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Melville's Short Fiction: Many Voices, Many Modes

James Rodgers

"History is a novel which happened; the novel is history as it might have happened."

The Goncourt Brothers

Although the problem of narration has become a central concern of contemporary literary criticism, the underlying questions go back to the nineteenth century, when both historians and novelists grappled with the relationship between a given set of facts and the manner in which those facts were arranged and recounted in a narrative sequence. As Wolfgang Iser has pointed out, Scott was the key literary figure whose use of historical facts would determine the direction of the novel in the nineteenth century. Scott's method of transforming eyewitness accounts of historical events into a fiction – thus authenticating those facts through fictitious characters – made his novels into vehicles of historical reality, which Iser defines as "an interaction of human motivation and historical situations."¹

What Hayden White has made equally clear is that nineteenth century historians debated essentially the same issues of narrative fidelity to historical reality and developed different modes of historical discourse by which to shape the "story" of what happened in the past into a consistent narrative. The Goncourt Brothers are witty but not entirely accurate. What nineteenth century novelists and historians shared was their desire to write narratives that had the consistency of fictions and the reality of history. Clearly, I am not arguing that novelists and historians used exactly the same modes of narrative discourse in the nineteenth century; but they did see the problem of narrative discourse as a shared and central concern in which the narrative's fidelity to what was considered to be objective reality figured as the primary task. It is in

¹ "Fiction – The Filter of History: A Study of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*," in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Richard E. Amacher and Victor Lange, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979, 95.

this broad sense that nineteenth century novels and histories are quintessentially realistic.²

To the extent that a given historian or novelist departed from these conventions, he risked alienating his historically given public, both critical and general readers alike. Worse still, if that writer openly questioned the very nature of those conventions, the public, quite naturally, refused to follow. This was Melville's situation after the publication of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, especially the latter. Melville found himself faced with the prospect of not being able to find a publisher willing to accept another novel. By turning to the magazine market, Melville self-consciously revised his notions about both the matter and manner of his future work. We need to look at his short fiction as the product of this brief and intense period of artistic experimentation during which he created "notable examples of advanced or experimental narrative, attempts at innovative symbolism, and frequently penetrating efforts to define and evaluate American manners, institutions, and ways of thought." And Marvin Fisher asserts quite rightly that Melville's use of the concept of point of view as both theme and technique in *The Piazza Tales* (1856) "constitutes a good part of Melville's modernity."³

In limiting myself to *The Piazza Tales* and especially to "Benito Cereno," I think it is important to recognize that this collection, which also includes "Bartleby," "The Encantadas," "The Lightning-Rod Man," "The Bell Tower," and "The Piazza," offers not only some of the finest examples of Melville's short fiction but also the full range of narrative experiments attempted by Melville after 1852. Obviously, I exclude from consideration the two novels, *Israel Potter* (1855) and *The Confidence Man* (1956), which belong to this period but which lie beyond the scope of this article.

I would characterize Melville's narrative strategies in these tales as a series of attempts to mask, under the guise of a narrative persona – either first person, third person limited omniscient, or third person omniscient – a hidden, essentially subversive meaning. As William Charvat says, Melville "masks his rejections of public values and slo-

² Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1973. Also, his more recent remarks on narrative in "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 7, Number 1 (Autumn, 1980), 5–27. The whole volume looks at the theme of narrative.

³ *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850's*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1977, 16.

gans so skillfully that, although twelve out of fifteen of his magazine pieces deal essentially and unsentimentally with some kind of loss, poverty, loneliness, or defeat, some of the blackest of these were praised as 'quaint', 'fanciful', 'lifelike', 'genial', and 'thoroughly magazinish.'"⁴

3

Melville developed a style that enabled him to stay within the familiar and popular frame known to his readers and thus to sell his stories better than his novels. In his full length study of Melville's short fiction, R. Bruce Bickley identifies these frames as the travel sketch ("The Encantadas"), the gothic story or tale of mystery with a solution ("Benito Cereno" and "The Bell Tower"), the romantic confessional ("The Piazza"), and the familiar essay or character sketch ("Bartleby"). He describes Melville's narrative method for his short fiction as

ironic narration learned in part from his earlier experiments with first person narrative but now more consistently focused and controlled. In his short tales, Melville, in a sense, harvested the declamatory pyrotechniques of *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre*, carefully releasing his imaginative energies through, and around, a collection of ironic personae. Thus, Melville anticipates the twentieth century and the vogue of narrative-heroes like Prufrock, Meursault, and Jake Barnes: the "real" stories that he tells, more often than not, are about this narrators' anxieties and insecurities, or about their failures of vision – sometimes comically rendered, sometimes pathetically or even tragically revealed.⁵

Bickley's study enables us to see to what extent Melville was self-consciously working out the implications of a new narrative technique in the stories themselves and particularly in the opening sketch, "The Piazza," written especially to introduce the collection. By placing "The Piazza" first and giving to the collection the same title as this apparently slight piece, Melville was using the tactic employed by both Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne in prefacing their collections of tales, *The Sketch Book* and *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Like Irving's

⁴ *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800–1870*, ed. by Matthew J. Bruccoli, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1968, 279.

⁵ *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1975, 22. Bickley also observes that "Melville . . . obliges the reader to discover the limits or biases of the narrator's perceptions . . . A major issue in the later short stories will be the extent to which Melville's narrators discover their own egocentricity for what it is." 12.

Geoffrey Crayon, Melville's narrator has the quality of a detached spectator in search of the picturesque, and like Hawthorne in "The Old Manse," Melville uses the house as the frame of reference of the writer who creates out of this surrounding landscape the products of his imagination.⁶

"The Piazza" strikes us immediately as a peculiar piece, since it occupies a position that is not quite autobiographical preface and not quite clear cut fiction. What Melville is doing here in a manner somewhat reminiscent of his earlier critical essay review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, entitled "Hawthorne's Mosses," is writing criticism through fiction. He creates a narrative persona who is not merely the author speaking but also a character enacting the critical meaning of the fiction. "The Piazza" is a fiction about fiction that, when placed in the context of the whole collection, provides us with one of the first major statements of a theory of fiction and particularly of narrative technique in American literature. It is a more secret way by which Melville alerts his underground readers to his darker, even subversive intentions.

We can summarize what happens in "The Piazza" fairly quickly. The narrator, who never identifies himself explicitly until the last line of the story, describes what he sees from his old farmhouse and recounts why he chooses to build a piazza on the north side. Having done so, he abruptly switches to an account of an "inland voyage to fairy-land" – that is, of his attempt to locate and define the nature of a gleaming object seen from the piazza at different times, different seasons, "visible, and then but vaguely, under certain witching conditions of light and shadow."

The narrator sets out for this spot, which he calls fairy-land, and after a time reaches a forlorn cottage, where he finds a lonely girl, Marianna. Marianna never leaves the cottage and dreams only of meeting the happy person who lives in the enchanted house that *she* sees from *her* window. The house she sees is, of course, the narrator's, and the narrator returns home to the solid security of the piazza, renouncing all future attempts to discover fairy land, but still haunted by the vision of Marianna's face.

⁶ Fisher, *op. cit.*, puts Melville's use of this tactic into the context of the debate concerning the role of the artist in America. See especially his introduction.

Thus summarized, the story seems one of Melville's slightest efforts, the kind of story his contemporaries called "quaint" and "fanciful." But a closer reading reveals Melville's preoccupation with the whole artistic process, with problems of "seeing," "prospect," and "perspective." As Marvin Fisher rightly points out, Melville's problem in "The Piazza" is "that of the artist in reconciling transcendent illusion with less pleasant empirical fact." He goes on to define Melville's concept of *prospect* as

an extensive view of what lies ahead and a hopeful anticipation of the envisioned results, in both senses a foretaste of what is to follow. And by *perspective* I mean the artistic devices by which a true picture is produced, whether through gradations of color or distinctiveness for an aerial perspective, through orthographic projections for a sharp, unshaded linear perspective, or in a more literary sense, through symbolic suggestion and artful allusion for an imaginative perspective. By *perspective* I also mean the way something appears from a particular standpoint, as in the phrase, *historical perspective*, or in the literary sense the way point of view and the inherent bias, assumptions, predispositions of the narrator affect the tale.⁷

"The Piazza" not only raises all these questions of prospect and perspective, reiterated through the insistence on seeing; it mocks the narrator himself as representative of a faulty vision of things, who would go in search of fairy land but who, confronted by Marianna's real sadness, retreats back to the illusory realm of his piazza without ever freeing himself entirely from the dark image of Marianna's face. The narrator thus becomes a model for a series of ironic narrators whose accounts of events Melville will progressively put into question in terms of their faultiness of vision, their distorted prospect, their limited perspective.

Once we realize that Melville's short fiction is not only "about" something recognizable, in the manner of realistic fictional conventions, which Frank Kermode describes as "invented stories in which the proprieties (as to connexity, closure, and character) are better observed ... [but is also] the product of two intertwined processes, the presentation of a fable and its progressive interpretation (which of course alters it)."⁸ Then we can see to what extent Melville was anticipating the contemporary question of what role the reader plays in creating meaning. As Kermode points out, the first process by which fiction asserts one level of meaning "tends toward clarity and propriety ('refined common sense'), the second toward secrecy, toward distortions which cover se-

⁷ Fisher, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁸ "Secrets and Narrative Sequence," *Critical Inquiry*, *op. cit.*, 85.

crets.”⁹ In short, Melville’s short fiction is also “about” the interpretive – or as some prefer, hermeneutic – nature of fiction itself.

Melville’s fascination with perspective and particularly with the interaction between narrated text and reader’s response can be seen at different levels in all of these stories, whether it be in the manipulation of narrative credibility through ironic understatement in “Bartleby” or in the fastidious working out of the explicit allegory in “The Bell Tower.” But what emerges throughout is Melville’s willingness to play with the validity of the narrative *per se*, which ultimately will lead him to that most playful and most secret of all his fictions of the period, *The Confidence Man*. And we can see this most completely in his short fiction in “Benito Cereno.”

The extraordinary variety of responses to this story attests the difficult nature of interpretation,¹⁰ yet it seems clear that Melville’s refusal “to clarify stems more from insight than from oversight. The story is a remarkable study in the problems of perception – . . . Delano’s [original] account [from which Melville drew the major details for the story] obscured almost as much as it revealed, and Melville’s exploration of individual consciousness and cultural differences raises problems that Delano never recognized.”¹¹ Indeed, like Delano, most critics seem also not to recognize the more subversive qualities of the narrative.

Although it is now widely acknowledged that “Benito Cereno” provides us with a highly critical view of both Amasa Delano and Don Benito Cereno as the embodiment, respectively, of New World (specifically North American) and Old World (specifically Spanish) values, clearly Melville’s contemporaries failed to see here, as in most of the short fiction, the ironic effect of the third person narrative, which is filtered, or as Gérard Genette would insist, focused through the consciousness of Captain Amasa Delano for nearly four-fifths of its length. Since Melville progressively deepens the irony, several long examples from the text will illustrate how Melville alerts and warns his readers about the reliability of Delano’s perceptions.

Early in the narrative the narrator describes Delano as “a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary

⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁰ A good sampling of useful criticism plus the relevant chapter from Amasa Delano’s narrative can be found in two collections: Seymour L. Gross, ed., *A Benito Cereno Handbook*, Wadsworth Publishing, Belmont, California, 1965, John P. Runden, ed., *Melville’s “Benito Cereno,”* D. C. Heath, Boston, 1965.

¹¹ Fisher, *op. cit.*, 105.

and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man." He immediately undercuts this already equivocal statement – equivocal for any one familiar with Melville's views on simple minded optimism – by the following observations: "Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine."¹²

This is one of the rare moments where the narrator directly addresses the reader. But from then on, having given us this warning, he turns to an indirect approach, hedged around with qualifiers that accentuate the problem of perception. As John Seelye has noted, there are some one hundred and fifteen "conjectural expressions" in "Benito Cereno" such as "might have obtruded," "might have been put a deception," "seemed to prove," and especially "appeared," the use of which forces the reader simultaneously to identify with the movement of Delano's mind and to wonder about the validity of Delano's conclusions.¹³ This procedure, already employed in "Bartleby," but through a first person narration, can be seen to work not only in descriptive passages but in dialogues, silent or indirect monologues, and spoken monologues or soliloquies, as the following examples demonstrate. The first concerns the appearance of Atufal, a gigantic African of royal blood who is brought before Delano and Don Benito in chains.

This is some mulish mutineer, thought Captain Delano, surveying, not without a mixture of admiration, the colossal form of the negro.

"See, he waits your question, master," said the servant. Thus reminded, Don Benito, nervously averting his glance, as if shunning, by anticipation, some rebellious response, in a disconcerted voice, thus spoke: – "Atufal, will you ask my pardon, now?"

The black was silent.

"Again, master," murmured the servant, with bitter upraising eyeing his countryman, "Again, master; he will bend to master yet."

"Answer," said Don Benito, still averting his glance, "say but the one word, *pardon*, and your chains shall be off."

Upon this, the black, slowly raising both arms, let them lifelessly fall, his links clanking, his head bowed; as much as to say, "no, I am content."

"Go," said Don Benito, with inkept and unknown emotion. Deliberately as he had come, the black obeyed.¹⁴

¹² "Benito Cereno," in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, ed. Harold Beaver, Penguin, London, 1970, 217–218. Hereafter cited, BC.

¹³ *Melville: The Ironic Diagram*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1970, 105.

¹⁴ BC, 237.

The second passage occurs while Delano, in pacing about the ship, trying to decide if Don Benito Benito's version of the story is true, has just avoided falling into the sea after leaning against a rotten railing:

He glanced up. With sober curiosity peering down upon him was one of the old oakum-pickers, slipped from his perch to an outside boom; while below the old negro, and, invisible to him, reconnoitering from a port-hole like a fox from the mouth of its den, crouched the Spanish sailor again. From something suddenly suggested by the man's air, the mad idea now darted into Captain Delano's mind, that Don Benito's plea of indisposition, in withdrawing below, was but a pretense: that he was engaged there maturing his plot, of which the sailor, by some means gaining an inkling, had a mind to warn the stranger against; incited, it may be, by gratitude for a kind word on first boarding the ship. Was it from foreseeing some possible interference like this, that Don Benito had, beforehand, given such a bad character of his sailors, while praising the negroes; though, indeed, the former seemed as docile as the latter the contrary? The whites, too, by nature, were the shrewder race. A man with some evil design, would he not be likely to speak well of that stupidity which was blind to his depravity, and malign that intelligence from which it might not be hidden? Not unlikely, perhaps. But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be 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? These difficulties recalled former ones. Lost in their mazes, Captain Delano . . . now regained the deck, . . .¹⁵

The third passage comes shortly afterwards and is one of the rare examples of direct thought:

"What, I, Amasa Delano – Jack of the Beach, as they called me when a lad – I, Amasa; the same that, duck-satchel in hand, used to paddle along the water-side to the school-house made from the old hulk – I, little Jack of the Beach, that used to go berrying with cousin Nat and the rest; I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard? Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean. There is some one above. Fie, fie, Jack of the Beach! you are a child indeed; a child of the second childhood, old boy; you are beginning to dote and drule, I'm afraid."¹⁶

Now, the overall effect of these passages is not only to show, as in straight description, both the movement of Delano's mind and the ironic cast which Melville clearly intends; it also traps the unwary reader into slowly identifying with the perceptions and prejudices of Delano.

¹⁵ BC, 253–254.

¹⁶ BC, 256.

So that, even if we call ourselves careful readers, Melville compels us to assume attitudes as readers, however unconsciously, that mirror Delano's. The second passage of the three already cited illustrates this procedure, where we risk accepting Delano's patently racist assumptions because Delano is our only overt source of facts; and if we dismiss these facts because we are reacting to the cumulative ironic effect that surrounds his perceptions, from where or from whom do we verify the truth of the narrative discourse?

An even more radical example of this narrative procedure occurs in the following passage:

Ha, there now's a pleasant sort of sunny sight; quite sociable, too.

His attention had been drawn to a slumbering negress, partly disclosed through the lace-work of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts, was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, 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, blending with the composed snore of the negress.

The uncommon vigor of the child at length roused the mother. She started up, at a distance facing Captain Delano. But as if not at all concerned at the attitude in which she had been caught, delightedly she caught the child up, with maternal transports, covering it with kisses.

There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love, thought Captain Delano, well pleased.

This incident prompted him to remark the other negresses more particularly than before. He was gratified with their manners: like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution; equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them. Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves. Ah! thought Captain Delano, these, perhaps, are some of the very women whom Ledyard saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of.

These natural sights somehow insensibly deepened his confidence and ease.¹⁷

The problem here is significant because it has led to the charge, by liberal white and militant black critics, that Melville was insensitive to if not downright racist towards blacks. Since I agree with Marvin Fisher's reading that "Benito Cereno" offers a radical criticism of New and Old World views of slavery and attitudes towards what we now call Third World peoples; and since I believe that the key to this reading lies in our understanding Melville's narrative procedures; I think it is essential to insist that, although Delano is providing us with real facts, is indeed the

¹⁷ BC, 251.

only source of facts in this narrative until the slave rebellion is revealed, these are his perceptions and not Melville's, even though Melville provides us with no *direct* contradiction of these perceptions. The animal imagery by itself is in keeping with the subject – so long as we assume with Delano that Africans are less civilized than Europeans, as Melville's contemporaries would generally have done.

Simply to reject Delano's language does not solve the problem, because the second half of this passage uses a tone and vocabulary that, strictly speaking, we cannot call vulgar or inaccurate in the context. Yet there is no doubt that every one of Delano's perceptions is in error, as the dénouement of the mystery shows.

In effect, the second part of "Benito Cereno" – excluding the brief narrative sequence that recounts the capture of the *San Dominick* and the rebellious slaves – consists of Don Benito's deposition placed before the court of inquiry, which is offered "as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it..." We need to read this sequence with extreme caution, given the already equivocal nature of the preceding narrative, and the narrator warns us here, as in the first part, of the difficulty of interpretation, by noting that the extracts chosen "from one of the official Spanish documents, will, it is hoped, shed light on the preceding narrative..." Aside from the obvious tentativeness of the statement, such a procedure in the marshaling of historical evidence implicitly undermines the objectivity of the methodology. In addition, the narrator informs us that the Spanish court of inquiry was in itself dubious about Don Benito's deposition. "But subsequent depositions of the surviving sailors, bearing out the revelations of their captain in several of the strangest particulars, gave credence to the rest. So that the tribunal, in its final decision, rested its capital sentences upon statements which, had they lacked confirmation, it would have deemed but duty to reject." Whatever doubts it may have had, the court uses the deposition as the source of "the data whereon to found the criminal sentences to be pronounced." And in the end, Babo, the chief of the rebels, is hanged, his body burned, and his head placed on a pole in the Plaza of Lima as a reminder and warning of what happens to rebellious slaves.

Just how does the deposition serve as the key to the preceding narrative? We need to make the following points about it. First, as already noted, the narrator characterizes the deposition in such a way as to introduce doubt about its validity. Second, the deposition, which serves as the only source of evidence by which to condemn the rebellious slaves, is an extremely partial account, reflecting, in a way parallel to the

previous narrative of Amasa Delano's view of events, a flawed and prejudicial view of what happened. Third, as the interpolated remarks describing the deposition make clear, the deposition is only one of many documents available to the court and potentially to the reader by which to judge the accuracy of the narrative. And fourth and perhaps most important of all, the deposition, indeed all of the account given as evidence before the court of inquiry, is a perfect fiction offered by Melville as if it were *verbatim* historical documentation.

To sum up the narrative problems, the reader confronts a text taken from real, that is, verifiable historical documents – Delano's *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels*. Melville's story employs an ironic mode of narration that underscores the ambiguity of the narrative sequence, the true meaning of which is ostensibly supplied by a second narrative sequence – the deposition – based on apparently genuine historical/legal documents. These are in themselves both self-justifying and entirely fictitious. Given these difficulties, how does the reader locate, if at all, a reliable perspective from which to view this tangle of narrative possibilities.

Here is where we see just how Melville's manipulation of narrative is fundamentally subversive in quality. Once we accept the premise that both Captain Delano and Don Benito are unreliable sources of truth, each trapped by their narrow prejudices towards blacks and each representing the value systems of New and Old World culture of which Melville was highly critical, then the only voice we can trust is the voice that never speaks as narrator, Babo's voice, the voice of the slaves. The nature of Babo's voice is nothing less than the voice of those who never speak historically, who never control what Hayden White has described as the narrative strategy of historical discourse,¹⁸ except through actions that disrupt the narrative flow of history. The slave rebellion is, then, Melville's way of disrupting his own narrator and narrative and of providing us with the only reliable perspective on these events.

Babo is the character who serves as the equivalent for Melville preferred narrative position – that of the ironist who offers a subversive version of history through fiction: what is Babo's "story" of the slave rebellion but a superb fiction which he conceals beneath his perfectly ironic slave identity? – and who, once captured by the authorities (that is, those who dictated the official meaning of the events) "uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I

¹⁸ Metahistory, *passim*.

cannot do deeds, I will not speak words." Babo meets a "voiceless end," and his head, "that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites..."

"Benito Cereno" is a story, a "history," that divulges its meanings ironically, through the manipulation of narrative perspectives passed through the filter of history treated as fiction and fiction treated as history. The interpenetration of the two narrative genres of history and fiction, which Melville would use effectively again in *Billy Budd*, was in fact characteristic of nineteenth century narrative strategies, both the realistic novel and the writing of history. But Melville reveals his modernity by subverting the assumptions that the narrative strategies of history and fiction depend on, namely, the correspondence between narrative statement and narrative meaning. The secret meaning of "Benito Cereno" gazes out at us, like Babo's head, unabashed and silent, waiting for us to follow its lead.