

INVENTION OF AN INFIDEL:  
HERMAN MELVILLE'S LITERARY HERESIES AND THE DOCTRINES OF  
EMPIRE

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“Invention of an Infidel” examines Herman Melville’s prose fiction written in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Specifically addressing Moby-Dick, “Benito Cereno,” and The Confidence-Man, I argue that these imaginative works attempt to expose the catastrophic associations between the U.S.’s domestic “problems”—such as Negro slave revolt and Indian insurrection—and the U.S.’s broader global interventions in politics and commerce. I show that it was through invention, through historical discovery and re-making, that Melville was able to characterize new and intense forces of domination and regulation over human populations, property, and networks of exchange that accompanied American interests in opening and liberalizing commerce. Melville’s heretical inventions, I further show, were not necessarily limited to religious and theological contexts, as many previous critics have presupposed, but rather had developed simultaneously in relation to a dominant U.S. discourse that conflated the religious notions of redemption and election with liberal and secular expressions of American power. These expressions, or what I call doctrines of empire, were often evinced in the discourse of the American sublime and American transcendentalism. Writing in the midst of and attempting to provide a literary understanding of the intensification and transnational reach of American power during the nineteenth century, Melville’s heretical inventions make possible a theorization of American power that, I argue, is important for studies of the U.S. and its geopolitical influence over the globe in our own moment.

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## PREFACE

The title of this dissertation recalls the term “infidel” as a category important to Herman Melville’s literary and intellectual engagement with the conditions and arrangements of power that followed the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act in the United States. My work addresses Melville’s propensity towards heresy and his understanding of the “infidel” in a manner that extends and challenges the theoretical scope of previous scholarship, and I do so by situating this critical category in the context of the struggles and conflicts that dominated the 1850s. “Invention of an Infidel,” therefore, traverses earlier scholarship that has addressed the question of war (work by Joyce Sparer Adler and John Berstein, for instance) as well as a growing body of criticism that has attended to the topic of religion in Melville’s writing.<sup>1</sup> Regarding the latter, it was William Braswell’s Melville’s Religious Thought, first published in 1943, which initially helped establish an important field of knowledge on Melville’s derisive

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<sup>1</sup> See Joyce Sparer Adler, War in Melville’s Imagination (New York: New York University Press, 1981); John Bernstein, Pacifism and Rebellion in the Writings of Herman Melville (London, The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1964). On the topic of Melville and religion, see William Braswell, Melville’s Religious Thought: An Essay in Interpretation (Durham: Duke University Press, 1943); Lawrence Thompson, Melville’s Quarrel with God (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952); H. Bruce Franklin, The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963); T. Walker Herbert, Jr., Moby-Dick and Calvinism: A World Dismantled (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1977); Robin Grey, The Complicity of Imagination: The American Renaissance, Contests of Authority, and Seventeenth-Century English Culture (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Robin Grey, “Surmising the Infidel: Interpreting Melville’s Annotations on Milton’s Poetry,” Milton Quarterly 26:4 (1992), 103–113. Gail H. Coffler, “Melville’s Allusion to Religion,” Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies 8:1 (March 2006), 107-119; Gail H. Coffler, Melville’s Allusions to Religion: A Comprehensive Index and Glossary (Westport and London: Praeger, 2004).

treatment of Christian doxa. With subsequent criticism, including works by H. Bruce Franklin, T. Walter Herbert, Lawrence Thompson, and most recently Robin Grey, this field formation has often focused on the question of the “infidel” or “heresy” in Melville’s oeuvre as one regarding disbelief, theocentric irreverence, or the flouting of “religious taboos.”<sup>2</sup>

It is true that Melville remained skeptical of both conservative and liberal, Calvinist and Unitarian theology in the mid-nineteenth century, and it is equally true that the “infidel” figured centrally in Melville’s reading of Sir Thomas Browne, Montaigne, Pierre Bayle, and John Milton, among others. That said, however, the above mentioned body of scholarship tends to repeat the central premise evinced by the title of Lawrence Thompson’s book, Melville’s Quarrel with God. I show in this dissertation that Melville’s understanding of the “infidel” was not necessarily restricted to religious and theological discourse and was not necessarily limited to an understanding of conflict qua metaphysical “quarreling” between humans and divinity. The category “infidel,” instead, provided Melville an historical account of a figure that emerges out of a set of relations established in and through conflict. What we find in Melville’s prose fiction of the 1850s, particularly Moby-Dick, “Benito Cereno,” and The Confidence-Man, is a mind engaged with new intensifications and reconfigurations of U.S. state force and, with these reconfigurations, a discourse that conflated Christian notions of election and redemption with secular and liberal expressions of American power.

Although many of Melville’s contemporaries such as Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Frederick Douglass, all of whom I address throughout this

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<sup>2</sup> Gail H. Coffler, “Melville’s Allusion to Religion,” 108.



dissertation, had celebrated and called on the emancipatory possibilities of American power, had celebrated the notions of transcendence, movement, and sublime transport as integral to this notion of power, Melville's literary works of this decade mark a critical or, more accurately, heretical departure from these panegyrics. As does Jonathan Arac in his illuminating study of nineteenth-century "locomotion" and "vision," Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne, my dissertation addresses concepts of movement, energy, and transport.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Arac, though, I argue that Melville's prose fiction does not necessarily lend itself to a "system of vision" and governmental "overview." Melville's writings, like others in the nineteenth century, Arac claims, "parallel the activity of the centralizing agencies of government that were studying and shaping the new human problems of a society much larger and more mobile than had ever before been known."<sup>4</sup> Challenging this idea, I propose that Melville's literary work renders problematic the arrangements of power that make possible this totalizing perspective or what I call global purview, and I further show that Melville linked the U.S.'s exercise of managerial and regulatory force with the passage and federal enforcement of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. This piece of legislation was not an aberration, as many of his contemporaries had wanted to believe, but was an instantiation of the U.S.'s commitment to securing commercial networks, governing populations, and enforcing property law.

Recalling how Melville had drawn on the tactics and cunning intelligence of previous heretical minds, my dissertation resituates Melville's literary inventions within

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Arac, Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Arac, 7.

the context of the U.S.'s nineteenth-century geopolitical influence. Within this global context, I further show, Melville's heretical inventions illuminate the catastrophes and violence brought about by the intensification and expansion of U.S. markets in China, the opening of commerce throughout the Pacific, and the transnational flow of commodities and human labor over the "terraqueous globe."

In the opening chapter, "Fishing for Whales: Moby-Dick and the Trappings of American Power," I explain how my use of the term "invention" draws on the rhetorical and philological notion of the Latin *inventio* or Greek *huresis*, meaning both to discover and make. Throughout this chapter and others, I make use of works by Michel de Certeau, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, Edward Said, and Giambattista Vico to help elucidate an important link between Melville's literary inventions and an order of cunning intelligence that struggles within and recognizes the nineteenth-century American scene as a set of arrangements from which there is no ready escape, no resolution to strife.<sup>5</sup> This chapter intervenes in a recent discussion in American literary studies on Melville that attempts to account for the radical transformations and revisions that Melville made in the writing of Moby-Dick. While critics such as Howard Vincent, George Stewart, and, most recently, Robert Sattelmeyer have long recognized the traces of revision in Moby-Dick, this scholarship has generally failed to fully investigate and theorize how, as I do, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 obliged Melville to

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<sup>5</sup> See Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant who trace out this genealogy on animal intelligence in Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978); Michel de Certeau, Practices of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1984); Edward W. Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975). Said also attends to the category of "invention" throughout a number of works too numerous to mention here. In most of these cases, his understanding of "invention" derives from Vico as does mine. See Giambattista Vico, On the Study of Methods of Our Time, trans. Elio Gianturco (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), and The New Science of Giambattista Vico, trans. Max H. Fisch and Thomas G. Bergin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).

reconceptualize the arrangement of the hunt or chase as a heuristic for understanding the arrangements of power and conflict of the mid-nineteenth-century occasion.<sup>6</sup>

Focusing specifically on Amasa Delano as a figure who evinces characteristics of American power, chapter two, “Bloody Enforcement on a Grand Global Scale,” shows how “Benito Cereno” critically depicts Delano’s ostensibly “benevolent” and “charitable” actions as an exercise of violence, a violence that is attendant with emerging managerial techniques and state regulatory power. This is a form of power, in other words, that further regulates human life, provides security over commercial networks, and enforces the exchange of chattel property in the nineteenth century. Melville’s story shows how Delano participated and championed the U.S.’s intervention in the economies and politics of world affairs and commerce, but “Benito Cereno” also anticipates how these global interests had been intertwined with America’s own seemingly domestic “problem” of Negro slave revolt. I begin this chapter by contextualizing the historical and geopolitical importance of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. By staging Delano as a figure who quells a slave revolt aboard a Spanish ship, who enforces the rights of “property” owners, and who evinces the qualities of modern management and security, Melville’s “Benito Cereno” further anticipates how American influence extends beyond a domestic sphere to the “terraqueous globe.”

Chapter three, “Terror and the Negro: A Mediation on Asymmetric Force and Fugitive Slave Conflict,” examines how Frederick Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” and Melville’s “Benito Cereno” each depicts violent struggle and slave insurrection in relation to American power. These two depictions, I argue, suggest divergent political

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Vincent, *The Trying Out of Moby-Dick* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1949); George R. Stewart, “The Two Moby-Dicks,” *American Literature*, 25 (Jan. 1954), 418-448; Robert Sattelmeyer, ““Shanties of Chapters and Essays”: Rewriting Moby-Dick,” *ESQ* 49:4 (2003), 213-247.

and aesthetic theories of conflict. For Douglass, slave insurrection instantiates and must be grounded in the revolutionary potential of American power. His aesthetics and notions of political struggle, therefore, reflect an order of conflict carried out in terms of symmetric and agonistic relations of force. In sharp contrast to Douglass's understanding of and fidelity to American power and potential, Melville's shows that the "terror of the Negro" that manifests itself in slave insurrection is a function of the domination and brutality exhibited by American power.

In the final chapter, "The *Fidèle* and American Movement," I address how Melville's The Confidence-Man poses the steamboat *Fidèle* as a figure of American power, a figure characterized by a fidelity in movement, energy, and progress. What this figure dramatizes, however, is the genocidal destruction of natives, doctrinal modes of thinking, and the mechanisms for opening up and safeguarding trade and global commerce. I take up the question of Melville's writing as infidelity, examining how The Confidence-Man establishes a problematic around the notion of movement and freedom, particularly how freedom as movement had formed the basis of a liberal doxa or even faith in U.S. instantiations of power. This is the same order of liberalism that, while celebrating concepts of movement and energy, had paradoxically produced a set of conditions resembling internal and perpetual conflict. I show, therefore, that The Confidence-Man attempts to dramatize the mid-nineteenth-century moment as one defined and influenced by what Paul Virilio calls a permanent "state of siege," a conflict the effects of which can be found in the American West and the Asian Pacific.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Virilio, Speed and Politics, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext[e], 1977).

# 1. FISHING FOR WHALES: MOBY-DICK AND THE TRAPPINGS OF AMERICAN POWER

## 1.1. Invention and the Arrangement of the Hunt

Frantic though such an invention seems to be, it might possibly have been accepted as the motive and purpose of an *extravaganza* had its author been consistent with himself.

From an 1851 review of The Whale.<sup>8</sup>

. . . to write is to “know” what at the outset cannot be known except by inventing it, exactly, intentionally, autodidactically.

Edward Said, Beginnings<sup>9</sup>

We know from Herman Melville’s correspondence with British publisher Richard Bentley in June of 1850 that the book Melville had slated to write was initially “a romance of adventure founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale

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<sup>8</sup> Review of Herman Melville’s The Whale [England October 16, 1851] in Athenæum of London (October 25, 1851). See Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews, ed. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 356.

<sup>9</sup> Edward W. Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 349.

Fisheries.”<sup>10</sup> We also know that this is not what finally emerged a year later. It was just several months before Moby-Dick would go to press when Melville composed perhaps one of his more eloquent though forlorn letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne. “I am so pulled hither & thither by circumstances,” he confessed. “The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man ought always to compose,—that, I fear, can seldom be mine.”<sup>11</sup> He was referring to matters quotidian—the “building & patching & tinkering away in all directions,” the “crops to get in . . . and many other things to attend to” at Arrowhead, the farm in Pittsfield that he had purchased nearly a year earlier.<sup>12</sup> Under the weight of increasing debt and the every-day obligations of labor—as well as feeling “rather sore” about his books and the “blisters on [his] palm”—he turned gravely to concerns of craft and market: “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.”<sup>13</sup>

The letter hints of hyperbole, an effect perhaps of late-night cogitation and the lingering taste for “the Gin.” (He presumed no faith in a “Temperance Heaven.”<sup>14</sup>) Certainly Melville’s books were not all botches, as we know from the early success of Typee (1846) and Omoo (1847). Yet in radically revising Moby-Dick, Melville seems to have anticipated how readers would judge the finished work. As one London reviewer

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in Hugh W. Hetherington, Melville’s Reviewers: British and American 1846-1891 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 189.

<sup>11</sup> Herman Melville, Letter to Hawthorne June 1?, 1851, in The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819-1891 2 Vols., ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Gordon Press, 1969), 412.

<sup>12</sup> Leyda, 412.

<sup>13</sup> Leyda, 412.

<sup>14</sup> Leyda, 412-13.

had written, “This is an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact . . . The idea of a connected and collected story has obviously visited and abandoned its writer again and again in the course of composition.”<sup>15</sup> This same reviewer, as I have indicated in the epigraph above, suggested that the “invention” could have achieved greater aesthetic and commercial success if only Melville had been “more consistent with himself.”<sup>16</sup>

If indeed Melville was not “consistent with himself,” as the London reviewer had claimed, then how were these inconsistencies revealed in the 1851 publication?<sup>17</sup> What discoveries had Melville made that obliged the rethinking or re-imagining of his craft—its style and scope, its dramatic and narrative impact? Melville’s letter to Hawthorne offers a glimpse of the conditions and material realities in which he had been composing his book on the Whale and how, despite these conditions and the need to publish quickly and make money, he belabored the manuscript and engaged in a radical revision, in effect creating a “botched” work which contained the traces of the initial “adventure” narrative and something altogether new. What was at stake in the revision, the “final hash,” that emerged from the materiality of writing and the overwhelming sense of obligation to write what “is banned”?

In composing the whaling narrative, and in recollecting philologically the *arrangement of the hunt* through sources ancient and modern, Melville, I argue here,

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<sup>15</sup> Review of Herman Melville’s *The Whale* [England October 16, 1851] in *Athenæum* of London (October 25, 1851). See *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 356.

<sup>16</sup> Review, *Athenæum* of London, 356.

<sup>17</sup> In a later section of this chapter, I return to the question of the “inconsistency” in *Moby-Dick*, a question that has preoccupied criticism on *Moby-Dick* in the twentieth century from R. P. Blackmur to William Spanos.

discovered a heuristic by which he attempted to better understand the mid-nineteenth-century occasion.<sup>18</sup> Moby-Dick instantiates that discovery *in medias res*; it is an invention that reveals a mind caught in the middle of the thing, attempting to think and understand the thing in the moment of discovery. Michel de Certeau has provided substantial thought to this notion of invention,<sup>19</sup> but it is Edward Said, through his continued engagement with Giambattista Vico, who has eloquently recollected the relationship between invention and obligation, discovery and “beginning intention.” “By obligation,” Said means,

the precision with which the concrete circumstances of any undertaking oblige the mind to take them into account—the obligation not just passively to continue, but the obligation to begin by learning, first, that there is no schematic method that makes all things simple, then second, whatever with reference to one’s circumstances is necessary in order to begin given one’s field of study. And by referring to sympathetic imagination I mean that to begin to write is to “know” what at the outset cannot be known except by inventing it, exactly, intentionally, autodidactically.”<sup>20</sup>

What does Melville discover that obliges a re-making, revision, and reorganization of the narrative?

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<sup>18</sup> This work marks a departure from Cesare Casarino’s Modernity at Sea (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 2002), which makes use of Foucault’s reference to the heterotopic space of the ship as matrix of modernity.

<sup>19</sup> The English translation of L’invention du quotidien does a disservice to the ways in which Michel de Certeau helps us theorize invention and its relation to quotidian discoveries and makings. In the English, see Practices of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, Beginnings, 349.



Moby-Dick is a story about movement and energy, about the capturing, violent transformation, and commodification of an animal into a biomass fuel that keeps the world afloat. Yet it is also a story about humans confronted with the technologies of capital and industry, with the liberalization and expansion of commerce, and the conquest of the Pacific. The ancient practice of the hunt gives way to an absolutely modern arrangement of power that privileges movement and speed, the management of laboring bodies, the charting of space, and the enforcement of property. “Possession is the whole of the law,” writes Melville rather sardonically.<sup>21</sup>

It was this latter topic—the problematic of property, possession, and force—which obliged Melville to recognize the chase or the hunt as the arrangement par excellence of his current political and historical moment. After Melville had already begun work on the manuscript, President Fillmore, on September 18, 1850, signed legislation that would expand “federal power [for] the interstate rendition of fugitive slaves.”<sup>22</sup> In April 1851, several months before Melville published Moby-Dick, Judge Lemuel Shaw, then Melville’s father-in-law, abandoned his “opposition to slavery on grounds of natural right” and enforced this law by deciding that the fugitive Thomas Sims should be returned to bondage.<sup>23</sup>

In light of these events in the early 1850s, critic Michael Rogin has argued that Moby-Dick signals Melville’s rebellion against the “liberal fathers” who, like Lemuel

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<sup>21</sup> Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, or, The Whale [1851] ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York and London: Norton, 2002), 309.

<sup>22</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government’s Relations to Slavery. Ed. and completed by Ward M. McAfee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 231.

<sup>23</sup> See Michael Rogin, Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 141-142.

Shaw, had forsaken their commitment to “human freedom” in order to maintain “social order.”<sup>24</sup> Rogin calls this Melville’s “subversive genealogy.” While this genealogy is compelling for understanding how Melville viewed the fathers’ willful forgetting of their revolutionary responsibilities, I want to suggest that the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 opened up the question of U.S. power more broadly. This was not a question merely of genealogical estrangement for Melville but an engagement with the transformations and intensifications of U.S. power that were gaining global reach. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Moby-Dick could no longer be the romantic adventure of whaling; the force of the new law obliged a revision or new understanding of “the chase” and obliged the writing of a different kind of book, one “wicked”<sup>25</sup> and “banned.”

One of my overall claims in this dissertation is that through invention, through historical discovery and remaking in the present, Melville’s works offer a heretical account of U.S. power. I want to be clear, though. Unlike Rogan, I don’t claim heresy as being entirely “subversive,” if by subversive we mean that force which overthrows or destroys. Nor do I claim, as I show in more detail below, that “heresy” approximates what William Spanos has termed “errancy.”<sup>26</sup> Both “subversive” and “errant art” reproduce the idea that Moby-Dick provides an “emancipatory measure” or possibility.<sup>27</sup> I want to suggest, instead, that Melville’s novel *opens up*—and *leaves open*—the question of the literary as a technique for change. The force of Moby-Dick’s heresy, I

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<sup>24</sup> Rogin, 142.

<sup>25</sup> Herman Melville, Correspondence, 212. In a letter to Hawthorne, November 1851.

<sup>26</sup> William Spanos, The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, The Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Spanos, 59.

argue, is evidenced in those moments when it addresses the arrangements of American power without privileging a liberatory discourse, when it tends to the question of brutality without necessarily invoking a redemptive outcome that comes through suffering.<sup>28</sup> What he discovered in 1850 necessitated an order of thinking or meditation on the current arrangement of power, its entanglements and webs, without immediately repeating the doctrine of futurity, that pious and implicit sense that America's revolutionary and emancipative realities were attainable in the future elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

It is Pip, more than Ishmael, who instantiates a kind of heretical comportment to American power and its historical implications. Pulled to “wondrous depths” by the lines that will eventually entangle and bring the *Pequod* to its destruction, Pip's surreal “drowning” and encounter with “the miser-merman Wisdom” and the “hoarded heaps” at the bottom of the Pacific presents a meditation on the catastrophes of history and the wreckage left in the wake of U.S. modernity (321). His is not the story of emancipation, however much we would like it to be. “Cursed” and “castaway” and finally reminded of the price he would fetch as a slave in Alabama, Pip's character dramatizes what Ishmael's story of redemption and escape cannot (321). Ahab recognizes Pip's “madness” and their “likeness” in “maladies.” Theirs is both the story of loss, yet Ahab refuses the “cure” that Pip can provide, refuses to recognize the catastrophe of history as does Pip. So Ahab unleashes his vengeance and willfully “heaps” violence on an

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<sup>28</sup> As Deborah Root helps explain, the term “heresy” historically arises with an operation of power, a relationship in which a population is designated (not self-identified) as heretical and, therefore, becomes the object of policing and surveillance. Root specifically discusses the way in which Muslims in Spain during the sixteenth century were targeted for conversion or expulsion. This is a population who does not necessarily identify with and willfully call for subversion, but who are deemed subversive and a threat to the order of things. See Deborah Root, “Speaking Christian: Orthodoxy and Difference in Sixteenth-Century Spain,” *Representations* 23 (Summer, 1988), 118-134, particularly 123-23.

<sup>29</sup> The chapters that follow take up directly this doctrine of futurity.

already-violent world. Like Ishmael, Ahab turns away from the historical and misdirects his “hate” toward the “malicious intelligence” of Moby Dick.

In what follows, I consider how Melville had recognized in the *arrangement of the hunt* a heuristic for giving thought to his current moment. This heuristic allowed Melville to make critical associations between the Fugitive Slave Act and the U.S.’s growing influence throughout other parts of the world, particularly the Pacific.<sup>30</sup> I begin by suggesting that works such as Oppian’s treatises on hunting and fishing provided critical categories and a philological touchstone for Melville’s heuristic.

## 1.2. An Ancient Heuristic for a Modern Arrangement: *Póros* and *Aporía*

Fain then am I to sing the glorious devices of the chase.

From Oppian’s *Cynegetica*, or *The Chase*<sup>31</sup>

It is like Melville’s line, whose two ends remain free, which envelops every boat in its complex twists and turns, goes into horrible contortions when that moment comes, and always runs the risk of sweeping someone away with it.

Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Jean Heffer, *The United States and the Pacific: History of a Frontier* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 47-49, 61.

<sup>31</sup> Oppian, *Cynegetica*, or *The Chase*, trans. A. W. Mair (New York: Putnam’s, 1928), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. and ed. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 122.

But as if perceiving his stratagem, Moby Dick, with that malicious intelligence ascribed to him, sidelingly transplanted himself, as it were, in an instant, shooting his pleated head lengthwise beneath the boat.

Moby-Dick, “The Chase—First Day”

Like the Sub-Sub Librarian’s seemingly “thankless” and “painstaking” work of introducing the “random allusions to whales” in the “Extracts,” critics have likewise indexed the ancient and modern sources Melville had used in Moby-Dick.<sup>33</sup> In the novel there are allusions to the Rev. Henry Cheever and Beale, Sir Thomas Brown and Olmsted, Aristotle and Linnæus, among many more. From the Penny Cyclopædia entry on “whales,” Melville borrows from Cuvier’s elaborate classification system and humorously alters it to form a new one, this time organizing whales as “books”—folios, octovos, and duodecimo.<sup>34</sup> Throughout the novel, Ishmael offers encyclopedic knowledge, histories, and accounts of the whale species as well as panegyrics to human institutions that had developed around the hunt. Indeed, we are reminded in the end that this is a narrative about the chase, about the hunt of hunts that will end in catastrophe. Despite the extensive philological “burrowing” and “grub-worm” work of tracing out the allusions to whales and whale fishing in Moby-Dick, little or no attention has been paid to how the novel alludes to the second-century treatises Cynegetica (The Chase) and Halieutica (On Fishing) attributed to Oppian. While Moby-Dick makes no direct

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<sup>33</sup> Moby-Dick, “Extracts,” 8. As an example of how Melville’s sources have been documented, see the “Discussions of Adopted Readings” in the Northwestern-Newberry edition of Moby-Dick (1988), 813-30.

<sup>34</sup> See Moby-Dick, Chapter 32 “Cetology,” as well as Penny Cyclopædia vol. 273-74.

mention of Oppian's name, there's evidence that he may have encountered his works either directly or indirectly.<sup>35</sup> The final three chapters of Moby-Dick, all titled "The Chase," invoke the English translation of Cynegetica. Also, there is an entry on Oppian in the same Penny Cyclopædia from which Melville had gleaned other materials, most notably the information on whales.<sup>36</sup> And Oppian's name appears in a number of other materials that Melville was reading at the time, including Littell's Living Age, Sir Thomas Browne's Pseudodoxia Epidemica, and Plutarch's "The Cleverness of Animals." With the frequency in which Moby-Dick refers to the whale's intelligence, it is likely that Melville had some familiarity with Aristotle's Historia Animalium, "which contains most of the material on the intelligence of animals which Oppian, following Plutarch and Athenaeus, was later to develop."<sup>37</sup>

Oppian's treatises are important because they "introduce us into the world of traps."<sup>38</sup> "These include not just baits, nets, weels, nooses and snares," Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant remind us, "but also in a certain respect those animals and men which appear alternately first as hunted and then as hunter."<sup>39</sup> They further note that the terms for strategy (*dólos*) and technique (*téchnē*) "recur constantly" and are often

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<sup>35</sup> I have located with the assistance of the Newberry Library three versions of Oppian's works published and translated into English before Melville's composition of Moby-Dick. J. G. Schneider (1776); F. S. Lehrs (1846); U. C. Bussemaker (Scholia, 1849).

<sup>36</sup> See The Penny Cyclopædia of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Volume XVI (London: Charles Knight and Co., 22 Ludgate Street. MDCCCXL), Murillo—Organ, 458-460. Located in The Newberry Library, Melville Collections.

<sup>37</sup> See Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant who trace out this genealogy on animal intelligence in Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), 47.

<sup>38</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 28.

associated with the Greek notion of *mētis* or cunning intelligence.<sup>40</sup> I mention these terms because they also play roles in Melville’s novel. Ahab in particular understands the hunt through these categories. Like Oppian’s treatises, Moby-Dick introduces us to the world of traps as well, but in there modern manifestations.

After “Etymology” and “Extracts,” the novel opens with the title “Loomings” and thus recollects the ancient fascination with the weave—the “bonds, ropes, cords, made from twisted willow and twisted snares.”<sup>41</sup> It’s an ominous beginning. Yet as Ishmael enters the scene, he describes the watery world with fascination and suggests that it’s a cure for his “hypos” and the “November” in his soul (18). The sea is movement and “commerce,” and its sense for mobility becomes his “substitute for pistol and ball” (18). “Ships from China” appear in the harbor, and it becomes clear that the Atlantic “Manhattoes” and Nantucket are commercially linked with locations throughout the Pacific (18). In this opening scene, we recognize echoes of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s admiration for the technological developments and “the thousand various threads” that “bind” the world “fast in one web.”<sup>42</sup> Here “Loomings” subtly alludes to the expansion of trade, the opening of markets in China, and the “watery region” as a “great highway” that stretches and connects the Atlantic with the Pacific (199). It also alludes to the way in which the sea has been understood as both the passageway (*póros*) and that chaotic and polymorphic expanse filled with potential traps (*aporia*).<sup>43</sup> “The original sense of *póros*

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<sup>40</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American” [1844], Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures (New York: Library of America, 1983), 213.

<sup>43</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 150-151, 222.

was a ford a passage through a stretch of water, and thus came to mean the route or path that the navigator has to open up through the *póntos* [disturbing and mysterious space] and across the sea.”<sup>44</sup> In Ishmael and Emerson, the nineteenth-century optimism asserts its technological conquest of the sea and celebrates “distance annihilated.”<sup>45</sup> For them the sea is passage and mobility. Yet *Moby-Dick* does not allow this optimism to go unchecked. Like Ahab’s “chart” which depicts an increasing number of “lines” and “additional courses” crossing and covering “over spaces that before were blank,” Ishmael’s account of the sea as an expansive commercial web also begins to resemble the “looming” figure of the ancient trap, an endless *aporia* (166).

This figure reappears in Ishmael’s lengthy description of the “magical, sometimes horrible whale-line.” The line, he claims, has often been the cause of “repeated whaling disasters” whereby men have been wrenched from “out the boat . . . and lost” (227, 229). Ishmael takes care to describe the materiality and suppleness of the line and the techniques of weaving:

The line originally used in the fishery was of the best hemp, slightly vaped with tar, not impregnated with it, as in the case with ordinary ropes . . . Of late years the Manilla rope has in the American fishery almost entirely superseded hemp as a material for whale-lines; for, though, not so durable as hemp, it is stronger, and far more soft and elastic. (227)

There are then long descriptions of how the whale-line must be skillfully placed in the boats, an elaborate process considering that it “measures something over two hundred

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<sup>44</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 222.

<sup>45</sup> Emerson, “The Young American,” 213.



fathoms” or 1,200 feet. “Towards the stern of the boat it is spirally coiled away in the tub,” forming “layers of concentric spiralizations” (227). The image is at first comical: “When the painted canvas cover is clapped on the American line-tub, the boat looks as if it were pulling off with a prodigious great wedding-cake to present to the whales” (228). At rest, the coil of line is a seemingly innocuous object resembling “cake” or a block of “cheese” (227). In the occasion of the hunt, however, the full force and potentially destructive properties of the rope become immediately palpable. As if sprung to life by the pull of the targeted whale, “the whale-line folds the whole boat in its complicated coils, twisting and writhing around it in almost every direction. All the men are involved in its perilous contortions” (228-29). In the world of traps, the hunter’s technology potentially becomes his own demise. And as Ishmael further describes the motion and entanglements of the line, he compares it to one of the nineteenth-century’s most advanced pieces of technology, the steam engine: “For, when the line is darting out, to be seated then in the boat, is like being seated in the midst of the manifold whizzings of a steam-engine in full play, when every flying beam, and shaft, and wheel, is grazing you” (229).

This is a world in which humans are integrally entangled with their own machinations, yet Ishmael seems incapable of understanding this entanglement as a condition of a specific order of labor in modernity. Instead, at the end of the chapter, Ishmael closes by stating,

But why say more? *All men live enveloped in whale-lines.* All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that morals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. And if you

be a philosopher, though seated in the whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side. (229, *my emphasis*)

Though Ishmael is able to observe the ways in which modern technology has fully “enveloped” human life, his tendency is to interpret this entanglement or *aporia* in metaphysical terms, thus obfuscating the historical and material contingencies of the entanglement, obfuscating as well the ways in which these conditions are constitutive of the division of labor and the liberal market that demands whale oil.

Ishmael exhibits this interpretive strategy again as he “advocates” for the whale hunter who suffers “a rather unpoetical” reputation (97). “I am all anxiety to convince ye, ye landsmen, of the injustice hereby done to us hunters of whales,” he exclaims (97).

While Ishmael accurately suggests that their labor is necessitated by the demand for whale oil on the global market—“For almost all the tapers, lamps, and candles that burn round the globe, burn, as before so many shrines of glory!”—his advocacy is always-already inscribed in the apologetics of the “business of whaling” (97-98). In other words, Ishmael confuses the distinction between the laborer and the function of labor, and ascribes to the hunter a value that can only come through the valorization of the “butchering sort of business” (98).

The distinction is important, for in attempting to advocate for the hunter, he valorizes the business of whaling by noting its essential role in making possible the expansion of commerce and the rise of empire: “Whaling is imperial,” Ishmael boasts (100). With whaling and because of whaling, commerce and empire are integrally linked. In this linkage, the definitions of war and peace become indistinct: “I freely assert,”

continues Ishmael, “that the cosmopolite philosopher cannot, for his life, point out one single peaceful influence, which within the last sixty years has operated more potentially upon the whole broad world, taken in one aggregate, than the high and mighty business of whaling” (98). Yet this understanding of “peace” ironically draws attention to Ishmael’s further claims that “The whale-ship has been the pioneer in *ferreting* out the remotest and least known parts of the earth” (99 *my emphasis*). “Ferreting,” from the Latin *furetus*, denotes thievery, and Moby-Dick will recall this association between empire, whaling, and the use of force in the “Fast-Fish, Loose-Fish” chapter. Ishmael continues,

She has explored seas and archipelagoes which had no chart, where no Cook or Vancouver had ever sailed. If American and European men-of-war now peacefully ride in once savage harbors, let them fire salutes to the honor and glory of the whale-ship, which originally showed them the way, and first interpreted between them and the savages. (99)

As the distinction between war and peace blurs, so do the distinctions between whaler, pioneer, and military avant-garde—or, more accurately, “forlorn hope.” Ishmael makes use of this term in both his allusions as well as in his explicit descriptions of the whaler’s mode of labor. Caught in a storm while pursuing a whale in “The First Lowering,” for instance, Queequeg figures as “the standard-bearer of this forlorn hope” (187).

Etymologically, the military term “forlorn hope” is an auditory appropriation of the Dutch “*verloren hoop*,” literally meaning “lost troop.”<sup>46</sup> Used in the sixteenth and

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<sup>46</sup> Oxford English Dictionary: From 1600, J. Dymmok, Ireland (1841) “Before the vanguard marched the forlorn hope,” (32); from 1678 Gaya's Art of War II., “Called the Forlorn Hope, because they . . . fall on first, and make a Passage for the rest” (74).

seventeenth centuries, the “forlorn hope” consisted of those soldiers who were the first into battle. Often caught between the advancing guard behind them and the closing enemy line in front, the “forlorn hope” had faint possibility for success or survival. As one entry in the Oxford English Dictionary aptly states, “Called the Forlorn Hope, because they . . . fall on first, and make a Passage for the rest.”

The hunt is integral to Ishmael’s story of the U.S. and its place in the world, but for him the hunt evinces movement, trajectory, and evolution. Beginning with the “Nantucketers,” he maps this trajectory and shows an ostensibly natural development of a people who move farther and farther from the “mere hillock, and elbow of sand” to the expansive “watery world” (64).

Look now at the wondrous traditional story of how the island was settled by the red-man. . . . In olden times an eagle swooped down upon the New England coast, and carried off an infant Indian in his talons. With loud lament the parents saw their child borne out of sight over the wide waters. They resolved to follow in the same direction. Setting out in their canoes, after a perilous passage they discovered the island, and there they found an empty ivory casket,—the poor little Indian’s skeleton.

What wonder, then, that these Nantucketers, born on a beach, should take to the sea for a livelihood! They first caught crabs and quahogs in the sand; grown bolder, they waded out with nets for mackerel; more experienced, they pushed off in boats and captured cod; and at last, launching a navy of great ships on the sea, explored this watery world; put an incessant belt of circumnavigations round it; peeped in at Bhering’s Straits; and in all seasons and all oceans declared

everlasting war with the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood;  
most monstrous and most mountainous! (65)

The evolutionary development of the Nantucketers moves from isolated primitivism to cosmopolitan militarism. Here, as in other moments, Ishmael associates the movement to sea with the discourse of “everlasting war,” and the hunt takes on characteristics of the war machine, “launching a navy of great ships.”

In retelling the story of this evolutionary movement to the sea, Ishmael ignores the colonization of Nantucketers by Europeans and, instead, graphs the “legend” of the “red-man” onto the grand narrative of U.S. supremacy over the Pacific and the “terraqueous globe” (65).

And thus have these naked Nantucketers, these sea hermits, issuing from their ant-hill in the sea, overrun and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders; parceling out among them the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, as the three pirate powers did Poland. Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires; other seaman having but a right of way through it. (65)

The indigenous “Nantucketers” in Ishmael’s story are not so much displaced as they are assumed into empire writ large, war and all. The violation of this historical memory recalls the first act of colonial violence, but yet this violence is endlessly repeated, and will seemingly be repeated as the imperial Nantucketers “overrun and conquer the watery world.” This “endless war,” this endless repetition of a past, without historical memory,

instantiates an inescapable trap, an *aporia*. Oppian introduces the world of traps, but Moby-Dick dramatizes this world in its modern instantiation.

### 1.3. Invention and Revision

What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard by way of waiving it for his royal master and mistress? What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-Fish.

Moby-Dick, “Fast-Fish, Loose-Fish”

I have attempted to show how Melville drew upon the arrangement of the hunt as a heuristic for understanding American power in the mid-nineteenth century. In doing so, I have so far drawn principally from Ishmael’s narrative—that is, those few chapters where it is obvious that Ishmael is the principal storyteller—to illustrate how he creates associations between the whale hunt and the practices of empire. While Ishmael is capable of irony, it seems clear that he is not being ironic when he “advocates” (in chapter 24) on behalf of his fellow whalers or when he offers his “history” of Nantucket (in chapter 14). This gives us all the more reason to suspect that his panegyrics are sincere. I want to note, too, that the “The Advocate” and the “Nantucket” chapters are relatively close in proximity to one another and relatively close to the beginning of the novel. Stylistically, we might describe them as conversational: “I am all anxiety to

convince ye, ye landsman,” he begins in “The Advocate.” Skipping ahead some sixty chapters, though, we encounter a peculiar variation on the question and presentation of empire. In “Fast-Fish, Loose-Fish” (chapter 89), it becomes difficult to tell if Ishmael is still the principal storyteller as he had been in the earlier chapters. While there is still an occasional reference to the first-person, this narrator seems more aloof and the style of the narration is less colloquial. More importantly, the narrator’s depiction of empire presents a radically different view from that of the Ishmael in “The Advocate” and “Nantucket.”

As I noted in the opening of this chapter, one of the first reviews of Moby-Dick had critiqued its “inconsistencies.”<sup>47</sup> The stylistic and ideological change that occurs in the narrative between “The Advocate” chapter and “Fast-Fish, Loose-Fish” marks one instance. And I will turn to these specific changes anon. First, I want to give a brief account of how the question of consistency and inconsistency has marked a central preoccupation in criticism of Melville’s novel through the twentieth century.

Howard Vincent and then George Stewart were the first to note “two versions” of the story simultaneously entangled in the one text.<sup>48</sup> Melville’s early conceptions of the novel as a “mere whaling voyage,” written in “folksy” style, had through revision been infused with what Vincent called “the sudden and magnificent release of those

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<sup>47</sup> Review of Herman Melville’s The Whale [England October 16, 1851] in Athenæum of London (October 25, 1851). See Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews, ed. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 356.

<sup>48</sup> Howard Vincent, The Trying Out of Moby-Dick (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1949); George R. Stewart, “The Two Moby-Dicks,” American Literature, 25 (Jan. 1954), 418-448. One of the most recent contributions to this scholarship on Moby-Dick and the question of revision is Robert Sattelmeyer’s “‘Shanties of Chapters and Essays’: Rewriting Moby-Dick,” ESQ 49:4 (2003), 213-247.

Shakespearean forces.”<sup>49</sup> Yet there was more at stake in Melville’s final amalgamation than the “genius” incarnate of Shakespeare. Other critics following Vincent would remark, as did Edward Said in recent years, on the “irregularities and inconsistencies” in the text that accompanied its “wholly different and much heightened prose.”<sup>50</sup> One of these inconsistencies is the story of Bulkington, who, as Said recalls, “belongs to the first version and is supposed to play a significant role there. In the final text he is referred to briefly, [and] then drops out.”<sup>51</sup> There is also the inconsistency, possible conflation, and interplay between a narrator proper and the first-person account provided by Ishmael, as I mentioned above. Recollecting these inconsistencies, Said was perhaps alluding to R. P. Blackmur’s essay on “The Craft of Herman Melville: A Putative Statement.” While Said suggested that these and other “apparent flaws seem actually to add to Melville’s overall effect,” Blackmur had argued that it was because of Melville’s “radical inability to master a technique”—and by “technique” Blackmur meant the novel as a dramatic form—that he had “suffered the exorbitant penalty of his great failure.”<sup>52</sup>

Whereas Blackmur had found “fault in a genius so great,” had found that the artist had failed to exhibit “mastery” and “control” over his craft,<sup>53</sup> William Spanos has recently attempted to recover this “failure” in Melville’s fiction by arguing that the “errant art” of Moby-Dick makes possible a critical break from the West’s—and, more

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<sup>49</sup> Vincent, 22-25.

<sup>50</sup> Edward Said, “Introduction to Moby-Dick,” Reflections on Exile and Other Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 360.

<sup>51</sup> Said, “Introduction,” 360.

<sup>52</sup> Said, 360; R. P. Blackmur, “The Craft of Herman Melville: A Putative Statement,” [1938] in The Lion and the Honeycomb: Essays in Solicitude and Critique (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), 144.

<sup>53</sup> Blackmur, 132.



specifically, the U.S.'s—privileging of transcendental overview and the “principle of metaphysical closure.”<sup>54</sup> For Spanos, the “failure” of the novel ironically marks its success. And its “errancy,” moreover, functions as a deliberate disjuncture from an aesthetics that, as Blackmur summarized, “holds it together, makes it move, gives it a center and establishes a direction.”<sup>55</sup> “Far from writing or failing to write a novel that enacts the encompassing epiphanic closure or tragedy,” Spanos continues, “Melville wrote a novel that exists to destroy not simply the idea of tragedy but the *metaphysical vision* that has given privileged status to the tragic form, indeed, to all structurally teleological literary forms.”<sup>56</sup>

It’s important to remember that, for Spanos, the metaphysics and teleology informing Blackmur’s aesthetics made possible and often obfuscated an order of power that “legitimated the [U.S.’s] imperial practice of Manifest Destiny.”<sup>57</sup> These imperial

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<sup>54</sup> William Spanos, The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, The Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 59.

<sup>55</sup> Blackmur, 132.

<sup>56</sup> Spanos, 60 (*Emphasis in the original*). Following Blackmur’s New Critical and F. O. Matthiessen’s Americanist approaches, critics in the U.S. have long invested in the “achievement” of the tragic form as an indication of aesthetic and therefore national or cultural exceptionalism. In light of this history and the privileging of the tragic form in U.S. critical practices, William Spanos has attempted to dismantle or “destroy” (particularly through Melville’s Moby-Dick and Pierre) “the idea of tragedy.” Spanos, however, understands “tragedy” as a monolithic category. Like his predecessors, the fathers he attempts to kill off, Spanos repeats an ahistorical account of tragedy by omitting the variances and complexities of tragedy, the ways in which, for instance, Aristotelian tragedy is reinterpreted by Horacian, Renaissance, and Neoclassical aesthetic theory. Spanos unwittingly assumes, oddly from the same critics against whom he is writing, an understanding of tragedy as “doctrine of instruction” and order, rather than as dramatic “open-ended explorations of crises and struggles” to borrow from Michelle Gellrich’s work. See Michelle Gellrich, Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 197. See especially chapter 3: Renaissance and Neoclassical Theory for the ways in which Horacian interpretation re-inscribes moral didacticism into tragic drama. See also F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941); William Spanos, “Pierre’s Extraordinary Emergency: Melville and the Voice of Silence,” Part 1. boundary 2 28, no. 2 [summer 2001]: 105–31, and “Pierre’s Extraordinary Emergency: Melville and the Voice of Silence,” Part 2. boundary 2 28.3 (2001) 133-155.

<sup>57</sup> Spanos, 7.

practices, Spanos recalls, were made evident in U.S. state aggression throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and were specifically directed towards populations in Mexico, the indigenous of the American “frontier,” as well as peoples of Southeast Asia. The U.S.’s intervention in Vietnam becomes the object of critique in much of Spanos’s criticism, and he aptly recalls how this Cold War conflict signals a repetition of state violence that Melville had observed in his nineteenth-century occasion.

While I share many of the same concerns regarding U.S. imperialism and the metaphysics that accompanies and often legitimates the U.S.’s monopoly on violence, I remain skeptical of how Spanos characterizes, in fact attempts to recover, “errancy” as an “emancipatory” possibility. Rhetorically, Spanos arrives at this reading of “errancy” and emancipation by pointing out the “precluding” elements of Blackmur’s position. He writes,

What [Blackmur’s] otherwise valuable New Critical insight necessarily precludes, in other words, is the possibility of reading Melville’s “rule of vagary” as an emancipatory “measure,” of perceiving the positivity of Melville’s ‘errant’ art in the context of a tradition of fiction that privileged the transcendent eye and the principle of metaphysical closure.<sup>58</sup>

This recovery of an “errant art” suggests the extent to which Blackmur’s “putative statement” seems to haunt Spanos’s engagement with the novel. It haunts Spanos to the

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<sup>58</sup> Spanos, 59. Spanos also links this to the “destructive” potential of *Moby-Dick*. He writes,

“I want to suggest, in other words, that *Moby-Dick* is a destructive social text—I am tempted to call it, after Nietzsche and Foucault, a work of “genealogy” in its parodic modality, or, after Mikhail Bakhtin, a “carnavalesque” novel—that finally exists to de-structure the ‘competent reader’s’ archivally inscribed –and thus always confident—impulse to read and ‘master’ texts spatially: not simply to expose its gaze’s “imperial” project of decipherment, but to release the temporality—and the sociopolitical forces—it has colonized” (60-61).

degree that he must arrive at an understanding of Moby-Dick that can thus account for the “irregularities and inconsistencies” of the craft, can account for them in such a way that these inconsistencies signal not a failure of form, as Blackmur argued, but a type of successful resistance to (or “emancipation” from) the “mastery” and “control” that Blackmur privileges.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, however, Spanos attempts to exorcize Blackmur’s ghost and, therefore, preserve the success of Moby-Dick as craft, by accounting for these inconsistencies as a deliberate and willful “strategy” on Melville’s part:

The “reading” of Moby-Dick that follows will suggest . . . that Melville was acutely conscious of his “craft” and that his collapsing of the distinction between “Ishmael” and “Melville” or, better, that his rendering the distinction a fluid one, was no accident of inattentiveness, but a deliberate destruction of precisely the form that “limits, compacts, and therefore controls what can be told and how.” I am going to suggest, in short, that Melville’s “careless” “method” is a *care*-ful, however (or, rather, because) uncertain, “strategy.”<sup>60</sup>

In accounting for Melville’s “careful strategy,” that is, the way in which both an “Ishmael” and “Melville” function simultaneously as narrator and the disruptor of a telic narrative in Moby-Dick, Spanos theoretically hinges his claim on the possibility of a “deliberate” though “decentered” authority. In this way, Spanos presumes to emancipate Melville’s craft from Blackmur’s understanding of art—that is, as a centralizing, controlling, and direction-bearing form.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Blackmur, 132.

<sup>60</sup> Spanos, 81.

<sup>61</sup> Spanos particularly resists Blackmur’s understanding of the “dramatic form of the novel.” By “dramatic form,” Blackmur means the controlling and authorial force that “holds it together, makes it move, gives it a center and establishes a direction; and it includes the agency of perception, the consciousness set up in the

I recall Spanos's project here not because it instantiates necessarily a radical alternative to the longer tradition of thinking the "inconsistencies" of Melville's craft but because it inadvertently perpetuates this tradition. In fact, Spanos unwittingly tends to the very economy of aesthetic judgment that Blackmur engages—that is, an economy wherein the binary categories of failure and success function as the primary values of aesthetic judgment. I, therefore, call into question Spanos's intervention because it attempts to recover value lost in Moby-Dick and then attempts to recuperate that value through the narrative's emancipative qua "destructive" capacities. In other words, for Spanos, errant art figures as the successful technique for change, the art that destroys the "metaphysics of [imperial] vision."<sup>62</sup> What Spanos therefore takes as given, and thus leaves unaccounted for, is the fundamental question of art or *technē* (errant as it may be) as an instrument of change, as an instrument of human freedom, as "emancipatory." The question, then, that I think we are obliged to at least recognize is: Does the technique of an "errant" and "decentered" literature "emancipate" humans from this metaphysics and its attendant violence?<sup>63</sup> This question, I think, is central to understanding the very problematic Melville had encountered in his writing of Moby-Dick.

Rather than marking these "inconsistencies" in the text as a basis for judging the book's aesthetic failures or successes, as these and other critics have done, I hypothesize that these differences, in both style and rhetorical presentation, constitute a moment of

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book upon which, or through which, the story is registered" ("The Craft of Herman Melville," 132). Spanos continually links Blackmur's conceptualization of form to the mechanisms of authoritative, monological, and imperial oversight demonstrative of the U.S. imperium.

<sup>62</sup> Spanos, 60.

<sup>63</sup> Pheng Cheah has recently taken up as a critical question the relation between *technē* and human freedom as it is found in the discourse of human rights. See Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

invention and revision that bring into sharper focus the problems of empire as Melville is inventing. I repeat Edward Said who says in Beginnings, “to begin to write is to “know” what at the outset cannot be known except by inventing it, exactly, intentionally, autodidactically.”<sup>64</sup> Moby-Dick instantiates the moment of Melville’s discovery, when the discovery obliges a remaking and reordering. Melville called this a “botched” attempt, and critics through the twentieth century have remarked on the irregularities, contradictions, and inconsistencies in the text, yet what we see here, I argue, is a revision, a re-writing-over of Ishmael’s ahistorical account of empire and its effect on the world.

The chapter “Fast-Fish, Loose-Fish” begins by explaining that the “waif” or “waif-pole” is a “grand symbol and badge” and that this waif is used to mark a party’s proprietorship over a fish. So a fish becomes “fast,” the chapter explains, when “it bears a waif, or any other recognized symbol of possession” (307).<sup>65</sup> “Alive or dead a fish is technically fast when it is connected with an occupied ship or boat, by any medium at all controllable by the occupant or occupants—a mast, an oar, a nine-inch cable, a telegraph wire, or a strand of cobweb, it is all the same” (308). As this passage begins to make clear, rendering property as “fast” is dependent upon “ability.” Though a seemingly innocuous term, the narrator provides further meaning. “These are scientific commentaries; but the commentaries of the whale-men themselves sometimes consist in hard words and harder knocks—the Coke-upon-Littleton of the fist” (308).

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<sup>64</sup> Said, Beginnings, 349.

<sup>65</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “Waif.” The “waif” dates to the fourteenth century, and has principally meant “lost property” that is open to possession

Although here the violence is rendered somewhat caricature-like, the subject matter and tone become more serious as the narrator proceeds. Rendering something fast, that is, to take possession, is to act with force. The narrator then poses a rhetorical question that establishes critique around the notions of force, law, and legitimacy: “Is it not a saying in everyone’s mouth, Possession is half of the law: that is, regardless of how the thing came into possession?” (309). To waif something is to take by force, and because force can take and possess, it legitimates the law, so that “often possession is the whole of law” (309).

The waif and the act of waifing, moreover, recall Ishmael’s earlier description and celebratory account of the whale-ship as a pioneer “ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth” (99). As I mentioned above, the word ferreting comes from the same Latin etymology that gives the word furtive. Waifing and ferreting function through force as legitimate thievery. Ishmael legitimates thievery through imperialist violence in his history of the Nantucketers:

And thus have these naked Nantucketers, these sea hermits, issuing from their ant-hill in the sea, overrun and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders; parceling out among them the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, as the three pirate powers did Poland. Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires; other seaman having but a right of way through it. (65)

I show again this passage from the Nantucket chapter because it performs a similar rhythmic and repetitive structure found near the end of “Fast-Fish, Loose-Fish.” One critical difference, though, is that “Fast-Fish” performs with interrogatives not panegyric exclamations.

“What are the sinews and souls of Russian serfs and Republican slaves but Fast-Fish, whereof possession is the whole of the law?” What to the rapacious landlord is the widow's last mite but a Fast-Fish? What is yonder undetected villain's marble mansion with a doorplate for a waif; what is that but a Fast-Fish? . . . What is the Archbishop of Savesoul's income of L100,000 seized from the scant bread and cheese of hundreds of thousands of broken-backed laborers (all sure of heaven without any of Savesoul's help) what is that globular 100,000 but a Fast-Fish. . . . What to that redoubted harpooneer, John Bull, is poor Ireland, but a Fast-Fish? What to that apostolic lancer, Brother Jonathan, is Texas but a Fast-Fish? (311-12).

The stylistic cadence here recalls the Nantucket chapter above, but through the form of the question it interrogates the force that legitimates the act of possession. It interrogates the powers that make war with Mexico and enforce slave laws (“The Republican slaves”). The “Fast-Fish, Loose-Fish” chapter, in other words, recollects and destabilizes through revision Ishmael’s history of conquest. As a matter of invention, Melville, while composing, discovered what lay hidden beyond the veil, or what Edward Said refers to as “pieties,” and doxa of his nineteenth-century moment.

## 2. BLOODY ENFORCEMENT ON A GRAND, GLOBAL SCALE

### 2.1. “Benito Cereno,” Amasa Delano, and American Power in the 1850s

Beginning in the October 1855 issue of Putnam’s Monthly, Herman Melville published his first of three consecutive installments of “Benito Cereno.”<sup>66</sup> Along with several other shorter works, particularly “Bartleby the Scribner,” “The Bell-Tower,” and “The Encantadas,” collected the following year under the title The Piazza Tales, Melville’s “Benito Cereno” dramatizes the conditions and conflicts attendant with the increased demand for wage and slave labor in the development and expansion of American power and commerce in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>67</sup> Specifically, “Benito Cereno” stages scenes from the institution of slavery—the trade, transportation, and consequent revolts that would arise under these conditions. Like much of Melville’s prose fiction, “Benito Cereno” draws from a complex of political, historical, and literary

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<sup>66</sup> Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno,” [originally published in Putnam’s Monthly, October, November, and December 1854] Following the story’s first printing in Putnam’s and including revisions for its inclusion in The Piazza Tales, I make use of the following edition: Melville’s Short Novels. (New York: Norton, 2002). Hereafter, I cite this text by page number.

<sup>67</sup> Melville had been composing and reflecting on “Benito Cereno” since the winter of 1854-55 (See Hershel Parker, Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 2, 242). Before Melville decided on the The Piazza Tales as a title for his collection, he had initially requested to his publishers Dix and Edwards in January of 1856 that the contents come under the title Benito Cereno & Other Sketches. This title seems to suggest the centrality of “Benito Cereno” to Melville’s over-all project and thinking up through the beginning of that year. By February, though, and after having written “The Piazza,” Melville had opted to use the title we know presently. See Melville’s letters to Dix and Edwards in The Letters of Herman Melville, Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman, editors. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 177-179.



sources that he had encountered in his extensive reading and amateur philology.<sup>68</sup> Though allusions to these discoveries are many, “Benito Cereno” principally recalls and, indeed, reweaves elements from A Narrative of Voyages and Travels (1817), a work written by American seaman and ship builder Amasa Delano.<sup>69</sup> Some of Melville’s contemporaries had recognized his source, and at least one reviewer had cited Delano’s Narrative of Voyages as “The Origin of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno.’”<sup>70</sup> Melville was no stranger to “borrowing” previously circulated stories. As in his novel Israel Potter (1853), published the year prior to “Benito Cereno,”<sup>71</sup> Melville had demonstrated an ability to recognize important topics from past materials and, from these materials and topics, style his own inventions. Of all the narratives that were available to Melville on the topic of slavery and insurrection—and certainly, the stories of Nat Turner, the *Amistad* and *Creole* revolts, as well as Toussaint L’Ouverture’s revolution in San Dominique, among others, would not have escaped his notice<sup>72</sup>—what obliged Melville to appropriate Delano’s 1817 travel narrative as an obvious and deliberate source for his

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<sup>68</sup> I use this term in its etymological sense, that is, philology as a “love of learning, of literature,” from the Latin *philologia* and Greek *philien* and *logos*. The critic who studies Melville understands the labor, love, and memory that it requires to read along with his work.

<sup>69</sup> Amasa Delano, A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World, Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery in the Pacific and Oriental Islands [Boston, 1817] (New York: Preager, 1970).

<sup>70</sup> “The Origin of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno,’” New York Evening Post [October 9, 1855] in Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, editors, Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 469.

<sup>71</sup> Herman Melville, Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile [1853] (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1982).

<sup>72</sup> Carolyn Karcher has made an important claim that the *Amistad* Case was a central influence on Melville’s “Benito Cereno.” See “The Riddle of the Sphinx: Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’ and the *Amistad* Case,” in Critical Essays on Herman Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno,’ Robert E. Burkholder, ed. (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992), 196-229. I have no doubt that the events surrounding the *Amistad* had influenced Melville’s understanding of slave insurrection, but his deliberate and obvious appropriation of Delano’s narrative poses the problematic of American power rather differently than the emancipatory and redemptive possibilities that brings resolution to the *Amistad* narrative.

1855 novella, specifically? And how was Delano, as both a narrator of his own work and a figure in Melville's fiction, important to Melville's meditations on America's influence in the world in the mid-nineteenth century, generally? In other words, if there was something to be learned about America from Delano and his Narrative, what was it? And, most significantly, how could Melville's own invention offer an adequate intelligence or way of knowing and understanding the forces that America had come to instantiate in the nineteenth-century historical occasion?

By posing these questions, my aim in this chapter is to show how Delano functions as the American *par excellence* in "Benito Cereno." That is, while Melville's novella initially (and ostensibly) provides a perspective akin to Delano's point of view, this perspective and its congruency with American power is called into question as the narrative slowly and ironically reveals the myths and doctrines that inform it. In other words, to understand Melville's meditation on American power in the mid-nineteenth century, and why he had made use of Delano's Narrative as a resource for his own invention, I want to suggest that we need to understand how the figure of Delano provided Melville the literary and topical "stuff" that his story about America is made on. Two central and related topics come forth in Melville's discovery and reweaving of Delano as both narrator and historical figure; the first of which is Delano's investment and participation in global commerce and his relationship to a growing world market. The second of which is Delano's "charitable" efforts to subdue a slave insurrection and return slave property to the rightful Spanish owner. Melville aptly recognized in Delano's Narrative of Voyages a figure who had participated and championed the U.S.'s intervention in the economies and politics of world affairs and commerce, but Melville

also anticipated how these global interests were intertwined with America's own seemingly domestic "problem" of Negro slave revolt.

Of the nearly 600 pages in A Narrative of Voyages, Melville's novella borrows principally from chapter 18, which tells "the account of the capture of the Spanish ship" and the suppression of rebellious slaves who had on board "risen and murdered many of the people."<sup>73</sup> "Benito Cereno" opens by showing how Delano and his crew come upon and perceive "a strange sail" in the harbor of St. Maria, a Pacific island off the coast of Chili.<sup>74</sup> This is a story of intrigue, and it exhibits many conventions and images of gothic fiction. For instance, the scene Delano first encounters appears "like a white-washed monastery after a thunder-storm, seen perched upon some dun cliff among the Pyrenees" ("Benito Cereno" 36). To Delano, in fact, the image before him seems "nothing less than a ship-load of monks," "dark figures" and "throng[s] of dark cowls" walking the deck (36). The figurations of the monastery, the profiles of monks, the image of ruins, as well as the vapors that mysteriously shroud the "peculiar" and distant vessel recall much of the Gothic *topoi* used in the literature of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in both England and the United States.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Delano, 318.

<sup>74</sup> Though not the first, Eric Sundquist's essay on "Benito Cereno" is perhaps the most comprehensive work to note the differences and allegorical significances between Delano's narrative and the changes and additions Melville had deployed. See Eric J. Sundquist, "'Benito Cereno' and New World Slavery," from Reconstructing American Literary History, Sacvan Bercovitch, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) 93-122.

<sup>75</sup> There is, as one recalls, a similar apparition that appears at the end of Lord Byron's Don Juan: "It was no mouse—but lo! a monk, arrayed / In cowl and beads" (16. 160-7). A more serious and sinister depiction of the figure of "the monk" occurs in Matthew Lewis's 1796 publication The Monk. See also Sir Walter Scott's The Monastery, to which Melville also alludes in White Jacket. For essays that examine the Gothic in "Benito Cereno" see most recently Peter Coviello's "The American in Charity: 'Benito Cereno' and gothic anti-sentimentality," Studies in American Fiction 30 (2002): 155-80. See also Charles Berryman, "'Benito Cereno' and the Black Friars," Studies in American Fiction 18.2 (1990): 159-170.

The “strange sail,” as Melville’s novella slowly reveals, is the dilapidated Spanish slave ship, the *San Dominick*, captained by Don Benito Cereno. On board, Delano is led to believe that what he has encountered is a ship in distress, for “every soul on board, down to the youngest negress,” rehearses this scenario (56). It’s not until the end of the narrative, however, that Delano is able to detect that the peculiarity and “strangeness” of the Spanish ship before him is actually the site of a slave insurrection *in medias res*. In the final moments of Melville’s narrative, Delano assists the Spanish captain by subduing and securing this rebellious “property,” returning it to its Spanish owners. As one contemporary reviewer in the New York Evening Post had stated, Amasa Delano’s A Narrative of Voyages and Travels marks America’s involvement in this event as a “bloody” enforcement of “a fugitive slave law on so grand a scale.”<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, this prospect of “bloody” enforcement on a “grand” and even global scale had been a preoccupation for others in the year that Melville wrote and published “Benito Cereno.” In the same October 1855 issue of Putnam’s that “Benito Cereno” first appeared, for instance, an essay entitled “The Kansas Question,” referring to the disastrous effects of the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), argued that “there is not a thinking man among us who is not absorbed in this topic of the domination and spread of slavery.”<sup>77</sup> This legislative maneuvering, supported by the slave-holding states and some legislators in the North, and signed by President Franklin Pierce, not only upended the earlier “Compromises” of 1820 and 1850 by shifting the once-agreed-upon

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<sup>76</sup> “The Origin of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno,’” New York Evening Post [October 9, 1855] in Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, editors, Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 469.

<sup>77</sup> “The Kansas Question,” Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art 6:34 October 1855, (425-433), 425.

boundaries of slavery in the U.S. territories from 36-degrees latitude to the north fortieth parallel, it further legitimized the role of what Stephen Douglas and others called popular sovereignty and thus the possibility that this seemingly minor expansion of slavery would be as limitless as the purview and ambition of the emerging U.S. imperium. I'll return to and elaborate on the term purview throughout this chapter, particularly in the following section.

This emphasis on popular sovereignty poses two interrelated problematics with which Melville's "Benito Cereno" grapples in its depiction of Delano's encounter with the Spanish slave vessel—an encounter that occurs, importantly, in a trans-Pacific context wherein Delano and his crew are "procuring seals" off the coast of Chili intended "for the Chinese market".<sup>78</sup> First, popular sovereignty (as it was conceived under the Kansas-Nebraska Act and earlier under the Compromise of 1850) and the potentially limitless expansion of the slave institution rendered the North-versus-South geographical and political framework as inadequate for understanding an arrangement of forces that could spread and operate throughout the global sphere. That is, while the 1854 Act used the fortieth parallel as the ostensible limit for the expansion of slavery, Melville's "Benito Cereno" allegorizes how this territorial line disperses into a non-linear geometrical configuration, into networks and forces that exercise and enforce the trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific flow of commerce and slave-labor. Second, and this is perhaps the insidious irony of the legislation, popular sovereignty further posed the problematic that territories like Kansas could, if necessary, invoke the power of the U.S. state to secure the territories' interests. The principal interest, of course, is the maintenance and assurance

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<sup>78</sup> Delano, 308.

of the slavocracy, extending the necessary enforcement of the fugitive slave law potentially to any part of the globe.<sup>79</sup> Several years earlier, in fact, it was Frederick Douglass who contemptuously recalled John C. Calhoun's declaration that "American ships were American territories" and therefore "constituted a part of the national domain" so that "wherever the American star-spangled banner waved, of course the right of slaveholders to hold their property was to be sacredly guarded."<sup>80</sup> Now, what I think is important about this moment in 1855, and as "Benito Cereno" helps us understand, is how this enforcement of U.S. law and security is supra-territorial (if not transnational) in scope and range, that in fact the institution and business of slavery requires the state to supersede the interests of the national body politic in order to maintain and secure the "popular sovereignty" of individual territories like Kansas and its right to hold slaves. It anticipates, too, the outcome of the 1857 Supreme Court decision regarding the case of Dred Scott, whereby the U.S. must enforce, under "due process" of law, the protection of property—even in those states where this slave "property" has been outlawed. So while this is ostensibly about slavery, the protection of property, and territorial sovereignty, it is more specifically about a reconfiguration of state force and an emergent arrangement of "bloody" enforcement on a global "grand scale."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See especially Sections 9 and 10 of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Statutes at Large, 33rd Congress, 1st Session. "Chapter LIX. An Act to Organize the Territories of Kansas and Nebraska" (May 30, 1854) 277-290. This can be found at the Library of Congress's website and its online project "American Memory": A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 – 1875. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=010/llsl010.db&recNum=298>

<sup>80</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Slavery: The Slumbering Volcano: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 23 April 1849," The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847-54 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 157.

<sup>81</sup> Against previous unsubstantiated claims, Stanley W. Campbell has argued convincingly that federal authorities had successfully executed and enforced the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. See Stanley W. Campbell, The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970).

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As a source, Amasa Delano (both the narrator and author of Narratives and Voyages) provided Melville with the “American” figure who made his home upon and extended influence over the globe. As his Narrative attests, Delano completed no less than three voyages around the world, had an expert familiarity with the Indian and Pacific Oceans as well as other “remote waters,” and helped lay the “foundation of the American commercial marine” in the period following the American Revolution.<sup>82</sup> Delano’s contributions followed and further bolstered an order of knowledge that had been the result of a long history of sea exploration and circumnavigation recorded and circulated previously by such figures as James Cook, Otto von Kotzebue, John Carteret, and George Vancouver among others—all of whom Melville had alluded to in previous works of fiction.<sup>83</sup> Delano’s surveys and documentations of the Earth’s expansive and inscrutable watery spaces—as well as the peoples who populated these spaces—had contributed to a growing body of knowledge that rendered the Pacific region and other world spaces more intelligible for the future of navigation, the expansion of trade, the opening of new markets (particularly in China), and the general acceleration and flow of commerce. While the stakes of Delano’s contribution to the discourse on global space and the expansion of commerce are many, what Melville’s “Benito Cereno” obliges readers to

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<sup>82</sup> “The Origin of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno,’” New York Evening Post [October 9, 1855] in Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, editors, Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 474.

<sup>83</sup> Melville’s interest in figures like these is made evident from the beginning of his writing career. These figures and others Melville mentions in chapter 24 of his first novel Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life [1846] (New York: Penguin, 1996), 177. And if space here permitted, we might trace out how this knowledge had merged with the nineteenth century developments in “modern geography,” initiated by Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter in Europe and its further development in North America.

better understand, I argue here, are the techniques and forms of regulation and management that emerged with this broad accumulation of information and its organization as knowledge.<sup>84</sup> Melville's "Benito Cereno" shows that this is the kind of regulation and management commensurate with the "bloody enforcement" of "fugitive" property.

Historically, this notion of manageability and the practice of management itself, linked closely with intelligibility, had become a central concern for American institutions, both commercial as well as governmental, in the expansion and intensification of American influence over the globe in the nineteenth century. Several scholars, particularly Merritt Roe Smith and most recently Manuel DeLanda, have noted that the techniques and practices of management—that is, "management" as an object of study—emerged not exclusively in industrial capitalism as many historians have suggested, but in an important nexus that links industrialization with state institutions, notably military enterprise.<sup>85</sup> Following Smith and DeLanda, I am interested in reading

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<sup>84</sup> While critics have generally avoided this dynamic of Melville's "Benito Cereno," the critic who comes closest, I would argue, is Eric J. Sundquist. See his "'Benito Cereno' and New World Slavery," from Reconstructing American Literary History, Sacvan Bercovitch, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) 93-122. Here Sundquist places "Benito Cereno" in the hemispherical debate on slavery and its further expansion throughout the Americas or "New World" as his title suggests.

<sup>85</sup> Merritt Roe Smith, "Introduction," Military Enterprise and Technological Change: Perspectives on the American Experience, ed. Merritt Row Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 1. See also Smith's chapter "Army Ordnance and the 'American System' of Manufacturing, 1815-1861" (39-86) in this same volume. Manuel DeLanda has recently published on this topic and relies heavily on Smith's research to suggest that technologies of organization and management, developed and practiced by the military, had become disciplinary innovations and techniques that were "slowly transferred to civilian factories." See Manuel DeLanda, "Beyond the Problematic of Legitimacy: Military Influences on Civilian Society," boundary 2 32:1 (2005): 117-128. Although Sidney Pollard's influential study of emergent management techniques doesn't explicitly discuss the relationship and influence of military practices with industrialization, there are instances in his citations where one can see the influence of military paradigms and the necessity to control or discipline bodies in relation to particular material practices and forces. See The Genesis of Modern Management: A Study in the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain (London: Edward Arnold, 1965) and particular the reference to Napoleon (258). See also Jonathan Arac's contribution to this discussion, which demonstrates important links between emergent managerial systems and the epistemological problematic of "overview" addressed by nineteenth-century British and American



Melville's "Benito Cereno" within a critical genealogy that traces out the connections between the "deepening of military involvement in civilian society in the last two centuries," if not earlier, to the "production of obedience" and manageability of humans.<sup>86</sup> This is a genealogy, moreover, that opens up ways for examining and understanding techniques of discipline and control that mobilize and regulate humans as resources in an arrangement of forces that resembles "total warfare"—a term that has taken on significance since Carl von Clausewitz's theorization of post-Napoleonic conflict and suggests that the practices of war are inscribed in and permeate human civilization.<sup>87</sup> (To be clear, Clausewitz's theories had arrived late to American war strategy, but as many historians have suggested, "Indian wars"—and I would argue Negro slave revolts—resembled on some level the practices and strategies of total war against an "internal" enemy.)<sup>88</sup>

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This notion of global enforcement and its concomitancy with limitless purview initiate my reading of "Benito Cereno." In tandem with the following chapter, "Terror and the Negro," I read Melville's writing from the mid-1850s as a critical and even heretical engagement with the more doxological perspectives of American power. Rather than praising America as the new beginning, the endless futurity, or the culminating force

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literature. Jonathan Arac, Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 22.

<sup>86</sup> DeLanda, 119-121.

<sup>87</sup> DeLanda, 119. In contrast to Jomini, Clausewitz understood that war is more than a purely military endeavor, that politics extends the field of battle and, conversely, that war is the extension of politics by other means.

<sup>88</sup> See Robert M. Utley, "Total War on the American Indian Frontier" in Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914. Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Forster, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 399-414.

bequeathing liberation, freedom, or redemption (about which Melville had previously expressed skepticism), “Benito Cereno” poses, and thus allows us to better understand, an intensification of American power—that is, its regulatory and managerial techniques over humans, its propensity for greater security over property and commercial networks. Methodologically and theoretically, I understand this literary production not to be merely a reflection or mimetic representation, but a willful act of intelligence and historical memory that allows us to understand better a configuration of forces or arrangement of power that often escapes recognition by others in the mid-nineteenth century—and even today. In both this and the subsequent chapter, I address how “Benito Cereno” stages (or invents) two figures who instantiate different orders of mind in this mid-nineteenth century arrangement of forces. These two figures are the American captain Amasa Delano, whom I have already begun to examine, and the slave Babo, a central figure in the following chapter, “Terror and the Negro.” In this chapter, I address Delano as a figure who sees and attempts to order the world in a manner that is congruent with American power.

Continually referred to as “the American” in “Benito Cereno,” Delano’s comportment in and perspective of the world further evinces a mind committed to movement and flow of commodities, resources, and bodies for the sake of expansion and movement itself, committed to what Paul Virilio reminds us is an often repeated conflation in modernity between freedom and movement, *demos* and *dromos*, democracy and “dromology.”<sup>89</sup> In fact, as I have shown in a previous chapter of this dissertation, Ishmael in Moby Dick makes a similar conflation, particularly in his defense or apology

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<sup>89</sup> Paul Virilio, Speed and Politics, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext[e], 1977).

for the business of whale-fishing, a business he describes as spreading empire as well as democracy. The history of this conflation is long. In ancient Greece, Moses Finley reminds us, Athenian democracy had been inextricably intertwined with the project of empire.<sup>90</sup> Like Ishmael's depiction of the Nantucketers—"these sea hermits, issuing from their ant-hill in the sea, overrun[ing] and conquer[ing] the water world"—the Athenians had before them created an empire in the form of a "thassalocracy—literally a rule over the sea."<sup>91</sup> In "Benito Cereno," I argue, Delano's character exemplifies a perspective of the globe that has as much to do with movement and proper regulation, with history as progress and chronology, with "uninterrupted, circular voyage,"<sup>92</sup> as it does with producing a comprehensive vista of the world. Indeed, all of these elements that Delano values and evinces—movement, regulation, security, vista, detection, history as progress—are entangled in the strategic impulse of maintaining American power—or, rather, America as an arrangement of power that yields what Melville's "Benito Cereno" helps us understand as "bloody enforcement" on a global scale.

As Melville's works attempt to show—and what I think we can learn from them—is that America is an arrangement of power that constitutes and maintains the mythic conflation between *dromos* and *demos*, between movement and freedom—or movement as freedom. (Indeed, America comes forth as an intensification or modulation of previous empires built on movement—that is, Athenian empire as Finley understands

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<sup>90</sup> M. I. Finley, Democracy: Ancient and Modern (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972). See chapter 2 and particularly pages 87-88.

<sup>91</sup> Peter T. Manicas, "War, Stasis, and Greek Political Thought," Comparative Studies in Society and History, 24 (October 1982), 684. For further reference, Manicas also cites A. H. M. Jones, Athenian Democracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

<sup>92</sup> Virilio, 41.

it.) So it's not surprising that one of the concerns that Melville's works like "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby," and Moby Dick and others often return to is the question of energy in relation to movement. Movement, as Melville reminds us in his fiction, requires energy; it necessitates coal, wind, wood; it takes whale oil and its petroleum substitutes; and, most importantly, it takes bodies and laborers to produce this energy.<sup>93</sup> In turn, these bodies and laborers become energy, too. Charles Olson had stated it succinctly if not poetically in his essay on Moby Dick: "Americans still fancy themselves such democrats. But their triumphs are of the machine. It is the only master of space the average person ever knows, ox-wheel to piston, muscle to jet. It gives trajectory."<sup>94</sup> And all the while energy (that which "gives trajectory") is being produced, and all the while movement or *dromos* is the predominant mode for organizing the world, this set of conditions and relations of power become increasingly more hostile to human life.

A year prior to the publication of "Benito Cereno," Melville's "Bartleby" had depicted how this hostility to human life comes forth ironically in the lawyer-manager-narrator's concluding apostrophe to the dead scrivener: "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" he exclaims.<sup>95</sup> While his apostrophe invokes Bartleby's misery as a universal condition of human experience, Melville's narrative ironically calls attention to the fact that this pale invalid's plight is a particular condition attendant with modernity and the incessant need for human bodies to work as efficiently and efficaciously as inhuman machines. The narrator's apostrophe, in other words, is not to "humanity" as the narrator is wont to

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<sup>93</sup> For an informative genealogy of energy in the context I am describing here, see Vaclav Smil, Energy in World History (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

<sup>94</sup> Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1947), 15.

<sup>95</sup> Herman Melville, "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," Melville's Short Novels. (New York: Norton, 2002), 34.

believe, but to humanity's death, its post-human or inhuman form in mid-nineteenth century conditions. As Melville's literary works from Moby Dick to "Bartleby" and from "The Bell-Tower" to "Benito Cereno" suggest, this is a set of conditions that transforms humans, and all the creative, poetic, and inventive possibilities of which humans are capable, into inhuman energies conducive to empire and its continuation.

Regarding the possibility of creation and invention, intelligence and mind, under these inhuman conditions, Melville's "Benito Cereno" draws different conclusions (or questions) than "Bartleby," however. Rather than the sheer annihilation of the creative possibilities of human action and intelligence—that is, the violent transformation or separation of intelligence and mind from the laboring and mechanized body—as we see in "Bartleby," "Benito Cereno" shows rather saliently how empire and global "enforcement" cannot always account for and anticipate invention, especially invention from the very minds and bodies that empire deems as inhuman. Babo—the "personal attendant" or slave to the Spanish Captain, Don Benito Cereno—is the figure in "Benito Cereno" who exhibits this intelligence and invention. I address Babo and the question of invention in the subsequent chapter, where I explain in depth my interest in and understanding of "invention" that develops in the arts of rhetoric (but which is not necessarily limited to it) from which the meaning and practices of invention can be traced out in a genealogy that includes Cicero and Vico. In the long historical sense of the term, from the Latin *inventio* or Greek *heuresis*, Babo's invention is an act of discovery and making which takes as its starting point the resources or "topics" (*topoi*) available to him. Melville's novel shows how Babo deftly makes use of the discursive resources and *topoi*

such as race and nationality, gender and strength, sublimity and terror, to mask his rebellious plot.

In the following three sections of this chapter, I examine how Delano invokes the conventions of the Gothic and Transcendentalist sublime when he encounters the slave ship. I then demonstrate how this discourse of the sublime and its American manifestations—aligned with influential concepts introduced by Edmund Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful—provides Delano with a set of categories for conceptualizing the site of potential conflict, the site where Delano exercises force for the sake of order, stability, and the security of property and networks of capital flow. In brief, Delano makes use of these Burkean aesthetic concepts of the sublime in order to convert the crisis before him into a scene that can be framed within his own American myths regarding race and nationality, history and progress, management and work, order and chaos, movement and stasis. I conclude this chapter by addressing how Delano’s propensity for regulation further dramatizes his inability to recognize this conflict as an historical problematic that is attendant with the very arrangement of power he supports and “enforces.”

## **2.2. The American looking out to the Horizon and the Global Sublime**

After the immediate introduction of Captain Amasa Delano, the American commander of “a large sealer and general trader” named the *Bachelors Delight*, a name Melville deliberately changed from the *Perseverance*, the narrative of “Benito Cereno” shows how Delano observes through “troubled gray vapors” and “shadows” a “strange

sail . . . coming into the bay” (36). With each successive inspection of the “stranger,” the narrative point of view, synchronized with Delano’s, moves closer in geographic space to the object being observed. “Upon a still nigher approach,” both third-person narrator and Captain Delano—in a moment wherein their respective fields of vision are still conflated—discover the “true character of the vessel.” The narrative identifies the object of Delano’s intrigue as “a Spanish merchantman of the first class; carrying negro slaves, amongst other valuable freight, from one colonial port to another” (36). Delano then surmises that “it might be a ship in distress” and that he would prepare to “board her, and, at the least, pilot her in” (36).

The initial conflation of Delano’s perspective with the limited omniscience of the third-person narrative point of view introduces the problem of intelligibility, detection, and perception that will recur throughout the narrative. In this opening scene, Delano’s ability to render intelligible the “singular” phenomenon before him is contingent upon proximity and vista. Delano understands that information gathering is ostensibly proportionate to the shrinking geographical space that initially separates his position from that of the mysterious ship’s location in the distance. The shifting perspective begins first from a position of “a less remote view,” and then to a position that is “still nigher,” and, finally to one where, “As the whale-boat drew *more and more nigh*, the cause of the peculiar pipe-clayed aspect of the stranger was seen in the slovenly neglect pervading her” (37 *My emphasis*). This attempt by Delano to shrink space—or, more precisely, to order and chart space and time in such a manner as to index and govern objects in it, to move through space with more efficiency and speed—stages many of the questions about the global sphere that Moby Dick attempts to raise. With more concision, though,

“Benito Cereno” introduces these questions immediately by depicting Delano’s point of view, a view that moves forward in space, that attempts a “less remote view.”

In a scenario that resembles the strategies of gaining purview, Delano attempts to overcome or transcend that which limits his will-to-vision and perception.

With no small interest, Captain Delano continued to watch her—a proceeding not much facilitated by the vapors partly mantling the hull, through which the far matin light from her cabin streamed equivocally enough; much like the sun—by this time hemisphered on the rim of the horizon, and apparently, in company with the strange ship, entering the harbor—which wimpled by the same low, creeping clouds, showed not unlike a Lima intriguante’s one sinister eye across the Plaza from the Indian loop-hole of her dusk *saya-y-manta*. (35-36)

Focusing on the curvature of space and the obfuscation of light as temporary impediments of vision, “Benito Cereno” evokes through the figure of Delano the common eighteenth- and nineteenth-century geographical and romanticized trope of the horizon. Delano’s vision of the ship’s “far matin light” as it is placed spatially on the same liminal or subliminal threshold as the sun, “hemisphered on the rim of the horizon,” recalls how the horizon signifies an epistemological and phenomenological crisis to be overcome or resolved.<sup>96</sup> As a matter of intrigue and detection, Delano enacts a kind of purview that attempts to predict, apprehend, and give order to this singular phenomenon at the edge of subliminal space, drawing it into an intelligible and rational frame. It becomes clear in these opening passages in “Benito Cereno” that Delano’s habit of mind is to make use of or even naturalize Gothic topoi, transforming or aestheticizing that

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. James B. Twitchell, Romantic Horizons: Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting, 1770-1850 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983).



which initially seems “singular” and “strange” into a recognizable convention of sign systems. These Gothic topoi and Delano’s invocation of the sublime further help render his experiences both “strange” yet familiar, terribly dangerous yet thrillingly “delightful”—categories used in tandem when the novel describes Delano’s way of understanding the scene before him.

The term “delight” or delightfulness in relation to notions of terror has an important genealogy in the discourse of the sublime that emerges in the eighteenth century, particularly out of Edmund Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.<sup>97</sup> In developing a body of thought on the category of terror in relation to the sublime, Burke reasons that a “species of delight” is derivative of terror—even though terror is ostensibly “a cause so apparently contrary to” delight (134). Explaining how a set of conditions in which delight may arise in the encounter with terror, Burke writes, “In all these cases, if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine, or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome encumbrance, they are capable of

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<sup>97</sup> Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful [1757] (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968). While Immanuel Kant uses the category of terror as well in his examination of the sublime in Critique of Judgment, it is Burke who initially formulates and provides a significant body of thought on the category of terror in relation to the sublime. Indeed, for Burke the notion of the sublime relies on the sense of terror. The changes from Burke and the stakes of Kant’s philosophical Critique are too numerous to rehearse here, but for a brief overview of this change, see Raimonda Modiano’s “Humanism and the Comic Sublime: From Kant to Friedrich Theodor Vischer,” Studies in Romanticism 26.2 (1987), 231-244. “Benito Cereno” seems also to be an explicit engagement with Burkean categories, particularly the notion of “delight” as it provides a sense of security or safety from the mortal dangers of terror. I give further attention to this below, particularly in my discussion of Delano’s habit of aesthetizing his encounter with the event before him. Before Burke, but not to the extent, John Dennis in the Grounds of Criticism had outlined six “Enthusiastic Passions.” They are admiration, terror, horror, joy, sadness, and desire. As Samuel Monk notes, Dennis discussed admiration and terror before he was able to finish the work. Samuel H. Monk, The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 51.

producing delight” (136). He continues to argue that what he means by delight is “not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions” (136).

In Part Four, Burke’s emphasis that “delightfulness” is “not pleasure” recalls his earlier formulation in Part One wherein he establishes a distinction between the concept of the beautiful and the sublime. While certain forms of pain are “analogous to terror” and are therefore a “source of the sublime,” pleasure is a sensation that is isomorphic with beauty.<sup>98</sup> So for Burke, this sensation of “delightful horror” is essential for one to achieve the sublime, and as critic James Twitchell notes in Romantic Horizons, the sensation of delight that Burke posits here forms the basis for romantic and transcendent vision: Transcendence comes at the moment when the viewer, “overcoming anxiety” and danger in the encounter with horror, then moves out “into something beyond.” It is this form of vision, Twitchell argues, that “fascinated the poets and painters in the early nineteenth century” in both England and the United States (14).

In Burke’s formulation on the sublime—and particularly in how he understands the viewer’s encounter with terror that can potentially bring about a sensation of delight—horror functions as an aestheticized object of experience. According to Burke, if terror doesn’t lead to death but instead becomes the impetus for the viewer to seek and be aware of his or her own “self-preservation,” then the viewer has encountered the sensation of “delightful horror,” a sense of the sublime whereby the viewer is raised above or beyond the quotidian perspective. Burke is then able to reason that terror, and its inherent dangerousness, can be surveyed or experienced from a transcendent position,

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<sup>98</sup> Burke, 39.

that is, from a point of view capable of observing terror from a safe but thrilling vantage point, thus bringing about what he calls a “species of delight,”<sup>99</sup> an aestheticization, and, just as importantly, a means of securing a once-potentially dangerous threat or encounter.

This relation between the “species of delight” and the encounter with terror is made all the more interesting if we recall that with Burke the figure of the Negro plays a subtle but altogether important role in codifying the percept of blackness and the concept of terror. To do this, Burke establishes the postulate that “Darkness [is] terrible in its own nature.” “We have all considered darkness as a cause of the sublime,” writes Burke, “and we have all along considered the sublime as depending on some modification of pain or terror” (143). He continues by positing a universal “association” between darkness and terror, an association “which takes in all mankind,” and he further relates this sense of terror to the lack of “safety” or security that results from darkness: “For in utter darkness,” continues Burke,

it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of objects that surround us; we may every moment strike against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take; and if an enemy approach, we know not in what quarter to defend ourselves; in such a case strength is no sure protection; wisdom can only act by guess; the boldest are staggered, and he who would pray for nothing else towards his defence [sic], is forced to pray for light. (143)

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<sup>99</sup> For Kant the notion of security that I’m discussing in Burke’s work is grounded in the category of Reason. Of course, this statement is a mere synthesis of what really requires an in-depth elaboration on Kant’s thought. For now, I might point to section 29: “It is attractive because reason exerts a dominion over sensibility in order to extend it in conformity with its proper realm (the practical) and to make it look out into the infinite, which is for it an abyss.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*. J.H. Bernard, Trans. (New York: Hafner, 1951) 105.

In the subsequent pages of Burke's Enquiry, the problems of security, intelligibility, and illumination—the necessity “to pray for light”—converge on Burke's discussion of the blackness of the Negro, a “negro women” to be exact. “I must observe, that the ideas of darkness and blackness are much the same,” reasons Burke. In order to concretize the concept of terror with the blackness of the Negro, Burke continues by referring to a 1729 publication in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society by the famous English surgeon William Cheselden. For Burke, Cheselden offers an important empirical “account” that supports his claim. The account is of a “young Gentleman, who was born blind, or lost his Sight so early, that he had no Remembrance of ever having seen”; this gentleman's sight was then restored through surgery at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Burke continues:

Among many remarkable particulars that attended [the boy's] first perceptions, and judgments on visual objects, Cheselden tells us, that the first time the boy saw a black object, it gave him great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro women, he was struck with great horror at the sight.  
(144)

Burke's account of the sublime, specifically the relation between the “blackness” of the Negro and the experience of terror, occasions both critical inquiry and departure in Melville's “Benito Cereno.” Where other American gothic and transcendentalist writers from Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman exhibit some aspects of Burke's concept of the sublime (or derivations of Burke's thought in German idealism) and replicate in their writing and thinking the aesthetic movement to a kind of Burkean “delightful horror” or romantic transcendent

vision, Melville's "Benito Cereno" is suspicious of how this vision is produced, how the discourse of race and racialogical thought are inscribed within theories of the sublime, and how a sublime perspective and point of view become privileged epistemologies in the mid-nineteenth century historical moment, a moment that is defined in many ways by the intensification of empire and a "global purview."<sup>100</sup> Permit me to elaborate on the etymological, historical, and geopolitical importance of this term purview.

I find the term "purview" important, for it has an historical development that is inextricably tied to questions of sovereignty, regulation, and strategy brought about by American interests in expanding commerce and creating markets since the late-eighteenth century. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, from its earliest formulations in the fifteenth century, the term "purview" referred to the provisional clause of a legislative document. Developing from this earlier juridical use of the term as "proviso" (i.e., the establishment of the "purview" of the legal document), "purview" by the late-eighteenth century had come to mean "the scope or limits of any document, statement, scheme, subject, book, or the like," and it further denoted the "purpose or intent" as well as the "range, sphere, or field of a person's labour or occupation."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> In Charles Brockden Brown's Wieland, for instance, the effect of terror operates throughout the narrative as that which cannot be seen, identified, or rendered fully intelligible. The residents of Wieland estate are haunted by apparitions and intrusions, but this sense of terror is resolved by the end of the novel when it is revealed that Carwin, through acts of ventriloquism, has been the cause. See Charles Brockden Brown, Wieland, or The Transformation (New York: Prometheus Books). Similarly, in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Sphinx," the "monster" that terrorizes the narrator is, by the narrative's resolution, placed in a safe and proper perspective by the detective work of the narrator's companion. In both narratives, the placing of the problem or potential threat into proper perspective helps bring about secure position from which to view horror, at once rendering this horror into the domain of delightfulness. See Edgar Allan Poe, "The Sphinx," Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales (New York: Library of America, 1984) 843-847. As I demonstrate later in this chapter, Delano's perception and modes of viewing the event of the slave revolt, and particularly his propensity to frame the event within the Gothic categories of delightful horror, is presented as one of the central problematics in "Benito Cereno."

<sup>101</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, "Purview."

This eighteenth-century meaning, and its further elaboration on the categories “range” and “sphere,” had arisen from a problematic that James Madison introduced in the Federalist Papers. He writes, “In determining the extent of information required in the exercise of a particular authority, recourse then must be had to the objects within the purview of that authority.”<sup>102</sup> While his use of the term “recourse” seems ambiguous here, what is clear about Madison’s essay is its interest in delimiting and establishing “the objects [within the purview] of federal legislation.” These objects are “commerce, taxation, and the militia.” For the sake of “proper regulation”—that is, for the sake of stabilizing market networks and commodity flow over space—“commerce requires much information” (Madison, Federalist #56). The question that Madison and others set out to resolve is how, and under what arrangement of state representation, could government best gather, organize, and put this information to use. More important than Madison’s argument for a republic with a limited number of state representatives, however, is his concern with the relationship between governance and “authority” over the “proper regulation of commerce.” What is at stake in Madison’s use of the term “purview” is a problematic that requires him to ask how or under what configuration of force and regulation must the U.S. gather information and, therefore, extend its purview.

Altering slightly but also expanding Madison’s initial use of “purview” in the Federalist Papers, the nineteenth century meaning of the term had come to include notions of “view,” “range of vision,” and “outlook.” These denotations further extended (by way of epistemological categories like vision and oversight) the problematic that Madison and others sought to address. One might phrase the problematic this way: The

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<sup>102</sup> James Madison, “Federalist #56.” This is also the sentence cited in the OED. My emphasis. Hereafter, I cite Madison parenthetically.

“exercise of a particular authority” depends on the ability of the “authority” or governing force to overcome the limits within its “range”—to have “recourse . . . to the objects within [its] purview.” Although Madison articulates this as a problematic particular to U.S. national institutions, his use of “purview,” I want to suggest, expresses an arrangement of forces that extends and intensifies governmental regulation over transnational or supra-territorial spaces, whereby the interests and success of the nation and its institutions depends on broader managerial regulations or controls over geopolitical spaces and global commerce. As historian Richard Van Alstyne in the 1960s had argued, the debates occurring among the intellectuals, investors, and founders of the U.S. state and its Constitution (including Madison) reflected a complex of international forces (i.e., imperial hegemonies) that were in contest not only for continental territory but, more importantly, for dominion over emerging markets and commercial networks, indeed, for global sea power itself.<sup>103</sup> I understand global purview as an intention that is attendant with these imperial ambitions, and I understand Delano’s work as a contribution to this purview. Purview, in other words, operates as a corollary of American power; its limits are tied to America’s ability to exercise governmental force and oversight. For Madison, then, the problematic is one of devising ways or “recourses” for overcoming the limits in order to achieve maximum purview.

Melville’s “Benito Cereno” signals that the tropes most useful to the practices of regulation and security, to managerial perspective and oversight, are found in the

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Van Alstyne, Empire and Independence: The International History of the American Revolution (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), vii-viii. See also chapter eight of this book (191-232) as well as Van Alstyne’s The Rising American Empire (New York: Norton, 1974) [originally published by Blackwell, 1960].

aesthetics and *topoi* of an American gothic and transcendental sublimity.<sup>104</sup> His discovery or invention of Delano in this narrative marks an instance where the problematic of governance, regulation, and purview conjoins with a particularly American articulation of the sublime. Tracing out the linkages between the Anglo and Continental notions of the sublime and transcendence found in British romanticism and German idealism and how this discourse had influenced (and even ramified within) American “vision” and habits of thought, Donald Pease’s important essay “Sublime Politics” addresses an American propensity to invoke the sublime as a means of legitimating “man’s future power over the landscape,” to express legitimacy “in the policy of western expansion.”<sup>105</sup> Rob Wilson, following some of Pease’s initial insights, recalls that early and nineteenth-century American appropriations of the sublime provided a set of tropes and discursive functions that were integral to the material and institutional practices of American power.<sup>106</sup> These tropes, in other words, lent themselves to a metaphysics that allowed or even legitimized the American (and America

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<sup>104</sup> Cf. Jonathan Arac, Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). While Arac does not take up directly the question of the sublime in this particular work, there’s no doubt that the sublime, which had informed Romantic British and American writers, contributed to the type of “overview” that Arac suggests is characteristic and complicit with the rise of managerial and disciplinary practices. Arac’s work reflects his reading of Michel Foucault’s genealogy of disciplinary forces instantiated by Jeremy Bentham’s design of the panopticon.

<sup>105</sup> Donald Pease, “Sublime Politics,” The American Sublime, Mary Arensberg, ed. (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1986) 46.

<sup>106</sup> For an extensive and important study of the sublime in relation to American literary production and ideology, see Rob Wilson, American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1991). I find the genealogical implications of Wilson’s study to contain valuable insights on the connections between American conceptions of power and what I call global purview; I do, however, take exception to Wilson’s intentions of “altering (decreating/creating) this American sublime . . . into a stance of empowerment that better fits the post-Cold War future” (40). Understood as an ideology, the American Sublime for Wilson can be “altered” and reinstalled into a more “pluralist,” inclusive, and “empowering” national project. My work on Melville (a figure noticeably absent from Wilson’s study) recalls some of Wilson’s genealogy but toward a very different aim.



itself) to “rise above” and, as Walt Whitman’s mid nineteenth-century poetics pronounce, envision “the fiery fields emanative, and the endless vistas beyond.”<sup>107</sup>

This “perspective” further bolstered if not constituted America’s new role in the world. This was a role that Ralph Waldo Emerson and other proponents of expansion typified in the category “Young America”—a category that presupposed a critical break or liberation from “Old World” institutions. Again, Richard Van Alstyne’s study of American empire suggests rather correctly a link between Emerson’s aesthetics and the web of banking, trading, transportation, and political interests of men like Stephen A. Douglas, George N. Sanders, Judah P. Benjamin, and George Law, “each of whom was active in business, and identified themselves as ‘Young Americans.’”<sup>108</sup> It is Emerson, among others, who had given voice to the potentialities of American force, a force made manifest through the “development of our American internal resources, the extension to the utmost of the commercial system, and the appearance of new moral causes which are to modify the State.” All of this, Emerson euphorically exclaims, bestows an “aspect of greatness to the Future.”<sup>109</sup>

Dramatizing how this seemingly benevolent aesthetics evinced by Emerson and others had become subsumed within American power, Melville’s “Benito Cereno” stages Amasa Delano as a figure who evinces an American propensity to gain an uncompromised perspective of the globe. This is a figure who, much like Emerson, praises the “annihilation” of distance, “the locomotive and the steamboat” and other

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<sup>107</sup> Walt Whitman, “To the Leaven’d Soil They Trod,” Leaves of Grass.

<sup>108</sup> See Richard Van Alstyne’s The Rising American Empire (New York: Norton, 1974) [originally published by Blackwell, 1960], 153.

<sup>109</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American” [1844].

machines and ships, which “shoot every day across the thousand various threads of national descent and employment, and bind them fast in one web.”<sup>110</sup> “Benito Cereno” helps to anticipate, in other words, how Delano’s view of the world and how Delano’s A Narrative of Voyages and Travels contributed to and extended the “range” and thus the purview of American influence—a point that did not go unnoticed by German political theorist Carl Schmitt in the twentieth century.<sup>111</sup> What is at stake in this extension and expansion of purview is an attendant violence that permeates potentially every part of the world. The annihilation of distance, the conquest of space over time, and the fabrication of “one web”—all of which Emerson venerates in “The Young American”—form also the trappings of market expansion and the appropriation qua regulation of spaces and populations. This is, moreover, one of the reasons that Delano, as both the reputable self-made “American” and the author of A Narrative of Voyages, figures as an object of Melville’s understanding of (and growing skepticism towards) America’s seemingly

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<sup>110</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American” [1844]. I quote the passage for a fuller contextualization: “This rage for road building is beneficent for America, where vast distance is so main a consideration in our domestic politics and trade, inasmuch as the great political promise of the invention is to hold the Union staunch, whose days seemed already numbered by the mere inconvenience of transporting representatives, judges, and officers across such tedious distances of land and water. Not only is distance annihilated, but when, as now, the locomotive and the steamboat, like enormous shuttles, shoot every day across the thousand various threads of national descent and employment, and bind them fast in one web, an hourly assimilation goes forward, and there is no danger that local peculiarities and hostilities should be preserved.”

<sup>111</sup> This is something that did not go unnoticed by the twentieth-century conservative German political theorist Carl Schmitt—albeit for a different purpose and politics than I have put forth here. As Thomas Beebee has recently noted, Schmitt repeatedly referenced Melville’s “Benito Cereno” as a story which provides the “mythic context” for what “we call globalization” (115). Schmitt’s identification with the Spanish captain, Benito Cereno, provides Schmitt a theoretical frame (or myth) through which Schmitt can account for the ascendancy of American power and the larger struggles Europe, particularly Germany, was facing. Beebee further suggests, “Invoking the ‘ship-of-state’ allegory, Schmitt predicts the impending destruction of Germany as a sovereign nation” (119). More must be said about this statement, but it does bear on the importance “Benito Cereno” has for those attempting to understand America power and new geopolitical and global arrangements. See Thomas O. Beebee, “Carl Schmitt’s Myth of Benito Cereno,” Seminar: A Journal of German Studies 42:2 (2006) 114-134.

benevolent role in the world, I argue here.<sup>112</sup> Melville's depiction of Delano in "Benito Cereno" as a mind committed to "benevolent" action helps formulate the basis of a problematic that troubles the relationship between American power and the inhuman conditions of market expansion, the reliance upon slave labor, as well as the intensification of security and control mechanisms over populations during the nineteenth century that are attendant with this power.

In a style that invokes both the gothic and detective fiction of the period, the novella portrays Delano making his way toward the "strange" and seemingly distressed Spanish slaver, the *San Dominick*. Alluding to dominant late-eighteenth and nineteenth century romantic conceptions of sublimity, "Benito Cereno" jests with its own depiction of Delano, rendering him as the easily identifiable romantic figure looking out at the sublime horizon. As Delano views "the stranger" from the vantage point of his own ship, ironically called the *Bachelors Delight*, the novella deploys recognizable gothic topoi and tells how "the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot" invokes "the sort of stories, at that day, associated with those seas" (35)—as if these were the very categories and narrative conventions by which Delano's mind frames and orders the singularity that he has encountered.

Delano has to continually adjust this frame, however, as the scene he encounters often tests his own beliefs and perspective of the world. One of the first instances of this is when Delano realizes that the "monks" and "dark cowl" before him in the distance are actually Negro slaves: "Upon a still nigher approach, this appearance [of gothic

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<sup>112</sup> For an account that glorifies both America's exploits in the Pacific as well as Delano's achievements and self reliance (and that interestingly omits any mention of Melville's narrative on said figure) see Daniel Henderson, *Yankee Ships in China Seas: Adventures of Pioneer Americans in the Troubled Far East* (New York: Hastings House, 1946).

figurations] was modified, and the true character of the vessel was plain—a Spanish merchantman of the first class; carrying negro slaves, amongst other valuable freight, from one colonial port to another” (36). Once on board, he makes observations and judgments about what lies before him, and he looks for clues that will help him organize what at first “seems unreal” (38). For Delano, the “strange costumes, gestures, and faces” look to be “but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive what it gave”—a line that seems to recall Pip from Moby Dick. Strange and peculiar, the encounter with the ship’s population—“whites and blacks . . . the latter outnumbering the former” and the “common tale of suffering” that is told simultaneously “in one language, and as with one voice” (38)—begins to draw his attention and alarm:

Perhaps it was some such influence as above is attempted to be described, which, in Captain Delano’s mind, heightened whatever, upon a staid scrutiny, might have seemed unusual; especially the conspicuous figures of four elderly grizzled negroes, their heads like black, doddered willow tops, who in venerable contrast to the tumult below them were couched sphynx-like, one on the starboard cat-head, another on the larboard, and the remaining pair face to face on the opposite bulwarks above the main-chains.” (38)

To Delano, more peculiar still are the “six other blacks; each with a rusty hatchet in his hand . . . engaged like a scullion in scouring” (39). Unrecognizable to Delano, these same hatchets and the “blacks” who wield them had been at the center of the violent insurrection aboard the slave ship just a short time earlier. Although the scene that confronts him seems out of joint, he attributes the slaves’ actions to “the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime” as they “sideways clashed their hatchets

together, like cymbals, with barbarous din” (39). Though at first this scene of slaves wielding and polishing hatchets appears sinister and potentially threatening, Delano attributes their behavior to the “raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans” (39). Any suspicions he has regarding the possible malicious intentions of those on board the *San Dominick* are believed by Delano to be within the agency of the Spaniards, not the slaves. And even then, he suppresses his own suspicions, attributing these suspicions to a kind of “atheist doubt” that “betrays” the “ever-watchful Providence above” (83).

Melville’s novella portrays Delano as a dupe of a racist myth or system of beliefs and ideology that posits a paradoxical, if not contradictory, notion of Negro intelligence: In one sense, this system of belief presupposes that the Negro, lacking Human intelligence, is incapable of entering fully into the domestic and civil sphere of human life and is always, therefore, a potential threat to Human civilization; in another sense, the conditioning of the Negro mind and body, under proper management and forces of control and domestication, renders the Negro as docile—much like the “Newfoundland dogs” to which Delano continually compares the Negro.<sup>113</sup> For Delano it is initially impossible to imagine or recognize that the Negro—the “unsophisticated African”—is capable of inventing the “common tale of suffering” that the entire population aboard the *San Dominick* perform as *dramatis personae*. To entertain such ideas would be, in Delano’s terms, “atheist,” to “doubt” the “ever-watchful Providence above” which has given ultimate meaning and order to the world. Delano’s misrecognition, however, while the function of this deep-seated racism inscribed within his own religious and nationalist

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<sup>113</sup> See David Brion Davis’s *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), which addresses in historical detail the bestialization of African slaves.

notions of “Providence,” is also the workings of Babo’s own ability to discover (*inventio*) this racism (as *topos*) and to use it as a means or strategy to shroud the rebellion. (I address this in further detail in the following chapter.) Rehearsing a drama that is conventionally recognizable to Delano’s hermeneutics and conceptions of tragedy and narrative, and to his conceptions of race and intelligence, the slaves are able to cloak their rebellious plot, even while traces of the revolt capriciously reveal themselves in Delano’s presence. These revelations and hints of revolt appear to Delano merely as problems of mismanagement, as things out of order, to which he generously applies his skills.

### **2.3. *Ordo Mundi*, the Geopolitics of Charity, and the Machinery of Control**

“In armies, navies, cities, or families, in nature herself, nothing more relaxes good order than misery.”<sup>114</sup>

On board the stranded Spanish vessel, Delano finds himself “Wonted to the quiet orderliness of the sealer’s comfortable family of a crew” and finds also that “the noisy confusion of the *San Dominick*’s suffering host repeatedly challenged the eye” (42). In the subsequent two pages and in other instances, the narrative uses terms like “mismanagement” and “unsightly disorder” to convey Delano’s perceptions of the derelict conditions aboard the Spanish ship. Viewed by Delano as “confusion” and displaced authority, these conditions “challenge” his “eye” on two registers. In the first sense, Melville’s novella alludes to the dramatic or narrative convention of blindness and

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<sup>114</sup> “Benito Cereno,” 40.

insight, the trope of blindness as misperception and ignorance (*agnoia*) that “brings error.”<sup>115</sup> In a gesture toward Sophocles’s understanding of hubris and fate as important elements of the tragedy—or even Homeric notions of sight and recognition—the “blunt-thinking American’s eyes” (46) become central to Melville’s concern with the American’s inability to understand the trajectory of nineteenth-century forces, even while these forces are committed to a kind of full-spectrum dominance or global purview. I take up this question of hubris and blindness in the next section, arguing that in “Benito Cereno” there is no moment of *anagnorisis*, no recognition scene where Delano truly understands why the “events ought not to have happened.”<sup>116</sup> The “challenge” to Delano’s eyes plays out on another register here as well. As if the weight of the entire *ordo mundi*—the alignment and movement of politics, economy, and history—were always in the balance, Delano thinks to himself, “in armies, navies, cities, or families, nothing more relaxes good order than misery” (40).

For a mind like Delano’s, order is the first principle. In this sense, Delano understands that the organization of power, exercised as management and governance, necessitates the maintenance of an “order” that is congruous throughout all levels of society—military, polis or cosmopolis, family, and “in nature herself” (40). Anticipating Michel Foucault’s reading of the post-Machiavellian La Perriere, Delano’s remarks in

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<sup>115</sup> Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 143.

<sup>116</sup> Sheila Murnaghan, “Sucking the Juice without Biting the Rind: Aristotle and Tragic Mimesis,” *New Literary History* 16.4 (1995) 755-773. This insight derives from Murnaghan’s statement concerning the relation between the resulting subsidence of a particular order of violence at the moment of identification and thus recognition of those whom the violence is directed: “For tragedy is characteristically about events that ought not to happen, actions that people should not take, experiences that people do not want to have. In Aristotle’s own formulation, which is representative although not exhaustive, tragedy focuses on acts of violence between *philio*, ‘close friends or relatives’ (*Poetics* 14.1453b19-23), actions that compound the horror of death and physical suffering with the violation of ties that are supposed to be secured by their sanctity and their basis in nature” (758).

“Benito Cereno” instantiate an understanding of sovereign power that emerges in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century (and Foucault includes here the U.S.) as the “practices” or “art of governance.”<sup>117</sup> “Like La Perriere,” states Foucault, “others who write on the art of government constantly recall that one speaks also of ‘governing’ a household, souls, children, a province, a convent, a religious order, a family.”<sup>118</sup> This is a form of governance that does not refer exclusively to territory, in the sense that Machiavelli had intended, Foucault suggests, but a new arrangement of powers which governs “things.”<sup>119</sup> In La Perriere’s Miroir Politique, “things” include more than mere territory. “Things” suggest “a sort of complex composed of men and things.”<sup>120</sup>

The things, in this sense, with which government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those things that are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, and so on; men in their relation to those other things that are customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, and so on; and finally men in their relation to those still other things that might be accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, and so on.<sup>121</sup>

Referencing the regulation and ordering of “things,” the metaphor most often invoked by treatises on government is that of the ship, Foucault states. It would be helpful to recall

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<sup>117</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” Power: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984. Volume Three, James D. Faubion, ed. Paul Rabinow, series editor. (New York: The New Press, 2000) 201-222.

<sup>118</sup> Foucault, “Governmentality,” 205.

<sup>119</sup> Foucault, “Governmentality,” 208.

<sup>120</sup> Foucault, “Governmentality,” 208.

<sup>121</sup> Foucault, “Governmentality,” 208-209.



Delano's own habits and propensities for order in Foucault's description of this relation of force: The governance of a ship "means clearly to take charge of the sailors, but also its boat and its cargo; to take care of a ship means also to reckon with winds, rocks, and storms; and it consists in the activity of establishing a relation between the sailors, who are to be taken care of, and the ship, which is to be taken care of, and the cargo, which is to be brought safely to port, and all of those eventualities like wind, rocks, storms, and so on."<sup>122</sup> These are all the forms of governance that Delano finds lacking aboard the "noisy confusion" and miserable conditions of the *San Dominick*. And these are the conditions that legitimize Delano to reestablish order.

How does he do this, though? Several times throughout the story Delano mentions his own "charitable" and "compassionate" response to the misery and how, out of his own benevolence, feels compelled to assist the Spanish slave ship. For Delano, world spaces and populations, under proper command or management and with the right application of force or energy, can be brought into a kind of orderliness that he himself practices as commander of his own ship. In order to legitimize his compassionate intervention aboard the *San Dominick*, Delano offers "charity." Melville would later take up rather critically the category and exercise of charity in *The Confidence-Man* (1857), but in "Benito Cereno" we can see already how "charity" provides Melville a way to understand practices of governance. More to the point, we can find in Delano's invocation of the term "charity" not only an important conflation of "economy" with "politics" that Foucault discusses, but Delano's means of extending this political

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<sup>122</sup> Foucault, "Governmentality," 209.

economy outward onto the “strange” and foreign world and populations that the American encounters in his global endeavors.

The term stranger, oft repeated in the opening of the novella, hints at Delano’s own endeavors in expanding America’s influence over the globe, whereby the opening of new markets and exploration of new territories often occasions encounters with “strange” and unfamiliar geographies and populations. I have already theorized how Delano’s habit of mind reads his encounter with the “stranger” through a Gothic lens or hermeneutic. There’s more to this, though. In an even longer history of the term stranger, the ancient Greeks, Michelle Gellrich explains, had made an important distinction between strangers or outsiders (*thuraioi*, in this case) and insiders or kinsmen (*oikeioi*). This was a distinction that was central to the political and tragic elements of Sophocles’ Antigone and the ancient Greeks’ understanding of order.<sup>123</sup> Philologically, it’s Giambattista Vico who suggested the correlation between “the first commerce in the world” and the category of “stranger.” Vico writes that the word for stranger, *hostis*, “means both guest or stranger and enemy.”<sup>124</sup> Vico scholar Giuseppe Mazzotta elaborates on this relation and Vico’s contribution:

The stranger, in Greek texts, is the one who enters the city—the space of defined structures—and with him a new world enters the perimeter of the polis. The stranger’s arrival reveals the existence of worlds other than one’s own, each world

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<sup>123</sup> See Michelle Gellrich, Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 59. Gellrich offers an insightful reading of the political stakes involved in Antigone’s burial of her brother, a familial insider or oikeioi.

<sup>124</sup> Giambattista Vico, The New Science of Giambattista Vico, trans. Max H. Fisch and Thomas G. Bergin (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1968), para. 11. Giuseppe Mazzotta, The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 175. It might be fruitful to trace out the relation, too, between Gellrich’s term for “outsider” (thuraioi) in the Greek and Vico’s “stranger” (hostis) in the Latin.

unknown to the other, and yet each accessible to the other. In this encounter, which the god favors, stranger and host exchange the gift of friendship, a precious inviolable gift that would bind them forever. While all of this is true, Vico also perceives that the encounter between stranger and host puts in place a strange relation, a relation of strangeness.<sup>125</sup>

This relation between stranger and host allows Vico “to draft the archeology of civil disturbance.”<sup>126</sup> While this archeology and its implications are too extensive to trace out here, the categories stranger and host, as Vico had understood them, obliges us to reconsider the changing dynamic of these relations. This is a dynamic that flexes with the site of the “encounter.” No longer relegated to the perimeters of the city in the ancient sense, the encounter between strangers at the moment of commerce gives way to a different arrangement within modernity. The polis becomes cosmopolis. In other words, this is an arrangement in which the conditions for commerce are potentially made possible throughout any space on the planet. But what happens in the encounter between strangers? How does “strangeness,” as Vico understood it historically and philologically, shift with the ancient orders to modern conditions? Again, “Benito Cereno” helps us consider this: As charity is proffered by Delano to the stranger, a new order is extended outward, resulting in an annexation (absorption or interiorizing) of the “stranger” or *thuraioi* into *oikeioi*, from which derives the word “economy.”

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<sup>125</sup> Giuseppe Mazzotta, 175.

<sup>126</sup> Giuseppe Mazzotta, 175.

Indeed, Delano's act of charity instantiates what Foucault marks as the "modern meaning" of economy, the "introduction of economy into political practice."<sup>127</sup> Charity is the act or strategy by which Delano is able to extend a political economy to the "stranger" (or "enemy" if we trace out how Vico understands the "diction" and "contradiction" within the term) and to apply certain mechanisms of control. By invoking charity, Delano legitimizes his intervention in a situation that is the result of mismanagement by a weak and "hypochondriac" Spanish captain, Benito Cereno. According to the American, "misery" and disorder aboard the Spanish *San Dominick* are directly the consequences of Benito Cereno's inadequacies as a captain and a man: "He was rather tall, but seemed never to have been robust, and now with nervous suffering was almost worn to a skeleton" (40). This sense of inadequacy follows Delano's perception of the Spaniard throughout the novella, finally summarized in the last pages by an image of male impotency: "And that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not, indeed, a sword, but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened was empty" (102). The energy and potency that Delano finds ostensibly lacking in the effete Cereno further bolsters a disdain for the Spaniard. "Is it, thought Captain Delano, that this hapless man is one of those paper captains I've known, who by policy wink at what by power they cannot put down? I know no sadder sight than a commander who has little of command but the name" (47). Melville's ironically charged characterization of Delano's perception of the Spanish as inferior reflected much of the complex political, military, and historical relationship between the United States and Latin America of that moment. As Don Coerver and Linda Hall have argued through

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<sup>127</sup> Foucault, "Governmentality," 207.

their research, “The ease with which the war with Mexico was won, and the extraordinary amount of territory which was taken, led to the perception that Latin Americans were somehow inferior and could be easily dominated by the U.S. military.”<sup>128</sup>

For Delano, strong policy is a direct function of strong energy, and Delano’s habit of mind is to think of good order in terms of management, policy, and discipline. Misery and misrule can be avoided, according to Delano, by using strategies of control and acts of sheer disciplinary force or energy. This is made specifically evident when he judges that Cereno lacks sufficient control of the unruly *San Dominick*: “Still, Captain Delano was not without the idea, that had Benito Cereno been a man of *greater energy*, misrule would hardly have come to the present pass” (40, *My emphasis*). Charity, in this sense, is the application of Delano’s own surplus energy to a problem that is inadequately addressed and “mismanaged” by Benito Cereno’s emasculated command.<sup>129</sup> My intention here is to open up and show instances of how the discourse of philanthropy and the micro-politics of charity, particularly here in “Benito Cereno” (and we see this in “Bartleby” as well as other titles), are congruent with the larger machinations of global purview and empire.<sup>130</sup> In Melville’s world, the practice of charitable politics is the extension or counterpart to other, often blatantly violent, mechanisms of control or *bloody enforcement*.

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<sup>128</sup> Don M. Coerver and Linda B. Hall, Tangled Destinies: Latin America and the United States (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>129</sup> Delano refers to the disorderliness or “mismanaged ship” several times. See again “Benito Cereno,” 44.

<sup>130</sup> For an insightful reading of “Benito Cereno” and the connections between Melville’s critique of charity and current practices of “humanitarian intervention,” see Paul Downes, “Melville’s Benito Cereno and the Politics of Humanitarian Intervention,” The South Atlantic Quarterly 103:2 (2004): 465-488. See also James H. Kavanagh, “That Hive of Subtlety: ‘Benito Cereno’ and the Liberal Hero,” in Ideology and Classic American Literature, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 352-383.

To further contextualize this, Delano's actions, manner of thought, and overall comportment alludes to and forms a composite image of a number of "American" figures, from Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson to John O'Sullivan. By invoking the discourse of charity, Delano reflects specifically O'Sullivan's 1847 essay "The War," published in the Democratic Review. O'Sullivan writes, "It is an acknowledged law of nations, that when a country sinks into a state of anarchy, unable to govern itself, and dangerous to its neighbors, it becomes the duty of the most powerful of those neighbors to interfere and settle its affairs."<sup>131</sup> Justification on grounds that order and governance must prevail, intervention on the *San Dominick* is reason enough for Delano, and is reason enough for the U.S.'s grand act of charity in the form of war with the misgoverned Mexico, according to O'Sullivan and his ilk. For O'Sullivan echoing Delano (or Delano echoing O'Sullivan), the "motto" becomes, "The Spaniards have ceased to rule in Mexico."

The war is not a matter of choice. It exists through the acts of Mexico without any present prospect of peace. The known obstinacy of the Spanish race, and the want of any respectable head to the Mexican government, indicates that the war can be ultimately terminated only by the seizure of all the large cities, including Mexico, occupying them by strong garrisons, and, while suppressing every species of Mexican military force, protecting the people from every kind of oppression, and, affording security to property, throwing the whole open to the free trade of all nations.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> "The War," The United States Magazine and Democratic Review 20 (February 1847): 101-99-102.

<sup>132</sup> "The War," 99-102.

On grounds that an application of force will better serve the “prospect for peace,” the protection of “the people,” and the “security” of “property” and “free trade,” O’Sullivan and Delano both call for, in policy, an exercise of force that functions as “charity.”

This application of force recalls the relation of power that Michel Foucault recognizes and attempts to analyze in his inversion of Karl von Clausewitz’s proposition. For Foucault, as for others like Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Paul Virilio, who essay on this very problem of power around the same time (1975-80), “politics is the continuation of war by other means.”<sup>133</sup> Security and peace, that is, the general management of a kind of order, must be examined in a “relationship of force that was established in and through war.”<sup>134</sup> Charity, in this instance, operates as a strategic exercise of force: Delano thinks to himself that “indulgent as he was at the first” with the stranded vessel and crew, “in judging the Spaniard” as an unfit commander, “he [Delano] might not, after all, *have exercised charity enough*” (41, *my emphasis*). Delano’s “exercise of charity” functions as one strategy among many. Charity, accompanied with other strategies of coercion, is deployed with varying intensities and intervenes in multiple strata—the individual, the crew of the ship, the tangential populations caught in the shifting and fluid oceanic geopolitical spaces.

In the midst of one particular conversation with Benito Cereno, Delano is “struck by one of those instances of insubordination previously alluded to” (47). The narrative describes the scene and Delano’s response as follows:

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<sup>133</sup> Michel Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76. David Macy, trans. (New York: Picador, 2003) 15. See also Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987) and Paul Virilio, L’insécurité du territoire (Paris: Stock, 1975); Speed and Politics, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext[e]).

<sup>134</sup> Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 15.

Three black boys, with two Spanish boys, were sitting together on the hatches, scraping a rude wooden platter, in which some scanty mess had recently been cooked. Suddenly, one of the black boys, enraged at a word dropped by one of his white companions, seized a knife, and though called to forbear by one of the oakum-pickers, struck the lad over the head, inflicting a gash from which blood flowed. (47)

This act of black on white violence finds Delano in a state of “amazement.” And he retorts, “Had such a thing happened on board the Bachelor’s Delight, instant punishment would have followed” (47). Readers of Melville cannot forget here the allusion to White Jacket and the ways in which flogging operates as a central technique for order and command. As a captain of his own ship, Delano addresses “insubordination” with disciplinary and punishing force, and does so rather swiftly.

While critics of “Benito Cereno” have often remarked that Delano occupies a “Yankee” position or perspective of the world (and of the Negro and Spaniard), I argue that his actions are constitutive of the same forces and relations of power that make slavery possible, a relation of power and politics that render the North-South, Yankee-Dixie polarities inadequate for understanding the level of complicity that America as a whole had in maintaining the institution of slavery.<sup>135</sup> For Delano, bodies become manageable and docile through the correct application of force, whether by charity or the whip. The practice of charity as a politics, policy, and even policing is not far removed

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<sup>135</sup> Though a number of critics have emphasized a reading of “Benito Cereno” based on the idea that Delano represents a kind of Yankee perspective, I want to trouble that reading here by noting the important connotations between Delano’s propensity to organize and manage (by what whatever means necessary) and the South’s increased militarization. Another interesting fact supports this. While Delano is indeed from Massachusetts, the text never at any point refers to him as Yankee. In fact, the word Yankee, in my closest reading of the text, never appears. Instead, Delano is constantly referred to as “the American,” a point critics should not take lightly.



from forceful, violent, or military intervention. Delano exercises on different levels what historian Herbert Aptheker describes in American Negro Slave Revolts as “the machinery of control” and militarism practiced by Southern slave-holders.

Aptheker’s research presents the extent and ubiquity of militarism and martial law throughout the antebellum south, put in place for fear of slave insurrection and its consequences. In one of many important anecdotal instances, he recalls that “a famous British scientist, visiting the south at the end of the eighteenth century”—the same moment in which Melville sets the story of “Benito Cereno”—observes how “all the white men” of the south “are all soldiers.” Aptheker also notes how another gentleman by the name of Basil Hall, as he was passing through Virginia, was “struck by the ‘military police . . . constantly kept up’ in Charleston.”<sup>136</sup> Aptheker depicts the extent to which the south exemplifies a militarized zone and police state, and this becomes forcefully clear in his quotation from Governor Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina: “A state of military preparation must always be with us a state of perfect domestic security. A period of profound peace and consequent apathy may expose us to the danger of domestic insurrection.”<sup>137</sup> Melville’s “Benito Cereno” depicts Delano’s propensity for enforcing and maintaining order—“in armies, navies, cities, or families, in nature herself,” including the maintenance of property rights—as an extension and exercise of war and the machinery of control, modeled on a seemingly regional Southern problem. Under the watch of this “American” figure, however, this is a problem that is potentially dispersed and intensified throughout the globe.

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<sup>136</sup> Herbert Aptheker American Negro Slave Revolts (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943). 68-69.

<sup>137</sup> Governor Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina quoted by Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts (New York: International Publishers, 1943) 69.

In his act of “charity,” Delano generously administers a lesson to Benito Cereno about how to manage a crew, how the administration of punishment and control should be carried out, and how order should be maintained aboard ship so as to suppress potential insubordination, insurrection, or mutiny (even though Delano doesn’t realize that this has actually already occurred here). “‘I should think, Don Benito,’ he now said, glancing towards the oakum-picker who had sought to interfere with the boys, ‘that you would find it advantageous to keep all your blacks employed, especially the younger ones, no matter at what useless task, and no matter what happens to the ship’” (47). In this moment, Delano is aware that the oakum-picker’s earlier intervention in the fight between the boys is another instance of what he thinks is displaced authority. Authority should reside in the commander of the ship, not in other crew members and especially not in Negro slaves. Describing then his own managerial technique as an example of proper authority, Delano states, “Why, even with my little band, I find such a course indispensable. I once kept a crew on my quarterdeck thrumming mats for my cabin, when for three days, I had given up my ship—mats, men, and all—for a speedy loss, owing to the violence of the gale, in which we could do nothing but helplessly drive before it” (47-48). This expenditure of the crew’s energy on these seemingly menial tasks like “thrumming mats” continually assures that potential and wayward energies are stifled and redirected into the vectors and trajectories that Delano has set. For Delano, it is better that “ship—mats, men, and all” are destroyed than for the order of command to be displaced by a rebellious crew. If order is the first principle, then, for Delano, proper management and regulation are an essential function of this principle.

## 2.4. Literary Involutions and Historical Entanglements

From the opening pages of the novella, Delano is confronted with events that seem out of joint. What does he encounter? A “strange sail” in a “lawless and lonely spot” off the coast of Chili; a hypochondriac for a captain; slaves running freely on the deck of the ship; whites with seemingly less authority than blacks, to name just a few instances in the disturbance of the natural order of things. Disordered and inverted, the setting obliges him to correct, to manage, to re-order. Indeed, the narrative stylistically presents these scenes in a manner that reflects Delano’s own disoriented perspective. “Benito Cereno” moves in and out of free indirect discourse; it confuses and conflates Delano’s point of view with the narrator’s; it offers hints but doesn’t necessarily or immediately reveal the narrative’s purpose or motivation. The images and metaphors of “shadows” and “troubled gray vapors” in which Delano initially finds the Spanish ship are present throughout the entire story, but these tropes give way to others which obfuscate and bewilder the scene as well. That is, as much as the narrative shrouds the event in a “shadowy tableau,” the event itself constitutes a twisted entanglement or knot, a set of reversals, doublings, and folds.

The full force of this entanglement reveals itself in the brief moment that Delano is confronted with the reality of the slave revolt, which until this point had been concealed by the slaves’ ability to stage a scenario that plays to Delano’s presuppositions regarding relations of power between master and slave, American and Spaniard, New World and Old. (This is an invention that I address in the following chapter.) Before the moment that “a flash of revelation,” the dropping of “scales . . . from his eyes,” and an “illuminating and unanticipated clearness” sweeps “across [his] long-benighted mind,”

Captain Delano finds it nearly impossible, despite all his efforts, to organize in time and space the circumstances and “enigmatic event of the day” (85). As if to punctuate its singular importance, the text offers a one-sentence paragraph that describes the moment of the dramatic reversal (*peripeteia*): “All this, with what preceded, and what followed, occurred with such involution of rapidity, that past, present, and future seemed one” (85). Initially, this sentence seems to present the problematic of narrating the chaos and tumult of this dramatic conflict—“all that preceded and what followed”—but there’s more to this sentence than the problematic of narrative structuring and sequence.

To borrow Melville’s own term, the question becomes rather “involved”: How does one present the slave revolt aboard this Spanish ship? The scene of disorder and mismanagement that Delano had initially encountered and set out to correct on the *San Dominick* gives way to a subtler problematic regarding historical time and order. Melville uses the term “involution” to describe the knotting or entanglement of the past with the present and even the future. At this particular instant, the revelation of the slave revolt ruptures the chronometrical and manageable relations between events and time, between men and their arranged movement in space. In other words, things and men (to recall Foucault’s terms) haven’t been what they seem for Delano. This dramatic reversal (*peripeteia*) in the narrative reveals or “unmasks” the slave revolt as a previous and still-occurring reversal in the relations of power between master and slave. The narrative then shows these convoluted or, if I may, “involuted” relations as a temporal-historical problematic that exceeds Delano’s recognition—a term that takes on a dramatic and ironic sense of seeing and knowing here. Despite his own attempts to detect, render intelligible, and therefore manage bodies in time and space—to align the operation of the

“ship” with what he understands to be the “good order” and progress of history and “nature herself”—Delano’s mind cannot recognize (as *anagnorisis*) the full historical weight of this moment. Melville uses dramatic conventions like *anagnorisis*, *peripeteia*, and *hubris* to stage an unconventional disruption of order and power, a disruption that does not eventually lead to order through the resolution of the conflict as Aristotle and others had long understood the relations between tragedy and life, conflict and order in the cosmos. I give closer attention to the questions of conflict and tragedy in the following chapter where I show the stakes of Melville’s “Benito Cereno” in relation to Frederick Douglass’ “The Heroic Slave,” a narrative about the slave insurrection aboard *The Creole*. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to address how Delano’s propensity to regulate and bring order actually dramatizes his inability to recognize, in the fullest sense of the term, the scene of misery as an historical problematic that is attendant with the very forces Delano champions despite his beneficence.

The temporality that Delano experiences in this moment recalls other figurations of historical involution and entanglement that are central to Melville’s story. In the opening scene of the novella, for instance, one is given a brief and cryptic description of the slave ship’s figure-head, motto, and name:

Whether the ship had a figure-head, or only a plain beak, was not quite certain, owing to a canvas wrapped about that part, either to protect it while undergoing a re-furbishing, or else decently to hide its decay. Rudely painted or chalked, as in a sailor freak, along the forward side of a sort of pedestal below the canvas, was the sentence, “*Siguid vuestro jefe*,” (follow your leader); while upon the tarnished

bead-boards, near by, appeared, in stately capitals, once gilt, the ship's name, "San Dominick." (37)

These figures recur again at this moment of "revelation," when Captain Delano sees "the negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt" (85). In this "unmasking," Delano further witnesses what lies under the canvas that enwraps the figure-head of the ship:

"But by this time the cable of the San Dominick had been cut; and the fag-end, in lashing out, whipped away the canvas shroud about the beak, suddenly revealing, as the bleached hull swung round towards the open ocean, death for the figure-head, in a human skeleton; chalky comment on the chalked words below, "Follow your leader" (86).

Don Benito, "covering his face," cries out, saying that the "human skeleton" is Don Alexandro Aranda, his "murdered, unburied friend" and master of the *San Dominick's* live "cargo."

The narrative later reveals in the "deposition of Benito Cereno" that Aranda's murder had been used as exemplum: While "pointing to the prow," Babo had instructed Benito Cereno to "keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal" or, as he further shows, "you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader" (93). This exemplum, though, is significant on two different registers. In one sense, it serves as the terrifying example for what will happen to the other Spaniards if they resist or "attempt to frustrate" the insurrectionary plot. And in the second, more important sense, it recalls the historical problematic of the event itself. To wit, the ship's "proper figure-head," the story reveals,

is “the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World” (93). And as all these images, signs, and figures (the island of San Dominick, Columbus, and Aranda—all figures of the New World and its institutions) are superimposed on one another as palimpsest, layers, and enfolded in canvas, the enfolding becomes not only a historical problematic but a problematic of power as well. Here the phrase “follow your leader” recalls a kind of trajectory (or lines of force) emergent with the triangulated flow of commodities and human labor among Africa, Europe, and the Americas over the Atlantic—further intensifying geographically and morphing geometrically to include the “Pacific region.”<sup>138</sup> Babo’s command to “follow your leader,” moreover, obliges one to trace out a genealogy of these lines of force. Residue of the slaves’ revolt against their master, the murdered and cannibalized chalky bones of Aranda, superimposed on the figure of Columbus, quite literally reveal the catastrophe of this history and how this catastrophe is a function of the forces of domination spread around several different continents and over oceans. In this difficult passage regarding history as involution, what “Benito Cereno” can help us understand is how these lines of force bend and fold back onto themselves, how this bending and folding (forming a complex and convoluted

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<sup>138</sup> As David Brion Davis’s now well-noted research recalls, “It was thus the discoverer of America who initiated the transatlantic slave trade, which moved originally from west to east,” and which has been financed for the already-established slave trade between Africa and Lisbon by 1477(8). See David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). I take the term “Pacific region” from John Eperjesi’s treatment of this category as it emerges with certain formations of power and U.S. empire in the nineteenth century. For a further theorization of “Pacific region” discourse, see John Eperjesi’s The Imperialist Imaginary: Visions of Asia and the Pacific in American Culture. (Hanover, Dartmouth College Press, 2005).

entanglement) occurs at the site of a particular form of conflict, for which the Negro slave and slave insurrection serve as important examples.<sup>139</sup>

Indeed, while “Benito Cereno” occasions such an examination of these entanglements and knots, Melville’s story suggests rather strongly that the American mind, characterized here by Delano, cannot or will not recognize how the atrocities of the past are interlaced with the present. Though committed to charting spaces, opening up lines of commerce in strange waters and territories, and generally creating a more totalizing perspective or vision of the world (in what I have described below as global purview), he ironically cannot see the historical implications of the forces in which he and the others are entangled.

The figure of the knot recurs throughout the novella, and in an important scene that literally provokes the question of knotting and entanglement, Delano encounters aboard the *San Dominick* an “aged sailer” whose hands are “full of ropes, which he [is] working into a large knot” (63).

Captain Delano crossed over to him, and stood in silence surveying the knot; his mind, by a not uncongenial transition, passing from its own entanglements to those of the hemp. For intricacy such a knot he had never seen in an American ship, or indeed any other. The old man looked like an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon. The knot seemed a combination of double-bowline-knot, treble-crown-knot, back-handed-well-knot, knot-in-and-out-knot, and jamming-knot. (63).

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<sup>139</sup> While my intention is to follow through with my examination of Delano here, in the following chapter I address and theorize the stakes of this conflict. See “Terror and the Negro: A Meditation on Asymmetric Force and Slave Insurrection.”



Stylistically, this passage presents a kind of knotting itself, an intertwining between Delano's mind and perspective (as free-indirect discourse) and the third-person narrative's description of Delano's mind, but even in this intertwining, the narrative is able to show again through dramatic irony how Delano operates as the figure of the *alazon*.<sup>140</sup> All along suspecting that something is "peculiar" about the situation before him, Delano finds it impossible that the Spaniards, let alone the Negro slaves, are capable of a secret cabal against Delano and his crew. Referring to the slaves, Delano thinks, "But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost by leaguings in against it with negroes?" (63). The narrative, moving out of free indirect discourse, comments on how this dilemma further confuses Delano and leaves his mind "lost in the mazes" (63). What Delano is ignorant of, of course, is that the slave insurrection is underway, that Babo—lowliest in the great chain of being, "a black man's slave" (50)—plays the *eirōn* to Delano's *alazon* and is, as well, the principal creator and organizer of the revolt.

As the singular knot and the confusion of the event get the better of him, Delano addresses the "aged sailer" in order "to comprehend the meaning of such a knot" and asks, "What are you knotting there, my man?" To this, the sailer replies, "The knot."

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<sup>140</sup> Less than careful readings of "Benito Cereno", usually those which frame the narrative within unproblematized conventions of tragedy, have led critics to form an identification with Delano's perspective and charitable actions. Read within the categories of good and evil, hero and villain, this conventional or naïve reading of tragedy marks a failure to understand how identification and perspective become central problems for Melville in this narrative. See, for instance, F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (London: Oxford University Press, 1941). There are few references to "Benito Cereno" in American Renaissance, and when Matthiessen actually addresses it, he frames his critique around the topic of "tragedy." I further address this in the final section of this chapter. Similar readings have followed in Matthiessen's trajectory. For example, see Stanley T. Williams, "'Follow Your Leader': Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" Virginia Quarterly Review, 23 (1947), 61-76; Rosalie Feltenstein, "Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" American Literature, 19 (1947), 245-55; Richard Harter Fogle, "The Monk and the Bachelor: Melville's Benito Cereno," Tulane Studies in English, 3 (1952), 155-78; Eleanor Simpson, "Melville and the Negro: From Typee to 'Benito Cereno,'" American Literature, 41 (March 1969).

Then asking what this knot is for, Delano is told that it is “for some one else to undo” (63). “While Captain Delano stood watching him, suddenly the old man threw the knot towards him, saying in broken English . . . ‘Undo it, cut it, quick’” (63). Because the passage above slips in and out of free indirect discourse, it remains unclear here whether it is Delano’s mind or the novella itself that makes the allusion to the Gordian knot and the act by which the knot is solved. The Gordian knot, we know, derives from the problem set forth by the oracle’s decree to the Phrygians. During a period of interregnum, the oracle decrees that the next man to enter the city driving an oxcart shall be the new ruler. It happens that the first to do so is a poor peasant by the name of Gordias, from which the city’s name Gordium, capital of Phrygia, derives. As a gesture of gratitude, Gordias offers his oxcart to Zeus by tying the cart to a post with an intricate knot. By oracle declaration, the one to untie the knot is to be the king of Asia. The problem established by the oracle is the knot as cipher—and as the legend goes, the cipher/knot is “consequently laid up in the Acropolis of Gordium,” guarded then for centuries by the priests of Zeus until Alexander the Great in his conquest through Asia Minor arrives in 333 B.C.<sup>141</sup> Unable to find a legitimate means for deciphering or untying the intricate knot, he produces an answer to the problem by an act of sheer force, in effect, cutting the knot with his sword.

As this problem of the cipher is placed before Delano, his inability and then refusal to solve it poses an interesting question: why not “cut it” as did Alexander? Delano’s response to the problem, instead, is to ignore it: “For a moment, knot in hand,

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<sup>141</sup> Robert Graves, The Greek Myths. (New York: Penguin, 1992) 282.

and knot in head, Captain Delano stood mute.” Near Delano stands an “elderly negro,” who begs the knot, “for of course, [Delano] would not care to be troubled with it” (64).

Unconsciously, it was handed to [the negro]. With a sort of congé, the negro received it, and turning his back, ferreted into it like a detective Custom House officer after smuggled laces. Soon with some African word, equivalent to psheew, he tossed the knot overboard. (64)

This act of tossing the knot into the sea by the African bears some remarks, particularly in contrast to Delano’s response of ignoring it, which is still the principal concern of my critique here. These remarks follow soon. The narrative continues: “All this is very queer now, thought Captain Delano, with a qualmish sort of emotion; but as one feeling incipient sea-sickness, he strove by, ignoring the symptoms, to get rid of the malady” (64). As “Benito Cereno” makes clear throughout, and here in particular, as Delano “ignores the symptoms” of the “malady,” he must then simultaneously re-frame this encounter with the problem/cipher/knot. As is often the case throughout the story, Delano frames his encounter with the strange or singular by invoking or returning to the category of “delight.” After failing to grapple with the knot, he quite literally turns away from it: “Once more he looked off for his boat. To his *delight*, it was now again in view, leaving the rocky spur astern” (64 *My emphasis*).

Still the question remains, why not cut the knot? To cut the knot would require not merely an act of force, as Delano is certainly capable of exercising, but one of historical memory and recognition as well, a memorable repetition of the Alexandrian founding of empire. If the American is one who continually looks to the future, he is also one who sacrifices old mythologies for the new, positing that the historical is merely, as

Delano claims, “the past” (101). Holding a strong resemblance to the figure of Delano, Emerson had understood memory as merely “imitation” which, for him, led to “suicide.”<sup>142</sup> “But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your memory?” he had asked.<sup>143</sup> The significant force of Delano’s actions here isn’t in the possibility of actually cutting the knot; instead, the American can demonstrate by a brute force perhaps even greater than Alexander’s that he is capable of ignoring or forgetting the problem of the cipher altogether, indeed, must forget or else risk seizing the future. I’ll explain further.

While U.S. institutions, both civil and military, devote resources to history and memory, Melville’s novella suggests that this form of memory usually serves the interests of U.S. purview and empire. One need only examine a long list of archives and texts on military history to see how U.S. state memory helps produce further doctrine that enables the continuation of American power. An example of this can be found in The New American State Papers. While each volume collects and archives manuscripts that help document particular lines of American intervention at the levels of policy, bureaucracy, and strategy, volume 4 takes up the question of combat, notably guerrilla. It thereby links, through the archive, the military’s nineteenth-century combat, “such as the three fought with the Seminoles, and [other] violent threats to domestic tranquility,” with the post-Vietnam anxiety over insurgency tactics and guerrilla warfare.<sup>144</sup> The state’s past failures and successes become synthesized into a matrix of information and

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<sup>142</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” [originally published in Essays (1841)] Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures. Joel Porte, ed. (New York: Library of America, 1983). 259, 255-282.

<sup>143</sup> “Self Reliance, 265.

<sup>144</sup> The New American State Papers: Military Affairs, Volume 4: Combat Operations, ed. Benjamin Franklin Cooling (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1979), ix.

knowledge for future successes. Though Melville constructs Delano as ignoramus, his ignorance and incapability is not in his capacities as sea-farer or manager. Indeed, the text is quite clear about this. Delano operates from an order of knowledge (and a particular order of memory) that allows him aptly to engage in purview, to manage his crew, to enforce “property” rights rather effectively. His ignorance, “Benito Cereno” ironically suggests, is in the refusal to bear the disastrous and catastrophic effects of his own success in the areas of management and enforcement. To look upon “delight” is to refuse the entanglement of his own exercise of power with the brutality and catastrophe of that history. With the figure of the knot held before him, Delano must willfully turn away or risk the success, efficiency, and continuation of American power—risk “suicide,” recalling Emerson’s term. The future and delight to which Delano looks forward cannot be risked by turning to history’s disastrous past.

Melville’s anti-cathartic narrative offers a less celebratory future than many of his contemporaries had imagined. The future will remain entangled and knotted in the historicity and configuration of forces that Delano helps perpetuate but ignores (as in *agnoia*). As the Negro throws the knot into the sea, the knot remains forever entangled and the past continues to fold into and haunt the present: Christopher Columbus, the first to initiate the transatlantic slave trade; Don Alexendro Aranda, the figure of the slave owner; *San Dominick*, an allusion to both the Dominican missionary oppression of the indigenous in the New World and the name of the island that gives way to revolt by Negro slaves at the pinnacle of the eighteenth-century revolutions.

Reminiscent of Ishmael’s attempt to essay a sequential story of events, Delano as well believes in the chronological and metricized organization of time and history. After

encountering the terror of the slave insurrection, Delano again resorts to mythos, or to what Deleuze recalls as the temporality of “Chronos,” in order to regulate or “encase” the event and reestablish a new present that is disconnected from the horrors of the past.<sup>145</sup> After the slave revolt has been discovered and then quelled by Delano’s men, Delano states to Benito Cereno, who is still contemplating the real possibility that he as well as Delano could have been murdered in the plot, “You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the *past is passed*; why moralize upon it? *Forget it*” (101). This moment in the narrative recalls a similar instance of American thought characterized in Melville’s earlier 1849 novel, White-Jacket:

The world has arrived at a period which renders it the part of Wisdom to pay homage to the prospective precedents of the Future in preference to those of the Past. The *Past is dead*, and has no resurrection; but the Future is, in all things, our friend. . . . Those who are solely governed by the Past stand like Lot’s wife, crystallized in the act of looking backward, and forever incapable of looking before. Let us leave the Past, then, to dictate laws to immovable China.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> In a further theorization of metric time, Gille Deleuze also focuses on the figure of Chronos: “In accordance to Chronos, only the present exists in time. Past, present and future are not three dimensions of time; only the present fills time, whereas past and future are two dimensions relative to the present in time. In other words, whatever is future or past in relation to a certain present (a certain extension or duration) belongs to a more vast present which has a greater extension or duration. There is always a more vast present which absorbs the past and the future. . . . Chronos is an encasement . . .” Quoted by Manuel DeLanda, Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy (London: Continuum, 2002) 88. DeLanda’s recent work has begun to take up questions of time and management that had emerged in the connections between capital and military practices. See my earlier discussion of this the first section of this chapter. See also Manuel DeLanda, “Beyond the Problematic of Legitimacy: Military Influences on Civilian Society,” boundary 2 32:1 (2005): 117-128.

<sup>146</sup> Herman Melville, White-Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War [1849] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 152. My emphasis. A number of critics have read this moment in Melville’s text as a reflection of Melville’s own attitudes about American progress and its imperial ambitions. A recent example of this reading is Andrew Delbanco’s biography, Melville: His World and Work (New York: Knopf, 2005). As a matter of careful reading of Melville, I have a number of problems with Delbanco’s larger narrative, the first of which is that Delbanco doesn’t always account for the degrees of mediation and

In both White-Jacket and “Benito Cereno” we find characterizations of American minds committed to forgetting, to separating the present from the presumably “dead” past. Delano can declare with full confidence that the “past is passed.” What these works further reveal is the American’s strategic vision of the world, a belief in the doctrine of futurity.<sup>147</sup> According to the doctrine, to look back upon these catastrophes, as does Lot’s wife, is in essence to be “crystallized,” caught in a state of arrest or stasis. We have to remember that in the West, starting principally with Plato’s Republic, stasis has been understood in terms of disease or even “death.”<sup>148</sup> Stasis takes on further significance in an American context as well, where it runs contrary to a general *doxa* that praises movement as a form of freedom, as the ostensible fruition of American democratic principles. More than principles, though, the U.S.’s commitment to movement (qua

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irony that Melville had wittingly invented in his prose fiction, including those moments where he stages particular habits of American thought.

<sup>147</sup> Michel de Certeau makes important observations on strategic concepts of time. In a discussion on Delano and global purview, de Certeau’s understanding of strategy makes Melville’s text all the more illuminating: “The ‘proper’ is the triumph of place over time. It allows one to capitalize acquired advantages, to prepare future expansions, and thus to give oneself a certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances.” De Certeau would also link “strategy” to “management” as well as to “Cartesian attitude” and to the “attitude of modern science, politics, and military strategy.” Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 36.

<sup>148</sup> With the advent of what I call global purview and with it an arrangement of power that organizes the world as an interiorized schematic, an administrative domain, I use the term stasis in order to help theorize forms of conflict that emerge in the nineteenth century. While stasis is a term derivative of Greek political philosophy of the polis, and has traditionally signified a form of conflict that is internal to and encompasses the entire polis, it’s this sense of internal or interiorized conflict that I suggest might help one theorize the relations of power and exercises of force and conflict that emerges in the nineteenth century under global purview. In the opening chapter of this dissertation, I explain further my use of the term stasis, offering a brief account of its role in political theory in Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, and then Hobbes, to whom Thucydides is extremely important. As does Michel Foucault, Paul Virilio theorizes the emergence of an arrangement or “relationship of force that was established in and through war” whereby the control or domination of “movement” is central to this relationship or arrangement. Citing Colonel Delair, Paul Virilio reminds us in Speed and Politics that stasis is often conceptualized as a kind of “death” to the machinery and movement or transformation of fortification: “The art of defense must constantly be in transformation; it is not exempt from the general law of this world: stasis is death.” See Paul Virilio, Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext[e], 1977) 13.

progress and futurity) has historically been expressed as doctrine.<sup>149</sup> And these beliefs and articulations of doctrine re-emerge here in the figure of Delano, as they do in White Jacket, showing the fidelity of this American mind to an arrangement of forces that can “dictate laws” and move the “immovable China,” opening markets and releasing the floodgates of commodity flows. But in this doxa, Melville discovers paradox. In the next two chapters, I’ll elaborate on the topic of stasis, arguing that Melville’s works suggest that in the U.S.’s commitment and celebration to movement, stasis and entanglement become the condition par excellence.

For Melville, this act of forgetting is not the same as disentangling. His concept of history is that there is no disentanglement, no past that isn’t an involution with the present and future. To understand “Benito Cereno” in this way is also to understand that Melville’s work stands as one of the earliest and sharpest critiques of this American ahistorical thought, and considering our current twenty-first century moment, it’s a critique that continually needs to be redeployed, even in the face of such brutal forces that work against it and relegate it to the silence of “the past.”

With satirical allusions to exemplary “American” figures such as Ralph Emerson and Daniel Webster, Captain Delano reads “nature” as a sign of the present’s return to order and new beginnings: “But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned

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<sup>149</sup> I am thinking specifically of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 that has been re-articulated and re-interpreted under U.S. imperial ambitions, particularly during the mid-nineteenth century contestations with other state powers over Mexico and western territories like Oregon and California. See again Richard W. Van Alstyne’s The Rising American Empire (New York: Norton, 1974) [originally published by Blackwell, 1960], particularly pages 98-99. The reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine throughout the nineteenth-century requires a longer discussion and theorization than I can offer here on how doctrine articulates a “fencing in” of the Western hemisphere but how, in practice, this “fence” operates as means for American power to have greater access and movement within and without an increasing and extensive sphere of influence.



over new leaves.”<sup>150</sup> For the Spanish captain, however, this is not the case. To Delano’s statements, Benito Cereno retorts, “Because they have no memory” (101). By re-encasing the slave revolt within a past that is disconnected from the present, Delano’s sense of history further secures an imagined future, one that is literally cut off from the present knot or involution that even Benito Cereno seems to recognize in this scene.

The allusion further encompasses John O’Sullivan’s doxology to America as the instantiation of a particular order of historical time, the achievement of which is always the future. Delano seems, in fact, to be taking a page from O’Sullivan’s essay “The Great Nation of Futurity,” published in the Democratic Review in 1839:<sup>151</sup>

The American people having derived their origin from many other nations, and the Declaration of National Independence being entirely based on the great principle of human equality, these facts demonstrate at once our *disconnected* position as regards an other nation; that we have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any of them, and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, *which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only*; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we

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<sup>150</sup> “Benito Cereno,” 101. See Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Nature” as well as Daniel Webster’s statements after the Compromise of 1850, particularly his remark, “A long and violent convulsion of the elements has just passed away, and the heavens, the skies, smile upon us.” Making note of this connection, see Eric Sundquist’s “Slavery, Revolution, and the American Renaissance,” in The American Renaissance Reconsidered, Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease, editors (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 1-33.

<sup>151</sup> The continuation of this thought is present in a number of projects, most notably in Richard Rorty’s Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), which offers a rather uncritical homage to an Emersonian perspective of America in the world from Whitman through Dewey.

may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity.”<sup>152</sup>

It’s fruitful to recognize how Walt Whitman’s poetry in 1855 formulates similar beliefs and celebrates this vision of America and its role in the world and history. Looking to “the fiery fields emanative, and the endless vistas beyond—to the south and the north,”<sup>153</sup> Whitman’s vision of America offers a point of view congruent with O’Sullivan’s concept of Manifest Destiny and Delano’s practices of global purview. In the same year that Melville publishes “Benito Cereno,” the first edition of Leaves of Grass celebrates America as a “new order.”<sup>154</sup> And he announces, “the United States themselves are the greatest poem” (5). A “great poem,” he continues, “is no finish . . . but rather a beginning;” it extends for “ages and ages” (24). Whitman couples this endless and futural temporality of the nation with a commensurate visionary, the poet, whose “expression” and “vista” of America “is transcendent and new” (8). The poet “sees eternity.” “High up out of reach he stands,” Whitman exclaims, “turning a concentrated light . . . he turns the pivot with his finger . . . he baffles the swiftest runners as he stands and easily overtakes and envelops them.”<sup>155</sup> Such speed and movement (and violence, too) Whitman celebrates in his poetic vision of America!

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<sup>152</sup> “The Great Nation of Futurity” from The United States Magazine and Democratic Review 23 (November, 1839) 426. My emphasis.

<sup>153</sup> Walt Whitman, “To the Leaven’d Soil They Trod,” Leaves of Grass. Of course, there are a number of examples from Whitman’s poetry that sing the praises of a national futurity.

<sup>154</sup> Walt Whitman, “Preface,” Leaves of Grass [1855], Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose (New York: Library of America, 1982), 25.

<sup>155</sup> Whitman, 9. Whitman’s ellipses.

Whitman's celebratory expression of America as the manifestation of a new energy and movement, of limitless vision and speed—vision that “easily overtakes and envelops”—stands in stark contrast to Herman Melville's heretical account of America in the nineteenth-century global arrangement. If the publication of Leaves of Grass in July of 1855 instantiated a summery<sup>156</sup> belief and celebration of America's new beginning and future possibilities, then by contrast Melville's story published in the autumn of this same year marked a growing incredulity in what the founders called “the new order of the ages.”<sup>157</sup> Whitman, who asked, “. . . and is liberty gone out of this place?” could answer emphatically and confidently his own question about America with “No never”—that liberty was not gone.<sup>158</sup> If Melville's “Benito Cereno” is a response to Whitman's same question, and I think on some level it is, then the story articulates a deep-seated skepticism toward the discourse of “liberty” and “freedom” produced within an arrangement of forces that continues to engineer new modes of regulating movement, of managing human potentialities, intelligence, and invention, of holding and securing certain peoples in bondage and destroying others. Unlike Delano and others of like mindedness, Melville had exhibited in “Benito Cereno” an intelligence committed to studying this destruction, knowing its contingencies, trajectories, and morphologies. “Benito Cereno” had drawn on the residue and dust of the catastrophic past—its

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<sup>156</sup> The memorable second stanza of the 1855 edition of Leaves immediately affiliates this seasonal impression with American poetic expression: “I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease . . . . observing a spear of summer grass.” Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass [1855], Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose (New York: Library of America, 1982), 27.

<sup>157</sup> The “new order of the ages” is the English translation of the motto *Novus Ordo Seclorum* introduced by Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress, in the making of the Great Seals of the United States in 1782.

<sup>158</sup> Whitman, “Preface,” 17.

documents, narratives, archives, etc.—and invented (by an act of discovery and making) a story that told again how these catastrophes entwined with the present.

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In the following chapter, I address further Melville's skepticism in relation to his contemporary Frederick Douglass who, with some similarities to other contemporaries of his, conceptualizes conflict and revolt within a framework of beliefs that posits the redemptive and futural possibilities of American power, the possibilities of liberation and emancipation as the fullest articulation of American power. In Melville's "Benito Cereno" and Douglass's "The Heroic Slave," both narratives about slave revolts aboard ship, each focuses on the clever strategies of Negro slave leaders, the designers of the rebellious plots. In a comparative critique of these two narratives, I examine how Douglass and Melville characterize these slave rebellions as violent struggle or conflict, and more specifically how these narratives depict the actions, tactics, and rhetorical powers exercised by the Negro slave leaders within these conflicts. These strategies, I suggest, demonstrate important differences between how Melville and Douglass understand the forces of their mid-nineteenth century moment. I make use of the categories cunning intelligence (*mêtis*) and invention (*inventio*) in order to explain how I think Melville understands or conceptualizes both the type of conflict (or arrangement of force) in which the slaves are entangled and the types of strategies or tactics they exercise while in this conflict. Referring to work by Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant on ancient and classical figures of cunning intelligence, I argue that Melville's Babo is a figure who exhibits a subtlety of mind, a "suppleness and malleability" that invents (discovers and makes) strategies for "success" in an arrangement of asymmetric forces or

“domains where there are no ready-made rules for success, no established methods,”<sup>159</sup> and where success, I further argue, is fleeting and impermanent, where there is no enduring emancipation or “way out.” These conditions form, in the fullest sense of the word, an *aporia*.

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<sup>159</sup> Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978) 21.

### 3. TERROR AND THE NEGRO: A MEDITATION ON ASYMMETRIC FORCE AND FUGITIVE SLAVE CONFLICT

#### 3.1. Conflict, Aesthetics, and Theories of American Power

Two years before the publication of “Benito Cereno” in Putnam’s Monthly (1855), Herman Melville’s contemporary Frederick Douglass included his only work of prose fiction in Autographs of Freedom, a volume of abolitionist writings collected with the efforts of The Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society and edited by Julia Griffiths.<sup>160</sup> Based on an actual set of historical events, Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” (1853) depicts Madison Washington’s initial escape from slavery in the United States to the freedom of Canada, his return to Virginia to free his wife, and finally his successful participation and leadership in the insurrection aboard the *Creole*, a coastal slave ship bound from Richmond to New Orleans in 1841, which Washington and other slaves commandeered and pilot to the liberty afforded by British Nassau where slavery had been abolished several years earlier.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Frederick Douglass, “The Heroic Slave” in Autographs for Freedom, ed. Julia Griffiths (Cleveland: John P. Jewett & Company, 1853) 174-239. Hereafter, I cite this text by page number. Douglass had previously serialized this work beginning in the March 11<sup>th</sup> issue of Frederick Douglass’ Paper.

<sup>161</sup> British slavery legally ended in August 1834; except for Antigua and Bermuda, however, most of the British colonies were under an apprenticeship system that lasted until August 1838. See Frederick Douglass, “A Day, A Deed, An Event, Glorious in the Annals of Philanthropy: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 1 August 1848,” The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847-54 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982) 134, note 2.

While other contemporaries such as William Wells Brown and Lydia Marie Child were familiar with and even used the “The Heroic Slave” as a source for their own writings,<sup>162</sup> only recently have critics examined Douglass’s work broadly, and “The Heroic Slave” specifically, in relation to Melville’s.<sup>163</sup> To date, Robert K. Wallace has made the most recent effort to find connections between these two nineteenth-century intellectuals.<sup>164</sup> Extending the work of Maggie Montesinos Sale, he cites Melville’s use of the phrase “slumbering volcano” from the opening of “Benito Cereno” as a possible echo of, if not an actual “inspiration” that derived from, Douglass’s use of the trope in an 1849 speech of the same title.<sup>165</sup> Recalling (with audience “applause”) the actions of Madison Washington and the *Creole* rebellion, Douglass’s speech had further critiqued the practices and intentions of the American Colonization Society and warned of the

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<sup>162</sup> Ivy Wilson’s recent essay on “The Heroic Slave” makes note of this. See Ivy G. Wilson, “On Native Ground: Transnationalism, Frederick Douglass, and ‘The Heroic Slave,’” *PMLA* 121:2 (2006): 453-468. Wilson notes (see number 7) Brown’s *The Black Man* (1863) and *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (1867) as well as Child’s chapter on Madison Washington in *The Freedman’s Book* (1865).

<sup>163</sup> An MLA bibliography search shows that four works of criticism have offered some degree of comparative study of Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” and Melville’s “Benito Cereno.” See Helen Lock, “The Paradox of Slave Mutiny in Herman Melville, Charles Johnson, and Frederick Douglass,” *College Literature* 30:4 (2003):54-70; Ivy Glenn Wilson, “‘I Give the Sign Democracy’: Race, Labor, and the Aesthetics of Nationalism,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 2002); Maggie Montesinos Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Krista Lynn Walter, “Loopholes in History: The Literature of American Slavery as Cultural Critique” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 1992). I think it important to add to this list Eric Sundquist’s first two chapters of *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: The Balknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993). Also Wallace’s *Douglass and Melville*, cited above, marks the biographical as well as artistic intersections. With the exception of Lock and Wallace, none of these critical works examines Melville’s and Douglass’s prose fiction within the same chapter or essay, and none specifically engages the question of conflict in ways that I am elaborating here.

<sup>164</sup> Robert K. Wallace, *Douglass and Melville: Anchored Together in Neighborly Style* (New Bedford: Spinner Publications, 2005).

<sup>165</sup> Wallace argues that Sale’s “interpretation locates Melville’s authorial sympathies closer to the complacent white mentality of Captain Delano than to the trenchant anti-slavery action of Babo, so she would not be likely to imagine Douglass’s speech as part of the inspiration for Melville’s story” (110). See also Maggie Montesinos Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

destructive forces that enslaved “coloured people” would discharge on their masters “in the Southern States.”<sup>166</sup> This speech had effectively connected Washington’s rebellion with the figure of volcanic force, both the kinetic and potential energies of slave resistance. In Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” the American Captain Amasa Delano invokes the “slumbering volcano” phrase in his initial sighting of the Spanish slaver *San Dominick*. Before he boards and begins to investigate the cause of the ship’s demise, Delano surmises that “Maley pirates” may be laying in wait to attack or, “like a *slumbering volcano*, suddenly let loose energies now hid.”<sup>167</sup> Later in the narrative, Delano will discover that these energies, unbeknownst to him earlier, had already erupted in the form of a slave revolt.

Referring to “Melville’s spatial and intellectual proximity to Douglass at the time of the ‘Slumbering Volcano’ speech,” Wallace claims that “Melville’s use of the ‘slumbering volcano’ phrase is more likely to be a conscious tribute to Douglass.”<sup>168</sup> This may or may not be true. The phrase, in fact, had circulated in a number of sources around the time of and prior to both Douglass’s use of it in 1849 and Melville’s in

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<sup>166</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Slavery: The Slumbering Volcano: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 23 April 1849,” The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847-54 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982) 148-167. The speech was later published by National Anti-Slavery Standard, 3 May 1849; Pennsylvania Freeman, 10 May 1849; Liberator, 11 May 1849; North Star, 11 May 1849; Foner, Life and Writings, 5:111-19.

<sup>167</sup> “Benito Cereno,” 56 (*my emphasis*). The greater irony that this passage reveals, as does Melville’s story generally, is Delano’s misrecognition of the scene before him and specifically the energies and capacities of intelligence exhibited by the Negro slave. Thinking the Spanish ship may actually be pirates feigning distress in order to attract the assistance of Delano and his crew, the American captain cannot conceptualize these potential energies as a slave revolt already underway. To complicate this scene further, we should remember as well that Delano’s modes of thought and categories—possibly including the use of “slumbering volcano” phrase here—are usually suspect in Melville’s characterization of the American.

<sup>168</sup> Wallace, 111.



1855.<sup>169</sup> One of these sources, for instance, had specifically reflected on the political climate and revolutionary tectonics in France: “It may be, as some alarmists suppose, that France is not yet sickened of revolutions, and is even now a slumbering volcano.”<sup>170</sup>

Melville’s use of the metaphor may have followed from Douglass’s speech, as Wallace is wont to claim; its broader circulation, however, seems to trouble the line of continuity or direct “influence” that one author had over the other. Circulation of the “slumber volcano” phrase, moreover, reflected entrenched concerns regarding politics, power, and the perceived historical role of conflict that emerged out of revolutionary and post-revolutionary discourse of the period. As Jonathan Arac has reminded readers, “No figure was more used by the nineteenth century for revolutionary violence than that of the volcano.”<sup>171</sup> In January of the same year that Douglass would make his “Slumbering Volcano” oration (1849), Melville’s Mardi had alluded in allegorical language to the “eruption” and “conflagration” spreading through France and other parts of Europe.<sup>172</sup> Melville staged the enterprise of pith and moment of the “great crowds” and dramatized revolutionary diction this way:

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<sup>169</sup> In my research, I have so far located the phrase in the following sources, listed chronologically: “Washington and His Generals,” The American Whig Review, Volume 5, Issue 5 (March 1847), 531; “Bride of an Hour,” The Living Age, Volume 3, Issue 31 (14 December 1844), 441; “Gossip of the Month,” The United States Democratic Review, Volume 22, Issue 120 (June 1848); “Humboldt’s Aspects of Nature in Different Lands,” The Living Age, Volume 23, Issue 293 (29 December 1849), 600; “France, Past and Present,” The Living Age, Volume 39, Issue 497 (26 November 1853), 549. Although Sale’s project researches “newspapers” and other non-literary sources, as she claims, her investigation of the “slumbering volcano” trope is limited to Melville’s “Benito Cereno” and Douglass’s “Slavery: The Slumbering Volcano.” Neither Wallace nor Sale seems to consider fully this philological complexity in light of the phrase’s importance to their readings on Douglass, Melville, and the nineteenth-century political milieu.

<sup>170</sup> “France, Past and Present,” Littell’s Living Age, Volume 39, Issue 497 (26 November 1853), 549.

<sup>171</sup> Jonathan Arac, The Emergence of American Literary Narrative: 1820-1860 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 220.

<sup>172</sup> Herman Melville, Mardi and A Voyage Thither [1849] (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 523

“Hurrah! Another kingdom is burnt down to earth’s edge; another demi-god is unhelmed; another republic is dawning. Shake hands, freeman, shake hands! Soon will we hear of Dominora down in the dust; of hapless Verdanna free as ourselves; all Porpheero’s [Europe’s] volcanoes are bursting!”<sup>173</sup>

By characterizing revolutionary conflict in terms of volcanic energies, the discourse of the period further privileged the oscillating categories “liberty” and “terror” as the binary expression of revolutionary force and its potentialities. This discourse and its attending categories had become particularly pronounced in the question of whether or not the spirit of Revolution should be or could be extended to Africana slaves held in bondage. I will elaborate on this topic anon and how both Melville and Douglass negotiate the categories liberty and terror in relation to revolutionary thought and the question of slavery.

In proceeding, I refrain from repeating Wallace’s argument that the relationship between Douglass and Melville was best characterized as one of authorial “influence”—that is, a direct or continuous relationship where one author’s work had derived from the other’s. Wallace’s terms, such as “inspiration” and “conscious tribute” among others, describe an empirical connection between Douglass and Melville—an empirical connection that, despite Wallace’s efforts, has yet to be textually substantiated.<sup>174</sup> I want

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<sup>173</sup> *Mardi*, 524. This is an earlier allusion to the “slumbering volcano” trope to which neither Wallace nor Sale gives attention.

<sup>174</sup> Wallace, ix. Wallace’s use of terms such as “profound influence,” “inspiration for,” and “conscious tribute” are indicative of his larger project and methodology. While Wallace’s subtitle of his work on Douglass and Melville, “Anchored Together in Neighborly Style,” may even suggest such a relationship of contiguity, his use of categories such as “direct influence” and “conscious tribute” implies an empirical and derivative relationship. The subtitle “Anchored Together in Neighborly Style” comes from a sentence in Melville’s “Benito Cereno” that describes how Delano’s whale-boat becomes moored to the *San Dominick*: “To be brief, the two vessels, thanks to the pilot’s skill, ere long neighborly style lay anchored together”

to suggest that we might imagine, instead, the relationship between Douglass and Melville as one which exhibits a contemporaneous contiguity—a relationship in which minds have been interlinked by their radical attempts to think and better understand the material realities, inhuman conditions, and arrangements of power that characterized the mid-nineteenth-century scene. How directly Melville was in “dialogue with” Douglass when he invoked the slumbering volcano metaphor is too difficult to say exactly, but in reading works such as “Benito Cereno” and “The Bell-Tower,” among other titles, we do know that the conditions and realities regarding slavery and conflict formed central preoccupations and subjects of meditation for both writers.

As works which had similarly taken historical accounts of slave-ship revolt as topics for their prose fictions in the mid-1850s, Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” and Melville’s “Benito Cereno” offer noticeably distinct rhetorical and stylistic presentations of slave rebellion and of conflict itself—that is, conflict as an aesthetic device within narrative as well as the thing being narrated, the manifestation of force between actors aboard the slave ship. I intend this comparative reading of Melville and Douglass as a means to extend and further elaborate on theoretical questions I had raised in the previous chapter, “Bloody Enforcement on a Grand Global Scale.” There, I had examined the figure of Captain Amasa Delano in “Benito Cereno” as a particular instantiation of American power, and I had focused, specifically, on his tendencies toward managerial techniques and exercises of regulatory force that, as I argued, approximates the practices and strategies of war. I further attempted to show how these were strategies that totalize

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(“Benito Cereno,” 81). See Wallace’s use of these terms that designate a derivative relationship between Douglass and Melville (Wallace, ix, 110, 111).

the field of conflict and permeate the civil and political spheres on a potentially global scale. In this chapter, my aim is to address how Douglass's and Melville's aesthetic projects suggest divergent conceptualizations of conflict within their nineteenth-century moment—conceptualizations, too, of American power if we understand this power as an arrangement that makes possible certain orders or types of conflict.<sup>175</sup> Principally focusing on the rebellious figures Madison Washington and Babo, central to “The Heroic Slave” and “Benito Cereno” respectively, I examine the problematic of conflict by asking how each narrative characterizes or styles slave rebellion and, more specifically, the actions, strategies, and rhetorical tactics exercised by the (slave) actors within these conflicts. How, in other words, do these strategies as they are narrated by Douglass and Melville further evince different conceptions of power, and America as a specific arrangement of power, in the nineteenth century?

These questions yoke the political and aesthetic in ways that oblige us to ask further how Douglass's and Melville's narratives follow, contribute to, or even work against particular aesthetic theories of conflict. Depicting scenes of nineteenth-century slave rebellion, how do “The Heroic Slave” and “Benito Cereno,” moreover, draw upon and resituate their understanding of strife in relation to a body of knowledge and criticism that developed out of and was influenced by Hegelian notions of historical progress, whereby conflict qua *Kollision* had been essential to history's unfolding?<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> This question regarding the aesthetics of conflict in a comparative reading of Douglass and Melville has yet to be undertaken by critics. More importantly, my work links this question of aesthetics and conflict to larger theoretical questions about conceptions of American power.

<sup>176</sup> I later refer to Michelle Gellrich's work to help explicate this history of aesthetic theory and particular theorizations of conflict, aesthetic history, and the role of criticism. See Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

While Douglass would not have met Otilie Assing and engaged her on the topic of German idealism until 1856, or have read the work of Ludwig Feuerbach until the 1860s, his earlier tendencies to view conflict as part of a world-historical movement toward freedom were not far from Hegelian paradigms.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, it is the notion of historical progress and the achievement of greater human self-consciousness (and hence freedom), made possible through conflict and human action, that arises in what Paul Gilroy has called Douglass's "metanarrative of emancipation."<sup>178</sup> Douglass's tendencies to invoke the category of freedom within this progressive and liberal frame, to note David Ericson's and Robert Levine's research as well, contrasts rather sharply with the strife and its aftermath that Melville had imagined aboard the Spanish slaver *San Dominick*.<sup>179</sup>

To wit, the conflict in "Benito Cereno" is masked and occurs in "shadowy tableau,"<sup>180</sup> to be sure, but the story also presents the conflict as a kind of knotting and does so, moreover, in a narrative style that is itself knotted and entangled.<sup>181</sup> Pertaining

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<sup>177</sup> See William S. McFeely's biography, Frederick Douglass (New York: Norton, 1991); Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), particularly pages 60-65; Eric Sundquist, To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature (Cambridge: The Balknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993) 125; Margaret Kohn has recently added to scholarship on Douglass's relationship to Hegel in "Frederic Douglass's Master-Slave Dialectic," The Journal of Politics 67:2 (2005). See especially 505, note 3.

<sup>178</sup> Gilroy, 60.

<sup>179</sup> On the question of progress and Douglass's liberalism, see David F. Ericson, The Debate over Slavery: Antislavery and Proslavery Liberalism in Antebellum America (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000). See specifically chapter three, "Child, Douglass, and Antislavery Liberalism," 39-61. See also Robert S. Levine, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>180</sup> "Benito Cereno" 38.

<sup>181</sup> Jean Fagan Yellin's short chapter on "Benito Cereno" marks one of the first works of criticism to engage exclusively with the figure of the knot. See The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776 – 1863 (New York: New York University Press, 1972). This chapter and the previous, I hope, complicate and contribute to the discussion of "Benito Cereno" as an engagement with the figure of the knot, a figure that has been central to Melville's thinking on history, power, and literature.

to the conflict between slaves and masters, the “nature of the narrative,” Melville writes, “has more or less required that . . . instead of being set down in order of occurrence, should be retrospectively, or irregularly given.”<sup>182</sup> This irregularity suffuses the entire story. Even in the moment of supposed narrative resolution—that moment in the narrative where we often invoke the critical French term *dénouement*, from *denouer* meaning “to unknot”—the story frustrates this unraveling and frustrates too the possibility of a regular or regulated outcome. This is an outcome that the American captain Amasa Delano continually attempts to achieve through his own managerial techniques, as I’ve discussed in the previous chapter. These techniques presuppose an ordered or regulated resolution (a literal end to the conflict) made possible through Delano’s suppression of the slave revolt and the restoration of fugitive slave “property” to its rightful Spanish owners.

If the effect of narrative knotting in Melville’s “Benito Cereno” troubles the American captain’s will to order and resolution as well as his regulative tendencies and enforcement of fugitive slave law on a grand and global scale (carried out by managerial force), it troubles too the narrative or metanarrative of emancipation. Critics over the last several decades have yet to fully examine the stakes of this important problematic.<sup>183</sup> In the last pages, and in the last paragraph, as the words on the leaf come to an end, “Benito Cereno” provides the lingering and spectral image of an intelligence that has neither been

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<sup>182</sup> “Benito Cereno,” 100; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>183</sup> This is a point that many critics of “Benito Cereno” over the last several decades have had difficulty theorizing, identifying instead with either Delano or Babo, and consequently with the very binary of liberty and terror that this work attempts to problematize. I intend to show how the effect of “Benito Cereno” problematizes sympathy for or identification with either Delano or Babo in order to examine how these figures or minds are attendant with the relations or arrangements of power made possible by the U.S. in the nineteenth century.

completely obliterated from the historical and material scene of strife nor achieved emancipation through conflict and telic resolution:

Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black [Babo] met his voiceless end. The *body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, the hive of subtlety*, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites (102, *my emphasis*).

This moment follows closely the previous page where Delano, after the suppression of the slave revolt, asks the Spanish captain Benito Cereno, “What has cast such a shadow upon you?” With a look of “mournful” and pensive “melancholy,” Cereno responds, “The negro” (101). Delano is incapable of recognizing the historical weight of Cereno’s words. As I have argued previously, Delano’s lack of memory—his willful commitment to forgetting the historical past and its catastrophes—evinces an exercise of force that Melville found concurrent with American power. Melville links this power to forms of violence and domination that have the dual capacity to both destroy and regulate humans and things on the globe. Even after Delano helps suppress the revolt and returns the slave property to Spanish owners, and after the “the body” of the insurrectionary slave has been destroyed, “Benito Cereno” ends with the haunting image of a “subtle” mind, an intelligence endowed with the capacity for inventing and carrying out terrific violence. I shall elaborate below on the category of invention in relation to intelligence.

What is peculiar about Melville’s story is that it imagines this “hive of subtly” as the trace of an intelligence that is neither free nor yet fully annihilated. It is, rather, an intelligence which emerges from (and is caught in) an ineluctable conflict, a mind that arises with and, indeed, is a function of the arrangements of power and inhuman

conditions on which Melville meditates in the 1850s. To put it differently, Babo himself may have been executed, “the body burned to ashes,” but the capacities and “subtle” intelligence that had been demonstrated in the *dramatis persona* of Babo emerge—and will unpredictably continue to reemerge—under the conditions of domination and brute force that the American both enforces and considers as the natural order of things.<sup>184</sup> In all its subtlety and cunning, this is intelligence that struggles (in endless conflict) against these forces, though without necessarily the possibility that conflict will lead to emancipation, the final escape or “final struggle” as Douglass had termed it.<sup>185</sup>

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What does this mean, to recognize the nineteenth-century American scene as a set of arrangements from which there is no ready escape, no resolution to strife—that is, to be caught or entangled in the *middle of the thing*? This is the problematic, I think, central to Melville’s meditation on violence and force in “Benito Cereno.” Does this mean necessarily that Melville himself was against the idea of emancipation or that he was in opposition to the abolitionists’ cause? No, quite the contrary. While Melville distanced himself from and was highly critical of many abolitionists’ integral ties with Christian evangelical and millenarian dogma as well as with “missionary programs and temperance crusades,” as Carolyn Karcher has aptly claimed, “he explicitly upheld the charges of

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<sup>184</sup> On this notion of “enforcement,” see my previous chapter, “Bloody Enforcement on a Grand Global Scale.”

<sup>185</sup> See Frederick Douglass, “The Final Struggle,” in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 335-36. This short work was originally published in the *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, November 16, 1855. Here Douglass offers a telic view of conflict: “There is some consolation in the reflection, that the conflict will not, cannot, last forever. The hour which shall witness *the final struggle*, is on the wing. Already we hear the *booming* of the bell which shall yet toll the death knell of human slavery” (355, *emphasis in the original*).



cruelty and sexual exploitation that the abolitionists leveled at slaveholders.”<sup>186</sup> Yet while “he condemned slavery as a monstrous betrayal of the American Revolution’s egalitarian ideals,”<sup>187</sup> Melville had as early as 1850 in White-Jacket expressed how the “broad principles of political liberty and equality,” ostensibly made possible by the Revolution and Declaration of Independence, were the exception rather than the rule.<sup>188</sup> Recalling the plight of the sailor under martial law, the following line from White-Jacket could have included an extensive population, including the Africana slave and the nearly annihilated American indigenous, among others, who fell under the domain of U.S. power: “For him our Revolution was in vain; to him our Declaration of Independence is a lie.”<sup>189</sup> Indeed, Melville’s White-Jacket had followed Richard Henry Dana’s condemnation of flogging, a condemnation which dramatized the absolute brutality of the captain over the crew and conflated this relationship of brutality with the practices of the slave-driver: “You see your condition!” Captain Frank Thompson booms to his crew in Two Years before the Mast (1840). “You see where I’ve got you all, and you know what to expect! . . . You’ve got a driver over you! Yes, a slave-driver—a nigger-driver! I’ll see who’ll tell me he isn’t a nigger slave.”<sup>190</sup>

As intellectuals, both Melville and Douglass had recognized and found themselves writing in the midst of the Revolution’s failure. Both had examined closely

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<sup>186</sup> Carolyn L. Karcher, Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 15-16.

<sup>187</sup> Karcher, 16.

<sup>188</sup> Herman Melville, White-Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War [1850] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 145.

<sup>189</sup> White-Jacket, 145.

<sup>190</sup> Richard Henry Dana, Two Years before the Mast (New York: New American Library, 2000), 92.

the exceptions that negated the universal realization of the Constitution's founding principles. And both had, at points in their public careers, expressed their "infidelity" to "Christian America" and its unyielding support of institutions that held men and women in bondage.<sup>191</sup> Where they depart, though, marks the beginning of my intervention here.

In focusing on the figure of the rebellious slave in Melville's "Benito Cereno" and Douglass's "The Heroic Slave," we need to remember that both Babo and Madison Washington's rebellious actions are closely associated with their fugitive status. In my closer reading of these two works, I want to emphasize that the principal context out of which Melville and Douglass were writing during the mid-1850s was the U.S.'s expansion, intensification, and enforcement of fugitive slave law. The "problem" of fugitive slave property, and the juridical and policing mechanisms that had been created as a response, had coincided historically with the formation of institutions and

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<sup>191</sup> In a speech delivered to the American Anti-Slavery Society in May 1848, Douglass invokes the term infidel to describe his opposition to ideological and juridical forces that justified slavery.

We have been accustomed, in this country, to hear much talk about "Christian America, and Infidel France." I want to say in behalf of France, that I go for that infidelity—no matter how heinous it may be in the estimation of the American people—which strikes the chains from the limbs of our brethren; and against that Christianity which puts them on, (applause;)—for that infidelity, which, in the person of Cremieux, one of the members of the Provisional Government of France, speaks to the black and mulatto men, that come to congratulate them, and express their sentiments upon the immediate emancipation of their brethren in the French islands. I sympathize with that infidelity that speaks to them in language like this: *friends! brothers! men!* In France, the negro is a man, while you who are throwing up your caps, and waving your banners, and making beautiful speeches in behalf of liberty, deny us our humanity, and traffic in our flesh. (122)

See Frederick Douglass, "The Triumphs and Challenges of the Abolitionist Crusade: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 9 May 1848," The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847-54 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 117-127.

In "The Heroic Slave," Douglass distances himself rhetorically and politically from this infidel figure and instead, I argue, appeals to a doxa in American revolutionary potential. By appealing to doxa, Douglass took on the task of extending and broadening the revolutionary project rather than turning away from it and remaining the infidel as we see in Melville.

governance in America since the seventeenth century.<sup>192</sup> The right of property, particularly as it was defined under common law going back to Blackstone, had been integral to the framing and enforcement of the juridical system in the U.S. (or what would become the U.S.) even before the Constitution had been ratified at the end of the eighteenth century. As historian Don Fehrenbacher notes, for instance, men like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, slave owners themselves, would have presumably exercised “a common-law right of ‘recaption,’ which, as defined by Sir William Blackstone, permitted private action to recover property wrongfully taken, or a wife, child, or servant wrongfully detained, so long as the exertion did not cause ‘strife and bodily contention, or endanger the peace of society.’”<sup>193</sup>

Blackstone’s formulation would undergo an ironic inversion by the nineteenth century. The protection and security of property, which Blackstone had understood earlier as a “private” and necessary exercise for keeping the peace, had given way to a form of permanent strife and a totalization of conflict. With the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act as well as with the support of earlier Supreme Court decisions such as Prigg v. Pennsylvania in 1837, the legal framework that at one time enabled inter-colonial and later interstate “recovery” of property by individual owners, by the mid-nineteenth century, had come to an intense realignment of power that mandated federal enforcement of the owner’s Constitutional right to property and its recaption. The force of the new law, therefore, implicated not only fugitives who had escaped their masters,

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<sup>192</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government’s Relations to Slavery. Ed. and completed by Ward M. McAfee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 205. See also Herbert Aptheker’s essay on “Slave Guerrilla Warfare” (11-30) in To Be Free: Studies in American Negro History (New York: International Publishers, 1948) and his investigation of fugitive “maroons” that existed since the seventeenth century.

<sup>193</sup> Fehrenbacher, 206.

but implicated as well all citizens (as *posse comitatus*) in the enforcement of the right of property. Various attempts by abolitionists to rescue or assist slaves in their escapes, in fact, had moved President Fillmore in 1851 to request legislation that “would make it easier for him to use army, navy, and militia forces in the execution of the federal law.”<sup>194</sup> And as a response to the first forcible slave rescue of the 1850s, then Secretary of State Daniel Webster argued that assistance to the fugitive slave and resistance to the law would be looked upon as treason.<sup>195</sup> By 1854, under the provisions in the Kansas-Nebraska Act as well as the ideological and juridical weight attributed to the notion of popular sovereignty, the federal enforcement and jurisdiction of this law had been expanded to the territories—a slippery category itself, if we recall how John C. Calhoun had asserted that the notion of “territory” had terraqueous reach; wherever American ships and property may fare, so too does American jurisdiction.<sup>196</sup> It was Calhoun, too,

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<sup>194</sup> Fehrenbacher, 232-34.

<sup>195</sup> Fehrenbacher, 234.

<sup>196</sup> My reading of “Benito Cereno” and its dramatization of Delano’s enforcement of fugitive slave law on a grand, global scale is further bolstered by research conducted by Stanley W. Campbell who argues convincingly that there was, indeed, an active enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act in the North. Even though many citizens in the North were opposed to the institution of slavery, Campbell claims, “only a few citizens in isolated communities engaged in the active opposition to enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law.” Stanley W. Campbell, The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970). On John C. Calhoun’s comments regarding American ships as an extension of U.S. territory, see Frederick Douglass, “Slavery: The Slumbering Volcano: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 23 April 1849,” The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847-54 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 157. Also, as Don Fehrenbacher documents in Slavery, Law, and Politics: The Dred Scott Case in Historical Perspective (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981),

In a series of resolutions introduced December 27, 1837, Calhoun also set forth his theory that the federal government was created as the “common agent” of the sovereign states with the duty of “strengthening and upholding” the domestic institutions of those states. Slavery, he said in a speech, was actually “as much under the protection of the Constitution” in the District of Columbia and in the territories as it was “in the states themselves.” In this manner Calhoun laid the basis for that convenient contradiction whereby southerners, especially in the late 1850s, were able to maintain that slavery was a local institution beyond the power of Congress to restrain in any way, and yet at the same time deserving full protection in the territories by direct force of the Constitution itself. Thus “nonintervention” could be converted at will to mean intervention. (58)

then as Secretary of War in 1820, who, because of territorial “frontier needs,” had undertaken the “expansible army” plan, intensifying what military historian Robert Utley has described as a scenario of total war.<sup>197</sup>

Subterfuges against counter-subterfuges, rebellious property against security forces evinced an order of strife that had entangled the entire civil sphere. “Perfect domestic security,” against the “danger of domestic insurrection,” Governor Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina had admitted, required “a state of military preparation.”<sup>198</sup> With the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 this “state of military preparation” achieved a new ubiquitous scope.

Where Douglass and Melville differ, I argue, is in their conceptions and dramatizations of the fugitive struggle and slave resistance. More specifically, the figure of the fugitive allowed each to theorize—dramatically and imaginatively—a set of relations that reflected their own conceptions of conflict and strife in America as well as of America itself—its role in the world, its history, as well as its potentialities.

As I show in the following section, the fugitive’s flight from bondage—a flight frequently incumbent upon the use of force—provided a figure and evinced a set of relations that Douglass used to conceptualize a world in which the spirit of revolution yielded further and fuller emancipative possibilities. In the “heroic” narrative of struggle

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<sup>197</sup> Robert M. Utley, “Total War on the American Indian Frontier” in Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914. Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Forster, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 402. The type of conflict that the U.S. had engaged on the frontier with American Indians, in other words, had “made a peacetime army necessary.” See also Russell F. Weigley, Towards and American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962). Also, as Weigley notes in another text, the “Indian frontier” required energies greater than preparing for a “European-style war” (67). See Weigley, The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

<sup>198</sup> Governor Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina quoted by Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts (New York: International Publishers, 1943) 69.

and escape, Douglass had understood the role of conflict—in its rhetorical, aesthetic, and material manifestation, waged against master and bondsman—as a technique for change. And in the conflict that Madison Washington had waged against his captors, Douglass had imagined this technique for change by appealing to the radical continuation and hopeful realization of the Revolution where it had ostensibly stalled or been foreclosed. It was radical and hopeful because it opened or reopened the potential of the revolution and, moreover, imagined rebellious action as the means for emancipation.

While critics have for some time noted the teleological and progressive frame in which Douglass characterized rebellion and escape, and while others have recently examined Douglass's progressive views made complex through his "transnational perspective," my aim here is to examine how, as a rhetorical and political strategy, Douglass must have had to elicit a recognizable historicist and, therefore, agonistic conception of conflict—a conception that would then link the destiny of white Americans with the same though yet unrealized emancipatory and triumphant future of black slaves who were actors in the historic struggle for freedom.<sup>199</sup> Recalling other men who had participated in the revolution of 1776, Douglass radically imbued Madison Washington with the physical, rhetorical, and intellectual capacity to take heroic action, overturning and forcefully rebelling against the "brutalizing dominion" qua antagonism of the slave system.<sup>200</sup> All this was radical, as I claim, because Douglass resituated rather

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<sup>199</sup> See especially Eric Sundquist and Paul Gilroy, cited above. See also Robert S. Levine, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Paul Giles and most recently Ivy Wilson (cited above) situate Douglass's work within the scope of transnational American studies. See Paul Giles, "Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass and British Culture," chapter two from Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and Transatlantic Imaginary (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>200</sup> The other principal example of this action is Douglass's self-characterization of his struggle against the slave "breaker" Covey. This was a struggle revised and repeated throughout his narratives.

compellingly and paradoxically the Negro slave figure within critical, philosophical, and aesthetic thought (as varied and vexed as it was) that Romanticism had come to express in the nineteenth century. Not as a mere echo, but as a re-association of heroic action with the slave's condition under bondage, Douglass's narrative resonates with Romanticism's homage to heroic action: "Who would be free themselves must strike the blow!" he had quoted Byron.<sup>201</sup> Along with such diverse minds as Byron and Shelley, Carlyle and Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, among others, Douglass not only drew from but contributed to the nineteenth-century recuperation of the hero, and he took the figure of the fugitive slave as the principal example of heroic potentiality—the one to "strike the blow."<sup>202</sup> He would directly resound this poetic phrase again in My Bondage and My Freedom (1855),<sup>203</sup> and in doing so he also resounded indirectly Emerson's understanding of the "warlike" and "military attitude of the soul" "towards all this external evil" as a quality of "Heroism."<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> From George Gordon Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto II, stanza LXXVI.

<sup>202</sup> On the extensive references to the figure of the hero in nineteenth-century aesthetic and philosophical thought see Walter L. Reed, Meditations on the Hero: A Study of the Romantic Hero in Nineteenth-Century Fiction (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>203</sup> See Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (1855) in Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994) 287.

<sup>204</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Heroism" from Essays: First Series in Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983) 373-4. I cite this passage at length here for further contextualization:

Our culture, therefore, must not omit the arming of the man. Let him hear in season, that he is born into the state of war, and that the commonwealth and his own well-being require that he should not go dancing in the weeds of peace, but warned, self-collected, and neither defying nor dreading the thunder, let him take both reputation and life in his hand, and, with perfect urbanity, dare the gibbet and the mob by the absolute truth of his speech, and the rectitude of his behavior. Towards all this external evil, the man with the breast assumes a warlike attitude, and affirms his ability to cope single-handed with the infinite army of enemies. To this military attitude of the soul we give the name Heroism.

By dramatizing heroic slave action against the antagonism of slavery broadly, and the slave holder or “breaker” specifically, Douglass radically turned and therefore re-imagined the asymmetric relation of domination between slave and master as a symmetric conflict. As an agonistic and symmetrical relation of strife, the slave actors along with white abolitionists were imagined as active (and heroic) participants in a struggle that would lead to a greater emancipative resolution. Of course, one could argue that “Benito Cereno” exhibits an agonistic conflict as well, and some critics have attempted to see the heroic possibilities in Babo’s rebellion.<sup>205</sup> As I want to show, however, Melville’s meditation on slave insurrection approaches agony of a different order. Where as Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” invoked agonistic conflict as a means of escape and freedom through heroic action and potential—and, moreover, conflict as necessary to the regenerative, revolutionary, and progressive forces of history—Melville’s “Benito Cereno” dramatized strife as a lasting condition constitutive of the arrangements of American power. For Melville, this was not necessarily the arrangement of the *agon* but of stasis and enduring strife, an arrangement of power in which conflict may not necessarily yield emancipation. I use the following sections to elaborate the stakes of how each imagined the field of conflict, beginning with Douglass.

### **3.2. Frederick Douglass’s Tactics of Escape and Aesthetics of the Final Struggle**

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<sup>205</sup> See specifically Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey, “The Death of Benito Cereno: A Reading of Herman Melville on Slavery: The Revolt on Board the *Tryal*,” *The Journal of Negro History* 67:4 (1982): 287-301.



Then, as a nation, if we are wise, we will prepare for the last conflict, for that final struggle in which the enemy of Freedom must capitulate. . . .

Let us prepare then for the last battle. Already the masses are moving.<sup>206</sup>

As critics and historians have previously noted, the figure of Madison Washington and the *Creole* event played an important role in Douglass's thinking on the question of slave resistance and, specifically, on the role of armed insurrection in the struggle for the full abolishment of slavery in the U.S.<sup>207</sup> Before he had written "The Heroic Slave," for instance, Douglass had referred to Washington in a minimum of six speeches, most of them given in the mid- to late-1840s.<sup>208</sup> Resulting in only two deaths and the liberation of 135 slaves, the *Creole* revolt provided for Douglass and other abolitionists at the time an example of slave resistance that didn't conjure images of bloody excess and Jacobin brutality as might other insurrections and plots. The successful outcome of Washington's actions, moreover, evinced an order of conflict and measured force that even the

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<sup>206</sup> Douglass, "The Final Struggle," 335-6

<sup>207</sup> Robert Stepto, "Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction: Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave.'" Black Literature and Literary Theory. New York: Methuen, 1984. 174-86; Mary Kemp Davis, "The Historical Slave Revolt and the Literary Imagination," Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1984; William Andrews To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865. Chicago: U of Illinois Press, 1988; also, "The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative." PMLA 105 (Jan 1990) 23-34; Richard Yarborough. "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave,'" Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1990. 166-88; Maggie Montesinos Sale, The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Ivy Wilson, "On Native Ground: Transnationalism, Frederick Douglass, and 'The Heroic Slave.'" PMLA 121.2 (2006), 453-468; Russ Castronovo, Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom. Berkeley: U of Cal Press, 1995; Robyn Wiegman. American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender. Durham: Duke U Press, 1995.

<sup>208</sup> See Sale, Note 9, 241.

Garrisonians who spurned “violence of any sort” could tacitly endorse.<sup>209</sup> Though Douglass had begun to distance himself from Garrison and considered the exercise of violent, militant resistance a viable and necessary means for abolition, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, he continued to draw upon the figure of Madison Washington—his tactics and actions—as the quintessence of emancipation through force.<sup>210</sup> Yet this question remains: why the *Creole* revolt and, more specifically, why Washington over other figures or instances of rebellion?<sup>211</sup>

The story of Madison Washington’s uprising aboard the *Creole* allowed Douglass to straddle two sides of a very difficult political and rhetorical problematic: On one side of this problematic, he had committed himself to the abolishment of slavery, even if this meant violent revolt. Indeed, after his initial meeting with John Brown in 1847, he had become “less hopeful of [slavery’s] peaceful abolition,” and he had expressed this openly with fellow abolitionist Sojourner Truth.<sup>212</sup> “My quaint old sister was of the Garrison school of non-resistants,” he stated retrospectively in 1893, “and [she] was shocked at my sanguinary doctrine, but she too became an advocate of the sword, when the war for the maintenance of the Union was declared.”<sup>213</sup> On the other side of this problematic,

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<sup>209</sup> For further elaboration on this topic, see Ellen Weinauer, “Writing Revolt in the Wake of Nat Turner: Frederick Douglass and the Construction of Black Domesticity in ‘The Heroic Slave.’” Studies in American Fiction (September 2005) 193- 202. As Weinauer shows, Garrison’s Liberator had written favorably about the “heroic” mutiny.

<sup>210</sup> William Andrews, “The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative.” PMLA 105 (Jan 1990), 28.

<sup>211</sup> My intent here is to reiterate a question I had put to Melville’s “Benito Cereno” in the previous chapter: Why this particular narrative over others as a means for imagining the arrangements and conditions of power evinced by the 1850s U.S.?

<sup>212</sup> Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass [1888, 1893 revised edition] in Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994) 719.

<sup>213</sup> Douglass, Life and Times, 719.

though, particularly in the midst of the political milieu of the 1840s and '50s, he understood that any form of violence or resistance shown by slaves had the effect of producing an immediate sense of “terror” in and backlash from a white audience.

There is no doubt that Douglass was attentive to how white members of his audience were preoccupied with slave violence, especially in the wake of Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey’s preempted plots as well as Nathaniel Turner’s rebellion. Mediated through his confessor, Thomas R. Gray, Turner described the intended effect of the insurrection and bloodshed in Southhampton, Virginia, this way:

I took my station in the rear, and as it *’twas my object to carry terror and devastation wherever we went*, I placed fifteen to twenty of the best armed and most to be relied on, in front, who generally approached the house as fast as their horses could run; this was for two purposes, to prevent their escape and *strike terror to the inhabitants*.<sup>214</sup>

An image in chiaroscuro, Turner’s “confession” (mediated through Gray) was made to depict the dark brutality of the revolting slave against the image of white familial innocence. This image, like so many others that had helped compose the mid-nineteenth-century canvas, recalled the “terror and devastation” of surreptitious schemes and rebellions like Turner’s in 1831. After the Vesey plot, Edwin Holland linked Negro terror in the U.S. to what he and others understood as the wayward and residual forces of the Revolution. “Let it never be forgotten, that our Negroes are truly the Jacobins of the country,” he argued. “They are the anarchists and the domestic enemy; the common

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<sup>214</sup> Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*, ed. and introduction by Kenneth S. Greenberg. (Boston: Bedford / St. Martins, 1996), 50-51. (*my emphasis*)

enemy of civilized world society, and the barbarians who would, if they could, become the destroyers of our race.”<sup>215</sup> The potential threat of slave violence at large, as Holland and others portrayed it, had affected the rhetorical and political strategies of a number of abolitionists, including Douglass.<sup>216</sup>

While Douglass understood that forceful resistance might be a legitimate means for achieving abolition, his tendency towards violence was tempered in contrast to (or even because of) Nat Turner’s actions and the radical juggernaut that his acquaintance and interlocutor John Brown had set in motion during the 1850s, particularly in his plan to raid Harpers Ferry in the latter-part of that tumultuous decade.<sup>217</sup> Upon Brown’s urging to have Douglass join his cause, Douglass “could not do so, and could but feel that [Brown] was about to rivet the fetters more firmly than ever on the limbs of the enslaved.”<sup>218</sup> For Douglass, Brown’s use of violence would effect little change and, as he recalled in Life and Times, might perpetuate the very forces and institutional practices he had set out to dismantle.

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<sup>215</sup> Eddie Glaude, Exodus: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 68. See also Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts, 15

<sup>216</sup> For further discussion on this topic, see Weinauer, “Writing Revolt in the Wake of Nat Turner: Frederick Douglass and the Construction of Black Domesticity in ‘The Heroic Slave.’” Studies in American Fiction (September 2005): 193- 202.

<sup>217</sup> For an insightful reading of how Douglass linked revolution with temperance, see Robert S. Levine, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity (Chapel Hill and Landon: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Levine’s work specifically examines Douglass My Bondage and My Freedom, but the “Temperate Revolutionary,” one who maintains controlled force over and against the intemperate and intoxicated slave holders, represents Douglass’s politics generally of this period. And we can see how he had also ascribed this temperance to the figure of Madison Washington in “The Heroic Slave.”

<sup>218</sup> Frederick Douglass, The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass [1888, 1893 revised edition] in Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (New York: Library of America, 1994) 760.

In order to resolve the problematic, he understood that the long-term success of abolition would only be possible through the rationalization of slave violence within a recognizable political frame, most notably the paradigm of revolutionary spirit. By the 1840s and 1850s, however, this was no easy endeavor.<sup>219</sup> Douglass had the rhetorical and critical task of wresting this spirit from deep-seated suspicions of Jacobin excess—wresting, too, its black revolutionary actors from a discourse that characterized them as “domestic enemies” or terrorists.<sup>220</sup> The story of Madison Washington and the *Creole* revolt provided Douglass the means for articulating this rationalization, and it provided a figure with whom a wider (notably white) readership could identify as one whose actions and intelligence marked the rational continuation of America’s revolutionary trajectory carried out and fulfilled by a heroic masculine subject—with Washington’s blackness being the obvious, though progressively radical, exception. In other words, Madison Washington, who literarily signals in name and embodies in heroic action the

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<sup>219</sup> In the same edition of Autographs for Freedom which appears Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave,” George Perkins’s essay asks, “Can Slaves Rightfully Resist and Fight?” Troubled with the same problematic as Douglass, Perkins begins with a bit of sophistry: “I do not answer this question. But the following facts are submitted as containing the materials for an answer.” These “materials” return to the American Revolution: “It was distinctly maintained in 1776, that men may rightfully fight for liberty, and resist the powers ordained by God, if those powers destroyed liberty. Christian men, ministers in their pulpits strenuously argued that it was men’s duty to fight for liberty, and to kill those who opposed them. . . I do not say that these positions were right, or that men of 1776 acted right. But I do say, that if they were right, we are necessarily led to some startling conclusions” (33-34). See George W. Perkins, “Can Slaves Rightfully Resist and Fight?” in Autographs for Freedom, ed. Julia Griffiths (Cleveland: John P. Jewett & Company, 1853).

<sup>220</sup> The word “terrorist,” as the Oxford English Dictionary and most recently Terry Eagleton remind us, emerges as a political term out of the French Revolution, referring to the Jacobins and agents “Reign of Terror.” See the OED as well as Terry Eagleton, Holy Terror (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). As I have already discussed in the previous chapter, we find in Edmund Burke’s Enquiry on the Sublime (1757) his linking of terror with insecurity and the blackness of the Negro. C. L. R. James recovers the revolutionary potential of the Jacobin figure in Toussaint L’Ouverture. See The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Here he takes what appears to be the “volcanic eruption” of the Haitian revolution and carefully examines the eruption “as projections of the sub-soil from which they came,” looking at the “economic forces of the age; their molding of society and politics, of men and the mass and individual men; the powerful reaction of these on the environment at one of those rare moments when society is at a boiling point and therefore fluid” (x-xi).

characteristics of American revolutionary fathers, functions as the black progeny capable of exercising and directing force within and for the further actualization of America's revolutionary potential.

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Addressed to “our readers,” the novella opens by locating the life of Madison Washington within a heroic genealogy sprung from the “State of Virginia.”<sup>221</sup> Virginia, Douglass begins, “has been dignified by some the mother of statesmen.” “History,” he declares, “has not been sparing in recording their names, or in blazoning their deeds” (174). Noting the “strange neglect” of “one of the truest, manliest, and bravest of [Virginia's] children,” Douglass's work of prose fiction—as did a number of his previous orations—embarks on telling Washington's story (175). Less subtly, Douglass then situates his own role in this storytelling: Although Madison Washington “holds now no higher place in the records of that grand old Commonwealth than is held by a horse or an ox,” he begins, Washington's life will, in the future, “command the pen of genius to set his merits forth” (175). Here, the future materializes in the present. Douglass's own pen signals “genius” and asserts his role among a select communion of writers who will style the life of Madison Washington into “American annals” and into History itself.

More than asserting his genius, however, Douglass's opening passage in the novella further imagines a black revolutionary genealogy whose origins are spatially located in and, in a matter of speaking, spiritually commensurate with the U.S.'s founding fathers:

Let those account for it who can, but there stands the fact, that a man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry—who deserved it as much as Thomas

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<sup>221</sup> Douglass, “The Heroic Slave,” 174; hereafter cited parenthetically.

Jefferson—and who fought for it with a valor as high, an arm as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence, lives now only in the chattel records of his native State. (175)

The story Douglass tells has an origin both historic and heroic. Recalling Virginia as the locus of this origin, Douglass establishes an imaginary narrative trajectory along which the story of freedom, previously epitomized by the lives of Henry, Jefferson, and others, has yet to be fully told. “Yet not all the great ones of the Old Dominion have, by the fact of their birth-place, escaped undeserved obscurity,” he writes (174-175). Entangled still by the institution and continued practice of chattel slavery, the spirit or movement of freedom becomes caught in stasis, unable to move toward its teleological end. “The Heroic Slave” enters into that story—that is, into the greater metanarrative of freedom—at precisely the moment that the story has stalled.

For Douglass slave insurrection had instantiated and was grounded in the revolutionary potential of American power—a power that would yield liberty and freedom through conflict and its resolution within a prescribed set of historical processes. Like others of the early and mid-nineteenth century, Douglass tended to conceive of these historical processes (and therefore the role of conflict) as moving toward teleological and progressive ends—a point that Eric Sundquist in his reading of Douglass’s major works has previously and aptly elaborated.<sup>222</sup> Douglass’s understanding of historical

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<sup>222</sup> This is a reading of Douglass that I share with Eric Sundquist. Sundquist makes a convincing case that Douglass consistently evinces an understanding of revolt as acts “bound very closely to the paradigm of progress implicit in the revolutionary tradition” (125). See his elaboration on this topic in the first chapter of *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: The Balknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993).

revolutionary time, therefore, was not unlike other self-proclaimed patriots and those who showed faith in an American power which, set in “motion,” moved from a necessary moment of revolutionary violence toward a “permanent peace in the world,” to recall the words of Daniel Webster.<sup>223</sup> Yet while figures like Webster and Theodore Parker could pay homage to the revolutionary conflict within a monumentalized past—when the revolution’s “rotation was guarded, regular, and safe”<sup>224</sup>—Douglass’s own politics necessitated the living and continuous memory of the revolution as an instrument of change, even if violent, in the mid-nineteenth-century present. What made Douglass’s view more radical, then, was that for him the revolutionary “movement” had not yet come to fruition—more radical because it insisted on the liberation of black slaves as a necessary culmination of the revolutionary spirit, where others like Webster and Parker, despite their differences, considered the belated manifestations of revolutionary violence, especially in Europe and San Domingo, as instances of conflict that could bring about only “conflagration and terror.”<sup>225</sup> Douglass’s retelling of Madison Washington’s story functions, therefore, as a reanimation and so begins at the place of spirit’s inert pause.

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<sup>223</sup> Daniel Webster, “The Bunker Hill Monument” [June 17, 1825] The Great Speeches and Orations of Daniel Webster with an Essay on Daniel Webster as a Master of English Style (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1889), 132-133.

<sup>224</sup> See again Daniel Webster’s speech on the “The Bunker Hill Monument” [June 17, 1825]. See also Webster’s “The Completion of the Bunker Hill Monument [June 17, 1843], The Great Speeches and Orations of Daniel Webster with an Essay on Daniel Webster as a Master of English Style (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1889), 136-151.

<sup>225</sup> See Daniel Webster, “The Bunker Hill Monument” [June 17, 1825], 132. Says Webster, “The great wheel of political revolution began to move in America. Here its rotation was guarded, regular, and safe. Transferred to the other continent, from unfortunate but natural cause, it received an irregular and violent impulse; it whirled along with a fearful celerity; till at length, like the chariot-wheels in the races of antiquity, it took fire from the rapidity of its own motion, and blazoned onward, spreading conflagration and terror around” (132). See also Sundquist’s eloquent elaboration on this topic in To Wake the Nations, 113



After recollecting Virginia as the space of heroic origins, Douglass's novella proceeds by reestablishing the direction and motion of freedom's historic trajectory.

Douglass's narrative thus provides a precise entry point for this reanimation, and he turns specifically to "the spring of 1835," six years prior to the *Creole* revolt, "on a Sabbath morning" (176). Scenes from the drama that will lead to that climatic revolutionary event in 1844 aboard the *Creole* begin to unfold. Here the novella presents a northerner by the name of Listwell who, while traveling through the State of Virginia, catches the "sound of a human voice" (176). The voice "arrests [the traveller's] attention" and draws him to observe "a soliloquy" delivered by a fugitive slave. Focalized through Listwell's perspective, the slave's dramatic vocalization depicts the makings of internal struggle. Through this struggle, the slave comes to realize his human capacities for liberty:

But what is freedom to me, or I to it? I am a slave,—born a slave, an abject slave,—even before I made part of this breathing world, the scourge was platted for my back; the fetters were forged for my limbs . . . But here am I, a man,—yes, a man!—with thoughts and wishes, with powers and faculties as far as angel's flight. (177)

Madison's ontological and metaphysical recognition, "I am a man," thus takes precedence over the historical and material conditions that have defined his life up to the present as a slave. Resolution and action then weigh heavily here: "I am no coward," Madison continues. Echoing Patrick Henry, he proclaims, "Liberty I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it" (178).

If Douglass had intended his white readers to sympathize with the life of Madison Washington—that is, to identify with the human qualities that would give rise to the heroic dimensions of his character—Douglass bolstered these sympathies by providing a narrative that, on one register, showed the familial connections and human strivings in Washington’s life prior to the *Creole* rebellion and, on another register, depicted the internal and rather private sentiments whites would (or should) experience in their encounters with such a figure. As we also learn from the soliloquy, for instance, Madison has a wife, and his love for her (inscribed within notions of masculine responsibility) will later in the narrative move him to wager his own freedom in an attempt to gain hers.<sup>226</sup> “How can I leave her? Poor thing! What can she do when I am gone?” he cries out. “Oh! oh! ‘tis impossible that I can leave poor Susan!” (180). Though heroic, the character of Madison exhibits qualities human and sympathetic, but this is sympathy that leads not only to profound changes in feeling but, as we see in the figure of Listwell, to direct action and ontological change.

To the point of being overly obvious if not propagandistic, Listwell becomes the exemplum of white consciousness which undergoes transformation in the encounter with the fugitive slave. The encounter elicits both pathos as well as sublimity in Listwell, and both play out as important elements of Listwell’s transformation and recognition. I cite this important passage at length to show the development of Listwell’s sentiment and thought as a result of this encounter:

Long after Madison had left the ground, Mr. Listwell (our traveler) remained in motionless silence, meditating on the extraordinary revelations to which he had

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<sup>226</sup> On the topic of rebellion and masculinity in Douglass, see Maggie Montesinos Sales.

listened. He seemed fastened to the spot, and stood half hoping, half fearing the return of the sable preacher to his solitary temple. The speech of Madison rung through the chambers of his soul, and vibrated through his entire frame. "Here is indeed a man," thought he, "of rare endowments,--a child of God,--guilty of no crime but the color of his skin,--hiding away from the face of humanity, and pouring out his thoughts and feelings, his hopes and resolutions to the lonely woods; to him those distant church bells have no grateful music. He shuns the church, the altar, and the great congregation of Christian worshippers, and wanders away to the gloomy forest, to utter in the vacant air complaints and griefs, which the religion of his times and his country can neither console nor relieve. Goaded almost to madness by the sense of injustice done him, he resorts hither to give vent to his pent up feelings, and to debate with himself the feasibility of his plans, plans of his own invention, for his own deliverance. From this hour I am an abolitionist. I have seen enough and heard enough, and I shall go to my home in Ohio resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race, by making such exertions as I shall be able to do, for the speedy emancipation of every slave in the land." (181-82)

Though refashioned as a critical and even secular response to "Christian worshippers" and their complicity with the slave system, Listwell's "meditation" comes to resemble a story of conversion. This is conversion set against the backdrop of "Sabbath" and "distant church bells." In the space of a more "solitary temple," the words of the "sable preacher" "[ring] through the chambers of his soul, and [vibrate] through his entire frame" until Listwell can proclaim at last, "From this hour I am an abolitionist."

Douglass's characters inhabit a world where persuasion and conversion (in its multivalent sense) are not only possible but constitutive of the forces of change. By contrast, the world of Melville's "Benito Cereno" troubles, or even depicts a world abandoned by, the possibility of words to effect change, to bring about action let alone justice. In the end, Babo "uttered no sound, and could not be forced to" ("Benito Cereno" 102). For Douglass, the power of the word has the ability to move souls.

By troping the Christian conversion narrative, Douglass had tapped a source of energy in American discourse and its fascination, if not identification, with movement and transport. This fascination with energy qua movement had its religious and secular articulations, and Douglass took advantage of both, as we see in the above passage. In particular, Douglass's narrative draws on a notion of energy that had been given expression in the discourse of the sublime in the U.S.<sup>227</sup> Standing in "motionless silence" like a speechless Thomas Jefferson peering out from atop the natural bridge overlooking the majestic and awesome Albemarle County,<sup>228</sup> Listwell's encounter with the fugitive slave's "mellow and mournful accents" is cause for "meditation" (179). This meditation

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<sup>227</sup> On work that addresses the "American Sublime," see for starters Mary Arsenberg, ed., The American Sublime (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1986); Joanne Feit Diehl, Women Poets and the American Sublime (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990); Rob Wilson, The American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991); David E. Nye, American Technological Sublime (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994); Joseph Tabbi, Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995); Barbara Claire Freeman, The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1995); and Christophe Den Tandt, The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1998). Perry Miller and Leo Marx nearly simultaneously began working out an understanding of an "American Technological Sublime,"—a topic which David Nye later examines. See Perry Miller, The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965); and Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>228</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). See in particular the oft-cited passages from Cascades (Query V) on the "Natural Bridge" (24).

then gives way to action in a way that resembles Madison's own resolve: "I have seen enough and heard enough, and I shall go to my home in Ohio resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race, by making such exertions as I shall be able to do, for the speedy emancipation of every slave in the land" (182).

Drawing on an understanding of sublimity that had been in circulation since earlier translations and appropriations of Longinus's Peri Hupsous, Douglass's treatment of Listwell's sublime encounter with Madison resembles something akin to but even more potent than persuasion—and more potent than sympathy. From William Smith to Nicolas Boilieu, Edmund Burke to Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller to Hugh Blair, among many others, these works drew from and expanded on the Greek notion of *ekstasis* that Longinus had found inherent in *hupsos* (the sublime). Of course, from the term *ekstasis* we get the word ecstasy, but rhetorical and then later aesthetic theories drew from the word a sense of "transport" and "movement." As Smith stated, "the sublime not only persuades, but even throws an audience into transport."<sup>229</sup>

By the nineteenth century, discourse of the sublime in the U.S. provided an expression that linked the world of nature and America's fascination with (if not fantasy for) transport, movement, and energy. Longinus's ancient term had by then given meaning to American modernity. In the encounter with the natural landscape—an encounter that was made possible and achieved greater intensity, penetration, and purview with emerging (and sublime) technologies—both secular and Christian made use

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<sup>229</sup> Quoted from William Bruce Johnson, "Introduction" to Longinus on the Sublime (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975), xxi.

of the sublime as a category to articulate the experience of conversion and movement.<sup>230</sup> “Objects of exalted grandeur elevate the mind that seriously dwells on them, and impart to it greater compass and strength,” Charles Caldwell had put it in 1832. “Alpine scenery and an embattled ocean deepen contemplation, and give their own sublimity to the conceptions of the beholders.”<sup>231</sup> For Caldwell and others, the sublime held transformative powers, and he, like many of his contemporaries, had coupled the transformative powers of sublime “scenery” with the transportation potential of the railroad system: “Its vastness and magnificence will prove communicable, and add to the standard of the intellect of our country.”<sup>232</sup> This reverence for the sublime effused secular and religious, thereby crystallizing the Jacksonian doctrine of conquest and expansion with a liberal doxa that celebrated the transcendence of space and time. It helped crystallize, too, an understanding and articulation of America’s exceptional and providential place in history (what the founders understood in the Latin motto *Annuit Coeptis*), further legitimizing as sacred all those techniques for transport. “Railroad iron is a magician’s rod,” Emerson wrote in 1844, “in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water.”<sup>233</sup>

While Emerson tended toward secular formulations of the sublime, his conception of the land, the transformative power of technologies, and the “sleeping energies” that

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<sup>230</sup> See David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1994), 27-28. See also my previous chapter where I examine the links between the discourse of the sublime and the epistemologies and exercise of power as purview.

<sup>231</sup> Cited in David E. Nye, 58.

<sup>232</sup> Nye, 58.

<sup>233</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American,” in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 213.

could be awakened through “a sublime and friendly Destiny by which the human race is guided” found many likenesses in more theological expressions.<sup>234</sup> In 1851, with the inauguration of the Cleveland Columbus Railroad, S.C. Aiken had celebrated sublime transport and linked it to both “a moral and religious point of view as well as a social and commercial” one.<sup>235</sup> Of “the opening of a great thoroughfare,” Aiken continued, “there is sublimity in it, indicating not only march of mind and a higher type of society, but the evolution of divine purposes, infinite, eternal—connecting social revolutions with the progress of Christianity and the coming reign of Christ.”<sup>236</sup> The discourse of the sublime in the U.S. provided the explanatory power for conflating both theological and secular interests in transport, whereby “movement” could be interpreted through a commercial or Christian hermeneutic. As David Nye and Leo Marx have previously noted, the “sublime was intimately connected to religious feelings” and “could hardly avoid becoming intimately interwoven with popular religion.”<sup>237</sup> Sites such as Niagara Falls in New York and the Natural Bridge in Virginia, among other locations, offered not only a sense of *ekstasis* that Jefferson early documented in his purview of the landscape but also played out as sites of Christian revivals and baptisms. “Atheist! Contemplate this grand scene, one hour, And though shalt own there is a God of Power,” a poet referring to the Natural Bridge had written in 1819.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Emerson, 217.

<sup>235</sup> Nye, 58.

<sup>236</sup> Nye, 58.

<sup>237</sup> Nye, 28.

<sup>238</sup> From Lexington Gazette, cited in Edmund Pendleton Tompkins and J. Lee Davis, The Natural Bridge and Its Historical Surroundings (Natural Bridge of Virginia, Inc., 1939), 25-26. Cited again in David Nye, American Technological Sublime, 29.

In the “The Heroic Slave,” Listwell’s atonement for “past indifference” and then resolution to the “speedy emancipation of every slave in the land” marks what Hugh Blair called “the power and force” of sublimity. Not from the landscape but from the potentiality of the heroic slave, clearly born out of those same forces that gave rise to the American revolutionary project, Douglass drew upon on a concept of the sublime that associated rhetorical and physical force with transformative powers. In his orations, printed lectures, and prose fiction, Douglass opportunistically attempted to harness this energy and direct it toward the fulfillment of emancipative struggles. Portrayed through the figure of Listwell, and invoking both religious and secular tropes, Douglass depicted how Madison Washington’s sublimity sparked conversion and transformation, a necessary force for the continuation and achievement of liberty. In My Bondage and My Freedom, published two years later, Douglass attributed sublime qualities to the emancipative rhetoric of one of the nation’s founders, Patrick Henry. It was he who could arouse a “magic eloquence,” enough so that his listening audience in the senate stood “by him in his boldest flights,” particularly when he proclaimed, “GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH.” As Douglass put it, “this saying was a sublime one,” and then he added rather subtly if not ironically, “even for a freeman.”<sup>239</sup> Of figures like Madison Washington or even himself—“men accustomed to the lash and chain—men whose sensibilities must have become more or less deadened by their bondage”—Douglass reserved the full force of eloquence, saying that these are voices

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<sup>239</sup> Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom [1855] in Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994) 312.



“incomparably more sublime” in their demand for liberty.<sup>240</sup> Recall once more Madison’s proclamation in his soliloquy: “Liberty I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it” (178). Douglass would reiterate this link between sublimity and emancipative energies again in 1861 by calling the “West Indian Emancipation” a “sublime event.”<sup>241</sup>

For Douglass, a technique beyond mere persuasion was needed to jolt the U.S. out of stasis, was needed to redirect American power towards achieving its revolutionary potential. An incarnation of this potential, Douglass’s Madison Washington exhibits qualities sublime and heroic—one enabling the other. And these qualities come forth in the physical body, Madison’s “manly form,” as well as the “voice.” Told through Listwell’s perspective, or “full view of the unsuspecting speaker,” Douglass describes Madison as “Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong” (178-79). “In his movements he seemed to combine, with the strength of the lion, a lion’s elasticity,” he continues.

His torn sleeves disclosed arms like polished iron. His face was ‘black, but comely.’ His eye, lit with emotion, kept guard under a brow as dark and as glossy as the raven’s wing. His whole appearance betokened Herculean strength; yet there was nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect. A child might play in his arms, or dance in his shoulders. A giant’s strength, but not a giant’s heart was in him. His broad mouth and nose spoke only of good nature and kindness. *But his voice, that unfailing index of his soul, though full and melodious, had that in it which could terrify as well as charm.* He was just the man you would choose when hardships were to be endured, or danger to be encountered,--intelligent and

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<sup>240</sup> Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 312.

<sup>241</sup> Frederick Douglass, “West Indian Emancipation” in The Civil War, 1861-1865, vol. 3 of The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1952), 134-35.

brave. He had the head to conceive, and the hand to execute. In a word, he was one to be sought as a friend, but to be dreaded as an enemy. (179, *my emphasis*)

Never withdrawing from the physical and material realities of the abolitionist conflict, never withdrawing either from the potential that comes from sublime terror, Douglass's narrative is want to simultaneously invoke and yet moderate the violence of the "slumbering volcano." In contrast to the imminent threat of slave insurrection as the irruption of volcanic force of which Douglass had warned in his Jeremiad of 1849, his 1853 depiction of Madison in "The Heroic Slave" alludes to this force with more subtlety. Madison's sheer strength—his "arms like polished iron," his Herculean and giant-like physical presence—comes under the domain of reasoned intellect not necessarily as an upsurge of uncontrollable energy. His rhetorical prowess, like the his physical comportment, exhibits the capacity to persuade or, more specifically, move an audience to action by either "charm" or "terror." The potential of both of these qualities, including the latter, Douglass had not abandoned. While Madison Washington "was one to be sought as a friend," Listwell says in the narrative, he was also "to be dreaded as an enemy." Yet Listwell describes the slave's capacity for terror within the register of rhetorical (sublime) force not necessarily the physical: "But his voice, that unfailling index of his soul, though full and melodious, had that in it which could terrify as well as charm." Douglass's narrative maintains the force of sublimity but modulates terror so as to serve better the possibility of rhetorical persuasion or, more accurately, sublime conversion and transport.

Reading Douglass within the context of nineteenth-century temperance discourse, Robert Levine has emphasized how Douglass privileged "mind over body, self-control

over rage.”<sup>242</sup> Levine argues that Douglass set out to articulate “a measured self-defense,” an order of “violence that [Douglass] types as temperate.”<sup>243</sup> For Douglass the notion of intemperance formed an operative and well-established category for illustrating the intoxicating and disastrous effects of slavery on both slave holders and slaves—in short, on all those associated with the slave system at large. Temperance and intemperance helped Douglass distinguish the differences between human action and brute force. The majority of the overseers in Douglass’s narratives, Levine reminds us, are drunkards and prone to use the whip, and Douglass often links the use of the whip with intoxication and ravenous consumption. The discourse of temperance, therefore, expressed a set of ideas and practices that avoided the possibility of re-enacting the intemperate excess of and the insatiable appetite for power that defined the inhuman relationship between handlers and slaves in the South, a relationship which reduced all to brutes.<sup>244</sup>

Levine’s analysis of how Douglass appealed to the discourse of temperance, particularly in My Bondage and My Freedom, has offered nuance to the ways in which critics have previously theorized the role of violence in Douglass’s work as an essential instrument of liberation. Levine particularly wants to read “against the grain” of Eric Sundquist’s and Nancy Bentley’s work on Douglass, both of whom posit that violence played a necessary role in overcoming his oppressors and, moreover, helped “him to

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<sup>242</sup> Robert S. Levine, 127.

<sup>243</sup> Levine, 128.

<sup>244</sup> Robert Levine, 122. See Levine’s chapter three, “Slaves of Appetite: Temperate Revolutionism in Douglass’s My Bondage and My Freedom.”

assert his own humanity.”<sup>245</sup> While Levine does not fully (or directly) account for Listwell’s invocation of the potential terror and dread exhibited by Madison Washington, and how terror with conflict occupies some role in the overall project of emancipation, I want to suggest that Levine’s reading of temperance does offer a way to examine how Douglass engaged with the notion of Negro terror.

Listwell recognizes the potential for terror in Madison, but terror itself is not the means to achieve revolutionary action and political ends. The narrative, rather, situates terror in a contrapuntal arrangement with its moderating characteristics: “His whole appearance betokened Herculean strength; yet there was nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect.” Rhetorically, Douglass counter-poses the potentially negative attributes of the rebellious slave (terror, capricious violence, sheer strength) with qualities that affirm Madison’s humanity, what could be perceived by his white audience as his likenesses to their own preconceptions of heroic character (soul, bravery, charm, comeliness, kindness). In this way, the potential for terror is drawn into the domain of human management, what Levine calls temperance, thus enabling and transforming the terrific qualities of insurrection into the larger world historical struggles for freedom.

Still Levine is not as far from Eric Sundquist or Nancy Bentley on the question of violence as he wants to imagine. As Sundquist has argued, conflict (even violent conflict) does play a role in Douglass’s cosmography. And the “capacity for force,” as Bentley notes, functions for Douglass as a sign of human will and agency. Levine, though, helps us understand that by the mid-1850s Douglass had applied to human agency the necessary ability to master or manage force through tempered and rational

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<sup>245</sup> Levine, 126-27.

means. While Douglass had in 1848 likened Madison Washington with Nat Turner, drawing them both into what Ellen Weinauer calls a “genealogy of resistance,” by the time he published “The Heroic Slave,” he had rhetorically distanced his protagonist from Turner’s publicly perceived style of revolt.<sup>246</sup> And by 1853, Douglass had altered slightly his earlier 1849 allusion to the volcano (to recall again the nineteenth-century trope) and presented force as a kind of geothermic energy in reserve, tapped and then administered as moderate and moderated kinetic energy which would yield movement towards a final and just end.

More than appealing to the discourse of temperance, as Levine has eloquently shown, Douglass’s depiction of conflict and strife, I further argue, provides a cosmography in which conflict can be understood in terms of finality and resolution—and is indeed necessary to resolution. In fact, Douglass dramatized in “The Heroic Slave” a concept of conflict which he had sloganized two years later: “Then, as a nation, if we are wise, we will prepare for the last conflict, for that final struggle in which the enemy of Freedom must capitulate.”<sup>247</sup> “We do not fear the result of such a battle,” he continued. “The sooner the last battle shall be fought, the sooner victory will perch upon the standard of the free. . . . Let us prepare then for the last battle. Already the masses are moving.”<sup>248</sup> For Douglass, movement and conflict of a particular order was integral to the teleological realization of human freedom. He synchronized the narrative of escape and fugitive strife with this realization.

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<sup>246</sup> Ellen Weinauer in “Writing Revolt in the Wake of Nat Turner” documents this move by Douglass rather aptly. See particularly page 197.

<sup>247</sup> Douglass, “The Final Struggle,” 335.

<sup>248</sup> Douglass, “The Final Struggle,” 336.

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Of the four parts that comprise “The Heroic Slave,” each presents a series of events and encounters that give rise to and culminate in Madison’s ultimate struggle aboard the *Creole*. The first three parts develop the relationship between Madison and Listwell. It is by chance, so it seems at first, that Listwell happens upon Madison in the opening of the story. Here each undergoes transformation and commits to the abolitionist struggle, as I have described above. In the second section of the novella, “Five years after the foregoing singular occurrence, in the winter of 1840,” Madison serendipitously encounters Listwell at his home while passing through the state of Ohio on his flight to Canada as a fugitive (182). In Part III, this time while Listwell travels through Virginia, he finds Madison once again re-enslaved. “Mr. Listwell saw, for the first time in his life, a slave-gang on their way to market” (215). After “running his eye up and down the fettered ranks, [Listwell] met the glance of one whose face he thought he had seen before” (216). By the end of this third section, the narrative has linked Listwell’s and Madison’s decisions and actions to a grander historic development and narrative unfolding, an unfolding that will culminate in a final conflict aboard the *Creole* and resolve with the emancipation of over a hundred slaves. So if not for Listwell’s first encounter with Madison, Listwell may never have committed to the abolitionist struggle. And again, if not for their third and final meeting in Part III, where Listwell stealthily hands Madison the metal files that will aid his escape and rebellion aboard the *Creole* in Part IV, we are left with the possibility that this “last battle” would hardly be possible.

Separately, the encounters between Listwell and Madison appear coincidental, capricious, serendipitous. Taken together, they evince order and trajectory. Indeed, the

world of Douglass's heroic slave unfolds in such a way that events appear as part of a greater design and direction, not as arbitrary force or movement. In the figures of Listwell and Madison, figures who both struggle against the institution of slavery, we see examples of human decision and action that function in accordance with cosmographic forces and historical progression. Wittingly or unwittingly, Douglass had approximated the Hegelian concept of determination or destination (*Bestimmung*), linking what Michelle Gellrich has described as "the progressive movement of the Ideal into . . . individuated human action."<sup>249</sup> "Human passions and activities are the vehicles through which Spirit expresses itself."<sup>250</sup>

One of the central problematics for both Douglass and Hegel, along with the question of human action and contingency, had been the role of conflict in relation to order and world-historical processes. Though while not absolutely identical, both Douglass and Hegel held a general conception of conflict, whereby, "far from posing an ultimate threat to order and stability," as it had for Plato, conflict functions as "a crucial transitional experience in world-historical process."<sup>251</sup> Hegel had referred to this order of

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<sup>249</sup> Michelle Gellrich, 35.

<sup>250</sup> Gellrich, 35. Gellrich is able to elaborate on the problematic of contingency, that is, "the particular deeds or passions of individuals" that "assert themselves against others" and could therefore produce a situation "mired in violent strife" (37). Hegel, Gellrich argues, "redefines the initial perception of historical chaos" by appealing to "the metaphor of *Schauspiel*, which suggests a dramatic performance with an ordering hand at work and an interested spectator," thus supplying "history with a meaningful form," order, and rationality (37). Hegel had put the question this way: "Even as we look at history as the slaughter bench on which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed, a question also necessarily arises in our thoughts: to whom, to what final end have these monstrous sacrifices been made?" (37). "In this question," Gellrich further explains, "is echoed the need of the beholder to eliminate contingency, to find rational meaning in the apparent aimlessness, conflict, and destruction of the past. It is precisely such a need that motivates Hegel's project of a 'philosophical history,' which attempts to prove that 'reason governs the world and that world history, therefore, has progressed rationally.'" (37-38).

<sup>251</sup> Gellrich, 28.

conflict as *Kollision*, and in it we can see also Douglass's understanding of an agonistic arrangement of forces and strife between slaves and the slave system.<sup>252</sup> As Hegel had described, "The collision arises, as we are now considering it, in an act of violation, which is unable to retain its character as such, but is compelled to find a new principle of unity; it is a change in the previously existent condition of harmony, a change which is still in process."<sup>253</sup> Though Hegel and Douglass understood change "still in process," they both appealed to the ordering and unifying power of conflict, insofar as conflict would bring forth "the resolution of the discord."<sup>254</sup> Recalling similarities to Douglass's temperance, this "requirement of resolution," as Gellrich notes, is the "importance of not carrying out opposition too far," what Hegel posited as a "principle of necessity (*Nothwendigkeit*)."<sup>255</sup> This principle and the appeal to resolution play out in the final section of Douglass's narrative.

In Part four, the setting turns again to Virginia. Shifting to a style noticeably different from the previous three sections, the narrative here mediates the *Creole* revolt through a conversation between "ocean birds" in a Marine Coffee-house some "two months after the sailing of [and rebellion aboard] the Virginia slave brig" (226). Challenged by an ignorant "old salt" by the name of Jack Williams, the first-mate of the *Creole*, Tom Grant, is forced to engage in apologetics and explain why he was unable to

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<sup>252</sup> I follow Michelle Gellrich's observations of Hegel and Hegel's conception of *Kollision*, which as Gellrich and others have observed, "owes something to pre-Socratic ideas." "Borrowing from such thinkers as Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Empedocles the notion of *eris*, 'strife,' as a force of universal order, Hegel develops a model of conflict that eliminates the problems of chaos, dissolution, and irrationality with which it was tied in the Platonic tradition" (13-14).

<sup>253</sup> Hegel, *On Tragedy*, ed. Anne and Henry Paolucci (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 113.

<sup>254</sup> Hegel, *On Tragedy*, 128. Another critical work to read along side these is Susan Buck-Morss's "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26:4 (Summer 2000), 821-865.

<sup>255</sup> Gellrich, 32.



“manage ‘em,” the “rebellious darkies” (227), as Williams boasts he could do if he had been in Grant’s situation. “With my back against the caboose, I could, myself, have flogged a dozen of them,” Williams swaggers; “had I been on board, by every monster of the deep, every black devil of ‘em all would have had his neck stretched from the yard-arm” (227).

The novella’s staging of Williams contra Grant poses an obvious but important rhetorical tactic. Convinced that “a nigger’s a nigger, on sea or land; and is a coward,” Williams comes forth in “The Heroic Slave” as one who exemplifies and upholds a flawed but conventional nineteenth-century view of Negro intelligence and action.

To me the whole thing seems unaccountable. I cannot see how a dozen or two of ignorant negroes, not one of whom had ever been to sea before, and all of them were closely ironed between decks, should be able to get their fetters off, rush out of the hatchway in open daylight, kill two white men, the one the captain and the other their master, and then carry the ship into a British port, where every darkey of them was set free. (231-232)

This is a perspective that his interlocutor Tom Grant, the first-mate who bears witness to the actual event, slowly dismantles in his own account of the “heroic slave” (228). Grant challenges Williams’s position by first marking that he, himself, is neither a “coward” nor an “abolitionist” (230). “I did all that any man with equal strength and presence of mind could have done,” Grant emphatically states to Williams and to the others in the Coffee-house.

Having contributed to the inter-workings of the slave system, and therefore having never sympathized with the Negro slave in the past, Grant finds himself in an

awkward position of explaining why he and other sailors aboard the slave ship were unable to quell the revolt. This becomes awkward for Grant because he must rely on and attribute to slave *property*—a category that had, until this moment, been unproblematic for him—a sense of *human* intelligence equal to or, in this case, greater than his own:

Mr. Williams speaks of ‘ignorant negroes,’ and, as a general rule, they are ignorant; but had he been onboard the Creole as I was, he would have seen cause to admit that there are exceptions to this general rule. The leader of the mutiny in question was just as shrewd a fellow as ever I met in my life, and was as well fitted to lead a dangerous enterprise as any one white man in ten thousand (232).

A moment later he will add this: “I confess, gentlemen, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any horrible enterprise” (237).

Grant further shifts the terms of the discourse from “murderous” rebellion to “mutiny” and, further still, to revolution—each denoting different registers of human action and intelligence as well as historic importance. He explains, “The name of this man, strange to say (ominous in greatness,) was MADISON WASHINGTON. In the short time he had on board, he had secured the confidence of every officer. The negroes fairly worshipped him. His manner and bearing were such, that no one could suspect him of a murderous purpose” (232). In describing the upheaval and homicide aboard the ship, Grant reiterates Madison’s understanding of force: “‘Sir, said he, ‘your life is in my hands. I could kill you a dozen times over during this last half hour, and could kill you now. You call me a *black murderer*. I am not a murderer. God as my witness that

LIBERTY, not *malice*, is the motive for this night's work” (234-235, emphasis in original).

Grant reinterprets and therefore understands more clearly the “motive” for the slave rebellion as something greater than a random act of murder and brute violence, thus conceding Madison’s actions and words to higher, revolutionary ideals of liberty. “It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they were the principles of 1776,” Grant confesses to the other gentlemen (238). While describing Madison and his exceptional qualities, Grant retells the scene of recognition, wherein his ignorance gives way to the truth of the *Creole* revolt and Madison’s higher purpose. “During all the storm, Madison stood firmly at the helm,--his keen eye fixed upon the binnacle,” he recounts to his listeners.

He was not indifferent to the dreadful hurricane; yet he met it with the equanimity of an old sailor. He was silent but not agitated. The first words he uttered after the storm had slightly subsided, were characteristic of the man. ‘Mr. Mate, you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free.’ (237)

As it had for Listwell in the opening of the narrative, the effect of Madison’s “words” play centrally in Grant’s ability to recognize Madison’s character and to recognize as well the scene not as murderous revolt but as a conflict that culminates forces writ large in nature itself: “The ocean, if not the land, is free.” Of Madison’s words, Grant further elaborates to his audience,

He seldom spake to any one, and when he did speak, it was with the utmost propriety. His words were well chosen, and his pronunciation equal to that of any

schoolmaster. It was a mystery to us where he got his knowledge of language; but as little was said to him, none of us knew the extent of his intelligence and ability till it was too late. (233)

It seems no accident that Douglass uses the word “propriety” to describe Madison’s speech. “Propriety” expresses, of course, a sense of decorum, of being “proper.” More accurately it further denotes how words are “suited” for the specific occasion or action. And if we recall, the etymology of propriety derives from the Latin *proprius*, a sense of “one’s own” or “property.”<sup>256</sup> So while Madison’s command of language challenges Grant’s previously held beliefs about slave intelligence, this ownership or mastery of language works in concert with his mastery (as temperance) over the energies of the rebellion. Words and action, under the propriety of the heroic slave, suit the occasion, and in that occasion Grant hears and sees the reanimation of the “principles of 1776” even while he is charged with the task of opposing them.

This part of the narrative then not only produces a crisis in Grant’s racial-logical cosmography—a cosmography that becomes dismantled by his encounter with a Negro slave whose intelligence and purpose recalls the American founders. It brings to crisis and therefore collision the forces of liberty and slavery on a grander historical scale. A couple years after Douglass had published “The Heroic Slave,” he would refer to this crisis as “The Final Struggle,” which must end, he argued with the “triumph” of liberty.

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<sup>256</sup> Michel de Certeau also links “proper” to “strategy”: “The ‘proper’ is the triumph of place over time. It allows one to capitalize acquired advantages, to prepare future expansions, and thus to give oneself a certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances.” De Certeau would also link “strategy” to “management” as well as to “Cartesian attitude” and to the “attitude of modern science, politics, and military strategy.” In contradistinction to “strategy,” de Certeau posed that “tactics” are “the art of the weak,” a fact also the Clausewitz noted in his discussion on deception. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 35-37.

The final scene of Douglass's narrative resolves with an image of the "heroic chief and deliverer, Madison Washington," disembarking the slave ship and marching to the "deafening cheers of a multitude of sympathizing spectators" (239). So, yes, Madison Washington's story becomes the retelling of the American Revolutionary story, even a more fully realized version that includes slave's break from bondage and, therefore, the fuller emancipation of all human beings.<sup>257</sup> And, yes, in this retelling of the revolutionary story, Douglass's narrative approximates an audience who, like those "sympathizing spectators" watching as the liberated slaves disembark the slave vessel for the freedom at Nassau, fully recognize the "triumphant leadership of their heroic chief and deliverer, Madison Washington" (230). That said, though, I want to underscore again that Douglass conceived of this triumphant ending and escape, this telos or destination to recall affinities to Hegel, as an outgrowth of or development from what he understood (or portrayed) as a larger agonistic between liberty and slavery. "Liberty and Slavery cannot dwell together forever in the same country," he had argued in November of 1855. "There is not one iota of affinity existing between them. They hate each other, with a hatred which is unto death."<sup>258</sup> The final conflict, as Douglass conceived it, had arisen out of these two incommensurable orders. The "ultimate triumph" would, however, belong to liberty, but not before the resolution of "a crisis more critical than any which [had] preceded it."<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> As Ivy Wilson reminds readers, this emancipation occurs not in the U.S. but under British domain. Douglass's understanding of emancipation, Wilson argues, must therefore be understood within a transnational context vis-à-vis that national. I want to suggest, however, that Douglass never really abandoned a national frame of reference for emancipation. As a progressive trajectory, the U.S. as a nation would, according to Douglass, realize its own history.

<sup>258</sup> Douglass, "The Final Struggle," 335.

<sup>259</sup> Douglass, "The Final Struggle," 335.

The agonistic struggle and its “final” resolution provided Douglass a conceit for imagining the role of conflict in history and as an unfolding of history itself. American power, or its full revolutionary potential as it had been articulated in the “principles,” was integral to the realization of this history.<sup>260</sup> Douglass’s aesthetics could account for violent struggle, but this struggle evinced movement, direction, destination.

In the relation between liberty and slavery, dramatized through the figure of the *agon*, however, Douglass evaded another set of relational possibilities and, therefore, another and more problematic order of conflict.<sup>261</sup> In other words, he avoided the problematic of portraying the struggle between the forces of domination and those dominated as a form of permanent strife or stasis attendant with American power. For Douglass, the ultimate conflict provided the ultimate escape, a way out—what, in philological and literary terms, we understand as *póros*.<sup>262</sup> This would not be true of Melville’s “Benito Cerero.”

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<sup>260</sup> David Ericson has aptly linked this understanding of history and progress to the abolitionists’ appeal to a dominant “liberal consensus” that was shaping the debate over slavery in the nineteenth century. See David F. Ericson, *The Debate over Slavery: Antislavery and Proslavery Liberalism in Antebellum America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000).

<sup>261</sup> To have concluded the narrative at the moment of liberation and success Douglass’s “Heroic Slave” also necessitated the omission of a juridical, geopolitical, and historical complication. As David Brion Davis recently documents and as other historians and critics have noted, the *Creole* case sparked a legal feud between the U.S. and Britain. Biting their thumbs at the Americans, the British refused to return the slaves to the United States and, moreover, supported the slaves’ appeal for liberty under British domain. Aligning himself with the same interests as the South’s, the Northerner and, at that time, Secretary of State Daniel Webster threatened Britain with retaliation, even war, and demanded that slave owners in the U.S. be compensated for their loss of property. David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 269. The tension between the two nations took over a decade to resolve, and in 1853 a “claims commission ruled in favor of Webster and the United States,” thus requiring Britain to “pay \$110,330 to American claimants” (Davis, 269). So while Douglass’s narrative had provided an ostensible resolution of the slave conflict aboard the *Creole*, the event set off and intensified geopolitical tensions over slavery, the question of property, and sovereign interests.

<sup>262</sup> See Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), 21.

### 3.3. Babo's Invention, Asymmetric Tactics, and the *Aporia* of American Power

“As for the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot . . .”<sup>263</sup>

“Like Negroes, these powers own man sullenly; mindful of their higher master, while serving, plot revenge.”<sup>264</sup>

While Douglass's “The Heroic Slave” depicts the successful liberation of Madison Washington and the other slaves aboard the *Creole* as a resolution to the narrative, a resolution that is meant also to suggest the further realization of the “principles of 1776,” Melville's “Benito Cereno,” by contrast, neither presents the insurrection aboard the *San Dominick* wholly in terms of revolutionary emancipation. Nor does it elide the destruction and violence of the uprising. Unlike Douglass's portrayal of “tempered” force in “The Heroic Slave,” violence and brutality play centrally in Babo's revolt aboard the *San Dominick*. “Babo was the plotter from first to last,” as Benito Cereno describes in his deposition; “he ordered every murder, and was the helm and keel of the revolt” (97). Cereno's deposition further describes the conflict with images of Negroes murdering by “hand-spikes and hatchets,” of “negresses” wanting “to have tortured to death, instead of simply killing, the Spaniards,” and of other slaves

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<sup>263</sup> Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno,” [1855] Melville's Short Novels. (New York: Norton, 2002) 102.

<sup>264</sup> Herman Melville, “The Bell-Tower,” The Piazza Tales [1856]. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987) 174.

throwing the ship's live crew members "overboard" (91). There is the scene, too, of Don Alexandro Aranda's demise, perhaps the most brutal of all:

[A]nd immediately the negro Babo commanded the Ashantee Martinque and the Ashantee Leche to go and commit the murder; that those two went down with hatchets to the berth of Don Alexandro; that, yet half alive and mangled, they dragged him on deck; that they were going to throw him overboard in that state, but the negro Babo stopped them, bidding the murder be completed on the deck before him, which was done, when, by his orders, the body was carried below, forward; that nothing more was seen of it by the deponent for three days. . . ." (93)

On the fourth day, following a number of other deaths, Babo displays a skeleton, "which had been substituted for the ship's proper figure-head, the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World" (93). To Benito Cereno, and subsequently to every other crew member yet alive, Babo asks "whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's," and pressing still, threatens Cereno and others: "'Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader,' pointing to the prow" (93).

How does one begin to theorize this order of violence aboard the *San Dominick* particularly in relation to the tempered, agonistic conflict in which Douglass conceived his narrative? Where Douglass had evinced faith in the possibility of liberal democratic ideals and republican principles, Melville was bitten by "atheist doubt" (83). It was an atheism that cast doubt, of course, on the "Providence" that guided Delano's actions, but it was also a doubt in the possibility of conflict as a necessarily liberating action. For Melville, there was no "final conflict," as Douglass had envisioned, but a perpetual



struggle that coincided with the security of property rights and the enforcement of fugitive slave law. For its cruelty and brutal spectacle, but also for the way it shows how Babo's violence and insurrection are inscribed within greater forces of domination, the scene of Babo's execution and dismemberment bears repeating: "Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of the mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for the many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites (102)." The scene recalls the execution of Nat Turner, the decapitation of other slave rebels, and the sight in Jerusalem, Virginia, that acquired the name "Blackhead Signpost."<sup>265</sup>

Attending to the topic of conflict, specifically focusing on the "war and peace theme" surfacing throughout Melville's *oeuvre*, Joyce Adler has argued that "Melville's passion against war was a great dynamic in his imagination and main shaping force in his art."<sup>266</sup> Though it's true that Melville's works do in fact exhibit a critical attitude toward the cruelties and consequences of war, especially in an era marked by the ubiquity of international conflicts and internal strife, Adler's thematic reading presupposes a model of conflict conceived around a binary: war and peace. For Adler, there are definitive boundaries between conflict and peace—a model of conflict that arranges peace as the resolution of conflict, and war as the dissolution of peace. Adler's reading of conflict in Melville's work, I want to contend, forecloses the possibility for understanding asymmetric relations of force, especially those forces exhibited by American power that,

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<sup>265</sup> Kenneth S. Greenburg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) notes that one or more heads may have been displayed at this location. He also notes that a cavalry in the moments immediately subsequent Turner's rebellion "had reportedly cut off the heads of 15 rebels." 21. Eric Sundquist in *To Wake the Nations* has previously linked Melville's image of Babo's head with "Blackhead Signpost." (71).

<sup>266</sup> Joyce Sparer Adler, *War in Melville's Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 1981), 3.

as I have been trying to show in the previous chapter and as I will further demonstrate in this one, had preoccupied Melville throughout the 1850s.<sup>267</sup>

My intention in this section is not solely to critique Adler's study of Melville but to redirect and pose the question of conflict in Melville's works a bit differently. To suggest the "war and peace" theme as paradigmatic of Melville's representation of conflict in the nineteenth century, as Adler does, is to misrecognize his radical understanding of slavery and the enforcement of property rights as a set of conditions and arrangements in which conflict had permeated the civil sphere.<sup>268</sup> We must remember that Melville understood Amasa Delano's actions as exemplary enforcement of fugitive slave law on a grand, global scale. His doubts about the "finality" of conflict—as, say, Douglass had imagined—allows us to examine, therefore, how "Benito Cereno" situates Babo's violence within the greater schematics of Delano's enforcement of domination and how this enforcement saturated the quotidian. This totalization of conflict throughout the civil sphere approximates Clausewitz, but just as importantly it borrows from and contributes to the concept of stasis, a concept that Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, among others, had used to theorize civil strife.

As a work of aesthetics, "Benito Cereno" styles Babo's plot rather differently than Douglass's narrative of struggle and escape. This anti-heroic, anti-cathartic, anti-progressive style has posed problematics for critics at least since F.O. Matthiessen's

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<sup>267</sup> In the previous chapter, "Bloody Enforcement on a Grand Global Scale," particularly in section 3, I explain in detail how Melville's understanding of this arrangement prefigures the historical and critical work of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Paul Virilio, among others, who examine the influence of Clausewitz's theory of "total war."

<sup>268</sup> See particularly Adler's reading of the final scene of *Moby-Dick* and the resolution of a conflict that culminates with a "memorable surrealistic image to pictorialize the idea of a transformed and peaceful world" (76).

American Renaissance and for those who have followed in Matthiessen's wake.<sup>269</sup> Of the dozens if not hundreds of pages devoted to Melville in American Renaissance, Matthiessen offered one solitary paragraph on "Benito Cereno":

Thus Melville's vision tended always to be more complex than the posing of a white innocence against a very black evil. In Moby Dick, and drastically in Pierre, the symbolical values of this contrast began so to interchange that they could not always be followed. In "Benito Cereno" they become distinct again, but the embodiment of good in the pale Spanish captain and of evil in the mutinied African crew, though pictorially and theatrically effective, was unfortunate in raising unanswered questions. Although the Negroes were savagely vindictive and drove a terror of blackness into Cereno's heart, the fact remains that they were slaves and that evil had thus originally been done to them. Melville's failure to reckon with this fact within the limits of his narrative makes its tragedy, for all its prolonged suspense, comparatively superficial.<sup>270</sup>

Rather than tracing out and theorizing the significance of how these "symbolical values" might be "interchanging" in "Benito Cereno" as they do in Melville's earlier works, Matthiessen argued, erroneously I believe, that these "values" become stable and "distinct again." Matthiessen's reading, therefore, posits that in order for Melville's narrative to arrive at any kind of tragic weightiness or import, rather than superficiality,

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<sup>269</sup> See for instance Stanley T. Williams, "'Follow Your Leader': Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" Virginia Quarterly Review, 23 (1947), 61-76; Rosalie Feltenstein, "Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" American Literature, 19 (1947), 245-55; Richard Harter Fogle, "The Monk and the Bachelor: Melville's Benito Cereno," Tulane Studies in English, 3 (1952), 155-78; Eleanor Simpson, "Melville and the Negro: From Typee to 'Benito Cereno,'" American Literature, 41 (March 1969).

<sup>270</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) 508-509.

Melville should have recognized that “evil had thus originally been done to [the slaves].” (Matthiessen misses, then, the torturous scene of Babo’s decapitation at the end of the story, a scene which I’ll address below.)

The idea that “Benito Cereno” is a failed tragedy or superficial narrative, as Matthiessen had argued, reflects not on Melville’s inability to recognize the problem of evil “done to” slaves. Indeed, as I have shown, as have a number of critics, Melville was keenly aware of this cruelty. The “failure” of the tragedy suggests, rather, Matthiessen’s own incapacity to recognize how “Benito Cereno” has rendered the problem of evil in terms of “values” unfamiliar to Matthiessen’s “economy” of struggle within tragedy, an economy of struggle evinced in slave rebellion that cannot be rendered in the relationship of agonistic struggle. Douglass had tried to work within this economy, providing a heroic representation of the slave rebel. For Melville, though, the violence of the slave revolt had challenged what Matthiessen is wont to describe as the “balance” and “reconciliation of opposites” essential to his definition of tragedy: “But not only must the author of tragedy have accepted the inevitable co-existence of good and evil in man’s nature, he must also possess the power to envisage some reconciliation between such opposites, and the control to hold an inexorable balance.”<sup>271</sup> Matthiessen finds the “savagely vindictive” “terror” of the rebellion incompatible with producing tragedy proper. The superficiality of Melville’s narrative, as Matthiessen had argued, falls outside the

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<sup>271</sup> Matthiessen, 180. In the opening of chapter five, “The Vision of Evil,” Matthiessen provides his definition of tragedy.

The creation of tragedy demands of its author a mature understanding of the relation of the individual to society, and, more especially, of the nature of good and evil. . . . For the hero of tragedy is never merely an individual, he is a man of action, in conflict with other individuals in a definite social order. . . . But not only must the author of tragedy have accepted the inevitable co-existence of good and evil in man’s nature, he must also possess the power to envisage some reconciliation between such opposites, and the control to hold an inexorable balance. (179-80).

“cathartic cultural form” and “dialectical/teleological economy,” to use William Spanos’s terms, that critics such as Matthiessen had attempted to read into nineteenth-century American works. I agree with Spanos that Matthiessen like others of the Cold-War era had indeed appropriated an Aristotelian, but more importantly, Hegelian concept of tragedy and conflict.<sup>272</sup> What Hegel had borrowed from the pre-Socratics—and what I would argue F.O. Matthiessen and others, including Douglass, inherited in their conceptions of tragedy and narrative—is the notion that opposing forces or agons express “the same elemental powers,” that they are “bound in a periodic order of reciprocity and symmetry.”<sup>273</sup>

Quite subtly, “Benito Cereno” avoids a conception of conflict that is understood in terms of symmetry and equilibrium. It poses, instead, an important historical problematic regarding the exercise of force by the U.S. after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act that intensifies and extends to the state a capacity to reinforce slavery’s strategy of domination. Rather than framing the question of violence in terms of

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<sup>272</sup> William Spanos, The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995). He writes, “Tragedy thus understood in Apollonian terms is a cathartic cultural form the dialectical/teleological economy of which enacts a ‘Hegelian’ Aufhebung: a sublimation of the conflicts of actual and immediate individual and collective human experience in the name of an anthropological end . . .” (39-40).

<sup>273</sup> Gellrich, 28. As Gellrich argues, Hegel’s theory of tragedy and concepts of conflict or *Kollision*, (differing from Plato’s suspicions of all conflict), “owes something to pre-Socratic ideas” and to Aristotle who also “had at his disposal” these ideas. According to these ideas—borrowed from such thinkers as Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Empedocles—“strife figures as a fundamental principle of structure in the cosmos, responsible for things coming to be or passing away in timely fashion, and thus, in a basic sense, a manifestation not of chaos or anarchy [as Plato argued] but of *logos*.” As Hegel theorized, strife (*eris*) is “a force of universal order” (13-14. See also pages 24-26). There is in Hegel’s theory of tragedy a “teleological rationalization” of struggle and *Kollision* between *agons* or agonistic forces. “Conflict, or rather war (*polemos*), is generalized for the structure of opposition that informs all things and produces *logos*.” For Hegel, whose theory of tragedy is rooted in some of the pre-Socratic ideas of conflict, “the universe is orderly not in spite of but because of strife and the violent opposition of elements” (Gellrich, 25-26). The “simultaneous destructive and revitalizing” qualities of *Kollision* renders this sort of conflict a “suitable structural principle for [Hegel’s] rationalizing account of tragedy” and his philosophy of history (Gellrich, 27). The synthesis produced in conflict as agonistic or *Kollision* “guarantees the forward thrust of the dialectic, as a principle of progress as history” (Gellrich, 28).

revolutionary emancipation and its triumph—a sense of order that emerges in the symmetric conflict of agons—Melville’s “Benito Cereno” meditates instead on the inhuman conditions out of which give rise the turbulence and asymmetric relationship of force between those who dominate and those, like Negro slaves, who are the subject of domination.

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Though the category “asymmetric conflict” isn’t formalized as a body of research until the latter half of the twentieth century, “Benito Cereno” depicts how this relationship of force has had a long historical entanglement with American power. First appearing in Andrew Mack’s “The Concept of Power and Its Uses in Explaining Asymmetric Conflict” in 1974, and supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the British Social Science Research Council, the category of “asymmetric conflict” as an object of study and a field of knowledge emerged in order to historicize and then theorize for the sake of strategy the disproportionate relationship of strong military state forces in conflict with weaker state or even non-state forces in the wake of the U.S.’s “failure” in Vietnam.<sup>274</sup> The central question of this research, as Mack articulated it in a 1975 essay, was “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars.”<sup>275</sup> The guerrilla tactics used by the Vietnamese against the U.S. exemplified the kind of relationship of power that this research could then trace to other conflicts that occurred in places like “Algiers, Cyprus, Aden, Morocco, and Tunisia,” whereby “local nationalist forces [or other aggregations] gained their objectives in armed confrontations with industrial powers which possessed

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<sup>274</sup> Andrew Mack, “The Concept of Power and its Uses in Explaining Asymmetric Conflict,” Richardson Institute for Conflict and Peace Research (London 1974).

<sup>275</sup> Andrew Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict,” World Politics. 27.2 (1975), 175-200.

an overwhelming superiority in conventional military capability.”<sup>276</sup> What Mack cites as “nationalist forces,” however, marks only one possible form of aggregation that can emerge as a response or counter-force to “metropolitan,” imperial power. This relationship of force could be found, historically, in the internal struggles between those committed to American order and “domestic enemies.”

In an archival collection arranged as The New American State Papers, and in the volume particularly focusing on source materials that document the “inconclusive guerrilla wars, such as the three fought with the Seminoles, and [other] violent threats to domestic tranquility,” editor Benjamin Cooling remarks, “what emerges most clearly” in this archive “is that organized violence through the agency of armed force was a central element in U.S. policy—foreign and domestic—during the period prior to the Civil War.”<sup>277</sup> This fact should not go unnoticed, as it suggests the centrality that military preparedness had played in an era where state violence was directed toward “not full-scale wars but small, often less than successful internal actions.”<sup>278</sup>

Asymmetry describes the relationship; guerrilla tactics articulate the type of force exercised by those who struggle against state domination. Though Mack omits from his analysis the “domestic” insurrections and the Negro slave revolts that occur in the nineteenth century (and earlier) as instances of asymmetric conflict, historian Herbert Aptheker had explicitly documented how the many insurrections by slaves (often in

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<sup>276</sup> Mack, 175.

<sup>277</sup> From “Introduction to Combat Operations” The New American State Papers: Military Affairs, Volume 4: Combat Operations, ed. Benjamin Franklin Cooling (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1979), ix.

<sup>278</sup> State Papers, ix.

collusion with American Indians) in the Americas evinced guerrilla warfare.<sup>279</sup> With the introduction and enforcement of chattel slavery in the New World since the seventeenth century, this type of conflict had become ubiquitous and regularly occurring. By the nineteenth century, especially during the 1850s, the moment out of which Douglass and Melville both take up the question of slave resistance, there is a general intensification of insurrectionary violence.<sup>280</sup> This violence, in turn, is coupled with a heightened security apparatus in the South, which in its implicit and explicit emergency status further deputizes and militarizes its white citizens in order to maintain control over Negro populations and to anticipate any possible threat of Negro slave terror. As I've described below, the federal enforcement of slave owners' property rights in the 1850s extended this security element throughout the U.S. and its territories.

In his comments on Nat Turner, Eric Sundquist has also touched upon the question of guerrilla warfare, and he aptly though briefly considers the effect of terror that arises out of Turner's guerrilla tactics.<sup>281</sup> What Sundquist overlooks in his treatment of Turner and his general references to guerrilla conflict, however, is the perpetual and irresolvable qualities of asymmetric conflict. Guerrilla tactics function within (and, indeed, are a function of) an arrangement of power in which decisive victory becomes nearly impossible to achieve for those subject to domination and brute force. This is precisely the type of arrangement which Melville had attempted to dramatize in "Benito Cereno." Like Clausewitz, who earlier in the nineteenth century had addressed the

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<sup>279</sup> See Herbert Aptheker, "Slave Guerrilla Warfare" in To Be Free: Studies in American Negro History (New York: International Publications, 1969, 1948).

<sup>280</sup> For more on this general intensification of conflict see again Aptheker's Chapter XIV, "1850-1860" in American Negro Slave Revolts.

<sup>281</sup> See Eric Sundquist, To Wake the Nations, 69-72.



question of guerilla conflict, or the “people’s war” as he described the Prussian resistance to France, Melville also understood that “the possibility of guerilla [conflict] alone” would not necessarily “bring any war to a decisive end.”<sup>282</sup>

Here I need to repeat the problematic with which I began—the problematic central to Melville’s meditation on violence and force in “Benito Cereno”: Melville attempted to dramatize the nineteenth-century American scene as a set of arrangements from which there is no ready escape, no resolution to strife. As it begins, so too does the story end: still caught *in medias res*—as entangled as the leitmotif of the knot that reappears throughout the story. The possibility of escape and the finality of conflict that was central to Douglass’s political, aesthetic, and rhetorical project, in Melville’s story becomes cast in shadowy doubt. Babo may have duped the American Amasa Delano and reversed, though temporarily, the relationship between master and slave, but in the end, the weight of “recaption,” evinced by Delano’s foot which “ground the prostrate Negro,” stifled the possibility of flight to Senegal (“Benito Cereno” 85). The story, though, does not end here—with Babo’s defeat and the containment of slave property—but with the subtle yet haunting image of a “subtle” mind: “the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot” (102). Melville’s mediation becomes as much about a lingering and historical intelligence under domination as it was about how the U.S. instantiated a form of state-sanctioned and enforced domination.

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Like Douglass, Melville assumed intelligence on the part of the rebellious slave. Rather than situating this intelligence within a heroic persona, though, Melville’s “Benito

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<sup>282</sup> John Ellis, From the Barrel of Gun: A History of Guerrilla, Revolutionary and Counter-Insurgency Warfare, from the Romans to the Present (London: Greenhill Books, 1995), 78.

Cereno” took up the question of Babo’s “hive of subtlety” as an historical and political problematic that had emerged with the trade and enforcement of human slavery. Where Douglass invoked Madison Washington’s actions as exemplary of the type of mind necessary from bringing about revolutionary, historic change, the possibility of escape from the bondage, Melville’s Babo seems coincidental with the long history of domination and, therefore, with insurrections that had defined arrangements of force in the Americas since the sixteenth century. In other words, the *dramatis persona* of Babo is not necessarily exemplary or exceptional (rhetorically or physically) in the ways that Madison is, but he does figure as an example of the uncountable minds in the long history of slavery and slave insurrections that had invented strategies for insurrection, invented tactics for the possibility of success, even as this success was temporary.

To avoid the detection of Amasa Delano’s intervention aboard the *San Dominick*, Babo’s insurrection necessitates a mask. He does this by actually inventing another “plot,” by discovering and making use of the discursive resources and topoi such as race and nationalism, gender and strength, sublimity and gothic aesthetics—the very topoi that give order, shape, and meaning to Delano’s world. After boarding and offering to help the suffering crew and “human cargo” of the *San Dominick*, Delano continues to believe the “story” about the cause of the ship’s demise told to him by Cereno, even though he senses at times that something is amiss. At one point, he conjectures, “If Don Benito’s story was throughout an *invention*, then every soul on board, down to the youngest negress, was his carefully drilled recruit in the *plot*” (56, *my emphasis*).

The reference to invention and plot here and elsewhere throughout the narrative underscores how “plot” operates ironically on two different registers: first, as piratical or

insurrectionary scheme; second, as fictional or dramatic narrative. How Babo exhibits inventiveness through his plots, and the role of invention in relation to tactics, I will elaborate anon. First, however, Delano's suspicions that there is a "plot" and that something is amiss aboard the *San Dominick* are not entirely wrong, but he is unable to recognize the source, attributing it mostly to the Spaniard. What makes it difficult for Delano to think the worst of the situation is that all aspects of the story and how the miserable condition befell the ship can be corroborated. In a mode of inquiry that resembles detective work, for instance, Delano asks other crew members if they can retell and therefore substantiate Benito Cereno's initial story about how the *San Dominick* had been imperiled and disabled off the island of St. Maria. In one instance, "He advanced to an old Barcelona tar, in ragged red breeches and dirty night-cap." Delano then asks him, "several questions concerning the voyage, questions purposely referring to several particulars in Don Benito's narrative, not previously corroborated by the impulsive cries greeting the visitor on first coming aboard. The questions were briefly answered, confirming all that remained to be confirmed of the story" (59-60).

It appears to Delano that every member aboard the *San Dominick*, "down to the youngest negress," is able to rehearse and perform the particulars of this miserable, gray narrative.

Occurring at least halfway through the novella, Benito Cereno "resumed, rehearsing to Captain Delano" the plot, making "repetitions of former statements" as if reciting lines, retelling "how it came to pass that the passage from Cape Horn to St. Maria had been so exceedingly long, now and then mingling with his words, incidental praises, less qualified than before, to the blacks, for their general good conduct" (73). And some moments later, in one of the most ironically constructed and highly theatrical scenes of

the novella, where the servant Babo is shaving his master, Delano is again confronted with the possibility that Cereno and all those aboard the *San Dominick* are masquerading while some other plot lies below the surface:

To Captain Delano's imagination, now again not wholly at rest, there was something so hollow in the Spaniard's manner, with apparently some reciprocal hollowness in the servant's dusky comment of silence, that the idea flashed across him, that possibly master and man, for some unknown purpose, were *acting out*, both in word and deed, nay, to the very tremor of Don Benito's limbs, some *juggling play before him*. Neither did the suspicion of collusion lack apparent support, from the fact of those whispered conferences before mentioned. *But then, what could be the object of enacting this play of the barber before him?* At last, regarding the notion as a whimsy, insensibly suggested, perhaps, by the theatrical aspect of Don Benito in his harlequin design, Captain Delano speedily banished it. (73-74, *My emphasis*)

More explicitly than any other scene in "Benito Cereno," this one presents the ironic masquerading of the conflict and of the temporary reversal of power relations between "master and "man." The irony—or the real force of Babo's invention—is that though the insurrection has temporarily reversed or inverted the relations of master and slave, the servant-slave continues to play the role of servant-slave. While Delano suspects that Cereno and Babo are "enacting this play of the barber before him," he is unable to recognize how the "play" performs the very thing that he habitually always-already anticipates. Even Cereno's seemingly "hollow" performance plays into that which Delano expects from the Spaniard's inadequate ability to execute the role of commander.

To Delano, Don Benito Cereno is the harlequin already masked. His scabbard “artificially stiffened” and “without sword,” he is an impotent who performs, as *commedia dell’arte*, the role of captain in a world that requires strong “policy.”

Though it is important to recognize, as many critics have, that Delano here continues to misread the shaving scene, a performance of the very master-slave relationship that has already been inverted, I want to suggest that performativity itself is not the central issue. Nor is it central that all those aboard the *San Dominick* are performing the “plot.” The real threat is the invention, a creative though potentially destructive force that borrows from the *loci* or *topoi* of Delano’s own cosmography.

Douglass’s protagonist uses physical strength coupled with his powers of persuasion equal to or greater than that of his oppressors. Babo evinces none of these qualities, as the story renders in the penultimate paragraph of the narrative: “As for the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot—his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat” (102). Against Delano’s “superior muscular strength,” here the full and ironic force of Babo’s cunning intelligence, “the head, that hive of subtly,” comes to the fore.

In the arrangement of the hunt, of chasing and fleeing, of applying force and exploiting subterfuges, Melville marked the arrangement *par excellence* of the mid-nineteenth-century moment. In Moby-Dick the question of intelligence, “malicious intelligence” as Ahab called it, Melville dramatized this arrangement through the hunt of the white whale. With further mediation on this arrangement and its link to the juridical and political problematic imposed by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Melville’s

attention turned directly to the figure of the slave in flight. Babo's intelligence and the tactics he deploys holds likeness to what Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant have described in their scholarship on ancient Greek culture as "a power of cunning and deceit" that "operates through disguise" (21). They trace these and similar tactics through the figure of an intelligence exhibited by *mētis*. Michel de Certeau would later call upon Detienne's and Vernant's work on Greek *mētis*, along with other "ancient ruses" such as the Chinese *I-Ching* and the Arabic *hīla*, to examine these inventive "tactics" as "an art of the week."<sup>283</sup> We need to remember, though, that Melville had long discovered these tactics as well in his own reading and philology. As Detienne and Vernant mark in a genealogy, the topic of "cunning intelligence" could be found, of course, in Homer's Odysseus, the man of twists and turns, but could be traced out in the influences that linked the writings of Aristotle to Plutarch and Oppian, figures whom Melville would have had access, either directly or indirectly.<sup>284</sup> Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey have also noted Melville's reading of Mungo Park and, therefore, the possibility that, through Park's knowledge of Senegalese culture and African irony, had based Babo's on the trickster figure, Brer Rabbit.<sup>285</sup>

As Vernant and Detienne claim, the history of *mētis* is long, "extending over more than ten centuries." My aim here is not to repeat this history but to draw out certain qualities and characteristics of intelligence and tactics that Babo evinces as a figure entangled in a relationship that pits him and other slaves against brute force and

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<sup>283</sup> de Certeau, 35-42.

<sup>284</sup> See chapter two, "Fishing for Whales as Practices of Empire"

<sup>285</sup> Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey, "The Death of Benito Cereno: A Reading of Herman Melville on Slavery: The Revolt on Board the Tryal," The Journal of Negro History 67:4 (1982): 287-301.

domination, to which the Greeks had also given names, *Bie* and *Kratos*.<sup>286</sup> It is out of this arrangement with domination that cunning intelligence has any chance for success. Metis “comes into play” in “the pursuit of success,” taking place “in a particular sphere of activity,” in a particularly sphere of conflict.<sup>287</sup> Writing in the same century as Melville, Clausewitz also explored the “tactics of the weak,” locating these tactics in practices of deception, trickery and wit, as de Certeau reminds us.<sup>288</sup> In opposition to Delano’s “muscular strength,” Babo must throughout resort to cunning (*dolos*), tricks, (*kerde*), and the ability to seize an opportunity, *kairos*.” Cunning intelligence and deceit, in other words, are those capacities which give “the weaker competitor the means of triumphing over the stronger, enabling the inferior to outdo the superior rival.”<sup>289</sup>

Babo’s insurrection and flight can only be successful if he is able to convince Delano that what he sees before him is not a Negro slave revolt but a ship in distress, one paralyzed by storms and bad currents and in need of his charity. As a weaker force in conflict with the strength of Delano, Babo must ironically continue to perform weakness and inferiority. Convincing Delano of requires Babo’s plot to develop from and deploy topoi that are congruent with Delano’s frame of reference, his own purview of the world and the place of America within it. The situation in which Babo and the other slaves find themselves calls for a way of concealing the revolt by posing or masking themselves as already-enslaved beings who show no signs of agency and intelligence equal to that of the American. They act the part of docile “Newfoundland dogs” as Delano expects them

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<sup>286</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 13.

<sup>287</sup> Detienne and Varnant, 11

<sup>288</sup> de Certeau, 37.

<sup>289</sup> Detienne and Varnant, 27. Leslie and Stuckey note these qualities in Babo as well (295).

to do, so their success in this instance depends upon Delano's continued belief in white supremacy and a racial-logical hierarchy—not only over Africana slaves but over the Spanish as well. Out of his invention must materialize the proper face (persona) for its role. This form of intelligence manifests itself “the thousand ploys which will make actions effective in the most varied of circumstances.”<sup>290</sup>

In Melville, “invention” assumes the tactical element of the field of battle that becomes central to the thinking of de Certeau, via the philology and classical research of Detienne and Vernant, but it likewise calls on a use central to the arena of rhetorical argument. Receiving its most influential treatment in Cicero's *De Inventione* and *De Oratore*, invention (from the Latin *inventio* or Greek *heuresis*) carries the double meaning of both *to make* and *to discover*. Whether in the arena of battle or the argument—the tactical challenges invoked by invention are similar: to invent what will help one succeed, to make or discover the topics that are suitable to the task at hand. The success of Cicero as orator and rhetorician, someone who was “an expert in the *ars topica*,” was a lesson that did not go unnoticed by Vico.<sup>291</sup> Asserting that rhetorical invention should be the principal or central component of education and the formation of intelligence, Vico posits in *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (On the Study of Methods of Our Time) that training in the *ars topica* is something that should not be lost to “modern” methods. Vico was of course in conflict at the time with Cartesian ideas about deduction and philosophical criticism, which he maintained had “utterly

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<sup>290</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 39-40.

<sup>291</sup> Giambattista Vico, *On the Study of Methods of Our Time*, trans. Elio Gianturco (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 16.



disregarded the art of topics.”<sup>292</sup> Recognizing the potential of rhetorical invention and the mastery of the “loci” that Cicero had exercised, Vico insists that it “was exactly by [the use of these loci] that he was able to dominate the law and courts, the Senate, and (most important of all) the Assemblies of the people” (16). Vico’s argument about education on the *ars topica*, eloquence, and invention gives shape to other ideas about secular history and human making (that is, on *verum factum*). Vico’s use of the term “discoverta” (discovery), Giuseppe Mazzotta reminds us, “is not different from the *invention* rhetoricians such as Cicero have elaborated.”<sup>293</sup> Invention enacts not only an argument or tactic in conflict but recognizes the historical as integral to the conflict. “As a discovery of what the past keeps hidden, invention finds and brings to light what is always already there.”<sup>294</sup> As does Melville’s novella through the figure of Babo, invention or “discovery” has “the power to unsettle the past and the understanding of the past.”<sup>295</sup> In “Benito Cereno,” Babo’s invention unsettles the past and in doing so shows its entanglement with the present.

Like trickery, entanglements and knots, too, are the “special weapons of *mētis*, Detienne and Vernant remind us.<sup>296</sup> “To weave (*plékein*) and to twist (*stréphein*) are key

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<sup>292</sup> Vico, *On the Study of Methods*, 14. “Traditional ‘topics,’” he instructed, “is the art of finding [discovering or making] ‘the medium,’ i.e., the middle term: in the conventional language of scholasticism, “medium” indicates what the Latins call *argumentum*. Those who know all the loci, i.e., the lines of argument to be used, are able (by operation not unlike reading the printed characters on a page) to grasp extemporaneously the elements of persuasion inherent in any question or case” (15).

<sup>293</sup> Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 60.

<sup>294</sup> Mazzotta, 60.

<sup>295</sup> Mazzotta, 60.

<sup>296</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 41.

words in the terminology connected with it.”<sup>297</sup> The Greeks had given the name *Strophaios* (from which we recognize the word strophe) to the “sophist who knows how to interweave and twist together speeches and artifices.”<sup>298</sup> Speeches interwoven can become traps or knotted puzzles, “which is the name given to some types of fishing nets.”<sup>299</sup> Melville offers little in the way of dramatizing Babo’s speech as Douglass does Madison Washington’s. Still, Babo’s plot evinces an ability on the slave’s part to discover and manipulate words, albeit they are mouthed through other characters such as Benito Cereno. But this, perhaps, becomes the trap of all traps, a work of sophistry so elaborate, a knot so tangled that Delano finds it nearly incapable of deciphering.

Discovering from an ancient set of figures, and from the classical and humanists notion of invention, Melville’s philology allowed him to create a scenario for thinking or understanding the arrangements that had come to define American power in the nineteenth-century present. In other words, the figures that Melville deploys in “Benito Cereno” and elsewhere cannot be taken as universal, but through invention they help form a more adequate way for depicting how the U.S. was shaping the world in the 1850s. Babo’s tactics, his “plot,” centered on subtlety, cunning, and trickery, but as trickster this does not necessarily make him heroic as other critics have claimed, most notably Leslie and Stuckey.<sup>300</sup> Trickery and cunning are not necessarily the mode of “final escape,” as Douglass had presented Madison Washington, but a set of tactics that might make possible a brief survival, maybe a temporary reversal of power relations.

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<sup>297</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 41.

<sup>298</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 41.

<sup>299</sup> Detienne and Vernant, 42.

<sup>300</sup> Leslie and Stuckey, 298.

Melville understood cunning and trickery as the tactics for a set of arrangements that resembled an aporiatic struggle, of stasis. Success under these conditions of domination was ephemeral. Babo's flight from bondage, we are forced painfully to recall, ends in his own destruction and the return of his comrades to bondage.

As all stories do, the words on the page come to an end, but in "Benito Cereno," the force of the narrative re-installs the haunting presence of Babo's mind into a present that has yet to recognize and understand how to escape from the very forces and conditions in which this order of intelligence becomes necessary: "Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (102).

It's telling that Melville's many images of entrapment or sabotage, of waif and line, figure also into his metaphors for writing and narrative. Moby-Dick performs an elaborate weave, "Benito Cereno" a hempen knot. In The Confidence-Man (1857), his final work of prose fiction from that turbulent decade, Melville would twist and turn one of the most elaborate *aporias*, would enact a sophistry so cunning that at least one critic would call it "one of the most *infidel* books ever written by an American."<sup>301</sup> In the following and final chapter, I take up the question of Melville's writing as infidelity, examining how The Confidence-Man establishes a problematic around the notion of movement and freedom, particularly how freedom as movement had formed the basis of a liberal doxa in the U.S. This is the same order of liberalism that, while celebrating the U.S. as an instantiation of movement and energy, had paradoxically produced a set of

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<sup>301</sup> Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York: Viking Press, 1950), 250.

conditions resembling stasis. Like “Benito Cereno,” The Confidence-Man becomes an exercise of inventing in stasis, where stasis signifies both the arrest of movement but also, historically and critically, the conditions of internal strife.

## 4. THE FIDÈLE AND AMERICAN MOVEMENT

### 4.1. A New *Stultifera Navis*

Here reigned the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide.

Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man<sup>302</sup>

But the historian will see that trade was the principle of Liberty; that trade planted America and destroyed Feudalism; that it makes peace and keeps peace, and it will abolish slavery. . . . Every line of history inspires a confidence that we shall not go far wrong; that things mend.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American”<sup>303</sup>

The mast which had powered Sabastian Brant’s *Stultifera Navis* (1494) gives way to the force and intensity of the steam engine in The Confidence-Man (1857). Not only

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<sup>302</sup> Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade [April 1, 1857] ed. Stephen Matterson (New York: Penguin, 1990), 14. Hereafter, I cite this text parenthetically by page number.

<sup>303</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American” [1844], Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures (New York: Library of America, 1983), 221.

an intensification of energy, but a new historical and political arrangement had provided Herman Melville an American “ship of fools” (21)—this one moving “helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide” (14). With the power of steam, Melville ironically linked the movement of commerce, and with commerce the necessity of “confidence” and “trust.” “Confidence is the indispensable basis of all sorts of business transactions,” preaches the “philosopher” of the “Intelligence Office,” satirically echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson’s sentiments in his 1844 lecture “The Young American.”<sup>304</sup> “Without it, commerce between man and man, as between country and country, would, like a watch, run down and stop” (155).

Time, trade, and markets form the confluence of a cosmopolitan movement that Melville allegorizes in the flow of the Mississippi River: “The sky slides into blue, the bluffs into bloom, the rapid Mississippi expands; runs sparkling and gurgling all over in eddies; *one magnified wake of a seventy-four*” (94, *my emphasis*). Yet sky, bluffs, and bloom figure the extent of the landscape in The Confidence-Man, and nature’s innocence is cast with the pall of the war machine—troped metonymically by the displacing force of the dominant nineteenth-century gunship, the seventy-four.<sup>305</sup> Preceding this, the

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<sup>304</sup> Who is this “philosopher” of the “intelligence office”? Though critics have referred to the essay “Friendship” as an object of Melville’s satire in The Confidence-Man, it seems clear from the beginning that Melville is also alluding to Emerson’s 1844 lecture “The Young American.” In that lecture, Emerson waxes philosophic on trade:

Trade goes to make the governments insignificant, and to bring every kind of faculty of every individual that can in any manner serve any person, on sale. Instead of a huge Army and Navy, and Executive Departments, it converts Government into an *Intelligence-Office*, where every man may find what he wishes to buy, and expose what he has to sell, not only produce and manufactures, but are, skill, and intellectual and moral values.” (221, *my emphasis*)

On Melville’s depictions and allusions to Emerson and Thoreau in The Confidence-Man see also these important essays: Egbert S. Oliver, “Melville’s Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in ‘The Confidence-Man,’” *College English* 8:2 (Nov. 1946), 61-72; Hershel Parker, “Melville’s Satire of Emerson and Thoreau: An Evaluation of the Evidence,” American Transcendental Quarterly, 7 (Summer, 1970), 61-67.

<sup>305</sup> One of the most comprehensive texts on the Seventy-Four gun ship is Jean Boudriot’s The Seventy-Four Gun Ship: A Practical Treatise on the Art of Naval Architecture in 4 volumes. trans. David H. Roberts.

opening of the narrative offers another iconic instrument of siege and security: The *Fidèle* “might at distance have been mistaken by strangers for some whitewashed fort on a floating isle” (13). The allusion is subtle, but here the fortresses and strategies designed by the seventeenth-century military engineer Sébastien Le Prestre Vauban cannot be mistaken. Vauban’s name had circulated with some regularity in nineteenth-century U.S. discourse.<sup>306</sup> And as Paul Virilio reminds readers, it was Vauban’s conception of the modern fortress that gave rise to a “fatal merger” between the “association of wealth and the production of destruction.”<sup>307</sup> The liberalization of trade or “Bourgeois power,” Virilio calls it, “is military even more than economic, but it relates most directly to the occult permanence of the state of siege.”<sup>308</sup> Melville’s floating “whitewashed” fortress riding the cosmopolitan and confident tide anticipates catastrophes seen and unseen from its interior, and it depicts the subtle and not so subtle ways the “state of siege” accompanied and made possible the continuation of trade. Like other works that I have examined in this dissertation, The Confidence-Man presents a world in which the practices of war had permeated the quotidian, totalizing the field of conflict on a global scale. Here, Melville links this order of conflict directly to the energies of trade and

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(Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986-1988). See also John F. Guilmartin’s review of this text in Technology and Culture 32:2 (April 1991), 440-41. As Roberts claims, “Boudriot was particularly fascinated by warships, which he approached not just as isolated artifacts or even as peculiarly interesting design studies—though he does that too—but as components of a dynamic political, economic, and social system” (440).

<sup>306</sup> One article on the “Fortification of Paris,” for instance, appears in Littell’s Living Age 11:130 (November 7, 1846), a publication to which Melville had ready access. Littell’s also published a number of articles mentioning Vauban before and after Melville’s publication of The Confidence-Man in 1857.

<sup>307</sup> Paul Virilio, Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology. trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext[e], 1977), 11-12.

<sup>308</sup> Virilio, Speed and Politics, 11.

commerce, the “confident tide” and kinetic forces of the market made possible by American power.

Compressed and framed through the “small embrasure-like windows,” the view from aboard the *Fidèle* offers nothing to resemble an American vista as Whitman had imagined it, no perspective of the sublime horizon (13). Labyrinthine and claustrophobic, the quarters of the steamboat come to resemble the narrative’s perplexed arrangement, closing in on a myopic vision of trade and exchange between characters:

Merchants on ’change seem the passengers that buzz on her decks, while, quarters unseen, comes a murmur as of bees in the comb. Fine promenades, domed saloons, long galleries, sunny balconies, confidential passages, bridal chambers, state-rooms plenty as pigeon-holes, and out-of-the-way retreats like secret drawers in an escritoire, present like facilities for publicity or privacy. Auctioneer or coiner, with equal ease, might somewhere here drive his trade. (13)

The mass of the “whitewashed fort” shrinks to the inner space of exchange, the space of the market. Yet this interiority, as I will show in more detail below, recalls the violence and siege of the world exterior, recalls with it a “metaphysics”—as in the chapters on the “Metaphysics of Indian-Hating”—that makes possible the removal and annihilation of populations who impede or who are otherwise un-assimilable to the flow and fluidity of commerce and the expansion of the market. The Mississippi in conjunction with the locomotion and technologies of steam (boat and train)<sup>309</sup>—all of which Melville craftily stages—had been integral to the intensification and expansion of the slave trade as

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<sup>309</sup> On steam technology and the development of energy at this time, see Vaclav Smil, Energy in World History (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), particularly 161-169.



well.<sup>310</sup> Onward towards New Orleans, the hub from which the business of the internal slave trade operated, the *Fidèle* transports those whose occupations drive and derive from the slave market: “Auctioneer or coiner, with equal ease, might somewhere here drive his trade” (13).

In the marketplace of exchange aboard the *Fidèle*, The Confidence-Man alludes to a more extensive and ineluctable arrangement of forces that had entangled white settlers, native Indians, and Negro slaves, and this arrangement extends geographically, politically, and economically to spaces over the globe. Concomitant with Indian “removal” is an emerging American cosmopolitanism, what the confidence-man describes as “World Charity,” enabling the removal of “obstacles” and opening “Hong Kong” and other markets to the “Wall street spirit” (51-52). The “dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West” as an expression of movement and the advancement of trade carried in its wake not the “principle of Liberty,” as Emerson was wont to claim in 1844,<sup>311</sup> but an intensification of managerial forces that further organized (and even annihilated) human life around the needs of liberating the market. It was in this sense of liberation and liberalism that Melville discovered the war-like catastrophes of the 1850s.<sup>312</sup>

The Confidence-Man considers the stakes of “movement” as it was invoked in nineteenth-century American discourse and liberal imagination. This ship of fools, a

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<sup>310</sup> I will elaborate on this connection below. On the expansion of the internal slave trade, see David Brion Davis’s Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 182.

<sup>311</sup> Emerson, “The Young American,” 221.

<sup>312</sup> Carolyn Karcher has aptly noted the reference to the internal slave trade in The Confidence-Man. Rather than examining how Melville problematizes “trade” and “confidence” in relation to a growing liberal economy, Karcher organizes her argument around the “theme of apocalyptic judgement.” See Carolyn L. Karcher, Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

Latinization and genitive construction of the “faithful,” steeps of Melville’s satirical attitude toward an American belief in “a sublime and friendly Destiny,” as Emerson phrased it.<sup>313</sup> The steamboat *Fidèle* further alludes to the image of religious conquest and crusades from earlier centuries. Melville’s The Confidence-Man poignantly recollects the violence and conditions in which the terms Infidel and Faithful had been deployed, re-associating the conflicts of sixteenth-century Spain with the arrangements of power evidenced in the nineteenth-century U.S. As Deborah Root’s research has shown, the inquisitorial system in Spain made use of the juridical categories infidel and heretic in order to address the problems posed by an “internal” and “potentially dangerous element of society.”<sup>314</sup> Recalling the arrangement of power inscribed with the Spanish state’s “Morisco problem,”<sup>315</sup> Melville wasn’t the first to layer palimpsest-like the new map of conquest occurring in North America with the religious wars of the past. Henry David Thoreau—who, along with Emerson, appears as an object of Melville’s satire in The Confidence-Man<sup>316</sup>—had lectured at the Concord Lyceum in 1851 on the habit of “walking.” In contrast to Melville’s spiny irony, Thoreau put it in terms metaphysical and imperial, associating the act of walking with the violence exercised by the Faithful’s conflict against Muslims:

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<sup>313</sup> Emerson, “The Young American,” 217.

<sup>314</sup> Deborah Root, “Speaking Christian: Orthodoxy and Difference in Sixteenth-Century Spain,” Representations 23 (Summer, 1988), 118-134.

<sup>315</sup> Root, 120.

<sup>316</sup> Again, some of the important essays that trace this connection are Egbert S. Oliver, “Melville’s Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in ‘The Confidence-Man,’” College English 8:2 (Nov. 1946), 61-72; Hershel Parker, “Melville’s Satire of Emerson and Thoreau: An Evaluation of the Evidence,” American Transcendental Quarterly, 7 (Summer, 1970), 61-67.

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understand the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks,--who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*: which word is beautifully derived ‘from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going *à la Sainte Terre*,’ to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, ‘There goes a *Sainte-Terrer*,’ a Suanterer,--a Holy-Lander.<sup>317</sup>

Thoreau’s iconic image of pilgrimage then melds with the march of war, sanctioned by State and Church: “*For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels.*”<sup>318</sup>

With all the references to movement and transport, of river current and capital fluidity, the narrative ironically and paradoxically seems arrested in a recurrent play of exchange, a hellish repetition the likes of which we might find in the depths of Dante’s *Inferno*. This, though, is the material of Melville’s *theatrum mundi* or, more specifically, *theatrum Americana*.<sup>319</sup> The narrator at the book’s end calls it a “masquerade” (298). And as critic Helen P. Trimpi has recognized, *The Confidence-Man* evinces elements that locate it within the satirical genre of dramatic pantomime and the *commedia dell’arte*.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” [Lecture delivered in 1851; published posthumously in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862] *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 2001), 225.

<sup>318</sup> Thoreau, “Walking,” 225 (*my emphasis*). Though Thoreau has reached a level of celebrity status for his critique of war in “Civil Disobedience,” Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* finds a complicity or relationship between Thoreau’s liberalism and the war machine.

<sup>319</sup> For a brief and helpful understanding of the concept of *theatrum mundi*, or the stage as the “scene of the world,” see Harriett Bloker Hawkins, “‘All the World’s a Stage’: Some Illustrations of the *Theatrum Mundi*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17:2 (Spring 1966), 174-78.

<sup>320</sup> Helen P. Trimpi, “Harlequin-Confidence Man: The Satirical Tradition of *Commedia Dell’Arte* and Pantomime in Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 16 (Spring 1974), 147-93. See also Helen P Trimpi, *Melville’s Confidence Men and American Politics in the 1850s* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1987).

This is not the adventure novel, not a Typee (1846) or an Omoo (1847), which many of his contemporaries had admired and praised.

In this drama of arrested development, Melville's pantomime displays human interaction as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of Adam Smith's liberal economy of exchange, an order in which "exchange" functions as the arrangement *par excellence* between humans. For Smith, humans are "naturally" inclined towards the market, and the world of "exchange" defines the activity of the species:

The division of labour, from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of human wisdom, which foresees and intends the general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in *human nature* which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and *exchange one thing for another*.<sup>321</sup>

Aboard Melville's *Fidèle*, there is little that resembles human relations and meaning outside the marketplace of exchange, little in the way of a shared and common human experience which arises out of struggle or adventure, little or no sense of development or depth of character, and, finally, no arrival at a destination—just the "waning light expired" and "a darkness" into which "the cosmopolitan kindly led the old man away" (298). The masquerade replaces the development inherent in the novel proper, and the market aboard the *Fidèle* evinces a world not necessarily of movement and progress, but of a pantomimic repetition found in the market.

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<sup>321</sup> Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol 1. [1776] (New York: Bantam, 2003), 22 (*my emphasis*).

In a world in which human social relations are constitutive of market exchange, where humans function as nodes through which “business” and commerce “transact,” The Confidence-Man raises the prickly and dirty questions that liberalism of the nineteenth-century had failed to ask: How, for instance, does a liberal political economy and the cosmopolitan ideals of trade account for (and manage through violence) those “populations” who inhibit or render inefficient the expansion and fluidity of the market, who cannot enter confidently into commercial trade, who do not, in other words, exhibit the “natural” inclination of the species toward exchange? Melville had looked to the example of indigenous populations in the Americas, to populations in China and other parts of the globe where humans were encountering the oncoming influence and violence of trade.<sup>322</sup> In the U.S and the world over, he found populations inchoate with the development of economic modernity, populations constituted as “problems” that would have to be “converted” by missionary “World Charity” or “removed” by “strategical, implacable, and lonesome vengeance” (180). Melville’s story forces the question, too, that critic Uday Mehta has recently examined, namely how “liberalism, from the seventeenth century to the present, has prided itself on its universality and political inclusionary character” yet “is unmistakably marked by the systematic and sustained political exclusion of various groups and ‘types’ of people.”<sup>323</sup> Melville’s rendering of the U.S. “West” here depicts more than exclusion, however. As Joyce Adler has previously noted, chapter after chapter in The Confidence-Man alludes to signs of

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<sup>322</sup> See chapter seven, “A Gentleman with the Gold Sleeve-Buttons.”

<sup>323</sup> Uday S. Mehta, “Liberal Strategies of Exclusion,” Politics and Society 18:4 (1990), 427-454.

disease, death, and annihilation.<sup>324</sup> These conditions which had attended the market and its aftermath poignantly suggest Melville's incredulity in Emerson's "confidence that we shall not go far wrong; that things mend."<sup>325</sup> Like others of the period, Emerson extolled the "anti-feudal power of Commerce" as a defining characteristic of America's "beneficent" "influence" over the globe, marked it also as the thing that "makes peace and keeps peace."<sup>326</sup> The Confidence-Man pantomimes liberalism's sense of historic progress and the market's liberating potential. It dramatizes, too, those arrangements, those characters and ideas that were giving force and legitimacy to the liberal imagination in the nineteenth century, and in this pantomime we can discover how the doctrine of movement and futurity elides its own complicity in catastrophe and conflict. "The liberal imagination," argue Nicholas and Peter Onuf, "emphasizes the good in modern history."<sup>327</sup> "Even if national imperatives, market forces, and the risks of unlimited war threaten the modern world with moral and material catastrophes, and perhaps even with destruction, the liberal imagination can only look ahead."<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> See Joyce Sparer Adler, chapter seven of War in Melville's Imagination (New York and London: New York University Press, 1981), 113. Adler further remarks that the "picture" Melville develops in The Confidence-Man "is of a masked war" (113). Adler then locates this type of war in a "psychologically, morally, and intellectually sick society, destructive and self-destructive" (113).

<sup>325</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Young American" [1844], Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures (New York: Library of America, 1983), 221.

<sup>326</sup> Emerson, "The Young American," 217-218, 221. Interestingly, Emerson's image of the globe, one might add, anticipates Thomas Friedman's liberal cosmology: "The sphere is flattened at the poles, and swelled at the equator," Emerson explains. See Thomas L. Friedman, The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2006). See also the opening chapter of Louis Hartz's influential study on the development of liberalism in the U.S. The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955).

<sup>327</sup> Nicholas Onuf and Peter Onuf, Markets, Nations, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 18.

<sup>328</sup> Onuf and Onuf, 18.

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As had his previous works of fiction, particularly those that I have examined in other chapters of this thesis, The Confidence-Man had called on topics and examples of the historical past in order to discover and know better the mid-nineteenth-century world that was undergoing transformation. Attendant with the ever expanding world of trade, with exchange functioning as the reductive and repetitive activity of the species, and with the forces of “removal” accompanying the “opening” of new markets over the globe, Melville found instances of conflict that had yet to be fully grasped or understood by his contemporaries in the mid-nineteenth-century. The conditions and arrangement of forces that had helped define sixteenth-century Spain provided one example, and Melville, as I’ve already begun to show, made use of the terms *Fidèle* and *Infidel* to discover associations between that moment and the conflict of the nineteenth-century. Yet Melville complicates and conflates this with other orders of conflict.

In the following sections, “Missionary Liberalism, World Charity, and Immovable China” and “Weaving the Web of Trade,” I examine how Melville’s critical dramatization of Indian “removal” in North America coincided with more extensive attempts by the U.S. to expand global trade, specifically opening up the Chinese market. Melville’s pantomime discloses the coalition between state forces, Christian missionary projects, and commercial interests. While a number of literary critics have given attention to the “Metaphysics of Indian-Hating” chapters of The Confidence-Man, noting Melville’s condemnation of the racism and violence that accompanied these actions, few have addressed how this “metaphysics” accompanied and extended liberalism’s reach in other parts of the globe. I argue here that Melville discloses the violence inherent in the

metaphysics of liberalism, a metaphysics that had informed Adam Smith's notion that the human's "natural" inclination is towards the market, towards exchange.

I follow this section by addressing how Melville's story pantomimes and critically dramatizes "movement" as it was invoked in nineteenth-century American discourse and liberal imagination, particularly in relation to the expansion of trade and the "destiny" of the nation. I note how The Confidence-Man depicts an absurd repetition of exchange that collapses in on itself, captures the *Fidèle* and its passengers in a state of arrest, or what I will call the stasis of American movement. I examine this paradox—the stasis of movement—by first recalling the historical importance of the term *stasis* in political and philosophical thought dating back to Thucydides. I elaborate on how stasis has denoted both civil faction as well as disease, and how it takes on important significance in nineteenth-century liberalism. In the liberal tendency towards movement, Paul Virilio reminds us, "stasis is death."<sup>329</sup> Michel Foucault helps recall how an entire discourse on disease and health had emerged in this period and had been applied broadly to the "population." As Melville's story dramatizes, and as Michel Foucault's work on nineteenth-century "biopolitics" helps explain, the violence necessary for diagnosing and removing those populations who were marked as the stasis or disease of liberal movement, ironically or paradoxically, instantiates a stasis even greater. In this way, I argue, Melville's pantomime thereby exposes the logic of biopolitics and the metaphysics of liberalism that had been practiced on populations who were seen as unwilling or incapable of entering the market.

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<sup>329</sup> Paul Virilio, 13.



I proceed by making further note of literary criticism that has attended to the question of movement. I take my cue from Jonathan Arac's illuminating study of nineteenth-century "locomotion" and "vision" in the works of Melville, Dickens, Hawthorne, and Carlyle.<sup>330</sup> It is here also that I demarcate a critical departure. In addressing the question of motion as it arises in Melville's The Confidence-Man, a title to which Arac gives little attention in Commissioned Spirits, I argue that Melville attempts not so much to offer a new "system of vision and knowledge," as Arac suggests.<sup>331</sup> Instead, The Confidence-Man troubles the arrangement of power that makes this vision possible, just as "Benito Cereno" had problematized the arrangement of forces that made possible a near-totalizing perspective, global purview, and a managerial force exercised on a grand scale. Indeed, The Confidence-Man troubles this metaphysics to the point that it provides no alternative, no "newly conceived order," as Arac has described it, no passage out (*poros*). By suggesting this, I intend to show how Melville's literary invention attempted to document rather imaginatively the nineteenth-century moment as one defined and influenced by a permanent "state of siege"—to recall Virilio again—a conflict in which its effects could be found in the American West extending to the Asia Pacific, that was coincident with the forces that Emerson and others had extolled for expanding trade and bringing peace. Like other works that I've examined in this dissertation, The Confidence-Man obliges questions about American power. We could put the question this way: What order of conflict becomes integral with American

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<sup>330</sup> Jonathan Arac, Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

<sup>331</sup> Arac, 17. Under a section heading titled, "Systems of Vision and Knowledge," Arac writes, "The major nineteenth-century writers with whom I am concerned participated in one of the greatest enterprises of the age, the production of knowledge from the observation of disorder and disruption, thereby transforming that disorder into the basis for a newly conceived order" (17).

conceptions of movement, energy, transport, and exchange? The Confidence-Man marks as an attempt to invent (to make and discover) under the conditions of stasis, to dramatize stasis, where stasis signifies not just an arrest of movement but also, historically and critically, the conditions of internal strife coincident with American power.

#### 4.2. Missionary Liberalism, World Charity, and Immovable China

Yes. You see, this doing good to the world by driblets amounts to nothing. I am for doing good to the world with a will. I am for doing good to the world once and for all and having done with it. Do but think, my dear sir, of the eddies and maëlstroms of pagans in China. People here have no conception of it. Of a frosty morning in Hong Kong, pauper pagans are found dead in the streets like so many nipped peas in a bin of peas. To be an immortal being in China is no more distinction than to be a snow-flake in a snow-squall. What are a score or two missionaries to such a people? A pinch of snuff to the kraken. I am for sending ten thousand missionaries in a body and converting the Chinese *en masse* within six months of the debarkation. The thing is then done, and turn to something else.

From The Confidence-Man<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Melville, The Confidence-Man, 52.

In a conversation with the “gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons,” the confidence-man evinces a cosmopolitan view of the world. Regarding the population and the order of life in China, he says to his fellow traveler, “People here have no conception of it” (52). After he alludes to the conditions in which “the pauper and pagan” populations exists, he then proceeds by explaining his intentions to enter the “charity business” (49). Inspired by the global possibilities that emerged from the model of the 1851 “World’s Fair in London”—a space which instantiated the concentration and worldly exhibition of industrial technology and wealth—the confidence-man explains how “on the fourth day” there he issued his “prospectus of the World’s Charity” (50). “Let some world-wide good to the world-wide cause be now done,” he proclaims (49-50). Playing the role of “philanthropist and financier” (50), the confidence-man reveals his design towards converting and bringing the “heathen” populations of China and other parts of the world into the greater flow and fluidity of modernity. And in a kind of sophistry and convoluted explication, he conflates the project of Christian missionary “charity” with the “magnifying and energizing” force of what he calls the “the Wall street spirit”:

“Yes; for if, confessedly, certain spiritual ends are to be gained but through the auxiliary agency of worldly means, then, to the surer gaining of such spiritual ends, the example of worldly policy in worldly projects should not by spiritual projectors be slighted.” (52)

As if to make this clearer, he provides a strategic map akin to nineteenth-century imperialist cartography, dividing the globe into manageable parcels:

In brief, the conversion of the heathen, so far, at least, as depending on human effort, would, by the World’s Charity, be let out on contract. So much by bid for

converting India, so much for Borneo, so much of Africa. Competition allowed, stimulus would be given. There would be no lethargy of monopoly. (52)

All the populations of the world, he says, can be “brought to bear” by “Archimedean money-power” (52). The tropes of water and motion abound, and Melville’s character associates the project of World Charity with Archimedean mechanisms and energies that render “eddies and maëlstroms” into the smooth flowing form or “confident tide” of the “liberal Mississippi” (52, 14, 158). “This doing good to the world by *driblets* amounts to nothing,” he reasons (52, *my emphasis*).

In contrast to these “driblets,” the confidence-man notes the hyperbolic scale of World Charity. And this hyperbole marks the exponential force needed to enact it: “I am, and always have been, as I always will be, I trust, in the charity business, as you call it; but charity is not like a pin, one to make the head, and the other the point; charity is a work to which a good workman may be competent in all branches” (49). The allusion to Adam Smith is clear, particularly Smith’s opening chapter in The Wealth of Nations that formulates a new theory of political economy and wealth based the division of labor. In contrast to the mercantilist paradigm of wealth as the accumulation of bullion, the wealth Smith envisioned was made possible by increased labor productivity, whereby wealth could be achieved through such ostensibly inconsequential commodities like the pin. By assigning individuals specific and specialized tasks, labor power could then yield higher production. “The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is anywhere directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labor.”<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Adam Smith, 9.

The confidence-man's comments regarding the labor necessary to produce the "pin" verses the work required in spreading charity seem, at first, to contradict Smith's theory of labor and, moreover, seem to contradict Smith's ideas generally about the role of charity in the commercial world. If we recall Smith's protracted argument about "charity," he begins by first acknowledging that "man stands at all times in need of the co-operation and assistance of great multitudes."<sup>334</sup> In developing this line of thought, Smith theorizes this "need" in humans as the basis from which emerges the "trucking disposition," the human's "natural" inclination towards exchange:

In almost every other race of animals each individual, when it is grown to maturity, is entirely independent, and in its natural state has occasion for the assistance of no living creature. But man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and shew them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this. Give me what I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from the regard to their own interest."<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Smith, 23.

<sup>335</sup> Smith, 23-24.

The question, however, that arises out of the allusion to Smith in the narrative is not how the confidence-man's scheme sets out to controvert Smith's understanding of the division of labor, but how charity, particularly "World Charity," as a force extends the logic and potential of Smith's political economy. For Smith, humanity "occasions the help of his brethren," but this "help" is mediated through the market. Exchange provides the necessary conditions under which these needs are best met. Or as Smith states, "It is in this manner [of the market] that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of."<sup>336</sup>

Applying this logic *in extremis*, the confidence-man envisions charity as something exercised with and through the "Wall street spirit," as the thing that brings to bear "Archimedean money-power." It is in this sense that the confidence-man's hyperbolic and global strategy qua "charity" amplifies and extends Smith's understanding of money-power as "the great wheel of circulation, the great instrument of commerce."<sup>337</sup> Pantomiming the telic and progressive registers attendant with the discourse of liberal economic development, the confidence-man understands "charity" as "converting the Chinese *en masse*," so that "within six months . . . the thing is then done," and he can then "turn to something else" (52). In this American arrangement of power, the confidence-man gestures to the conflation between commercial expansion and the role of Christian missionary influence over a population whose order of life and "nature" has yet entered into the fluid medium of the market.

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<sup>336</sup> Smith, 23.

<sup>337</sup> Smith, 371.

Here Melville's story recollects a topic that had long haunted his fiction and memory. It was in Typee (1846), in fact, that he first critiqued the practices of Christian missionary influence over the Sandwich Islands, where "the natives had been civilized into draught horses and evangelized into beasts of burden."<sup>338</sup> The U.S. edition of Typee would endure censorship and expurgation because of its depiction of the missionaries in Honolulu, but Melville's narrative maligned other modern forces as well.<sup>339</sup> In the opening pages of Typee, the splendid view of Nukuheva bay is interrupted by "the tri-colored flag of France trailing over the stern of six vessels, whose black hulls and bristling broadsides proclaimed their warlike character."<sup>340</sup> This was not merely an indictment of the French, however; the image of state imperial force broadly, and U.S. force specifically which followed and further assisted the security of commercial expansion, would reemerge in many of Melville's other works over the next decade.<sup>341</sup> In Moby-Dick, for instance, Melville problematizes Ishmael's "advocacy" on behalf of the laborers of the whaling business, for it was in this form of advocacy that Ishmael unwittingly supplies an apologetics for the commercial and imperial influence wrought by the industry. "For many years past the whale-ship has been the pioneer in ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth," Ishmael claims. "She has explored seas and archipelagoes which had no chart, where no Cook or Vancouver had ever

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<sup>338</sup> Herman Melville, Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life [1846] (New York: Penguin, 1996), 196.

<sup>339</sup> On the U.S. "Revised Edition" of Typee, see Hershel Parker, Herman Melville, 1819-1851, Volume 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 416-17.

<sup>340</sup> Melville, Typee, 12.

<sup>341</sup> Here I agree with Joyce Adler that Melville's Typee and Omoo had characterized the violence wrought by European and American imperial interests. See Adler, 6-7.

sailed.”<sup>342</sup> “If American and European men-of-war now peacefully ride in once savage harbors,” Ishmael continues, “let them fire salutes to the honor and the glory of the whale-ship, which originally showed them the way, and first interpreted between them and the savages.”<sup>343</sup> Concluding this panegyric, he proclaims, “Whaling is imperial!”<sup>344</sup>

As Jean Heffer has recently documented, whaling was indeed imperial, and the American whalers were by the mid-nineteenth century particularly responsible for opening up and even dominating the industry in the Pacific.<sup>345</sup> “Without the whalers,” Heffer notes, “the Hawaiian islands might never have come under American domination.”<sup>346</sup> With the ever-increasing presence of whale ships in the Pacific, and with the increasing cartographic knowledge, so, too, came the further expansion of commerce. “The Hawaiian economy became one more cog in the machinery of the international market and, since the great majority of companies, such as Elisha Grimes and Company or Pierce and Brewer, had come there from the United States, ever closer links were forged with America.”<sup>347</sup> To protect these commercial interests and the expanding web of trade that entangled the Sandwich Islands, “the United States Navy was led to show the flag in the Pacific.” It was in the Pacific, and because of its growing interests in the Pacific, that

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<sup>342</sup> Herman Melville, Moby-Dick; or, The Whale [1851] (New York and London: Norton, 2002), 99.

<sup>343</sup> Melville, Moby-Dick, 99.

<sup>344</sup> Melville, Moby-Dick, 100.

<sup>345</sup> Jean Heffer, The United States and the Pacific: History of a Frontier (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 47-49, 61.

<sup>346</sup> Heffer, 64.

<sup>347</sup> Heffer, 64.



the United States was beginning to develop and flex its political, economic, and military muscle.<sup>348</sup>

Though non-conspiratorial and not always ideologically in concert with each other, religious, commercial, and state forces nevertheless coalesced around a grander effort to open the terraqueous globe to their interests, ultimately bringing about further development and the expansion of trade.<sup>349</sup> While whaling may have provided the initial cartography and established a series of links across the more expansive portions of the Pacific—particularly making Hawaii a principal hub of this commercial expansion—“nothing tangible could have been accomplished without” the influence of Christian evangelical missions and the efforts to transform or convert indigenous populations.<sup>350</sup> Originating from a “spiritual crisis which shook New England” in the wake of rationalism and the “triumph of Unitarianism,” American Protestantism had responded by energizing both its domestic evangelical efforts as well as developing those abroad.<sup>351</sup> “In an attempt to re-create their lost unity,” Jean Heffer explains, “Congregationalist and Presbyterian ministers, brought together by the Plan of Union of 1801, turned to the foreign missions as one way to enlist all the New England Protestants in a common cause, which it hoped would heal the rift between denominations and bridge their political differences.”<sup>352</sup> And in 1810, New England Calvinists had established their own

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<sup>348</sup> Heffer, 64.

<sup>349</sup> As Heffer aptly notes, “Evangelization did not necessarily imply Westernization, nor, more specifically, Americanization . . . However, it is difficult to separate New England Congregationalism from the broader political and social context” (113).

<sup>350</sup> Heffer, 115.

<sup>351</sup> Heffer, 109-110.

<sup>352</sup> Heffer 110.

version of the British London Missionary Society. The American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (ABCFM), as they called it, provided new impetus to unify their efforts and solidify their identity by “bringing the Gospel to heathens and saving them from eternal damnation.”<sup>353</sup> It was because of Christian missionary efforts, Heffer notes, that “by 1840 the groundwork had already been laid for the Americanization of Hawaii.”<sup>354</sup>

While the U.S. could boast of a successful “Americanization” and subjugation of the Polynesians, the same could not be said of U.S. influence in and over China through the 1850s.<sup>355</sup> Even by 1870, “in comparison with Hawaii, the efforts of American Protestant missionaries in China seemed to have been a failure.”<sup>356</sup> This fact by itself underscores the hyperbole of the confidence-man’s “charitable” effort to send, with “Wall street spirit,” a fleet of “ten thousand missionaries” in order to convert “the Chinese *en masse* within six months of debarkation” (52). By pantomiming the missionary discourse and its conflation with commercial money-power, The Confidence-Man further exposes the problematic China had posed to the expanding political economies of the West. That is, it satirically recollects how critical the missionary

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<sup>353</sup> Heffer, 110.

<sup>354</sup> Heffer, 115. Heffer notes further:

“In 1848, the Boston organization felt that the conversion of the populace had gone far enough for them to envisage an independent Hawaiian church, where Americans, whether from the United States or born locally, and native Polynesians would worship side by side. Fifteen years later, it transferred its remaining responsibilities to the Hawaiian Evangelical Association. Nevertheless, it was the resident or naturalized Yankees who retained control. The indigenous culture, weakened by a declining population, was losing ground, contrary to the hopes of the first missionaries. In 1853, the government chose English as the language of instruction in Hawaiian schools. Conversion to Christianity was leading inexorably to Westernization” (115).

<sup>355</sup> Jean Heffer has provided extensive and specific evidence of this in his research. See Heffer, 115-118.

<sup>356</sup> Heffer 117.

project of converting heathens to the ways of Christianity was to a broader cultural leveling that made liberal trade more efficient and successful. This sense of cultural leveling couldn't have been rendered more poignantly than in the confidence-man's response to his interlocutor's skepticism that China poses certain "obstacles": "Obstacles? I have confidence to remove obstacles, though mountains" (52).

That China had been understood as one "obstacle" to the growing political economy of trade and commerce was not new to Melville's meditations on American power. Several years earlier, Melville dramatized in White-Jacket (1849) an association between the doctrine of futurity in American thought and the expansion of U.S. political economy:

The world has arrived at a period which renders it the part of Wisdom to pay homage to the prospective precedents of the Future in preference to those of the Past. The Past is dead, and has no resurrection; but the Future is, in all things, our friend. . . . Those who are solely governed by the Past stand like Lot's wife, crystallized in the act of looking backward, and forever incapable of looking before. Let us leave the Past, then, to dictate laws to *immovable China*.<sup>357</sup>

The reference to "immovable China" at first seems oblique, but Melville had aptly discovered and then characterized in several works of prose—including White-Jacket as

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<sup>357</sup> Herman Melville, White-Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War [1849] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 152 (*my emphasis*). As I've argued in an earlier chapter, we need to account for how Melville stages and dramatizes American habits of mind. Critics have often sometimes conflated Melville with his characters. A recent example of this reading is Andrew Delbanco's biography, Melville: His World and Work (New York: Knopf, 2005). Delbanco reads this moment in Melville's text as a reflection of Melville's own attitudes about American progress and its imperial ambitions. Considering how Melville often returned, in ironic style, to the question of populations abroad, in fact coining the term "snivilization" as a sign of his repugnance of the violence that had accompanied European and American influence on populations around the globe, Delbanco doesn't always account for the degrees of mediation that Melville had wittingly invented in his prose fiction.

we see here, Moby-Dick, “Benito Cereno,” and again in The Confidence-Man, among others—how American habit of thought conceived of China as both a destination as well as an “obstacle” to be overcome or moved—that is, the population that by force or conversion must yet be brought into the modern liberal movement of trade. In a 1841 publication on “Free Trade,” for instance, the authors depict China as the antithesis of the “goals of the modern movement,” noting China’s impenetrability and how these conditions have created a “people” who “vegetate in stupidity, barbarism, and selfishness.”<sup>358</sup>

In characterizing China, the confidence-man seems to draw from a range of discursive sources, including Christian Protestant missionary discourse as well as from Smith’s descriptions of China as “stationary”—a nation which exhibits a historical and economic “stand still.” “China has long been one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world,” Smith explains. “*It seems, however, to have been long stationary.*” Smith then refers to Marco Polo, “who visited [China] more than five hundred years ago.” Comparing Polo’s description of the “cultivation, industry, and populousness,” with those descriptions made “by travelers in the present times,” Smith finds there to be very little difference, very little progress or change.<sup>359</sup>

As a cosmopolitan “traveler” himself—or so he wants others to believe—the confidence-man describes the impoverished conditions of China: “Of a frosty morning in Hong Kong, pauper pagans are found dead in the streets like so many nipped peas in a

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<sup>358</sup> “Free Trade,” The United States Democratic Review 9:40 (Oct. 1841) 341-342. The article is a reprint of the “Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Import Duties,” London, 1840.

<sup>359</sup> Smith, 100-3 (*my emphasis*).

bin of peas” (52). The image of pauperism provides the confidence-man all the evidence he needs to initiate “Global Charity” and “energize” or “quicken” the missions in China with the “Wall street spirit.” His description, moreover, bears likenesses to Smith’s, who remarks, “The poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpasses that of the most beggarly nations in Europe. In the neighborhood of Canton many hundred, it is commonly said, many thousand families have no habitation on the land, but live constantly in little fishing boats upon the rivers and canals.”<sup>360</sup> Smith’s mediated account of the impoverished conditions in China continues, and he provides further images of people eating “the nastiest garbage” or “any carrion” that a “European ship” might throw “overboard.”<sup>361</sup> As does the confidence-man, Smith uses this depiction of Chinese poverty as evidence for his own theories on wealth and modern political economy. Several pages later, Smith associates China’s “stationary” status to its “neglect” of “foreign commerce”: “A country . . . which admits the vessels of foreign nations into one or two of its ports only, cannot transact the same quantity of business which it might do with different laws and institutions.”<sup>362</sup>

While for Smith the “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange” is a “natural” human disposition, he finds this inadequately developed in Chinese culture, hence the reason for its seemingly “stationary” tendencies.<sup>363</sup> If the Chinese were to open up to the world of international trade, or, as he puts it, open up to “more extensive navigation, the

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<sup>360</sup> Smith, 102.

<sup>361</sup> Smith, 102.

<sup>362</sup> Smith, 132. In a later section, Smith again repeats, “China seems to be standing still” (258).

<sup>363</sup> Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol 1. [1776] (New York: Bantam, 2003), 22 (*my emphasis*).

Chinese would *naturally* learn the art of using and constructing themselves all the different machines made use of in other countries.”<sup>364</sup>

#### 4.3. Weaving the Web of Trade

“And Indian-hating still exists; and, no doubt will continue to exist, so long as Indians do.”

##### The Confidence-Man<sup>365</sup>

In this pantomime that hyperbolizes and satirizes Adam Smith’s understanding of the human’s “natural” inclination towards commerce and exchange, and satirizes too the role that “charity” plays as a set of relations among humans that becomes subsumed by the market, Melville’s The Confidence-Man further raises questions regarding liberal conceptions of humanity. More specifically, it dramatizes how human “nature” is constituted through the relations of trade and exchange under the emerging conditions and arrangements of liberalism. It provides further glimpses of how orders of human populations are subject to specific operations of power, especially as the “nature” of these populations come under suspicion—that is, are interpreted as inchoate or alien to liberal political economy. At one moment in Melville’s narrative, the confidence-man (or one version of him) attempts to pawn herbal medicine. His words put into play the liberal conception of “nature.” Describing the herbal remedy, he proclaims, “Trust me, nature is

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<sup>364</sup> Smith, 866 (*my emphasis*).

<sup>365</sup> Melville, The Confidence-Man, 172.

health; for health is good, and nature cannot work ill . . . Get nature, and you get well” (99). Getting “nature” here, of course, means also to enter into exchange, to pay “half a dollar a vial” (100).

In chapter twenty-five, the “cosmopolitan” encounters “The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating.” In a work of prose that jump-cuts more often than not from one scene of exchange to the next, the story of Colonel Jon Moredock, “Indian-hater of Illinois,” importantly plays out over three continuous chapters. The problem of mediation becomes immediately apparent, as Moredock’s tale is notably twice or thrice removed from the “passenger” who retells the story: “I never fully saw the man [Moredock], yet, have I, one way and another, heard about as much of him as any other; in particular, have I heard his history again and again from my father’s friend, James Hall, the judge, you know” (171). Melville, in fact, recasts the 1846 publication of James Hall’s Wilderness and the Warpath.<sup>366</sup>

While many critics have written extensively on this section of The Confidence-Man, few have linked it to the broader questions regarding liberalism and an intensification of managerial forces that further organize human life around the needs of opening the market. Michael Rogin has made mention of how “the confidence man exposes the absent core of marketplace reality itself,” and here his reading holds some adjacency to my own.<sup>367</sup> His analysis, however, then veers towards explicating the “absent core,” examining how Melville’s masquerade “calls attention to the fictionalized,

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<sup>366</sup> See Mary K. Bercaw, Melville’s Sources (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 86.

<sup>367</sup> Michael Rogin, 239.

self-constructed character of American life.”<sup>368</sup> Taking a different approach, my aim has been to theorize more fully how Melville stages the “marketplace” as the thing around which human life on the globe is organized and managed. The Confidence-Man depicts the metaphysics of Indian-hatred as a counterpart to nineteenth-century forces set on liberalizing and expanding trade, particularly trade that had confronted populations who would not or could not enter into the smooth and fluid relations of exchange. Melville’s character uses the terms “Indian molestation,” and we can recognize how these terms ironically abbreviate the long history of colonial and indigenous relations in America, a history which Melville’s Moby-Dick helps to recollect as well by alluding to the Pequots’ fate after 1637. In the nineteenth-century occasion, Melville makes clear that the role of the “Indian-hater” is to clear the path by “strategical, implacable, and lonesome vengeance” (180), remove those populations who may impede or who are otherwise unassimilable to the greater movement of trade.

Joyce Adler refers (rather vaguely) to this order of conflict in The Confidence-Man as a “masked war,” but her argument then turns to the “warring impulses within individuals.”<sup>369</sup> This idea gets lost by the end of her analysis, however, and it is there that war, for Adler, seems less about individuals and more about “race extermination.”<sup>370</sup> “In the Indian-hating section of The Confidence-Man,” she argues, “the war is the war of white America against the American Indian, and the ‘historian’ is its accessory.”<sup>371</sup> Adler aptly recalls the following line from The Confidence-Man: “And Indian-hating still

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<sup>368</sup> Michael Rogin, 239.

<sup>369</sup> Adler, 113.

<sup>370</sup> Adler, 131.

<sup>371</sup> Adler, 131.



exists; and, no doubt will continue to exist, so long as Indians do” (172). This is the same line that I’ve used in the above epigraph to this section. She then writes, “[These words] take on a new, more sinister meaning when the whole book has been read, for it is clear then that the judge is not making a sad prediction but setting forth the doctrine of race extermination. He can be seen, then, to have expressed from the beginning the view of the master race.”<sup>372</sup> For Adler, “race” seems to function as a given, a priori category. To complicate Adler’s argument, and to further theorize how the question of race and conflict come together in The Confidence-Man, I want to suggest that Melville’s narrative dramatizes how race and racial-logic are a function of the conflict, not the conflict itself. What is at stake in The Confidence-Man is a metaphysics that makes “race” possible. That “Indian-hating still exists,” that it “will continue to exist, so long as Indians do,” presents again the problematic entanglement between a nineteenth-century metaphysics and perpetual conflict, the totalized “state of siege.”<sup>373</sup> In other words, conflict arises and continues to arise with the very metaphysics that invokes race as an index for measuring a population’s relationship to liberal political economy. The “Indian” functions as an order of humanity that exhibits an impasse to the movement and expansion of the market. We are reminded again and again of the liberal “confidence” that “removes obstacles, though mountains” (53).

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<sup>372</sup> Adler, 131.

<sup>373</sup> As I’ve discussed in the previous chapter, historian Robert Utley has demonstrated how conflict against Indians on the U.S. frontier approximated total war. See Robert M. Utley, “Total War on the American Indian Frontier” in Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914. Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Forster, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 402. See Weigley, The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973). The conflict on the “Indian frontier,” Weigley notes, required energies greater than preparing for a “European-style war” (67).

As I've attempted to show in the previous section, this metaphysics is not necessarily isolated to Indian hatred and removal. For the Chinese, whose development seems caught in a kind of stasis or "station," the liberal missionary cosmopolitanism of the confidence-man calls for a cultural conversion that would enable the Chinese to both open up and enter into the market. Under the metaphysics of liberalism, "nature" (and the discourse of "nature" and "race" are not far removed) operates as a conceptual category for indexing a population's proximity, inadequacy, or obdurate relation to the market. The "nature" of American Indians and Chinese, as well as the "nature" of the populations from India, Borneo, and Africa, and those from potentially other parts of the globe, is continually read through a hermeneutic that allows liberalism to gage and respond to orders of human life that are or are not "naturally" inclined to the market. This metaphysics further legitimizes particular mechanisms that intervene and manage populations, whether by "removal" or "conversion."

Of course, U.S. expansion under the ideology of Manifest Destiny had played a part in Melville's satire of American life in The Confidence-Man, as critics have repeatedly noted.<sup>374</sup> As Joyce Adler reminds us, James Hall's "history" showcases the grander strategy of Indian removal and annihilation that accompanied the further conquest of territory, "the ever-beckoning seductions of a fertile and virgin land" (177).<sup>375</sup> More than depicting a frontier narrative, however, Melville's pantomime, I argue, dramatizes the arrangements and conditions in which trade and "business

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<sup>374</sup> William Spanos reiterates this idea in his recent essay on The Confidence-Man. See William Spanos, "American Exceptionalism, the Jeremiad, and the Frontier: From the Puritans to the Neo-Con-Man," boundary 2 34:1 (2007), 35-66.

<sup>375</sup> Adler make note of how the text repeats the word "history" three times. See Adler, chapter seven of War in Melville's Imagination, 111-115.

transactions” were made possible. The Confidence-Man, moreover, seems less interested in the debates that raged during the early and mid-nineteenth century between the protectionists and proponents of free trade than he is in the overwhelming sense that the “business transaction” (155) itself had become the arrangement *par excellence* between humans, that a liberal economy, despite the debates, had come to define the world in which humans interacted. In other words, though he had satirized the propensity in the U.S. towards free trade, this wouldn’t have made him a protectionist. In fact, as Nicholas and Peter Onuf suggest, the debate had not been about trade itself but how best to achieve trade, how best to interpret Adam Smith’s understanding of wealth and the role of the nation or nations. Should the “progressive development” of trade, as protectionists had argued, give priority to “the home market”? Or should the development of trade, as Ricardo had written, function in the “universal society of nations through the civilized world”?<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> On the history and context of the debates between protectionists and free trader, see (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 256.

Whigs and Democrats of the period had fiercely debated and battled over the banking system in the U.S., particularly over the role of the Bank of the United States and the role federal regulation vis-à-vis the more autonomous control of the state banks. While these debates helped carve important political differences, both expressed an interest in providing a system for the maintenance of trade and exchange. How this should be done had often been the point of contention, particularly as the Jacksonians dismantled the Bank of the United States. As historian Murray Rothbard has argued, the Jacksonians were not “ignorant anti-capitalist agrarians” as many previous historians had described them. “They were libertarian; they strongly favored free enterprise and free markets, but they just as strongly opposed subsidies and monopoly privileges conveyed by government to business or to any other group. They favored absolutely minimal government, certainly at the federal level, but also at the state level. They believed that government should be confined to upholding the rights of private property.” See Murray N. Rothbard, A History of Money and Banking in the United States: The Colonial Era to World War II (Auburn, Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2002), 91.

In the spirit of accelerating and making an apt set of conditions for the continuation of free trade, the intentions of Jacksonian policies, as Rothbard explained it, were not that far removed from Daniel Webster’s Whig position. Webster’s speech on “Currency” argued, “Every man, Sir, who looks over this vast country, and contemplates the commercial connection of its various parts, must see the great importance that this exchange should be cheap and easy.” Christopher Newfield explains that Webster favored a “federally sponsored uniform currency while rejecting “local self-regulation” of the state banks.

Along with the currency (and counterfeits) that change hands aboard the *Fidèle*, Melville's novel depicts human beings as the indispensable nexus of these arrangements, as the nodes through which capital and commerce must pass. Any exchange requires confidence, a trait or capacity found in humans. Chapter after chapter, confidence-men attempt to seal the deal by reminding potential victims that the world requires confidence, not the kind of meditative thought exemplified by minds skeptical of empire, minds like Tacitus and Thucydides. "Whatever our lot, we should read serene and cheery books, fitted to inspire love and trust," remarks one confidence-man to an unsuspecting "sophomore." "But Tacitus!" The confidence-man then further explains, "he is the most extraordinary example of a heretic; not one iota of confidence in his kind. . . . Without confidence himself, Tacitus destroys it in all his readers" (35).

The "all infusing spirit of the West" has less to do with land than it does with what Emerson and others praised as "the thousand various threads" bound fast in a "web" of human and commercial connections. Locomotive and steamboat were the means by which space and time could be annihilated, and Emerson, like others of his moment, celebrated the "steam [that] has narrowed the Atlantic to a strait," but these forms of kinetic energy and transport were the means to an end, the means to "bring people so much nearer" for the sake of trade.<sup>377</sup> In the latter portions of The Confidence-Man, we

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What was central to Webster's intention was the "unity" of the commercial market, not necessarily the "freedom." "Its means is not free contract but a uniform currency, one in which a central power guarantees the mutual resemblance, the perfect correspondence, of all signs of value." See Christopher Newfield, The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.), 196. Newfield cites Daniel Webster, "The Currency, September 28 and October 3, 1837," in The Papers of Daniel Webster: Speeches and Formal Writings, vol. 2, 1834-1852, ed. Charles M. Wiltse (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 165, 162, 193.

<sup>377</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Young American" [1844], Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures (New York: Library of America, 1983), 216, 213.

recall, Emerson appears in the character of Mark Winsome. His “disciple and poet,” Thoreau, dons the mask of Egbert, and regurgitates the “doctrines” of the “master’s” “system” (233-36).

In the “web” of commercial and human connections, Emerson somewhat awkwardly invoked cosmopolitanism through the new nation’s “Americanizing influence,” which, he further observed, “promises to disclose new virtues for ages to come.”<sup>378</sup> Here he envisioned America as the exemplary force for “the uprising and culmination of the new and anti-feudal power of Commerce,” and therefore as an order of cosmopolitanism made possible through the connections of its population.<sup>379</sup>

A heterogeneous population crowding on all ships from all corners of the world to the great gates of North America, namely Boston, New York, and New Orleans, and thence proceeding inward to the prairie and the mountains, and quickly contributing their private thought to the public opinion, their toll to the treasury, and their vote to the election, it cannot be doubted that the legislation of this country should become more catholic and cosmopolitan than that of any other.<sup>380</sup>

Emerson’s “Young American” lecture (1844) had echoed (though with some distortion and reverberation) a Kantian understanding of trade as the grounds for perpetual peace, “that [trade] makes peace and keeps peace.”<sup>381</sup> The reverberations had, most likely made their way through an elaborate and extensive discourse on free trade, picking up ideas Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations, too. Thomas Cooper a decade before Emerson had

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<sup>378</sup> Emerson, “The Young American,” 216-17.

<sup>379</sup> Emerson, “The Young American,” 217.

<sup>380</sup> Emerson, “The Young American,” 217.

<sup>381</sup> Emerson, “The Young American,” 221.

asserted that “War is seldom the interest of any nation, and is likely to be less so in the future than formerly.”<sup>382</sup> Free trade, he insisted, connects everyone as “whole human family,” “makes one family of all the nations on earth.”<sup>383</sup> And in 1838, the economist Henry Vethake argued that the principles of a free trade would help bring about “the piece of the world.”<sup>384</sup> In a “Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons” on the topic of “Free Trade” (1840), which was reprinted a year later in the U.S. by the Democratic Review, the authors wrote, “[Free Trade] is the offspring of a grand movement, the first-fruits of a rich harvest, the precursor of a mighty, world embracing revolution.”<sup>385</sup> Like Emerson, this document saw the liberalizing of markets and the expansion of free trade as a greater step toward global progress:

[Free trade] is connected with a great question of political and social improvement, with the elevation of the depressed millions, with the expansion of the sphere of human activity and happiness, with the progress of civilization and refinement, and with the establishment of universal peace over the globe.<sup>386</sup>

Contrary to Emerson’s liberal sensibilities and belief that “trade” was the “plant which grows wherever there is peace, as soon as there is peace, and as long as there is peace,”

<sup>387</sup> Melville’s The Confidence-Man re-imagines the historical and material conditions of commerce in less than pacific terms, especially as it coincided with the intensification

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<sup>382</sup> Cited in Unof and Unof, 261.

<sup>383</sup> Cited in Unof and Unof, 261.

<sup>384</sup> Cited in Unof and Unof, 261.

<sup>385</sup> “Free Trade,” The United States Democratic Review 9:40 (Oct. 1841), 329.

<sup>386</sup> “Free Trade,” Democratic Review, 329.

<sup>387</sup> Emerson, “The Young American,” 220.

and expansion of American power in the 1850s. Emerson's "web" had for Melville become an instantiation of strife and conflict—a "state of siege" that accompanied what some understood as forces of liberation. While Emerson had imagined this power in terms of progress, peace, and movement, Melville's The Confidence-Man dramatizes paradoxically this movement as a set of conditions and arrangements resembling stasis.

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In what follows, I examine the term "stasis" as a critical category in political and philosophical thought. I further note how stasis denoted in the classical sense both civil faction as well as disease, and how it takes on important significance in nineteenth-century liberalism and the emergence of what Foucault calls biopolitics.

#### 4.4. The Stasis of Movement

Narratively speaking, The Confidence Man is meager and monotonous. A work like Candide, which expresses somewhat similar thoughts, is still viable because, as a tale, it moves; moves swiftly, gaily, and variously; Melville's book is all but motionless."

Newton Arvin<sup>388</sup>

It its immediate sense, the term stasis denotes a standing (*histanai*) or stoppage. We are reminded of Newton Arvin's condemnation of the The Confidence-Man for its lack of movement and motionless. In what follows, I attempt to theorize this

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<sup>388</sup> Arvin, 250.

“motionless” tale in relation to a long historical discussion on “stasis.” From its earliest instantiations, particularly as it was used by classical political theory, stasis referred to faction or discord, civil strife or even anarchy. Classicists have debated over its exact translation. One of the earliest and most influential writings on the term, preceding Plato’s and Aristotle’s thinking, was the Greek historian Thucydides, who documented the stasis at Corcyra—depicting how stasis emerged out of conditions made possible by the Peloponnesian war.<sup>389</sup> Hobbes’s translation of the History of the Peloponnesian War had used the term “sedition,” and in this notable passage from Book Three, the stasis of Corcyra depicts not only a civil strife but a corruption of *logos*, meaning, and value:

But war, taking away the affluence of daily necessaries, is a most violent master, and conformeth most men’s passions to the present occasion. The cities therefore being now in sedition, and those that fell into it later having heard what had been done in the former, they far exceeded the same in newness of conceit, both for the art of assailing and for the strangeness of revenges. The received value of names imposed for signification of things, was changed into arbitrary. For inconsiderate boldness, was counted true-hearted manliness: provident deliberation, a handsome fear; modesty, the cloak of cowardice; to be wise in every thing, to be lazy in every thing. A furious suddenness was reputed a point of valour. To re-advise for the better security, was held for a fair pretext of tergiversation. He that was fierce, was always trusty; and he that contraried such a one, was suspected. He that did insidiate, if it took, was a wise man; but he that could smell out a trap laid, a more dangerous man than he. . . . In brief, he that could outstrip another in

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<sup>389</sup> Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War. As I mention above, Thucydides like Tacitus shows up as a “heretic” and counter-force to “confidence.”



the doing of an evil act, or that could persuade another thereto that never meant it, was commended.<sup>390</sup>

As Kostas Kalimtzis has recently argued, the “dominant image” that the Greeks associated with stasis was not merely “intransigent factions,” but the “governing concept of νόσος (*nosos*) or disease.”<sup>391</sup> After Plato and Aristotle, the conceptual connection between stasis and disease would follow the meaning and use of the term up through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. As the Oxford English Dictionary notes, it was in the eighteenth century that the term was applied by medical and physiological discourse to diagnose “a stagnation of the humors” in the body.<sup>392</sup>

By the twentieth century, physician Walter Cannon, in the book The Wisdom of the Body (1932), had expanded this concept and coined the term “homeostasis” to denote how the body underwent particular regulating and self-regulating mechanisms for “stabilizing” the “fluid matrix of the body.”<sup>393</sup> Understood as an “open system,” the body required mechanisms to maintain the proper “balance” or “steady states” of

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<sup>390</sup> Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War, trans. Thomas Hobbes and ed. Richard Schlatter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1975), 3:82 (222-223).

<sup>391</sup> For one of the more extensive discussions on stasis as disease, see Kostas Kalimtzis, Aristotle on Political Enmity and Disease: An Inquiry into Stasis (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), 5. For other work on the stasis in Thucydides as well as classical political philosophy, see For a beginning list of scholarship on the topic of stasis, see Clifford Orwin, “Stasis and Plague: Thucydides on the Dissolution of Society,” The Journal of Politics 50:4 (Nov. 1988), 831-847; Peter T. Manicas, “War, Stasis, and Greek Political Thought,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 24:4 (Oct. 1982), 673-688; Alexander Fuks, “Thucydides and the Stasis at Corcyra: Thuc., III, 82-3[Thuc.], III, 84,” The American Journal of Philology 92:1 (Jan. 1971), 48-55; Jonathan J. Price, Thucydides and Internal War (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Michelle Gellrich, Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict Since Aristotle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>392</sup> See “Stasis” in Oxford English Dictionary, which cites the Chamber Cyclopaedia of 1753. This sense of the term was used in Todd’s Cyclopaedia of Anatomy (1835-6) as well.

<sup>393</sup> See opening chapters of Walter B. Cannon, The Wisdom of the Body (New York: W.W. Norton, 1932).

equilibrium for health.<sup>394</sup> In this sense, Cannon had invoked the older and residual meaning of stasis as disease (*nosos*), designating homeostasis as the means of regulating and keeping the body free from illness or “defects.” In the closing chapter of his book, Cannon enlarged his theory of homeostasis to encompass and find parallel the “body physiologic” with the “body politic.”<sup>395</sup> Michel Foucault’s research and lectures from the mid- to late-1970s would provide a critical genealogy and further problematize the kind of discourse that Cannon was invoking in the 1930s, arguing in fact that this discourse and the mechanisms associated with “homeostasis” were already in place by the early nineteenth century. In the opening of his epilogue, Cannon asks, “Are there not general principles of stabilization?”<sup>396</sup> “May not the new insight into the devices for stabilizing the human organism, which we have been examining in the foregoing chapters, offer new insight into *defects* of social organization and into possible modes of *dealing with them*?”<sup>397</sup>

In Cannon’s work, there are echoes of Adam Smith, particularly Smith’s account of human historical development in relation to the market and the division of labor, and Cannon made use of liberal economic discourse to trope the mechanisms of homeostasis as a function that could be found also in the population *en masse*.<sup>398</sup> One of the central

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<sup>394</sup> Again, see the opening chapters of Cannon’s *The Wisdom of the Body* (1932).

<sup>395</sup> Cannon, 310.

<sup>396</sup> Cannon, 305.

<sup>397</sup> Cannon, 305-6 (*my emphasis*).

<sup>398</sup> As Nicholas and Peter Onuf remind us, Smith formulated the development of human history as four stages: hunting and gathering, herding, farming, and commerce. It is this latter that Cannon uses as analogy for the homeostatic relation of both cell biology in complex organisms and complex society, each of which requires a division of labor and means of distribution (*Markets, Nations, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War*, 40).

tenets of his analogy is the importance of the “division of labor” among those “massing of cells” organized in higher, more complex organisms.<sup>399</sup> “The list of special types of workers in a civilized society is almost unlimited. Again, like the division of labor in the animal organism, the division of labor in a complex social group has notable and positive effects.”<sup>400</sup> Cannon then situates the organization and division of labor into the larger schematics of a liberal political economy. I cite this passage at length:

In a functional sense the nearest equivalent to the fluid matrix of animal organisms that is found in a state or a nation is the system of distribution in all its aspects—canals, rivers, roads and railroads, with boats, trucks, trains, serving, like the blood and lymph, as common carriers; and the wholesale and retail purveyors, representing the less mobile portions of the system. In this vast and intricate stream, whose main channels and side branches reach more or less directly all communities, goods are placed, at their source, for carriage to other localities. These other localities are sources of goods which likewise are placed in the stream. Thus the products of farm and factory, of mine and forest, are borne to and fro. But it is permissible to take goods out of the stream only if goods of equivalent value are put back in it. Ordinarily, of course, this immediate exchange does not occur. It would be highly awkward. *To facilitate the process of exchange, money which has a generally recognized value, is employed.* Or credit may temporarily be its substitute. By means of his money or his credit any

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<sup>399</sup> Cannon, 308.

<sup>400</sup> Cannon, 310.

individual can take from the stream whatever he needs or desires. *Money and credit, therefore, become integral parts of the fluid matrix of society.*<sup>401</sup>

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In the mid- and late-1970s, Michel Foucault's research set out to examine an order of governance which, emerging in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, took up the problematic of "life" through the medical discourse of care for the body.<sup>402</sup> "It seems to me," he lectured, "that one of the basic phenomena of the nineteenth century was what might be called power's hold over life."<sup>403</sup> With the emphasis on "life," political right in the nineteenth century underwent one of the "greatest transformations," shifting from the "old" right of sovereignty, that is, "the right to take life or let live," to a "new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it." "It is a power," Foucault explained, "to make live and to let die."<sup>404</sup> This new right, this "biopolitics" he called it, constituted a reorganization of power that intervened with a new set of mechanisms, not on the individual necessarily as might disciplinary power (though this power was not entirely erased), but on the "population as a political problem."<sup>405</sup> "Of those mechanisms," Foucault claimed, "regulatory mechanisms" had been established in order to make for "an equilibrium,

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<sup>401</sup> Cannon, 314 (*my emphasis*).

<sup>402</sup> See Michel Foucault's lectures.

<sup>403</sup> Foucault, 239.

<sup>404</sup> Foucault, 241.

<sup>405</sup> Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 245.

maintain an average, *establish a sort of homeostasis*, and compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field.”<sup>406</sup>

This physiology and the mechanisms for determining health and diagnosing disease were transposed onto the population as a body politic, as biopolitic. In the language of physiology, homeostasis denotes the tendency to maintain normal, internal stability.<sup>407</sup> In this lecture, and others given over the following couple years, Foucault would expand on his understanding of “homeostasis” in terms of a broader “normalization” of the population.<sup>408</sup> What is important, that is, what emerged with this new arrangement of power were new technologies which were aimed at establishing and maintaining “a sort of homeostasis . . . by achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers.”<sup>409</sup> Coincident with the emergence of biopolitics, Foucault noted, are a whole set of regulatory forces, security forces, whose aims were to maintain the *homeostasis* of the population qua body. “It is, in a word, a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not [necessarily] disciplined, but regularized.”<sup>410</sup>

The emergence of a biopolites, and with it the mechanisms that determine health, that protect or secure health of the population, had coincided with preoccupations regarding the success of an expanding liberal economy and the further division of

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<sup>406</sup> Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 246. (*my emphasis*).

<sup>407</sup> See the Webster New World Dictionary.

<sup>408</sup> See Michel Foucault, Lectures 18 January 1978 and 25 January 1978 in Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78. ed. Michel Sanellart. Trans. Graham Burchell. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

<sup>409</sup> Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 249.

<sup>410</sup> Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 246-47.

labor.<sup>411</sup> Illnesses, broadly conceived, “sapped the population’s strength, shortened the working week, wasted energy, and cost money, both because they led to a fall in production and because treating them was expensive.”<sup>412</sup> If, as The Confidence-Man further dramatizes, the fluidity and movement of exchange and the flow of trade must go through humans, then the health, adequacy, and therefore integration of humans instantiates the object on which these mechanisms must focus. In this way, Melville had anticipated Foucault’s lengthy question on the politics of death, on the war machine, on security mechanism, that enforce and maintain “health” in a population that is integral to the market:

If it is true that the power of sovereignty is increasingly on the retreat and that disciplinary or regulatory power is on the advance, how will the power to kill and the function of murder operate in this technology of power, which takes life both as its object and its objective? How can a power such as this kill, if it is true that its basic function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances, to avoid accidents, and to compensate for failings? How, under these conditions, is it possible for a political power to kill, to call for deaths, to demand deaths, to give the order to kill, and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death? Given that this power’s objective is essentially to make live, how can it let die? How can the power of death, the function of death, be exercised in a political system centered upon biopower?<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> See Foucault’s Society Must Be Defended, 243-246, as well as Foucault’s “Lectures 18 January 1978 and 25 January 1978 in Security, Territory, Population, particularly pages 48-49.

<sup>412</sup> Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 244.

<sup>413</sup> Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 254.

Foucault's response to this question led him to think further how race or "racism intervenes." Melville's Confidence-Man imaginatively documents this moment when "race" enters into the domain of modern State power, when mechanisms are put in place to establish a "caesuras within a biological continuum."<sup>414</sup> Race or racism, Foucault reminds us, "can justify the murderous function of the State,"<sup>415</sup> can justify what the confidence-man sees as the natural "removal" of "obstacles" or internal threats.

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Jonathan Arac's Commissioned Spirits takes up the topic of movement in the works of Melville and his near contemporaries, Hawthorne, Dickens, and Carlyle, beginning with William Wordsworth. Lines from The Prelude provide the title for his study: "Like that of angels or *commissioned spirits*, / Fix us upon some lofty pinnacle, / Or in a ship on waters, with a world / Of life, and life-like mockery, beneath / Above, behind, far stretching and before."<sup>416</sup> These lines provide, too, the question of "overview" and "social motion" that play a central role in Arac's reading of these nineteenth-century figures. Documenting the "mobile thrusts and counterthrusts of energy" which "shook things loose, forming an ever shifting set of circumstances" ushering in the nineteenth century, Arac persuasively argues that "writers understood their task as a process of shaping, of giving direction to this motion, a form to this force, to create a vision from which action might follow."<sup>417</sup> There is agency here. As a category, the term "action" allows Arac to locate a "shaping" force in these nineteenth-

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<sup>414</sup> Foucault, 255.

<sup>415</sup> Foucault, 256.

<sup>416</sup> William Wordsworth, The Prelude, cited in Arac, 1-2. (*my emphasis*).

<sup>417</sup> Arac, 3-4.

century writers' conception of the literary. "Not the least disturbing aspect of their work for the writers of the mid-nineteenth century," he further claims, "was the extent to which writing itself as a force was not only trying to form the world, to shape the energetic chaos, but was also transforming the world, itself *actively joining in the motion it was trying to chart*."<sup>418</sup> Force and form provide the literary stuff suitable to the occasion.

Importantly, Arac locates this transformative power in the novel, for it was the novel as form, he argues, that marked an important institutional relationship "to the other forms and forces of the age"—forces "disrupting the age," forces "building it, or—most typically—those doing both."<sup>419</sup> "The novel," he further shows, "had to discard old forms and techniques; it had to appropriate smaller forms and borrow form adjacent practices of discourse to make new forms in order to contain the mobility of its age in a new totality."<sup>420</sup> In using terms such as "action," "contain," "chart," among others, Arac suggests the novel as an exercise of human will that functions coincidentally with the very forces that seem otherwise to overwhelm modern human life in the nineteenth century. "To 'contain' new forces," he says, "is not only to check and perhaps neutralize them, but also to be invigorated by them, and, most importantly, to use and direct them."<sup>421</sup> The nineteenth-century novel, a "new literary technique," supplied an epistemology, "gave them a grasp on the new content of their society."<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> Arac, 4 (*my emphasis*).

<sup>419</sup> Arac, 8-9.

<sup>420</sup> Arac, 9.

<sup>421</sup> Arac, 9.

<sup>422</sup> Arac, 9.



Along with addressing principally the works of Dickens, Hawthorne, and Carlyle, the bulk of Arac's study of Melville focuses on Moby-Dick. Ishmael's propensity toward the kind of mobility, overview, and containment that Arac also finds in other works of that historical moment allows for Moby-Dick to be nicely situated in Arac's larger critical schematic. While my reading of Moby-Dick poses another set of questions in relation to the novel's propensity toward movement and overview, my intention here is to elucidate the problematics posed by Melville's last work of prose fiction from the 1850s, problematics that trouble Arac's understanding of how Melville had, or had not, I will argue, "actively [joined] in the motion [he] was trying to chart."<sup>423</sup>

The question of form surfaces subtly like a whale. While Moby-Dick might instantiate what Arac understands as a will-to-order found in a number of nineteenth-century novels, while it might evince the inclination to "actively join in the motion," we find in The Confidence-Man that "motion" itself becomes wholly problematized. If a novel, it had completely absorbed the artifice of pantomime, of masquerade, of *commedia dell'arte*, until this style of pantomime wrested it from the conventions of novelistic development and narrative structure itself. With its episodic chapters, repetition of trickery, minimal description of setting, no presentation of inner consciousness or thoughts, The Confidence-Man resembles less a novel, Helen Trimpi reminds us.<sup>424</sup> Its "analogue," she has shown, can be "found in various forms of stage comedy"—ancient, early-modern, and, especially, contemporary English stage pantomime.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Arac, 4.

<sup>424</sup> Trimpi, 2.

<sup>425</sup> Trimpi, 6.

As a pantomime, then, The Confidence-Man performs in such a way that it could not fit the prescriptions of the nineteenth-century novel as Arac understands them, that is, as a shaping force *actively joining in the motion it was trying to chart.*<sup>426</sup> As pantomime, then, it presents motion in absurdum until motion and movement resemble a kind of stasis, a standing (*histanai*). (Trickery, disguise, knavery, and cunning are the predominate modes of character interaction in the pantomime,<sup>427</sup> but as we recall these are also attributes of stasis, particularly since Thucydides's description of the strife at Corcyra.) This gives further insight, I think, as to why Arac seems to have bypassed the problematic of stasis in Melville's story.

Melville also finds ambivalent the power that he locates in Moby-Dick, but the work *exults in the mobility* of its subject, form, and language; *only* in Pierre, The Confidence-Man and 'Bartleby,' do *tortured immobility*, drifting, and apathy characterize Melville.<sup>428</sup>

One aspect of my work in this dissertation, and in this final chapter specifically, has been to offer some account of this "tortured immobility," not as the exception operating in Melville's *oeuvre*, as Arac seems to suggest, but as an important thread that weaves through much of Melville's prose fiction of the 1850s. As an argument and method, I'm less interested in mapping the structural and formal elements of The Confidence-Man onto the pantomime. Helen Trimpi, as I've noted already, has provide new knowledge in this area. By marking a distinction between Arac's articulate

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<sup>426</sup> Arac, 4 (*my emphasis*).

<sup>427</sup> See Trimpi, 6-7. Here she discusses in more detail the structural elements of the English stage Pantomime and then attempts to map this structure in The Confidence-Man.

<sup>428</sup> Arac, 26. *My emphasis*.

understanding of the role of the nineteenth-century novel and the kind of “work” that The Confidence-Man performs, I have attempted to distance Melville from Arac’s thesis, that is, of Melville “actively joining the motion.” I try to show, therefore, how Melville’s interest in the question of energy and mobility, in the opening of a liberal economy and the expansion of markets throughout the terraqueous globe paradoxically linked this mobility to stasis, a linkage that depicts a more elaborate problematic of American power and an order of conflict that coincided with this power.

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While Jonathan Arac’s Commissioned Spirits tended to the question of motion over immobility in Melville, more as a matter of method I believe, there have been other critics whose readings of The Confidence-Man have leaned towards resentment and dismissal. Confounded by the general sense of obstruction and lack of movement in The Confidence-Man, for example, mid-twentieth-century critic Newton Arvin had condemned outright the work on artistic and moral grounds: “There is an infinitely stronger sense of flow and movement in two pages of Life on the Mississippi than all the forty-five chapters of Melville’s book: the magical power of sensuous embodiment that had rendered the sea with grandeur in Moby Dick had now failed him, all but wholly.”<sup>429</sup> Like countless other critics have, Arvin saw in Melville’s spirit and artistry a general fading.<sup>430</sup> After all, The Confidence-Man would be Melville’s final work of prose fiction published in his lifetime. The world would not find the manuscript to Billy-Budd until

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<sup>429</sup> Arvin, 249-50.

<sup>430</sup> Arvin, 247-249. Also, F.O. Matthiessen helped initiate this understanding of Melville’s literary life trajectory that had come to a kind of failure in The Confidence-Man. F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) 221, n3. and 373.

the “revival” of Melville in the early twentieth century. Yet Arvin’s resentment of Melville here runs deeper than a story about commercial and artistic failure. “Narratively speaking,” Arvin had further denounced, “The Confidence Man is meager and monotonous. A work like Candide, which expresses somewhat similar thoughts, is still viable because, as a tale, it moves; moves swiftly, gaily, and variously; Melville’s book is all but motionless.”<sup>431</sup> Along with the work’s sense of narrative stasis, Arvin charged The Confidence Man as being one of “the most *infidel* books ever written by an American; one of the most completely nihilistic, morally and metaphysically.”<sup>432</sup>

We need underscore that while Arvin condemns The Confidence-Man, his condemnation aptly highlights an important association between the doctrine of mobility that informed nineteenth-century liberal political economy and the figure of the infidel that emerged out of a set of relations established in and through war during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Deborah Root has aptly reminded us, “the infidel was marked in the initial moment of conquest, at the fall of Muslim Granada in 1492.”<sup>433</sup> In *Expulsion justificado de los moriscos españoles*, the seventeenth-century theologian priest Aznar Cardona had likened the Moriscos in Spain to “wolves in the sheepfold, the drones in the beehive, the ravens among the doves, the dogs in the Church, the gypsies among the Israelites, and finally the heretics among the Catholics.”<sup>434</sup> This document had followed a long-standing “problem” of separating and indexing the heterodox Muslim population

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<sup>431</sup> Arvin, 250.

<sup>432</sup> Arvin, 250.

<sup>433</sup> Deborah Root, “Speaking Christian: Orthodoxy and Difference in Sixteenth-Century Spain,” *Representations* 23 (Summer, 1988), 118-134.

<sup>434</sup> Root, 118.

from the Christian in Spain. And so the metaphorical comparisons helped frame a larger project by the Church and State to justify the expulsion of a “deviant” Muslim population. The *Repertorium inquisitorum*, written a century earlier, provided the inquisition with the definition of the Infidel, the being whose religion threatened “Christian claims to universality.”<sup>435</sup> This definition then supplied the inquisition with a proper juridical and “inquisitorial apparatus” for separating the “wolves” from the “sheepfold,” the “enemy of Christian society” from the Christian.<sup>436</sup> The question of population, integration, removal, and annihilation (and, therefore, the question of race and war) in the nineteenth-century echoed a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century problem. Melville’s Infidel narrative recollected an order of “internal” conflict from a previous historical moment and used that moment to dramatize the nineteenth-century American present.

More recently, Michael West’s work on Transcendental Wordplay, which generally celebrates the twists, turns, and witticisms of language in nineteenth-century writing, accuses The Confidence-Man of an excess. West remarks that “Punning is pandemic,” thus locating the style of the The Confidence-Man within the metaphors of pathology and contamination; it “teems with enough practical punning to make it a peculiarly humorless and unlovable book.”<sup>437</sup> Cleverly modeled after the heroes of his study—particularly Thoreau—West here puns the word “humorless,” commenting therefore on the lack of the comedic in Melville’s story as well as the deficiency of

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<sup>435</sup> Root, 120.

<sup>436</sup> Root, 120.

<sup>437</sup> Michael West, Transcendental Wordplay: America’s Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 331.

cardinal humors (blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy) which, when kept in balance, constitute the health of the body. West's all-too-brief account of The Confidence-Man doesn't reach the acrid judgment evinced by Arvin, yet Transcendental Wordplay's propensity as criticism toward "play" and delight seems ready to dismiss The Confidence-Man on grounds of *over*-playing puns that then upset the homeostatic balance of "humor" and seriousness. So prone to puns and imbalance of humor, in fact, the story becomes too serious, too ill even, for West's understanding of "wordplay." He dismisses it, as well, for being "unlovable," a reference perhaps to R.P. Blackmur's understanding of the critic as *amateur*, as the lover. In this case, according to West, The Confidence-Man stands outside the possibility of love, and outside the possibility of critical engagement.

By attributing to Melville's novel a kind of pathology, as a disease that disrupts the homeostatic equilibrium necessary for the proper "humor" in punning, West refuses to examine perhaps the mid-nineteenth-century's most serious attempt at puns, double meanings, wordplay, and allusion. He refuses also to see how Melville's redoubling of language, masking, and cunning was an attempt to invent (discover and make) those relations that had come to characterize the American scene, invent them as a way of knowing and giving thought to American power. West's criticism, ironically, refuses to examine the things about America that he diagnoses as disease ("pandemic") within Melville's The Confidence-Man, all the while celebrating these things in other authors as they evince "balance, "play," and "delight." And so he exercises a discourse and invokes a set of critical categories which, historically, arose out of the relations of power that The Confidence-Man had attempted to problematize. I will put this differently. By ascribing

a pathology to Melville's story and by diagnosing its imbalance of "humor," West's criticism unwittingly recalls and reframes the story within a biopolitics that emerged in the nineteenth century.

I reiterate that Melville's dramatization of stasis in The Confidence-Man is not necessarily an endorsement of the excess and conflict that West, Arvin, and others have condemned, but an inventive tactic for approximating the arrangements of power and the conditions that exemplified aspects of American modernity. In other words, Melville discovered and borrowed from a classical category in order to reinterpret it within a moment that had given rise to the liberal expansion of the markets and "free trade." As an invention that calls on the past, that discovers from the past, Melville's story helps make clear in its present how an order of violence and metaphysics arose in the nineteenth-century that made it possible to diagnose, manage, and, if necessary, remove populations who instantiated a kind of impasse or disease to American movement. By dramatizing this violence and this readying need to movement, Melville's story helps make clear how this movement had evinced a stasis even greater. Melville's pantomime thereby exposes the logic of biopolitics and the metaphysics of liberalism that had been practiced on populations who were seen as unwilling or incapable of entering the market. Finally, we need to resist, therefore, the tendency to read Melville's The Confidence-Man as a necessarily nihilistic perspective of human life in modernity. To do so is to risk the chance of placing his work in binary categories of hope and despair, as Andrew Delbanco has done with his previous works of criticism and biography.<sup>438</sup> We risk, too, the

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<sup>438</sup> See Andrew Delbanco, The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) and Melville: His World and Work (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

occasion to understand more clearly how Melville's literary heretical inventions help us look upon the past and understand better the catastrophes that follow in the wake of the American doctrine of futurity.



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