Orders of Power: The Authority of Babo in Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno"[1]

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At the conclusion of Herman Melville's novella "Benito Cereno," Babo, the principal leader of a slave revolt, suffers an appalling fate: "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; . . ." (Melville 2002 [1856]: 102).[2] The slave rebellion took place aboard the Spanish *San Dominick* and the scene just described is set in Lima, the administrative center of Spain's colonial holdings in the region. Babo's punishment and public humiliation is meant to demonstrate the irrefutable authority of Spanish colonial rule. However, this display of terror, masked as compensatory justice, is re-articulated by Babo's obstinate stare of defiance. Despite his mutilation and dismemberment, the figure of Babo remains resolute and undefeated in Melville's text. More than an indelible nineteenth-century symbol of political insurrection, Babo's mortal expression forever condemns those who perpetuate racial violence. Summarizing the attributes of Babo's extraordinary character, C.L.R. James contends: "He is a man of unbending will, a natural leader, an organizer of large schemes but a master of detail, ruthless against his enemies but without personal weakness, as was proved by his behaviour after he was captured. Melville purposely makes him physically small, a man of internal power with a brain that is a 'hive of subtlety'" (James 2001: 112).

In this paper, I wish to enlarge upon the opinion expressed above and further explore the particularity of Babo's genius. Contrary to the view

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[2] All subsequent references made to "Benito Cereno" appear parenthetically hereinafter and refer to the Norton Critical Edition of *Melville's Short Novels: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism.*

that deems Babo a dark intelligence made cruel by slavery, I will argue that Babo is a resourceful and inventive character, one that is critically aware and socially responsible. In his short-lived career as a free man, he demonstrated the power to unite and uplift the lives of those who were judged less than human. It is for this reason that the presence of Babo hauntingly lingers in the mind of Benito Cereno as well as incessantly returns to the thoughts of Melville's reader.

Taking Command

Published in 1855, Melville's antebellum tale is clearly filled with political resonance. A number of commentators view "Benito Cereno" as a critique of the anti-slavery debate that was feverishly discussed when it first appeared in print.[3] Although the narrative is set in 1799 and the action takes place on a Spanish colonial vessel, it has been argued that Melville's story is an allegory of the contemporary controversy over the slave issue in the United States. For instance, "Benito Cereno" has been read against the background of Melville's disapproval of Northern liberals who maintained a limited view of slavery's institutional complexity and who were willing to resolve black oppression with a "back-to-Africa" unification policy.

On one level, Babo represents the revolutionary ideal Thomas Paine advocated in his essay "The American Crisis." In his appeal, Paine uses the bondage of slavery as a trope to describe the political and economic tyranny exercised by England against its American colonies. Implicit in Paine's argument is the belief that human freedom, as a natural law, supersedes state power or legislative acts. While this principle became a cornerstone in the rhetoric that supported the struggle for independence, we know that liberty, before and after the formation of the United States, was not extended to all. With its focus on the subject of slavery, "Benito Cereno" re-contextualizes the denial of personal liberty and political independence in terms of race relations. Babo understands the deeper structures of racism and cunningly re-figures them for his own purposes.

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[3] For insightful commentary regarding the historical and political context of "Benito Cereno" see in particular Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, pp. 135-182; Michael Rogin's "Mutiny and Revolt"; Maurice S. Lee's "Melville's Subversive Political Philosophy: 'Benito Cereno' and the Fate of Speech"; and James H. Kavanagh's "That Hive of Subtlety: 'Benito Cereno' and the Liberal Hero".

On the other hand, because Melville's text contains clear references to geographical and political zones beyond the immediate borders of the United States, I feel that the narrative is most richly read from an international perspective. Laurie Robertson-Lorant, among other scholars, reminds us that "Benito Cereno" is based on an actual slave revolt that occurred on the Spanish *Tryal* in 1805[4] but Melville changed the date of the mutiny to 1799 "to evoke memories of the revolution in Santo Domingo and altered the description of Babo so that the Senegalese mastermind resembled Haitian patriot Toussaint-Loverture, president of the first black republic in the New World" (Robertson-Lorant 1996: 293). This international reference in Melville's text should not be undervalued in spite of what might be considered allegorical allusions to the controversies over slavery in the United States. Consequently, I believe that the South America setting is crucial to the inner logic of the story and certainly significant if we are to more fully understand the tactful turns of Babo's intelligence as he reshapes order on the *San Dominick*.

The historical and geographical cross-referencing embedded in Melville's story directly alludes to shifts in the political and economic perception of the Americas at the time. Columbus's project of New World exploration, settlement, and exploitation becomes a deeply-rooted transnational enterprise by the nineteenth century. Nation-state interests and commercial trade expansion overtakes the more narrowly defined endeavor of conquest and resource appropriation in the New World. Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, perceptively analyzes the global dimension of nineteenth-century political and economic structures that supersede national boundaries. According to Gilroy, ethnic and national distinctions become unsettled because transnational cultural experiences, in the form of colonialization and commercial transactions (slavery being the most sinister) dislocate previously stable notions of ethnic and national identity.

Correspondingly, it is their shared profession as sea-faring entrepreneurs rather than as representatives of separate nations that initiates an empathetic bond between the Yankee Captain Delano and the

[4] Melville's "Benito Cereno" builds upon Captain Amasa Delano's autobiographical account of this event. Although Melville is faithful to the story outlined in Delano's non-fictional text, including word for word duplication of passages, he adds fictional details that provide deeper hues of meaning to the principal characters of the action. See *Delano's Voyages of Commerce and Discovery*, edited by Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves.

Spanish Captain Cereno. Delano's ship is returning from Canton bound for Boston with tea and silk and Cereno is transporting slaves and local produce from Valparaiso, the port of Santiago, to Callao, the port of Lima. Delano and Cereno both understand the commercial value of transported merchandise, whether it is silk, tea, sealskins, or the human cargo of slaves. Their shared experience and professional interests make them particularly sensitive to the risk and responsibility of transporting valuable cargo across large bodies of water. Babo too knows the value of shipped cargo, which is why he and his comrades are willing to purchase their freedom with the lives of whites and if necessary with their own. Rising to reclaim their freedom, the slaves violently seize the *San Dominick*, forcefully resisting the commerce that turns human beings into commodities of profit.

The slave revolt requires a commander and Babo provides the necessary leadership. Because of several years of servitude in the Spanish colonies he has learned to speak Spanish. Babo's linguistic skill and his rhetorical versatility are instrumental assets as he negotiates the terms of the Spanish crew's safety after the take-over. Moreover, Babo strategically organizes the diverse slave population. Far from an indistinguishable lot of submissive bodies, Benito Cereno makes clear how diversified the slaves were when it comes to their place of birth, experience, and temperament In his legal deposition, which functions as a kind of narrative appendix, Cereno states that there were "one hundred and sixty blacks, of both sexes, . . ." (90) and goes on to give brief descriptions of certain individuals. A young man named José assisted Aranda and spoke Spanish well. There was a man named Dago, a grave digger, who too had lived among the Spaniards many years. Fernando, a Buenos Aires mulatto who sang in Valparaiso churches, was a cabin steward. There were four blacks between 60 and 70 years of age who were experienced caulkers. The fiercest rebels were identified as Ashantees, among them a man named Atufal who was "supposed to have been a chief" (90).

Finally, there was the Senegalese Babo. Little in stature but large in ability, Babo gives shape and direction to the repressed rage and deferred hopes of his companion slaves. Against this background of ethnic diversity, Babo achieves a common standard of restraint and discipline among the slaves. In spite of the massive discontent and a volatile desire for reprisal among many of the slaves, Babo effectively manages their simmering rage. Though members of the Spanish crew are murdered both deliberately and indiscriminately, Babo insures the survival of Cereno and a handful of seamen and makes certain that the *San Dominick* remains navigable. In

this context, Babo persistently comes up with improvised solutions when dealing with the fluctuating temperaments of his fellow rebels as well as inventively responding to the unexpected arrival of the American Captain Delano. Taken together, these acts denote a character that far surpasses the reductive image that surfaces in Delano's thoughts. For Delano, Babo is mostly remembered as the shadow that left a traumatized mark on Benito Cereno's spirit. But Babo, as I have been suggesting, is much more than a slaveholder's worst nightmare.

The Mime of Power

Originally from Senegal, Babo claims that he has suffered two cultural domains of oppression. In contrast to one of Babo's co-conspirators, the majestic Atufal whose ears were once adorned with "wedges of gold" (50), Babo confides that he was a black man's slave only to become the slave of a white. Whether Babo's statement is true or whether it is part of his carefully designed charade, this comment cunningly addresses the transatlantic colonial connections that placed Africa, Europe and the Americas in a geometry of dehumanizing commercial exchanges. Babo's mention of his double enslavement is at once both a political remark that enlarges considerations regarding human bondage and one of the many self-effacing comments he makes that directs suspicion away from him. The twofold reference to oppression artfully conceals Babo's actual authority by compounding his servitude.

Throughout the different phases of the revolt, Babo maintains a delicate peace between the vengeful slaves and the severely reduced Spanish crew. His effectiveness as a leader and his social competence are specifically put to the test when the Yankee skipper, Captain Delano, unaware of the upheaval, boards the slave vessel. Babo directs a masquerade of deception and assumes command over what some early reviews of "Benito Cereno" narrowly appreciated as a gothic tale of misrecognition and violence. But beyond the eerie aspects of the story's action, what is truly uncanny is Babo's performance and how he subverts the logic of racial politics by miming the forms and images that construct blacks as obedient yet unintelligent attendants. He pretends to be Cereno's body servant and is successful in orchestrating a false explanation regarding the *San Dominick*'s battered appearance. In Delano's eyes, Babo comes across as a humble and congenial assistant, more companion than servant: "By his [Cereno's] side stood a black of small stature, in whose rude face, as occasionally, like a

shepherd's dog, he [Babo] mutely turned it up into the Spaniard's, sorrow and affection were equally blended" (39). This condescending attitude is later concentrated in one of Delano's private thoughts. Considering his first impression of Babo, Delano assumes: ". . . harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune" (70-71). Impressed with the devoted loyalty of Babo, Delano makes an attempt to purchase Babo from Cereno: "I should like to have your man here, myself—what will you take for him? Would fifty doubloons be any object?" (58). Before Cereno can come up with a reply, Babo ingeniously deals with Delano's self-indulgent proposal: "Master wouldn't part with Babo for a thousand doubloons" (58). Babo's remark is followed by an authorial narrative comment: "the strange vanity of a faithful slave, appreciated by his master, scorning to hear so paltry a valuation put upon him by a stranger" (58). The critique is obviously ironic. Conversely, it is Delano who is vain in his offer to purchase Babo and vain when he believes that he understands the significance of Babo's response. Babo is no longer a commodity to be traded or purchased. Instead, it is Cereno's life, and for that matter Delano's too, that has been deposited in an economy of debt and payment.

Babo's mime of what Delano appreciates as dog-like loyalty is masterful because it is plainly performed and effortlessly executed. But adjacent to Babo's simple behavior is the cunning eradication of racial discourse. Relevant to this point, Homi Bhabha, in an abstract and more theoretical manner, reflects on the radical nature of mimicry and proposes:

> [T]he discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. (Bhabha 1994: 86)

Viewing Babo's masquerade of servitude through Bhabha's notion of mimicry, one could argue that Babo's deception excessively represents the imaginary difference between whites and blacks. His imitation of a loyal and decorous servant convinces Delano because it amplifies the formulaic traits that construct and maintain racial differences. Concurrently, Babo's deception subversively transgresses the outer limits of a subjugated person.

Babo is quick to take liberties in a surreptitious fashion, maintaining control even as he conforms to a racialized stereotype.

At the same time, Babo's impersonation of a faithful servant is disciplinary in the way Bhabha suggests because it requires Cereno to mime the appearance of authority. Broken in rank and mind, Benito Cereno is forced to imitate the attitude and actions commensurate with a sea captain's status. Cereno does this under great duress and his performance is awkward and intermittently raises misgivings in Delano. Such incongruities are, however, inadequately explored in Delano's mind. And because Babo understands the protocol of master-slave relations thoroughly, he is able to author and perform persuasively the necessary parts of his grand charade.

The Signature of Authority

Within this script of evolving deception, Melville plants a number of portentous signs that provide narrative and interpretative complexity. In my opinion, the most resonate example of this is found in the following excerpt:

> Whether the ship had a figure-head, **or** only a plain beak, was not quite certain, owing to canvas wrapped about that part, either to protect it while undergoing a re-furbishing, **or** else decently to hide its decay. Rudely painted **or** chalked, as in a sailor freak, along the forward side of a sort of pedestal below the canvas, was the sentence, '***Seguid vuestro jefe,***' (follow your leader); while upon the tarnished headboards, near by, appeared, in stately capitals, once gilt, the ship's name, 'SAN DOMINICK, ' each letter streakingly corroded with tricklings of copper-spike rust; while, like mourning weeds, dark festoons of sea-grass slimily swept to and fro over the name, with every hearse-like roll of the hull (emphasis mine, 37).

This scene appears early in the story and describes the first sighting of the Spanish ship. Notes of uncertainty and indecision are clearly marked and establish the major chord in which the narrative's action is set. The repetition of the conjunction "or" syntactically reinforces the pervasive sense of ambiguity within the text and, from the beginning, places Captain Delano between feelings of trust and doubt.

The above quote is also noteworthy for its embellished literary figures. The tropes "mourning weeds" and the "hearse-like roll of the hull" are unmistakable references to death, which in turn literally refer to the

casualties onboard. Captain Delano, at this point, has yet to discover the true extent to which the slave ship is a vehicle of death. From his white merchant marine perspective, he sees narrowly, making him vulnerable to the lie about the storms and calms that have caused the calamity now witnessed aboard the *San Dominick*. On the other hand, from a slave's perspective, a slave ship is always a vehicle of death regardless what the weather conditions are. In all instances, the life of a chattel slave, subjugated against his or her will, can be regarded as a life prematurely concluded.

In addition to the syntactic and figurative significance of this passage, the imperative "*Seguid vuestro jefe*" ("Follow your leader") is of primal importance. *Sequid vuestro jefe* rhetorically functions as a command and a threat, a point that I will discuss in greater detail below. Melville's use of Spanish here strategically reminds the reader that the action is set in the realm of Spain's colonial possessions and that the conversations between Delano, Cereno, and Babo are held in Spanish, despite the story's English narration of events. We are directly told that Delano knows Spanish because, over the years, he has frequently navigated along Spanish sea-trade routes. Delano's understanding of Spanish facilitates his communication with Cereno, Babo, and the others aboard the ship. Yet his ability to read the multiple signs of meaning encountered on the *San Dominick* is seriously restricted.

Initially, the American captain attaches an ornamental, albeit disfigured, function to the inscription *Sequid vuestro jefe*. The phrase's deeper meaning evades him and it is only near the conclusion of the narrated action that Delano, as well as the reader, confronts the sinister dimension of this phrase. The three-word imperative, at the outset, is thus an enigma, similar to the concealed revolt, which goes unobserved. To my mind, *Sequid vuestro jefe* can be read as a shrewd yet ambiguous redefinition of power relations. Consequently, interpreting the registers of this scrawl is not only problematic for Delano but for all who are brought before it.

The ship's draped prow is suddenly revealed during the climax of the narrative's action. Benito Cereno desperately leaps into Delano's departing boat and the American captain imperfectly grasps the duplicitous nature of the *San Dominick*'s predicament. Cereno's dash towards freedom has an explosive effect aboard the slave ship. Hatchets and handspikes flash in animated fury. The cable that connects Delano's boat and the *San Dominick* is slashed "and the fag-end, in lashing out, whipped away the canvas shroud about the beak, suddenly revealing as the bleached hull swung round towards the open ocean, death for the figure-

head, in a human skeleton; chalky comment on the chalked words below, *Follow your leader"* (86). This imperative, as mentioned earlier, is both a command and a threat. Delano's chief mate, who was selected to command the recapture of the *San Dominick*, shouts "Follow your leader" (88) as he heads the assault.[5] Delano's men hurtle over the ship's bulwarks with cutlasses and sealing spears eager to wreck havoc on the black rebels. The fighting is fierce, in part fuelled by the prospects of financial reward: "The more to encourage the sailors, they were told, that the Spanish captain considered his 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" (87).

If the call to conquer and profit seemed powerful in the American crew's eyes, there was a potent deterrent in the original Spanish formulation *Seguid vuestro jefe.* It is only in Cereno's deposition that we learn additional details about the skeleton and the chalked words that were placed on the *San Dominick*'s prow. As a sign of extraordinary symbolic power, slave owner Don Alexandro Aranda's blanched bones were "substituted for the ship's proper figure-head, the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World; . . ." (93). Aranda and Cereno were dear friends and the first sight of Aranda's desiccated remains sickens Cereno. He shuts his eyes in revulsion and during this backwash of emotional shock, Babo, according to the deposition, serenely approaches Cereno and murmurs: "Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader" (93). Stripped of flesh, Aranda's remains are invested with another tissue of meaning. Babo ingeniously creates a palimpsest of colonial history when he orders the image of Christopher Columbus to be written over by the bones of Aranda. Babo superimposes a revolting text upon the mythologized explorer of the New World. To complete the revisionist and prophetic aspects of this palimpsest, Babo scribbles the portentous *Seguid vuestro jefe*

[5] Delano is eager to lead the attack himself. Cereno is unsettled by the circumstances and cautions Delano: "What! Have you saved my life, senōr, and are you now going to throw away your own?" (87). It is, however, financial considerations that determine Delano's decision: "The officers also, 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" (87). It is noteworthy that the narrative shows how commercial interests are decisive at a moment when emotions are at their peak.

below it. The threat, to "keep faith with the blacks," is repeated to each and every one of the remaining Spaniards on a daily basis and effectively compels the aggrieved and terror-stricken crew to cooperate with Babo.

New Orders

The symbol of Aranda's bones and the repeated pledge of collaboration from the Spanish crew underscore a new order and direction aboard the *San Dominick.* Although the cooperation of the Spaniards is important, I believe that the allegiance among the slaves is even more essential to what the rebellion hopes to ultimately achieve. In this context Babo proves to be an indispensable leader. Originally, the slaves were judged to be "tractable" by their owner Alexandro Aranda, which is why they were not chained or kept under lock in the ship's hold. Aranda presumably saw his slaves as a conquered collective, unvarying in their subjugation and obedience. This misjudgment proved fatal for Aranda and Babo cunningly uses Aranda's skeleton as a spectacular display of authority and power.

If the unsightly remains of Aranda are effectively used to crush the last vestiges of resistance among the Spaniards, Aranda's bones instrumentally serve as a banner of victory and as a kind of talisman for the blacks. The multiple symbolic dimensions of Aranda's skeleton can be noted when seen in metonymic proximity of the "unseaworthy" long-boat "warped as a camel's skeleton in the desert, and almost as bleached, [which] lay pot-wise inverted amidships, one side a little tipped, furnishing a subterraneous sort of den for family groups of the blacks, mostly women and small children . . ." (68). The skeleton-like form of the long-boat, bleached as it was, is a variant of Aranda's skeleton. In its inverted form, the boat provides a sheltered space of privacy and comfort. Similarly, in a stripped and overturned form of authority, Aranda's skeleton harbors an irrefutable fact: the slaves are no longer exposed to the will of their master.

The successful coercion of the Spanish seamen and the disciplined teamwork of the mutineers are essential to Babo's plan for freedom. Without a place of refuge or free black state in the surrounding sea, Babo envisions a return to Senegal. This may seem ironic given the fact that Babo claims that he was once a black man's slave in his home country. Nevertheless, it is the destination chosen by Babo, a choice that perhaps reflects the nostalgia for origins among those who experience diasporas. There is a political idealism embedded in Babo's strategy of homeland reunification. And this idealism runs counter to the reality of the

rebellion's New World location and to the ethnic diversity of the slave population. The journey to Senegal is thus an unrealistic, if not impossible, goal. But failing to reach this desired destination does not diminish the triumph of Babo.

Babo's accomplishment is better measured within the unreal yet visionary space of the *San Dominick*. The vessel is an imaginary fabrication of intersecting references, fragments of the past reassembling into a not yet available future. Initially, death is undoubtedly the most prominent image projected by the *San Dominick*. But in addition to the melancholic mood attached to the vessel when it is first sighted, the *San Dominick* is compared to a variety of figures, ranging from "a Lima intriguante's one sinister eye peering across the Plaza from the Indian loop-hole of her dusk *saya-y-manta*" (35-36) to "a whitewashed monastery after a thunderstorm, seen perched upon some dun cliff among the Pyrenees" (36). The former grandeur and now decaying surfaces of what Delano describes as "a Spanish merchantman of the first class" (36) is also compared to an Italian palace with the ship's "two high-raised quarter galleries" suspended over a "grand Venetian canal" (37). The mix of New World and Old World imagery produces a critical space of possibility. The *San Dominick*, not unlike the Mississippi river raft used by Huck Finn and Jim, is adrift between the past and the future, between the predictable consequence of capture and the unlimited opportunities of freedom. No longer one man's property or free people in a free state, the rebels, under the leadership of Babo, constituted a new class of beings. With the inversion of authority and the surreptitious establishment of a new social contract, Babo manages another structure of relationships.[6] Those onboard the *San Dominick* are no longer rigidly defined by their national affiliations, social standing, or professional rank. Blacks and whites must control their animosity and pool their labor to sustain the new order. The

[6] In Cereno's deposition, it is mentioned that there was a formal written agreement between Cereno and Babo (who represented his rebel comrades) and co-signed by "the sailors who could write" (94). The agreement stipulated that Cereno "obliged himself to carry them to Senegal, and they not to kill any more, and he formally to make over to them the ship, with the cargo, . . ." (94). Such a contract would not hold up in a court of law because slaves were not in a legal position to sign such an agreement. However, the gesture has symbolic value, as does the ship's new figurehead of bones and the inscription *Sequid vuestro jefe*. In signing over the ship and cargo to Babo, the *San Dominick* becomes a newly formed state and its enslaved cargo a liberated citizenry.

large-scale fraud hence becomes a hybrid effort, where the drive to survive supersedes the severing emotions of hate and anger.

This point is illustrated when Delano's men appear with much needed provisions. The crew and slaves are desperate for want of food and water and Babo has organized a chain of command amongst the rebels to better secure control and stability aboard the ship. But some of the blacks "hung over the bulwarks in disorderly raptures" (66) when Delano's men arrive with the first wave of provisions. There is a moment of confusion as casks of water are lowered onto the deck and Delano is pushed. He orders the slaves to stand back. A number of the blacks freeze poised to attack. The black oakum pickers, however, re-establish control and "as if nothing had happened, the work of hoisting in the casks was resumed, whites and blacks singing at the tackle" (67). Rations of "soft bread, sugar, and bottled cider" circulate among whites and blacks against the opinion of Delano, who felt that such provisions should have been reserved only for the whites (67). But with Babo secretly in command, Cereno expedites the new order of things and the supplies are equally distributed regardless of a person's color.

Masked Meanings

Delano initially reads *Seguid vuestro jefe* as "a sailor freak," a mischievously streaked gesture, to which he attached curiosity but little importance. However, this "imperfectly" lettered phrase personifies a transculturated vision of what is to come in a post-colonial era. Babo's enigmatic formulation, together with the palimpsest of Columbus's image and Aranda's skeleton, dramatically expresses what could not previously be imagined about a black man. What Babo authors on the prow of the *San Dominick* can therefore be read as a New World icon and as a compositional act of authority. In both instances, Delano reads them incorrectly.

What also runs the risk of being read imperfectly is the detailed description of a woodcarving mounted on the rear of the ship: ". . . the principal relic of faded grandeur was the ample oval of the shield-like stern-piece, intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon, medallioned about by groups of mythological symbolical devices; uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his

foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" (37).[7] The visual drama depicted in this emblem of victory is frequently interpreted as a prefiguration of the scene where Cereno suddenly darted to the safety of Delano's departing boat. Cereno's action confuses the American captain. Delano first believes that Cereno is staging his kidnap. When Babo too lands in the boat bearing a knife, Delano assumes that Babo is trying to stab him in order to rescue Cereno. Babo is disarmed and Delano pins him to the bottom of the boat with his foot. This stillness, however, is only momentary: "Glancing down at his feet, Captain Delano saw the freed hand of the servant aiming with a second dagger—a small one, before concealed in his wool—with this he was snakishly writhing up from the boat's bottom, at the heart of his master, . . ." (85). The similarity between the stern-piece figures and the action just described seems obvious. The writhing masked figure in the woodcarving logically corresponds to Babo "snakishly writhing up from the boat's bottom." Yet there is reason to pause and reconsider this apparent parallel.

To compare Delano with the masked satyr crushing the writhing masked figure in the stern piece is tempting. The assumed similarity reinforces the defeat of an evil Babo, coiled at the bottom of Delano's boat. However, one of the story's primary concerns is the treatment of Delano's constant misreading of events and relationships. In the narrative it is suggested that Delano is naive and good-hearted, making him vulnerable to the deceptions and dangers aboard the *San Dominick.* Delano's vision is also diminished by his racial prejudices; his perceptions are dimmed by categorical assessments regarding the supremacy of whites and the inferiority of blacks. Delano, for instance, wonders: "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, leaguing in against it with negroes?" (63).

In addition to Delano's racial prejudices, his status as a sea captain and as an agent of international trade preconditions him to interpret and react to the plight of the *San Dominick* in a particular manner. Delano is primarily

[7] In Greek mythology satyrs represent the spirits of forests and mountains. Their unexpected appearance would frighten unsuspecting travellers. According to the *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, satyrs, "with their low forehead, their snub nose, their pointed ears, their hairy body ending in a goat's tail, their cloven hooves" (160), possessed the features of a monkey and a male goat. Only pointed ears and horns survived this earliest image of a satyr. What is most prominently associated with this woodland spirit in modern times is the satyr's lecherous and malicious nature.

preoccupied with supplying the ship's crew and slaves with water, food, and provisions in the form of a "new suit of sails" (77) so Cereno can continue and complete his journey of commerce and profit. This aspect of Delano's reasoning adds yet another veil of dullness to his consciousness.

If the shrouded nature of intentions and the failure of interpreting properly are a problem for Delano, these difficulties seem to occur for the reader of the text as well. Untangling the knot of appearances is, as the old sailor in the narrative hints when he throws a giant knot of hemp at Delano, crucial yet filled with difficulty and danger. First impressions, including seemingly logical connections, can certainly be misleading. Are the mythological carvings illustrated in the stern piece a reliable foreshadowing of the physical struggle that occurs between Delano and Babo? Or do they represent an Old World myth waiting to be "overwritten" by a New World reading? Is the writhing figure a representation of Babo or is the figure an indeterminate and shadowy other?

Perhaps an answer depends on where we place our attention. If we concentrate on the posture and physical positions of the mythological figures and the scene where Delano places his foot upon the prostrate Babo, the masked satyr predicts Delano's triumph in the boat. If we focus, however, on the mythological history of satyrs and their practice of terrifying travellers and their malevolent deeds, Babo better fits this description. What further supports the latter interpretation is the fact that, after the court investigation in Lima, Cereno is left prostrate and spiritually crushed by the weight of Babo's memory. Reading the narrative parallels in this manner would be a symptomatic kind of reading that surreptitiously approaches the masked figures of the stern piece from a different angle. But having offered this counter-intuitive reading, there is still another way to understand the significance of the combating masked characters.

The stern-piece carving could also be an allegorical portrayal of the clash between bigotry and empathy that occurs in Captain Delano's inner consciousness. This alternate reading is indirectly suggested by Delano's reaction upon discovering Babo's deception: "He [Delano] smote Babo's hand down, but his own heart smote him harder" (85). This passage indicates a two-directional anger. Delano realizes that he has been duped; his physical anger is aimed at Babo but he directs moral wrath towards himself for falsely believing Cereno a criminal. But, as I see it, Delano's self-condemnation misses its mark. For it is Delano's racist attitude that led him astray and not misguided suspicions about an innocent man. It is thus Delano's bigotry, posing as a benevolent observer, that keeps his

empathy pinned to the ground. This being the case, Delano remains ignorant of both Cereno's dilemma and of Babo's political strategies. An outward admission of this fact is inconceivable for Delano and his guilt can be transformed into a high-minded condemnation Babo. The two-faced nature of Delano's rage, similar to the mythological battle depicted on the stern piece and the iconography of the imperative "*Seguid vuestro jefe,*" is again an example of how difficult it is to read with certainty.

Finally it is Babo's terminal stare, head perversely severed and undyingly defiant, that resists conventional reading. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Melville's story concludes with a horrific image made all the more disturbing by what can be described as a slow-motion visual widening of the scene. Babo's detached head sits speared upon a pole in the town plaza of Lima. This grim exhibition is intended to convey the futility of revolt and to demonstrate the power of colonial authority. Ostensibly, decapitation mutilates the integrity and disfigures the memory of Babo by making him a grotesque symbol of defeat and humiliation. On the other hand, Babo's authority is maintained through his head's defiant stare, which "met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (102) and looked outward to the church whose vault contained the bones of Babo's master and Cereno's beloved friend Alexandro Aranda. This visual back reference to the stripped flesh and mutilation of Aranda's body is a key narrative element. It should not simply be considered a formal means by which to bring the story full-circle or to give it an ironic kind of symmetry. Although the horror evoked by Babo's head seems as frightening as was the skeletal remains of Aranda, these two signs of human ruin connote different registers of meaning. Aranda, the owner of the slaves who were transported on the *San Dominick*, was killed to insure the freedom of the slaves. From a slave's perspective, it was a vengeful and necessary political act. In what might be termed the "semiotics of slavery," Aranda's bleached bones serve as the actual and symbolic demise of the master. On the other hand, I would argue that Babo's authority remains intact in spite of his defilement. His relentless stare is an undiminished revolt against those who would enslave others.

In the end, the reader is told that Babo's gaze reaches out to the site of Aranda's remains. And beyond that, Babo's gaze "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" (102). The syntax of this final statement seems to stutter towards a reluctant conclusion. Stylistically, it perhaps connotes the

shallow and irregular breaths of a terminally ill Cereno. But what is significant in the final declaration "Benito Cereno, . . . did, indeed, follow his leader" is how it subversively defines the relationship between Cereno and Babo, captive and captor. Beyond what could be voiced or reasonably recorded, it is Babo who inevitably holds power and control to the very end. And if this is the case, Benito Cereno does, in fact, follow Babo, not to a grave but to a traumatized understanding of what it is like to be a slave. The singularity of this awareness withers Cereno from within and he soon dies. In contrast to Cereno's demise, Babo endures. With panoptic force, his look opens outward to a world still waiting to be unmasked.

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