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E. F. CARLISLE*

Captain Amasa Delano: Melville's American Fool

Melville's tale, "Benito Cereno," and his generous Captain Amasa Delano have provoked a broad range of critical evaluations; the range of interpretations, however, is surprisingly narrow. Opinions about the quality of the tale vary from unqualified admiration [1] to the frank doubt of the story's value expressed by Newton Arvin. Although Arvin does not question the standard reading of the story, he does suggest that Delano's simplicity borders on weak-wittedness—a condition which apparently flaws the story for Arvin because a weak-witted man cannot effectively be a heroic innocent.[2] Others, of course, have recognized Delano's ignorance and inadequacy. But no one quite suggests that the key to the story and to solution of some of the disagreement about the quality of the tale lies in the fact of Delano's weak-wittedness rather than in any strength he displays as hero.

The standard readings of the story, however, make the Captain a hero—even a tragic hero.[3] He generally represents the American hero, the American national fate, who begins in innocence, experiences the dangers of life, and arrives, somehow, at awareness or maturity. At least he escapes evil because of his innocence. In the course of the tale Delano triumphs by accident, muscle, and innocence and thus becomes the typical hero of American experience in spite of his simple-mindedness. This standard interpretation seems to depend on Delano's point of view—especially at the end of the tale—as the most legitimate as well as the dominant one. It is true that Delano's point of view does dominate the tale, but his way of looking at reality is totally inadequate and must be qualified (if not invalidated) by several other points of view.

In order to offer an alternative interpretation of the tale and try

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[1] For example: "'Benito Cereno' is one of the best single pieces Melvlile wrote." Richard Chase, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1949), p. 150.

[2] Newton Arvin, *Melville* (New York, 1950), p. 240.

[3] Max Putzel, "The Source and the Symbols of Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *American Literature*, XXXIV (May, 1962), p. 193. This article approaches a few of the conclusions of my essay, but it deals mainly with sources and with psychological, ritualistic, and moral symbols. It finds, also, Delano's common sense reassuring.

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to resolve the doubts and questions about Delano's character, this essay will focus on the generous American's undistrustful good nature as the main theme of the story. However, instead of being "Delano's struggle to comprehend the action"[4] the theme becomes, rather, Delano's *inability* to comprehend the action. His failure results from the stupidity and foolishness basic to his character. This thematic reversal suggests the tale's basic irony: apparent virtues—innocence, benevolence, and optimism—become defects as the tale emphasizes the ignorance, foolishness, and blindness of the Captain. Even after he knows what has happened to him and Don Benito, he does not really understand; for Benito's retreat from life lies beyond the American's comprehension (and note how frequently the narrator calls him "The American"). At the end Delano's prevailing optimism asserts itself in a future of blue skies and blue seas:

> You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon 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.[5]

For Delano the world *has* changed, but it changes *only* for him. The reality that Melville portrays is far more complex than Delano's conclusion suggests, for in a very important sense the reality remains unchanged—the world does not turn over a new leaf.

Thus Melville seems to have placed the extreme of Emersonian affirmation and hope for the future in the mind of a sea captain. In *Moby Dick* Ahab dramatizes self-reliance gone mad; in "Benito Cereno" Delano reveals affirmation become foolish and blind. Instead of an American hero, who reveals the triumph of American innocence, benevolence, and good will, then, Melville's tale presents the American fool, or—to borrow a phrase from Daniel G. Hoffman—"The Great American Boob."[6]

II

The narrator's initial description of Delano establishes the American's essential character; he tells the reader that the Captain is

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[4] Richard Harter Fogle, "Benito Cereno," *Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Chase (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962), p. 118.

[5] Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," *The Piazza Tales* (New York, 1948), p. 139. All subsequent quotations from "Benito Cereno" will be taken from this edition and will be noted in the text by page number.

[6] Daniel G. Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (New York, 1961), p. 121. Hoffman defines the Boob as "the naif whose odyssey leads him, all uncomprehending, into the dark center of experience."

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> a person of a 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. (p. 55)

No real change occurs during the tale. Throughout, Delano maintains his singularly optimistic, generous, and benevolent disposition. He persistently forces himself to see "the benign aspect of nature" (p. 115); any suspicions he may have, vanish regularly in the "mild sun" of his "good nature." In other words, the American's thoughts "were tranquillizing" (p. 83).

Besides describing the Captain's personality, the opening description raises a serious question about the man's intelligence. The narrator seems to insist ironically, if not on the stupidity of the man, certainly on his slowness and lack of intelligence. Not only is Delano simple and incapable of satire or irony (as the reader learns later), but he cannot see the ruth of human experience even with extraordinary and repeated incentives. The significant action of the story simply dramatizes and develops this initial characterization of Captain Delano.

The narrator does not often judge Delano or lead the reader directly, for the dominant point of view which Melville establishes almost completely prevents direct narrative intrusion. The tale unfolds mainly through Delano's point of view. The reader learns of the *San Dominick* and of Benito Cereno (and their supposed misfortunes) through the eyes and ears of the American. Shortly after Delano boards the slave ship, Melville presents the Captain's impressions as he perceived them, not as the author interprets them:

> Neither were his thoughts taken up by the Captain alone. Wonted to the quiet orderliness of the sealer's comfortable family of a crew, the noisy confusion of the *San Dominick's* suffering host repeatedly challenged his eye. Some prominent breaches, not only of discipline but of decency, were observed. (p. 64)

Delano believes certain acts were breaches; Delano feels uncomfortable aboard the ship. The story is unfolding through him. In one sense, then, "Benito Cereno" becomes Delano's story because the tale dramatizes the impact of the events and experience on him.

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The reader must see as Delano does, except for occasional help provided by the narrator. But the reader can also perceive that something is amiss. The ironic contrast, then, between Delano's lack of understanding and the reader's inevitable perceptions becomes one means of conveying Delano's inadequacy. The ironic narrative method is important in order to understand why Melville does not directly *tell* the reader the American is a fool; instead, Melville *shows* him by means of a dramatically ironic point of view. He suggests the stupidity in the narrator's initial description; then he relates the action almost wholly from the American's point of view. The pattern of the significant action of the story consists almost entirely of Delano's alternation between trust and suspicion. His benevolent good nature, of course, repeatedly makes him blind to the "real" situation. Delano sees only surfaces; he cannot strike through even the thinnest mask.

After reading one rationalization after another, one begins to sense that the American does not merely understand slowly, but that he fights awareness. The point, after which only a foolish American innocent would misread the signs, seems to occur when Delano dwells for some time on his incorrect suspicions about Benito Cereno. Cereno has just asked a series of suspicious questions about the American's ship, ending with "Your ships generally go—go more or less armed, I believe, Senor? " (p. 79) Naturally, Delano answers all of the questions —questions that must suggest to the reader that Benito Cereno is considering an attack. If the American does not pursue or confirm his suspicions at this point, one feels he never will; his fate is set by his character which cannot maintain doubts for more than a few moments. From here on his rationalizations become increasingly inadequate, and, therefore, he cannot be accepted as a hero—he must be thought of as a fool.

In addition to the narrator's point of view, Melville presents two other ways of seeing the present and past of the tale that qualify, and perhaps negate, Delano's view of reality. Babo cannot be dismissed merely as an evil force. Benito Cereno's own point of view, of course, should be related to the other three as they all bear on the main theme of the tale—Delano's inability to comprehend the action and his role as American Fool.

So far this essay simply suggests that Captain Delano is Melville's American Fool. The pattern of action, the ironic point of view, the frequent signs and subsequent rationalizations by the American captain provide some valid evidence. But it is not yet enough. No one denies Delano's undistrustful good nature or that he does *not* understand; nor

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does anyone seriously think that the reader does not perceive a great deal more than the generous American. Upon looking closely at Delano's attitudes and thoughts, however, one discovers that the Captain holds profound misconceptions that mislead him and make him an utter failure at understanding and dealing with life. He may in the end sail away into "yon bright sun . . . and the blue sky"; he does so, however, not because of anything he has done, but by sheer accident.

The good American Captain suffers from three major misconceptions. His optimistic, benevolent outlook (his American innocence), as the reader has seen, causes him to misread life. Although he professes to be fair and republican in his dealings—and American in his outlook—he knows nothing about negroes, and he easily accepts their slavery and oppression. The third misconception involves Delano's pride, his superiority complex; he seems excessively concerned with himself and with details—with his personal treatment, for example, aboard the *San Dominick.*

It seems unnecessary to pile up examples of Delano's ineptness; the above paragraphs adequately suggest his inability to understand complexity. But one further example will remind the reader that Delano's character never allows him to see any *reason* for subterfuge, for he lacks awareness of a whole aspect of life. At one point he reproaches himself for thinking that his murder has been plotted:

> I, little Jack of the Beach, that used to go berrying with cousin Nat and the rest; I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard? Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean. There is some one above. Fie, fie Jack of the Beach! you are a child indeed. (p. 92)

He is a child indeed; even the style betrays him. He thinks *of* childhood, and he thinks as a child (of pirate-ships and hobgoblins), firmly convinced that every aspect of the world, every experience of life, is ruled by benevolent justice. Somebody up there likes him.

Two erroneous assumptions about negroes cloud Delano's mind. He sees them, first, as primitives: he has a distorted idea of them as noble savages. At one point, as he wanders about the ship observing the seamen and the negroes, he notices "a slumbering negress . . . lying . . . like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock." The woman is sleeping with her child, "her wide-awake fawn," at her breast. She wakes to find the American looking at her and immediately begins to play

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the part of mother. Delano's reaction is typical; the specific language and the point of view emphasize the extreme misconception involved. He thinks, "There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love." The narrator goes on to explain Delano's reaction:

> 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. Ah! thought Captain Delano, these, perhaps, are some of the very women whom Ledyard saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of. (pp. 87-88)

This prevailing misconception proves wrong, of course, when all the violence and cruelty that occurred on the *San Dominick* becomes apparent. There is a tiger heart or a sharkish nature behind that noble mask.

The American's second error about negroes consists of his belief that they are stupid, inferior, and naturally servile. Still walking about the deck, he tries to analyze the strange behavior of Benito Cereno. He speculates about possible complicity between Benito and the blacks for some mysterious end. He asks himself:

> But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes? (p. 90)

(Herman Melville might name one: "one Ishmael.") Delano's sense of the negroes' inferiority and of the necessary separation of the races becomes obvious from the quote. He reveals the same belief when he thinks about the negro's fitness as servant. As he watches Babo shave Benito Cereno, the Captain observes (assuming the narrator presents Delano's thoughts),

> There is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person. Most negroes are natural valets and hairdressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to castinets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction. (pp. 99-100)

Negroes, of course, are "naturally" more musical than whites; Delano attributes to them even "the great gift of good humor . . . a certain

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easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune" (p. 100). Babo's intellect and the scheme produced by it soundly refute both of Delano's absurd notions.

Babo's very existence—his intelligence and control of the ship—suggest, of course, that there are more ways of looking at reality than Delano ever imagined. Thus Babo's point of view, although usually over-simplified (he is too often dismissed as some form of masked depravity), invalidates Delano's point of view, at least regarding negroes.

The obvious absurdity of Delano's notions pass judgment on him as a fool, rather than as merely a deceived innocent. In addition to this, however, the narrator himself passes rather severe judgment on the American by making him the butt of jokes: he ridicules him. Delano tries to figure out the knot the old sailor throws at him as a sign that something is wrong. "For a moment, knot in hand, and knot in head, Captain Delano stood mute" (p. 91) The narrator comes dangerously close to calling the American a knot-head. A more obvious joke at Delano's expense occurs at the end of a description of his character and of his views about the blacks. Delano has been thinking about "the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind" (p. 100). The narrator then explains to the reader:

> At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in at his door, watching some free man of color at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor, invariably he was on chatty and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men of good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs. (p. 100)

Though he is kind, genial, and no doubt benevolent (in the fashion of the old master-slave relationship?), Captain Delano nevertheless treats negroes like dogs. This American would assuredly not understand Ishmael's idea about the First Congregational Church of the World.

Delano's sense of racial superiority and his obvious condescension to negroes suggests a third misconception—this time about himself. He does in a sense have a superiority complex. His attitude towards negroes suggests this, of course. He also seems excessively concerned with surfaces and details; his frequent concern, for example, about Don Benito's courtesy is nothing more than concern for his own

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treatment. At one point the American expresses displeasure with Benito Cereno when he and Babo step aside to talk to one another:

> Presently the Spaniard, assisted by his servant somewhat discourteously crossed over from his guest; a procedure which, sensibly enough, might have been allowed to pass for idle caprice of ill-humour, had not master and man, lingering around the corner of the elevated skylight, began whispering together in low voices. This was unpleasing. And more; the moody air of the Spaniard, which at times had not been without a sort of valetudinarian stateliness, now seemed anything but dignified; while the menial familiarity of the servant lost its original charm of simple-hearted attachment. (p. 76)

Delano is embarrassed by this act—presumably because the action violates his sense of courtesy. He apparently concerns himself first with appearances, the courtesy involved in this case; then he looks beyond, sometimes, to suspicions which are usually wrong. Perhaps as Captain of a ship he can rightly expect proper treatment. In the context of all the reader knows about the American's character, however, his displeasure with Cereno's impoliteness suggests personal resentment and an ability to see only surfaces. His attention, then, to superficial details and to himself helps to cloud his vision and mislead him.

Delano's obvious misconceptions, the multiple and ironic use of point of view, the occasional suggestion of Delano's stupidity by the narrator, and the American's repeated inability and refusal to read sign after sign of evil or mystery aboard the *San Dominick* offer strong evidence that Melville *has* written a subtle parody or criticism of Captain Amasa Delano—the innocent, benevolent, unsuspicious American. The tale clearly dramatizes that an undistrustful good nature, such as the American's, can lead a person into the midst of danger, to possible death. Certainly, such a nature places one in a situation where he has no knowledge, no defense against what he cannot perceive, and no control over events.

But Captain Delano does escape, and he seems to succeed by conquering. He survives, however, not because of anything he does—but by accident. For example, Delano escapes poisoning (p. 134) only because Babo had other plans and forbade Francesco to do it. When the obvious confronts him—when Babo assaults Benito directly—of course the American can recognize it and act as a brave heroic, American innocent should. The obvious occurs, however, because Benito *happens* to have a chance to jump overboard—not because Delano

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acts or perceives. It seems, then, that accident, sheer luck, is an important aspect of Delano's success—what might have been and what did happen. Otherwise, one would have to assume that some order or justice exists which allows innocence (ignorance) to triumph in spite of itself.

One can argue that Delano's very innocence saves him, for if he suspected rightly and acted in any way, he would have immediately been killed.[7] It is true that *had* Delano betrayed any sign of knowledge he would surely have been killed. And if Benito Cereno *had* not jumped and *had* Delano made it back to his ship, the Captain would have been as safe and as unwise and as ignorant as he had always been. He would have remained untouched by knowledge and evil. As a result, his understanding of life and his ability to cope with complexity and ambiguity—a constant in human experience—would remain the same. The ironies and complexities of the tale, however, raise more than merely a question of safety and apparent success.

One must not forget, either, that Delano does conquer the rebellious negroes; he seems to deal successfully with "evil." Although he may deal with it practically, he uses forces (a simple, obvious solution) to overwhelm, he thinks, a complexity which may not even be evil. His innocence ironically saves him; his (and his crew's) muscle makes him a success. But his innocence is ignorance rather than divine innocence, and therefore it is inadequate. Certainly, Delano (and his reader) cannot accurately hope and expect (as America could not collectively) that muscle and a series of happy accidents will carry one through. Perhaps the American does win, for a moment; the victory, however, does not change the basic condition that exists (evil or complexity), nor does it change Delano—he still knows nothing. Thus his victory is hollow and superficial at best: at the worst, it is meaningless and misleading.

So Captain Delano survives and conquers to see another day, but he has discovered nothing. He has advanced no further toward knowledge than he had when he first appeared. At the end Benito's reaction baffles him. "You are saved: what has cast such a shadow on you?" (p. 140) After this remarkable experience, only Delano, the American fool, could say: "Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves" (p. 139).

[7] James E. Miller, *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville* (New York, 1962).

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III

The story also suggests a basic social and moral significance which reinforces the above interpretation and which provides an alternative to the traditional explanation of the black-white color symbolism. In the traditional reading of the story the negroes, of course, represent evil, violence, and death (blackness); and the whites (Captain Delano particularly) symbolize innocence, virtue, and benevolence. However, the description of the ship and of the crest which it bears, the aristocratic class structure on board the *San Dominick*, and both Delano's *and* Cereno's misunderstanding of the slaves suggest that decadence, cruelty, and oppression existed on the ship before the mutiny, in spite of the benevolence of Benito Cereno and his slave-owning friend. Perhaps, then, the mutiny is understandable and justifiable; perhaps, the whites are all blind fools, rather than virtuous, moral, civilized human beings. Perhaps, the negroes do not merely represent unadulterated evil and blackness asserting itself in meaningless violence and cruelty.

The *San Dominick*, as the narrator describes it, suffers from age, decay, and neglect; it seems to be part of an old, outmoded and decadent aristocratic order characterized by sharp class distinctions and slave ownership. It appears "like a white-washed monastery after a thunderstorm" (p. 57). In its time a fine vessel, it merely "preserved signs of former state" (p. 57). "Slovenly neglect" prevaded her, and—the narrator tells the reader—she seemed laid and launched "from Ezekial's Valley of Dry Bones." The forecastle is battered, mouldy, and decayed (p. 57-58). The ship reflects a past glory gone to ruin and corruption. Benito himself, although he dresses as a gentleman, belongs on this ship out of the past. "There seemed something so incongruous in the Spaniard's apparel, as almost to suggest the image of an invalid courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague" (p. 69).

The *San Dominick* is a death ship; the old order has died, and both whites and blacks have died on it. The age, decay, and death are thus older than the slave's mutiny. The crest or coat-of-arms which the ship bears confirms the suspicions created by the narrator's description of the ship and its Captain.

> But the principal relic of faded grandeur was the ample oval of the shield-like stern-piece, intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon, medallioned about by groups of mythological or symbolical devices; uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked. (p. 58)

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The crest does ironically dramatize the present condition on the ship; the negroes—those dark satyrs—are in control. One must remember, however (a further irony of Melville's), that the shield originated with Europeans or South Americans and that the figures wear masks. Perhaps, the whites are the real moral "black" men—though they remain masked.[8] Perhaps, then, Benito Cereno, the South American aristocrat (the world he represents, at least), caused the mutiny by the oppression implicit in the condition of slavery. Nevertheless, the reader can at least conclude that the ship, the shield, and the *San Dominick's* captain suggest age, decay, death—a past aristocratic glory, cruelty, and oppression.

These possibilities suggest that the mutiny results from the basic oppression of the system and from the whites' inability to understand or estimate their slaves. Benito Cereno's faulty understanding must be partially similar to Delano's misconceptions about negroes because both assume the legitimacy of slavery and thus assume the basic inferiority of the slaves. The mutiny, of course, shows that Babo, the leader, equals or surpasses the shrewdness, intelligence, and awareness of the whites. The slaves, then, seem to be humans who revolt against the oppression they have been subjected to: they were once free; they have been kidnapped from their homes; they have been impressed into slavery. In *Moby Dick* exploitation and enslavement of others (Ahab exploited and enslaved his crew) led to destruction; the same acts lead to destruction in "Benito Cereno."

No one can deny the violence and savagery of the slaves. Their reaction to their oppression, however, does not necessarily bear on the cause and the fact of the slavery. The only refutation to an argument which asserts that the black men reveal their basic evil by their savagery must simply point out that some of the white sailors react savagely, too, in a similar situation. They have suffered from violence, cruelty, and enslavement; so they react violently when they are freed:

> Beside the negroes killed in the action, some were killed after the capture and re-anchoring at night, when shackled to the ring-bolts on deck; . . . these deaths were committed by the sailors, ere they could be prevented. (p. 137)

[8] The reader need only recall the terror and the potential destruction or evil suggested by the whiteness of the whale to understand the possible ambiguity or reversal of traditional color symbolism. Edward Stone's "The Devil Is White," an unpublished paper read at the MLA convention, Chicago, 1963, provides an interesting brief account of this reversal in American literature.

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Only a difference of degree exists in the evil or savagery of black and white. All men—both black and white—are capable of evil (murder, here), and this aspect of man and life is what eludes Captain Delano so successfully.

The humanity of the slaves and their lack of specific evil intent in overthrowing the ship becomes clear if one understands their motive for revolt and their destination after it. Some of the negroes have been kings in their native lands (p. 74); all have been free men to a degree. Their goal is understandable, therefore. They simply wish to go home or to a negro country where they can be people again, instead of slaves. The deposition reveals these desires:

> The negro Babo asked him [Benito Cereno] whether there were in those seas any negro countries where they might be carried, and he answered them, No . . . The negro Babo afterwards told him to carry them to Senegal, or to the neighboring islands of St. Nicholas. (p. 126)

They wish only to be taken and left; they evidently do not care about gain, piracy, or permanent control of the ship.

These observations about the negroes' behavior lead one to conclude that the white's inability to understand the negro and the basic nature of the system (of immoral white man superiority) contribute substantially to the mutiny and the resulting cruelty and death. In their own way the South Americans are ignorant—perhaps even foolish. Benito Cereno accepts slavery and the inferiority of the negroes as a natural and social fact much as Delano apparently does in spite of his "republicanism." Although the two men differ in temperament and although they represent different worlds, neither understands the slaves.

Benito misunderstands them because of his position as a slaveholder—as a part of an order which assumed the inferiority of negroes and which assumed the validity of a master-slave social order. Amasa Delano seems to accept the implications of that social order—he is no Young American revolting against the depravity of European-aristocratic society—yet he shares none of the personal, collective, and historical guilt of Benito Cereno. Delano misunderstands the slaves mainly because he is blind to their humanity. Although he does not share the guilt of slave ownership, the ignorance, indifference, and tacit consent he represents could perpetuate (and has perpetuated) the cruelty. After all, Faulkner's South did occur in America, and all Americans (even those who do not descend from slaveowners) collectively share the guilt for that past.

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By justifying, in part, the negro mutiny, one must think of them as something besides symbols of the evil and malevolence lurking behind nature's placid surface, and thus one can no longer see the conflict in "Benito Cereno" as a simple or complex white-black, good-evil conflict. Such an explanation also reveals the responsibility of the whites for their own fate, and it shows again that Delano's misconceptions about negroes contribute heavily to his foolishness and ignorance.

IV

At the end of "Benito Cereno" the reader longs for Ishmael's vision. The knowledge of himself, humanity, and the world which he achieves after his journey assures the reader that Ishmael will not be tricked or trapped again. He has experienced his Ahab, and he emerges from the ocean a new man, but not an innocent, ignorant new man as Delano is. Nor does Ishmael turn European, giving up all the apparent values in the American character. He does not remain ignorant either. Rather he seems to survive his fall into knowledge with his generosity, good nature, and good humor intact. Delano, on the contrary (who does not have a shred of a sense of humor), learns nothing; he becomes the American Boob in extreme who fails in his journey from innocence to experience. He is indeed a case of arrested development. One feels confident that if Delano had a future beyond the context of the tale, he would be fooled and tricked again; his benevolence would lead him blindly into the midst of danger. Perhaps, this next time no accident would save him—he might well be destroyed. As an American, Captain Amasa Delano lives in the present and for the future, but he does not understand that present—the world that exists; nor can he hope to comprehend the future if all he sees are "bright sun . . . the blue sea, and the blue sky."

Delano's character and nature, then, do not allow him to perceive the depravity and ambiguity in the Babo-Benito masquerade. He cannot see; the problem of should he have seen through the mask does not come up. His great defect—personally and as an American—results from this inability, from this inadequacy. His innocence provides no asset here, for his innocence stems from ignorance, not just from separation from the guilt and depravity of the past. One cannot cut himself off from knowledge of the past or from the complexity and ambiguity of life, even if he does not "share" the evil and guilt. Rather, one must become an Ishmael if he hopes to advance personally and nationally; even then he has no guarantees.

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Benito dies a cynic, but he has not always been bitter and disillusioned. He, too, is a fool in his own way. He is a fool because he believes in a world and class structure that no longer exists or is no longer relevant. The Captain of the *San Dominick* thinks he has been overwhelmed by the world's evil and malevolence, but Benito does not understand what has happened, either. Because of his own form of blindness he must conclude that any opposition to him—any revolt or change is evil. He dies disillusioned because the simple world of aristocrats (or benevolent slave traders) and submissive slaves no longer exists, if it ever did. Thus life plays its ultimate trick on Benito—by turning him into a cynic, it forces him to withdraw and soon kills him.

The end of the tale presents the two extremes dramatized in *The Confidence Man*: Trust and No Trust. Delano sails off into his blue sky, still full of hope and trust; Benito Cereno never hopes or trusts again—he wastes away physically and mentally and soon dies. He is no more capable of dealing with reality than he was before the mutiny. The tale, then, finally reveals the inadequacy of either approach. For the very existence of Benito Cereno must qualify Delano's optimism. Likewise, the valid hope that exists in Delano's American good nature reveals the weakness and foolishness of Cereno's cynicism.

And in the course of reading the tale one also discovers that although Babo and the slaves have a case for revolt against their white oppressors, their way offers nothing tenable because it leads to revolt and violence, not to any understanding or solution of a serious social and moral problem. Nevertheless, Babo's way of seeing reality invalidates the two white men's views of negroes and slaves.

Since no Ishmael exists in this world of fools and violence, except possibly in the narrator's point of view, perhaps the reader must believe that all of these approaches are inadequate. Such a conclusion should suggest that, above all, Delano's point of view, though dramatically dominant, is finally invalid because it is qualified and negated by Cereno, Babo, and the narrator. Delano's optimism and innocence become inadequate—and fail in all ways but the superficial—because his good nature does not have essential knowledge with which to confront the ambiguity of experience and the guilt of the past. "Benito Cereno," then, reveals an awareness, frequently dramatized in American fiction, of the failure of optimism—of the inadequacy of the Great American Boob.

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