

Benito Cerino: Freud and the Breakdown of Politics

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In a world shaken by terrorist assaults it can seem as if no one is in control. Political leaders often appear at a loss. They cast about for opponents, for those on whom they can exert their political will. The terrorists, however, need not identify themselves. If they do, the language they use may be messianic rather than political. Rather than indicating negotiable political solutions, it points to something else. Coincident with this is the pursuit of terror despite the harm it causes to a given political agenda. The extreme form of terrorism does not speak at all. It bombs and kidnaps, not to negotiate, not to use its victims as pawns to gain a political advantage, but simply to terrorize, to involve innocent bystanders in its own suicidal acts. How does politics confront the absence of negotiable demands? By seeing terrorist acts as a “declaration of war?” War, however, has its goals. It is, Clausewitz teaches, a continuation of politics by other means. Yet in the absence of any clear statements, can we know what someone who mails anthrax has in mind? Can we tell what would actually satisfy those who use passenger planes as missiles to kill themselves and thousands of others? Terrorism, here, represents not politics, but its breakdown. It is not some state power in control of a political process. It cannot be characterized as a political opponent. Rather, it is a method. By implying a way to achieve a political goal, even the word “method” says too much. As a sign of the breakdown of politics, it should rather be called a symptom.

It was Freud who first introduced the notions of “symptoms” and “breakdown” to describe the loss of control. In what follows, I will apply his insights to Melville’s tale of revolt on a slave ship. His novella, “Benito Cerino,” describes its captain’s catastrophic loss of control. The point of my account is, however, not literary. Neither is it psychological in the narrow Freudian sense. It is rather political. It is to use the insights gained by playing these authors against each other to raise the question of repression and political control in troubled times.

I

At the end of his life, writing in exile in London, Freud attempted to schematize his conception of the self. In Freud’s view, three elements were essential: the id, the super-ego, and the ego. The deepest, most original layer of selfhood is formed by the id. The id, he writes, “contains everything that is inherited, that is present at birth.” As such, it is the place of our inborn, bodily instincts. Such instincts exhibit the pressure of the body on consciousness. In Freud’s words, they “represent the somatic demands on the mind” (Freud, *OP*, 17). The id is where they first come to presence, i.e., achieve “a first psychological expression” (Freud, *OP*, 14). Over against this organic, bodily influence on the mind, we have the demands of society. Our parents place restrictions on our instinctual demands. The super-ego designates the “special agency” that “prolongs” their influence in imposing moral strictures on us. According to Freud,

it “includes in its operation not only the personalities of the actual parents but also the family, racial and national traditions handed on through them, as well as the demands of the immediate social milieu which they represent” (Freud, *OP*, 15–6). If the id exhibits the internalized presence of the body on the mind, the super-ego is the place of the internalized presence of our others. Their internalized voice gives us an external standpoint, one from which we can stand back and view ourselves. Viewing and judging the demands of the id, the super-ego makes its own demands felt as the voice of conscience.

While the id represents “the influence of heredity,” and the super-ego that of others, “the ego,” Freud writes, “is principally determined by the individual’s own experience, that is, by accidental and contemporary events” (Freud, *OP*, 16). It is the place where the “real external world” is acknowledged and dealt with (Freud, *OP*, 14). The opening up of the self to this world involves the repression of the id. Parental prohibitions first cause the child to reflect on its instinctive impulses. It learns to cope with these “by deciding whether they are to be allowed satisfaction, by postponing that satisfaction to times and circumstances favorable in the external world or by suppressing their excitations entirely” (Freud, *OP*, 15). To guide it, the child must attend to reality, i.e., to the intersubjective world that includes its parents. Since its survival depends on its parents, the child must have their approval. Separating itself from the immediacy of its desires, the child has to consider their effects on them. When its instinctual demands are inappropriate, i.e., lead to parental disapproval, the child must repress them. Its selfhood, which previously yielded at once to the pressure of desire, thus acquires through these actions the inner distance that is both a *self-separation* and an *openness* to the real, intersubjective world. With the internalization of the action of its parents and their successors, i.e., with the appearance of the super-ego, the maintenance of this openness becomes part of the functioning of the self. The ego names its result. Phenomenologically regarded, the ego *is* the self’s openness to reality.

Paradoxically, such openness requires that the ego become, in part, closed to itself. Its origin requires repression. The repressed material—the instinctual urges and the circumstances that in childhood were involved in their arousal—are forced into the unconscious. There they live a subterranean existence, occasionally making their presence felt by those disturbances of conscious life that Freud calls “symptoms.” A symptom is a pattern of behavior—deeply disturbing to the patient—that cannot be explained in terms of a person’s actual situation or consciousness of it. It is, in fact, the inability of our conscious life to account for these disturbances that motivated Freud originally to posit the existence of an unconscious.

The question raised by this schema of ego, super-ego, and id is: Who or what is in control? Freud’s response to this question is ambiguous. On the one hand, he asserts: “The power of the id expresses the true purpose of the individual organism’s life”—“the satisfaction of its innate needs.” Here, the ego seems to be in service to the id, since its “task” seems to be “to discover the most favorable and least perilous method of obtaining [this] satisfaction” (Freud, *OP*, 17). On the other hand, the super-ego can also claim to be in control. Not only does it represent society and, hence, our ability, in meeting its demands, to function socially, it is also crucial for our sense of the real world. The repression it continually exercises is what opens a space for

the ego and hence for our grasp of reality. As for the ego, Freud often speaks of it as exercising control. The point of his therapy, he asserts, is to “strengthen the weakened ego,” which involves “extending its self-knowledge,” the loss of which “signifies for the ego a surrender of power and influence” (Freud, *OP*, 56). Such language implies that the goal of therapy is to restore control to the ego. Is the ego, then, the master of the self, or is it simply a servant alternately satisfying the id and the super-ego? The question can be framed ontologically, i.e., in terms of the being of the ego. Is this being independent or dependent? Is it a *result* of a successful negotiation between the demands of the two or is it the *agent* that brings this about? Freud implies that it is *both* an agent and the result of its agency. Speaking of the ego’s agency, he asserts that “an action by the ego is as it should be if it satisfies simultaneously the demands of the id, of the super-ego and of reality—that is to say, if it is able to reconcile their demands with one another” (Freud, *OP*, 15). But he also notes that failure in this task can result in the id and the super-ego making “common cause against the hard pressed ego.” Together they can “succeed in loosening and altering the ego’s organization, so that its proper relation to reality is disturbed or even brought to an end” (Freud, *OP*, 50). At the extreme, the result is “psychosis,” i.e., the collapse of the ego understood as the self’s relation to reality. Given that the failure of this negotiation results in its own collapse, the ego seems to be a dependent, rather than an independent, aspect of the self.

Plato, facing a parallel difficulty, thought to overcome it by a shift in perspective. By assuming that the state is the soul writ large, he thought that we might, in its larger canvas, gain a clearer view of the elements that make up the self (Plato, *Republic* 368b–369a). In Melville’s “Benito Cerino” the ship, the San Dominick, can be taken as playing a similar role. It can be understood as a tableau upon which all the factors of the self are seen in their attempts to exercise control. Such an understanding must, of course, base itself on a self-confessedly anachronistic reading. Eighty-some years separate Freud’s *Outline of Psycho-Analysis* from Melville’s tale. In the absence of any direct influence, how can I treat this 1855 story as a Freudian parable? On a practical level, the answer must wait upon the result. A successful interpretation will justify the attempt. On a theoretical level, one can only say that if Freud did actually grasp an enduring truth about the human self, this truth was also there for Melville to express in literature.

II

The opening pages of “Benito Cerino” are remarkable for their dreamlike quality. Incongruities and ambiguities abound. The novella begins with Captain Delano, an American captain of a commercial vessel, lying at anchor in the harbor of a “desert” island. Improbably, he is described as having “touched [there] for water” (Melville, BC, 141). Coming on deck, he gazes on “[f]lights of troubled gray fowl,” mixed “with flights of troubled gray vapors.” Together they yield, in their indistinctness and blurring of outlines, “[s]hadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come” (Melville, BC, 142). Presently, a ship appears “like a white washed monastery after a thunderstorm.” For a moment, Delano almost believes “that nothing less than a shipload

of monks was there before him." On closer inspection the ship, with its "singular ... movements," takes on an even more spectral appearance: "The spars, ropes, and great part of the bulwarks looked woolly from long unacquaintance with the scraper, tar, and the brush. Her keel seemed laid, her ribs put together, and she launched, from Ezekiel's Valley of Dry bones" (Melville, BC, 144). Above all, there is the unreal appearance that presents itself to Delano as he boards the ship. If the approach to the vessel is, in the gradual buildup of Melville's descriptions, like falling asleep, boarding the ship is like entering the dream state itself. In the words of the narrator, "... the living spectacle it contains upon its sudden and complete disclosure, has, in contrast with the blank ocean which zones it, something of the effect of enchantment. The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave" (Melville, BC, 145).

What Delano sees, once on board, only deepens the sense of mystery. He is greeted by a "clamorous throng," largely black, pouring out "a common tale of suffering." It seems that this is a "Negro transportation ship" in distress, the great part of whose white sailors have been lost to the "scurvy together with the fever" (Melville, BC, 145). Over this multitude Delano sees the figures of four elderly Negroes, who, "crouched, sphinx-like," are engaged in the apparently senseless task of "picking junk into oakum." They are kept company by "six other blacks," who "with a bit of brick and rag" are polishing hatchets. At intervals, two by two, they "sideways" clash "their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din" (Melville, BC, 146). Delano next catches sight of the captain of the vessel, Benito Cerino. At one moment, the captain casts "a dreaming, spiritless look upon his excited people, at the next, an unhappy glance towards his visitor" (Melville, BC, 147). In obvious poor health, wracked by violent fits of coughing, the captain seems to Delano to be "the involuntary victim of mental disorder" (Melville, BC, 150). Babo, his servant, completes the tableau. Of "small stature," he is seen turning his head upward "like a shepherd's dog" to regard his master, his face a mixture of "sorrow and affection" (Melville, BC, 147).

Of all the relations on board the ship, that between Babo and Cerino is the most puzzling. Babo appears to exemplify the ancient view of the slave as a mere *instrumentum vocale*—a speaking implement—to the extreme. He apprehensively follows Cerino as the latter "totters about." Sometimes he gives "his master his arm," sometimes he takes "his handkerchief out of his pocket for him" (Melville, BC, 148). When Cerino experiences a "fainting attack of his cough," Babo draws "a cordial from his pocket," placing "it to his lips." He then supports Cerino, encircling him with his arm, "keeping his eye fixed on his face" (Melville, BC, 152). This account of Babo as a living implement reaches its climax in the scene describing Delano's departure from the ship. Cerino follows Delano and "the better to support him, the servant, placing his master's hand on his naked shoulder, and gently holding it there, formed himself into a sort of a crutch." "[P]resenting himself as a crutch," Babo walks "between the two captains" till the moment of Delano's departure (Melville, BC, 200). In Delano's mind, the relation of Babo to Cerino presents "a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other" (Melville, BC, 154). At times, however,

something seems amiss. Watching Babo shave Cerino, he notices Cerino's violent trembling at the sight of the razor. There comes to his mind the thought "that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white a man at the block" (Melville, BC, 186). This "vagary" is immediately dismissed. Delano, however, remains troubled at the vagueness of Cerino's account of the calamities that have befallen his vessel. There is also the disturbing incident when, after privately conferring with Babo, Cerino asks him about the sailors and armaments aboard his ship. As Melville relates Delano's thoughts, "there was something so hollow in the Spaniard's manner ... that the idea flashed across him that possibly master and man, for some unknown purpose, were acting out, both in word and deed ... some juggling play before him. But then, what could be the object of enacting this juggling play ... ?" (Melville, BC, 188).

This inability to decipher what is passing before him marks the entirety of Delano's stay aboard the *San Dominick*. Again and again he is presented with incidents that do not seem to cohere. Ordinary sailors are seen to be wearing fine linen. One even sports a hidden jewel. Delano sees the blacks assaulting the whites without a word of reprimand from Cerino. Cerino's behavior toward Delano as his guest—at one moment full of extravagant courtesy, at another cold and remote—is equally inexplicable. Melville sums up these puzzlements in the figure of an aged sailor tying an intricate knot. Asking him its purpose, Delano is told "For someone else to undo." The sailor hands it to him with the words, "Undo it, cut it quick" (Melville, BC, 176). Delano, however, "knot in hand, and knot in head," is left speechless. A black takes the knot from him, and as Melville relates, Delano found the proceeding "very queer ... but as one feeling incipient seasickness, he strove, by ignoring the symptoms, to get rid of the malady" (Melville, BC, 176–7).

For readers of Freud, this description of Delano's experiences has, in its puzzlements, a certain resonance. It calls to mind Freud's theory of dreams, for which dreams are wish fulfillments, substitute satisfactions for the desires whose actual fulfillments would interrupt our sleep. In Freud's words, "The sleeping ego ... is focused on the wish to maintain sleep.... It meets the demand [arising from some desire] with what is in the circumstances a harmless *fulfillment of a wish* and so gets rid of it" (Freud, *OP*, 44). Some fulfillments, such as dreams of eating, are obvious in terms of the desires they satisfy. Others, however, are less clear. They are both charged with energy and illogical. For Freud, their puzzling character points to the "distinction between the *manifest* content of a dream and the *latent* [or hidden] dream thoughts" (Freud, *OP*, 39). The strange energy behind dream images is given by the hidden instinctual impulses arising from the id. These impulses, which are composed originally of *unconscious* material, find expression in preconscious thoughts. The latter are the thoughts, lying just below the surface of consciousness—for example, memories of recent as well as more distant events—that can be reactivated and made conscious. In dreaming they become, as it were, the clothing of the unconscious. As Freud puts this, "the dream-work is essentially an instance of the unconscious working-over of the preconscious thought-processes." Taking on the garb of such processes, the unconscious "brings its own modes of working with it" (Freud, *OP*, 41). The dream thus allows what cannot inherently appear—the unconscious as such—to appear. This appearance, however, is often the result of a "compromise." If the original

instinctive impulse is unacceptable to the ego, the material in which it is clothed is arranged so as to distort its true significance. Hence, the puzzling quality of the manifest dream is, in part, a result of censorship. The substitutions, shifts, and blurrings at crucial moments can all be seen as “attempts at giving the total result a form not too unacceptable to the ego ...” (Freud, *OP*, 41). What is hidden from its view is the latent content, the content of the original impulse.

What makes dreams so interesting for Freud is their close connection with mental illness. In neuroses, for example, we find the same split between manifest and latent content. Here, however, the manifest content appears as symptoms. Like the distorted content of the manifest dream, the symptom can be understood as a substitute satisfaction, the true goal of which is hidden from the patient. In other words, the instinctual desires that the subject cannot express in ways that are acceptable to himself come out as symptoms. Symptoms, then, are the ways in which unacceptable unconscious materials appear in waking life. Such materials, it should be noted, may have at one point become conscious, but through repression they have been shoved back into the hidden realm. If we ask why we should accept this account, i.e., see symptoms as waking dreams pointing back to the unconscious, Freud’s answer is that we have no alternative. The very irrationality of the symptom, the fact that it does not cohere with its manifest context in waking life, means that this context cannot account for it. Because of this, we have to say with Freud that our “conscious processes do not form unbroken sequences which are complete in themselves.” Something else, something unconscious, must be determining them. We thus come up with “the idea of something psychical being unconscious.” Even though this appears “self-contradictory,” it, according to Freud, “is precisely what psycho-analysis is obliged to assert” (Freud, *OP*, 29).

III

To apply this to Delano’s experience, we must have recourse to Plato’s stratagem. We must move from the consideration of an individual—Delano and his puzzlements—to that of the larger canvas of the ship itself. In this larger perspective, Delano is but one aspect of the self. In the system of the self that is represented by the ship, he stands for the super-ego. Benito Cerino, the troubled captain, represents the ego, while Babo, his servant, portrays the id. These descriptions, as we shall see, provide a key to the desires and repressions that animate Delano the individual.

BABO: The id, for Freud, is the most fundamental part of the self. Seated within the unconscious, “it has no direct communication with the external world and is accessible even to our own knowledge only through the medium of another agency”—i.e., the preconscious materials with which it clothes its impulses. Freud adds that “within this id, the organic instincts operate.” These instincts are “compounded of fusions of two primal forces (Eros and destructiveness) ...” (Freud, *OP*, 84). The latter force, when it dominates, appears as the death instinct. To see Babo as representing the id is to transform his relation to Cerino, taken as the ego. From a figure that supports Cerino, he becomes a factor invisibly controlling him. This, as we learn from the trial deposition at the end of the novella, is in fact the case. Thus, Babo’s posture

as a living crutch is actually a way of keeping his knife close to Cerino's breast. Cerino's words, we discover, are actually Babo's. Cerino simply supplies the garb in which they appear. Cerino thus testifies in his deposition "that the Negro Babo warned him that if he varied in the least, or uttered any word, or gave any look that should give the least intimation of the past events or present state, he would instantly kill him, with all his companions, showing a dagger which he carried hid, saying ... that the dagger would be as alert as his eye." He also speaks of Babo's control of his actions. He reports "that in every particular he informed the deponent what part he was expected to enact in every device, and what story he was to tell on every occasion always threatening him with instant death if he varied in the least" (Melville, BC, 214). Babo is, in fact, the "captain of the slaves" who have taken over Cerino's ship. The ship's dreadful state has been brought about by their prolonged but ineffectual attempts to force Cerino to return them to Senegal. The violence of the destructive instinct within Babo is evidenced by his treatment of the white sailors as well as his gruesome disposal of the body of Don Alexandro, the owner of the blacks. The wounded sailors are tossed alive into the sea, while Alexandro's body is reduced to a skeleton and set in place of the San Dominick's figurehead. Under it, Babo has inscribed the words, "follow your leader." Having shown the bleached bones to the surviving sailors, he daily warns them that "they should, soul and body, go the way of Don Alexandro" if they speak or plot against him (Melville, BC, 212). Understood in Freudian terms, what we have here is a parable of the overcoming of the ego by the id. The reversal of the role of master and servant in the tale of the revolt points back to the reduction of the ego to a servant of the id's demands. What gives Delano's experience of the relation of Babo and Cerino its unreal quality is not just the fact that Cerino cannot speak on his own, i.e., express what is actually going on. It is that, to keep his purpose hidden, which is that of taking over Delano's ship, Babo can speak to him only through Cerino. If he were to speak to the world represented by Delano on his own, his purpose would be betrayed. Thus, his words to Delano have to be clothed with Cerino's presence. Like the unconscious, he must remain mute, only appearing through the substitute satisfactions of dreams or neurotic symptoms. We thus have the strange lack of context and logic of many of Cerino's actions, which in fact are not his own but are rather determined by Babo. We also have the fact that when the plot is finally discovered and Babo is deprived of Cerino's voice, he cannot be made to speak. In Melville's words, "Seeing that all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to" (Melville, BC, 222).

DELANO: The ego does not just have to satisfy the demands of the id; it must also accommodate those of the superego. According to Freud, its task is made more difficult by the fact that both the superego and the id disregard the external, real world. For the superego, this is a function of the fact that its focus is not on what is, but rather on what ought to be. As the voice of our conscience, it expresses the standards or norms of our social milieu. For Delano, the captain of "a large sealer and general trader," these standards concern the proper ordering of the commercial and social relations that characterize a well-run ship. Again and again, as representing the superego, Delano expresses surprise at their violation aboard the San Dominick. Not only is the ship in shocking physical disarray, the social relations on board seem to follow

no norm. Thus, for Delano, “[t]he singular alternations of courtesy and ill-breeding in the Spanish captain were unaccountable, except on one of two suppositions—innocent lunacy, or wicked imposture” (Melville, BC, 162). If in fact the captain is mad, then Delano, to restore order, plans “to send her to Conception in charge of his second mate” (Melville, BC, 168). The social relations between the blacks and the whites also violate his standards. Rather than being treated as commercial cargo and confined accordingly, the blacks appear to have free reign of the ship. Even more shocking is the apparent insubordination of some of their members. Thus, having observed a black strike a white, Delano says to Cerino, “Had such a thing happened on board [my ship] the Bachelor’s Delight, instant punishment would have followed” (Melville, BC, 157). In fact, the only racial relation on board the ship that fully meets his standards is that between Cerino and Babo. This is made clear in a number of ways. Delano, for example, immediately moves from expressing alarm at the sight of two blacks dashing a sailor to the deck—“Don Benito ... do you see what is going on there? Look!”—to wanting to purchase Babo. Don Benito swoons into Babo’s arms in response to Delano’s cry, and Delano congratulates “his host on possessing such a servant.” The sight of Babo’s faithfulness has so overcome his alarm that he is moved to make his offer: “Tell me Don Benito ... what would you take for him? Would fifty doubloons be any object?” (Melville, BC, 169). Just as telling are Delano’s thoughts as he regards the carefully staged scene of Babo shaving Cerino:

There is something in the Negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one’s person. Most Negroes are natural valets and hairdressers, taking to the comb and brush congenially.... And above all there is the great gift of good humor ... a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture, as though God had set the whole Negro to some pleasant tone. When to this is added the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors, one can see, he adds, why people take to them (Melville, BC, 185).

Delano himself takes to them “genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (Melville, BC, 185).

As Melville makes clear, it is Delano’s prejudices that prevent him from seeing beyond this staged performance. As he questions Cerino about the particulars of his voyage, he sees him tremble at the sight of the razor in Babo’s hand, yet he never draws the conclusion that Cerino is speaking under constraint. The reason for this is “the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind” that he attributes to the blacks. In Delano’s mind, the limitation is such that blacks become assimilated into the animal world. Again and again, we are confronted by animal imagery in Delano’s reflections. To take but two of the most striking examples, he describes a sleeping Negress as “doe,” her child being a “fawn.” In his words, “Sprawling at her lapped breast was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, crosswise with its dam’s; its hands, like two paws, clambering upon her; its mouth and nose ineffectually rooting to get at the mark; and meantime giving a vexatious

half-grunt ...” (Melville, BC, 172). The sight gratifies Delano as does the sight of blacks under an overturned longboat. These he sees as a “social circle of bats sheltering in some friendly cave, at intervals ebony flights of naked boys and girls three or four years old darting in and out of the den’s mouth” (Melville, BC, 182). The narrator remarks, “These natural sights somehow insensibly deepened [Delano’s] confidence and ease” (Melville, BC, 173). They undo any suspicions he might have regarding the conduct of the blacks. A revolt of the blacks seems to him as implausible as a revolt of the animals. He considers it only to dismiss it. Particularly telling are his thoughts at this moment: “...could, then, Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? 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 leaguering in against it with Negroes?” (Melville, BC, 175). As almost a different species, more akin in their intelligence to the animal than to the human world, the Negroes can present no danger.

CERINO: Given Delano’s attitudes, which are largely those of the contemporary slave-holding society, Cerino’s difficulty in conveying his sentiments are readily intelligible. Not only must he overcome Delano’s ingrained prejudices, every attempt to do so brings the threat of instant action by Babo with his knife. What makes Cerino’s situation so impossible is that he is caught between two conflicting sets of demands. Delano, as the representative of social order, insists on his cooperation in returning his ship to port and the Negro “cargo” to captivity. Babo, however, demands that he assist him in the capture of Delano’s ship which Cerino is to pilot to Senegal. Beset by both, Cerino seems a picture of what Freud describes as the “neurotic ego.” According to Freud:

That ego is no longer able to fulfill the task set it by the external world (including human society). Not all of its experiences are at its disposal, a large proportion of its store of memories have escaped it. Its activity is inhibited by strict prohibitions from the super-ego, its energy is consumed in vain attempts at fending off the demands of the id. Beyond this, as a result of continuous irruptions by the id, its organization is impaired, it is no longer capable of any proper synthesis, it is torn by mutually opposed urges, by unsettled conflicts and by unsolved doubts (Freud, *OP*, 60).

This description seems an accurate portrayal of Cerino with his inexplicable shifts of mood. Thus, Cerino cannot fulfill Delano’s prohibitions regarding the black’s misconduct or the lack of general order on the ship. Neither, however, can explain to Delano, given Babo’s presence, the reasons for his sudden silences, hesitations and apparent memory losses regarding the questions put to him. As a result he is, in Delano’s eyes at least, a picture of mental imbalance. As the American captain describes him, “His mind appeared unstrung, if not still more seriously affected.... [L]ike some hypochondriac abbot, he moved slowly about, at times suddenly pausing, starting, or staring, biting his lip, biting his fingernail, flushing, paling, twitching his beard, with other symptoms of an absent or moody mind” (Melville, BC, 148). In fact Cerino’s functioning, as he tries to negotiate between Babo’s threats and Delano’s expectations, is seriously impaired. Caught between the “captain of the slaves” and

the American captain, his weakened state is such that in Delano's judgment, "... the poor invalid scarcely knew what he was about; either sulking in black vapors, or putting idle questions without sense or object" (Melville, BC, 168). As a representative of the neurotic ego, he is, as Delano asserts, "the involuntary victim of mental disorder" (Melville, BC, 150).

IV

The question of who is in control of the San Dominick may be posed in terms of the inscription Babo has had painted below its figurehead: "Seguid vuestro jefe ('follow your leader')" (Melville, BC, 144). At the beginning of the novella, the figurehead is covered. The identity of the "leader" is unknown. At the end, however, the canvas covering it is "whipped away" from the prow and we learn its identity (Melville, BC, 203). Death, in the form of the bleached bones of the slave owner, is revealed as the "leader" of the ship. Melville indicates this leadership in a number of ways. He has Babo, for example, point to the prow and threaten Cerino and the sailors with death by saying: "you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader" if you fail to obey (Melville, BC, 212). When Cerino does later die, the novella ends with the statement that "borne on the bier, [he] did, indeed, follow his leader" (Melville, BC, 223). Death, in fact, can be understood as the leader of the entire ship with all its inhabitants, white and black. In its inability to function as a whole, it is where it is being led.

This point may be put in terms of its three "captains," none of whom is actually in control. Babo, the captain of the slaves, cannot control the ship since he cannot pilot it. Lacking any knowledge of navigation, he must rely on Cerino who for months on end has thwarted his designs to sail to Senegal. If Babo, with his hatchet grinders, represents power without knowledge, Delano can be taken as the reverse: knowledge without power. He is an excellent pilot. In spite of the San Dominick's dreadful condition, Delano manages to bring her to harbor. His assumption of being in control, however, is unfounded. In bringing Cerino's ship close to his own, he is actually forwarding Babo's designs. Moreover, as we later learn, he is nearly killed during his stay a number of times. In Cerino's eyes, his complete lack of power was such that only heaven's intervention saved him. Of the three captains, only Cerino grasps the reality of the situation. He knows what Babo is capable of and the danger of Delano's situation. He is in fact party to both their milieus, since he knows both Delano's world of commerce with its living "cargo" and Babo's world of revolt and escape. Yet torn as he is between the demands of the two, he is unable to act. Only when he springs from the ship into Delano's longboat, thus freeing himself from Babo's importunity, can he at last speak and warn Delano.

Viewed as a Freudian parable, the lack of control evinced by each of the captains points to the insight that Freud attempts to convey in speaking of the self in terms of the id, ego, and super-ego: The identity of the self is not that of substance. It is rather a system. As such, the self's proper functioning involves a balancing of all of its aspects. Thus, the destruction of this balance is this system's undoing. It is in fact the destruction of the self, understood as a system. "Self" control, accordingly, is possible only if all the aspects of the self work together. When they oppose each

other, when in particular the id and super-ego, in the incompatibility of their demands, make common cause against the ego, control becomes impossible. The self-destructiveness that characterizes the out-of-control self results, then, in the leadership of death. The death instinct takes control.

V

These descriptions of the captains as components of the self point to the desires of the repressions animating Delano. As noted earlier, Delano has knowledge without power. It is clear, however, that the "knowledge" he possesses is limited to technical and commercial matters. He is skilled in navigation and is careful to negotiate on behalf of his ship's owners an acceptable price for the sails and rigging he is providing Cerino. His ignorance, however, of the human factors before him is almost total. Again and again the white sailors try to signal their distress to him, but with a singular obtuseness he fails to read the signs. While noting their reduced numbers and mistreatment by the blacks, his only thoughts are that they are somehow in league with the invalid captain against him. As for the danger posed by the blacks, Delano's firm belief is that they are "too stupid" to revolt. They are practically a different "species"; to his mind, they are a part of the animal world. The reality, of course, is quite different. Babo, whom he takes as exhibiting the "un aspiring contentment of a limited mind," is later revealed as the person "whose brain not body had schemed and led the revolt" (Melville, BC, 222). His "head" is in fact a "hive of subtlety" (Melville, BC, 223). As for the Negresses whose animality "gratifies" Delano with the thought of "naked nature, ... pure tenderness and love" (Melville, BC, 173), they turn out to have actively encouraged and participated in the revolt of the blacks. According to the disposition, "had the Negroes not restrained them, they would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing, the Spaniards slain by command of the Negro Babo" (Melville, BC, 217).

Delano's obtuseness can only be understood in terms of repression. Again and again, he dismisses as "vagaries" the suspicions aroused in him. Like the "symptoms" of seasickness, he strives to ignore them (Melville, BC, 176). Even his own body tries to warn him through "an apprehensive twitch in the calves of his legs" as he passes through Babo's guard of hatchet grinders. Yet when Delano turns about and sees the Negroes "still stupidly intent" on their work, his only response is to "smile at his late fidgety panic" (Melville, BC, 156). The blacks, working "like so many organ-grinders," cannot harm him. These remarks, like so many others attributed to Delano, indicate the tie between his repression and desires. His desire to see blacks as "organ-grinders," as "does," "fauns," "dogs," and other animals, above all, his desire to see them as "stupid," as possessed of a "limited mind," is such that he represses all evidence to the contrary. Were he to acknowledge the ability of the blacks to revolt, he would have to admit that they had a sense of human liberty. This, however, would imply that their slavery was unjust and that he and his slave-holding society were also unjust. The latter are not, for Delano, simply unfortunate truths. The strength of his resistance to them marks them as "impossible." This can be put in terms of the work of repression. Like the dreamwork, the goal of repression is to prevent us

from confronting an unacceptable content. Thus, repression substitutes what, for Delano, is a possible representation—e.g., the blacks are happy animals, are part of “unadorned nature,” etc.—for an impossible one—the blacks are fellow human beings, unjustly enslaved. In dreaming, the goal of the dream-work is the preservation of sleep. In the waking dream that characterizes Delano’s stay aboard the *San Dominick*, Delano remains asleep to the end. The strength of his desire not to be disturbed is such that, dismissing all evidence to the contrary, he remains oblivious to the dangers that surround him.

VI

Melville’s tale invites us to consider repression not just as an individual, but also as a social phenomenon. When we do so, we move from Delano, the individual dreamer, to America as engaging in a collective dream. To consider this a waking dream, one characterizing its national life in the 1850s, is to see the repressed material coming back as symptoms. The latter, in their lack of coherence with the actual state of things, indicate the impairment of the reality principle and, hence, of the ego as embodying this. The rise of the death instinct in the resulting disorganization would, then, as in Melville’s story, signify that the “leader” had become death—that is, that society as a whole was proceeding to its destruction.

The evidence that such thoughts are not absent from Melville’s intent can be drawn both from history and from the story itself. “Benito Cerino” first appeared serially in 1855. This is three years after the appearance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and six years before the outbreak of the Civil War. In 1855, the Supreme Court took up the “Dred Scott” case. Basing itself on the opinion of the framers of the Constitution that blacks were “beings of an inferior order,” possessing “no rights which the white man was bound to respect,” it ruled that Dred Scott was indeed “property to be returned to his owner.” The disturbances and denials surrounding this 1857 decision left America essentially without any unified, effective leadership. Even by 1855, however, no great prescience was required to see its drift toward the destruction of civil war.

That Melville shares the preoccupations of his time is apparent in the dates and names he uses to frame his story. In his account the *San Dominick* has been at sea from May 20, 1799 to its encounter with Delano’s vessel on August 17, 1799. As has been pointed out by numerous critics, 1799 is the midpoint of the French Revolution, with its Declaration of the Rights of Man. The midpoint of the *San Dominick*’s journey falls on July 4th, the date of the Declaration of Independence, a document asserting that “all men”—but not, according to the Supreme Court, the Negro—are created equal. The year 1799 points to this exclusion since it is the midpoint of the twenty-year constitutionally imposed grace period allowing the enslavement and transportation of blacks from Africa to the United States. The name “*San Dominick*” also points to the blight of slavery. The island of Santo Domingo was the first land discovered by Christopher Columbus. It is the place where, at the behest of the Benedictine monk named San Bartholomew, Columbus introduced slavery to the New World. Starting in 1799 with the revolt of Toussaint l’Ouverture and extending to the mid 1800s, the island experienced a number of devastating, but ultimately successful, slave

rebellions. In Melville's story, the original figurehead of the San Dominick was "the image of Christopher Colón, the discoverer of the New World" (Melville, BC, 212). Babo replaces it with the skeleton of the slave-owner Aranda. As if to emphasize the connection with the original event, Melville, at the end, has the head of Babo placed on a pole, where "it met, unabashed, the gazes of the whites, and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew's church," a Benedictine foundation where Aranda's bones were interred (Melville, BC, 223). He also chooses the name "Benito Cerino"—signifying "pallid Benedictine"—for the San Dominick's captain.

There is no doubt that from Melville's perspective, the introduction of slavery into the New World was a disaster. Modern critics largely agree that, as an abolitionist, his view of slavery is that it is, as he writes in *Mardi*, "a blot, foul as the crater-pool of hell." Critics are also united in seeing Captain Delano as "a microcosm of American attitudes of the time towards the Negroes." As Schiffman describes, Delano suffers a "mental block" in that he can conceive blacks only as "subhuman beings" (Schiffman, 322). "Benito Cerino" is, then, a cautionary tale regarding Delano's attitudes. Viewed in the context of its time it is, as John Bernstein writes, "a warning to America to either 'keep faith with the blacks' ... or be prepared to follow the leadership of Alexandro Aranda to ultimate destruction" (Bernstein, 173–4).

From a psychoanalytical perspective, one can generalize this warning by putting it in terms of repression. Repressed material does not disappear; it does not vanish when forced into the unconscious. Rather, it shows itself as symptoms, i.e., as those patterns of behavior whose illogic points back to their coherence with the inadmissible, with what, given the structure of our psychic economy, cannot appear. What could not appear in pre-Civil War America was the humanity of the blacks. The repression of this was both individual and collective. Individually, it expressed itself in the "mental blocks" that prevented people from acknowledging this humanity. Collectively, it was a function of the social and economic institutions of slavery, the effect of which was to deprive blacks of the means to appear human. In Melville's tale, these deprivations take the form of the language available to the blacks. Babo can speak to Delano only through Cerino. Cerino, as it were, supplies the linguistic garb in which he can appear. So clothed, however, the appearance is distorted. Control being exercised by the other who cannot appear, what does appear in Cerino's distracted language makes Delano take him as "the involuntary victim of mental disorder." Cerino's language, in its apparent irrationality, in its lack of contact with what Delano takes to be the "real world," takes the form of a symptom arising from repressed material. In the tale, it is symptomatic of the other whose humanity has been repressed.

It was Jacques Lacan, who in his famous "return to Freud," spoke of symptoms as linguistic disturbances. In his view, they arose from breaks in the linguistic continuity of the subject, gaps caused by the repression to the unconscious of unacceptable materials. As he writes, "The unconscious is that chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood: it is the censored chapter." The censored material reappears in "the distortions necessitated by the linking of the adulterated chapter to the chapters surrounding it." It appears in symptomatic language, i.e., language that points back to what has been censored. It also appears in the actions that cannot, in the accepted, nonsymptomatic language, account for themselves. For Lacan, what

has ultimately been censored is “the other.” In his words, “... the unconscious of the subject is the discourse of the other.” The symptom points to the repression of the other’s role in the subject’s self-recognition (Lacan, FF, 55). Viewed in these terms, what is at work in the language, not just of Cerino, but of all the whites of the tale, is the denial of the humanity of the blacks. Their language betrays a striking lack of self-recognition precisely because they cannot recognize the blacks as sharing their humanity. In Hegelian terms, they cannot recognize the humanity of those whose recognition must mediate their own grasp of themselves as human. Thus, the similarities of behavior and desire through which we recognize others as like ourselves, granting them thereby their indispensable role in recognizing our own humanity, are both recognized and repressed by them. The very characteristics that link them to the whites must be cast into the unconscious as censored chapters—gaps—in their self-understanding.

To see the same processes at work today is to raise the question of the concealing nature of our current language of markets, financial discipline, and globalization. To the point that this language becomes the exclusive means of our self-understanding, it can be taken as forcing other, perhaps incompatible, expressions of our humanity into the censored chapters of the unconscious. The result of this process would be twofold. On the one hand, our language, in its lack of self-recognition, would become increasingly symptomatic of our detachment from the actual world. On the other, the repressed expressions of our humanity would appear in the cracking and breaking of the facade of this world. Here, the extreme of terrorism that cannot name itself appears as a symptom of what cannot in our current language express itself at all. Like Babo, lacking an acceptable language, it cannot speak. It can only clothe itself in the symptoms of a world increasingly uncertain of its ultimate direction. What about the terrorism that does speak, that does claim responsibility for its actions? I believe that the distorted language it uses must also be considered as symptomatic of a disconnect from reality. In its messianic, absolute demands (such as the elimination of all Western influence tout court, the destruction of Israel, etc.), it shares with our language a detachment from the actual world. When the language of both state power and its opponents appear as symptomatic, both point to the action of repression. This repression can in fact be mutual. The repressed elements can themselves engage in repression, thus complicating and entangling each side’s nonrecognition of the other.

To view Melville’s novella as a cautionary tale in the present context is, then, to ask whether the intractable conflicts and unintelligible violence that often mark the present do not point to a lack of balance in our collective selfhood. That such selfhood is now worldwide indicates the nature of its fragility. Globalization, understood as a set of social, technological, and financial norms, can require an unacceptable level of repression. As such, part of its costs may be the distorted, symptomatic return of the repressed material, be it religious, philosophical, or social. The same can be said of the repressions by which other elements of collective selfhood—e.g., those of Islam—attempt to counter its influence. Melville invites us to look beyond these often violent symptoms to the impulses of the other that underlie them. He also invites those in conflict to examine the censored chapters of their selfhood. His warning is that unless we recognize our common humanity, we might indeed follow the San

Dominick's leader in ceding control of our common destiny.

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