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THE ORDER OF THE EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE IN *BENITO CERENO*

Shigeo Suzuki

It has generally been supposed that one of the themes of Melville's *Benito Cereno* is the conflict between "a white innocence" and "a very black evil."¹⁾ Although this reasonable view really offers a key to an understanding of this story, it still leaves us in a thick mist. For we are not taught what this "black evil" means in a deeper sense of the word. The purpose of this essay is to analyze what Melville has made of the opposite attitudes toward the evil between Amasa Delano and Benito Cereno and then to reveal the evil in a more definite way.²⁾

The uncertainty of the outcome of the American captain's kindness causes the prolonged suspense in this story. This suspense which makes the reader want to know how his kindness is going to turn out is caused by the strange circumstances of the ship, the *San Dominick*, and the mysterious attitude of the Spanish Captain, Benito Cereno, toward the kindness of the other Captain, Amasa Delano. This suspense is prolonged in this sinister dark situation. The development shows how this malicious situation on the foreign ship gradually comes to penetrate through the consciousness of the American Captain.

In the first place, Amasa Delano mistakenly suspected that the hypochondriac Spaniard would try to kill him and to capture his ship. After he noticed that this man was so small-hearted as to shiver at the sight of the barber's blood, he wiped out his idle fancy. But there still remained for him the mystery of the ship *San Dominick*, whose circumstances made even the daylight at noon dark and grey, and dismayed this good-natured American. He was then asked by the old white sailor, like Alexander the Great, to cut the knots of the rope. This man seemed to be telling him that it was his duty to solve the problem of the strangeness of this ship. Even though he clearly noticed that "there is

a strange craft, a strange history, too, and strange folks on board," he quickly added, "But – nothing more."³⁾

This suspense was solved when Don Benito leaped into the boat of Captain Delano and cried out, "this plotting pirate means murder!"⁴⁾ From this point onward, we gradually come to know what really happened on this ship. This slave boat was occupied and ruled by the leader of the Negroes named Babo with the slogan, "*Follow your leader.*"⁵⁾ All the whites on board were forced to obey the commands of the slaves. Fortunately this disordered boat was recaptured and came to be ruled by the whites again.

Judging from the development of the suspense and the result, this story seems to belong to the genre of an adventurous detective story. We cannot, however, explain the complete meaning of this whole story from the standpoint of this view. Just as *Moby Dick* appears to be an adventure novel of the sea and, at the same time, has a philosophical side as well, so this story has both an adventurous side and a philosophical side. That is why the story did not merely end when the ship carrying slaves was recaptured and put into right order by the whites. If this story had come to an end with the long description from the point of view of Captain Delano, we would better call it *Amasa Delano*. Although Benito Cereno had been merely a poor victim of the slaves until he was saved by the American Captain, he began to play an important role in revealing the deep meaning of the riot of the slaves. We could finally realize the real significance of this story through the deposition of Don Cereno in the last part of the story.

The Spaniard described how his slaves started a riot on the voyage homeward and what the purpose of the riot was. He unconsciously let it be known how wise and clever those innocent-looking Negroes had been at deceiving. They were not merely slaves made to work for the white people. The awakening truth here was that the honorable friendship between the captain and the Negroes has nothing in common with fraternal acts of a servant for a master. There was also the presentation of the reverse world of white supremacy in the deposition of the Spaniard. Without noticing what he was saying, he earnestly depicted the vision of

a world where the values of ordinary life were completely reversed. In addition, there remained the irony of the fate of the story-teller. Although he insisted on his confident belief in the Providence of God in his deposition, this Captain did not die safe and sound. His name Benito Cereno suggested "blessed, serene", but ironically he had to die in the end on a Mount of Agony because of his ever-present haunting fear that he would be again swallowed up in the completely reversed world.

The problem is not that there is another world whose values are completely opposite to those of man's ordinary world, but that man can be so haunted by the shade of another world that he can no longer recover his presence of mind. It is true to say that Captain Delano, who was once made to notice the presence of another mysterious world by the Spaniard, continues to cruise about with a white man's self-assured and providential innocence about the world. Unlike Benito Cereno, this Captain, who had peeped at this world as well as at that other world, did not notice the real significance of the other world at all. Even though he helped Benito Cereno by accident, he has experienced nothing and so has learnt nothing. He simply advised the Spaniard as follows: "the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it."⁶⁾ He took what had fallen upon him as Acts of God which pass away. His stoicism is an attitude toward time; the immediate present is accepted as only the immediate present. Therefore he found there was no reason to suppose that the future would be the same and that this presentation of the extraordinary world would ever menace him again. His attitude was, what we might call, "American innocence" or "white noddy."

In short, Melville tried to suggest another order of experience through this fiction. This order of experience is an extent which is the sum of infinite greatness.⁷⁾

We can find this kind of experience in "Young Goodman Brown" to some extent. The hero in that story saw what had never before come to his mind. All the good and faithful people in his neighbourhood were revealed to be sons and daughters of the devil. He thought that he saw the completely opposite side of his neighbours in the wood. As Hawthorne told the reader at the end of that story, it was only the hero's

dream. He believed that it was the truth and he forced himself into a gloomy grave. In this sense, the hero was similar to Captain Cereno. Both of them saw what they least expected and never dreamed of in their ordinary human thought. Their death was caused by such a gloomy experience so that it would be almost impossible to find any hopeful verse for their tombstone. They both had an extraordinary experience in an incomprehensible world. This new world was nothing but the mysterious "Valley of Dry Bones."⁸⁾ In his work, Hawthorne half-caricatured the figure of this rigid Puritan hero and let the reader know that what the hero saw was merely a dream. *Benito Cereno* showed, however, a real and not imaginary world. There was no caricature of the characters in this story. Melville's new world exists outside of our real life and so we might possibly have the same experience as Benito Cereno tomorrow.

The relation between the order of our general experience and that of this extraordinary one can be explained as follows: on one side Melville explicitly tried to accumulate any materials, and only revealed the blurred image of the other side to the reader. This story presented to the reader what the author could not solve, but the reader has to confront all through his life.⁹⁾ All we have to do is to cut the Gordian knots, although we do not know how. After reading through this work, we are naturally forced to have the same impression as in other Melville's works, especially *Bartleby*: there is no way to deal with what the author presented to the reader. If we are allowed to change the expression of Seneca, we may exclaim: *Effugere non potes necessitates, et non potes vincere.*

NOTES

- 1) F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), p. 507; James E. Miller, *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), p. 158.
- 2) Rosalie Feltenstein has discussed this aspect of the story from the viewpoint of a factual and a symbolic level, but she simply emphasizes that "he [Melville]

is examining in the actions of the Negroes how evil operates and...what its effects are." cf. Rosalie Feltenstein, "Melville's *Benito Cereno*," *American Literature*, 19 (1947), 245–255; The only critic to discuss the problem of evil in any detail is Richard Harter Fogle in *Melville's Shorter Tales* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1960), pp. 116–147. Although the conclusion of this essay appears to be similar to his, it was written independently without scrutinizing his study.

- 3) Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales*, Vol. 10 in *The Standard Edition of the Works of Herman Melville* (1922–1924; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, Inc, 1963), p. 113.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 144
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 7) cf. Robert Martin Adams, *Nil: Episodes in the literary conquest of void during the 19th century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 143.
- 8) Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
- 9) Compare Hawthorne's comment on Melville in his *English Notebooks*, which was quoted by Randall Stewart in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Bibliography* (1948, rpt. New York: Archon Books, 1970), pp. 169–170.