



## Skinned

WALTER JOHNSON

In July 1952, in a cell block on Ellis Island, C. L. R. James began writing a book about Herman Melville. The Trinidadian journalist, historian and social theorist was awaiting deportation under the McCarran Act. Caught in the administrative limbo of the “detainee”, James built his book, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* on Melville’s abidingly pertinent observation that, in the United States, “freedom is the name for a thing which is not freedom”.

For James, Melville was a “visionary”: the first American writer to confront the false promises and spiritual pitfalls of modern life. *Moby-Dick* becomes the story of a ship populated by men who had been raised on fables, taught to believe that they were free-born and self-sovereign and then cast out into

an indifferent world. Forced by the pitiless immensity of the sea to confront his own insignificance, the *Pequod's* Captain Ahab rages against the laws of man and the limits of nature. His, for James, is a “totalitarian personality” forged out of the contradictory aspirations and limitations of “industrial civilization”.

But *Moby-Dick*, according to James, was, above all, a book about work and workers. The hundreds of pages of technical and operational detail about whales and whaling portray the world as empirically known by the “savage” harpooners who are the book’s real heroes. In their work, James saw the melding of nature, practical science and collaborative labour that he believed pointed towards a version of freedom defined not by liberty, but by commonality, not by the absence of constraint, but by its embrace.

Despite his focus on the question of labour and unfreedom, however, James had little to say of Melville’s novella “Benito Cereno”, the story of an American ship’s captain at sea who comes across a slave ship drifting under what eventually turns out to be the command of its human cargo. The story follows the creeping realization of the American, Amasa Delano, that something is not right aboard the *San Dominick*. The ship’s Spanish captain, Benito Cereno, turns out to be under the control of the sly, servile-seeming African, Babo, who memorably draws a razor across Cereno’s neck, seeming to shave the master who is in reality his slave. For James, “Benito Cereno” was a mere “propaganda story”, a mustering of stock characters to prove a preordained point, a mediocre counterpoint to *Moby-Dick*.

Greg Grandin’s marvellous new book, *The Empire of Necessity*, brings the scepticism about “freedom” and careful attention to work that James valued in *Moby-Dick* to bear on the history of the nineteenth-century slave rebellion on which Melville based his story. As with James, Grandin centres his analysis on the possibilities and limits of nineteenth-century liberalism, in his case the telling observation that “what many meant by freedom was the freedom to buy and sell black people”. Framed by the paradoxical interdependence of the Age of Liberty and the Age of Slavery, *The Empire of Necessity* traces the pathways by which the American captain, the Spanish slaver and the African rebel made their way towards their fateful meeting.

At the centre of Grandin’s account is Amasa Delano, a man in search of the main chance – more like Melville’s profit-reckoning first mate, Starbuck, than the mad Ahab. Delano was in the South Pacific at the helm of a ship

called *Perseverance* to hunt seals, whose skins he hoped to sell in Canton. By 1805, however, the short-lived seal boom had come and gone, undone by wanton over-hunting and a glut in the Asian and European markets. Many of the men who had sailed with Delano from Boston had already deserted at various stops along the way. Those who remained were hungry, doubtful they would ever get paid, and, the captain worried, mutinous.

The historical Cerreño was a merchant seaman, trading at the margins of Spain's parlous South American mercantile empire. Like other European imperialists, the Spanish tried to produce revenue by controlling and taxing the goods (among them slaves) that went in and out of their New World colonies. The slaves aboard Cerreño's ship, the *Tryal*, had originally landed in Montevideo aboard the *Neptune*, an English ship that had been taken at sea by a French privateer. But, because the slave trade was legally limited to Spanish ships, the slaves were seized by the courts and sold at auction. They were purchased by a slave trader, who marched them across the Andes to Valparaiso. There, he hired Cerreño to carry them aboard the *Tryal* northwards to Lima for final sale. On that voyage, during the evening of December 22, 1804, Cerreño, who had gone below to sleep, was awakened by the noise of their revolt.

Melville's Babo was a composite of two of those who revolted aboard the *Tryal*. The historical Babo and his son Mori were Muslim slaves, probably shipped from Bonny, in present-day Nigeria. They were two of the more than 12 million slaves who made the Middle Passage in four centuries of the Atlantic slave trade. More slaves were landed in Montevideo, the hub of the Spanish slave trade on the Atlantic coast of South America, in 1804 than in any other year of the trade. They were put to work as dockers, horse-drivers and domestic servants in the ports along the Atlantic coast; they worked as street hawkers in the cities and as cowboys on the Pampas of Argentina; they were, like Babo and Mori, marched across the Andes to be sold on the other side. By the time that Babo, Mori and the others were herded onto the *Tryal*, many of them had spent almost a year in the slave trade. They had crossed the Atlantic in the hold of a slave ship, pressed up against hundreds of others, mourning, thirsty, burning, sick, stinking, mad, dying. They had been impounded in Montevideo as contraband; sold at auction; marched, ill-clad and freezing, across the spine of the continent; and sold again. On the eve of Laylat al-Qadr (translated as the Night of Destiny), the holiest night of Ramadan, when the angel Gabriel had appeared to the prophet Muhammad to remind him of God's promise to deliver the faithful, they

rose up, killing eighteen of the thirty or so crewmen aboard the *Tryal*, and took control of the ship.

The *Perseverance* had been at sea for almost two years when it encountered the *Tryal* on the morning of February 20, 1805. Cerreño had been steering aimlessly around the Pacific coast of Chile for a month and a half, trying to keep Babo, Mori and the rest convinced that there was no such thing as Haiti (they had asked him to take them to the “Black Island”) and that Africa was too far away to reach without resupplying the ship. As Delano rowed over in a small launch, Babo and Mori instructed Cerreño to pretend that he was still in charge of the ship, and that they were simply lost. Delano later catalogued his confusion in the memoir on which Melville based his own account. He was put off by Cerreño, interpreting the Spaniard’s reticence as arrogance; he felt crowded by the fawning Mori, who refused to leave his master’s side and seemed persistently underfoot. Finally, bewildered and a little bit peeved but still unsuspecting, he climbed down to his boat, and prepared to row back to the *Perseverance*. At that moment, the Spanish captain jumped from the gunwale above, and crashed down into Delano’s lap.

The American returned to his ship and unleashed his men upon the *Tryal*, which was soon retaken. That night, as Delano slept, some of his sailors, in a grotesque twist on Melville’s received version, used the razor-sharp knives intended for the seals to skin several of the rebels alive. Delano spent the next several months engaged in a fruitless legal struggle with Cerreño (and the latter’s creditors) over whether he could claim the *Tryal* and its human cargo as a “prize” rescued at sea. After several changes of venue and an unsuccessful set of appeals, Delano returned to sea, where he spent another year filling the hold of his sealer. Three years out of port, he delivered his haul to Canton, sold at rock bottom, and returned home in much the same way he had left: in debt.

Grandin adduces many important lessons from the history of the encounter aboard the *Tryal*: about slavery as the “flywheel” of capitalist development; about the role of Islam in Spanish history and the role of slavery in the intellectual and political history of Europe more generally; about the vexations and contradictions of the history of “freedom” in the age of the American Revolution, the Second Great Awakening and the Atlantic slave trade.

But what makes *The Empire of Necessity* a truly remarkable book are the sort of concrete, operational details that C. L. R. James treasured in Melville: the empirical results of Grandin's extraordinary work. The lives of ordinary seamen aboard sealers, who were dropped on islands in the South Pacific, where they lived alone for years at a time, harvesting seals (those from the *Perseverance* were left on an island for the entire time that their captain pursued his Jarndyce-like claim to the *Tryal* in the various colonial courts of South America); the bare fact that one of these islands was called Más Afuera (Even Further); the history of the slave ship *Rôdeur*, beset by a disease at sea that caused the blindness of all aboard, save one mate, who faithfully guided the ship towards the slave market in Guadeloupe; the colonial medical practice of using slaves as living carriers to transport the smallpox virus between ports needing vaccine: these details and many more like them make Greg Grandin's book one of the most interesting ever written about slavery and the Atlantic World.

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