

Benito Cereno
English 213

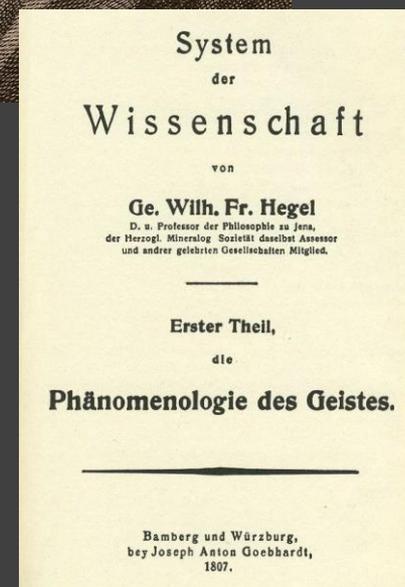
Setting down the basin, the negro searched among the razors, as for the sharpest, and having found it, gave it an additional edge by expertly strapping it on the firm, smooth, oily skin of his open palm; he then made a gesture as if to begin, but midway stood suspended for an instant, one hand elevating the razor, the other professionally dabbling among the bubbling suds on the Spaniard's lank neck. Not unaffected by the close sight of the gleaming steel, Don Benito nervously shuddered, his usual ghastliness was heightened by the lather, which lather, again was intensified in its hue by the contrasting sootiness of the negro's body. Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the the thus postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white, a man at the block. But this was one of those antic conceits, appearing and banishing in a breath, from which, perhaps the best regulated mind is not always free" (72)

Herman Melville

- 1818-1891
- Father a merchant of French dry goods
- Grandparents were heroes of the Revolutionary War
- 1839-1844 Melville becomes a sailor on a merchant ship
- 1845 Melville begins his career as a writer
- 1849 studies Hegel with George Adler
- 1855 Writes *Benito Cereno*



“Just where the master has effectively achieved lordship, he really finds that something has come about while different from an independent consciousness. It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved. He is thus not assured of self-existence as his truth; he finds that his truth is rather the unessential consciousness, and the fortuitous unessential action of that consciousness. The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the bondsman. This doubtless appears in the first instance outside itself, and not as a the truth of self-consciousness. But just as the lordship showed its essential nature to be the reverse of what it wants to be, so, too, bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness repressed within itself, it will enter into itself and change round into real and true independence” (192-3)



Hegel & Haiti



“The self-liberation of the African slaves of Saint-Domingue gained for them, by force, the recognition of European and American whites – if only in the form of fear. Among those with egalitarian sympathies, it gained them respect as well. [...] The black Jacobins of Saint-Domingue surpassed the metropole in actively realizing the Enlightenment goal of human liberty, seeming to give proof that the French Revolution was not simply a European phenomenon but world-historical in its implications

[...]

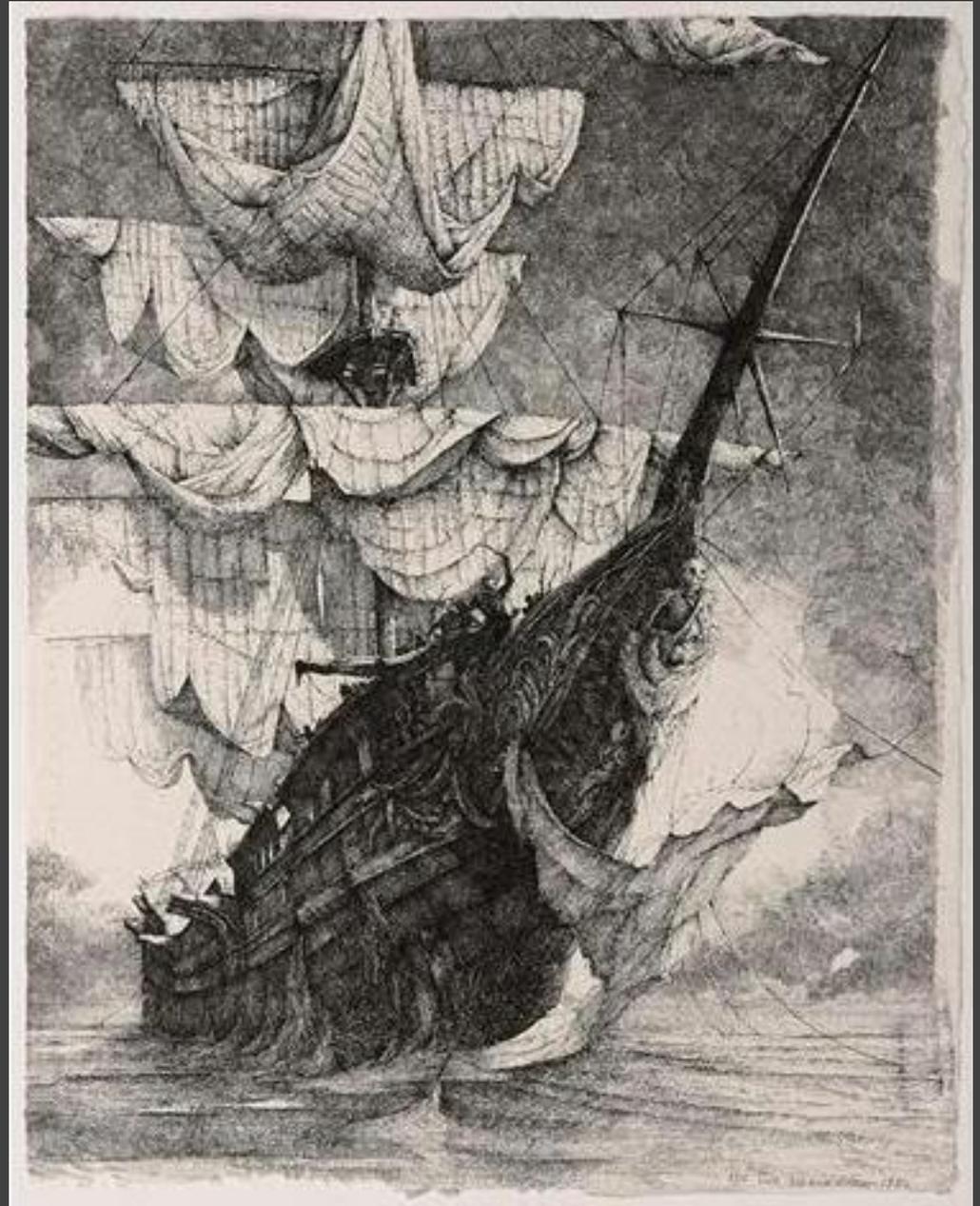
Hegel used the sensational events of Haiti as the linchpin in his argument in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The actual and successful revolution of Caribbean slaves against their masters is the moment when the dialectical logic of recognition becomes visible as the thematics of world history, the story of the universal realization of freedom”

- Susan Buck Morss

“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); while upon the tarnished head-boards, near by, appeared, in stately capitals, once gilt, the ship’s name, ‘**San Dominic.**’” (37)

There is a substantial body of criticism devoted to the many changes Melville made in the Delano chapter. Among them: changing the date from 1805 to 1799, changing the names of the ships from the *Perserverence* and the *Tryal* to the *Bachelor’s Delight* and the *San dominick*. Modern readers see an allusion to the island of Santo Domingo, where Toussaint L’Ouverture led a slave rebellion in the 1790s.”

- footnote 1



“Several critics have demonstrated that the contrast between Captain Delano and Benito Cereno draws on a convention of plantation novels: Delano is a stock Yankee Traveller who visits Benito Cereno, an exhausted slaveowning aristocrat of the Old South” (48)

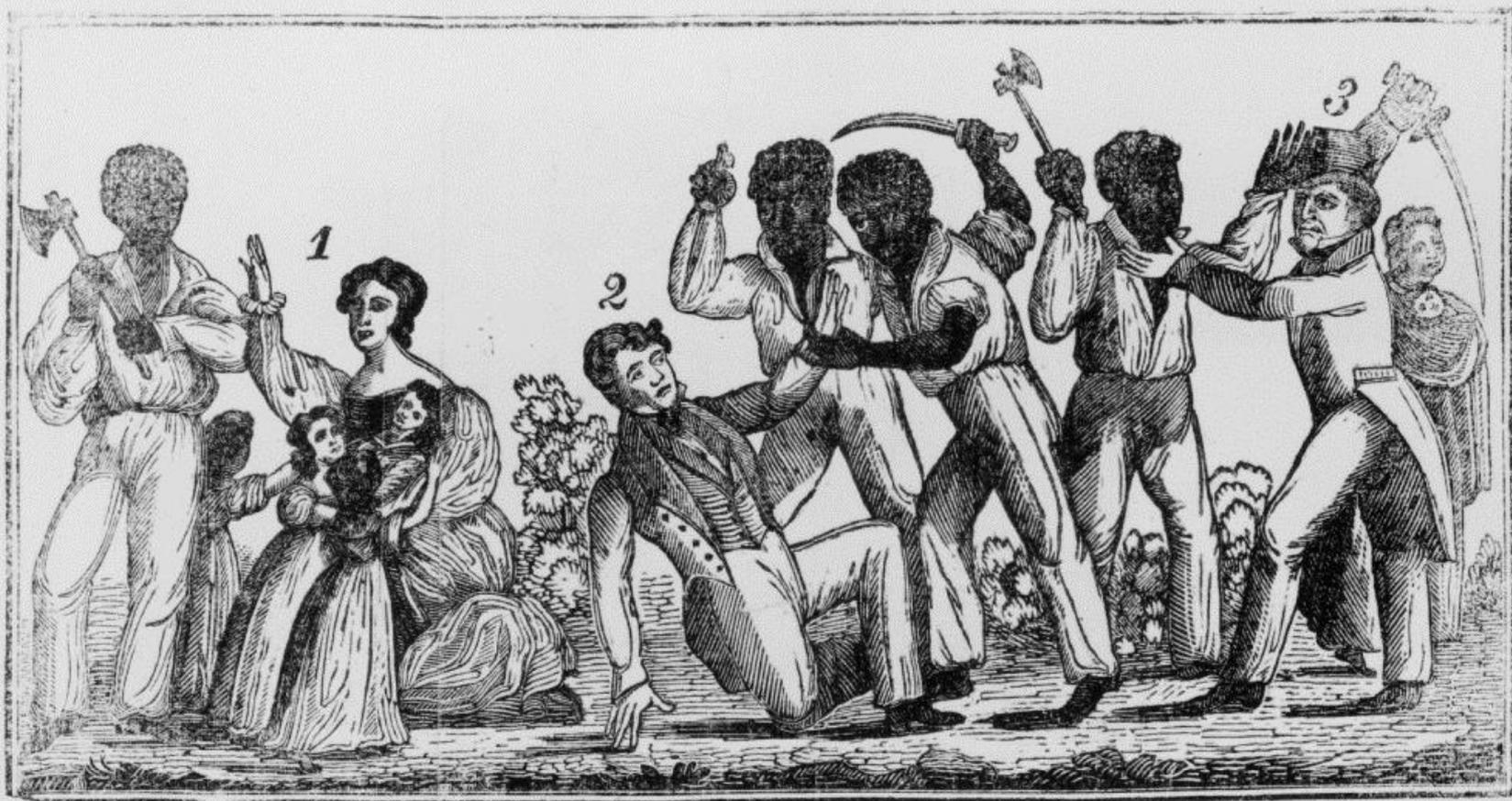


“I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference!”

-Thomas Jefferson

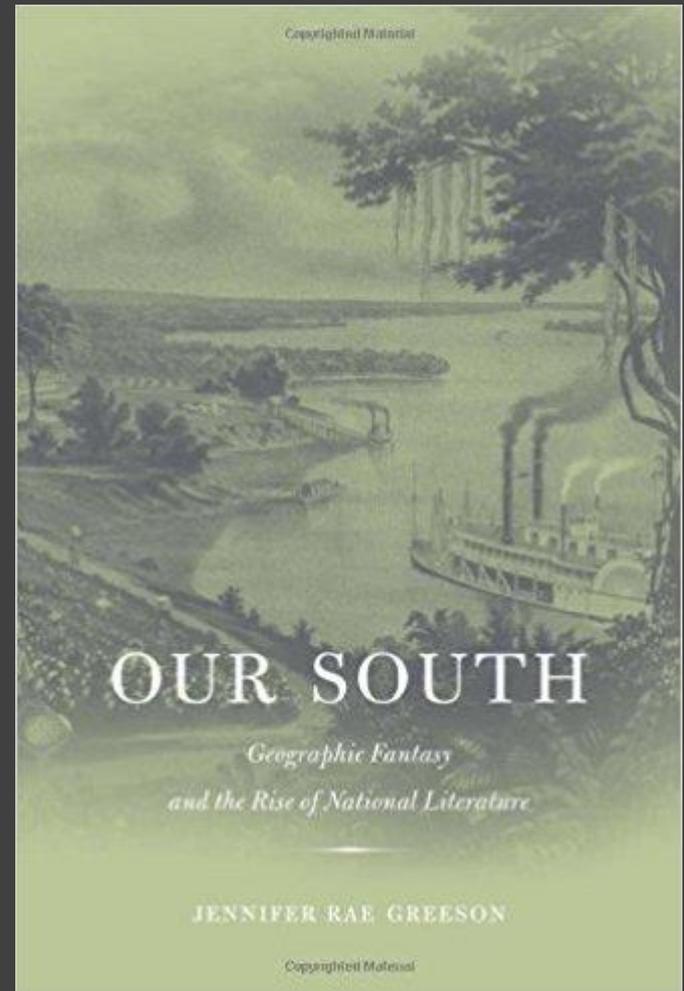
Monticello (Jefferson's Plantation)

HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA.



Depiction of the Nat Turner Slave Uprising, Virginia (1831)

US exceptionalism “has depended, from the founding onward, on U.S. writers writing their South- a term that becomes legible in the first place only as it is understood to deviate from the republican model of U.S. nationalism. Against the ideal of a freedom from power extremes, our South appears in U.S. literature to embody both sides of the disavowed binary: simultaneously colonial and colonized, it diverges from the nation writ large on the basis of its exploitativeness as the location of the internal colonization of Africans and African Americans in the United States and - on the basis of its exploitation - as the location of systemic underdevelopment, military defeat, and occupation.”
-Jennifer Rae Greeson *Our South*



“His mind appeared **unstrung**”

“like some **hypochondriac abbot** he moved slowly about, at times suddenly pausing, starting, or staring biting his lip, biting his finger-nail, flushing, paling, twitching his beard”

“**distempered spirit**”

“He was rather tall, but seemed never to have been robust, and now with nervous suffering was almost worn to a **skeleton**” (40)

“Don Benito faltered; then, like some **somnambulist** suddenly interfered with, vacantly stared at his visitor” (43)



I Walked with a Zombie (1943)

“Always upon first boarding a large and populous ship at sea, especially a foreign one, with a nondescript crew such as Lascars or Manilla men, the impression carries in a peculiar way from that produced by first entering a strange house with strange inmates in a strange land. Both house and ship, the one by its walls and blinds, the other by its high bulwarks like ramparts, **hoard from view their interiors till the last moment**; but in the case of the ship there is this addition; that 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” (38)

“the equation of the governance of the self and the governance of society, a reliance on a moral constitution to check and balance passions in individuals and a written one to check and balance them in politics” (qtd in Grandin 64)

Captain Delano was “a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man” (35)

“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 hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castinets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction. There is, too, a smooth tact about them in this employment, with a marvelous, noiseless, gliding briskness, not ungraceful in its way, singularly pleasing to behold, and still more so to be the manipulated subject of. And above all is the great gift of good humor. Not the mere grin or laugh is here meant. Those were unsuitable. But a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune.

When to all 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 readily perceives why those hypochondriacs, Johnson and Byron – it may be something like the hypochondriac, Benito Cereno – took to their hearts, almost to the exclusion of the entire white race, their serving men, the negroes, Barber and Fletcher. But if there be that in the negro which exempts him from the inflicted sourness of the morbid or cynical mind, how, in his most prepossessing aspects, must he appear to a benevolent one? When at ease with respect to exterior things, Captain Delano’s nature was not only benign, but familiarly and humorously so. At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor invariably he was on chatty, and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (71)

“But here, as early as 1855, Melville had, in the opinions of capable, well-meaning, Negro-loving Captain Delano, itemized every single belief cherished by an advanced civilization about a backward people and then one by one showed that they were not merely false, but were the direct cause of his own blindness and stupidity. Under his very nose, Babo had been forcing Benito Cereno to participate in a new plot, aimed at capturing Delano’s own ship” (111)

-CLR James

