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High Myth & The Failed Hero in Melville's *Benito Cereno*

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Penetration

Peaceful waters lie still but
Anger subsists submerged just
Beneath the surface.
Meaning is absent.
Searching is frustration
And in the end the swells of horrid truths
Break deliberately on the shore and
Dissipate—only to regenerate—
Into unrelenting waves of monstrosity.

Rosy swarms of krill
Surface at sunset
Creating a kaleidoscope of color.
Kinetic dancing lures their killer...

Behold!
The Beast of the blue
Who rises to
Swallow the swarm
In a gulp to large to comprehend!

But millions of krill are gone
And then...
Naughty boys in New York pools get
Nasty under water.
They grope and grab and poke and pinch and touch and
Whoops there it is!

Peaceful waters lie still
With an occasional swell.
The serpent lives
Submersed beneath the surface
Disguised as man
Stalking the streets.
Smelling fleshy prey.
The Lakewood Spur Posse
Pierce young women and are
Rewarded with a hundred points
And a thousand dollars from The Home Show.
Spurs of serpents dig deep
Into soft flesh
Deep enough to kill
But peaceful waters lie still.

Jennifer Close

High Myth &
The Failed Hero in
Melville's Benito Cereno

by Randy Bush

Author’s note: For those not immediately familiar with this wonderfully dark Melville piece (as I was not before last year) here’s a little map: Amasa Delano is a Spanish American ship’s captain who finds a seemingly derelict vessel and, discovering life, goes aboard to offer help. The story, based on an actual account of a bloody slave revolt aboard a ship, is one of incredible tension and dread as the surviving crew members attempt to signal help while under the scrutiny of their African “masters.” Don Benito Cereno, captain before the rebellion, is now a pawn of the slaves’ diabolical leader, Babo.

Let me say, immediately, that my purpose herein is neither to address racial motifs nor to argue the point of Babo’s being in command or Benito Cereno’s being, like Bartleby, unable to face a real presence of evil. Any Melville bibliography will yield a half-dozen or so pieces that deal with either theme. And nearly every article or anthology I’ve found has examined resemblances between Don Benito and Charles V and between the “black friars” of the San Dominick and the real Dominican black friars of the Inquisition. I will argue that to approach Benito Cereno as an example of “high” myth (or myth that draws upon universal archetypes), before his “cruciﬁxion” and “resurrection” on the ship’s “beak,” both brilliant and self-conscious he is, obviously: he knows he has near-absolute power over everyone on board. And, knowing it, he manipulates everyone. Yet his is the dreadful presence of “Star Wars” emperor. He is no play-actor but is the god of the Pit.

Barbara Baines would agree. She presents Babo as a demonic mastermind whose ultimate work of vengeance is to trick the whites into sharing a perverse “eucharist” in which they partake of the secretly prepared flesh of Aranda, one of Benito Cereno’s “officers,” before his “cruciﬁxion” and “resurrection” on the ship’s “beak.” Lord Babo holds power over both body and soul (and thus, Melville’s) isto attack the ethics and direction of America of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [48-68]. Approaching from that angle, I can hardly disagree with him. Amasa Delano, whom I hope this paper will suggest as a fallen or, better still, a failed mythic hero, might well represent America. His mind and soul, like his country’s, are a tangle of ignorance within optimism and haughty virginity within compromise. Delano’s quest, in which he is technically unsuccessful, is to solve—from clues—the riddle of the San Dominick. And, as the hero needs a counterforce, so enters Babo.

To Charles Swann, Babo is simply fulﬁlling his devious role as “actor-manager” of a “dramatic production” [112]. And to this I cannot agree. Both brilliant and self-conscious he is, obviously: Lord Babo is simply fulﬁlling his devious role as “actor-manager” of a “dramatic production” [112]. And to this I cannot agree. Both brilliant and self-conscious he is, obviously: Lord Babo holds power over both body and soul (and thus, Melville’s) isto attack the ethics and direction of America of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [48-68]. Approaching from that angle, I can hardly disagree with him. Amasa Delano, whom I hope this paper will suggest as a fallen or, better still, a failed mythic hero, might well represent America. His mind and soul, like his country’s, are a tangle of ignorance within optimism and haughty virginity within compromise. Delano’s quest, in which he is technically unsuccessful, is to solve—from clues—the riddle of the San Dominick. And, as the hero needs a counterforce, so enters Babo.

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the--fairly neutral--Greek Hades or Hela (or Hel) of Norse myth. He is no mere guardian of the dead but is Death, itself. And if so, then Benito Cereno is his oracle, unwilling or not. As Christ mediates between God and sinful humanity, so Cereno provides a link between Babo-of-the-Pit and Captain Delano, the embodiment of humanity’s (and possibly America’s) guilt and innocence and the quest’s main force. The tale bears Cereno’s name because, though a pawn caught between hero and devil, he is a vital one; Lord Babo’s dark plan rests on him. In any case, though, on to the hero and his quest.

Though the “questing” hero normally volunteers for the job, and Delano, some might say, never does, I believe there is another way of looking at it that does no violence to the metaphor. The first branch of the Welsh mabinogi has Pwyll, king of Dyfed, becoming separated from a hunting party and winding up in woods he has never seen before. He has, in fact, ridden out of his world and into the world of Arawn, Lord of the dead. For his own reasons, Arawn asks him to exchange identities with him for one year and Pwyll accepts [Ford 37-39]. And so does Amasa Delano. By the rules of his particular quest, he accepts again every time he chooses to ignore his natural suspicions. “Captain Delano is constantly seeking a rational explanation for the evil he fleetingly imagines,” says Miller, “and when he can find none, he dismisses the suspicion as ‘whimsy’” [155]. So Delano enters the blackness of Babo’s dominion not when he first steps onto the San Dominick’s deck but when, taking stock of the situation, he sees the Ashantee hatchet polishers and, willingly, denies his instinct.

The Ashantees, changing their axes together, mimic the role of Australian aborigines as they perform the manhood rite. In the semblance of spirits they come, naked but for goose down set in stripes of their own blood, swinging “bull-roarers” (spirit-voices), to escort the pubescent boy, via circumcision and the drinking of men’s blood, into manhood [Campbell 81]. Amasa Delano is that boy—or could be—with one exception. At that place Novalis called “the seat of the soul... where the inner and outer worlds meet,” we find in him only mediocrity [Campbell 57]. The hatchet-polishers dare him to commit the virtuous act of recognizing evil and then matching its force to eat the forbidden fruit and to enter manhood. But the “scales” have still to drop “from his eyes” [Melville 2508]. Until they do, he remains innocent of truth.

In The Mystery of Iniquity, William H. Shurr tackles the question of that act of virtue (of the “rare and superior” type), “an act that has all of the strength and brazen self-confidence which usually characterizes evil actions” [153]. This sort of virtue is as frightening to the average folk as is the direct evil. “The action leaves one on a lonely peak.... Such pure goodness alienates one from his fellow man” [Shurr 153]. And never for a moment does Delano rise above his fellows. In the end, his courage is of the most common sort.

[O]rdinary people cannot recognize the good in its pure form, just as the ordinary person, Captain Amasa Delano, cannot recognize the extreme of pure evil when he encounters it in Benito Cereno [Shurr 153-154]. And to be “ordinary” is the core of Amasa Delano. It is the exact thing that ties him to mediocrity and denies his entry into the realm of enlightenment.

And so ignorance and an endless belief in the power of good work together both to confound his quest and, miraculously, to preserve him. Ignoring portents of evil, like Norwegian Jack of Sjoholm marching into the hut of the Gan-Finn (black sorcerer) whose storms have destroyed Jack’s ship and many others, he steps willingly into Babo’s realm, with nothing more than personal altruism as armor, specifically because he trusts in universal altruism [Booss].

That he clings to dependence on that same good for protection, again and again, while being hopelessly “out-brained” is evidence of his failure as hero. Melville says, “The singular alternations of courtesy and ill-breeding in the Spanish captain were unaccountable, except on one of two suppositions—innocent lunacy, or wicked imposture” [Melville 162]. Of course, Delano is wrong on both counts, hugely wrong, and this is the essence of why he survives at all: though a Spaniard, he is the American virgin, the newborn crazy one who walks free among the tribes because he is without the mark of any god. He is neither natural man nor heavenly angel but is suspended in a void between godly insight and animal instinct. For Delano, and some would say for America, ignorance is, indeed, bliss.

Yet, in spite of playing Babo’s (or Abaddon’s) game, Delano is not, in the last moment, corrupted. With the final shattering of the “pact,” even though Don Benito hands him the key to the riddle of San Dominick, his soul is torn from Death and, if sullied, at least it is freed from Don Benito’s fate. One might question, though, who’s end of the bargain is worse.