

21st-Century Survival Skills: On Teaching "Benito Cereno"

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Abstract:

Academics and other intellectuals are often accused of teaching "moral relativism" and criticized for calling simplistic ethical positions into question. But as Herman Melville showed throughout his body of work, nothing is ever simple or certain where human morality is concerned. Nowhere is this more effectively demonstrated than in the disturbing "Benito Cereno." This novella, written five years before the outbreak of the American Civil War and considered by some critics to be possibly the greatest American story, demonstrates the necessity of holding a multivalent, relativistic viewpoint, of seeing things for what they truly are, without prejudice or isolation, from multiple perspectives. As our world enters what promises to be a century characterized by ever-greater reciprocal acts of violence by oppressors and oppressed, we would do well to arm our students with the skills they need to survive.

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Responding to an article that had been written as an obvious April Fool's joke, a reader of a popular British magazine recently accused the editors of fostering "the far left liberal arts theory that believes in nothing and holds that all views are equally valid" (May 74). While the respondent had missed the humor in the article he found so objectionable, his statement reflected a widely held view that we university teachers of the humanities often encounter. Like Socrates, we are accused of misleading youth away from simple clarity and into a confusing morass of mutually exclusive "truths," and in so doing, destroying students' ability to make moral judgments.

This was a criticism that Herman Melville endured as well; every time one of his books was released upon the world, it seems, he suffered accusations of attacking morality. And there was a grain of truth in these accusations, just as there is in the accusations against teachers in the liberal arts tradition, for it is true that we, as Melville, attempt to shake our society out of its complacency and encourage it to take a fresh, critical look at assumed truths. Indeed, this is one of our most important jobs at the university level.

Thus it is that teaching Melville serves well in helping us do our jobs, as there is hardly a Melvillian tale that does not, like a *koan*, throw an attentive reader into confusion which, meditated upon and worked through, leads to enlightenment, an eventual deeper understanding of the world and humanity — particularly the American variety of the species. And the most effective of his tales in inducing such a state of cognitive dissonance is probably "Benito Cereno."

Published less than six years before the start of America's Civil War, "Benito Cereno" is a difficult, unsettling mystery, called "most painfully interesting" by a contemporary reviewer ("Unsigned notice" 359) and "as ideologically disturbing as it is aesthetically satisfying" by a more recent critic (Lonoff 91). Its central character is Captain Amasa Delano, a historical personage whose memoirs contain the source for Melville's tale (Melville, "Benito" 230). The story begins on a gray, shadowy day. Delano, an American, is in an isolated harbor in an island off the coast of Chile, taking on provisions, when he spies a strange vessel which flies no colors sailing clumsily, almost drifting, into the harbor. Although the lack of a flag should cause an ordinary seaman to be suspicious of piracy, Delano has "a singularly undistrustful good nature" which the narrator backhandedly implies might indicate less than "ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception" (55).

Delano takes the ship's whale-boat — named *Rover*, sailor slang for "pirate" (Emery, "'Benito Cereno' and Manifest Destiny" 54, footnote) — to investigate and offer aid. As he nears her, he imagines the ship to resemble a crumbling monastery manned by "Black Friars pacing the cloisters" (57). Among the weed-grown and barnacle-encrusted dilapidation of the ship, he notes a stern-piece that features, along with "the arms of Castile and Leon," a curious symbol: "a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked." In addition, he sees that the usual place for the figurehead is covered in canvas, beneath which is chalked "*Seguid vuestro jefe* (follow your leader)" (58). As the name of the ship turns out to be *San Dominick*, Delano's association of Dominican monks turns out to be prophetic, although the "dark moving figures" are revealed

to be the remnants of the crew — Spanish — and the cargo — black slaves, who far outnumber the whites on board.

Boarding the ship and pressing through the starving, dehydrated crowd, Delano meets the captain, Benito Cereno, "a gentlemanly, reserved-looking, and rather young man" in "a South American gentleman's dress" with stockings, sombrero, and sword, and his devoted body servant, Babo, "a black of small stature" wearing patched sailcloth trousers held up by a rope belt which "made him look something like a begging friar of St. Francis" (60, 68). Delano sends the whale-boat away to fetch water and food, staying behind to find out what has brought the *San Dominick* to this state. First the surviving slaves and then Cereno, who seems by turns sullen, haughty, hysterical, pitiable, somnambulist, and sinister, tell a story of gales, calms, and fevers that sounds suspiciously contrived even to Delano, though Delano manages again and again during the story to talk himself out of his suspicions, using his prejudices — assumptions such as the trustworthiness of a fellow-captain, the stupidity of blacks, and so on — as reasons not to fear. He is aided in this by the tumult on deck: the crowd is eagerly milling about, while six warriors polish rusty hatchets — clashing them together at intervals that sometimes seem timed to break Delano's feeble concentration — and "four elderly grizzled negroes" chant and pick at junk while watching over the rest of the slaves, occasionally speaking to them and attempting to keep them in line (59).

Other events briefly excite Delano's suspicions: a black boy cuts a white boy's head with a knife and goes unpunished, a Spanish sailor tries to warn Delano of danger with significant glances only to be later seized and beaten in full view, and another offers Delano a sort of Gordian knot with a

hurried English demand to "Undo it, cut it, quick" (91). Delano, anything but quick, stares befuddled at the knot until a slave takes it away from him and drops it over the side, while the knoter is led belowdecks, never to be seen again.

Most suspicious is a series of questions that Cereno, after a rudely whispered conference with Babo, asks Delano about his ship and crew, including the cargo, weapons, and the number of crew who will be aboard at night. Even Delano cannot fail to realize that such questions seem "put with much the same object with which the burglar or assassin, by day-time, reconnoitres the walls of a house". But it seems so overtly obvious to him that he convinces himself that it is "Absurd, then, to suppose that those questions had been prompted by evil designs" (82).

In addition to Delano's trusting nature, a number of events distract him from following his meandering lines of thought to their proper conclusions. In addition to the aforementioned hatchet-clashings, Delano witnesses Atufal, a large, well-formed African king, come before Cereno in chains. Cereno offers to remove the chains if Atufal will ask for pardon, but Atufal remains silent. Later, Delano sees a sleeping woman, her body revealed, her infant trying to nurse. He admires the scene in a mix of paternalistic regard and sexual longing, never imagining that it might have been purposefully set before him to derail his thoughts. Delano is also periodically distracted by the ringing of a flawed bell.

The most chilling scene in the story is when Babo takes Cereno and Delano belowdecks for Cereno's daily shave. The pervasive Catholic imagery runs together into a scene out of the Inquisition — which had yet to die out in South America at the time — with chairs like "inquisitors'

racks," a Bible and crucifix, a screw (for thumbs?) and a basin (for catching blood?), and Babo's long, slow stropping of the razor, reminiscent of the traditional displaying of the instruments of torture to the victim before beginning the interrogation. Some "old rigging, like a heap of poor friars' girdles," recalls Babo's "Franciscan" belt as well as the image of Dominican "Black Friars" that Delano imagined while approaching the ship. As one critic notes, "The Franciscans too [as well as the Dominicans] were reputed to have been diligent prosecutors of the Inquisition" (Newman 102). Delano here unknowingly plays the role of Inquisitor, continuing to press Cereno for answers to clear up inconsistencies of location and date in his story, while Babo holds a razor to Cereno's throat. When Cereno fails to prove convincing, Babo draws blood. Any suspicions that this last may have aroused are extinguished when, shortly after Delano leaves the room, Babo appears with a cut on his cheek, which he claims to have been given him by Cereno in petty retaliation (98-105).

After an uncomfortably tense lunch, the wind picks up and Delano helps pilot the ship to anchor near his own *Bachelor's Delight*. He invites Cereno to join him for the evening meal, but Cereno discourteously replies, "I cannot go" (113). He even fails to see Delano off. Insulted, Delano begins to take his leave, and this time the sound of the flawed bell awakens, rather than lulls, his "superstitious suspicions":

He paused. In images far swifter than these sentences, the minutest details of all his former distrusts swept through him.

Hitherto, credulous good-nature had been too ready to furnish excuses for reasonable fears. Why was the Spaniard, so superfluously punctilious at times, now heedless of common propriety in not

accompanying to the side his departing guest? ... His last glance seemed to express a calamitous, yet acquiescent farewell to Captain Delano forever. (114-5)

But just as Delano is about to enter the whale-boat to return to his ship, Cereno comes to see him off after all. Cereno bids him an agitated and apparently heartfelt farewell, but just after Delano's boat begins to pull away, Cereno leaps from his ship into the whale-boat, shouting something "in tones so frenzied, that none in the boat could understand him" (117). Some Spanish sailors jump overboard and swim to join their captain, while Babo poises to leap, dagger in hand, into the whale-boat after his master. Delano imagines absurdly that Cereno is trying to incite his crew to attack the American ship by pretending to be kidnapped. Delano disarms Babo in mid-leap and throws him to the bottom of the boat; as his crew rows desperately, Delano "clutched the half-reclined Don Benito, heedless that he was in a speechless faint, while his right foot, on the other side, ground the prostrate negro" (118), in a pose echoing the masked figures of the *San Dominick's* stern-piece image.

Then Delano sees that Babo, with a second concealed dagger, is attempting to kill Cereno. Finally, Delano sees through the masks and realizes that the slaves are the true masters of the ship, the Spaniards their captives, and that they had intended to take the *Bachelor's Delight* by force. Delano again disarms Babo. As his boat reaches his ship, the *San Dominick* cuts its cable to escape. The cut cable "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*'" (119).

This skeleton is revealed to be that of Alexandro Aranda, owner of the slaves and friend of Cereno.

The crew of the American ship, led by Delano's ex-privateer first mate, agree to retake the *San Dominick* after Cereno offers them "no small part" of the valuable cargo. Using the ship's boats, they chase down, fire upon, and finally board the Spanish ship. Despite thrown axes and a fierce melee, the whites are victorious. More than twenty rebels, including Atufal, and two Spaniards — both of whom were shot down by marksmen because they appeared to be siding with the rebels — were killed. The captured ship and remaining prisoners are taken to Lima for trial.

The next section of the story is composed of excerpts from the deposition of Benito Cereno, which appear to fill in the gaps of our knowledge of the events, but which really lead to even more questions. We learn that Aranda, trusting in his slaves' docility, left them unchained, which allowed them to rise up and take the ship, intending to force the Spaniards to take them to Senegal. We learn that Babo and Atufal, whose chains were fixed so that "in a moment the chains could be dropped," were the ring leaders, and that they avoided performing any actual bloodshed themselves, but directed who should live and who should die among the Spaniards, even going so far as to protect the Spaniards against the torture urged by the African women. Still, atrocities were committed: several Spaniards were thrown overboard alive, often tied so that they could not even attempt to swim, and while Aranda's execution was somewhat justifiable, he being the slaves' owner, the flaying of the flesh from his bones — with hints of cannibalism (Baines) — and the daily ritual of forcing each Spaniard to look upon the bones, telling him to "Keep faith with the

blacks ... or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader" (129), cross the line into psychological torture and terrorism.

Finally, the story draws to a close with a brief conversation between Delano and Cereno on the way to Lima. Delano seems wholly unaffected by all that has happened, but Cereno, more sensitive and having undergone all the tortures and losses directly, in addition to being forced to experience the life of a slave for weeks, is a broken man. Delano urges Cereno to "Forget it" and asks, "more and more astonished and pained; 'you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?'" Cereno simply replies, "The negro," and there the conversation ends (139-40).

Babo, having refused to speak a word after his capture, is hanged, and his head, "that hive of subtlety, [is] fixed on a pole in the Plaza," where it meets "unabashed, the gaze of the whites," also looking upon the monastery where Benito Cereno has retired, and where he dies soon after.

"Benito Cereno" has been interpreted in many conflicting ways in the nearly one hundred fifty years since its publication. Serious criticism began in the 1920s, but until the 1960s critics by and large seemed to take for granted that the blacks, especially Babo, represented evil, while Delano and Cereno were victims of that evil (Fischer 111-2). These critics tended to ignore or downplay the fact that Cereno, a slave-ship captain, and Aranda, a slave owner, are themselves guilty of serious moral crimes. Even Delano, an American, indirectly benefits from slavery, and, while he softly deprecates it here and there, could not even imagine siding with blacks on the issue — and he even offers to buy Babo from Cereno at one point. Also ignored in this criticism were Melville's other works, in nearly all of which

Melville finds time to condemn slavery and racism against blacks, South Seas islanders, Native Americans, and others.

In the 60s, however, views began to change among critics and in society at large, and the "standard" interpretation (as far as there can be said to be one), became, and to some extent still is, that Babo is the victimized rebel, to be admired for rising up against his oppressors. Often cited is the change from the source material of the year, from 1805, the year of the actual event, to 1799, which was during "the uprising on Santo Domingo led by Toussaint L'Ouverture" (Newman 103) to successfully establish Haiti, the first black republic in the New World. This is an additional reason for the change of the name of Cereno's ship, originally called *Tryal* in the source. Santo Domingo was also originally a Spanish colony and it was the first place in the Americas where imported black slaves began to be used in favor of Native American slaves. And, as H. Bruce Franklin points out, in 1799 "that original site of New World slavery, now became the vanguard of world revolution as the black slaves interpreted the message of the American and French revolutions precisely in the way most dreaded by the plantation owners of the South and the French Caribbean colonies" (149). Many critics with this view soft-pedal the atrocities committed by the rebels of "Benito Cereno," either ignoring them completely or excusing them as "violent resistance to unjust authority" and "necessary" (Fischer 146-7).

Both of these views seem too constricted to do more than scratch the surface of Melville's tale. Still, they have their place. As Dennis Pahl writes, "while such readings obviously stand in sharp contrast to each other, we may wonder if they do not ultimately serve the same purpose, in the sense

that they do nothing more than preserve intact those binary opposites of good and evil that Melville's works seem always at pains to put into question" (171).

More recently, critics have taken a "third way" (though this implies an egregious oversimplification of the vast amount and great variety of criticism of this story). Many critics see that "both the slaves and the American seamen commit excesses of violence in pursuing their initially just goals. Violence, once loosed, even in the cause of righteousness, is not easily confined to its original purpose" (Bollinger 832). This comment can seem almost prophetic in light of events since the early days of our new century.

Some of these scholars point out that some of Melville's most significant changes from his source material actually put the slaves in a worse light. For example, in the real Amasa Delano's report, Aranda was simply thrown overboard rather than having his flesh stripped from his bones, and thus of course there was no gruesome skeletal figurehead. But he made changes that make the whites look worse, as well. As mentioned earlier, the name of Delano's whale-boat, *Rover*, can be seen as an implied reference to piracy, especially since the first mate is a former privateer, which is merely a euphemism for "licensed pirate." But the crowning hint that Melville regards Delano and crew as little more than pirates is the name of Delano's ship, which was originally called *Perseverance*. The *Bachelor's Delight* was "The name of a famous pirate ship belonging to William Cowley and William Dempier, who captured it from Danish slavers off the coast of Sierra Leone, sold the slaves found on board, and sailed it to South America and the Pacific, where they raided Spanish ports and shipping" (Karcher

2515). Delano is a citizen of "a society based on the enslavement of human beings, who are imprisoned in ships, plantations, factories, and offices, forced to expend their human creativity to enrich those who convert everything of human value into money" (Franklin 155). As a member of the exploiting class, he — along with Melville's primary audience — is a pirate by default.

But if Melville meant to criticize white society, particularly slavery — though he went beyond the Abolitionists' stance by, in this and other stories, criticizing wage slavery and other evils of unrestrained capitalism — why did he make the blacks worse than in Delano's already-racist account? Again, he was likely reacting to the myths of many Abolitionists, "the contemporary image of the Negro as more 'docile,' 'cheerful,' and 'harmonious' than other men" (Emery, "Topicality of Depravity" 322), which oddly echoed the myths of Southern slave owners, that blacks were childlike, too "innocent" and "simple" to survive on their own. In light of numerous slave uprisings and his own multicultural experience, Melville knew better than to believe that skin color would make blacks any more capable than anyone else of forgiving and forgetting their mistreatment at the hands of whites. Blacks were no better — or worse — than other human beings. Given a chance for a revenge that feels fully justified, they are very likely to take it — and then take it too far, going from victim to oppressor without realizing it. "Benito Cereno" was a warning that the abolition of slavery, while certainly desirable, would not magically solve all America's problems.

Domination requires submission, oppressors require their oppressed, masters require slaves. One figure will always grind the other — merely

exchanging masks will change nothing in substance. This is one possible meaning of Cereno's enigmatic answer to Delano's exasperated question, "what has cast such a shadow upon you?" "The negro" means slavery, the oppressed, Master Cereno's other half, without which he cannot exist. As Joyce Adler writes, "so long as the master-slave relationship exists, neither slave nor master is free of the other. Each lives in the shadow of the other" (39). Cereno, however, has seen the other side — he has been a slave now, and knows what it is like to be ground beneath a cruel master. Can he by this learn to leave behind the false, dualistic state and become someone not defined as "master" or "slave"? He fails to do so, and so he dies.

Of these three main views, far too briefly considered, which one is "correct"? The magazine reader who failed to get the joke would laugh cynically at the answer: all of them, and more besides. Yet it is wrong to take this as proof that teachers "believe in nothing" — most teachers I know believe that students must learn to think critically and seriously, to understand alternate and unfamiliar points of view even if they do not agree with them, and to realize that answers in the real world are rarely as simple as portrayed in a typical movie or television drama. Even in the case of the best, most multilayered literature, most students "have been taught in high school that a story has to have a single or unified meaning, and all but the most adventurous prefer interpretational certainties to multiple possibilities" (Lonoff 92). The glory of "Benito Cereno" and other stories of its caliber is that, like the reality to which it holds up a mirror, it "cannot be reduced to any single explanation — that however convincing a case one makes, there will always be something left over, something that just

doesn't fit" (Lonoff 93). This is a supreme lesson for students to learn, not only for the pure intellectual joy (and existential angst) of discovering that there are things we can never fully understand — and thus never fully exhaust our explorations of — but also because developing the ability to deal with multiple *Rashamon*-like realities is a practical survival skill in today's world: survival in the globalized business world, survival as a politically aware citizen, and possibly even literal, physical survival.

One has only to look at the hardening lines and extreme positions that have formed in American politics over the past generation to be reminded of the decade in which Melville wrote his story. In times of fear and uncertainty, people cling to what they "know" — whether they actually know it or not. It is easier to take a position, any position, and then stop thinking about it. Such a mental shutdown may have been a survival mechanism when we lived in isolated tribes, but today, it spells worldwide disaster.

In the characters of Amasa Delano and Benito Cereno, Melville demonstrates the dangerous seduction of certainty — of choosing one interpretation of reality and blinding oneself to all others. This comfortable clarity has deadly consequences. Delano nearly loses his ship and his life because his mind has been ossified by his many prejudices; Cereno dies because he cannot adjust to a life outside the dualistic *yin-yang* of master and slave. Even Babo, in his just struggle for freedom, becomes that which he despises. Melville demonstrates that, instead of taking a clear, "black and white" position, a more nuanced, ambiguous viewpoint that holds simultaneous, multiple perceptions of reality is the only one capable of approaching true understanding. One cannot simply declare this side

"good" and that side "evil," as if good and evil are objective things that exist in isolation. Are atrocities committed in the name of freedom forgivable? Do oppressors deserve to suffer the revenge of their former chattels? These are questions that haunted America on the eve of the Civil War, and that continue to haunt America — and the world, especially any nation with a history of imperialism — one hundred fifty years later.

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