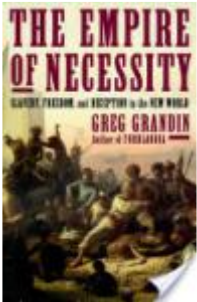


Slave Labor, Melville's Rebellion, and Captain Delano's Journal



In his newest book, historian Greg Grandin provides background to Herman Melville's classic *Benito Cereno*, an 1855 short novel about a slave rebellion. Reflecting on this story written almost two centuries ago, Grandin opens up space for further research by those investigating the Black Atlantic. Melville's novel told the story of a concerned and liberal sea captain, Amasa Delano, who boarded the slave ship *San Dominick* and encountered a deferential slave, Babo, caring for his slave master who had taken ill. Delano was moved by the humble slave's concern for his master, the ship's captain. Not until the end of that day does Delano realize that he had been deceived and that the slaves on the *San Dominick* had revolted and had actually taken charge. Babo was not a deferential slave, solicitous toward his sick master, but rather was the revolt's ringleader! When Delano discovers the true circumstances, he directs his armed team of sailors to round up the rebels, and a fight ensues. The Melville narrative is extraordinary, ironic, and liberatory, and Grandin's book provides some remarkable background material to the novel. *Benito Cereno* had been based on actual events recorded in the non-fictional Delano's 1817 journal.

Grandin provides a context for grasping this late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century revolutionary era, reflecting a whole period of slave rebellion. However, three special contributions by Grandin deserve explication here: his emphasis on the Muslim influence on the slaves, the brutality of the free-enterprise seal-hunting industry, and the harsh march of slaves over the Andes.

First, one of Grandin's striking contributions is his situating the real and the fictional Amasa Delano, and fictional Babo, within a revolutionary history and alerting his readers to the Muslim background of many West African slaves. Grandin reports that "some estimate as many as 10 percent" of over twelve million African slaves taken to America were Muslims (195). Grandin shows us, in fact, that when Protestant Delano meets Babo, he is possibly not confronted with a Christian slave, but a Muslim one, a Muslim brother of those who rose up and fought for a decade to acquire Haitian independence in 1804. (Melville may not have known this Muslim connection fully, but he clearly had Haiti in mind when writing his own version of the story.) Grandin further removes our blinders by stressing the significance of the prime counterpart to the Haitian revolution, "the largest urban slave rebellion in the Americas" in 1835 in Bahia, Brazil (195-96): many of these slaves in Bahia were also practicing Muslims with a rich history of advanced education and culture. Ironically, Grandin shows, Muslim culture and knowledge were not passed to the Americas predominantly through wealthy travelers, but rather arrived through the slave trade, as West African Muslims were ripped from their homelands, trapped in the Middle Passage, and forced into bondage—and many, perhaps like Babo, fought back.

Second, Grandin broadens the discourse on this historical period by revealing a graphic aspect of the callousness behind the commercial sea world. The non-fictional Delano captained a "sealer" that sent out teams to slaughter the abundant seals on small islands. Grandin critically describes the hunting of terrorized seals and the vividly gory ins-and-outs of early factory processing. He tells of enormous elephant seals and human-sized seals and the violent clubbing, mass slaughtering, and then methodical processing of them (134-37). Melville scholars will enjoy how Grandin takes up Melville's method of describing and cataloguing labor processes, a virtual extension of Melville's cetological explanations of the

detailed anatomical and social aspects of whales and raw whaling in *Moby-Dick*; this time whales are replaced by seals. Describing the actual steps involved in sealing, Grandin states, "When the killing was finished, the men skinned the carcasses, ... cut the hides ... [into] two-by-two-foot squares, each as thick as eight inches with blubber, ... strung [them] on poles, ... carried to the tryworks ... by a stream or a river ... [where] sand and blood could be washed off the blubber. ... Ripped [them] into two-inch strips, scored, and tossed into ... pots ... fired ... with wood" (135). Grandin is clearly referencing *Moby-Dick* with the use of "tryworks," as in whale processing on the *Pequod*. He also catalogs the late eighteenth-century Argentinian factory production of beef jerky, tallow, and animal hides with extensive salting, drying, steaming, and boiling—and as readers of Melville's *Moby-Dick* know—nothing immediately profitable goes to waste (102-104). And tragically, slaves were forced to provide the labor in these factories so men like Protestant Captain Delano could further their own spiritual and economic freedom. Although the sea captain did not favor slavery (83), it comes as no surprise when Grandin informs us that Delano's huge debt from failed sealing voyages eventually spurred him to join the many other merchants maintaining slavery by selling dried fish to Caribbean slave islands (255).

During this era, men like Captain Delano sought their own liberty by going to sea, and they thought that by doing so they were building a better world through commerce. Perceptively, Grandin exposes those who went to sea only to discover themselves caught up in bashing helpless seals and penguins and trading in slaves in order to further that sense of enterprising freedom—oblivious to how the animals might fit into a wider ecology and blind to their own entanglement and complicity in the subjugation of other human beings. Grandin reports that although Captain Delano's journal indicated that one island had millions of seals, it was only a few short years before there were no more seals to hunt (139-141).

Realizing the divergent natures of the whaling and sealing industries, Grandin carefully distinguishes between the two on the basis of labor relations: Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, expressed the “intense coordination and camaraderie” (Grandin, 142) required on a whaling ship to master one huge whale that could tear off a sailor’s leg, while sealing involved “pitting desperate captains and officers ... against equally desperate foremast hands” (142)—the former brutalizing the latter for not rapidly bringing in wealth, and the latter extending their anger toward nature by violently brutalizing innocent seals and their pups.

The third aspect of the period that Grandin elaborates is the harsh marching of slaves to their labor destinations and a comparison of the forced movement of slaves across the plains and mountains of South America with the compulsory march west of large numbers of slaves in the United States (265).

Grandin is quite explicit in the following juxtaposition:

Just as merchants decades earlier had begun sending more and more slaves over the pampas and then up the Andes, drivers now were moving ever greater numbers of enslaved peoples out of the old slave states ... to new sugar and cotton plantations in the Deep South and the Southwest. Many of them traveled the way Babo [crossed the pampas and the Andes], in single or double columns on foot, their necks shackled together like links in a chain, across flatlands and over mountains. (265)

Grandin extends the now frequently discussed “Black Atlantic” to the Pacific: he melds the slaves’ long—often very long—forced trudges from the interior and western Africa into the trek across South America from east to west, to waiting ships on the Pacific, one of which was the ship where Babo revolted.

There are two further matters of special interest to this reviewer: Grandin’s strength in delineating the Enlightenment

paradox and a possible weakness in his interpretation of Melville. Grandin's focus, and one to which he repeatedly returns throughout the book, is the permeable border zone between freedom and slavery, which has long confounded the Americas. Grandin's understanding of this hazy interstice is evident in his contrasting of the early nineteenth-century desire for amplified individual freedom with the felt necessity for an expanding slave workforce. Grandin clearly references this moral disparity as a paradox: "[Merchants] didn't mince words saying what they wanted: ... more liberty, more free trade of blacks" (7). And he surely perceives the ramifications of this contradiction, where the slave trade gained momentum and the liberals reveled in their increased commercial success that led to their expanded liberties.

A version of this paradox was similarly elaborated by Susan Buck-Morss in *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009), engaging Enlightenment thought as upholding a contradiction between "freedom ... as the highest ... political value" and "the economic practice of slavery"—both were simultaneously envisioned (Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 21). Buck-Morss was concerned that although current authors have all the facts before them, some writers still form their historical narratives of human liberty along solely positive trajectories (22), ignoring the Enlightenment's cozy relationship with slavery, colonization, and other forms of oppression. But Grandin explicitly departs from that sort of blind interpretation of history held by some current writers; he readily explores a version of the paradox. In fact, in preparation for his book, Grandin stepped beyond his extensive museum and library research to physically travel the South American slave route over the Andes (293) in order to tease out the tensions between the adventurous striving for freedom and the "necessity" for enslavement.

I did uncover one possible problem in Grandin's book. Grandin

thinks that Melville was a pessimist, who saw America in crisis and was waiting for the catastrophe to hit. Although Melville, as his life progressed after the Civil War, did become deeply disappointed that America did not keep its best promises, Grandin misses the revolutionary spirit of Melville in the early 1850s when *Moby-Dick* and then *Benito Cereno* appeared. And he too narrowly insists that Melville was not a rebel and that he was afraid of revolution's outcomes (269). He almost interprets *Benito Cereno*, where Babo is recaptured, as Melville cautioning the oppressed against rebellion. There is a history to Melville interpretations which Grandin may not know. True, with the 1920s Melville revival, many read *Moby-Dick* through Captain Ahab's voice, ringing with daring, driven, virtually insane persistence to send out that floating factory, the *Pequod*, to subdue the wild whale. But some African-American writers of the 1940s, in particular Richard Wright, C. L. R. James, and Ralph Ellison, began a new "signifying on" Melville's work ("signifying on," as described by Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*). Wright, James, and Ellison did not identify with Captain Ahab, but rather with the crew, being driven to death by America's captains. And, I believe, they understood Melville's true intent. Melville was against slavery and disgusted with his Northern relatives. He had been to sea, and never as a captain. In his writings, he humanized the internationalist sailors he met and repeatedly mocked America's arrogance. Frederick Douglass was often on Melville's mind, reflecting Melville's interest in the oppressed and reinforcing the view that in no way was *Benito Cereno* a cautionary tale against slave insurrection. Melville studied the works of the Abbé Guillaume Raynal, and understood, like Hegel (who interested Melville), the rebellion in Haiti fifty years earlier, alluding to it in his novels. He was aware of the rising number of slave rebellions shaking the South. *Moby-Dick* is filled with cooperative labor but also threats of rebellion, and *Benito Cereno*, written just a few years later, can be seen as its sequel: We're back! And we can run the ship. *Benito Cereno* is not a message that

revolution ends in recapture, but that revolution is a process with repetitive incursions, and will move revolutionary history into the future.

Although Grandin seems to misread Melville somewhat, Grandin's strengths surely outweigh any weaknesses, and his book should be useful for those exploring the Black Atlantic scholarship developing over the last two decades. In addition, those, like this reviewer, who take an interest in the Enlightenment paradox can profitably mine Grandin's recent historical work. But Grandin's description of seal slaughter and of the dreadful slave march Babo would have endured over the Andes, with the horrifying link to marching chained slaves westward in the United States, would, alone, justify this book.