

## Melville's "The Confidence-Man"

J.B. Jones

### Abstract

This paper will explore one of Melville's least-known novels: "The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade." Of course Melville's greatest, best-known and largely unread masterpiece is "Moby-Dick," the novel that everyone intends to read, but never really gets to or finishes; it is widely considered a 'difficult' book. If this can be said of "Moby-Dick" then "The Confidence-Man" is an almost impossible book.

It was Melville's last novel and the great merit of this work is its characterization of the American people in the 1850s. Admittedly, Melville was an embittered writer by this time; but he was too much of a philosopher not to be truthful about Americans and their behaviors and attitudes. His people in this novel accurately portray some of the strengths and weaknesses of Americans, at that time and this; these traits are still relevant to an understanding of America and Americans; this is perhaps truer today than in 1857.

### I. Confidence

One dictionary definition of this word is, "bold to a vice," and this is the sense in which Melville probably meant to characterize his protagonist; readers of Melville for many years have assumed that the main character is the Devil, who can certainly be considered, "bold to a vice." Of course, in standard English, a confidence-man is a crook; someone who preys on the unsuspecting or the trusting.

In America, there is always the con: wealth, health, power, beauty, whatever it may be one seeks, if a swindler has the brains and the victim is innocent enough, the con works. Someone once said the U.S. is a place where one person is constantly trying to con the other—a nation of con-men. This is perhaps what Melville meant, and if one sees the main character as the Devil, then the ultimate con is the loss of one's soul. This may also be a theme in the novel: that Americans have sold their souls to materialism. Now they are selling it to the world, not consciously perhaps; there is no grand conspiracy. However, materialism is a value which many cultures did not previously possess, or not strongly, before they met with the 'modern' idea of selling something to someone else in a way that is sometimes deceitful.

Though the novel is set on a Mississippi River steamboat in 1857, what Melville has to say still applies today. Just think of the recent Bernard Madoff case, perhaps one of the biggest cons in modern history, one which has become an emotional symbol of the terrible recession the world is experiencing today. John Bryant feels that though the novel is a comedy about trust and deceit, it has a didactic purpose: “By withstanding Melville’s deceptions we exercise the mental skills needed for us to survive more dangerous deceptions ‘out there’ in the real world of deception” (CM; xiv). Fraud is not a specifically American trait, it is found around the world, but Melville perhaps felt that he was doing a kindness for his trusting countrymen, or perhaps he was simply pointing out to them the types of tricks one human can play upon another in a democracy. The long list of cons practiced in this novel seems somehow designed to educate the reader into being more skeptical and less blindly trusting in others. It should be remembered what P.T. Barnum, a contemporary of Melville’s, famously said about those who fall for a con: “There’s a sucker born every minute.” In other words, a fool and his money are easily parted, especially in a democracy, where the acquisition of material goods has replaced the acquisition of spiritual wealth.

## II. Hunters and Prey

Doubt is the obvious antonym of confidence and trust. It seems human to doubt; so in modern life, we doubt as a way toward self-preservation, which this novel seems designed to do: to be a guidebook to scams. Doubt arises in business, in friendship and in closer relationships, like marriage. The image that suggests itself here, that seems central, is a Darwinian one; big fish preying upon littler fish, who themselves prey upon even littler fish, and in a democracy, since there are many Darwinian parallels, this comes very close to the natural truth. Life in any society is truly wrapped up in the survival of the fittest. Survival means being able to identify danger quickly and accurately. However, in this book, the cons come so thick and fast that, while it is easy enough to know the hunters from their prey, the nature of the con is less easy to relate to the meaning of the next con; we finally become confused by the profusion of trickery.

The protagonist in this novel is a personality that assumes many guises or characters, in other words, he has many “avatars” throughout the course of the book. His entrance, though disputed, is probably as a mute who boards the boat at the beginning of the novel. Some scholars feel that he represents God because God does not answer men’s petitions, just as the mute passenger cannot speak. He quotes from the Bible by chalking words onto a slate he carries with him.

Melville believed, according to Bryant, “that fiction should be real, but that to be real, fiction must approach fantasy” (CM; xxxiii). Nothing could be more fantastic than the entrance of the mute:

---

\* Son of the sun God; founder of the Incan civilization.

At sunrise on a first of April, there appeared, suddenly as Manco Capac\* at the lake Titicaca, a man in cream-colors, at the waterside in the city of St. Louis. His cheek was fair, his chin downy, his hair flaxen, his hat a white fur one, with a long fleecy nap. He had neither trunk, valise, carpetbag, nor parcel. No porter followed him. He was unaccompanied by friends. From the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings of the crowd, it was plain that he was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger.

(CM; 3).

Notice the whiteness of the stranger: his hair, clothing, his hat. The 'downy' chin suggests he is just a boy, not a man. The fact that he carries no bags suggests that he is not burdened by material concerns. He travels alone.

He is a stranger. This is perhaps the most salient fact about him. He is contrasted with 'the crowd.' It appears that Melville is trying here to point out the ultimate existential aloneness men in modern life must face, and the stranger, as perhaps we all are, is to be contrasted with the crowd. Melville continues, and notice the word 'advent' in the first sentence:

In the same moment with his advent, he stepped aboard the favorite steamer Fidele, on the point of starting for New Orleans. Stared at, but unsaluted, with the air of one neither courting nor shunning regard, but evenly pursuing the path of duty, lead it through solitudes or cities, he held on his way along the lower deck until he chanced to come to a placard nigh the captain's office, offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious imposter, supposed to have recently arrived from the East; quite an original genius in his vocation, as would appear, though wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given; but what purported to be a careful description of his person followed.

(ibid.)

The word advent is a Biblical term and Melville's use of it here is important because, (if the author is not conning us), it suggests a Christ-figure. But the reader is never sure in this novel where the 'con' begins and ends, and where Melville is being serious or 'having us on,' as the British say. But the mute has a 'duty'—a mission in life. He may be found in the city or the country, which suggests that he is a universal figure. The description of the sign near the captain's office is of importance here:

Pausing at this spot, the stranger so far succeeded in threading his way, as at last to

plant himself just beside the placard, when, producing a small slate and tracing some words upon it, he held it up before him on a level with the placard, so that they who read the one might read the other. The words were these:—

“Charity thinketh no evil.”

(CM; 4)

The fact that the mute holds up his slate on a level with the description of the con-man from the East, suggests that he is making a direct plea, as a part of his “duty” to remind the gathered crowd to read his warning, about the importance of not thinking evil of others. “Charity” in this sense means love, not the more common definition of “kindness to others.” This seems to be what the mute is selling, as everyone in this novel is trying to sell something to someone else. Of course, the stranger here may be the central character, who later is transformed into other characters, other “avatars” or incarnations. This in itself is very unusual in a novel. There may be precedents, but they are rare. Nineteenth-century readers liked things simple, as readers do today, but Melville was an experimenter, and this is perhaps why so many of his novels were not successful. Be that as it may, the main figure in this series of sketches is trying to sell love to others. Now, the irony is that many readers see the Devil using love as a sales pitch. Perhaps it is important to remember that the Devil is concerned about men’s souls, just as God is, but with a different end. The quote the mute chalks is from Corinthians 13:4-5, 7-8.

The crowd does not appreciate the mute’s behavior. They do not see his reason for assuming authority in this situation. So they push him aside. One unknown assailant even crushes his fleece hat (it is wise to notice that ‘fleece’ suggest the lamb of God, who is Christ). When he realizes someone in the crowd has flattened his hat, without adjusting it, he chalks and holds up: “Charity suffereth long, and is kind” (CM; 5). This makes the crowd even angrier. Now they “thrust him aside” (ibid.). He bears this treatment without complaint. He sees that it is futile to impress a crowd where so many are “fighting characters” (ibid), so he slowly moves away. But before he does, he chalks, “Charity endureth all things” (ibid.). He then writes, “Charity believeth all things” (ibid.), and finally, “Charity never faileth” (ibid.). What is interesting in this series of chalkings, is that he never erases the word “Charity” as he writes each succeeding message. Melville compares this non-erasure as similar to “the left-hand numeral of a printed date” (ibid.), suggesting that charity is one virtue that lasts over time. But the series of verbs used by Melville is important, too: “Thinketh,” “Suffereth,” “Endureth” and “never Faileth,” (ibid.), are important in the mute’s mission, which appears here to be to provide civilized injunctions to a crowd of violent, rapacious men.

Melville compares the deck of the boat to an arcade in the East—in Asia, and notes the barber, especially. His shop is later in the novel a scene of importance. He is the “river barber” (ibid.) and Melville may see an analogy between the flowing river and flowing hair, though there is no way to tell, unless one consults the original manuscript. The barber in this scene is opening his shop and he

noticeably hangs out a commercial sign: “No Trust,” it says. This is in direct contrast to all the mute has written. Melville uses the contrast of the crowd’s reaction to the barber’s sign and the message series from the mute; they seem not at all surprised by the barber’s message, while they deride and persecute the stranger. The mute is, at this point, pushed roughly aside by some porters carrying a large trunk, and Melville so reveals that he also cannot hear. This may again suggest that God cannot even hear human pleas for aid. The mute gives up and moves to the fore-castle (the front of a ship), and sits near a ladder. This is an allusion to Jacob’s Ladder to Heaven in the Bible. Melville calls his spot a “humble corner” (ibid.), and speculates that he has not far to go on the boat, as he has no baggage and he stays on deck. The final description of the mute is probably the most revealing because he never appears again in the book:

Though neither soiled nor slovenly, his cream-colored suit had a tossed look, almost linty, as if, traveling night and day from some far country beyond the prairies, he had long been without the solace of a bed. His aspect was at once gentle and jaded, and, from the moment of seating himself, increasing in tired abstraction and dreaminess. 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.

(CM; 7)

This first chapter is perhaps a key to understanding this apparent jumble of cons. It should be remembered that what the mute is selling is love; while the world of the larger work dwells on the negative aspects of American behavior, the mute at the start stands for love and apparently nothing else.

### III. Good and Evil

Delbanco feels that “Melville was increasingly drawn to what he called ‘elemental evil’—a preoccupation that grew in proportion to his quest for transcendence, because he understood God and sin to be mutually dependent ideas, each inconceivable without the other” (MG; no page given). How Melville reached this conclusion is not within the scope of this paper; however, he dealt with good and evil in “Moby-Dick” and his final book also confronts the same dilemma. The mute in the first chapter is perhaps a representative of evil, an evil which spouts, or one should say, ‘chalks’ injunctions to love one another—which is pearls before swine, considering the mute’s audience.

Not all readers will agree with Delbanco's assertion, but Melville was certainly focused on the problem of evil and man's relation to it. It is to be assumed that his use of 'elemental' suggests a source, which in Christian belief, is of course, the Devil. If the Whale represents Fate or God, then it is perhaps not too much to say that the trickster in this book is the Devil. That the Devil quotes from the Bible is not unusual at all and has a long precedent in literature and even in the Bible itself. The fact that the mute wears white reminds the reader of Melville's other great novel. The fact that both Moby-Dick and the stranger are mute, again, suggests the problem Melville struggled with: that God or Fate may ultimately be unknowable or uncaring. Man may not know, he may only make approximations concerning ultimate questions. This is perhaps what fed Melville's bitterness about current conceptions of optimistic ultimates in statements like those spouted by Emerson, an object of Melville's scorn in the novel.

#### IV. The Solar Lamp

Solar lamps were used before the discovery of kerosene; they burned animal fat; but whale oil was the choice fuel for lamps in the homes of the rich. The lamp in the final chapter, titled, "The Cosmopolitan Increases in Seriousness," is one of the main symbols presented at the end of this drama. Of course, lamps are symbols of the spirit or intelligence. The most notable feature of the swinging lamp is its shade, which is of etched glass; we see "the image of a horned altar, from which flames rose, alternate with the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo" (CM; 273). The robed figure is clearly Christ; the 'horned' altar is, of course, a place of sacrifice. The 'horns' of the altar, which are raised edges at the four corners, may allow a god to descend, or may be a symbol of the god himself in ancient religions.

The scene over which the lamp swings takes place in the middle of the 'gentleman's cabin': A public sleeping place with berths for passengers. Each berth has its own solar lamp—most lights are out because most residents are asleep, others are turned low. This may be a metaphor for the energy-level of each individual, represented by the height of the flame. It would be natural, in a room full of sleeping men, to extinguish all the lights, but by captain's orders, one light to be kept "burning until the natural light of day should come to relieve it" (CM; 273). There are probably a number of ways to interpret this; the single lamp could be the hope of mankind during a dark night, which is an allusion to Christ or a savior. We often speak of 'hope being extinguished.' Still, the lamp burns on as both a beacon and a light to see by: "So the lamp—last survivor of many—burned on, inwardly blessed by those in some berths, and inwardly execrated by those in others" (CM; 274).

Beneath this lamp sat "a clean, comely, old man, his head snowy as the marble" (ibid). This man is compared to Simeon from the Bible, who upon taking the baby Jesus in his arms, declares him to be "a light to reveal you to all the nations" (Internet; Wikipedia). The metaphor of Christ as a light is a very well-known one. The old man had about him a "look of greenness in winter" and seemed "a well-

to-do farmer” one to whom “seclusion gives a boon more blessed than knowledge” (ibid). Melville gives the impression that the old man is above the world somehow because of his innocence of its ways and his contented self-containment.

At this point ‘The Cosmopolitan’ enters. He is the protagonist now, if this book can be said to have one; he has gone through a number of incarnations before his final form as this man of the world. When first introduced in Chapter 24, The Cosmopolitan says of humanity, in a very Mephistophelean way:

“Ah, I may be foolish, but for my part, in all its aspects, I love it. Served up a la Pole, or a la Moor, a la Ladrone, or a la Yankee, that good dish, man, still delights me; or rather is man a wine I never weary of comparing and sipping; wherefore am I a pledged cosmopolitan—a taster of races; in all his vintages, smacking my lips over this racy creature, man, continually. But as there are tee-total palates which have a distaste even for Amontillado, so I suppose there may be tee-total souls which relish not even the very best brands of humanity.”

(CM; 152)

This ‘taster of races’ sees man metaphorically or literally as ‘a good dish’ or as wine to be tasted; he refers to man as ‘a racy creature’ to be ‘served up’ (ibid.). Of course, this is the joke. When reading this book, one has to continually be aware that it is a satire, a bitter satire perhaps, but worthy of attention because, as such, it helps the reader to think on different levels of meaning. Literally, the attitudes of The Cosmopolitan reveal that he loves and enjoys the company of other people, that he is furthermore an internationalist. On another level, the language becomes, metaphorically, quite threatening, almost twisted and sadistic. The Cosmopolitan detests “the unprofitable philosophy of disesteem for man” (CM; 153), which solitary people fall into; he says, “Trust me, one had better mix in, and do like others” (ibid.). And that is what this entire book is about: trust, or the lack of it. Along with the quest for the meaning of ‘elemental evil’ that Delbanco posits, Melville seems to have been concerned in his life and art with the ability of humans to trust others and be trusted by them in return, a bond that is fragile and always changing; while sometimes charged with danger, at others, it is enhanced by joy.

One passenger calls The Cosmopolitan a “metaphysical scamp” but he says of himself, “irony is so unjust; never could abide irony; something Satanic about irony. God defend me from Irony, and Satire, his bosom friend” (CM; 156). The response to this by the character called ‘The Bachelor,’ is, “A right knave’s prayer, and a right fool’s, too” (ibid.). How is the reader to interpret this?—especially in a text where irony and satire are the main vehicles? Perhaps, as the bachelor later says, “No one goes into the crowd but for his end; and the end of too many is the same as the pick-pocket’s—a purse”

(CM; 157). In other words, The Cosmopolitan, by urging against the solitude of The Bachelor, is apparently urging love and the sharing of human experience; however, The Bachelor asserts that men only mix for money, that given the choice, most men will choose to be solitary. This conflict between misanthropy and sociability is a basic one in Melville's thought and in much of his writing. But the puzzlement of the reader persists: if the Cosmopolitan is the Devil, why does he declare himself against the 'Satanic' use of irony? These forms of thought are possible only in a society, why would He be against them? He is one who loves society and mixing with other people. The Bachelor would probably never use either of these literary tropes, for his speech is simple and direct; there is no layered meaning. Irony is the use of words to imply the opposite of what they ordinarily mean; satire suggests ridicule and scorn of folly or evil. Perhaps the Cosmopolitan dislikes irony and satire because they might be used against him. By saying that they are 'Satanic' he is being ironic in a most direct sense.

It is instructive to compare the mute with The Cosmopolitan. In the first chapter, the mute wears all white or cream colors and has yellow or white hair; The Cosmopolitan in contrast wears mostly red colors

in a style participating of a Highland plaid, Emir's robe, and French blouse; from its plaited sort of front peeped glimpses of a flowered regatta-shirt, while, for the rest, white trousers (sic) of ample duck flowed over maroon-colored slippers, and a jaunty smoking-cap of regal purple crowned him off on top; king of traveled goodfellows, evidently.

(CM; 150-151)

But it is his pipe that is most of interest, for it shows

linked crests and arms of interlinked nations---a florid show. As by subtle saturations of its mellowing essence the tobacco had ripened the bowl, so it looked as if something similar of the interior spirit came rosily out on the cheek. But rosy pipe-bowl, or rosy countenance—.

(ibid.)

It may be noted that the interior/exterior simile suggests The Cosmopolitan has a fire inside. The mute is all simplicity and purity; The Cosmopolitan is complexity, show and falsity; the colors he wears are Satanic, as is the metaphor of the pipe.

So, this is the character that faces the old, innocent man under the lamp at the end of this very



strange book. The *Cosmopolitan* enters, his “look of cheeriness seeming to disperse a sort of morning through the night” (CM; 274); it is well here to remember that Satan was called ‘the son of the morning star.’ He sits quietly at the old man’s side. But this is not to be a dialog, for those men not asleep in their berths continue a running comment offstage on what is said between the two. The old man is reading the Bible. The *Cosmopolitan* looks expectantly at him. This causes the old man to comment that perhaps what he is reading appears to the *Cosmopolitan* to be a newspaper in a wartime coffee house. The *Cosmopolitan* says that indeed the Bible is good news. From one of the darkened berths comes, “Too good too be true” (ibid.). The old man wonders why the *Cosmopolitan* sees the Bible as a newspaper containing good news. The *Cosmopolitan* desires to read it and the old man irritably begins to hand it to him. But the stranger says he does not mean to rush the old man, which mollifies the reader as he kindly hands over the Book. The *Cosmopolitan* reads for a time and then lays the Book down. The stranger says he has a doubt that perhaps the old man can resolve:

“I love man. I have confidence in man. But what was told me not a half-hour since? I was told I would find it written— ‘Believe not his many words—an enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips’—and also I was told that I would find a good deal more to the same effect, and all in this book. I could not think it; and coming here to look for myself, what do I read?— ‘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 bare, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep.’”

(CM; 275)

From a berth we hear offstage, “Who’s that describing the confidence-man?” (ibid.). The *Cosmopolitan* asks the old man the location of the speaker; the oldster returns to the conversation. He asks if he really quoted from the Book. “I did—and gall and wormwood it is to me, a truster in man; to me, a philanthropist” (CM; 276). But the old man objects that, while he has read the Bible for seventy years, he has never read what the *Cosmopolitan* just quoted. The old man then realizes that the *Cosmopolitan* has been quoting from the Old Testament, not the New, and further that he has been quoting from the apocrypha (texts not in the Hebrew canon). The old man calls the text “not warranted” and “something of uncertain credit” (ibid.). A voice offstage then says, “What’s that about the Apocalypse?” (ibid.). Of course, this technique, which Melville probably took from Shakespeare, serves a humorous purpose, but a serious one also. Perhaps the book has been hinting at the end all along—one gets that impression from Melville, in any event.

The *Cosmopolitan* continues by noting that the Book of Sirach also says, “Take heed of thy friends” — “that is to say, not the truest friend in the world is to be implicitly trusted” (ibid.). He

finally concludes about the Book of Sirach, “—how can that be trustworthy that teaches distrust?” (ibid.). Two sleepers complain at this point and the old man suggests that they lower their voices.

At this point, a boy appears, “in the fragment of an old linen coat, bedraggled and yellow, who, coming in from the deck barefooted on the soft carpet, had been unheard. All pointed and fluttering, the rags of the little fellow’s red flannel shirt, mixed with those of his yellow coat, flamed about him like the painted flames in the robes of a victim in auto-de-fe. His face, too wore such a polish of seasoned grime, that his sloe-eyes sparkled from out it like lustrous sparks of fresh coal. He was a juvenile peddler....” (CM; 278). This character has been seen in criticism as a companion (though unknowingly) of the Cosmopolitan—or a foil. His dress and the references to flames and coal seem clear enough. He sells the old man various things: a lock, a money-belt and gives him, for free, a little pamphlet on how to identify counterfeit money. The boy is twice referenced as having, white, sharp teeth (ibid.). A voice offstage now calls the whole group ‘devils’ and curses them. This gives a sinister cast to the scene. The young boy then leaves. The two spend some time discussing how to detect counterfeit money; at that time in the U.S., there was no central bank—each bank issued its own currency.

The Cosmopolitan then desires to read the old man a chapter he has found; he also notes that the solar lamp is beginning to run out of fuel. The old man says he must retire, but he has forgotten something his son reminded him about, as he boarded the riverboat; the Cosmopolitan guesses it is a life-preserver. The old man replies that that’s it exactly. At which the Cosmopolitan holds up a commode, which he calls a life preserver, though he himself never uses them, he says.

As the light gutters, the old man wonders the direction of his state room. The Cosmopolitan offers to go along with him, but first wants to extinguish the light. As the light dies so do “the horned altar, and the waning halo round the robed man’s brow; while in the darkness that ensued, the cosmopolitan kindly led the old man away” (CM; 286).

By comparing the first and last chapters, a few conclusions can be made about Melville’s intention in this book. He was of course commenting on his society at the time. The innocent at the beginning, compared to the man of the world at the end is the most obvious contrast. This may appear a mirror of an evolution in the American character: from innocent beginnings to satanic endings, eighty years after America’s struggle for Independence and eight years before the Civil War. The crowd’s scorn of the mute in the beginning provides a contrast to the private (yet public), conversation at the end of the book. However, the common factor is the emphasis on the Bible and man’s treatment of and trust in other men. Melville struggled with belief all his life, and sought answers where many others did not even think to look. He appears in the end to see man as a mixed creature; a devil at times and at times an angel. A question that has occupied philosophers like Melville since the time of the Greeks.

Delbanco, A. 1997. Melville the Great. *The New York Review of Books*. Vol. 44, No. 8. May 15, 1997. NYRB Online edition.

Melville, Herman. (John Bryant ed.). 2003. *The Confidence-Man; His Masquerade*. Modern Library. New York.