Confidence Men and Painted Women
A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830–1870

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open, urban society. Those anxieties were central to the emergence of genteel social forms during an important period in the development of American middle-class culture.

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The Era of the Confidence Man

During the first half of the nineteenth century, unprecedented numbers of young men were leaving their rural homes and families to seek work in the booming cities of industrializing America. As thousands of young Americans broke away from traditional restraints on their conduct, middle-class moralists began to grow alarmed. Who would guide the conduct of America's rising generation as they wandered far beyond the surveillance of their families, their towns, and their churches? After 1830, a number of clergymen, teachers, and sentimental writers confronted the moral problem generated by this mass migration in dozens of manuals of advice to American youth. In these manuals, they offered advice on manners, morals, personal appearance, mental development, and work habits; they instructed their readers where to live, what to eat, how to entertain themselves, and when and whom to marry. Their books were enormously popular; William A. Alcott's *Young Man's Guide*, first published in 1833, had gone through twenty-one editions by 1858, and the first edition of Daniel Eddy's *Young Man's Friend* sold ten thousand copies. By 1857, Albert Barnes noted "the unusual number of books that are addressed particularly to young men." More specifically, the advice manuals were addressed to the youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five who had just left home and now stood poised on the threshold of a new life in the city.[1]

In a very literal sense, antebellum advice literature focused on that moment when the inexperienced young man first set foot in the city. As Eugene Arden has observed, the literary image of the

raw but ambitious youth striding into the city achieved legendary proportions in the nineteenth century: "Knapsack in hand, clothing coarse and homespun, the bloom of outdoor health on his cheeks, the rustic hero entered [the city] to seek fame and fortune."[2] The imaginative power of this image owed much to one of the greatest moments in American autobiography, when a dirty runaway apprentice named Benjamin Franklin awkwardly entered colonial Philadelphia with two large bread rolls tucked under his arms and a third fast disappearing down his throat.[3] But nineteenth-century advice writers added a significant new dimension to this powerful image. In the pages of antebellum advice manuals, the youth just entering the city was immediately approached by a confidence man:

> The moment the inexperienced youth sets his foot on the sidewalk of the city, he is marked and watched by eyes that he never dreamed of. The boy who cries his penny-paper, and the old woman at her table professedly selling a few apples and a little gingerbread, are not all who watch him. There is the seducer in the shape of the young man who came before him, and who has already lost the last remains of shame. There is the hardened pander to vice who has as little remorse at the ruin of innocence as the alligator has in crushing the bones of the infant that is thrown into his jaws from the banks of the Ganges: and there is she—who was once the pride and hope of her parents—who now makes war upon virtue and exults in being a successful recruiting-officer of hell.[4]

Although the term *confidence man* does not appear in the advice manuals, it accurately identifies the villain of the piece. The seducer—whether rake or pimp, gambler or thief—begins his assault on the innocent youth by winning his confidence through an offer of friendship and entertainment. In the classic antebellum tale of seduction, he then leads the youth into a gorgeous theater—the seducer's natural habitat, for he himself is a skilled actor. He takes him to a fashionable club where he coaxes his prey into accepting his fatal first drink and gradually draws him into a card game. Finally, he lures his victim to a brothel where, if the theater and the alcohol and the gambling have failed to win him to a life of vice, illicit sexuality succeeds. The youth's character has been destroyed, step by fatal step, because he has been tricked into offering his confidence to a man without principle, a man whose art it is to deceive others through false appearances.

The figure of the confidence man was not entirely new within American success mythology. A century before he made his appearance in the antebellum advice manuals, he had approached Ben Franklin in the person of Governor Keith of Philadelphia, who falsely promised to set up the naive youth as the colony's printer. Franklin also met up with some confidence women on a boat to New York, two friendly young ladies who turned out to be thieves.[5] But Franklin's deceivers, unlike their nineteenth-century counterparts, did not deliberately direct their confidence games toward the total destruction of the young man's character. What distinguished the nineteenth-century confidence man was his position at the center of the anxieties that advice manuals expressed about American youth. Henry Ward Beecher, in the introduction to his *Lectures to Young Men,* stated clearly that his entire purpose in writing the manual was to warn American youth against the arts of the seducer:

> Having watched the courses of those who seduce the young—their arts, their blandishments, their pretences;—having witnessed the beginning and consummation of ruin, almost in the same year, of many young men, naturally well disposed, whose downfall began with the appearance of innocence; I felt an earnest desire, if I could, to raise the suspicion of the young, and to direct their reason to the arts by which they are, with such facility, destroyed.[6]

In the nineteenth century, the raw country youth entering the city to seek his fortune was coming to symbolize the American-on-the-make. And in the central drama of antebellum advice literature, that inexperienced young man had just set foot in the city when he was approached by a confidence man seeking to dupe and destroy him. Why did this archetypal villain pop out of the shadows just as the American youth entered the city in search of fame and fortune? What were the symbolic connections between the youth's effort to rise in the world and the confidence man's evil game? A full understanding of popular American attitudes toward social mobility during the "era of the common man" must begin with a careful examination of the many layers of meaning conveyed in the image of the confidence man.

In their efforts to warn youthful readers against the evil power of the confidence man, the manuals offered a detailed picture of how the confidence game worked. The game depended, first of all, on the malleability of the youthful character. Within prevailing Lock-

ean psychology, the youth's character was like a lump of soft wax, completely susceptible to any impressions stamped upon him: "Everything leaves its impress on the young: the countenances they look at, the voices they hear, the places they visit, the company they keep, and the books they read."[7] The term *character,* in fact, could apply not to the lump of wax itself but to the impression made upon it: "The primary meaning of the word *character* is a mark made by cutting or engraving on any substance, as wood, stone, or metal. Hence, as applied to man, it signifies the marks or impressions made upon the mind."[8] The youth was said to be especially vulnerable to impressions made by the company he kept: "Young men, to an extent greater or less, are chameleon-like. They take a tinge, so to speak, from the company they keep; especially if it is *much* kept. Nay, they are often affected for life by the society of an individual for merely half an hour."[9] This susceptibility to the mark of his companions was reinforced by the inexperienced youth's confiding nature. Because he had known only the open trust of the domestic circle, he was "generous and confiding. He mingles feelings without suspicion, and is ready to believe all sincere who proffer him their friendship."[10] Malleable and confiding by nature, the youth proved easy prey.

The confidence man acted upon the waxen character of his youthful victim through a mysterious force called influence. Within the sentimental culture of Victorian America, influence was believed to be the power by which any person's character affected the characters of others, for good as well as for evil.[11] "You will have *associates,*" David Magie told his readers, "and you will feel their influence." He continued, "The link is mysterious which binds human beings together, so that the heart of one answers to the heart of another, like the return of an echo; but such a link exists. . . . The influence is often silent and unperceived, like the rolling in of a wave in a quiet sea; but like that same wave it is mighty and resistless."[12] As a force for good, influence was spoken of as a moral gravitation, a personal electricity, a cosmic vibration. But as a force for evil, influence was compared to a poison, a disease, a source of contamination and corruption. The impressions made by wicked companions were "like poison, taken into the physical system, and will be sure, sooner or later, to reveal its bitter results."[13] Henry Ward Beecher expressed his horror lest his son fall under the libertine's influence by saying he would "rather see him rot in a lazar-house, than putrify with such corruption."[14] The "very presence" of the profligate was said to be "polluting to the soul."[15] In fact, so powerful was the force of evil influence that a young man could be contaminated merely walking the streets:

> Feel as they may, contact with evil it is impossible to avoid. If they walk the streets of the city, or tread the floors of the hall, it is to see sights, and hear sounds, and be subjected to influences, all of which, gradually and imperceptibly, but surely and permanently, are drawing the lines of deformity on their hearts.[16]

This belief in the contaminating powers of influence owed much to the popular pseudoscience of mesmerism and to the miasmic theories of the cholera epidemics that swept the United States in 1832 and 1849.[17] The licentious man was said to be "a pestilence in the community" who could infect everyone around him because "his breath blights every innocent thing."[18]

Although simple contact with evil was enough to begin the ruin of youthful character, the confidence game worked not simply through contagion but through seduction. The confidence man launched his seduction subtly: "The young are seldom tempted to outright wickedness; evil comes to them as an enticement."[19] His skill in enticing his victim rested on his mastery of the art of disguise; the "seducer was a man of wealth and fashion, and professed to take a deep interest in the youth, and to be anxious to promote his welfare. He had a pleasant address, was mild and courteous in his manner,—but within him was the spirit of a fiend."[20] After introducing his victim to a few attractive and apparently innocent pleasures, the seducer drew him farther and farther into sin. "From pleasures which may be termed innocent, to those deeply criminal, there is an approximation which is not the less fatal because it is gradual and unperceived. There is a sort of shading off in this criminal process of seduction that keeps the mind inattentive to its progress from comparative innocence to the dark and deepening colors of guilt."[21] The confidence man knew exactly how to lure his victim from one stage of guilt to the next, because he was a master of human psychology, who specialized in the passions and caprices of youth: "These wild gushes of feeling, peculiar to youth, the sagacious tempter has felt, has studied, has practiced upon, until he can sit before that most capacious organ, the human mind, knowing every stop and all the combinations, and competent to touch every note throughout the diapason."[22]

The object of the confidence man's game was thus not simply to

corrupt the youth, but to achieve total mastery over him. The youth was warned that "the first sacrifice of conscience and principle is like Samson giving up his locks,"[23] and once these were gone, he had lost all power of self-mastery. He was "ensnared," "taken captive." "He may, in his moments of meditation and remorse, strive to tear the manacles from his limbs, and break the chains that bind him to his cruel task-masters [bad habits]." But he was helpless before the power of the "tyrant vice."[24] In Beecher's view, the young men who fell under the power of the confidence man were the victims of a monstrous breed of slave traders:

> Men there are, who, without a pang or gleam of remorse, will coolly wait for character to rot, and health to sink, and means to melt, that they may suck up the last drop of the victim's blood. . . . The agony of midnight massacre, the phrenzy of the ship's dungeon, the living death of the middle passage, the wails of separation, and the dismal torpor of hopeless servitude—are these found only in the piracy of the slave-trade? They are all among US! worse assassinations! worse dragging to a prison-ship! worse groans ringing from the fetid hold! worse separations of families! worse bondage of intemperate men, enslaved by that most inexorable of all taskmasters—sensual habit![25]

From that first enticement through the many subtle stages of deepening guilt, the confidence man had one ultimate purpose: the total enslavement of his victim.

To what extent did advice literature confront a real flesh-and-blood villain in the confidence man? The term *confidence man* was probably first coined by the New York press in 1849 during coverage of the arrest of a swindler named William Thompson. Thompson was a man of genteel appearance whose trick was to approach a gentleman on the street, chat with him briefly, and then ask whether he had the confidence to lend his watch to a stranger. Upon being handed the watch, Thompson walked off laughing. In this fashion, he succeeded in tricking several New Yorkers out of expensive gold watches before being spotted one day by a previous victim, named Thomas McDonald, who apparently did not share the trickster's sense of humor and had him thrown into the Tombs. In its extensive coverage of Thompson's case, the press suggested that he was not the only criminal of this kind operating in the city.[26] In 1857, Herman Melville published his own fictional confidence game, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (which may have been

inspired in part by the Thompson case), and one reviewer noted that America was filled with confidence men: "One of the indigenous characters who has figured long in our journals, courts, and cities, is 'the Confidence Man'; his doings form one of the staples of villainy, and an element in the romance of roguery. Countless are the dodges attributed to this ubiquitous personage."[27] Two years later, the notoriety of this breed of criminal achieved recognition in *The Rogue's Lexicon,* a dictionary of crime published by the *National Police Gazette.*[28] But the most reliable evidence that confidence men did in fact roam American cities in the mid-nineteenth century lies in police records. A survey of New York police captains in the 1860s estimated that of 2,500 professional criminals in the city, 100 were confidence men operating games such as the "Spanish Prisoner" racket; another 100 were "damper sneaks," men who posed as businessmen and engaged in elaborate negotiations or simply loitered around places of business to steal unguarded bonds and cash; and 25 were forgers.[29] Police thus estimated that nearly one out of ten professional criminals in New York in the 1860s was a confidence man. The proliferation of moveable wealth, especially negotiable paper, in the early nineteenth century, and the growing confusion and anonymity of urban living, had made possible for the first time a wide variety of swindles, frauds, forgeries, counterfeiting activities, and other confidence games.[30] Ironically, the new law-enforcement officer who emerged during this period to handle this sophisticated new breed of urban crime himself often resorted to the arts of the confidence man. The police detective was said to be "dishonest, crafty, unscrupulous, when necessary to be so. He tells black lies when he cannot avoid it, and white lying, at least, is his chief stock in trade. He is the outgrowth of a diseased and corrupted state of things, and is, consequently, morally diseased himself."[31]

The most notorious and possibly the most numerous class of confidence men were the gamblers. In 1825, the first successful gambling house in New York City opened, and by 1835, the New York *Herald* could report that "there is a small and select number of very splendid hells in this city where young men with property are sent to perdition in no time."[32] Policemen and politicians learned to look the other way as professional sharpers set up operation all over the city and enjoyed between 1835 and the Civil War their most prosperous period in New York history. "Thimble-riggers, Three-Card-Monte throwers and other sure-thing tricksters worked

openly in the streets."[33] Most houses cheated, and some establishments known as "second-class skinning houses" operated only when a "sucker" was on hand. To keep a steady stream of suckers coming to their tables, many houses employed "steerers" or "ropers in," "men of considerable address" who "make a flashy-genteel appearance, very impressive and taking with greenhorns."[34] "They worm themselves into the confidence of strangers; show them every thing worth seeing in the city; and finally introduce them to their employers, the gambling-house proprietors."[35] Given the skill of these and other confidence men, it is not surprising that nineteenth-century urban guidebooks warned newcomers to beware "the goodnatured civilities of persons you have never seen before. Gratuitous offers of assistance or advice, or good fellowship, are suspicious, to say the least. Do not be persuaded to go anywhere with these casual acquaintances."[36]

When antebellum advice manuals delivered similar warnings against "the goodnatured civilities of persons you have never seen before," their concerns for youthful readers were clearly grounded in reality. But the villain whose confidence game was so elaborately described in the advice manuals was far more dangerous than the "watch-stuffer," the "damp sneak," or the "steerer." In the confidence game, an impressionable youth fell under the power of a villain who corrupted his character, enticed him into a life of vice, and finally reduced him to slavery. The intellectual framework of this nineteenth-century melodrama was eighteenth-century republican ideology. At the center of the radical Whiggism that had fueled the American Revolution was the belief that politics was fundamentally a matter of the disposition of power, which meant "the dominion of some men over others, the human control of human life: ultimately force, compulsion."[37] The central characteristic of power was its aggressiveness; it preyed on liberty, which was fundamentally passive, vulnerable. Radical Whigs were obsessed with the intoxicating desire of men for domination over others. In itself, they believed, power was not evil, but it was made malignant by the nature of man. No man could withstand the corrupting effect of power, which acted like a strong liquor on those who held it. If corrupt rulers were suffered to encroach upon the liberty of the people, they soon became tyrants and reduced the people to slavery. To eighteenth-century republicans, slavery meant "a force put upon humane nature, by which a man is obliged to act, or not to act, according to the arbitrary will and pleasure of another."[38] But

the people had one sure defense against enslavement by tyrants: their virtue. So long as they practiced the republican virtues of industry, sobriety, frugality, and simplicity, their liberty was safe. Once they were corrupted by the poisonous love of luxury, their vigilant watch over their liberty would relax and they would be reduced to slavery. The republican mind-set was highly conspiratorial: within their paranoiac fear of encroachments against their liberty, American Whigs interpreted all events as part of a systematic plot to corrupt and enslave them.[39]

All the major elements of eighteenth-century republican ideology—the struggle between liberty and power, the danger of corruption and decay, the ultimate threat of tyranny and enslavement—were present in the nineteenth-century confidence game. In it, the passive liberty of the American youth falls victim to the self-aggrandizing power of the confidence man. The youth loses his liberty because he surrenders his vigilance and abandons his republican virtue for a riotous life of luxury and sin. Once the liberty of the rising generation was lost, the advice writers feared, the American republic would be in grave danger. Along with eighteenth-century republicans, the advice writers believed that the republic "depends upon the personal character we individually possess. There is no charm in free institutions to sustain themselves and to bless a nation. Liberty, where the individual is the slave of his neighbor's opinion, or still worse, of his own passions and appetites, is a mere sound."[40] America was passing through a critical period when its character was not yet formed, "and great are the responsibilities that rest upon her, and critical the trial through which she must pass."[41] Since the Revolution, Americans had stressed that what made a republic great was the character and spirit of its people. The ultimate threat of the confidence man was thus his power to subvert the American republican experiment.

The writers of advice to young men were addressing a generation of Americans deeply anxious about the future of the republic: "No sooner did Americans create their Union than they began to speculate fretfully about how long it would last."[42] As the self-proclaimed sons of the nation's founding fathers, many Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century felt a powerful sense of their responsibility to preserve their inheritance of liberty and transmit it to future generations. But after John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died on the fiftieth anniversary of American independence, the American people entered what George Forgie has called the post-

heroic age, and began to fear that they were betraying the sacred trust bequeathed to them.[43] Themes of doom and decline and vivid rhetorical images of a violent breakdown of social order began to dominate discussions of the state of the republic.[44] "Countersubversion movements," dedicated to exposing the enemies of American liberty, began to accuse groups such as Masons, Mormons, and Catholics of secretly plotting to overthrow the republic.[45] Andrew Jackson's war against the Bank was presented as part of a larger struggle to protect republican values against betrayal by a conspiratorial "money power," which used "ill-gotten gains to corrupt and dominate the plain republican order."[46] The fatal disease of luxury, it was widely feared, was once again contaminating the character of the American people. "Should our grand experiment of self-government ultimately fail," said Lauren Persus Hickok, a professor at Union College, "it will doubtless be because our prosperity is greater than our virtue can bear."[47] In the midst of this crisis, Americans came to believe that the republic's only chance for survival lay in the character of the rising generation. As George Forgie has argued, "The connection between child rearing and the future of the Republic elevated child rearing to a concern of the highest order."[48] Significantly, in the 1840s, Americans began to refer to the republic itself as a growing youth. "Republicanism," as Gordon Wood has observed, "was the concomitant of youth," just as monarchy and aristocracy were the product of age and social decay.[49] The American Revolution had been the nation's season of youth, which had to be preserved if nineteenth-century Americans were to ensure the survival of the republic.[50] The spectre of the confidence man was very compelling to antebellum Americans. The confidence game was not simply a literary device intended to persuade young men not to consort with gamblers and dandies and pimps. It was a symbolic expression of deeper fears about the direction of American society. But what was the nature of the crisis confronting the new nation? The confidence game played on eighteenth-century republican fears about the threat of self-aggrandizing power. Exactly what kinds of power were represented by the nineteenth-century image of the confidence man? Who was this alleged villain who lurked in the dark corners of society plotting to corrupt and enslave American youth and thus bring down the republic? By nature, the confidence man defied social definition; he was a man of shifting masks and roles, without fixed status or profession. But for purposes of discussion, three types of confidence men may be distinguished that suggest more specifically what kinds of power this villain represented: the youth's urban companion, the demagogue, and the gambler. With these three portraits, the advice writers revealed the nineteenth-century meaning behind their eighteenth-century republican drama by expressing implicitly their concerns about the major social, political, and economic forces transforming the American nation in their own time.

The most common portrait was the youth's urban companion. He was the stranger who approached the young man just entering the city, at the precise moment when all familial and communal restraints were falling away. The urban stranger began his confidence game with an offer of friendship: "Practiced in the arts of temptation, they make a gradual advance upon the ingenuous and unsuspecting youth. They insinuate themselves into his confidence and friendship."[51] Because he knew his way around the city, this stranger proved attractive to his innocent victim, who soon began to defer to him:

> Drawn, as they soon are, into fellowship with those who have gone there before them, and accustomed, as they are, to look up to them as their superiors, they naturally conform to their habits and practices, and fall an easy prey to the corrupt and corrupting examples by which they are surrounded. They have not firmness to resist the enticements of depraved companions.[52]

The youth's attractive, witty companion knew how to lead his victim gradually down the steps into corruption without arousing the youth's suspicions until it was too late. With the first sacrifice of principle, the young man was at his seducer's mercy: "He has carried his point; and one breach of obligation, he well knows, will make way for another, until your character and your destiny become identified with his own.[53] The evil companion thus acted as a recruiting agent for the ranks of confidence men. Out of fear of this archetypal false companion, the advisers pleaded with the rising generation to avoid bad company. "If I could persuade you, my reader, to shun bad company as you would the poison that destroys even by contact,—to be more careful of your company than of almost anything else, I should rejoice."[54]

Why did antebellum advice books reflect such anxiety concerning the American youth's companionship in the city? To answer that question it is necessary to examine briefly the mass migration of

young men to the city in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, the population of the American colonies had resulted at an average rate of 3 percent annually, and this rapid growth had increased in an agricultural crisis, for within the system of partible inheritance, average farm holdings underwent a steady rate of decline. At the same time, the increasing efficiency of technological agriculture reduced the demand for manpower. As a result, many farmers' sons became landless agricultural laborers, craftsmen, or small home manufacturers. Gradually, as regional agricultural specialization spurred the development of commercial cities, alternatives to farming expanded, and thousands of young men swarmed into cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Rochester, New Haven, and Lowell to work as insurance clerks and brokers, storekeepers and traders, skilled and semiskilled artisans, merchants, professional men, innkeepers, drivers, stablers, and dock hands. With all these push-and-pull factors encouraging the farmer's son's migration, the age at which young men left home began to decline. Between 1750 and 1820, the average age of departure dropped from the mid-twenties to the late teens, despite continued encouragement from parents and counselors that young men stay home until the age of twenty-one. Antebellum advice books, written for young men who had just left their families for the perils of an unsupervised life in the city, often specifically addressed readers as young as fourteen.[55]

In the patriarchal family of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the father had exercised great control over the lives of his children, who depended on him for the land and capital goods needed to begin their own families. But as farmers became less able to provide sufficient farm holdings for their sons and as new opportunities opened to young men, the patriarchal family began to lose its power to shape the lives of its children. The demands of the commercializing economy for new financial and technological skills were undermining the traditional paternal task of teaching sons how to make a living, and the family's role as educational institution began to give way to a growing reliance on self-education. Even the apprenticeship system, which had been designed to extend and formalize the family's authority over young men, was in decline. The traditional master-servant relationship had stressed reciprocal obligations of moral watchfulness and deferential obedience, broad educational guidance and personal service, but by the mid-eighteenth century the moral elements of the

agreement were disappearing, and by the early nineteenth century the entire system was breaking down under the impact of mercantile capitalism and the factory system. Through the first several decades of the nineteenth century, young men in the cities found themselves increasingly less inhibited by traditional restraints on the social conduct of single workingmen. They were moving out of their rooms above the shops of their masters and into hotels and boarding houses, where their employers could not supervise their leisure activities. In Rochester, New York, in the 1820s and 1830s, home-centered work relations broke down as workingmen were removed from the homes and the domestic discipline of their master craftsmen into working-class neighborhoods, where a lawless disregard for middle-class morality prevailed. Although the Rochester pattern may not have been universal, the gradual breakdown of small shop work-organization was under way in antebellum America. In the early nineteenth-century interval between an apprenticeship system and later institutional structures for containing adolescents, there was "a very real crisis of youth in the nineteenth-century city."[56]

As the ties between family generations weakened and as traditional controls over young workingmen declined, older patterns of social deference were giving way to the new significance of relations between peers. The growing importance of women's friendships between 1780 and 1835, according to Nancy F. Cott, suggests a new sense of the desirability of peer relationships, an ideal that owed much to the egalitarianism of republican ideology and Christian revivalism.[57] But the writers of advice to young men were not nearly so sanguine about peer group contact. The decline of parental and employer authority, they feared, had given free rein to what later generations would call peer pressure. Cut off from the family discipline of their own homes and those of their shop masters, young men were clustering in boarding houses and hotels. With their leisure time freed from employer supervision, they were banding together to attend the theaters, the gambling saloons, and the brothels of the early industrial city. What peer contact meant to middle-class moralists was the moral contamination of innocent young men by their vicious companions. Into the figure of the confidence man as urban associate, the advisers cast broader anxieties about the replacement of traditional, hierarchical social relationships based on deference with peer relations among social equals.

A second type of confidence man set forth in antebellum advice literature was the demagogue, whose game was to profess an interest in the public good in order to disguise and carry out his own selfish purposes. He was a man of shifting faces, a man without fixed principles: "For a profitable popularity he accommodates himself to all opinions, to all dispositions, to every side, and to each prejudice. He is a mirror, with no face of its own, but a smooth surface from which each man of ten thousand may see himself reflected."[58] His aim was to shape the political character of any youth who had failed to form independently his own political opinions, and had thus become "a fit subject for the unprincipled demagogue, to be moulded and managed at his will."[59] One special type of demagogue was the amoral "PARTY MAN," who would lie, slander, place wicked men in office, support the liquor traffic, and even deny his religion, in order to secure victory for his party. The party man was a hypocrite of the deepest dye, a man who had two distinct characters. In his inner character, he was a man of principle, but when he donned his political character, he was a man of deceit:

> All the requisitions of his conscience he obeys in his private character; all the requisitions of his party, he obeys in his political conduct. In one character he is a man of principle; in the other, a man of mere expedients. As a *man* he means to be veracious, honest, moral; as a *politician,* he is deceitful, cunning, unscrupulous,—*anything* for party.[60]

The political confidence man, in his efforts to deceive American youth and mold them into "tools of demagogues," presented a grave threat to the republic.[61] In a republic each citizen was a sovereign and thus needed "the same independence of mind, the same personal virtues, and sense of personal responsibility, as he would if clothed in purple, and wearing a diadem."[62] If the rising generation were to be successfully "moulded" and "managed" by demagogues, their liberty would be lost. And within Jeffersonian political theory, in which land ownership was to protect the independent yeoman from political enslavement to unscrupulous demagogues, this danger was particularly pronounced. The landless young men drifting into the early industrial cities of America seemed to be at the mercy of political confidence men.

Such repeated warnings against the evil machinations of the demagogue reflect an uneasiness with the emergence of mass

politics in Jacksonian America. The early republican period between 1789 and 1840 marked the gradual transition from traditional deferential politics focusing on the political leader to modern egalitarian politics focusing on the electorate. An eighteenth-century disapproval of parties as evil associations put together by factious men bent on self-aggrandizement was giving way to the more modern view, held by new professional politicans such as those of the Albany Regency, of parties as democratic associations providing beneficial political competition. By the end of the 1820s, the consensus tradition of American politics, defended in a last-ditch effort by the People's Party of New York, had been utterly defeated. "By 1840 the parties were so meticulously organized down into every ward and precinct and were so successful in mustering the citizenry in huge numbers to the polls that we may finally speak of the full emergence, in modern terms, of mass political parties, the first in the world."[63]

The new mass political parties met with great hostility from the religious community. Pious evangelical conservatives such as Lyman Beecher and Ezra Stiles Ely had few quarrels with democracy itself, but they condemned political factionalism for disrupting man's efforts to establish divine law as the foundation for worldly government. Behind this distrust lay their justifiable fear that politicians were commanding more public attention than were religious leaders and winning this attention in ways unacceptable to the clergy. "The whole array of democratic trappings, from chauvinistic drumbeating to secret bribes, appalled the religious community, used to the deferential ways of the past."[64] The new professional politician, as depicted by Lyman Beecher's son, Henry Ward Beecher, was selfish, godless, and unprincipled.

The demagogue's confidence game was most dangerous, however, not because he was personally wicked, but because his authority over the American people rested illegitimately in his direct appeal to a slavish political mob. His "insidious attacks" were directed at the "multitude, ignorant, prejudiced, inflamed and infuriated by unseen guides, till they trample on law, order, property and life."[65] In condemning the demagogue's appeal to the mob, the advisers expressed deep concern about what Alexis de Tocqueville called the "tyranny of the majority": "And is this a condition of liberty, to hold my property, my opinions, my life, subservient to the dictates of the mass; let those dictates be what they will? No!"[66] More than this, however, the figure of the demagogue reflected

concern about the new professional men whose business was to exploit that tyranny for selfish ends. This critique rested not simply on the emergence of partisan politics in the Age of Jackson, but on the massive transformation in the social relations of power that accompanied the new politics. In the 1820s and 1830s, political success increasingly demanded new techniques for organizing a mass electorate through patronage and manipulating the party press, techniques that contributed steadily to the nationalization of the power of the majority. In the new era of mass politics, political power flowed out of local communities and state capitals into the national arena.[67] As professional politicians learned to shape public opinion, various groups in American society began to oppose what they saw as an illegitimate and dangerous manipulation of the ignorant masses from the national level. One example of this resistance was the early Whig opposition to Jackson's bank veto of 1832 as an act of executive usurpation that infringed "upon the accustomed powers of established, locally based political leaders."[68] Significantly, Jackson's veto had been addressed not to the legislature or to the Court, but directly to the voters themselves, while the proto-Whig response appealed to the authority of established political leaders. Another example of local opposition to the nationalization of public opinion were the anti-abolitionist mobs of the 1830s. The "gentlemen of property and standing" who led these mobs feared that the manipulation of national public opinion by the abolitionist press threatened to usurp local control by appealing directly to an emotionally susceptible people without deference to local authorities.[69] For the writers of antebellum advice literature, too, the dangerous direction of American politics seemed equally clear: hypnotic, charismatic demagogues were rising up to enslave a generation of American youth for selfish, unprincipled gain. Through the art of the confidence game, they were usurping the prerogative of local authorities to shape the character of the rising generation, and in so doing they were threatening to destroy the American republic.

A third common form assumed by the confidence man of antebellum advice manuals was the gambler. The gambler, like his two evil fellows, was regarded as a serious competitor for the power of influence over the rising generation, and so horrible was his influence that one clerical adviser expressed the graphic wish to see his son die rather than fall victim to this confidence man:

> Rather than have a child of mine seduced by the flatteries and black treachery of these foul destroyers, I would see him struggling with death—his eye sinking, his breast heaving, his heart throbbing—throbbing with its last pulsations. . . . I would return from his grave thankful that he rests,—*rests* there, rather than lives to mingle with gambling fiends, to feel the damning influence of their oaths and curses, and to imbibe their horrible principles.[70]

The gambler's confidence game was unvarying: he approached the unsuspecting youth with a smile and an offer of friendship, lured him into granting him confidence, drew him gradually into fashionable gambling society, and then thoroughly fleeced him. But the evil of gambling was not simply that young men could be cheated out of all their worldly goods at the card table. Gambling was evil because it produced nothing: "In gambling, it is true, property is shifted from one individual to another, and here and there one probably gains more than he loses; but nothing is actually *made,* or *produced.*"[71] In fact, gambling undermined all desire to practice industry, for the gambler inevitably came "to regard the moderate but constant and certain rewards of industrious exertion as insipid."[72] Because it brought gain without production and without industry through a game of chance, gambling was a kind of speculation: "Indeed, a Speculator on the exchange, and a Gambler at his table, follow one vocation, only with different instruments."[73]

Into the image of the confidence man as gambler, the advisers cast their antipathy for capitalist speculation. Speculation, Henry Ward Beecher warned his readers, was a game of skill that produced nothing of benefit, but instead encouraged an aversion to steady industry. Even worse, the reckless speculator, like the gambler, cheated himself and those around him: "He defrauds himself, his family, the community in which he dwells; for all these have an interest in that property."[74] By encouraging fraud, speculation undermined the "principle of *mutual confidence*"[75] upon which commerce rested. And it was commerce alone that bound all human society together, just as "the great law of gravitation"[76] bound together the world of matter. God had created commerce "for the development of the benevolence and all the noble qualities of the human heart."[77] But the archetypal speculator, the gambler, was the "cool, calculating, essential *spirit* of concentrated avaricious selfish-

ness."[78] When this speculative spirit of pure selfishness ran amuck and produced a panic in 1837, then the ties of commercial benevolence were completely severed, as debtors wrote tricky pledges and cheated their creditors: "Fidelity seemed to have forsaken men. Many that had earned a reputation for sterling honesty were cast so suddenly headlong into wickedness, that man shrank from man. Suspicion overgrew confidence, and the heart bristled with the nettles and thorns of fear and jealousy."[79]

Behind this extended attack on the gambler/speculator lay an uneasiness with the dramatic expansion of the American market economy in the first decades of the nineteenth century. After 1790, success in the export sector stimulated urbanization, and growing urban demands for foodstuffs and labor began to draw people out of self-sufficiency into the money economy. After 1815, the transportation revolution made possible greater regional specialization and the growth of interregional trade. The scope of the domestic market expanded as the West produced food, the South grew cotton, and the Northeast provided banking services, insurance, brokerage, transport, manufacturing, imports, and, most important, capital. As the growth of the national market stimulated manufacturing in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states, capital shifted from shipping into textiles; increasing social overhead investments were made in transportation facilities, banking, insurance, and warehousing; and a distribution system for imports developed. In the expanding domestic market of early nineteenth-century America, speculative economic activity was rapidly on the rise.[80]

In their moral opposition to games of chance, the advice writers presented a critique of capitalistic speculation, a critique rooted in the *mentalité* of the Northern agricultural society of pre-industrial America. The populations of the small rural communities of the eighteenth century, as James A. Henretta has argued, did not display the strong entrepreneurial mentality attributed to them by previous historians of colonial New England. In the small eighteenth-century towns, the lack of transportation and of markets made subsistence the primary way of life and thus necessarily circumscribed human goals. Without a market for his surplus, the eighteenth-century farmer lacked any real incentive to produce more than he could sell locally. In the absence of an external market, the system of exchange was predominantly local and usually involved direct exchange not for profit but for the acquisition of

necessities. The basic social unit of production, of capital formation, and of property transmission was the family, which was defined along extended intergenerational lines. The eighteenth-century agricultural emphasis on the welfare of the family line, Henretta argues, inhibited the emergence of economic individualism, and local face-to-face economic exchange was directed largely toward the maintenance of the community's established social relationships.[81]

In the early nineteenth century, this limited economic exchange, which was integrally tied up with the social relationships of the family and the immediate community, was giving way to an expanding market economy that appeared to many Americans as a giant, threatening game of hazard. Jacksonian Democrats succeeded in harnessing some of this anxiety in their war against the Bank by accusing a "money power" of constructing a "mysterious, swaying web of speculative credit" in "a false, rotten, insubstantial world" of corrupt finance in an effort to destroy the Jeffersonian republic of industry and simplicity.[82] The Jacksonians thus appealed to a growing sense of helplessness before the vicissitudes of a vast and unpredictable market. "Men of business are, like threads of a fabric, woven together, and subject, to a great extent, to a common fate of prosperity or adversity," and the reckless speculator could carry whole communities with him to ruin. To Henry Ward Beecher, economic prosperity built upon speculation was itself a kind of cosmic confidence game:

> Upon a land—capacious beyond measure, whose prodigal soil rewards labor with an unharvestable abundance of exuberant fruits, occupied by a people signalized by enterprise and industry,—there came a summer of prosperity which lingered so long and shone so brightly, that men forgot that winter should ever come.

But suddenly, in the Panic of 1837, "men awoke from gorgeous dreams in the midst of desolation." Merchants were ruined, clerks were discharged, mechanics stood idle, and farmers stared at useless wheat surpluses. Economic historians have tended to play down the severity of the Panic of 1837, but to Beecher the devastation was incalculable: "The world looked upon a continent of inexhaustible fertility, (whose harvest had glutted the markets, and rotted in disuse,) filled with lamentation, and its inhabitants wandering like bereaved citizens among the ruins of an earthquake, mourning for

children, for houses crushed, and property buried forever." Economic expansion built on speculation was, in Beecher's view, groundless, hazardous, overcommitted, and uncontrolled. The benevolence of commerce had given way before "the gambling of commerce," and all men were now threatened with financial ruin by the confidence man as speculator.[83]

In these three portraits in villainy—the youth's urban companion, the demagogue, and the gambler/speculator—the writers of antebellum advice literature expressed a deep disenchantment with the direction of historical change in early nineteenth-century America. In the figure of the urban associate, they cast their fears of the major social forces transforming American society: a high rate of geographical mobility and particularly of migration to the city, the decline of social deference and a loosening of ties between family generations, the breakdown of traditional restraints over single workingmen, and in general a replacement of traditional hierarchical social relationships with modern peer relations. In the image of the demagogue, they expressed anxieties regarding the political changes of their time: the growing dominance of party politics and techniques of mass politics, the new tyranny of the majority, the nationalization of public opinion, and the decline of "natural" local leadership in the face of the manipulative, charismatic leadership of new professional politicians. Finally, in the spectre of the gambler/speculator, they embodied their fears of the economic forces shaping the young American republic: the rapid expansion of the national market and of speculative economic activity.

How accurate was the advice literature's implicit assessment of the historical forces transforming American society in the early nineteenth century? As I have suggested, their views of social, political, and economic change as expressed in their portraits of the confidence man did reflect a certain awareness, however crude and simplistic, of some major changes taking place. In very general terms, the advice writers were addressing the gradual emergence in the early nineteenth century of a system of horizontal social relations that replaced the vertical social relations dominant in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American life. As James E. Henretta has observed, most Northern Americans throughout the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century lived their lives within the bounds of three social institutions—the family, the local community, and the church. Though largely autonomous and

independent, all three were traditional, vertical institutions in which the lines of force radiated downward, from the father, the selectmen, and the minister, and the prevailing pattern of social relationships was authority and deference. But this traditional framework underwent severe strain throughout the eighteenth century from the powerful forces of demographic growth and economic development, which gradually tended to pry the individual loose from the "tight social, psychological, and ideological bounds of the traditional systems of elite control."[84] By 1815, when the increasingly complex preindustrial economy had reached full maturation, the ties of kinship, community, and religion were receding: "The centrifugal forces of trade and war, of geographic migration and political participation had shattered the tiny self-contained cosmos of the agricultural village."[85] Because the traditional vertical institutions could not contain the new complexity of national social life, new social organizations emerged that were formed along the horizontal lines of economic class and social status—organizations such as medical societies, mechanics' institutions, benevolent fraternities, charitable associations, and political clubs. Membership in these new organizations was not hereditary or compulsory, but voluntary; the pattern of authority was not one of mastery and deference, but one of equality.

To the clergymen, educators, and popular moralists who wrote advice manuals, the meaning of this transformation was alarmingly clear: "We have fallen on a period of social disorders, agitations, and excitements. There are signs of a spirit of anarchy in the very midst of us, which makes us sometimes tremble for the weal of our institutions."[86] Although they revealed some crude awareness of the forces of social, political, and economic change at work around them, they could only understand those forces within a declension framework. Their sense of history rested fundamentally on the belief that the golden age of American social relations was past. Once, they believed, young men had deferred without question to their fathers, their town authorities, and their clergymen; intergenerational family ties had been unbreakable, political opinion had been determined by the proper local authorities, and economic transactions had been characterized by honesty and plain dealing. The social history implicitly woven throughout the advice manuals was an extended jeremiad on America's declension from a more ordered and virtuous era. When the advice writers deplored the decline of deference among the rising generation, they were echo-

ing a complaint that had been voiced by New England clergymen as early as the Reforming Synod of 1679.[87] Within their declension framework, the advice writers were using the confidence man as a scapegoat for the loss of a mythical era when American social relations had known nothing but integrity, harmony, and obedience to legitimate authority.

When the clerical Jeremiahs of 1679 lifted up their voices against the perilous apostasy of their generation, they were expressing in part a fear that their own authority over the New England people was in decline, and the antebellum advisers of youth, in their denunciations of "a spirit of anarchy" in their midst, were revealing a similar concern. Ever since the Great Awakening, the official power and prestige of the American clergy had been in a state of decline. With the coming of the American Revolution, and especially by the nineteenth century, ministers had begun to shore up their failing status by claiming major responsibility for forming the character of the rising generation in the young republic.[88] But in the confidence man, they found what they perceived to be a serious competitor for the power to shape the character of American youth. Nowhere was their concern about this competition more evident than in the advice manuals' direct attack on the pernicious literature believed to be dragging thousands of young men to their ruin. Evil writers, too, were seen as confidence men, whose trick was to cloak their villainous characters in the garb of virtue. "The most abandoned knaves are presented to the reader, as gentlemen of honor. The apostate from religion and the hypocrite are favorite characters with this class of writers."[89] The influence of such literature was incalculable: "The deadly streams from such a fountain flow through the streets, enter the houses, shops, stores and public institutions, penetrate into the chamber and retired apartment, and thousands at the same time partake of the fatal fluid."[90] Having warned their readers against the poison of pernicious literature, the advice writers went on to urge American youth to read good literature. A good book, they stressed, preserved its reader from evil companions, for he "has no inducement to resort to bad company, or the haunts of dissipation and vice; he has higher and nobler sources of enjoyment in himself. At pleasure, he can call around him the best of company,—the wisest and greatest men of every age and country."[91] Presumably, the wisest and greatest men in antebellum America included the advice writers themselves. The youth who passed by a French novel in favor of an advice manual,

in other words, erected a kind of literary barrier against the machinations of the confidence man.

In their exaggerated assessment of the influence of bad books, the advice writers betrayed professional jealousy of the confidence man's power over American youth. According to Henry Ward Beecher, the young men of a given community actually belonged to their parents and guardians, their employers and political leaders, and their clergymen: "We grade our streets, build our schools, support all our municipal laws, and the young men are *ours;* our sons, our brothers, our wards, clerks, or apprentices; they are living in our houses, or stores, or shops, and we are their guardians, and take care of them in health, and watch them in sickness." But this prerogative of ownership was continually under challenge from a "whole race of men, whose camp is the Theatre, the Circus, the Turf, or the Gaming-table . . . a race whose instinct is destruction, who live to corrupt, and live off of the corruption which they make." This evil race of men acted as if the young men belonged to them: "and when they offer to corrupt all these youth, we paying them round sums of money for it, and we get courage finally to say that we had rather not; that industry and honesty are better than expert knavery—they turn on us in great indignation with, *Why don't you mind your own business—what are you meddling with our affairs for?*"[92] Beecher's heavy irony made his own view unmistakably plain: it was the confidence man, not the parents and masters and clergymen, who was the meddler, who was usurping the prerogative of shaping the rising generation.

Within the advice writers' declension framework, American society was falling into anarchy in part because the American clergy were no longer heeded and respected by the rising generation. But as Beecher's tirade suggests, the advice writers' attack was directed against a new and dangerous form of social authority emerging in America. The collapse of familial, communal, and clerical influence over American youth had left a vacuum into which flowed the confidence man. According to Henretta's historical schema, this fear that a new kind of social leadership was emerging in the early nineteenth century was well founded. The clear authority exercised within the hierarchical social institutions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America was giving way to the more tenuous authority possible within the egalitarian social organizations of the nineteenth century. In the emerging social system, authority could be seized by any charismatic figure who emerged from the masses as

man celebrated solely for his individual social and economic advancement.[107] By the early nineteenth century, explains John G. Cawelti, "under the impact of a rapidly growing economy and the expansive mood of manifest destiny, with the prospect of a vast supply of cheap land, rapidly expanding markets, an increasingly more efficient transportation system, and high wages continuing into the indefinite future, it was easy to believe that if individuals were sufficiently enterprising and society put no artificial barriers in their way, the general welfare would take care of itself."[108] The American cult of the self-made man was entering its heyday. By 1840, both political parties had adopted the rhetoric and symbols of the open society and were loudly professing their devotion to the interests of the self-made man. Popular biographies of self-made men—politicians, businessmen, even artists and intellectuals—proclaimed the faith that, in the boundless American social environment, any man might rise to any position in life.

The advice manuals for young men written between 1830 and 1860 were not intended solely as guides to success. In fact, direct discussion of the young man's work life comprised but a small proportion of the advice offered. William A. Alcott's *Young Man's Guide,* for example, which provided a relatively lengthy discussion of business management, also covered such topics as marriage, amusements, criminal behavior, and social, moral, and mental improvement. The writers of antebellum advice literature were not primarily successful businessmen but clergymen such as John Todd, Joel Hawes, and Henry Ward Beecher, educational reformers such as William A. Alcott and Horace Mann, and popular sentimental writers such as Timothy S. Arthur. Middle-class moralists all, they were less interested in constructing a success ethic than in ensuring the formation of moral character.

Nonetheless, character formation was the nineteenth-century version of the Protestant work ethic. Through personal exertion and resolve applied steadfastly to molding his character, the youth was told, he might overcome his lack of endowed faculties and advantages to triumph over circumstance and become anything he chose. *"You may be,"* said one advice manual, *"whatever you will resolve to be."*[109] In the American republic, with its rapid property turnover in the absence of hereditary honors, most "real men—men of force of character—men who command respect—men who do good in the world—are self-made men."[110] In the boundless, open society of the young American nation, the advice writers believed, the only

limitations on the individual's ultimate station in life seemed to lie in his character, which might be deliberately molded into the shape of success.

Recently the new social history has challenged this faith in the boundlessness of the Jacksonian social environment and has begun to piece together a picture of what Edward Pessen has called "the surprising immobility of the 'era of the common man.' "[111] Such studies serve to underline the vitality of the antebellum American faith in the cult of the self-made man. Stuart Blumin explained the discrepancy between myth and reality by arguing that "the American Dream is fed, not by such mundane matters as mobility matrices but by isolated cases of spectacular success."[112] Alternatively, Stephen Thernstrom has suggested that even the small property gains made by some hardworking laborers may have been sufficient to maintain the faith expressed by Calvin Colton in 1844, that "this is a country of *self-made men.*"[113] Whether fed by a few dramatic stories of men who rose from rags to riches or by many stories of men who worked hard all their lives to buy a modest little house of their own, the cult of the self-made man thrived in antebellum American culture. And its fundamental assumption was that all Americans were liminal men, in passage from a lower to a higher social status. This assumption was best expressed in a new nineteenth-century usage of the term *middle class.* In the eighteenth century, the term *middling class* referred to people who occupied a static social position between the extremes of peasantry and aristocracy, a position believed to offer only modest opportunities for advancement. But by the 1830s, middle class no longer meant a point of equilibrium between two other fixed classes; to be middle-class was to be, in theory, without fixed social status. Members of the middle class imagined themselves on a social escalator to greater wealth and prestige. They lived suspended between the facts of their present social position and the promise, which they took for granted, of their economic future.[114] In reality, as Stuart Blumin's study of antebellum Philadelphia, for example, has shown, the middle-class escalator was at least as likely to go down as up. Whether rising or falling, however, middle-class Americans were defined as men in social motion, men of no fixed status. And the middle class was believed to include a vast majority of Americans who were neither very wealthy nor very poor. This view of the composition of American society thus ascribed to most Americans a permanent condition of liminality and offers support for Victor

Turner's argument that liminality in modern societies can be virtually institutionalized:

> What appears to have happened is that with the increasing specialization of society and culturé, with progressive complexity in the social division of labor, what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities "betwixt and between" defined states of culture and society has become itself an institutionalized state. . . . Transition has here become a permanent condition.[115]

This idea that all Americans were liminal men was clearly expressed in the various regional characters of American legend and folklore, many of whom were confidence men. From the West came the backwoodsman, with his gift for masquerade and his mastery of the tall talé. Mike Fink, the Mississippi boatman, and Davy Crockett, the frontier hunter, told endless lies about their strength and prowess and delighted in anecdotes of their own trickery.[116] From the Southwest came a variety of legendary confidence men, from the cardsharp and the horse-race "fixer" to the bogus lawyer and doctor and banker and long-lost relative. "Avaricious, cruel, and utterly ruthless, always operating on the edge of the law, he moved through the land like a flight of seven-year locusts, leaving empty wallets behind him." His "supreme incarnation" was regional humorist John Jones Hooper's creation Simon Suggs, whose motto was *"It is good to be shifty in a new country."*[117] But the master trickster of all came out of New England. He was the Yankee, famed for maintaining a laconic silence or answering all questions with other questions, while he peddled warming pans in the West Indies and pills made of white paper to cholera victims in Canada. Seba Smith's Jack Downing was the most famous fictional Yankee of his era.[118] But it was a flesh-and-blood Yankee named P. T. Barnum who fully captured the American imagination with his sharp entrepreneurial dealings and self-admitted bunkum. Barnum dedicated his autobiography, somewhat awkwardly, to "The Universal Yankee Nation, of which I am proud to be one."[119] By the time *The Life of P. T. Barnum* was published in 1854, the Yankee had been transformed from a regional character into a national myth. Constance Rourke has argued that the Yankee absorbed some of the attributes of the backwoodsman: "I am Sam Slick thé Yankee peddler," a London broadside announced, "—I can ride on a flash of lightning and catch a thunder-bolt in my fist."[120] But in this era of dawning industrial capitalism, the Eastern entrepreneurial sharper got the upper hand of the preindustrial Westerner, and emerged as the dominant symbol, not just of the American confidence man, but of American national character.

Despite the vast differences between the Yankee and the backwoodsman, the two figures held one quality in common that permitted their merger into a single American national character. That quality was identified by a British traveler named Lady Emmeline Stuart Worthey, who toured America in the 1840s. "It is said," she wrote, that "if you ask a Connecticut Yankee in any part of the world how he is, he will, if not 'sick,' answer 'moving, Sir,' equivalent to saying 'well'; for, if well, he is sure to be on the move."[121] In all his guises, the American confidence man displayed an abundance of what George Pierson has called the "M-factor" that has shaped the American national character: movement, migration, mobility. He was, first of all, a wanderer, independent of any fixed social nexus of community, family, or permanent friends. His geographical mobility determined a second distinguishing characteristic: his upward social mobility. As Pierson argues, "In a new community (frontier or town) family and past performance hardly count. Everyone has to make his own mark, and stands equal with his fellow-strangers. The social competition, as it were, starts over, with all the camaraderie and 'gamesmanship' of a new catch-as-catch-can."[122] As a wanderer, the confidence man was eternally self-aggrandizing. Blessed with superior wit, skill in the use of resources, adaptability and enthusiasm, he was a one-man enterprise, inspired as much by the beauty of his scheme as by the need for aggrandizement.[123] In the theoretically fluid, open social world of the Age of Jackson, the trickster emerged as the archetypal American because the trickster represented man-on-the-make.

The image of the Yankee, as William R. Taylor has argued, was ambiguous.[124] On the one hand, he was mercenary, hypocritical, philistine, an evil genius of duplicity whose sharp practices exploited the confidence placed in him by his fellow men. But on the other hand, he was thrifty, industrious, ascetic, "a cracker barrel mentor, a Romantic rustic given to apothegms on trust in oneself, in one's fellow man, and in the benevolence of 'Natur.' " In his more attractive guises, he was not simply a confidence man, but a "man of confidence," uniquely suited to represent the American nation in an age of democratic patriotism, Romanticism, and expanding capitalism.[125] At first glance, this attractive Yankee figure appears vastly

different from the confidence man of the advice manuals who threatened to destroy the character of the rising generation. But the scenario of the confidence game as sketched in antebellum advice literature carried its own ambiguities. The contaminating powers of the confidence man sprang from his social formlessness, his marginality, but his youthful victim was also socially formless, liminal. The confidence man was selfish, self-aggrandizing, but the youth too was seeking to make his fortune in the "open society." It is most significant that the confidence man's final purpose was to recruit the American youth to his own ranks, to lure his victim "until your character and destiny become identified with his own." Here lay the deepest fear buried in the confidence game of antebellum advice literature: that the youth himself might become a confidence man, that his worst enemy lurked not in the city streets but within his own breast. And here lay also the attractive powers of the confidence man. For the youth to become successful, he himself might have to learn the tricks of the confidence man.

Historians of American success mythology have recognized that, although antebellum Americans threw themselves into the cult of self-improvement, many nonetheless expressed anxiety about the American pursuit of the main chance. In *Apostles of the Self-Made Man,* John G. Cawelti argues that many were uneasy about the conflict between the pursuit of individual success and traditional social and religious ideals. Alternatively, Fred Somkin, in *Unquiet Eagle,* has stressed the republican foundation of popular concerns about America's growing prosperity, which raised the old spectre of luxury and extravagance.[126] But the anxieties about social mobility that were expressed in the scenario of the confidence game went far deeper than Cawelti and Somkin have suggested. The confidence man served as a symbolic expression of the dangers of marginality in a society of placeless men. In this "era of the common man," when most Americans claimed to be middle-class, and when to be middle-class was to be socially fluid, a majority of Americans appeared to be liminal men who defied social classification. And the American youth entering the city in pursuit of fame and fortune symbolically captured the liminality of the placeless American. It was his liminality that made him susceptible to the seductions of confidence men, and ultimately threatened him with recruitment to their ranks. Somehow, the middle-class culture of social mobility emerging in America after 1830 would have to come to terms with this fearful spectre of the confidence man.

Hypocrisy and Sincerity in the World of Strangers

In warning the American youth not to be seduced by the evil confidence man, antebellum advice manuals were cautioning him above all not to become a confidence man himself. And in warning him against the contagious moral leprosy of the confidence man, the advice manuals focused on a single evil trait: hypocrisy. The youth who was successfully recruited into the ranks of confidence men became a "fiend of hell, disguised in the robes of honor and purity," who destroyed his victims "by his fascinating arts and deep hypocrisy."[1] The advisers' broadest fear was not simply that a small corps of confidence men roamed American society, but that an entire generation of Americans was being tainted with hypocrisy:

> Instead of acting in open daylight, pursuing the direct and straight-forward path of rectitude and duty, you see men, extensively, putting on false appearances; working in the dark, and carrying their plans by stratagem and deceit. Nothing open, nothing direct and honest; one thing is said, and another thing meant. When you look for a man in one place, you find him in another. With flattering lips and a double heart do they speak. Their language and conduct do not proceed from fixed principle and open hearted sincerity; but from a spirit of duplicity and management.[2]

The confidence man personified the pervasive duplicity of the rising generation.

As shown in chapter 1, the young men streaming into the cities of antebellum America were viewed as potential tricksters because of