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# The Allegory of the Confidence Man

Upon a twirling carrousel at the end of a pier, water comingles with the sky, light's spectrum seems one with the music, and faces twist together with the comic busts of ever-smiling figurines. The grand old machine, spinning indifferently on its hinges, renders the sea of visages indistinct. Creating a daedal world within its bounds, *The Confidence-Man; His Masquerade* reminds me much of this old fairground ride, particularly in its representation of character. The sheer volume of faces that appear on its pages, the russian nesting doll of its narrative layers, and the work's multivocal philosophical digressions all twist and play with the reader's perception. But venturing into the center of the masquerade, one still finds a central axis of rotation: the confidence-man himself. This figure forges an allegorical unity within the work, epistemologically training the reader to recognize his typological form as he appears. But the use of this literary feature feels all the more strange given Melville's opinion that allegory is "detestable… hideous and intolerable" (Moby-Dick, Ch. 45), casting doubt on the extent to which we can trust Melville's fiction. I will take the opportunity in this essay to investigate the typological interaction between the confidence man and his interpreter as it recurs throughout the narrative.

The task of outlining a figure whose form is fundamentally inconsistent presents an interpretive nightmare to the reader. Amid the rumors, myth, fibs, concoctions of the book there is little of the "physical world" for a reader to hold onto. Let us begin by considering the first confidence man—the Adam of his kind—who steps aboard the *Fidèle* in the first chapter. Dressed in all white yet "in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger" (841), the mute is singular amongst the fray. His

appearance is concurrent with the description of a reward posted for the capture of a "mysterious impostor," who was "quite an original genius in his vocation, as would appear, though wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given" (841). And though "what purported to be a careful description" of the individual in question was laid out on the placard, the reader is not privy to this information (841). The physical ambivalence of the placard and the originality of the mute immediately correlates the figure described and the figure presented. Stepping beside the placard before the crowd, the queer individual presents his own text on his slate, "Charity thinketh no evil" (842). Fighting the textual document which indites him, the mute and the placard engage on an intertextual level, two sets of text nested within the greater text of Melville's work. The crowd previously "enveloped in some myth" (841) thereby enter an interpretive game analogous to that of the readers, taking the form of a greek chorus.

The textual nature of the scene, along with lack of physical clarity with regards to the stranger's presentation, ejects the collective audience—the crowd and Melville's readership—from the physical world into the interpretive. Attempting to "read" this bizarre figure using the hermeneutical toolkit, the audience offers a hubbub of "epitaphic comments, conflictingly spoken or thought, of a miscellaneous company" (846). The mute is at once the mysterious German imposter "Casper Hauser," a Mormon "Green prophet from Utah", a "Kind of daylight Endymion", a "Moon-calf," a "Singular Innocence," and "Jacob dreaming at Luz" (846). One captures his ambiguity in the simplest way: "Means something" (846). Indeed, the eccentricity of the mute obfuscates the attempt to create a cohesive mental image of him. The variety of typological considerations set forth by the crowd endeavor to create a consistency between the singularity of the individual with the microcosm of the *Fidèle*, an interpretive act much like Augustine who sought to create a cohesive Christian community by syllogizing the Old Testament and the New through the figure of Christ. This biblical typology is literally invoked in the mute's "lamb-like" description and his insistency on the fundamental

benevolence of Charity (844). His naïve innocence, like Adam pre-fall, invokes yet another possible typology from Genesis. The accusatory placard, warning mankind of a "mysterious imposter" who has appeared within the Garden of Man—placed by the authorial deity of Melville—seems to implicate the protean Satan in this biblical recreation, as both a figure apart from and contained within, the mute. In a mere three pages of text, the mute becomes a titanic conglomerate of mutually exclusive allegories. A member of none as a member of all, Melville founds the mythological origins of a new allegorical figure that is uncapturable by any other typological consideration. These are the origins of the *confidence man*.

The confidence men of the book are both explicitly and typologically connected. In the episode with "Black Guinea", recalling the uninterpretable gold guinea nailed to the mast in *Moby-Dick*, the black cripple calls upon a set of characters upon the boat who would attest to his good character:

> … dar aboard here a werry nice, good ge'mman wid a weed, and a ge'mman in a gray coat and a white tie, what knows all about me; and a ge'mman wid a big book, too; and a yarb-doctor; and a ge'mman in a yaller west; and a ge'mman wid a brass plate; and a ge'mman in a wiolet robe; and a ge'mman as is a sodjer; and ever so many good, kind, honest ge'mmen more aboard (852).

As if offering the reader a ledger containing the great majority of the confidence men of the book, this character map explicitly joins these figures together. The scene adds another layer of self-referentiality upon considering the unerring confidence in Charity and Trust that all of them profess in the narrative, something that will all but guarantee a good character recommendation. Though the scenes and outward appearances of these character change, indeed, the same character—that of the confidence man—remains consistent. This consideration is confirmed by the naming scheme in conversation. The confidence men are united in being referred to as the "other," the "stranger," or the "companion" in discourse, whereas their conversation partner is always given their allegorical handle, i.e. the "good merchant," the "clergyman", the "sophomore". The naming convention of the

confidence men follow a predictable pattern as well, relying on sets of physical accessories that do little to portray the men they pertain to, an altogether uninspiring portraiture that gives only a "weed" in the hat, a "grey suit," or a "traveling cap" to stir the imagination. The clothes make the "masquerade" of the novel rather literal, as if the confidence man were simply exchanging clothes between scenes; a hypothetical made all the more possible by the observation that two confidence men rarely ever appear together in a scene, an event that "the author" seems to hint at later on with regards to the appearance of "original" characters: "For much the same reason that there is but one planet to one orbit, so can there be but one such original character to one work of invention" (1098). Though the confidence men outwardly present a plurality, they are unified into a singular, protean figure in the text's subsurface.

The portraiture of the confidence men is sparsest in the description of the face. Indeed, Melville often goes great lengths to obfuscate it. In the darkness of the emigrants' quarters, an old sick miser has his face described quite viscerally, with a "flat, bony mouth, nipped between buzzard nose and chin" (919). Prevailing upon the miser to give him 100 dollars, the man with the travelling cap asks him to trust him as "Honesty's best voucher is honesty's face" (919). But, as opposed to the graphic description of the miser's visage, the miser, peering through the dim obscurity of the cabin, plaintively responds, "Can't see yours, though" (919). As the miser was so accurately described by the man with the travelling cap, the lack of clarity of the con man's face must pertain to an essential indescribability rather than a mere atmospheric consideration. Nor is this an isolated event. The confidence men of the book often bring attention to the face as a measure of honesty, a pure attestation of Truth, but ironically never fully show their own facial form. Like the morphing visage of some demon or the smudged face of a dream, the reader is consistently left guessing as to the distinct identity of these figures. The psychological disorientation produced from this obscurity, in contrast to the direct facial descriptions given to their companions, is also evident in the episode

between Mr. Roberts and the man with the weed, who presses Mr. Roberts to "Look harder" (858) after Mr. Roberts attestation that he had never before encountered him. The confidence man reiterates, "Can I be so changed? Look at me" (859). Applying the reader's and the interpreter's attention directly to a face that is not apparent to either party amplifies the dissociative aspect of these faces.

The absence of direct portraiture of the confidence men presents a problem of epistemology for the victims of confidence. Later in the book, deep in the sleep, the barber is woken by a voice that seemed like a "spiritual manifestation" to him but is unable to identify its source. The cosmopolitan—a man of confidence—politely indicates that it was he, standing behind the barber's chair, who uttered the phrase, much to the barber's relief. The barber states "it is only a man, then" (1083). The cosmopolitan rejoins, "*Only* a man? As if to be but 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" (1083). Like a parade of shadows cast from a hidden, essential form, the cosmopolitan behind the barber transforms into a comic reinvention of Plato's cave. The cosmopolitan confidence man questions the epistemological ambiguity attending the human form, hypothesizing the possibility that he himself may be a transfiguration of an angel or a devil. The barber, one whose principal occupation is to change the form of his clients, carries the opposing philosophical belief. It is on this basis that the cosmopolitan, much like the confidence men before him, attempts to convince the barber to place trust in man, even without knowledge of the face, say one sitting on the barber's chair or someone "by night in some dark corner of the boat where his face would… remain unseen" (1086). As if referring to the episode between the miser and the man with the travelling cap directly, the cosmopolitan demonstrates an eerie omniscience of the events of the boat, spoken as if it were indeed he who was there. The fundamental ambiguity attending the form of

the confidence men seems to confirm the radical consideration that the novel is not a series of distinct and contradictory events, but rather a single history reduceable to two unique figures: the confidence man and his interpreter (the reader, typologically cast as the greek chorus, the Missouri Bachelor, or any of the other people on board the *Fidèle*). This distinction is collapsed at the end of the book into a single unity—that of the misanthrope—but it will take time to get there.

Any claim with regards to the work's unity cannot be made without first addressing the strata of Melville's narrative surface. The plain on which the confidence men reside—abord the ironic *Fidèle*—is a central geological layer of the book. But above and below this central stratum, linguistically thick with half-truths and simplifications, there are a host of cascading layers with their own distinct voices. The long digressive parables are separated into their own chapters in the work, upon the rather awkward insistence of Melville's characters that they be rendered in their own voices. This insistence takes many forms, from the good merchant's "venture to tell it in other words than his" own (902), to the boon companion's tale of the Indian-hater who renders the story in the voice of a judge "word for word" (992). The narrative layers become increasingly convoluted towards the end of the story, especially in the story of China Aster, which is told by Melville, through the author, through the cosmopolitan and Egbert, from within their hypothetical conversation in which they rename themselves Frank and Charlie (the supposed names of the cosmopolitan and the boon companion from earlier). Though all of these distinct narrative stratum in the work brings the artifice of fiction itself into view, none do so as clearly as the highest narrative layer: the episodes of direct discourse between the "author" and his reader.

The first time the author interrupts the masquerade is in the chapter "Worth The Consideration Of Those To Whom It May Prove Worth Considering (913). The cyclical nature of the title, where a phrase is used to condition itself, i.e. "X given X", draws the reader to apply closer scrutiny to each instance of X. Rolling the predicate "Worth The Consideration" and the subject "To

Whom It May Prove Worth Considering" around in the mouth, attempting to differentiate the two—to see how one might shed light on the other—the reader has already fallen for the author's trap. It is "consideration" itself that the author is vying for, a *trust* that he offers something of "worth" in the fictional artifice,[1] which the reader has bought into through their consideration. Sheltered in the title is the acknowledgement, or perhaps warning, that an author, much like the confidence men he has spawned, relies on the trust of the reader, playfully establishing the terms of the discourse that follow.

Doubt is a natural byproduct of this realization. As a linguistic operator whose primary unit is confidence, the author looks to be another refraction of the confidence man, rather than a representation of Melville; an allegorical figure whose "theodicy" of his creation serves his own ends, not the reader's. It would be wise to proceed into the subsequent argument with caution; it seems we are in the hands of a demiurge. Fiction, according to the author, "should never be contradictory to [fact]; and is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is a *rara avis*?" (913). The style of the language here is perhaps that which jumps out the most. The "author" speaks in the rhetoric of confidence—those oily, philosophical blandishments which lie in the mouths of all his fabrications—rather than in the rich and painterly language of Melville that shows rather than tells. Here, the author does not place the "brow" of the sperm whale before the reader but proceeds under the auspice of reason and a certain dignity, derived from his identity as an author, to unambiguously restore confidence in the facticity of his work. Parody is evident here, particularly in the consideration that Melville—the man who aimed to write books that fail—would be genuinely concerned about the public's ability to interpret his work and embarrassed by the inconsistency of his characters. If we are to acknowledge the authorly apparition as a character rather than the author proper, his attempt to appear from out of the tempest to justify his inconsistency to man tumbles into paradox. How can

[1] This idea of "worth" is another way to refer to the third and fourth layers of allegory—the moral and prophetic implications of the work—something that will be addressed later.

one trust a fictional character's claim to the natural inconsistency of fictional characters? Speaking out from within the "comedy of thought" before moving back into the "comedy of… action" (915), the authorial dialogue is itself a confidence game in line with the rest of the text.

This allegorical displacement, of the author into the typological "confidence man," lends this layer of the text its multivocality. Phrases like, "It must call for no small sagacity in a reader unerringly to discriminate in a novel between the inconsistencies of conception and those of life" (914), are steeped in polysemy. On the literal level, the author is making a mimetic claim that his inconsistency is representationally consistent with nature. But the consideration of the author as a confidence man unseats the literal here, opening a hermeneutical gap in our reading. The author itself becomes an artifice, an "inconsistency of conception", apart from life and the sentence transforms into a tongue-in-cheek epistemological challenge by Melville to the sagacious reader. If we are to be epistemologically taught how to distinguish between the inconsistency of conception (i.e. fiction) and nature, a lesson which seems to occupy the "moral" stage of the confidence man allegory, Melville's literary project takes on gnostic implications. Indeed, rather than a "moral" endeavor, this suspicion that Melville teaches is notably immoral by anyone's conception. To take as one's aim the recognition of the inconsistencies of conception, to see the author himself as typologically consistent with the confidence men of his book, is the interpretive model of Gnosticism, denying theodicy and unveiling the creator as the demiurge. Where other authors attempt to uphold the narrative action, to keep their readers entrenched within it, Melville pushes the reader to acknowledge the false creation of which they are a proper part. This hermeneutical training seems to be an inversion of Augustine's semiotics and allegory. Rather than using his literary methods to forge consistency between the Old and New Testaments and to acknowledge the sign of the word as unerring Truth, the typology of the confidence man is used by Melville to inspire distrust in the word.

The gap between the inconsistencies of conception and those of nature, existing concurrent on the pages of the book, necessitates a level of interpretive insight on the behalf of the collective audience. They must "unmask" these confidence men when they arise, to reveal them for what they truly are. But in order to "unmask", there must be a recognition of reality's fictitiousness. This fictitiousness is remarked upon via the conceit of the "stage" that runs throughout the work, though most notably in the title, *The Confidence Man, His Masquerade*. Take for example the man with the weed, who ironically contemplating his own propriety, claims "the world, being earnest itself, likes an earnest scene, and an earnest man, very well, but only in their place—the stage" (865). Placing the truthful character as a feature of the dramatic, Melville inverts the classic supposition that fiction speaks more truth than reality. The first nested parable within the work addresses this claim of fiction's truth directly. Told by the misanthropic cripple in defense of his belief that Black Guinea was a "white masquerading as a black" (873), the parable follows the story of a man who falls in love with the "character of a faithful wife" in a theatre performance and marries the actress after the play. It is not long before the man finds her to be unfaithful (872). For the cripple, the dramatic presents an illusion that is often completely at odds with the truth, as mutually opposed as the white under the black of Black Guinea's skin. Rather than speaking a greater truth, fictitiousness only hides evil and thus the cripple claims man's natural state is to "act" (874). Absurd to the clergyman who doesn't accept that Guinea would go to so much trouble for a few coins, the misanthrope cripple draws the confidence man as a different typological consideration, "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?" (875). The misanthrope's recognition of the world's motiveless malignity—a common theme in Melville—in the casting of the confidence man in Satan's light demonstrates a certain apprehension of the allegorical, protean form of the confidence man. This implicit recognition of the misanthropy at the heart of the confidence man is something we shall come back to.

This dramatic fictitiousness is perhaps most clearly addressed in the episode between the cosmopolitan and Egbert. Playing the part of "two friends from childhood" they take on the names Frank and Charlie—the names given by the cosmopolitan and the boon companion in an earlier episode—"acting" the typological scene of one asking for money (1056). The hypothetical presented is to be a test of the philosophy of Egbert's master, for the "proof of the soundness of his system" is that "the study of it tended to much the same formation of character with the experiences of the world" (1081). Though he starts his argument with what seems to be a philosophy of self-reliance, his supposedly inalienable precepts slowly disperse into inconsistency throughout the drama, after claiming that "there is no bent of heart or turn of thought which any man holds by virtue of an unalterable nature or will. Even those feelings and opinions deemed most identical with eternal right and truth, it is not impossible but that, as personal persuasions, they may in reality be but the result of some chance tip of Fate's elbow in throwing her dice" (1080). To which Frank responds bitterly, "There speaks the ventriloquist again" (1080). The philosophy, rather than one of precept, is one that embodies the mutability of natural environment; as such, the soundness of his system relies on the system never being formed. But Egbert cannot recognize his own inconsistency, nor the artifice in which he is a proper part, "at a loss to determine where exactly the fictitious character had been dropped, and the real one, if any, resumed" (1082). A manifestation of pure fiction, Egbert is just as fictitious on the level of his own identity as he is when he is Charlie. Egbert's recognition of inconsistency, enacted into experience as his philosophy claims, obscures his attempt to recognize himself in the context of the fictious background in which he plays a proper part. The chapter ends with a quote from Hamlet, confirming the work's fictitious nature:

> 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. (1082)

Melville never allows the fictitiousness of his creation to pass by unobserved, prefiguring the fact that there is something obscured behind the mask that the characters wear. The lack of "self-knowledge" the confidence man possesses, his inability to recognize the inconsistency between his professed ideology and his action, stops the character from comprehending the masquerade of the *Fidèle* despite the attempts of other individuals on the boat to "unmask" him (935). For instance, the reader is given all the possible signs that would indicate the herb-doctor's typological identity as the confidence man, attempting naively to convince people of the goodness of God's creation. He endeavors to sell his herbs with the supposition held by many of the confidence men in the work, "Trust me, nature is heath; for health is good, and nature cannot work ill" (926). He links science to "that forbidden tree," and upon being asked the reason for giving his herbs and their nature, he claims "It cannot be made known" (924-5). For the herb-doctor, the silence of God's creation is not ambivalence but a kind of consent. Speaking to a crowd that refuses to indulge his particularly religious confidence game, he claims "silence is at least not denial, and may be consent" (929). Trust in an essential goodness is an essential component of Melville's confidence man, and yet these actors cannot see the evil they obscure and inflict. Claiming his herbs would cure the grief over the loss of a loved one, a "Titan in homespun" strikes him down. The titan, evidently knowing a certain degree of the world's evil, calls him out to be "Profane fiddler on heart-strings! Snake!" (933). A devil in disguise, a mere typological form that the titan recognizes as false, his mask is torn off before the crowd. But this operator, "completely unmasked" becomes a figure of a religious admiration in the next chapter, "Inquest into the True Character of the Herb-Doctor," in which a trinity forms between three interpreters debating his "original genius" (935). Truth of the inner nature of the confidence man once more escapes understanding.

Where the first half of the book follows the operation of the allegorical figure of the confidence man as he accosts the passengers of the boat, the misanthropy of the Missouri bachelor

acts as a turning point in the novel, beginning a journey into the heart of the confidence man and his allegorical nature. Cast in the mold of the misanthropic cripple and the titan of Tartarus—among the few characters given anything resembling portraiture—the Missouri bachelor is also presented in graphic detail, "ursine in aspect" with a "grim stubble chin" (953), securing him in the physical reality of the book. Only these misanthropes seem to grasp the inner character of the confidence man. Encountering the "fool" of the herb-doctor, he immediately casts down his proposition of the essential benevolence of nature from his experience of it, for though "Nature is good Queen Bess," nature is also "responsible for cholera" (953). The unity of good and evil in nature—the moral ambivalence of the universe—recalls the thematic elements of *Moby-Dick* and points out the Christian folly of theodicy, seemingly placing the character closer to Melville's heart. The Missouri bachelor is not infallible however. Accosted by a confidence man from the "Philosophical Intelligence Office," the Missouri bachelor is convinced to purchase another boy, fooled by the confidence man's "theory" that proceeds "by analogy from the physical to the moral" (968). We arrive thus at the crux of the matter. The stories used by the confidence man pursue a fallacious allegorical reasoning that steps up the allegorical ladder, moving from the literal story of a boy, to the typological figure of a youth, into some far flung conclusion of man's essential morality. Melville here is focusing on the very act of drawing morals from stories using the allegorical method, the act of building a moral universe premised loosely on the mutable and inscrutable background of raw physical existence.

Considering the "swampy and squalid" shores of Cairo into which the "good" confidence man departed (978), Melville offers the Missouri bachelor unique insight into the confidence man. Questioning how he was persuaded to waive his natural distrust, he ponders the "doctrine of analogy" that created the condition for being fooled, "where was slipped in the entering wedge? Philosophy, knowledge, experience—were those trusty knights of the castle recreant?" (978).

Attempting to pierce through the mask, to understand the whole of which he is a part, he is stopped short on the surface for he "cannot comprehend the operation, still less the operator. Was the man a trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre" (979). Echoing the opinion of the cripple, "How much money did the devil make by gulling Eve?", he begins to interpret the confidence man as a vague imprint of another typological form, recognizing the inconsistency of his professed goodness with the malignity of his method. Indeed, he "analogically… couples the slanting cut of the equivocator's coat-tails with the sinister cast in his eye" (979). Reapplying the analogical method, the literary artifice of the work reaches a critical point.

These vague profundities coalesce into metaphysical insight upon understanding the true form of the cosmopolitan. Placing a hand upon his shoulder, the cosmopolitan appears before the other, the third confidence man to importune him so far. Upon hearing his rhetoric, primed like the reader to recognize the language of confidence, the Missouri bachelor sees the fiction before his eyes, stabbing through the mask: "You are another of them. Out of my sight!" (982). The cosmopolitan—a confidence man in the shape of the typical New York reader/critic—ignores his attempts to push him away, claiming to delight in all humans, "in all its vintages, smacking my lips over this racy creature, man, continually" (982). Consuming the figures on the page, this cosmopolitan readership attempts to bring the Missouri bachelor into the fictional landscape where goodness and trust can exist unbridled, claiming that 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" and remarks upon the Missouri bachelor's "long face" makes him a "blot upon the scene" (983). He calls upon the Missouri Bachelor *to step into the narrative*, to enter the fictionality of life, the superficial layer on which morals can be drawn, in which consistency can be preserved. This is diametrically opposed to the bachelor's attempt to unmask the masquerade, to tear down the fiction in which he is a proper part. The two characters seem to exist on different planes, much like the stratified planes of the narrative we

discussed earlier. This narrative disjunction has the effect of bringing fictionality itself into view, the dramatic force becoming a tangible aspect of the narrative.

In this moment of insight, the bachelor sees deep into the machinery of Melville's work. Stepping up his accusations despite the confusion of the cosmopolitan (as well as those readers of his work that he represents), the bachelor probes whether indeed he was a "confidential clerk" of "Jeremy Diddler"—a representation of the allegorical confidence man (985). Like an atheist pointing out the inconsistency of god's creation, the bachelor remarks upon the strange "visitations" of "metaphysical scamps" that had accosted him throughout the day, insisting that the cosmopolitan was indeed in line with these masked figures (985). The cosmopolitan attempts over and over to bring the misanthrope back into the world of Melville's fiction, to be consistent with the narrative rather than standing apart from it. But, in revealing himself to be of Diogenes' party, the Missouri bachelor sees the misanthropic heart of the confidence man and rejoices, "that the disguised, to be undeceived" (988). In blank amazement the cosmopolitan stares, as the bachelor labels him as "Diogenes masquerading as a cosmopolitan" (988). One after his own heart, the allegorical confidence man is revealed to be a misanthrope, a fallen man. Couched behind the trust and goodness of his fictional artifice is the "original impulse" of a malignant spirit (1098).

*The Confidence Man* is an earnest book. It keeps the reader in the constant presence of its own fictionality, which only highlights the discrepancy between the expectations of Melville's readership and the fiction they engage with. The reader expects to draw truth and goodness out of fiction and does so by looking for neat allegorical characters to unify narratives on the physical and the ideological plane. This allegorical model theoretically induces moral or prophetic knowledge about the outside world. It is this same allegorical impulse that Christians use to unify the Old Testament with the New via the typology of Christ, despite the inconsistency of the two. Indeed, Christ is exactly the kind of typological figure the Old Testament guards against, that of the idolater. Jesus

Christ claims himself to be a literal manifestation of a God, a confidence man if one ever were to exist. God in the Christian Bible is transmuted from an inscrutable force into one that is wholly "good"—creating the need for the literary acrobatics of Augustine to conduct his theodicy. *The Confidence Man* is a diatribe against this kind of neat allegorical reading that supposes that something essentially "good" can be drawn from the literal. The book on the surface offers the reader what they want: *an allegory*. But steeped in satire, the "neat" typological figure of the confidence man, professing Christian trust and charity, is shown to be the exact opposite of that which he professes. He is Christ inverted—a misanthrope at his heart—a depthless refraction of fictionality that is altogether morally ambiguous. This ambiguity of the moral stage of allegory, attempting to draw goodness out of typology, is what Melville attempts to highlight in the work. Amid the artifice of language, goodness is but a "noun, a common one in every language" ratherthan a feature of metaphysical import (877).

Where Melville offers the profundities of a natural feature to demonstrate the moral indifference of creation—like the whale of *Moby-Dick* or the stone of *Pierre*—*The Confidence Man* executes this uneasy "natural inconsistency" within a typological figure so as to destroy the allegory from within. This is how Melville executes his satire. The remainder of the narrative after the encounter between the Missouri bachelor follows the cosmopolitan—representative of Melville's readership—as he struggles to comprehend the coexistence of good and evil within characters. After the listening to the disturbing story of John Moredock, the Indian-hater, the cosmopolitan expresses confusion, claiming that the story doesn't "hang together," rhetorically asking, "If the man of hate, how could John Moredock be also the man of love?" (1008). The same coexistence of good and evil exists in story that "personally aggrieves" the cosmopolitan about the false-hearted man who accounted "society so sweet a thing that even the spurious sort was better than none at all" (1014). This lack of consistency internal to his characters comes to a head in a discussion of the "hidden

sun" of Shakespeare. Discussing certain morally ambiguous passages, the boon companion suggests to the cosmopolitan that they were created to "open people's eyes" to which the cosmopolitan "slowly expanding his own" asks, "what is there in this world for one to open his eyes to? I mean in the sort of invidious sense you cite?" (1025). Dancing around the rim of truth, the readership encapsulated in the cosmopolitan grows uneasy with the layers of interpretive simulacrum, and Shakespeare's own ambiguous characters, which often present good and evil together within his heroes, take Autolycus or Hamlet for example. Fearful of the implications of such a reading, the readership flirts but ultimately is unable to comprehend the whole. The same uneasy balance exists when they later discuss the possibility of a "genial hangman" (1030), before advancing the truly horrifying concept that geniality "will eventually exert its influence even upon so difficult a subject as the misanthrope" who will "take steps, fiddle in hand, and set the tickled world a dancing" (1030-1).

The naïveté of the cosmopolitan and "the confidence man" allegory that contains him is challenged directly by the barber and his True Book. The barber, giving the cosmopolitan a shave, professes, "I sadly fear, lest you philanthropists know better what goodness is, than what men are" (1089), for how can one deal with oils, hair, and appearances, "and still believe that men are wholly what they look to be?" (1090), before citing a passage from Sirach in the "True Book: 'An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips'" (1095). In the cabin later at night, the cosmopolitan searches with fear through the book, fearing the possibility that good and evil could exist together in Truth. He reads the rest of the verse: "With much communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bear, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep'"(1101). The cosmopolitan confidence man is relieved to find that the barbers "True Book" was just the Apocrypha. But from beyond sleep, a passenger in a berth calls out, "who's that describing the confidence-man?" (1101). The truth of the statement seems to be

metaphysically confirmed, as this unseen figure enacts the very passage read, awaking in his sleep to hear the voice of the confidence man.

The single light illuminating the cabin speaks to the moral ambiguity finally reached at the end of the story. Variegated fancifully 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," we see good and evil existing together in a single light, illuminating the True Book amid the darkness (1099). The old man sitting beneath the light speaks softly to the cosmopolitan as he manically flips the pages of the book, "there are doubts, sir, which if man have them, it is not man that can solve them" (1101). The doubts of the cosmopolitan, the only confidence man to carry such doubts, ejects him from the typological mold, as he flirts with the moral ambiguity of the universe. Much like the misanthropes whose knowledge of both good and evil allowed them to see through the fiction, the cosmopolitan believes "that to distrust the creature, is a kind of distrusting of the Creator" (1103). In the moral ambiguity of character, Melville strikes up at the maker. The mystic puts it clearest earlier in the book: "The data which life furnishes, towards forming a true estimate of any being, are insufficient to that end as in geometry one side given would be to determine the triangle" (1047). The triangle invoked by the mystic, along with the invocation of a holy geometry, implicates the trinity. Once more we arrive at the shores of Melville's divine indifference.

*The Confidence-Man; His Masquerade* treks such a vast expands of metaphorical space that any single reading ultimately leaves much left unsaid. But the work impressed upon me the sense that the *The Confidence-Man* is an epistemological manual to Melville's work. If "living character" cannot be understood by the "acutest sage," Melville asks the reader, how can one hope to glean truth within fictional characters, those "mere phantoms which flit along a page?" (914). For Melville, The allegorical model is worse than naïve. It is misanthropic. In peddling false hopes about the nature of

reality itself to a readership that is more than willing to buy in, the author reveals himself to be the greatest confidence man of all.

Citations

Melville, Herman. Pierre, Israel Potter, the Piazza Tales, the Confidence Man & Billy Budd, Library of America, New York, 1984.