

Yet it is no easy task. The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed.

Moby Dick, ch. 32

For much the same reason that there is but one planet to one orbit, so can there be but one original character to one work of invention. Two would conflict to chaos. In this view, to say that there are more than one to a book, is good presumption there is none at all.

The Confidence Man, ch. 44

...the personification of chaos...is also intended to represent America and change.... It is the old theme of *The Confidence Man*. He is a figure in a country with no solid past or stable class lines; therefore he is able to move about easily from one to the other.

Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: an interview,"
Shadow and Act

**"The wild disguise hath almost antick'd us all":
a note on the guises of the Confidence Man
in Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade***

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The Confidence Man is perhaps Melville's least accessible novel. One must begin, then, where most critics have been obliged to begin, with the most ready avenue of access that is presented to the reader, namely with the list of friends enumerated by the darkie cripple as character references. Beginning in this way forces one to place confidence in the protagonist almost without realizing that one is doing so. If one does this, one realizes that the confidence is placed rightly and that the reader too becomes a party to the con game, i.e., the reader too becomes an avatar or guise of the Confidence Man because he, in return for the reader's confidence, *confides* his secret to the reader. The reader too, then, should appear on the list in which he or she has beforehand placed trust.

Therefore, it is incumbent on the reader to look at the list (3. NN13/NC10)¹ to see if this supposition is justified.

The first four friends listed are in the sequence in which they appear later. The first is “a werry nice, good ge’mman wid a weed” who appears in chapters 4-5 under the name of John Ringman. Then the “ge’mman in a gray coat and white tie” appears as the nameless representative of the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum in chapters 6-8. He is followed by the “ge’mman wid a big book,” John Truman, representative of the Black Rapids Coal Company, in chapters 9-13 and 15. No sooner does the stock salesperson disappear than the “yarb-doctor” appears in chapters 16-21. If one skips the fifth and central person on the list (although only temporarily), one finds that the “ge’mman wid a brass plate” follows the doctor in chapter 22 as the representative of the Philosophical Intelligence Office. Here one’s certainty seems to falter, but one must not therefore become suspicious.

If the list were consistent, one would expect the “ge’mman in a wiolet robe” to be the cosmopolitan, Frank Goodman, who appears in chapters 24-32, 34-43, and 45. The only violet article of clothing that he wears, however, is “a jaunty smoking-cap of regal purple [that] crowned him off at top” and that makes him seem “king of traveled good-fellows, evidently” (24. NN131/NC114). The only robe that is mentioned in connection with his dress, as one of the styles in which it participated, is an “Emir’s robe” (24. NN131/NC114), a regal garment. The prominence of the smoking cap is reinforced by the cosmopolitan’s incessant smoking, and the implicit regal connection between the cap and the robe impels one to conclude that the expectation was correct. So one’s confidence has been justified.

One assumption that has thus far remained unspoken must be mentioned: Black Guinea, who appears in chapter 3, is an indubitable guise of the Confidence Man. Indeed, he is the source from which all attempts to pin down the Confidence Man’s guises must derive. If one cannot trust him, whom can one trust?

The careful enumeration of the chapters in which each of the Confidence Man’s guises appears has been done for good reason. For one can see now that the only chapters that have been omitted are chapters 1 and 2, in which appeared the mute, a guise that has not yet been placed on the list, but one that one can safely guess is the first in which the Confidence Man appears,² and chapters 14, 33, and 44, in which the narrator holds forth exclusively by stepping outside the narrative itself. Can these two men both be found on the list? One should be confident that they can.

Beginning with the narrator is an act of trust in one’s initial, instinctive response to the question of his identity. For if one were asked directly, after once reading the novel, “Who is the narrator?”, one would confidently answer, “Why, Herman Melville, of course.” With this in mind, and trusting that Melville’s concern with names as reflections of identity extended to his own name as well, if one looks at the name “Herman,” one sees that its German roots *heer* + *mann* mean “army man.” Therefore, the “ge’mman as is a sodjer” would turn out to be none other than the author himself, and (as correlate of this) the “many good, kind, honest ge’mmen more” would refer to the readers. One may trust this conclusion and continue.

¹ Citations from *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* are by chapter and page number to both the Northwestern-Newberry Edition (Evanston, 1984) [designated NN] and the Norton Critical Edition (NY, 1971) [designated NC].

² For a compelling argument to this effect, see H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology* (Stanford, CA, U. Press, 1963), 155-157. I do not agree with the argument in all its particulars, but it is generally sound and well substantiated.

The central position on the list, then, is the only one left unaccounted for, and the mute is the only guise left unplaced. Can one with confidence assume that the cream-colored clothing of the mute is the “yaller west” (or vest, or vesture) of the remaining person on the list? One can. Why, then, is this the only guise that Guinea lists out of order? Perhaps since the mute will not appear again, and since special attention must be elicited from readers in order to be sure that the readers associate him with themselves, Guinea places him in the center of the list in order to guarantee that one is especially attracted to it. This would seem to serve a double purpose: first, it deceives those who lack confidence into calling the entire list into question, thereby forfeiting their primary means of entrance into the meaning of the novel; second, it allows those who have confidence to interpret the list properly.

Now one should examine the journey of the steamer *Fidèle* down the Mississippi River from its point of embarkation at St. Louis. The narrative begins “[a]t sunrise on a first of April” (1. NN3/NC1), and the suggestiveness of this is striking. The time is dawn, the beginning of day and, by extension, the beginning simply. Therefore, the stage is set for an advent, for the advent of a new metaphor for the human condition, the human condition as revealed through the complexity and diversity of the American experience. The day is April Fool’s Day, a day of pranks, of tricks, of confidence games, of masks and masquerades. The background is the Mississippi River, *the American river*,³ and the stage is the steamer *Fidèle* (Faithful), i.e., faithful to the American experience. In other words, one is about to see *the American* archetype, as Melville viewed it. “From a proper distance *all* archetypes would appear to be tricksters and confidence men; part-God, part-man, no one seems to know he-she-its true name, because he-she-it is protean with changes of pace, location and identity.”⁴ Melville is seeking that proper distance while at the same time preserving with it the immediacy of the experience as lived within a definite social context. In so doing, he will present the “American’s Manichean fascination with the symbolism of blackness and whiteness expressed in such contradictions as the conflict between...Judeo-Christian morality, ... democratic political ideals and ... daily conduct ...”⁵

³Cf. Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days*, in *The works of Walt Whitman in two volumes as prepared by him for the deathbed edition* (NY, 1969), volume II: “The valley of the Mississippi River and its tributaries ... comprehends more than twelve hundred thousand square miles, the greater part prairies. It is by far the most important stream on the globe, and would seem to have been marked out by design.... Not even the mighty Amazon ...—not the Nile ...nor the Danube ...nor the three great rivers of China, compare with it. Only the Mediterranean sea has play’d some such part in history, and all through the past, as the Mississippi is destined to play in the future. By its demesnes ... it already compacts twenty-five millions of people, not merely the most peaceful and money-making, but the most restless and warlike on earth. Its valley, or reach, is rapidly concentrating the political power of the American union. One almost thinks it is the Union—or soon will be.” (150) “In the more than two thousand miles between, though of infinite and paradoxical variety, a curious and absolute fusion is doubtless steadily annealing, compacting, identifying all. But subtler and wider and more solid, (to produce such compaction,) than the laws of the States...or all the kneading and fusing processes of our material and business history, past or present, would in my opinion be a great throbbing, vital, imaginative work, or series of works, or literature, in constructing which the Plains, the Prairies, and the Mississippi River, with the demesnes of its varied and ample valley, should be the concrete background, and America’s humanity, passions, struggles, hopes, there and now—an *eclaircissement* as it is and is to be, on the stage of the New World, of all Time’s hitherto drama of war, romance and evolution—should furnish the lambent fire, the ideal.” Also, cf. *Democratic Vistas*, volume II, 226, 245.

⁴ Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” *Shadow and Act* (NY, 1964), 46.

⁵ Ellison, “Joke,” 47-48.

Melville had exhausted his serious exploration of the ideal of Judeo-Christian morality as embodied in Pierre Glendinning in *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*; he had exhausted his serious exploration of the democratic political ideal as embodied in Israel Potter in *Israel Potter, His Fifty Years of Exile*. As preface to both these works there loomed *Moby Dick* in which the ultimate questions (of order and chaos, appearance and being, nonentity and identity) were faced honestly and radically: the mask was ripped aside,⁶ and tragedy expressed itself in its raw force. Then two of the masks were examined only to find that they revealed the same tragedy although in a somewhat qualified form because of the narrowed focus of *Pierre* and *Israel Potter* as compared to the magnificent vastness of *Moby Dick*. In *The Confidence Man*, Melville is trying to examine both the ideal American mask of confidence in all its diverse avatars and the practical conduct that belies that ideal.⁷ This is Melville's joke, a joke of formidable and carefully crafted complexity.⁸

Returning to the narrative at hand, one sees that "there appeared, suddenly as Manco Capac ..., a man in cream-colors" (1. NN3/NC1). The allusion to an Incan god gives a godlike quality to the first person whom one encounters. Since the first person is the first guise of the Confidence Man,⁹ one can expect that there will be a godlike quality about them all. Eventually, the god who will be associated with the Confidence Man is Proteus.¹⁰ As the man in cream colors walks through the crowd on deck, one's attention is turned to a poster "offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East; quite an original genius in his vocation" (1. NN3/NC1).¹¹ There is no specification of who this impostor is, but one can venture a safe guess that he is the protagonist and that the reason that the author

⁶ Cf. *Moby Dick*, ch. 36.

⁷ Cf. Ellison, "Joke," 53-54: "For the ex-colonials, the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national self-consciousness, it gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind. And perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man's creation, not God's. Americans began their revolt from the English fatherland when they dumped the tea into Boston Harbor, masked as Indians, and the mobility of the society created in this limitless space has encouraged the use of the mask for good and evil ever since Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical."

⁸ Cf. Franklin, 153-154: "*The Confidence Man* ... is Melville's most nearly perfect work Not a word is wasted or misplaced We must look at every word, every object, every action as though it represented an ultimate meaning. But every word, every object, and every action in the book is almost endlessly meaningful."

⁹ The reader will have noticed that I have thus far referred to the Confidence Man of the title with capital or upper case letters. I will continue to do so, restricting lower case letters to the other confidence men who may be encountered too.

¹⁰ See chapter 7, in which the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum representative discusses his invention, the Protean easy-chair (NN38/NC33). Proteus had the power to change his shape at will. In addition, he was a seer. Furthermore, he was the son of Poseidon, the god of the sea. It is appropriate, then, that Melville, perhaps the greatest writer of the sea, should assume the persona of Proteus. Also, cf. Ellison, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," in *Shadow*, 105-106: "For the novelist, Proteus stands for both America and the inheritance of illusion through which all men must fight to achieve reality; the offended god stands for our sins against those principles we all hold sacred. The way home we seek is that condition of man's being at home in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy. Our task then is always to challenge the apparent forms of reality—that is, the fixed manners and values of the few, and to struggle with it until it reveals its mad, vari-implicated chaos, its false faces, and on until it surrenders its insight, its truth."

¹¹ The phrase "quite an original" will reappear as the last words in chapter 43 and serve as the text of the discussion in chapter 44.

omits a careful description on the poster is that he has already given the description of the man in cream colors and will continue to give new descriptions as the narrative progresses.

The “original” impostor then yields briefly to one “quite in the wonted and sensible order of things” (1. NN5/NC3), the barber setting up shop whose “NO TRUST” sign (1. NN5/NC3) contrasts sharply with the doctrine of charity that the mute has been expounding on his blackboard. When one considers that the barber’s name is William Cream (see 43. NN235/NC201-202), the tension between the doctrines exposed here becomes clearer. For the barber is the last of the Confidence Man’s interlocutors whom he encounters on April Fool’s Day.

One may divide the Confidence Man’s interlocutors into two types: (1) those whom he encounters and then dupes; (2) those with whom he engages agonistically. The former present either a conscious pretense of confidence with an ultimate denial, e.g., Charles Noble (one of the lesser confidence men), or an initial distrust that yields to a confidence that may be either sustained or subsequently denied, e.g., the sick miser; in either case, they are never fully idealistic or practical, but rather they constantly waver because of their acquaintance with the Confidence Man. The latter, i.e., the antagonists, are the explicit opponents of confidence both in thought and in action, e.g., the wooden-legged misanthrope who engages Black Guinea. The action alternates, then, between encounters and agons, the Confidence Man ultimately holding forth in all cases, either by the assent or by the retreat of the interlocutor.

The first encounter is that between the mute and the crowd. The mute presents to the crowd his scriptural slate on which he writes five successive mottoes that are powers of charity taken from *I Corinthians* 13: 4-8. The biblical text begins with the words “Though I speak” (13: 1), and the man in cream colors is a mute. In addition, the biblical text lists fourteen powers of charity, which means that the mute omits nine.¹²

The mute goes to sleep in the forecastle (1. NN6/NC4) and soon disappears. However, the next person toward whom one’s attention is turned in the forecastle is Black Guinea: “In the forward part of the boat ... was a grotesque negro cripple” (3. NN10/NC7). Melville here, as throughout the narrative, establishes either explicit or implicit links between the various guises of the Confidence Man. The business card that Mr. Roberts dropped and that Black Guinea recovered (3. NN17/NC14) and Black Guinea’s parting mention of the “good man wid de weed” (3. NN17/NC14) lead directly into the encounter between John Ringman,¹³ the man with the weed, and Mr. Roberts. This connection is more solidly established when Ringman vouches for Black Guinea (4. NN18-19/NC15). Ringman in turn prepares the way for the stock salesperson of the Black Rapids Coal Company (4. NN22/NC19). In the meantime, the Asylum representative appears and is associated, at least in bearing, with Ringman: “this last person ... like the man with the weed” (6. NN28/NC24). He too vouches for Guinea (6. NN29/NC24-25), defends him (6. NN31-33/NC26-29), and accepts money

¹² The number nine seems crucial to a proper and full understanding of the book. For instance, two metaphors, one extended and one brief, are used to describe the passengers on the steamer: the first (2. NN9/NC6) can be divided into eighteen (two times nine) major divisions; the second, the catalogue of trees (2. NN9/NC6), lists nine trees. Black Guinea lists nine guises of the Confidence Man. In addition, Colonel Moredock, the diluted Indian Hater, is one of nine children (27. NN152/NC132), and the novel has forty-five (five times nine) chapters. I would add that this centrality of the ennead is not unique to *The Confidence-Man*. Indeed, the total of numbered chapters of *Moby Dick* is also a multiple of nine. A full study of this goes beyond the scope of this essay.

¹³ “Ringman” seems to suggest a pun on “ringmaster.”

for him (6. NN33/NC29). When John Truman (cf. 20. NN102-103/NC87-88),¹⁴ the stock salesperson, appears, he mentions having spoken to both Ringman (9. NN46/NC39) and the Asylum representative (9. NN46-47/NC39). The herb doctor ties himself to his past guises by mentioning that he has sold the negro some medicine (19. NN99/NC85)¹⁵ and by trying to help the sick miser find Truman (ch. 20), and he discovers the opening (21. NN108-109/NC93) that the P. I. O. man uses to dupe Pitch, the Missouri bachelor. This link is solidified when the P. I. O. man vaguely remembers the doctor and when Pitch senses a relationship between them: “as I told that cousin-german of yours, the herb-doctor” (22. NN116/NC99). The final guise, the cosmopolitan, Frank Goodman,¹⁶ is made the final link in the chain when he confesses to ‘overhearing’ the conversation between Pitch and the P. I. O. man (24. NN133/NC116).

April Fool’s Day (and the narrative along with it) draws to a close while Frank Goodman is in the barbershop (cf. 43. NN235/NC202). The final chapter, then, takes place on April 2, and it is in this chapter for the first and only time that the term “confidence man” appears (45. NN242/NC208). The mask is beginning to slip away, and the boy peddler, the final antagonist of the Confidence Man seems to be aware of the protagonist’s identity (cf. 45. NN246/NC211-212 and 45. NN246-247/NC212) and even to have assumed some of his characteristics (cf. 45. NN246-247/NC212 to 3. NN10-11/NC7 and 6. NN32/NC27-28). However, the Confidence Man retains his priority, and one sees him at the end extinguishing the light, thereby plunging the scene into darkness, a darkness that it would seem is a final darkness of despair. Melville adds, however, “Something further may follow of this Masquerade” (45. NN251/NC217). Whether it does or not seems to be in the reader’s interpretive hands. To guide the reader, he or she has been entrusted with an extremely powerful and complex metaphor, a metaphor that is necessarily insufficient, as all metaphors must be.¹⁷

Nonetheless, it is a guide in which one must and should have confidence.

¹⁴ Truman is associated with Ringman by given name: both are “John.” In addition, it need hardly be noted that “Truman” is a compound formed from “true man.”

¹⁵ Of the effect of his medicine on the negro, he says: “I shouldn’t wonder at all if, in a very short time, he were able to walk *almost as well as myself*.” [Italics mine]

¹⁶ “Frank Goodman,” of course, can be broken down into “frank, good man” and thus can allow for a series of puns, especially on his given name. In other words, whenever he assures his interlocutor that he is being frank, he could just as reasonably be referring to his name as to the possible veracity of his statements.

¹⁷ Cf. Ellison, “‘A Very Stern Discipline’: an interview,” *Harpers* 234 (March 1967), 78: “no one has yet forged a metaphor rich enough to reduce American diversity to form.” He further implies that no one ever will or should.