

論文

Incapable Leaders in Melville's "Benito Cereno"

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要 旨

1855年に出版されたHerman Melvilleの短編小説“Benito Cereno”の中で、黒人奴隷のBaboは支配者であるDon Benitoに繰り返し“Follow your leader”と言い、殺されたDon Benitoの親友、Arandaを思い出させる。“Follow your leader”というBaboの言葉は本作品において複数の意味を持ち、かつ重要な役割を果たしている。Baboの脅しと、従順な奴隷を装ったパフォーマンスによって、Don Benitoの精神と肉体は徐々に衰弱し、ついには奴隷たちを統制することが出来なくなってしまう。本小論では、まず作家Melvilleが他の短編小説の中で、どのようなリーダー像を描いてきたのかについて言及し、“Benito Cereno”の中に登場する支配者たちとの共通点を提示する。そして、この作品が書かれた当時の社会背景と、Baboや支配者層に属する登場人物たちの行動とを関連付けながら、Baboの言葉や行動、死後の身体が、どのような影響力を持っているのかについて考察する。

Keywords: 支配力, 支配者, 無能さ, 慈善, 奴隷, 声

I

Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" was first published in 1855, a time when the issue of slavery was of great concern to readers. At different points in the story, four characters exercise controlling power over a ship, the *San Dominick*: Don Benito Cereno, Captain Amasa Delano, Captain Alexandro Aranda, and the black slave Babo. Every leader except Captain Delano at some point has power over the *San Dominick* but loses the voice of authority through death. In the story, a leader who owned slaves loses power, and the slaves have opportunities to hold power on the ship. Babo repeatedly says to Don Benito, "Follow your leader"—a sentence that has a double meaning. Readers may wonder who the leader is and whom people should follow. The leader might be the deceased Aranda or the black ring leader, Babo. This thesis examines the meaning of Babo's words and roles of the four leaders and investigates how Melville represents the collapsed slave system and leadership in this work.

Babo, who used to be Aranda's slave, leads a slave rebellion on the *San Dominick* and forces Don Benito to pretend in front of Captain Delano that Benito is the ship's captain. When Delano observes Babo's behavior, Babo is seemingly "less a servant than a devoted companion" (40) to his supposed master Don Benito. In reality, however, Babo is actually the leader of the slaves in charge of the *San Dominick*. At the end of the story, only Delano survives as an insensitive white American leader, yet he never recognizes the cause of Don Benito's depressed mental state. Babo is executed, and his head is fixed on a pole. On this point, Richard E. Ray says, although "for a brief moment, he is a man with the voice of authority" (340), Babo meets a "voiceless end" and "is no longer the leader of revolt but once again a slave" (340). Thus, Ray takes a proslavery position in interpreting the meaning of Babo's death and admitting Babo's failure in rebellion. In other words, Ray attributes evil and missteps only to Babo.

However, the shortcomings of insensitivity of the other leaders, namely, Don Benito, Captain Delano, and Aranda also caused disorder on the *San Dominick*. At first, Don Benito and Aranda are owners of black slaves. Then, just before Aranda is killed, Don Benito loses controlling power over the ship and becomes a slave to the black leader, Babo. Don Benito then acts as a leader and pretends as if he is

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establishing a good relationship with the slaves in the presence of Captain Delano. In the following sections, I will first focus on how Melville describes the insensitive and incapable leader, Don Benito. Next, I examine Don Benito's fear and the performance in the shaving scene. Finally, I present my own view on why Babo can present his controlling power through his performance.

II

Melville repeatedly creates insensitive but self-confident leaders similar to Captain Delano in other works, including the lawyers in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and the factory supervisor Cupid in "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." In "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," Melville created a character, Cupid, who would not sympathize with maids in the paper factory. As a consequence, the factory girls with pale complexions are about to sacrifice their health and die. In "Benito Cereno" as well, Captain Delano's character reflects the self-confident American society partly controlled by the ideas of the time including "Manifest Destiny," a term coined by John L. O'Sullivan. The idea of "Manifest Destiny" is that desire for land and its expansion is apparent for Americans. Human superiority was advocated with the ideas of "transcendentalism," and Bibles and churches were no longer authoritative at the time when those works were published.

In "Benito Cereno," and "Bartleby, the Scrivener," self-righteous charity is an implicit common theme. Captain Delano and the lawyer practice charity in ineffective ways for Don Benito and Bartleby, respectively. They never recognize their ineffectiveness, hence they make the situation worse. Both works are in *The Piazza Tales*, and to this point, Lea Bertani Vozar Newman states they are closely related to each other (96). According to Newman, the original title was not *The Piazza Tales* but *Benito Cereno and Other Sketches*. Melville intended to put "Benito Cereno" as the very first story and "Bartleby, the Scrivener" the second. Melville switched the order later but these works remain connected (96). Although Newman does not mention what relationships we can see in these two works, they have three common points. First, both Don Benito and Bartleby are socially vulnerable. Second, the protagonist's names are in the title, and both names begin with "B." Third, they cannot accept charity in conventional ways respectively from Captain Delano and

from the lawyer.

Although Captain Delano sympathizes with Don Benito, he is displeased with Don Benito's reserved, self-contained attitude. Delano's charity is lukewarm and is described as follows:

But ere long Captain Delano bethought him that, indulgent as he was at the first, in judging the Spaniard, he might not, after all, have exercised charity enough. At bottom it was Don Benito's reserve which displeased him; but the same reserve was shown towards all but his faithful personal attendant. (41)

Moreover, Captain Delano is ironically described as "American in charity" (41) as if he were an advocator of Manifest Destiny or an American Christian with the ideas of transcendentalism, who exercise insincere and superficial charity to the socially weak. Carolyn L. Karcher asserts that Captain Delano's words, "There is something in the negro which, in a particular way, fits him for avocations about one's person," must have made every reader from Melville's time uncomfortable (131). Captain Delano furthers a Negro stereotype while Melville acknowledges that the Negro's intellectual power is equal to whites. Karcher argues that this is a crucial difference between Captain Delano and Melville (130). Unlike Ray, Karcher suggests that Melville takes an antislavery position while Captain Delano takes a proslavery position. Melville is ambiguous about which side he is taking, although we can surmise that Melville is taking an antislavery position because his other savage characters, Pip in *Moby-Dick*, or Billy, being admired for their easygoingness and cheerfulness.

As for "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the lawyer asks himself a question about charity and describes charity as a self-evident concept as follows:

Aside from higher considerations, charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor. Men have committed murder for jealousy's sake, and anger's sake, and hatred's sake, and selfishness' sake, and spiritual pride's sake; but no man that ever I heard of, ever committed a diabolical murder for charity's sake. Mere self-interest, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should, especially with high-tempered men, prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy. ("Bartleby" 252)

The lawyer's motive for charity is only his self-interest. When the lawyer is concerned about how to dismiss Bartleby, he "did not accomplish the purpose of going to Trinity Church" ("Bartleby" 19) on Sunday morning. Although he makes it a rule to

go to church and admires celebrated preachers in Trinity Church, he neglects his church-going for his private reasons. Therefore, the lawyer is not a dedicated Christian either, maintaining vigilance or displeased feelings toward his employee.

In these two works, charity is not exercised properly for Don Benito and Bartleby. However, their masters still believe that they are pious Christians or charitable men, not recognizing their sense of uncertainty regarding the socially weak protagonists. This insensitivity, including callous remarks made by the masters, leads to a communication breakdown at the end of the story. Both Don Benito and Bartleby die a solitary death at the end of their respective tales.

Unlike the lawyer, who says "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" ("Bartleby" 34) at the very end, Captain Delano never cries over the death of Don Benito and never recognizes that his charity ends in failure. The narrator only says "on Mount Agonia without; where, three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader" (102). The narrator's remarks show that Captain Delano is not a capable leader, so Don Benito neither follows him as an ideal model nor asks him for help. There is no white leader in this story. Instead, Don Benito follows deceased former leaders Aranda and Babo.

III

Babo and the remains of Aranda are harmful to Don Benito's mental condition throughout the story. Aranda's bones worsen Don Benito's state of mind, and in the same manner, Babo's words "Follow your leader" weaken Don Benito's authoritative power on the ship. Some critics including Robert S. Levine argue that white American masters of the time were afraid of slave rebellion and always lived in this fear. This historical background is reflected in the work (166). In addition, Levine notes that since the number of immigrants increased from the 1830s to the 1840s along with industrialization, churches lost authority, ultimately weakening the institution of family (177). Therefore, a nervous protagonist like Don Benito might be more acceptable and sympathetic to readers of the time than Captain Delano if this work is an allegory of social backgrounds in the 1850s.

However, even generous readers may not admit that Don Benito is an ideal leader to control the ship. The failure is not only on Delano's side but also on Don

Benito's. Don Benito tries to compensate for his fault and weakness, so he gives a performance in front of Captain Delano. His aristocratic attire is used ironically to show his superficial power and dignity.

The Spaniard wore a loose Chili jacket of dark velvet; white small clothes and stockings, with silver buckles at the knee and instep; a high-crowned sombrero, of fine grass; a slender sword, silver mounted, hung from a knot in his sash; the last being an almost invariable adjunct, more for ornament than utility, of a South American gentleman's dress to this hour. Excepting when his occasional nervous contortions brought about disarray, there was a certain precision in his attire, curiously at variance with the unsightly disorder around; especially in the belittered Ghetto, forward of the main-mast, wholly occupied by blacks. (45)

His costume is of no use because he gives Captain Delano the impression of "some hypochondriac abbot" (40) and "almost worn to a skeleton" (40). Don Benito unconsciously creates ironical disparity between his costume and mental status, which contributes to Captain Delano's misconception of who he is. Don Benito neither performs perfectly as a capable leader nor reports what is happening on the ship to the American captain. Moreover, Captain Delano never recognizes his fault. On this point, Leslie A. Fiedler notes that Captain Delano is "still convinced that the true source of moral infection is to be found only in the decaying institutions of Europe" (Fiedler 401); therefore, he cannot understand "why, even after the exposure of Babo, Benito Cereno continues to pine away and seems to long only for death" (Fiedler 401). Leslie believes that Captain Delano is endowed with an "undistrustful good nature" (Fiedler 400). However, the cause of misconception should not be attributed to Captain Delano's innate characteristics or the decay of European institutions, but rather on the elaborate performance to conceal the fact that Don Benito is completely intimidated by Babo. As a consequence, because of Don Benito's poor performance and Captain Delano's poor insight, Babo takes over the leader's position on the *San Dominick*.

Another performance is the famous shaving scene. Babo intentionally or perhaps recklessly cuts Don Benito and imbrues the Spanish national flag with his blood. When Captain Delano sees this scene, he thinks it is only "antic conceits" and cannot share the feeling of fear with Don Benito:

Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as

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he saw the two thus postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black he was a headsman, and in the white a man at the block. But this was one of those antic conceits, appearing and vanishing in a breath, from which, perhaps, the best regulated mind is not always free. (72)

Don Benito cannot help indulging himself in Babo's shaving process, so he loses his power again as he uses Babo as his servant. Captain Delano sympathizes with Don Benito's fear but he has a misconception about it. Captain Delano says "Poor fellow, thought Captain Delano, so nervous he can't even bear the sight of barber's blood . . ." (73). As long as Captain Delano believes that the Negro is fit only for "avocations about one's person" (70), he cannot mitigate Don Benito's fear.

This shaving scene is important in interpretation of the remark, "Follow your leader." Don Benito is on the executioner's block, and he is about to lose his power and voice. In other words, the former leader is about to be executed by the former slave in front of the impervious American captain. Don Benito is now controlled by the intelligent black slave and is about to be killed in the same way as his friend Aranda. It means he is forced by his slave to follow his leader. Don Benito loses his voice at the moment he is shaved. Therefore, the shaving process deprives the leader of his voice and makes him silent. Not only does Babo lose his voice at the end of the story, but Don Benito also loses his voice while he is performing in the shaving scene.

On the other hand, Aranda has already been voiceless, and his remains are on the prow, but it is not the end of his power. Although he does not speak out, he still speaks to Don Benito's mind and weakens him. Unlike fearless Captain Delano, Don Benito is afraid of his body being cut and caped, or being exposed like Aranda. The following citation shows the crucially different reaction between Don Benito and Captain Delano to the dead body.

"Were your friend's remains now on board this ship, Don Benito, not thus strangely would the mention of his name affect you."

"On board this ship?" echoed the Spaniard. Then, with horrified gestures, as directed against some specter, he unconsciously fell into the ready arms of his attendant, who, with a silent appeal toward Captain Delano, seemed beseeching him not again to broach a theme so unspeakably distressing to his master. (49)

The remains of the former leader still have power to weaken Don Benito

because he will always stare at death and be forced to look at the chalked message, “Follow your leader.” Don Benito is convinced that Aranda’s bones are a figure-head and believes that Babo placed the bones in order to intimidate him. Babo wants Don Benito to follow his leader, Aranda, indicating that Babo is plotting to kill Don Benito sometime in the near future. Babo intended to cover up his plot; hence the true features of the figure-head are obscured from Captain Delano.

Whether the ship had a figure-head, or only a plain beak, was not quite certain, owing to 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, “Seguid vuestro jefe,” (follow your leader). . . . (37)

Captain Delano would not unveil the process of how this figure-head was made and placed, so he would not recognize the fear of a slave rebellion. Don Benito feels the fear of a slave rebellion in his bones, as an incapable leader, he could do nothing to prevent it.

IV

Another implication of “Follow your leader” is that “leader” indicates Babo and the remark means to follow Babo’s side. Babo tells Don Benito to “keep faith,” both spiritually and physically, pointing to Aranda’s skeleton that is used as a prow:

. . . the negro Babo asked him whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white’s; that, upon his covering his face, the negro Babo, coming close, said words to this effect: “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)

Although Babo uses the skeleton to intimidate his leader, the skeleton may have other meanings to Babo. According to Geoffrey Sanborn, there are three ways of looking at a skeleton displayed by what he calls “savages”: first, “as a symbol of cannibal desire; second, as an object sacralized by superstition; and third, as a trophy designed ‘to throw intimidation and terror upon the enemy’” (183). Sanborn argues in “Benito Cereno” that the first and the third interpretations are possible, and the skeleton symbolizes the “presence of instinctual savages” (Sanborn 183). However, we

cannot determine whether or not slaves in Africa of the time had a man-eating culture. It is true that Babo did not return Aranda's body for four days even though Don Benito anxiously asked them to do so. Nevertheless, whether or not Alanda's flesh is eaten is not mentioned in the story. Therefore, the first definition may not be possible, while the second and the third interpretations might be acceptable.

Babo may have upheld Aranda's skeleton in order to reply to Don Benito's pleading to return Aranda's remains. Babo forced Don Benito to sacralize his friend's remains although it is against Don Benito's religion. Don Benito's wish to bury his friend's body is ignored, thus spiritually, religiously, and culturally, Babo dominates Don Benito.

Don Benito is afraid of being executed and his body being upheld like Aranda, so he has no other choice than to follow Babo's order, religion, and spirit. Don Benito remains weak and coward even after Babo's death. The following conversation between Captain Delano and Don Benito shows that Babo still overshadows Don Benito:

"But these mild trades that now fan your cheek, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are trades"

"With their steadfastness they but waft me to my tomb, senor," was the foreboding response.

"You are saved," cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; "you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?"

"The negro."

There was silence, while the moody man sat, slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle about him, as if it were a pall. (101)

Babo continues to dominate Don Benito spiritually as a head on the pole. Babo's body part, like Aranda's remains, is upheld and becomes an icon of threat and dignity. Babo is not only a living voice of authority, but his corpse also has a voice, and Don Benito is about to follow his dead leader, Babo. Babo's gaze and Aranda's skeleton are images of continuing warning to the society of whites. Their remains are endowed with second life. In other words, Babo's head is reproduced as another leader at the end of the story.

On the other hand, Don Benito would not follow Captain Delano, an American leader, because his advice of "A human-like healing" would not help. To

this point, Richard Chase notes that Captain Delano “can rescue Don Benito bodily from the mutinous slaves; but he does not understand that spiritual rescue is necessary” (158). Although Captain Delano offered “a spiritual rescue,” it was not appropriate for Don Benito. Don Benito refused the spiritual rescue because he had already followed the black slaves spiritually. Don Benito’s clothes are now not an aristocratic costume but a pall, and he is ready to die and follow his deceased leaders, Babo and Aranda. Babo’s head is now “fixed on the pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites” (102), thus his appalling stares have driven Don Benito to death. Therefore, Babo’s death is not a voiceless end but he resurges as a sacred appalling icon to dominate the living.

V

Don Benito is followed by the stares of Babo and his friend Aranda. Don Benito’s endeavor to conceal the mutiny is in vain, and this only leads to Captain Delano’s misconception. Captain Delano, as a self-confident American, cannot exercise charity properly, so he fails to rescue Don Benito spiritually. As a consequence, incapable Don Benito is compelled to obey Babo’s religion and spirit even after Babo’s death. Therefore, Melville stresses from an antislavery position that Babo’s authority continues even after his death. Although Babo’s plot for mutiny falls through and is executed, it is not a complete failure. He continues to exercise his power by staring at whites, although indifferent whites would not notice. Overall, every leader in this work is imperfect. Aranda fails to control his slaves, and his death debilitates Don Benito and clouds his judgments. His deeds bring about Captain Delano’s misconception. Melville’s message is therefore that there are no ideal leaders to follow, and those who follow imperfect leaders cannot escape the fate of death.

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