A POLITICAL COMPANION TO
Herman Melville

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What Babo Saw

Benito Cereno and “the World We Live In”

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The miracle of Herman Melville is this: that a hundred years ago in two novels . . . and two or three stories, he painted a picture of the world in which we live, which is to this day unsurpassed.

—C. L. R. James, Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In

Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: “Too late.”

—Martin Luther King Jr., “A Time to Break Silence”

In 1952, while awaiting possible deportation in a prison on Ellis Island, the Trinidadian intellectual and radical activist C. L. R. James wrote a book-length study of Herman Melville and the totalitarian reach of the cold war state. James’s book focuses on Moby-Dick, from which it borrows its title, and on Melville’s unfulfilled allegiance to the fate of the Pequod’s polyglot, multiracial crew. Though Melville shrinks from embracing democratic revolt, James nevertheless looks to him as the poet of the “renegades and castaways and savages” who counter the sickness of modern existence with their humor and their deep sense of history and who prefigure the multinational crew of detainees on Ellis Island. In Benito Cereno, a novella first published serially in 1855 and then as part of The Piazza Tales a year later, James discerns both the power of Melville’s democratic art and the point of its deterioration into mere “propaganda.” Melville’s narration of an American sea captain’s incapacity to comprehend the meaning of an insur-
rection aboard a slave ship represents “every single belief cherished by an advanced civilization . . . about a backward people,” James argues, even if it is ultimately a mystery story with a point to prove rather than the inauguration of something genuinely new.²

James is not alone in finding resources for democratic thinking in Melville’s fiction and in Benito Cereno specifically. Indeed, Melville has been called “one of the principal interpreters of the American obsession with race and commitment to racism,” a touchstone for twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists attempting to conceive the possibilities for and obstacles inhibiting multiracial democracy.³ Perhaps most famously, Ralph Ellison begins Invisible Man with an epigraph from the concluding section of Benito Cereno: “‘You are saved,’ cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; ‘You are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?’” Ellison omits Captain Cereno’s reply, but it would be familiar to Melville’s readers: “the negro.” The ambiguity of that shadow—is it thrown by a single black individual, or does it represent a more abstract conception of blackness, or both?—conjures a long history in which racialized violence, democracy, and denial intertwine. It also suggests the lasting power of Melville’s imaginative destabilization of prevailing fictions of race.⁴ Accordingly, this essay seeks to highlight those dimensions of Benito Cereno that, by reflecting on the political challenges of Melville’s time, most acutely limn the challenges of democratic life today. I consider how his attention to the rituals that cloaked the viciously inegalitarian racial order of the mid-nineteenth century in the mantle of civility calls our attention to a regressive politics of friendship at work in our “postracial” era.

Melville’s novella recounts a slave revolt on a Spanish ship off the coast of Chile in 1799. The ship’s history is revealed largely through the eyes of a quintessentially American captain, Amasa Delano, who happens on the drifting San Dominick and attempts to rescue the ragged vessel and its human cargo and crew. The scene Delano encounters is one of apparent disarray, as the blacks and whites on board “in one language, and as with one voice, all poured out a common tale of suffering.”⁵ In his innocence—and his confident sense of American superiority not only to the slaves on board but also to the Old World Catholics who are the captain and crew—Delano fails to recognize that the disorder he attributes to the Spanish captain Benito Cereno’s leadership disguises an elaborate pantomime orchestrated by Babo, a Senegalese slave and mastermind of the revolt. It is the slaves
who rule, until the moment when Cereno attempts to escape with the departing Delano, Babo pursues him with a knife, and the extent of the insurrection is unveiled.

Whereas other commentators have examined Melville’s story as a powerful apprehension that the price of racial domination would soon come due, I explore Melville’s prescience about the character of the postrevolutionary racial order that would emerge from American slavery. Melville’s ironic treatment of the American seaman enables him to disclose, simultaneously, what Delano saw and what the slaves would have foreseen. Crucially, the latter would have known that the generosity and openness so characteristic of the American character were inseparable from an insatiable demand for gratitude, that easy friendship could and would at any moment give way to cruelty, that white witness to the horrors of slavery could not be disentangled from the pleasures of voyeurism. This does not mean that *Benito Cereno* explores what Elizabeth Alexander calls “the black interior.” The reader, in fact, learns nothing of the thoughts or feelings or losses sustained by the Africans on board the *San Dominick*, and Babo dies, emphatically, in silence. Nonetheless, *Benito Cereno* gestures toward practices of racial domination that are not only insusceptible to remedy by dint of white goodwill but are, in fact, sustained by it.

More specifically, the novella raises pointed questions about the viability of friendship as a mechanism for democratic revival in the aftermath of slavery and Jim Crow. One of the most disquieting elements of Melville’s story is its insight into the ways in which a brutal, racially hierarchical order was maintained through performances of friendship. What are the legacies of such performances? To what extent do political theoretical commitments to the value of social trust obscure this history or reinspirit its legacies? In a period defined by segregated neighborhoods and schools and widening racial inequalities, on the one hand, and the hegemony of color-blind discourse and policies, on the other, can the habits and rituals of friendship enable American citizens to negotiate the difficult choices and inevitable losses of collective life? If the regressive racial policies of the post–civil rights era are undergirded by a “friendship orthodoxy” that insists on citizens’ essential sameness under the skin and feeds a culture of blame, can the idea of political friendship be reworked in progressive ways? I approach these questions by reading *Benito Cereno* alongside Danielle Allen’s *Talking to Strangers*, which makes a vigorous case for the democratic
importance, in the post–civil rights era, of treating one’s fellow citizens like friends. Although Melville published his story with an “eye on the gathering storm,” I conclude that the novella’s great, troubling success may consist most dramatically in its capacity to foreshadow dangers that would linger long after the storm.8

**Imagining Slave Insurrection**

For today’s readers, it may be hard to understand how Melville’s story could be evaluated in isolation from its historical context or why his critical sense of events around him evaded so many astute critics for so long. Composed in the middle of a decade that began with the Fugitive Slave Law and ended with John Brown on the gallows, *Benito Cereno* first appeared in serial form in *Putnam’s Monthly*, an antislavery journal.9 Yet, as Carolyn Karcher remarks, “Until the mid-1960s, there was almost no interest in Melville’s racial views, and very little recognition of the prominent place that social criticism occupies in his writings.”10 Early commentary on the novella, which reads Babo as the embodiment of evil, has been supplanted more recently by an appreciation of Melville’s multiple social-critical targets. The text’s critique of prevailing racial ideologies, its references to Haiti, its implicit condemnation of American slavery and expansionism, and its exploration of the kinship of American and Spanish imperial aspirations have generated a vast scholarship.11 Recognizing that it would be a mistake to pin Melville to any one of these as his dominant preoccupation, I concur with Sandra Zagarell’s conclusion that “the novella’s comparisons range throughout modern Western history, often pivoting, as if in warning, on the rebelliousness of subordinated populations.”12

Although much of the action is seen, or not, from the perspective of the myopic American captain, Melville weaves references to historical events throughout the story. Taking inspiration from the historical captain Amasa Delano’s *Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*, which was published in 1817, Melville redacts the original in ways that call into question the world that Delano—both historical and fictional—represents. Perhaps most obviously, by changing the name of Cereno’s ship from the *Tryal* to the *San Dominick* and shifting the time of the revolt from 1805 to 1799, Melville sets his tale in the context of the age of revolution, generally, and the liberation of Haiti, most especially.13 As recent
commentators have noted, furthermore, Melville would have been familiar with the slave revolts on the *Amistad* (1839) and *Creole* (1841) as well as the slave uprisings that terrified the southern states and the debates about the expansion of slavery and the status of fugitives that roiled the nation. More, the story’s reference to the *San Dominick* as a “slumbering volcano” (698) may direct the reader to Frederick Douglass’s 1849 “Slumbering Volcano” speech and foretell the inevitability of slave insurrection. Melville does not tell us for certain, however. As Joyce Sparer Adler remarks, “Far from developing his thought in glaring black and white, Melville beclouded it, challenging American readers to ‘pierce’ in this work, as they needed to in life, the surface and also the upper substratum of slavery in order to arrive at its skeletal reality.”

In its portraits of key figures, *Benito Cereno* also examines and undermines prevailing views about slavery and race. Delano stands for the liberal racialism of many northern abolitionists, opposed to slavery but not to the idea of racial hierarchy. Cereno, though emblematic of Old World attitudes, is also, in the view of many scholars, a stand-in for slavery’s southern defenders. As Michael Rogin remarks, “Melville’s slave mutiny as masquerade inserted itself between two opposed perspectives on the master-slave relationship in antebellum America, and unsettled both.” Further, Melville differentiates the slave characters, giving them individual histories that defy white characters’ repeated references to them as “the blacks” or “his blacks” or “the negro.” Though James’s characterization of Babo as “the most heroic character in Melville’s fiction” is not persuasive, Melville parodies Delano’s incapacity to recognize Babo’s genius (“that hive of subtlety”), exposes the costs of Cereno’s inability to transform his own experience of bondage into insight into the slaves’ desires, and raises uneasy questions about which characters engage in “ferocious piratical revolt” (734). Indeed, Sterling Stuckey and Joshua Leslie make a compelling case that Melville’s reading of Mungo Park and others inculcated in him a sense of West African cultural traditions that enabled him to produce complex accounts of even the unnamed characters—the African women, the oaken pickers, and the hatchet polishers.

To say that *Benito Cereno* is a work of social commentary is not to unravel, once and for all, the puzzle of precisely what Melville’s message might be. Indeed, the story signals its inscrutability from the first. Calling readers’ attention to what cannot be known, Melville sketches an opening scene that is inaccessible to at least three of the senses: it is gray, mute, and calm (673).
He also muddies the narrator’s point of view by writing in a flat, apparently detached tone across the novella’s three sections. In the first and longest section, the action is narrated in the third person, but the perspective seems to be the occluded vantage of Delano himself.21 The second section consists of excerpts from Benito Cereno’s deposition after the American and Spanish sailors have retaken the ship and captured or killed the insurrectionary slaves. Drawing from the historical documents in Delano’s Narrative, this section testifies to extraordinary events in a manner that both mimics and undermines the objectivity of legal documents. The third section returns to the third person but no longer seems to issue from the viewpoint of the American captain. Throughout the novella, moreover, Melville deploys devices that hide the meaning of events from the reader’s view. One of the most effective of these is his extravagant use of double negatives, which, Eric Sundquist argues, signal the tautology that “asserts the virtual equivalence of potentially different authorities or meanings.”22 As Philip Fisher observes, furthermore, Melville intensifies both the critique and its ambiguity through the use of inclusive either/or sentences in which the second term preserves rather than negates the first: “For Melville this either/or that is protected from denial is the syntax of the superimposed space of American slavery. It is the political space of what we call occupation rather than conquest. Each gesture and every single fact has a double location that can only be experienced by means of what appears to the eye and to the mind as an either/or.”23 Through a series of overlapping truths—Babo is slave and master, Cereno master and slave—Melville signals that it is impossible, finally, to cut the “intricate knot,” to get to the bottom of things, and, most important, either to realize the promise of liberation or to restore, unchanged, the upended order. “What Melville represents,” in Fisher’s view, “is the simple fact that there might be no fundamental sense to the belief that slavery could be, in the strong sense, ‘abolished.’”24 And in this regard Benito Cereno may be most valuable not for its prediction of the cataclysm of the Civil War so much as for its illumination of the “low-grade civil wars” that both preceded and followed the epic struggle of 1861–1865, right up to the present day.25

Troubling Friendship

Among the many themes that have captured the attention of commentators on Benito Cereno, friendship may be one of the most salient and least
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remarked. Even as the story advertises its gloominess with repeated reference to shadows, grayness, and specters, it is also permeated with allusions to friendship, civility, and sociality. These allusions do not serve to lighten the atmosphere, however. Instead, Melville’s reflections on the costs—both current and impending—of chattel slavery set the terms through which friendships, both interracial and intraracial, develop. And gestures of friendship are the currency through which the action advances. It may even be in these performances of friendship that the story is most ominous. For in this regard, *Benito Cereno* offers more than a cautionary tale about democratic politics in the age of human bondage and imperial expansion: it also provides a vantage from which to regard the politics of friendship and the potential role of friendship in democratic politics after slavery.

Three central “friendships” structure the narrative of *Benito Cereno*: Benito Cereno and Alexandro Aranda, Cereno and Babo, and Cereno and Delano. Presented in overlapping or layered fashion, rather than entirely discrete from one another, they might be said to represent the story’s past, present, and future, respectively. Despite obvious differences among them, furthermore, they are all entangled in the traffic in human beings and mediated by racial hierarchy. That this is true even of the oldest friendship, the abiding love that Cereno expresses for Aranda, raises unsettling questions about the possibilities of *intra*racial friendship in a time of white supremacy. Murdered during the mutiny, Aranda haunts the action as his skeleton hangs behind a shroud from the prow of the *San Dominick*. His friendship with Cereno goes back to the latter’s youth, according to the deposition (743), but his introduction in the story is preceded by his slaves’. When Cereno declares to Delano that he is the owner of everything on board the ship, he makes an exception for “the main company of blacks, who belonged to my late friend, Alexandro Aranda” (689). As the conversation proceeds awkwardly, Delano attempts to extract more information from Cereno, incorporating the slaves into an elaborate euphemism about the death of the Spanish captain’s friend: “And may I ask, Don Benito, whether—since awhile ago you spoke of some cabin passengers—the friend, whose loss so afflicts you, at the outset of the voyage accompanied his blacks?” (689). In a final twist, when Aranda exits the story in the company of Benito Cereno, their reunion is effected by the absent body of Babo, which has been “burned to ashes” in punishment for the revolt (755). Only his head remains. Stuck on a pole in the Lima Plaza, where it could meet
“unabashed, the gaze of the whites.” Babo’s head rejoins Aranda’s bones, which are buried at St. Bartholomew’s Church, and Cereno’s body, interred in a monastery beyond the church, by holding both resting places in its regard (755).

Whereas Melville offers the reader—and Delano—only glimpses of the friendship between Aranda and Cereno, helavishes attention on the elaborate pantomime of devotion presented by Babo and his master. As Delano regards the pair, his distaste for slavery, or at least the Spanish variety, melts. Babo, he notes, fulfills his duties “with that affectionate zeal which transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial; and which has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body servant in the world; one, too, whom a master need be on no stiffly superior terms with, but may treat with familiar trust; less a servant than a devoted companion” (680). If Delano disapproves of slavery’s “ugly passions,” he admires the sociable passions it instills and says of Babo: “Faithful fellow! . . . Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him” (685). Whether “presenting himself as a crutch” (732) for his master or explaining away an injury vindictively inflicted by Cereno, Babo demonstrates a virtuosic command of the conviviality through which slavery was sustained. Although the story is replete with happy images of interracial friendship, in other words, it does not countenance anything approximating the equality of Queequeg and Ishmael, sharing first the marriage bed and then the monkey rope.27 Instead, the reader encounters master and man tethered together by something more like a leash. Babo, after all, is introduced with a face “like a shepherd’s dog” (678), and the narrator continues by observing that “Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (716). The question, of course, is: who is leading whom? Although Delano is deceived about who commands the San Dominick, the faked friendship he witnesses between Babo and Cereno copies precisely the everyday performances of familial and friendly relations that were part and parcel of the order of slavery. Babo’s self-fashioning as a loving and loyal friend to Cereno exposes an order based in “violence and ventriloquism,” feigned enjoyment and affection.28 Intimations of interracial friendship or friendliness, furthermore, also provide the mechanism through which the rebels advance the plot, as when the oakum pickers relieve the tension engendered by Delano’s momentary suspicions “with gestures friendly and familiar, almost jocose, bidding him,
in substance, not be a fool” (711). The performance reaches a climax when Babo, “a dagger in his hand, was seen on the rail overhead, poised, in the act of leaping, as if with desperate fidelity to befriend his master to the last” (733).

Of all of the relationships that drive *Benito Cereno*, the halting friendship between Delano and Cereno is the only one that unfolds across all three sections of the story. The first and longest section relates how Delano’s repeated gestures of sympathy and friendship are rebuffed by the mysteriously unhappy Cereno. During his day on board the *San Dominick*, Delano continually makes overtures to Cereno. When they are, repeatedly, not rewarded, Melville wryly observes, “He was not a little concerned at what he could not help taking for the time to be Don Benito’s unfriendly indifference towards himself” (680). This is not to say that the captains are wholly equal in Delano’s eyes. While the American captain sees his colleague as “my poor friend,” he also regards him as “the Spaniard,” an envoy from a world that is dark in its own right and atavistic in its religious customs and its treatment of slaves. Indeed, one of the story’s most ingenious elements is its exposure of the degree to which rituals of friendship, for Delano, rely on a presumption of hierarchies that not only divide ship captains from bondsmen and crew but also sustain a vertical order between the captains themselves. Crucially, that order depends on rituals of friendship, and these rituals make possible Babo’s ingenious inversions. For example, one of the most harrowing scenes of the novella—when Babo drapes Cereno in the Spanish flag and proceeds to shave him—begins with an invitation to Delano to join the two men in the cuddy, which the American approves as a “sociable plan” (714). Delano’s insistent reversion to the language of friendship appears to defy common sense, but my reading in this regard departs slightly from Zagarell’s comment that Delano’s attachment to a “code of gentility” prevalent in Victorian America is “conspicuously irrelevant to the situation he actually faces.”29 Though Delano’s interpretation of the action within a framework of friendship, reciprocated and rebuffed, blinds him to the meaning of the action, Melville reveals that it is entirely appropriate to the world of American mastery he inhabits. When Cereno clings to the departing Delano’s hand “across the black’s body” and bids him good-bye as “my best friend,” Melville lays bare the ugly terms on which relationships among white men played out within the political and social economy of slavery (732).
Melville also figures friendship as a primary currency of white intercourse after revolution and restoration. During Cereno’s brief spell of relative tranquility and health on the return journey, “ere the decided relapse which came, the two captains had many cordial conversations—their fraternal unreserve in singular contrast with former withdrawals” (753). Strikingly, Cereno repeatedly calls Delano “my best friend,” despite his admission that the American was able to foil the slaves only because of his hopeless obtuseness. Against the backdrop of the two captains’ repeated failures of communication on board the San Dominick, moreover, Melville’s portrayal of the them speaking with intimacy and affection calls into question the terms on which friendships are undertaken.

Further, Melville hints that the promiscuity of Delano’s friendship, his democratic openness to all, goes hand in hand with a failure to feel the injustice of slavery. Just as he distributes freshwater to the thirsty men and women on board the San Dominick “with republican impartiality” (712), disregarding differences of rank and race, Delano seems equally determined to share his geniality with everyone and everything he encounters. The American captain’s expressions of friendship, significantly, are not insincere. Indeed, Melville reveals them to be sincere and fatuous. Their dubious value is expressed by Delano’s readiness to extend the title “friend” beyond the human world, thereby exposing the ease with which he forgets the suffering of others, the fragility of his bonds of friendship. Attempting to cheer the morbid Cereno in the final pages of the story, Delano looks to the sky and sea and remarks: “‘These mild trades that now fan your cheek, . . . do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades’” (754). The political implications of this paean to benign nature are troubling. As Wilson Carey McWilliams notes, Delano—and the North he exemplifies—“could express emotion and seek solidarity only with nonhuman things, with a personalized ‘Nature’ or with ‘natural men’ deprived of human personality.” Further, Glenn Alshuler reminds us, the friendly winds Delano invokes are the trades that carried slaves from Africa to the Americas.

Present-day readers may be able to see through Melville’s superficially positive figurations of interracial and intraracial friendship and apprehend “the skeletal reality” he sketches with such devastating power. But what seems obvious in the alien costume of a nineteenth-century slave ship may remain elusive when we turn to the conditions of democratic life today. In
Benjamin DeMott’s view, modern Americans are as blind as Delano to the regressive function of friendship in the post–civil rights era. *The Trouble with Friendship: Why Americans Can’t Think Straight about Race* eviscerates the reactionary politics of today’s “friendship orthodoxy,” which underwrites a form of politics that personalizes entrenched structures of racial inequality and relieves white citizens of any sense of responsibility. Three assumptions, DeMott argues, feed the idea that friendship is the cure for what ails interracial relations: (1) a conception of shared humanity that gives rise to a belief in shared values and feelings; (2) an understanding of racial disparities as the consequence of “personal animosity” rather than structural injustice; (3) a view of public assistance efforts as unnecessary relics of the past.32 Together these assumptions paper over a history of caste distinction whose effects have not been fully acknowledged, much less effaced. In effect, they bring Delano’s blindnesses into the twenty-first century: “How is possible to sustain faith in sameness and sympathy between the races when one knows at first hand the texture of today’s American cityscape—the ocular evidence that gives the lie to versions of black America as solidly middle class? What are the sequences of thought and feeling that enable men and women neither callous nor credulous to confront, day after day, in their lived experience, manifest inequity while clinging to the myth of sameness and escaping altogether the sense of personal misconduct?”33

Can friendship be saved? Should it be? In spite of the ills DeMott associates with appeals to interracial friendship, one of the most exciting recent books in democratic theory, and one of the few to take racial inequality as a fundamental concern, is premised on a vigorous defense of the importance of friendship as a vehicle for revitalizing democratic citizenship. Danielle Allen’s *Talking to Strangers* develops from the observation that “congealed distrust” among citizens signals a fundamental breakdown in the polity.34 In the absence of habits of interaction among strangers, Americans are incapable of negotiating the losses inherent in majority rule and becoming a genuinely democratic people. What American citizens need, Allen avers, are “more muscular habits of trust production.”35 In her elaboration on what this entails, furthermore, she develops a conception of friendship that counters the terms on which the “friendship orthodoxy” is grounded.

First, Allen dispenses with arguments about shared humanity that depend on what DeMott calls “sameness-under-the-skin.” Her democratic society is defined by its heterogeneity, the manyness of the citizenry who
engage together in the difficult enterprise of becoming a people. “Whole-
ness,” not “oneness,” is the metaphor that captures this aspiration. And it
cannot be realized through the disavowal of difference or the pretense that
citizens are not situated in such a way that their interests may and often do
conflict. Accordingly, Allen advances a conception of political friendship
premised on self-interest rather than its denial. In view of the inevitability
of sacrifice, of giving something up for others in democratic life, political
friendship sustains a form of autonomy that “consists . . . of getting one’s way
in concert with others, and as modified by them.”36 Reinvigorating democ-

racy, then, involves the cultivation of a capacity to transform the pursuit of
one’s interests into practices, habits, rituals that enable citizens to interact
as if they were friends.

Second, Allen does not reduce racial inequality among citizens to
personal animosity or argue that they need to develop stronger emotional
attachments to one another. Drawing on Aristotle and Ellison, she empha-
sizes the rituals and practices that enable citizens to treat each other with
respect. Recognizing the inevitable gap between the freedom and autono-
my democracy promises and the actual experiences of democratic citizens,
Allen maintains that these rituals serve a critical, political purpose. “Since
the purpose of rituals is to create, justify, and maintain particular social ar-
rangements, they are the foundation also of political structures, and an in-
dividual comes to know intimately central aspects of the overall form of his
community by living through them.”37 Becoming a more democratic people
entails replacing the habits of domination and acquiescence with “new citi-
zenly techniques . . . [that] integrate into one citizenship the healthy politi-
cal habits of both the dominators and the dominated.”38 In this light, we
see one danger of precisely the kind of friendship exhibited by “the gener-
ous Captain Amasa Delano.” Friendship requires not only a willingness to
sacrifice for others but also an openness to being the beneficiary of such
sacrifice: “we must . . . confront the counterintuitive idea that citizens who
give often and generously to other citizens may be distrusted, despite their
equitability.”39 An unwillingness to be indebted to others (or to acknowl-
edge one’s indebtedness) may simply be a ploy to reinforce one’s power,
and it reflects a resistance to the vulnerability and lack of sovereignty that
are the condition of all democratic citizens. Fugitive glimpses of human
beings’ “mortal inter-indebtedness,” a term Jason Frank aptly draws from
Moby-Dick in the introduction to this volume, point toward an alternative
conception of democratic sociality.\textsuperscript{40} It is a conception, crucially, that cannot be realized under conditions of racial domination.

Third, Allen counters Delano’s and her own contemporaries’ desire to put the past behind them with an insistence on the democratic value of historical consciousness. Her argument begins with a retelling of the integration of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957 and the “new constitution” that was “inaugurated” through the actions of the young women and men who braved murderous crowds to refound the polity more democratically.\textsuperscript{41} Countering scripts in which it is African Americans who play the role of the supplicant and whites the part of the benefactor, Allen presses us to consider whether the Little Rock Nine and their allies were in fact “philanthropists.”\textsuperscript{42} She reverses prevailing understandings of who has been dependent on whom across the arc of U.S. history. Concerned that this history remains “undigested,” she traces the political consequences of such indigestion: the invisible costs some citizens are expected to pay to mitigate the unowned vulnerabilities of others.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite the many strengths of Allen’s case, Melville’s story sounds an uneasy echo. Where Allen’s argument shifts between the habits of domination and the challenges of manyness, \textit{Benito Cereno} (in contrast to \textit{Moby-Dick}) adheres to the former and leaves little room for a heterogeneous world not permeated by the residual traces of hierarchy. Although Melville ingeniously disturbs assumptions about the racial order of his day, he cannot conceive that his characters will experience their \textit{interchangeability}—black for white, master for slave—as \textit{equality}.\textsuperscript{44} The centrality of friendship to the action of \textit{Benito Cereno} raises questions about the vexed character of the rituals to which Allen turns to alleviate the effects of racial domination. The novella both “dramatizes the epistemological fancy footwork Delano must perform in order \textit{not} to understand what is amiss on the \textit{San Dominick}” and shows how much of that footwork is bound up with sending and interpreting signals of friendship.\textsuperscript{45} In other words, Melville sketches a world in which gestures of friendship and rituals of sociality not only modify the distrust of strangers but also inhibit reflection or vision. They blind Delano to the truth of what is happening on board the slave ship even as they enable him to perpetuate his blindness about the character of slavery itself. Indeed, Delano comes closest to apprehending what is happening on the \textit{San Dominick} at those moments when his gestures of friendship fall flat. He stifles any possible insight when “a thousand trustful associations,” like
the sight of his old boat, reassure him that his own goodwill is legible to those around him (708).

Further, Melville’s story queries the likelihood that citizens might cultivate “habits of ‘antagonistic cooperation’” in such a way that sacrifices are acknowledged and reciprocated, when perceptions of self-interest and sacrifice are themselves shaped by expectations about one’s position in a racialized economic and political order.46 Though Allen rightly challenges the idea that self-interest is reducible to wealth maximization, Delano perceives his own pursuit of profit, including profit derived from the trade in human beings that he professes to abhor, to be something akin to what she calls “equitable self-interest.” (He only wants his fair share!) Indeed, the dark side of Delano’s conviviality makes vivid Samuel Delany’s observation that social capital is “a truly outrageous metaphor.”47 Benito Cereno suggests why the insecurity that Allen identifies as the shared condition of democratic citizens remains politically undecided; it may move us to new forms of citizenly friendship, but it may also, perhaps more readily, reinforce our commitment to the undemocratic relationships of old. Melville’s story eerily inquires of us: Would we know the difference? In the shadow of Benito Cereno, Allen’s gloss on Ellison’s claim that “our fellow citizens are the boat, and we in turn the planks for them” both demands something more strenuous than easy assurances that “we are all in the same boat” or Delano’s promiscuous friendship and elides a question raised so pointedly by the insurrection on the San Dominick: What kind of boat?48

What Babo Saw

Benito Cereno concludes with the display of Babo’s head, regarding white passersby as well as the remains of his former master and his master’s friend. What are readers to make of “his voiceless end” (755)? As several commentators note, at the very moment when the reader sees the action from Babo’s point of view, he has been permanently silenced. The action, as Dana Nelson suggests, is “arrested” in a way that may prevent emancipation from the dynamic of black-white relations Melville so effectively undermines through the inversions of the plot.49 Further, it vivifies the fact that the black characters never speak in their own voices at any point in the story. Not only are all Babo’s words thoroughly scripted, even if he is the author of that script, but Melville prefigures Babo’s fate through the
character of Atufal, who in an especially elaborate masquerade is required to ask Cereno’s pardon and instead regards him with “unquailing muteness” (690). As Jean Fagin Yellin concludes, “Melville did not pretend to speak for the black man, but he dramatized the perception that his voice had not been heard.” Neither singly nor collectively. Melville does report the gestures of the oekum pickers, the clang of the hatchet polishers, and the “blithe songs of the inspirited negroes” (726), but the effect is to amplify the absence of their individual voices. Perhaps most obviously, Melville omits any discussion of friendships among the slaves, despite the fact that their elaborate cooperation drives the plot.

What might Babo and his allies have said, if they could? What did they see? Unhindered by the blinders of mastery, Babo would not only have understood the inherent barbarity of his condition, but would probably have foreseen the obstacles to a postrevolutionary order shared by former slaves and masters alike. Although he utters no words after the unveiling of the plot, it is unlikely that he would have expressed surprise at the viciousness of the retaking of the San Dominick from the former slaves, during which shackled captives were killed by sailors (752); or at the spectacle of his own execution, beheading, and burning; or at the breeziness of Delano’s insistence that the events on the San Dominick should be left in the past. Least of all would Babo have been surprised that the same man who had admired his services, to the point of offering to buy him, would not hesitate to grind the fugitive slave into the hull of a boat with his boot (733).

Babo might also have expected that Delano’s liberality in extending the title of “friend” to all would carry a substantial price tag. If the captain’s gifts are freely given, the gestures are meant to be received with appropriate gratitude and the giver’s generosity recognized. In the historical Delano’s Narrative, the captain reports that he “was mortified and very much hurt” by Cereno’s unwillingness to compensate him for his efforts. The recollections of “the generous Captain Delano” are tinged with self-pity for “such misery and ingratitude as I have suffered at different periods, and in general, from the very persons to whom I have rendered the greatest services.” Even when Melville relates that “the noble Captain Delano” struggled to put an end to the needless massacre of captured slaves, the story leaves open the question of whether his mercy reflects humanitarian motives or his interest in the fate of the ship’s “cargo” as a source of his own repayment. Melville forces us to consider how certainly we can discern
the gap between a gesture of common humanity and a cold calculation of profit.

Where Melville dramatizes Delano’s easy slide from generosity to resentment vis-à-vis the insufficiently grateful Cereno, he also drops clues to the kinds of expectations that would become the cost of black freedom in the United States. In its most pointed form, Patrick Buchanan’s “Brief for Whitey” summarizes the puzzled reaction of future Delanos to the articulation of African American grievances: “Where is the gratitude?” To be sure, Buchanan represents an extreme view, but it is also a view that crystallizes a tradition of friendship tethered to expressions of generosity and expectations of thanks, to the maintenance of hierarchy between benefactor and supplicant. Such a tradition manifests itself not only in the stance of open racists but also in the responses of generations of “friends of the Negro,” who expect acknowledgment for their forward thinking on matters of race. Maybe this attitude even ensnares Melville himself, whose final poem in Battle Pieces asks, “Can Africa pay back this blood / Spilt on Potomac’s shore?” As Karcher notes, the poem “reverses the role of debtor and creditor, victim and perpetrator, blaming Africans for having caused the war to end their enslavement in America and placing a higher value on the blood of white soldiers than on that of black slaves.” It presages what Saidiya Hartman calls “the debt of emancipation” and the rise of new habits of domination and submission.

Babo might also have justly mocked Ishmael’s famous expression of shared subjection—“Who ain’t a slave? Tell me that”—as politically sterile. Certainly, Cereno’s experience of subjection fills him with horror, but it does nothing to enlighten him about the plight of the women and men in his charge. Despite their physical intimacy throughout most of the first section of the story, Babo never represents brotherhood for Cereno. Rather, Babo is a vision so fiendish that he continues to inspire fainting spells in the captain long after the insurrection has been suppressed. Delano, for his part, proves no more equipped than Cereno to broaden his sense of human concern, whether as a consequence of his democratic character or as a result of his experience in Babo’s thrall.

Nor is he equipped either to remember or to forget the plight of the slaves who were killed, imprisoned, or reenslaved for their aspiration to freedom. “The past is passed; why moralize upon it?” Delano’s attempt to cheer his melancholy friend summarizes his own actions, across the arc
of the story, as he continually responds to slights and stifles his suspicions of Cereno’s intentions toward him. Repeatedly, Delano is portrayed “drowning criticism in compassion, after a fresh repetition of his sympathies” (686), or reassuring himself with the reminder that “yes, this is a strange craft; a strange history, too, and strange folks on board. But—nothing more” (710). Delano’s ritual suppression of unease not only heightens that of the reader but also reveals what his advice to Cereno disavows. Keeping the past at bay is not a once-and-for-all accomplishment but a task that requires continual vigilance on the part of the former masters and their allies. For the formerly enslaved, it might entail the imperative to “get over it,” “stop whining,” or simply “cease to be the special favorite of the laws.” For Delano’s heirs, it would involve an insistent repetition of the mantra that “the past is passed,” which has been deployed so effectively to forestall discussion of affirmative action, reparations, or even modest race-conscious proposals. The call to leave the past in the past might also manifest itself in the continuing force of the immunity-by-friendship defense through which relationships with African Americans reinscribe white innocence, even in the face of stark evidence of racial injustice. Neither Melville nor Babo predicts such developments, but I expect that neither would be surprised by them.

“Whatever else [Melville’s] works were ‘about,’” writes Ellison, “they also managed to be about democracy.” Benito Cereno was about the conditions of American democracy in the 1850s, to be sure, and it looked ahead to see that the American appetite for slavery and expansion was propelling the nation toward disaster. That Benito Cereno traffics in partial truths and resists easy conclusions also suggests another way to read it as a democratic story. It calls on readers both to reflect on the circumstances as Melville laid them out and to heed Allen’s admonition, following Aristotle: “You’ve heard me, you understand. Now judge.” In this way we might say that the living value of Melville’s tale resides equally in what it tells us about his time and in what it withholds. This call to judgment, moreover, is not limited to the relatively safe enterprise of reflecting on the past. Much of Benito Cereno’s power emerges from the uncanny sharpness with which it prefigures the legacy that the age of enslavement would leave to future generations and demands a rethinking of our own circumstances. Part of that legacy, Melville intimates, is a history of friendships—interracial and intraracial—that transpire across and through the subject bodies of black women and men. This is not to say that political friendship has no role to play in remaking
American democratic life after the civil wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But it presses us to be particularly alert to the ways in which friendship might yet sustain the relations those wars were meant to undo.

Notes


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2. Ibid., 111.


5. Herman Melville, Benito Cereno, in Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd (New York: Library of America, 1984), 676. Subsequent references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text.


8. Andrew Delbanco uses this phrase to describe Melville’s acuity as a so-
cial analyst during the period in which he wrote *Benito Cereno*. Delbanco further maintains that “in our own time of terror and torture, *Benito Cereno* has emerged as the most salient of Melville’s works: a tale of desperate men in the grip of a vengeful fury that those whom they hate cannot begin to understand.” Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 231.


11. There is an extensive literature debating Melville’s racial views and his commitment to abolition as revealed both in *Benito Cereno* and in the larger body of his work. For an incisive summary of these debates, see Dana D. Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading “Race” in American Literature, 1638–1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 164–165n1.


13. He also changes the name of Delano’s ship from the *Perseverance* to the *Bachelor’s Delight*, which, Zagarell notes, was the name of the ship sailed by the buccaneer William Ambrose Cowley. Ibid., 141.

14. As many scholars have noted, Melville’s personal life was intimately tied to the politics of the Fugitive Slave Law. His father-in-law, Massachusetts Supreme Court chief justice Lemuel Shaw, famously opposed slavery but felt compelled to abide by the law and, in 1851, ordered Thomas Sims returned to his master.


20. Sterling Stuckey and Joshua Leslie, “The Death of Benito Cereno: A Reading of Herman Melville on Slavery,” in Stuckey, *Going through the Storm: The

21. In chapter 10 of this volume, Tracy Strong aptly observes that this part of the novella is written “from, although mostly not in, the third-person point of view of Captain Amasa Delano.” Tracy B. Strong, “‘Follow Your Leader’: Melville’s *Benito Cereno* and the Case of Two Ships.”


24. Ibid., 88.


26. In the sequence of action that begins with Cereno’s leap into Delano’s departing boat, continues with Babo’s armed pursuit of the captain and his capture by Delano, and ends with the unveiling of Aranda’s skeleton, Melville writes: “All this, with what preceded, and what followed, occurred with such involutions of rapidity, that past, present, and future seemed one” (733).

27. For an exploration of the sublimity of Ishmael and Queequeg’s friendship and its antirevolutionary implications, in contrast with the friendship imagined in Frederick Douglass’s *Heroic Slave*, see John Stauffer, “Interracial Friendship and the Aesthetics of Freedom,” in Levine and Otter, *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville*, 134–158. For an account of the unadmitted erotic economy of interracial friendships in American cinema, see Robert Gooding-Williams, “Black Cupids, White Desires,” in Gooding-Williams, *Look, a Negro! Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17–33.


33. Ibid., 145.
35. Ibid., 84.
36. Ibid., 133.
37. Ibid., 28.
38. Ibid., 116.
39. Ibid., 134.
42. Allen explores this idea through the Invisible Man’s ruminations on whether African Americans living under Jim Crow are philanthropists or scapegoats. Ibid., 101–118.
43. Ibid., 7.
44. On interchangeability and its limits, see Nelson, *The Word in Black and White*.
45. Zagarell, “Reenvisioning America,” 128; emphasis in original.
46. Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 118. The term is Ellison’s.
47. Samuel R. Delany, “. . . Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red,” in Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 199. Thanks to Mark Reinhardt for pointing me to Delany’s counter-narrative of cross-class contact.
50. Such silences multiply, as Strong points out elsewhere in this volume, over the course of Melville’s career. They register his growing doubtfulness “as to the possibilities of expressing what was wrong with America.” Strong, “Follow Your Leader”; emphasis in original.
52. Matthew Rebhorn makes a convincing case for the centrality of nonverbal communication in *Benito Cereno*, but the novella allows only glimpses of how “the languages of embodiment” circulate among the black characters on the *San Dominick*. Matthew Rebhorn, “Minding the Body: *Benito Cereno* and Melville’s Embodied Reading Practice,” *Studies in the Novel* 41 (Summer 2009): 157–177.

54. Ibid., 122.


58. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 130–134. Although I am generally persuaded by Hartman’s argument, I depart from her characterization of emancipation as a “nonevent” (116).


“Follow Your Leader”

*Melville’s Benito Cereno and the Case of Two Ships*

*Tracy B. Strong*

Conceive the sailors to be wrangling with one another for control of the helm. . . . And they put the others to death or cast them out from the ship, and then, after binding and stupefying the worthy shipmaster with mandragora or intoxication or otherwise, they take command of the ship, consume its stores and, drinking and feasting, make such a voyage of it as is to be expected from such, and as if that were not enough, they praise and celebrate as a navigator, a pilot, a master of shipcraft, the man who is most cunning to lend a hand in persuading or constraining the shipmaster to let them rule.

—Plato, *Republic*, Book VI

I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to attend to the gross and somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, “Economy”

The metaphor of a ship for the polity is, as the epigraph from Plato shows, as old as Western political thought. It was especially prominent in American political discourse in the middle of the nineteenth century: as Alan Heimert has pointed out, there was a widespread fear about the direction in which the country was going, most often expressed as the fear that the American ship of state was running aground or being sucked into a giant maelstrom.⁠¹ President Polk’s provocation of the war with Mexico, the relentless expansionism, and the increasing tension over slavery all called
into question the nature of the American experiment. The ship of state could be foundering, and, as an author of his times and a widely traveled seafarer, Melville often chose, therefore, to place his tales on ships. Indeed, except for Pierre, all his novels take place aboard or in relation to ships: they were his frame for America. Appealing to his “shipmates and world-mates,” he writes in White-Jacket (1850): “We mortals are all on board a fast-sailing . . . world-frigate.”

In the case of Benito Cereno, we have two ships, linked by a longboat, throughout the book in some kind of contact with each other. The one is captained by a New Englander; the other, while appearing to be Spanish, is in fact run by slaves. Joined together as if they might be thought to form the two main sections of America, the two are, as we shall see, less different than they might at first appear. Central to the question of a ship, as Plato tells us, is the question of the captain and thus the question of sovereignty. The captain—as Melville will have the American captain observe in Benito Cereno—has absolute authority while at sea. It follows that the character of the captain and his relation to his crew may be reflected in the character of the ship, that is, of the polity. Such embodiment produced doubts in Melville: at the end of White-Jacket, a novel that is in part about the just way to run the ship of state, he indicates that trusting everything to the captain is a mistake.

If the ship is the polity, what were Melville’s expectations for his own country? In his youth Melville had held to a version of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. In White-Jacket he writes that Americans are “the chosen people, the Israel of our time.” Even here, however, his doubts are already present, as he goes on to say that the “political messiah . . . has come in us, if we would but give utterance to his promptings.” As he matured, he came to worry greatly about the course his country was taking; America was a country that knew little of who or what it was, for, as he wrote in Redburn, it had neither mother nor father. His distress that America either does not know or has a dangerous idea of itself remained an important American trope. As Robert Frost put it a century later:

MIST
I don’t believe the sleepers in this house
Know where they are.
America did, however, have those who claimed to lead it, and the direction these leaders—its captains—sought to take was of major political concern in the middle of the nineteenth century (as it remains to this day).

In 1850 white Americans worked out a compromise concerning the status of the land arrogated from Mexico.7 To keep the country united, the slave trade was abolished in the District of Columbia, though the practice of slavery was retained; California was admitted as a free state; the new Southwest territories were to decide on the question of slavery by vote; the Fugitive Slave Act, however, required all citizens to assist in the recapture of escaped slaves. The result was a short-term papering over of the divisions in the country. It is in this context that the novella Benito Cereno first appeared in 1855, serialized in three issues of Putnam’s Monthly Magazine, an antislavery publication with a distinguished stable of authors. (Thoreau’s Cape Cod first appeared there.) Stunningly, the last issue of the serialization included an anonymous, heavily ironic article titled “About Niggers,” which depicted blacks both as happy and with “terrible capacities for revenge,” referring specifically to the revolt in San Domingo.8 The anonymous article thus ironically exemplified (and, in my reading, undermined) the very ideology of white supremacy that Melville had taken up (and undermined) in his novella.

Melville republished his work in 1856 in a slightly revised version in The Piazza Tales. The story is adapted from the real-life account of the American Captain Amasa Delano in the eighteenth chapter of his Narrative of the Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres.9 In Melville’s account, the Bachelor’s Delight, captained by Delano, encounters a Spanish ship, the San Dominick, off the coast of southern Chile. The Spanish vessel is in seriously bad repair. Delano goes over to it to offer help and finds a ship whose personnel consists mainly of blacks, albeit with a
white captain, Don Benito Cereno, and very few other white sailors. Cereno tells a tale of disaster and death from storms, fever, and scurvy to account for the condition of the boat. He is assisted in all things by the African Babo, a small and physically unprepossessing man, who appears to be his body servant and never leaves his side, even when Delano asks for a private conversation with Cereno. Although the condition of the ship and a number of incidents raise doubts in Delano’s mind—he fears at times that Cereno is a pirate who means to take over his ship—he is never moved to action. As Delano leaves the *San Dominick*, Cereno jumps into the longboat; Babo jumps in after him, dagger in hand. Delano thinks first that Cereno means to kill him, then realizes that Babo means to kill Cereno. Babo is captured and the truth appears: the slaves had taken over the ship, killing the owner, Don Aranda, and most of the whites, keeping only Captain Cereno, those with the necessary skill as navigators, and a few others for show in case they were to encounter another ship. The entire experience aboard the *San Dominick* has been a piece of theater, carefully worked out by Babo, intended to dupe those commanding any ship they might encounter. The Spanish ship is recaptured. Taken to Lima, the capital city of the Viceroyalty of Peru, the slaves are tried and eventually executed; three months after the trial, the historical Cereno dies.

Let me proceed by increments. The story is at least about the fact that the kind-souled, well-mannered, and unfailingly affirmative Delano has (like most of the first-time readers of the opening part of the novella) only the dimmest comprehension of the hatred that might have led the slaves to take over the ship. Nor does Delano ever come to an acknowledgment of the lot of the slaves that led to rebellion: at most he is interested in securing his salvage rights. If Delano is indifferent, however, the story makes it progressively more difficult for the reader to be so. It was thus certainly not a random choice that led Ralph Ellison to choose as an epigraph for *Invisible Man* this quotation from *Benito Cereno*: “‘You are saved,’ cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; ‘you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?’” Cereno’s reply, tellingly not given in Ellison’s epigraph, is “the negro.” Because of the question of race, we are not saved, we remain in the shadow.

What is meant by this question and this response? There is little doubt that race is an important question in Melville’s novella. Cereno is certainly referring at least to Babo, the self-liberated slave with whom he appears
joined throughout the first part of the story. Race is what orients Delano toward everything that he sees, does, and feels; it also orients him toward everything that he does not see, do, and feel. As one peruses the secondary literature, it is problematically clear that the judgments about what Melville was saying about race vary enormously. They go from readings of the novella as being about human depravity and evil (as embodied in Babo), to a justification or acceptance of slavery, to an avoidance of the question of slavery, to an indictment of slavery wherein Babo becomes a kind of revolutionary hero and martyr. I shall consider another kind of appropriation: the source of the range of interpretations derives, I think, not from lack of clarity or oversight on Melville’s part but from the fact that his novella is written precisely to get his readers to question first their own attitudes and behaviors in racial matters and then, more important, the source of those attitudes and behaviors.

Consider the lack of any authoritative authorial voice. Of the three separate sections, the first, three-quarters of the book, is written from, although mostly not in, the third-person point of view of Captain Amasa Delano (and is several times longer than Delano’s account in his book). I say from (not in), because for the most part the effect is as if a camera were following him around recording from his point of view both what he does and what he sees. This point of view is complicated by the fact that occasionally the narrative voice (of the camera, as it were) offers ironic reflections on Delano’s character. We find straight off that Delano might have been uneasy were he not “a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature.” The narrator goes on to ask “whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception” and indicates that this “may be left to the wise to determine” (673). The irony alerts us to Delano’s lack of wisdom, although the syntax and double negatives allow a casual reader to pass over the passage, much as Delano passes through the world around him without really seeing it.

On occasion, his anxieties lead him to question his position. After an incident that produces a “qualmish sort of emotion” (708), Delano interrogates himself—notably he thinks of himself in the third person, seeing himself as he thinks a camera might—only to conclude that it is “too nonsensical to think [that someone would] murder Amasa Delano. . . . His conscience is clean” (709). Delano suspects Cereno of malfeasance because he simply
cannot conceive of the possibility that African slaves might have been able to take over a ship—this despite the fact that by setting the story in 1799 (rather than 1805, when the original account took place) and by renaming the Spanish ship San Dominick, Melville reminds us of the proximity of the slave rebellion in Haiti (1791–1798) and anticipates the subsequent freeing of the slaves in Santo Domingo in 1800. One would think that these events would be more present to Delano. As Lawrie Balfour shows in her contribution to this volume, what matters most to Delano are courtesies and good manners—what one owes to a stranger—and these courtesies are precisely what allow him to sustain relations of racist domination. That his conscience is “clean” merely means that he is unable and unwilling to perceive the reality of the situation—so also was the conscience of many a New Englander “clean” about the matter of slavery (just as Thoreau had pointed out in his 1849 “Civil Disobedience”).

Delano encounters a world that is in effect a stage set for a ghastly play, although he does not know it to be theater. As in the case of a classical three-level Elizabethan stage, on the highest deck are four symmetrically arranged “elderly grizzled negroes,” apparently occupied at picking oakum (hemp fibers to be used for caulking) from junk (old or inferior rope). Below and in front of them, “separated by regular spaces,” are “the cross-legged figures of six other blacks; each with a rusty hatchet in his hand.” Below and in the center of this tableau, leaning against the mast, are Delano and Babo. This is the setting for what will turn out to be a staged play (677–678).

This first section forms the bulk of the book. The second section consists of Cereno’s deposition before the court. Melville’s version of the deposition is often word for word from the original but adds great emphasis on the weakness of Cereno (he is borne in on a litter, accompanied by a monk—whose name, Infelez, calls to mind infeliz, “unhappy”), a weakness and company not found in the original. That account (both in Delano’s book and in Melville’s story) is notably certified by “His Majesty’s Notary”: by explicitly omitting Delano’s account (present in Delano’s book), however, Melville focuses attention on what is referred to as Cereno’s account of a “fictitious story” dictated to Cereno by Babo after the takeover (747). In Delano’s book Cereno refers immediately to a signed contract (“by the deponent and the sailors who could write,” Babo and Atufal doing so “in their own language”). In Melville the agreement among the slaves now in pos-
session of the ship—that Cereno will take them to Senegal and that they will kill no more whites—is at first purely verbal; Melville presumably postpones the drafting of the contract in the novella to call attention to the fact that whites cannot conceive of valid contracts with slaves: it is only after further threats by the blacks to kill some of the crew (the cook in particular) that Cereno, “endeavoring not to omit any means to preserve the lives of the remaining whites, . . . agreed to draw up a paper” in which he also formally made the ship over to them (744–745).

In this section the story is told purely from the point of view of the members of a slave-accepting system. It is clear that the written agreement between the blacks and the whites is of no serious importance to the court, which presumes it was extorted, despite the fact that the whites had first refused to agree to any contract. No credence is given to the blacks’ description of this refusal. On the other hand, the court remarks that the blacks indeed had a plan to poison Cereno, on the grounds that “the negroes have said it” (749; again on 750). As the passage about the testimony of the blacks is not in Cereno’s actual deposition, Melville presumably added it as an ironic counterpoint to the unwillingness of whites to acknowledge the validity of any contract with blacks.

The narrative technique of the book is frequently reiterated across Melville’s work. There are official stories and unofficial stories. The separate accounts of the same event (here three, four if you count Delano’s original book, which was well known) serve to call into question, that is, to politicize, the very idea of an event. In Israel Potter, for instance, Melville’s intertextuality manages both to call upon and to critique authoritative books and figures, including the Bible, the Odyssey, Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard’s Almanack, Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle,” Cervantes’s Don Quixote—and this is only a start. As he says in Billy Budd: “The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial.”

Benito Cereno has many “ragged edges.” The first two parts consist of a staged play and an ostentatiously “official” account of the meaning of the play. The third and last part is entirely Melville’s invention. Overall, the tripartite division is intended to cast doubt on at least the first two versions of the events. As if to raise the question, Melville is careful to note “it is hoped”
that the deposition will “shed light on the preceding narrative” (738). The stamp of authoritative state approval in and to the second part clues us to the fact that this is the dominant power’s version of events. Part III opens with an “If” of interrogation—here it is a question if the deposition did in fact “serve as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it”: the presumption is that the answer must be “not entirely” (752–753). We have thus in the second part a questioning of the first part and in the last part a questioning of the two previous parts. Importantly, we find that even the identification necessary for the conviction of Babo as ringleader depended on the accounts of the surviving sailors, as Cereno had refused or been unable to speak of Babo or even look at him. Cereno’s refusal suggests that as he was constantly joined to Babo, he may have in some sense also been ringleader. Thus: “On the testimony of the sailors alone rested the legal identity of Babo” (755).  

So is the novella about slavery? At one level it obviously is. Though against abolitionism (which he saw as another kind of racism), Melville detested slavery. He was, however, well aware that preaching the message of the moral corruption induced by slavery would be of no avail to the broader public. That approach had been tried for decades. So he elected in this book to verbally so complicate the character of Delano that many or most of his white readers would be swept along by the events, as was Delano, without even grasping what was going on. The eventual revelation to Delano (“the negro”) thus functions as a revelation to the reader also. 

Yet the slavery that this book is about is not just the slavery that existed in America in 1855 and over which a war was soon to be fought. All is mixed, without precise definition. The novella starts with an assertion of the color gray: Melville gives us both a lack of distinction between black and white and a lack of distinctness—there are vapors, like the fog and mist Robert Frost saw obscuring America’s view of itself. The San Dominick appears as a “white-washed monastery” (675) apparently occupied by (Dominican) Black Friar monks (that is, whites who are dressed in black). No appearance is secure: we are told that Atufal, who appears as a chained slave, was “a king in his own country” and that Babo, who, as we find out, is the leader, was a slave in his country. (Slavery is not exclusive to America.) The two figures on the carving on the stern of the San Dominick are engaged in a combat that will be mirrored in the struggle in the longboat after Cereno jumps into it. Both are masked, and the “dark satyr” holds a “writh-
ing figure” down, his foot on the other’s neck (676). If a parallel is intended with the scene in the longboat, it is Delano who becomes the “dark satyr” as he there holds Babo down with his foot.

It is thus significant that at no time during the story is the institution of American chattel slavery the explicit central focus of the book or directly called into question. On a rare occasion, Delano muses that “this slavery breeds ugly passions in man”—but, despite the fact that he is from Massachusetts, the most abolitionist of the states, the focus of his distress is what he takes to be Cereno’s insolent behavior (721). As we shall see, I do not take this lack, as did F. O. Matthiessen, to be an oversight—I take it to be importantly purposeful, for Melville seeks to go, as it were, *below* the institution of American slavery. The simple condemnation of American slavery, especially by a New Engander, is easy—so easy that Melville, as had Thoreau, thought it self-serving. He not only explores the effects of slavery in *Benito Cereno* but seeks to bring to light what in human relations gives rise to slavery and what slavery gives rise to in human relations.

There are many ways to read this story. One can read the novella, as does Michael Rogin, against the events of 1848 in Europe, as revealing the difficulties political theory has in dealing with slavery, and more narrowly as a reproach by Melville to his friend Hawthorne for the latter’s support of Franklin Pierce (and Pierce’s support of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise). Along these lines, it is clear, as Jason Frank shows in his introduction to this volume, that Melville offers a far more complex analysis of slavery than the well-known section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which, despite everything, the ultimate victory of the slaves is dialectically assured. In the end, with Hegel we do not have to worry too much about the institution of slavery, for it is, ultimately, historically progressive; for Melville, there is no such assurance.

It does seem to me the case, then, that we cannot do justice to *Benito Cereno* if we limit it to being about American slavery. It is also, we can say, about the tendency Americans have to think of their nation as innocent and blessed. It is not so much that Delano has standard “white” opinions of blacks but that he is self-deluded, a delusion that Americans tend to share, thinks Melville, about themselves generally. And this delusion is not without its dangers; there are hints and more than hints of this: by renaming Delano’s ship the *Bachelor’s Delight*, Melville has given it the name of the ship of a well-known seventeenth-century pirate, James Kelley. Though the
slaves may or may not technically be pirates (as they have taken over a ship and are using it for their own purposes), Melville gives an ironic credence to the possibility that the true pirate here may be the American ship. As he remarks in *Israel Potter*, “Intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart, America is, or may yet be, the Paul Jones of nations.”

It is also certainly the case that Delano manifests all the prejudices of certain American whites regarding the basic docility and gentleness of blacks. For example, in 1852, three years before the publication of *Benito Cereno*, Harriet Beecher Stowe could write in her best-selling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that when the “negro race [will] no longer [be] despised and trodden down, [it] will, perhaps, show forth some of the latest and most magnificent revelations of human life. Certainly they will, in their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart, their aptitude to response on a superior mind and rest on a higher power, their childish simplicity of affection, and facility of forgiveness.” Melville entertains no such illusions about any human being, black or white.

While *Benito Cereno* is indeed about slavery, it is not only about chattel slavery as practiced in America and elsewhere. If one reads this book as being about only the institution of slavery, one must read it as simply a dialectic between oppressor and oppressed, as having a bipartite structure. Yet there is another way of reading. Babo, now a leader, had been a slave who was then enslaved by Don Aranda. Cereno, once in command, is now a slave. If the book is about slavery, it is about slavery as a consequence of the fact of domination, and it is thus about the meaning of how one follows one who is in power. (That Thoreau had the same distress can be seen from my second epigraph.) Let us say, then, that at least one of the principal subjects of *Benito Cereno* is the question of the actual practice of authority—here of “following your leader.” This question lies under and informs any consideration of the master-slave dialectic, for Melville, it seems to me, understood that one cannot rest human affairs on a happy outcome of the dialectic. If one reads the book as being about leading and following, one must read it as having a second three-part structure, now centered on the three protagonists and loosely corresponding to the three-part narrative structure.

The final section, as noted above, starts with a conversation between Delano and Cereno, to which I now turn. After the trial and the account of the slave takeover, Delano wishes to know from Cereno how the latter was
taken in by the evil brewing under his nose. Cereno notes that had he been more acute, it might in fact have cost him his life. Indeed, “malign machinations and deceptions impose” themselves on all human beings—he could not have done otherwise. The captain of a ship might be thought to be the model of what we mean by a “leader.” Yet here we have a story about a man who was obliged to accept a pose as being in control, while going along with evil because his safety required it (754).

As the longboat of the *Bachelor’s Delight* approaches the *San Domingo*, the sailors and Amasa Delano notice that “rudely painted or chalked, as in a sailor freak,” along the forward side of a sort of pedestal below the canvas [that covered the figurehead], was the sentence, ‘*Seguid vuestro jefe,*’ (follow your leader)” (676). We learn later that the original figurehead was that of Christopher Columbus, the “discoverer” of the New World who landed first on the island now called San Domingo and who introduced slavery to the Americas, and that that figurehead was replaced by the slaves with the defleshed, whitened bones of the murdered owner, Don Aranda. Toward the end of the first section of Melville’s story, after Babo and the other slaves have been exposed and the battle to retake the ship has commenced, the shroud falls from the figurehead of Cereno’s erstwhile ship to reveal the skeleton of the slave owner in conjunction with its chalked message, “Follow your leader” (734). And here is how the book ends:

Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza looked toward St. Bartholomew’s church, in whose vaults slept, then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda; and across the Rimac bridge looked toward 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. (755)

The last sentence (103 words!), with its slow and relentless cadence of a funeral dirge, has the effect of tying all the elements of the story together into a whole. The whole centers on the following of one’s leader. (We were given a clue to this when Melville has the first mate, leading the boarding
of the *San Dominick*, apparently gratuitously cry out: “Follow your leader” [737].) *Benito Cereno* is about, among other things, what being a leader or captain is, how one is to recognize one, and the mistakes that can be made in following him.

We are told at the end that Cereno does indeed “follow his leader.” But precisely whom is he following? In Melville’s account of his deposition before the court, he indicates that Babo had shown him a skeleton “which had been substituted for the ship’s proper figure-head, the image of Christopher Colon . . . ; that the negro Babo had asked him whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white’s; that, upon his covering his face, the negro Babo, coming close, said words to this effect: ‘Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader,’ pointing to the prow.” Babo then repeats this requirement to each to the surviving Spaniards (744). The leader could be Columbus. It could be Don Aranda (now skeletonized by Babo and the others—with a hint of cannibalism). It could be Babo. It could be the church to which Cereno retires. It could be the Spanish sovereign, Charles V, who had retired to a monastery: all are instances of leading and thus of sovereignty itself.

In the actual deposition there is no mention of the change of figure-heads; the various references to following a leader do not appear: these are all Melville’s additions. And as they bracket the story, appearing first with the passage about the figurehead and the warning from Babo, then the dropping of the shroud and the boarding of the first mate, down to the last words of the story, it would seem that Melville has clued us here to a central concern of his work. If the novella is about following a leader, what is Melville’s understanding of a leader? As Catherine Zuckert and John Schaar have separately pointed out, there are three images of leadership in the novella: Delano, Cereno, and Babo. Let us take them in sequence.

Delano self-identifies in Melville’s account and is identified in Cereno’s actual deposition as a person of “good nature, compassion, and charity” (754). As noted, he is unfailingly courteous and concerned with good manners, shutting out the occasional doubts that the odd happenings on the *San Dominick* arouse in him. This is despite the fact that the white sailors try repeatedly to signal to him that something is wrong. His inability to grasp the situation is summed up in his encounter with an “aged sailor” whose hands are “full of ropes, which he was working into a large knot . . .
[which] seemed a combination of a double-bowline-knot, treble-crown-knot, back-handed-well-knot, knot-in-and-out-knot, and jamming-knot.” Captain Delano addresses the knotter in Spanish: “‘What are you knotting there, my man?’ ‘The knot,’ was the brief reply, without looking up. ‘So it seems; but what is it for?’ ‘For someone else to undo,’ muttered back the old man.” The knotter urges Delano in the first English-language words heard in the novella to “undo it, cut it, quick.” Despite the fact that he apparently has recognized each of the component knots, Delano is no Alexander. He picks up the great knot, but does not know what to do with it (“knot in hand, and knot in head”) and surrenders it to “an elderly negro” who tosses it overboard (707–708). Delano finds “all this . . . very queer” but soon gets over his qualms. The knot stands for what Delano does not understand, or rather that of which he has only the dimmest sense as something being wrong. Thus, he “ignore[s] the symptoms” (708). Such ignorance is his trait. Despite the fact that he noticed that the San Dominick flew no colors, it never occurs to him that if Babo can use the Spanish flag as a shaving smock, it is unlikely that he, Delano, is now aboard a ship under Spanish command.

Additionally, he is self-satisfied in his ability to overcome his doubts. In his final conversation with Cereno, he claims that these traits are in the end a good thing, as without them he would have openly questioned the status of the Spanish ship and, in turn, would have certainly been murdered by the slaves. “Had it been otherwise, doubtless . . . some of my interferences might have ended unhappily enough. . . . Those feelings . . . enabled me to get the better of momentary distrust, at times when acuteness might have cost me my life” (754). Delano is a New Englander of a distinguished family. (Franklin Delano Roosevelt will be one of his descendants.) At the beginning, he arrives on a scene that is chaotic to the point practically of anarchy. It is decidedly not the way a ship should be run—one imagines him coming on the ship Plato describes in the epigraph to this essay. If it had been his world, it would have been his role to restore order and set things right. We know from the account that he gives in his book that he had previously managed to set things in order on his ship with some “refractory” crew by “giving them good wholesome floggings; and at other times treating them with the best I had.” He clearly knows what supposedly proper order is: in his book he explicitly details all of the qualities that he thinks leadership and rule should have—and in the case of the San Dominick is unable to exercise any of them.
Why so? He is kept from doing anything because he is unable to learn from the past how to deal with a new situation. Like Americans in general in Melville’s understanding, he knows of nothing and cares for nothing but the present. The past is simply not available for him in his present circumstances—which is one reason Melville took care in the story to change names and dates so that the immediate past should have been present, as it should also be to the reader. Delano thus must fall back on the courtesy he fancies one owes a stranger, even one whose behavior is as strange as Cenero’s. In his conversation with Cenero after the trial, just before Delano wonders why “the negro” continues to cast such a shadow on Cenero, Cenero has consoled Delano for having mistaken him for the dangerous person: “You were in time undeceived. Would that . . . it was so ever, and with all men.” Delano responds: “You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize on it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.” The “bright sun” contrasts with the fog and gray of the opening: colors (that is, black and white) are now clearly visible, and the world has come back to the order that Delano thinks it should have. Much as in Thomas Cole’s 1836 painting The Oxbow, the sun of civilization has pushed back the clouds of savagery and order is reestablished. That order is one in which whites rule and blacks obey. A true citizen of “Nature’s nation,” Delano has, in other words, learned nothing from the experience with Cenero and Babo, except perhaps to be more anxious about the dangers of blacks revolting if they were treated too trustingly (as had Don Aranda). (In Delano’s book, in fact, the incident of the San Dominick is not mentioned again and Delano passes immediately on to other matters, opening the next chapter with a business-as-usual “I shall now finish my account of the coast of Chili by giving some description” of various islands.) Nothing is retained, except the desire for salvage rights. It is against men such as Delano that Melville puts this passage at the very close of the “Supplement” to his Battle-Pieces: “Let us pray that the terrible historic tragedy of our time may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through terror and pity.”

What are we to make of Cenero? The matter is not easy. Take this case. Carl Schmitt had risen to be one of the most prominent German legal scholars during the Weimar period and in 1933 had joined the Nazi Party. In 1938 he had been severely criticized in SS publications and had been re-
lieved of his official non-university positions. Protected by Goering, he continued to teach and publish at the University of Berlin.47 He did not resign from the party and never apologized after the war. In a letter apparently written on his fiftieth birthday, in 1938, Schmitt signed himself as “Benito Cereno,” seeming to identify his lot during Nazism with that of Cereno.48 He continued to use the name for himself in various letters and exchanges with Ernst Jünger throughout the war.49 Schmitt referred to Benito Cereno as “the hero of Herman Melville’s story” and noted that “in Germany he [Benito Cereno] has become a symbol of the situation of intelligence in a system of mass politics [einem Massen-System].”50 What is striking here is the reference to Cereno as the Held—the hero. Schmitt noted in a letter of March 11–12, 1941, to Ernst Jünger that “B C tells himself: better to die from them than for them.” The only place that this might make sense with reference to Melville’s story is the moment when Cereno leaps into the boat. He may indeed die, as Babo has clearly indicated that he will kill Cereno (or try to) if Cereno gives the play away. (And Babo does leap in after him.) In this sense, Hitler and the SS would be Babo, and Schmitt’s self-identification with Cereno a sign that he thought resistance to the state to be justified but would be at the risk of one’s life (and thus he was excused in the postwar period).51 In this reading Cereno (and Schmitt) are the aristocratic elite, now dominated by the corrupted masses led by evil itself.52 And, indeed, Schmitt closed his Ex Captivitate Salus by portraying himself as the “last conscious representative of the jus publicum Europaeum, its last teacher and researcher in an existential sense, [experiencing] its end as does Benito Cereno the voyage of the pirate ship.”53 Cereno is the old Europe taken over first by the dangerous masses, unable to find an intelligent leader, enslaved to the crowd, and helpless face-to-face with an uncomprehending, powerful, but fundamentally stupid America unappreciative of excellence. The novel then is more about class and its fate in mass society than it is about race.

There is a truth to this: Cereno is enslaved; Delano is unthinking. Melville’s story does not exempt the New World from the sins of the Old: I noted above the allusions to Charles V and more extensively to the bringing of institutions like slavery to the New World. (Lima was built on the backs of slave labor in the gold mines.) It is harder, however, to find in Cereno the aristocratic elite that seems at the basis of Schmitt’s interest. He appears initially to Delano as “half-lunatic”: indeed, “no landsman could have
dreamed that in him there was lodged a dictatorship beyond which, while at sea, there was no earthly appeal” (680, 681). It is noteworthy that while Delano is deluded in almost all of his perceptions of the situation about the Spanish ship, he is not deluded in his sense of what a ship’s captain should be: he recognizes clearly that Cereno does not correspond to it. Cereno is no hero, despite Schmitt’s need to call him one. The problem for Melville may rather lie in what Delano thinks a leader should be. (And here I recall that in White-Jacket Melville goes out of his way to attack the practice of flogging as well as the expectation that one should trust the captain in everything.) The parallels drawn by Melville serve rather to indicate that he does not find the American polity, as exemplified in Delano, to be exceptionally exempt from the sins of the Old World. But what are those sins?

Don Benito Cereno replies to Delano’s greeting of the healing sun and the turning over of “new leaves” with the following. The leaves can start anew “because they have no memory . . . because they are not human.” (The implication is that Delano lacks something as a human being.) To Delano’s insistence that the “mild trades [winds] that now fan your check, do they not come with a human-like healing to you?” Cereno replies that “their steadfastness but waft[s] me to my tomb.” It is at this point that the central teaching of the novella appears. It is the passage used by Ellison as an epigraph that I mentioned at the outset.

“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.” (754)

The next line is “There was silence.” Cereno’s answer—explicitly—puts an end to all conversation. There is not another word of direct speech in the novella, as if with this nothing more could be said, as if words had failed. At the outset of the story, at the end of the third paragraph, we were warned that there were “shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come” (673). We now encounter them.

The shadow for Cereno is “the negro.” In Spanish, negro means not only a black person, but also blackness, jet blackness. Blackness is associated by Melville with “those deep far-away things in [a person]; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth . . . ; those short quick probings at the very axis of reality.” What do Cereno’s last words mean? Some read-
ers have taken them to mean that Cereno has acknowledged what Delano could not, that the enslavement of others is wrong, a reading that could be that of present-day Delanos.55 A more obvious reading is that the caster of the shadow is simply Babo and that he, Cereno, is incapable of doing anything, even of saying anything, about this fact. It is no accident that Ellison used this passage for *Invisible Man* without Cereno’s answer: the novel that follows becomes the answer to Delano’s question. Cereno will keep Babo invisible and unspoken of except by his own death. Saying “the negro” is a “flashing-forth of [an] intuitive Truth”; however, it is a truth Cereno cannot acknowledge. It leaves him speechless, and thus he refuses or rather is unable to acknowledge the actuality of his insight (an insight that never occurs in any form to Delano). The actuality of “the negro” calls into question for different reasons the ability of both Cereno and Delano to say anything appropriate to the circumstances.

Most centrally, what is the relation of this shadow to the repeated injunction to “follow your leader”? To explore this, I turn to the third of the leader figures: Babo. Throughout the story he is presented as joined to Benito Cereno. They are leaning on each other in their first appearance to Delano, who finds in the tableau an example of the proper and admirable relation of whites to blacks. At the end it is not even clear that Babo and Cereno may not have died at the same time, for Babo is executed “some months” after the trial and Cereno dies “three months after being dismissed by the court” (755). Yet this union has multiple dimensions. Joyce Adler has given an excellent analysis of its complexity. On the one hand, she notes, the two are “inseparable.” From the scene in which Babo kneels to fix Cereno’s shoe buckle, to the shaving scene and more, “in all these scenes, which are like photographic stills, master and slave are bound together, their social connection constituting their chain.” Beyond this inseparability, however, they are also “irreconcilable”: Babo seeks to kill Cereno after the latter leaps into the boat; Cereno will not confront or even face Babo at the trial. Finally, the two are “interchangeable”: the two cross the plaza at the end in the same direction. Master and slave are not a question of race but of domination. From all this, violence in inevitable.56

We know from the beginning of Rousseau’s *Social Contract* that “he who believes himself to be the master of another is just as much the slave as they.” Melville’s point here is similar. As long as one has domination over the other, Cereno and Babo are not individually free, or free of each other.
Note that when Cereno jumps into the longboat, even though he, in effect, breaks the contract he has made with Babo to take the blacks to Senegal, the two nonetheless remain tied to each other. This is why the story starts in gray, the colors indistinct from each other. There are no masters without slaves, no slaves without masters. Once Babo takes over the ship and makes Cereno the equivalent of his slave, he is just as much caught in this web as was Cereno before the revolt. This is the reason that Melville appears ambivalent about the slavery question: he understood that turning things upside down only reproduced the previous dynamics. Not for him was the too easy condemnation so loved by Northerners in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. (This is one of the reasons Ralph Ellison thought that Twain and Melville were the best writers on slavery in nineteenth-century America and paid no attention to Stowe, except to dismiss a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.)

Nonetheless, one cannot stop here, for to do so would reduce the abilities and courage of Babo and the other blacks to insignificance. We must also ask about Babo as the third example of leadership. Adler catches part of this in her essay: “His blackness marks him as the man taken by force from Africa to be a slave in the Americas. He has a rich intelligence: he has the qualities of mind of a master psychologist, strategist, general, playwright, impresario and poet. Melville endows him with his own poetic insight into the symbolic implications that can be found in significant figures and objects: the skeleton, the black giant who may throw off his chains and will not ask pardon, the padlock and the key, the Spanish flag used as a rag.”

One could add that he writes and speaks Spanish. It is the case that of the three, Babo appears by far the most perceptive and able. We know him, however, only through his deeds—alone of the three, he is not given a point of view, except at the very end, where his “head . . . fixed on a pole, met . . . the gaze of the whites” (755). Delano is the eye for the reader in the first section; Cereno’s deposition offers his account in the second (an account, as I noted, stamped with official approval from the powers that be). But at the end we learn of Babo only that “seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words” (755). The words he spoke earlier in the story were the words of a script that he made up for himself in accordance with the expectations of the audience; they are not authentically his own. As there is no one able to hear whatever Babo has to say as himself, there are (as yet) no words for this situation. The contract
with Cereno has not been honored (and should not have been): after which there is nothing that can be said. As I observed earlier, in note 22, there is controversy over the resonances of “Babo.” While it is clear that Melville took the term from Delano’s account, it is also clear that he kept the name and did not change it, as he did a number of other names. Indeed, he fuses Babo with his son Mure (who does not appear at all) and does not have Babo die during the retaking of the ship. One possible reason Melville may have wanted to keep the character Babo is that his name resonates with the Greek term for those they could not understand, the barbaroi, the antonym to those of the pólis, those whose speech is of the logos—so Babo has nothing of his own to say. Our word babble possibly comes from this root. Demosthenes (Orations 3.10) is clear that the barbaroi do not speak Greek and relates barbaroi to language. For Melville, the name becomes a badge of the recognition of the distance to an acknowledgment of the other who is the enslaved.

In Moby-Dick the sailors come to follow Ahab enthusiastically: the result, for all but Ishmael, is death, and he is saved only by a coffin. There are three cases in Benito Cereno where the injunction to follow one’s leader appears: they also are all associated with death. The first are the words chalked by Babo on the ship’s prow. These are associated with him and the murders by the slaves. Babo warns the white survivors to keep their promise to help; if they don’t, they will “follow their leader.” The second is the cry of the first mate during the retaking of the San Dominick. These are associated with the slaughter of the blacks and the reestablishment of a legal order that allows slavery, and thus with the actions of Amasa Delano. The third is associated with Benito Cereno in death, as he in life does indeed follow his leader. Who the leader is has no single answer. The issue, rather, is the following of one’s leader.

I noted at the start that Melville writes the first part of the story more or less from the point of view of Delano. This perspective is one of a rather obtuse person, overly satisfied with his version of the state of the world. At times perceptions of the situation are given narrative voice. By and large, Delano and the narrator share similar perceptions: the doubling simply keeps one from too easily moving away from seeing the world as Delano does, for his vision seems confirmed (if occasionally undercut) by a more abstractly authorial voice. This is a device that Melville uses quite often, notably in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” and “Bartleby
the Scrivener.” It consists in giving the reader a point of view that must then be discarded, even though it appears at times to be confirmed.

At the beginning of the story, the reader’s point of view follows that of Captain Delano. As the story goes along, the reader finds himself or herself more and more distant from Delano. At the end of the story the reader is left with the head of Babo—his body having been burned—a “hive of subtlety” that continues its gaze and which, having no words for what has happened, speaks volumes. As Melville moved through his career’s work, he became increasingly doubtful about the possibilities of expressing what was wrong with America. Bartleby, famously, has nothing to say to the other presences in the story. In “The Tartarus of Maids” the women are not allowed to talk. In “The Bell-Tower” workers are replaced by a speechless automaton “without a soul”; a giant bell is cast, during which the architect murders a man, and a fragment of the murder shows up as a flaw in the bell (much as the ship’s bell in Benito Cereno has a flaw: the resonances are obviously to the Liberty Bell). The automaton kills the architect and is destroyed by the townspeople. The great, flawed bell is rung for the first time and destroys the tower. The last lines of the story: “So the blind slave obeyed its blinder lord, but, in obedience, slew him. So the creator was killed by the creature. So the bell was too heavy for the tower. So the bell’s main weakness was where man’s blood had flawed it. And so pride went before the fall.” So also liberty as Americans practice it may destroy their polity.

In all this Melville’s strategy is to prod the reader to move from an initial comfortable position to a more complex understanding. Babo and the slaves are clearly presented as having murdered, often viciously: sailors were tied up and thrown alive overboard; Don Aranda was murdered and possibly cannibalized. Melville in no ways hides their violence. The same is true for the whites: during the retaking of the ship the sailors behave savagely toward the surviving blacks, to the point that Delano must stop them the next day. Likewise, the violence meted out to Babo and the other slaves is cruel; it is, however, “official” violence. Slavery is in itself cruel. The movement of the novella is thus a form of political education: it impresses on the reader the ease with which one accepts one’s prejudices as natural, and the difficulty in abandoning them. The important point is that this difficulty is made all the greater by virtue of the fact that one is not clear for what one abandons them (thus, Babo has no words of his own). If, in the
case of the Civil War, a shadow may be expiated and lifted from the land, *it will still not be clear in which direction the land is headed*. As Lincoln remarked at the opening of his June 16, 1858, “House Divided” speech: “If we could know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending, we could then better judge *what* to do and *how* to do it.”61 The end of *Battle-Pieces* is a poem titled “America.” It closes like this, partially echoing the last conversation of Delano and Cereno:

While the shadow, chased by light,
Fled along the far-drawn height,
And left her on the crag.62

At the time of the writing of *Benito Cereno*, what was clear was that leaders—the leaders of that time—were not to be followed. (He also has leaders in general in mind and, as noted, at that moment Franklin Pierce in particular, whose signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act had opened the whole country to slavery.) The question Melville poses is whether we can see legal savagery in the same light as we see supposedly “extralegal” savagery. To do so would be to see ourselves as others—the slaves—see us, and this is what is lacking in all the white characters in this story.

There is great violence in this story, violence by blacks and whites. This shadow is on this story, as was the shadow, Melville knew, on the land. The shadow, then, is not slavery or blackness or Babo: what underlies all these is the following of a leader, simply because he is the leader. “Follow the leader” is child’s play: this is what Melville finds the most distressing. And his position is sorrowfully complex. In “The Portent,” the first poem in *Battle-Pieces*, Melville writes:

> Hanging from the beam,
> Slowly swaying (such the law),
> Gaunt the shadow on your green Shenandoah!
> The cut is on the crown
> (Lo, John Brown),
> And the stabs shall heal no more.63

Harpers Ferry, the site of Brown’s raid, is on the Shenandoah River. Brown
was wounded by a sword during his capture. The next poem in *Battle-Pieces* is the 1860 “Misgivings,” which opens:

When ocean-clouds over inland hills  
Sweep storming in late autumn brown,  
And horror the sodden valley fills,  
And the spire falls crashing in the town,  
I muse upon my country’s ills—  
The tempest bursting from the waste of Time  
On the world’s fairest hope linked with man’s foulest crime.

The silences that envelop this story point to an increasing distress Melville has with his country. He writes the first three-quarters of the novella in such a manner that readers will be caught up in their own refusal to acknowledge the evil of slavery—much as Delano denies it. It is not that they do not know that slavery is evil, but that they do not, cannot, acknowledge it. Melville thus understands that simply telling his countrymen that they are in denial would be of little effect or import. As with the nation, the reader comes too late to see his or her “complicity in moral blindness.” One should, in reading the novella, have a certain embarrassment at what one has assumed. At the end, though, there is silence.

Shortly before his execution, John Brown gave a handwritten note to his jailor: “I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty, land: will never be purged away; but with Blood. I had as I now think: vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed; it might be done.” Melville knew it also: so it is when leaders are followed simply because they are the leaders. Despite or because of his hatred of slavery, Melville found in Brown’s raid the bursting of a tempest on the land. (We have already seen the crashing spire in “Misgivings” and falling bell in “The Bell-Tower.”) Babo has no words of his own. Neither Cereno, nor Delano, nor Brown is able to find words for “man’s foulest crime.” Perhaps there could not have been any. For, if we can adequately express nothing, if we cannot find words for our actuality, then only violence will suffice: war was but five years away.
Notes

I should like to thank Babette Babich for a helpful reading of this text and in particular for her suggestions about Plato and the name Babo. Forrest Robinson provided comments that expanded several issues more than I had done. Jason Frank’s careful reading opened up many doors, and the essay is much better for his intelligence and generosity. Lawrie Balfour pointed to paths for rethinking two key issues.


2. Herman Melville, White-Jacket, in Melville, Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick (New York: Library of America, 1983), 768–769; further citations to these three works are to this edition.

3. Ibid., 768.

4. Ibid., 506; emphasis added. The term Manifest Destiny was coined in the 1830s by the writer John J. O’Sullivan. He is the subject of one of the chapters of the Ph.D. thesis of one of my students, Adam Gomez, “An Almost Chosen People” (University of California at San Diego, 2010).

5. Melville, Redburn, 185. As an example of these doubts, Melville contributed seven satirical articles to the journal Yankee Doodle on General Zachary Taylor’s role in the Mexican-American War. In the third, for instance, Taylor spends a day in the saddle despite the fact that a tack has been placed point upward on it. On dismounting, his trousers tear and his buttocks are laid bare. “Though Valiant as the Cid, the old hero is as modest as any miss. Instantly muffling up with his coat tails the exposed part, he hurried into his tent.” See Luther Stearns Mansfield, “Melville’s Comic Articles on Zachary Taylor,” American Literature 9, no. 4 (January 1938): 415. Mansfield tends to read them as supportive of Taylor; I find them mocking. Yankee Doodle ran weekly from October 10, 1846, to October 3, 1847. Based in New York, it satirized American politics, especially with regard to James Polk.


7. Mexico was obliged to cede Texas and gave over the rest of the Southwest for $18 million—less than half the prewar offer.

8. I owe this reference to Matthew Rebhorn, “Minding the Body: Benito Cereno and Melville’s Embodied Reading Practice,” Studies in the Novel 41, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 169–170. Looking up the Putnam’s article “About Niggers” online, we find that when the whites on an island shout “Liberty! Liberty! To Arms! . . . it penetrated the thick tympanums of these degraded niggers . . . and they
discovered . . . that liberty does not mean slavery!” *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, December 1855, 609, http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=putn; cc=putn;view=toc;subview=short;idno=putn0006-6.


10. The theatricality of the story is one of the basic points made by Michael Rogin.

11. Lima was the administrative capital of Spanish colonies on the western coast of South America south of Bolivia. In the actual events, Babo is killed during the retaking of the ship and Delano gives a deposition that goes unreported in Melville’s story. Additionally, Cereno does not die but tries to make Delano out to be a pirate in an attempt to deny him salvage rights. See Delano, *A Narrative*, 334, 342–344.

12. Michael McLoughlin, following E. F. Carlisle, argues that Delano is meant as a critique of Emerson and transcendentalism in McLoughlin, *Dead Letters to the New World: Melville, Emerson and American Transcendentalism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 122. This is a bit one-sided, as Melville, if not without some questioning, was in no doubt about Emerson’s extraordinary qualities. See Herman Melville to Evert Duyckinck, March 3, 1849, in *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1993), 121–122.

13. The point is very well made by James Kavanagh in “‘That Hive of Subtlety’: *Benito Cereno* as Ideological Critique,” *Bucknell Review* 28, no. 1 (1984): 127–157. Kavanagh points out that “the analysis of ‘Benito Cereno’ must begin by breaking absolutely the seductive grip of ‘identification’ between the reader and Amasa Delano, a grip not even loosened by the seemingly negative judgments of the American Captain carried in phrases like ‘moral simplicity’ and ‘weak-wittedness.’” He adduces a number of critics who have failed to accomplish this break, on whom the effect of Melville’s irony seems to have gone unnoticed.

14. Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, in *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, and Billy Budd*. (New York: Library of America, 1984), 754. All citations to *Benito Cereno* are given parenthetically in the

15. Some account of this can be found in Allan Moore Emery, “The Topicality of Depravity in *Benito Cereno*,” *American Literature* 55, no. 3 (October 1983): 316–331. See also Kavanagh’s comments in “That Hive of Subtlety” on those critics who think that Melville is simply saying that there is a beast in us all.

16. The four previous sentences draw directly from remarks offered to me by Professor Forrest Robinson. I am grateful for his comments.

17. The original name of the Spanish boat was *Tryal*, and that of the American was *Perseverance*.


19. This was typically work imposed on jailed convicts.

20. On the gothic qualities of the whole scene, see McLoughlin, *Dead Letters*, 120–121.

21. Melville, *Billy Budd*, in *Pierre . . . Billy Budd*, 1431. Architectural finials were once believed to deter witches from landing on one’s roof. I owe some of the thoughts in the next paragraph to Forrest Robinson.

22. See the important discussion in Joyce Sparer Adler, *War in Melville’s Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 1981), 88–110. There is, incidentally, some controversy in the literature about the origins of the name Babo. Whatever reason Melville might have had for retaining this name, the name is in Delano’s deposition as that of the ringleader. See Delano, *A Narrative*, 335. See also Robert Cochran, “Babo’s Name in *Benito Cereno*: An Unnecessary Controversy?” *American Literature* 48, no. 2 (May 1976): 217–219. I discuss the name below.


24. Melville backgrounds a very complex relation between the New World and the Old by a set of images that refer the reader to the Spain of Charles V (who, like Cereno, left his position of power to end his life in a monastery). See the seminal article by H. Bruce Franklin, “Apparent Symbol of Despotic Command: Melville’s *Benito Cereno*,” *New England Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (November 1961): 462–477. See also, on the lack of color, Darryl Hattenhauer, “‘Follow Your Leader’: Knowing One’s Place in *Benito Cereno*,” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 45, nos. 1/2 (1991): 7–17, esp. 8–9, and Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 208,
who relates it to Hegel’s “gray on gray” in from the introduction to his *Philosophy of History*.


26. Schaar, “The Uses of Literature,” 67–68, gets at this point in his consideration of the importance of the “world of domination.”

27. Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 208–220. The act gave the territories an opening to decide on the question of slavery by popular vote: this produced a bloody war in Kansas as settlers of both persuasions rushed to the territory. Lincoln’s speech against the act in Peoria on October 18, 1854, marks the real beginning of his national career. Hawthorne wrote a campaign biography of Pierce.


29. In the late seventeenth century Kelley became a pirate after being freed from a slave ship; his piracy was conducted mainly in the same waters as the events in this novella. He was eventually captured in Boston (with Captain William Kidd) and hanged in London in 1701.

30. See Carolyn L. Karcher, “The Riddle of the Sphinx: Melville’s *Benito Cereno* and the *Amistad* Case,” in *Critical Essays on Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno*, ed. Robert Burkholder (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), 196–228, which analyzes very carefully the parallels and disjunctures between this case and that of the *Amistad*, wherein blacks had taken over the ship that was taking them to slavery. They were acquitted of piracy at their trial in Boston (John Adams was their lawyer), as their abduction had been against their will and the takeover had happened outside American jurisdiction. On the name change, see ibid., 213–214.

31. Melville, *Israel Potter*, in *Pierre . . . Billy Budd*, 561. The distinction between privateer (which Jones called himself) and pirate was a matter of perspective.

“Follow Your Leader”

33. See similar thoughts in Schaar, “The Uses of Literature.”

34. *Freak* can mean a prank or a sportive fancy.

35. According to Cereno’s deposition Aranda was murdered and simply thrown overboard.

36. This passage is not in Delano’s book.

37. See the similar thoughts in H. Bruce Franklin, “Past, Present and Future Seemed One” in Burkholder, *Critical Essays*, 231. Franklin makes an extensive case for the figure of Charles V of Spain. See also Franklin, “Apparent Symbol of Despotic Command.”

38. Catherine H. Zuckert, “Leadership—Natural and Conventional—in Melville’s *Benito Cereno*,” *Interpretation* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 239–255. This is a helpful article even if I do disagree with its conclusion that Babo is the example of a democratic leader (assuming at face value that this is all she means). See also Schaar, “The Uses of Literature.”


41. In chapters 16 and 17 of his book he spends a good deal of time laying out the proper qualifications of a sea captain.

42. An image of *The Oxbow* can be seen at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~cap/nature/oxbow.gif.

43. The phrase is Perry Miller’s: “Thus, superficial appearances to the contrary, America is not crass, materialistic: it is Nature’s nation, possessing a heart that watches and receives.” See Miller, *Errand into Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 210, as well as his *Nature’s Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

44. Increased vigilance and severity of treatment were consequences of the rebellion of Nat Turner (1831). Delano expresses surprise several times at the laxity of the treatment of the Africans.


48. Copies of the letter were sent to several people after the war, among them Armin Mohler, who printed it in the publication of his correspondence with Schmitt. Schmitt had apparently wanted this letter to become the epigraph to a reissue of his book on Hobbes, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes. Sinn und Fehlschlag eines politischen Symbols* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlaganstalt, 1938).


52. It is certainly no accident that José Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses*, first published in 1930, had been a best seller in Germany.


59. I was led to look to these works by Franklin, “Past, Present and Future.”
61. The text of this speech can be found, for example, at www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2934t.html; emphasis added. Similarly, Emerson had opened his great essay “Experience” (1844) with the question “Where do we find ourselves?”
62. Melville, Battle-Pieces, 162. Adler cites the same poem in War in Melville’s Imagination, 158.
64. I can know you are late, you can know you are late, you can know that I know you are late; but unless you acknowledge it by doing something (saying, “I’m sorry”), the situation is not adequately dealt with.
65. Herman Melville, “Misgivings,” in Battle-Pieces. I owe the phrase “complicity in moral blindness” to a personal communication from Forrest Robinson.