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FACT, FICTION, AND FAITH
IN
THE CONFIDENCE-MAN: HIS MASQUERADE

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THESIS
IN
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ABSTRACT

In The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, Melville explores the relationships among fact--what man knows, fiction--what man creates, and faith--what man believes, and emerges with a new view of reality--what man is.

Man perceives reality in terms of his individual needs, experiences, and knowledge. Because his perceptions are limited, much of what he accepts as fact, or accepts on faith may be fiction, that is, fictitious. In the absence of verifiable truth, man creates the fictions by which he lives, but in a world characterized by inconsistency and ambiguity, in a world in which good and evil co-exist, any fiction based upon absolutes is dangerous.

Conflict arises among the various absolutist modes of perceiving reality, and is reflected in the disintegration of society and in the debasement of language. The unfortunate situation in which man finds himself is the result of unfortunate fictions. Nevertheless, by portraying the Confidence Man as one masquerading character playing many roles, Melville forces upon us the awareness of the commonality of man and of man as actor--one whose actions are all. There is evidence to suggest that Melville would endorse the acting out of this basic kinship as the most desirable fiction in the face of the unknowable.

I wish to thank Professor David Ketterer
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In its simplest terms The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade consists of a series of episodes wherein passengers on a ship called the Fidèle are variously conned. This ship can be viewed as a microcosm of American society, or more generally of human society, with its passengers including "all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man."¹ While The Confidence-Man presents a satire of clearly nineteenth-century American institutions, beliefs and personages, it is at the same time an allegory of the human condition, and our interest here is with Melville's larger theme of man as confidence man.

Melville's concern with man as confidence man was prompted by his awareness that America in the 1850's had embarked on a perilous journey into darkness. A confident tide was sweeping the nation, yet in Melville's view, this tide threatened to destroy all who lay in its path. Encouraged by a prospering economy, a steadily increasing population, and a wealth of new scientific discoveries, many of Melville's contemporaries were blindly optimistic about the future. They placed faith in science, in nature, in business, and perhaps most dangerously of all, in an absolutely benevolent, and one might say, American God. The easy optimism of the

¹ Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, ed. H. Bruce Franklin (New York, 1967), p. 14. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

Wall Street Spirit was insinuating itself into all avenues of life, including charity and religion, and it was a popularly held belief that American progress was divinely sanctioned. As D. E. S. Maxwell points out, "the dominating image in the intellectual life of mid-nineteenth century America was that of the American Adam, 'a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history. . . . Surrounded by . . . evidences of merit rewarded' Americans believed that . . . for the centuries to come the United States would be superior to any nation the world has ever seen."² Behind this Edenic mask of supreme assurance, however, lurked an obtrusive, hellish reality. H. Bruce Franklin tells us in his Introduction to The Confidence-Man:

America in the 1850's was a jungle in which all kinds of hunters pursued their quarry. . . . American troops had just seized almost half of Mexico, were now busy exterminating Indians from Florida to Oregon and were preparing to attack the Mormons in Utah. Slavery had already caused much blood to flow and the nation was on the brink of civil war. Bands of killers roamed almost at will on both sides of the Mississippi and far to the West. . . . Violence came from the Gold Rush, land claims, competing settlements, economic catastrophe, obscure feuds, racism and plain blood lusts (p. xiv).

Unable, then, to see man as Adam, Melville chose rather to portray him as a less than innocent confidence man preying

² D. E. S. Maxwell, American Fiction (London, 1963), p. 141.

on others, and swarming the decks of the Fidèle are representatives of all types of tricksters: agents of stock companies and of charitable societies, herb-doctors, peddlers, beggars, and Mississippi operators.

The term "confidence man" was a popular one in Melville's time. In 1849 Evert Duyckinck, Melville's close friend and literary agent, wrote an article in The Literary World, entitled "The New Species of Jeremy Diddler," and it concerned the arrest of a "confidence man" as reported in The New York Herald. The operation of this swindler closely resembles that of several of Melville's con men.

[This Confidence Man] . . . would go up to a perfect stranger in the street, and being a man of genteel appearance would easily command an interview. Upon this interview, he would say, after some little conversation, 'have you confidence in me to trust me with your watch until tomorrow; the stranger, at this novel request, supposing him to be some old acquaintance, not at the moment recollected, allows him to take the watch, thus placing 'confidence' in the honesty of the stranger, who walks off laughing, and the other, supposing it to be a joke, allows him so to do.³

In a recent article, Helen P. Trimpi mentions that there was a theatrical farce entitled The Confidence-Man given in New York at William E. Burton's Chamber Street Theatre in the summer of 1849 at a time when Melville was staying in New York. Melville may have seen the

³ "Arrest of the Confidence Man," New York Herald (July 8, 1849), rpt. in Hershel Parker, ed., The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, Norton Critical Edition (New York, 1971), p. 227.

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performance, although Miss Trimpi admits that there is as yet ~~no~~ substantiating evidence.⁴

As a literary figure, the confidence man has enjoyed a long history, and as a betrayer of trust, he may be recognized in such characters as Chaucer's Pardoner or Milton's Satan. It is, however, particularly in nineteenth-century American fiction that the confidence man has found his fullest expression, perhaps, as Susan Kuhlmann suggests, because he shares qualities with the type of character one thinks of as having "opened up" the United States. Among these qualities may be noted "superior wit, skill in the use of resources, a nomadic and bachelor existence, adaptability, enthusiasm, and a continual desire to better one's condition."⁵ In Miss Kuhlmann's view, these traits are the subject of a wide range of nineteenth-century American writers, including Hawthorne in The Blithedale Romance, Howells in The Leatherstocking, Mark Twain in Huckleberry Finn and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, and Henry James in The Wings of the Dove.

While the concept of a masquerading confidence man has no direct antecedent in Melville's fiction, the portrayal

⁴ Helen P. Trimpi, "Harlequin--Confidence-Man: The Satiric Traditions of Commedia Dell'Arte and Pantomime in Melville's The Confidence-Man," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1974), 156.

⁵ Susan Kuhlmann, Knave, Fool, and Genius (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1973), p. 6. See also Daniel G. Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York, 1961) on the trickster type.

of evil masquerading as good is not new to Melville. As several critics have remarked,⁶ the confidence man has a certain resemblance to Benjamin Franklin in Israel Potter, to the salesman in The Lightning-Rod Man, and to Babalanja in Mardi. There is a later similarity to Claggart in Billy Budd.

In comparison with the acclaim accorded to some of Melville's other fiction, however, The Confidence-Man has fared quite poorly. From the time of its publication in 1857, it has been regarded by most critics and scholars as a difficult work, and up until the early 1950's, the general view was that it was an "unfinished ruin,"⁷ an "abortion,"⁸ a "great disappointment,"⁹ and "hopelessly obscure."¹⁰ Nevertheless, with Richard Chase's Herman Melville: A Critical Study in 1949, there has been an awakened interest in The Confidence-Man, along with a growing recognition of Melville's achievement. Chase

⁶ See Ray B. Browne, Melville's Drive to Humanism (Lafayette, Indiana, 1971), p. 304; Richard Chase, Herman Melville: A Critical Study (New York, 1949), p. 262; James E. Miller Jr., "The Confidence-Man: His Guises," PMIA, 74 (March, 1959), 111.

⁷ Ronald Mason, The Spirit Above the Dust: A Study of Herman Melville (London, 1951), p. 201.

⁸ John Freeman, Herman Melville (London, 1926), p. 141.

⁹ Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950), p. 246.

¹⁰ Freeman, p. 142.

praises The Confidence-Man as Melville's "second best book"¹¹ and sees it as important social criticism, with the title character a composite figure drawn from myth, the Bible, and American folklore. In 1954 appeared Elizabeth Foster's major annotated edition¹² providing considerable commentary particularly on Melville's satire of the optimistic philosophies of nineteenth-century America, and on several of the book's sources such as Richard Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Cervantes' Don Quixote, Milton's Paradise Lost, Shakespeare's plays, and many of Hawthorne's stories, notably "The Celestial Railroad". Among other seminal studies of The Confidence-Man may be mentioned H. Bruce Franklin's The Wake of the Gods (Stanford, California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963) which emphasizes the multi-mythic nature of the book, R. W. B. Lewis' Afterword to the Signet edition (New York, 1964) which places it in an apocalyptic tradition, and Edgar Dryden's Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth (Baltimore, 1968) which includes insightful comments on the digressionary chapters, the narrative technique, and the general form, determined according to Dryden, by Melville's need to reveal a "maddening truth".

Criticism of The Confidence-Man in recent years has been diverse, and modern scholars have concerned themselves

¹¹ Chase, p. 185.

¹² Elizabeth Foster, ed., The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, by Herman Melville (New York: Hendricks House, 1954).

with virtually all aspects of the work. There have been, for example, useful commentaries by Daniel Hoffman, Carolyn Lury Karcher, and Roy Harvey Pearce on the interpolated tales, by Egbert S. Oliver, Hershel Parker, and Harrison Hayford on the portraits of Melville's contemporaries, and by Cecilia Tichi and William Bysshe Stein on language and style. Although the "obscurity" of The Confidence-Man has been considerably diminished, there is still no real agreement as to its meaning or underlying vision. It has generally been held to be a pessimistic, despairing, nihilistic book, with the Confidence Man seen as a totally diabolical figure, yet certain affirmative elements have been detected by Warner Berthoff, R. W. B. Lewis, Paul Brodtkorb, Richard Boyd Hauck, Ray B. Browne, and Paul McCarthy.

Our concern here is with the nature of the Confidence Man and with Melville's view of reality as revealed by his presentation of the relationships among fact--what man knows, fiction--what man creates, and faith--what man believes. Man is a confidence man not only because he swindles others but also because he deceives himself as to the nature of reality. In his fiction, it was Melville's aim to tell the truth, a truth which is both good and evil, and to present even more reality than life itself is capable of showing. In The Confidence-Man, by making us aware of the fictions by which we live, Melville forces us to re-examine our concepts of man and God and of what constitutes the truth. Central to our discussion of Melville's view of

reality are the three digressionary chapters on fiction and the several interpolated tales. Also to be explored are the attributes of the society aboard the Fidèle and the various guises of the Confidence Man, the language of this society as an expression of its instability, and the various alternatives open to its members.

I have in this thesis often assimilated previous critical material, for I believe such an approach is warranted in the consideration of a work such as The Confidence-Man. Although there are a variety of interpretations, the criticism has been at the same time progressive and cumulative, and each serious study affords additional insights. As Michael Millgate has written, "To ignore . . . what others are saying, or have said in the past is not merely to be redundant: it is to deny the very principles embodied in the terms scholarship and criticism and to undermine all possibility of rational discussion and interchange."¹³

I have found particularly valuable Professor David Ketterer's New Worlds for Old¹⁴ which examines the book in apocalyptic terms, William Bysshe Stein's "Quicksands of the Word"¹⁵ which has suggested that a close textual analysis will yield meaningful results, and Franklin's The Wake of the Gods.

¹³ Michael Millgate, "Faulkner," in American Literary Scholarship 1971, ed. J. Albert Robbins (Durham, North Carolina: Duke Univ. Press, 1973), p. 104.

¹⁴ New Worlds for Old (New York: Anchor Press, 1974).

¹⁵ "Melville's The Confidence-Man: Quicksands of the Word," American Transcendental Quarterly, No. 24, Part 1 (Fall, 1974), pp. 38-50.

CHAPTER II

THE WORLD OF THE CONFIDENCE-MAN

The Confidence-Man begins with the "advent" on board the Fidèle of a deaf-mute, "lamb-like" man who in many ways shows a resemblance to Christ. Among other things, we are told "his cheek was fair, his chin downy, his hair flaxen, his hat, a white fur one, with a long fleecy nap. He had neither trunk, valise, carpet-bag, nor parcel. He was unaccompanied by friends" (3). We are also informed that "he seemed already to have come from a very long distance" and that his aspect was "at once gentle and jaded" (9). On his slate, this "stranger" traced a series of messages for the crowd from I Corinthians 13: "Charity thinketh no evil," "Charity suffereth long and is kind," "Charity endureth all things," "Charity believeth all things," and "Charity never faileth." Because he is "singularly innocent," he is taken for a simpleton, somehow "inappropriate to the time and place" (7), and he is jeered and jostled by the crowd. In contrast to this message of the mute stranger, the illuminated pasteboard sign of the barber, reading "No Trust" is considered "quite in the wonted and sensible order of things" and it did not provoke in the crowd "any corresponding derision or surprise, much less indignation" (8). There is, further, in this opening scene, a third sign for the passengers' perusal: a placard "offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East" (4).

The signs of the deaf-mute and the barber, then, introduce the conflict that is to be debated during the course of the voyage--Trust vs. No Trust--while the placard alerts us to the possibility of the presence on board of a mysterious Confidence Man. The fact that this poster purports to give a careful description of the impostor, but that the narrator nevertheless does not share this description with us, indicates moreover that we must take this trickster as we find him.

Several critics, among them notably R. B. Watters, R. W. B. Lewis, Ray B. Browne, and Elizabeth Foster, noting the innocence of the lamb-like man and his association with whiteness, take him to be the true Saviour, and maintain that Melville meant to differentiate clearly between the deaf-mute and the Confidence Men who follow. There are, however, many indications to suggest that this lamb-like Christ figure represents the first appearance of the Confidence Man. These points have been noted by Franklin and are here summarized as follows:

1. The 'advent' (3) of the lamb-like man is described with great mystery, and he forms the centre of interest in the first two chapters. This introduction would encourage the reader to suspect that he may be the title character of The Confidence-Man.
2. After the lamb-like man falls asleep in a retired spot on the forecastle, Black Guinea, the first undisputed Confidence Man, appears in the very same place. The white fleece cap of the lamb-like man now becomes the 'black fleece' and 'bushy wool' (15) of Black Guinea. Later, the word

'fleece' becomes one of the puns associated with the Confidence Man.

3. The first of the typically complicated sentences in The Confidence-Man begins by describing the lamb-like man and ends by pointedly not repeating the 'careful description' which the reward poster gives of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East. Then we learn that the lamb-like man looks as if he had been 'travelling night and day from some far country beyond the prairies' (9).
4. The last character to be introduced in the book, the mysterious boy, embodies the unity of the lamb-like man and Black Guinea. Like Black Guinea, he has a black face, and both are described as a 'Caffre' (47, 343) and a 'steer' (15, 343). Like the lamb-like man, he has no place to sleep and he is dressed in 'the fragments of an old linen coat bedraggled and yellow' (339), which is presumably all that is left of the lamb-like man's cream-colored clothes.
5. The lamb-like man's mute scriptural message is the text by which the later Confidence Men are able to operate.
6. The lamb-like man is quite literally and genuinely a 'confidence man', that is, his message stresses the necessity for confidence in God and in mankind.

After the disappearance of the lamb-like man, the Confidence Man, as has been noted, assumes the form of a crippled Negro beggar, Black Guinea. When his honesty is called into question by another cripple, Black Guinea produces from memory a list of gentlemen who can vouch for him, thereby indicating ostensibly all of the remaining Confidence Men: a man with a weed, a man in a gray coat

¹ Franklin, The Wake of the Gods, pp. 155-56.

and white tie, a man with a big book, a herb-doctor, a man in a yellow vest, a man with a brass plate, a man in a violet robe, and a soldier.

What characterizes all of these apparent Confidence Men is their protestations of philanthropy and optimism, together with the demand that their victims place complete confidence in whatever product, cause or creed they happen to be promoting. In general, the various Confidence Men make their appeals on the basis of the Christian doctrines of faith, hope and charity. For instance, Black Guinea, Mr. Ringman (the man with the weed), and the Agent for the Seminole Widows and Orphans Asylum (the man in the gray coat and white tie) use the ploy of charity to relieve their victims of their money; Mr. Truman, President of the Black Rapids Coal Company (the man with the book), and the herb-doctor are both hawkers of hope--hope of riches, or hope of good health; the Cosmopolitan, not mentioned by Black Guinea, but undoubtedly the final representative of the Confidence Man, gulls his victims by means of faith or confidence: faith in the benevolence of man, nature and God, and confidence that the world has no dark side.

The remaining characters in the novel² apparently fall roughly into two groups: those who are duped by the Confidence

² Although The Confidence-Man may, strictly speaking, be considered a romance, for the purposes of simplicity I shall refer to it as a novel, which may be defined as a long prose narrative.

Men, that is, the victims or gulls, and those who are not duped, that is, the cynics, or those who maintain the barber's position of No Trust.

Several of the men listed by Black Guinea can be found according to his description of their externals. We can easily locate, for example, a man with a weed, a man with a big book, and a herb doctor. Yet others on the list--a gentleman in a yellow vest and a gentleman who is a soldier--cannot be tracked down in this way. Also, Black Guinea concludes his list by saying that there are "ever so many good, kind, honest, ge'mmen more aboard what knows me and will speak for me, God bress 'em" (20). Franklin has taken this conclusion of the list to suggest that there are more guises to the Confidence Man than those specifically enumerated by Black Guinea. He also demonstrates how many of the descriptions can have more than one application. For example, concerning a "werry nice good ge'mman wid a weed" (20), he remarks:

The first listed Confidence Man seems easiest to find. John Ringman appears with 'a long weed on his hat' in Chapter 4 and then is referred to in the title of Chapter 5 as 'The Man With the Weed'. But to establish this identity we must assume that the author sticks to Guinea's terms. . . . We might, as one alternative, take Guinea's weed to mean tobacco, making each of the two confidence men who force cigars on the other in Chapter 30, a man with a weed; one of them, Frank Goodman, [the Cosmopolitan], is certainly a 'good man wid de weed' to use Guinea's very words. Or we could take another common meaning of weed, 'A covering; that which

covers, spreads over vest or vestment, clothing or garment' (Richardson's Dictionary, 1844), and see the first of Guinea's listings to be as equivocal and far-reaching as the last. We may create this form of the Confidence Man wherever we see him.³

Franklin goes on to show that this ambiguity applies to almost all of Black Guinea's descriptions. It is logical, therefore, to assume that no character is above suspicion, and that any character may in fact be a Confidence Man.

That this assumption is valid can be demonstrated by examining the three basic types of character found in the novel: the confidence man, the cynic, and the dupe. At the outset, in Chapter 3 concerning the true identity of Black Guinea, we are offered a representative of each type. Here we see the confidence man in Black Guinea, the dupe variety in the members of the crowd who toss him pennies, and the cynic in the man with the wooden leg. There are certain similarities to be found among these three apparently different types of character.

The "gimlet eyed" (17) man with the wooden leg has some insight. He insists that Black Guinea is not who he says he is, and he denies that any of Black Guinea's friends are on board. As we later discover, he is both right and wrong. Black Guinea is indeed an impostor, but those who will vouch for him actually are present. The man with the

³ Franklin, "Introduction" to The Confidence-Man, pp. xxi-xxii.

wooden leg is not only right and wrong in this instance, but he is also, as will be demonstrated below, both cynic and Confidence Man.

In this chapter, Black Guinea is described as a "black steer" (15), a "dog" (15), a "black sheep" (16), and an "elephant" (17). Reference is also made to his "houselessness" (15). The man with the wooden leg is described in strikingly similar terms. We are told that he moved with a "writhing" (22) motion and that he "croaked" (17,20)--a croak being the deep hoarse sound of a frog or raven, a sound foreboding evil. We are also told of his "houselessness," that is, he might be "some discharged custom-house officer . . . suddenly stripped of convenient means of support" (17). This description is suggestive of Satan's expulsion from heaven, as is the fact that the "black sheep," Black Guinea is "der dog widout massa" (15). The animal imagery similarly can be seen as having Satanic connotations, for the focal point of this generalized imagery can be found in the repetition of the snake metaphor and its familiar diabolical associations. Further, the several references to Guinea specifically as a dog subtly link him with the position of a cynic, which literally means "dog-like," from the Greek word for dog, "kyon, kynos". Thus Black Guinea, the apparent Confidence Man, and the man with the wooden leg, the apparent cynic, may in fact be different manifestations of the same person. Both are houseless cripples, and both are described in terms of Satanic animal imagery.

It can also be shown that the apparent dupes form part of this pattern of Confidence Man/Satan. There appears to be an obvious way of discerning if Black Guinea is honest or not, and the man with the wooden leg says he knows it. He maintains that Black Guinea is "some white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy" (20), and "to prove his alleged imposture on the spot" (18), he would strip him and then drive him away. But just as man is prevented by the trickery of the Confidence Man from getting at the truth, so the man with the wooden leg is prevented by the crowd from stripping Black Guinea. The story of China Aster sheds further light on this point. In the story, Aster's ruin is initiated by a man called Orchis who urges him to have confidence that he will make a great fortune. Orchis is by trade a shoe-maker, "one whose calling it is to defend the understandings of men from naked contact with the substance of things" (292). Thus it becomes clear that the crowd, the dupes who want to believe in Black Guinea and enjoy tossing him pennies, are also Confidence Men for they will not allow the man with the wooden leg to get at the truth. That they are also Satanic in nature is suggested by the reference to the "hisses" (23) of the crowd.

We have shown that the Confidence Man, the cynic and the dupe are all manifestations of one character and all have Satanic, animalistic attributes. Yet if we keep in mind that the original Confidence Man, the lamb-like man, was described in Christ-like terms, we see then how Christ

too becomes a part of this pattern now expanded to Confidence Man/cynic/dupe/Satan/Christ.

There is certainly much evidence to indicate that the Confidence Man is not a man at all, but rather a supernatural being. Melville's subtitle, "His Masquerade," points to the fact that the Confidence Man is but one creature appearing in a series of different masks, and as Elizabeth Foster has remarked, "No mere disguises could achieve the Confidence Man's extraordinary changes in appearance and also withstand the scrutiny of his many victims, some of whom see him in more than one phase."⁴ The only character in fact to notice any resemblance among the Confidence Men is Pitch, who refers to the P. I. O. man as the "cousin-german" (160) of the herb-doctor. Later, when he meets the Cosmopolitan, he begins to suspect the true Protean nature of the trickster and says, "Somehow I meet with the most extraordinary metaphysical scamps today. Sort of visitation of them" (192). Supporting this notion of the supernatural nature of the Confidence Man are references to the "everlasting fortunes" (141) made by Mr. Truman, whose trade is "a secret, a mystery" (102), and whose two interests are the New Jerusalem and the Black Rapids Coal Company, suggestive of heaven and hell respectively. While Mr. Truman is apparently very interested in the payment of cash in return for stocks in his companies, it is clear

⁴ Elizabeth Foster, ed., The Confidence-Man, p. xlviii.

that the real motive of the Confidence Men is not money-getting. For example, Pitch ruminating on his duping by the P. I. Q. man thinks, "Was the man a trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre. Two or three dirty dollars the motive to so many nice wiles?" (182). These thoughts echo the words of the wooden legged cynic who had said earlier, "Money you think is the sole motive to pains and hazard, deception and deviltry in this world. How much money did the devil make by gulling Eve?" (48). Then later, we see that the Cosmopolitan, although he had in his possession fifty gold crowns, did not refrain from attempting to borrow a similar sum from Charlie Noble, nor from trying to con a free shave from the barber.

The Cosmopolitan, perhaps more than the other avatars of the Confidence Man, strongly evinces his superhuman nature. In his first encounter with the barber, the latter, half-asleep, is greeted from behind with the words pronounced in tones "not unangelic", "Bless you, barber!" (312). To him, the voice seemed "a sort of spiritual manifestation," and turning round to confront the Cosmopolitan, he says, "Ah: . . . it is only a man then." To this remark, the reply of the Cosmopolitan is at least suggestive:

Only a man? As if to be man were nothing. But don't be too sure what I am. You call me man, just as the townsfolk called the angels who, in man's form, came to Lot's house; just as the Jew rustics called the devils who, in man's form, haunted the tombs. You can conclude nothing absolute from the human form, barber (313).

Finally, perhaps the most telling and the most amusing testimonial in this connection is the admission of the Cosmopolitan that he loves "that good dish, man" served up "à la Pôle, or à la Moor, à la Ladrone, or à la Yankee" (186). Like Satan, however, whose favourite dish is man, he never has to deal with the consequences of such a dinner. As he tells the old man in the final scene, showing him a brown stool with a curved compartment underneath, "I don't pretend to know much about such things, never using them myself" (349).

If the Confidence Man, as we have shown, is more than human and partakes of the nature of both Christ or God and Satan, conversely then, Melville seems to be implying that God similarly partakes of the nature of Satan and of the Confidence Man. Despite what the Confidence Man would have his victims believe, there is an "inscrutable malice" at large in the universe, and this evil is well documented in the novel, particularly in the four major interpolated stories, as Merlin Bowen has noted. Briefly summarized, Bowen interprets these stories as follows:

1. The story of the Unfortunate Man shows us that there is an inborn and motiveless depravity in some people that delights in causing pain, finds its convenient instrument in society and the law, and easily overthrows the good.
2. The story of Colonel Moredock demonstrates that this almost universal malignity may be held at bay (though never finally defeated) through vigilance and an uncompromising hatred of evil.

3. The story of Charlemont suggests that withdrawal and an apparent misanthropy may prove at times the only refuge of a man who would continue, in the face of evidence, a lover of his kind.
4. The story of China Aster makes the point that a single-minded optimism, however warmly encouraged by the blandishments of earth and heaven, is almost certain to prove deadly.⁵

The story of Colonel Moredock, the Indian-hater, merits further elaboration in this respect. Although this tale like the others is grossly equivocated, a point which will be discussed further in a later chapter, it perhaps illustrates best the evil present in the world, an evil which is apparently condoned by God, the Deceiver Supreme. In this story, Colonel Moredock, having had his entire family massacred by a certain tribe of Indians, vows to be avenged upon the whole race. While Colonel Moredock is considered to be a "diluted" Indian-hater, we are given a portrait of the Indian-hater "par excellence" in the chapter entitled "The Metaphysics of Indian-hating". Such a creature first "makes a vow, the hate of which is a vortex from whose suction scarce the remotest chip of the guilty race may reasonably feel secure." Next, he "declares himself, and settling his temporal affairs with the solemnity of a Spaniard turned monk, takes leave of his kin." Lastly,

⁵ Merlin Bowen, "Tactics of Indirection in Melville's The Confidence-Man," Studies in the Novel, 1 (Winter 1969), 410.

he "commits himself to the forest primeval; there . . . to act upon a calm, cloistered scheme of strategical, implacable, and lonesome vengeance" (212). Then, in the next chapter dealing directly with the exploits of Colonel Moredock, we are told that "nearly all Indian-haters have at bottom loving hearts", and that to be a consistent Indian-hater involves "sacrifices" and "renunciation of ambition, with its objects--the pomps and glories of the world." Charlie Noble, the narrator of the story, continues by explaining that "since religion, pronouncing such things vanities, accounts it merit to renounce them; therefore, so far as this goes, Indian-hating . . . may be regarded as not wholly without the efficacy of a devout sentiment" (218-220).

While Indians are here and elsewhere in the novel treated as a symbol of evil, and the Indian-hater's attitude toward them can be perceived as one of hatred of evil, Colonel Moredock is nevertheless considered by Melville's narrator to be "a man of questionable morality" as he is called in the title to Chapter 27. His God is a God of both love and hate, and a God who sanctions the "shooting of human beings" (219).

This God, then, who like Satan is permissive of evil and who hides this evil beneath a mask of good, has betrayed man's faith in His goodness and is thus a Confidence Man. By being so masked and remaining a mystery, He prevents man, as did the crowd in Chapter 3 and Orchis in the story of China Aster, from coming into naked contact with the substance of things. The truth about the universe remains essentially

unavailable to man, and Melville did not share the belief of the Transcendentalists that this truth could ever be perceived. While an apprehension of metaphysical reality is beyond man's reach, Melville saw the universe, in human terms, as possibly a cruel, practical joke with man's day on earth as April.

Fool's Day.

The story itself takes place on a single day, beginning at sunrise on April 1st, and ending shortly after midnight. April Fool's Day is traditionally a time when nothing is as it seems and people are sent on "fool's errands" or "wild goose chases". There are in fact three specific references to wild goose chases in the novel. In the first, the wooden legged cynic croaks, "Wild goose chase!" (20) when the young Episcopal clergyman says that he will go to find one of the men on Black Guinea's list. Later, the old man, testing the counterfeit detector which was given to him by the juvenile peddler, is unable to find the microscopic figure of a goose on his bill, although the Cosmopolitan, insisting that the money is good, says that he sees "a perfect goose; beautiful goose" (346). He further urges the old man to have confidence and to throw away the detector, with the words, "Don't you see what a wild goose chase it has led you?" Also in this scene, the old man and the Cosmopolitan, in poring over the Apocrypha, are speaking rather loudly and they awaken several of the passengers. One of them cries out in a brogue, "Arrah, and is't wisdom the two geese are gabbling about all this while. To bed with ye, ye divils, and don't

be after burning your fingers with the "likes of wisdom" (338). He is implying, of course, that the search for wisdom is a wild goose chase, and as Melville shows us, in the world of The Confidence-Man, so it is.

Nothing is known for certain. We never even really discover if the apparent Confidence Men are swindlers at all. How do we know that the money solicited by the man in gray does not go directly to the Seminole Widows and Orphans, or that the money handed over to the President of the Black Rapids Coal Company will not be duly invested and yield a fine profit?

Great attention is given in the novel to appearances. The passengers on the Fidèle try to find out who people are by their externals, their "visage and garb" (14), and Melville, in fact, punningly entitles one chapter, "In Which a Variety of Characters Appear" [*italics mine*]. This reliance upon externals is perhaps one of the reasons that all of the passengers are referred to as strangers.

It may be true that "looks are one thing and facts another" (21), but in The Confidence-Man facts are based on looks, and these facts in turn tend to become rigidly classified. We are told in Chapter 14 that when the duck-billed beaver of Australia was first brought stuffed to England, the naturalists, "appealing to their classifications, maintained that there was, in reality, no such creature, that the bill on the specimen must needs be, in some way, artificially

stuck on" (95). Man, it seems, is prone to interpret reality in terms of known "fixed principles" (97), and what he would accept as proofs are not proofs at all. The crowd on the Fidèle, as noted above, instead of stripping down Black Guinea to see if he really is an impostor, is content merely to question him. They ask him if he has "any documentary proof, any plain paper about him attesting that his case [is] not a spurious one" (19). Black Guinea has none of these "walooble papers" but he can rattle off a list from memory, and the crowd indicates that upon checking his list, they will be content that he is speaking the truth. Black Guinea's list, though, can be endlessly equivocated. They never do find out the truth based on this kind of evidence, and of course neither do we if we rely solely upon the list as given.

It can also be shown that man's experiences are equally inadequate for an accurate interpretation of the world about him. "Experience," observes the sophomore in his encounter with Mr. Truman, "is the only teacher" (70), yet the sophomore may nevertheless be duped when he entrusts Truman with a sum to be invested in his coal company. Pitch, having had unfortunate experiences with thirty-five boys is still able to be persuaded to experience another. Moreover, even if one were able to be safely guided by his own experiences, how is he to deal with matters that fall beyond the scope of these experiences? As in the case with the classification of the duck-billed beaver, the narrator notes, "Experience is

the only guide here; but as no one man can be coextensive with what is, it may be unwise in every case to rest upon it" (95). In like manner, the merchant remarks that "from the gay spectacle before them, one would little divine what other quarters of the boat might reveal" (79), and he then proceeds to cite three contrasting scenes as illustration.

Similarly, man's memory is shown to be a less than reliable register of experience. It will be recalled that Black Guinea's list was recited from memory, a fact no doubt contributing to its ambiguity. We are told that his memory, "before suddenly frozen up by cold charity, as suddenly thawed back into fluidity at the first kindly word" (19). The efficiency of his memory, it would appear, is heavily reliant upon external stimulation. Later, we observe that the man in gray "forgets" that he helped Black Guinea ashore (47), and that this same character comes close to convincing Mr. Roberts, the country merchant, that they had enjoyed a previous acquaintance. When Roberts cannot recollect such an encounter, the man in gray offers to supply the "void" in his memory with the appeal that "those who have faithless memories should . . . have some little confidence in the less faithless memories of others" (29). While we know that the man in gray had picked up Roberts' business card which had been dropped and conveniently covered by the stump of Black Guinea, and from it had culled enough information to fabricate a story concerning their former friendship, it is clear enough that man remembers

what he wants to remember, and forgets, or represses in modern psychological terms, what he wants of his past experience. This process would explain Pitch's duping by the P. I. O. man, for in his eager desire to try a scientific experiment, he temporarily "forgets" his earlier unfortunate experiences.

This forgetfulness similarly accounts for the means whereby all of the other victims are gulled by the Confidence Man. They all mistrust the Confidence Man at first, presumably on the basis of previous experience of having been tricked by this type of character. Yet, because of some particular desire, weakness or greed, they are nevertheless vulnerable to a particular kind of Confidence Man. Ostensibly then they ignore their memories of past experience in order to satisfy some inner need. The Confidence Man is most crafty in ferreting out the need to which to make his appeal. The herb-doctor, for example, is unsuccessful with Pitch, yet learns that Pitch has had some dealing in boys. Thus, in his next visitation, he appears in the guise of the P. I. O. man, who in reply to the puzzled Pitch's query, "How did you come to dream that I wanted anything in your line, eh?", he whines, "Oh sir, from long experience, one glance tells me the gentleman who is in need of our humble services" (158). An old miser is even duped twice--once by Mr. Truman and his promise of trebling his miserly sum, and again by the herb-doctor and his alleged cure for his "church-yard" cough. Another sick man, although at first wary of the herb-doctor,

"could not according to his light conscientiously disprove what was said. Neither . . . did he seem over anxious to do so" (112). This need, then, of the dupes is like some inner "light" which when illuminated by the Confidence Man, makes them forget their past experience and become willing victims.

Any "light" or "construction" based on any given need may be put on matters, and any one of these may be used to interpret reality. There can be a "sinister construction" (72), a "fresh and liberal construction" (76) or a "charitable construction" (21), to name a few specifically mentioned in the novel. This problem is well put by Pitch who, considering the doctrine of analogies, reasons that it is "a fallacious enough doctrine when wielded against one's prejudices, but in corroboration of cherished suspicions, not without likelihood" (183). Experience is most feeble compared to man's constructions derived from need. As the country merchant, anxious to have his name inscribed in the transfer book of the Black Rapids Coal Company, asks, "How by examining the book should I think I know any more than I now think I do; since if it be the true book, I think it so already; and since if it be otherwise, then I have never seen the true one and don't know what that ought to look like" (78).

Because God is a Confidence Man, there is finally no available truth by which to test the veracity of these constructions or lights or interpretations. The drama in the novel arises from the conflict among these various modes of perceiving reality, and this conflict is reflected in the

general disintegration of the society on board the Fidèle. Although the characters are thrown together in the communal situation of the voyage, we find little evidence of fellow-feeling or of cooperation among them. Indeed, as Cecilia Tichi has remarked, this is the only one of Melville's "ship" novels where there is no indication of a harmoniously working crew.⁶ Yet all of the characters are seen in societal situations. In fact, most of those who are left alone are either sleepy, as the barber or the lamb-like man, or else melancholy, as the man in gray. Solitude is shown to be a most uncomfortable state, and the Indian-hater, for example, must make great sacrifices to pursue his lonesome path. As Pitch asks the Cosmopolitan, "How came your fellow-creature, Cain, after the first murder to go and build the first city? And why is it that the modern Cain dreads nothing so much as solitary confinement?" (193). In this debate about the social vs. the solitary man, the Cosmopolitan concedes that while "men are social as sheep gregarious," in being social "each man has his end" (193). This end, as Pitch has correctly evaluated, is usually a purse.

Pitch is right here for friendship does not seem to stand a chance, at least not on the Fidèle. Here, no one has any friends. China Aster is betrayed by Orchis; Charlemont,

⁶ Cecilia Tichi, "Melville's Craft and Theme of Language Debased in The Confidence-Man," ELH, 39 (1972), 648.

fearing the derision of his friends during his bankruptcy, flees until his fortune is restored; the misery of the Soldier of Fortune begins when, not having any friends, he cannot obtain bail; and the old miser cannot get up out of bed because he too has no friends. All friendships in this society are motivated by monetary concerns, and all are aborted for the very same reasons. Witness for example the boon companions Charlie Noble and Frank Goodman, each of whom is trying to get the other drunk for his own gain. Because friendship is impossible, the characters remain strangers to each other, and their society is thus a spurious one.

It is a society dominated by the spirit of "joint stock-companies and free and easies" (251), and this spirit even contaminates religious practices. Christianity is presented here as free and easy, optimistic and comfortable. It is well symbolized by the man in gray's Protean Easy Chair on which "the most restless body, the body most racked . . . the most tormented conscience must somehow and somewhere find rest" (55). In this society, charity has degenerated into a business, and when the herb-doctor wishes to donate some of his proceeds to the poor (perhaps to regain the confidence of the passengers after the unfortunate incident with the Invalid Titan), he asks, "Is it to be believed that in this Christian company, there is no one charitable person? I mean, no one connected with any charity?" (126). Charity

to be sure has become so organized that the man in gray, a "retail philanthropist" had issued at the World's Fair his prospectus for the World's Charity, the aim of which would be the "methodization of the world's benevolence" (57). He would quicken missions with the "Wall Street spirit" and would "let out on contract the conversion of the heathen" (58).

On the Fidèle, charity is not only a business, but a game as well. When the interest of the crowd in Black Guinea began to lag, it was revived as they discovered "a singular temptation at once to diversion and charity" (17), by tossing pennies into his mouth which became "at once target and purse". As both a business and a game, charity in practice diverges widely from the lamb-like man's injunction, "Charity never faileth." Charity in fact does fail. Some of the crowd toss buttons instead of pennies to Black Guinea, and this crowd tolerates in its midst the presence of a "pale pauper boy" and a "ragged juvenile peddler". Elizabeth Foster points out that the clothes of this peddler which "flamed about him like the painted flames in the robes of a victim in an auto-da-fé" (339) remind us of "the crimes that have been committed in the name of Christian faith in the past," and that "the ragged houseless poverty of a child is a no less ironic testimonial of Christian brotherhood in the present."⁷ Far from being charitable, many of the passengers are downright

⁷ Foster, p. lxxvi.

cruel. They treat Black Guinea as a "curious object" (16) and they jostle aside the lamb-like man and flatten his fleecy hat down upon his head.

There is much imagery of sickness and disease in the novel, and this imagery may be read as emblematic of Melville's view of the diseased society of nineteenth-century America. The herb-doctor no doubt was able to do a brisk business what with a bandaged man, a miser with a cough, a sick man, and a wounded Soldier of Fortune. This disease imagery is also expressed in the multitude of characters who are lame, who limp, or who walk with canes. The point Melville is making via these cripples is best expressed by the narrator who, when the wooden legged cynic is intent upon exposing Black Guinea, says: "That a cripple should refrain from picking to pieces a fellow-limber did not seem to occur to the company" (17).

Closely allied with these physical cripples is a group of verbal cripples, or those characters who stutter, stammer, and are generally quite inarticulate. They too are both the products and the authors of a sick society, for as Cecilia Tichi brings to our attention, Melville was quite aware of Aristotle's view of man as a creature primarily of the word and was sympathetic to his belief that "reasoning powers and the inculcation of ethical norms are correlative functions of language in the social body."⁸ In the corrupt

⁸ Tichi, p. 646.

society of the Fidèle, where there are varying "constructions" of reality based upon varying needs, language has become debased, and communication is virtually impossible. In the following chapter we shall focus our attention upon the language of The Confidence-Man.

CHAPTER III

THE LANGUAGE OF THE CONFIDENCE-MAN

The Confidence-Man begins in silence with the advent of a deaf-mute. It ends in silence as well, when, after all of the passengers are asleep, the Cosmopolitan kindly leads the old man away. In between, however, pass a succession of extremely glib, garrulous, and "wordy" men. Yet, in spite of their loquacity, the passengers on the Fidèle tend to be a rather inarticulate group. The man with the weed, for example, about to ask Mr. Roberts for a needed shilling, "made one or two attempts to speak, but words seemed to choke him" (31). In the following scene, the man with the weed is fluent enough, but now the sophomore can "hardly speak" (41). In fact, throughout their entire encounter, he is able only to "stammer" a few words. Similarly, when the charitable lady is asked for a charitable contribution by the man in gray, we are told that she "sat in a sort of restless torment, knowing not which way to turn. She began twenty different sentences and left off at the first syllable of each" (63).

Besides this general lack of mastery over their speech, many of the characters have rather harsh or unpleasant voices. Pitch "growls" (151) and the herb-doctor thinks he is suffering from a sore throat. The voice of Charlie Noble has a "latent squeak" (225) to it, the voice of the miser is "disastrous with a cough" (101), and that of the sick man is "as the

sound of obstructed air gurgling through a maze of broken honey-combs" (151). The voice of the Invalid Titan seems "deep and lonesome enough to have come from the bottom of an abandoned coal-shaft" (119), a rather sinister sound considering the hellish association with Black Guinea's "coal-sifter of a tamborine" (15), and the Black Rapids Coal Company.

That the sounds uttered by the passengers on the Fidèle are frequently fragmented, unhealthy, and animalistic suggests quite strongly that the verbal exchange among this often vociferous group is less than effective. It is clear that the general malaise in society finds its expression in a lack of expression, the collapse of clear communication among its members. For example, while Mr. Truman of the Black Rapids Coal Company is soliciting both confidence and cash from the old miser, about all the latter can manage is "ugh, ugh, ugh". Further, when Truman happens to mention that he can treble the miser's profits, we are told that he "fell back, sputtering into his previous gibberish, but it took now an arithmetical turn" (103).

In Chapter 35, another interchange seems incoherent to the narrator, this time between the Cosmopolitan and Mark Winsome, but it does shed some light on the problem of communication. The conversation takes a labyrinthine turn when Winsome, in attempting to discredit Charlie Noble, says, "I conjecture him to be what, among the ancient Egyptians,

was called a ---" (272). Then, "coming out with a sentence of Greek," he proceeds to explain that "a --- is what Proclus, in a little note to his third book on the theology of Plato, defines as --- ----." The Cosmopolitan, professing not to comprehend Winsome's meaning, replies with the request, "If you could put the definition in words suited to perceptions like mine, I should take it for a favor." Far from complying with this entreaty, Winsome maintains that he does not understand the word "favor" as employed by the Cosmopolitan. The key phrase here is "to perceptions like mine" for Melville believed, as we have shown, that each man has his own perceptions of reality based upon his own needs. Winsome, according to his perceptions does not understand "favor," and the Cosmopolitan, according to his, does not understand "----". Hence, communication breaks down. Because language is tied to the individual's perception of reality, when this perception is strongly governed by self-interest or by greed, as it is in The Confidence-Man, language ceases to be an effective instrument in the free exchange of ideas.

William Bysshe Stein, in his important article "Quicksands of the Word," sees all words in The Confidence-Man and hence all communication as rooted in the body. He believes that what is said or thought remains tethered to instinctual life, and that all perceptions thus have a strong physiological and sexual bias. According to Stein, Melville strongly influenced by Sterne and Swift, "exploits . . . a common characteristic of language, the tendency of cognates to

polarize in meaning with parodic thunder."¹ For example, concerning the word "charity," a word much bandied about in The Confidence-Man, Stein writes:

In its etymological nomadism 'charity' travels from the Latin, 'caritas' (love), through the French, 'charité' to the English, its radicle form always charged with the notion of desire. In its Germanic route the word retains and emphasizes the sensuality, the cognate 'horaz' (one who desires or adulterer) evolving into the Old English 'hore' (whore) and finally the Modern English 'whore'. In effect, the theological and sexual bifurcations of meaning provide the artist-narrator with the verbal artifice to orchestrate the discordant flow of his controlled legerdemain. On the overt level of the narrative the antithesis emerges in his ironic paralleling of the thirteen verses of Paul's hymn to 'charity' (I Corinthians 13: 1-13) with a foreshortened excerpt of the first thirteen of Ben Sirach's hymn to 'treachery' from the 'Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach'. The contrast between the mute's or Paul's exhortation to trust the 'word' and Ben Sirach's monition to distrust the 'word' betrays the absolute inadequacy of language as a means of spiritual communication, for the auditors in each case respond to what they see or hear in a wholly subjective manner, with thought subservient to feelings of resentment. Prostituted by the desire embodied in 'charity', the eye and ear of the mind inescapably wallow in a confusion of tongues. The body makes the mind.²

While Stein's reading of The Confidence-Man is an original one, and his approach, that of close attention to etymologies, has opened up whole new vistas of interpretation, to his view that language is rooted solely in physiology and sexuality might be added that much of the language in the novel also

¹ William Bysshe Stein, "Melville's The Confidence-Man: Quicksands of the Word," American Transcendental Quarterly, No. 24, Part 1 (Fall 1974), p. 39.

² Ibid., p. 43.

springs from secondary desires only indirectly related to the body, such as the desire for riches, for power, for pleasure. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that language has become severed from any moral base, and there is little correlation between the word and what we call reality.

This "meaninglessness" of words is suggested by the narrator's observations of the gentleman with the gold sleeve buttons. He tells us here; "Considering that goodness is no such rare thing among men--the world familiarly knows the noun; a common one in every language--it was curious that what so signalized the stranger . . . was but the expression of so prevalent a quality" (50). As one reads through this sentence, one begins to realize that the word "goodness" tells us nothing about the gentleman. "Goodness" may be a "common noun," but the fact that we have a word for this quality does not mean that we know what it is, nor that it actually exists. There is of course the implication that the good man is not good at all, for we are told, "There would be some chance that the gentleman might after all be quite innocent of it" (52). The narrator begs the question when he tells us that the gentleman "expresses" goodness, for he explains that this expression is nothing but a wholesome accident. His good luck has kept him, like Pontius Pilate who knew how to keep his hands clean, unspotted by the world. What his good luck has done is to protect him, like the shoes of Orchis, from coming into "naked contact

with the substance of things" (292), and allowed him to be in effect the victim of a con game of his own making. When the narrator tells us that he was "in a word, one whose very good luck it was to be a very good man" (52), it is quite likely that Melville means to pun with the phrase "in a word" for while he is saying on the overt level that "in summary" the man's goodness was due to good luck, he is also reminding us that goodness is, after all, just a word. Later, we see that "good words" also have nothing to substantiate them, for as Mr. Truman says, "If by words, casually delivered in the social hour, I do any good to right or left, it is but involuntary influence--locust-tree sweetening the herbage under it; no merit at all; mere wholesome accident of a wholesome nature" (77).

Given this situation where words are rooted in self-interest or in the body, such as "charity" in desire, where need determines perceptions, and perceptions determine vocabulary, words often objectively mean nothing, and it is no wonder that the characters experience difficulty in comprehending one another. The Soldier of Fortune admits to the herb-doctor, "Don't know much what you meant, but it went off well" (136), and the Cosmopolitan complains to the barber, "You talk like an oracle--obscurely barber, obscurely" (320). When, however, the herb-doctor confesses to Pitch, "I pretend not to divine your meaning there" (152), our suspicions soon become aroused. "Pretend" can, in this

context, signify both "assert" and "feign" and both senses would be appropriate here, for either a genuine or a spurious lack of understanding would function as effectively in breaking down the conversation. To return to the exchange between Winsome and the Cosmopolitan mentioned above, it is quite likely that when the Cosmopolitan requests the "favor" of a suitable definition for the Greek "----", Winsome, a philosopher, does understand the word "favor," but pretends not to, for as he says, the word strikes him as "unpleasingly significant in general of some poor, unheroic submission of being done good to" (272), which submission is, of course, diametrically opposed to his philosophy of Self-Reliance. Less likely but certainly worthy of our consideration is the possibility that the "Cosmopolitan," the citizen of the world, understands Winsome's Greek, but is reluctant to hear any disparaging remarks about Noble. Here, Winsome and the Cosmopolitan are about evenly matched, but in general, whenever a Confidence Man encounters a willing victim, he understands well the perceptions of this victim and is able to manipulate the conversation in such a way as to prey upon them.

We have seen, for example, how Mr. Truman was able to direct the gibberish of the miser toward an "arithmetical turn". This skill of the Confidence Man is again aptly exemplified in the scene between Mr. Truman and the sophomore as noted by Cecilia Tichi. When the avaricious sophomore

observes that experience is the only teacher, the cunning Confidence Man shrewdly replies, "Hence am I your pupil; for it is only when experience speaks that I can endure to listen to speculation" (70). Falling neatly into his verbal trap, the sophomore ever governed by greed, continues by saying, "My speculations, sir . . . have been chiefly governed by the maxim of Lord Bacon; I speculate in those philosophies which come home to my business and bosom--pray, do you know of any good stocks?" As Miss Tichi remarks, "Within a brief span, the word 'speculate' has shifted in meaning from philosophical conjecture to financial investment. Flattered, the sophomore never divines that he has been manipulated."³

While, as we have noted, the passengers on the Fidèle seem to experience a great deal of difficulty in speaking well, it seems that this dysfunction applies only to the victims, whose speech is inspired solely by need, and to the cynics, whose gruff speech is inspired solely by their misanthropic "one-sided view of humanity" (23). A closer examination of the situation reveals that the Confidence Men are actually in perfect linguistic control. Even the man with the weed, whom we noted seemed to choke on his words, no doubt considered such a tactic the most efficacious under the circumstance, for his victim, the humane but gullible merchant, was "not entirely unmoved" (32) by a fellow human in such a visible and audible state of distress. In general,

³ Tichi, p. 655.

however, the Confidence Men tend to ingratiate themselves to their victims by their pleasing voices and their flattering words. The herb-doctor speaks "so glib, so pat, so well" (125), and the voice of the Cosmopolitan is "sweet as a seraph's" (183).

In the final chapter of the book, this particular talent of the Confidence Man is made explicit. Here, in attempting to resolve his doubts about certain passages in the Bible, later shown to be from the Apocrypha, the Cosmopolitan explains to the old man,

I have confidence in man. But what was told me not a half-hour since? I was told that I would find it written--'Believe not his many words--an enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips'. . . . I could not think it; and coming here to look for myself, what do I read? Not only just what was quoted, but also, as was engaged, more to the same purpose, such as this: 'With much communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? (335-6).

One of the passengers, half asleep and overhearing these words, calls out, "Who's that describing the confidence-man?" The sleeper here, in his dreamy state, has jumbled the words "I have confidence in man," with the Apocryphal warning, and has come up with an accurate definition of the "confidence man".

The Cosmopolitan has above related a summary of Verses 4-13 of Ecclesiasticus 13. If, however, we look at the exact words of Verse 11, even more is revealed:

Affect not to be made equal with him in talk, and believe not his many words; for with much communication will he tempt thee and smiling upon thee, will get out thy secrets.

A comment by the P. I. O. man explains further the true function of the Confidence Man. When Pitch accuses him of being a "wordy" man, he replies, " . . . what is the greatest judge, bishop, or prophet, but a talking man? He talks, talks. It is the peculiar vocation of a teacher to talk. What's wisdom itself but table-talk? The best wisdom in this world, and the last spoken by its teacher, did it not literally and truly come in the form of table-talk?" (173). By this reference to Christ's Last Supper, the P. I. O. man is not only exalting his own whining dribble (effective nonetheless on Pitch) to a Christ-like level, but he is also debasing the wisdom of Christ. Nevertheless, it is also clear from this comment that the role of the Confidence Man is that of teacher, or, as was that of Christ, Enlightenment Bringer. Although he illuminates only to clearly lead the way into darkness, by his talk he brings to light the secrets or the latent weaknesses of his dupes. Even when the Cosmopolitan appears to be unsuccessful with Charlie Noble, he still manages to expose the latter's hypocrisy. A master of masks himself, his function is to unmask his victims, and to force upon the reader at least a new awareness that things are not as they seem. If he does in fact betray the confidence of his victims, a likely supposition considering the book ends

in darkness, then he forces upon his victims as well a very real awareness of evil, an awareness which Melville felt was sorely lacking in the easy optimism of nineteenth-century America.

The verbal control of the Confidence Man over his victims is described as magical. In the chapter entitled "Very Charming," we see that the barber was "irresistibly persuaded" to try the experiment of trusting man when the Cosmopolitan addressed him in a manner "sort of magical; in a benign way, not wholly unlike the manner fabled or otherwise, of certain creatures in nature, which have the power of persuasive fascination--the power of holding another creature by the button of the eye, as it were, despite the serious disinclination, and indeed, earnest protest of the victim" (323). Later, we are told that the barber afterwards spoke of his queer customer as the "man charmer--as certain East Indians are called snake charmers" (328). Elizabeth Foster has uncovered an earlier draft of the title to this chapter which reads, "In which the Cosmopolitan . . . earns the title of the man-charmer but not in the same sense that certain East Indians are called snake-charmers . . . pretty much in the same rank with the snak(e)."⁴ The snake of course was the original Man(kind) charmer, with his many words tempting Eve to eat the forbidden apple, and thus

⁴ Foster, p. 362.

acquire a knowledge of evil. By his charm, the Confidence Man teaches his victims not the wisdom of Christ, but that of the serpent, that is, knowledge of evil.

Magic is to be expected from a Confidence Man who has both Christ-like and Satanic attributes, but there is really nothing mysterious about his powers if we consider how strongly the victims are motivated by self-interest and how eager they are to believe in the benevolence of man, nature and God. All the Confidence Man has to do is to determine the nature of his victim's wish and then appeal to him to have confidence that it will be gratified. In this respect, the narrator reminds us of Socrates' view of harmony--". . . the sound of a flute in any particular key will, it is said, audibly affect the corresponding chord of any harp in good tune within hearing" (54). The herb-doctor, it will be recalled, has a "flute-like voice" (148). The Confidence Man has simply to find the right key and his victim will soon start vibrating in tune.

Because words are separate from a common ethical nexus, it is not difficult to comprehend the "magical" process by which the Confidence Man can manipulate his victim. For example, Pitch remarks to the old miser after the miser has purchased some of the herb-doctor's medicine, "He diddled you with that hocus-pocus, did he?" (146). Hocus pocus is a juggler's trick, the magic or sleight of hand performed by jugglers in order to deceive their viewers. From "hocus" we get the word "hoax" which is, of course, what The

Confidence-Man is all about. The Confidence Man merely juggles his words in order to elicit the desired response from his victim. The words "hocus-pocus" are themselves a corruption of the Catholic sacrament changing bread into the body of the Son of the Lord: Hoc est corpus filii (This is the body of the son).⁵ Perhaps we are to take transubstantiation and Christ's feeding of the multitude with five loaves of bread as a hoax, but also a hoax is the emptiness of words in a society in which all communication is based on self-interest. As in the Catholic sacrament, bread has been traditionally a symbol of sustenance. In The Confidence-Man, however, the word "bread" and those words associated with it have come to mean quite something else. The barber is "crusty-looking" (8), the P. I. O. man is "baker-knead" (158), Goneril is possessed by a "calm, clayey, cakey devil" (85), the beds in the emigrants' quarters are "Procrustean" (99), money is "dough" (14), Black Guinea, an outcast, is left to sleep on "der floor of der good baker's oven" (16), the baker being the indifferent sun who leave him to freeze in winter. The "miser", from the Latin "mica" meaning "crumb" is one who gives out bread not piecemeal, but crumbmeal. Much is also made of the word "companion" in the novel. Originally meaning "bread-sharer," it has come to mean "fellow" or "mate". The

⁵ Joseph T. Shipley, Dictionary of Word Origins (New York, 1945), p. 181. Shipley adds that sometimes the magic formula is given as "hocus pocus filiocus". See also Barclay's English Dictionary (Macclesfield, 1800).

characters in The Confidence-Man are indeed "fellows" for they share many similarities, but these similarities being masked, they remain strangers rather than "breakers of bread together." Bankrupt themselves, words have become the currency of swindle.

In The Confidence-Man not only have words become corrupted, but it is quite often difficult to determine who is speaking them. For example, in Chapter 30, "Poetical Eulogy of the Press," a rather long, extended dialogue between Frank Goodman, the Cosmopolitan, and Charlie Noble begins with the introduction, "'There,' said the stranger" (240). This conversation continues for several pages, and although the speakers are from time to time identified by name, it is nevertheless a problem to distinguish between them because of the lack of individualizing traits. At one point, Frank Goodman even says to Charlie, "Why, bless you Frank . . . you musn't be so touchy" (249). Franklin calls this an "apparent mistake" (249, n. 18), but considering the already existing confusion, it is not unlikely that Melville means to confound us even further.

It should also be noted here that most of the interpolated stories are told at second hand, a fact which seriously throws into question their veracity. As a preamble to his story of China Aster, Charlie Noble, alias Egbert, says, "I will tell you about China Aster. I wish I could do so in my own words, but unhappily the original story-teller

here has so tyrannized over me that it is quite impossible for me to repeat his incidents without sliding into his style. . . . It is too bad that any intellect, especially in so small a matter, should have such power to impose itself upon another, against its best exerted will too" (290). This same character later remarks, " . . . there is no bent of heart or turn of thought which any man holds by virtue of an unalterable nature or will. . . . As particular food begets particular dreams, so particular experiences or books, particular feelings or beliefs" (309). These observations, taken together, argue strongly for the potency of particular experiences in fashioning a man's beliefs or perceptions and hence his vocabulary. For example, on two occasions, Pitch, in attempting to ward off the advances of the P. I. O. man, says, "My name is Pitch, I stick to what I say" (162, 175). He obviously does not stick to what he says at all, but later we find that Charlie Noble, who admits to having had a "little skirmish" (196) with Pitch (an encounter not recorded in the novel unless the "skirmish" occurred when Noble was in the guise of the P. I. O. man), says to the Cosmopolitan, "I stick to what I said" (248).

All people of course are influenced by their experiences with others, but the passengers on the Fidèle, responding only to what satisfies their own selfish interests, are unable to evaluate these experiences. They thus allow themselves to be manipulated, and in so doing they abandon

any real control over what issues from them. As we have seen in the examples of the miser and the sophomore, the Confidence Man, by the process of the "sociable chat" (182) and by "sleek speech" (183) is able literally to put words into the mouths of his victims. They become in effect ventriloquists' dummies.

The Cosmopolitan recognizes the situation as such when he says to Charlie/Egbert, "Oh, this, all along, is not you Charlie, but some ventriloquist who usurps your larynx. It is Mark Winsome that speaks, not Charlie" (289). Obviously it is neither Charlie nor Winsome who is speaking, but the words of Winsome have so "tyrannized" over Egbert, that it is impossible for him to speak in his own words. As the narrator notes, Egbert even looks like a ventriloquist's dummy, for as soon as Winsome departs, we are told that "he seemed lithely to shoot up erect . . . like one of those wire men from a toy snuff-box" (281).

Pitch, protesting to the P. I. O. man, summarizes the situation as follows:

Gammon! . . . You don't mean what you say. Else you are like a landsman at sea: don't know the ropes, the very things everlastingly pulled before your eyes. Serpent-like, they glide about, travelling blocks too subtle for you. In short, the entire ship is a riddle. Why, you green ones wouldn't know if she were unseaworthy; but still, with thumbs stuck back into your arm-holes, pace the rotten planks, singing, like a fool, words put into your green mouth by the cunning owner, the man, who, heavily insuring it, sends his ship to be wrecked (165).

These remarks accurately describe conditions on board the Fidèle. The entire ship is an enigma, an April Fool's Day riddle to which no answer is forthcoming. It is a "ship of fools" (22) populated by a "flock of fools" singing forth the praises of faith, hope and charity, words put into their mouths by the crafty Confidence Man, the "captain of fools" on the journey toward darkness. Serpent-like, the truth is too subtle to be apprehended.

In the light of the above, a comment by one of the characters in Chapter 18, "Inquest into the true character of the Herb Doctor," assumes new significance. Here, a new arrival on the scene says that he is suspicious of the herb-doctor: "I shrewdly suspect him . . . for one of those Jesuit emissaries prowling all over our country. The better to accomplish their secret designs, they assume, at times, I am told, the most singular masques, sometimes, in appearance, the absurdest" (128). "Absurd," from the Latin "surdus," originally meant "deaf". It was then extended to mean "mute," and also "inaudible or insufferable when heard". With "ab" as an intensive, this became the English "absurd": contrary to reason, inconsistent with the truth.⁶ The new arrival's suspicion of the herb-doctor not only reinforces our own earlier impression of the lamb-like man as an impostor, for as a deaf-mute, his "masque" is literally absurd, but

⁶ Shipley, pp. 4-5.

it also incriminates virtually all of the passengers on the Fidèle, for they are all in a sense ventriloquists' dummies or deaf-mutes.

There are many references in the novel specifically to deaf-mutes. We are told that the miser "lay mute" (101), the herb-doctor was "mute a moment" (111), self-respect "long kept the unfortunate man dumb" (86), the Methodist Minister "mutely eyed the suppliant" (25), the sick man replied with "feeble dumb-show of his face" (106), and Chapter 6 is entitled "At the outset of which certain passengers prove deaf to the call of charity." The victims can certainly be considered mute for the Confidence Man is able to control their words, and when they speak, their sounds are often "insufferable," that is, "absurd". They are also at least partially deaf, for they hear only what they want to hear. For example, in responding to Charlie Noble's interpretation of Polonius' advice to his son, the Cosmopolitan comments, "To be frank, by your ingenuity you have unsettled me there, to that degree that were it not for our coincidence of opinion in general, I should almost think that I was now at length beginning to feel the ill effect of an immature mind, too much consorting with a mature one, except on the ground of first principles in common" (245). Believing himself to be complimented, "with a kind of tickled modesty and pleased concern," Noble cries out, "Really and truly." While the words of the Cosmopolitan are here equivocal, it

is likely that he has deliberately couched his insult in ambiguity in order to avoid offending Noble directly. It is unthinkable that he would refer to his own mind as "immature," considering his vanity, overtly revealed when he confesses to the barber that he could never entirely free himself from "so harmless, so useful, so comfortable, so pleasingly-preposterous a passion" (315). Also, when Noble protests that his is "an understanding too weak to throw out grapnels and hug another to it," the Cosmopolitan replies quite simply, "I believe you, my dear Charlie" (245).

By opening his novel with a deaf-mute, and by having most of his other characters unable to hear what is said and unable to communicate effectively, Melville is clearly indicating that man's powers of speech and hearing are deficient instruments for arriving at the truth. That the Confidence Man is a smooth talker suggests only that language is an effective vehicle for swindle, but not for expressing the truth. Truth is silent. Man cannot speak it nor can he hear it. All he can grasp of the truth is absurdity--insufferable sounds, contrary to reason. Indeed, as R. W. B. Lewis has noted, Melville's aim is to "bring into question the sheer possibility of clear thinking itself--of knowing anything."⁷

This inability of words to express a basically ineffable reality is well reinforced by Melville's technique of

⁷ R. W. B. Lewis, Trials of the Word (New Haven, 1965), p. 65.

having the story told from the third person point of view by a narrator who is in a sense himself a Confidence Man. From this narrator, we receive all of our information, and from this position we can easily be seduced into seeing things as he does, and into accepting as fact the information with which he presents us. Yet to give our confidence to the narrator is to invite confusion. For example, there are roughly thirty-six characters in The Confidence-Man, and the entrance of each is heralded by an elaborate description of his physical appearance, clothing and accoutrements. Often, though, it is difficult to retrieve any sort of positive statement from the narrator's introductory remarks. When we first meet Charlie Noble, we are told

He was neither tall nor stout, neither short nor gaunt; but with a body fitted, as by measure, to the service of his mind. For the rest, one less favored perhaps in his features than his clothes; and of these, the beauty may have been less in the fit than the cut; to say nothing of the fineness of the nap, seeming out of keeping with something the reverse of fine in the skin.

But, upon the whole, it could not be fairly said that his appearance was unprepossessing; indeed, to the congenial, it would have been doubtless not uncongenial (196).

Similarly, as we have shown in the preceding chapter, because most, if not all, of the characters are avatars in some sense of the Confidence Man, they are often described in a similar fashion. Mr. Truman, for instance,

has a "tasseled travelling cap," while the Cosmopolitan has a "tasseled pipe". The cumulative effect of the passages undercut with negatives and of the recurrence of certain details which tend to confuse us as to the identity of the character in question, is to leave us, in essence, with no description at all. The narrator gives us much information about many characters, but somehow their features never quite quicken into focus.

In general, the narrator comments merely on the appearance of things, inviting the reader to consider the significance behind them. Noting, for example, the different reactions of the Cosmopolitan and Charlie Noble to an anecdote told by the former, he tells us, "As after firecrackers, there was a pause, both looking downward on the table as if mutually struck by the contrast of exclamations, and pondering upon its significance, if any. So, at least, it seemed; but on one side, it might have been otherwise" (234).

On those occasions when he does deign to give us some interpretation of the surfaces of things, his exegesis is replete with indirection, equivocation and qualification. In commenting on the animation of the man in gray, he says:

...which animation, by the way, might seem more or less out of character in the man in gray, considering his unsprightly manner when first introduced, had he not already in certain after colloquies, given proof, in some degree, of the fact, that, with certain natures, a soberly continent air at times, so far from arguing emptiness of stuff, is good proof it is there, and plenty of it, because unwasted, and may be used the more effectively, too,

when the opportunity offers. What now follows on the part of the man in gray will still further exemplify, perhaps somewhat strikingly, the truth, or what appears to be such, of this remark (54, [italics mine]).

This passage is typical of many other such long, complicated and convoluted sentences which uncoil slowly away from our grasp, eluding our expectation of available sense. The narrator is, of course, the mask behind which Melville, the artist-confidence man, is perpetrating his literary hoax on the reader, and betraying his confidence in the accessibility of meaning through words. The narrator cannot give us the truth, but by his circumlocutory techniques can only suggest what to him "appears to be such," more or less, in some degree and with certain natures."

The word is not to be trusted, for it can mean different things to different people, according to their varying perceptions. To conclude our discussion of this subject, let us look finally at two conversations involving the Cosmopolitan towards the end of the book. In the first, after the Cosmopolitan has persuaded the barber to remove his sign of "No Trust," and, the agreement having been put in "black and white" (323), assented to insure him against loss, the barber asks for his cash:

Why, in this paper here, you engage sir, to insure me against a certain loss, and-

Certain? Is it so certain you are going to lose?

Why, that way of taking the word may not be amiss, but I didn't mean it so. I meant a certain loss,

you understand, a CERTAIN loss: that is to say .
a certain loss (327).

"Certain" of course can mean both "specific, particular" or "sure." Both of these definitions are at work, when, in the final scene the old man, turning the pages of the Bible explains to the Cosmopolitan:

Look, sir, all this to the right is certain truth, and all this to the left is certain truth, but all I hold in my hand here is apocrypha.

Apocrypha?

Yes; and there's the word in black and white (337).

The "certain truth" may be "particular truth" or it may be "sure truth." If it is truth, though, why does it require an act of confidence or faith? Further, if it is truth, how can it be any less than "certain"? Is there such a thing as "uncertain truth"? Apparently, the word in "black and white" is no more to be trusted than the black and white agreement between the Cosmopolitan and the barber. In this chapter, we have examined the spoken word as the stuff of swindle. In the following chapter, we shall look more closely at the written word, or at the relationship between fact and fiction in The Confidence-Man.

CHAPTER IV
FACT, FICTION, AND FAITH

In The Confidence-Man, as we have seen, any "light" or "construction" based on any given need may be used to interpret reality. The conflict in the novel arises from the various modes of perceiving reality, and is reflected both in the general disintegration of society and in the debasement of language as an effective means of communication. An examination of this language further reveals that there is no essential connection between the word and actuality or fact, and that man's powers of speech and hearing are deficient instruments for transmitting and receiving the truth. If man, then, perceives reality in terms of his needs, much of what he accepts as fact, and by implication, much of what he believes or accepts on faith, may be fiction, that is, fictitious or invented. His various "constructions" are merely various fictions. How then is one to get at the truth? Does the Bible present "certain truth"? Should one have confidence or not? While Melville does not give us a clear-cut solution to these problems, he does explore them in his three digressionary chapters on the art of fiction and in the several interpolated "fictions" or stories told by the characters.

In the first of these sections, Chapter 14 entitled "Worth the consideration of those to whom it may prove worth considering," Melville deals with the question of

inconsistency in fiction. That this problem was worth the serious consideration of Melville is attested to by the fact that, according to Elizabeth Foster, the chapter "passed through at least three and possibly six or more versions before Melville achieved the text that he allowed to be published."¹

On the surface, this chapter purports to be an apology for the apparently inconsistent behavior of the merchant who, earlier shown to be optimistic and cheerful, now reveals a "depth of discontent" in his statement, "Truth will not be comforted" (94). This "mad disclosure," however, hardly warrants a four-page apology considering the merchant's earlier observation of the contrast provided to the gay spectacle before him by the sorry condition of the miser, the Negro cripple, and the man with the weed. In addition, other instances of inconsistency have, by this point in the narrative, begun to make themselves felt. Our attention has been drawn, for example, to the "changed air of the man with the weed who . . . seemed almost transformed into another being" (37), and to Mr. Truman who, like the "grave American savor," was capable of both jaunty levity and of philosophical and humanitarian discourse (88). Nevertheless, by discussing the inconsistency of the merchant, a fictional character, in terms of the incongruities of the natural world and of the contrasts of divine nature, Melville is

¹ Foster, p. 374.

forcing us to focus our attention upon the relationships among fact, fiction and faith, and upon the relationship of each of these to the truth.

Fiction based on fact, the narrator informs us, should never be contradictory to it, and in real life, a consistent character is rare. Melville's fiction then, it would seem, is true to fact, for his characters are indeed inconsistent. Two characters who admittedly guide their actions according to the principle of inconsistency are Mark Winsome and his disciple, Egbert. To the Cosmopolitan's charge that Winsome's doctrine of triangles is inconsistent with his doctrine of labels, Winsome replies, "I seldom care to be consistent" (271), and later, when the Cosmopolitan expresses his shock and amazement at Egbert's inconsistency, the latter replies, "Inconsistency, bah!" (310). This distaste for consistency of course recalls the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson who in "Self-Reliance" (1841) wrote, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. . . . With consistency a great mind has simply nothing to do" (271, n. 14). Several critics² have pointed out certain similarities between Emerson and Melville's portrait of Winsome, and have argued somewhat less convincingly for parallels between Thoreau and Egbert. Elizabeth Foster's position, however, that Egbert instead

² See Egbert S. Oliver, "Melville's Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in The Confidence-Man," College English, 8 (November 1946), 61-72; Sidney P. Moss, "'Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!': and Some Legends in Melville Scholarship," American Literature, 40 (May 1968) 192-210; Elizabeth Foster, Introduction to The Confidence-Man, pp. lxxii-lxxix.

objectifies "the practical half, the practical application of Emerson's philosophy,"³ seems more accurately to correspond to what actually takes place in the novel. According to Miss Foster, the overt splitting of Emerson's philosophy into its abstract and practical aspects has enabled Melville to dramatize a dualism in Emerson and "to say very earnestly that though the metaphysics might be dismissed as moonshine, the practical ethics were operative and were charged with moral danger to mankind."⁴

Basically, Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance is founded upon the belief that "all nature is the rapid efflux of goodness executing and organizing itself and that the individual therefore shares in the self-existence of Deity."⁵ While this philosophy does recognize the existence of evil, it urges self-reliance "in spite of the evil in the Napoleons of the world."⁶ Through Winsome and Egbert, however, we see the inhumanity of this philosophy. When, for example, the haggard beggar approaches, Winsome reveals his lack of fellow-feeling, and we are told that he sat "more like a cold prism than ever--while an expression of keen Yankee cuteness . . . lent added icicles to his aspect" (274). We are forced here to admire by contrast, the "kind and considerate"

³ Foster, p. 352.

⁴ Ibid., p. lxxiv.

⁵ Ibid., p. lxxvi.

⁶ Ibid., p. lxxvi.

gesture of the Cosmopolitan. It is a philosophy which turns out "a head kept cool by the under ice of the heart" (311), and it is reduced on the practical level, by the "practical disciple" Egbert, to "the folly, on both sides, of a friend's helping a friend" (308).

Although Winsome and Egbert do appear to be heartless, it is nevertheless true that protected by their philosophy of inconsistency and self-reliance, they are the only two characters who are able to withstand successfully the advances of the Confidence Man. It would appear then that their philosophy has passed the "test of truth," for we are told, "Any philosophy that, being in operation contradictory to the ways of the world, tends to produce a character at odds with it, such a philosophy must necessarily be but a cheat and a dream" (278). This statement, of course, implies that Christianity must be a cheat and a dream, for the disciples of the mystic master Mark Winsome are perhaps better suited to live in this world than the disciples of Christ. Certainly the lamb-like man, whether seen as Christ, a disciple of Christ, or simply a Christian is "inappropriate to the time and place" and is "in the extremest sense of the word a stranger." Because Winsome's philosophy "tends to the same formation of character with the experiences of the world" (278), that is, his philosophy corresponds to the actuality of the world described in The Confidence-Man, then his philosophy must be true. But how true are "the experiences of the world" if much of what we know of the world is

fictitious or made up? In Chapter 14, the narrator implies that the natural world itself is a fiction, for our understanding of it is based on experience, classifications and fixed principles. To comprehend the natural world, man relies on his experience, and this experience is simply inadequate for a true conception of reality. "It may be unwise in every case to rest upon [experience], the narrator warns us, as he cites the case of the naturalists' dismissal of the duck-billed beaver, simply because "no one man can be coextensive with what is" (95).

Man's classifications then are fictions and do not necessarily describe reality. Winsome's philosophy may correspond to the experiences of the world, but what we understand of these experiences are merely fictions. As Richard Boyd Hauck has pointed out, Melville simply did not believe that through experience man could "deliberately attune himself to some omniscience and thereby perceive the organic unity and abstract value of the universe."⁷

We have been told that it is a fact that in real life a consistent character is rare, and that "fiction based on fact should never be contradictory to it." Therefore, fiction must have inconsistent characters. Similarly, we have been told that a philosophy should not, in operation, be "contradictory to the ways of the world." Therefore, a philosophy that is not to be a cheat and a dream must

⁷ Richard Boyd Hauck, A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Aburd" in American Humorous Fiction (Bloomington, Indiana, 1971), p. 114.

produce inconsistent characters. But the fact or experience of inconsistency may yet itself be just another fiction, invented to account for a phenomenon we do not fully comprehend. We certainly do not know all there is to know about inconsistency. Paul Brodtkorb Jr., for example, differentiates among the various types of character inconsistencies found in The Confidence-Man. He distinguishes among irrational inconsistency, such as the rhapsodic pessimism of the optimistic merchant, rational inconsistency, such as that of Charlemont, and the inconsistency of those who have been led by a Confidence Man into premature revelation of their own irrationalities, such as Pitch and the old man in the final scene.⁸ That there are indeed different types of inconsistency is suggested by the narrator in Chapter 14 when he says, "That author who draws a character, even though to common view incongruous in its parts, as the flying squirrel, and at different periods, as much at variance with itself as the butterfly is with the caterpillar from which it changed, may yet, in so doing, be not false but faithful to facts" (95). Thus, in the natural world, there are according to the narrator, at least two types of inconsistency. There is a temporal metamorphosis as in the caterpillar-butterfly, and a constant incongruity as in the flying squirrel.

⁸ Paul Brodtkorb Jr., "The Confidence-Man: The Confidence-Man as Hero," Studies in the Novel, 1 (Winter 1969), 423-24.

There are, further, two conflicting reasons given for inconsistency, and these are presented in terms of the caterpillar-butterfly metaphor employed by the narrator. In trying to convince Pitch that a bad boy may grow up to be a good man, the P. I. O. man argues, "Would you visit upon the butterfly the sins of the caterpillar? In the natural advance of all creatures, do they not bury themselves over and over again in the endless resurrection of better and better?" (172). The response of Pitch is in direct opposition to this stance, for he replies, "Was the caterpillar one creature, and is the butterfly another? The butterfly is the caterpillar in a gaudy cloak; stripped of which, there lies the impostor's long spindle of a body, pretty much worm-shaped as before" (172). Is inconsistency then an advancement or is it an imposture? Both of these views would seem to be applicable to the novel's most inconsistent character, the cunning Confidence Man who eventually evolves into the colorful Cosmopolitan, yet these distinctions are irrelevant in the case of Winsome and Egbert who deliberately and openly opt to be inconsistent. In their case, inconsistency is a chosen mode of behavior and does not necessarily imply either development or deceit. All of these manifestations of inconsistency simply point to the fact that the truth is past finding out. As the narrator reminds us:

Upon the whole, it might be rather said that he, who, in view of its inconsistencies, says of human nature the same that, in view of its contrasts, is said of the divine nature, that

it is past finding out, thereby evincing a better appreciation of it than he who, by always representing it in a clear light, leaves it to be inferred that he clearly knows all about it (96).

All we can safely say is that man is past finding out because he is so excessively mutable, whether he chooses so to be or not. On the other hand, the narrator carefully observes, "The grand points of human nature are the same today as they were a thousand years ago. The only variability in them is in expression, not in feature" (97). As we noted earlier, the expression of human nature, that is, man's behavior and speech, is largely dependent upon his needs, perceptions and experiences, and will thus change in accordance with these variables. We are capable of seeing only the "expression," the outward manifestation, the mask. We cannot see the inner being, nor can we determine whether the observable inconsistency is development, deceit, simply change, or all three at once. Beyond evolution or deception, the inconsistency of Melville's characters must be viewed as changing "expression" or mask. Also, as we have remarked earlier, most of the characters in The Confidence-Man are described in similar terms, and it is likely that the apparent Confidence Men, cynics and dupes are all externalizations of one masquerading character who expresses qualities of both Christ and Satan, these qualities forming part of the common humanity, or as the narrator puts it, "the grand points of human nature." As Egbert/Charlie remarks, "The difference

between this man and that man is not so great as the difference between what the same man may be today and what he may be in days to come" (309). In any given situation, a character may wear the mask of Confidence Man; in another, he may wear the mask of cynic or dupe. All are involved in role-playing and the expression of the Satanic/Christlike humanity varies according to the mask worn. This same role or mask switch is true in actuality as well, and we know from Melville's letters that he believed inconsistency and mutability to be basic characteristics of human existence. In a letter to Hawthorne in November 1851, Melville wrote, "This is a long letter, but you are not at all bound to answer it. Possibly, if you do answer it and direct it to Herman Melville, you will missend it-- for the very fingers that now guide this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper; Lord, when shall we be done changing?"⁹

We may change masks more slowly than the Confidence Man does, but change masks or roles we do. There is a masquerade at work and this masquerade or role-playing appears to be the fundamental human condition. To the wooden legged cynic, "To do is to act; so all doers are actors" (47), and to the Cosmopolitan, "Life is a pic-nic en costume; one must take a part, assume a character; stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool" (187). This concept of life as acting or

⁹ Eleanor Melville Metcalf, Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 129.

role-playing is well illustrated in the scene in which "the disciple Egbert unbends and consents to act a social part" (281), thus making himself and the Cosmopolitan "the hypothetical friends". Here Egbert plays the social role of Charlie Noble, and is thereafter referred to by the narrator as such. When the hypothetical bond of friendship becomes ruptured, the Cosmopolitan departs in scorn, "leaving his companion at a loss to determine where exactly the fictitious character had been dropped and the real one if any resumed" (311). He wonders if there is any real character, because there occurred to him as he gazed after the Cosmopolitan the familiar lines:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players,
Who have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts (311).

The novel itself, somewhat reminiscent of a Ben Jonson comedy of humors is centered around the metaphor of the world as a stage, as Edgar A. Dryden¹⁰ has remarked, with numerous references to costumes, transformations, disguises and dramatic performances. Helen Trimpi in a recent study further sees The Confidence-Man as within the satirical tradition of the Commedia Dell'Arte, the "improvised comedies performed by troupes of Italian actors during the period 1550-1800,"¹¹

¹⁰ See Edgar A. Dryden, Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth (Baltimore, 1968), p. 151.

¹¹ Helen P. Trimpi, "Harlequin--Confidence-Man: The Satiric Traditions of Commedia Dell'Arte and Pantomime in Melville's The Confidence-Man," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1974), 150.

and of nineteenth-century English Pantomime. One of the major masks was that of Harlequin, and in Pantomime, "Harlequin had the power with a tap of his bat upon the stage to metamorphose a character, object, or entire stage scene from one appearance to another," and as Miss Trimpi points out, "Melville alludes to both the act of transformation and to the many colored patterned costume of the English Harlequin, of which the Cosmopolitan's parti-hued and rather plumage aspect seems to be an American variant."¹² What is especially relevant to The Confidence-Man is the fact that in Commedia Dell'Arte, "a fixed troupe of actors who specialized in these comic types or 'masks' performed all the parts of the play, sometimes appearing in more than one role representing the type."¹³ According to Miss Trimpi, "in the history of the art, the famous actors time and time again became identified with the masks they played. . . . In this theatrical tradition, what is playing and what is real lose their distinctions."¹⁴

In The Confidence-Man, there is similarly this lack of distinction between what is playing and what is real. The world is a stage in a state of flux, as represented by the constant motion of the Fidèle, in which the actors are engaged in acting a play about a group of actors acting a play, ad infinitum and perhaps ad nauseam in the Sartrian sense, for

¹² Trimpi, p. 159.

¹³ Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 162.

beyond the play there would appear to be nothing. There is no available meaning behind the masks. Apparent inconsistencies of character are derived from the playing of various roles, and the fact of real life to which The Confidence-Man as fiction is true, is the fact of life as an enactment of roles, a drama, a fiction. The narrator concludes his discussion of inconsistency in fiction with precisely this thought, as he says, "Nothing remains but to turn to our comedy, or rather to pass from the comedy of thought to that of action" (97).

In his second digressory chapter, Chapter 33, entitled "Which may pass for whatever it may prove to be worth," a title which in tone echoes that of Chapter 14, the narrator, prompted by a voice he thinks he hears complaining that his Cosmopolitan is an unreal character, discusses the problem of reality in fiction. Here, he maintains that in fiction, a work of amusement, severe fidelity to real life should not be insisted upon. He finds it strange that "any one should clamor for the thing he is weary of; that any one, who, for any cause, finds real life dull, should yet demand of him who is to divert his attention from it, that he should be true to that dullness" (259). This position, on the surface, appears to be the reverse of that taken in Chapter 14, where the narrator urged that fiction based on fact should never be contradictory to it. Yet the two comments do not conflict at all, for if inconsistency is role-playing as we have seen, then real life partakes of the characteristics of fiction.

"In real life," the narrator continues, "the proprieties will not allow people to act out themselves with that unreserve permitted to the stage; so, in books of fiction they look not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality, than real life itself can show. . . . In this way of thinking, the people in a fiction, like the people in a play, must dress as nobody exactly dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks, act as nobody exactly acts" (259-60).

Fiction is able to show even ~~more~~ reality than real life can show because in fiction role-playing is not hindered by the same restrictions limiting the actions of real people. The rapid changes of costume and mask, for example, made by the Confidence Man would not of course be possible in real life, but these changes are nevertheless based on fact, for we do change our appearance or behavior or outlook on life, only at a different pace. Further, if as the narrator has explained, no man can be coextensive with what is, then the number of experiences he can have is of necessity limited, and thus his perceptions of reality are limited in turn. Through fiction, one's perspectives can be broadened--one can encounter new people, new experiences, and see reality in ways different from those afforded by the limited experiences of life. As Eric Bentley in The Life of the Drama has written, "[In drama] there are many subjects that can enter in but which do not enter in as often as they do in real life or we shall be bored. Washing one's hands for

example."¹⁵ Other subjects, such as birth and copulation are unlikely to enter directly into stage drama, but while they can and do enter into prose fiction, they often do so "in proportions different from those of life." This method, Bentley goes on to say, "produces a world which operates on partly different principles from the world we know."¹⁶ It is clear then that if real life is based on fictions and presents only a limited, rigid view of reality, then fiction, which is based on fact, but fact "unfettered, exhilarated . . . transformed" (260), can present even more reality than real life itself can show. Fiction, according to Melville, should not be concerned with actuality, with everyday experiences--"the same old crowd round the custom-house counter, and the same old dishes on the boarding-house table" (259), for actuality is itself a fiction, and a rather limited one at that. Instead, Melville was interested in reality--that which "lies beneath the surface, the meaning of the surface, the meaning of life, or as much of it as the writer can apprehend."¹⁷

The two writers whom Melville most admired were Hawthorne, a contemporary of his, and Shakespeare. What Melville so

¹⁵ Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York, 1966), p. 37.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 39

¹⁷ Allan Hayman, "The Real and the Original: Herman Melville's Theory of Prose Fiction," Modern Fiction Studies, 8 (Autumn, 1962), 221.

highly regarded in Shakespeare was "those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings forth of the intuitive Truth in him, those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality."¹⁸ In Hawthorne, it was the "great power of blackness" that Melville most esteemed. In his two-part essay, "Hawthorne and his Mosses" (published in The Literary World on August 17th and 24th, 1850), Melville wrote of Hawthorne:

This great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeal to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from those visitations in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For in certain moods, no man can weigh this world without throwing in something, somehow, like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance.¹⁹

It is in this "blackness" that Melville saw an affinity between Hawthorne and Shakespeare, for to him, they were both masters in the "Art of Telling the Truth," a truth which is evil as well as good. As he wrote, "In this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white dove in the woodlands and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth--even though it be covertly and by snatches."²⁰ Melville's aim in his own fiction was to tell the Truth, and the way to do so, as he wrote in

¹⁸ Hayman, p. 216.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 215.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 216.

the famous Agatha letter, sending Hawthorne material for a story he thought suitable for him to write, was to take a "skeleton of actual reality" and to "build about it with fulness and veins and beauty."²¹ This skeleton of actual reality is most likely what Melville is referring to in Chapter 33 of The Confidence-Man with the statement, "It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie" (260).

One way in which we are offered this skeleton of actual reality, or the world to which we feel the tie is in Melville's frequent use of actual people or places as models in The Confidence-Man. Paschal Reeves has commented, for example, that the idea of a deaf-mute impostor was suggested by a certain stranger who in 1850 visited Samuel W. Tillinghast, claiming to be a deaf-mute Herman Melville,²² and Edwin Fussell has noted that there was actually a Western steamboat named "Fidelity," which was listed in James Hall's Statistics of the West (Cincinnati, 1836) significantly as "destroyed".²³

Most strikingly, however, this "tie to the real world" is effected through the presence in the novel of several of Melville's contemporaries and of certain historical personages.

²¹ Metcalf, p. 142.

²² Paschal Reeves, "The 'Deaf-Mute' Confidence Man: Melville's Impostor in Action," Modern Language Notes, 75 (January, 1960), 18.

²³ Edwin Fussell, Frontier: American Literature and the American West (Princeton, 1965), p. 307.

On occasion, they may appear under their own names, such as Colonel John Moredock or Judge James Hall, but more often they are in disguise or masquerade, as are the fictional passengers on board the Fidèle. We have already commented upon the "tie" between Winsome and Emerson and possibly that between Egbert and Thoreau. In addition, Edgar Allen Poe may be seen masquerading as the haggard, crazy beggar peddling a rhapsodical tract to Winsome and the Cosmopolitan.²⁴ With his look of "picturesque Italian ruin and dethronement, heightened by what seemed just one glimmering peep of reason" (294), this beggar, or Poe, is here depicted as both a gentleman and a madman, a figure which recalls the earlier portrait of the "gentleman-madman" Charlemont, as well as the reference to the character whose "Ode on the Intimations of Distrust in Man" had been taken for the "moonstruck production of some wandering rhapsodist" (74). Goneril, the wife of the Unfortunate Man, may be a caricature of the actress Fanny Kemble,²⁵ while Pitch is possible modelled on James Fenimore Cooper,²⁶ a reference to whom is again suggested by the mention of "Pathfinder" (205) and "Leatherstocking" (212) in the preamble to the story of Colonel Moredock. Hawthorne's presence as Orchis in the

²⁴ Harrison Hayford, "Poe in The Confidence-Man," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 14 (December, 1959), 207-18.

²⁵ Egbert S. Oliver, "Melville's Goneril and Fanny Kemble," New England Quarterly, 18 (December, 1945), 489-500.

²⁶ Fussell, pp. 313-19.

story of China Aster has also been detected by Fussell who sees the story as "a rather transparent allegorical parody of Melville's disastrous literary career and its relation to Hawthorne's."²⁷ Hawthorne, who had been "dismissed abruptly from the Salem Custom House in 1849" (17, n. 6), may also be linked to the wooden legged cynic who, as we are told, is possibly some "discharged custom house officer" (17). By incorporating these "real people" into his fiction, Melville is offering us a world to which we feel the tie, but is also illustrating at the same time that the boundary line between the fictional and the actual is a very fine one, indeed.

David Ketterer has remarked that "each of the various identifications aside from the more extended cases of Thoreau and Emerson, either occurs or 'ties' in with one of the four interpolated stories."²⁸ Yet, while Goneril may be a caricature of Fanny Kemble, she is at the same time also "tied" to her namesake, Lear's daughter, reinforcing the notion that the world to which we feel the tie is itself a fiction. Indeed all of the four stories are based by their narrators on a fictional world--the world of The Confidence-Man. The story of Charlemont is tied to Charlie Noble, the story of the Unfortunate Man to the Invalid Titan, the story of Colonel Moredock to Pitch, and the story of

²⁷ Fussell, p. 314, note 11.

²⁸ David Ketterer, New Worlds for Old (Anchor Press: New York, 1974), p. 282.

China Aster to the Cosmopolitan, as the "hypothetical friend," Frank. Because Chapter 14 on inconsistency follows shortly after the story of the Unfortunate Man, while Chapter 33 on reality in fiction comes directly before the story of Charlemont, it would appear that these two digressive chapters have a particular relevance to the four stories within the story.

Each of the stories, as we have noted earlier, may be seen as exemplifying the presence and power of evil in the world. Both the story of the Unfortunate Man and the story of Colonel Moredock include characters who find happiness "in the very easy way of simply causing pain to those around them" (84). The stories of Charlemont and China Aster deal more with financial concerns and have as their theme the incompatibility of friendship and charity. All of the stories involve inconsistencies to some degree: Goneril has a "cactus-like beauty" (83); Colonel Moredock is a man of love and hate; China Aster's good friend Orchis initiates or at least contributes to his ruin; and Charlemont turns full circle from affable to morose and back again. Generally, this inconsistency emphasizes the problem of human inscrutability as elsewhere illustrated in the novel. While Charlemont's motives may be understandable to us, to his friends they remain a "mystery" (263), and China Aster is at a loss to comprehend "that strange kind of capriciousness" (302) lately characterizing Orchis. We are told that Goneril was so "anomalously vicious" (82) that

it would "almost tempt a metaphysical lover of our species to doubt whether the human form be, in all cases, conclusive evidence of humanity." In short, Goneril's strange nature remained an "enigma" (85), a sentiment which reverberates through the account of the Indian-hater par excellence, whose career, we are told, has the "impenetrability of the fate of a lost steamer" (213). This metaphor is particularly apt to describe the situation on board the Fidèle, a steamer whose destination is not reached in the novel, and which is populated by a group of passengers about whom, finally, we know very little.

It is significant that all of the stories are distanced from personal experience, whether in their conception, narration or both. The story of the Unfortunate Man is particularly removed from its original teller. Initially told to the merchant by the man with the weed, it was then "confirmed and filled out by the testimony of a certain man in a gray coat" (81). On neither occasion was the reader invited to join in the audience. When we finally do hear the story, we are told by Melville's narrator, "... as the good merchant could perhaps, do better justice to the man than the story, we shall venture to tell it in other words than his, though not to any other effect" (81). The story of Colonel Moredock is told from an "impressible memory" (201) by Charlie Noble in the words of Judge James Hall, in actuality the author of Sketches of History, Life, and Manners in the West (Philadelphia, 1835), and Egbert tells

the story of China Aster in the words of the original story-teller, as we have noted above. Finally, although the Cosmopolitan does tell the story of Charlemont in his own words, the experience is not his own, and he denies the veracity of the story. As he explains to Charlie Noble, "It is a story which I told with the purpose of every story-teller--to amuse. Hence, if it seem strange to you, that strangeness is the romance; it is what contrasts it with real life; it is the invention in brief; the fiction as opposed to the fact" (264).

Because these stories are either told at second hand or are otherwise removed from personal experience, they are not accepted as truth by those to whom they are told. Mr. Truman, on hearing the sad "touching" case of Goneril and the Unfortunate Man, does not, as the merchant, entirely sympathize with the Unfortunate's plight, but rather holds that "there were probably small faults on both sides, more than balanced by large virtues; and one should not be hasty in judging" (90). The response of the Cosmopolitan to Noble's story of Colonel Moredock is one of sheer disbelief: "That story strikes me with even more incredulity than wonder. To me, some parts don't hang together. If the man of hate, how could John Moredock be also the man of love?" (221). Charlie Noble in turn considers the Cosmopolitan's story of Charlemont "a very strange one" (264) and doubts whether it is true. Finally, the Cosmopolitan in the role of Frank finds he can "no way approve" (308) the moral of

the folly of a friend's helping a friend in the story of China Aster told by Egbert in the role of Charlie.

These expressions of incredulity are similar to the response of the herb-doctor who, upon hearing the story of the Soldier of Fortune, exclaims, "I have considered your story my friend, and strove to consider it in the light of a commentary on what I believe to be the system of things; but it so jars with all, is so incompatible with all, that you must pardon me, if I honestly tell you, I cannot believe it" (135). Obviously, whenever an experience is recounted, it is told from a certain point of view which highly influences the effect the story will have upon its listener. Equally true, however, is the fact that the listener brings to the tale a point of view of his own, based upon whatever need, perception or role of his is dominant at the time. One is tempted to consider what the response of Goneril, for example, would be if the Cosmopolitan, let us say, were to tell her the story of China Aster. What to her would be the "truth" of the story?

In general, all of the responses to the stories tend to undercut the themes of human inscrutability as therein expressed, for the listeners are clearly more comfortable with a simplified version of human nature and experience. In fact, it hardly matters what the story is about, for each individual tends to respond in a manner compatible with his own "system of things." As the Soldier of Fortune

admits to the herb-doctor, "Hardly anybody believes my story, and so to most I tell a different one" (135). He is, however, perhaps closer to the truth of his experience than he realizes, for the truth is not contained in one story, but several. A comment by Melville in Pierre, Book XXV, Chapter III further explains: "As a statue, planted on a revolving pedestal shows now this limb, now that, now front, now back, now side; continually changing too its general profile, so does the pivoted soul of man when turned by the hand of Truth. Lies only never vary."²⁹ Human experience, because "tied" to one individual with his own particular needs, perceptions and limited roles, can tell only one story. Fiction, on the other hand, because distanced from personal experience in that it shows the experience "unfettered, exhilarated . . . transformed," shows more clearly the ambiguity of existence and thus comes closer to the truth. When personal experience is similarly distanced from the individual as in the case when it is recounted at second or third hand, it too becomes open to interpretation and equivocation. In this way, it is as fiction, and is thereby able to show even more of reality than real life, that is, the original actual experience, can show. Ultimately then, as far as Melville's readers are concerned, our response is the same to admitted

²⁹ See Hayman, p. 223.

fiction such as the stories of China Aster and Charlemont, to the true account twice removed of an actual historical character such as Colonel Moredock, or to the true account twice removed of a fictional character such as the Unfortunate Man. All are clearly fictional and all present even more reality than real life itself can show.

In The Confidence-Man, reference is made to characters from other fictions such as Autolycus and Polonius, mythical characters such as Manco Capac, religious figures such as Christ, and historical characters such as Diogenes and Socrates. In addition, some of the fictional characters may be tied to Melville's contemporaries, such as Winsome to Emerson, some seem to stand on their own such as the miser or the sick man, some are tied to yet another fictional world such as Goneril to King Lear, while others are themselves created by other fictional characters such as Charlemont by the Cosmopolitan. As Charlie Noble rightly asks the Cosmopolitan, "Say Frank, are we not human? Tell me, were they not human who engendered us, as before heaven, I believe they shall be whom we shall engender?" (250)... Fictional characters are indeed human in the sense that although all fiction is based on fact, fiction may in turn strongly influence fact or actuality. In the story of the wooden-legged cynic, for example, of which we are given, incidentally, a "good-natured" (45) version, a certain Frenchman of New Orleans who, influenced by the character of a faithful wife dramatized in the theatre, "as there represented to the

life" (45), subsequently decides to marry. Art may be an imitation of life, but similarly, life is often an attempt to imitate art, or fiction. As Mr. Truman asks in reference to a gloomy man, " . . . and do you know whence this sort of fellow gets his sulk? Not from life; . . . No, he gets it from some of those old plays he sees on the stage, or some of those old books he finds up in garrets" (69). It soon becomes clear that the reality of Charlemont is no more nor less real than that of his author the Cosmopolitan, or that of his author Melville, or perhaps of Melville's author God. All we know of reality are various fictions and these in turn serve to shape our concept of reality.

This point is well illustrated in the story of Charlemont, a fiction which indicates the relationship between our concept of God and fiction, and which thus shows even more reality than real life can show. Carolyn Lury Karcher's interpretation of the story is particularly relevant in this context and may be abbreviated as follows:

In the course of the narrative the details of Charlemont's career become increasingly more reminiscent of the details of Christ's career. Luke 3:23 tells us that when the holy spirit descended upon him 'Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age.' Also reminiscent of Christ is Charlemont's resurrection in the spring.

Nevertheless, despite all the similarities between the histories of Christ and Charlemont, there are a sufficient number of details inexplicable in this connection seriously to call into question any unequivocal identification.

Obviously by being collated, the story of Charlemont and the story of Christ redefine each other. Not only does the analogy elevate Charlemont to a literally Christ-like figure, but it adds significance to the otherwise whimsical details of his somewhat bizarre history. The reverse is also true, however. The comparison of Christ with 'a young merchant of French descent' cannot but diminish the glory of the Son of God.

Whereas Melville is the narrator of The Confidence-Man, the Cosmopolitan, his own creation, is the narrator of the Charlemont episode. With whose concept of fiction, then, are we to interpret the Charlemont episode? The ultimate irony is that it doesn't matter. Since the story of Charlemont fuses the fictional history of 'a young merchant of French descent' with the mythical history of Christ, if we accept the Cosmopolitan's evaluation of his narrative, we reduce the Christian myth, along with the story of Charlemont, to 'a story . . . told with the purpose of every story-teller--to amuse'. If we accept Melville's evaluation, once again, since fiction is fused with myth, the mythical history of Christ, however 'true' becomes ultimately neither more nor less significant than the fictional history of Charlemont.³⁰

Miss Karcher's point is that Melville, "linking . . . the fictional representation of human reality with the mythical representation of divine reality is implying that our religious myths are fictions."³¹ This link between human and divine reality is also carefully structured in the three digressionary chapters on fiction. In Chapter 14,

³⁰ Carolyn Lury Karcher, "The Story of Charlemont: A Dramatization of Melville's Concepts of Fiction in The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 21 (June, 1966), 73-84.

³¹ Ibid., p. 73.

it will be recalled, the narrator implies a connection between the inconsistencies of human nature and the contrasts of divine nature. In Chapter 33, he maintains that "it is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie" (260), and in Chapter 44 as we shall see, he compares the original character in fiction with the founder of a new religion. Because this association of human reality and divine reality is suggested in terms of fiction and the reality it presents, the result is to raise serious doubts about the assertion made by the old man at the end of the novel that the Old and New Testaments of the Bible present "certain truth". The truth found in the Bible is neither more nor less certain than the truth found in other fictions. As Nathalia Wright sees it, "Melville . . . read [Scriptures] with the same kind of attention he gave all books. As he disentangled its truth from dogma, he perceived it as akin to all other truth in the world. . . . And as he probed thus beneath the surface, he arrived almost inevitably at what was for him the true religious significance of the Bible: its mythology or its allegorical representation of metaphysical truth."³²

In its myths, Western religion, or Christianity in this case, is based on differences, categorizations and classifications: good vs. evil, God vs. Satan, heaven vs.

³² Nathalia Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible (Durham, 1949), p. 16.

hell, and trust vs. no trust. Given these divisions or sets of opposites, man would have consistency: God is absolutely good and Satan is absolutely evil. Man's penchant for consistent characters in fiction, Melville suggests, arises from his "perplexity as to understanding them" (94). By implication, our aversion to an inconsistent deity originates from the same source. The Cosmopolitan, for one, insists upon consistency. As he says to the barber, "Don't you think consistency requires that you should either say 'I have confidence in all men,' and take down your notification; or else say 'I suspect all men' and keep it up" (318).

Because of this need for consistency, this need to see God as supremely good, man is ill prepared to cope with the very real presence of evil in the world. To the passengers on the Fidèle, evil exists apart and separately from good, and it would seem, because they believe themselves to be created in God's image, this evil likewise exists apart and separately from themselves. Evil is objectified in the "other," and it is not incidental that the truest Christian in the book is the Indian-hater. To him, all evil is focused in the Indian--an external enemy--and he fights his foe with the devoutness of a true Christian. Hating his enemy with a "righteous hate," he fails to recognize his common humanity with the Indian and he fails to recognize the evil within himself. Because he sees evil as apart from himself and from his God, man is not equipped to deal with it, and

thus allows it full reign. Evil often operates through good, or to use the metaphor of The Confidence-Man, evil often wears the mask of good, as good may wear the mask of evil. Contrary to the vision of the Cosmopolitan, the day of the "genial misanthrope" (253) and the "surly philanthropist" is not in the "process of eras" but in the time at hand. Based as it is on a separation of good and evil, Christianity, symbolizing the good, is open to evil committed in its name. As the Protean easy-chair with its "endlessly changeable accommodations of back, seat, footboard and arms" (55), Christianity will accommodate many of man's nefarious schemes--Indian-hating, autos-da-fé, and of course all confidence games.

As myth, then, Christianity is a particularly unworkable fiction, not as Winsome would have it, because "it tends to produce a character at odds with the world" (278), but because it produces a world in which the characters are at odds with themselves and with others. Christianity, in operation, is not contradictory to the ways of the world. Rather, the ways of the world are the result of Christianity and what man has made of it. As in the case of the theatre-goer who decided to marry, or the fellow who got his sulk from reading gloomy books, mankind's sorry condition as represented on board the Fidèle is a consequence of the operation of Christianity. Christianity of course does not teach that man must trust blindly, but the American Dream being one of optimism and confidence, it does lend itself

easily to such an interpretation.

Christianity also accomodates itself easily to the Wall Street spirit, as we have noted earlier. On the Fidèle, both the Bible and Mr. Truman's transfer book are referred to as the "true book" (326, 78) and both are adorned with gilt. It is important here to recognize that the stock market operates on the basis of fictions, and that according to Truman, the depression of his stock had been caused by hypocritical bears, "hypocrites in the simulation of things dark instead of bright, souls that thrive less upon depression, than the fiction of depression, professors of the wicked art of manufacturing depression" (67). It is a particularly potent fiction, for the effect on the market is identical, whether there be an actual depression or the fiction of depression. This situation is similar to the one created by the Confidence Man only in reverse, for he is a hypocrite in the simulation of things bright to the exclusion of things dark. The word "hypocrite" interestingly derives from the Greek hypokrites, one who plays a part on a stage, a dissembler, and the Confidence Man as an actor or masquerader is a soul that thrives less upon faith, hope, charity and confidence than on the fiction of these same Christian tenets. There is indeed evidence to suggest that the Confidence Man himself lacks the trust he preaches. The herb-doctor, for example, says to Pitch, "Yes, I think I understand you now, sir. How silly I was to have taken you seriously in your droll conceits, too, about having no

confidence in nature. In reality, you have just as much as I have" (148). Ironically, he may be right. Further, at the conclusion of the novel, the Cosmopolitan says to the old man fortified with money-belt, traveller's lock, counterfeit detector and life-preserver, "In Providence as in man, you and I equally put trust" (349).

Confidence is merely a fiction, convenient and comfortable enough for Melville's time, but nevertheless a dangerous one, for it shapes a world in which all men are strangers, the society in which they live is crippled, and communication among them is virtually impossible. When in the final scene the old man is reading the Bible, he says to the Cosmopolitan anxiously awaiting his turn for the book, "One would think . . . I had a newspaper here with great news, and the only copy to be had, you sit there looking at me so eager" (334). The Cosmopolitan, eyeing the Bible, replies, "And so you have good news there, sir--the very best of good news." Overhearing their conversation, one of the sleepers in the berth cries out prophetically, "Too good to be true." And it is in fact too good to be true. We are here reminded of an earlier occasion in the novel in which these self-same words were used. In Chapter 25, commenting on Noble's appearance, the narrator remarks, "And, though his teeth were singularly good, these same ungracious [critics] might have hinted that they were too good to be true; or rather, were not so good as they might be; since the best false teeth are those made with at

least two or three blemishes, the more to look like life" (197). While admittedly, to speak of the Bible in terms of teeth makes for an unlikely metaphor, it is nevertheless true that for Melville the best fictions, like the best false teeth, should have a few "blemishes," that is, they should allow for the existence of evil as part of the good. Christianity is too good to be true and yet not quite as good as it might be. The truth in the Bible is no more certain than that in the transfer book which it outwardly resembles, nor than that in the newspaper with which it is confused. Christianity is as comfortable as an easy-chair, but, as we have been reminded, "Truth will not be comforted" (92). This of course is the "mad disclosure" or revelation of the merchant in his lapse of inconsistency, so essential for fiction, yet for which Melville finds it necessary to apologize, it being so abhorrent to man.

The third and final digressory chapter on fiction, Chapter 44, is a discourse upon the theme of original characters in fiction inspired by the last three words of the previous chapter, "QUITE AN ORIGINAL" (328). It will be recalled that these words form the conclusion of a sentence concerning the barber and the Cosmopolitan: "But in after days, telling the night's adventure to his friends, the worthy barber always spoke of his queer customer as the man-charmer--as certain East Indians are called snake-charmers--and all his friends united in thinking him QUITE AN ORIGINAL;" The last three words appear to apply to the

Cosmopolitan, whose "charming" qualities we have already noted, but because of the dubious syntax of the sentence, they may apply also to the barber. The word "original" as descriptive of a character first occurs at the beginning of the novel when the mysterious impostor is represented as an "original genius," and this impostor may, as we have shown, first appear as the lamb-like man. These words are later suggested as being applicable to the herb-doctor (127). The recurrence of the word "original" thus serves to link the mysterious impostor, the lamb-like man, the herb-doctor, the barber, and the Cosmopolitan, and to lend support to the premise that the various Confidence Men are one.

It is perhaps the Cosmopolitan, as the most resplendent of the Confidence Men, who is the original upon whom the copies of the other Confidence Men are formed. He is, by his own description, "a cosmopolitan, a catholic man, who, being such, ties himself to no narrow tailor or teacher, but federates, in heart as in costume, something of the various gallantries of men under various suns" (186). The Cosmopolitan differs somewhat from the Confidence Men who precede him, not only in that he makes his appeal largely to faith or confidence rather than to hope or charity, but also in that he promises nothing--not health, wealth, nor reliable boys. His message is trust man and the Creator who made him. Also, in comparison with the several scoundrels with whom he comes in contact, such as the cold Winsome or the Mississippi operator Noble, we cannot but admire his

shrewd intelligence, his compassion and sociability. He is, however, similar to the previous Confidence Men in his insistence that the world has no dark side. The word "cosmopolitan" suggests "citizen of the world" and "harmony", and in his nature, he embodies many of the apparently conflicting and inconsistent traits demonstrated by the earlier Confidence Men and their victims. He is the human embodiment of the "dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide" (14). The word "cosmopolitan" is also etymologically linked to the word "cosmetic," meaning "skilled in decorating," both words sharing the common root of the Greek "kosmos". The Cosmopolitan, with his "parti-hued and rather plumagy aspect" (184) is, of course, the masquerader par excellence. The word "cosmetic" becomes directly associated with the Cosmopolitan when the barber, in attempting to defend his distrust of mankind, protests to him, "Can one be forever dealing in macassar oil, hair dyes, cosmetics, false moustaches, wigs and toupees, and still believe that men are wholly what they look to be?" (321). The Cosmopolitan Confidence Man then is the Original Man in the sense of Everyman, for he personifies a wide range of conflicting characteristics and is at the same time highly skilled in concealing his true identity or nature.

The word "original," however, has yet another important meaning in reference to The Confidence-Man. As Franklin points out, "original" derives from "oriri" meaning "to rise," the root word of "Orient" (4, n. 10), and because it is related in this way to the sunrise and to the source of illumination, it thus assumes an added significance. The novel begins at sunrise, when there appears "suddenly as Manco Capac at lake Titicaca, a man in cream-colors" (3). Manco Capac, an incarnation of the sun, first appeared in the form of a mysterious stranger, and we are later told that the mysterious impostor for whom a reward is offered is "supposed to have recently arrived from the East" (4). According to the narrator, the original character "is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it--everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it . . . so that, in certain minds, there follows upon the adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things" (330). Further, we are informed that an original character in fiction is "almost as much of a prodigy there, as in real history is a new law-giver, a revolutionizing philosopher, or the founder of a new religion" (330). These two passages well describe the Cosmopolitan Confidence Man, for as Everyman in his various guises, he is originative, shedding his light on a world created by himself. He appears in shapes or roles which are evoked by the passengers' various needs. To the sick man he appears as the herb-doctor, to the

greedy he appears as the President of the Black Rapids Coal Company. Shape-shifting himself, he illuminates the ambiguous nature of man. As the originator of a new religion, he makes us aware of a world created in the image of God as Confidence Man--a Mysterious Impostor Who is at once Satan and Christ, good and evil, and Who is highly skilled in concealing His true nature. There can, of course, as Melville says, be only "one original character to one work of invention. Two would conflict to chaos" (331). It is in the work of our invention, that is, in our confident and optimistic Christian fiction, that we have two original characters--God and Satan. The result, as exemplified on board the Fidèle, is clearly chaos.

The Drummond light, or light of the Confidence Man, is an artificial light, but the problem of distinguishing between the true light and the artificial light soon becomes irrelevant. Christianity may be referred to as the "true light" (208), but then all concepts, experiences, theories, philosophies and beliefs may be seen in a number of different lights. We have already remarked that the miser could not "according to his light" disprove the words of the herb-doctor, and later we hear the Cosmopolitan say to Noble, "Your suggestions have put things in such a strange light to me as in fact a little to disturb my previous notion. . . . " (245). On another occasion, in discussing the press, the Cosmopolitan explains, "In the press as in the sun, resides . . . a dedicated principle of beneficent force and light.

For the Satanic press by its coappearance with the apostolic, it is no more an aspersion to that than to the true sun is the coappearance of the mock one. For all the baleful-looking parhelion, god Apollo dispenses the day". (237).

A parhelion is a mock sun produced by ice-crystals refracting the sun's rays. A mock sun, however, can appear only in the presence of the true sun. It derives its existence from the true sun. By implication, the "false light" or Satan, derives its existence from the "true light" or God. Seen in this way, Satan is called into being through God and is one of His many reflections.

We are told also that the original character is born, not in the author's imagination, but from the "egg" (311), that is, from life. Coming thus from life, the Cosmopolitan Confidence Man with his artificial light may be a "baleful-looking parhelion," but he is nevertheless a part of the true light. An author "picks up" an original character from life, or to use Melville's words, from a "man-show" (329). In this frame of reference, the Drummond light is particularly pertinent for the "new religion," as it is essentially limelight--"an intense white light produced by focusing ignited streams of oxygen and hydrogen on a ball of lime." It is this light which is used in the theatre, the "limelight" being that part of the stage upon which the limelight is cast, usually where the chief action is. The world to which the Confidence Man directs out attention is, appropriately, the world as a stage, with each man playing

many roles and each role expressing a different facet, good or evil of his humanity. The new religion is one of lightness and darkness both, with the dark side of humanity finally receiving its rightful recognition.

As an original character, the Confidence Man has qualities not only of Satan, the devil, but also of Lucifer, the light-bringer. Lucifer is the name which the Romans gave to the morning star, and which according to Milton in Paradise Lost is the former name of Satan. The name Lucifer recalls that of China Aster, which as Daniel Hoffman points out, suggests Star of the Orient--the rising or morning star.³³ His craft is suitably that of candlemaker or illuminator--"a kind of subordinate branch of that parent craft and mystery of the hosts of heaven, to be the means, effectively or otherwise, of shedding some light through the darkness of a planet benighted" (291).

Another subordinate branch of this parent craft of illumination is that of writing fiction. In Charlie Noble's view, Shakespeare opens people's eyes and corrupts their morals, and the Cosmopolitan says of him, "There appears to be a certain--what shall I call it?--hidden sun about him, at once enlightening and mystifying. Now, I should be afraid to say what I have sometimes thought that hidden sun might be" (246). When Noble inquires, "Do you think it was the

³³ Daniel G. Hoffman, "The Confidence Man: His Masquerade," in Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Richard Chase (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962), p. 138.

true light?", the Cosmopolitan replies, "I would prefer to decline answering a categorical question there. Shakespeare has got to be a kind of deity." As Melville sees it, Shakespeare, and other authors of original characters in fiction, such as Milton or Cervantes, those authors who through their fiction are able to show even more reality than real life can show, do not corrupt morals, but instead open men's eyes and enlighten them by illuminating their benighted morals, and the ambiguous "mystifying" character of creation.

The image of the writer as Satanic or Luciferean is supported by Maximilian Rudwin who in his book, The Devil in Legend and Literature writes, "The German mystic Jacob Boehme as far back as the seventeenth-century relates that when Satan was asked to explain the cause of God's enmity to him and his consequent downfall, he replied in justification of his act, 'I wanted to be an author.'³⁴ In a footnote, Rudwin adds that the word "author" is used in this connection in its current meaning. Rudwin points out further that the devil is regarded as the inventor of the drama, and that secular dramatic performances were condemned by the early Church as "pompae diaboli."³⁵ Books too were considered "tools of hell," for imaginative works of literature apparently "have their influence in formulating the ideas

³⁴ Maximilian Rudwin, The Devil in Legend and Literature (New York, 1970), p. 8.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 259.

and ideals of the reader and to this extent, authors stand in the service of Satan."³⁶ The word "genius" also has Satanic overtones, for as Rudwin explains:

The word 'demon' (from Latin daemonium, daemon) meaning a 'knowing spirit' originally had a complimentary connotation. It signified in pagan Greece a benevolent deity, but came to mean in Christian lands a malevolent being. Coleridge in his Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798) and Emerson in his essay Demonology (1877) likewise use the word 'daemon' as a term for genius.³⁸

The original genius then is the demonic shaper of new fictions.

As a fallen angel, Lucifer the light-bringer is expelled from heaven, his home, and this "homelessness" applies to virtually all of the travellers in The Confidence-Man. The Cosmopolitan, the most ubiquitous of all, forever "roams . . . the gallant globe" (186); the Unfortunate Man is an "innocent outcast" (87); the Indian-hater par excellence is "good as gone to his long home" (212); the lamb-like man looks "as if travelling night and day from some far country beyond the prairies, he had long been without the solace of a bed" (9); Black Guinea is "der dog widout massa" (15) and reference is made to his houselessness; the wooden legged cynic may be "some discharged custom-house officer" (17); the juvenile peddler has "no allotted sleeping place" (339).

³⁶ Rudwin, p. 260.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

the Invalid Titan boards the boat at a "houseless landing" (117); and the Soldier of Fortune is "drifting downstream like any other bit of wreck" (135). They are all without a home, alienated, expelled. Their "true light" or religious belief has made them a society of outcasts and strangers, and this light is finally extinguished by the Cosmopolitan in the final chapter, marking the demise of Christianity.

Here, the Cosmopolitan enters the gentlemen's cabin in the middle of which burned "a solar lamp, swung from the ceiling, and whose shade of ground glass was all round fancifully variegated, in transparency, with the image of a horned altar, from which flames rose, alternate with the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo" (332). As Elizabeth Foster has noted, this lamp "represents the light of the Old and New Testaments, the horned altar . . . standing for the Old, and the robed man with a halo for the New."³⁸ There is the suggestion that this solar lamp as emblematic of the Bible is not the "true light," but may be another mock light or parhelion. This lamp is "the last survivor of many," and we are told that "here and there, true to their place but not to their function, swung other lamps, barren planets, which had either gone out from exhaustion, or been extinguished by such occupants of berths as the light annoyed, or who wanted to sleep, not see" (332-3). It is significant that this lamp has Biblical images "in

³⁸ Foster, p. lxxxiv.

transparency," if we recall the narrator's words in Chapter 14 where he admonishes most novelists for representing human nature "not in obscurity but transparency" (96), adding that those who represent human or divine nature in "a clear light" are those who do not evince a true appreciation of it. It has been observed moreover by Dryden that "the images are not the source of the lamp's light but merely filters which refract and color it as it passes through them. To change the quality and meaning of its illumination, one has only to change the shade."³⁹

Present in the cabin with the Cosmopolitan is a "clean, comely old man" who is reading the Bible. This old man is clearly a Christian, yet he resembles somewhat several of the earlier Confidence Men, specifically, the "rich old farmer" (300) who loaned China Aster the dried up livestock, for the old man "seemed a well-to-do farmer" (333), and also the gentleman with the gold sleeve-buttons, for the old man seemed "untainted by the world because ignorant of it" (334). Furthermore, as a man with a book, he may be one of those specifically enumerated by Black Guinea. We are told also that he had a "countenance like that which imagination ascribes to the good Simeon, when, having at last beheld the Master of Faith, he blessed him and departed in peace" (333). Franklin has annotated that "it was prophesied of Simeon that

³⁹ Dryden, Melville's Thematics of Form, p. 185.

he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ" (333, n. 5). Here, Christ is represented by the Cosmopolitan, "redolent from the barber's shop, as any bridegroom tripping to the bridal chamber might come" (334), the bridegroom being a traditional designation of Christ (Matthew 9:15).

The old man and the Cosmopolitan are engaged in a discussion of the Apocrypha, when a voice cries out from the berth, "What's that about the Apocalypse?" (337). Here, the Apocalypse, or that which is revealed, is confused with its opposite, the Apocrypha, or that which is concealed. The "certain truth" is confused with "something of uncertain credit" (337). As Dryden remarks, "Not only does the Bible have the true and false bound up together, but the names of each part are similar enough to be confused. Even more terrifying is the realization that the names may have been originally misapplied."⁴⁰

The apocalypse, or the destruction of the world as created by the belief in an absolutely benevolent deity is shortly to take place and is now attendant upon the arrival of the Anti-Christ, here most likely represented by the juvenile peddler whose "appearance betokens Hell and fiery destruction."⁴¹ Like the old man, this peddler is also reminiscent of those whom we have encountered earlier. He

⁴⁰ Dryden, p. 187.

⁴¹ Ketterer, New Worlds for Old, p. 294.

has a certain resemblance to the dried up old miser who has "the stature of a boy of twelve" (140), and to the pale pauper boy (232). His clothes, the "fragments of an old linen coat bedraggled and yellow" (339) recall the lamb-like man's cream colors, and his "rags of a red flannel shirt" bring to mind the recipient of the herb-doctor's charity, "a man with the appearance of a day laborer, who had been sitting in his red flannel shirt sleeves" (126). Further, like Black Guinea, he has the "air of a young Caffre" (343), and his face wears "the polish of seasoned grime so that his sloe eyes sparkled from out it like lustrous sparks in fresh coal" (339), and like China Aster's sons, he is barefoot. Finally, because he did business in Cincinnati, he may be one of the boys of the P. I. O. man, who had there been in business for "no small period" (165).

Both the old man and the peddler seem to be reflected in the images on the solar lamp. Like the figure of the robed man, the old man's "snowy" head would appear to be encircled by the light, for he sat directly beneath the lamp "which lighted his book on the table" (333). The peddler, on the other hand, is represented by "the image of a horned altar from which flames rose," for we are carefully told, "he scraped back his hard foot on the woven flowers of the carpet much as a mischievous steer in May scrapes back his horny hoof in the pasture" (343), and "... the rags of the little fellow's red flannel shirt mixed with those of his yellow coat, flamed about him like the painted flames

in the robes of a victim in auto-da-fé" (339). The animal sacrifices at the horned altar have become instead human sacrifices and the haloed Christ has become a confused old man, easily duped.

As Anti-Christ, the juvenile peddler is just another form of the Confidence Man, for by encouraging distrust, he urges one to believe solely in the dark side of man. There is, further, the suggestion that he is working together with the Cosmopolitan, for we are told that he tipped him "a wink, expressive of a degree of indefinite knowingness" (341). The Christlike Cosmopolitan promotes trust, the Anti-Christlike peddler promotes distrust, and the aged Christian, seeing them as opposites, is hopelessly confused. As does the Cosmopolitan, he professes trust in man and the Creator, yet he inconsistently arms himself with the peddler's traveller's lock, money belt and counterfeit detector. There is ultimately no real conflict between blind faith and blind distrust. Apparent opposites amount to the same thing--a grand swindle. The Cosmopolitan finally extinguishes the already waning light of Christianity, and the old Christian, "fresh-hearted as at fifteen" (334) is left in the dark, blinded by his faith in a one-sided God.

The masquerade is now over, and Melville's concluding sentence, "Something further may follow of this Masquerade," may be read as an expressed hope that a new "light" will replace the old--a recognition that life is itself a

masquerade, and that man, created in God's image, is a mysterious impostor, at once good and evil, whose essential nature remains "apocryphal" or concealed.

CHAPTER V.
CONCLUSION

If truth is indeed, as Melville sees it, elusive and ambiguous, if God does appear at times to be capricious, if not malicious, how then is man to survive? What options are available to him? Should he have confidence or not? In Ketterer's view, the four interpolated stories may be seen as presenting alternative responses to the world of The Confidence-Man: the story of Colonel Moredock illustrates the response of defiance, the story of China Aster the response of the dupe, the story of the Unfortunate Man the response of aping the Confidence Man, and the story of Charlemont the response of 'self-imposed illusion,' that is, of disregarding one's awareness of God's malignity. Ketterer does acknowledge, however, that "no single one of the four possible attitudes that Melville isolates is necessarily better than any other."¹ It is clear that those who have confidence and believe in Bright Future, China Aster's smiling and radiant angel, are misled, while those who pessimistically have no trust are similarly no closer to the truth; for as we have seen, the wooden legged cynic, like all of the passengers on the Fidèle, is unsuccessful in resolving whether or not Black Guinea is "what he seems to be" (43). All of these positions are unsatisfactory for

¹ Ketterer, pp. 288-9.

they are self-deluding, one-sided, or tend to perpetuate the situation.

In order to determine Melville's own position regarding his characters, it is perhaps useful to return to the placard wherein a reward is offered for the capture of a "mysterious impostor" who is "quite an original genius in his vocation" (4). It will be recalled that on this placard there followed "what purported to be a careful description" (4) of this impostor, but that this description was never imparted to the reader. It was of course not possible for Melville to have divulged any particulars, for the mysterious impostor is every passenger on the Fidèle, and by implication, all of humankind. Melville endorses neither the position of blind faith nor that of cynical distrust, but instead demands of the reader an awareness such as that which he is called upon to bring to the reading of Black Guinea's list. If we keep in mind that Black Guinea's list affords a multiplicity of meanings, we can discover the omnipresence of the Confidence Man. If we now examine the wanted placard with the same awareness, we can perhaps uncover or unmask him.

An impostor is defined most immediately as "a deceiver, swindler, cheat . . . one who passes himself off as someone other than he is" (Oxford International Dictionary of the English Language [Toronto, 1958]). The Confidence Man, or man, because he is inconsistent and his life involves the enactment of many roles, "passes himself off" in a variety

of ways, and within the context of the novel, it would seem that this imposture has as its aim the swindling of others by betraying their trust. As an impostor, man is of necessity mysterious, for if he is ever role-playing, we obviously cannot know exactly what he is. As Winsome asks, "What are you? What am I? Nobody knows who anybody is. The data which life furnishes toward forming a true estimate of any being are as insufficient to that end as in geometry, one side would be to determine the triangle" (271). Man's nature then is mysterious in the sense of "something that has not been or cannot be explained; something beyond human comprehension." The word "mysterious," which derives from the Greek "mystes"--"one initiated in mysteries," means further, on a literal level, "closed-mouthed," the root word being "myein,"--"to close, be shut (the lips or eyes)," a cognate with the Indo-European word "mu" from which we get our word "mute". The first impostor that we encounter is significantly the deaf-mute lamb-like man, and as we have seen, all of the rather inarticulate passengers on the Fidèle may be considered deaf-mutes or closed-mouthed, for they are incapable of speaking or hearing the truth. Thus, "mysterious" meaning "closed-mouthed" and "beyond human comprehension" is in a sense synonymous with the word "absurd," which as we have noted earlier means "deaf-mute" and "contrary to reason".

"The absurd view of the universe as expressed in Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus has provided several modern critics.

with a frame of reference in which to read The Confidence-Man. Richard Boyd Hauck, for one, defines the absurd as "the sense of meaninglessness experienced by the man who has no abstract faith."² This view would appear to be relevant to The Confidence-Man which illustrates that truth cannot be intellectually known, and that men therefore live by fictions. It follows that if we are to function at all, our understanding of reality demands faith or confidence in whatever fictions we choose to live by. One example of the necessity for confidence is provided by the herb-doctor who convinces the sick man to purchase his medicine with the words, "the mind so acts upon the body, that if the one have no confidence, neither has the other" (111). Admitting to his patient, "A radical cure . . . as should make you robust, such a cure I do not and cannot promise," the herb-doctor commits himself only to "some eventual result of good." Clearly, the sick man cannot be cured if he believes himself ill, and although he may yet be ill even if he believes himself cured, if he does not place his faith in any medicine at all, he cannot be cured at all. "Hope," the herb-doctor insists, "is proportioned to confidence."

That confidence is essential is also held by the P. I. O. man who explains, "Confidence is the indispensable

² Richard Boyd Hauck, A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction (Bloomington, 1971), p. xi.

basis of all sorts of business transactions; without it, commerce between man and man as between country and country would, like a watch, run down and stop" (178). Commerce, or the stock market, as we have seen, is based on fictions, and the depression of a stock may easily be caused by "hypocritical bears" who withdraw their confidence in it. It is confidence or the lack of it which determines whether a stock will rise or fall.

Confidence then is necessary, yet it is also irrational or absurd, for man always runs the risk of being duped and has no means whatsoever of ascertaining whether or not his confidence is warranted. Man, however, is more than a mysterious impostor who must have faith. He is also an original genius in the sense that he is an originator who creates the fictions by which he lives. Man may be an actor in the theatre of the absurd, but he is also the originator or author of the play, and the director. He decides what roles are to be played, how they should be played, and then he acts.

As the originator of his own life, man is a genius, defined as "having extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention or discovery." The word "genius" derives from the Latin "gignere"--"to beget," which is also the root word of the Latin "gens, gentis," meaning "tribe or race," and of "gentilis," meaning "of the same clan". Man is a genius, a creative force; but inherent in the word is the notion of a common humanity, for

what can man beget but a human creation. "Also inherent in the word is the notion of the demonic as we have noted earlier. Although the narrator wonders whether "it should not . . . be held for a reasonable maxim that none but the good are human" (82), Melville illustrates that both the good and the bad are human, and that where most of the characters in The Confidence-Man go amiss is in their narrow perception of the human race.

There has been a wide range of critical opinion as to which character finally emerges as representative of Melville's own position, yet none of the characters can be considered as such, for all fail to recognize their affinity with others of their own species. James E. Miller Jr., for example, sees Winsome and Egbert as Melville's heroes, claiming that they alone "understand the nature of evil sufficiently to cope with it without getting hurt or duped," and adding that if they do at times seem inhuman, it is "because they know they cannot share human sympathies with the nonhuman, with the devil himself."³ This view, however, is basically similar to the one held by the Confidence Man who insists that evil exists apart from humanity. John W. Shroeder maintains that the "heroic adversary" is Colonel Moredock who "hated Indians like snakes," for in Shroeder's opinion, "hatred of the snake amounts to a positive virtue

³ James E. Miller Jr., "The Confidence-Man: His Guises," pp. 109-110.

in the cosmos of the Fidèle."⁴ This position is likewise untenable for it too sees evil or Indians as nonhuman. Alternatively, both Seelye and Fussell⁵ consider Pitch to be Melville's savior--"good" because vulnerable and 'wise' because partly successful in rebuffing the Confidence Man."⁶ While admittedly Pitch is one of the most carefully and sympathetically drawn characters in the book, it is nonetheless clear that he is veering toward a reliance on machines rather than men. When the Cosmopolitan hints that the surly and gruff Pitch may actually have some respect for the human race, Pitch replies that he has some respect for himself. The Cosmopolitan then inquires astutely, "And what race may you belong to?" (190). Pitch too, it seems, must deny his humanity to avoid being duped.

Like Winsome and Colonel Moredock, Pitch has found it necessary to secede from the human race in order to protect himself. Like the Invalid Titan, he has become "lost to humanity" (122), as indeed have most of the other characters. All are strangers "in the extremest sense of the word" (3), that is, on the outside, and as outsiders, they are able to have only "hypothetical friendships" (283), the hypothesis being that one man can dupe another. We have been warned

⁴ John W. Shroeder, "Sources and Symbols for Melville's Confidence-Man," PMLA, 66 (June, 1951), 376.

⁵ See Edwin Fussell, Frontier, pp. 315-16.

⁶ John Seelye, Melville: The Ironic Diagram (Evanston, 1970), p. 127.

that "in being social, each man has his end" (193) and although, as Pitch has observed, this end is often a purse, there is a deeper significance to this sort of sociability. Man's end is frequently nothing but self-gratification at the expense of other men, and to this end, he treats other human beings as objects. To the crowd, for example, Black Guinea appears as a "curious object" (16), and they amuse themselves with him by means of a "game of charity" (17).

It is charity, or "the act of loving all men as brothers because they are sons of God" which has suffered most in Melville's view. The herb-doctor for one tries to find an "object of charity" (126). The man in gray is interested in the "methodization of the world's benevolence" (55) and says, "I am for doing good to the world once for all and having done with it" (58). One act of charity for him will suffice. Does this mean that upon its completion he will no longer love his fellow-man? For the gentleman with the gold sleeve-buttons, charity was "in one sense, not an effort, but a luxury; against too great indulgence in which his steward, a humorist, had sometimes admonished him" (53). Charity can indeed be a luxury, for as Eric Bentley explains regarding pity, "Because we feel that our pity is virtuous, we begin to enjoy it. Then we start to look for potential objects of our pity. These objects become our victims."⁷ Bentley's observations are of course equally applicable to

⁷ Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 283.

the luxury of charity.

Man often appears to be "inhuman" because he has lost touch with what it means to interact with other human beings. This point is well illustrated by the dream-like quality of the entire novel. As Joel Porte has noted, when the lamb-like man is gradually overtaken by slumber, he "puts himself in the attitude necessary for the production of the book that follows."⁸ In the last chapter, the *Cosmopolitan* notes that "someone talks in his sleep," to which remark the old man replies, "And you--you seem to be talking in a dream" (334-5). This dream-like state, Porte believes, "defines the condition of the passengers on board the *Fidèle*."⁹ We are also told that the "daedal" boat "speeds as a dream" (105). "Daedal" signifies something "ingeniously formed or created, an artifice" but what is most significant here is the fact that in a dream, the dreamer creates all the characters. The dreamer does not interact with other human beings, but rather, the other beings are creatures of the dreamer's imagination. Seen in this way, man may be an impostor in that he himself plays many roles and deceives others, but he is an impostor also because he imposes roles on others and deceives himself. To the passengers on the upper deck, for instance, the sleeping lamb-like man appears, among other things, as an "odd fish," "Jacob dreaming at

⁸ Joel Porte, *The Romance in America* (Middletown, Conn., 1960), p. 157.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

Luz," "Moon Calf," and "Casper Hauser" (p. 10-11). The herb-doctor sees the Soldier of Fortune as skipping for joy, and when reminded of the latter's lameness, he confesses, "Pardon, I forgot the crutches. My mind figuring you after receiving the benefit of my art overlooked you as you stand before me" (138). Thus also in his so-called waking state, man often treats his fellows simply as objects of his own creation.

To be human is to be inconsistent and to play various roles, both good and bad, but man is so caught up in his private melodrama that he loses sight of the fact that the other characters in his play are other human beings. Man's nature may be mysterious, but there is some evidence in the novel to suggest that there is at least a common humanity, that man may be "multiform" (14), but he is of a common species with other men. As Melville wrote in his review of The Oregon Trail:

We are all of us--Anglo-Saxons, Dyaks and Indians--sprung from one head, and made in one image. And if we regret this brotherhood now, we shall be forced to join hands hereafter. A misfortune is not a fault; and good luck is not meritorious. The savage is born a savage; and the civilized being but inherits his civilization, nothing more.¹⁰

In The Confidence-Man, much of the natural imagery implies this idea of unity manifested by variety and a link

¹⁰ See Roy Harvey Pearce, "Melville's Indian-Hater: A Note on the Meaning of The Confidence-Man," PMLA, 67 (December, 1952), 943.

between man and nature is forged early in the novel in the passage which informs us that "the passengers' attention was soon drawn away to the rapidly shooting high bluffs and shot-towers on the Missouri shore, or the bluff-looking Missourians and towering Kentuckians among the throngs on the decks" (12-13). We are later told that "as pine, beech, birch, ash, hackmatack, hemlock, spruce, bass-wood, maple interweave their foliage in the natural wood, so these varieties of mortals blended their varieties of visage and garb" (14). Because man is lost in the woods, he does not see that all other varieties of men are similar to himself. Also, in "The River," Melville's manuscript fragment which is believed to have a strong relationship to The Confidence-Man, we are told:

As the word Abraham means the father of a great multitude of men, so the word Mississippi means the father of a great multitude of waters. . . .

Under the benign name Mississippi, it is . . . the Missouri that . . . rolls to the Gulf, the Missouri that with the snows from his solitude freezes the warmth of the genial zones. . . the Missouri that not a tributary, but an undermine enters the sea, long disdaining to yield his white wave to the blue (354-5).

The implication here is that as all waters are inextricably linked, all men similarly have a common ancestry. The Mississippi may be warm and benign and the Missouri freezing and malign, yet they are one. In the Mississippi, the streams of the most distant and opposite zones are united

in an all-fusing spirit, and on the Fidèle, all men are "ambassadors of the human race," forming an "Anacharsis Cloots congress" (14), "mute representatives of the tongue-tied nations of the world" (14, n. 16).

This commonality of mankind is most strongly suggested of course by the fact that all of the Confidence Men, cynics, and dupes are described in similar terms, and that it is often difficult to distinguish among them. All can be seen as different manifestations of one masquerading character, and all are at once Confidence Man, cynic and dupe. All are distrustful of others, and as Hauck has remarked, "Men are so skeptical that they do not believe their eyes. . . . Although he is twisted and deformed and gives a list of people who can vouch for him, few people believe that Black Guinea is in legitimate need."¹¹ The herb-doctor has "adopted precautions" (114) against those contrivers who would pawn vials purporting to be his, and the Cosmopolitan, lacking trust in Charlie Noble, goes to great lengths to expose him. All are Confidence Men as well, in one sense of the word at least, for all have faith in their own ability to determine truth. The mistake they make, however, and one which makes victims of them all, is in their belief that truth can be rationally demonstrated, be it by the doctrine of analogies or by a list of external descriptions such as

¹¹ Hauck, p. 117.

that furnished by Black Guinea.

Because truth cannot be intellectually understood, man must believe, and Melville would most likely agree with Kierkegaard when he wrote, "If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this, I must believe."¹² If man understands the Bible as "certain truth," that is, sure or proven truth, then he does not accept it on faith. Confidence is necessary, yet Melville would not have one embrace Carlyle's "Everlasting Yea," abandoning reason and leaping toward hope. What is needed is an acceptance of man's absurd or mysterious condition, and this acceptance involves "absurd creation," or as Hauck puts it, "the special faculty of man to 'do his thing'".¹³ The universe may appear as meaningless to man, but this signifies only that it cannot be apprehended by reason. The mysterious impostor or man will never be "captured" or apprehended by reason, and all that Melville will admit is that human nature and divine nature are "past finding out" (96). There may or may not be a rational explanation for the universe--it simply is, in all its ambiguity. Man cannot know the universe because he cannot be co-extensive with "what is" but he can, nevertheless, create a part of "what is". As Kierkegaard has written,

¹² Regis Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, trans. W. H. Barber (New York, 1946), p. 98.

¹³ Hauck, p. 6.

"It is in no way sufficient to know the truth, what matters above all is to be the truth. There is no truth for the individual except in so far as he creates it in himself in his actions."¹⁴ In Melville's view, man is an actor--not simply a masquerader, but a doer--one whose actions are all.

What actions then are appropriate for man? Melville advises us at the close of The Confidence-Man when he tells us, ". . . the cosmopolitan kindly led the old man away" (350). There is no evidence at all to suggest that this is other than an act of kindness, an act which contrasts sharply to the pushes and punches accorded the lamb-like man, or to the action of one "less kind than the rest" (7) who flattened his fleecy hat upon his head. The word "kind" derives from the Old English "cynn" meaning "kindred, one's own kind; people or race," which is a cognate with the Latin word for tribe or race, "gens, gentis," which, as we remarked earlier, shares a common root with "genius". A kind act is a kindred act, and as a genius, or the creator of his own reality, man must be kind.

There are many other acts of kindness to be found in The Confidence-Man. The herb-doctor "would fain do the friendly thing" (138) by the Soldier of Fortune and offers him medicine free of charge. The Soldier of Fortune in turn insists upon paying, recognizing that the herb-doctor

¹⁴ Jolivet, p. 97.

has "borne with him like a good Christian, and talked to him as such" (139). The Cosmopolitan, addressing the haggard beggar in "tones kind and considerate" (274) purchases his rhapsodical tract. Mr. Truman fetches a glass of water for the helpless miser, and the herb-doctor later physically supports this same miser, although he does urge him not to lean quite so hard. Most of these kind acts are on the part of the apparent Confidence Men, and may conceivably be preludes to victimization, but we have no "conclusive evidence" that this is so. Because we cannot truly know a man's motives or intentions, we must consider him by his actions.

What is needed is confidence--not in the benevolence of man, nature and God, and certainly not in the smooth talk of a subtle trickster, but a confidence which simply acknowledges that mankind shares a common fate or existence. Certainly, the "difference between this man and that man is not so great" (309), for we have in common both inconsistency and the genius to create our own lives. Charity is not merely alms-giving nor the Wall Street spirit. It is man's actions which matter, and the truly charitable action is the encounter between two human beings. We are told that when Mr. Truman asks the sophomore if he has acted the part of the brother to the Unfortunate Man, the latter, concerned only with his own finances, replies, "Let the unfortunate man be his own brother" (69). Man has the choice of charitably acting the part of the brother, or of uncharitably refusing

to acknowledge him, and Melville deplors the situation wherein man lacks "a little sympathy in common misfortune" (18) with his "fellow-limpers" on the rough terrain of meaninglessness.

Obviously a man must be cautious for there will always be those who act unkindly but a man deceives himself if he does not recognize that, by his actions, he creates his own reality. Good and evil are human distinctions, and there is in all probability no intrinsically "good man" as Melville suggests by his portrait of the gentleman with the gold sleeve-buttons, nor an intrinsically "bad man". A true man is, as Mr. Truman with his connections in both the Black Rapids Coal Company and the New Jerusalem, an original blend of both. There are, however, kind or unkind actions, and if man unkindly manipulates others as objects for his own gain, he will have to face an unkind world. Man is at once knave, fool, and genius, but as is said of the herb-doctor, "he is not wholly at heart a knave among whose dupes is himself" (125). Man is a fool, on a ship of fools, on April Fool's Day, because he is not aware that it is in his own self-interest to act kindly. Man is deceived not by a Confidence Man but by his limited perception of his own existence and his failure to recognize that the human achievement in the face of the unknowable is to act out one's life with the awareness of kinship to other human beings.

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