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HERMAN MELVILLE'S *BENITO CERENO* AND THE SUBVERSION OF THE SLAVERY IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT. ***Herman Melville's Benito Cereno and the Subversion of the Slavery Ideology.*** The current paper aims to analyse in Herman Melville's novella the interplay between the ambiguous narrative voice limited by Amasa Delano's racially charged perception of events and the auctorial presence in the text. We argue that in *Benito Cereno*, the writer has constructed a symbolically charged but carefully targeted criticism against the social and moral failure of the slavery system in the U.S.

Keywords: *ideology, power relations, racial dynamics, racial stereotypes, subversion, slavery.*

REZUMAT. ***Subminarea ideologiei sclaviei în nuvela lui Herman Melville „Benito Cereno"***. Articolul de faţă îşi propune să analizeze nuvela lui Herman Melville din punctul de vedere al jocului dintre ambiguitatea vocii narative limitate de perceptia încărcat rasială a personajului Amasa Delano şi prezenţa auctorială în text care pare să ezite între identificarea cu naratorul şi respingerea înţelegerii realităţii de pe corbia cu sclavi dată de cel din urmă. Considerăm că prin *Benito Cereno* scriitorul a construit o critică încărcată simbolic dar bine ţintită împotriva eşecului social şi moral al sistemului sclavagist din Statele Unite.

Cuvinte cheie: *ideologie, relaţii de putere, dinamica relaţiilor rasiale, stereotipuri rasiale, subminare, sclavie.*

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1. Introduction

A subject of dispute among literary critics along the years, (interpreted either as an example of the author's reflection of the 19th century's prejudiced outlook on the time's interracial dynamics, or as an exquisite rendering of the writer's subtle criticism regarding the evil of slavery), *Benito Cereno* has certainly made generations of readers gasp at the crescendo of tension and gothic horrors that gradually built up on the deck of the once proud and glorious slave ship "San Dominick". The very same readers, upon reaching the blood-chilling end of the book, were made by the author, through his skilful use of narrative technique, go back to the beginning to read it all again from a new perspective, in the hope of deciphering the hidden meaning of the clues and foresights scattered along the way to the denouement.

One of the possible sources for this wide array of interpretations offered by critics and scholars to the novella, could originate in the writer's use of a third person narrator who presents the events for the readers using the distorted, racially-charged perception belonging to one of the main characters, captain Amasa Delano. His apparently benevolent, but truly naïve and racist, world view that keeps surfacing in the narration, quite often makes readers think that his point of view might be that of the author too. Nonetheless, on a closer inspection, one can repeatedly detect the author's presence in text subtly introducing doubt about the anomalies in Delano's perceptions. This gradual sedimentation of the erroneous assessment of events and human characters done by Amasa Delano, and the understated auctorial presence that contradicts the afore-mentioned narratorial evaluation, has turned this short story into a source of conflicting interpretations for the critics. "Did or did not Melville express a racist outlook in this short story?" – seems to be the question several scholars have raised. As I will illustrate further on, the historical context of the appearance of the novella and the fact that *Benito Cereno* was initially published in instalments in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine,* one of the few publications that had committed to the anti-slavery cause in the mid-19th century (when few others dared to raise their voices against the atrocities and the ethical failure of human bondage) are tremendously important. Based on these two elements and on an analysis of the power relations between the characters, I would argue that the novella was intended as a criticism of the ideological construct asserting that men of a different skin colour and ethnic origin could be considered inferior, and therefore be subjected to their fellow men from other richer, more powerful countries.

Probably written in the winter of 1854-55, firstly published in 1855 and then republished in 1856 in a volume called *The Piazza Tales*, the novella

must have been a serious warning about the moral effects of supporting slavery to the New Englanders who read it. Presumably they were all too aware of the schizoid reality of their times, when a considerable part of the population was still in favour of a world built upon racism, injustice, cruelty and a double moral standard, while still believing that their proud country was the land of the free, of a bourgeoning democracy supportive of equality and the pursuit of happiness.

Moreover, the novella also must have echoed in that age the chilling thought that salves might take to arms again and seek justice for themselves, as they have done before during the Southampton Insurrection from Virginia. In August 1831 the slave leader Nat Turner, a self-educated black man, conducted a rebellion against the white masters, where at least 51 white people were killed. Although the revolt was quickly suppressed, and the leaders executed, it showed to the baffled American public that things had run out of control and that at any moment, the revolutionary powder could be ignited again by slaves that had been stereotypically presented as submissive, good-natured, and highly obedient regarding their masters. A divergent perspective on the implications of *Benito Cereno*'s historical context and on the writer's view on the issue of slavery is presented by Kevin Hayes in his study dedicated to Melville's work (2007). The critic insists on the author's reluctance to openly condemn slavery and to clearly disapprove it in the novella:

> In his writings before the war, Melville never assumed the role of polemicist. Not even in "Benito Cereno", his fullest treatment of slavery, did he launch a diatribe against its practice. Melville eschewed abolitionist rhetoric. It has become cliché to call slavery a national sin. Melville took a much broader view. Instead of seeing slavery as unique to African descendants in the United States, he saw it as a universal condition that could afflict anyone. Whoever lets someone control their behaviour becomes a slave. (Hayes 22)

Indeed, the novella raises poignant universally valid issues on the nature and source of leadership, on the flimsy character of freedom and power, on the importance of asserting the basic humanity of all people, regardless of the skin colour. The author also ponders on the inherent depravity that potentially comes with the human condition. Nonetheless, I would like to underline the fact that the book was published only six years before the start of the Civil War, in a climate of national tension and bitter debates regarding the values embraced by the United States at the time. In this historical context, Herman Melville brings to the attention of his American readers this gloomy story of Gothic inspiration, of a marooned ship of rebellious slaves who play a perfect,

acquiescent pantomime (most of them lacking a voice of their own) in front of an unsuspecting, eager-to-help American captain, in order to win their way to freedom and revenge. The connection to the condition of the slaves in the Southern states, the dilemmas faced by the politicians and the potential for open conflict on the U.S. territory seem to be utterly transparent to me.

2. Racial blindness and asserting the conventional

Herman Melville's main source for the short story was the 1817 memoir of the real-life captain Amasa Delano that delineated some similar events that took place in 1805 in a deserted bay at the island of Santa Maria, along the coast of Chile, when his vessel the "Perseverance" encountered the slave vessel the "Tryal". Admittedly, the auctorial intervention in the fictionalized set of events made several changes to the actual unfolding of the episode, probably in order to emphasize the irreconcilable conditions of the protagonists, and to heighten the crescendo effect of tension and terror. Most importantly, the date of the events is changed to 1799 and the names of the two ships are transformed into the "Bachelor's Delight" for the American one, suggestive of a young, naive, unsuspecting and optimistic captain, crew and national political outlook – if we are to extrapolate – and into "San Dominick" for the slave ship.

Both the fictional date of events and the name of the Spaniard ship resonate with the French colony island of Saint Domingue – modern day Haiti – a place that following the slave rebellions from the 1790s became the first free black republic in the Americas. Incidentally, Haiti was one of the first landing places for Cristopher Columbus and the European-induced destruction and slavery legacy that he brought with him. The contagious nature of the freedom-for-the-slaves ideal that began to engulf the two Americas and the Caribbean islands couldn't have been lost on the American public, which had been confronted with Nat Turner's revolt on the American soil just a few decades earlier. It is precisely this historical context that Eric Sundquist sees in his study "Melville, Delany and New World Slavery" (1998) as being decisive in revealing the author's view on the slavery issue:

> It is, indeed, the spectral presence of San Domingo within Melville's story that constitutes the most sombre, suffusing "shadow of the Negro" that falls on Benito Cereno (and Melville's reader) at the story's end. The threat of black rebellion is historically latent in all contemporary allusions to San Domingo – and always barely repressed, by extension, in the slaveholding South's psyche – but it also provides a continual analogue and point of reference for antebellum debates about the expansion of the slavery. From Melville's perspective in the early 1850s,

> the nature and the extent of future American power inevitably remained a function of the unfolding pattern of anticolonial and slave revolutions in the Americas. […] The region offered in miniature an emblem of the Americas in their historical revolutionary moment, with the remnants of Spain's great empire (Benito Cereno), free blacks who have revolutionized their own nation (Babo), and the American expansionist interests (Delano) all in contention. *Benito Cereno* does not prophesy a civil war but rather anticipates, just as plausibly, an explosive heightening of the conflict between American democracy, Old World despotism, and Caribbean New World revolution. […] Melville's ship is a perfect chronotope (in Bakhtin's phrase) of his story's engagement in the historical moment. (Sundquist 832, 833)

In presenting the truth about the unfolding events as always eluding the rational mind of the American captain, who apparently is always analysing facts and seeking for presumably objective interpretations, Melville refuses to acknowledge the dominant 19th century cultural construct of a "coherent self" and pre-defined social order. On the slave ship the hierarchy seems to be the expected one with the Spanish captain in command and the blacks under the supervision of the European sailors. Yet time and again, little incidents build up in the reader a sense of unease and discomfort that Amasa Delano brushes away, based on the assumed moral superiority of his condition as a white, American, free man in charge of many other less socially important fellow-men.

This pattern of suspicion and subsequent reassurance in front of obvious discordant events as presented by the captive Spaniard Benito Cereno and reinforced by the clamorous voices of the blacks on the ship, renders the narrator an intellectually obtuse man, impervious to the evil that hovers around him. For the writer, this makes the suspense easy to sustain and the build-up of tension towards the denouement brings the end as a shock both to reader and character, since the narratorial objectivity is limited to Delano's misperception of reality. The captain's portrait depicted by the author speaks about the gullibility of the American from the very first lines. Seeing for the first time the strange ship that "showed no colours", no form of identification, with a potential pirate, lawless crew according to the naval customs of those days, Delano nevertheless sets aside all concern. The author's irony regarding his character's reasoning and assessing capacity is evident.

> Considering the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot, and the sort of stories, at that day, associated with those seas, Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms,

> any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. 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 may be left to the wise to determine. (Melville 35).

The American captain's inaccurate perceptions of the racial dynamics on the boat are caused by the racial stereotypes that govern his worldview. After all, he is a man of his age. He is blind to the truth because the conventional assumptions about the slaves were that they could not be but docile, kind-hearted, affectionate and simplistic servants, in a child-like, even dog-like manner. Repeatedly, Babo and the other slaves are presented – by Amasa Delano, to be noted – as loyal dogs, happy to serve their masters. Sometimes they are even sketched as being not fully human, as being as void of a soul and will as ordinary lifeless cargo.

> By his side [Benito Cereno's] stood a black of small nature, in whose rude face, as occasionally like a shepherd's dog, he mutedly turned it up into the Spaniard's, sorrow and affection were equally blended. (Melville 39). Sometimes the negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him; performing these and similar offices 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 not be on stiffy superior terms with, but may treat with familiar trust, less servant than a devoted companion. (Melville 40) The San Dominick was in the condition of a transatlantic emigrant ship, among whose multitude of living freight are some individuals, doubtless, as little troublesome as crates and bales. (Melville 42) (…) There is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for advocations about one's person. Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and the brush congenially as to the castinets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction. […] When to all this is added the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors, […] Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs. (Melville 70, 71).

To find out in the end that the head of the tragically heroic, African slave-leader Babo could master a desperate revolt and come up with an intricate plan to dispose of the white masters and return the ship to Africa and therefore freedom, is the ultimate blow to the safe, self-sufficient and pro-slavery mentality that Delano embodies. That Babo's head could be a "hive of

subtlety" (Melville 102) is inconceivable at the beginning to the white captain, whose rationalizations and mode of action have already been shaped by the epoch's slavery ideology. What the cultural conventions of the time refused to associate with the salves was the capacity for thinking, planning ahead, having the potential to express volition and pursuing their goals of a free life lived on equal terms with the white masters. The realm of the black slaves revolves in the novella around the strong feelings or even better said, life instincts and impulses that ordinarily are associated with the animal kingdom. The benevolent Amasa loves to find reassurance for his disquietude in the delightful sight of a carelessly sleeping black woman whom he sees like a doe in the shade of the forest. The carefully constructed dreamlike, heavenly harmony of contrasts – leopardesses and doves at the same time – is meant as a distraction from the all too real, mundane realities of a slave ship in distress and the repeated, disturbing, metallic sounds of the black hatchet polishers.

> Sprawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, crosswise with its dam's; its hands, like two paws, clambering upon her […] There's naked nature, now, pure tenderness and love, thought Captain Delano, well pleased. This incident prompted him to remark the other negresses more particularly than before. He was gratified with their manners; like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution; equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them. Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves." (Melville 60, 61)

The fact that slaves could harbour nothing less than a warm, protective, natural instinct towards their babies and masters alike seems to be self-evident to Delano. His American trust in the goodness of people and in the rightness of the makings of the world as conceived by the white man bears no contradiction to him. Those are the resorts of the world he lives in. The American captain is the outcome of the culture of his country and he cannot act or believe otherwise. To him it is unconceivable that a white man of noble extraction, privileged education and condition could be under the dominion of a black servant. Regarding the presence of an ideological construct at work in the novella, James H. Kavanagh directs our attention in his article "That Hive of Subtlety: 'Benito Cereno' and the Liberal Hero" (1986) to the fact that "ideology" may signify more than a set of explicit political ideas, but a "lived relation to the real", a relation mediated not necessarily by ideas, but by preconscious images that show the subject as a version of the of the social world and his/her place in it. And Delano's racial misperceptions clearly support this interpretation.

> Because ideology works most effectively through its *unconscious* hold on the subject, it resists being made conscious or explicit. An ideology structures "seeing" and "feeling" before it structures "thinking" and appears to have no historical or social specificity but to be simply the *natural* way of perceiving reality. […] Ideological conflicts can be deadly because at stake in them are not different *opinions*, but different *realities.* The ideological, in this sense, is not some mental sphere or dogma or doctrine, that one can embrace or reject at will […] but an unavoidable terrain of social practice, where collective imaginations are fabricated, where the social construction of reality is continually articulated with the constitution of the self. (Kavanagh 353)

Trapped in a power game he does not master, Amasa Delano falls prey to his own misrepresentation of the world and the dangers around him. He asserts to the end, even after the trial, the conventions of his time because without them, life does not make sense to him. With the execution of the rebellious slave leader Babo and restoration of the world order he is familiar with, things fall in their usual place again. That is why he cannot understand the "shadow" that had been cast over the dispirited Spaniard. The weakness he sees in the unassertive, incapacitated Benito Cereno are just a reflection of his own debilitated capacity to understand obvious ominous signs and to read people for what they truly are. His vision is distorted by a racism he is not even aware of possessing. If he admires the black race, it is for their perceived servility and closeness to "nature" rather than for their humanity.

3. Power games – inverted leadership

Considering that the American captain is the prisoner of the conventions of his time, Benito Cereno, the Spanish captain is a hostage in a spatial enclosure, his own ship he lost control of. Delano is a prisoner of time, of a history he doesn't understand, while the European captain is despite his youth, laden with the weight of a corrupted old heritage – slavery – the dimensions, severity and the consequences of which he is well aware of. Unlike Amasa, who notices everything but understands nothing, Benito seems to float above the current, mundane concerns, making the American draw the only correct assessment regarding the entire line of events: that Cereno is just a "paper captain", an ineffectual leader. However, the locus of real leadership is hidden from him due to the obtuseness of his racial perceptions.

One can say that the novella is built on an antinomical structure brought together by the shadow of slavery and the complicity in human evil: the naïve optimism of the American narrator (Delano) and the enduring

pessimism of its protagonist (Cereno) are both questioned by the author. Neither of them can try, or is able to fathom a more just future for mankind, one that does not encompass slavery, or is built on its burdensome past.

Benito Cereno is no more than a puppet, carefully handled by Babo, the skilful ventriloquist in a play where each man if faced with his worst fears and demons: greed, violence, guilt, harmful ignorance, a prejudiced mind, cruelty. The background for this descent into the heart of darkness is not the African continent like in Conrad's novel, but not surprisingly for Melville, the sea. It is depicted from the very beginning as a grey, gloomy canvas, reflective of the events to come and mirroring the laden mobility of the humans' condition. Though in control of the ship, the slaves are nevertheless not free, while the free American captain, the intruder in this static, metallic, trapped-in-time universe, becomes himself captive in the minstrelsy play carefully woven around him by the deceptive slaves. It is the paradoxical immobility of this aquatic realm that forces the characters and readers alike to confront their limitations. The ambiguity of the atmosphere is suggestive of the ambiguity of the moral standing of the two captains and of the precarious, temporary rule of the slaves on the ship. In between white and black, the two non-colours of the highly charged racial spectrum of the novella, grey/ "gray" is the indefinite, confused middle ground where none of the two dominates.

> Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that cooled and set in the smelter's mold. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled sea vapours among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before the storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come. (Melville 35)

When the benevolent and trusting Amasa Delano sets his foot on board the San Dominick, from the point of view of the power relations, he finds there a reversed polarity crisis. The former slaves turned themselves into masters, and the masters, stripped of their freedom and control, were reduced to the menial condition of captives with their humanity cancelled. That is why, on repeated occasions, Benito is described less like a living human being and more like a zombie, a ghostlike presence of his former self, always on the verge of fainting and needing the constant support of his "loyal servant", Babo. The narrator goes even further, in comparing Don Benito's languor and dejection to that of the Spanish emperor, Charles V, in an obvious drive to make the Spanish captain an embodiment of the decaying status of European political, economic and moral power.

> Had Benito Cereno been a man of greater energy, misrule would hardly have come to the present pass. But the debility, constitutional or induced by the hardships, bodily and mental, of the Spanish captain, was too obvious to be overlooked. A prey to settled dejection, as if long mocked with hope he would not now indulge it, even when it had ceased to be a mock, the prospect of that day or evening at furthest, lying at anchor, with plenty of water for his people, and a brother captain to counsel and befriend, seemed in no perceptible degree to encourage him. His mind appeared unstrung, if not still more seriously affected. […] His manner upon such occasions was, in its degree, not unlike that which might be supposed to have been his imperial countryman's, Charles V., just previous to the anchoritish retirement of that monarch from the throne. (Melville 40, 41)

One of the most poignant scenes in the short story is the description of the weather and time-worn slave ship as first seen by captain Delano, a spatial symbol of the disintegrating power of the old European empires built on ruthless conquest, human bondage and even annihilation of the New World natives. The sentence that ironically coagulates and reveals the true meaning of all the loose, cryptic messages that Benito and the old white sailor tries to transmit to the confused Delano, is the one inscribed on the forward side of the ship "Seguid vuestro jefe!, (follow your leader)" (Melville 37), a sentence scribbled near a figure-head concealed in a shroud-like canvas. At the end of the story, as a shock to both Amasa Delano and the readers alike, we learn that the initial statue represented Cristopher Columbus, the discoverer of the New World. The figure had been morbidly replaced by the angry slave mob with the defleshed corpse of Don Alexandro Aranda, Benito Cereno's friend and owner of the slaves transported on the ship.

In her analysis of the power balance within the novel, Tracy B. Strong, in an article entitled "'Follow your Leader' Melville's *Benito Cereno* and the Case of Two Ships" (2013), ponders on the relationship between the (potential) capital of power the characters have at the beginning of their voyage and the way it is exercised en route to the colonies, given the fact that it basically changes hands. The co-dependent nature of slavery keeps master-and-slave (whoever would take these roles in turn) bound in a mutually destructive relationship.

> If one reads this book as being about only the *institution* of slavery, one must read it as simply a dialectic between oppressor and the 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 this 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. […] Throughout the story he [Babo] 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. […] Yet this union has multiple dimensions. 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 at 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 is inevitable. […] 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 why Melville *appears* ambivalent about the slavery question: he understood that turning things upside down only reproduced the previous dynamics. […] (Strong 290, 297)

What readers cannot ignore while closely following the unfolding events, are the many instances in which the black slaves are characterized as having real power and authority, if only for a fleeting moment. The dignified, royal-like manner in which the chained "gigantic black" Atufal, a former African king, presents himself before Don Benito, the ineffectual captain and refuses to acknowledge his authority by bending before him, the way the three black boys stab a Spaniard sailor without fear of punitive measures, the "cymbaling of the hatchet-polishers" (Melville 46), all allude to the temporary reversal of the poles of power. The ironical words uttered by Babo when referring to the chained Atufal and Benito's position as the holder of the secrets is revealing in this sense: "The slave here carries the padlock, but master here carries the key" (Melville 51). What the American captain and the readers don't know at that moment is that the roles had been exchanged between the two. That is the mystery Amasa Delano cannot unlock, the Gordian knot he is symbolically invited to untie by the old Spaniard sailor. The fact that he cannot do that is a measure of his own entrapment and precarious condition on the now slaves-owned ship.

4. Individual and collective black agency

Babo has no voice of his own in the trial (and neither do the other slaves). Although everything revolves around him and he is the mastermind behind all that happens on the ship, he is the only one who is given no voice by the author. The African refuses to utter a word in his defence or explain his

deeds, knowing all too well that in the society he lives in, a slave is seen as just a tool, an instrument in the hands of the master, which can be used only for the benefit of the white people. Therefore, he rejects the court's offer to be instrumentalized again in helping them justify their sentence and their world and life views. He simply knows that there is no mercy or escape for him at the hands of white people. His thoughts and feelings about what had occurred and about his fate as a slave are never presented, but there is no need to, because deeds speak louder than words. What Melville does in refusing Babo a voice of his own, other than that of the minstrelsy role that he plays, is to put in front of the 19th century American society a mirror in which it could see all its inner lights and more importantly, shadows.

An interesting perspective is brought by Herman Beavers in his article "The Blind Leading the Blind: The Racial Gaze as Plot Dilemma in 'Benito Cereno' and 'The Heroic Slave' (1996) to the aspect of Babo's post-rebellion silence and the magnetic, almost demonically powerful gaze of his severed head, raised on a pike in the Plaza, overlooking the cemetery where his former's master body was laid to "rest". The playful symmetry of their destinies both in life and death is chilling: the European master turned feeble slave and the black slave turned all-powerful and controlling leader of the rebellious ship, meet again to spend the eternity one under the watchful gaze of the other. Not even death can exorcize the evil that was done to them both: slaves being stripped of their humanity and turned into objects or animal-like creatures that can be owned, and masters later on humiliated, tortured and murdered by the enraged slaves seeking revenge, freedom and the restoration of their initial condition.

> Melville's language proposes that the affair reaches its conclusion because Babo's head is separated from his body. However, as the narrator takes care to inform us, Babo has, from the moment of his capture, refused to speak, choosing silence over speech of any form. The narrator, bearing more than a trace of Captain Delano's sense of racial superiority perhaps, attributes this silence to Babo's realization that "all was over", moving from conjecture to ventriloquism to argue that the slave's reticence plainly states, "Since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak". But this interpretation of Babo's decision needs to be questioned. Should we accept the narrator's characterization of Babo's silence as an act of resignation or submission? For Babo's silence is just as easily read as an act of resistance, a recognition of "the use his words would be put to by the Spanish court" and his unwillingness to cooperate. The "order" we find restored at the close of the court proceedings culminates not only in Babo's death, but in the installation of his head on the pike in the Plaza, where his lifeless countenance can gaze at – and be gazed

> upon by – the whites who require reassurance that the matter has come to a successful end and that the threat has passed. […] In short, Babo serves as both visual trope of power and palliative gesture, for if he is a tangible symbol of the power of the slave-owner (and the State's endorsement of that power), he would seem to be, just as well, a symbol of the powerlessness of the slave, reinforcing the notion that whites not only have more power than blacks but also that the state will respond in like manner to any rebellious threat that they may choose to mount in the future. (Beavers 207)

The white masters' frail predicament and sense of insecurity are bountifully illustrated through the story on each occasion that the Spanish captain is seen as needing the support of his slave in order to walk around the ship, to give "orders", to speak, even to stand up. The message is transparent in its bitter reinstatement of the realities of the American economy, especially the one from the Southern States: at that time white people needed slaves for their economic survival and prosperity. Without them, their whole social and financial constructs would crumble. Sterling Stuckey in his 1998 article "The Tambourine Glory: African Culture in Melville's Art" draws attention to the way African singing and dancing performed by the black women on board serve as ceremonial, war-connected rites meant to reinforce this master-slave dialectic: "Melville was under Hegelian influence in one vital respect: […] in 'Benito Cereno' […] the slave is the creative force, the master parasitic." (Stuckey 54). The critic admits not finding any reference to Hegel in Melville's work, yet he considers that Melville's work illustrates skilfully in literature the master-slave dialectic found in Hegel's philosophical work.

In this interrogation on the nature of the human condition, the essence of freedom and the source of power that is Benito Cereno, many critics have pointed out the fact that precisely at the moment when the readers see the events from Babo's perspective, he is silenced by the author.

This fact can be seen as suggestive not of a bias in Melville's mind, but of the fact that in the 19th century, black slaves did not have a voice and were not the masters of their destiny. In this case the author does nothing more than present to his countrymen reality as it was, filtered through the artistic vision. If this narrative device makes current readers wonder about the African's point of view and the way Babo – as the archetypal slave – saw and lived things; one can also suspect that Melville's contemporary readership must have had the same reaction. In her article "What Babo Saw. *Benito Cereno* and '*the World We Live In*'" (2013), Lawrie Balfour ponders on the way the "performance" of friendship was used in support of a brutal, unjust social order based on racial discrimination. Time and again, Babo, like countless

other slaves before and after him, has to acquiesce to an impeccably performed pantomime of servility, concern and friendly devotion for his "master" Don Benito, so as to sustain the appearance of "normality" on the ship for the inquisitive eyes of the American captain. Not even once does he allow himself to speak the truth or show his real thoughts and intentions, for fear that his plans for gaining freedom and returning back to Africa would be hindered by Amasa Delano. Tragically enough, even when he has gained control of the ship and therefore freedom from his master, the slave still has to play the role of the friendly, faithful servant. He is seen as a supportive aid to the enfeebled master the moment the outside world bursts in by the intermediary of the American captain.

> Whether "presenting himself as a crutch" […] 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 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. (Balfour 266)

This outside-sealed universe on board the ship, described by the author as a volcano on the verge of eruption, somehow manages to transfer its potential for destruction to the external world of the peaceful monastery where Don Benito Cereno was brought during the final days of his life. Still troubled by the events he lived, even if his tormentor's body was burnt to ashes and his head raised on a pike in the plaza – so seemingly justice was done to him and the Spanish crew – he is still unable to find rest and peace for his soul. Faced with Delano's encouragement and urge to turn over a new leaf in his life, the same way nature in its unity, sun-sea-sky, continues to glow and impart a joy for life, the moribund captain has a chilling answer.

> "But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, you bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves."
> "Because they have no memory", he dejectedly replied; "because they are not human." (Melville 101)

What Melville knew and transmitted to his readers by putting these words in Delano's mouth is that an essential part of our humanity is the

memory of the past that has shaped our present and probably, unknown to us, would also influence our future to some degree. Moral human beings that hope for a better life in a more equalitarian and just society cannot forget the tragedies and the mistakes of the past, lest they repeat them. The world may go on despite all the turmoil in people's souls, but individuals cannot escape the responsibility they have for their deeds.

5. Conclusions

The novella *Benito Cereno* brims with subtle foresights of tense, incoming stormy weather and events, being also dotted with barely sketched ironies regarding the gullible nature of an all-trusting, all-superior white man who thinks he cannot possibly be wrong in his interpretation of reality and in his way of relating to the racially Other. As such, it highlights once again Melville's talent in depicting the intricacies of the human condition, the ambiguity of appearances and the pervasiveness of evil. The latter is seen as corroding the base of all racial and ethnic groups alike, when harm and misery is brought to the others. This may happen either from a putrid desire for wealth and power at all costs, or from a need for justice and/or revenge taken to the edge of the human limit. Never the one to point the finger and assign guilt or a verdict, Melville nonetheless, in the apparent Gothic mystery and suspense of this tale of sea adventures, casts a chilling warning regarding the potential consequences of processing reality through the filter of prejudice, racism and an unsubstantiated high moral ground. A lesson that unfortunately still rings true, almost three centuries later.

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