

*Zsolt Mohi*

## “Knot in Hand, and Knot in Head”

### The Enigmatic Language of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’\*

The work of contradictions, the contradictions that amount to nothing, the nothing that is impossible to neglect or forget. The ever-recurring “leaden-hued swells” (p. 214)<sup>1</sup> wash away the cheerfulness of our soul, their burden lies heavy on one’s mind irremovably like “waved lead that has cooled and set in the melter’s mold” (p. 212). The means that accomplish that irresistible effect are extremely complex, and can hardly be explored within the limits of a single essay. In order to account for the compelling force of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno,’ therefore, it is inevitable to restrict the scope of the observation to some of the most characteristic features of the long short story.

The most striking effect, at the first encounter with the text, is perhaps due to its

#### *POETIC LANGUAGE.*

Melville is, as J. S. Adler claims, “a poet-maker, not taker, of symbols, methods, and forms.”<sup>2</sup> The intricate and enigmatic web of extremely condensed and systematically contradictory images requires an exhaustive effort of the reader, which makes it necessary to refer to the features that constitute the diffi-

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<sup>1</sup>Page references without indication of the author are to the edition of Melville’s short story in question as described in the Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup>Adler, *War in Melville’s Imagination*. p. 88

culty and, in addition, to make clear how it contributes to the effect of the text as a literary work on the reader.

Like a living organism that, from the very moment of its birth, bears an indication of self-destruction in its nature, the long short story—starting with its smallest particles, i. e. words, up to the largest components (authorial narration plus deposition)—is built up of constituents with definite meanings on their own which will, however, ultimately be blurred and mutually neutralized by their constantly recurring opposition.

The following examples might at first sight look like *harmless* plays on words. The fishing party of the seamen of the *Bachelor's Delight* “had returned, having met with no small success” (p. 214) which stands, of course, for great success. The wind entirely dies away “not many minutes” (p. 218) after the boat’s pushing off. In Benito Cereno’s apparel there seems something “incongruous” (p. 226), and Captain Delano, finding his companion withdrawn, becomes “less talkative” (p. 233). Some more formal and unusual negative expressions can, however, be added to the list: “unacquaintance,” “incommoded,” “inquietude,” “discontinuing,” “less good-natured,” etc. We have here instances of more or less contracted simple negation.

Having started to approach the complexity of the text in a mechanical way with the least complicated constituents, on the next level we find words and expressions consisting of double negation: *litotes*. Captain Delano does, for example, not simply suspect, but he “is not without the idea, that” Benito Cereno should be more energetic (p. 219). Babo does not look at his master gratefully, but he eyes him “not ungratefully” (p. 237). After Captain Delano beholds the Spanish sailor behind the great stay trying to signal him something, he is not just bewildered, he is “not unbewildered” (p. 246). Surveying the knot knitted by the old, simple-witted negro, Captain Delano’s mind passes from his own entanglements to those of the hemp by a “not uncongenial” (p. 248) transition. Upon the invitation of Babo into the cuddy, Captain Delano is, instead of being pleased, “not unpleased” (p. 255), etc.

With a step further, we leave the level of words and expressions and arrive at the more complex realm of poetic images. It is not surprising at all that they also teem with contradictions and paradoxes. “The sea,” we read, for example in the description of the depressing nautical landscape, “though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed” (p. 212). Incessant ambiguities serve two aims at the

same time. They bring about, on the one hand, the constant hesitation of Captain Delano, for whom

the same conduct, which, in this instance, had raised the alarm, served to dispel it. In short, scarce any suspicion or uneasiness, however apparently reasonable at the time, which was not now, with equal apparent reason, dismissed.

(p. 240)

On the other hand these paradoxes corroborate the gloomy impression and embarrassment of the reader. The latter intention is, furthermore, confirmed by the recurring allusion to an impending danger:

Flights of troubled grey fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storm. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

(p. 212)

Delano's misgivings are now attributed to the meteorological conditions, as above, now to the conduct of someone as follows:

that icy but conscientious policy [of the Spanish captain] obliterates alike the manifestation of sway with every trace of sociality; transforming the man into a block, or rather into a loaded cannon, which, until there is call for thunder, has nothing to say.

(p. 221)

Besides, the strange ship itself can also be blamed for his uneasiness:

The present destination of the ship [viz San Dominick] was the anchorage. There she would be near his own [Amasa Delano's] vessel. Upon gaining that vicinity, might not the San Dominick, like a slumbering volcano, suddenly let loose energies now hid?

(p. 239)

Captain Delano's uncertainty is fully justified, among many other circumstances, for example by the appearance of the Spanish captain:

[...] there seemed something so incongruous in the Spaniard's apparel, as almost to suggest the image of an invalid courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague.

(p. 226)

A more surprising and puzzling characterization of a captain in charge of a sail is hardly conceivable. A true and sensuous contradiction indeed. Accounts of the American captain's state of mind complete the picture and convey the uncertain atmosphere effectively to the reader. As for the second purpose, i. e. inducing the reader's embarrassment, here stands another visual contradiction:

Trying to break one charm, he was but becharmed anew. Though upon the wide sea, he seemed in some far inland country; prisoner in some deserted château, left to stare at empty grounds, and peer out at vague roads, where never wagon or wayfarer passed."

(p. 246)

The constant repetition of the same word with different endings (*figura etimologica*: "charm," "becharmed," "shadows," "foreshadowing," "shadows," etc.) and the seeming tautologies provide the text with a monotonous rhythm and thus underline the bewildering style of the narrative. As a consequence of the twofold role of ambiguities, it applies both to Captain Amasa Delano and to the reader of the story that "[...] of the details no clear understanding had been had" (p. 222).

Contradictions and opposing images, moreover, contribute to the characterization of the ship from outside, as well as from inside. The "faded grandeur" (p. 215) of the *San Dominick* already gives a taste of all that is going to surround Captain Delano on board of it. "The ship's general model and rig appeared to have undergone no material change from their original warlike and Froissart pattern. However, no guns were seen," (p. 215) the narrator observes, while Delano, in his whale-boat, approaches the *San Dominick*. New oppositions await us on board, e. g.: "the living spectacle it [viz the ship] contains, upon its sudden and complete disclosure, has, in contrast with the blank ocean which zones it, something of the effect of enchantment" (p. 216). Most of the images suggest the fake nature of things, persons and behaviours. The scene seems from the very beginning to be odd, even the morning is "peculiar to that coast" (p. 212). The *San Dominick*, even more from inside than from outside, and its people are curious: "The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces but a shadowy tab-

leau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave" (p. 216).

The opposite directions of the gestures "giving" and "receiving back" annihilate each other, the latter revokes the result of the former. Consequently, they appear to be *exclusive contradictions*, although the possibility of a correlation, moreover, of mutual dependence between the two poles is suggested. Although "giving" and "receiving back" cannot be performed at the same time, they can be accomplished successively, and so, from the point of view of the agent, can be regarded as *complementary contradictions*. The ambiguity of antagonism and correlation is even more striking in the pretended (again, not real!) relationship between Atufal and Don Benito: "The slave there carries the padlock, but master here carries the key" (p. 232).

To tell exclusive contradictions from complementary ones is, as a result, not easy. A further example illustrates that the difference can be merely a matter of viewpoint: white people tend to separate work and leisure in terms of time, but this is not the case with the black. As we understand it, there is a "peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime" (p. 217). Hence, an exclusive contradiction in one culture can be considered as complementary in another, that is, contradictions are culturally bound.

He is "less a servant than a devoted companion" (p. 219), we read about Babo. The more he is a companion, the less he can be a servant. The question itself whether Babo is a servant or a companion (or both) contains a presupposition and therefore cannot be answered unequivocally. The contradiction is thus doubled, and the mystery of the situation constitutes itself in the way Delano tries to solve the riddle. At the same time, there lies the actual problem of the whole story, for Babo is neither servant nor companion to Benito Cereno; he is but his master since the rebellion, or his kidnapper, to be more precise.

The statement: "The ship seems unreal" (p. 216), already quoted above, seems to me to comprise one of the most general paradoxes of 'Benito Cereno' in a most condensed and very subtle way. William B. Dillingham, who gives special emphasis to his distinction of four points of view in 'Benito Cereno' "labelled reportorial, official (the deposition), authorial, and individual (Delano),"<sup>3</sup> in referring to similar expressions of visual sensation, deems it necessary to record that "Melville frequently uses the words *was like* or *seemed*, but seldom adds to *Delano*

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<sup>3</sup>Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction*. p. 243

when figures are used.”<sup>4</sup> Dillingham attributes this peculiarity to the portrayal of the American Captain’s personality:

Since Delano is blunt-thinking and incapable of irony, the elaborate similes and metaphors that characterize much of the style of ‘Benito Cereno’ come most commonly from the authorial voice.<sup>5</sup>

Melville, however, has accomplished yet another very important effect by writing “The ship seems unreal” instead of, e. g., *The ship seems unreal to Captain Delano*. Although “the ship” is the subject of the kernel clause, it is not certain that it is also the ship that the statement is all about. The fact that no recipient of the vision is represented overtly, and a semantic slot is thus empty and blurred, gives the sentence a general character and encourages the reader to accept a universal interpretation of Delano’s bewilderment. Consequently, the ship, together with everything that has happened or is going to happen on board of it, is endowed with a symbolic significance and, at the same time, with a peculiar, almost otherworldly, infernal atmosphere.

Although the subject complement “unreal” refers, grammatically, to the ship, semantically this adjective, due to the ellipsis, obtains a twofold character and very much relates also to Captain Delano himself. Since he is constantly full of doubts concerning the past history of the ship, the identity of its crew and its passengers, the meaning of Benito Cereno’s and Babo’s gestures, etc. (for example: “The singular alternations of courtesy and ill-breeding in the Spanish captain were unaccountable” [p. 234], or “what did all these phantoms amount to?” [p. 238]), he is more and more uncertain about the validity of his own interpretation concerning them as well (“He rubbed his eyes, and looked again; but again seemed to see the same thing. Under a new form, but more obscure than any previous one, the old suspicion recurred...” [p. 242]). His doubts, as a result, affect his existence too, and so, after a while, it appears that it is only a matter of viewpoint whether the ship is unreal or he himself.

I have shown above how an exclusive contradiction can be transposed into a complementary one and vice versa, by changing the viewpoint. A similar, constant alternation can be observed in the role of the main characters. As long as Delano is on board of the *San Dominick*, the relationship of the two captains is

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* 245

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* 245

undefinable, ambiguous. Now their spirits change in a parallel way ("finding his companion [Benito Cereno] more than ever withdrawn, [...] by and by Captain Delano likewise became less talkative, oppressed, against his own will" [p. 233]), then they act just in the opposite direction, with a deliberate intention of complementation and substitution ("Well, thought Captain Delano, if he has little breeding, the more need to show mine" [p. 271]), another time again, Delano thinks Benito to be hostile towards him ("he began to feel a ghostly dread of Don Benito" [p. 238]), that is, they appear to embody the two sides of an exclusive contradiction. On the whole, nonetheless, the two captains seem to be attracted to each other, even to the extent of seeming inseparability, which is corroborated by the seating arrangement at lunch: "Without companions, host and guest sat down, like a childless married couple, at opposite ends of the table..." (p. 264).

That attachment produces tension when Captain Delano is about to leave: "I can go no further; here I must bid you adieu," Benito Cereno says. "Adieu, my dear, dear Don Amasa. Go—go!" (p. 274). The separation seems to be inevitable, even the "meekly admonitory eye of the servant" hastens it. The tension is at its peak when Captain Delano orders "the boat shoved off," while Don Benito is "standing rooted in the gangway," but ultimately they find themselves again together, now in the boat.

Benito Cereno and Babo ("a black man's slave was Babo, who now is the white's" [p. 232]), in contrast, stand at the utmost ends of the scale. The captain is a white man, Babo is a black slave, who ordered to kill Benito's friend, Don Alexandro Aranda and threatens the captain of the *San Dominick* constantly with death: "Keep faith [...] or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader" (p. 286). They are still bound together by the murderous violence of Babo. Although Benito succeeds in fleeing into Delano's boat, immediately after, Babo follows him. Their desperate duel reaches its end in the narrow space of the boat. Melville uses in that passage a wide range of shades and turns of contradictions, like "an artist carving a three-dimensional scene in ivory and ebony, working subtle designs that are hidden away in the recesses."<sup>6</sup>

Behind the layer of seeming contradictions brought about by rhetorical structures, dealt with in the first part of this section, there lies the real contradiction between Delano's world, his way of thinking and the world of "the most savage energies" (p. 234) he enters when stepping aboard the *San Dominick*. The riddle is even demonstrated for him, again ironically, by someone who is not only

<sup>6</sup>Adler, *War in Melville's Imagination*, p. 109

a black, a slave and an outlaw, but also “simple-witted” who often plays “his odd tricks,” and who looks “like an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon” (p. 248).

At last, puzzled to comprehend the meaning of such a knot, Captain Delano addresses the knoter:—

“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 some one else to undo,” muttered back the old man, plying his fingers harder than ever, the knot being now nearly completed.

[...]

For a moment, knot in hand, and knot in head, Captain Delano stood mute...

(p. 248)

Thus we have reached the highest level of contradictions and paradoxes, where they are the most intricate and most elaborate, contributing to “the realization of mystery, the effective presentment of overwhelming complexity.”<sup>7</sup>

The complexity, and even more the mystery, lies in the perplexing image: “knot in hand, and knot in head.” In order to arrive at an adequate appreciation of the message or *meaning* of the knot being at once in the “hand” and in the “head,” I have to come to the analysis of

#### *AMASA DELANO, THE UNWILLING DETECTIVE.*

Stanley Cavell, in his analysis of Beckett’s *Endgame*, observes that “the unbelievable, the plain truth which you cannot tell, that others will think you mad when you try to tell, is one of Hitchcock’s patented themes.”<sup>8</sup> In this respect, nevertheless, the Anglo-American film director has talented rivals like Woody Allen, for example, who, in his film, ‘Manhattan Murder Mystery’ (1993), as protagonist, is confronted with a series of unaccountable events and facts that gradually convince him of his friendly neighbour’s being a cold-blooded murderer and make him act as a detective in spite of himself.

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<sup>7</sup>Fogle, “Benito Cereno.” p. 122

<sup>8</sup>Cavell, *Must we Mean what we Say?* p. 131



Captain Delano is lured into a similar situation by his mere curiosity, by his "benevolent interest" (p. 222). This "no small interest" (p. 213) with which he peers at the *San Dominick* "through the glass" (p. 213), at first, leads him into a trap (on board of the *San Dominick*) literally and proves to be a pit-fall figuratively for him, at the same time, since he can neither resist the temptation of tracing the apparent facts back to their origins, nor comprehend anything relevant in that respect, due to his self-preserving instinct.

Melville makes use of the possibility that the two frames of mind, curiosity and blindness, scornful suspicion and terror, may be connected so that they alternate from time to time in a way that naïveté, on the one hand, releases tension caused by dread; and fear, on the other hand, enables Delano to be again on the alert. As an illustration, a characteristic example of this constant alternation follows: "...he could not but smile at his late fidgety panic. Presently, while standing with his host, looking forward upon the decks below, he was struck by one of those instances of insubordination previously alluded to" (p. 228). Delano, then, carries both his suspicion and bona fides too far, so as to make excessive statements concerning Don Benito, like: "The man was an impostor" (p. 234), or, soon after: "Away with suspicion. He was a true off-shoot of a true hidalgo Cereno" (p. 235).

Shakespeare's Othello, likewise, in his hesitation between two poles, does not accept anything in between:

By the world,  
I think my wife be honest, and think she is not;  
I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.

(III 3 384-386)

Once Othello has felt the slightest doubt concerning his wife's being faithful, he, in contrast to Amasa Delano, who never asks a straightforward question, demands absolute certainty:

Make me to see 't; or, at least, so prove it,  
That the probation bear no hinge, nor loop,  
to hang a doubt on: or woe upon thy life!  
(III 3 365-367)

It is “to see it” that Delano is eager for, also. It is his sight, though, that is impaired mentally, in spite of his eagerness and exertion, owing, among other things, to his prejudice, and physically by the deceitful arrangement of things. The tension between his intention to look and his inability to “see” is reinforced from the beginning of the story, on the one hand, in strongly suggestive accounts of Delano’s efforts, like: “With no small interest, Captain Delano continued to watch her [the *San Dominick*]—a proceeding not much facilitated by the vapours partly mantling the hull...” (p. 213); and, on the other hand, in poetic images, for example: “...the sun [...] which, wimpled by the same low, creeping clouds, showed not unlike a Lima intriguante’s one sinister eye peering across the Plaza from the Indian loop-hole of her dusk *saya-y-manto*” (p. 213).

In connection with vision in the narrative, William B. Dillingham observes: “Central in ‘Benito Cereno,’ then, is the acting of seeing.”<sup>9</sup> Later on, he remarks that “Delano’s vision is willfully myopic.”<sup>10</sup> Dillingham understands this myopia both literally (“Whenever he looks out into the distance, as he does in the beginning to see the *San Dominick* entering the harbour, he is troubled”<sup>11</sup>) and metaphorically (“To avoid seeing the far-reaching implications of the *San Dominick* situation, Delano, in moments of fear, makes himself dwell on the individual details of what he has seen.”<sup>12</sup>) At the end of the story’s second part, Captain Delano, in retrospect, gives his own explanation of his short-sightedness, casting a psychological light upon his behaviour and allowing, at the same time, a deeper interpretation of his role throughout the story: “...acuteness might have cost me my life, without saving another’s” (p. 296).

As we have seen above, Othello’s reaction to doubt is quite different from Delano’s. While the captain suffers from his deficient vision and cannot overcome his paralysed state, the Moor, to conclude his writhing between the poles of fanatic belief and utmost apostasy, takes what he sees for granted and proceeds with his action accordingly. As a Renaissance hero, he sacrifices his own life (besides his wife’s) in defence of his moral conviction. Delano, in contrast, sacrifices his sense of reality to save his life.

Whereas Othello, in order to get the better of doubt, points to someone who seems to undermine the order of his world, René Descartes, the philosopher,

<sup>9</sup>Dillingham, *Melville’s Short Fiction*. p. 247

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* p. 249

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.* p. 249

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.* p. 254

preserves his scepticism and uses it as the only proof of his existence. Descartes relates his state of mind when doubt attacks him like an unexpected, agonizing disease:

...just as if I had all of a sudden fallen into very deep water, I am so disconcerted that I can neither make certain of setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim and so support myself on the surface<sup>13</sup>.

Having once swallowed the hook of suspicion, the philosopher cannot get loose either:

I shall ever follow in this road until I have met with something which is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing else, until I have learned for certain that there is nothing in the world that is certain.<sup>14</sup>

Considering oneself to be submitted to a superior power may aggravate the confusion and open the way to the presumption of being *deliberately* exposed to doubt:

Is there not some God, or some other being by whatever name we call it, who puts these reflections into my mind? [...] But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me.<sup>15</sup>

The answer to the Cartesian question concerning the existence of the self, and, at the same time the restriction of the self to its mere mental abilities, is not denied by the possibility of being deceived. On the contrary, the activity of a superior power on the self does nothing but confirm the undeniable existence of the self:

But what am I, now that I suppose that there is a certain genius which is extremely powerful, and, if I may say so, malicious, who employs all his powers in deceiving me? [...] I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. [...] But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? It is a thing

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<sup>13</sup>Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy. Meditation II.” p. 77

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* p. 77

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.* p. 78

which doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.”<sup>16</sup>

Delano, aboard the *San Dominick*, is, similarly, nothing but “a thing which doubts [...], affirms, denies...,” without the ability, nevertheless, to point, e. g., to Benito Cereno, saying *you are the one who deceives me* (which would be very Othelloan since, like Iago for the Moor, it is Babo who stages a fake world for the American captain so that both Iago and Babo appear to be altruistic companions, while Desdemona and the Spanish captain are looked upon with suspicion). Nor does Delano point to himself, realizing that he lacks the firm stand indispensable to sound judgement, and nobody but he himself is to blame for it, which would lend his mentality a philosophical depth. No, the means that would free Amasa Delano of his inhibition that renders him incapable of detecting the past of the *San Dominick* and of judging whether he is deceived or not is *not in hand and not in head*. His being paralysed finds, therefore, its adequate expression in the words: “For a moment, knot in hand and knot in head, Captain Delano stood mute” (p. 248).

The Moor of Venice has become the captive of his own consciousness, and laments the fact accordingly:

*Othello*. I swear, 't is better to be much abus'd,  
Than but to know 't a little.

(III, 3, 337-338)

Consequently, not reality itself is unbearable, but the knowledge of it. No wonder, then, that the Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, blames consciousness as such saying: “Man, by the very fact of being man, of possessing consciousness, is a diseased animal”<sup>17</sup>. It is awareness Delano tries to escape throughout the story, and it is oblivion he recommends to Don Benito in the end: “See, your bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves” (p. 297).

The style of the dialogue about the knot above, with the figura etimologica (“knot,” “knotter,” “knotting”) lending a repetitive manner to it, and with its terse narrative elements resembling stage directions, might almost have

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid* p. 78-79

<sup>17</sup>Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*. p. 17

been taken from an absurd play. This is, however, not the only reason why I have to turn my attention now to the

*ABSURDITY IN 'BENITO CERENO.'*

On the one hand, this is justified by the tendency towards the foregrounding of the poetic function of language<sup>18</sup> observable in the extract above and also elsewhere in the text. Dillingham, for instance, in his essay already referred to, points out that Melville must have been struck with the final 'o's' that appear in the names of the real people mentioned in *Voyages* [the real Captain Delano's book serving as "the primary source for 'Benito Cereno'"<sup>19</sup>—Delano, Benito Cereno, Don Alexandro...]<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, further characteristics of the text also urge me to propound the notion of absurdity in connection with 'Benito Cereno.' I think my assumption does not contradict Dillingham's opinion according to which "Melville was in a sense rewriting *Mardi* ['Mardi and a Voyage Thither,' his novel published in 1849] with its ceaseless and meaningless repetitions and alternations."<sup>21</sup> Similar repetition, also coupled with alternation like in the dialogue above ("knot," "knotter," "knotting"), as an absurd element, is to be found, for example, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*:

MARTHA: I like the way you move.

NICK: I like the way you move, too.

GEORGE: [to HONEY] They like the way they move.

HONEY: [not entirely with it] It's so nice.<sup>22</sup>

Guildestern, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, while referring to his own and Rosencrantz' prospects:

<sup>18</sup>Jacobson, *Linguistics and Poetics*. p. 350-377

<sup>19</sup>Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction*. p. 229

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.* p. 235

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.* p. 235

<sup>22</sup>Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* p. 81

GUIL: This is all getting rather undisciplined... The boat, the night, the sense of isolation and uncertainty... all these induce a loosening of the concentration,<sup>23</sup>

seems to be delineating a situation similar to that which Captain Delano is caught in: "The calm was confirmed. In the far distance, away from the influence of land, the leaden ocean seemed laid out and leaded up, its course finished, soul gone, defunct" (p. 250). Similarly to Delano, who, "despite present prospects," is "cherishing hopes of a breeze, and a fair and fresh one" (p. 250), Guildenstern is engaged in "the speculation or the assumption or the hope that something is about to happen."<sup>24</sup>

If the condition of waiting only implicitly characterizes the extracts compared above, Melville, like Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, presents us straightforwardly with the problem of filling meaningless time: "By way of keeping his mind out of mischief till the boat should arrive, he tried to occupy it with turning over and over, in a purely speculative sort of way, some lesser peculiarities of the captain and crew" (p. 251). Beckett contrasts with this only in the circumstance that for his figures death has lost its meaning, too:

VLADIMIR: [...] What do we do?

ESTRAGON: Wait.

VLADIMIR: Yes, but while waiting.

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?<sup>25</sup>

Rosencrantz, in his effort to find a way out of the labyrinth of lost identity, tries to trace his life, shared with Guildenstern and Hamlet, back to their childhood thus establishing a vague connection between past and present:

ROS: [...] We, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, from our young days brought up with him, awakened by a man standing on his saddle, are summoned, and arrive, and are instructed to glean what afflicts him and draw him on to pleasures, such as a play, which unfortunately, as it

<sup>23</sup>Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. p. 82

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.* p. 82

<sup>25</sup>Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*. p. 18

turns out, is abandoned in some confusion owing to certain nuances outside our appreciation – which, among other causes, results in, among other effects, a high, not to say, homicidal, excitement in Hamlet, whom we, in consequence, are escorting, for his own good, to England...<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Delano endeavours to maintain integrity by means of reviving his childhood memories:

What, I, Amasa Delano—Jack of the beach, as they called me when a lad—I, Amasa; the same that, duck-satchel in hand, used to paddle along the waterside to the school-house made from the old hulk;—I, little Jack of the Beach, that used to go berrying with cousin Nat and the rest; I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard?—Too nonsensical to think of!

(p. 249)

Eugène Ionesco’s definition of the absurd fits both cases quoted above: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”<sup>27</sup>

There certainly may be strong objections to my proposal for looking at ‘Benito Cereno’ from the point of view of the absurd. I am aware of the fact that the narrative has a “cleverly constructed story” and even its most repetitive parts cannot be labelled as “incoherent babblings.”<sup>28</sup> Regarding Esslin’s other criteria concerning plays, nevertheless, I would like to point out some that definitely support my argument. Although ‘Benito Cereno’ has a characteristic beginning and an end, its theme is “finally solved”<sup>29</sup> only in the second part of the story, in the deposition, which is loosely connected to the narrative, and the difference in style represents a strongly marked division between the two. Consequently, the “key” to the “padlock” is merely presented to us, the story still remains “a kind of riddle that the reader, no less than Delano, must solve.”<sup>30</sup> Another strong argument may be built on the fact that the story undeniably fulfils Esslin’s criterion according to

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<sup>26</sup>Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. p. 81

<sup>27</sup>quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. p. 23

<sup>28</sup>Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. p. 21, 22

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.* p. 22

<sup>30</sup>Bickley, *The Method of Melville’s Short Fiction*. p. 102

which works of the absurd “seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares.”<sup>31</sup>

Even though I do not intend to claim that ‘Benito Cereno’ is an absurd narrative proper, I still affirm that it undoubtedly bears absurd traits as I have shown above. Thus I attempted to establish a connection between the narrative and a literary style blossoming a hundred years later.

Like Captain Delano, who is left without any hope for a “clear understanding” (p. 222) of obscure signs and riddles, the philosopher, in his utmost doubt, is bereft of a firm grasp of the meaning of existence. Descartes, assuming an elemental unity of the self, points to it as to the ultimate answer to all the uncertainties of the outer world. *Inside*, however, as we learn from psychoanalysis, there is not less ground for doubt and suspicion than outside, which justifies the

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT

of literary analysis.

Dillingham, at the end of his profound analysis of ‘Benito Cereno’ proposes that the story may be understood as a “parable of a psychological situation that might well have projected Melville’s fears about himself.”<sup>32</sup> He implicitly identifies the author’s “concern for his mental stability”<sup>33</sup> with the narrator’s intention by claiming that Melville’s severe illness and existential difficulties have to be included in a psychological interpretation of the short story. According to him, Benito Cereno and Babo belong together as two components of the same, “split personality, one side violent, strong, and rebellious, the other side humane, reasonable but weaker.”<sup>34</sup> Murfin refers to a similar practice of applying a much simplified version of Freudian theory in psychoanalysing the author: “Figurative literary language in general is treated as something that evolves as the writer’s conscious mind resists what the unconscious tells it to picture or describe.”<sup>35</sup>

This kind of approach is now definitely obsolete, and elementary but enthusiastic application of Freudian theory in literary criticism since the 1950s became much humbler. Precedence of psychoanalysis over literature was resisted,

<sup>31</sup>Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. p. 22

<sup>32</sup>Dillingham, *Melville’s Short Fiction*. p. 267

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.* p. 266

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.* p. 268-269

<sup>35</sup>Murfin, *What is Psychoanalytic Criticism?* p. 119



first of all, by the authors. O'Neill, for example, emphatically rejected conjectures concerning his closely following Freud's and Jung's teachings saying: "Authors were psychologists, you know, and profound ones, before psychology was invented."<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Wright, in her overview of psycho-analytic criticism, unmistakably declares that "after all, psychoanalysis is now being used to show how clever literature is."<sup>37</sup>

What Melville does in 'Benito Cereno' is, in my estimation, nothing but the opposite of concealment. He does not disguise the content of any of his "manifest dreams" by means of a metaphorical language (by "condensation" or "displacement"), but tells a fearful, dystopian tale about repressed, inarticulate, and savage energies breaking their shackles and, through overturning the sensitive balance, subjugating their ruler.

What black people, especially Babo in 'Benito Cereno' represent, is certainly very close to what Freud calls, according to the topographical viewpoint of the mind, the *id*, "the dark, inaccessible part of our personality."<sup>38</sup> He even attributes "a strong upward drive" to the *id*, "an impulsion to break through into consciousness."<sup>39</sup> The *id*, like Babo in the American captain's culturally determined conception, is normally subdued, its drives are held within limits. Babo's presence and actions represent a threat, an outburst of once repressed savage energies. The social criticism of the story may be derived hence, since the author's irony is directed not only against Delano (who refers to blacks as "stupid" [p. 247], while he is not able to grasp what they are about), but against the hypocrisy of white people in dealing with blacks in general. The idea however, that the masked figures, Castile and Leon, on the sternpiece of the *San Dominick*, refer to Melville's potential selves or his disguised "fear of what could happen to him"<sup>40</sup> sounds far-fetched and certainly cannot be proved by Melville's text.

We have to accept, therefore, that the sensuous metaphor represents, first of all, the concealment of the existing situation aboard the "haunted" ship. The "dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure" (p. 215) is but the emblematic representation of Babo. Although it is tempting to project on to the satyr, and thus on to the figure of Babo, the attributes of the

<sup>36</sup> quoted in Egri, *The Birth of American Tragedy*. p. 31

<sup>37</sup> Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism*. p. 176

<sup>38</sup> Freud, *The Dissection of the Psychological Personality*. p. 105

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100

<sup>40</sup> Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction*. p. 270

inherent, similarly disguised component of the psychical personality, the Freudian *id*, that “knows no judgements of value: no good and evil, no morality,”<sup>41</sup> an even more general interpretation of the symbol is possible and, in addition, supported by the whole body of the text.

The vast amount of contradictions and interdependencies that permeate human relations as well as Melville’s language describing them in ‘Benito Cereno’ seem, after all, to amount to nothing but the idea of life and death, in the purely physical sense of the words, engaged in an incessant striving against each other. Truth and principle have nothing to say, since bodily survival is constantly at stake, moral has no bearing on action, cruelty and murder are part and parcel of everyday life on the *stage* of the Spanish ship. All that resembles a nightmare teeming with fierce monsters, full of mortal danger, or a rather real, but inhuman, prehistoric state in which nothing but pure instincts ruled over living creatures. The amoral striving of antagonistic but inseparable forces is not far from that what Freud says about the everlasting rivalry of the two kinds of basic instincts:

If it is true that – at some immeasurably remote time and in a manner we cannot conceive – life once proceeded out of inorganic matter, then, according to our presumption, an instinct must have arisen which sought to do away with life once more and to re-establish the inorganic state.<sup>42</sup>

Freud calls this “death instinct”, and believes that it cannot “fail to be present in every vital process.”<sup>43</sup> He assumes the contradictory forces of life and death to be mutually presupposing each other:

And now the instincts that we believe in divide themselves into two groups – the erotic instincts, which seek to combine more and more living substance into ever greater unities, and the death instincts, which oppose this effort and lead what is living back into an inorganic state.<sup>44</sup>

Captain Delano, from the first moment on, struggles with his own incapability of discovering the concealed (or far too obvious) hostility controlling the uncanny ship. The clear fronts in the second half of the story, the discharge of

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<sup>41</sup>Freud, *The Dissection of the Psychical Personality*. p. 107

<sup>42</sup>Freud, *Anxiety and Instinctual Life*. p. 140

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.* p. 140

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.* p. 140

tensions and the consequent restoration of order, nevertheless, bear nothing but death and amoral destruction. A full cycle has been accomplished: the rebellion on the unreal ship, on this weird stage has been suppressed, the dark, evil forces have with commensurate cruelty been exterminated, and it seems that the depth "must receive back what it gave" (p. 216). The sole *purpose* of knotting the knot was "for some one else to undo" (p. 248); and there is no meaning in the dead Babo's vacant eyes. "Why moralize upon it? Forget it" (p. 297), these are the words of advice Delano gives Don Benito, and, although they call each other "my dear friend" (p. 295), the Spanish captain never again visits him. "Nor then, nor at any time after, would he look at him" (p. 298). Three months after Babo's "body was burned to ashes" (p. 298), Benito Cereno dies. The contradictory forces seem ultimately to have annihilated each other.

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