

BENITO CERENO AND LEGAL OPPRESSION: A SZASZIAN INTERPRETATION

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To collaborate with an author in perceiving the implied ethical problems he poses and passing a moral judgment on their solution can be, as Wayne Booth has remarked, a heady experience for the enlightened reader.¹¹ The wide attention given to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, both as novel and as film, suggests to the student of literary history that nineteenth century fiction has also raised questions which may give pause to anyone considering the American Dream. Since Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* were both mimetic portrayals of slavery, it is instructive to contrast the two. Each was an attempt, like Ken Kesey's book, to awaken its readers from somnolent optimism, forcing them to confront the realities of institutionalized evil. Yet *Benito Cereno* appeared almost thirty years before *Huckleberry Finn*, and it addressed a pre-Civil War audience. Thus the insights provided by the psychiatric scholar Thomas S. Szasz for understanding a novel like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are applicable to Melville's story, for reasons that I shall demonstrate in this paper.

To begin with the obvious, which sometimes needs to be emphasized, we should remember that, like coercive psychiatry today, in large parts of the western hemisphere during most of the nineteenth century slavery, though abhorred by many people, was legal, defended with all the power of the state. It was also socially sanctioned, in the antebellum North as well as in the South, with religion and custom combining to mask it as an institution benefiting not only white society but also the oppressed blacks.

Hence much of the pathos of *Huckleberry Finn* lies in Huck's unquestioning acceptance of the fact that he is committing a crime by not

surrendering his slave companion to Jim's legal owner. According to the beliefs of his society, Huck is also endangering his soul. The most poignant scene in the novel occurs when, after much mind-twisting vacillation, he finally resolves not to reveal Jim's whereabouts. Teetering back and forth in an agony of indecision and doubt over what course to follow, he never doubts that one alternative involves compounding a crime and enacting a sin.

The more I studied about this, the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. . . . The plain hand of Providence [was] slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm. . . . I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire."

It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray; and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was, and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come.

Huck thinks of the many kindnesses Jim has shown him.

I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied it a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell." . . .

It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming.¹²

Although Huck chooses to contravene the legal sanctions of his society for Jim's sake, he does not question the morality of the law; he simply decides to break it. Moreover, his opinion of the very conventional Tom Sawyer falls

when he thinks that Tom has also decided to break the law in helping a slave escape. Subsequently we learn that Tom has done no such thing. Jim has been free all along, manumitted in his dead mistress' will, and Tom knew it. His cruel torments of Jim, and his reckless disregard for the ex-slave's safety as well as their own, had been occasioned by nothing but a romantic playing of foolish boys' games. He is merely enacting an elaborate charade, which has no more ethical profundity, though it is a good deal more dangerous for all concerned, than his earlier rout of a Sunday School picnic with wooden swords.

Huck makes a completely individual decision to break the law in one instance; it never occurs to him to challenge the moral foundation of the law itself. Tom Sawyer, however, does not break the law even in the single instance involving Jim; he merely pretends to do so. Both he and his creator were, in a fundamental sense, playing it safe. *Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1884-1885. Mark Twain wrote his novel years after the abolition of slavery, although he was portraying an antebellum society. Moreover, whatever its status at law, helping the kindly and paternalistic Jim flee to freedom was hardly an offense to right feeling.

Herman Melville, however, said "NO! in thunder"^[3] to slavery while it was still legal by showing its victims reacting with murderous violence.^[4] His extraordinary novella, *Benito Cereno* (1855),^[5] in effect turns the institution upside down, and portrays whites as the slaves of a band of African Negroes. Cargo on a South American slaver, they have mutinied and become dominant on board the *San Dominick*, killing the whites or holding them hostage. The Castilian Chilean captain, Don Benito Cereno, had formerly accepted slavery unthinkingly along with his society's other mores. But his experience as a helpless slave forces him to recognize the horror of human bondage, and although he is rescued from the insurrectionists, who are either captured or killed, his distraught psyche has been dealt a fatal blow. An honorable if hitherto unreflective man, he cannot cope with the ethical inferno he has glimpsed, and he wastes away. Telling the blunt Captain Amasa Delano that the Negro has cast

"such a shadow" upon him that he cannot live, he succumbs to the vision of an evil too monstrous to be borne.

This story, written while slavery was under statutory protection in the United States, was created with great subtlety so that the horror of what the blacks do is fully apparent. Nevertheless, it is clear to modern readers that Melville was really mounting an extraordinarily effective attack against the perverted laws which allowed so intelligent and resourceful a person as Babo, leader of the mutineers, no role except that of a slave. *Benito Cereno* presents a wholly legal institution as a betrayal of humanity. The horrendous and terrifying crimes of mutiny and murder threaten society, to be sure, but the society they threaten is thereby revealed as one that has institutionalized evil.

When we look at the novella in more detail, we perceive the subtle ways in which Melville has portrayed his nightmare vision. He says explicitly that the devices on the oval shield mounted on the *San Dominick's* stern are symbolic. The most prominent medallion among them shows a masked satyr "holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" (p. 70). Who is the oppressor, who the oppressed?

The differing responses to slavery of Captain Amasa Delano and Don Benito Cereno reveal Melville's psychological profundity. Only a superficial Candide who sees little harm in the human soul can maintain his equanimity in a slave-holding society riddled with injustice. Delano is described as "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". Melville then adds sardonically: "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." His benignity, indeed, is what enables the Yankee captain to bear a charmed life, as he smiles and chats his way among the mutineers. He himself says that his feelings of "good-nature, compassion, and charity" conquered his distrust in a situation

where he might have paid for acuteness with his life (pp. 67, 168).

But in a profounder sense, this same shallow optimism prevents him from understanding Cereno's distress and fatal melancholy after his rescue. The Castilian has observed that "even the best man [may] err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted". Don Benito himself, having become acquainted with those dark recesses in the microcosmic slave society of the *San Dominick*, is now in a position to understand the mutineers' conduct. It is a knowledge he cannot live with. When Captain Delano says, "the past is past; why moralise upon it?" Don Benito reveals his premonition of death. The astonished Yankee cries, "You are saved, . . . you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?" "The negro", is Don Benito's response (pp. 168-169). After such knowledge, what forgiveness? On being dismissed by the court of inquiry into the mutiny, he retires to the seclusion of a monastery, where he dies three months later.

At this point, it is instructive to consider some comments by Dr. Szasz — who has made detailed studies of various forms of oppression — on American slavery and its psychological consequences, for slave, slaveholder, and abolitionist.¹⁶ His perceptions help us to understand not only Amasa Delano and Benito Cereno, but also Babo and his followers. Szasz, following other thinkers, begins by emphasizing the paternalistic perspective that played an important part in justifying slavery. He quotes Stanley M. Elkins on the comforting stereotype of the merry Negro slave, happy in his bondage. According to Elkins, "the failure of any free workers to present themselves for enslavement can serve as one test of how much the analysis of the 'happy slave' may have added to Americans' understanding of themselves". The Yankee Captain Amasa Delano is, of course, no adherent of slavery; but for that very reason the stereotypes with which it has infected his thinking are the more repugnant. Although at one point he reflects that "slavery breeds ugly passions in man", he does not consider blacks as fully human.¹⁷ In his view they are almost a different species from whites; their docility and

contentment are due to their limited minds. He regards them as rather stupid, inferior beings specially adapted to make cheerful, loyal and affectionate personal servants. African women, he thinks, are tender-hearted but tough, "unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves". The animal imagery in which Delano thinks of Negroes is revealing. "At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting at his door, watching some free man of colour 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". He "took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (pp. 105, 121).

Szasz points out to the contrary that nothing in the nature of things ordained that Africans should be slaves. Rather, "the white man who sailed for Africa, captured the Negro, brought him to America in shackles, and then sold him as if he were an animal, created slavery and slaves". Slavery was not an existential absolute; it was a particular form of interaction between oppressor and oppressed, which, like all tactics of exclusion, could be turned around, with the former victim becoming the master. But seeing it in this light had far-reaching implications. It meant that the dedicated slave-holder, while paying lip service to the fatuous notion that "a merrier being does not exist on the face of the globe than the Negro slave", lived in constant fear of his violence and revolt. On the other hand, Szasz indicates that to protest "against the slave trade would have provoked the hostility of powerful religious and economic interests", since the critic of slavery would have been "at odds with all the tradition and wisdom of Western civilization". The decent slaveholder who manumitted his slaves — as he had to once he faced honestly his oppressive relationship to them — was threatened with "expulsion from the community — through economic pressure or personal harassment or both". It is this moral dilemma that Benito Cereno's harrowing ordeal has forced him to confront — and he can find no solution. After his rescue, he cannot even look at Babo, and faints at the trial when he is forced to do so.

But the perception of slavery as an oppressive

relationship had even more drastic consequences for slaves. It meant, according to Szasz, that they "had an obligation to revolt and emancipate themselves". Even the fatherly Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* has this attitude. The young Huck is horrified, as Mark Twain ironically points out, when his slave companion reveals that "the first thing he would do when he got to a free State" would be to save his money

and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife, which was owned on a farm close to where Miss Watson lived; and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them.

It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, "give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell". Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children — children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm. (p. 73)

But the decision that Melville's Babo reaches is far more terrible, with monstrous consequences. Like Jonathan Swift before him, Melville recognized that, if the oppressed are not to internalize their own degradation, they must fight against it. At the same time, again like Swift, he realized that the enslaved make the worst tyrants.^[8] We learn at the trial that Babo "had determined to kill his master, Don Alexandro Aranda, [who had thought his slaves were so "tractable" they need not be fettered] both because he and his companions could not otherwise be sure of their liberty, and that to keep the seamen in subjection, he wanted to prepare a warning of what road they should be made to take did they or any of them oppose him". We learn also that "all the negroes, though not in the first place knowing to the design of revolt, when it was accomplished, approved it" (pp. 154, 161).

The dauntless Babo was a man of extraordinary intelligence and administrative ability. He had been, as he says, even "in his own land . . . only a poor slave; a black man's slave was Babo, who now is the white's" (p. 90). Gambling everything on mutiny and murder, he

had achieved a few months' respite from his debased status. But he had not won "freedom"; as shackled by slavery as ever, he simply became the oppressor rather than the oppressed, still lacking the independence which, in Szasz's words, would have afforded him "the luxury of seeing and saying the truth". His grim fate haunts the reader, a symbol, like the *San Dominick's* medallion, of man's inhumanity to man:

As for the black — whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot — his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat. Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words . . .

Some months after [the trial], dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites. (pp. 169 — 170)

What I am suggesting in this paper is that *Benito Cereno*, unlike *Huckleberry Finn*, is in many ways a precursor of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and that most people can deal with it more objectively than they can the modern novel. Both Melville and Kesey had the courage to attack legal oppression at the very time when it was most strongly entrenched, supported not only by law but also by social custom and economic interest. Although Kesey has been a member of the prestigious American Association for the Abolition of Involuntary Mental Hospitalization, an organization composed primarily of psychiatric and legal professionals, many people, as the cinematic version of his novel revealed, have failed to perceive that it was institutional psychiatry itself he was attacking. The reactions to both his novel and its film adaptation illuminate some of the difficulties Melville was struggling with. Like Kesey, he had to pick his way gingerly over territory strewn with land mines, any one of which might blow up in his face. In *Benito Cereno* he answers a rhetorical question posed by Szasz. Commenting on Euripides' definition of a slave as someone who cannot speak his thoughts, Szasz asks — as the Greek dramatist had not — "Is a man a slave because he cannot speak his thoughts, or is he incapable of speaking his thoughts because he is a slave?" Melville por-

trayed one of his three main characters as an intelligent and resourceful man who could not speak his thoughts precisely because he was a slave. Moreover, Babo himself was acute enough to realize that his status shackled not only his limbs, but his tongue. Since he could not speak his mind, he remained silent.

That Melville was honest and courageous enough to remain true to his vision of evil in the society he lived in cost him the price of perceptive critical recognition of his novella for many years. Despite the resurgence of interest in his writing in the 1920s and 30s, *Benito Cereno* continued to be misread until the last decade. Thus Merlin Bowen in 1960 still saw Babo as a malignant expression of existential evil rather than the oppressed victim of a legally sanctioned social institution. Even today one encounters curious readings of this story. For example, while William B. Dillingham's recent study of *Benito Cereno* is in many ways penetrating and sophisticated, its conclusion is skewed by contemporary fashionable attitudes toward "mental illness". Not only does Dillingham fail to deal with Cereno's perception of slavery, after he has experienced it at first hand, as an oppressive institution; he trivializes Melville's portrayal of Cereno's vision of this terrible truth as a "parable of a psychological situation" in which Babo is subjected to the further indignity of completely losing his own identity to become incorporated into Cereno's soul, with the critic taking up where a slaveholding society left off. The Spanish Cereno-Babo, who is called "Dominick" in this interpretation, admits that he is "mentally ill" and wants to be "normal" like Delano (now called "Bachelor"). Even though, through Bachelor, "society with its institutions" helps him, there is no final "cure for the patient" because his "mental stability" has been taken over by madness. Bachelor, "an ordinary, normal person", cannot understand "why Dominick could not simply snap back and be normal once this illness was diagnosed and the treatment applied".¹⁹

One is chagrined to discover a sensitive and well-informed study of Melville's story deteriorating into this nonsense at its conclusion. The reason, however, is not far to seek. Just as slavery in antebellum America

permeated the thinking and imagery of an entire society — including the Yankee abolitionists represented by Captain Delano — so "mental illness" today, with all its stereotypes, has become imbedded in contemporary thinking to the extent that an able critic like Dillingham is swept up by its capacity for creating myths. *Benito Cereno* has had to wait over a century for any real understanding. But it is now time to recognize and confront the issues of human wickedness it explores, instead of evading them by resorting to the metaphors of disease. This monumental achievement of nineteenth-century fiction is awe-inspiring in its examination of what evil institutions can do to the ethical standards even of good men.

NOTES

1. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961; rpt. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 307.
2. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, eds. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1962), pp. 166–168.
3. Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, April 16, 1851; from Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman, eds., *The Letters of Herman Melville* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960). Actually, Melville is referring to Hawthorne himself.
4. For useful discussions of Melville's attitude toward slavery, see Charles H. Foster, "Something in Emblems: A Reinterpretation of *Moby Dick*", *The New England Quarterly*, 34 (March, 1961), pp. 3–35; Alan Heimert, "Moby Dick and American Political Symbolism", *American Quarterly*, 15 (Winter, 1963), p. 512; Margaret M. Vanderhaar, "A Re-Examination of 'Benito Cereno'", *American Literature*, 40 (May, 1968), pp. 179–191; Eleanor E. Simpson, "Melville and the Negro: From *Typee* to 'Benito Cereno'", *AL*, 41 (March, 1969), pp. 19–38; Scott Donaldson, "The Dark Truth of *The Piazza Tales*", *PMLA*, 85 (October, 1970), pp. 1082–1086; Jean Fagan Yellin, "Black Masks: Melville's 'Benito Cereno'", *AQ*, 22 (Fall, 1970), pp. 678–689; Ruth B. Mandel, "The Two Mystery Stories in *Benito Cereno*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14 (Winter, 1973), pp. 631–642; Joyce Sparer Adler, "Melville's *Benito Cereno*: Slavery and Violence in the Americas", *Science & Society*, 38 (Spring, 1974), pp. 19–48; Howard Welsh, "The Politics of Race in 'Benito Cereno'", *AL*, 46 (January, 1975), pp. 556–566; and Carolyn L. Karcher, "Melville's 'The Gees': A Forgotten Satire on Scientific Racism", *AQ*, 27 (October, 1975), pp. 421–442.
5. Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno", in *The Piazza Tales*, Vol. X, *The Works of Herman Melville* (London: Constable and Company, 1923), pp. 66–170. This edition is used for all quotations and page references in the text.

6. His observations are taken from the following sources: *Ideology and Insanity* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books / Doubleday, 1970), pp. 127–136; "Blackness and Madness", *The Yale Review* (Spring, 1970), p. 337; *Ceremonial Chemistry* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press / Doubleday, 1974), p. 86; *Karl Kraus and the Soul-Doctors* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), p. 46.
7. A good contextual *Weltanschauung* for his views is provided in an anthology edited by Louis Ruchames, *Racial Thought in America*, Vol. I, *From the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1969). See also Warren Howard, *American Slavers and the Federal Law, 1837–1862* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).
8. For a perceptive analysis of Swift's views that has large implications, see Ann Cline Kelley, "Swift's Explorations of Slavery in *Houyhnhnmland* and *Ireland*", *PMLA*, 91 (October, 1976), pp. 846–855.
9. William B. Dillingham, "A Dark Similitude — 'Benito Cereno'", in his *Melville's Short Fiction: 1853–1856* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), pp. 227–270; see especially pp. 267–270. For Bowen's interpretation, see his *The Long Encounter: Self and Experience in the Writings of Herman Melville* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).