MELVILLE'S CRAFT AND THEME OF LANGUAGE DEBASED IN *THE CONFIDENCE-MAN*

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For twenty years or so critics have been praising Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerades,* but the novel still remains a coterie book. It may be a favorite of the academic mind trained in the New Criticism, but often it seems a treadmill of tiresome repetition to readers disappointed by the absence of fiction's conventional accoutrements. An unfolding story, rounded characters, movement, speech tags, telling gestures—Melville either sprinkles these parsimoniously, if delectably, or flatly spurns these familiar appointments of fiction. It is as if he, like John Barth's *persona* a century later, had wearied of the novelist's usual business: " To move folks about, to give them locales and disposition, past histories and crossed paths—it bored me, I hadn't taste or gumption for it."[1] Melville's own state of ennui is a moot point, but his omission of much of the fiction craftsman's stock in trade raises important questions about why, when he pursues no innovative form for fiction, he excludes so many furnishings that would make his novel " readable," then dares send his reader through a verbal gauntlet so challenging that, as Warner Berthoff remarks, " the most approving reader can take in hardly more than twenty pages at a time."[2] Daniel Hoffman describes Melville's organization as " the dialectical development of ideas " resembling platonic dialogue, though substituting for " truth-loving, steadfast Socrates, the obscurantist, slippery confidence man."[3] Thematically, as a number of critics have pointed out, the repeated verbal cony-catching damns the crass American Wall Street spirit and its debased cultural ramifications. But such structural and thematic explication cannot account for Melville's

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[1] John Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. xx.

[2] Warner Berthoff, *The Example of Melville* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 60.

[3] Daniel G. Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 288-89.

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obsessive insistence that his reader attend closely not to dynamic
action, but to equivocating and obfuscating narrative, and to
quasi-socratic dialogues rife with jingoism, choplogic, false ana-
logy, and words that change meanings as easily as the con-
fidence man slips into new disguises. Recent attention to *The
Confidence-Man* has dealt in the main with its generic definition,
with Melville's sources for it, and with its relations to Melville's
other works.[4] But very little has been said about Melville's
thematic reasons for being such a martinet to his audience,
handicapping readers with his eccentric craftsmanship. To under-
stand the motivation for Melville's onerous charge to his reader,
one must deal both with the nature of his craft, and with his
conviction that language had become the meanest stuff of swindle
because it was severed from its ethical and communicative
functions.

Melville does at intervals construct islands of visually rich
description: Goneril chewing her sticks of blue clay, the Soldier
of Fortune with legs swinging " Stiff as icicles," like a " ship's
long barometer on gimbals," and the " round-backed, baker-
kneed man " who " slunk obliquely behind." [5] In these images,
as in such intermittent similes as that of the wooden-legged man
" morosely grave as a criminal judge with a mustard plaster on
his back " (p. 33), Melville cannot resist his propensity for

[4] Since Richard Chase's *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York: Macmillan,
1949) rescued *The Confidence-Man* from critical obscurity, the thrust of discussion
about the work has concerned structural-generic problems. See, for instance, Ronald
Mason, *The Spirit Above the Dust* (London, 1951); Daniel G. Hoffman, *op. cit.*;
Walter Dubler, " Theme and Structure in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*," *AL*, 33
(1961), 307-19; John Cawelti, " Some Notes on the Structure of *The Confidence-Man*,"
AL, 29 (1957), 278-88; James E. Miller, Jr., " *The Confidence-Man*: His Guises,"
PMLA, 74 (1959), 102-11. Recent Melville studies have attempted to place *The
Confidence-Man* structurally apposite to Melville's other works, or to locate its place
developmentally in the canon of Melville's writings. See John Seelye, *Melville: The
Ironic Diagram* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970); Edgar Dryden, *Mel-
ville's Thematics of Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969); Alan Lebowitz, *Progress
into Silence* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970). Virtually all critics make
note of the limitations of reason and logic in the novel. Richard Chase mentions
Melville's criticism of his age's " fondness for uplifting rhetoric " (p. 206); and Daniel
Hoffman discusses Melville's uses of parable and indictment of rationality as a means
toward moral corrective (pp. 288-89, 311). But as yet no one has discussed at length
Melville's theme of debased language, and the relation of that theme to his
craftsmanship.

[5] Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerades*, ed. Elizabeth S. Foster
(New York: Hendricks House, 1954), pp. 65, 105, 129. All references to the novel
are to this edition, and page numbers are hereafter cited in my text.

visual play. But portraiture is generally minimal in *The Confidence-Man* and, moreover, fragmented. We are told of lantern jaws, hook-noses, ruddy cheeks, but seldom about the entire face. The man " with " takes precedence over the man " who "; nor do the prepositional accessories (the weed of mourning, the gray suit, the traveling-cap) stir the imagination to envision the figures they pertain to. Melville gives his own *apologia* for suppression of portraiture, arguing that fiction in which characters can be " comprehended at a glance either exhibits but sections of character . . . or else is very untrue to reality " (pp. 76-77). The aggregation of con men may perhaps be thought to form *in toto* a demonic and misanthropic Dorian Gray, but apart from this the reader is seldom moved by evocative portraiture.

Nor is he roused to visualize action. There is no plot movement and few telling gestures or tics. In sum, we miss the theatrical business that keeps a reader's eye on the novelist's scene and enables him to infer character and motivation. For instance, in the discussion following the story of Indian-hating Colonel John Moredock (Chap. XXVIII), Melville presents fifteen successive speeches bereft of name tags or of any background activity at all. Paragraph indentations become one's only clue to the identity of speakers as the topic strays afield to Dr. Johnson's possible misanthropy posited from the Augustan's incredulity about the Lisbon earthquake. At this point in the novel the two discussants, the cosmopolitan and the stranger (soon to be revealed as Frank Goodman and Charles Arnold Noble) are slight acquaintances to each other, as the reader is to both of them. Yet during their talk Meville provides no visual clues nor even differentiation of speech idiom, and only at the very end of the scene (at the twentieth speech, in fact) does he have the two shake hands and perform a little skit. This construct is a recurrent pattern in *The Confidence-Man*. Only the continuous serpentine wrigglings and writhings of the devilish extortionists evince Melville's full awareness of a need for the thematic reinforcements of action. Otherwise he operates in the fashion of the cosmopolitan about to hear the Colonel Moredock story: " to intensify the sense of hearing, he seemed to sink the sense of sight " (p. 162).

In fact, Melville enhances readers' aural sensitivity with his frequent and multifarious adverbial constructs. Characters speak " feverishly," " in a manly, business-like way," " in mild surprise," " in a convulsed voice," " with an air of bland protest," etc.

Further, Melville works to render pitch and timbre precisely in extensive descriptions of voices. The man in gray, for instance, has " a not unsilvery tongue, with gestures that were a Pentecost of added ones, and persuasiveness before which granite hearts might crumble into gravel " (p. 47). And the homespun Titan has a " voice deep and lonesome enough to have come from the bottom of an abandoned coal-shaft " (p. 97). It is important that in a novel pictorially spare and slighting of action Melville expends a great deal of descriptive power delineating qualities of voice.

If primarily the reader is not to see, but to listen, he is nonetheless prevented from linking much of what he hears to its sources. Especially in the long digressive stories that vary the relentless dialectic cycles, Melville insists (rather awkwardly at that) that the language of narration is not the language of the narrator. The authorial voice says of Goneril's account, " We shall venture to tell it in other words " than those of the merchant just launching into it (p. 64). Later the Missourian's foreword to the history of Colonel Moredock is that, " having heard Judge Hall's account," he " can render the judge upon the colonel almost word for word " (p. 161). The story told, he reminds his hearer that he had given him " not my story, mind, or my thoughts, but another's " (p. 176). And Egbert prefaces the tale of China Aster with the remark that " the original story-teller has so tyrannized over me, that it is quite impossible for me to repeat his incidents without sliding into his style " (p. 233). These tales at second hand make their narrators conduits only, dissociating them from any experiential action or moral weight the stories might bear. Even when, in his own language, Frank Goodman tells the parable of the St. Louis merchant Charlemont, he immediately denies its truth and avers its point as amusement only. Repeatedly Melville blocks the motivational character inferences invited by revealed personal history in conventional fiction.

Further, for the most part he omits biography just as he is niggardly about portraiture and activity. Although the *Fidèle* assemblage consists mainly of nineteenth-century American men of action, Melville refuses to have them elaborate upon his thumbnail sketches of them. There are no first-hand frontier stories, salesmen's anecdotes, or commercial deeds of high emprise—all of which could easily be structured to reinforce most of the themes of the novel. Finally, except for the dialect of Black

Guinea, there is a paucity of individualizing manners of speech.

By depersonalizing dialogue, divorcing speeches from speakers, and restraining visual evocation, Melville forces his reader to focus largely upon the entity of language, itself horrendously corrupted and debased. Neither does Melville permit aural inattentiveness to the woeful abuses of it. A close reader is taxed throughout to discern both blatant and subtle flaws in the rhetoric, and indirectly he is enjoined to deplore them. The debasement of language is, in fact, a salient theme in *The Confidence-Man,* and the one which very likely bound Melville to these eccentricities of craftsmanship. For to keep his reader attuned to appalling verbal corruption, Melville had to distance him from intertwined lives of visually palpable characters, lest familiarity with the con men breed a sympathetic understanding rather than the intended contempt. Among others, Leon Seltzer points out the ways by which indirectly Melville conveys his "fundamental aversion for the cunning operator," especially in images of snakes and misanthropes.[6] But since Melville's narrative voice is no omniscient repository of truth or of fixed ethical standards, he cannot intrude overtly his condemnation of the flawed figures of thought. What he can and does do, however, is omit all rhetorical techniques of fiction that might obscure or, worse, vindicate the debasement of language he deplores. He thus gives none of his characters foibles that might make abuses of language a forgivable or even sympathetic trait. His signposts to specious rhetoric are the intermittent condemnations of the verbal conniver by the "Canada thistle," Missouri bachelor, and Homespun Titan. But the closest Melville can come to outright indictment of the verbal swindler is to have an unknown voice call from a berth in the darkness, "Who's that describing the confidence-man?" (p. 274). For the rest, discernment of the abuses of language is Melville's authorial charge to his reader.

To get some sense of the basis for that injunction, it is necessary to speculate briefly about Melville's view of his intended reader. William Charvat calls *The Confidence-Man* Melville's "uncompromising, strictly non-commercial novel," yet demonstrates that in the five-year interval between the publicly unsuccessful *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* Melville had not

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[6] Leon Seltzer, "Camus's Absurd and the World of Melville's *Confidence-Man,*" *PMLA,* 82 (1967), 24-26.

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abandoned the public he was at loggerheads with.[7] Yet neither in *Pierre* had he successfully wooed that public by his intended concealment of "profundities under a pleasant or sensational narrative surface through which the reader looking for mere diversion could not penetrate."[8] That he drops those diversionary tactics completely in *The Confidence-Man* really indicates the likelihood, not that Melville withdrew to write for himself alone, but that he deliberately shucked off some segment of his public, namely "the tribe of 'general readers'" or, as he otherwise called them, the "superficial skimmers."[9] He evidently now anticipated an audience "fit though few," and designed *The Confidence-Man* as a way to teach his attentive, select listeners what the immoral Wall Street spirit and its ramifications had done to language in America.

Since the late 1840's Melville had heard such slogans as "Fifty-four forty or fight," "free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men," and "fight on and fight ever." That is, he had confronted one effect of popular culture upon language. As George Steiner remarks, "What save half-truths, gross simplifications, or trivia can be communicated to that semi-literate mass audience which popular democracy has summoned to the market place?"[10] Steiner adds that "only in a diminished or corrupted language can most such communication be made effective," that is, effective as persuasion evoking thoughtless assent. In Melville's novel the confidence man's continuous semantic by-pass, specifically his tireless injunctions to his hearers to have heart-felt confidence, is precisely this kind of "effective" talk. What's more, Melville lards *The Confidence-Man* with mindless homilies ("better cold lather than a cold heart," "humble pie before proud cake," "it is small beer that sours") as empty as the slogans current in his

[7] See William Chavat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870*, ed. Matthew J. Brucolli (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1968), p. 256. Charvat lists not only the publication of *Israel Potter*, but also Melville's contributions to periodicals, his lectures, and other works both planned and begun.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 275.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 274, 214. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), writes that "it is not, after all, only an image of himself that the author creates. Every stroke implying his second self will help to mold the reader into the kind of person suited to appreciate such a character and the book he is writing. But this act of communication, fundamental to the very existence of literature, has in modern criticism often been ignored, lamented, or denied" (p. 89).

[10] George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 26.

culture, yet uttered with a solemnity that defies picayune inquiry about real meaning.[11]

Furthermore, Melville could not have escaped the doubly disconcerting awareness that if popular democracy in the market place had debased verbal communication, words in America had also become tools for the perversion of ethics. Daniel Webster, for instance, had enraged New England by his support of the Compromise of 1850, including the Fugitive Slave Act. His grandiloquent rhetoric had served an immoral cause so flagrantly that Whittier declared " Ichabod " dead, seduced by the original confidence man, Satan. Long before writing *The Confidence-Man* Melville had reacted to the susceptibility of language to cant and to expedient pseudo-ethics. Leon Howard remarks that he had a " disillusioned dislike of American politicians and their demagoguery " and expressed " irritation at the rhetorical chauvinism which was one of the dominant characteristics of American politics at the time." [12] And Jay Leyda points to Melville's desciption in *Mardi* of the grand council of Vivenza, in which buzzard-like Senator William Allen " was laboring under violent paroxysms " and, despite others' efforts to restrain him, " burst anew into his delirium, while . . . the rest of the assembly seemed wholly engrossed with themselves." [13] In *The Confidence-Man* Melville refines burlesque into verbal irony, but for years he had seen his protagonist's stock in trade in contemporary culture, and could thus admonish his reader that " it is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie " (p. 199). Melville's transposition of the mid-nineteenth-century verbal paraphernalia into *The Confidence-Man* only magnified it, in his own words, as " more reality than life itself can show " (p. 199).

The philosophical foundation for Melville's theme of language corrupted is essentially Aristotelian, even if Melville was more of a cursory pupil than a careful scholar of the *Ethics* and *Politics*.[14] As a writer he was probably sympathetic to Aristotle's

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[11] For discussion of the bases for and manifestations of popular rhetoric in mid-nineteenth-century America, see Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture 1840-1861* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1959).

[12] Leon Howard, *Herman Melville* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1967), p. 124.

[13] Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), I, 235-36.

[14] To some degree Melville's acquaintance with Aristotelian ethics came from Spenser, who in *The Fairie Queene* says he borrowed the twelve moral virtues from him. See

view of man as a creature primarily of the word; but more specifically Aristotle had described a nexus of language, ethics, and society, indicating that reasoning powers and the inculcation of ethical norms are correlative functions of language in the social body which works for the best material and spiritual interests of its members.[15] This powerful linguistic, ethical, and social bond is not, of course, restricted to the hypothetical confines of Aristotle's writings, and Melville's own first-hand observations might have led him to recognize (or, more likely, to reinforce a bookish sense of) that interrelation, one which B. F. Skinner describes in functional terms that are analogous in meaning to the Aristotelian postulates.[16] The importance of this triad in *The Confidence-Man* lies in its conjoint nature. Because of their interdependence the components are influenced mutually. Should one be flawed, the others become defective as well. As Emerson had written, "The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language."[17] Thus, when society is dissolute, the nice balance is

John W. Shroeder, "Sources and Symbols for Melville's *Confidence-Man*," *PMLA* 66 (1951), 363-80. In 1859 Melville disappointed two Williams College undergraduates by exalting "Homeric times" when they had hoped instead to reminisce about the South Seas. Afterward one complained that "the shade of Aristotle rose like a cold mist between myself and Fayaway" (*The Melville Log*, II, 605). If as Elizabeth Foster asserts, "Melville seems not to have known Aristotle with any great familiarity and accuracy, in spite of the fact that his works contain numerous references to him" (p. 346), still a cursory scanning of the *Ethics* and *Politics* might well have been the basis for Melville's conviction that debased language was a corollary of an ethically debased society.

[15] See John H. Randall, Jr., *Aristotle* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1960), p. 254: "The excellences or *aretai* of the individual are formed in the *polis*, in society, and they can function only in the *polis*. . . . Hence, 'society,' the *polis*, exists 'by nature,' *physei*; and man is 'by nature' a social animal, a *zoon politikon*, an animal who lives in a *polis*. . . . The 'reason why' man lives in a *polis*, *to dioti*, is that alone of all animals man possesses *logos*, the power of speech. It is significant that the same *logos* that makes man a 'rational animal' in its sense of 'reason,' also, in its sense of discourse and language, makes him a 'political' or social animal. For speech serves to indicate the right and the wrong. Through speech it is man alone who has a sense of good and bad, right and wrong."

[16] B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 324-25: "The principal technique employed in the control of the individual by any group of people who have lived together for a sufficient length of time is as follows. The behavior of the individual is classified as either 'good' or 'bad' or, to the same effect, 'right' or 'wrong' and is reinforced or punished accordingly. . . . The group as a whole seldom draws up a formal classification of behavior as good or bad. A sort of informal codification takes place, however, when the terms themselves come to be used in reinforcement. Perhaps the commonest generalized reinforcers are the verbal stimuli 'Good,' 'Right,' 'Bad,' and 'Wrong.'" Skinner adds that "selfish behavior is restrained, and altruism encouraged" (p. 327).

[17] *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. I (Boston and New York, 1904), 35.

destroyed—which is exactly the situation in *The Confidence-Man*.

Predatory maneuverings are not the sole index of social dissolution in the novel. Melville at the outset emphasizes the absence of mutual human responsibility among the *Fidèle* assemblage. Of all Melville's water-borne settings, only that of *The Confidence-Man* deals, not with interworking crewmen, but with disjunctive passengers which the "Mississippi pours along, helter-skelter" (p. 8). Even prior acquaintance establishes no human bond, for Black Guinea's vouching "ge'mmen" are not readily to be found when he needs "documentary proof." Lacking responsible human affiliations, Melville's figures evince only that spurious commonwealth, gregariousness, without which they languish. Pitch aptly characterizes it when he asks, "How came your fellow-creature, Cain, after the first murder, to go and build the first city? And why is it that the modern Cain dreads nothing so much as solitary confinement?" (p. 156). The man with the traveling-cap certainly abjures solitude, for "lightly moving to and fro, [he] looks animatedly about him, with a yearning sort of gratulatory affinity and longing, expressive of the very soul of sociality" (p. 58). But his "longing" is for a dupe eager to buy the bogus *Black Rapids* coal stock. Likewise, solitude sinks the man in gray into lassitude, for "society his stimulus, loneliness was his lethargy" (p. 48). He goes "laggardly into the ladies' saloon," there to revivify himself by bilking the kind-hearted woman of twenty dollars. By definition a gregarious animal, the confidence man plies his craft virtually unchecked in the novel because, as the narrator hints, "natural law ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member" (p. 8).

With society unraveled in *The Confidence-Man*, ethical norms turn fugitive, hinging on so slight a point as a man's digestion, "upon which so much depends" (p. 251). As Charlie Noble says,

"The difference between this man and that man is not so great as the difference between what the same man be to-day and what he may be in days to come. For there is no bent of heart or turn of

It is possible that Emerson enhanced Melville's consciousness of causality in debasement of language. Emerson further wrote, "When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires, the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise,— and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults."

thought which any man holds by virtue of an unalterable nature of 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 thowing the dice." (p. 251)

In reply Frank accuses his companion of inconsistency, which really verifies Charlie's point, even if he is piqued by " an allusion little flattering to his originality." As to *that* quality, Melville works persistently to establish how very unoriginal is the confidence man, how rather typical of the age he is. His singularity, touted early-on as " original genius," is doubted when a hook-nosed discussant says of the conniving herb-doctor, " as this age goes, not much originality about that " (p. 104). At the last Melville's authorial voice intervenes to say that in point of fact a novelist finds his character in a kind of urban human stock show, in consequence of which there is " something prevailingly local, or of the age " in the ostensibly original characters in his fiction. By this Melville indicates that, in whatever masquerade, the confidence man is typical of mid-nineteenth-century America. Ethically wanting, his norms shift from moment to moment, and a dissolute society shares his lack. This is why Black Guinea, dolorous at the pitch-penny game, turns inhumanly dogfaced, " as if instinct told it that the right or the wrong might not have overmuch to do with whatever wayward mood superior [i. e., human] intelligences might yield to " (p. 11).

Since language is the symbolic cache of ethical commitment, the diction of ethics becomes a very cheap commodity whenever, as in *The Confidence-Man*, the commitment is lacking. Indeed, by demonstrating egocentric uses of ethical terms for dubious reasons, Melville reveals his theme of language deplorably corrupted. First, ethical words become interchangeable in the *non sequiturs* of *The Confidence-Man*. The man with the weed assures the sophomore that " even were there truth in Tacitus, such truth would have the operation of falsity " (p. 28). And the herb-doctor who talks " so glib, so pat, so well " tells the sick man that " from evil comes good " (pp. 102, 94). Moreover, such words are contorted hedonistically. The Bone-setter dubs himself the " Happy Man " because he is smugly pleased to do " some little good to the world " (p. 106). And the man in gray inquires about the " Canada thistle " who, " even were truth on his tongue, his way of speaking it would make truth almost

offensive as falsehood " (p. 34). Later the merchant is just so truthfully offensive, for, quaffing champagne, he declares that "wine is good, and confidence is good," but that neither can percolate downward and "drop warmly and ruddily into the cold cave of truth " (p. 74). Quickly his companion in the traveling-cap tries to restore confidence against such "mad disclosures," and the merchant retires in hope that these disquieting revelations are suppressed beneath "confidence restored." The cosmopolitan sums up the case for hedonistic pseudo-ethics when he says of the passage from the Apocrypha, "Wisdom, indeed! What an ugly thing wisdom must be! Give me the folly that dimples the cheek, say I, rather than the wisdom that curdles the blood " (p. 276). In *The Confidence-Man* truth and goodness are determined by a pleasure principal that relegates the offensive to falsity and evil.

The language of ethics also becomes a legitimizing imprimatur to reprehensible careers. The mercantile philanthropist's notion of doing good is of a single stroke briskly executed. "This doing good to the world by driblets amounts," he says, "to just no-thing." He is for "doing good to the world once for all and having done with it " (p. 46). His "retail philanthropy " for "better profit " subsumes the ethical word which, undefined, lends a patina of legitimacy to his methods. Similarly, as Colonel Moredock's "instinct of antipathy against an Indian grows in the backwoodsman with the sense of good and bad, right and wrong " (p. 165), the antinomies are never suggested to be abrasive, for both ethics and killer instinct appear as the bedfellows of maturation.

Marius Bewley believes that the paradox of democracy is responsible for the morally baffled tenor of Melville's late fiction, including *The Confidence-Man*. He writes that while democracy is predicated upon "belief in social and political improvement " within a "working idea of good and evil, it makes it extremely difficult to tell them apart." Bewley feels that Melville finally confronted "a tragic confusion in which good and evil were indis-tinguishable." [18] Indications are, however, that Melville was not personally baffled by a muddling of good and evil, but that he understood the self-righteousness and tenacious hold of his age on the language of ethics, when the age had really lost all ongoing

[18] Marius Bewley, *The Eccentric Design* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 187-91.

ethical conviction. It is this view that leads him in *The Confidence-Man* to call goodness a "noun, a common one in every language" (p. 39). The part of speech is useful, even if it has no workable referent. Melville was extremely sensitive, in sum, to disparities—and sometimes inversions—between non-moral or immoral actualities and the rhetorically virtuous representations of them.

The Melville Log contains evidence of Melville's fascination with language as appearance at odds with the actual state of things. In 1848 he acquired *Seneca's Morals by Abstract* and wrote in the margin:

It is indeed undeniable, that in Seneca & other of the old philosophers, we meet with maxims of actual life, & lessons of practical wisdom which not only equal but exceed any thing in the Scriptures.—But behold the force of example, & its omnipotence over mere precepts however lofty. Seneca's life belied his philosophy; but that of Christ went beyond his own teachings.[19]

Two years later he scored the following passage from Isaiah 5:20:

Woe unto them that call evil good, and good, evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.[20]

It is in part this kind of inversion between reality and verbal appearance that provokes Melville's criticism of Franklin in *Israel Potter* (1855). Windy and platitudinous as the Doctor is, Melville calls him "a tanned Machiavelli in tents," a "household Plato," and "a labyrinth-minded but plain-spoken broadbrim." [21] What irked Melville was not only the obtuse yet pious discourses of Franklin, but the great gap between Poor Richard's plain talk and Franklin's own manipulative mental intricacies.

Such disparities recur thematically in *The Confidence-Man*, usually with ethical implications. When first they meet, Charlie says to the cosmopolitan, "I always speak a good word for man; and what is more, am always ready to do a good deed for him" (p. 179). Here the ethical word is spoken, but the corroborating good deed is held only in perpetual readiness, as far as we know never executed. In fact, the figure in the traveling-cap admits to having no ethical motivation to substantiate his language. He

[19] *The Melville Log*, I, 285.
[20] *Ibid.*, I, 370.
[21] *Israel Potter* (New York: Putnam, 1855), pp. 77-79.

says that "if by words, casually delivered in the social hour, I do any good to right or left, it is but involuntary influence—locust-tree sweetening the herbage under it; no merit at all; mere wholesome accident" (pp. 60-61). Throughout *The Confidence-Man* we see the appropriation of ethical terms for divers egocentric uses. In effect, the terms become self-gratifying nonsense syllables because those who use them neither respect nor believe in their normative referents.

Communication falters, too, when in the novel logic and reason succumb to the greed of self-interest. George Steiner remarks that "a writer who feels that the condition of language is in question, that the word may be losing something of its humane genius, may seek to render his own idiom representative of the general crisis, to convey through it the precariousness and vulnerability of the communicative act." [22] Certainly Melville repeatedly destroys the integrity of speech in *The Confidence-Man* by denying its communicative function, and asserting spoken language instead as matter of manipulation, expediency, and the posting of private psychic property. For instance, Melville's savage parody of Emerson is based not only on his skepticism of Emersonian philosophy, but upon his ill regard for philosophical language so arcane as to exclude others from understanding it. In vain the cosmopolitan tries to pry from Mark Winsome a cogent definition of " — —," that allegedly ancient Egyptian term which Winsome obligingly translates in a sentence of Greek as " — — — —." The cosmopolitan's entreaties gain him only garbled, if oracular, pronouncements about mummies, life, and the Emperor of all the Russias (pp. 217-18). Mark Winsome's language, a private code that circumvents the sociality of a verbal interchange, is his means of retreat into a wholly private world, a retreat especially ironic in view of Emerson's professed admiration for the American vernacular. To Melville, still writing for a public, such use of language as a social barrier is egregious self-indulgence. And if Emerson's language is a retreat by way of "oracular gibberish," the Franklinesque circumlocutions of the herb-doctor are a self-imposed boundary of language between him and fresh experience.[23] Elizabeth Foster observes that the gist of the doctor's

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[22] *Language and Silence*, p. 49.
[23] *The Melville Log*, I, 287. Franklin may have been Melville's special target of the Enlightenment because in the *Autobiography* he proposed his grand scheme for

speech to the crippled "Soldier of Fortune" is an argument typical of the Enlightenment view that "partial evil is universal good" (p. lxi). Assuming the role of comforter as he speaks, the doctor really manages to comfort *himself* by forgetting that the victim of social injustice before him is bound to his crutches. His speech is self-mollifying as he faces a phenomenon which, confronted disinterestedly, would cast doubt on the very precepts he so glibly expounds.

Instead of communicative acts, dialogue in *The Confidence-Man* is filled with verbal manipulation largely made possible by the condition which I. A. Richards describes succinctly: " The man engaged all his days in intricate (and preferably shady) negotiations most easily becomes an expert in divining other people's intentions." [24] Melville's favored technique for revealing shrewd verbal manipulation is to have the confidence man use a word his hearer is certain to intepret in a different sense from that of the con man's utterance. When the callow, greedy sophomore opines to the Black Rapids agent his sage conviction that experience is the only teacher, the devilish agent vows to be the collegian's pupil, "for it's only when experience speaks, that I can endure to listen to speculation" (p. 55). The sophomore replies, "My speculations, sir, have been chiefly governed by the maxims of Lord Bacon; I speculate in those philosophies which come home to my business and bosom—pray, do you know of any other good stocks?" Of course within a brief span the word "speculate" has shifted meaning from philosophical conjecture to financial investment. Flattered, the sophomore never divines that he has been manipulated. A similar exchange is that between Frank Goodman and Charlie Noble, in which the cosmopolitan first asks a question "with quiet forbearance, expressive of the patience of a superior mind, at the petulance of an inferior one" (p. 192). Soon he says outright to Charlie that he had begun to "feel the ill effect of an immature mind, too much consorting with a mature one" (p. 194). Of course he says it with blithe impunity, certain that Charlie will misinterpret to flatter himself, which he does, crying out in a "kind of tickled modesty" that

self-improvement based upon the moral virtues of Aristotle's *Ethics*. Melville's portrait of Franklin as Merlin-Machiavelli indicates skepticism about Franklin's ethics and reduces his ethical discourse to specious verbiage. See Robert E. Spiller, *The Oblique Light* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 42.

[24] I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929), p. 308.

his " is an understanding too weak to throw out grapnels and hug another to it." Both are gratified, for the cosmopolitan has his irony, and Charlie his puffed ego.

The cosmopolitan is especially clever at such ambiguity. When he draws up the written agreement with the barber, William Cream, the tonsor says,

" Why, in this paper here, you engage, sir to insure me against a certain loss, and—"
" Certain? Is it so *certain* you are going to lose? "
" Why, that way of taking the word may not be amiss, but I didn't mean it so. I meant a *certain* loss; you understand, a CERTAIN loss; that is to say, a certain loss." (p. 268)

Initially the word indicates some loss, but Frank introduces the notion of a destined loss, an additional meaning that seems to entrap the barber as he reiterates the word now burdened with a construction impeding his effort to use it precisely. The cosmopolitan is once caught at his game by the Missouri bachelor. Just after he says he must have " fellow creatures round me " and " thick, too—I must have them thick " (p. 156), the bachelor reminds him that the pick-pocket also loves humanity *en masse*. But he misses the cosmopolitan's double meaning of dim wit as well as numbers.

The comic function of Melville's technique is what Henri Bergson calls the reciprocal interference of series; but as it pertains to communication I. A. Richards' remarks about the mis-reading of poetry come closer to rendering the motivational basis of such misunderstanding:

Fundamentally, when any person misreads a poem, it is because, *as he is at that moment,* he wants to. The interpretation he puts upon words is the most agile and the most active among several interpretations that are within the possibilities of his mind. Every interpretation is motivated by some interest, and the idea that appears is the sign of these interests that are its unseen masters.[25]

Richards' observations are especially pertinent to those being gulled in *The Confidence-Man*. China Aster's dream, " in which a being in the guise of a smiling angel " pours gold dollars from a cornucopia, convinces the candle-maker that Orchis' loan check will bring prosperity. Recognizing the artisan's delusion, Old Plain Talk tries to rectify a crucial syntactical flaw. " China

[25] *Practical Criticism*, p. 229.

Aster," he says, "you tell me that an angel appeared to you in a dream. Now, what does that amount to but this, that you dreamed an angel appeared to you? Go right away, China Aster, and return the check" (p. 239). But the candle-maker does not, preferring to misinterpret. Similarly, Mark Winsome elsewhere evades definition of one of his abstruse terms, even as " a favor" to the cosmopolitan. He exclaims, "A favor! a bridal favor I understand, a knot of white ribands, a very beautiful type of the purity of true marriage; but of other favors I am yet to learn" (p. 217). Still, he concedes (and selfishly in the passive voice) an awareness that one meaning of " favor " is " some poor, unheroic submission to being done good to," and thus admits to his wilful misinterpretation of the term.

Significantly, then, it is not only the verbal manipulator who subverts the communicative function of language, but also the dupe, who purposefully misunderstands for self-gratification. By tacit consent of both parties, word meanings shift, and neither connotations nor even denotations remain firm.[26] In some part Melville is demonstrating his own versatility, as in his description of the beautiful Tennessee lady of " a liberal mould " and " liberal education," who after marriage was " liberal to a fault " (pp. 33-34). But recurrently he evinces deep concern that insidious uses of language have supplanted open and frank communication. Pitch alone, of all figures in *The Confidence-Man*, recognizes the manipulative euphemism and calls it for what it is. Asked by the wheedling P. I. O. agent whether his agency might not " accommodate " Pitch with a man, the Missourian varies his pitch in reply:

" Accommodate? Pray, no doubt you could accommodate me with a bosom-friend too, couldn't you? Accommodate! Obliging word accommodate: there's accommodation notes now, where one accommodates another with a loan, and if he don't pay it pretty quickly accommodates him with a chain to his foot. Accommodate! God forbid that I should ever be accommodated." (p. 131)

[26] See Edward Mitchell, "From Action to Essence: Some Notes on the Structure of Melville's *The Confidence-Man*," *AL*, 40 (1968), 27-37. Mitchell writes that " any man who puts confidence in another is a potential, if not actual, victim, just as any man who solicits confidence from another is a potential, if not actual confidence man. Since essence is determined by action, the implication is that the roles of confidence man and victim are potentially interchangeable, depending upon which ' direction,' in any given instance, the activity flows " (p. 33).

But of course God does not forbid, and Pitch eventually succumbs.

When language is not employed for euphemistic wheedling, it is likely on the speaker's part to be ostensible communication only, a verbal mask hiding other motives. Again, it is Pitch who recognizes such verbal chicanery when, for instance, he cries to the P. I. O. agent, " Gammon! You don't mean what you say " (p. 135). But Pitch has had the hard experience of accepting the mask without probing the motives. He recounts the roguishness of his erstwhile boy number thirty, who neglected stable chores and broke a hoe to avoid using it. Pitch says, " But the more he abused my service, the more polite he grew. . . . Very politely stole my pears, odd pennies, shillings, dollars, and nuts; regular squirrel at it." Pitch's admonition to him is that " a little less politeness and a little more honesty would suit me better " (p. 134). Melville is quite explicit about potential costs to victims of such verbal politesse, for toward the end of *The Confidence-Man* he unmasks the saccharine misanthrope when the barber recalls to the cosmopolitan " what the son of Sirach says in the True Book: 'An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips ' " (p. 267). That night in the cabin the cosmopolitan 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 ' " (p. 274). Of course the cosmopolitan is relieved to find that the barber's " True Book " is the Apocrypha, a word which " says as much as ' not warranted,' " which " implies something of uncertain credit " (p. 275). But the cosmopolitan's sanction for continued hypocrises cannot in the reader's mind overturn that summary definition of the protean potagonist. The verbal mask at odds with motives is in *The Confidence-Man* Melville's discursive correlative to ethical diction unverified by ethical commitment.

Not only does Melville reveal language to be communicatively sacrificed for smug insularity, manipulation, and misrepresentation, but he reduces logic, its very architectonics, to sophistical execise whose only governing rule is expediency. For instance, Charlie on the shared pretense that he and Frank are lifelong friends, cites the mature basis of his early attraction to his companion: " Though our friendship began in boyhood, think

not that, on my side at least, it began injudiciously. Boys are little men it is said " (p. 231). But when for aid Frank appeals to Charlie's recollection of that romantically shared boyhood when the two " went nutting " and " walked the woods, arms wreathed about each other," he is cut short with " Pish! we were boys " (p. 232). Indeed, Mark Winsome makes a virtue of inconsistency when Melville plays upon Emerson's " foolish consistency," that " hobgoblin of little minds." " Since nature is nearly all hill and dale," says Winsome, " how can one keep naturally advancing in knowledge without submitting to the natural inequalities in the progress? " (pp. 216-17). He then absurdly likens advances in knowledge to flotation through the Erie Canal locks.

Even when argument is true to its premises, those are likely to be false if there exists a good chance of winning over a mark. The P. I. O. agent finally seduces Pitch with an extended false analogy of a rascally boy promising as a dormant lily bud and as likely to mellow as new wine. The rascal's moral blemishes will recede like his acne, for his juvenile sickness is as poor May maize destined, as even Pitch is deluded into believing, to " thrive up into the stiff, stately spear of August " (p. 143). Pitch does resist the agent for a time, calling him a " wordy man " and denouncing his specious arguments in want of ethical basis. " Is analogy argument? " he asks, calling the agent one who puns " with ideas as another man may with words " (p. 141). " This knowledge of yours," he says, " which you haven't enough knowledge to know how to make a right use of, it should be taken from you " (p. 142). But the P. I. O. company man finds him vulnerable to the analogies which the agent dignifies as reason.

By exhibiting a series of figures who propound yet are susceptible to arguments terribly flawed in varied ways, Melville evinces his own skepticism about the value of reason. Leon Seltzer writes that Melville was not only " doubtful about the reasonableness of reason," but " also suspicious of its ethical value "; and that " since reason might vindicate any action one wished to take, it could hardly be understood as having any ethical commitments." [27] Indeed, Melville implies his skepticism from that very first scene in which the enigmatic man in cream colors proves to

[27] Leon Seltzer, *The Vision of Melville and Conrad* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1970), p. 24.

be a deaf-mute. About to demonstrate linguistic travesties of reason, Melville pointedly strips his Prologue of speech and hearing; for the other-worldly figure espousing lofty tenets of Christian ethics via his chalk board hints that the world of this novel is to be one morally defective in its ways of speaking and hearing. Throughout the novel Melville makes his skepticism increasingly explicit in the multiple tangents from which arguments are advanced, and also in the defectiveness of single argumentative structures. He works persistently to force his reader to inspect these, insisting again and again that his rhetorical constructs be examined as verbal action in and of themselves, and not as windows upon something else. Melville pays a price for his method. Even his devotées call *The Confidence-Man* " tedious " or " tiring to get through," [28] terms which seem not to indicate ennui, but rather fatigue, perhaps from the constant imperative to listen. Accustomed to engage several senses imaginatively in reading fiction, we find *The Confidence-Man* both sensuously constricting and yet exhausting in Melville's demand that we unremittingly tax to the utmost our powers of hearing. Indeed, Melville's structural implication in *The Confidence-Man* is that those not attuned throughout the work to the debasement of language are no doubt contributors to its devaluation, unwitting participants in Babel.

But what for those who do pursue this troublesome novel, apprehending and deploring the rhetorical quagmires even as they admire Melville's resources for revealing them? According to Leon Seltzer's reading, the absurd world of *The Confidence-Man* generically precludes the social correctives possible in satire. There is hope neither of redemption nor reform.[29] Yet Seltzer writes that " Melville, like the absurd man, is clearly seeking not what is desirable, but what is true "—and herein may well lie the crux of Melville's charge to his reader.[30] For Melville conveys belief that language, though insufficient for social reform, is for those sensitive and respectful to it most adequate to an under-

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[28] See Alan Lebowitz, *Progress into Silence*, p. 188; and Warner Berthoff, *The Example of Melville*, p. 60.

[29] At least two other critics doubt that generically *The Confidence-Man* is a satire, or even, as Elizabeth Foster feels, an allegory with satirical elements. Both Daniel Hoffman and Edward Mitchell join Seltzer in the position that what prevents the novel from being a satire is its lack of embodied precepts.

[30] Leon Seltzer, " Camus's Absurd and the World of Melville's *Confidence-Man*," p. 26.

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standing of the human condition in a socially disjunctive and ethically dissolute world. Accordingly, the novel itself is the embodiment of Melville's theme, for one can view *The Confidence-Man* as a manual of the epistemology of language. Melville himself works homeopathically, illuminating the real malaises of the world by deliberately exploiting rhetoric flawed, degraded, debauched. His readiness to do so indicates his own faith in the tonic powers of language.

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