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Benito Cereno's Mute Testimony: On the Politics of Reading Melville's Silences

WHEN MELVILLE'S FIRST BIOGRAPHER, Raymond Weaver, determined in 1921 that *Benito Cereno* shows "the last glow of Melville's literary glamour, the final momentary brightening of the embers before they sank into blackness and ash" (348), it was as an extension of his thesis that Melville's career gradually approached a final silence following the publication of *Moby-Dick*. If, in the wake of abundant recent criticism on what are still referred to as Melville's late works (those collected in *The Piazza Tales* as well as *Pierre*, *The Confidence-Man*, and *Billy Budd*), Weaver's assessment seems almost a dismissible anachronism, contending with the steep decline in extant writing and publications from the last half of Melville's life is far from currently irrelevant.¹ In 2005, Andrew Delbanco's biography invoked Weaver's closing chapter, "The Long Quietus," in naming Melville's last decades "The Quiet End," effectively reprising, rather than surpassing, the question that insists as one nears the conclusion of his predecessor's work: what is there to say about one who, after 1859, seems to have said little?

Determining how to read what remains silent is a task that has haunted critics of *Benito Cereno* as well, for the short novel ends with its principal characters mute and conveys, more generally, a "dominant impression of uncertainty" (Hattenhauer 8). As the only Melville text to deal explicitly with the morality of the slave trade, its inconclusiveness seems to politicize and historicize silence as at once part of narrative and exceptionally difficult to narrate. The experiences of those devastated by slavery were silenced, and so subsist in the silences of

American history; to address these gaps without collapsing them as “quiet ends” is to approach apparent absence as essential context.²

It is my contention that *Benito Cereno* figures the complexity of writing about the silences of an obscured past, insisting on a revision of the terms of authorship that have been predominantly used to approach the suffering that neither fictional nor official archives capture on record.³ Attending further to the reading such revision requires, *Benito Cereno* ultimately suggests a theory of responding to evasive testimonies. It thereby allows for a reassessment of why Melville’s biographers and *Benito Cereno*’s critics are drawn to revisit the absence as much as the presence of text, while exposing the ethical terrain upon which such visits are made.

REVISING WHISPERS

Although the biographies produced by the “astonishing revival of interest in Herman Melville in the 1920’s which rescued him from oblivion” (Zimmerman iii) contain little analysis of *Benito Cereno*, their treatment of Melville’s post-*Moby-Dick* career bears heavily on the critical tradition through which silences in the late works have long been understood. While Weaver does not quite formulate what soon became commonplace, he set the stage for assessments that equated the texts’ treatment of silence with Melville’s diminishing public regard: “in his old age he was again to turn to prose: but before Melville was half through his mortal life his signal literary achievement was done. The rest, if not silence, was whisper” (348).

For Weaver, 1500 prose pages are “whispered” because they are generally unworthy of being read aloud, but he also begins to read them as representing this bleak end: *Pierre*, for instance, is summarized as “an apologia of Melville’s own defeat” (343). The gesture is repeated when John Freeman’s characterization of *Bartleby*—“something unbearable peers out of the story to wring the heart of the reader, as the simpler episodes of the life of a mute forlorn innocent are unfolded—type of all the ineffectual, the wounded, and unwanted” (48)—is resuscitated to describe Melville a few pages later: “sunk to the depth of the obscure, mute, unpublished throng” (68). Again analogously, in the third key revival biography, Lewis Mumford focuses his final chapter, “The Flowering Aloe” (the plant is said to bloom only every hundred years), on

Billy Budd, the meaning of which is “so obvious that one shrinks from underlining it” (356): “At last [Melville] was reconciled. He accepted the situation as a tragic necessity; and to meet that tragedy bravely was to find peace, the ultimate peace of resignation, even in an incongruous world” (357).

Even as scholars have seemed to outgrow patently biographical criticism, the imagined equivalency between the prolific author and his taciturn characters has persisted. As it has taken hold in the popular imagination, Melville's last works bear a relationship to silence because he was writing that he was not writing. He was “not writing,” as most accounts have it, because he did not have the time or means to devote to it, and because if he had, what he wanted to say would not be well received, would not be published, and would not earn him an income for his family.⁴ This “not writing” is at once the tragedy of his work after *Moby-Dick* and what makes him an American hero: “Melville is not a civilized, European writer; he is our greatest writer because he is the American primitive struggling to say more than he knows how to say, struggling to say more than he knows” (Kael 400).

This analytic lineage implicitly notices the peculiarity of Melville's late works: a considerable amount of words, paragraphs, and scenes are devoted to silence, muteness, and resignation. Yet such criticism also obscures what it unintentionally reveals: if it was a quiet end, it was an end that talked about being quiet. The texts are not silences or even whispers, but meditations on how not speaking nonetheless becomes discernible in speech and in writing. To assign the texts' or their characters' silence to their author's experience is to ignore the fact that the author's experience was, precisely, authoring them. Melville wasn't mute and unpublished, as *Bartleby* was: we know this because he wrote and published *Bartleby*.⁵

I do not mean to propose that Melville wrote in ideal conditions, or to belittle the importance of material comforts for thoughtful composition—the “silent grass-growing mood in which a man *ought* always to compose,” as he himself puts it (*Letters* 128). I want to suggest, though, that if Melville was not always in the mood in which one ought to compose, he had many moods in which he nonetheless composed, and the results of those moods do not simply declare writer's block and poverty: they have much to say about what it means to write (and write about) silences.

The critically derided *Pierre* suggests, for example, that what it means to write and write about silences is what it means to write. That text opens as “all Nature, as if suddenly become conscious of her own profound mystery, and feeling no refuge from it but silence, sinks into [a] wonderful and indescribable repose” (7), and the remainder of the novel is in part devoted to discovering how Nature may be coerced from her repose in language that yet refrains from violating her mystery. Even in chronicling signal actions, such as Pierre’s journey from homestead to city, the narration remains concerned with the surrounding silence. “All profound things, and emotions of things are preceded and attended by Silence,” it states, but silence is further delineated as a separate, expressive entity: “Silence is at once the most harmless and most awful thing in all nature. It speaks of the Reserved Forces of Fate. Silence is the only Voice of our God” (240). If silence is not only natural background but divine speech, it exists, paradoxically, as a verbal element, one that ultimately supersedes any invocation that *Pierre* could make.

Silence thus comes to seem at once that which cannot be humanly transcribed and the only element common to everything the author contracts to engage. It is alchemical absurdity to manifest the essence of profundity with its opposite: if “impostor philosophers” believe that they translate the Voice, it is “as though they should say they had got water out of stone.” But this is because, as silence, the Voice has no voice to give: “for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence?” (245). Once silence is equivalent to the divine voice, there is no divine voice as such; and the narrator’s indictment of the philosophers seems to be, like the “Chronometricals and Horologicals” pamphlet it precedes, “the more excellently illustrated re-statement of a problem, than the solution of the problem itself” (247). The problem, of course, is that of the writer who cannot get a voice out of silence, but has no other element—for “Silence permeates all things” (240)—from which to derive his voice. The only solution, which the remainder of this essay will explore, subsists in a writing that expresses silence without silencing it with voice.⁶

SILENCES AS YET UNFILLED

Direct meditations on silence are scarce in the prose works that follow *Pierre*. Blatant gaps punctuate certain texts, such as the chapter,

no longer than those meant to describe the occurrences of a few hours, entitled "Forty-five Years" in *Israel Potter* (606), or the "—Enough." that breaks off the narrator's conversation with Marianna and the scene of his visit to her in *The Piazza* (634). There are also texts that manifest a certain idea of silence, but through their narrativization obfuscate it. The words of the text seem to constitute story rather than silence, so that the quiet of which they speak is masked by the narrated procession—the "voice"—running through the reader's mind. Thus one may consider, if not hear, how Bartleby's preference not to creates a silence that interrupts "reasonable" speech and marks an unknowable history (645). One may similarly strain to recognize as mute the stranger that initiates the text of *The Confidence-Man* by writing on a slate. And in the case of *Benito Cereno*, the reader's attempt to discover the "true history" on which the story turns must be acknowledged as thwarted by the promises for it that proliferate without finally delivering (*Benito* 738).

In fact, it was the potential of such delivery—an answer for the text's discomfiting silences—that first galvanized acclaim for *Benito Cereno*. Amidst the publication of book-length biographies, Harold Scudder in 1928 reported that, reading Amasa Delano's *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* for quite another purpose, "I discovered the interesting fact that in Chapter xviii of Captain Delano's book Melville found his story ready made. He merely rewrote this Chapter including a portion of one of the legal documents there appended, suppressing a few items, and making some small additions" (502). Scudder had indeed stumbled onto a text that seemed to provide the "true history" underlying Melville's narrative, for the names, places, and general plot outline were undoubtedly correlative: In 1805, American Captain Amasa Delano boarded a ship in which would-be slave cargo was holding the colonial Spanish captain Benito Cereno hostage with the plan of returning to Senegal. Delano had published the account as part of his larger memoirs, presenting it through the ship log of his experience, some of his own narration, and several of the legal declarations produced at the trial once the Americans had gained control of the Spanish ship; he had also added correspondence attesting to his bravery and the raw, as Delano saw it, deal proposed by Cereno once he was vindicated.

Scudder's accidental discovery and the three-page article announcing it almost exclusively set the direction for studies of *Benito Cereno*

through the late twentieth century, many of which were devoted to resolving ambiguities or uncertainties in the plot by reconciling them with Delano's text.⁷ Robert Burkholder's claim, in his introduction to the 1992 *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno,"* that "the reader is *implicitly pointed* toward an inquiry into the circumstances of Melville's time and the genuine and possible sources for the story that may inform the tensions and gaps that beckon the reader into the text" (4, emphasis added), if difficult to substantiate, certainly summarizes the dominant critical impulse to exchange tension and gap for genuine source.

These correlating readings have proliferated, however, in part because none (after Scudder) has been regarded as conclusive, and none has been conclusive in part because Melville's text is oriented around a very inconclusive bit of historical writing. His "source text" is far from coherent or determinate: it is, rather, a compilation of variously authored writings attesting to a series of events and collected under the general title "A Narrative." Delano's "original" already reads as a rewriting insofar as it gathers several accounts and types of writing, and as such it not only contains "tensions and gaps" but occasionally contradictory bits of information.⁸ What Scudder proclaimed as critical bedrock was, in effect, that Melville chose as his subject not a series of known events, but a text that already exposed the divergence between "history" as it occurred and the writing that later recorded it.

In fact, the correlation between Melville's text and Delano's exponentializes, rather than reduces, this divergence. By replicating the names and places and events presumed, in Delano's narrative, to belong to "real-life" occurrences grounded in confirmable fact, Melville's fictional account troubles its distinction from the historical one that seems to found it. For instance, the "Benito Cereno" inhabiting Melville's text refers to an imagined character, but also to a Spanish captain who was stranded at St. Maria in 1805, and Melville fills out the personality of the latter just as he invents that of the former. The actual "Benito Cereno" may be said to undergird Melville's text only to the extent that he becomes multiplied, fictionalized, as soon as he is invoked. And since the name now more commonly designates Melville's short work than the man who, meriting mention by Delano, inspired the text, his status as a historical figure has been eroded as his name has been canonized.⁹ Given the fact that Melville's doubling is virtually unrestricted—

at points he reprises sentences, paragraphs, and even whole passages from his "original"—*Benito Cereno* as a whole comes to seem less like a text in need of substantiation and more like an exercise in disturbing that very premise.

Further, as Brook Thomas points out, the institutional structures expected to provide substantiation—historical archives, legal documents—were at the moment of Melville's writing notable not for the speech that they guaranteed but for that which they prohibited (42). That Delano's *Narrative* omits slave testimony may not have been remarked at the time of its publication (1817); but its absence in Melville's work would have been noted in 1855. Five years earlier, the Fugitive Slave Act had been passed, and its silencing effects were, as Melville composed, becoming increasingly evident. In 1854, the case of Anthony Burns demonstrated both Massachusetts' compulsion to participate in the slave system and that system's unrelenting disregard for the testimony of accused fugitives: it marked the silencing of liberal legal apparatus as well as of the oppressed the apparatus attempted to protect.¹⁰ The involvement of Melville's ostensibly antislavery father-in-law, Massachusetts Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, on the side of federal law contributed to a local sense that official institutions had ceased to represent stability.¹¹

Thomas's attention to judicial uncertainty suggests that the "silences and ambiguities" in Melville's text do not offer gaps to be filled by a source text so much as reflect the gaps that institutional sources themselves proliferated in the mid-nineteenth century (112). By extension, it would not be inaccurate to propose that juridical silence is as much the historical referent of the text as Delano's *Narrative*. Melville's text may be understood to represent justice's perversion as an archive of silence, empty of the content it is expected to hold.

The promise that Melville's text could attend to the undelivered testimonies of slaves and fugitives is undoubtedly politically and historically urgent. It would require, however, overcoming the seemingly metaphysical problem of voicing silence raised in *Pierre*.¹² As Melville's biographers demonstrate, transposing silence with voice is not only a philosophical pretension; it is a practical response to a difficult situation. After remarking upon the scarcity of materials attending his late life, Weaver turns to Eleanor Melville's recollections of her grandfather's jollity in Central Park, whereas Delbanco analyzes *Billy Budd*.

Neither writer can sustain a meditation on the silence as such, and so each replaces it with other text. The usual alternative, as demonstrated by Weaver's contemporary John Middleton Murry, is to aggrandize silence as mystical and ineffable: if Murry believed that Melville's silence was "an utterance, and one of no less moment than his speech," it is not one that may be articulated and studied: "something was at the back of his mind, haunting him, and this something he could not utter. If we handle the clues carefully we may reach a point from which we too may catch a glimpse of it; but then, by the nature of things, we shall be unable to utter what we see" (433). In the case of *Benito Cereno*, a rewriting would obscure the fact that its "true history" is largely unspoken, whereas an exaltation of its absences would fail to specify the suffering by which they were occasioned.¹³

I want to suggest that *Benito Cereno* centers itself around what is unspoken and unverified in American history, but that it avoids the moral repugnance of over- or under-writing slave silences, through its insistence on muteness. Describing the situation in which speech is expected and possible but withheld, muteness at once locates the premise of the "true history" and the silence that ultimately sustains it.

A HISTORY OF MUTES

Benito Cereno contains eleven iterations of the term "mute," each of which is located in a situation with the potential to clarify either the preceding or succeeding narrative. Because explanation always fails to appear, muteness in the text becomes connotative of the noticeable absence of expected and desired speech. The first instance of "mute," although describing a setting, prefigures and begins to develop the more precise meaning:

The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come. (673)

Insofar as “mute” etymologically indicates a state of being without speech (“mutus”), the adjective seems at first unnecessary: neither morning nor sea nor sky would be expected to speak, and it is therefore unremarkable that they do not. Understood in its developed sense, however, of refraining from speech, Melville suggests that, in fact, the landscape might speak: it could be less gray, it could more definitively exhibit what is on its horizon. The landscape is mute because it foregrounds and yet forbids this possibility: the shadows “foreshadow” what is to come, but they keep such information unobservable. The scene indicates that a narrative is to unravel without assisting in the process of its telling.

The expression of the pregnant possibility of speech that does not culminate in articulation is in fact endemic to the text, not only because “mute” is repeatedly invoked in similar capacities, but because the text’s entire structure turns upon just such undelivered suggestions. The declaration that “Everything was mute . . .” establishes the scene, but it also literally describes the narrative to come.

Benito Cereno comprises three sections of diminishing length. The first and longest takes place on the “lawless and lonely” island of St. Maria, off the coast of Chile (673). It focuses on Amasa Delano’s attempt to understand the strangeness aboard the Spanish *San Dominick* and concludes when, realizing that the slaves have revolted and are holding hostage their would-be captain, Delano enlists his crew in a violent take-over of the ship. The second presents Benito Cereno’s deposition from the “investigation” undertaken at Lima that results in capital sentences for the slaves (738). The final narrates a conversation between Delano and Cereno on the boat passage between Chile and Peru and describes the bloody end of Babo, the leader of the slaves, as well as the more subdued end of Cereno. Each aspect of this triptych thus narrates an enclosed and complete set of events, yet is exposed as having omitted something essential when read in relation to its companions.

For instance, the first section reaches its climax when “across the long-benighted mind of Captain Delano, a flash of revelation swept, illuminating in unanticipated clearness his host’s whole mysterious demeanor, with every enigmatic event of the day, as well as the entire past voyage of the *San Dominick*” (734). Yet if “every enigmatic event” and “the entire past voyage” were truly made clear, Melville’s inclusion

of the second section would be unnecessary, for it begins by promising exactly such illumination: “The following extracts, translated from one of the official Spanish documents, will it is hoped, shed light on the preceding narrative, as well as, in the first place, reveal the true port of departure and the true history of the *San Dominick’s* voyage” (738). The third section opens as if affirming that such a “true history” has been finally explained: “If the Deposition have served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the *San Dominick’s* hull lies open today” (753). Melville’s use of the conditional, however, suggests that the ship’s story still has yet to be laid bare, since he continues: “Hitherto the nature of this narrative, besides rendering the intricacies in the beginning unavoidable, has more or less required that many things, instead of being set down in the order of occurrence, should be retrospectively, or irregularly given; this last is the case with the following passages, which will conclude the account” (753). Although the passages do conclude the account insofar as the text ends three pages later, “many things” are only again “irregularly given”: one dialogic exchange is rendered in detail, but others are “passed over,” and the “some months” between the trial and Babo’s execution, and then the “three months” between Babo’s execution and Cereno’s death, are given a single paragraph (755).

The overall narrative proceeds, that is to say, by seeming to speak and explain but in fact withholding. On a more local level, this “narrative muteness” describes the plot of the major first section. It is largely driven by Delano’s belief that, no matter how “unusual” the scene before him (677) or how “half-lunatic” Cereno seemed (680), with regard to the history of the *San Dominick*, “The best account would, doubtless, be given by the captain” (682). This sentiment generates plot for fifty pages in part because Delano refuses to see the reversal before him of a presumed racial hierarchy,¹⁴ and, importantly, because Cereno never fulfills “the best account” promised by his authoritative position. He falters, he chokes, he whispers, he faints, he cringes; as a result, his would-be accounting becomes itself an aspect of the ship’s unexplained situation (729).

On one level, Melville’s use of muteness to narrate a history is a clever demonstration of how storytelling, and even speech in general, works as much through “tensions and gaps” as direct iteration. On

another, however, it serves to critique the premise that qualified narration of historical events has the capacity to convert any silence that the past seems to hold. Delano expects that the scene before him only appears mute, but that it can be made to speak by appeal to authority. Yet not even the story's first witness can replace stubborn silence with clear explanation. In fact, Cereno's deposition is subject to the same patterns of inadequate formulations and incomplete assertions that his previous speech demonstrates. Even first-person, testimonial speech fails to deliver the experience to which it refers, suggesting that silences persist in history regardless of the appropriate speaker having the opportunity to fill them.

Cereno's deposition is accordingly introduced with a prefatory remark as to the potential inaccuracy of the transcribed document:

Some disclosures therein were, at the time, held dubious for both learned and natural reasons. The tribunal inclined to the opinion that the deponent, not undisturbed in his mind by recent events, raved of some things which could never have happened. But subsequent depositions of the surviving sailors, bearing out the revelations of their captain in several of the strangest particulars, gave credence to the rest. So that the tribunal, in its final decision, rested its capital sentences upon statements which, had they lacked confirmation, it would have deemed it but duty to reject. (739)

Although the sailors' corroboration appears to resolve the paragraph's misgivings, the fact of its inclusion, as well as its commentary on Cereno's disturbed mind, the idea that some of his recollections "could never have happened," and the discrepancy between the "strangest particulars" and "the rest" fail to produce an overall message of confidence. Further, the warning cedes not to Cereno's own first-person declaration, but to the "I" of Don Jose de Abos and Padilla, who notarizes the document, and then to a third-person transcription of the deposition. Cereno's speech is thus set up with a generalized doubt regarding its production of the truth, uncertainty as to how one might distinguish between the ravings and the affirmed facts, and the divestment of the very voice expected to offer it.¹⁵

The remaining deposition continues to impress itself as a muted

document, one which could relieve Cereno of his nervous cough but fails, again, to imbue him with the authority Delano so expected. The text is partially excerpted, includes brackets and ellipses, and is punctuated at its mid-point with the caveat that “in some things his memory is confused, he cannot distinctly recall every event” (748). Amidst many details that offer a more nuanced perspective on Delano’s experience, but do not provide new information, one fact that might have been startlingly revealed by Cereno is characteristically withheld. As to the slaves’ action that seems to be the most cold-blooded and horrific, the preparation and display of the skeleton of the murdered slave owner, he demurs: “Yau was the man who, by Babo’s command, willingly prepared the skeleton of Don Alexandro, in a way the negroes afterwards told the deponent, but which he, so long as reason is left him, can never divulge” (749). Hence it is not surprising, though neither is it satisfying, that the deposition concludes with another indication as to what it has not made available: “for all the events, befalling through so long a time . . . he cannot here give account . . . what he has said is the most substantial of what occurs to him at present.” Cereno’s signature is prefaced with the notation that he is “broken in body and mind” (752).

Melville’s implicit characterization of Cereno’s deposition as muted is important in part because its official certification lends it no ultimate, explanatory clarity. Largely quoted from a court-authorized document, it paradoxically foregrounds what cannot or will not be authored and what accordingly remains silent. But such an emphasis proves even more pressing as a commentary on what an individual’s official testimony to suffering induced by the slave trade actually comprises. If the reader obtains a sense of Cereno’s experience through his deposition, it is as much due to a surmising of what he never iterates as to the summary information he provides.¹⁶

This line of thinking is crucial given recent critical attention to Babo, the slave leader whose voice is only transcribed when he is “in character” as Cereno’s servant, who in fact does not speak after his capture, and whose “voiceless end” entails having his head mounted on a pole (755). As a matter of law, Babo is prohibited from testifying in his own defense, and although the story’s narration generally omits his point of view, Melville’s concluding paragraphs also call attention its absence:

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. (755).

Scholarship focused on the political implications of *Benito Cereno* has focused heavily on what to make of this emphatic silence. While it has been construed as allowing for unsympathetic assessments of the slave leader, many recent scholars have instead insisted that Melville means to draw attention to his oppression as one unremarked upon or unheard.¹⁷ In Joyce Adler's words, "The slave, Melville seems to be telling America, has yet to be heard from; it would be well to imagine his condition and what is in his mind" (89). Yet she and others ultimately maintain that "what is in his mind" need not be imagined, since it was precisely Babo's "head, that hive of subtlety" (755) that created and executed the revolt at the center of Melville's text. He is to her "a playwright and poet" (92), an idea common to Sandra Zagarell's view that the text "shows the blacks' genius in disrupting the meaning of [cultural] markers" (136) and Peggy Kamuf's assertion that Babo is "the text's real author" (185).

Such analysis proposes that if Babo appears to be silent, it is only because contemporary reading practices have yet to surpass the racist stereotypes invoked by the text: we fail to realize how "human history is written black on white, white against black, and its traces are preserved, remembered no less by the black man than the white" (Kamuf 196). To read "black on white," by transposing Babo's silence with the text detailing the violence that oppression generates, is to begin to shift one's mindset from a dominant white view to that of the one on whom, and for whom, history tends to be written.¹⁸

Granting Babo authorship, however, revokes rather than understands the position granted to him as the most mute of all the mutes that constitute *Benito Cereno*. Such criticism repeats the gesture common to Melville's biographers, insofar as it replaces the silence in which it is interested with an oppositional, and necessarily destructive, voice. Moreover, the substitution of Babo's silence for Melville's composition

imagines a slave engagement with the production of text that is historically and materially unlikely, and as a result idealizes a version of the “master narrative” as potentially written by a slave—when the point of the designation is precisely the slave’s exclusion.¹⁹

What Benito Cereno’s deposition suggests, I would instead argue, is that Babo’s testimony may not be dissociated from the muteness that characterizes the relay of history throughout the text. Babo’s muteness is not an absence upon which his testimony could or should be inscribed; rather, his muteness is his testimony. This is the case not only because his slave voice was systematically suppressed, but because, in the context of Melville’s narrative, the suffering borne out of such oppression may only be told through coughing fits and haltings, through silences that, pointedly, are never replaced with clean, assuring text.

The challenge of *Benito Cereno* is thus to see so far around the dominant white mindset that the expectation that the past is authored is exposed as insufficient. As Paul Downes explains, it is possible “to claim that the third-person, omniscient narrative voice of *Benito Cereno* belongs as much to the African revolutionary, Babo, as it does to either Herman Melville or Amasa Delano, . . . as the figure who stands outside of and beyond the Euro-Americans knowing all that they know and more” (480). But such a claim requires a shift in what it means to tell the story: Babo’s is a “speechless authority” allied less with control than its loss. “To claim a narrative voice for Babo, after all,” Downes continues, “is to claim a voice from beyond the grave, or, what is the same thing, to claim language’s relationship to death” (482). That Babo could not, properly speaking, have authored the paragraphs describing his own death is more than a technicality: it reveals the inclusion of a final, speechless incapacity in the text’s vision of Babo’s account.²⁰ Babo explicitly does not aim to overcome the muteness that repeatedly characterizes him; he maintains it, rather, and so proposes a radical reassessment of how slave testimony is produced.

At stake in Downes’s argument is the question of how to read Babo’s muteness as testimonially meaningful, as speaking to the history of slavery in terms of the limitations and possibilities for it to become, speechlessly, significant.

TESTIMONY ON THE TABLE

Benito Cereno's first remark linking Babo to muteness is subtle and brief, but its intricacies resonate with phrasings from *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*, and it accordingly sketches a context for pursuing the slave character's silence as testimonial. Delano has been invited by Cereno to dine aboard the *San Dominick*, and, in the guise of his servant, Babo encourages the ever-faltering Spanish captain:

Soon, [Cereno's] manner became still more reserved. The effort was vain to seek to draw him into social talk. Gnawed by his splenetic mood he sat twitching his beard, while to little purpose the hand of his servant, mute as that on the wall, slowly pushed over the Canary. (724-25)

The phrase "mute as that on the wall" is emphatic for two reasons. In the first place, just a page earlier, the same action has been narrated without reference to muteness: Cereno starts and stares, but stares at "vacancy. For nothing was to be seen but the hand of his servant pushing the Canary over towards him" (723). The added quality of muteness insists in the latter instance, yet because Babo also does not speak in the first, exactly how the gesture is modified is unclear.

In the second place, though, the phrase invokes the biblical verse that originates references to the "writing on the wall." Yet, whereas it is the writing of a disembodied hand in the Book of Daniel that cannot be interpreted and thus might be understood as mute, Melville elides the writing and makes the apparent muteness refer to Babo's hand. Although it does not write, his hand is as mute as one that does.

The comparison is neither as sloppy nor as incidental as it first seems. The mute hand figures elsewhere in Melville's post-*Moby-Dick* works, at once pointing to the assumption that the hand stands in for an author and asserting the insufficiency of such an association. The mute hand thus begins to suggest a speech detached from the logic of authorship and oriented instead towards the silence it cannot overcome.

In *Pierre*, Plotinus Plinlimmon is characterized as originating the "Chronometricals and Horologicals" pamphlet: Pierre is said to have read "a treatise of his" in the stage coach on the way to the city. Yet the philosopher has never touched the the pivotal pamphlet; in addition to his other eccentricities,

He never was known to work with his hands; never to write with his hands (he would not even write a letter); he never was known to open a book. There were no books in his chamber. Nevertheless, some day or other he must have read books, but that time seemed gone now; as for the sleazy works that went under his name, they were nothing more than his verbal things, taken down at random, and bunglingly methodized by his young disciples. (339)

The extent to which an author's hands are commonly thought inextricable from his writing becomes evident when the case of Plinlimmon proposes the contrary. The passage separates the figure, and his hands, from "his" influential text, a pamphlet which comes to seem at once disembodied and strangely orphaned. That his hands remain mute means that the man's body bears no direct responsibility for the "sleazy work," which is why Pierre's "chance brush encounter" (339) brings him no closer to understanding the text he appeared to have written.

A similar dissociation appears in an 1851 letter from Melville to Hawthorne. Closing characteristically with an apology, Melville notes: "This is a long letter, but you are not at all bound to answer it. Possibly, if you do answer it, and direct it to Herman Melville, you will missend it—for the very fingers that now guide this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper" (*Letters* 143). The fingers are Melville's, but neither they nor he are consistently identical to the text that is signed Melville: so that the name, coming by return post, would fail to reach the fingers that originally recorded it. The fingers are, the sentence suggests, no longer responsible for that which they articulated.

This pattern of hands not accepting responsibility for "their" author's text, remaining unable to speak for it and thereby being characterized as mute, is reprised in the first chapter of *The Confidence-Man*, in which "A mute goes aboard a boat on the Mississippi." Unlike the notations in *Pierre* and Melville's letter, the mute's writing is presumably (although not explicitly) conducted by his fingers. The chapter details his inscribing, upon a slate, a series of quotations from 1 Corinthians: "Charity thinketh no evil," "Charity suffereth long, and is kind," "Charity endureth all things," "Charity believeth all things," and finally "Charity never faileth" (842–43).

No one asks the mute man for an explanation of his unexpected written utterances: the crowd is more disposed to jostling, thrusting, jeering at, pushing, and punching him (842, 844). Yet it soon becomes clear that the mute could not produce such an explanation, precisely because his fingers speak in a language that the crowd does not understand: The mute is walking away from his impromptu soapbox, when suddenly,

he was hailed from behind by two porters carrying a large trunk; but as the summons, though loud, was without effect, they accidentally or otherwise swung their burden against him, nearly overthrowing him; when, by a quick start, a peculiar inarticulate moan, and a pathetic telegraphing of his fingers, he involuntarily betrayed that he was not alone dumb, but also deaf. (844)

The mute appears not to react because he does not hear it. But he does in fact respond: only it is not in any coherent manner, for what he expresses verbally is legible as an “inarticulate moan”; what he telegraphs with his fingers is “pathetic.” Unlike the precise biblical statement that he previously wrote, the language of his hands will not bear repetition, quotation, or interpretation: it exists on an entirely different register, at least according to the narrator, from the printed speech of the text. The language that accompanies him to the forecandle thus turns out to signify only mutely: its signs elude the system by which he made his charity sign, and through which *The Confidence-Man* is received as a novel.

Melville's recurring references to mute hands suggest that the body of one who writes is independent of, and irresponsible for, the writing it nonetheless performs.²¹ Separated from the register of archivable text, the body eludes codification from the moment it authors its experiences. This thesis implies that recorded testimony never catches up to, or wholly represents, the suffering of the body. By extension, it suggests that the body's unarticulated activity itself constitutes another register of testimony, one which remains mute—and by virtue of remaining so, is never represented only to be surpassed.

In emphasizing the muteness of Babo's hand, then, Melville sketches the testimony that never leaves his body, that is never converted into a

text from which the body would subsequently depart. What Babo offers for our reading is not an inscrutable-yet-compelling text akin to that of Plinlimmon, Melville's correspondence, or *The Confidence-Man's* mute, but the body that is still living, and suffering, the experience that their articulations only approximate. This is in fact the significance of Melville's elision, from the common phrasing of the "handwriting on the wall" to his description of "the hand of the servant, mute as that on the wall": there is no writing at all—it is omitted in favor of the mutely testifying body.

Babo is thus set apart from Melville's other mute bodies because he authors no text at all. Such a distinction does more than represent legal sanctions on slave testimony. What Babo has to say is not necessarily suppressed by colonial institutionalism, because he is mute not in relation to a text that he might produce, but as an image of a testifying body. In other words, he is saying what he has to say; he is saying it mutely, instead of in a text that could only fail to give an account.

Babo's mute testimony thus "supplie[s] a tongue to muteness," in the words of *Pierre*, but only if it is recognized that such supply consists not in converting muteness to voice but allowing muteness its own bodily articulation. The phrase in the earlier novel describes Pierre's vision of Saddle Meadow's rock-form Enceladus, personified as an "armless giant, who despairing of any other mode of wreaking his immitigable hate, turned his vast trunk into a battering-ram, and hurled his own arched out ribs again and yet again against the invulnerable steep" (402). Appearing as Pierre despairs of his ability to write, the image only explains Pierre's predicament to the extent that it represents his muteness, culminating with the placement of "his own duplicate face" upon the "armless trunk" (402). Pierre, like Babo, has no hands that would succeed at writing, and the only "tongue" in such a situation is a silent body.²²

Further, if Pierre's demise suggests that his book still has yet to be written, that it silently subsists, the construing of Babo's mute testimony marks the horrific American past as similarly present. *Benito Cereno* suggests that slave testimony exists in a register other than the archive from which it was prohibited—and that it is persistently available, although not as a series of documents. Such an alternative register comprises the mute collection of speech that, in an important sense, never ceased to be prohibited. The Works Progress Administra-

tion interviews in the 1930s did not reverse the silence of the fugitives who could not claim their personhood in 1850. Melville's insight is not only that such silences still exist to be read, but that they are not to be reclaimed by diligent historical research.²³ They are unarchivable: not even their speechless authors could have claimed them.

CATS-PAWS AND COFFINS

Arguing for Babo's mute testimony might seem to repeat the gesture toward the ineffable enacted by Murry, for I do not propose to translate his suffering into a delineated list of experiences. Yet while Murry finds that Melville's silence might only be glimpsed, and then would recede into the unutterable, I would argue that Babo's muteness insists: it cannot help but be seen, and since a large quantity of critical writing owes itself to its blatancy, it can hardly be called unspeakable. Because it does not represent knowable past events does not make it less central or less legible than Cereno's deposition. Indeed, insofar as it crystallizes the idea of unwritten testimony to which Cereno's deposition only alludes, Babo's mute testimony represents a more articulate version of how the legacy of slavery departs from the logic of the courtroom archive.

The practice of reading mute testimony is, of course, not identical to one cultivated for discerning historical fact. It involves, rather, an orientation toward an unsaid that persists, that attains a facticity, precisely because its exact outline may not be discerned. And Melville suggests, finally, that such attunement is not out of reach for ordinary American readers: indeed, *Benito Cereno* indicates that it is just such flawed characters that may model it. Amasa Delano, for all his racist stereotyping and valiant violence, seems to me, at least in the text's first section, to be an adept reader of mute testimony. While others have characterized him as a "bad reader" (Kamuf 186) whose understanding is "inadequate" (Guttmann 45), Delano's unwillingness to clarify the scene before him may also be read as a reluctance to call muteness anything but muteness.

Despite Delano's biases and wish for the "best account," he delays translating inconclusiveness to conclusion, and he does so without dismissing mystery as unknowable. He remains between these two common approaches to persistent silence, hypothesizing only to revisit

the potential significance of “secret sign[s],” “enigmas and portents,” “phantoms” (752), and “imperfect gesture” (706). If his actions once his mind is “illuminated” demonstrate blatant insensitivity—his violent takeover of the slave-held ship is followed by his injunction to Cereno to forget the past—the text nonetheless implies that the terror in which he is involved is legible, even to him, in the register of muteness. At about the midpoint of Delano’s time aboard the *San Dominick*, he observes the “inquietude” of history signaled by the appalling calms surrounding him:

To change the scene, as well as to please himself with a leisurely observation of the coming boat, stepping over into the mizzenchains he clambered his way into the starboard quarter-gallery . . . As his foot pressed the half-damp, half-dry sea-mosses matting the place, and a chance phantom cats-paw—an islet of breeze, unheralded, unfollowed—as this ghostly cats-paw came fanning his cheek, as his glance fell upon the row of small, round dead-lights, all closed like coppered eyes of the confined, and the state-cabin door, once connecting with the gallery, even as the dead-lights had once looked out upon it, but now calked fast like a sarcophagus lid, to a purple-black, tarred-over panel, threshold, and post; and he bethought himself of the time, when that state-cabin and this state-balcony had heard the voices of the Spanish king’s officers and the forms of the Lima viceroy’s daughters had perhaps leaned where he stood—as these and other images flitted through his mind, as the cats-paw through the calm, gradually he felt rising a dreamy inquietude, like that of one who alone on the prairie feels unrest from the repose of the noon. (704–5)

Delano responds to the calm with “inquietude,” like one who responds to repose with unrest, because what seems silent, all around him, is speaking, unceasingly, of death and imperialism. Seeking leisure, he instead implicitly witnesses the history he seems not to recall in attempting to understand his situation. The “ghostly cats-paw” refers to a breeze, but, as a type of prehensile front appendage, ends up acting analogously to Babo’s mute hand: it signifies but does not speak for coffins, dead-lights, a sarcophagus. These floating images of death and

decay give way to one of “the Spanish king’s officers,” metonymically invoking the nation which perpetrated, directly and indirectly, so many murders at sea: those of the Middle Passage as well as those more local to *Benito Cereno*. Delano sees without knowing, hears without believing, that muteness appears not as an absence to be obliterated and forgotten but as a presence that continues to signify the “speechless authority” of the dispossessed.²⁴

Melville’s Amasa Delano certainly is not the most ethical reader upon whom to model one’s reading practice. But if, as Melville’s text says, “Everything is mute,” the haunted Delano may not be a bad tutor with which to begin a reassessment of texts of the American past.²⁵ The challenge would then be to keep them silent.

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NOTES

1. Melville’s rate of publication dropped off steeply once he retired from lecturing in 1859 and began to work full time as an outdoor customs inspector in 1866: from nine novels and almost twenty short pieces brought out between 1846 and 1857 to three books of poetry afterwards. No journal and little correspondence from this period exists.

2. In Delbanco’s book, such collapsing is evident insofar as the last thirty years of Melville’s life receive one-sixth the page space dedicated to his first forty.

3. Of course, the issue of reading or writing a historical silence is in no way limited to Melville or the American nineteenth century. Several discussions of the Holocaust, for instance, center around the problem of unavailable testimony; see especially, Agamben; Derrida; and Levi.

4. See, for example, Olsen’s *Silences*: “All attempts at making a living from writing had failed. Melville yielded himself to silence . . .” (134).

5. Melville was also writing poetry for many of the years which have been disregarded as silent ones. Although I do not focus on the poems in what follows, it has been argued that Melville’s turn to poetry was borne out of his interest in the boundaries of language: “Melville needed a form less discursive, less syntactically determined than prose, one more given to linking unlike things through accidental associations, phonic and semantic—less a dealing out of verbal cards in sequence than a shuffling of the deck” (Spengemann 581).

6. For a related but distinct thesis, see Spanos’ two-part article, which reads the novel’s expression of silence as raising an alternative to nationalist ontology or “hegemonic” thinking (141).

7. The contortions that such scholarship put itself through are exemplified by Cochran, who explains the uselessness of attempting to derive the significance

of Babo's name: "all of this debate is unnecessary . . . Babo, it turns out, is the first person identified, in Delano's account, as the leader of the revolt" (228). Previous scholars (including Scudder) were so focused on matching "Babo" to some essential darkness that they had missed the name's placement in the very source document from which their pursuits had originated.

8. One obvious contradiction, explicable perhaps by the idea that Amasa Delano was trying very hard, in his own narration, to portray himself as a hero, is his declaration, "I was alone with [Cereo and the slaves], or rather on board by myself, for three or four hours, during the absence of my boat" (324). Twenty pages later, Delano's midshipman Nathaniel Luther claims in his sworn deposition that he "went with his captain, Amasa Delano, to the ship *Tryal*, as soon as she appeared at the point of the island . . . and remained with him on board of her, until she cast anchor" (345).

9. It is worth noting here that "Benito Cereno" is no more stable a signifier in Delano's text than it is in Melville's. Despite the fact that Delano includes the official documents with the spelling Melville adopts, Delano's own narrative of the events insists on referring to "Don Bonito Sereno." A special thanks to Martin Gaspar for pointing out that this spelling means, very loosely and somewhat cunningly translated, "pretty quiet."

10. See von Frank's description of how the Anthony Burns trial so impressed upon Boston the feeling of being silenced that it, in turn, largely ignored the victim whose silence provided the demonstration (59–60, 204).

11. Cover argues that the mandate of Burns's return resulted in sufficient public dissatisfaction to mount a court case over the appropriateness of the Fugitive Slave Act's commissioner, Edward Loring, also serving as a local probate judge (179–82).

12. As the remainder of my argument suggests, the metaphysics of silence and its historical or political manifestation are to an important extent inextricable. Yet I would maintain that *Benito Cereno* crystallizes the historical and political implications of the problem of unpublished writing that is raised in *Pierre*. At stake is not only the former text's "everlasting elusiveness of Truth" (393), but a set of experiences which have occurred at a particular moment in the past; the latter thus constitutes a situation more specific than the "everlasting" problem of literary expression.

13. Hartman expresses a version of this paradox in introducing her study, which largely utilizes Works Progress Administration interviews with former slaves: "a totalizing history cannot be reconstructed from these interested, selective, and fragmentary accounts," she explains, but their "lapses of forgetting, silences, and exclusions" do not reduce them to insignificance (11–12).

14. Delano's portrayal not as a naive and generous American, but as an enactment of the bias and ignorance endemic to the white racial mindset, is most convincingly presented by Karcher, *Shadow*; and by Kamuf.

15. As several scholars have noted, the free indirect discourse of the text's first section disturbs attempts to assign racist metaphors to Melville or to a specific narrative voice; I am suggesting here that, despite its legal tone, the second section continues to exploit that device of uncertainty.

16. Dryden makes this point: "The documents . . . prove to be 'disappointing sequels' [*Pierre* 169], for while they give the factual history of the ship's voyage, they raise more questions than they answer . . . While the extracts clear up [the context of certain events], they make no attempt to deal with the questions of meaning and motive" (*Melville's Thematics* 202).

17. Ray shows how the absence of an accounting of Babo's history made it possible for early critics to read him simply as a manifestation of evil violence.

18. See also Karcher's "The Riddle of the Sphinx," which considers how to read "the story of the *San Dominick* from the perspective no longer of the masters, but of the slaves" (197).

19. This is not to say that slavery and slaves were not pivotal to the narratives from which they were excluded—Toni Morrison convincingly argues the opposite—but that the appearance of the oppressed within text hardly grants them authorship as we conceive of, and especially as we canonize, it today.

20. *Battle-Pieces* similarly approaches the impossibility of chronicling the deaths of the Civil War, especially in poems such as "The Armies of the Wilderness"—"None can narrate that strife in the pines, / A seal is on it . . . / A riddle of death, of which the slain / Sole solvers are" (50). See Dryden's *Monumental Melville* and note 24 below.

21. Curiously, Melville's most famous speaking hand, Billy Budd's, does not fit into the tropes of muteness outlined here. While my examples point to hands that speak in a separate register from written or spoken text, his is said to replace and therefore speak as a mouth: "Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him. But he foully lied to my face and in presence of my captain, and I had to say something, and I could only say it with a blow, God help me!" (150). That the hand is held accountable for the otherwise absent text might be read as an attempt to reclaim the author's intentionality and responsibility for his speech or writing. Yet because the hand is fatal, that alternative registers as no more favorable: to take responsibility with one's body is to cease to live independently of one's writing, to be sentenced to death.

22. Sundquist's observation that in *Pierre* (with a nod to *Moby-Dick*) "the *mute* and the *mutilated* go hand in hand" (167) is also borne out in a way that resonates with *Benito Cereno*, although again the earlier text speaks more to the expression of Truth generally than of specific historical experiences. *Pierre* describes texts expressing the "profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life" as "mutilated stumps" (169)—an image that invokes at once the irresolution that marks *Benito Cereno* and the body that bears witness to a human life that cannot be more explicitly known.

23. In fact, compared to other large-scale historical oppressions, especially genocides, a significant amount of historical materials on American slavery exist: its perpetrators were unlike, for instance, the Nazis, who attempted to obscure their deeds from historical record. Perhaps because slaveholders were so unabashed, however, what still remains unwritten requires even more scrutiny and attention.

24. Dryden's analysis of *Battle-Pieces*' "An Uninscribed Monument" bears on my description of the reader's attending to muteness by being captivated by it. Employing the monument as the speaker, the poem suggests that "Silence and Solitude may hint" (line 1) of what has failed to be recorded, and the reader is directed to "the import of the quiet here" (12) to register the battle, so that "Thou too wilt silent stand— / Silent as I, and lonesome as the land" (14–15). As Dryden argues, "the reader ('Thou who beholdest' [line 10]) in the face of universal absence takes on the mute fixity of stone, caught, it would appear, in the 'after quiet' [13] world of the end, a world capable of being represented by a text that speaks silence" (100). Such a "mute fixity" in the face of "a text that speaks silence" reflects the idea of reading that I am approaching here.

25. As Lee notes, *Benito Cereno* is not a text proscribing a "hard and fast" politics, but its treatment of speech and silence nonetheless recommends itself to contemporary assessments of America's conflicted past (514).

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