Emery suggests that "Benito Cereno" is not so much of slavery as of American expansionism ("Manifest Destiny" 49-50). And yet

we have to pay attention to the fact that American expansionism and racism went hand in hand, as Reginald Horsman argues in his book *Race and Manifest Destiny*, a thorough study of antebellum racial thought. The national expansion was not only "manifest," but was meant for the Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

According to Horsman, it was often implied that, among the Caucasians, the Anglo-Saxons of England and America were supreme and therefore "destined to rule the world" (170). And keeping the purity of the superior blood became equivalent to ensuring a continuous advance of civilization and progress. As a natural consequence, the mixed blood (either between the white and the black or between the white and the Indian) meant an obstacle to human progress and to "the westward march of [American] empire" (224)¹⁵. When Benito gently restrains Delano's further harangue on the mulatto's debased quality by calling it "your planter's remark" and juxtaposing with it the case of "the Spanish and Indian intermixtures" and thereby making the issue of race less definite (76), he stands closer to Melville.

The Mexican War precipitated the dissemination of the view of Mexicans as "inferior mongrel" and the Spanish were often regarded as no better than Mexicans:

[The] Spanish-Mexican ruling class were themselves little better than Indians. ... [The] Spaniards in Yucatan "were about equal to the Mexicans. (Horsman 247)

In the mind of many Americans, the Spanish were excluded from the supreme blood of whites. Doubtless Captain Delano shares this vision as he imputes Benito's seemingly inconsistent behavior to the racial quality: "as a nation ... these Spaniards are all an odd set" (66).

If the black is associated with animals, the Spaniard then is connected with feeble, delicate, even effeminate images. Benito's singularly rich attire with a decorated sword signifies the South American ruling class: "The Spaniard wore a loose Chili jacket of dark velvet; white small clothes and stockings, with silver buckles at the knee and instep; a high-crowned sombrero, of fine grass; a slender sword, silver mounted, hung from a knot in his sash; the last being an almost invariable adjunct, more for ornament than utility, of a South American gentleman's dress to this hour" (45). To the American captain, the sumptuous costume and the ornamental "adjunct" Benito wears do not match either the disorder all around him

or the pale face of the afflicted commander. They are so incongruous that Delano even imagines “an invalid courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague” (46). Since Delano attributes after all what appears strange in Benito to his nationality and race, he does not recognize that his toilet is a forced one.

Likewise, Benito’s delicate condition symbolized by a fit of coughing or tremor is regarded more as lack of valor than a sign of long suffering. Being a victim of both physical and mental debility, Delano thinks, he seems “never to have been robust” (40). The term “robust” is used here to represent a healthy, practical, self-made Yankee in contrast to an enfeebled, whimsical Spanish aristocrat; Delano prides himself on being a native-born Northerner of Duxbury, Massachusetts. This racial comparison is surfaced more explicitly in the exclamatory sentence, “How unlike are we made!” (49)—the words he silently uttered when he saw Benito violently tremble at his mere reference to the body of the dead slaveholder Alexandro Aranda; Delano took Benito’s upset for manifestation of his terror of a ghost.

Delano’s covert contempt for the Spanish captain assumes a touch of feminization of him. Watching Benito terrified at the moment when Babo’s razor drew a drop of blood in the shaving scene, Delano thinks, “Poor fellow, ... so nervous he can’t even bear the sight of barber’s blood; and this unstrung, sick man, is it credible that I should have imagined he meant to spill all my blood, who can’t endure the sight of one little drop of his own?” (73). In his imagination Delano almost compares Benito to a delicate lady fainting at a bloody sight, while he denies the recurrent suspicion of his evil scheme. Around the time of the Annexation and the Mexican War, an image of Spanish / Mexican men as being weak, lazy, unable to control their women and country was disseminated among Americans and served to justify America’s seizing and governing the Spanish / Mexican territory in place of them (Horsman 227-48, 233-34). Delano’s view of the Spanish corresponds to the image.

In examining the Spanish image in “Benito Cereno” constructed through Delano’s perception, we must note that his racist discourse is also intertwined with anti-Catholicism. Lyman Beecher, Stowe’s father and a famous Calvinist minister in New England, had already expressed anti-Catholic sentiment in his *A Plea for the West* (1835), urging his audience to follow him in delivering the West from “feudal ignorance and servitude” of Catholicism (Sandquist 146-47). The “great” migration of the Beecher family to Cincinnati, Ohio (still a part of the West at that time), had

been intended to be a crusade against Catholic encroachment (Hedrick 68, 168). Emery remarks that America's anti-Catholic sentiment reached its culmination during the 1850s "in conjunction with a rising Anglo-Saxonism and a 'nativist' dislike for all things 'foreign'" (Emery, "Manifest Destiny" 56-57):

Catholicism was condemned for its "totalitarian" church structure, its "authoritarian" methods, its popularity among the "Celtic" races of Southern Europe, and its "imperialistic" commitment to world-wide evangelism. (57)

The *San Dominick* is full of monastery imagery. Seen from distance, the ship veiled in thick fog appears to Delano like "a white-washed monastery ... perched upon some dun cliff among the Pyrenees," with "Black Friars pacing the cloisters" (36). Though it is a Spanish merchant ship of the first class, an air of oldness and decay is everywhere and its captain, Don Benito, "like some hypochondriac abbot" (40), suffers from lethargy. The antiquated and ruinous atmosphere signifies fading relics of some mighty power of the past both secular and religious.

The embarking of the cheerful American captain upon the weather-beaten Spanish ship, therefore, marks a victory of democratic America over the despotic old world¹⁶. It also implies that the emerging Anglo-Saxon-Protestant American empire takes over the declining Catholic-Spanish empire. And the persistent chase of the Spanish merchantman by the American crew represents another American sentiment of the 1850s that a new empire, replacing the old one, is marching westward into the Pacific in pursuit of economic wealth. Captain Delano regards Benito's entreating not to chase the *San Dominick* as renouncement of his right to it, and commands his men to capture the ship and its cargo (including the slaves) which are "worth more than a thousand doubloons" (87).

V

The Roman Catholic church was frequently linked with the Inquisition in Protestant Americans' imagination, and it appeared in "popular accounts, particularly in Northeast newspapers and journals," as a symbol of opposition, or a dangerous threat, to "the ideals of republican liberty" (Levine 202). Melville seems to recast this popular narrative of anti-Catholicism in the shaving scene Babo stages,

for a scene of religious execution of an apostate is replaced by that of a daily act of shaving by a black barber, so familiar a scene in American life that Delano cannot perceive any danger except a momentary impression of the arm-chair as “some grotesque engine of torment” (70); and the tableau of this pseudo-Inquisition mocks the anti-Catholic sentiment, since the victim here is the Spaniard with an apron of Spanish flag tied around his neck, and Babo, the executioner, while Delano plays the role of the inquisitor himself, without knowing it, and *enjoys* the sight (Emery, “Manifest Destiny” 58-59).

As many critics point out, the Spanish Catholicism, in association with totalitarian power and lawless punishment, was identified with Southern slavery (Levine 201-02; Kelley 121; Sandquist 148). The Inquisitional sadism displayed in a dark hidden place like a dungeon as illustrated in Poe’s “Pit and Pendulum” (1842), suggested what was going on behind the planter’s resplendent mansion¹⁷. Theodore Weld had already exposed what the slaveholder’s arbitrary power could bring about in his *American Slavery As It Is* (1839). Declaring his purpose in its introduction to prove the atrocities of American slavery, he gives a kind of summary of the savageries that are to be listed in the whole volume:

We will prove that the slaves in the United States are treated with barbarous inhumanity; that they are overworked, underfed, wretchedly clad and lodged, and have insufficient sleep; that they are often made to wear round their necks iron collars armed with prongs, to drag heavy chains and weights at their feet while working in the field, and to wear yokes, and bells, and iron horns; that they ... have some of their front teeth torn out or broken off, that they may be easily detected when they run away; that they are frequently flogged with terrible severity, have red pepper rubbed into their lacerated flesh, and hot brine, spirits of turpentine ... poured over the gashes to increase the torture; that they are often stripped naked, their backs and limbs cut with knives, bruised and mangled by scores and hundreds of blows with the paddle, and terribly torn by the claws of cats, drawn over them by their tormentors; that they are often hunted with blood hounds and shot down like beasts, or torn in pieces by dogs ... ; that their ears are often cut off, their eyes knocked out, their bones broken, their flesh branded with red hot irons; that they are maimed, mutilated and burned to death over slow fires. (9)

In his attempt to prove the inhuman brutality of slavery in the South, Weld gives numerous examples of unspeakable violence gleaned from personal confessions, letters, newspaper articles, and books, which contain, for instance, a case of a runaway slave who was captured and compelled to run back to the plantation after the overseer's horse for some fifteen miles, being whipped all the way; when he reached home, the slave was further whipped till his back was almost "mince-meat," and, this torture not being satisfactory yet to his master, his weary legs were burnt with hot embers, and he was found dead in the next morning (70).

Weld's document is chiefly directed to the Northern audience who would not believe the cruel treatment of slaves in America but who are ready to give credit to "the atrocities perpetrated by Ovando in Hispaniola, Pizarro in Peru, and Cortez in Mexico" (8). Weld equates the violence of America's South with that of Spanish (Mexican)- Catholic nations in South America. By the extension of this parallel, we can say that, if Benito, the captain of the Spanish vessel carrying more than a hundred slaves, embodies a Southern slaveholder, Delano, then, represents a Yankee visitor to the Southern plantation (McCall 48; Yellin 217) who sees nothing horrible behind the grand plantation house, behind "the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other" (45).

Delano, a proud Northerner, is against slavery, and voices his criticism of the slaveholder's unrestrained power as he hears Babo's "wailing soliloquy" (74) over the master's revenge on him for the little cut: "Ah, this slavery breeds ugly passions in man—Poor fellow!" (75) And yet he is not free from the idea of a slave as chattel and offers to buy Babo for fifty doubloons. And he captures, in the end, all the mutinous slaves and sends them to the original destination, Lima in Chili, where they are destined to be auctioned and sold. He indeed supports slavery. This connotes that the North conspires with its counterpart, the South, in maintaining the institution in the United States, and that America is no better than the ruinous Spain that had drained herself away by expanding her empire in company with slavery¹⁸. Melville sees America's fate in the perturbed history of Spain (Emery, "Manifest Destiny" 66). As Joyce Adler suggests, Benito's farewell greeting uttered with unusual zeal just before Delano descends into his boat, "[Go], and God guard you better than me" (84), can be interpreted as a prayer-like warning to America's future (107-08).

In this context the transposition of the figurehead of the *San Dominick* from

Cristobal Colon to the skeleton of the slaveholder Aranda is symbolic of the shadow that gathers over the nation. Since Columbus who “discovered” America and whom Americans have celebrated as a historic hero is also the agent who introduced slavery into the New World (Kelley 120; Adler 105-06), the sentence painted on the pedestal of the figurehead, “*Seguid vuestro jefe*” (follow your leader) (37), then, comes to mean a triple warning: a disastrous end to those who follow 1) the slaveholder, 2) the Spanish empire, and 3) the history initiated and written by Columbus. As long as America follows the example of Spain, the skeleton seems to caution, she is doomed to bear “a slumbering volcano” (56) that might explode at any moment like the bloody revolt on board the *San Dominick*.

VI

Melville places Benito’s legal deposition at the end of the main narrative as if to present a solution to the mystery that has been unfolded on the *San Dominick*. This italicized deposition was unwelcome to the *Putnam’s* editor George William Curtis who regarded the dry document as “dreary” and complained that Melville had written the story “too hurriedly” (Newman 95-96; Robertson-Lorant 350). Yet the deposition functions as a means to reveal its own unreliability as well, while it solves the mystery to some extent. It is, in the first place, only the “partial translation” of some extracts from the Spanish legal documents. Second, the deposition is written exclusively from the viewpoint of the Spanish captain Benito. It is also added that “*in some things his memory is confused, he cannot distinctly recall every event*” (96). Given the fact that Benito could not stand even looking at Babo in the court of Lima and that his surviving sailors, in revenge for the black violence, killed some of the slaves already bound to the ring-bolts on the deck after the capture, it is quite dubious if what the captain testified and his crew confirmed is objective.

What is more important as to the authenticity of the legal deposition, however, is the absence of the blacks’ claims. Babo kept silent to the end since the moment of his capture: “Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to” (102). The side of the ringleader of the black mutiny is thus to be excluded forever from the tribunal records. As Eric Sundquist suggests, the deposition, working as a key to unlock “the complications which precede it,” also “locks up the significance of the revolt” (180). It exposes how wrong Delano’s perception of the slaves has

been and, at the same time, reveals the deficiency of the public records of the slave insurrection.

Babo's silence eloquently tells of the very truth that the formal history has been written by whites. In order to sense the full weight of this fact, it would be enough to recall the scene in Douglass's *Narrative* where he recognized that the black's witnesses meant nothing in the court: "If I had been killed in the presence of a thousand colored people, their testimony combined would have been insufficient to have arrested one of the murderers" (93). Babo's attitude expressed in the words, "since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (102), conveys his understanding that, without voice, the slave is virtually dead under the slavery system. And he was dragged to the scaffold and "met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but ... the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (102). Babo's "unabashed" meeting of the whites' gaze indicates his unabashed resistance and it opens a loophole in the history written by the whites. It also insinuates the "slumbering volcano" that can never be suppressed.

Before concluding his story, Melville inserts a short conversation between the two captains in which the lighthearted American tries to dispel the melancholy of the Spaniard who is possessed with the past apparition:

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

"Because they have no memory ... because they art not human.

...

"You are saved," cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; "you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?"

"The negro." (101)

The dialogue reveals that Delano has learned nothing from his experience, from the past. His optimistic thought (the past is passed, and the bright sun shines again) echoes Daniel Webster who praised the Union when he succeeded in passing the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850: "A long and violent convulsion of the elements has just passed away . . . and the heavens, the skies, smile upon us" (Sandquist 149). Benito, on the other hand, could not forget the past, for he had been put in the slave's

place that had made him utterly voiceless and had learned what to be a slave. He, above all, recognized the precarious and reversible master-slave relationship. His melancholy condensed in the two words “the negro” reflects an underlying menace of the suppressed black voice that is tantamount to the “slumbering volcano,” which Delano cannot perceive to the end.

As is already mentioned, “Benito Cereno” is narrated almost entirely from the viewpoint of Delano, a good-natured American of the ruling class who shares much of the sentiment prevalent in mid-century America. The story is, in a sense, a counterpart of *White Jacket* which is told by a sailor of the lowest rank capable of criticizing the social system more directly. When we note that the mildly antislavery *Putnam’s* was intended chiefly for middle-class readers in the North¹⁹, and that the theme of slavery had become an extremely touchy issue by the 1850s, it may not be hard to understand why Melville chose a character of the propertied class for the main narrative perspective of his story. Or, as some critics point out, he might have worried about his father-in-law, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, who supported the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and who determined to return the fugitive slave, Anthony Burns, to his master (Yellin 215; Sandquist 176; Robertson-Lorant 351-52). Whichever may be the reason, this fictional device has made the writer’s creative process, as well as the reader’s deciphering it, far more problematic than that of *White Jacket*. Yet it is in this subtlety of the narrative that Melville has succeeded in creating a new form of antislavery literature, quite different from Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that evokes the reader’s empathy for the slave, or from slave narratives written by blacks that protest against slavery more directly by uttering their own voice.

In line with this subtle style of narration, “Benito Cereno” suggests another complex, almost labyrinthine, relationship among the author, the average reader / the publisher, and the ideal reader. Babo is at once an artist who creates a story that the average reader, Delano, is eager to read and an imposter who camouflages the truth, the artist’s dark imagination, by mimicking what he is expected to create. Benito is another artist who drops hints of the truth through the fine mesh of the textual design imposed by the publisher (or the average reader) and who patiently waits for a small number of ideal readers, if there is any, to decipher the truth. And his suffering as hostage is a metaphor of the author’s painful dilemma between what he really wants to write and the demand of marketplace. It is indeed the reader’s task to dissolve the

extremely complicated "knot" that Melville has thrown toward him/her.

Notes

¹ Although the words "slumbering volcano" in the title of this paper are taken from the phrase that Melville uses in "Benito Cereno," I have to note here that my understanding of what this can mean owes much to Maggie Sale's book entitled "The Slumbering Volcano."

² This work is sometimes expressed as *Benito Cereno* since, being rather long for a short story, it can be better treated as an independent novella. However, as I have mentioned in this paper, the story was included in *Piazza Tales* soon after it was serialized in the *Putnam's*, and was never separately published. Therefore, I put its title in quotation marks instead of italicizing it.

³ Though publishing a story anonymously was "the established custom" of this magazine (Scudder 502), Lea Newman states that the author of "Benito Cereno" was well guessed, referring to the New York *Dispatch* which identified the story as Melville's (Newman 95).

⁴ As for the details of the two slave revolts, see Delbanco (232-33), Rogin (320), and Sale (163). Sidney Kaplan remarks that not only slave revolts in the plantations but also black rebellions on the high sea were familiar topics to Americans because they could read about them "in their daily press or in the pamphlet literature of the slavery controversy" ("Apology" 168). According to Maggie Sale, the New York *Sun*, one of the most influential penny newspapers, for instance, had very extensively covered the *Amistad* case (171). She suggests, moreover, that the *Amistad* affair had more influence on "Benito Cereno" than Delano's *Voyages* on which the story is based (148).

⁵ The terming of the phrase differs a little among the authors who use it: Kaplan introduces the idea, "the slave insurrection panic of 1856," borrowing the words by Harvey Wish, a historian ("Apology" 168), and later expresses the same idea as "the slave insurrection panic of the middle fifties" (170), which Newman cites in her book on Melville (104); Mark Eaton quotes this phrase as "the slave revolt panic of the 1850s," referring to Newman's book (213).

⁶ As for Melville's view of the black, see Sidney Kaplan's "American National Sin."

⁷ As for the shift of the criticism of "Benito Cereno," see Feltenstein, Sale (147), Kaplan ("American National Sin" 332-36), Levine (165-66).

⁸ All the references to Melville's text of "Benito Cereno" are from *Melville's Short Novels* edited by Dan McCall.

⁹ The *Voyages* by the historical Delano records his punishment of sailors by whipping: "[My] crew were refractory; the convicts were ever unfaithful, and took all the advantage that opportunity gave them. But sometimes exercising very strict discipline, and giving them good wholesome floggings; and at other times

treating them with the best I had ... I managed them without much difficulty during the passage across the South Pacific Ocean" (Scudder 505; emphasis added).

¹⁰ This devil image of a mulatto reminds us of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* where Douglass, a racially mixed slave, was called "You yellow devil !" (89), when he was about to be dragged to a prison after a failed escape.

¹¹ Reginald Horsman analyzes his racial ideas in detail (116, 129-31, 151-55).

¹² As for the information of the articles about race published in the American magazines of the mid-fifties, see Newman (104-05), Emery ("Topicality" 309-14), Sale (151-52), McCall (60), Sandquist (144-45).

¹³ Some critics refer to the possibility of rapes on the deck of the *San Dominick* behind the brutality of the black women (Karcher 212, 217; Robertson-Lorant 350).

¹⁴ Many critics have already pointed out that Melville changed the date of Delano's voyage from 1805 to 1799 and the name of the Spanish ship from *Tryal* to *San Dominick* in order to invoke the violent slave revolt of Santo Domingo that happened in 1799. As for the detailed differences between "Benito Cereno" and its source book, *Voyages*, see Scudder (530-31) and Newman (98-100).

¹⁵ As for the argument on interracial mixture, see Horsman (116-38).

¹⁶ Emery suggests that Delano achieves "a kind of annexation" when he adjoins the Spanish ship to his *Bachelor's Delight* ("Manifest Destiny" 53).

¹⁷ Many of Poe's gothic romances are set in feudal Europe, but the gothic horror in them begin to assume awful reality if they are reconsidered in the context of Southern slavery.

¹⁸ My understanding of the parallel of the fate of America with that of Spain owes much to Joyce Adler's insightful analysis of "Benito Cereno."

¹⁹ As for the character of the magazine, see Edward Chielens (328-32), Levine (165), Delbanco (230), Yellin (216), Sale (151-52), and Robertson-Lorant (352).

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