BENITO CERENO AND THE INFORMATION ENTROPY OF THE SLAVE REBELLION

Robert Tindol
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies
China
roberttindol@hotmail.com

Abstract

The frequency of slave rebellions in antebellum America is an obscure chapter in American history. But even though news of the 250 or so uprisings was sparse at the time and equally as sparse in the mainstream historical narrative of today, the dynamics of the rebellions were nonetheless suitable for literary rendering. This paper focuses on Herman Melville's Benito Cereno in order to demonstrate that the novel highlights a unique type of information entropy at work in the interactions between rebelling slaves and both the white masters who own them and the indifferent society that nonchalantly assumes it benefits materially from slavery. This view is based on the assumption that strategic information moves more efficiently among those who wish to gain the initiative -- such as slaves desiring their freedom -- and that this informational advantage typically provides the latter with certain advantages in outmaneuvering those who would keep them in bondage.

The frequency of slave rebellions in antebellum America may be one of the best-kept secrets in the country's history. High school students have usually heard of Nat Turner, the organizer of an unsuccessful slave revolt, and others have seen the film *Amistad*, about the failed slave uprising aboard a ship, but the topic has been and continues to be obscure to all but the specialist. Yet, an iconoclastic 1937 book by Herbert Aptheker showed that at least 250 slave uprising took place on American soil, each involving at least 10 slaves, and occasionally, hundreds if not thousands. Aptheker, who based the book on records, journals, newspaper accounts, transcribed family histories, courthouse transcripts, bench warrants, wanted posters, and whatever else he could put his hands on, lamented in the preface that "the controlling view held that the response of the slave in the United States to his bondage 'was one of passivity and docility'" (Aptheker xi). And though he concluded that the news of slave rebellions was often willfully and enthusiastically suppressed by the very journalistic institutions with whom the moral responsibility of informing the public rested, the fact remained that there had always been a puzzling information blackout on slave rebellions in America.

Thus, it seems paradoxical that slave rebellions are typical fare for nineteenth-century literature, even though the historical antecedents of various literary works are based on events that somehow never entered the mainstream American historical narrative. But another explanation is that, even though news of the rebellions was often minimized or even suppressed, the dynamics of the rebellions were nonetheless suitable for literary rendering. The purpose of this study is to focus on one novel, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, in order to demonstrate that the novel highlights a unique type of information entropy is at work in the interactions between rebelling slaves and both the white masters who own them and the indifferent society that nonchalantly assumes it benefits materially from slavery. This view is based on the assumption that strategic information moves more efficiently among those who wish to gain the initiative -- such as slaves desiring their freedom -- and that this informational advantage typically provides them with certain advantages in outmaneuvering those who would keep them in bondage.

At the same time, information among the complacent white owners and slave traders tends to be very inefficient, and at times, dysfunctional. There are reasons that can be inferred from information science on why this might be true and how entropy may be structured into the very fabric of reality, but this paper will settle for merely demonstrating that *Benito Cereno*, which was based on a historical event, strongly implies that the very nature of slavery was such that white America would be increasingly threatened if it didn't get rid of the institution once and for all, and that this threat was a natural manifestation that was over and above the religious justifications for abolition, as well as any secular notions that slavery was morally bankrupt. The problem for those who wanted to perpetuate slavery, I argue, was that slavery by its very nature led the oppressors into informational inefficiency.

The definition of information entropy probably necessitates a brief explanation of entropy in general. Entropy is by no means a new concept, having been derived empirically in the mid-19th century when experimenters began noticing that a mechanical engine simply cannot be used to run itself without an external source of power. Extrapolating well beyond the mechanics of the steam engines of the day, physicists realized that energy dissipated by dint of physical reality, and further assumed that human beings were not the exception to the rule. By the turn of the twentieth century, "heat death" was assumed to be the ultimate fate of the universe, and soon became a familiar concept in works such as *The Education of Henry* Adams. There was for decades a troubling question of how humanity can be a veritable perpetual-motion machine if the laws of thermodynamics are correct, but this conundrum was resolved in the 1960s, when the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Ilya Prigogine demonstrated through cleverly-constructed chemical pumps that a system running far from chemical equilibrium (such as a living, breathing human being) could stably exist for a surprisingly long period of time without in any way violating the principle of entropy. (Porush 370-71)

Information entropy follows very closely, and is described with particular eloquence by Stephen Hawking in his bestselling work *A Brief History of Time*. According to Hawking, the three arrows of time are the psychological, the thermodynamic, and the cosmological, and that the first two are inextricably linked. If it weren't for the linkage, then there would be no "development of intelligent beings who can ask the question: why does disorder increase in the same direction of time as that in which the universe expands?" (Hawking 185).

Hawking, whose discussion of the arrow of time is reminiscent of Prigogine's work on dissipative structures, explains that the lesser-known concept of informational entropy is important in understanding how heat-death relates to human psychology. In a particularly clear explanation of informational entropy, he explains that the best way of understanding how the neurons in a human brain are involved in the process is to look at the less complicated workings of a computer's memory circuits, which in turn is analogues to the even less complicated working of an ancient abacus:

> Before an item is recorded in a computer's memory, the memory is in a disordered state, with equal probabilities for the two possible states. (The abacus beads are scattered randomly on the wires of the abacus.) After the memory interacts with the system to be remembered, it will definitely be in one state or thee other, according to the state of the system. (Each abacus bead will be at either the left or the right of the abacus wire.) So the memory has passed from a disordered state to an ordered one. However, in order to make sure that the memory is in the right state, it is necessary to use a certain amount of energy (to move the bead or to power the computer, for example). This energy is dissipated as heat, and increases the amount of disorder in the universe. One can show that this increase in disorder is always greater than the increase in the order of the memory itself. Thus the heat expelled by the computer's cooling fan means that when a computer records an item in memory, the total amount of disorder in the universe goes up. The direction of time in which a computer remembers the past is the same as that in which disorder increases (Hawking 151).

To extrapolate to humans, our very act of acquiring information in our brains requires some expenditure of energy. There's no point in proving this meticulously, but likely it is self-evident that slight changes in brain chemistry always occur in any sort of brain activity, and that this activity is always slightly higher than in a case of total sensory deprivation. Thus, even if learning is quite passive, there is still some chemical activity going on in the brain, however nominal, and this activity is ultimately giving off some heat. We come full circle with the application of Prigogine's dissipative structures in that these very chemical processes that make learning possible are analogous to the simple test-tube experiments in which swirling chemical reactions are demonstrated to be time-dependent and irreversible at some level. In short, learning and accumulation of knowledge -- whether by man, a simple animal with a primitive sensory system, or machine -- has an arrow of time. Therefore, the acquisition of knowledge and chemical dissipative structures are pretty much two faces of the same coin: we memorize a poem by Wordsworth, and the giant red spot of Jupiter persists for hundreds of years. Both are dissipative structures. It may be helpful to return to Hawking's summation of thermodynamics and its importance to human existence:

> …a strong thermodynamic arrow is necessary for intelligent life to operate. In order to survive, human beings have to consume food, which is an ordered form of energy, and covert it into heat, which is a disordered form of energy. Thus intelligent life could not exist in the contracting phase of the universe. This is the explanation of why we observe that the thermodynamic and cosmological arrows of time point in the same direction. It is not that the explanation of the universes causes disorder to increase. Rather, it is that the no-boundary condition causes disorder to increase and the conditions to be suitable for intelligent life only in the expanding phase….
>
> The progress of the human race in understanding the universe has established a small corner of order in an increasingly disordered universe. If you remember every word in this book, your memory will have recorded about two million pieces of information: the order in your brain will have increased by about two million units. However, while you have been reading the book, you will have converted at least a thousand calories of ordered energy…into disordered energy, in the form of heat that you lose to the air around you…This will increase the disorder of the universe by about twenty million million million million units – or about ten million million million times the increase in order in your brain – and that's if you remember *everything* in this book. (Hawking 156-7).

With this explanation, it is clear that technological innovation cannot go on forever.

To return to the question of slave rebellions and how the master and slave process information differently, it is helpful to point out that the one with the weapon is almost always the one who devotes the least possible attention to the entities the weapon is intended to subdue. The one with his or her back to the wall, by contrast, is willing if not forced to expend inordinate amounts of energy in merely surviving the encounters that will take place in the quest for freedom. It makes sense, then, that the stressed rebel or runaway slave will be using and processing information at a highly efficient rate due to the very nature of the human organism, while the master will be very unlikely to do so. The equation will have to be balanced eventually, and will probably be balanced on the backs of the ones who benefited from the temporary and localized increase of order (i.e., the highly efficient accumulation of information). But to shift the discussion from the natural world to the political world, the institution of slavery will have long since ceased to exist by then.

Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* first appeared in 1855 in serialized form in the popular *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, and in a more polished version the following year as part of his collection *The Piazza Tales*. Appearing a decade after Melville's enormously popular bestsellers *Typee* and *Omoo*, the story undoubtedly attracted a great deal of attention, even though the author was

widely perceived by the reading public to have stumbled with his more recent works such as *Moby Dick*.

The story is based on the real-life episode in which the crew of the Spanish slave ship *Tryal* was subdued by the several dozen slaves on board that were erroneously thought to be "tractable," and was ordered to sail for the nearest country governed by black people. The leader of the uprising was a charismatic native of West Africa named Babo, who has lived in Spanish-speaking countries long enough to have become fluent in the language, as have several of his black shipmates. Even though there is an African king on board, leadership was deferred to Babo because of his superior abilities and organizational skills. On learning that the slave ship doesn't possess sufficient drinking water to cross the Atlantic Ocean to Senegal, which Babo had decided is the only place where he and his colleagues could live free, Babo elected to set a duplicitous trap for an unsuspecting ship so that fresh supplies could be obtained. A whaling ship from New England eventually passed close by, and the captain, Amasa Delano (a Bostonian of Spanish ancestry but barely communicative in the language) came on board to see if the ship and its crew were in distress. A somewhat peculiarly-acting Spanish captain named Bonito Sereno said that bad luck and malaria had wiped out many of the crew and slave cargo, and that he indeed could use some supplies. Delano obligingly sent his boat back for supplies from his own ship, but hours later as he prepared to leave the *Tryal*, the Spanish captain at the last possible instant jumped onto his boat as it was being lowered back to the water and rapidly told Delano that he was being held hostage by the black people on board. Delano could not follow Sereno's excited Spanish, but a Portuguese shipmate who happened to be in Delano's gamming crew -- himself fluent in Spanish -- translated into English the facts of the rebellion for Delano. The Americans, though pursued by several rebels who jumped into the water to try to overtake the boat, made it safely back to their ship, where Delano gathered weapons and bribed the crew to assist in the battle. The whaling crew then returned to the *Tryal* to recapture the ship and place the rebels in chains. Several of the rebels were killed, including Babo and the king, and after capturing the surviving rebels, Delano took the two ships to the nearest major port, an inquiry was conducted by the Spanish authorities, and nine members of the rebel band were condemned to death, their heads placed on poles in public, presumably to warn others of the dire consequences of insufficient docility. The remaining black survivors of the *Tryal* were returned to slavery (Richardson 95-122).

Delano wrote up the story of the 1805 rebellion in his 1817 book, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*. Melville, a voracious reader of anything pertaining to the sea, rendered the history of the rebellion into his 1855 work at the height of the confict between the abolitionists and those sympathetic to slavery. Though the *Tryal* rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful, the actual details of the episode were by their very nature of little comfort to anyone who wished to preserve the institution of slavery -- or to anyone who merely wished for the relatively calm status quo of 1850s America to be maintained, for that matter. Anyone really perusing the details of the *Tryal* affair would have to have admitted that the American captain overcame the rebels through sheer luck and force of arms. From Bonito's convenient jumping into the ship and slipping out of the hands of his captors, to the one-sided battle pitting the Americans armed with muskets and portable cannons against men armed only with the sharp onboard instruments routinely used in shipping, the suppression of the rebellion indicated no confidence that all such rebellions would be contained. If anything, the story suggested a growing danger to America if the country persisted in supporting slavery, because the story of Babo's near-success was one more heroic account that circulated like wildfire among those enslaved. A closer look at various details from Melville's story, especially those textual instances where the narrative differs from the historic account, show that Melville was more than willing to supplement the natural insecurities of the *Tryal* incident with some additional insecurities of his own making. But before turning to a reading of *Benito Cereno*, it is probably a good idea to provide just a bit more information about Melville's attitude toward slavery.

According to the critic Charles E. Nnolim, Melville had established his strong partisanship in the slave issue with the publication of *Mardi*, in which one of the sympathetic characters states that slaves are morally justified in applying deadly force and even violent revolution. That and other references to slavery in *Mardi*, Nnolim writes, amount to a condemnation of slavery despite the most ironic reading one can manage in attempting to demonstrate the contrary (Nnolim 5). Conveniently for Melville's American publisher, however, the novel was set in the faraway South Pacific, where a writer in the 1850s could call for violent rebellion without raising the hackles of the entire southern half of the country -- and significant portions of the northern half, as well. Nnolim, thoroughly convinced that Melville "was not unaware of the rebellious nature of the American Negro slave," sees the story as "a satire on American blindness and prejudice" that can be told most effectively through the application of irony (Nnolim 7, 65).

This irony depicts the most intelligent and politic of African-American slaves as individuals who are capable of outsmarting the white owners whose very justification of the moral rightness of slavery is based on the assumption that they are intellectually and spiritually superior. Babo, the leader of the slaves in both the actual overthrow of the Spanish slave ship *Tryal* and in Melville's fictionalized retelling, is clearly more capable as a leader and as a thinker than Amasa Delano, the American sea captain who has chanced upon the slaves and their Spanish hostages. And Babo is certainly more capable than Benito Cereno--whom Melville has playfully renamed to suggest the translated meaning "pallid monk," from the original "Bonito Sereno," or "blessed serenity" (Richardson 81). The vitiated, pallid titular captain of the *San Dominick* (which Richardson believes was coined by Melville from the original *Tryal* as a reference to the Santo Domingo slave uprising) is an examplar of his home country, which once had a powerful economy fueled in part by slavery, but by the nineteenth century was a victim of its own New World excesses (Richardson 72). Don Benito is not only a mediocre sea captain who is easily duped by resourceful slaves, Delano eventually discovers, but is also physically unwell. He is so ill by the time the slave rebellion is put down and his ship is recaptured that he is forced into long-term convalescence as soon as he gives testimony to the legal authorities, dying three months later. Though he is a Spanish gentleman, his refinement has no impact on his ability to keep slaves directed toward their destinies as pawns of the capitalistic system.

Don Benito's physical condition is a detail invented by Melville, and as such provides support for the critical assumption that Melville considered slavery an institution that could not remain economically viable for any country, because great powers rise and fall.[1] The actual Bonito Sereno was a perfectly healthy man who was indeed held hostage by the rebelling slaves on his ship, but whose moral probity might be considered by some observers to be much more hazy than his fictional counterpart. Sereno, as in the novel, offered Delano a substantial sum of the ship's capital if he will put down the rebellion, according to court testimony, but later tried vigorously to back out of the deal. The Spanish authorities were so contemptuous of his conduct that the court paid Delano the money that had been promised him, presumably with the intention of later confiscating the goods on the

[1] Presumably this is a truism that requires no documentation, but Harvard historian William Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* is a meticulously documented and convincing argument that all great economic powers eventually spend themselves out and lose their former prominence on the world stage. Melville, who consumed books and information with endless enthusiasm, would have been familiar with Gibbons's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, from which a somewhat similar thesis can reasonably be inferred. The major difference in Kennedy's modern book and Gibbons, however, is arguably that the latter argues that things can fall apart, while the latter argues that things will fall apart, despite compensatory efforts to avoid the inevitable.

Tryal for remuneration (Richarson 102-5). But the very fact that Delano finds it necessary to receive a monetary bribe is a matter apparently too ambiguous for even a novelist of supreme ambiguities such as Melville. The real-life Delano, we learn when we read the actual documents of the incident, was obliged to fight constantly for control of his own ship, having been forced to take on a number of convicts for deck hands due to attrition. Had there not been booty to promise his band of cutthroats, he might have found his own situation nearly as precarious as that of Sereno upon returning to his own ship after putting down the rebellion on the *Tryal*. These details were obviously not the ones Melville chose to reform the details of the rebellion for his story, but an argument can be made that both the actual recounting of events and the fictionalized rendering leave the reader with little confidence in America's ability to maintain the institution of slavery. That Delano can put down the rebellion only with superior technology (the slaves had nothing to shoot back at the attackers from Delano's ship) and superior bribery made possible by the sheer inertia of America's privileged economic circumstances, leaves little optimism that the eventual fate of America will differ from that of Spain.

However, the text of *Benito Cereno* from the very first page undercuts any assumption that the putting down of a slave rebellion is a black-and-white matter in which the more advanced race exerts its natural superiority over an inferior race. The very first physical description of Delano's gaze across the bay at the San Dominick emphasizes the grayness of the situation: "Everything was mute and calm; everything gray," is the description of the morning itself (Melville 673). The sea "was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mold," while the sky "seemed a gray surtout," the birds -- "gray fowl" -- are obliged to fly among "troubled gray vapors," and everything else the eye can see is dimmed by "shadows present," presumably also rather gray in color (Melville 673). Melville's statement that the ship "showed no colors," is standard seagoing jargon referring to the lack of flags on display, but the metaphorical meaning is an unsettling foreshadowing for the naïve reader reading the text for the first time, and a confirmation of the ambiguity and irony of the circumstances for the reader who knows what is in store (Melville 673).

Delano immediately recognizes the pecularity of the circumstances -- in fact, the mate who awoke him to have a look at the ship immediately recognized the peculiarity himself -- but Delano is "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 673). This highly ambiguous statement is taken by critics such as Nnolim as an indication of the threat that America's naïve optimism poses in regard to the slavery question (Nnolim 16). But the construction of the statement also indicates that one cannot determine whether Babo and his cohorts are, for Melville, actually evil. All we are told is that Delano is not inclined to become unduly alarmed, but the question of whether there is no evil to raise his suspicious, or else the evil itself doesn't rise to the threshold of raising Delano's suspicions cannot be resolved on the first page, nor in the remainder of the story.

Another interesting detail that Richardson says is deeply imbedded in the narrative is the fact that the putting down of the slave rebellion must have occurred on July 4, according to the manner in which the date of the voyage's beginning on May 20 and the number of days that passed until the encounter occurred are mentioned in the text (Richardson 71-72). Thus, the freedom and self-government of a group of individuals are taken away by an American on the very day America celebrates its freedom from tyrrany and its right to self-government (Richardson 72).

Perhaps the most significant reason that Delano is duped by Babo and his cohorts is that their system of internal communication is highly efficient in dealing with their hostages and the Americans alike. They naturally all have their stories straight and have coached the Spaniards to stick with the fabricated account if they wish to keep their lives. But the depth of the communicative manipulations go far beyond the rebels merely telling Delano, "in one language, and as with one voice…a common

tale of suffering" (Melville 676). The stories are consistent, but so are all the physical actions and visual symbols. The fact that the ship is displaying no colors deprives Delano of the semaphores that he would normally rely upon in determining the nature of the vessel, but the vaguery of the ship's provenance is also useful in keeping him cognitively off-balance, for a ship flying its colors according to covention, while at the same time operating in other unconventional ways, might have served to raise his suspicious. The reader is never told whether the taking down of the colors was intentional, but the treatment of the figurehead is repeatedly alluded to, and whether the pun is intentional or not, figures into the unfolding of events. A careful description of the masthead is provided in the early pages:

> Whether the ship had a figure-head, or only a plain beak, was not quite certain, owing to canvvas wrapped about that part, either to protect it while undergoing a re-furbishing, or else decently to hide its decay. Rudely painted or chalked, as in a sailor freak, along the forward side of a sort of pedestal below the canvas, was the sentence, "sequid vuestro jefe," (follow your leader) (Melville 76).

We later learn that the original figurehead was a representation of Columbus, taken down and thrown away by the rebels and replaced with the gruesome skeleton of the slave owner, who was killed in the initial uprising. The slave owner's corpse was subsequently taken below, presumably boiled down or else cannibalized in a ritual that is never made clear in the text, and then mounted as the figurehead with the sardonic warning "sequid vuestro jefe," written in the language that the Spanish hostages can understand. The figurehead thus has several intentions for characters in the text as well as the American reading public. For Don Benito and his Spanish crew, the action serves notice that Columbus's discovery of the New World may have consequences that can still become unpleasant as the years wear on. The sight of the corpse is an obvious warning that the Spaniards can be killed like the slave owner if they do not get the rebels to the safety of an African country, but it also serves cynical notice that the institution of slavery is the entity in which authority on the ship is invested, rather than the maritime powers invested in the captain. And to American readers of the 1850s, the gruesome image undoubtedly suggested the dire fate that awaits a country that doesn't resolve the issue of slavery within its borders.

Even when Babo is forced to improvise explanation of odd occurrences Delano observes during his hours on the ship, he does so with ingenuity and invention. When a fight breaks out between a black youth and a Spanish offspring of one of the officers, for example, the former slave delivers a severe cut to the head of his opponent with a knife now in his possession. This impetuous act was certainly unwelcomed by Babo and the other rebel leaders, but was probably unavoidable due to the youth of the perpetrator and his lifetime history of having been brutalized. Delano naturally thinks this is very impudent behavior for a slave, and tells Don Benito that the youth should be severely punished, but Babo improvises an explanation that the injury was due to a good-natured roughhouse between two friends that had led to an accidental injury, which is sufficient to satisfy Delano.

One sign that Delano fails entirely to interpret is the possession of sharp weapons by many of the black men on deck. Several of them are busily pretending to sharpen hatchets, which Babo explains have been rusted due to expose in the lower holds. We later learn from Don Benito's testimony to the Spanish authorities--a fictionalized version of an actual court document -- that the men were stationed on deck to attack Delano and his men with the hatchets if the masquerade broke down. Interestingly, Delano has had his suspicion raised by the view of the men with hatchets and feels "an apprehensive twitch in the calves of his legs," but dismisses his qualms, we are told by the narrator. The American sea captain simply cannot conceive of a black man posing a significant threat; in fact, he constantly looks for assurances that the "slaves" are docile, as he expects all slaves everywhere to be. Neither do Don Benito's constant fainting spells -- themselves instances of short-

circuited communications--create any suspicion in Delano, for he considers Babo's constant attention to Don Benito to be appropriate for a slave, if not exceeding the call of duty:

> "Faithful fellow!" cried Capt.l Delano. "Don Benito, I envy you such a friend: slave I cannot call him." (Melville 685)

Oleaginous comments of this sort are typical of Delano, and as we know upon re-reading the story, quite ironic. As for ironic comments, the statement of Babo's that set up Delano's observation is also worth stating:

> "Ah, master," sighed the black, bowing his face, "don't speak of me; Babo is nothing; what Babo has done was but duty." (Melville 685)

This line undercuts the common critical assumption from the twentieth century that Babo was patterned after Shakespeare's Iago to represent a force of pure evil for evil's sake. Babo is seizing an opportunity to employ the truth in the service of irony. In this and every other instance in the story when Babo speaks, he displays total command of his acquired language for multifaceted communication purposes. But even his playfulness with language seems to be more a show of brinksmanship than contempt, because his alertness and alacrity with the turn of phrase contrasts sharply with those of the languid Don Benito, who Delano suspects to be a possible "involuntary victim of mental disorder" (Melville 681). Delano goes over in his mind thee maritime laws pertaining to relieving an incompetent commander, which is only to be done in "signal emergencies" (Melville 681). Delano, of course, doesn't realize that he has a signal emergency of an entirely unexpected kind on his hands.

The most celebrated episode in *Benito Cereno* in terms of communication breakdown is the scene in which one of the Spanish mates ties up a rope into an impossibly complicated knot. Delano recognizes the scene as reminiscent of the Gordian knot in Greek story and the prophecy that whoever undid the knot would rule the known world. Alexander the Great, not succeeding in untying the knot through conventional means, cut it with a blow of his sword, and as history recounts, subsequently ruled much of the known world (D'Avanza 192). However, Delano is unable to attach any greater significance to the mummery play enacted by the Spanish sailor:

> His hands were full of ropes, which he was working into a large knot. Some blacks were about him obligingly dipping the strands for him, here and there, as the exigencies of the operation demanded. Captain Delano crossed over to him, and stood in silence surveying the knot; his mind, by a not uncongenial transition, passing from its own entanglements to those of the hemp. For intricacy he had not seen in an American ship, or indeed any other…
>
> "What are you knotting there, my man?"
>
> "The knot," was the brief reply, without looking up.
>
> "So it seems; but what is it for?"
>
> "For someone else to undo." (Melville 707)

The old Spanish sailor then throws the knotted rope to Delano and says in broken English, "undo it, cut it, quick." These are the first English words that have been spoken on the ship, but the episode fails to dupe the rebels, who presumably had first thought they were assisting the Spanish sailor with the maintenance of the ship. An elderly rebel quickly approaches Delano, and in halting Spanish explains to him that "the old knotter was simple-witted, but harmless; often playing his old tricks" (Melville 708). Delano is satisfied by this, but almost becomes suspicious again when the elderly rebel tosses the knotted rope overboard. The man did not know the Greek legend, but his action was essentially the same as that of Alexander, for his disposing of the rope without solving its riddle was a blatant reference to the knot as a symbol of the struggle for power. But as usual, Delano possesses the knowledge but not the interpretive skills to see the episode as a signal of danger -- or else he simply

cannot come to terms with the idea that a black man can be equipped for matching wits with a white man.

Delano's gam on board the *San Dominick* concludes with Don Benito's unlikely jumping into his boat and informing him of the rebellion and hostage situation. Had Don Benito suffered from another of his many fainting spells, Delano would undoubtedly have gone back to his ship still unaware of the rebellion, and the slaves would have carried out their plans that night to take over the American ship as well and make off with sufficient supplies for the trip to Africa. Instead, the Spanish slavers and their American sympathizers succeed in putting down the rebellion and placing the rebels back in chains through a simple stroke of luck. An American reading *Benito Cereno* in the 1850s, regardless of being enthusiastic about slavery, would have been confronted with the unsettling dramatization of the potency of slave rebellions.

Michael Paul Rogin in his 1979 book *Subversive Genealogies: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*, argues that *Benito Cereno* is a warning that America's days of continually reinventing itself for advantage may eventually come to an end. The grayness of the situation offers the reader little comfort in America's too-easy acquiescence in exploitation, and quick reduction nuanced and ambiguous issues into black-and-white struggles against good and evil, where there are no troubling questions about the moral rightness of fighting one's antagonists and the cause is always good and just.

Don Benito, the Spanish sea captain taken captive by the rebelling slaves, is unsettled because the very commodity that has been traditionally exploited--black labor--is itself capable of a grand deception that serves to undercut the very social order that would establish the rules of deception for achieving political hegemony. Everyone on the *San Dominick* is wearing his or her proper costume and going about his or her proper functions, but this is all play-acting. This very deception, in fact, rescues the story from becoming a trite tale of the slave turning the tables on his master; in fact, the reader is unsettled when forced to realize that the rebellion undercuts his or her own comfort and security.

Benito Cereno, therefore, shows how information management on the part of the oppressed can undermine the whole American program of Manifest Destiny and, later, global economic dominance, because it posits that the very mechanisms for exploitation are themselves unstable. In a world in which those in power tend toward complacency and those with no power find themselves struggling for the upper hand, the master convinced of his superiority will likely not achieve informational parity with the desperate and motivated individual who seeks his freedom. The possession of expensive modern technology may provide a temporary advantage -- and in fact, Babo would probably have led a successful rebellion if Delano's men hadn't happened to bring along firearms -- but as physicists say of entropy, the fight cannot be won in the long run. Information simply doesn't flow in such a way that exploiters are able to gain a permanent advantage, and *Benito Cereno* is an elegant statement of this insight.

Works Cited:

Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams.* Ed. Ira B. Nadel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Aptheker, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts*: *50th Anniversary Edition*. International: New York, 1993.

Hawking, Stephen. *A Brief History of Time: The Updated and Expanded Tenth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Bantam Books, 1996.

Melville, Herman. "Benito Cereno." *Herman Melville: Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd.* The Library of America: New York, 1984.Nnolim, Charles E. *Melville's "Benito Cereno."* New Voices: New York, 1974.

Porush, David. "Prigogine, Chaos, and Contemporary Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 18 (1991): 367-386.

Prigogine, Ilya. *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature*. New York: The Free Press, 1997.

Richardson, William D. *Melville's "Benito Cereno": An Interpretation With Annotated Text and Concordance*. North Carolina: Durham, 1987.

Sealts, Merton M., Jr. *Melville's Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed.* Wisconsin: Madison, 1966.