DISCURSIVE CONFLICT IN 'BENITO CERENO': NOBLE SAVAGE VERSUS WILD MAN

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THE criticism of Melville's short novel "Benito Cereno" is full of contradictory interpretations as to the author's position with regard to slavery. An early group of critics sided with Charles Neider in viewing "Benito Cereno" as Melville's "effort to blacken the blacks and whiten the whites, to create poetic images of pure evil and pure virtue" (1948: 10). Sidney Kaplan followed the same tendency of denouncing "Benito Cereno" as "an 'artistic sublimation' not . . . of anti-slaveryism, but rather of notions of black primitivism dear to the hearts of slavery's apologists" (1957: 45). A second group maintained that through the clear presentation of proslavery prejudices, Melville finally undercuts them. Allen Guttmann (1961:42) interpreted Delano's and Cereno's narrow-mindedness, together with the impartial lawsuit, as "*the very thing which Melville is subverting.*" Lately, many scholars have drawn upon the ambiguities and ironies in the text to prove that in fact, as Carolyn Karcher points out, it is Delano who "falls into the language of the southern apologists of slavery" (1980: 132), while Melville himself remains in a much more indeterminate position. Brook Thomas (1984: 119-20) and Eric J. Sundquist (1986: 154) hold a similar position when they defend that Melville finally provides no authoritative perspective or point of view to help the reader determine whether the whites

or the blacks were fighting for a just cause.[1] As these divergent reactions indicate, the text appears ambiguous and complex; it flows among constant ironies and contradictions. It has often been pointed out that the story "starts as a world full of grays only to transform into a world divided between blacks and whites" (Thomas 1984: 119); from the reader's perspective, however, the story remains gray throughout: it never fully ascribes to either pro-slavery or anti-slavery positions. As Brooks Thomas indicates, the silences and ambiguities in the story, and the absences responsible for its final indeterminacy, "can be explained in terms of the historical contradictions which slavery posed to 'enlightened' whites" in ante-bellum America (1984: 124). While this article sides with those critics who defend the impossibility of finding Melville's authoritative point of view within the text, it proposes to analyze the "authority" of Delano's point of view and to study the discursive conflict and ambiguities visible in his rendering of the story.

Delano's perception of the black man in "Benito Cereno" suffers from the contradictions which white America had to face as slave uprisals started to destabilize the image of the peaceful and contented "uncle Tom." Along the first half of the nineteenth century, the slave revolts and the efforts of white abolitionists activated the repressed suspicion that the slaves being brutalized actually shared a humanity with their brutalizers. The debates centered over whether blacks possessed, beneath their animal aspect and behavior, a *human* soul. Eventually, this debate highlighted the confusion present in the white man's mind over the nature of his own humanity. It was not so much a search for the essence of the blacks' soul as a search for the quality of that humanity felt to belong exclusively to the white man. The distinction between a "normal" humanity and an "abnormal" one was being increasingly destabilized, the borders between one and the other, blurred. The indeterminacy of the nature of ontological frontiers separating whites and blacks generated basic discursive conflicts and sites of confrontation that are visible from the Declaration of Independence to the different Slave Acts.[2]

The instability and fluctuation of the white man's notion of humanity pervades "Benito Cereno." This meaningful inconsistency not only permeates the story as a whole but is also reflected in each one of the characters, whose defining characteristics are either unstable or equivocal. Don Benito fluctuates between being an emblem of pure goodness, an amiable seaman, and "a weak and corrupt sea captain engaged in the trade of slavery" (Bernstein, qtd. in Nnolim 1974: 29). Babo seems to be caught

between his instinctive and natural fight for freedom —together with Atufal, he feels ready to do "what was necessary for their design of returning to Senegal" (BC 226)[3]— and his evil desire for revenge upon the whites — which could explain his refusal to sail away when he first saw Delano's ship, as well as his suicidal pursuit of Don Benito after he jumped into Delano's boat. The blacks on the *San Dominick* are also a site of contradiction in Delano's eyes: they are slaves, though they wear no fetters. The character who best reflects the discursive conflict of the period in American history is Captain Delano himself. His constant hesitations with regard to the blacks, his image of them as faithful servants while he feels somehow threatened by their presence, do not only reflect his weak and unstable position on board the *San Dominick* but are also the result of a discursive conflict internal to the Euro-American monologue on the black "other." His uncertainty and apprehension are not mainly caused by Babo's masquerade and machinations as much as by opposing historical and ideological discourses fighting a battle in Delano's mind. Through his narration he reflects a historical confrontation between two divergent discourses that shared ideological positions in nineteenth century America.[4] As this paper pretends to elucidate, Delano apprehends the black man only through metaphors whose submerged meanings he partially misses or represses. Delano alternates between his image of the black as an innocent Noble Savage and as a depraved Wild Man; in adhering to both essentialist metaphors, he utterly misinterprets the slave revolt and totally neglects the blacks' inner motivations. While exposing how Delano adapts these ideological images of the black man to fit his own insecurities Melville underscores the purely discursive nature of both metaphors and discloses them as empty constructions artificially maintained.

In Delano's monologue, the discourse of the Noble Savage and the discourse of the Wild Man are visible as the captain shifts from total confidence on the blacks to quiet distrust and fear. Both had originated much before the nineteenth century, in the classical period, and had traditionally substituted one for the other in a cyclical process. The discourse of the Wild Man, biblical and medieval in nature, identifies the descendants of Ham, who are black and embody "Cain's rebelliousness" (White 1978: 161). The notion of the Wild Man is based on a primitivism which gathers all men's fears of evil and the unknown and projects them onto a corrupted human species. On the other hand, the discourse of the Noble Savage appears much later in time, and is an evolution of the image of the Wild Man. The Noble Savage idea relies on a pastoralism which emphasizes the unblemished and

benign nature of the African, while focusing the capacity for evil specially on the white man and civilization (Cf. White 1978: 183-96).

In the image Captain Delano offers of the blacks, Melville unifies both discourses on the black man. Their constant interplay in the text renders Delano's position as full of hesitation and instability; his attempts at gaining confidence are basically asserted through the continuous repression of meaning. Evidence of the existence of both discourses surfaces only through metaphors and textual absences which point at an unconscious conflict in Delano's mind. In this sense, in Delano Melville puts to the test the unresolved opposition between the discourse of the Noble Savage —which admits the black man within the "civilized world"— and the discourse of the Wild Man —which rejects him— as it evolved in nineteenth-century America.

From the very beginning of the story the narrator emphasizes the special location outside civilization where this test will take place. Delano lies at anchor in the "small, deserted, uninhabited island" of Santa Maria, significantly situated in "the southern extremity of the long coast of Chili" (BC 154). The impression of desolation of the island reverberates and intensifies as the narrator considers "the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot," a clear indication of the suspension of the two basic elements on which civilization is founded, the community and the law. As Walter Herbert points out, the act of travelling outward "beyond the presumed borders of civilized community in order to bring back a report on the savage portions of mankind" (1980: 8) was a fairly natural routine from the middle ages and up to Melville's time. As Melville situates his characters beyond the structural and organizing rules of civilization, he also places them beyond the constraints of civilization, in a perfect spot to prove the validity of the white man's ideological superiority over the African.

However, this natural spot is tainted with the mental and experiential baggage each of the passengers on both ships brings over from the Western world. Significantly, the *San Dominick* itself seems to carry the same unconscious burden as all her passengers. The *San Dominick*, as Benito tells in his deposition, set sail from the port of Valparaiso with a group of slaves; "none wore fetters, because the owner, his friend Aranda, told him that they were all tractable" (BC 224). As Delano first boards Benito's ship, the slaves are still unfettered, as pertains to a natural environment beyond the constraints —fetters— of civilization. Nonetheless, in the *San Dominick*'s hold, the unconscious of the ship —of the text, as well—, as if repressed, the fetters lurk, unused but still equally menacing to the blacks.[5]

Delano enters the narration armed with his civilized discursive defenses against the unknown, his textual fetters. As he perceives the stranger ship approaching from the distance, he gets ready to cast his discursive and perceptive web over the *San Dominick* and its crew. His first impressions on board the ship are of bafflement at the mystery which is contained in it: "The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave" (BC 158). This "shadowy tableau," populated mainly by unfettered blacks, is ready for Delano to project his interpretive strategy. Reading signs that have previously been formed and encoded in his mind, Delano's "undistrustful good nature" compels him to adopt the image of the Noble Savage in his interpretation of the unknown Africans on the ship.

Although Eric Sundquist (1986: 154) maintains that "Melville's tale, antislavery though it may be, contains no invocation of noble savagery," the distorting image of the black man as Noble Savage permeates Delano's account. Before even making contact with the blacks on the ship, Delano readily stresses their good-natured and pristine qualities. These "unsophisticated Africans," with their "self-content" and "peculiar love . . . of uniting industry with pastime," (BC 159) bring out Delano's "weakness for negroes." In his understanding of them, they are a mixture of docility and nobility. Delano feels confident as he sees "the affectionate zeal" and "good conduct" (BC 161) of Babo, Don Benito's private servant. The masquerade of Atufal appearing as a noble —although unrepentant— slave, confirms Delano in his impressions of the "general docility" of the blacks. A little later in the narration, the connection is made between the kindness and nobility of the blacks, and their deep links with unspoiled nature. While civilization has generated some evil tendencies in white men, the African remains pure, true to nature, but also subject to the danger of being contaminated by the white man: "if a little of our blood mixed with the African," affirms Delano, "should, far from improving the latter's quality, have the sad effect of pouring vitriolic acid into black broth; improving the hue, perhaps, but not the wholesomeness" (BC 205).

Given his position as captain, Delano is used to classifying his society (as well as his crew) along a hierarchical axis. In his conception of the blacks, he offers a vertical division in which the blacks share certain noble capacities of the whites but occupy an inferior stage in the natural chain of being. The blacks belong within a sphere immediately inferior to the humanity in which the white man is securely settled. In this neoplatonic understanding, the black man is continuous with the white man, but in an

inferior rung of the ladder, a lower species of it. This is partially veiled when Delano feels confident that Don Benito would never ally with the blacks against his own white crew: "Who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species, by leaguing in against it with the negroes" (BC 189). These meditations have the secondary effect of establishing the blacks as a different "species" from the white man. In the blacks Delano recognizes the "limited mind" natural to "indisputable inferiors" (BC 199). The display of topics akin to the Noble Savage stereotype are, at one point in the text, related to one of the many written sources initially responsible for reviving the discourse of the Noble Savage; while meditating on the negresses he sees on the ship, Delano thinks, well pleased: "Ah! . . . these perhaps are some of the very women whom Ledyard saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of" (BC 176). John Ledyard was the author of *Proceedings of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa* (London, 1790).[6] This work highlighted the nobility and kindness of the Africans, and together with many others helped to revive the discourse of the Noble Savage, which had been long present in classical and Christian thought and was rediscovered during the second half of the eighteenth century (White 1974: 191).

The benevolent and paternalistic image Delano casts of the blacks also contains certain limits to the complete admission of the noble blacks within the superior civilization of the whites. If the border between civilized white and uncivilized slave is to be safely maintained, the boundary line must be securely drawn. Delano willfully depicts the blacks as noble while at the same time he obscures them as ontological "others." The ultimate and insurmountable frontier between whites and "others" is signalled by the black's lack of articulate expression within the story. All the blacks are kept enclosed within Delano's point of view, which forces them to keep silent. They speak with the undefined voice of the "other," a silenced voice that maintains Delano at a safe distance from them. The oakum pickers accompany their task "with a continuous, low, monotonous chant; droning and druling away" (BC 159). Every now and then, "an unknown syllable" (BC 194) is passed between them. An elderly black man utters "some African word, equivalent to pshaw" (BC 190). All these inarticulate attempts at speech amount to a significant negation of language (Early 1982: 195). Besides, Atufal's obstinate silence indicates as much his refusal to ask Don Benito's pardon as his —apparent— submission to him. Babo comforts his master by appearing as "the silent sight of fidelity" (BC 208). Among the blacks, only Babo speaks; his voice, however, does not come naturally from

him, but springs from his mask. As soon as the mask is ripped off when his plot is discovered, he remains silent. Thus, the blacks never achieve real consciousness in the story, that is, they are precluded from sharing Delano's humanity. They never become fully human (Early 1982: 194).

In Delano's understanding, the noble blacks are closer to animal nature than the white man is. Delano's discourse continuously dehumanizes the slaves by attaching animal imagery to them. First of all, as the narrator mentions, "Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (BC 199). The groups of blacks in an old boat are "like a social circle of bats, sheltering in some friendly cave; at intervals ebon flights of naked boys and girls . . . darting in and out of the den's mouth" (BC 195-96). When Babo looks up at Don Benito, he is "like a shepherd's dog," (BC 160) whose grins denote "mere animal humor" (BC 179). These references to the animal nature of the slaves serve not to reject them as nonhuman, but rather to admit them within the white community in their position as docile servants —the image of the dog, domesticated animal, is significant in this context. At the same time, their animality accounts for their incapacity for being totally free. This description is in keeping with the conception of the slaves as Noble Savages, in that it admits them into the civilized world. They become the personification of Aristotle's "natural slave," an inferior species capable of occupying their given position in the world without threatening the existence of "civilized" men (White 1974: 189). The notion of the Noble Savage implies a hierarchical division of nature in which the white man occupies one of the superior levels in the chain of being. According to this organization, Delano appears much worried about how authority is kept on the *San Dominick*, since authority is fundamental to maintaining the hierarchy which Delano longs to see "in armies, navies, cities, or families, *in nature herself*" (BC 160).

As Hayden White indicates, traditionally the inscription of the "the other," —the slaves, in this case— within the stereotype of the Noble Savage occurs only after the confrontation between the "civilized man" and "the other" has been decided and when, therefore, the idolization of the pristine virtues of the "savages" can no longer hamper the exploitation of the latter by the former (1974: 186). In nineteenth-century America, slavery had been established long enough to afford a harmless —though cautious— appropriation of the image of the Noble Savage. Thus, the idea of the nobility of the black man in Delano's discourse is in consonance with his safe position as a "menial" and servant, content with its place in the civilization of the white man. However, the explosion of the slave revolts at

the end of the eighteenth century and all through the nineteenth century represented a threat to that *status quo*. Along the first half of the nineteenth century, the American civilization was caught in an unstable position with regard to slavery. The threat of overspread slave uprisings pervaded the 1850s. The outbreak of the slave revolution in Haiti (then called Saint Domingue, reminiscent of the *San Dominick*) in the 1790s was a clear point of reference to American slaveholders (Sundquist 1986: 147). Slave revolts were also frequent on the high seas; the mutinies on board the *Amistad* (1839) and the *Creole* (1841) were specially noted. To account for this new threat, the American advocates of slavery gradually deployed the discourse of the Wild Man to exorcise the image of the black man. In this new image of the blacks as Wild Men, the whites projected the brutality and degeneracy they began to think the blacks represented. An article in the *Democratic Review* in 1853 declared the blacks in Haiti to be "a horde of black savages, whose grandfathers murdered their brothers . . . and [who] would as readily exterminate every white man, as would their ancestors in the jungle of Africa" (qtd. in Sundquist 1986: 160). Even the abolitionists silenced the slave revolution in Haiti, while most Americans considered the island to be lost "into the lowest state of poverty and degradation" (qtd. in Sundquist 1986: 149).

In order to counteract that ominous threat, the literature of the period repressed all images of slave insurrection. The Plantation literature, which originated in the 1830s, spread the southern myth of the contented slave, the Noble Savage, in his plantation. However, lurking behind that discursive myth artificially imposed, the myth of the Wild negro was slowly arising. In a microscopic reproduction of that *status quo*, Delano enters the *San Dominick* armed with his myth of the docile servant, but also aware, although somewhat unconsciously, of the potential bestiality hidden in the black man's soul. This potential for destruction and revenge remains veiled in Delano's discourse previous to his discovery of Babo's plot, but there are certain traces that point at Delano's unconscious reflection upon the myth of the Wild Man; a repressed fear that emerges openly as soon as Delano apprehends the full meaning of the masquerade.

The passage that best inscribes the discourse of the Noble Savage is, significantly enough, also where Delano first unconsciously hints at the discourse of the Wild Man. As Delano walks around on board the *San Dominick*, he catches sight of a negress motherly nursing his baby. The imagery which Delano pours on his description of the edenic scene reveals

how behind the image of the Noble Savage, full of innocence and charm, the threatening shadow of the Wild Man lurks:

> His attention had been drawn to a slumbering negress, partly disclosed through the lace-work of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, crosswide with its dam's; its hands, like two paws, clambering upon her; its mouth and nose ineffectually rooting to get at the mark; and meantime giving a vexatious half-grunt, blending with the composed snore of the negress.
>
> The uncommon vigor of the child at length roused the mother. She started up, at distance facing Captain Delano. But as if not at all concerned at the attitude in which she had been caught, delightedly she caught the child up, with maternal transports, covering it with kisses.
>
> There is naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love, thought Captain Delano, well pleased.
>
> This incident prompted him to remark the other negresses more particularly than before. He was gratified with their manners; like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution; equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them. Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves. (BC 186)

In this passage, Delano is well pleased to describe an edenic scene of pristine innocence as seen from the distance. From his position as the onlooker, he renders a natural sight of the Noble Savage in nature, who carries on peacefully and unconcerned about the stranger. The animal imagery which pervades Delano's discourse emphasizes the natural innocence and tenderness of the Noble Savage: "doe," "fawn," "dam," "doves;" all seem to connote the innocence and maternal care common to these animals. However, among such animal images of innocence, certain unexpected signs of savagery appear: the child is depicted as climbing up on his mother on his "two paws," which does not follow from the previous description of the child as a "doe." The mother, previously a "wide-awake fawn," appears suddenly transformed into a "leopardess." As William Richardson indicates, Delano does not seem to perceive the duality in nature suggested by this double-edged imagery (1987: 80). That is why, surprisingly, he feels relieved at the sight of the negresses —"these natural sights somehow insensibly deepened his confidence and ease" (BC 187); they reaffirm all his conceptions of the Noble Savage. However, the image

of the Wild Man, capable of springing up at any time, is already present: although Delano represses the potential threat of the blacks and forces it into his unconscious, the fear comes out through metaphors whose submerged meaning the Captain fails to apprehend.

Later, after Delano discovers the slave revolt plotted by the blacks, the idea of the Wild Man flows consciously in Delano's discourse. His "flash of revelation" allows him to perceive "the negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, . . . but with masks torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt" (BC 217). The slaves are now by nature not innocent or docile but "ferocious," wild. In Delano's perspective the negro has suffered a metonymic change: the signified "negro" shifts from Noble Savage to Wild Man. The animal imagery changes from signifying the blacks' innocence and contentment in a natural world to symbolizing their savagery and evil nature. In the final battle between the slaves and Delano's crew, "the blacks now fought in despair. Their red tongues lolled, wolf-like, from their black mouths" (BC 221). The blacks who had previously been characterized as "Newfoundland dogs" and "shepherd's dogs" are now "wolf-like."

The vertical distinction along the natural chain of being that Delano used previously to submit the slaves to his own understanding of the world now appears inadequate. If the slaves occupy a lower rung in the chain, in the position of Noble Savages, they cannot be accountable for any evil doings. From the very early Greek philosophy and through the Christian world, the capacity for evil appears peculiar to human conduct. Delano acknowledges this idea several times in his meditations:

> The whites, too, by nature, were the shrewder race. A man with some evil design, would he not be likely to speak well of that stupidity which was blind to his depravity, and malign that intelligence from which it might not be hidden? Not unlikely, perhaps. But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be in any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. (BC 189).

Still within the discourse of the Noble Savage, Delano finds the blacks "too stupid" to participate in any evil schemes. Quite on the contrary, he always feels ready to imagine all kinds of machinations on the part of Don Benito, a representative of the human species, thus capable of evil plots: "To think that, under the aspect of infantile weakness, the most savage energies might be couched—those velvets of the Spaniard but the silky paw to his fangs" (BC 176).

When Delano discovers the blacks' plot, his discourse of the Noble Savage is utterly unsuitable to account for their behavior. That vertical neoplatonic conception of nature is revealed as inherently ambiguous and problematic. The hierarchical disposition of the species "presupposes a common stuff or essence shared by the various creatures dispersed across its ranks or some common source from which all of the creatures so dispersed derive, a common goal toward which they all tend, or a single cause of which they are all effects" (White 1974: 189). In this sense, the animal world, as well as the human world, equally derive from God and aspire to return to Him; that is, they equally participate in the divine essence. That means, all the species are somehow protected —either from a natural or religious understanding of the hierarchy— by the law that governs the functioning of the whole and its parts. Delano's conception of the blacks occupying a lower position by nature as well as in the social hierarchy is found inadequate when he realizes the hierarchy in the ship has been overturned. Babo, the representative of an inferior species, has transmuted into the commander. In Delano's vertical understanding of nature and society, that situation is merely unthinkable and requires a totally new understanding of the slaves. Delano seeks to find an explanation for that situation, as well as to sanction his anxiety to impose himself by force upon the blacks, even to slay them if necessary. So long as the discourse of the Noble Savage remains, that can not be done; the vertical conception of nature implies a continuity between human beings and the animal world, since what holds together the chain must be the common essence shared by the diverse species. Delano is, thus, forced to change into a horizontal understanding of the slaves. He effects the shift into the idea of the Wild Man, a human species contiguous with "civilized" humanity but physically and mentally corrupted. His conception of this Wild Man that separated from the ideal of humanity and turned evil is closely linked to his religious understanding. In Babo's final pursuit of Don Benito, Delano describes him as "snakishly writhing up" (BC 217) from the bottom of the boat. The metaphor conveys a clear reference to the biblical devil, disguised as a snake, and also connotes the depravity and evil of the fallen.

Originating in classical times, the metaphor of the Wild Man reflects the existence of a group of people who have degenerated; unlike the Noble savage, Wild Men belong in the realm of human beings. In the secular version of the myth, they have undergone the same evolutionary motion as the white man, but due to a process of species corruption as the result of certain faulty genetic combinations, they have fallen below the condition of

animality itself (White 1974: 160).[7] In the Christian tradition, the Wild Man was a descendant of Ham, the accursed son of Noah, who, according to biblical exegetes, was also black. His physical attributes are in themselves clear evidence of his evil nature (White 1974: 162). With the sole exception of Cain, in the Christian tradition the Wild Man can be punished and slain with impunity (White 1974: 191). He embodies depravity, "motiveless malignity;" all of man's vices are focussed upon him. His belonging in humankind accounts for his intelligence, while his corruption is responsible for his evil use of those capacities.

As a result of the increasing fear of brutal slave uprisings in the first half of the nineteenth century, white Americans deployed the stereotype of a depraved and vicious race —the Wild Man stereotype— and projected it on the black man. In time, it turned into a discourse maintained ideologically and institutionally. In 1854 John C. Calhoun, a senator for the state of South Carolina (and former vicepresident of the United States), declared the blacks to be a "low, degraded and savage" race (1837: 13). Such works as J. H. van Evrie's *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination*, and Nott and Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* testified to the marks of inferiority and evil in the black man's complexion and attempted to trace their whole genealogy. Van Evrie even predicted the "ultimate extinction" of the black race as a result of its inferiority and degradation (van Evrie 1868: 115-24).

Given this new interpretation of the slaves as wild and degraded men, they are now capable of evil in a much higher degree than "normal" people. If the myth of the Noble Savage admitted the black man within the civilized world —although in the position of "the other"—, the myth of the Wild Man serves to deny admission of this inferior and corrupted breed of people within the human community. While the black man appeared as docile and humble servant, the idea of the Noble Savage fitted him; as soon as he appears as a threat to humanity, when he refuses to comply with his position as servant, the same society that previously accepted him now discloses the myth of the Wild Man to keep him away. As Cain, the children of Babel, or the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, the corrupted blacks are readily rejected from the human community. Along the nineteenth century, as slave revolts and protests grow, "the [negro] stereotype shifts from safe to unsafe, acceptable to unacceptable, and blacks are increasingly depicted as uncontrollable animals with emotions that need to be disciplined. Accordingly, the mode changes from humor (which includes) to satire and grotesque (which rejects)" (Ostendorff 1982: 74). Delano simply follows a trend already present in the American society of the first half of the

nineteenth century when he releases this conception of the blacks as evil brutes. In adopting this new image of the black man as wild and depraved, Delano sanctions his pursuit of the slaves and even his annihilation of some of them. Delano's punishment of the slaves is in keeping with nature —it does not imply a distortion of the chain of being, but rather a natural purification of the human species— as well as with the Christian religion he professes.

After discovering the true facts that have taken place on board the *San Dominick* —as well as before— Delano has enclosed the slaves within essentialist discourses in which their true essence has remained always silenced. The images of Noble Savage and Wild Man are metaphors which obscure their referent, the blacks, to such an extent that they never come to consciousness within the text. In the same way as Don Benito's deposition at the end of the story obscures the slave revolt on board the *San Dominick* by turning it into a bloody act of motiveless malignity, Delano falls into the prison house of his own metaphoric language and perspective. That narrow perspective enables him to bind the black man to the position of ontological "other," but at the cost of losing his understanding of the blacks' soul. Thus, the motiveless malignity which they impersonate in Delano's eyes is limited to their corrupted race. However, Melville goes beyond Delano's ideological enclosure of the slaves within the notion of the Wild Man. As the story ends, Delano is ready to forget the evil doings of the blacks —as pertaining to a degraded breed of humanity: "the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it" (BC 238). His previous metaphoric discourse has enabled him to exclude the barbarous savagery from the humankind to which he belongs. His sense of civilized humanity remains pure and positive; that optimistic vision accounts for the hopeful "human-like healing" (BC 238) that he ascribes to the trade winds. Meanwhile Don Benito remains gloomy and sad. Delano wonders as to the cause for Don Benito's sadness: "You are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?" Don Benito's answer, "The negro," (BC 238) suggests his apprehension of the shadows the blacks have cast not only upon Don Benito but upon humanity itself. In a sort of quiet understanding, Delano remains silent. Both men realize that evil is not only the intrinsic essence of the wild black but also lurks in men in general. Thus, both men prelude the future development of the notion of the Wild Man, which suffered a process of interiorization. For many centuries the Wild Man was always thought to exist out there, in the wilderness, where the "dark" repressions of "civilized" men were also kept hidden. As all the unknown areas of the world are increasingly discovered and explored along

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Melville was a renowned explorer himself), the notion of the Wild Man becomes interiorized. As Hayden White indicates, by the end of the nineteenth century, the conception of the Wild Man had utterly changed: "Wildness and barbarism are regarded, in general, as potentialities lurking in the heart of every individual, whether primitive or civilized, as his possible incapacity to come to terms with his socially provided world. They are not viewed as essences or substances peculiar to a particular portion of humanity *out there* in space or *back there* in time" (1974: 179). This new direction is already implied in Don Benito's gloomy answer at the end of "Benito Cereno." The story seems to suggest that the Wild Man "is lurking within every man, clamoring for release within us all, and will be denied only at the cost of life itself" (White 1974: 154). In the end, Babo quietly offers his life so that Don Benito —and, partially, Delano— can understand. To make sure that the reader can also understand, Melville places Babo's execution at the end of "Benito Cereno," thereby emphasizing it. As the reader sees Babo "dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule," (BC 239) ready to be beheaded and burned to ashes, while his head will be for many days "fixed on a pole in the Plaza," the white man is made to appear as savage as the blacks. In this final scene, Melville reveals the brutality of the whites and makes it match the ferocity of the blacks; this way, the writer dramatizes the savage impulse lurking in the soul of every man. a

NOTES

1. Aware of the racial strife in the 1850s, Melville could not possibly risk indicting openly either blacks or whites: "Especially in the present transition period for both races in the South, more or less of trouble may not be unreasonably anticipated; but let us not hereafter be too swift to charge the blame exclusively in any one quarter" (*Battle-Pieces of Herman Melville*, qtd. in Grejda 1974: 161).

2. Initially, it was radically contradictory for men like Thomas Jefferson and many others to sign the Declaration of Independence —one of whose principles sanctions that "all men are created equal"— while they kept numerous slaves. It is also worth noticing here the contradictory position of the American Supreme Court in the *Amistad* case. The *Amistad* was a Spanish slave ship whose slaves had revolted and taken hold of the ship on its way from Africa in 1805, only to be captured later by an American ship. In the lawsuit, the Spanish owner demanded the ship's cargo to the American government. The United States Supreme Court finally granted the Africans their freedom claiming that the blacks had been unlawfully enslaved and could not be treated as property. Contrarily, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 guaranteed American slave owners their right to bring back to slavery any runaway slave captured on American soil.

3. Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," in *Billy Budd and The Piazza Tales* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 226. All subsequent references to this edition appear parenthesized in the text.

4. My understanding of "discourse" is based on Foucault's use of this term. I define "discourse" in this particular context as a series of ideas about the slaves which after existing in fragmented form for a certain period were later gathered into a discourse by the mainstream culture and were maintained by a certain ideological and institutional context.

5. Although no reference is made to the fetters on the San Dominick, the reader can surmise that Aranda couldn't possibly have taken enough fetters for 160 slaves with himself. Besides, being the San Dominick a "negro-transportation ship" (158), it was only natural for it to have a good supply of fetters ready.

6. Melville initially became confused with names and, in the first edition of "Benito Cereno," he wrote the name Mungo Park instead of Ledyard. Mungo Park was a Scottish traveller who in his *Travels in the Interior of Africa* frequently made reference to Ledyard's work (Baym 1989: 2245).

7. The discourse of the negro as a different species of mankind, as the result of a different genetic mixture and separate human origins, was inscribed in antebellum America in a series of studies which suported racist ideologies. Possibly the most notable of these was Josiah C. Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1854), which traced the evolution of the different types of mankind to conclude with the superiority of the Caucasian. Equally important were Samuel G. Morton's, *Crania Americana* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839) and *Crania Aegyptiaca* (Philadelphia: John Pennington, 1844).

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