Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno”

Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” is a long, enigmatic, sometimes ponderous tale that remains one of the most studied short stories of the U. S. nineteenth century. Based on a true incident that occurred off the coast of South America in 1805, the story first appeared in three installations in *Putnam’s Magazine* at the end of 1855. Captain Amasa Delano retold the event in his narrative of his voyages and travels, published in 1817, a work Melville picked up in the late 1840s. According to Delano, he and his ship *Perseverance* encountered the slave ship *Ttryal* at the island of Santa Maria, off the coast of Chile. Recognizing that the ship was in trouble, Delano offered assistance to the captain of the other vessel, Benito Cereno. Cereno explained to Delano that due to terrible storms the ship had lost much of its white crew, but hours later, when Delano went to leave the *Ttryal* to return to his ship, Cereno frantically jumped overboard into Delano’s boat and informed him that the slaves had revolted and had been in the charge of the ship the entire time Delano was onboard. In response, Delano offered his crew a reward for recapturing the ship, which they did. After sailing both ships to Concepcion on the Chilean coast, Delano was accused by Cereno of attempting piracy of his ship.

Melville drew on the basic outlines of Delano’s narrative in constructing his own story, but changed many details, excluded Cereno’s accusation against Delano, and added a concluding scene onboard between the two captains. The story has long been a focal point for trying to understand Melville’s response to and view of slavery, but for much of the twentieth century, critics read the story as having far less to do with the political context of the 1850s than with abstract questions of morality and evil. For such critics, the story centers either on Delano’s innocent naiveté and his ability to survive in the face of evil or on Delano’s moral blindness in not being able to recognize evil fully, even after the slave revolt is revealed and put down. From such a perspective, the slaves and their leader, Babo, symbolize humankind’s immorality, its tendency to violence and mayhem. Such readings, then, suggested either that Melville himself was blind to or uninterested in the moral ambiguity of slavery and revolt, or that he identified completely with a potentially pro-slavery acceptance of white superiority. In the past few decades, however, a number of critics, most notably, perhaps, Michael Paul Rogin and Eric Sundquist, have admirably demonstrated how Melville’s changes to Delano’s narrative reveal his probing intellect fully engaging with the moral and political issues of slavery. As with his other most famous story from this period, “Bartleby,” “Benito Cereno,” then, works on multiple layers, allowing more complaisance readers to embrace its apparent acquiescence to contemporary moral sentiments while simultaneously overturning such a position for more subtle readers open to its critique of status quo thinking.

Critics have focused on a variety of elements of the story in explicating its moral vision and its position on slavery, including such things as it possibly positive use of Africanist elements, the inclusion in rewritten and edited form of
depositions from the actual case, and the changes made to the ships’ names
(becoming San Dominick—a reference to slave revolt in Haiti—and Bachelor’s
Delight—a famous pirate ship) and the year of the event (from 1805 to 1799).
My focus, however, will be on the story’s characterization of Delano and of Babo.
The story itself is structured through its three, vastly unequal sections—the
longest first part told from a third-person limited point of view, the second section
consisting of Cereno’s deposition to the court, and the short conclusion. Melville
uses third-person limited narration in the first section, placing the narrator outside
the story, but confining our knowledge to what Captain Delano knows. Such
narration is common to mysteries, where the author wants to keep us in the
dark—as characters are—concerning what exactly has happened or is
happening. In Melville’s hands, this narrative perspective takes on a particular
subtlety. He often blurs the narrator’s perspective with Delano’s, allowing us, at
times, to identify the two. At other times, however, an ironic distance between
the narrator and the main character begins to appear, especially when it comes
to Delano’s own view of himself and his perspective on the slaves and Cereno.
Even as the story hints that Delano does not fully grasp the situation, this
distance only becomes clear to us when the mystery itself is revealed after
Cereno leaps into Delano’s boat. Throughout most of the story, we, like Delano,
are only dimly aware something is wrong on the San Dominick, that Cereno’s
story does not quite add up. We are placed, then, to follow Delano’s various
conjectures about what Cereno may be up to (something absent from Melville’s
source in the historical Delano’s journal) or how ill or incapacitated Cereno must
be for his ship to be in some disarray. But with the revelation of the slave revolt,
we should realize that one of the main reasons Delano has been incapable of
seeing through the masquerade has been his paternalistic racism. Throughout
the first part of the story, Delano dismisses any concern about the slaves, even
though they are actively sharpening hatchets, even after a black boy cuts a
Spanish boy, and even when confronted by Atufal in chains or seeing Babo nick
Cereno during the shaving scene. The story ascribes Delano’s dismissal of
these events to the “mild sun of [his] good-nature,” his “singularly undistrustful
good-nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and
hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of
malign evil in man.” Yet Delano does impute evil to Cereno, while dismissing it in
the slaves in his condescension towards them. For example, in first viewing the
slaves sharpening the hatchets, Delano remarks their occasionally clanging them
together, viewing it as an example of “the peculiar love in negroes of uniting
industry with pastime.” As it is presented in the first section of the story, it is
unclear whether this description comes from the narrator or from Delano’s limited
view, but with the revelation in the deposition that this activity was part of the
slaves’ orchestrated conduct—knowledge the narrator would know from the
outset—it is clear, in retrospect, that this view is Delano’s. This perspective fits
with Delano’s later thoughts that the slaves were too “stupid” to be part of any
conspiracy and with the narrator’s characterization of him as taking “to negroes,
not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs,” an
apparently positive, yet still demeaning view of the slaves echoed in his view of

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the slave mothers as “naked nature . . . Unsophisticated as leopards; loving as doves.”

This sort of racism easily fits with Delano’s inconsistent views on slavery. On the one hand, he reflects that “slavery breeds ugly passions in man” after Cereno, apparently, cuts Babo to punish him for nicking him. Yet he immediately dismisses this violence (apparently on the part of the master) as a “sort of love-quarrel,” and he earlier offers to buy Babo, almost immediately after stating that he cannot call him a “slave” but must see him as a “friend.” Finally, after Cereno tells Delano of the slave revolt and begs him to let the slaves escape (for fear of what they might do), Delano readily embraces the idea of recapturing the ship and its cargo—primarily the slaves—for economic ends. Melville’s characterization of Delano’s racism can be read in several different ways, but perhaps most directly it seems to be an indictment of a certain easy, somewhat liberal Northern racism that informed much anti-slavery thought (it’s important to remember Delano is from Massachusetts, a hotbed of anti-slavery activity during the antebellum period). The story suggests that Delano, like many others who viewed slaves sympathetically, may have a weak recognition of the horrors of slavery and may consider himself the slaves’ friend, but such feelings depend on viewing himself as superior to the slaves and to the slaves staying in their appointed position of submission. Most directly, the story can be read as interrogating the kind of racial thinking behind the most popular anti-slavery text of the years immediately preceding its publication, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).

If Melville’s story—through its depiction of Delano’s utter blindness to the slaves’ potential to act violently—undermines the vision Stowe and others put forward of Africans as innately docile, submissive, and moral (and therefore more deserving of our protection from the horrors of slavery), it is less clear what image of black character we end with. As noted earlier, older readings of the story tended to view Babo and the slaves as the embodiment of the evil that Delano’s blithe ignorance and innocence—even in his concluding conversation with Cereno—refuse to see. To some extent such a reading is correct, but it is incomplete, as the story, especially through the deposition’s account of the Spaniards’ reaction after the slave ship is retaken, suggests the systemic cause of the slaves’ violence. The Spaniards’ desire to inflict the kind of violence they suffered on the recaptured slaves indicates the cyclical nature of the violence when the positions of master and slave are simply reversed. If the story indicates that it is slavery itself (“slavery breeds ugly passions in man”) that encourages such violence, it remains much more reserved in characterizing the slaves and Babo in particular. The second section, with its legalistic framing and its revelation of what had happened on board the ship prior to and during Delano’s time on board, seems, as the narrator puts it, to “shed light on the preceding narrative.” And it certainly offers a great deal of information that potentially helps to explain what has occurred. Yet Melville concludes the deposition with a conditional statement that suggests the incompleteness of the official story, as offered by Cereno: “If the Deposition have served as the key to
fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the *San Dominick*’s hull lies open to-day."

That Melville does not think the complications are fully unlocked is apparent from the fact that he does not end the story there. Instead, he incorporates a completely fictional exchange between Cereno and Delano subsequent to the recapturing of the ship, in which Delano attempts to get Cereno to move beyond what has happened and Cereno replies that he will never be able to escape the shadow cast by “the negro” upon his life. The “negro,” most importantly Babo, remains inexplicable at the end, as he “whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt,” refuses to speak after being recaptured, his head “that hive of subtlety” decapitated and placed in the public plaza where it “met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites.” Melville refuses to give us access to Babo’s thoughts and feelings, to diagnose or describe the motives that lead to his actions. The only times we get Babo’s voice are when he is playing the role of the subservient slave. This silence, as with so much of this story, can be read in contradictory ways. On the one hand, it can be seen as a refusal to humanize Babo and the slaves, as he remains simply the embodiment of violent inhumanity, his head merely a hive, an animalistic image of concerted but merely instinctual activity. Yet this refusal to grant us access to Babo’s true thoughts or to explain them to us in readily understandable terms fits with Melville’s critique of Delano’s racism. Delano’s blindness largely derives from his belief that he can know and understand how Babo and the other slaves are feeling. While Cereno may, following his experience in being deposed as ship’s captain, facing the violence of the slaves, and being forced to act a role, be able to empathize with Babo’s position as a slave, Delano, it seems, has no grounds for fully recognizing what Babo has experienced or how those experiences may have shaped him. Delano may sympathize with Babo, but, as Melville suggests, his sympathies depends on his seeing Babo as subordinate and as barely human in many ways. It easily slips into a kind of pity. Melville’s story, however, refuses to give us firm ground for either pitying or demonizing Babo. Instead we, like the whites at the conclusion of the story, merely face his “unabashed” gaze. It is in this respect, I think, that the story both most directly comments on slavery and speaks to far broader social and moral issues. Through his characterization of Delano’s condescending and racist sympathy and his refraining from characterizing Babo, Melville suggests the self-serving nature of a kind of white liberal racism and indicates the profound moral problem of attempting to understand or judge the experiences of someone distinctly different from ourselves. In that way, Melville’s story does not merely reflect on the slavery controversy of the 1850s but offers an astute commentary on social and moral problems that we, as humans, continue to face.