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“What do the devils find to laugh about” in Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“What do the devils find to laugh about” in Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*

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The failure of identity in *The Confidence-Man* has confounded readers since its publication. To some critics, Melville’s titular character has seemed to leave his readers in a hopelessness without access to confidence, identity, trust, ethical relationality, and, finally, without anything to say. I argue, however, that Melville’s text does not leave us without hope. My argument, consequently, is inextricably bound to a reading of Melville’s text as deeply engaged with the concepts it inherits from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, an inheritance woefully under-examined by those critics who would leave Melville’s text in the mire of hopelessness. In examining how these two texts bind themselves together while simultaneously cutting against each other, my reading finds in *The Confidence-Man* an alternative way of responsibly living, one that eschews the fatal task of shoring up either our confidence or our embarrassment in favor of an inauthentic redeployment of identity that laughs at both the embarrassment in our confidence and the confidence in our embarrassment.

Keywords: Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, identity, ethics, critique, deconstruction

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THE CON-MAN AND THE PROBLEM OF CRITIQUE

(but, indeed, where in this strange universe is not one a stranger?)

—Frank Goodman, a.k.a., *The Cosmopolitan*

She sat in a sort of restless torment, knowing not which way to turn.

—The Narrator

That Frank Goodman cannot easily be pinned down becomes apparent rather quickly to anyone reading Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*. He's been called by some critics a magician and by others the Devil.¹ But, as Peter J. Bellis notes, even though some of the most prominent figures in Melville scholarship "begin with this same unifying gesture [characterizing Frank as satanic]," they "reach widely differing conclusions" about the con-man and the novel as a whole (549). And beyond the various and inconclusive analyses of the con-man's "true character," one could even contest whether Frank is one person at all. While several scholars agrees with John P. McWilliams' assessment that, "the eight avatars of the Confidence-Man become the only means of perceiving any continuity in the nonevents that occur," today's scholars have mostly taken for granted the previous findings that Frank, in his alter egos, is only one person (190). Philip Drew serves as a good example of this assumption by not proposing "to dispute the contention that all the confidence-men . . . are manifestations of the same character" (422, my emphasis).

Nevertheless, he admits that, "it is important to remember that this *cannot* be proved" (422, my emphasis). The text remains sufficiently equivocal to allow us to imagine that Frank is not one person with eight avatars but, instead, that he is in cahoots with a group of conspirator con-men.

The above is to say that Frank's identity slips, remaining impossible to identify as such.

But the con-man's identity isn't the only identity that slips in Melville's novel. In fact, upon

¹ Those critics who attribute the character of "the Confidence-Man" to Satan include prominent Melvillian scholars: Richard Chase, Edgar Dryden, Charles Feidelson, Jr., R. W. B. Lewis, James E. Miller, Jr., Roy Harvey Pearce, Joel Porte, Edward Rosenberry, et al.

further examination of his cons, one can begin to see how Frank is undoing and opening up all of his marks' identities as well. This undoing is so intense that, at one point in Melville's *Confidence-Man*, a so called "charitable lady," conflicted by the con-man's equivocality, sits down "in a sort of restless torment, knowing not which way to turn" (69). What brings on this paralysis? The narrator tells us, "A natural struggle between charity and prudence" (68). It's this struggle between apparent non-negotiables that leaves Frank's marks unable to decide one way or the other and, ultimately, exhausts, to the point of torment, what at first appeared to be their stable identities. It's an exhaustion, in other words, that marks, much like Frank's marks mark themselves, the point at which the self can no longer grasp the concepts that have held the self together. It's a torment in which the self loses all confidence, embarrasses itself, and is no longer able to do anything but stutter, "but, indeed, where in this strange universe is not one a stranger?" (306). Melville's text constitutes the one as a stranger to the other and a stranger to one's self. At last, *The Confidence-Man* calls into question and puts at stake the very possibility of self and relationality: Does this torment leave us permanently paralyzed, cut off from our essence, leaving us unmoored, without anything to say? Does it undo—along with identity—ethics, leaving us without relation, referring us—to the self and the other—instead, as solipsistic strangers?

Of course, these stakes are not new to anyone familiar with Melvillean criticism. That Frank and his cons seem to take identity to its final extreme is conceded, for instance, by Michael Rogin who notes, "The distinction between stage performance and stable identity breaks down. There is no longer a character who plays different roles, but only costumes and performances, designating a character *no longer there*" (244, my emphasis). This "void at the center of personality," as Paul Brodtkorb calls it, has led critics on to see a void at the center of

The Confidence-Man's representation of social life (430). "Nobody knows self or other," Brodtkorb notes, "because there is no self or other to know" (427).

But what is most unsettling to these critics is the absence of ethics that they see as also having to exist in the absence of self and of other. Specifically, Frank's refusal of stability, in Rachel Cole's words, "has seemed to demonstrate both the indispensability and the foolhardiness of trust" (385). That is, "The confidence-man has seemed to represent the impossibility of one of realism's central goals: to securely locate free and self-defining individuals within a social order by discovering the truth behind their social masks" (385). Instead of truth, as Richard Hauk notes, the con-man demonstrates that all we are left with is a vacuous "confidence in the 'truth' of a proposition or set of data" (115). This demonstration of the indispensable yet foolhardy trust has destabilized ethics in the works of critics like Frank Palmieri who describes this third far more nihilistic void in Melville's text as an "absent center of *value* in *The Confidence-Man*" (98, my emphasis). To these critics, Melville has seemed to leave his readers in a hopelessness without access to knowledge, identity, trust, ethical relationality, and, finally, without anything to say.

However, in focusing on absences and voids, these Melvillian critics have given themselves—and critique—over to embarrassment, missing the confidence required to do so. This all too simple pessimism, in turn, overlooks the hope available in the deconstruction of a text, a hope that I argue is made all the more available in *The Confidence-Man*. Moreover, it fails to see how one might refuse such a simple binary, working instead to keep oneself from being held in the hand of one or the other. In the following pages, I will offer an alternative reading of Melville's text that refuses any notion that we could vanquish outright, as if the one—confidence or embarrassment—could undo the other once and for all.

My reading, consequently, finds Melville's text deeply engaged with the concepts it inherits from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, an inheritance woefully under-examined by those critics who would leave Melville's text in the mire of hopelessness. More specifically, I will look at how Melville's text plays within the struggle of two key concepts—"charity and prudence," mentioned above—found first in *The Canterbury Tales* and then in *The Confidence-Man*, finding that far from annihilating these concepts per se, the text, instead, shows us how they might have always already been beyond us. That is, while I admit that, on the one hand, this deconstruction in the text will and ought to leave us—especially as critics—in a kind of torment with Frank's marks, I will also argue that, on the other hand, *The Confidence-Man* offers us a hope beyond solipsism, paralysis, and silence. The con-man, after all, does not characterize life as either an optimistic or a pessimistic journey. Rather he finds much to laugh about along the way in both sorrow and joy, knowing that someone who lives in such a way, so as to find much "to laugh about in wisdom," is usually "persecuted for the fool" (381). Nevertheless, he offers up to us this way of living as a responsibility that eschews the fatal task of shoring up either our confidence or our embarrassment in favor of an inauthentic redeployment of identity that laughs at the embarrassment in our confidence and vice versa, allowing the two, neither one resolving the other, to remain held in the ecstasy of that laughter.

THE PILGRIM SENTENCE

For, as us semed, it was for to done,
To enden in som vertuous sentence . . .
—Chaucer, "The Parson's Prologue"

While underrepresented in Melvillean scholarship, it certainly has not gone unnoticed that *The Confidence-Man* binds itself to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The novel itself suggests this connection when the narrator describes the group of passengers on the *Fidèle*: "As among

Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, or those oriental ones crossing the Red Sea towards Mecca in the festival month, there was no lack of variety" (10). To the credit of those Melvillian scholars disciplined in poetics, the scholarship focused on the connection between these two texts deals primarily with their stylistic and structural similarities. James E. Miller, for instance, examines *The Confidence-Man* in relation to *The Canterbury Tales* in order to answer the question: "Is Melville a failure in his craft?" (260). And, indeed, there are striking stylistic and narrative similarities between the two texts. Both, for instance, deploy a frame narrative that encloses within itself an eclectic assortment of journeying characters representative of a certain idea of the cross section of their respective times and places. But by focusing only on the texts' poetic similarities, the critical conversation has created a deficit for itself, missing how Melville's novel binds itself to and cuts against the themes and concepts found in the tales. Chaucer's collection of stories, after all, shares with Melville's text a concern for absence of meaning, a concern illustrated in *The Canterbury Tales*' use of the medieval concepts, *sentence* and *game*. Moreover, both texts, while unable to reconcile the contradictory terms outright, seem to suggest the two are bound together. As will be shown, Chaucer's and Melville's texts provide a kind of counter-magic that calls out the magic of the con. In turn, this counter-magic found in both texts, rather than relying on one assumption, instead opens up a procession of assumptions and with this procession a kind of hope for relationships of generosity.

Sentence over Game. At the heart of the conflict of identity in *The Canterbury Tales* is the conflict between text as "game" and text as "earnest." As Hallisey notes, it was commonplace in medieval times for a piece of literature to be judged both on whether it pleases, "the pleasure principle," and on what medieval writers called its *sentence*, or "the moral lesson it teaches" (6). The medieval writer Boethius shares this idea, saying, "the duty of the faculty of rhetoric [is

both] to teach and to move” (“Structure of Rhetoric” 489). This tension between “the *ernest*, purpose of literature, its usefulness as a road map to the heavenly city,” Hallisey continues, “and its function as *game* [pleasure]. . . is present throughout the tales” (6).

Nevertheless, we can often see in the tales a tendency towards “the medieval passion for order” (Hallisey 5). It is a passion that takes death to be a serious threat. Chaucer’s tales give attention to death, first, in the “Manciple’s Tale” where the Manciple asks Phoebes, in the wake of having killed his adulterous wife, “Where was thy wit and thy discrecioun?” (H.282-287). Phoebes’ abandonment of discretion for reckless rage brings on this warning:

O every man, be-war of rakelnesse,
Ne trowe no-thing with-uten strong wisesse;
Smyt nat to sone, er that ye witen why,
And beeth avysed wel and sobrelly
Er ye doon any execucioun,
Up-on your ire, for suspecioun. (H.282-287)

As Hallisey notes, many scholars have agreed that this attention to the final risk in the tales gives way to a continual, if inconsistent and often incongruous, tendency in the text towards an *ernest* ordering of oneself in relation to the world and God. These scholars often point to both the prologues that bookend the tales and the infamous “Retraction” as evidence of Chaucer’s privileging of *ernest* over *game*.

Indeed, Chaucer’s text is framed by the Pardoner and the Parson in the “General Prologue” and the “Parson’s Prologue,” calling for the tales to ultimately “enden in som vertuuous sentence” (VIII.63). In the “General Prologue,” the Pardoner sets up the game: each traveler will

tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two more on the return. But in the organization of the game the Pardoner seems to subordinate *game* to *sentence*:

And which of yow that bereth him best of alle,

That is to seyn, that telleth in this cas

Tales of best sentence and most solas,

Shal have a soper at our aller cost

Here in this place, sitting by this post,

Whan that we come agayn fro Caunterbury. (I.796-801, *my emphasis*)

The winning traveler—that is, the one who “bereth him best of all”—will be judged *first and foremost* on which tale offers the best *sentence*. Is it any wonder, then, that the Parson concludes the tales, not with a story, but rather with a sermon whose *sentence* offers a consideration of how best to order oneself before man and God? There, again, at the end of the tales, we could easily find play subjugated to order as the Parson promises to “Do yow pleasunce *leefful*, as I can” (H.41, *my emphasis*), with a sermon on “Moralitee and vertuuous matere” (H.38).

This privileging of *sentence* over *game* is emphasized all the more by the “Retraction” believed by most critics to have been appended to the end of the tales along with both “The Pardoner’s Prologue” and “The Pardoner’s tale” (Hallisey 6). In the “Retraction,” Chaucer revokes his “translacions and endytinges of worldly vanitees,” including those playful stories in *The Canterbury Tales* he calls, “thilke that sounen in-to sinne” (644). Hallisey notes, perhaps too hastily with regards to Chaucer’s intent, that the “Retraction” “represents his judgment of the ultimate place of literature in the life of both poet and audience: as one of the ‘things of the world,’ inferior to the ‘things of God’” (6). However true this interpretation of Chaucer’s intent might be, many of the tales are caught in a struggle between the order of God and the disorder of

the world. And if there is any “lesson” to be learned in the tales, it seems to be one that emphasizes our duty not to take ourselves too certainly and, instead, to be generous to each other in the face of uncertainty.

Searching for The Sentence in the tales. Far more difficult to locate than the subsumption of *game* in *sentence*, is precisely The Sentence of *The Canterbury Tales*. What, in other words, does the text hold out as the proper means of relating oneself to the other? Is it possible that, as Traugott Lawler suggests, “the discontinuities and contradictions so rife in the simile are repaired in the episode at large, in the rescue, because there a connection is made, a gap is bridged” (227)? On the contrary, one can find hints, throughout the text and more specifically in “The Franklin’s Tale,” of a medieval construction of reason being deconstructed to the point that the gap in this reason can no longer be bridged. Instead, the “rescue,” if it can be called that, takes place precisely in the moment of giving up on reason. In that moment, an indefinable ethic, what Chaucer calls “chieritee,” works against any construction of reason, allowing the characters to find themselves giving up their own self-fashioning for the other.

Rather than moving directly to “The Franklin’s Tale,” though, we stop to note the philosophical inheritances of the tale, viz., the definition of reason as taught in the medieval “grammar school.” As J. Stephen Russell notes, Aristotle’s “*Categories* was the single most important elementary logical work in the Middle Ages” (35). From *Categories* and *Topics*, medieval thinkers like Boethius inherited the two Aristotelian characteristics of logic.

First, these medieval thinkers share the Aristotelian view that logic is dialectic, differing from rhetoric, as Boethius notes in his widely circulated *De Topicis Differentiis*, only inasmuch as dialectic (1) “is not involved in [the who, what, where, when, and why of] circumstances” and (2) “uses complete syllogisms,” unlike rhetoric which is “content with the brevity of

enthymemes” (79-80). Dialectic, then, operates, as Hass describes, “as the ability to question things” (52), or as Aristotle says, it is “a method by which we shall be able to reason from generally accepted opinions about any problem set before us” (*Topica* 273).

Second, to this deductive reasoning, medieval thinkers coupled the definition theory provided by Aristotle at the beginning of *Categories*. The landmark fourfold distinctions are as follows: “Of things there are: (a) some are *said of* a subject but are not *in* any subject. . . . (b) Some are in a subject but are not said of any subject. . . . (c) Some are both said of a subject and in a subject. . . . (d) Some are neither in a subject nor said of a subject” (*Categories* 4). What comes out of this dense taxonomy are two sets of predicables. The first are genus, species, and individual. The second—and, as Russell calls, “with only a bit of over dramatization, the cornerstone of medieval philosophy”—is the distinction between the essential and the accidental attributes of an individual (35). With these two sets of predicables the medieval thinkers believed it possible for the analytical thinker to distinguish not only between categories but also between varying individuals within a certain category: for example, rational man, rational woman.

Moreover, with both dialectic and definition theory, medieval writers were equipped with a certain set of tools necessary to reason, based on general assumptions, about how an individual within a given category should behave. Boethius describes this set of tools as follows: “The part which purges and instructs judgment . . . we can name ‘analytical.’ The part which aids competence in discovering . . . is called ‘topical’ by us” (29). Medieval reasoning, in other words, finds itself dependent on Aristotle’s “topical,” a.k.a. definitions, aiding the “analytical,” a.k.a. the dialectic, and vice versa. Put yet another way, Aristotelian and Medieval reasoning requires the defining of the general assumption and general assumptions to define. This requirement created by the need for there to be an *a priori* set of assumptions *and* definitions if

we are to reason is fulfilled, in “The Franklin’s Tale,” by a reflexive construction of charity as, to borrow Lawler’s terminology, both gap and bridge.

Reason and “Chiertee / Toward mankinde” in “The Franklin’s Tale.” To say Arveragus, Dorigen, and Aurelius receive little respect among critics would be an understatement. A quick sampling of the literature reveals that most critics, like R. D. Eaton, at the very least make note of the “central characters’ limited moral vision, courage and understanding” (317). Others, like Kurtis Haas, are far more severe, arguing “that in the fictive universe of the Franklin’s Tale, Dorigen and Arveragus demonstrate a dangerous deficiency in the cognitive skills inculcated by the medieval” grammar school (45). The tale, I would argue, deserves a far more sympathetic reading of Dorigen, Arveragus, and Aurelius, looking for how reason inevitably fails them, regardless of the amount and endless depth of their topical distinctions.

Lee Patterson notes that “the *Franklin’s Tale* is a Breton lay, a kind of narrative that explicitly asserts its difference from real life” (349). As a Breton lay, the narrative itself becomes an allegory for the complexities involved in not only the characters’ reasoning but also in the reader’s impossible task of finding sound reason for which to condemn the characters’ lack of judgment. Again and again, we find ourselves, with the characters, confused and erring with no basis for proper rectification. This confusion is exemplified right away in Dorigen’s soliloquy to the rocks:

I woot well clerkes wol seyn as hem leste,
By argumentz, that al is for the beste
Though I ne kan the causes nat yknowe.
But thilke God that kan wynd to blowe
As kepe my lord! This my conclusion.

To clerkes lete I al disputison. (V.885-90)

We might find it easy, as modern readers, to laugh at a rant directed at inanimate rocks. But there is a fear in this scene that drives the despair. Dorigen has been waiting for her husband, Arveragus, to come home, and his path home leads directly across a patch of ocean where “An hundred thousand bodies of mankinde / Han rokkes slayn” (V.149-150). This fear is unalleviated by Dorigen’s ability to name and distinguish the rocks from the ocean or one rock from the other. In fact, it is the naming and characterizing of the threat “That semen rather a foul confusion” inasmuch as the naming of the threat, at the end of the day, does nothing to predict the threat’s actuality (V.141). Dorigen puts words to this concern when she says, “I ne kan the causes nat yknowe.” The fate of her oceanfaring husband, after all, remains in the future and, thereby, an enigma, despite the efforts of the defining predicables of Aristotelian logic. And, consequently, any action, if any could be taken, by Dorigen gives no assurance ahead of time. Is it any wonder then that Dorigen gives up on “al disputison”? She gives up, as Haas notes, on the very “pedagogical means by which [medieval] university clerks learned to inquire and reason” (52). And finally, without any predictive principle, she gives up on the possibility of definition as a means to determine any clear and proper way forward, instead, giving in to confusion, and that confusion, likewise, invades her subsequent decision.

This confusion in Dorigen’s reasoning makes its next appearance in the tale as Dorigen bats off the overzealous advances of Aurelius. At first she has no problem telling him no, simply replying that she will remain true to Arveragus. However, the confusion of the previous scene returns at their parting, when she can’t help but get one last jab in. Said “in pley,” she makes the vow that sends the tale spiraling into dilemma: “Looke what day that endelong Britayne / Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon. . . / Thanne wol I love yow best of any man” (V.992-

93, 997). Here again the threat of the rocks looms. Haas notes well that the vow “has forced the reader to think back to that moment and remember [Dorigen’s] distrust of ‘clerky’ thought processes” (53). Moreover, the vow is not taken “in pley” but rather in all seriousness by Aurelius, allowing him to set in motion the chicanery that will further confuse both those at the center of the tale’s action and the reader. For, with the introduction of the clerk of Orlean’s “magic,” the confusion is no longer relegated merely to the future but also to the present. Suddenly the reality that the text has hitherto presented to the reader is called into question. Indeed, when his brother presents the “magical” solution to his impossible situation, Aurelius realizes men have always made “diverse apparences / Swiche as this subtile tregetoures pleye” (V.1120-24). After all, Aurelius’ “tregetoures play” is made possible only through the possibility of nailing down with any certainty the playfulness of Dorigen’s vow. While the reader may take the narrator at his word, the text itself gives no corroboration to the narrator’s claim that her vow was given “in pley.” In fact, the tale seem to suggest otherwise when the very thing that would have corroborated the playfulness of Dorigen’s vow—the impossibility of its completion—is proven possible with a little help from “magic.” Indeed, Aurelius accomplishes the task: But thurgh his magik, for a wyke or tweye, / It semed that alle the rokkes were aweye” (V.1295-96). This “magic,” though, is little more than a con. We are told that the clerk of Orleans,

. . . knew the arysing of his mone weel,
 And in whos face, and terme, and every-deel;
 And knew ful weel the mones mansioun
 Acordaunt to his operacioun,
 And knew also his othere observaunces
 For swiche illusiouns and swiche meschaunces

As hethen folk used in thilke dayes. (V.1287-93)

As Bayiltmiş Ögütçü notes, “this long depiction of the clerk’s calculations is . . . functional in displaying his scientific method to calculate the motions of the sun and the moon and thus the high tide period” (197). Science, then, “is the reason underlying the disappearance of [the] rocks despite its magical reception by all the other uneducated people in the tale” (Ögütçü 197). In the end, the limitations of definition are merely made analog to the “magically” disappearing rocks, for, as Aurelius realizes, definition remains slippery but with a little help from “magic.”

And through a little rhetorical magic, “The Franklin’s Tale” holds out hope for reasoning. Perhaps, it suggests, definition and judgment can be saved by assumptive element, the “generally accepted opinion.” The Franklin, however, shows us the limitations of “generally accepted opinions.” For example, Dorigen’s gives us a lengthy retelling of legendary women who killed themselves or were killed, that “dishonour” is not an adequate “generally accepted opinion” by which to make judgement. Dorigen tells us that “Fortune . . . / hast me in thy cheyne; / For which, tescape, woot I no socour / Save only death or elles dishonour” (V.1355-58). The rigidity of such an assumption fails its individuals, presenting a double betrayal: either a betrayal of the self by death or the betrayal of the spouse by infidelity.

Only when Aurelius is moved by “compassioun” does the Franklin permit a vehicle for not only Dorigen’s escape, but also for Aurelius’ and Arveragus’ (V.787). This vehicle—“Chiertee / Toward mankinde”—is, at last, offered up to the characters as a means of relating to each other in a way that overcomes the double bind of “honor.” This is not to say everything in the tale suddenly makes sense. On the contrary, it is only by undoing reason that “chiertee” moves Aurelius to return the married couple to their previous arrangement. Likewise, this opening up of reason moves the magicain to “compassioun,” moving him to erase Aurelius’

£1000 debt for the disappearing of the rocks, saving Aurelius from bankruptcy: “But-if a clerk coude doon a gentil dede / As wel as any of yow, it is no drede!” (V.883-884).

“Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?” The extreme difficulty of holding these disparate concepts—the dialectic and definition—together, in other words, is all the more emphasized once “cheritee” is introduced. This exploding of reason is especially evident when the Franklin asks: “Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow,” requiring us to not only consider again the details of the tale’s circumstances but also the definition of “fre” (V.1622). Pinpointing definition, after all, was crucial to the tale’s characters’ ability to make a judgment one way or the other. And yet, here the Franklin leaves us again in confusion. As Haas points out,

“Fre” could also mean a whole host of other things, of course, including something like our [modern] notion of agency. Thus, even the definitional functions of this question become difficult. What is the Franklin really asking us? Who is generous? Who is noble? Unencumbered? (62).

The Franklin’s question far from asking us to pass judgment on, as Haas puts it, “a victimized lady, an overly literal knight, a lusty squire, and a practitioner of black magic” (62), instead invites us to consider again the lack of logic in the tale and, more specifically, in its finale.

Yes, Dorigen and Arveragus get their spouses back and Aurelius get his money back, but the finale remains, nonetheless, conspicuously reticent on the failure of negotiation in Dorigen’s vow to Aurelius. After all, money isn’t what Aurelius first desired. Aurelius desired Dorigen and, in the end, he is the one whose “cost hath al forlorn” (V.829). Of course, that’s not to say that greater cost was not avoided. Nor is it to say that Aurelius’ desire for Dorigen outweighs Dorigen’s desire to remain alive and a faithful wife. On the contrary, the opposite is almost certainly true. Rather, we acknowledge that in pitting two vows against each other—Dorigen’s

vow to Aurelius and her marital vow—we can find no reason for choosing to uphold one vow over the other beyond the circular reasoning of the vows themselves: Dorigen should keep the vow because she made the vow.

We acknowledge, in other words, that Dorigen’s predicament is created by the failure of reason between two sets of reflexive and irreconcilable vows. Unable to help the vows escape or move beyond the circularity of their own reasoning because of their own reflexivity, “Chiertee” actually pits the vows against themselves. Ultimately, the negotiation between the two sets of vows fails because neither has rational means for usurping the other. As Jacques Derrida notes,

One cannot separate this concept and this practice of negotiation from the concept of the *double bind*, that is, of the double duty. There is negotiation when there are two incompatible imperatives that appear to be incompatible but are equally imperative. One does not negotiate between exchangeable and negotiable things. Rather, one negotiates by engaging the nonnegotiable in negotiation. (*Negotiations* 13)

This failure in negotiation, then, isn’t necessarily the characters’ fault. The very nature of negotiation doomed their vows from the start. Moreover, though the peculiar way in which their negotiation was incepted—through the misinterpretation of one “vow”—makes the impending failure of their negotiation all the more obvious, the very nature of negotiation—the negotiation of non-negotiables—dooms *all* negotiation to failure and thus would have doomed this negotiation with or without misinterpretation.

“Chiertee,” necessarily points out this failure, allowing Aurelius to release Dorigen from her vow to him. It is “chiertee,” after all, that moves him to see that he has mistaken Dorigen’s intentions. As the third term, “chiertee” might be thought to hold the two terms together—in this case, quite literally the two terms of the contractual vow—but, “chiertee,” also undoes the terms.

“Chiertee” strikes through Dorigen’s “lamentacioun” which challenge the “good reasons” for Aurelius’ intentions usurping her own (V.1516). That is not to say that Aurelius now understands what her intentions are. Instead, “chiertee” has forced him to acknowledge that he *cannot* know her intentions and, therefore, *can* exercise generosity in the face of what is no longer a merely binding vow, but one that is also disjointed. Ultimately, “chiertee” allows Aurelius to renounce reason and his own self-fashioning for a kind of heteronomic responsibility to the other, one that would have to be continually about the work of relinquishing control over reason.

Enter Melville’s con-man, who similarly takes up the same procession of reason, showing us why attempts at binding closures should be refused and exposing the impossibility of such a closure and the violent consequences of such an attempt.

THE CON-MAN’S TORMENT

Wild goose chase!

—The Wooden-Legged Man, a.k.a., The Canada Thistle

My young friend, if to know human nature is your object, . . . go north to the cemeteries . . .

—John Ringman, a.k.a., The Man with the Weed

Frank Goodman also pulls off magic tricks in *The Confidence-Man*. In at least one instance, his magic is as literal as the clerk of Orleans’ disappearing rocks. There Frank puts a belligerent man, Charles Arnold Noble (“But do you call me Charlie” (251)), in a trance by placing ten coins around him in a circle and waving “his long tasseled pipe with the air of a necromancer” (282). Charlie exhibits “every symptom of a successful charm” and, upon being released from the trance, loses any air of belligerence (282). Charlie’s confidence had allowed him to be cruel to Frank in the face of his “begging,” the narrator going so far as to describe this cruelty in an allusion to Cadmus’ rash request of the gods to be turned into a snake. Charlie, after having

turned on Frank, “underwent much such a change as one reads of in fairy-books. Out of old materials sprang a new creature. Cadmus glided into the snake” (282). Frank’s magic trance, however, not only stuns Charlie, but also leaves him unnerved and even embarrassed for his serpentine transformation. Frank has not only presented a dazzling performance, but he has also shown that he really didn’t need the money. He had ten coins, after all. Charlie tries to cover by chalking up his embarrassment to a joke: “My dear Frank, what a funny man you are; full of fun as an egg of meat. How could you tell me that absurd story of your being in need? But I relish a good joke” (283). Charlie pretends that he had realized all along that Frank was not in fact in need and that he was merely “humoring the thing,” but the damage to his confidence is already done (283).

At this point, it is important to note that scholars have recognized Charlie himself as a con-man, though not the same person as Frank. Rachel Cole characterizes Charlie as “a stranger who appears suddenly, under the spotlight of a zoned lamp, in order to face the confidence-man head-on in a kind of confidence duel” (387). And Philip Drew agrees, calling Charlie “an ordinary confidence-trickster” (426).² But where Cole argues that “the only thing that distinguishes Charlie Noble from Frank Goodman or any other instance of the title character is that Charlie loses his confidence game” (Cole 388), Drew argues that Charlie’s cruelties are exposed by “an extraordinary man [Frank Goodman] who is genuinely concerned to encourage in the world a spirit of confidence and charity” (Drew 426). While I agree, as noted above, that Frank is exposing Charlie, I argue that Frank does so not by encouraging confidence, but by undoing it. This undoing is evidenced not only in the episode of magic above, but also in the

² Other prominent scholars who characterize Charlie as another con-man include among others: Merlin Bowen, Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., John G. Cawelti, James E. Miller, and John W. Shroeder. Bowen, Cawelti, Miller, and Shroeder, each in their own way but, nevertheless, much like Rachel Cole, see Frank as a con-man superior to Charlie, but still nefarious, because Frank, ultimately, bests Charlie. Brodtkorb, on the other hand, falls more in the camp of Philip Drew, arguing that Frank should be seen as a hero.

interaction between Frank and Charlie leading up to it. There Frank observes, “that a man of humor, a man capable of a good loud laugh—seem how he may in other things—can hardly be a heartless scamp.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed the other, pointing to the figure of a pale pauper-boy on the deck below, whose pitiableness was touched, as it were, with ludicrousness by a pair of monstrous boots, apparently some mason’s discarded ones, cracked with drouth, half eaten by lime, and curled up about the toe like a bassoon. “Look—ha, ha, ha!” (255)

As Drew notes, “The ineptness of Charlie Noble’s attempt to establish himself as a good fellow at the expense of the pauper-boy is too obvious to need comment” (427). And Frank readily exposes the irony of Charlie’s cruel gesture a little later, recalling “Phalaris, the capricious tyrant of Sicily, that he once caused a poor fellow to be beheaded on a horse-block, for no other cause than having a horse-laugh” (256). Charlie replies, “Funny Phalaris,” to which Frank retorts, “Cruel Phalaris!” (256-257).

The difference between Frank’s magic and the clerk of Orleans’ and Charlie’s cons is that Frank uses his magic/cons, much like Chaucer’s “chiertee,” to expose his marks’ embarrassments—that which is lacking in their confidence—rather than to disguise their embarrassing deficits. And in that exposure, Frank simultaneously exposes the cruelty of confidence. Frank, then, relishes in the opening up of the inadequacies of topical distinctions, and, like “The Franklin’s Tale,” Melville’s con-man never attempts to shore them up in dialectic, preferring instead to subject the inadequacies of definition and dialectic to the laughter of “a good joke.” Put another way, Melville’s con-man takes the words of *The Canterbury Tales* to their furthest extreme when that text says, “And therfor wol I do yow obeisaunce, / *As fer as reson axeth*” (V.24-25, my emphasis), showing how, at the extreme (or, in other words, as far as

can be asked), an impossibility of thought is encountered. We will see, again, that reason deployed in the tales in both its defining and assumptive capacities and when put to its limits, quickly exhausts itself, unable to reach beyond its limits. Frank, rather than refusing this exhaustion, refuses to reconcile “continence, / To chieritee” (Chaucer IV.1907-1908), refusing understanding by “grace and by resoun” (Chaucer II.3408). But that’s not all. Frank exposes a variety of “generally accepted opinions” from the empiricism of the Enlightenment to the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the early onset skepticism of an approaching modernism. But, for the purposes of this essay, I will take up only the con-man’s undoing and opening up of those two concepts found in Chaucer’s tales—Aristotelian reason and *The Canterbury Tales*’ construction of charity—showing how the undoing and opening up of Frank’s cons also take place in these Canterburian concepts and in the profusion of concepts at work in *The Confidence-Man*.

Scrutinizing the Black Guinea. Near the beginning of Melville’s novel, Frank’s second guise to be exact, a group of the Fidèle’s passengers gather around a cripple described as having an “honest black face” (12). He is, to the growing crowd, “a curious object” who produces “a singular temptation at once to diversion and charity” (14). This beggar is all the more curious in the contradictory impulses he elicits because, as the narrator tells us, he gives no indication of his “secret emotions” (14). Yet the crowd is egged on by another cripple with a wooden leg to find out the Black Guinea’s true nature. The wooden-legged man forces the crowd to confront the terms of the negotiation: diversion or charity? How the crowd goes about determining who the Black Guinea really is and what his true motives are is of particular interest to us here because this crowd evinces the twin characteristics of Aristotelian reason: definition and dialectic. What

is of even more interest is how the Black Guinea resists their reasoning, leaving them more uncertain than when they began.

Before the crowd even begins their scrutiny, our narrator requires us to be attentive to what is going on with reason. Quoting Shakespeare's Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the narrator suggests, "The will of man is by his reason swayed" (16). Rather than a statement reassuring reason, this seems to be an invitation to consider how the crowd sways because of the failure of reason. Reason, far from "improv[ing] judgment," leaves things more inscrutable for the crowd (16). This quotation, then, is an invitation to think on the limits of reason precisely because, as the crowd is "scrutiniz[ing] the negro curiously enough," they eventually reach both a literal and a metaphysical line that they will not and cannot cross (16).

By asking the Black Guinea about his name, his origins, his slave status, and so forth, it seems for a moment that the crowd, by way of assessing the accidentals and the essentials of the Black Guinea's character, may actually arrive at some definitive conclusion. But the crowd is not able to scrutinize the Black Guinea "curiously *enough*" (16, my emphasis). Put another way, the evidence for the Black Guinea holds within it the trace that, as Jacques Derrida suggests, signals the "absence of another here-and-now, of another transcendental present, of another origin of the world appearing as such, presenting itself as irreducible absence" (Of Grammatology 47). At last, the more the crowd looks to shore up their confidence in the Black Guinea by defining his origin, the more doubts arise and the more apparent it becomes that his origin was never actually "constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin" (Of Grammatology 61). In this procession of supplemental evidence, neither the definition before or the one that comes after is sufficient or originary. Regardless of how much evidence the crowd collects, they never collect quite enough to eschew the "doubts [that] were at last suggested" (45). It seems that the more evidence the

crowd collects, the more doubtful they become. He appears to be black, but is it merely paint? He appears to have no legs, but is it merely a trick of the eye? He says his name is “Der Black Guinea,” but how can we be sure (12)? The evidence carries with it a suggestion of doubt that becomes all the more irreducible with the introduction of each new piece of evidence.

Soon the crowd gives up altogether on definition and turns instead to dialectical questioning; that is, they turn to questioning from “generally accepted opinions.” First they ask if he has “any documentary proof, any plain paper about him, attesting that his case was not a spurious one.” (17). Here the “generally held opinion” is that if someone has papers, then their identity must be legitimate. the Black Guinea, however, does not. “But is there not some one who can speak a good word for you?” (17). Again, the major premise is as follows: if someone has a person to vouch for him, then his identity must be legitimate. This time the Black Guinea’s answer is affirmative, but with condition. Yes, he has quite a few friends; they just don’t happen to be here right now and, of course, they all happen to be the con-man’s different alter egos. The list the Black Guinea gives is intriguing. Inasmuch as his list categorizes its persons by physical attributes related to their essentials and accidentals, the Black Guinea’s list reads a lot like an Aristotelian taxonomy:

“Oh yes, oh yes, dar is aboard here a werry nice, good ge’mman wid a weed, and a ge’mman in a gray coat and white tie, what knows all about me; and a ge’mman wid a big book, too; and a yarb-doctor; and a ge’mman in a yaller west; and a ge’mman wid a brass plate; and a ge’mman in a wiolet robe; and a ge’mman as is a sodjer; and ever so many good, kind, honest ge’mmen more aboard what knows me and will speak for me, God bress ‘em.” (17-18)

This is a clever move, indeed, on the part of the Black Guinea. He has flipped the crowd's Aristotelian reasoning on its head, exposing its circular nature and, thereby, exposing the lacking in their "generally accepted opinions." The evidence requested by each question is not enough to prove the identity of the Black Guinea.

Like "The Franklin's Tale" whose finale exposes the lacking in the logic, the Black Guinea points to the holes in dialectics. The Black Guinea shows his audience that dialectic and its syllogisms are subject to definition and vice versa. While Aristotle may agree that the dialectic is subject to definition and definition is subject to dialectic, he ignores the fallacious reciprocity of such a construction of reason. To get an answer out of a major premise, like the ones proposed by the crowd, the premise must be defined, but to define the premise would be to suggest prior to the answer not only the *doubtfulness* of its origins but also the irreducible *absence* of its origins, precisely because the origin of the premise is reflexive.

This crisis of reason throws the crowd into a frenzy: "But how are we to find all these people in this great crowd?" "Where are we to find them?" "Wild goose chase!" (18) the Black Guinea seems to have hit a nerve. He has embarrassed his marks, undoing and opening up their confidence in reason and, thereby, in identity, to the absolute alterity of absence. Moreover, he has exposed the double bind of their negotiation between "diversion and charity." Like the charitable lady, the crowd is tormented, "knowing not which way to turn" (69). They have been left by the Black Guinea without any sure basis on how to relate themselves to the Black Guinea because their assumptions remain an indeterminate means to discover whether the Black Guinea is a con or an ally. Charity, suggested by the methodist minister, is the crowd's final recourse. But like the crowd's other assumptions, charity only further destabilizes the reflexivity of the trace.

The Charitable Methodist and the Cynical Wooden-Legged Man. Interestingly, this time the exposing does not come by way of the con-man, but rather through infighting in the crowd itself amongst the methodist and that same wooden-legged man who first called attention to the possibility that the Black Guinea might be a con-man. “Charity is one thing, and truth is another,” rejoins the wooden-legged man when asked by the methodist whether he has any charity (19). The “truth” he’s talking about, however, seems to be different from the “truth” as defined by the crowd’s Aristotelian reasoning. There’s a cynical pep to his wooden step. The wooden-legged man believes that there is not a “benevolent wise man” on the face of the earth (20). He describes himself as a man who “has lost his piety in much the same way that the jockey loses his honesty” (20). To the wooden-legged man, humanity, like the jockey who throws the race for personal gain, is above all else self-interested. This is a man whose distrust in his fellow men is regained tenfold in himself. The world is a place where everyone has to look out for themselves with an “insolent sneer” (20), calling it *as oneself* sees it so that if a man looks to be a rascal *to you*, then you treat him as a rascal (19).

This cynicism, in turn, unnerves the minister’s confidence in charity. After a heated exchange, the wooden-legged man gives this retort on his way out, “But trust your painted decoy . . . and I have my revenge” (21). The minister is caught by the wooden-legged man in yet another double bind of negotiation. The vulnerability in his reasoning has been exposed. To give or to deny his alms, either way the minister will be embarrassed. On the one hand, if he denies his alms, he has given up on the very thing he has used to fortify his identity as a Christian minister. On the other hand, if he gives alms to the con-man that fortification will be exposed as no fortification at all, but rather as yet another vacuous attempt at defining one’s identity. Either

way an absence of origins prior to any meaning at the center of identity is suggested. The trace of doubt and embarrassment strikes again, this time through the wooden-legged man:

“Look you, I have been called a Canada thistle. Very good. And a seedy one: still better. And the seedy Canada thistle has been pretty well shaken among ye: best of all. Dare say some seed has been shaken out; and won't it spring though? And when it does spring, do you cut down the young thistles, and won't they spring the more? It's encouraging and coaxing 'em.” (21-22)

The Canada Thistle gives us yet another apt metaphor for the embarrassment suggested by confidence. The more confidence tries to cut down the suggestion of embarrassment in its own construction, the more embarrassment insists on itself, pointing to the absence of origin prior to confidence's constructed presence. The wooden-legged man, however, doesn't seem to catch the ironic implications of the trace on his own cynical and “one-sided view of humanity” (21). In the end, he has shown the methodist and the onlooking crowd that the lack of originary meaning undoes not only any originary reason for giving alms, but also any originary reason for diversion. He refuses his own embarrassment, fortifying his identity with cynicism by committing the same sin of omission as the crowd. The crowd, after all, likewise refuses to accept the embarrassment in their confidence, refusing the irreducibility of their doubts and waiting, instead, for someone to find one of the Black Guinea's supposed friends before they act one way or the other.

Confident Execution: An Arkansan Case Study. This contradiction in the wooden-legged man thus leads me to believe that the text is not offering the wooden-legged man up as a kind of anti-hero to the con-man or the methodist. If anything, the text seems to warn us just as intensely, if not more, against this type of austere confidence. It is, after all, the wooden-legged man who confidently takes the crowd's impulses to their limits. If it hadn't been for the crowd's lack of

appetite for such a show, he is the one who would have assaulted the Black Guinea, strip searching the con-man in order to find evidence sufficient to identify him. And it is the wooden-legged man that brings on the strongest warning in the novel. Directly after he tries to assault the Black Guinea, the narrator talks about how often, at times like this, crowds can escalate their violence, the worst violence of all being the silencing of another through murder. The narrator's warning comes in the form of a cautionary tale about a community of Arkansans who,

when, instead of standing by and having their fellow-feelings touched by the sight of an alleged culprit severely handled by some one justiciary, a crowd suddenly come to be all justiciaries in the same case themselves; as in Arkansas once, a man proved guilty, by law, of murder, but whose condemnation was deemed unjust by the people, so that they rescued him to try him themselves; whereupon, they, as it turned out, found him even guiltier than the court had done, and forthwith proceeded to execution. (16-17)

It may seem counter to the reader's sense of justice that the narrator has directed his sympathy towards a guilty murderer. However, the way he tells the story invites us to put ourselves in the place of the murderer, "having [our] fellow-feelings touched by the sight of an alleged culprit severely handled by some one justiciary" (16). Wouldn't we want sympathy as well if we were in the place of the culprit? The narrator, in turn, invites us to consider the crowd as culprits, highlighting their own culpability in violence. Maybe those in the crowd are not murderers in the same way the Arkansan culprit is, but the narrator, nonetheless, is asking us to acknowledge the executions they nevertheless carry out in passing judgment on the Black Guinea. The Arkansans in the narrator's story become murderers themselves, "rescu[ing] him to try him themselves" and then "proceed[ing] to execution" (17).

“Execute” here is an interesting choice of words precisely because of its polysemy connotation. On the one hand, it means, “to carry out or put into effect” and, on the other hand, “to put to death” (*OED*). By calling into question the violence of the crowd before their actual interrogation of the Black Guinea, the narrator invites us to consider how these polysemy connotations are related. Rather than merely an apt metaphor, this story becomes an astute observation of what is going on between the crowd and the Black Guinea. On the level of discourse, the crowd does the same thing to the Black Guinea as the Arkansans do to the culprit: in their procession of questions, they rescue one definition of the Black Guinea after the next in order to try him and to execute a *final* origin. Their “execution,” in its attempt “to put into effect” a stable, conclusive definition of the Black Guinea, murders by silencing the absence of his identity, denying, in turn, his absolute alterity. This silence, as represented by murder and death in the narrator’s Arkansan case study, is represented in the crowd by their closure, an attempt to stop the procession of discourse regarding the Black Guinea’s identity. This cessation recalls what Derrida calls “the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse” (“Violence and Metaphysics” 146). The crowd refuses, in other words, to allow the Black Guinea to remain a stranger to them “in this strange universe” (306).

A Field Trip to the Cemetery: The Impossibility of Death. It is this attempt at cessation, ignoring our strangeness to each other and threatening to silence discourse, to which Frank Goodman’s cons invite us to be attentive. Time and time again Frank invites us to consider absolute strangeness, disallowing us to pin down the other’s identity lest our discourse become murderous. Indeed, the risk of death abounds in Melville’s novel. At one point, Franks even goes so far as to tell a young collegian, “My young friend, if to know human nature is your object, . . . go north to the cemeteries” (40). This invitation to contemplate death is directed at a sophomore

leaning on the rail of the side of the Fidèle holding a “small book bound in Roman vellum” (38). We find out earlier in the exchange that this book is a copy of the Roman Tacitus’ *Annals*. At this point in the encounter, the con-man, in the disguise of John Ringman, a.k.a. the man with the weed, has already derided the sophomore for taking confidence in Tacitus, a writer who, “Without confidence himself, . . . destroys it in all his readers” (41). Ringman isn’t wrong when he says the Roman historian was suspicious of confidence. Much of the four volumes of the *Annals* is dedicated to cataloguing the overconfidence of the Roman leaders of his day and the tragic consequences that ensued. The young student, however, misses the irony of having confidence in Tacitus even as Tacitus is about the business of calling out confidence. So Ringman tells him to consider, instead, the nature of humanity at the cemetery. This request adds to the student’s “ever-increasing embarrassment, arising, perhaps, from such strange remarks coming from a stranger” (41). The sophomore, leaving in haste, misses the link between the contemplation of death and the assertion that he is a “stranger,” the assertion made by him the stranger.

Nevertheless, Ringman’s invitation to the cemetery calls the reader to consider the limits of reason by inviting us to consider the impossibility of death. We remember that Chaucer’s text had us thinking about death as well when we read, “And beeth avysed wel and sobrelly / Er ye doon any execucioun, / Up-on your ire, for suspeciou” (H.285-287). But, rather than giving rise to a shared sense of what it means to be “avysed wel and sobrelly” as is suggested in Chaucer’s text, Melville’s text invites a contemplation of strangeness. This encounter with the final absolute—death—echoes Kant’s own consideration of “pure reason”:

For this is the fate of all assertions of pure reason: that since they go beyond the conditions of all possible experience, outside of which no document of truth is ever to be encountered, yet at the same time must make use of the laws of the understanding, which

are destined merely for empirical use but without which no step may be taken in synthetic thought, they must always be exposed to the enemy, and each can take advantage of the exposure of his enemy. (*Critique* A751/B779)

The contemplation of death, like the contemplation of “pure reason” or our contemplation of definition and general assumptions, remains limited and, ultimately, impossible to pin down. Like the sophomore, we find death to be a “strange remark,” “beyond the conditions of all possible experience” and, thereby, beyond the thinkable. Death, the final absolute, acts, then, as a kind of metaphor for all of the concepts, all the “generally accepted opinions,” we would hold up as principles for our reason. The contemplation of death, like the contemplation of charity by the Franklin, by “the charitable lady,” by the Black Guinea’s crowd, or by the minister, brings us back within our limits, leaving us not knowing which way to turn, not knowing how to adequately define the other, ultimately, making strangers of us all. And here it seems that returning to the text’s bracketed observation on “this strange universe” is especially apt: “(but, indeed, where in this strange universe is not one a stranger?)” (306). Does our strangeness, a strangeness that arises out of our inability to escape the reflexivity of reason, inter us between those parentheses? In other words, does this lack of access to any assurance beyond ourselves leave us, as Bataille, responding in part to Kant, ironically writes, “in the depth of a tomb,” in that cemetery Ringaman sent us to, both solipsistic and without relation or ethics (Bataille 61)? Or worse yet, does it leave us, as Kant would suggest, as enemies, taking advantage of one another’s ontological weakness? I argue that Melville’s text suggests otherwise. Although Melville’s text leaves us, literally, in the dark at its close, through a scene involving laughter in the face of irony, the text suggests not only that the self is not solipsistic per se, but also that our relationality one with the other does not per se have to be adversarial.

CONCLUSION: THE LAUGHING FOOL

Don't, pray, say that; don't let him think that poor Laughter is persecuted for a fool in this world.
—Frank Goodman, a.k.a., The Cosmopolitan

Many critics have puzzled over what has seemed to them to be a sinister ending: the con-man walking the old man into darkness. This ending, however, seems to me to be as good a metaphor as any for being lost in what I have called “the procession of nonorigins” and the “conditions of all possible experience.” Melville’s text refuses us entry into the bright daylight of assertions of pure reason. That said and while I appreciate this metaphor, I would argue that what comes before the lights go out is just as deserving of our attention and may offer, not an escape from the dark, but rather an alternative approach to living in the dark. I’m thinking of Frank’s and the old man’s encounter with the boy and his “miniature mahogany door.”

The scene begins right after an urchin boy, attempting to sell Frank and the old man locks for their cabin doors, interrupts their discussion about wisdom. As should be expected by now, Frank and the old man haven’t made much headway on the subject. “There are doubts, sir,” the old man says, “there are doubts, sir, which, if man have them, it is not man that can solve them” (378). This concession to doubt, however, doesn’t stop the old man from confidently dismissing the boy, saying, “Go thy ways with thy toys, child” (382). And therein lies the humor and the con-man’s first lesson: *one should know to laugh at wisdom*.

“What do the divils find to laugh about in wisdom?” (382) is a question easily answered on the surface: the boy is not holding a toy; he’s holding a model of the product he is selling. But what’s this got to do with wisdom? The boy, likewise, draws our attention to the failure of wisdom, sarcastically rebuffing the old man for making untenable assumptions: “Now, may I never get so old and wise as that comes to” (382). His laughter calls out the failure of the old

man's "wisdom," exposing the confidence necessary for the old man to take for granted his wisdom's own certainty. The urchin breaks the spell in laughter's realization that the old man's view of him is an attempt to bring the absolute, "pure reason," death itself, into the procession of nonorigins. The old man has attempted, like all the different wisdoms found in the novel from "reason" and charity" to "cynicism" and "theology," the fatal task of defining the undefinable by attempting to reduce the irreducible strangeness of the boy. As Derrida notes, in responding to Kant and Bataille, assertions "must simulate, after a fashion, the absolute risk, and must laugh at this simulacrum" ("Restricted to General" 324). Altogether, we can neither avoid simulation nor the confidence that this avoidance would require, but we can laugh at the irony that was implied all along by the word confidence itself. Confidence descends from the Latin *confidere*: "from *con-* (expressing intensive force) + *fidere* 'trust'" (*OED*). Confidence is laughable in that etymological inheritance, submitting itself "to the force of the imperative," taking the simulacrum to be real and self-evident as and through its ascribing of meaning and truth to the risk ("Restricted to General" 324). It's laughable because it fails to realize that force is necessary only because "trust" is not evident beyond itself. Our "trust" has to force itself because there is nothing beyond itself to make its case. We are, after all, "divils" who have fallen from heaven with no way to get back to the throne of reason, of the origins of our "generally accepted opinions." Laughter at the irony of confidence, therefore, is a suggestion of our fallen, devilish nature, exceeding reasoning as an expenditure of our reflexive reasoning and acknowledging the absolute beyond that confidence has attempted to ignore.

Furthermore, it is a refutation of Kantian "as if" ethics. After acknowledging the problems with trying to think "pure reason," Kant wrote, "Act as if the maxims of your action were to become through your will a **universal law of nature**" (*Metaphysics of Morals* 4:421,

original emphasis). The laughter in Melville's text, on the other hand, calls out the binding of our embarrassment to our confidence, keeping us, in a way, more honest than any recourse to truth or meaning ever could. As Bataille writes, "The entire morality of laughter, of risk," is man acknowledging his fall from transcendence, "Man ceasing—at the limit of laughter—to wish himself to be everything and wishing himself in the end to be what he is, imperfect, incomplete" (24-25). Laughter, put another way, is a kind of inauthentic redeployment of ourselves through the self-referentiality of words as already corrupted, pointing ourselves and our words back to their corruption. Laughter, in other words, tells on itself, calling itself out for its own audacity.

The next lesson we can take from Frank, a warning against cessation, comes after another passenger complains about the noise, telling the group, "to bed with thee ye, ye divils, and no more of ye" (382). The old man tells the boy, "You see, child, you have disturbed that person, . . . you mustn't laugh any more" (382). But Frank quickly rebukes the old man, "Ah now, . . . don't, pray, say that; don't let him think that poor Laughter is persecuted for a fool in the world" (383). The con-man has already invited us to consider time and time again the consequences of stopping the procession of nonorigins and the laughter it engenders. Here again that threat is given a metaphor, this time in the urchin boy's sales pitch. After the urchin sells the old man a lock for his door, he reveals that the old man's cabin is still not secure—"But how about the window?" (385). And, once the window is secure, what about "money-belts, sir, only fifty cents" and, then, a "Counterfeit Detector" and so on. Like his own identity, the old man's cabin is never secure enough. Just as one assumption is seemingly "locked down," another is exposed.

Only in laughter is the procession itself called out. Frank's rebuke of the old man's foreclosure on laughter recalls what Derrida says of "the philosopher (man), that "he *must* speak

and write within this war in which [we] always already [know ourselves] to be engaged; a war which [we know] is inescapable, except by denying discourse, that is, by risking the worst violence” (Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics” 146). The work of laughing at the irony in wisdom, of tattling on oneself and the other, never ends. Or if it does end, it is only “by risking the worst violence,” silence. But our vigilance must be careful, disturbing as little as possible. As the old man says, “Well, . . . you must, at any rate, speak very low” (382). Laughter after all does not come from the realm of “pure reason.” It too participates in this “war which is inescapable,” in the violent displacement of the procession of words. And Frank seems to acknowledge this when he says that laughter must be permitted but that speaking low, “wouldn’t be amiss, perhaps” (383). While violence is inevitable in the procession of words inasmuch as words inevitably subsume, displace, and consume one another, Frank’s promotion of a continual laughter makes an attempt to understand itself as an economy of subsumption, displacement and consumption, *continually* calling itself out, rather than authorizing itself.

In the end, Frank’s reprimand of the old man gives us the self reconfigured as a laughing fool whose work of inauthenticity is never finished. Like the Franklin’s “chiertee,” Frank Goodman’s laughter opens up the self to a heteronomic responsibility to the other, allowing for a generosity that seeks to define neither the other nor the self absolutely. This laughter is a kind of generosity that realizes that definitions must be deployed, but also that those definitions can be used generously to call out definition. This laughter privileges as its first principle the calling out of first principles: the con calling out the con for being a con.

And this redeployment of the inauthentic self should give us, especially us Melvillian critics, reason to give up our pessimism, or at least reason to see it inextricably bound to our optimism. There’s been a lot of anxiety lately over the state of criticism. And, as we have seen,

Melville's text lends itself well to this conversation. *The Confidence-Man* forces us to confront questions concerning the purpose of writing or whether writing's purpose is undone from the beginning. These questions have long been with us. Kant formulated the anxiety of criticism as such:

How can two people conduct a dispute about a matter the reality of which neither of them can exhibit in an actual or even in a merely possible experience, about the idea of which he only broods in order to bring forth from it something **more** than an idea, namely the actuality of the object itself? (*Critique* A751/B779, original emphasis)

More recently, critics like Rita Felski have, likewise, lamented the state of criticism. Felski is wary of the ways in which criticism gives itself up to the text's performance of a "metacommentary on the traps of interpretation" that preempts the critic, calling into question the very standard by which the critic might call out the text ("After Suspicion" 29). Felski and her acolytes worry that this inability to speak for the text moves the critic and the budding student of literature from "attachment to detachment and indeed to disenchantment," leaving them unable to overcome hypocrisy and without anything to say ("After Suspicion" 30). Felski has even suggested a return to phenomenology (in her words, "neophenomenology"), as a cure for the pessimism of critique ("After Suspicion" 31). The orientation of neophenomenology, as described by Felski, "is toward meaning rather than truth or the demystification of truth, toward examining the intricate play of perception, interpretation, and affective orientation that constitutes aesthetic response" ("After Suspicion" 31). Under this description, "neophenomenology," sounds uncannily similar to Kant's "as if" ethics. Felski's neophenomenology acknowledges the inaccessibility of truth while at the same time

supplementing truth anew by way of the terms “meaning” and “aesthetic response” as the arbiter of “perception, interpretation, and affective orientation.”

And yet, it’s difficult to blame Felski’s affront to critique and her desire to return to a kind of phenomenology. We’ve seen already, with Brodtkorb, Palmieri, and Rogin, the nihilistic hopelessness this kind of critique can quickly land us in if we’re not careful. Which is not to say that I want to forgo Felski’s optimism for this kind of critical pessimism. But I want to have the courage to stare into the “void at the center of personality” found in texts like Melville’s. His *Confidence-Man*, after all, shows us that our ethics are bound to an impossibility of ethics. That is to say, that if we are to have any ethics of relationality at all, it seems it would need to be an ethics against “ethics.” That is, it would need to be an ethics that calls out any construction of ethics that sets itself up, within the synthesis of discourse, as having escaped into the realm of “pure reason.”

Perhaps it seems that this formulation of ethics leaves us to strain like pedantic ascetics. But if such is our lot as critics, it is only in opposition to closure and the silence it constitutes. Which brings us back to Melville’s *Confidence-Man*. As ascetics, Melville’s con-man shows us how we might shape ourselves as inauthentic, laughing fools. This kind of writing—a laughing, never ceasing kind of writing that points to irony rather than attempting to obscure it—“wouldn’t be amiss, perhaps.” But only *perhaps*, because, as Derrida notes, “this writing must assure us of nothing, must give us no certitude, no result, no profit. It is absolutely adventurous, is a chance and not a technique” (346).

Frank Goodman has given us such an example, shapeshifting from one con-artist to the next, never ceasing, never allowing a proper authentication of his shape. He kindly leads us on an adventure in the darkness which will have always already ensued (394). His adventures on the

Fidèle show us how we might already be caught in the uncontrollable chance in our own writing, exposed to the embarrassment that is suggested in our confidence. His adventures, in other words, might guide us towards an attentiveness to our words brought back into their limits. He shows us through laughter that writing can be used simultaneously to close and to open up a multiplicity, not giving us access *per se* to the other, but giving us a life bound to the other nonetheless. In the end, Frank Goodman prefers to see the impossibility of not being conned. This vision leads him to do the work of the con: continually undoing and opening up, rather than authenticating and closing down.

When all is said and done, Frank keeps himself open even if he knows the lights must go out, refusing closure and giving us a hope beyond solipsism, paralysis, and silence that “something further may follow of this Masquerade” (394).

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