The Journal of English Language and Literature Vol. 67 No. 3 (2021) 399–415
DOI: 10.15794/jell.2021.67.3.003

"The Negro Babo" and "the Blond Beast": Melville's *Benito Cereno* as Nietzschean Genealogy*

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ABSTRACT: This study reads Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* in the light of Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogy of morality, delineating specific aspects of the narrative into three categories: *contentious, contingent,* and *dialectical*, and closing with a contemplation on the question of historical subjectivity. *Benito Cereno*, published in 1855 and based on an actual slave revolt that had occurred on board the Spanish slave ship *Tryal* in 1804, raises fundamental questions about the meaning of the "slave revolt": namely, questions on the nature of slavery, the morality of the revolt, and ultimately, the condition of humanness. Melville portrays the *contentious* nature of master-slave relations in multi-layered ways. The apparent master-slave roles are reversed, then staged as a show for Delano and the reader by Babo the mastermind. Babo's staged charade is also an illustration of the *contingent* history of modern slavery. The meticulously orchestrated spectacle of black subservience and white supremacy is "the exteriority" of the slave revolt, which is enacted as pantomime using "the body." Finally, *Benito Cereno* interweaves interrelated, overlayed histories into a genealogy of slavery, rendering it *dialectical* by breaking open the linear continuum of history and bringing the fragments into a sedimented moment of Now. In the final instance, Babo is human as proven by his capacity for revenge and hatred as much as his unrelenting heroic search for liberation. Ironically, however, it is due to this humanity that he fails to redeem himself, breaking free of the vicious cycle of power struggles.

Key Words: Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, Friedrich Nietzsche, genealogy of morality, master-slave relation

* This research was financially supported by Hansung University (Seoul, Korea).

I. Introduction

Benito Cereno, generally regarded as Herman Melville's fictional exploration on the history of slavery, opens with "everything gray": gray sea gulls mixed with gray sea vapors under the gray sky, all enmeshed into "shadows," "foreshadowing deeper shadows to come"; and into this gray shadow, a "strange" ship with "no colors" emerges (161). Melville immediately follows with an insinuation that this "gray" history will involve "the imputation of malign evil in man," in view of which his story will be a study of "what humanity is capable" (162). Melville locates at the core of the slavery problem a gray field of morality question, where the values of good and evil are not clearly defined as black and white, but inseparably mixed in the subtle shades of gray. For Melville, this gray field of morality is basically colorless, as slavery is not confined to a particular race but common in the universal history of mankind. As Joyce Adler succinctly puts, he paradoxically uses "color" in probing for "what is colorless" (82). In short, probing the fundamental nature of the human being, particularly in its darkest manifestations, is Melville's primary concern in this story of racially overdetermined New World slavery.

"Gray" is also the color that Friedrich Nietzsche attributes to "genealogy" as an alternative way of conducting historical research. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he demands that a genealogist should look into the gray area, which for him is "that which can be documented, which can really be ascertained, which has really existed," and "the very long, difficult-to-decipher hieroglyphic writing of the human moral past!" (6). The gray history, in other words, is concerned with human life as actually lived in concrete and complex material reality. His gray genealogy aims to critically revalue traditional historiography and invert its devotion to "the blue" (6)—his color metaphor for metaphysical truth and timeless value in history. His proposed genealogy is then premised on the inversion of existing values, or in Michel Foucault's phrase, "proximity" of immediate material realities over "distance" of taken-for-granted moral values such as good and evil (352). For Nietzsche wants nothing less than history for "life and action," and a pursuit of knowledge is meaningful for him only in the service of human life (*On the Advantage and Disadvantage* 7).

As such, Nietzsche shares with Melville the primary concern about human life as both of them set out to investigate the conditions of humanness—what exactly value judgments "good and evil" mean, and how such moral valuation affected the constitution of human nature? They proceed with their respective philosophical and literary tasks by tracing the tangled history of morality in its most acute manifestation as the master-slave dynamic. In this vein, the present study aims to read Melville's historical fiction about New World slavery in terms of Nietzsche's genealogy of the master-slave relation. A number of critics have noted Melville's approaches to history as Nietzschean. Among others, Bruce Franklin, like a literary genealogist, attempts to undo "the snarled knots" of overlaid stories by tracing their historical and narrative chronology (230). Dennis Pahl reads the novella as a Nietzschean genealogy on "epistemic violence" (173). He argues that the narrative concerns not so much moralizing or locating moral meanings in historical events as exploring the ways in which moral truth becomes constructed out of contending wills to historical consciousness. Dana Luciano also draws on Nietzsche, positing *Benito Cereno* as a "counter-monumental" historiography that resists both "monumental amnesia" and "anti-monumental melancholia." Following suit while hoping to expand the existing critical studies, I propose to analyze *Benito Cereno* in light of Nietzsche's genealogy of morality, delineating specific aspects of the narrative into three categories: *contentious*, *contingent*, and *dialectical*, and closing with a contemplation on the question of historical subjectivity.

II. *Benito Cereno* in the Tangle of Contentious, Contingent, and Dialectical Histories

Benito Cereno, published in 1855 and based on an actual slave revolt that had occurred on board the Spanish slave ship *Tryal* in 1804, raises fundamental questions about the meaning of the "slave revolt": namely, questions on the nature of slavery, morality of the revolt, and ultimately, condition of humanness. For such purpose, Melville makes changes on some details of the incident for his fiction, including the date of the insurrection to 1799 and the ship's name to the *San Dominick*. The intended effects are, as numerous critics have pointed out, not only to associate the incident in question with the historic Haitian Revolution (1790-1804) as well as the relatively recent *Amistad* case of 1839, but also to put the narrative in the context of contemporary heated debates on the so-called "Negro Question" and a concomitant set of mid-nineteenth-century

American ideologies summed up as "Manifest Destiny" (Emery 99-100; Sundquist 146-49; Zagarell 127).

Moreover, central figures involved with the revolt are practically sheer artistic products of Melville's creative imagination. Babo, the leader of the slave revolt, owes almost nothing to records of the original documents. Rather, according to Carolyn Karcher, merging the historical Babo and his son Mure from the *Tryal* along with Cinquez the *Amistad* rebel leader, Melville in effect promotes his fictional character to "the rank of coauthor" (221). Also, Melville removes from the original Benito Cereno, the Spanish captain of the *Tryal*, some "villainous traits" in order to dramatize his apparent growth in "human awareness and tragic wisdom" from his experience of having been reduced to slave (Vanderbilt 66). Finally, Melville creates his Yankee character Amasa Delano as the repression of American ideologies personified. The real Delano was the American captain of the merchant ship *Perseverance*, whose 1817 memoir about his encounter with the *Tryal* was the main source for the novella. As Karcher notes, Melville chose the *Tryal* incident over the more famous *Amistad* case for several reasons, among which was to make Delano embody "the complicity of the U.S." and the contradictions of its ideology (212).

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche posits a *contentious*, *contingent*, and *dialectical* history of morality in rather disturbing polemics. Our moral values of good and evil, he claims, came into being as a result of the "slave revolt," which began with the Jews—specifically, "three Jews" and "one Jewess," indicating Jesus, Peter, Paul, and Mary (31); and he declares that a new ethics is in need, which should be heralded by the coming "blond beast" (22). As is well known, Nietzsche's notorious rhetoric verging on racialism had been misappropriated and abused by the Nazis. As Maudemarie Clark explains in the introduction to the book, however, morality Nietzsche rejects is Christian morality, and the slaves in revolt are neither Jews nor any particular race of people, but priests. And by the slave revolt in morality, he means an inversion of what he believed to be classical, noble, proud, life-affirming values into Christian, humble, self-denying, life-negating morals. Priests led this "slave revolt" and put the classical aristocratic value system upside down because they wanted to take "revenge" upon the nobles, against whom they were in struggle for power and prestige. The goal of Nietzsche's genealogical project is to re-invert this slave morality with a renewed "interpretation" of asceticism, whose life-affirming, pro-active ethics he metaphorically

attributes to the prowling "blond beast" of prey (vii-xxxiv). In sum, the genealogy of morality, for Nietzsche, is a history of successive struggles for power in order to impose a particular interpretation upon a complex of contending meanings. Genealogy, in other words, approaches history as a succession of warring regimes of interpretation or clashing wills to power.

Then in *Benito Cereno*, a story of black slaves in revolt against white masters, what does Melville intend to suggest regarding the morality of the slave revolt and the condition of human life? Is he insinuating that the master-slave relation is racially determined in that the blacks, like Nietzsche's Jews, are slaves revolting against white masters? That the resulting inversion of moral values evinces the slave revolt as "evil," thus confirming Babo and the blacks as Evil personified? Some early critics seem to follow such old symbolism of black as evil and white as good, interpreting "Babo the Negro" as the transcendental symbol of Evil in human nature while proposing Cereno and Delano as good, innocent victims of "black" iniquity. For example, according to Adler, Yvor Winters saw the issue in the story as not the "morality of slavery" but "the fundamental evil of a group of men" (87). Also, Sterling Stuckey notes that some critics such as Sidney Kaplan and Barbara Baines have suggested cannibalism on the basis of Alexandro Aranda's skeleton (183). However, Stuckey argues that it might reflect influences of Ashantee culture where the royal bodies are prepared for burial by removing the flesh until "only the skeleton was left" (191).

In fact, Melville portrays the *contentious* nature of master-slave relations in much more complicated and multi-layered ways. The apparent master-slave roles are reversed in reality, staged as a show for Delano and the reader by Babo the mastermind. Seeing Cereno and Babo together, Delano readily assumes their relationship as "filial or fraternal" (169) in the tableau of "romantic racialism"—the contemporary "ethnologic" explanation of race and culture, distinguishing the Anglo-Saxon as supposedly liberty-loving, resourceful, practical, etc. from "the Negro" as docile, emotional, subservient, childlike (Fredrickson 98). In reality, however, the two are in the master-slave reversal where "the negro" is "a Nubian sculptor" carving "a white statue-head" (217). Similarly, Cereno and Atufal, one with the key and the other chained with a padlock, which Delano declares as "significant symbols, truly" (184), are in reality masquerading in the reversed master-slave roles. Also, Delano and Babo are paired in that the self-serving "benevolent" American, who finds in

Babo's apparent subservience the same congenial satisfaction as in "Newfoundland dogs" (213), turns out to be a spiritual slave to his racially confined worldview. Lastly, Delano and Cereno make up a pair in that New World democracy is not so much mastering Old World despotism as Delano wants to believe; rather, it is Delano who comes out entrapped in the same path to the imperialist enslavement of the world, "follow[ing] [his] leader" (234).

As such, Melvillean master-slave relations can be summed up as "inseparably" bound together and "irreconcilably" violent with their respective positions not immutable but "interchangeable" (Adler 82-83). Melville complicates the master-slave dichotomy by intertwining the Spaniard, the North American, and the black slaves in the triangulated narrative structure, reflecting the history of "triangular" voyages. Delano's North American wealth was made in the transatlantic slave trade where New England's manufactured goods were exchanged for slaves in Africa, who were to be exchanged again for sugar and molasses in the West Indies, and the molasses was then sold in New England as the raw material for rum (Adler 85). Moreover, the transatlantic interrelationships become even further entangled as Melville implicates Delano in the transpacific trade as well as Orientalist imagination. Delano, who exchanged his "sealskins for teas and silks" in Canton (187), imagines that Cereno might be a pirate with his Spanish crew "lurking" like "the Malay pirates" under the deck "with yellow arms ready to upthrust" (191).[1] In this way, Melville's master-slave relations are neither racially fixed nor morally determined, but undefinably entangled in the complex dynamics among the individuals concerned as well as the multifaceted strands of historical occurrences.

Then what does Melville say about the morality of the slave revolt? Who are the slaves, and what values are inverted in the first place? For Nietzsche, "the priestly caste" made the first inversion of values out of their "hate" for their "powerlessness" vis-à-vis the nobles by confounding the origin with the purpose and inverting the cause with the result:

> Originally […] unegoistic actions were praised and called good from the perspective of those to whom they were rendered, hence for whom they were *useful*; later one *forgot* this origin of the praise and, simply because unegoistic actions were *as a matter of habit* always praised as good, one also felt them to be good—as if they were something good in themselves. (*Genealogy* 10)

[1] Coleen Tripp expands Melville's engagement with the history of transatlantic slave trade to include that of transpacific migration. *Benito Cereno* features, according to her, Orientalist images from "the specter of phantomlike Asian sailors to "Malay piracy to "Peruvian women covered in hijab-like cloth "reminiscent of the Spanish Moors.

As a result, the original opposition of nobles as "good" and commoners as "bad" came to be jumbled up with the value judgment "egoistic" and "unegoistic," and the priestly institutionalization of Christian morality stipulated "unegoistic," i.e., self-effacing, life-denying attitudes as "good," and "egoistic," i.e., life-affirming, human-oriented values as "evil."

Reminiscent of Nietzsche's priests, Melville's story indeed draws heavily on Christian symbolism, and opposing values are thrown together in violent upheaval vying for re-interpretation. For instance, to Delano's vigilant eyes, the *San Dominick* appears like "a whitewashed monastery" with "a ship-load of monks" in "dark cowls" as if "Black Friars" are "pacing the cloisters" (163). Black slaves onboard are also described in Catholic images: the four elderly "oakum pickers" are like "stoical" monks working to unstrand old ropes with "a continuous, low, monotonous chant" (166); and Babo wearing "a bit of unstranded rope" around his waist looks like "a begging friar of St. Francis" (176). But Catholic imagery is not confined to the blacks but strongly associated with the Spanish captain Cereno as well. Comparing Cereno to "some hypochondriac abbot" (169), who eventually makes an "anchoritish retirement" like "his imperial countryman's, Charles V" (170), Delano, claiming for himself Anglo-Saxon "energy" and vigor unlike "the Spaniard," triumphantly declares, "How unlike are we made!" (181)

In this way, Melville's use of Christian symbolism draws attention to the muddled origins and colliding meanings of modern slavery. For one thing, it unveils the origin of transatlantic slave trade as a political-religious collusion: New World slavery was initiated in 1517 when Charles V, in response to pleas of Bartholomew de las Casas and other Dominican priests, authorized the first official transatlantic transport of African slaves (Sundquist 150). For another, Melville places the slavery question in the context of 1850s American society embroiled in tumultuous conflicts over slavery, race, religion, and national identity. Monastic symbolism is his critical commentary on the contemporary "nativist" Anglo-Saxon, anti-Catholic, Protestant liberals, in particular, on the northern

abolitionists like the readers of *Putnam's Monthly* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who equated the Catholic Church with European despotism in order to attack the anti-abolitionist South. Melville employs religious symbolism so as to expose not only the irony of Christian justification of slavery but also to indict the northern hypocrisy through Delano's condescending subscription to romantic racialism and slaveholding paternalism (Emery 104; Havard 82; Sundquist 151).

In addition, the entire narrative about the staged master-slave acting is an illustration of the ways in which an inversion of values took place in the origin of the Anglo-European interpretation of modern slavery. Babo showcases a charade of plantation slavery by mimicking black servitude while forcing Cereno to perform white mastership. And by masquerading in the conventional master-slave costumes, the slaves "invert" their meaning: as Michael Rogin puts, "By overthrowing slavery and then staging it as a play, Babo has conventionalized the supposedly natural relations of master and slave" (215). What Delano smugly takes for granted as "natural"—seemingly "filial" devotion of the servant to his master as "inhering in indisputable inferiors" (212)—is revealed as "conventional," arbitrary, absurd, and brutal. For whites, the institution of slavery must have been "useful," so they may have interpreted it as "good," but this does not corroborate inherent moral goodness in slavery. Babo's playacting unveils the Nietzschean moment where purpose is justified as origin. For what is "useful" and "good" for the blacks is not slavery but freedom, as Babo made it clear that the purpose of the slave revolt was "liberty," that the slaves wanted to go back home to "Senegal" (242). In this sense, Melville's white masters turn out to be the Nietzschean slaves—the priests, who made the first inversion of what could be truly worthy values in the service of human life into the arbitrary moral values of good and evil.

Another genealogical trait of *Benito Cereno* is Melville's treatment of history as *contingent*. For Nietzsche, history is never a progress from a singular origin to a destined goal, but discontinuous and full of accidents, leaps, and ruptures:

> The "development" of a thing, a practice, an organ is […] least of all its *progressus* toward a goal, […] but rather the succession of more or less profound, more or less independent processes of overpowering that play themselves out in it. (*Genealogy* 51)

Genealogy is about tracing such multiple beginnings and divergent processes under particular material circumstances in order to unveil what different purposes and meanings contended, and as a consequence, what system of interpretation came out dominant. Besides, genealogy reveals that a certain historical "truth" often has psycho-physiological, that is, material beginnings, which become essentialized into a concept or "the thing in itself." For example, Nietzsche argues, some visual stimulus is transferred into an auditory imitation, which is then metaphorically "interpreted" into a linguistic sign. In this way, an abstract concept is constructed out of countless leaps and ruptures that are homogenized through a process of anthropomorphic interpretations into human language: as Nietzsche says, "Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things" ("Truth and Lie" 83). Hence, Foucault explains that genealogy is not about locating the singular "origin" (*Ursprung*) and recovering it as "the site of truth"; rather, it seeks "descent" (*Herkunft*)—"the subtle, singular, and subindividual marks" that might come together to form "a network that is difficult to unravel," in short, "the exteriority of accidents," "the body," and "everything that touches it: diet, climate, and soil"; and lastly, the genealogist awaits "their emergence" (*Entstehung*), which "once unmasked" will reveal as "the face of the other" (343-50).

Babo's staged charade throughout Benito Cereno is the most eloquent illustration of the contingent history of modern slavery. The meticulously orchestrated spectacle of black subservience and white supremacy is "the exteriority" of this particular revolt against enslavement, which is enacted as pantomime using "the body"—"the inscribed surface of events" (Foucault 347). What emerges in the final instance is "the face of the other"—the contradiction in the racialized ideology of slavery and the paralyzed ideal of the American Revolution. Delano, watching a black slave woman kissing her baby, is "well pleased" to witness "naked nature," equating "negresses" with "leopardesses" and "doves" (198), thus unashamedly reciting the notion of "black bestiality" a la Thomas Jefferson's notorious comparison of blacks to "Oran-ootans" (138). Proving himself "an ideal audience for Babo's minstrelsy" (Haegert 28) and incapable of catching the irony underneath the spectacle, Delano happily remains on the surface of romantic racialism.[2] Seeing "master and

[2] Peter Coviello suggests that Delano emblematizes Melville's anger at the "self-satisfied and pointedly sentimental mode of reading (156), in which the contemporary readership enthusiastically received Stowe's sentimental novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, but disregarded his *Moby-Dick* in 1851 and *Pierre* in 1852.

man with "the black upholding the white, Delano can only think of "the beauty of that relationship—"a spectacle of fidelity and "confidence between slave and master (176). Similarly, Cereno's "silver-mounted sword," the symbol of white authority, turns out to be "the ghost of one" as the "scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty" (258). Miming in this way Delano's racialized assumptions about slavery, Babo successfully discloses the absence of corresponding content to the appearance. As such, *Benito Cereno* as a genealogy of slavery illuminates that the whole cluster of meanings surrounding slavery is not "natural" but "conventional," that is, ideological[3], and that modern slavery emerged as a contingent network of dominant Anglo-European interpretations descending from contentious struggles.

Furthermore, Babo's mimicry is a powerful reminder of the ambivalence in colonial desires, which, according to Homi Bhabha's theoretic formulation, connotes the potential for a subversive reconfiguration of master-slave relation and thus, for an alternative interpretation of new ethics beyond the morality of good and evil. Defined by Bhabha as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (86), mimicry exposes the contradictory desire of the colonizer that wants the colonial other to be simultaneously identical with and different from himself. And this ambivalence inherent in colonialism opens up a possibility for the colonial other to assume subjectivity by simultaneously mirroring and distorting the colonizer's image, thus returning "a gaze of otherness" (89). In this sense, Babo's extended mime effectively reveals the inconsistency in the romantic racialist justification of slavery. Specifically, Babo's embodied performance, as Matthew Rebhorn argues, showcases the chattel slave's contradictory status as "both material object" and "acting subject" (207): the body of the enslaved is reduced to its bare materiality, as the commodity in the slave economy, while simultaneously this mute body is always already a subjective articulation of "dissent" through "that very materiality" (170). Also, Babo certainly returns the American's disciplinary gaze with the colonial other's gaze of surveillance: for example, when Delano approaches Cereno for a private talk away from Babo, he hears "another footstep, keeping time with his," and sees from "the opposite door, a salver in hand, the servant […] likewise advancing" (225). In the same vein, the most prominent image of "the displacing gaze of the disciplined" returning "the look of surveillance" (Bhabha 89) must be Babo's severed head—"that hive of subtlety," that "met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (258).[4]

Finally, *Benito Cereno* interweaves interrelated, overlayed histories into a genealogy of slavery, rendering it *dialectical* by breaking open the linear continuum of history and bringing the fragments into a sedimented moment when "past, present, and future seemed one" (232). Melville's meticulous literary craftmanship entwines both diachronic and synchronic strands of historical events into his imaginary vessel of creative art. The matrix in which he embeds his fictional narrative is the historical context, or "a great sweep of history" (Franklin 230), transpiercing from Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas and establishment of a colony in Haiti in 1492, to 1517 when Charles V initiated the Atlantic slave trade, to the series of eighteenth-century revolutions such as the 1776 American, 1789 French, and 1791 Haitian revolutions, with the last of which Melville deliberately linked his story by naming the ship the *San Dominick* after Haiti's other name Santo Domingo, and setting the event within the same revolutionary era in 1799. In addition, the emergence of *Benito Cereno* in 1855 was of contentious and contingent 1850s' descent. Nationwide conflicts were becoming ever more acute over the question whether to institute slavery in the newly acquired western territories from the U.S.-Mexican War of 1848, and as a result, the Missouri Compromise of 1820, practically invalidated in the Compromise of 1850, was finally repealed by the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, followed by the presidential election of pro-slavery Franklin Pierce in 1852. In the mid-1850s, the national craze for Manifest Destiny reached its height and some even advocated U.S. expansion into the Caribbean. And in the midst of all this, Melville was writing such tumultuous historical events into the intricate knot of *Benito Cereno*.

In fact, Melville's dialectical imagining of history is symbolically ren-

[3] For example, James Kavanagh reads Melville's work as an example of "the ideological constitution of the aesthetic (or the literary), analyzing Manifest Destiny embodied by Delano's "misrecognition through the Althusserian concept of ideology (353). In the similar vein, Han Kwangtaek notes how Delano's failed egalitarian liberalism indicates "an ideological homology between North and South (105); and Kim Eun Hyoung takes Delano's presumption of benevolence and charity as in reality an act of "piracy—a metaphor for antebellum American ideology constituting market capitalism and territorial expansionism.

[4] Jungha Kim insists that Babo's mimicry ruptures the progressive time and creates a space for alternative temporality and that Babo's gaze in death marks the temporality of melancholia resisting historical forgetting and closure (56-66).

dered as knot-making. In the oft-discussed scene of making Gordian knots, "an aged sailor seated cross-legged" like "an Egyptian priest" makes intricate knots of all imaginable types, and to Delano's naïve question, "what is it for?" he answers, "For some one else to undo" (202). The image of knotted history is similar to what Walter Benjamin calls "the constellation"—a unity which our "own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (263), which in turn is reminiscent of Nietzsche's metaphor of "crystallization." When explaining how the concept "punishment" emerged over time out of different meanings and accumulated into "an entire synthesis of 'meanings,'" he claims all previous history of punishment and exploitation "finally crystallizes into a kind of unity that is difficult to dissolve"—in fact, so entangled as to make it "completely and utterly *undefinable*" since "only that which has no history is definable" (53). The Gordian knot Melville throws to the reader is the utterly, undefinably entangled history of modern slavery and imperialism, as if he is telling the audience to stop "knee-jerk liberalism" and to consider just "how and why slavery is wrong" (Swann 179). The Egyptian-like old sailor along with "sphynx-like" elderly oakum pickers (166) throw the central riddle of the story. Just like the key to the sphynx's riddle is "man," as Karcher points out, the knot for the reader to undo comes down to the problem of "recognizing Africans as fellow human beings" (198)—in short, the question of human condition.

III. Conclusion

Thus, questions linger. Does Babo succeed in proving his humanity, or does he fail and remain slave? Babo's mute gaze of otherness in death may certainly have a disturbing effect, but does it reconstitute the now-conventionalized master-slave relation and rearticulate the sum total of existing relations of power with a vision for new ethical life? Simply put, does Babo succeed in breaking free of the slave's desire for "revenge" out of "resentment" for his own powerlessness vis-à-vis the master? Does he simply attempt to invert the existing value system for his own good, and in consequence, remain a slave, similar to his white masters-turned-slaves, imprisoned in the power of weakness? As illustrated throughout the narrative, nothing is fixed or permanent in the role of master or slave; the only "natural" and "immutable" thing is, as Adler also points out, the human instinct to break "free" when enslaved and the basic

"nature of slavery" itself (83). Put differently, the fundamental condition of humanness is an innate desire for freedom, and conversely, negation of liberty makes one slave or not fully human. Slavery results from an absolute imposition of one's will upon another human being—a will to power exercised to the other in the extremity of violence. Slavery is making "a thing of anybody," as Simone Weil says: When "might" is "exercised to the full" in its "elementary and coarse forms," "it makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him a corpse," or more prodigiously, "a thing of him while he still lives" (qtd. in Bartley, 452).

But Nietzsche's priests are still slaves even though they are not forcefully deprived of their physical freedom by the nobles. Negative liberty or freedom from external constraint alone is not sufficient to make one truly free. When one's will to power is violently inflicted upon the other, the result is chattel slavery; when it is directed inward onto oneself, it causes self-enslavement or what Nietzsche calls asceticism. When the human "instinct for freedom" is repressed, "forcibly made latent," "driven back, suppressed, imprisoned within," it ends up "venting itself only on itself," causing "bad conscience" (59). Likewise, when "*ressentiment*" about one's own powerlessness "changes the direction" and blames oneself for one's suffering, it acquires an ascetic meaning—self-denial interpreted as a meaning of life (91-92, 117-18). What hinders one from breaking free of this self-imprisonment may be another equally powerful human instinct along with the desire for freedom and life—namely, an impulse for death or a negative will to power: "*a will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life," as Nietzsche claims, because "man would much rather will *nothing* than *not* will" (118). Maybe true freedom is obtainable through a willed effort to escape the prison of *subjectivism*—a negative will to subjectivity by objectifying the other, by denying freedom to the other and/or to the self-turned-other. This self-overcoming ethics is a new interpretation of asceticism Nietzsche calls for, which "the *redeeming* human" or "the blond beast" will herald so as to give back "the earth its goal" and "man his hope" (66).

In the final instance, Babo is human, all too human, evinced by his capacity for revenge and hatred as much as his unrelenting heroic search for liberation. Babo may have proven "he is a man, not a baboon" (*Putnam's Monthly* qtd. in Bartley 445), but his humanity denied by racist slavery is ironically redeemed by his capacity for "a tyranny of an exceptional kind, over body and soul" (Bartley 452). In *Benito Cereno*,

Melville is positing slavery as a metaphor for universal human condition, and Babo is human insofar as he bears testimony to how deadly the effect of slavery is on his humanity. As Kermit Vanderbilt argues, slavery becomes a metaphor for "the black complicity in mankind," and Babo is recast, along with Hawthorne's Chillingworth and Goodman Brown, in "the universal brotherhood of evil," who commits "the unpardonable sin" of "heartless mastery over their brother-man" (67). As Rogin puts, the charade gives Babo "no voice of his own" because he stages the play only with "the words he has already been given" (217). Babo mimics the existing Anglo-European master-slave relation and inverts its surface meaning, and by subverting, he takes revenge upon white masters, but fails to transcend the binary entrapment. In the end, Babo utters "no sound," and his insistent muteness seems to say, "since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (258). His willful muteness may be interpreted as his embodied action, an emphatic testimony to the horror of slavery, yet granting Babo authorship or substituting his silence for authorial intent—promoting him to the status of "a poet" (Adler 88) and "a coauthor" (Karcher 221)—might end up, as Shari Goldberg suggests, "idealizing" a slave's potential participation in the production of the "master narrative" (14). Babo's head displayed on the pole may herald the end of slavery, but as Rogin says, "it is a portent of violence," and "it does not promise the liberation of the slave" (220). In the bleak universe of Melville's imagination, the promise of the coming "blond beast" remains still in the gray.

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Received: July 31, 2021.
Reviewed: August 24, 2021.
Accepted: August 26, 2021.