

## The Confidence-Man : The Indeterminacy of His Identity

Misao Nishida

“*Only* a man? As if to be but man were nothing. But don’t be too sure what I am. You can call me *man*, just as the townfolk called the angels who, in man’s form, came to Lot’s house; just as the Jew rustics called the devils who, in man’s form, haunted the tombs. You can conclude nothing absolute from the human form, barber.”<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter XLII, the cosmopolitan thus replies to the barber, when the barber, frightened by the cosmopolitan’s voice, which he had mistaken for “a sort of spiritual manifestation,” cries in relief, “it is only a man” (225).

Here we can observe “the major contradictions embodied by the confidence man — “human versus inhuman; god versus devil”.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, what most puzzles critics about the identity of the central character is that these and other conflicting traits are equally attributed to the confidence man, and among the major mistakes made by earlier critics is to choose one out of the two polarized ways. Elizabeth S. Foster, for instance, distinguishing the lamblike deaf-mute who she believes possesses “the stigmata of the true Christian, and even of Christ himself”<sup>3</sup> from his successors, discerns an equivalence between the confidence man and the devil. Richard Chase, who calls *The Confidence-Man* Melville’s “second-best book”,<sup>4</sup> regards the confidence man as “a composite figure”<sup>5</sup> composed of the negative characteristics of the “Yankee peddler, Brother Jonathan, Uncle Sam, Orpheus, Christ”<sup>6</sup> and affirms that the confidence man “is not a man” on the ground that “the perpetually shifty mask never quickens into the features of a human being”.<sup>7</sup> Both Foster and Chase emphasize the supernatural and Satanic traits of the confidence man, although they don’t overlook the opposite traits. If we pay attention to Melville’s tone, however, we will notice that Melville doesn’t

intend to put emphasis on only one side of the contradictory features of the confidence man. Let us first examine how Melville depicts the confidence man's Christlike or Satanic traits.

Though other confidence men also seem to exhibit certain Christlike traits, but for the deaf-mute, it may be hard to assume him to be Christlike. As pointed out by Foster in her explanatory notes,<sup>8</sup> the deaf-mute's "flaxen" (3) hair and "fleecy" (3) white hat recall "the Holy One that sitteth there white like wool"<sup>9</sup> in the Vision of St. John. His written message is quoted from the Scripture. His aspect is "singularly innocent" (4), and, though badly treated by the rude passengers, he remains "meek, gentle, dreamy".<sup>10</sup> That he is deaf and dumb is also suggestive of God, because Melville considers silence to be the true voice of God.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, it is also true that some of his aspects remind us of something quite different from Christ. His advent is compared to that of Manco Capac, the heathen god, whom Foster identifies as "child of the sun and legendary founder of the Inca dynasty of Peru."<sup>12</sup> The fleece of the deaf-mute's hat is inherited by Black Guinea, who has a "knotted black fleece" (10).<sup>13</sup> Though "innocent" and "harmless" (4), he is innocent in excess, for he is taken for "a simpleton" (4). Above all, he is described as, "in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger" (3). According to Foster, his strangeness is a manifestation of "the Christian ideal" which is "unfit for this world."<sup>14</sup> However, considering that Melville repeatedly uses this term to describe not only other confidence men but also some of the passengers such as Charles Arnold Noble, Mark Winsome and Egbert, Foster's view may be off the point. Melville may use "stranger" as almost synonymous with "impostor," for in his "predatory role"<sup>15</sup> the confidence man should be normally a stranger to his victims and "build his Rome in a day so that he may be gone tomorrow."<sup>16</sup> Or it may be possible to assume that Melville uses this term to imply Satanic traits of the confidence man as Mark Twain does in *The Mysterious Stranger*.<sup>17</sup> In short, if we take notice of the details, it is difficult to look on the deaf-mute as the incarnation of Christ. At most, he is "a mock-Christ"<sup>18</sup> intermingled with heathen, human, and devilish features.

On the other hand, Melville openly intimates a resemblance between

other confidence men and the serpent of the devil several times. The wooden-legged man analogizes Black Guinea to the devil: "How much money did the devil make by gulling Eve?" (32) The furious dusk giant calls the herb-doctor a snake: "Profane fiddler on heart-strings! Snake!" (88) The "grotesquely-shaped bluff" (128) where the P. I. O. man lands after gulling Pitch is called "the Devil's Joke" (128). Later, in his reveries, Pitch feels that the P. I. O. man's "undulating flunkyisms dovetail into those of the flunky beast that windeth his way on his belly" (130). The cosmopolitan, arguing with Mark Winsome about the rattle-snake, wreathes "his form and sidelong crest his head" (190) like a snake.

From these hints, what is connoted in *The Confidence-Man* may be considered "the devil's temptation of man."<sup>19</sup> However, there are several evidences that the confidence man is not wholly portrayed as the devil even in the latter part of the story. The cosmopolitan's sweet voice is likened to "a seraph's" (130), though its angelic effect is somehow reduced by the barber's quotation from the apocrypha: "An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips" (236). The cosmopolitan indeed appears to be the "ambassador from the human race" (138) when he reveals the coldness and inhumanity of Winsome and Egbert's philosophy. And, after all, the confidence man preaches the confidence between men.

It is true that the later confidence men are more Satanic than Christlike, but Melville avoids describing them as wholly devilish, by attaching several other features to them. Besides, it is doubtful whether what appears to be supernatural about the confidence man is really supernatural or not.

One of such instances is his magical power. On several occasions, the confidence man resorts to his magical power to fascinate others and control the situation. When the cosmopolitan restores his transformed friend, Charlie Noble, he acts "a necromancer" (180), making a magic-ring around Charlie with ten gold coins and chanting a spell. He also uses this power of fascination to persuade the barber to try "the experiment of trusting men" (234), and the barber later refers to him as "the man-charmer" (237). From these evidences, some may infer that the confidence man has something supernatural about him. However, actually, the confidence man never goes beyond

human power. His devilish or godlike traits openly hinted by Melville are written only figuratively after all. His magical power, though effective enough, it is nothing more than a mixture of mesmerism and necromancy. Thus, within the human power, showing off such a power, the confidence man dazzles the readers, as well as his victims, who try to interpret and identify him.

Meanwhile, the confidence man's extraordinary shifts in appearance, which some critics consider evidence of his supernatural power, can be explained as his theatricality that is plainly observed in *The Confidence-Man*. That is, if the confidence man merely plays the part of the confidence man on the stage of the *Fidèle*, as often suggested by the confidence man himself, other characters, and the narrator, his quick changes in costume and role are not quite impossible. Here is, for example, a conversation between the man in gray and the wooden-legged man about Black Guinea's disguise:

“...Tell me, sir, do you really think that a white could look the negro so? For one, I should call it pretty good acting.”

“Not much better than any other man acts.”

“How? Does all the world act? Am *I*, for instance, an actor? Is my reverend friend here, too, a performer?”

“Yes, don't you both perform acts? To do, is to act; so all doers are actors.” (31)

The wooden-legged man insists that not only Black Guinea but also other people are acting their parts. The same idea is repeated in the following lines quoted from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and added at the end of Chapter XLI:

“All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players,  
Who have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts.” (224)<sup>20</sup>

These lines are quoted to express Egbert's state of mind after the play within a play, in which he had played the part of the cosmopolitan's friend, was ruptured. The cosmopolitan himself, who dresses like harlequin and seems to embody the theatricality in this book, professes his dramatic idea: "Life is a picnic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool" (133). Later, in Chapter XXXIII, Melville tries to justify this harlequin-like cosmopolitan. He explains to the readers that "the people in a fiction, like the people in a play, must dress as nobody exactly dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks, act as nobody exactly acts" (183). For, in fiction, characters can "act out themselves with that unreserve permitted to the stage" (183), while, "in real life, the proprieties will not allow people" (182) to do so.

From these repeated references to the similarity between action in a play and characters — especially, the confidence man — in the world depicted in *The Confidence-Man*, it can be inferred that the confidence man as well as other characters merely plays his part in the dramatic world, and therefore the rapidity with which the confidence man changes his costume, like the eccentricity of his costumes, can be explained as a dramatic device.

Thus far we have discussed that the confidence man never goes beyond human power. But, this doesn't mean that Melville wants us to regard the confidence man as "only a man" (225). As the cosmopolitan suggests that the barber "can conclude nothing absolute" (225) from the confidence man whose capacity remains human. It is apparent that the confidence man is neither Christ nor Satan. Yet, his superiority over mankind in power and insight, as well as his god-like traits figuratively attached, makes us assume that Melville designs the confidence man for the pseudo-god, though parodic and unidentified, who rules over the microcosm, or the *Fidèle*. On the other hand, Melville also hints to us that the confidence man may be a mere actor who, wearing various masks from a mock-Christ to a Satanic harlequin, plays the part of an impostor preaching confidence on the stage. In other words, just as the *Fidèle* in the shape of a ship is set up as the microcosm and the stage at the same time, so the confidence man in the shape of a man performs the function of not only the pseudo-god but also the actor. In either case, however,

his real identity remains unrevealed in the book. It is hidden deep behind the layers of masks and none can reach it.

#### Notes

1. Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man : His Masquerade*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (1857 ; Evanston and Chicago : Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1984) 225- 6. Hereafter all references to *The Confidence-Man* will be found in parentheses in the text.
2. R. W. B. Lewis, *Trials of the Word* (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1965) 72.
3. Elizabeth S. Foster, introduction, *The Confidence-Man : His Masquerade*, by Herman Melville (New York : Hendricks House, Inc., 1954) 1.
4. Richard Chase, *Herman Melville : A Critical Study* (New York : The Macmillan Company, 1949) 185.
5. Chase 186.
6. Chase 188.
7. Chase 188.
8. Foster, explanatory notes, 290.
9. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick ; Or, The Whale*, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (1851 ; New York and London : W. W. Norton & Company, 1967) 164.
10. Foster, introduction, li.
11. Herman Melville, *Pierre ; or, The Ambiguities*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (1852 ; Evanston and Chicago : Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1971) 204.
12. Foster, explanatory notes, 289.
13. The fact both of them possess the "fleece" is one of the clues to the identity of the deaf-mute ; since it suggests the similarity between the deaf-mute and Black Guinea, it implies that the deaf-mute should be included among the masks of the confidence man.
14. Foster, introduction, li.
15. Susan Kuhlmann, *Knave, Fool, and Genius* (Chapel Hill : The University of North Carolina Press, 1973) 114.
16. Kuhlmann, 115.
17. Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger : Manuscripts*, ed. William M. Gibson

(Berkeley, Los Angeles, London : Univ. of California Press, 1969).

18. Daniel G. Hoffman, "*The Confidence-Man : His Masquerade*," *Melville : A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Chase (Englewood Cliffs : Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962) 131.
19. Foster, introduction, 1.
20. As quoted by Melville from *As You Like It*, II, vii, 139-142.