

“Ship of Fools”:

Democracy and Religious Performance in Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*

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English

In Book VI of Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates, illustrating a thought experiment, describes a mutiny aboard a ship. During the mutiny, every member of the crew begins to jockey for the position of captain, and each sailor makes his case despite his apparent unfitness for the job. Without true steerage, or any qualified captain for the job, the ship drifts aimlessly. The sailor who might actually be able to command the ship—one who is attentive to the wind, stars, and other minute details of navigation—is never considered. Instead, Socrates explains, his fellow shipmates regard him as “a real stargazer, a babblers, and a good-for-nothing” (Plato 162).

This analogy of the “ship of fools,” which functions as one of Plato’s more potent critiques of democracy, provides an interesting way into examining Herman Melville’s famously difficult 1857 novel *The Confidence-Man, His Masquerade*. Plato lends his focus to his “true captain,” intending his audience to consider the qualities he believed a leader should possess. Yet, in his novel—even invoking Plato’s “ship of fools” in Chapter Three—Melville takes the opposite tact. Rather than emphasize democracy’s failings by denouncing groupthink and the tyranny of the majority (as Plato does), Melville examines the philosophical viewpoints of democracy’s “fools” in order to better understand the drifting political institution they inhabit. In particular, Melville is interested in using the variety of religious and political opinions aboard his “ship of

fools” to investigate the role that religion plays in American democracy, here figured as a steamship travelling the Mississippi River (on April Fool’s Day) ironically named *Fidele*. Through this, Melville echoes the political philosophy of Alexis de Tocqueville, as he goes about dramatizing Tocqueville’s observation that “when authority in the matter of religion no longer exists, nor in the matter of politics, men are soon frightened at the aspect of this limitless independence” (418). Melville’s novel seems an extended proof of Tocqueville’s assertion that democracy and secularism are mutually exclusive ends, as Melville explores the implications of what occurs once we throw the philosophical baby out with the bathwater.

Perhaps in part due to its resistance of traditional genre conventions, scholarship on *The Confidence-Man* is wide-ranging and often contradictory (much like the novel itself). Lawrence Thompson, in his seminal 1952 critical work *Melville’s Quarrel with God*, asserts that Melville’s Confidence Man acts as a shape-shifting agent of a malevolent God, preaching Christian doctrine only for selfish gain (Thompson 297). On the contrary, more contemporary critic Jonathan Cook calls the novel a “satirical apocalypse” and seems to take a diametrically opposite view: “*The Confidence-Man* is a literary theodicy dramatizing the author’s obsession with the problem of evil, the existence of God, and man’s limited capacity to know God or comprehend the truths that would justify the ways of God to man” (Cook 10). The novel’s inconsistency of message, as well as the difficulty of sometimes perceiving Melville’s subtle irony, allows these two supposedly diametrically opposed readings to both contain a kernel of truth. Yet, if we consider the novel as making an overall political statement rather than a simply theological one, these critical differences are perhaps easier to square. While Melville is

certainly interested in questions of God's justice and epistemological matters such as the availability of divine knowledge, *The Confidence-Man*—through its political and performative paradoxes—seems to also demonstrate how varieties of religious performance (and the ensuing uncertainty) serve to destabilize a democratic republic.¹

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Melville intends for his reader to consider the *Fidele* as a self-contained political institution. Of course, Melville uses the ship as a political microcosm elsewhere in his fiction. But, more than this, in the second chapter of *The Confidence-Man*, Melville specifically describes it as such: “the *Fidele*...might at distance have been taken by strangers for some whitewashed fort on a floating isle” (13). In this way, we see the *Fidele* as a contained political space (indeed a “fort”) that is forced to make sense of internal multiplicity and diversity. Yet even that diversity takes on a mythological and religious tint of pilgrimage: “As among Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims, or those oriental ones crossing the Red Sea towards Mecca in the festival month, there was no lack of variety...In short, a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man” (14). In the space I have elided from that quotation, Melville launches into a Whitmanian epic catalog describing the assorted masses contained on the boat. Like Whitman’s infamous Homeric catalogs in “Song of Myself,” this listing serves to create an inclusive and representative picture of American democracy. Like Whitman, Melville intends for his ship to reflect the religious and ethnic diversity of American society. For our purposes, the religious diversity of the ship’s makeup (featuring “Eastern philosophers,” “French Jews,” and “hard-shell Baptists” among others) is of special importance, as it demonstrates the depth of Melville’s investment in ensuring that his narrative’s religious

commentary is not solely limited to the Christian viewpoint of its most vocal characters. In addition, it is crucial that Melville—while taking pains to demonstrate the diversity of the ship’s participants—still refers to them as a political collective with revolutionary motive (“an Anacharis Cloots congress,” after a crucial figure in the French Revolution).

In addition to these political attributions, Melville also has invested the *Fidele* with religious purpose as a ship of “pilgrimage.” We saw this at first with his comparison to Chaucer’s “Canterbury pilgrims,” but there are additional resonances with his characterization of man as “that multiform pilgrim species.” When we consider the political configuration of the ship, which clearly represents a democratic entity winding through the heart of America, as well as the Chaucer allusion, it is perhaps inevitable that the *Fidele* never reaches its final destination of New Orleans. The novel instead ends open-endedly. Due to the resultant insinuations, it is still up for debate whether Melville intends the *Fidele*’s status as “pilgrimage” to be meant ironically, as Jonathan Cook certainly believes:

Melville’s placing of the action [of the novel] on a ship of fools on April Fool’s Day is symptomatic of his religious predicament...[referencing St. Paul’s notion that “We are fools for Christ’s sake” from 1 Corinthians 4:10]...being a fool of Christ could mean either becoming redemptively ‘wise’ or else falling prey to a pious hoax created by an evil or amoral creator. (Cook 10)

In this respect, Cook reads Melville’s pilgrimage rhetoric as yet another example of the characters being “conned.” This connects with Cook’s larger reading of the novel as a “satirical apocalypse,” wherein he views earnest religious belief as alongside numerous

other satirical targets (both historically specific and conceptually general). Melville's religious skepticism is certainly on display in the novel, particularly in the way he figures belief as essentially requiring hypocrisy, however the role of religion in the novel (and in particular the political implications of this role) seems to be clearly much more complex than simple skepticism.

Rather than present a single monolithic religious authority, Melville presents a plurality of philosophical and religious stances, all of which are undercut by irony as they jockey for dominance of the novel's world. Like the worlds of the *Pequod* in *Moby-Dick* and the *Bellipotent* in *Billy Budd*, the *Fidele* is a political blank slate waiting to be dominated by a monolithic ambition. Yet unlike those other ships—which are dominated by a monomaniacal desire for metaphysical justice and totalizing martial law (respectively)—the *Fidele* alternatively values any number of different philosophies, each revolving in and out of the narrative interchangeably. On this issue, Gary Lindberg remarks:

Because the familiar bases of authority, class, and social position have been systematically uprooted in the culture Melville projects, each social gathering requires the *creation* of a credible authority...Social relations appear as games of confidence. If the breakdown of communal patterns frees the characters to create and assume their own identities, it also removes their security in identifying others or knowing how to relate to them. (Lindberg 24)

This idea of “created” authorities, none of which privileged by Melville over others, provides the common impression of the novel as a “postmodern” text. Some of this

impression can certainly be traced to the Confidence Man character himself, who fades in and out of the novel in assorted guises (many of which will be addressed as this study proceeds). Yet, despite this unity of character working as a through-line between the novel's many disparate dialogic scenes, Melville never allows any of the discussions to be concretely resolved or continued serially for any length across the novel. In these different dialogic scenes, the Confidence Man character takes various assorted (and sometimes contradictory) positions, shifting his convictions so that he might prove a more provocative interlocutor. This continuous dialogic structure then has the effect of knocking down each respective authority that emerges, replacing them instead with a deep distrust of social authority more generally. Through this technique, Melville appears to undercut the idea that there might be a totalizing social authority at all. Yet rather than asserting a postmodern resistance to narrative authority in all forms, Melville instead allows for individuals to (at times) express earnest and compelling viewpoints, even if he later demonstrates the hypocrisy of those positions.

The first chapter of the book immediately sets up this competition of philosophical viewpoints, as it pits Christian charity against suspicious nihilism. The Deaf-Mute (the first iteration of The Confidence Man character), who acts as the catalyst for this initial action, provides a conceptual framework for understanding the actions that follow.² At this start of the *Fidèle's* journey, the deaf-mute brings a chalkboard upon which he writes verses concerning the nature of "charity": "Charity thinketh no evil"; "Charity suffereth long, and is kind"; "Charity endureth all things"; and "Charity never faileth" (Melville 8-9). These axioms are paraphrases of Paul's famous description of "love" (translated in the King James Version as "charity") from 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

Melville casts the deaf-mute in opposite to the steamer's barber, who writes "NO TRUST" on his corresponding chalkboard which—contrary to the "charity" verses—"did not, as it seemed, provoke any corresponding derision or surprise, much less indignation; and still less, to all appearances, did it gain for the inscriber the repute of being a simpleton" (Melville 10). From the start, the passengers on board the *Fidele*, by embracing the barber's view and attacking the Deaf-Mute, seem to indicate that the prevailing attitude of the ship is "no trust" and—consequently—no truth. Hence, when the deaf-mute drifts to sleep at the end of the chapter, marking the slumber of pure Christian altruism in the text, Melville figures him almost as a sacrificial lamb: "Gradually overtaken by slumber, his flaxen head drooped, his whole lamb-like figure relaxed, and, half reclining against the ladder's foot, lay motionless, as some sugar-snow in March, which, softly stealing down over night, with its white placidity startles the brown farmer peering out from his threshold at daybreak" (Melville 11). This impressionistic description seems meant to emphasize that the Deaf-Mute, unlike many of the other Christian caricatures throughout the novel, is portrayed earnestly and with a valuable message that is clearly lost on his fellow passengers. Further, we can perhaps even view the Deaf-Mute as a forerunner of Billy Budd, with the Deaf-Mute's "lamb-like figure" and "white placidity" serving as markers for a type of archetypal innocence that Melville would employ with great effect in his last work of fiction.³

In addition to his sacrificial and metaphorically charged slumber, the Deaf-Mute functions as a thematic prelude to the philosophical games that will soon follow. "Without his appearance at the beginning, the whole book would be different," Tom Quirk writes. "Although he 'cons' no one out of anything, he is an apostle of charity who,

in contrast to the barber and his sign of No Trust, advocates faith, thereby setting the ironic stage that Melville's antihero occupies while he preys upon these Christian virtues as well as upon the occasional hopes of his victims" (Quirk 69). The Deaf-Mute, perhaps because of his muteness, serves in a way as the ideal paragon of the novel's Christian message. He also works to set the stakes of the book's comment on democracy, demonstrating the people's hostility to an outright message of faith when delivered without an external motive.

Following the slumber of the innocent Deaf-Mute, the novel begins to interrogate in earnest the religious contradictions of its characters, notably considering a sober Methodist minister in Chapter Three. The minister attempts to advocate "charity" towards The Confidence Man (in the guise of the Black Guinea), who is being interrogated by a wooden-legged man. After a physical confrontation with the man, he gives a soliloquy about the importance of mutual trust in a society: "Let us profit by the lesson; and it is not this: that if, next to mistrusting Providence, there be aught that man should pray against, it is against mistrusting his fellow man" (Melville 22). Yet nearly immediately after this, the Methodist too eyes the Black Guinea with mistrust: "With an irresolute and troubled air, he mutely eyed the suppliant; against whom, somehow, by what seemed instinctive influences, the distrusts first set on foot were now generally reviving, and, if anything, with added severity" (Melville 23). The hypocrisy shown in this scene soon enough becomes a common occurrence and theme of the novel. Helen Trimpi, identifying the character as an allusion to Methodist preacher William Gannaway Brownlow, states Melville's purpose with the character was to emphasize "the contradiction of the profession of Christian principle with the practice of a Christian minister" (Trimpi 69).

And so it goes with much of the novel's Christian figures, as well as those professing almost any ideological system in the novel.

This dissonance, between characters' professed beliefs and their inability to put them into practice, cuts to the heart of Melville's political intent in *The Confidence-Man*, particularly its assessment of the various religious truths and traditions the book represents. By uniformly demonstrating the difficulty of living up to one's professed beliefs, Melville asserts a sort of democratic equality upon all religious belief. All believers are subject to hypocrisy at times; all belief is fundamentally inconsistent. Instead of genuine religious devotion and adherence to principles, we see the Methodist present a type of religious performance, mimicking the message and prestige of American religious devotion while never fully committing to the role. Throughout the novel, characters like these are left as enigmas: "we never learn whether characters are crooks or not, whether decisions to give or withhold trust are wise or foolish, ethical or wicked" (Lee 118). Indeed the novel seems obsessed with this type of moral ambiguity and the competing political fragments that result from it, especially when applied to notions of nation, self, or both. We can then think about every character throughout *The Confidence-Man*, and indeed The Confidence Man himself, as a cipher: an empty performance whose actual beliefs are subject to discussion. "All the characters on the *Fidele* wear costumes; none has a self" (Rogin 243). In this vein, Helen Trimpi asserts the inconsistency of the novel's characters acts as a commentary upon the inability to maintain the political unity of "the states as a nation" (a message that would certainly resonate in 1857 as the nation hurdled towards the Civil War):

Against such unity [Melville] has set up a multiplicity of fragmenting political and philosophical agents—satirizing each and all of them as betrayers, for various reasons, of the national “faith” in political unity and in the founders’ “dream” of the trustworthiness of men to govern themselves. (Trimpi xiii)

This returns, in part, to the ship’s attack upon the Christian Deaf-Mute from Chapter One. Without defined religious authority, and given the ambiguities of democracy’s political authority, the people are constantly in conflict with each other and with themselves. Indeed, the novel’s democratic conflict seems a proof of James Madison’s assertion in *Federalist* No. 51, “But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” In his insistence that government serve as a check on the impulse of man, Madison shows an acknowledgement of the same truth that Melville seems to intimate: that inconsistent mankind alone cannot be trusted to create functioning political democracy.

Later in the novel, we see Melville furthering an even more explicit viewpoint on the role of religion in society, one that he again hedges by filtering it through the herb doctor (another of the Confidence Man’s guises). In Chapter Nineteen, the herb doctor responds to a pessimistic cripple who sarcastically calls his country “free Ameriky.” After chastising him for his lack of gratitude and patriotism, the herb doctor embarks upon another of the novel’s signature soliloquies:

But it is never to be forgotten that human government, being subordinate to the divine, must needs, therefore, in its degree, partake of the characteristics of the divine. That is, while in general efficacious to

happiness, the world's law may yet, in some cases, have, to the eye of reason, an unequal operation, just as, in the same imperfect view, some inequalities may appear in the operations of heaven's law; nevertheless, to one who has a right confidence, final benignity is, in every instance, as sure with the one law as the other. (Melville 120)

Once again, the herb doctor certainly has ulterior motives, and he later succeeds in getting the cripple to buy his medicine. Yet, as we must do with every speech in the novel, it is important to judge the value of his words apart from their utilitarian value in the confidence game. Indeed, the doctor here seems to echo the distrust Melville shows over the ability of individuals to have faith in the American project as well as to act rationally in their long-term best interests. The herb doctor's final point—that, in essence, we are powerless to perceive the workings of law and thus must “have confidence” in the larger authority—seems a conciliatory rhetorical move not unlike that at the close of *Job* (a book Melville cites in the “Extracts” opening to *Moby-Dick*).⁴ In other words, the herb doctor advocates the long view of law's efficacy, as he indicates that one must trust one's institutions whether religious or secular.

One can also read the herb doctor's speech as an argument for the long-term benefits of political freedom over the more immediate benefits of political equality. He seems to assert that the pursuit for immediate equality is itself a confidence game, trading the (far more valuable) benefits of long-term freedom for short-term fulfillment through equality. Tocqueville describes a similar viewpoint: “The goods that freedom brings show themselves only in the long term, and it is always easy to fail to recognize the cause that gives birth to them. The advantages of equality make themselves felt from now on,

and each day one sees them flow from their source” (Tocqueville 481). In this way, we can consider the herb doctor as an apologist for justice, not only in the cosmic, Joban sense but also in the literal, political sense. Hence, by advocating for confidence in these matters, the herb doctor actively ties religious faith (and the authority that it trusts in) to faith in an American democratic system and the freedom it is designed to enshrine. In this way, Melville seems to again tie the religious performance of the herb doctor (as he attempts to sell his medicines through appeals to Christian charity and American patriotism) to larger political questions surrounding equality and the ability of government to pursue it.

The introduction of the Cosmopolitan, the most stable iteration of the Confidence Man, makes this issue of performance even more pronounced. The Cosmopolitan’s presence overwhelms the second half of the novel, and his digressions and soliloquies provide the reader with some of the most vibrant and philosophically nuanced language in the book. Jonathan Cook emphasizes the change thus: “In broad terms, the most prominent difference between the Confidence Man in the first and second halves of the novel are those between a national and an international operator, and between the exploitation of the knave and the victimization of the fool” (68). Thus, we may perceive the Cosmopolitan’s message as perhaps less self-contradictory and less exploitative than previous iterations, especially in his honest and unabashed self-interest. In his introductory chapter, he famously characterizes life as a performance in the novel’s most quotable lines: “Sad business, this holding out against having a good time. Life is a picnic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool” (Melville 161). This notion has countless formulations throughout history

and literature, from Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage..." soliloquy (which is actually alluded to in Chapter Forty-One) to the twentieth century sociological theories of Erving Goffman (in his 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*). Yet perhaps the most apparent use of such a characterization in this novel is that it helps mark the distinction between the public and private self, where one may hold and perform a public position while still participating in hypocrisy all the while—a crucial lens by which to interpret various characters' religious stances.

By emphasizing the artificiality of performance (and asserting life as fundamentally part of a performance), the *Cosmopolitan* is able to indicate how logic and cause-and-effect reasoning break down on board the *Fidèle*. In this formulation, democracy becomes a world of games, in which there will always be both winners and losers. Gary Lindberg views the *Cosmopolitan* character's emphasis on performance to be key to comprehending the novel's inner workings:

Once we leave the conditional world of human encounters to predicate something absolute about one of the characters, we discover that logic fails... The many religious allusions in the novel may seem like hints at a subtext in which ambiguous appearances are clarified in fixed interpretations. But the very abundance of the allusions creates the effect of metaphysical punning, in which every appearance is, for allegorical purposes, multivalent... a reader cannot follow this novel by having a personal stake in the characters, an intellectual stake in the metaphysics, or a moral stake in the principles. We follow the immediate action of *The Confidence-Man* as we follow the moves in a game. (25-26)

This obviously has resonances in the idea of personal inconsistency (discussed earlier). However, Lindberg particularly identifies Melville's refusal to ever fully enumerate a coherent ideology. Instead, the novel paints democratic society as a grand game of ideas, a performance of competing fools, wherein there will never truly be a winner. Melville seems to delight in the text's inscrutability, as he distances his authorial voice and masks the true intentions of his characters. However, the multi-valence of meaning in the novel does not invite value judgments. The novel is not a one-to-one political or metaphysical allegory; there is no exact correspondence to reality for the many messages and conflicts it describes. Instead, Melville seems to dramatize the problem of existence within a political society that values both equality and religious difference simultaneously. As Tocqueville writes: "The greatest advantage of religions is to inspire wholly contrary instincts...Religious peoples are therefore naturally strong in precisely the spot where democratic peoples are weak" (419). Tocqueville sees religion as crucial for a democratic society because it inspires individuals out of self-interest. When there is widespread democratic and political equality, yet there is no check to ensure that individuals think also of the greater good, society runs the risk of becoming morally and philosophically unmoored.

In a demonstration of this unmooring, the *Cosmopolitan* refuses to admit that there is a difference between a truth and a lie. Instead, in Chapter 28, he insists that there is only faith or an absence of faith:

I do not jumble [misanthropy and infidelity]; they are coordinates. For misanthropy, springing from the same root with disbelief of religion, is twin with that. It springs from the same root, I say; for, set aside

materialism, and what is an atheist, but one who does not, or will not, see in the universe a ruling principle of love; and what a misanthrope, but one who does not, or will not, see in man a ruling principle of kindness? Don't you see? In either case the vice consists in a want of confidence. (Melville 188)

This differential, which asserts that there are only those who believe and those who do not, seems an especially interesting comment to come from Melville, about whom Nathaniel Hawthorne famously declared “could neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief” (Delbanco 253). In this way, the *Cosmopolitan* asserts a false duality between confidence and lack thereof. There is—and, accounting for the multiplicity of democracy, must be—middle ground between confidence and lack of confidence. Contrary to what he says, the *Cosmopolitan* seems to instead illustrate that there is no middle ground in religious *performance*. When he claims, “one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool,” the *Cosmopolitan* is demonstrating that performance only manifests in extremes (Melville 161). When performing an ideal of religious faith, there is no room for doubt.

In this light, it seems that many critical readings of the novel—which often assert that the novel furthers postmodern themes—are misguided. Andrew Delbanco, in his critical biography of Melville, summarizes this critical perspective well: “Melville’s book now seems a prophetically postmodern work in which swindler cannot be distinguished from swindled and the confidence man tells truth and lies simultaneously” (248). Yet it seems clear from this study so far that the confidence man does not tell truth and lies simultaneously, rather he tells them *alternatively* and for a particular motive. Further, it is

indeterminate the length to which the Confidence Man tells lies at all: “[the reader] does not have the privileged view of the past or of the future...that would bear out his or her suspicion that anybody in the novel is ever actually deceived” (Johnson 126). Thus, rather than making a postmodern point about the subjective nature of truth, as some critics assert, Melville instead seems to further a (typically Melvillian) point about the indeterminacy and inscrutability of any presented reality. This would again line up well with the understanding of these characters as all featuring indeterminate levels of confidence more generally, despite their performances of one extreme or another.

Indeed, Melville’s larger point is to indicate the ways to which totalizing philosophies (religious or secular) are unsatisfying in a democratic environment, as we see in Mark Winsome, Melville’s satire of Ralph Waldo Emerson (which begins in Chapter Thirty-Six). The primary point of contention between the Cosmopolitan and Winsome regards the basic goodness of humanity, particularly stated by one of Winsome’s opening greetings: “yours, sir, if I mistake not, must be a beautiful soul—one full of all love and truth; for where beauty is, there must those be” (Melville 224). The Cosmopolitan balks at this generous view of human nature, and their exchange goes on to consider general aspects of Transcendentalist thought as it relates to the possibility of “confidence.” Winsome, in his debates with the Cosmopolitan, is arguably a more overt confidence man than any of the titular figures throughout the novel. Unlike the various guises of the Confidence Man, who alternatively preaches truth and falsehood, Winsome’s philosophy is entirely incoherent: “for death, though in a worm, is majestic; while life, though in a king, is contemptible. So talk not against mummies. It is a part of my mission to teach mankind a due reverence for mummies” (Melville 230). Melville

renders Winsome as a purposefully haughty and disdainful thinker, unwilling to hear different points of view and full of “infantile intellectuality” (Melville 225). Unlike the *Cosmopolitan*, whose motives are (at the very least) discernable and stated, Winsome’s (and by extension Emerson’s) purposes are more opaque. Brian Yothers gives a helpful analysis of Melville’s critique:

By the standards of, say, the sober Methodist minister [from Chapter Three], Winsome is clearly heretical, but he is at the same time deeply concerned with questions of morality, immortality, and the nature and destiny of humanity. Winsome presents an uncompromising argument for a way of viewing humanity that compliments human nature with a vision of its perfectibility, but also makes demands of human nature that seem wildly out of keeping with its frailties. (122)

For Melville, who (throughout his entire career) is concerned with issues of man’s insignificance in the universe, Emerson’s philosophical “confidence”—in the ability of man to transcend a broken reality as well as the ability of humanity to forge an “original relation” to the universe—rings as false and misleading. Keeping in mind the Tocquevillian idea that religion should draw our focus away from our selves, Melville fears that transcendental ideas of the perfectible self have the contrary effect of drawing a democratic citizenry deeper into self-absorption. To counter these Emersonian ideas, Melville allows the Confidence Man to reflect their opposite: “Emerson postulates a being who can exist quite independent of social relations; Melville counters with an agent who exists only in the mutability of those relations” (Lindberg 43).

To further add to the critique, Melville endows Winsome with the same hypocrisy that effects all other inhabitants of *The Confidence-Man*'s world. In this instance, Melville draws directly upon the historical details of Emerson's life to endow Winsome with Emerson's own political biases, in this case against the southern beggar (thought to satirize Edgar Allan Poe). In so doing this, Melville not only satirizes two of his fellow nineteenth century literary giants, but he also gives vivid insight into the politics of an American democracy on the verge of civil war. Helen Trimpi evaluates this connection as such: "There is evidence in Emerson's writings to show that he intensely disliked and distrusted not only Southerners like Poe who defended the slave system but Northern men who defended Southern rights under the Constitution, at the same time as he admired, liked and trusted Northern men of pronounced antislavery views" (Trimpi 205-206). Through his evocation of Emerson's bias, Melville once again makes a specific link between political stances and (quasi-) religious ones. And indeed, the link that he makes here (unlike the others earlier in the novel) is between a flawed philosophical stance and a confrontational political one. Other moments in the novel may be ambiguous as to whether they pass judgment on the views espoused; this is certainly not one of them. Yet, following the examinations of Winsome/Emerson (as well as his disciple Egbert, commonly read to satirize Henry David Thoreau), the novel takes a surprisingly meditative turn in its final reflections.

The closing chapter of the novel, aptly titled "The Cosmopolitan Increases in Seriousness," demonstrates Melville's resistance to assert religious meaning on the book while also demonstrating his insistence on religion's political value. The chapter features the discussion between the Cosmopolitan and an old man about the vagaries of religious

belief and, of course, confidence. Like the soliloquy of the herb doctor, both interlocutors assert the necessity of confidence in interlocking religious and political terms: the old man asserting religious confidence, the Cosmopolitan attempting to argue this should require worldly financial confidence. As many of these other dialogues do, the scene ends in uncertainty, as the audience is unsure whether or not the old man has been defrauded.

Brian Yothers reads this scene, however, as key to the novel's religious message:

"Melville has brought us at the end of *The Confidence-Man*...to an agnostic stance in its strongest and richest sense...It is emphatically not a state of disengagement from the ultimate questions, but rather an especially bold and consistent probing of those questions" (125). Yothers is especially interested in a minor pun in the chapter: as the old man makes reference to the Bible as "apocrypha," another man interrupts to ask "what's that about the Apocalypse?" (Melville 287). Yothers remarks that this minor detail hits to the heart of the novel: "things hidden are conflated with things revealed, the word of God is conflated with the words of human beings, and a fundamental uncertainty about the status of religious knowledge is encapsulated in the pun of a sleepy and perhaps drunk passenger" (126). Through this scene, Yothers helpfully encapsulates the final notes of the novel as well as the ways in which we can attempt to make sense of the novel as a whole.

The Confidence-Man, in its refusal to advance any concrete religious or political views, indeed acts as a fascinating text for considering the way in which Melville coopts his ideas concerning metaphysical inscrutability (as we see in works such as *Moby-Dick*) for more overt political and social motives. In critically addressing these ideas, Brian Yothers's discussion of religious difference in the novel again perhaps is most applicable.

In particular, he emphasizes that Melville marks the separation between the private religious self and the public, social self, and he identifies this stance as prefiguring philosophical works such as Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (a theoretical influence for this study as well). Yothers explains the ways in which Melville both associates religious and political issues while also demonstrating the way in which they deviate from each other: "Time and time again in *The Confidence-Man*, characters affirm religious and philosophical identities that they have adopted, but the world in which they live and move is one in which the choice of whether or not to lend \$100 to the person who requests it is one that transcends any sort of religious commitments" (Yothers 128). In this way, we can consider the personal inconsistencies of characters across the novel as demonstrating the way in which the modern world is disentangling two previously associated acts—charity and the monetary charitable giving that so often accompanied it. Further, Melville seems to probe the philosophical foundations of this disentanglement in an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which American political structures have always inevitably headed for this crossroads.

The Confidence-Man, as one of Melville's simultaneously least-popular and most-difficult works, resists meaning and easy categorization for a reason. And while it is perhaps a cliché in this day and age to indicate that Melville's work is "before its time," this characterization seems perhaps more true in regards to this work, the final novel Melville published in his lifetime. Rather than engage in a critique of democracy (such as the one advanced by ancient writers like Plato), where political actors' self-interest and performativity might undermine political unity, Melville stubbornly continues to advocate for democracy, despite its contradictions. In this way, *The Confidence-Man*

remains a startling testament to both the importance of democracy as well as the difficulty of maintaining it—issues that have only grown in importance since Melville's time. Today, we can recognize the performances of the Confidence Man not only in TV commercials and political advertisements, but we see him in our neighbors and even in ourselves. In an increasingly commoditized world in a secular age, it seems more and more evident that, to make sense of our democratic society and our own roles in that society, we must take moral account of our personal inconsistencies as well as our own religious performances. Through this demand upon the reader, Melville's feat in this novel—demanding introspection and serious thought from a book that seems to mock those same values—is a singular accomplishment, and it boldly makes its own place among both his already impressive oeuvre and the annals of American literature.

Notes

1. Significant scholarship has also been done—most notably by critics such as Helen Trimpi and Michael Rogin—to pursue Melville’s specific allusions and historical references in the text of the novel. This is interesting and important work that I hope to draw on, though it will not be my main focus. This study will instead proceed with a more theoretical and philosophical reading of Melville’s religious politics in *The Confidence-Man*.
2. Critical consensus reads the Confidence Man as a shape-shifting character who inhabits many roles over the course of the novel, and this reading will be assumed here. However, it is worth noting, there is a small minority of scholarship that dissents from this view.
3. The appearance of “whiteness” in any Melville text certainly must draw comparisons to Chapter 42 of *Moby-Dick*, “The Whiteness of the Whale.” Thinking of the Deaf-Mute in this light, with whiteness signifying atheistic absence, perhaps renders the character more in line with Cook’s notion of the Confidence Man as oscillating between alternate roles of both devil and angel.
4. See Job 38:4, “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (KJV). God’s proof of his justice is an argument from power, that Job cannot understand God’s ways because of the differing orders of magnitude.

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