

The Wild Goose Chase for Consistency in *The Confidence-Man*

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“With consistency a great soul simply has nothing to do.” (Emerson, *Self Reliance*).

In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville writes an entirely dialogue-driven novel in which words shift meaning as often as the confidence-man shifts characters. As such, the central theme in this generically strange novel which lacks a unified plot, access to character interiority, and semantic stability seems to be inconsistency. In many ways, Melville’s insistence on non-consistent characters, both in the person or persons of the confidence-man and the passengers he encounters, can be understood as analogous to his use of inconsistent words. In this novel, Melville does exactly as he pleases without regard to convention, tradition or dictionary definition. Melville dazzles readers with an abundance of words and conversation much as the confidence-man does with his targets and certainly gives his reader’s “great soul[s]” something to do in attempting to make sense of the novel.

From the beginning of the novel, readers are presented with two key words, “charity” and “trust,” which continually reappear in various situations and which seem to shift meaning with each use. By juxtaposing these two words, Melville clearly seems interested in evaluating them in relation to the other. Through these inquiries, what appears to be Melville’s overarching claim is that truth in words is not absolutely fixed: they vary according to context, and they may be manipulated by speaker intent. What is up to the “great souls” is to figure out how to read a novel in which authenticity or consistency in words is so glaringly absent.

In one key moment of the text, Mark Winsome, a character typically understood as an allegory for Ralph Waldo Emerson¹, informs the confidence-man that he “seldom care[s] to be consistent” (194) and compares “advanc[ing] into knowledge” (195) to advancing through the

¹ John Bryant, “*The Confidence-Man*: Melville’s Problem Novel,” 330.

Erie canal by a series of locks and levels—far more interesting travel than the “long-level” part of the journey which is composed of a “consistently-flat surface of sixty miles through stagnant swamps” (195). Similarly, Melville’s own readers are not flowing freely and easily down the constantly level Mississippi River of semantics, but rather up and down the Erie locks, through which levels and definitions are constantly altered and contrived and on which a fixed point of reference is difficult to locate. What is remarkable about the Erie locks is that despite (and even because of) their shifting levels, goods are still transported from one location to another.

Winsome even remarks that “you are locked up and locked down with perpetual inconsistencies, and yet all the time you get on” (195). So even though the novel takes place on the Mississippi River, it seems that we should still think about the novel as akin to this locks and levels system of transport. Though we are bombarded with perpetual inconsistencies in the novel, which Melville insists is a reflection of real life, we still get on and meaning can still be transported through inconsistency.

The reasons behind Melville’s emphatic and deliberate inconsistency in a novel which was “generally dismissed (when treated at all) as baffling, unreadable, and incomprehensible”² can be as difficult to fathom as the words themselves. What does seem clear is that this novel is not a failure or a collection of hastily thrown together dialogues, but is indeed, very purposeful and deliberate in its repetition and emphasis on words and ideas—importantly, it seems consistently committed to inconsistency. We can define inconsistency as a word, thought, idea, or character which lacks a “true” or fixed definition. Indeed, through the very semantics and characters which compose text, Melville proposes that authentication of a person, object or word is impossible; that neither words nor characters have a rigid classification or identity, but are fluid and find varying expression. Melville characterizes this fluidity as an essential aspect of

² Ibid., 333.

realism as he endeavors to write “a fiction based on fact” (75). We can compare Melville’s philosophy of language to Emerson’s professed doctrine in “The Poet.” Though seemingly in contradiction to his embrace of inconsistency in “Self-Reliance,” (F.O. Matthiessen cites Walt Whitman’s observation that “there is hardly a proposition in Emerson’s poems or prose which you cannot find the opposite of in some other place”³) he argues that the poet “is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals.”⁴ Emerson believed that the poet could indeed discover truth in the midst of the glaring inconsistencies in language in the world and that “the human mind [of the poet], in effect, replaces the Creator.”⁵ Melville, in contrast, did not believe that any mortal was capable of locating the source of truth or validity. Authenticity, in fact, seems to be the White Whale of *The Confidence-Man*, an object of obsession and search, which is ultimately proven futile.

At the beginning of the novel, the wooden-legged man terms the quest for the Black Guinea’s character references “a wild goose chase” (21). Likewise at the end of the novel, the confidence-man terms the old man’s quest to determine the authenticity of his paper money “a wild goose chase” (248). This repetition of identical phrases at both the opening and closing of the novel seem to describe exactly the problem of ascertaining truth—that it is a wild goose chase. We might say that even a coherent interpretation of the novel as a whole is a similarly wild goose chase. This is not to say, though, that the novel is meaningless and would-be-readers would be better advised to eschew the novel for its resistance to interpretation. Rather, this wild goose chase is the key to the brilliance of the novel. Melville seems to be saying that we should not search for the evenness of the Mississippi River, but instead should recognize that while

³ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 523.

⁴ Emerson, “The Poet.”

⁵ Mutlu Konuk Blasing, “Essaying the Poet: Emerson’s Poetic Theory and Practice,” 9.

uneven and irregular, the Erie locks system still works as it overcomes the topographical obstacles and delivers goods to consumers. Likewise, Melville is well aware of the impossibility of fixing words, characters and texts (and even *The Confidence-Man*, itself) as static and focuses instead on revealing glaring inconsistencies as an echo of the un-tenability of authenticity itself—making the novel’s resistance to cohesive interpretation essential to its substantive message, rather than a side-effect of a disjointed author.

“Who’s that describing the confidence-man?” (241).

In *The Confidence-Man*, the only source of guidance we have is our narrator. Though John Bryant argues that he is unreliable and detached, calling him “the novel’s true confidence-man and the reader his dupe,”⁶ this seems to be too simple an explanation for the complexities offered in the novel. It does not seem that we can write off the inconsistencies in both character and dialogue as the narrator’s attempt to trick readers into the belief that Melville’s novel has substance, when in actuality its purpose is conning readers out of their time. The moments which I believe most illustrate what Elizabeth Renker calls “the novel’s superb self-control”⁷ occur in chapters 14, 33, and 44 when the narrator emerges from the novel to educate readers about the process of both writing and character development. In chapter 14, the narrator states that

Upon the whole, it might rather be thought, that he, who, in view of its inconsistencies, says of human nature the same that, in view of its contrasts, is said of divine nature, that it is past finding out, thereby evinces a better appreciation of it than he who, by always representing it in a clear light, leaves it to be inferred that he clearly knows all about it. (76).

⁶ Bryant, “*The Confidence-Man*: Melville’s Problem Novel,” 337.

⁷ Renker, “A _____!’: Unreadability in *The Confidence-Man*,” 117.

Unpacking this, we discover two crucial aspects of the novel's philosophy: one, that humans are inconsistent; and two, that the author recognizes his own inability to comprehend human inconsistencies into a comprehensive doctrine and thus endeavors to write those inconsistencies into both the characters and language of his novel—creating a work that is “not false, but faithful to facts” (75). Remarkably, there is a collection of critics who characterize the novel as nihilistic.⁸ Bryant notes that “Melville’s nihilism has been observed to encompass all realms: historical, theological, epistemological, ontological, aesthetic.”⁹ The narrator, though, does not argue that there is no truth to be found in the world nor does he suggest that because consistency in human nature cannot be fixed, life is all for naught. Rather, he argues (convincingly) that humans (and our language) are subject to inconsistencies and just as we can only surmise about the nature of the divine, we can only surmise about the reason for, or origin of, human inconsistency. The narrator, then, does not seem unreliable, but highly invested in writing a “fiction based on fact” (75). This commitment to inconsistency, then, unlike Emerson’s, is not an appeal to transcendentalism, but ultimately, realism.

“Showing that Many Men Have Many Minds” (13).

Charity:

One of the most obvious examples of inconsistency in Melville’s often slippery language is the word “charity.” In the opening of the novel, we are presented with the confidence-man in the guise of the “lamb-like figure” (13) of the deaf-mute holding up his slate for the interpretation and benevolence of his fellow passengers. While the focus of this moment is primarily the slate, we should also take note of the parallel between the slate and the deaf-mute,

⁸ Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville*, 251; Bryant, “*The Confidence-Man: Melville’s Problem Novel*,” 339.

⁹ Bryant, “*The Confidence-Man: Melville’s Problem Novel*,” 339.

himself. As a mute, he too is subject to the interpretation of the crowd. He seemingly has no method of communication with his audience other than to transcribe words onto slate and hope the crowd understands his meaning—a hope which is proven vain. In the following chapter, the crowd engages in a similar interpretative project to determine the identity and goals of the sleeping deaf-mute (sans slate tablet)— illustrating the close tie between the difficulty in both linguistic and character interpretation.

In this opening scene, the mute’s slate sign successively changes from “‘Charity thinketh no evil’” to ‘Charity suffereth long, and is kind’” to “‘Charity endureth all things’” to “‘Charity believeth all things;’ and then [to]—‘Charity never faileth’” (11-12). Notably the word “charity” remains on the slate while the predicates are rewritten. The narrator draws a clear analogy between this presentation of “charity” and the way in which the printed date might be left on a check or bank registry: one aspect of “charity’s” stability is the similarity to “the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank” (12). The narrator’s commentary significantly links the word “charity” to economics and monetary exchange— important to the novel, as later we observe the confidence-man rebuke an old gentleman for his obsession with authenticating his paper bills. Both moments similarly deal with the interpretation and authentication of printed words or characters. Like the old man’s quest to validate his paper money as legitimate, passengers (as well as readers) are likewise forced to participate in what certainly appears to be a wild goose chase in deciphering texts or objects and determining their “real” value. What is also notable in this first presentation of the word is that “charity” is stable, both in terms of consistency upon the slate, and also in terms of the verbs which it takes. “Charity” apparently endures, suffers long, and never fails, yet it also seems clear that it is

Melville's intention that "charity" does not adhere to the consistency which this first definition promises.

In this use of the word on the slate, the mute is quoting from 1st Corinthians 13: 4-8 out of the King James Bible (ca. 1611). Notably there are inconsistencies even in terms of the scriptural translation (an issue which is later raised in the confidence-man's interaction with the old man), as the word "charity" was originally "love" in Tyndale's New Testament (ca. 1534)—drawing attention to the parallel between "charity" in sense of alms-giving and Christian "love." In the case of the mute, however, it seems as if this aspect of Christian love might be somehow corrupted to mean simply common, everyday alms (according to Hershel Parker, anyway)¹⁰, or as "self-interested"¹¹—at least it appears that is what his desired reader response *should be*, if his character is set up as explicitly beggar—though he never overtly asks for cash as the Black Guinea and others do in the novel. The readers of his slate, the passengers of the *Fidele*, are both confused and annoyed by his Biblical insights on charity and the responses he receives are hardly charitable or generous, perhaps in part because his slate is so undecipherable. The narrator notes that the mute appeared "singularly innocent; an aspect, too, which they took to be somehow inappropriate to the time and place, and inclining to the notion that his writing was much of the same sort: in short taking him for some strange kind of simpleton" (11). His slate is difficult to interpret both for the passengers and for readers of *The Confidence-Man* because neither the mute nor the narrator offers any explanations or interpretations of his message. He never directly asks for charity or alms, but simply offers the word up as an object or concept for the reader's interpretation to take it as they will. That is: he asks not for money, but interpretation. And although we might interpret his slate as an implicit request for alms, or at least a request for

¹⁰ Parker, *The Confidence-man*, by Herman Melville, 11n2.

¹¹ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, "Masquerades of Impairment: Charity as a Confidence Game."

Christian kindness to those less fortunate, what is essential in this scene, as in later moments as well, is that the narrator does not explicitly tell us how to interpret this message and neither does he grant us access to the confidence-man's thoughts. Like the crowd, we have to attempt to interpret the slate on its own merits, without comment or guidance from the slate's author. This, I contend, is analogous to the larger project of interpreting the novel as a whole. We do not have the luxury of accessibility to the confidence-man's thoughts or motivations and so must subjectively interpret the confidence-man's slate and dialogues, and Melville's novel, without this knowledge of interiority. This introduction to the confidence-man is an introduction into the types of inferences and interpretations we are required to draw from his dialogues throughout the novel. This section, then, is really a model for the interpretability of a word or text, the character of the confidence-man, and even the interpretability for the novel as a whole. Paralleling the mute's slate with the barber's "NO TRUST" sign, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that "an either/or interpretive system is inaugurated and the story sets out to test both principles as an experiment in the validity of American faith in absolutes."¹² I similarly argue that ultimately the novel is an argument against the use or effectiveness of absolutes, or at least the ability to ascertain an absolute interpretation of object, character or text. Even as we think about how to interpret the words on the slate, it seems clear that a cohesive reading is simply a wild goose chase— no one ever sets forth a coherent explication of the mute's slate, aside from pointing out its "lunacy" (12) and the novel quickly moves on from questions regarding the sign to interpretation of the mute himself. We can attempt to define the word, "charity" and attempt to decipher the mute's message, but ultimately we're still left with questions and speculations lacking a clear answer. This speculation points to the idea of interpretative difficulty even when given a definition. We know that the mute advocates "charity," but we can only speculate about

¹² Mitchell and Snyder, "Masquerades of Impairment: Charity as a Confidence Game."

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his motives (alms, evangelism, etc) in offering biblical definitions of the word. Likewise, although we know Melville appears to encourage “confidence” in the novel, the narrator is as mute as the first guise of the confidence-man in offering any interpretative guidance.

In the second guise of the confidence-man as the Black Guinea, his motives (as well as the meaning of the word) are better secured, as he is very clearly involved in the supplication of charity or alms. Indeed, the delivery method his benefactors employ—namely by pitching coins (or buttons) at his face so as to be caught between his teeth—the narrator terms a “game of charity” (19). It seems that this scene could be read as a very traditional view of “charity” in the picture of an unfortunate person collecting cash from those in better economic circumstances in the form of a game or entertainment. Or, we could wonder about the intention behind the “charity” as this “game” appears rather inhumane, even cruel. This is a position which the text seems to support as well. Even though readers should be aware of Black Guinea as a guise of the confidence-man, the scene is described so that the narrator’s (as well as the reader’s) pathos is with the cripple. That our pathos (or charity) should lie with the confidence-man is counter to what one might expect from the novel, but the scene is undeniably set up this way. We are made to sympathize with Black Guinea in this humiliating “game” in which “the cripple’s mouth [is] at once target and purse” (19). So, even though this spectacle is termed “charity,” the conveyance of the alms seems anything but charitable—causing the reader to wonder if benevolent intention is required for real altruism—that is, if charitableness is required for real “charity,” or if intention is irrelevant. Mitchell and Snyder argue that “charity becomes a ruse by obscuring rather than exposing the truth of social injustice.”¹³ They suggest that while the scene is presented as “charity,” it is a guise for something far more sinister—the wealthier classes buying off their

¹³ Mitchell and Snyder, “Masquerades of Impairment: Charity as a Confidence Game.”

responsibilities,¹⁴ an idea which is later explored with the confidence-man in the guise of the Agent for the Seminole Orphan and Widow Asylum. That is, while the confidence-man may assume a guise, his donors' charity could also be termed as inauthentic as he himself is— and thus would explain the narrator's alignment with the Black Guinea.

This scene serves to further highlight the topsy-turvy nature of “charity as the fact that the Black Guinea is presumably *not* a black cripple is irrelevant to how we are meant to feel in regard to the treatment he receives. Essentially this is another moment of deception on the part of the confidence-man (as well as *The Confidence-Man*) to trick readers into placing trust in an object that may not actually be worthy of that trust. This is not to say that the confidence-man is a malevolent figure in the novel (as this does not seem to be the case). The disconnection between the uncharitable charity the crowd gives Black Guinea and the charitable analysis we give him highlights how irrelevant authenticity and consistency are in the novel. We are made to feel that yes, intention behind a charitable donation does matter, that this “game of charity” (19) is cruel. We come to these assessments even though we, unlike the crowd, *know* that the Black Guinea is a fraud. So while we come to a conclusion on what charity is not, we simultaneously ignore what the Black Guinea is not.

This question of whether we should consider a character's legitimacy before giving him a charitable assessment is further explored when the Methodist minister inquires of the suspicious wooden-legged man regarding the authenticity of the Black Guinea, “have you no charity, friend?” (22). The wooden-legged man replies that “charity is one thing, and truth is another” (22), suggesting that a charitable way of thinking about human nature may simply be a blithe and delusional perspective, completely separate from reality or *truth*. Further as the Methodist urges him to have “charity, man, charity” (23), the wooden-legged man exclaims,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,.

To where it belongs with your charity! to heaven with it! [...] here on earth, true charity dotes, and false charity plots. Who betrays a fool with a kiss, the charitable fool has the charity to believe is in love with him, and the charitable knave on the stand gives charitable testimony for his comrade in the box. (22).

In this exchange, the words “charity” and “charitable” are used, ironically, not to mean kindness or goodwill, but something far more elaborate—that the charitable fool is a dupe and the charitable knave is a duper. With this diatribe, the wooden-legged man sets up two possible views towards “charity”: either the charitable individual is a moron and dupe, or he is in cahoots with the villain about whom he is speaking well. Like the parallel signs in the opening of the novel (“charity” or “no trust”), the wooden-legged man sets up the possibilities in absolute terms of either this or that—there is no in-between. And again, readers are forced to wonder, which character are we supposed to read with “charity”: the confidence-man or those he fools? Once again, however, such alternatives seem insufficient to the novel. While the wooden-legged man may be correct in his assertion that the Black Guinea is not what he appears to be, it seems that our sympathy goes to the inauthentic, though un-knavish cripple. While it also appears that the Methodist’s aim is genuinely to be charitable and defend an individual whose reputation he believes is in need of defense—even if he is not quite so gracious toward the other cripple—he wavers in his defense. For all his impassioned speech on behalf of the Black Guinea and chastisement of the wooden-legged man, he too loses confidence in the confidence-man. It appears that the Methodist is not so much a champion of the Black Guinea (which ironically, it seems, would be more admirable), but simply a man who likes to vehemently argue for Christian principle, whether or not he actually believes it.

Notably in this exchange, the Methodist and the wooden-legged man are not talking about “charity” in terms of the actual donation of cash or commodity. Their conversation has turned to a discussion about the merits of charity in the abstract, even as they are discussing a figure who is seemingly in need of concrete charity or money. While the wooden-legged man and the Methodist are focused on dualistic definitions, they simultaneously ignore other possibilities in Black Guinea’s need for charity. It is not so easy to simply assume that the wooden-legged man is correct in his maxim about the two categorizations of “charity,” because although the confidence-man may be engaged in a game of deceit, it is certainly not clear that the Methodist is his partner in crime, as the wooden-legged man’s definition might suggest. It also does not seem as if the Methodist is castigated for being foolish enough to believe in Black Guinea, but mainly for his abandonment of him after he is declared to be a dupe. Despite his initial revulsion of the wooden-legged man’s philosophy, he is afraid of being the charitable fool that the wooden-legged man describes. And for all the Methodist’s efforts in convincing the crowd to consider the Black Guinea charitably, “a change [came] over that before impassioned intercessor” as he “mutely eyed the suppliant; against whom [...] the distrusts first set on foot were not generally reviving” (25). Again, the narrator casts aspersions on the characters who show distrust, not on the inauthentic figure himself. In light of this, the wooden-legged man’s definition of charity requires malevolent intention to be in the mind of the suppliant of charity. This does not seem applicable to the confidence-man, despite his guises and schemes as we never see a moment in the novel where the confidence-man is explicitly and undeniably malicious. So, though we get a definition of “charity” as either knavish or foolish, it is not entirely useful in thinking about the type of charity which the confidence-man preaches and is rather another false lead in the semantic “wild goose chase” (21) on which Melville leads us in

order to demonstrate how absolutism in language limits a wide range of possibilities. The confidence-man neither needs to be, nor is, knavish or foolish, but genuinely both intelligent and benign in his exchanges with passengers.

The wooden legged man initially brings up the wild goose chase analogy as the young clergyman departs to locate the Black Guinea's references—nearly all various guises which the confidence-man assumes in the novel. Later the confidence-man repeats this wild goose chase analogy to an old gentleman in the sleeping cabin in regard to the old man's ineffective attempts to authenticate his paper bills with a counterfeit detector. With these parallel moments, the novel exhibits an analogy between the futile quest to validate cash and the irrationality of validating one guise of the confidence-man with another. The novel also constructs a homology between words and characters, and reveals the difficulty, if not impossibility, readers experience in attempts to validate either as authentic. In these moments, what Melville claims that one may define a word (i.e. "charity") with an assortment of other words, but such definitions cannot fix an absolute identity or meaning in every situation. This is not to say that Melville believed words to be useless in communication, but rather that in limiting semantic possibility to a narrow scope (i.e. knave or fool), limitless intricacies in characters are ignored. The novel, then, while arguing against absolute representations, simultaneously reveals that while character inconsistency is "realistic" and limitless, the semantics used to describe "realistic" characters are often limited and ineffective in painting an authentic portrait of a character.

Despite the limited possibility of the wooden-legged man's definition, this idea of "charity" as associated with either knavery or foolishness reoccurs in chapter 18 when the passengers conduct an "inquest into the true character of the herb-doctor" (95). Here only the confidence-man charitably donates to an unfortunate-looking figure whom the narrator describes

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as a “duly-qualified claimant” (97) for the alms which the heavily critiqued herb-doctor bestows upon him. The auburn-haired gentleman, and proponent for the herb-doctor’s characterization as knave, is ironically the very figure who acts with the least amount of charity and kindness toward the “poor wounded huzzar.” The hook-nosed gentleman (and advocate of the herb-doctor’s categorization of “fool”) asks whether it is “knavery to devote the half of one’s receipts to charity? He’s a fool I say again” (97). With this debate, the passengers are unable to decide whether the herb-doctor is a knave or a fool, especially in light of his charitable donation. Despite their opposing characterizations of him, both the hook nosed gentleman and the auburn-haired gentleman subscribe to the wooden-legged man’s definition of “charity” as either knavish or foolish. The quarrel then, serves to highlight the continuing uselessness in defining either the confidence-man or “charity” in such narrow terms as either knavish or foolish. Neither the confidence-man nor his expression of charity are exclusively malicious or foolish.

Their debate ends when another passenger suspects him of being neither a knave nor a fool but a Jesuit emissary, and the “triangular duel” (98) ends at last with “a triangular result” (98). This an essential aspect to Melville’s message in *The Confidence-Man*— that neither characters nor words have either/or or dualistic possibilities, but that there can be a wide variety of potential interpretation. Even the word “triangular” is inconsistent with the accepted definition of “duel,” yet we are not so befuddled with this pairing of language that we miss its meaning. Melville’s message is not entirely lost on us: as he asks us to consider the possibility of a “triangular duel,” he also argues against absolute definitions and two-sided possibilities. This conflicting moment is similar to Melville’s characterization of the most realistic characters as inconsistent (chapter 14) in their contradictory beliefs. The “triangular dual” then speaks not only for varying interpretations of the confidence-man or inconsistent modifiers of “dual,” but is

illustrative of Melville's larger argument in the novel—that even our most basic understandings of how semantics function cannot be taken for granted as fixed and absolute.

In addition to Melville's linguistic twists in this scene, we are forced to wonder on which character the real critique lies. Although the novel seems to debate the merits of the confidence-man, the narrator does not critique his deceptions. The critique rather is on those who would seek to expose him as a malevolent operator. The auburn-haired gentleman who portrays the herb-doctor as a knave treats the "poor wounded huzzar" with repulsion and expels him from the cabin. In this case, then, the person who shows the least amount of charity towards the confidence-man is also the character who demonstrates the most aversion towards a figure who is genuine candidate for charity. Further, because of the way in which the narrator describes the scene, it does not seem as if the confidence-man's charity is somehow lessened by the fact that he receives silver for the sale of herbs (which may or may not be authentic): what matters is that he seems to demonstrate truer kindness and charity, ironically, than those who seek to define him (or "charity" in general) as either knave, fool, or "knave, fool, and genius all together" (97). With this debate, the text shows that "charity" is not the business of those who are focused on authenticity. The hook-nosed and auburn-haired gentlemen are unable to believe that a man whom they believe to be inauthentic would also be capable of real, genuine charity. But this scene is undeniably described so that we feel pathos toward the "poor wounded huzzar" and his benefactor (the confidence-man) and aversion toward the other gentlemen. It does not seem to matter if the confidence-man acquired the charity from the sale of herbs to individuals the auburn-haired gentleman would term "charitable fools." When the hook-nosed gentleman and the auburn-haired gentleman are unable to agree on a cohesive theory to explain the confidence-man, an individual enters the debate who suspects the confidence-man for a Jesuit emissary—causing

the narrator to term the duel “triangular.” The knave/fool binary is again proven terribly ineffective in describing a person who seems to be neither of those possibilities. Though the likelihood of the confidence-man as a Jesuit emissary seems equally unlikely, it does present an alternate possibility into the duel.

In a situation similar to the Black Guinea’s, another cripple engages in something of a confidence game— a deception aimed at securing the charity of fellow passengers. But once again we can wonder if authenticity is the crucial issue. Happy Tom, mistaken by the confidence-man for a wounded soldier, relates his tale of unjust imprisonment and the subsequent atrophy of both legs. The confidence-man, focused as he is on the goodness of humanity, can hardly believe such an outrageous tale. Happy Tom, unsurprised at the disbelief, assures the confidence-man that “hardly anyone believes my story, and so to most I tell a different one” (103). And indeed he does, immediately assuming the guise of a poor soldier wounded in the Mexican war, and departs to beg the surrounding crowd for their charity. The question, raised by a prim-looking stranger, is whether “yonder rascal should lie so” (103) for the sake of alms? Once again in this exchange, Melville emphasizes the question of whether authenticity matters to the practice of charity. The stranger, of course, argues that authenticity is everything, and that Happy Tom has no right to collect cash from a fictional tale presented as the truth, saying that in doing such, Happy Tom must invariably be a rascal. The confidence-man, as Happy Tom’s champion, begs the stranger to consider that “he lies not out of wantonness” (103) as he works to convince the prim-looking stranger that authenticity is irrelevant in this situation. The stranger is unable to see how a lie could arise from any other motivation besides wantonness and threatens to expose him for a sham.

The stranger's definition of Happy Tom's lie as necessarily wanton should remind us of the wooden-legged man's shallow definition of "charity" as either knavish or foolish. What the confidence-man seems to argue is that the authenticity of the story is not necessarily tied to the genuineness of the donation of charity, or of the need for charity. The confidence-man maintains that the men most interested in authenticity (the wooden-legged man, the gentlemen in the car, and the prim-looking gentleman, etc) are on the same type of wild goose chase on which the young clergyman embarks. By seeking to define "charity" in relation to authenticity, they ignore the possibility of real need or real expression of charity in an un-wanton, un-knavish, character who tells an inauthentic tale. What Melville argues is that circumscribed definitions or conditions of "charity" are often ineffective in considering that an inauthentic individual may have authentic need.

At any rate, the confidence-man is successful in convincing the stranger to retire rather than carry out his threat of exposure. So if we concede that Happy Tom "lies not out of wantonness" (103) and therefore is worthy of charity in the forms of both donation and consideration, we could similarly view the confidence-man's actions in a charitable light. This instance of a cripple enacting a performance for the charity of the surrounding crowd should immediately remind us of the Black Guinea at the opening of the novel. In that moment, the narrator remarks that "to be the subject of alms-giving is trying, and to feel in duty bound to appear cheerfully grateful under the trial must still be more so" (19)—clearly aligning the narrator with "the subject of alms-giving." While the narrator is more conservative with his commentary in Happy Tom's confidence game, we still understand these similar moments as analogous and locate our pathos with the cripple and his advocate. According to the wooden-legged man's definition, the confidence-man acts knavishly in his support of the lying cripple.

The confidence-man is not a knave, though, but rather a friend to an unfortunate individual. The cripple's story is so pathetic (true or not) and his injuries so realistic, that it is unlikely that we are meant to agree that Happy Tom belongs to "the Devil's regiment" (104) as the stranger argues. What does seem accurate, is that the confidence-man is really the more truly charitable of the two individuals discussing the merits of Happy Tom's lie. The stranger, with his quest for truth over charity, is clearly not an admirable character and the overwhelming support of the text seems to be with the confidence-man in his charity towards the cripple. The confidence-man even attempts to bestow Happy Tom with his healing liniment at no charge, an offer which, though the cripple refuses, does not discount the charitable gesture of the confidence-man. It does not really seem to matter if the cripple tells a more effective story than the one he tells the confidence-man (true or not) in his quest for charity or if the herb-doctor and his herbs are authentic, what is significant is that the cripple is in need and that the confidence-man is a friend to him. We need not worry about who Happy Tom and the confidence-man *really* are, the need for and the provision of charity are the only crucial aspects to this scene. What Melville demonstrates is that the search to define a person or a concept ("charity") as "wonton" ignores other possibilities that are not wanton.

The implications of the word "charity" as both abstract and concrete noun are again brought to the fore in Chapter 6, "At the Outset of which Certain Passengers Prove Deaf to the Call of Charity." The title obviously reveals a continued interest in the word and a reminder of the deaf-mute's slate. In this section, we observe the confidence-man as the agent for the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum—a guise which would necessarily suggest "charity" to be the actual exchange of money or commodity goods from one individual to another. Passengers who converse with the confidence-man in this appearance would naturally understand their

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engagement with him as (at least partially) solicitations for money or charity on behalf of needy human beings. In his second unsuccessful solicitation, an old gentleman addresses the confidence-man, saying “look you, you on others’ behalf ask for money; you a fellow with a face as long as my arm. Hark ye, now: there is such a thing as gravity [...] but of long faces there are three sorts; that of grief’s drudge, [...] the lantern-jawed man, and that of the impostor. You know best which is yours” (38). To this accusation, the confidence-man replies, “heaven give you more charity, sir” (38). The exchange here touches upon several variations on the meaning of “charity.” The first is the concrete collection of money on “others’ behalf,” which the old gentleman understands is the agent’s intent. Like the wooden-legged man, the old gentleman here hints at knavery or trickery in the request for charity. Though notably we are not given enough information to ascertain whether his collections will or will not be donated to the charity—one of the ways the novel precludes us from making absolute judgments regarding the confidence game in which the confidence-man is engaged. This is another sticky moment in which authenticity is difficult (or impossible) to ascertain as we have no access to his motivations or thought. The second variation of the word is in the confidence-man’s reply of “heaven give you more charity, sir” (38) which implies not a monetary exchange, but rather something far more abstract, coming closer to the word as written on the mute’s slate—charity as benevolence, brotherly love, or even, simply confidence. The motivations behind this particular guise of the confidence-man are particularly tricky to fix as benign or malicious. Either the confidence is a genuine agent for charity or he is a thief, but neither the text nor the narrator attempt to aid readers in this quandary. Melville does not simply ignore the possibility of malevolence in the confidence-man’s motivations in his collection of donations, but his exclusion of characters’ interiority is intentional in his “realistic” portrait of individuals. In

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“nature” we have no access to another person’s thoughts other than that which they choose to share. In this novel, as in “nature,” we are forced to judge the confidence-man on his actions, rather than his interior thoughts. Because we can not ascertain any true knowledge about the confidence-man’s motivations just as we could not ascertain the motivations of his first disguise, we must instead rely on the effect of his actions. I argue that even as the confidence-man adopts various guises, his inauthenticity does not preclude benignity. He does not have to be knave simply because he is inauthentic, but like a “triangular dual” he could also be charitably inauthentic.

The agent for the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum eventually does succeed in securing confidence in his persona via the exchange of bills from the gentleman with gold sleeve buttons (45) and with whom he shares further dialogue regarding the concept of “charity.” After hearing a tale about an invalid’s easy chair, which the agent has purportedly invented, the gentleman inquires if he has “not always been in the charity business?” (47). The gentleman clearly understands “charity” as a business in which “consumers” exchange money for the satisfaction of knowing that they have aided another human being. He even defines charity as a “luxury” (46). This characterization accords with Mitchell and Snyder’s description of Melville’s portrait of charity as “a cultural ritual where the economically able garishly donate in public venues [...] to bolster their own celebrity.”¹⁵ Whatever the wealthy gentleman’s intentions, the confidence-man proposes a far more comprehensive version of charity—namely that all forms of lessening the degree of human suffering should be included in a business model. Charity, as the confidence-man describes, should not be run like an efficient factory with subdivisions of labor; rather, “charity is a work to which a good workman may be competent in all its branches” (47). The comparison of charity to a business seems like an unusual choice, but it is a relationship

¹⁵ Mitchell and Snyder, “Masquerades of Impairment: Charity as a Confidence Game.” 37.

which the novel further insists upon in the agent's depiction of his "World's Charity" (47), which would require a "methodization of the world's benevolence" (47), doing away with voluntary contributions and creating a benevolence tax to be collected and distributed to the whole world. This scenario is so ostentatious and the confidence-man's auditor so incredulous that we wonder, could the forced extraction, collection and redistribution of cash really be termed "charity" at all? The confidence-man asks, "who will refuse [...] his own little dollar for sweet charity's sake?" (49). The answer is that no one could refuse because it would be a required duty. This grandiose scheme, possibly, is a way to further emphasize the various moments in the novel where "charity" is discussed, as it takes all the microcosmic forms of charity (begging, collection, etc) and presents them in a macrocosmic scale. And in these moments, we see the diverse expressions of one concept: charity. It does not matter, then, if money, goods, or services necessarily have to be provided voluntarily or freely as a gift in order to "count" as charity, or if the obligation to provide changes the nature of an identical sum into something other than "charity." What is important in this section is that "charity" is utilized in an unexpected, but not invalid, analogy to Wall St.—very different from the biblical "charity" on the deaf-mute's slate, or the game of charity in which the Black Guinea's benefactors were engaged.

One could argue that in this exchange, the confidence-man seems to be stepping away from his heretofore relatively consistent position on "charity,"—that the word and concept necessitate *confidence* in another's trustworthiness in exchange and that this consistency is essential to the novel. What seems more likely is that the confidence-man (and *The Confidence-Man*) is being deliberately inconsistent in defining the ways in which charity is able to be distributed—this version of "charity" then becomes another aspect of the "triangular dual" of semantic definitions. What appears to be most important in this scene is not necessarily how the

confidence-man defines “charity,” but rather the effect his definition will have on the man who will potentially donate to his charity. The narrator advises us that the wealthy gentleman “remained proof to such eloquence; though not, as it turned out, to such pleadings. For after listening a while longer with pleasant incredulity [...] put another bank note into his (the confidence-man’s) hands; charitable to the last, if only to the dreams of enthusiasm” (51). The effect of the confidence-man’s elocutions, then, is to inspire the wealthy gentleman to contribute more largely than originally planned. With this, the confidence-man may be using a tactic similar to Happy Tom’s—telling a misleading story in order to acquire a more substantial donation. As Alexander Gelley notes, “the confidence-man’s dealings [...] display no single strategy. Rather, he operates tactically, seizing the opportunity offered by his interlocutor in order to pursue his goal.”¹⁶ If his goal is an additional contribution, he proposes an enthusiastic scheme, not to convince readers that a “World’s Charity” is a workable or admirable proposition, but merely to acquire additional funds. We could, therefore, term this exchange another facet of this wild goose chase to fix some consistency to the definition of “charity” as this depiction, though at odds with other references to “charity,” is still a feasible classification. While ostentatious, this scheme makes sense, at least theoretically. Although we may disagree, as the wealthy gentleman does, about the effectiveness of this scheme, we are not confused by his definition. The confidence-man is not attempting to convince readers that this definition or that classification is correct, but rather that we should have confidence that there are many aspects to a single concept—indeed, we should understand this as another aspect to the triangular dual. So it is not clear and neither is it important if the confidence-man *actually* thinks it is a good idea to initiate a World’s Charity, because eventually, his story works as he achieves his original goal in approaching the man, that is, a donation to his specific charity.

¹⁶ Gelley, “Melville’s Talking Man: Rhetoric in *The Confidence-Man*,” 251.

Ultimately, we could view this section as another way in which the confidence-man secures the donation of charity as a symbol for trust in his persona. It is unimportant if a specific guise or speech is inauthentic: what is important is that they work to achieve a specific end. What we are able to glean from this discussion of “charity” is that to seek to define a word or idea in relation to the trustworthiness of a text or individual is impossible, indeed unimportant; both require *trust* when absolute knowledge cannot be ascertained. The confidence-man proves that it is a wild goose chase to seek to define a person or character as consistent, and we can similarly see how “charity” (as both concept and word) necessitates faith as the multiple variations of the word preclude our ability to fix it as static. Analogous to the way in which “charity” cannot be put down as primarily knavish or foolish, we cannot claim that the confidence-man (or any character) is solely malevolent, especially since we have no access to his motivations. Essentially, both characters and semantics are variable and express themselves differently in various contexts, but this inconsistency does not render either as useless—individuals still communicate and relate to one another. Trust that both concepts and characters work in spite of their inconsistencies is the essential element to the novel. Though we cannot *know* that “charitable” always describes a knave or a fool, or that the confidence-man is not malicious in his confidence game, what seems to matter more is the triangular possibilities characters like the wooden-legged man and the hook-nosed gentleman overlook in their quest for binary absolutes.

Trust:

The novel clearly sets up a distinction between the word, “charity,” inscribed on the slate of the deaf mute and the “NO TRUST” (12) message of the barber shop sign. The double meaning is fairly clear in this case, since the sign both conveys the unwillingness of the barber to provide a

service for credit as well as the figurative “no trust” in humanity he has that legitimizes his refusal of credit. The opposing signs represent two extremes—trust is a biblical virtue but also impractical in a capitalist economy. In this moment, anyway, no character suggests trust or charity in some instances, but not in others, as a valid point of view.¹⁷ The possibilities for confidence here are explicitly binary—“charity” or “no trust.” The barber’s sign, importantly, is treated neither with contempt nor confusion by its readers (both in the novel and of the novel) and unlike the mute’s slate, all can understand its simple message. The *OED* defines this type of “trust” as “confidence in the ability and intention of a buyer to pay at a future time for goods supplied without present payment” and the passengers are certainly not surprised that a businessman would operate on a cash-only basis and refuse to give credit. This moment is the first instance in which cash or coin is presented as a symbol of trust—later we observe the good merchant announce, “Yes, my poor fellow, *I* have confidence in you [...]. And here is some proof of my trust” as he bestows a half-dollar on Black Guinea. If the novel suggests that the presentation and acceptance of actual coin or bills is a legitimate method of proving trust, then we may ask if monetary exchange is the only way to show trust in the novel. The exchange of cash too may be an either/or possibility for the proof of trust in the novel, as it seems that the conferring of cash symbolizes trust, while the refusal demonstrates “no trust.” It is clear that the confidence-man places a strong emphasis on monetary exchange in the procurement of trust or confidence (as with the widow, the miser, the sophomore, the good merchant, etc). And yet, there are also a few moments when the confidence-man secures confidence without this exchange. He declares to Happy Tom that “I shall take nothing from you” as he attempts to bestow his healing liniment on the beggar at no charge. In the novel’s closing, he also does not attempt to separate the old gentleman from his bills. Although in many instances, cash is the means by which the

¹⁷ Mitchell and Snyder, “Masquerades of Impairment: Charity as a Confidence Game.” 39.

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confidence-man secures that confidence, it is not necessarily the only way of doing so.

Even cash is not immune to a lack of trust in its legitimacy or value as the old gentleman's trust in paper money wavers as he is unable to determine its authenticity using another text (the counterfeit detector). While cash, then, is consistently the object through which the confidence-man secures confidence, the old man demonstrates that we cannot even fix its authenticity in every situation. The confidence-man is un-perplexed by this difficulty and terms the old gentleman's search for a goose on a bill (which is supposed to document the bill's legitimacy) "a wild-goose chase" (248). Clearly then there is an analogy between the difficulty of determining the legitimacy of one text (the paper money) with another (the counterfeit detector) and the impossibility of ascertaining one guise of the confidence-man through another. The confidence-man's nonchalance in response to the old man's anxiety shows that he is not concerned with determining validity. If the old gentleman first accepted the bill as valid when passed to him, why should others not also believe in its authenticity, even if it is a counterfeit? What the confidence-man is trying to show the old gentleman is that his bill is useful, even if possibly inauthentic. As in other moments when the confidence-man places less emphasis on authenticity than other characters, this instance seems to be the pinnacle moment in which the confidence-man separates an object's value from its ability to be authenticated as valid. He shows that individuals can still function and institutions still work, even though authenticity cannot be validated. He advises the old man to "believe [him], the bill is good; don't be so distrustful" (247).

These parallel wild-goose chases demonstrate how difficult, if not impossible, it is to fix objects, texts, or individuals as static. It seems significant that all three objects in these moments (the "charity" slate, the "no trust" sign, and the bills) are written texts. As texts, they are subject

to our interpretation. Like the other definitions we see in the novel, especially of the word “charity,” these moments present an either/or possibility for “trust.” Either we can identify with the barber, Pitch and the old gentleman and practice a “no trust” philosophy; or we can identify with the confidence-man and his mantra of “confidence,” despite the possibility that the object in which a person places their confidence is inauthentic. From the opening of the novel, it is clear that a linguistic battle will be carried out between the proponents of the two philosophies—whether to trust or to have no trust. This initial binary, however, is what the novel sets up as a false dichotomy as it argues against absolute definitions.

Despite the confidence-man’s enthusiastic apologetics for trust, it does not seem to be enough for the passengers on the *Fidele*. The confidence-man in the guise of the Agent for the Seminole Orphan and Widow Asylum invokes the Black Guinea upon being asked to ascertain his authenticity as a black cripple, “Ah, poor Guinea! Have you too been distrusted? you, upon whom nature has placarded the evidence of your claims?” (38). The confidence-man points out that even apparent physical manifestation of those characteristics which would seem most difficult to fake, race and handicap, are not immune to distrust. Peter Bellis further points out that “bodily form is no longer self-evident proof of identity.”¹⁸ The wooden-legged man and the crowd are unable to trust that the Black Guinea is that which he appears to be and the crowd instead attempts to validate his appearance with “documentary proof” (21). Although the Black Guinea has “none o’ dem waloable papers” (21) the homology between this attempted textual validation and the old man’s counterfeit detector is apparent. In both moments, the old gentleman and the crowd attempt to fix authenticity with a document, but neither consider the possibility that the authenticating document may also be counterfeit and the effect of this moment is to demonstrate the foolishness in this approach. Later in the novel, subsequent guises of the

¹⁸ Bellis, “Melville’s *Confidence-Man*: An Uncharitable Interpretation,” 558.

confidence-man do present textual “proof” of their identities, which one could reasonably assume are counterfeit—showing that neither physical appearances nor texts are reliable to authenticate objects. This difficulty, the confidence-man proposes, is rendered irrelevant if we have confidence that systems like charity and economics function in spite of in-authenticity. The argument seems to be that if everyone practiced a “no trust” philosophy, systems could not function as nearly all facets of human interaction are dependent on trust. While the confidence-man cannot guarantee that the old gentleman’s bills are legitimate, he does try to persuade the old gentleman to “believe [him], the bill is good” (247) as even the young peddler who sold the counterfeit detector believed the old man’s bills were good.

Regardless of the difficulty and impracticality of enacting such an elaborate masquerade for a “few paltry coppers” (41), the wooden-legged man is, in reality, justified in his distrust of Black Guinea, as presumably the confidence-man is neither black nor crippled. But while we know that the Black Guinea is not, in fact, either black or crippled, the narrator does not condemn the confidence-man for his masquerade. In this moment especially, his pathos is clearly with the Black Guinea who is subject to a cruel pitch-penny “game of charity” (19) and who, as the narrator describes “feel[s] in duty bound to appear cheerfully grateful under the trial,” swallowing “his secret emotions [...] while still retaining each copper this side of the esophagus” (19). The idea that the Black Guinea has “secret emotions” speaks to the idea that the confidence-man has authentic feelings even as his persona is inauthentic. This may be the only moment in the novel in which we are granted even a glimpse into the interiority of the confidence-man. We are not told that he has “secret malevolence” or “hidden schemes,” but rather that he has unenthusiastic emotions towards his role as the object of charity. From the narrator’s viewpoint, trust in the Black Guinea is the most admirable position as he terms the

wooden-legged man “a sour-faced, [...] shallow unfortunate” (19) who “concluded to be avenged on government and humanity by making himself miserable for life, either by hating or suspecting everything and everybody” (19). Distrust (even though it may be validated) is certainly not the lens through which readers are meant to view the designs of the confidence-man, and for that matter, most characters, objects and texts. Our sympathies are not with the “sour-faced” wooden-legged man, though he is the figure most aligned with truth. Determining authenticity is not the moral imperative of the novel, rather the most admirable position is to trust the individual who is able to raise “a smile even from the gravest” (17).

The way in which the crowd’s trust in the Black Guinea is not fixed mirrors the way semantic definitions are not fixed or absolute. In this scene, the crowd (including the young clergyman) professes to have “trust in him” (38), (the Black Guinea) as further evidenced by their donation of coins. This trust, though, is proven to be highly fickle and transient. The young clergyman admits as much to the confidence-man when he says, “doubts [about Black Guinea] were at last suggested; but doubts indirectly originating, as I can but think, from prior distrust unfeelingly proclaimed by another” (38). The other individual to whom the young clergyman is referring is wooden-legged man, who alone is able to influence the opinion of the crowd from enthusiastic profession of trust (as evidenced by their game) to disdain and distrust of the cripple. Like the desire of the crowd to look for “documentary proof” to legitimize trust, the crowd similarly acquires their distrust through the claims of another individual—again showing that identity and legitimacy are often contingent on the legitimacy of something or someone else. To the crowd, the Black Guinea’s legitimacy as a black cripple rests either with “waloable papers” (20) or other individuals (i.e. guises of the confidence-man) which creates a cycle of “references and cross references that ultimately calls the possibility of all self-knowledge into question.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Bellis, “Melville’s *Confidence-Man*, An Uncharitable Interpretation,” 557.

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This moment also foreshadows the counterfeit detector which is similarly able to persuade the old gentleman away from his previous profession of confidence in humanity. The young clergyman makes the journey from blithe trust in the Black Guinea to distrust based on the cynicism of the wooden-legged man, to full trust restored when he secures the reference of the confidence-man as Agent for the Seminole Orphan and Widow Asylum. He evidences that restored trust by a monetary donation banked with the agent, who assures him that he “accept[s] the trust” (42) on Black Guinea’s behalf. What we should glean from both moments, then, is that an individual’s trust is not secure but is as fickle and unfixable as semantic definitions and as unverifiable as authenticating documents, but simultaneously necessary for all types of human interactions.

The discussion of what makes a person or article worthy of trust is one which continues when the confidence-man takes the guise of the president and transfer agent for the Black Rapids Coal Company. In this tortuous exchange, trust in the appearance of the transfer book is the object held up to inquest. Oddly, it is not the merchant who expresses distrust; instead the confidence-man himself inquires how the merchant can be certain the book “is not a bogus one?” or that it is “what it is lettered to be” (64). This use of what could be described as reverse psychology is successful as the merchant “knowing[ly] smile[s]” and answers, “because, [...] if you were other than I have confidence that you are, hardly would you challenge distrust that way” (64). Although we assume that the book is *not* authentic, the merchant raises a valid point when he remarks that, having never seen a book inarguably validated to be the “true book” (64), he has nothing with which to compare the one he observes. He must trust that the book the confidence-man is holding is true, having no other standard for authenticity. This moment seems to represent how “trust,” according to the confidence-man, should function. The book functions

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as an authenticating document regardless of its potential illegitimacy. Notably, the merchant does not need to have absolute faith in the confidence-man, he merely has to have enough trust in his inability to determine the authenticity of the book to engage in a financial transaction. So while later he critiques confidence as separate from truth (73), in this moment he is the perfect consumer, having just enough faith to realize that he must have confidence to engage in a transaction when authentication is impossible. Significantly, though the book may not be authentic, it is not clear whether the shares the confidence-man sells are bogus. The novel notably does not depict the merchant as a dupe, but rather as possessing both “logic” and “confidence” (64). As we are not told otherwise, it is entirely plausible that the stock the merchant procures is legitimate, though purchased on trust in inauthentic objects (both the book and the confidence-man). Importantly, the novel never proves that the confidence-man’s exchanges are illegitimate. The merchant is astute enough to recognize that he would not know the “true book” from a counterfeit (unlike the Black Guinea’s accusers) and elects to trust in appearances—the same type of trust the Cosmopolitan advises the old man to have in his paper money.

This example of trust in a financial contract which the merchant displays initially with the confidence-man as the president of the Black Rapids Coal Company is in stark contrast to the statement the merchant makes at the end of their conversation. Declaring that “wine is good, and confidence is good” he further asks if

wine or confidence [can] percolate down through all the stony strata of hard considerations, and drop warmly and ruddily into the cold cave of truth? Truth will not be comforted. Led by sweet charity, lured by sweet hope, fond fancy

essays this feat; but in vain; mere dreams and ideals, they explode in your hand, leaving naught but the scorching behind! (73).

The confidence-man, in response to the merchant's inconsistency in his perfect trust, declares that "for all the fine confidence you professed with me, just now, distrust, deep distrust underlies it" (74). This inconsistency of character even merits a metacritical explanation covering the entire chapter that follows, in which the narrator reasons that "no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature herself has" (75). While both the confidence-man and the merchant are shocked at this inconsistent exclamation, it is certainly not the only moment in which an individual's trust proves fickle (e.g. the young clergyman's trust in Black Guinea). In this profession, the merchant suggests that without real knowledge or ability to ascertain authenticity, an individual's trust will necessarily be betrayed as hope and charity will "explode in your hand."

The idea that trust will necessarily be betrayed is what the novel sets out to overturn. Renker states (in reference to the chapter "The Metaphysics of Indian Hating" but relevant here too) that "metaphysics, the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality, is the type of inquiry into ultimate truths that *The Confidence-Man* presents as futile."²⁰ The merchant is aware that the book might suggest doubts, "but not knowledge; for how, by examining the book, should I think I knew any more than I now think I do" (64). He reasonably admits that the possibility of knowledge is impossible, and chooses not to entertain unverifiable doubts; he errs on the side of confidence. If the possibility of ascertaining objects, texts or individuals is futile, then Melville is saying something crucial about language—namely that words are similarly ineffective to legitimize other words. Both the President's book and the Black Guinea's "waloable papers" (if they existed) might suggest doubts, but not knowledge. This is not to say

²⁰ Renker, "'A _____!': Unreadability in *The Confidence-Man*," 130.

though that words, definitions or unverified papers are purposeless or breed chaos. Melville argues that it is difficult or impossible to fix semantic definitions—it is a wild goose chase like the old man’s counterfeit detector—but this does not preclude their usefulness in human interactions. The confidence-man uses various definitions to discuss both “charity” and “trust” in his attempts to secure confidence. No single definition can be termed the correct one as all variations are valid in their contexts. There is little sense then in attempting to define trust in absolute terms, but whether one has enough trust to make human relations workable.

The concept of trust as related to authenticity is further explored as the confidence-man (in the guise of the herb-doctor) simultaneously urges a sick man to have confidence in nature and in his medicine but also to prove that other vials of herbs are authentic before placing trust in them. The sick man accuses the herb-doctor of preaching distrust after convincing him that trust and confidence are the only necessary requirements to health and wellbeing. The confidence-man, notably and uncharacteristically qualifies his professions on confidence to encompass only “the genuine medicine, and the genuine *me*” (89) and further advises the sick man to “prove all vials; trust those which are true” (89). This qualification of confidence, advocating the authentication of an object of trust is unusual in the novel. As on the surface it seems antithetical to the earlier scene, Melville certainly could have chosen to leave out this moment of the confidence-man’s demonstration of how to check for a counterfeit label and his subsequent emphasis on “distrust [as] a stage to confidence” (89), and simply left the sick man renewed with confidence, as the herb-doctor does with the miser. In that similar scene, the herb-doctor does not advocate authenticity as crucial for the efficacy of his herbs. On the contrary, he chides Pitch for ridiculing the miser’s trust in the herbs, saying that “mere imagination, if nothing more, may help eke out his disease” (115). These opposed moments reveal binary interpretations of “trust”—

either distrust is valid when attempting to validate authenticity or unquestioning trust is essential to health. This example of the confidence-man speaking in a manner apparently inconsistent with his previous philosophy is akin to his “World’s Charity” scheme in which he seemingly advocates the forced extraction of cash from the world’s population. As noted in that situation, it is unimportant whether the confidence-man actually believes in such a scheme, what is crucial is that his “dreams of enthusiasm” (51) aid in his procurement of more cash for the Seminole Orphan and Widow Asylum. Similarly in this moment, we should examine the *result* of his discourse, rather than the inconsistent rhetoric he uses to accomplish his goals. He instructs the sick man to authenticate the validity of the herb-bottle by the imprinted word, “confidence” on the label. These instructions to the sick man could be viewed as a test of his confidence in the herbs. The sick man is the one who expresses his discontent with the confidence-man’s advice to suspect other bottles and thereby the confidence-man is able to “prove” (89) the sick man’s confidence. So while this appears to be an inconsistency in the confidence-man’s philosophy, and indeed, rhetorically it does seem as if the confidence-man is as inconsistent as the good merchant, he is utilizing variable semantics to secure perfect confidence.

This moment also touches on a key aspect of trust—namely, that one cannot determine legitimacy in each situation. While the confidence-man urges the sick man to have confidence in “the genuine me” (89), we must certainly wonder who is the genuine confidence-man? The answer is that there is no single, unadulterated confidence-man, but all of his guises are equal aspects of his multi-faceted persona. What the confidence-man asks of the sick man is not to validate his persona as “genuine,” but rather to simply believe he is genuine in his desire to help. In this way, the multiple guises of the confidence-man are illustrative of the fact that there is no true, single way to use or define a word. While in this dialogue, he advocates “prov[ing] all vials;

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trust[ing] those which are true” (89), and in another he promotes “the trust of perfect confidence” (127), the confidence-man seems to be very much in control of his operation, persuading passengers that he, himself, is true in his desire to aid passengers. Certainly the confidence-man is *not* purely a malevolent duper or the devil incarnate, as Hershel Parker would suggest, and indeed, his operations seem benign, even beneficial to the passengers whose confidence he does secure. That benignity is not dependent on the confidence-man’s stability or consistency. Indeed, the confidence-man himself embodies inconsistency, but, like language, that fact does not preclude his usefulness to the passengers with whom he converses. Even in his second guise of the Black Guinea, the narrator notes that “it was curious to see him, out of his very deformity, indigence, and houselessness, so cheerily endured, raising mirth in some of that crowd, whose own purses, hearths, hearts, all their possessions, sound limbs included could not make gay” (17). This seems to prove that his goal is genuinely to help fellow passengers and raise the spirits of those around him. As even in this early moment, the narrator describes the confidence-man as bringing gaiety to the passengers, he likewise brings comfort to the miser and the sick man. Perhaps, trust in the confidence-man (or *The Confidence-Man*) is much like trust in semantics—fixable to a degree, but worthy of our trust simply because they are useful.

In the last moments of the novel, we again return to the barber shop which displays the “NO TRUST” placard at the beginning of the novel. In response to the confidence-man’s questions regarding the trustworthiness of humanity, the barber confesses that if a man appears honest, it would be likely that he would grant trust for future payment of services rendered. If, however, he met that same man in a dark corner of the ship, he admits that he would not trust him. In this moment the confidence-man proposes an either/or possibility for trust when he asks, “don’t you think consistency requires that you should either say ‘I have confidence in all men,’

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and take down your notification; or else say, 'I suspect all men,' and keep it up?" (229). This limited scope of possibility introduces another black and white binary, oppositions which the novel as a whole seems to reject. Again, we should not wonder so much about the specific rhetorical devices the confidence-man utilizes, as they do indeed prove inconsistent, but rather consider their usefulness in contributing to a desired goal—namely trust in the credit system. The confidence-man succeeds in his goal as the barber takes down the sign, and enters into a contract necessitating his trust in the confidence-man for future payment on a shave. Even though he returns the sign to its previous position and tears up the contract after the confidence-man departs, with the impression that he would never see the confidence-man again, the encounter so sticks in his mind to warrant future discussion with the barber's friends who term the confidence-man "quite an original" (236).

The narrator notes that "whether that impression [of the confidence-man's faithlessness] proved well-founded or not, does not appear" (236), again precluding us from drawing a conclusion regarding the confidence-man's motivations. It is clear, however, that the confidence-man does not collect cash in this exchange and it is intentionally unclear whether he obtains a free shave, so his primary goal seems to be convincing the barber to remove the notification so antithetical to his own "charity" slate, and he departs believing he accomplished this goal. The barber does not have the trust that the merchant demonstrates in his business transaction with the confidence-man, even though the merchant realizes that doubts (but not knowledge) may be suggested by the book. The novel seems to critique the barber for not even having enough trust to honor his contractual agreement. The barber requires the confidence-man to front a "material pledge" (236) of fifty dollars to protect him from "certain loss" (235), which barber means as specific loss, but which the confidence-man takes as guaranteed loss, asking the barber "is it so

certain you are going to lose?” (235). Aside from the semantic misunderstanding, the barber loses trust in the validity of the contract as the confidence-man is unwilling to place a “money-pledge” (235) with him. The requirement of money as a trust object proves that the barber does not have even basic trust in the confidence-man or his contract—unlike the merchant. Melville presents this moments of an individual’s refusal of even basic trust in another as antithetical to the way in which all types of human systems and interactions work. The barber has neither trust in the confidence-man’s words nor his authenticating document (the contract) and is in a less admirable position than either the merchant who accepts the book as valid or the crowd who would have accepted papers as evidence of the Black Guinea’s legitimacy. Without trust, he misses out on the possibility of financial gain from customers who would honor their contractual agreement.

While the barber refuses to place trust in the Cosmopolitan, he does, however, place trust in a document, the authenticity of which becomes a matter for debate. The barber quotes Ecclesiasticus 12.16 and 13.11 “an enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips; [...] I believed not his many words” (235). Discovering, with the aid of an old gentleman, that this passage comes out of the apocrypha, the Cosmopolitan and the old gentleman come to perfect agreement that the quotation is of “uncertain credit” (242) and ought not to be included with the rest of the scriptures which advocate trust and charity. This distinction presents another black and white binary regarding the sagacity of trust in fellow man. That the legitimacy of a text would be in question is not a new issue to the novel. It is likewise unlikely that the book the President of the Black Rapids Coal Company holds is a “true book” (64). This term “true book” is repeated as the Cosmopolitan asks the barber if he “say[s] that such cynical sort of things are in the True Book” (235). That both books would be termed “true” in light of their questionable authenticity seems

to link these two moments together. Both books require *confidence* in their authenticity as knowledge is unavailable. Though the merchant recognizes that the book might “suggest doubts,” he chooses to trust. The Cosmopolitan chooses to trust in the Bible, but not the section “of uncertain credit” (242). While confidence is necessary for belief in the truth of the scriptures, the confidence-man discounts the apocrypha as illegitimate and contrary to his philosophy of trust. Although one may critique the confidence-man for his inconsistency in choosing one aspect of scripture over another based on its legitimacy, this moment is akin to his espousal of the “charity” sign and rejection of the “no trust” message, as well as his advice to “prove all the vials; trust those which are true” (89). In these moments, the confidence-man utilizes inconsistent rhetoric to accomplish a consistent goal—confidence. And though the delivery of the message may vary, his general campaign to renew the passengers’ confidence remains steady. If in rejecting the apocrypha, he is able to remind the old gentleman that “to distrust the creature, is a kind of distrusting the Creator” (243) his goal is still achieved.

The philosophy of the old gentleman is proven inconsistent, however, as evidenced by his fascination with a young peddler’s counterfeit detecting booklet. Simultaneously, the confidence-man is deeply concerned about the incredibility of the apocrypha, but is unconcerned about authenticating paper bills as legitimate. His nonchalance about the old gentleman’s paper bills is in keeping with his message of usefulness or effectiveness as the standard for an object’s value. His message of confidence, however, is deeply dependent on the apocrypha being of “uncertain credit” (242) as the text advocates a message of “no trust.” So while the focus of the scene is on the old gentleman’s inconsistency, the Cosmopolitan demonstrates an equal amount of inconsistency as he remarks, “what a peck of trouble that Detector makes for you now; believe me, the bill is good; don’t be so distrustful” (247), as the old gentleman is unable to either

confirm or reject the bill as legitimate. The confidence-man is inconsistent; this inconsistency, however, is actually in keeping with his larger message of confidence. We can compare this overall consistency characterized by inconsistencies to the narrator's description of human nature: "The grand points of human nature are the same today as they were a thousand years ago[;] the only variability in them is in expression, not in feature" (77). Although the confidence-man is inconsistent in expression, his feature, confidence, remains the same. While John Bryant wonders whether "the novel's epistemological dilemma suggest[s] nihilism and the failure of language, form, and fiction,"²¹ Melville is not writing a nihilistic novel in which truth is non-existent. On the contrary, Melville seems to be arguing against absolute dualistic definitions which cannot point to truth. Recognizing that faith in authenticity has little to do with knowledge, he espouses a mantra of confidence in the novel. This is why, though the confidence-man's rhetoric may seem inconsistent, that inconsistency is irrelevant as his dialogues all point to a larger doctrine illustrating the essentiality of confidence in all types of human interactions. Distrust in his money does indeed make a great deal of trouble for the old gentleman as he painstakingly goes through his bills, until he "[doesn't] know what [...] to think" (247). Even with his device, authenticity is still a difficult matter to prove and one which the confidence-man advises him to remedy with simple trust that the bill will work and trust that, since at one time, he accepted it as valid, that others will as well—which seems to be the way *The Confidence-Man* treats language and rhetoric. If different variations of the same word still function to transfer meaning and positive affect, they are valid, despite the variation. Indeed, "charity" is called a "game," a "business," a "luxury," any lessening of mankind's suffering, etc, in the novel—variation that proves that a consistent definition cannot be reached. What matters is not that we should aim to reach a stable definition, but that in each situation in which the word is evoked, the

²¹ Bryant, "*The Confidence-Man*: Melville's Problem Novel," 334-335.

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confidence-man achieves his specific goal with varying disguises and varying rhetoric.

“If reason be judge, no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature herself has” (75).

Returning to chapter 14, in which the narrator expresses his commitment to inconsistent characters, he also argues that “the only variability in [the grand points of human nature] is in expression, not in feature” (77). This profession seems akin to the way language in the novel operates. One can pin human nature down to a few key features, but the ways in which an individual expresses those features (consistently or inconsistently), the narrator argues, no one can “infallibly discover” (77). As it is with language too; we can pin “charity” or “trust” down to a few unifying features, but how these words are expressed or variably defined is similarly impossible to discover. Elizabeth Renker notes that both novel and the title character share the same name, and further observes that “they operate analogously: just as the confidence-man’s constant changes of identity baffle the perceptions of the other characters, *The Confidence-Man* baffles the reader with a bewildering proliferation of characters and descriptions.”²² In both the protagonist and the novel, the emphasis is on changeability and variation. In the three chapters which metacritically discuss characterization, this point is expressly emphasized.

Chapter 33 is written as in response to a hypothetical critic’s complaint about the unauthenticity of the Cosmopolitan. The narrator responds that he writes for those who want “nature [...] but nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed” (186). So while *The Confidence-Man* links us to “real life” (186), it also, as a work of fiction, is not bound by the same rules as nature. While Hershel Parker and Mark Neimeyer argue that as no human being is able to transform himself into all the various guises the confidence-man assumes without

²² Renker, “‘A _____!’: Unreadability in *The Confidence-Man*,” 117.

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detection, he must be “subhuman”²³ and even devilish, they seem to ignore that the Fidele is “another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie” (187). In this world, Melville demonstrates how absolute identification (both in character and language) is ineffective in depicting human nature, which the narrator tells us “is subject to variation” (77). The novel seems to argue against black and white arguments and either/or distinctions and instead presents variability and variety as closer to truth and reality. So the confidence-man’s guises, while perhaps closer to “nature unfettered” than “real life,” accentuate the way in which human nature is inconsistent and varied. The merchant is able to in one moment profess perfect confidence in a business transaction, and in another moment abandon this confidence and succumb to “the queer, unaccountable caprices of his natural heart” (74). The confidence-man as well inconsistently alters his rhetorical devices and language, but often this variability is accompanied by a different guise—highlighting the tie between his inconsistent rhetoric and his personas. The confidence-man need not be a devil to change his appearance, he is simply able, like an actor in a play, to transform himself.

While the narrator balks at the barber’s friends’ assignment of the phrase “quite an original” (236) to describe the confidence-man, in portraying a truly original character, parts of his description seems to depict the confidence-man accurately. He says that “the rarity [of an original character] may still the more appear from this, that, while characters, merely singular, imply but singular forms, so to speak, original ones, truly so, imply original instincts” (237). The confidence-man seems anything but singular; indeed, we observe the confidence-man reject “singular forms” and embrace multiple guises and rhetorical schemes. The narrator, as the implied author, also admires original characters. He states that an original character cannot be conceived in the author’s mind but “is akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things” (238). Jenny Franchot likens this creation of an original character to a repetition of the

²³ Parker and Neimeyer, Preface to *The Confidence-Man*, by Herman Melville, xii.

divine creation of the world. She notes though, that “this struggle to repeat Genesis with original literary characters inevitably produces dumb mystery as a sign of its originality.”²⁴ This struggle to repeat creation could be part of the veil of incomprehensibility surrounding the novel, as Melville is undeniably attempting to reinvent the form of the novel in *The Confidence-Man*. Even the word, “original,” however, seems inescapably ineffective in characterizing the confidence-man accurately. Even as he is not a “singular form,” he is also very much based on reality, a goal which the narrator continually reasserts in Chapters 14 and 33 when he states that people “want more reality, than real life itself can show” (186). The confidence-man, then, is that extension of reality and is “nature [...] transformed” (186) and variable (or original) “in expression, not in feature” (77). The goal of *The Confidence-Man* seems to be rejecting labels, absolutes, and knowledge that a character, object or word is invariably bound by one definition, even if the definition is “original.” So while the confidence-man may contain aspects of originality, he also cannot be defined by this term alone.

An aspect of characterization which precludes us from knowledge of character’s motivations is the lack of “transparency” (76) of intention. The narrator notes that it is “the practice with most novelists” to “always [...] represent human nature not in obscurity, but transparency” (76). This, according to the narrator, is opposed to reality as human minds and motivations cannot be “readily seen through” (76). Critics concurring with Hershel Parker’s analysis misinterpret this absence of interiority as necessarily malevolent. This, however, is not the only possible conclusion. As in “real life” (75), we must decide if the confidence-man’s actions are truly dubious and his motivations malevolent. But without knowledge or interiority, Parker’s suspicion of malevolent intent is just unverifiable suspicion. This aspect of *The Confidence-Man* is one reason why critics find the novel so mystifying and incomprehensible. I

²⁴ Franchot, “Melville’s Traveling God,” 177.

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argue that it is precisely the preclusion of that knowledge which makes the novel so “faithful to facts” (75). We cannot absolutely know that the confidence-man is either benign or malevolent—he transcends definability in these terms. And like gentlemen in the triangular dual we might “want knowledge” (98), but like so often in real life, knowledge cannot be ascertained in an either/or binary.

“Is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is a *rara avis*?” (75).

In a key dialogue between the Cosmopolitan and Mark Winsome they discuss the identity of Charlie Noble. The confidence-man asks Winsome, “what do you conjecture him to be?” (195). Winsome replies that he is what

“among the ancient Egyptians, was called a ‘-----’ using some unknown word”

“A -----! And what is that?”

“A ----- is what Proclus [...] defines as ‘----- -----’” (195).

What the confidence-man asks Winsome to define in the intentional blanks is a “Mississippi operator” (198). This moment serves to explicitly demonstrate the interpretative conundrum in which readers find themselves in attempting to make sense of the novel. In this exchange we are precluded from knowledge of the literal word Winsome uses to describe Noble. In so doing, Melville again emphasizes how he wants his readers to struggle with the novel. In this moment both readers and the confidence-man are similarly perplexed by the both the word and the definition Winsome offers. The confidence-man remarks that if Winsome “could put the definition in words suited to perceptions like [his], [he] should take it as a favor” (195). Similarly, I’m sure we would take it as a favor if Melville were clearer in his semantics, but as

Renker notes, in this moment “the novel shows its interest in unreadable characters”²⁵—by which she means both the confidence-man and “the literal writing on the page.”²⁶ This dialogue, although it leaves readers perplexed and baffled, illustrates the close association between characters and words—and the difficulty of interpreting either in the novel. The narrator remarks that “the great masters (of literature) excel in nothing so much as challeng[ing] astonishment at the tangled web of some character, and then raise admiration still greater at the satisfactory unraveling of it” (76). The narrator’s claim reveals that great authors endeavor to create the most realistic portrait of a character as both complex and inconsistent. Our attempt to unravel these characters is traditionally where our pleasures in novels lie, but *The Confidence-Man* is yet more realistic as it resists untangling. And whether we can completely unravel either the words or the characters in the novel is questionable, but what is clear is that Melville insists upon *The Confidence-Man* as a novel based on realism.

The reason behind his commitment to inconsistency and un-interpretability seems to be voiced, not by the confidence-man, but by Mark Winsome. After Winsome remarks that “he seldom cares to be consistent” (a clear reference to Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”), he compares inconsistency of thoughts to the locks and levels of the Erie Canal; “you are locked up and locked down with perpetual inconsistencies, and yet all the time you get on” (195). This seems to be the message of the novel. Despite the ineffectiveness of either/or definitions, inconsistent rhetoric and thought processes, un-ascertainability of authenticity, and lack of insight into characters’ interiority (which, as Melville makes clear, is a reflection of real life), we get on; both systems and individuals are able to function without stability and certainty—as long as we don’t lose confidence in human relationships.

²⁵ Renker, “‘A _____!’: Unreadability in *The Confidence-Man*,” 120.

²⁶ Ibid.

This embrace of a seemingly Emersonian perspective of language is what originally inspired my interest in the apparent linguistic inconsistencies in the novel, as Melville was not a disciple of Emersonian transcendentalism. It seems that in attempting to rework the form of the novel and write a “fiction based on fact” (75) in spite of himself, he became a self-reliant author. In *The Confidence-Man*, he writes a novel in which coherent interpretability seems to be a wild goose chase—not a generic novel in which the characters and the message can be clearly deciphered. He self-reliantly reworks and challenges the ways in which readers interpret dialogue and character. This embrace of a tenet of transcendentalism does not render *The Confidence-Man* a satire, though. If the novel resists anything it is the ability to be generically described. Rather, Melville is dedicated to demonstrating that even aspects of the form of the novel need not be absolute and immutable. Even if he was unwilling to identify himself with transcendentalist doctrine as a whole, he at least appears to embrace self-reliance and autonomy. What he does argue against in the novel, though, is the message in “The Poet” in which Emerson promulgates that the poet has the ability to determine authenticity and understand the nature of reality. In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville argues that consistent truth in both human and divine natures “is past finding out” (76), by a poet, a clergyman, or any other mortal. *The Confidence-Man*, then, is not a fragment or a failure²⁷ or an expression of nihilism, but a clear embrace of realism, its message illustrating the foolhardiness of the wild goose chase to determine one clear meaning for either a word or a character, because in the end, “is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is a *rara avis*?” (75).

²⁷ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 409-412.

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