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Delano's Devils;
or, A Case of Libel

by Tommy Joe Ray

As with politicians and evangelists, so with the scholar there is ever present the danger that he will misuse his materials in order to prove his point. Although such practice (hopefully) is accidental, the damage done by promulgation of conclusions based on faulty evidence is regrettable. Sometimes it happens that a scholar will get so close to his subject that he is unable to see the ideas among the words. A recent case in point is an essay by Ray B. Browne, who set out to interpret the political symbolism in Melville's "Benito Cereno."¹ The thesis of his paper is that Melville is attacking the institution of slavery and that in Cereno there is implicit the decay of Old World systems and in Amasa Delano the apparent hopelessness of New World tendencies. Given time and space I would argue that this is merely a secondary theme: Melville more likely wanted to write a story in which realities are false, in which master is actually slave, slave master, white black, and black white or gray. The story is one of concerted deceit. But it is not about this central theme that I wish to disagree with Browne; it is rather with some developments of that theme, particularly his assertions that the white sailors are savages.

Having decided that slavery is cruel and inhuman, Browne seeks to demonstrate that the white people in "Benito Cereno" are savages and that the black people act cruelly only after extreme provocation. Whatever Herman Melville may have felt about slavery, the facts of this story clearly do not prove that the author considered white slave owners bestial and Negro slaves simply good folks pushed beyond the limits of endurance. Brown has selected portions of incidents in the tale that support his position, and in doing so he has misrepresented Melville.

Perhaps comparison of Browne's criticism and Melville's writing will indicate the liberties Browne has taken in his interpretation.

¹ Ray B. Browne, "Political Symbolism in 'Benito Cereno,'" in *Critical Approaches to American Literature*, Vol. I, eds. Ray B. Browne and Martin Light (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1949), 309-325.

The ruthlessness of the whites in the fight which occurs when the sailors overtake the *San Dominick* is generally overlooked by critics. The battle is far from even. The sailors have all the advantage. They have guns; the Negroes have only hatchets. Lying out of range of the thrown hatchets and handspikes, the whites could pick off the Negroes one by one. But they want to board the ship, apparently, to a large degree, only so that they can hack and slaughter the blacks. Their military superiority and greater bestiality is terrifyingly revealed in Melville's figure of speech: "there was a vague, muffled, inner sound, as of submerged sword-fish rushing hither and thither through shoals of black-fish. Soon, in a reunited band, and joined by the Spanish seamen, the whites came to the surface, irresistibly driving the negroes toward the stern."²

Obviously in open combat the whites would have had great firepower superiority, but this was not an open fight. The men in the small boat were at great disadvantage in attacking the slave ship. Whereas they could only shoot slaves when targets offered, the sailors themselves were constantly exposed to the flying hatchets, so much so that for a time they had to lie back and not press the attack.

The negroes giving too hot a reception, the whites kept a more respectful distance. Hovering now just out of reach of the hurtling hatchets, they, with a view to the close encounter which must soon come, sought to decoy the blacks into entirely disarming themselves of their most murderous weapons in a hand-to-hand fight, by foolishly flinging them, as missiles, short of the mark, into the sea.³

Do these lines show the whites at an advantage? On the contrary. Certainly they would be in great danger when they closed the slaver because they could not then efficiently use their guns when boarding while the Negroes could make grim use of their hatchets. And they did not lie off and snipe the slaves.

The fire was mostly directed toward the stern, since there, chiefly, the negroes, at present, were clustering. But to kill or maim the negroes was not the object. To take them, with the ship, was the object. To do it, the ship must be boarded; which could not be done by boats while she was sailing too fast.⁴

² Browne, p. 321.

³ Herman Melville, *The Complete Stories of Herman Melville*, ed. by Jay Leyda (New York: Random House, 1949), p. 330.

⁴ Melville, p. 331.

Not only does Browne err in suggesting that they kept their distance in order to shoot the slaves, but he misreads Melville again when he interprets the sailors' motive for wanting to board the big ship: "apparently, to a large degree, only so that they can hack and slaughter the blacks." As Browne noted earlier in his paper, Melville did not change the time of this story from the nineteenth back to the eighteenth century. And that observation on his part unwittingly lays the grounds for refuting his assertion about the hacking and maiming. But we do not have to depend on Browne; we can look in Melville himself for argument against this idea.

During the period of this story a slave was a valuable piece of property. And although a plantation owner might abuse his property, it is doubtful that a sailor looking to sell slaves would endanger that transaction by mutilating the merchandise. These white sailors have been told by Delano that the owner of the Spanish ship considers prize value of ship and cargo, *which was mainly slaves*.⁵ Is it very reasonable to expect that these sailors, who have been done no injury by the slaves up this point, would deliberately destroy their chances of realizing a profit from this venture?

And how great is "the military superiority and greater bestiality" of the whites when they board the ship?

For a time the attack wavered; the negroes wedged themselves to beat it back; the half-repelled sailors, as yet unable to gain a footing fighting as troopers in the saddle, one leg sideways flung over the bulwarks, and one without plying their cutlasses like carters' whips. But in vain. They were almost overborne, when, rallying themselves into a squad as one man, with a huzza, they sprang inboard, where, entangled, they involuntarily separated again. For a few breaths' space, there was a vague, muffled, inner sound, as of submerged sword-fish rushing hither and thither through shoals of black-fish.⁶

White military superiority is almost wholly lacking here. And if there is bestiality, it may be nothing more than the desperation of a dubious fight. Melville's figure about sword-fish does on its surface suggest savagery in the attackers. But is Melville accurate in his figure? Black-fish are practically defenseless against sword-fish. And sword-fish act naturally in attacking smaller fish for food. Unjust it may

⁵ Melville, p. 330.

⁶ Melville, pp. 331-332.

seem, and unjust it may be. But if a critic wants to lodge a complaint, he should rail against God for arranging affairs thus, rather than attack the sword-fish. Here, of course, the "black-fish" are not at all defenseless. Their axes are probably more effective weapons in a close fight than are the cutlasses and guns of the sailors.

In short, Melville has not up to the time of the capture of the slave ship shown the whites to be inhumane beasts. Nor has he let the slaves show through as blameless, mistreated creatures, which the unwary reader might conclude after reading Browne.

The Negroes had not, in fact, engaged in what they would have considered unnecessary violence at any time in their activities. They had used force to overthrow their master and get out of fetters. But most of their subsequent violence can be explained as the result of nervousness in wanting to avoid being put back into chains. The treatment accorded the corpse of Aranda, their master and Cereno's friend, which has been seized upon by many critics as the wildest bestiality, can be attributed partially to this nervousness and partially to the Negro leaders' realization of the importance of a symbol in their battle. Compared with the frenzied activities of the white sailors the violence of the Negroes is weak indeed. The murder of Raneds, the mate, was undoubtedly due mainly to the nervousness arising from a five-day calm, "from the heat, and want of water," "that republican element." And the Negroes were sorry immediately after the murder.⁷

Shades of Nuremburg, this would be a good defense for the commandant of Dachau. Nervousness as an excuse for murder? Nevertheless, if we are to believe the deposition given later during the trials, Browne has again misread Melville. The story says, "That all the negroes slept upon the deck, as is customary in this navigation, and *none wore fetters*, because the owner, his friend Aranda, told him that they were all tractable."⁸ Surely Cereno might lie patently to secure extreme punishment for the slaves. But could he contrive such a story in his broken condition? Even Browne goes to great lengths to show that Cereno is a disheartened, fatalistic wreck by the time the ships reach land.

Browne's reference to the murder of Raneds, the mate, is a good example of biased or inaccurate reporting. Yes, the slaves were sorry after they murdered Raneds. (At least Browne calls the act murder.)

⁷ Browne, pp. 322-323.

⁸ Melville, p. 335; emphasis mine.

But he does not go one clause further to cite Melville's reason for their being sorry: "but that for this they afterwards were sorry, the mate being the only remaining navigator on board, except the deponent."⁹ In other words, they realized that with the mate dead, they no longer had as much leverage over Cereno, whom they could only then kill at the risk of never escaping.

Is it not in order to quote Melville concerning the bestiality of the slaves? Notice that there is no apparent reason for them to be nervous at these times.

... that the negresses of age, were knowing to the revolt, and testified at the death of their master, Don Alexandro; that, had the negroes not restrained them, they would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing, the Spaniards slain by command of the negro Babo; that the negresses used their utmost influence to have the deponent made away with; that, in the various acts of murder, they sang songs and danced—not gaily, but solemnly; and before the engagement with the boats, as well as during the action, they sang melancholy songs to the negroes, and that this melancholy tone was more inflaming than a different one would have been, and was so intended; that all this is believed, because the negroes have said it;—that of the thirty-six men if the crew, exclusive of the passengers (all of whom are now dead), which the deponent had knowledge of, six only remain alive, with four cabin-boys and ship-boys not included with the crew; * * *—that the negroes broke an arm of one of the cabin-boys and gave him strokes with hatches.¹⁰

* * *—that the young Don Joaquin, Marques de Aramboalaza, like Hermenegildo Gandix, the third clerk, was degraded to the office and appearance of a common seaman; that upon occasion when Don Joaquin shrank, the negro Babo commanded the Ashantee Lecbe to take tar and heat it, and pour it upon Don Joaquin's hands. . . .¹¹

If we are to accept the depositions of the witnesses at the trials as to what had transpired before Cereno's and Delano's ships found one another, and if we are to accept Melville's deposition as to what happened after the two ships came together, then it can be fairly charged that Browne has misrepresented the facts. Given the conditions of racial attitudes that existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and given the laws of the high seas that made a vessel adrift free salvage, we must conclude that the white sailors acted

⁹ Melville, p. 241.

¹⁰ Melville, pp. 346–347.

¹¹ Melville, p. 348.

quite normally. This is not to say that the slaves under Babo did not have more than just grounds of rebelling. Nor is this an argument that Herman Melville approved of slavery as a social institution. Much of his work, and indeed much of "Benito Cereno," would lead any perceptive reader to conclude that Melville condemned any form of servitude. This paper has had as its purpose the demonstration of how an otherwise sensitive and perceptive critic can go astray in his scholarly pursuits.