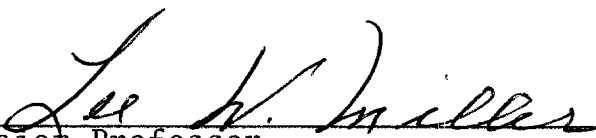


ISOLATION AND CARITAS: POLAR THEMES IN  
MELVILLE'S THE CONFIDENCE-MAN

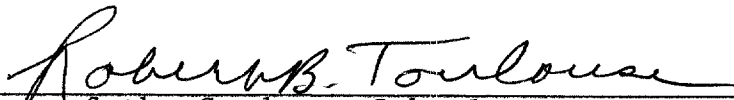
APPROVED:

  
Major Professor

  
Minor Professor

  
Consulting Professor

  
Chairman of Graduate Studies in English

  
Dean of the Graduate School

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The thesis examines isolation and caritas, or charity, in The Confidence-Man as polar themes which express, respectively, withdrawal from and suspicion of the human community and integration within and appreciation for that community. Isolation is considered a negative theme; caritas, an affirmative theme.

Using as its primary text the Hendricks House edition (1954) edited by Elizabeth S. Foster, the thesis is organized in five chapters. Chapter I briefly surveys the scholarly writing pertaining to the novel and notes that a critical consensus about its meaning is not established and that no specific examination has been made of the isolation-caritas polarity in the book. The isolation-caritas themes are analyzed through a scrutiny of the imagery, characterization, setting and vocabulary.

Chapter II demonstrates the predominance of the isolation theme throughout the first half of the novel, pointing out its indirect presence in imagery and word choice, though secondary characters and the riverboat setting also suggest isolation. The word "stranger" with its connotation of the isolated figure is especially conspicuous in the early part of the work.

Chapter III extensively catalogues the allusions to the caritas theme at the outset of the novel and particularly throughout the last half of the novel. Although Melville uses the word "charity" in the popular sense of organized relief for the poor, he also explores its multiple meanings of friendship, benevolence, humaneness, conviviality, and the warmth of human intercourse generally. His use of scriptural tags from St. Paul's hymn to love ("And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.") suggests that he is concerned with the specifically Christian meaning of charity. Melville's treatment of the theological meanings of caritas is explored in relation to the Greek tripartite division of the concept of love into philia, eros, and agape.

Chapter IV considers the interrelationship of the two themes as they form a conceptual polarity within the novel. Melville used polar themes in his earlier work, and the evidence in this and preceding chapters demonstrates that he continued to use polarity in The Confidence-Man.

Chapter V concludes that The Confidence-Man, while undoubtedly a stylistic departure, nevertheless is a logical continuation of themes present in the entire Melville canon. His dominant interest in the theme of human solidarity and human isolation is revealed in the novel through its focus on isolation-caritas.

ISOLATION AND CARITAS: POLAR THEMES IN  
MELVILLE'S THE CONFIDENCE-MAN

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
North Texas State University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Norman V. Hollen, B.A.

Denton, Texas

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville finished his last full-length prose work in the fall of 1856. Worried about his state of mind, his family arranged for him to take a recuperative trip to Europe as soon as the publishing details were completed. He sailed on October 11, the day after he delivered the manuscript to the publisher.<sup>1</sup> The book was published on April 1, 1857, April Fool's Day. A few weeks later, Melville's brother-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, Jr., wrote to a member of the family: "A new book by Herman called 'The Confidence-Man' has recently been published. I have not yet read it; but have looked at it & dipped into it, & I fear it belongs [to] that horribly uninteresting class of nonsensical books he is given to writing--where there are pages of crude theory & speculation to every line of narrative [sic]--& interspersed with strained & ineffectual attempts to be humorous--I wish he could or would do better, when he went away he was dispirited & ill-- & this book was left completed in the publisher's hands."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Leon Howard, Herman Melville (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1951), p. 237.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, ed. Elizabeth S. Foster (New York: Hendricks House, 1954), p. xxii. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. Quotations from the text of the novel will be indicated by parentheses within the body of the paper.

Tending to see the novel as a satire on America, British reviewers paid some attention to it, but American reviewers generally ignored it altogether or gave it puzzled, negative notices.<sup>3</sup> The Confidence-Man was not published again until 1923, and according to Elizabeth Foster, the editor of the 1954 edition, it was the last of Melville's novels to receive "its due of either critical study or critical acclaim."<sup>4</sup> The neglect of the novel perhaps stems from its cool, satirical tone, its absence of a narrative line, its lack of a central unifying character, and its evidently intentional obscurities. It initially appears to be an atypical work of Melville's and seems in no way to relate clearly to his other works whose characteristic themes are the quest, the initiation of the innocent, the symbolic death and rebirth of the protagonist.

In a biographical study written during the Melville revival of the 1920's, Lewis Mumford compares Melville to Shakespeare in his "vision of life" and "furious contempt for mankind." Mumford writes: "Shakespeare carries this contempt into Lear and Timon of Athens, even as Melville did into The Confidence-Man: the contempt is mixed with impotence and self-distrust, and the art itself is marred by an uncontrollable sense of outrage. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Cesare Pavese, the Italian

<sup>3</sup> Hugh W. Hetherington, Melville's Reviewers: British and American, 1846-1891 (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> Foster, p. xxxvii.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929), pp. 233-34.

critic, describes the novel as "a kind of human attempt to get to the bottom of humanity, for polemical and pessimistic ends, but which instead turns into long drawn-out, confused and heavy satire."<sup>6</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, a critic who deeply admires Melville as a writer, asserts that the "bleak sense of existence" expressed in the novel is a result of Melville's inadequate grasp of society along the Mississippi. Having failed to imagine a conclusion to The Confidence-Man, Melville "could only break it off as a distended fragment."<sup>7</sup> For Newton Arvin, the novel is a failure because it "expresses a dull despondency of mistrust and disbelief," and Melville's loss of confidence in both nature and man causes him to lose his "sense of the tragic," leaving him "hardly more than psychoneurotic suspiciousness."<sup>8</sup> But in a full-length critical study of Melville, Richard Chase attributes high artistic merit to The Confidence-Man. He considers it Melville's "second-best book" and believes the Confidence-Man to be "one of the most extraordinary figures in American literature."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in The Recognition of Herman Melville, ed. Hershel Parker (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 199.

<sup>7</sup> Francis O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), pp. 411-12.

<sup>8</sup> Newton Arvin, Herman Melville: A Critical Biography (1950; rpt. New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 251.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Chase, Herman Melville: A Critical Study (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 185.



Not many critics would place this novel so high in the Melville canon, for as Elizabeth Foster points out, there remains a great deal of disagreement about the meaning of the novel and the novelist's intentions. Foster attributes this to the fact that "it keeps its secrets because its submerged meaning, it seems probable, was deliberately hidden," although the secret can be "decoded."<sup>10</sup> She deems the novel to be critical of Christianity, more specifically, nineteenth century liberal Christianity as well as all optimistic philosophies; nevertheless, she feels the novel to be essentially affirmative because the author's theme is that without charity the world becomes one of "solitary, dehumanized Indian-haters."<sup>11</sup>

In the nearly two decades following the publication of Foster's definitive edition, the majority of critics have tended to interpret The Confidence-Man as a deeply pessimistic, despairing, even nihilistic work. Although Foster identifies the Confidence-Man altogether with the demonic, some later critics, such as Lawrance Thompson and Merlin Bowen, believe that he represents the "attributes of three celebrated characters in Christian doctrine: Satan, Christ, and God," or

<sup>10</sup> Foster, p. xlvi.

<sup>11</sup> Foster, pp. lxviii-lxx.

"an amoral God not merely permissive of evil but including it as part of His own mysterious Nature."<sup>12</sup>

Willard Thorp warns; however: "One must remember that consistency in Melville's thought can be found only in his early work, that is, through Moby-Dick."<sup>13</sup> In an article about "Benito Cereno," Kingsley Widmer comments: "The later Melville, it should now be evident, writes fables that leave his readers uneasy, and not least the critics." Furthermore, the "'furious trope' of each of Melville's major tales cannot be reduced to an unequivocal idea."<sup>14</sup> His remark is also applicable to The Confidence-Man because the longer work was written within a few months after "Benito Cereno" and certainly within the same creative period of all the major tales.

Notwithstanding these cautionary statements, the reader perseveres in attempts to extract a clearer meaning from the novel. An examination of thematic elements lying partly beneath the surface of the narrative elicits a pattern of two themes somehow joined yet seemingly antithetical. The

<sup>12</sup> See Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 323; and Merlin Bowen, "Tactics of Indirection in Melville's The Confidence-Man," Studies in the Novel, 1 (Winter 1969), 406.

<sup>13</sup> Willard Thorp, Herman Melville: Representative Selections (New York: American Book Company, 1938), p. xcix.

<sup>14</sup> Kingsley Widmer, "The Perplexity of Melville: Benito Cereno," Studies in Short Fiction, 5 (Spring 1968), 225.

two themes are isolation and caritas. They seem to operate in a kind of contrapuntal tension, and a perception of the manner in which they interrelate and establish a conceptual polarity within the novel should contribute to a better understanding of Melville's intentions and, thus, also of the meaning of the work.

Though the theme of human isolation permeates the early pages of the novel, it manifests itself only implicitly through imagery, setting, and language. In contrast, the caritas theme appears explicitly in the first chapter and figures subsequently on nearly every page of the book. Charity is a constant subject of conversation, although it is generally discussed ironically. The subject of human isolation--one man's lonely separation from all his fellow men--is seldom mentioned in this novel of almost continuous dialogue. Yet, the aura of isolation, detachment, and alienation hovers about the narrative and contributes an extraordinary bleakness to a book described by more than one critic as a comic novel.<sup>15</sup> This atmosphere of isolation becomes apparent through the use of Christ imagery, the frequent reference to secrecy, privacy, and concealment, the constant use of the word "stranger," the absence of family or friendly relationships amongst the characters, the isolated setting of a passenger steamboat on a river in the West,

<sup>15</sup> James E. Miller, Jr., "The Confidence-Man: His Guises," PMLA, 74 (March 1959), 102; and Bowen, p. 413.

and the imagery of masquerade and costumes as means of disguise and concealment. The cumulative effect upon the reader is the eventual awareness of the novel as encompassing a world of disparate characters, each presented as a figure of solitude and human loneliness. It is a world devoid of ordinary human intercourse--the warmth and affection of friends or family and the bonds of love or concern which join one man to another.

Oposing the isolation theme as revealed through the imagery of solitariness, the caritas theme appears in a positive and explicit manner at the beginning of the novel when the first character introduced is a deaf-mute who holds up a small slate with a quotation from I Corinthians 13: "Charity thinketh no evil." The deaf-mute then erases the concluding verb phrase and substitutes four other phrases in turn, completing most of the attributes of caritas, or Christian charity, as listed in the First Epistle to the Corinthians in the New Testament. The word "confidence" in the title of the novel is related to caritas in the sense that confidence means literally having faith, thus recalling the triad of virtues extolled in I Corinthians 13: faith, hope, and charity. Asking for "confidence," the Confidence-Man, in various disguises, plays upon his intended victim's inclination toward charity in order to dupe him. So pervasive is the theme of charity in The Confidence-Man that

R. W. B. Lewis states, "the book's emergent theme . . . is the theme of charity." Enlarging upon this, he adds, "charity in its traditional Christian or Pauline sense--the self-giving love between man and man--had always been for Melville the supreme human resource, the supreme human counter-measure, in a wolfish and maddeningly ambiguous world; and Melville's commitment to it was passionately manifested in his fiction, his letters, his marginalia, and his life."<sup>16</sup>

Aboard the steamboat Fidele, the deaf-mute holds up his message to the world: charity. He is depicted through unmistakable Christ imagery--Christ as sacrificial lamb, as victim--thus, not only does he symbolize caritas, but he is an isolated figure as well. The deaf-mute both introduces and conveys the contrapuntal themes which thread from the beginning to the end of the novel: isolation and caritas. These themes, expressing polar opposites, are seldom in equipoise, but their interplay contributes richly to the meaning of The Confidence-Man.

A serious and detailed attempt to untangle the various skeins of meaning in The Confidence-Man begins in 1942 with a doctoral dissertation written by Elizabeth S. Foster. She incorporates this material in her introduction and explanatory notes to the critical edition published in 1954.<sup>17</sup> All

<sup>16</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, Trials of the Word (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 62 and p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> See "Preface," Foster, p. v.

quotations in this study are from this edition. In her introduction, Foster offers a general survey of the novel's critical reception by contemporary reviewers and critics writing from the beginning of the Melville revival in the 1920's through the early 1950's. She writes: "The Confidence-Man was reviewed in England promptly and more widely than any of Melville's other works since Moby-Dick. . . . Although some of the English reviewers reveal a certain respect for any work by Herman Melville, it is clear that one reason for the attention given the book in England was its sharp satire on the American scene."<sup>18</sup> Still, there was an "almost complete failure to detect the underlying pessimism; and the absence of any suspicion that Christianity is being criticized. . . ."<sup>19</sup> In America, however, The Confidence-Man was generally ignored; the reading public was apparently no longer interested in Melville's writings. After the first New York edition of 1857, it was not reprinted until published as part of the Standard Edition (London, 1922-24). Foster points out that the novel was issued in three later editions subsequent to the Standard Edition and before her own of 1954: one English, one American, and one a translation into French.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Foster, p. xxxiii.

<sup>19</sup> Foster, p. xxxv.

<sup>20</sup> Foster, pp. xxxvi-vii.

Admirers such as Carl Van Vechten, Lewis Mumford, and Yvör Winters wrote favorably of the work in the late 1920's and early 1930's. William Ellery Sedgwick praised it in 1944, and Richard Chase, as previously noted (p. 3), considered it second only to Moby-Dick in artistic merit. Literary antecedents for The Confidence-Man were pointed out by John W. Shroeder, who traced the story's sources and symbols to John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress and Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Celestial Railroad."<sup>21</sup> Most twentieth-century critics, concludes Foster, "take Timonism or misanthropy or cynicism to be the mood or the conviction which dictated the satire and which emerges as the moral. . . ." <sup>22</sup> Foster herself feels, however, that Melville attacks not Christianity alone, "but all optimistic philosophies which assume that the universe is benevolent and human nature good"; and she asserts that there is a central and primary antinomy in the novel: "Christian brotherly love [and] Emersonian individualism."<sup>23</sup> In other words, her interpretation of The Confidence-Man would reveal it to be a coherent, carefully organized philosophical satire, which, far from being cynical and nihilistic, is, rather, an attack on the ideas of the

<sup>21</sup> Sedgwick is quoted in Foster's "Introduction," The Confidence-Man, p. xxxi; John W. Shroeder, "Sources and Symbols for Melville's Confidence-Man," PMLA, 66 (June 1951), 364-65.

<sup>22</sup> Foster, p. xlv.

<sup>23</sup> Foster, p. lxix and p. lxxxii.

Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and all forms of Christianity of the nineteenth century which deny the primal force of evil in the world. She writes of Melville: "in spite of his criticism of the pitfalls of faith, it is not apparent that he thought the disappearance of religion would be a good thing." Rather than accuse Melville of misanthropy, as so many critics do, Foster ascribes to him "a sort of last-ditch humanism."<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent critics of The Confidence-Man have tended to agree that it is not an unfinished novel but a carefully worked out intellectual satire. In Form and Fable in American Fiction, Daniel Hoffman relates the novel to literary, cultural and folk tradition of the nineteenth century, but he concludes that it is flawed in form and, as a satire, fails because it attacks "not only institutions and human folly, but . . . human nature itself." As a result, "Melville's merciless apocalypse" is a creative dead end, leading the author to Bartleby's fate: facing the blank wall. Hoffman concludes that the novel is "a despairing book, a bitter book, a work of Byzantine ingenuity," an expression of Melville's totally negative view of human nature, which marks "both a personal tragedy and the experience of his culture."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Foster, p. lxxxvii and p. lxxxix.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel G. Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (1961; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 281 and p. 312.



Recent critics are inclined to agree that Melville's views as expressed in the book are ultimately ambiguous. John Cawelti believes that the reader not only will "find in this novel an attempt to grasp and structure human experience; to represent man's involvement in an inscrutable cosmos," but also will apprehend Melville's perception that "there are at least two opposing sides to everything."<sup>26</sup> According to Philip Drew, Melville uses a "formula of alternative possibilities" as a means to "permit the writer to avoid committing himself to a definite point of view." However, while Melville, he feels, "adopted this form because of its inherent ambiguity . . . , the total effect of his work is not ambiguous, because Melville seizes on the fact that his novel-dialogue is formally reversible and uses it to drive home an unequivocal lesson in charity."<sup>27</sup> Drew suggests also that Melville chooses ambiguous means in order to write an unambiguous novel. He contends that it is Melville's purpose to draw the reader into the interplay of ideas in the work; thus, mistrust and the lack of charity may actually emanate from the reader rather than the author. His interpretation ameliorates the deep pessimism which many critics find in The Confidence-Man.

<sup>26</sup> John G. Cawelti, "Some Notes on the Structure of The Confidence-Man," American Literature, 29 (November 1957), 287.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Drew, "Appearance and Reality in Melville's The Confidence-Man," ELH, 31 (December 1964), 429.

Ernest Tuveson warns that "it is never safe to draw any clear, logically exclusive conclusion from any of Melville's work," for the reader is finally confronted with "the ultimate paradox; one side of man's nature impels him to strike through the masques, while another holds up a placard inscribed 'TRUST!'"<sup>28</sup> Tuveson believes Melville to be saying that "[Man's] new doctrine of implicit faith in himself is attractive, but a disturbing voice, from his long history, warns him that this may all be illusion."<sup>29</sup>

Edward Mitchell seeks to clarify critical divergences by stating that the coherence in the novel derives from "repetitive activity" and not from "consistency and depth of characterization." He believes that the structure is "one of constancy of activity rather than constancy of character." No particular conclusion can be reached: "Perhaps the most reasonable conclusion is that Melville, like other artists of his stature, offers us a dramatic insight into the nature of the human condition, while not dictating the attitude we should take toward it."<sup>30</sup> Merlin Bowen, however,

<sup>28</sup> Ernest Tuveson, "The Creed of The Confidence-Man," ELH, 33 (June 1966), 269-70.

<sup>29</sup> Tuveson, pp. 268-69.

<sup>30</sup> Edward Mitchell, "From Action to Essence: Some Notes on the Structure of Melville's The Confidence-Man," American Literature 40 (March 1968), 32, 36-37.

assumes a much bolder critical stance and identifies the Confidence-Man as God; this "will account more adequately than other hypotheses for the unparalleled deviousness of this work." Bowen draws his conclusion from internal evidence and "the absence . . . of any effective representation or defense of Christianity."<sup>31</sup> Paul Brodtkorb relates The Confidence-Man to modern apocalyptic novels in its absence of "normal plot and character expectations." He believes the book to be a "nihilistic gloss on 'All the world's a stage.'"<sup>32</sup> Unlike Bowen or Brodtkorb, Fred E. Brouwer looks back to the eighteenth century for an interpretation of Melville's novel, to such works as Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan and the subsequent attacks on it by Shaftesbury, Berkeley, Butler, and other eighteenth century philosophers who attempted to justify "altruism and Christian love" over against Hobbes' "bald statement of egoism." Thus, "it may be argued with plausibility that Melville has a specific historical development in mind and that, further, he is referring to specific philosophers."<sup>33</sup>

In opposition to most of the critical opinion cited above, Paul McCarthy insists that, "while generally regarded as Melville's most pessimistic statement of man's condition,

<sup>31</sup> Bowen, pp. 406-7.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., "The Confidence-Man: The Confidence-Man as Hero," Studies in the Novel, 1 (Winter 1969), 421 and 434.

<sup>33</sup> Fred E. Brouwer, "Melville's The Confidence-Man as Ship of Philosophers," Southern Humanities Review, 3 (Spring 1969), 159-61.

The Confidence-Man is not without indications of affirmation and hope." "Further, the prevailing mood of gloom and futility in The Confidence-Man is lightened somewhat by the writer's treatment of various characters."<sup>34</sup>

The preceding views indicate that interpretations are often diametrically opposed. Some would assert that the Confidence-Man is the devil, others that he is God. Some critics connect the novel to American folklore and see it primarily as a study of American character. Several relate it to many novels written in the twentieth century and attribute present interest in it to its modernity. A number see it as an allegorical satire on a theological or philosophical theme. The majority of critics agree that it is a despairing, perhaps nihilistic work. A very few interpret it as essentially affirmative in its message; and some would assert that it is an unfinished fragment and that Melville intended to write a sequel.

While there are numerous studies of characteristic themes and fictional techniques used by Melville in his earlier, better known works, there are few which examine how these distinctive themes and techniques may apply to his last novels. An analysis of these themes and techniques may be useful in further explication of The Confidence-Man.

<sup>34</sup> Paul McCarthy, "Affirmative Elements in The Confidence-Man," in Studies in the Minor and Later Works of Melville, ed., R. E. Hull (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1970), p. 56.

In the following pages this study proposes to show that Melville returns to a theme which deeply engages his imagination through his earlier writings: human isolation. The isolation theme, discernible on an implicit level, moves in juxtaposition with the more explicitly stated theme of caritas, or charity. The two form a relationship of polarity, for the first moves toward extreme individualism and personal solitude, whereas the latter moves toward communal fellowship and society.

Richard Chase points out at the beginning of a study of the American novel that "the American imagination, even when it wishes to assuage and reconcile the contradictions of life . . . has been stirred, rather, by the aesthetic possibilities of radical forms of alienation, contradiction, and disorder."<sup>35</sup> He concludes that "many of the best American novels achieve their very being, their energy and their form, from the perception and acceptance not of unities but of radical disunities."<sup>36</sup> In another work, devoted solely to Melville, Chase comments: "man is fated to move between the polar symbols with the cyclical rhythms of universal life."<sup>37</sup> Asserting a similar thesis, Elizabeth S. Foster states that "antinomy is central to The Confidence-Man."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Richard Chase, The American Novel and its Tradition (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Chase, pp. 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> Chase, Herman Melville, p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> Foster, p. lxxxii.

Melville uses repeatedly one element of this antinomy-- isolation--as a major theme in earlier works. R. E. Watters, in an article entitled, "Melville's 'Isolatoos,'" points out that the "unhappy fate of the man whom choice or chance has alienated from the human community . . . held a . . . fascination for Melville -- even before he became acquainted with many of Hawthorne's tales." He declares that "the five novels Melville wrote before this time [1850] all employ in some degree the theme of isolation." Watters includes among Melville's "Isolatoos," the following: the narrator in Typee, the narrator in Omoo, Taji in Mardi, White-Jacket in White-Jacket, Ishmael in Moby-Dick, the title character in Redburn, Isabel in Pierre, and Israel Potter in Israel Potter. These are "involuntary Isolatoos," but Ahab and Pierre are "voluntary Isolatoos" in Moby-Dick and Pierre, respectively, and the Missourian, Pitch, is a "minor self-determined" Isolato in The Confidence-Man.<sup>39</sup>

Another critic, Howard P. Vincent, also agrees that, "throughout Moby-Dick Melville progressively develops the theme of the isolated individual. Unequivocally, he calls the Pequod whalemens 'isolatoos.' The theme, the problem, the fact of isolation haunted the most sensitive minds of Melville's century, from Coleridge to Arnold, and from Emerson

<sup>39</sup> R. E. Watters, "Melville's 'Isolatoos,'" PMLA, 60 (1945), 1138-39 and 43.

to Emily Dickinson, and it still hovers above the twentieth century, a restless and unlaidd ghost. In Moby-Dick the theme moves like a corposant from Ishmael to Ahab, from Father Mapple to Queequeg. . . ."40 Vincent also classifies the men aboard the Pequod, such as Stubb, Flask, Tashtego, and Daggoo as "isolated monoliths, in variations repeating the loneliness theme of Moby-Dick."41 The chapters entitled "The Cabin-Table" and "The Mast-Head" he cites as studies in loneliness and calls attention to the fact that Pip, a symbol of human isolation, is called a "lonely castaway."42

Again, in The Dungeon of the Heart, Edwin T. Bowden examines the use of the isolation theme throughout American literature, particularly in the novel. He believes that "isolation may be fairly called a common theme of American fiction."44 "In one sense," writes Bowden, "Moby-Dick is, in fact, a culmination of the theme [of human isolation] in American fiction. . . ."45 In Ahab, one sees "a complete

40 Howard P. Vincent, The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 58.

41 Vincent, p. 105.

42 Vincent, p. 327.

43 Vincent, p. 146, p. 328.

44 Edwin T. Bowden, The Dungeon of the Heart: Human Isolation and the American Novel (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 3.

45 Bowden, p. 157.

spiritual isolation that is terrifying in its proportions."<sup>46</sup> In an article on the imagery in Moby-Dick, still another critic, Sr. Mary Ellen, analyzes the psychological process involved in the Ahab-Moby-Dick relationship and concludes that it results in "total isolation" for Ahab.<sup>47</sup>

After the publication of Moby-Dick in 1851, nearly all of Melville's subsequent prose works have to do with isolation themes. Pierre, published the following year, has a protagonist who refers to himself as "an infant Ishmael."<sup>48</sup> Although Israel Potter (1855) reflects a lighter mood, the main character is a typical wanderer in picaresque fiction. Drawn from actual history, Israel Potter roams homelessly from country to country. Scott Donaldson finds isolation to be one of the three major themes in the collection of short stories published as The Piazza Tales in 1856. He sees isolation symbolized in the character of Marianna in "The Piazza," Hunilla in "The Encantadas," Amasa Delano in "Benito Cereno," and Bartleby in "Bartleby the Scrivener." Donaldson continues: "Even in the humorous sketch 'The Lightning-Rod Man,' Melville touches on the theme of isolation vs. community."<sup>49</sup> Richard Harter Fogle also affirms that the Lightning-

<sup>46</sup> Bowden, p. 161.

<sup>47</sup> Sister Mary Ellen, "Duplicate Imagery in Moby-Dick," Modern Fiction Studies, 8 (Autumn 1962), 262.

<sup>48</sup> Herman Melville, Pierre (1949; rpt. New York: Hendricks House, 1962), p. 105.

<sup>49</sup> Scott Donaldson, "The Dark Truth of The Piazza Tales," PMLA, 85 (October 1970), 1082-84.



Rod Man "advocates complete self-insulation, or isolation."<sup>50</sup> In his introduction to Selected Tales and Poems, Richard Chase draws attention to the resemblance between "The Lightning-Rod Man" and The Confidence-Man. In the former story, writes Chase, "slight and imperfect as it is, we discover one of Melville's greatest characters: the confidence man. He appears pre-eminently, of course, in The Confidence-Man." Chase comments that the narrator's instinctive trust is in "his hearth, his God, and his feeling of solidarity with his fellow man," while the Lightning-Rod Man "seeks to lure his victim away from his soundly human instincts."<sup>51</sup>

Thus, it is evident that Melville is concerned with the theme of human isolation in all of his prose up to the publication of The Confidence-Man in 1857. Three years earlier, specifically in "The Lightning-Rod Man," he also deals tentatively with the themes of isolation and caritas as polarities. In the short story, the hearth in the mountain cabin represents friendship and hospitality. The host invites the Lightning-Rod Man into his cabin and places the chair "invitingly on the broad hearth, where a little fire had been kindled." The Lightning-Rod Man rejects the host's hospitable invitation; his game is confidence, and he spurns the

<sup>50</sup> Richard H. Fogle, Melville's Shorter Tales (1960; rpt. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1966), p. 56.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Chase, "Introduction," Selected Tales and Poems by Herman Melville (1950; rpt. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. ix.

offer of human community: "But of all things, I avoid tall men." In astonishment, the host replies, "Do I dream? Man avoid man? and in danger-time, too."<sup>52</sup>

The use of isolation and *caritas* as polar themes has a long literary history, according to Bowden: "It is not accidental--perhaps it is inevitable--that the answer to the problem of human isolation was again and again to be a part of the particular specific answer embraced by the Puritans: forgetfulness of self, love of fellow man in the light of the love of God, united battle against evil, Christian charity in a hostile world." [Italics added] He quotes the seventeenth century governor of Plymouth Colony William Bradford's remark about "a rare example herein of brotherly love, and Christian care" as the characteristic answer to the problem of human isolation.<sup>53</sup> Bowden sees the polar themes of isolation and caritas exemplified in Moby-Dick, and he quotes Melville's answer to the predicament of human isolation stated in the chapter "The Monkey-Rope": "I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two. . . . I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals."<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Herman Melville, Selected Tales, ed. Richard Chase, p. 152, p. 157.

<sup>53</sup> Bowden, pp. 18-19.

<sup>54</sup> Bowden, pp. 163-64.

The isolation-caritas polarity is apparent in the first story Melville published in a magazine, "Bartleby the Scrivener." Published in 1853, it concerns a young clerk in a law office who unaccountably refuses to perform his duties, gradually withdraws from all human contact, and eventually dies. Bartleby is an "Isolato," but his voluntary withdrawal is a kind of perverse demand for human community. Bartleby's employer is unable to respond to his inexplicable demands and refusals. "The most he can give is pity," writes John Seelye, "and that is not enough for the scrivener, who continues to put his employer's neat compartmentalizations to the test, confronting his convenient relativism with an absolute demand -- a denial that is a cry for recognition."<sup>55</sup> In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the reader perceives caritas in its very absence from the story.

In the episodic little tales which make up "The Encantadas," isolation pervades each narrative, the settings being pictures of unrelieved desolation. Here, too, caritas presents itself by its absence. Melville writes, "Hunilla, this lone shipwrecked soul, out of treachery invoking trust. Humanity, thou strong thing, I worship thee, not in the laureled victor, but in this vanquished one."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> John Seelye, Melville: The Ironic Diagram (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970), p. 97.

<sup>56</sup> Herman Melville, "The Encantadas," in Selected Tales, p. 267.

The longer stories, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno," together with "The Piazza," "The Lightning-Rod Man," "The Encantadas," and "The Bell-Tower," were published in one collection as The Piazza Tales. They were all written during the years 1853-1856; during the latter part of this period, probably late summer 1855, Melville began work on The Confidence-Man. Thus, the novel was written concurrently with, or shortly after, The Piazza Tales.<sup>57</sup> Melville's concern with the polar themes of isolation and caritas, as manifested in the shorter works, continues to engage his attention in the longer, philosophical satire. Relatively little critical attention is directed toward the concept of charity in the Confidence-Man; thus, a somewhat longer Chapter III will introduce substantial textual material in documenting the place of charity in the novel. The setting and characters in The Confidence-Man represent a departure from most of his earlier work; nevertheless, the novel also incorporates the two themes, achieving a polarity which furnishes conceptual interest and textural richness to a relatively austere work.

<sup>57</sup> Foster, pp. xxiii-iv.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ISOLATION THEME

On the surface, The Confidence-Man seems to be a journey narrative, almost Chaucerian, so Melville hints at the beginning of his catalogue of travelers embarking on the steamboat, Fidele, about to commence her downriver trip on the Mississippi. Melville writes, "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" (8). The story begins at sunrise on April Fools' Day sometime in the 1850's. The passengers on the Fidele are "a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man" (8). Just as many trees are intermixed in a forest, so "these varieties of mortals blended their varieties of visage and garb. . . . Here reigned the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide" (8). However, Melville first introduces, in seeming contrast to the "dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West," a mysterious deaf-mute character dressed in cream colors.

He stops before a crowd which has gathered in front of a placard offering a reward for the capture of a "mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East; quite an original genius in his vocation" (1). One of those clustered around the placard peddles money belts, and another peddles biographical stories of notorious criminals of the frontier -- pirates, thugs, and bandits -- now all "exterminated." This might, says Melville, "seem cause for unalloyed gratulation, and is such to all except those who think that in new countries, where the wolves are killed off, the foxes increase" (2). The deaf mute takes out a small slate, holds it up to the crowd, then inscribes certain verses from Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter thirteen: "Charity thinketh no evil; Charity suffereth long, and is kind; Charity endureth all things; Charity never faileth." At the same time, however, the steamboat barber opening his shop for the day hangs out his sign: "No Trust." The deaf-mute retires unobtrusively to a corner and goes to sleep, never to reappear in the remainder of the novel.

The next character introduced is the Negro beggar, Black Guinea, who describes eight gentlemen who might serve as references for him. Six of the eight do appear in succession in the first half of the book. There then follows a series of confrontations between these gentlemen, all confidence men, and their victims. The reader cannot be certain, though,

whether there are many confidence men or only one man with many disguises. There are five interpolated stories, each one a kind of parable. The first is about an unfortunate man married to an ugly, malicious wife; the second is about a soldier of fortune; the third is about a notorious frontiersman who devotes his life to the systematic extermination of all Indians in revenge for the massacre of his family; the fourth is about a gentleman named Charlemont, who exiles himself when he loses his fortune because he is certain that his friends will desert him; and the last story is about a man named China Aster, who is ruined when he trustingly borrows money from a friend. The "cosmopolitan," perhaps the final manifestation of the Confidence-Man, dominates the last half of the book. He confronts two men who proclaim compassion for all men but who refuse to express it in practical action. After the cosmopolitan has succeeded in tricking the barber into giving him a shave on "trust," the book concludes with his meeting a "clean, comely, old man, his head snowy as the marble, and a countenance like that which imagination ascribes to good Simeon, when, having at last beheld the Master of Faith, he blessed him and departed in peace" (273). The cosmopolitan offers to show him to his state-room. When the old man asks for a life preserver, the cosmopolitan hands him a wooden stool with a tin pot fastened under it--a chaise de convenance--and leads him away into the darkness.

The Confidence-Man, then, is not merely a journey narrative, although its setting is a steamboat on the Mississippi; nor is it an adventure novel of quest, endowed with a collection of richly developed characters. It is, instead, a satirical novel which uses a series of dialogues and confrontations between characters who are described but seldom named. The characters are without depth; they are abstractions rather than persons. Although the story takes place during one day on a journey down the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans, there is little sense of movement or activity. There is a static quality throughout the dialogues. Unlike earlier novels such as White-Jacket or Moby-Dick, The Confidence-Man is without adventurous action or suspense. Daniel Hoffman writes that "the form of Melville's story and the rhythms of its development are determined not so much by characters in action as by the dialectical development of ideas. . . . Perhaps the clandestine analogue and probable model for Melville is the Platonic dialogue, in which the search for truth proceeds through query and reply."<sup>1</sup> "this haunting, slow-motion confusion of human movement and impulse, as of blind men bumping against blind men, . . . is the substance of every scene; it takes the place of plot." He concludes, "If there

<sup>1</sup> Daniel G. Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (1961; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 288.



is critical agreement on anything about The Confidence-Man, it is on this point: that the style rather than the story is the surest measure of what the book has to say, and the chief indicator--more than the broken, enigmatic narrative sequence--of its general import."<sup>2</sup>

Critics generally agree that The Confidence-Man exhibits a radical departure in fictional technique for Melville, but, again, some disagree about how well he succeeds in his ninth novel. Alexander Cowie suggests that there are "strains of autobiography in The Confidence-Man [but] unhappily the book does not reflect the whole Melville, . . . only a jaundiced likeness." He concludes, "there are in it many passages as brilliantly written as ever came from Melville's pen, and much of its satire rings unpleasantly true. Its fatal flaw is its lack of structural proportion."<sup>3</sup> More recently, however, H. Bruce Franklin has asserted that it is "Melville's most nearly perfect work. In no other work--possibly excepting Bartleby--is his language under such careful control. Not a word is wasted or misplaced."<sup>4</sup> Richard Chase characterizes Melville's style in this novel as "unique

<sup>2</sup> Warner Berthoff, "The Confidence-Man," in Landmarks of American Writing, ed. Hennig Cohen (New York: Basic Books, 1969), p. 124 and p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Cowie, The Rise of the American Novel (New York: American Book Company, 1951), pp. 393-94.

<sup>4</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, The Wake of the Gods (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 153.

among his writings for its leanness, nimbleness, and jaunty vigor," displaying a "ripe satirical intelligence."<sup>5</sup>

Walter Dubler, in "Theme and Structure in Melville's The Confidence-Man," believes that the book's theme is "a commentary on American life," and, furthermore, that, "in this book he [Melville] did not attempt to establish a national or even a personal philosophy. Rather he attempted to create a dramatic framework by means of which he could survey and comment upon the American scene."<sup>6</sup> However, Melville had sought to set forth his personal philosophy by thematic emphasis in preceding works; therefore, it seems not unlikely that he intended to do so in The Confidence-Man. The pervasiveness of the isolation theme in his other novels is apparent, as R. E. Watters notes (see p. 17); however, Watters pays little attention to this theme in The Confidence-Man, except to remark that, "Frank Goodman calls the Missourian 'an Ishmael.'"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Richard Chase, Herman Melville (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Dubler, "Theme and Structure in Melville's The Confidence-Man," American Literature, 33 (November 1961), 309 and 319.

<sup>7</sup> R. E. Watters, "Melville's 'Isolatoos,'" PMLA, 60 (1945), 1143.

The Confidence-Man, nevertheless, expresses the isolation theme rather clearly. Critics relate isolation generally to the Ishmael-motif or isolato-motif in preceding novels. Melville uses the term "Isolato" in Moby-Dick: "They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, Isolatoes too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own."<sup>8</sup> Critics sometimes apply this term to the "central searchers" in Melville's novels, as does Milton Stern; though he does add that the quester or searcher is not necessarily an equivalent to the "isolato": "All questers are isolatoes, but not all isolatoes are questers."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the "isolato," Melville uses the figure of Ishmael as a type of loneliness. The name Ishmael refers to the son of Hagar in the narrative in Genesis 21.9 - 21, in which Abraham banishes Ishmael into the wilderness. In her study of Melville's use of the Bible, Nathalia Wright points out that there are seven Ishmael characters in Melville's works: Redburn, White Jacket, Ishmael, Pierre, Israel Potter, Pitch, and Ungar.<sup>10</sup> Pitch is the name the

<sup>8</sup> Herman Melville, Moby-Dick: or The Whale, ed. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), p. 118.

<sup>9</sup> Milton R. Stern, The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1957), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Nathalia Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1949), p. 46 and p. 55.

Missouri Bachelor gives himself in The Confidence-Man. The Ishmael allusion is a device, says Wright, that Melville uses to "underline the isolation and loneliness of a character."<sup>11</sup> Though Pitch is related to the theme of isolation in the novel, he does not appear in the work until Chapter XXII, exactly at the middle of the book. The isolation theme is introduced immediately through word choice and imagery, whereas in earlier writings Melville uses a character as a means to dramatize loneliness and isolation.

Melville also uses the word stranger to signify isolation. The word stranger appears at the outset of The Confidence-Man and thereafter with great frequency throughout the first half of the novel. The first stranger is the mysterious deaf-mute who is dressed in "cream colors" and is invariably referred to as the stranger. He is deaf, silent, withdrawn, isolated. He holds up his one message to the world: charity. Thus, he both introduces and conveys the contrapuntal themes which thread throughout the novel-- isolation and caritas. These themes, expressing polar movements, are seldom in equipoise, but their interplay contributes richly to the meaning of The Confidence-Man. While Lewis writes that "the book's emergent theme . . . is the

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth S. Foster, ed., The Confidence-Man by Herman Melville (New York: Hendricks House, 1954), p. 333, n. 157.23.

theme of charity," this point fails to take into account the extraordinary saturation of isolation imagery which permeates the novel, particularly the early chapters.<sup>12</sup> . . .

Shortly after the somewhat mysterious disappearance of the deaf-mute, Melville describes the steamboat Fidele as being "always full of strangers" who are continually replaced "with strangers still more strange" (7). The first manifestation of the Confidence-Man, according to the Negro Black Guinea's list, is the "man in mourning clean and respectable, but none of the glossiest, a long weed on his hat" (19). He also is referred to as a stranger. He complains to a fellow passenger, his intended victim, that he is "thrown among strangers, utter strangers" (22). The man with the weed next confronts a student, and he ends his confidence game with the remark that there is very little confidence between "stranger and stranger." The chapter concludes with the word "stranger" repeated four times in the space of a last brief paragraph: ". . . such strange remarks coming from a stranger. . . . Somehow, the stranger fascinated him. . . . Being apparently of retiring nature, [he] abruptly retired from the spot, leaving the chagrined stranger to wander away in the opposite direction" (30).

<sup>12</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, Trials of the Word (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965), p. 63.

In Chapter VIII, the Confidence-Man appears as "the man in gray," and he, too, is described as a stranger. The word also constantly recurs in his conversation: "The stranger breathes, 'Madam, pardon my freedom, but there is something in that face which strangely draws me. . . . It is very solitary for a brother here. . . . Entire stranger . . . Ah, who would be a stranger?'" (49). The isolation imagery is deepened here by the narrator's description of the character as a stranger, the character's reference to himself as a stranger, and the character's repetition of the word "stranger" in his speech.

The chapter following introduces a "brisk, ruddy-cheeked man in a tasseled traveling-cap, carrying under his arm a ledger-like volume." He is still another manifestation of the Confidence-Man, this time as president and "transfer-agent" of the "Black Rapids Coal Company." Described likewise as a "stranger," he invites a collegian to make a "charitable investment" in his company.

In Chapter XVII, the Confidence-Man as herb doctor attempts to sell a "pain dissuader" to the invalid "Titan." In this instance, the Titan, not the Confidence-Man, is described as a stranger, and the imagery surrounding the description of the Titan is replete with isolation imagery: "houseless. . . . tenantless. . . . alien. . . . lonesome" (96-97). This reversal of the reader's expectations is a

pervasive tactic which Melville uses throughout the novel.<sup>13</sup> Lewis refers to Melville's "self-erasing prose," and the language surrounding the meeting between the herb doctor and the invalid Titan is an example.<sup>14</sup> After a number of instances, just as the reader begins to recognize the Confidence-Man whenever the author introduces him as a stranger, a character obviously not the Confidence-Man assumes all the characteristics of a "stranger."

The unusual frequency of the work in the first half of The Confidence-Man has a reverberating effect on the reader. As each succeeding character is designated a stranger, the reader feels overwhelmed by a world of strangers. Instead of one isolated individual questing for truth or shedding his innocence in an evil world, as in earlier Melville novels, the Fidele carries a number of strangers, each one isolated from the other. In linking Herman Melville with Albert Camus, Leon Roudiez remarks that "a stranger, in addition to his being physically removed from his own group, stands apart from the life of the family or community into which he has been cast." And, "there can be no denying that Melville's work is overflowing with strangers of one sort or another, literal ones and symbolic ones."<sup>15</sup> In the same article,

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Leon S. Roudiez, "Strangers in Melville and Camus," French Review, 31 (Jan. 1958), 218-219.

Roudiez, in discussing The Confidence-Man, draws attention to the fact that the passengers aboard the Fidele are "all strangers to one another."<sup>16</sup>

The Confidence-Man diverges from the traditional nineteenth century novel in that its characters never interact in a realistic way. In each successive masquerade, the Confidence-Man appears and disappears mysteriously. The reader discovers almost nothing of a character's past, and he soon learns that he must discredit much of what each character tells about himself. Every character is thus a symbolic abstraction.<sup>17</sup> On the realistic level, characters are described primarily by their clothing. They remain extraordinarily faceless and without individuality, with the possible exceptions of Pitch, the old man, and the ragged boy who appear only in the last chapter of the novel. Every character is a stranger to every other character, and each remains essentially such in the mind of the reader. The ultimate effect of this continuous use of the word "stranger," together with the author's refusal to create dimensional characters, is to intensify the sense of isolation and apartness which pervades every page of The Confidence-Man. Thus,

<sup>16</sup> Roudiez, p. 222.

<sup>17</sup> Fred E. Brouwer, "Melville's The Confidence-Man as Ship of Philosophers," Southern Humanities Review, 3 (1969), 158-65.



Melville uses the concept of the stranger--a generalized Ishmael--to express the theme of isolation.

In addition to revealing the calculated recurrent use of the word "stranger," a close reading of the first half of the novel indicates a number of other instances in which word choice, literary allusion, and imagery support the theme of isolation. The mysterious deaf-mute clearly resembles a divinity, specifically Christ. He appears "at sunrise . . . suddenly as Manco Capac." Manco Capac is a Peruvian sun-god, and the word-play on "sun" contributes to the Christ imagery.<sup>18</sup> The reference to the deaf-mute's lack of belongings is a biblical echo and reinforces the meaning of the use of Christ as a type of isolation and loneliness. The crowd looks upon the deaf-mute "not with the best relish." They saw that he was "singularly innocent . . . a strange kind of simpleton" (2). His isolation is underlined again by the statement that, "having no luggage, [he had come] . . . from a very long distance. . . . Traveling night and day from some far country beyond the prairies, he had long been without the solace of a bed" (4-5). These lines echo the passage from Luke 9.58: "Foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."

<sup>18</sup> Foster, pp. 289-90, n. 1.4.

The second chapter opens with a series of brief, descriptive comments about the deaf-mute, apparently made by some of the passengers aboard the Fidele. One calls him "Casper Hauser." Hauser, according to Chambers's Encyclopedia, was a mysterious youth who appeared on the streets of Nuremberg, Germany, in 1828, without known origin. He achieved a degree of notoriety because he seemed to have been reared in the wild, or in complete seclusion, but he was rumored to be the child of a distinguished German noblewoman.<sup>19</sup> The enigmatical German boy evidently captivated Melville's imagination, because he is referred to also in Pierre, written in 1852, five years earlier than The Confidence-Man. In Pierre, Melville uses Hauser as an example of a tabula rasa, a mind without the imprint of experience on it. In The Confidence-Man, Melville employs the same historical figure, but as a type of the man of mysterious origin. He uses the reference in both novels, however, within the context of Christian imagery.<sup>20</sup> The narrator in Pierre notes that "the world is forever babbling of originality; but there never yet was an original man, in the sense intended by the world; the first man himself--who according to the Rabbins was also the first author--not being an original; the only original author being God. Had Milton's been

<sup>19</sup> Chambers's Encyclopedia, 6, New Revised Edition (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967), 776.

<sup>20</sup> See Herman Melville, Pierre, p. 304; and The Confidence-Man, pp. 6-7.

the lot of Caspar [sic] Hauser, Milton would have been vacant as he."<sup>21</sup> The Hauser reference in The Confidence-Man follows immediately the concluding paragraph to the first chapter, in which the deaf-mute is explicitly described in Christ imagery: "His aspect was at once gentle and jaded. . . . His flaxen head drooped, his whole lamb-like figure relaxed. . . (5). Thus, Christ and the mysterious Hauser were joined in Melville's imagination.

In a paragraph immediately following the reference to Hauser, the deaf-mute sleeps "like some enchanted man in his grave" (6). Though this phrase may carry several connotations, the imagery suggests the crucified Christ lying in the tomb before the resurrection. Christian imagery is intensified as Melville describes the Fidele as "some white-washed fort on a floating isle," echoing Christ's speech about the "whited sepulchres" in the New Testament.

The second chapter also contains an extraordinary concentration of images suggestive of isolation, secrecy, privacy, and concealment: "Merchants on 'change' seem the passengers that buzz on her decks, while from quarters unseen, comes a murmur of bees in the comb. Fine promenades, domed saloons, long galleries, sunny balconies, confidential passages, bridal chambers, state-rooms plenty as pigeon-holes,

<sup>21</sup> Pierre, p. 304.

and out-of-the-way retreats like secret drawers in an escritoire, present like facilities for publicity or privacy" (7). [Italics added]

Chapter III introduces a "grotesque negro cripple" called Black Guinea, whose "houselessness" was "cheerily endured" and who describes himself as a "dog widout massa" (9). In the same chapter, there is a reference to Timon, who may be interpreted as a type of man isolated through misanthropy.

Isolation imagery relates to every successive masquerade of the Confidence-Man. In Chapter VI, the man in gray is shown "patiently remaining in the chilly loneliness to which he had been left" (31). The gentleman with "gold sleeve-buttons," in the seventh chapter, is described as a stranger and as a "full-leaved elm, alone in a meadow" (39). He wears spotless white gloves which remain spotless because his "negro body-servant . . . did most of his master's handling for him" (40). The man in the gold sleeve-buttons, apparently the Confidence-Man, is also compared to "the Hebrew governor" who literally washed his hands of another's affairs. He is so fastidious that he avoids human contact altogether; he is completely isolated from the world of men. Again, the man in gray complains to a woman that it is "very solitary here" (49). The isolated figures appear mysteriously and disappear mysteriously. In every instance, the different masquerades of the Confidence-Man are related to isolation. In some

cases, he is placed in a lonely, isolated setting; in other cases, he is related to a figure in history who is an isolate, an alien or one who flees from the responsibilities of the world.

During the course of the novel, other characters appear and disappear. The transfer agent, however, returns in Chapter XV. He is obviously the same man, but he is referred to, this second time, as "the man with the traveling cap." He meditates on the theory of virtue and searches for some "hint, which . . . may . . . serve for a finger-post to virtuous action" (80).

The subsequent paragraph is a curious interposition in its description of a section of the steamboat. The isolation imagery is again remarkably concentrated:

Ere long his eye brightened, as if some such hint was now caught. He rises, book in hand, quits the cabin, and enters upon a sort of corridor, narrow and dim, a by-way to a retreat less ornate and cheery than the former; in short, the emigrants' quarters; but which, owing to the present trip being a down-river one, will doubtless be found comparatively tenantless. Owing to obstructions against the side windows, the whole place is dim and dusky; very much so, for the most part; yet, by starts, haggardly lit here and there by narrow, capricious sky-lights in the cornices. But there would seem no special need for light, the place being designed more to pass the night in, than the day; in brief, a pine barrens dormitory, of knotty pine bunks, without bedding. As with the nests in the geometrical towns of the associate penguin and pelican, these bunks were disposed with Philadelphian regularity, but, like the cradle of the oriole, they were pendulous, and moreover, were, so to speak, three-story cradles; the description of one of which will suffice for all (80). [Italics added]

The reference to the emigrants' quarters is reminiscent of the passage describing the scenes of horror in the emigrants' quarters in Melville's earlier novel, Redburn (1849). In The Confidence-Man, however, the quarters are not inhumanly crowded as they are in Redburn. They are "comparatively tenantless." Instead of great numbers of suffering people, the Confidence-Man discovers one elderly miser. This exemplifies the characteristic narrowing of focus in the Confidence-Man. In contrast to the limitless Pacific of earlier novels, the setting of this novel is a steamboat bound for New Orleans. The crew is absent from the novel altogether, unless the barber is considered a member of the crew. Aside from the crowd scene at the beginning of the book, nearly all of the scenes involve two or sometimes three persons. The paragraph describing the emigrants' quarters is quoted at length because of its unusually rich texture. The quarters are "narrow and dim," "less ornate," "dim and dusky," "haggardly lit," "without bedding." The words might serve as a description of a prison. The phrase, "pine barrens dormitory" is juxtaposed ironically with "bunks . . . disposed with Philadelphian regularity." Philadelphian refers to geometrically laid out city streets, but it also refers to brotherly love -- in this case, its absence. The word "barrens" carries connotations of sterility, emptiness, loneliness, isolation. In the paragraph preceding, the Confidence-

Man advances into the pine barrens dormitory "like Orpheus in his gay descent to Tartarus," and when he sees the sick miser, "like Dives," he hovers over him. Orpheus may be understood as an isolate figure; he loses Eurydice forever. Tartarus is an allusion to the underworld--the ultimate place of isolation. Indeed, Melville writes, "purgatory as the place would appear" (81).

The numerous references to birds and nests--penguin, pelican, and oriole, may be another reminder of the passage from Luke 9.58: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." This passage almost constitutes the locus classicus for the symbol of Christ as an isolate figure. In the context of this paragraph, bird images evidently are suggestive of lonely isolation in Melville's creative imagination.

The subsequent chapter, XVI, continues the theme of isolation. The opening paragraph is a poetic description of the Fidele on her downstream journey: "Speeds the daedal boat as a dream" (86). The dream simile is another reminder of the isolation of the boat and passengers on Melville's nineteenth century ship of fools. The Confidence-Man immediately appears as a "stranger in a snuff-colored surtout," who approaches a sick man who is "withdrawn in a corner, wrapped about in a shawl . . . an unparticipating man" (86).

In Chapter XVII, Melville introduces the only characters in the novel who may be related to one another. The Titan embarks from a "houseless landing" accompanied by a "puny girl, walking in moccasins, not improbably his child, but evidently of alien maternity" (96). The child never speaks, nor is she further described. The Titan, on the other hand, is described as a "stranger" who withdraws or averts his eyes when spoken to. He asks the herb doctor (Confidence-Man) if his medicine produces "insensibility," and he accuses the herb doctor of lying about the medicine, saying that some pains can only be cured by death. The following words are used in relation to the Titan: "houseless," "withdrew," "averting," "deep and lonesome," "stranger," "insensibility," and "death." All of these words carry connotations of isolation, and their frequent occurrence in the space of a few paragraphs contributes significantly to the novel's isolation theme.

The interpolated stories may be understood primarily as parables of isolation. The first story is about a very ugly woman named Goneril who "had a strange way of touching, as by accident, the arm or hand of comely young men" (66). Her husband, driven to despair, leaves her and takes their child with him. Goneril searches for him so that she can commit him to an asylum as a lunatic, "Upon which he fled, and was now an innocent outcast, wandering forlorn in the great valley of the Mississippi (68). The husband becomes a kind of Ishmael, isolated from all other men.



The parable of the soldier of fortune relates the life of a man who has gone to the Tombs, a prison, for a crime that a wealthy man had committed. After his exoneration, the constables inquire the whereabouts of his friends, and he replies, "I have none" (109). His misfortune continues as he is hospitalized "alongside of groaning thieves and mouldering burglars;" finally, he makes his way to Indiana to see his brother, but he discovers that his only relative is dead. He finishes his story: "Here I am, drifting downstream like any other bit of wreck" (109). The story, with its unrelieved persecution and suffering, is reminiscent of the tale of Hunilla, the Chola Widow, in "The Encantadas." Victimized by circumstances and his fellow men, the "soldier of fortune" is a figure of total isolation.

Melville takes four chapters to recount the story of Colonel John Moredock, Indian-hater of Illinois. Longer, and much more complex than the soldier of fortune tale, the story-parable of the Indian-hater will be dealt with in greater detail subsequently; the immediate point is that he is another isolate figure. Moredock's entire family had been massacred by Indians, and, consequently, he "hated Indians like snakes." He dedicates the remainder of his life to the extermination of all Indians. He voluntarily chooses solitude so that he may hunt down his Indian enemies the more efficiently: "With few companions, solitude by necessity his lengthened lot, he

stands the trial--no slight one, since, next to dying, solitude, rightly borne, is perhaps of fortitude the most rigorous test" (164).

On the surface, the story of Charlemont, the "gentleman-madman," is dissimilar to that of Moredock in character and setting. Charlemont, a wealthy and carefree young gentleman in St. Louis, changes suddenly without apparent reason. He vanishes for nine years, and on his return he reveals to a guest that he had disappeared because he lost his wealth. Now, in possession of a second fortune, the "restored wanderer" rejoins his old circle of friends. Not having confidence that his friends would remain loyal to him when he is poor, Charlemont became a "voluntary Isolato."

Another parable concerns a character named China Aster, a poor candlemaker who borrows money from his friend, Orchis, a prosperous shoemaker. China Aster is reluctant to borrow the money, but his friend urges the loan on him. After a series of misfortunes, the poor candlemaker loses all of the money, is unable to repay his debts, and finally dies penniless and alone. Melville underlines the fabulous nature of the story with a reference to "poor old pauper Job" (237). China Aster is, perhaps, a lesser illustration of the isolation theme; nevertheless, the character of Aster resembles the soldier of fortune in its portrait of victimization and suffering.

More evidence for the pervasiveness of the isolation theme in The Confidence-Man is drawn from the narrative of Pitch, the Missouri Bachelor. As pointed out earlier, Nathalia Wright described Pitch as an "Ishmael." The Confidence-Man warns Pitch that "this notion of being lone and lofty is a sad mistake. Men I hold in this respect to be like roosters; the one that betakes himself to a lone and lofty perch is the hen-pecked one, or the one that has the pip" (153). He continues, "Say what you will, to shun a social proposition like mine, to shun society in any way, evinces a churlish nature--cold, loveless; as to embrace it, shows one warm and friendly, in fact, sunshiny" (155). However, Pitch remains in the "solitude he held so sapient" and recognizes the Confidence-Man as being the actual misanthrope rather than himself.

Throughout the first half of The Confidence-Man, the theme of isolation is conveyed through a saturation of images and words connoting apartness, loneliness, alienation from society. Midway through the novel, the Missouri Bachelor, Pitch, appears and clings steadfastly to his isolation. Pitch is the only character in the story who pierces the masquerade of the Confidence-Man and sees him for what he is: "You are another of them. Somehow I meet with the most extraordinary metaphysical scamps to-day. Sort of visitation of them" (155).

The full title of the novel, The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, announces a sustained metaphor used throughout.

Leon Howard surmises that Melville's idea for the book originated when he attended a "fancy dress picnic" in the Berkshires, September, 1855.<sup>22</sup> In his conversation with Pitch, the Missouri Bachelor, the *Cosmopolitan* remarks: "Life is a pic-nic en costume; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool" (152). If the *Cosmopolitan* is only the latest of the numerous avatars of the Confidence-Man, then perhaps he expresses the rationale for all. Edgar Dryden notes that being "Structured around the metaphor of the world as stage, the book is filled with references to costumes, transformations, disguises, dramatic performances, and characters from various plays."<sup>23</sup> The relationship to the appearance-reality theme is obvious; Leon Roudiez makes the point that, "the confidence man . . . represents fictions or myths. Through his various disguises he is the actor attempting to persuade his audience (and usually successful in the attempt) of the reality of those fictions."<sup>24</sup> Masks are used by "Jesuit emissaries," remarks the "new comer" in Chapter XVIII, "better to accomplish their secret designs, they assume, at times, I am told, the most singular masques" (104). The newcomer, himself, is probably

<sup>22</sup> Leon Howard, *Herman Melville* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1951), p. 226.

<sup>23</sup> Edgar A. Dryden, *Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 151.

<sup>24</sup> Roudiez, p. 223.

the Confidence-Man in still another disguise. The masks and disguises in the novel thus make possible the relentless, ongoing confidence game; however, the victims as well as the Confidence-Man wear masks. In the same chapter, "A demure-looking woman . . . drew her veil well down" and later "hid her face behind a meagre bundle," while still another passenger, seeking "charity," appears with "a white bandage across his face" (103). Since the masks are not always used to deceive, Melville's constant use of them in the novel seems to imply that all men isolate themselves from the actual world through façades. In this sense, the stage and mask references not only express the appearance-reality theme, they also reinforce and convey the isolation theme as well.

The atmosphere of isolation in the book originates from Melville's choice of words signifying loneliness and apartness, his literary allusions to isolate figures, both in recent history and in biblical history to Christ as an isolate figure, and his imagery conveying ideas of isolation and isolated persons. The sustained metaphor of disguise, symbolizing facade and concealment also suggests voluntary isolation from society.

## CHAPTER III

### THE CARITAS THEME

Herman Melville chose St. Paul's hymn to love, I Corinthians 13, as a kind of epigraph for his last full-length prose work, yet The Confidence-Man is, in the view of most critics, a pitiless, misanthropic, bitter novel. The quotation from the Apostle Paul is the focal New Testament passage on the Christian doctrine of love--caritas--and Melville's numerous references to it suggest that he may have intended to write specifically about the biblical concept of love. The word in the Greek text is agape; the Latin equivalent is caritas. Both words are translated as charity in the Authorized Version available to Melville.

The caritas theme manifests itself at the beginning of the novel by means of a character who resembles a savior-god, perhaps Christ, who uses phrases from the caritas passage in First Corinthians for his message to the world. Although this character, a mysterious deaf-mute, never reappears after the opening chapter, his message echoes and re-echoes in the remainder of the novel. There are many explicit references to the word charity, a number of plays on the word itself, and numerous occurrences of related words, such as benevolence, philanthropy, and friendship.

The narrator remarks that another sign, displayed by the shipboard barber, is in contrast to the deaf-mute's sign. The barber's sign says NO TRUST, and on succeeding pages the novel contains many references to trust, confidence, trustworthiness, and faith. These in turn, are associated with such words as philanthropy, charity, and benevolence. The literal meaning of philanthropy, i.e. "love of mankind," is a source of word-play. The Cosmopolitan, describing himself as a philanthropist in the closing pages of the novel, pleads with the barber to take down his NO TRUST sign, but the barber replies, "Very odd sort of man the philanthropist. . . . I sadly fear, lest you philanthropists know better what goodness is, than what men are" (261). In this instance, caritas is coupled with philanthropy, and the Cosmopolitan carefully defines the latter word: "I am Philanthropos, and love mankind. And, what is more than you do, barber, I trust them" (261). In this fashion, Melville repeatedly plays on the interrelationship of meanings of philanthropy, caritas, brotherly love, and trust.

The name of the steamboat itself, Fidele, means faithful. The reader may discern allusions to the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity, as he recalls the words from I Corinthians 13.13: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

Elizabeth Foster asserts that the three virtues are represented in the novel by three avatars of the Confidence-Man. She believes that John Truman (the man with the "big book") is faith; that the herb-doctor is hope; and that both the man with the brass plate and the Cosmopolitan are charity.<sup>1</sup>

Play on the words confident and confidence permeates the book. Johannes D. Bergmann convincingly suggests an actual source for Melville's Confidence-Man, at least in the surface reality of the character. The name "confidence man" was first used, according to Bergmann, in connection with a swindler arrested in New York City in July 1849. A newspaper account relates the story:

For the last few months a man has been travelling about the city, known as the "Confidence man;" that is, he would go up to a perfect stranger in the street, and being a man of genteel appearance, would easily command an interview. Upon this interview he would say, after some little conversation, 'have you confidence in me to trust me with your watch until to-morrow;' the stranger . . . at this novel request, supposing him to be some old acquaintance allows him to take the watch, thus placing 'confidence' in the honest of the stranger, who walks off laughing. In this way many have been duped.

Bergmann further asserts that this man was "the first such swindler to whom the particular title confidence man was applied. The reason is evident: he used the word confidence in his swindle."<sup>2</sup> Melville was a part of literary New York

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth S. Foster, ed., The Confidence-Man, by Herman Melville (New York: Hendricks House, 1954), p. lvi.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes D. Bergmann, "The Original Confidence Man," American Quarterly, 21 (Fall 1969), 561-62.



in 1849, declares Bergmann, and he would certainly have read the contemporary newspaper accounts, and undoubtedly he would have perceived the satiric possibilities of the popular new name given to a man who practiced a very old game. By the time that Melville wrote The Confidence-Man, six or seven years later, the term was on its way to becoming a common phrase in popular usage.<sup>3</sup>

The use of the word "confidence" in the sense of a swindling game is strongly hinted at in the conversation between the crippled Negro beggar, Black Guinea, and several passengers. Black Guinea cries, "Oh, oh, good ge'mmen, have you no confidence in dis poor ole darkie?" and one gentleman replies that there "is no reason why you may not be some sort of black Jeremy Diddler" (16). Jeremy Diddler was a character in a farce written in 1803 by the Irish playwright, James Kenney. Diddler was a character who used flattery in order to cajole small loans which he did not repay. His name probably is the source of the slang term, "to diddle," meaning to cheat or swindle.<sup>4</sup> The gentleman's suspicion is borne out later when the Confidence-Man uses a business card which had been lost by the country merchant and stealthily retrieved by Black Guinea.

<sup>3</sup> Bergmann, pp. 574-75.

<sup>4</sup> See Foster, p. 301, n. 16.30; and A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English by Eric Partridge, 7th ed. (1937; New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 219.

But the words "confident" and "confidence" are also associated with charity, for the preceding Chapter II ends with a description of the shipboard scene in the following suggestive words: "Here reigned the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide" (8). In this case, "confident" is perhaps used to mean optimistic, but it may also be related to "the all-fusing spirit of the East" with its connotation not only of optimism but of brotherhood (charity-brotherhood) as well. Melville links the words "confidence," meaning a swindle, and "charity" near the beginning of the Black Guinea episode: "While this game of charity was yet at its height" (11).

[Italics added]

In Chapter IV, John Ringman, described as the "man with the weed," speaks to the country merchant, whom he identifies apparently through the business card picked up by Black Guinea. Melville associates confidence and faithfulness in this instance: "But didn't you admit, my dear sir [Ringman is speaking to the country merchant], that in some things this memory of yours is a little faithless? Now, those who have faithless memories, should they not have some little confidence in the less faithless memories of others?" (21). [Italics added]

John Ringman next meets a young student who is reading Tacitus, whereupon Ringman urges him to read "serene and

cheery books, fitted to inspire love and trust." Tacitus, says Ringman, is without confidence and "destroys confidence in all his readers. He destroys confidence, paternal confidence, of which God knows that there is in this world none to spare." Plaintively, he inquires, "My dear young friend, did you never observe how little, very little, confidence, there is? I mean between man and man--more particularly between stranger and stranger" (29-30). Here, once again, Melville seemingly equates confidence with caritas.

The title of Chapter VI is "At the outset of which certain passengers prove deaf to the call of charity" (31). Confidence is now linked specifically to "trust," a word used repeatedly throughout the chapter. A "man in gray" replaces John Ringman in the round of confidence games; an agent for the "Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum," he solicits money for its benefit. "Trust" is used in the sense of relying on, or being without suspicion. The "man in gray," after being jeered at by a wooden-legged man, accuses the latter of being suspicious: "It is one of the imbecilities of the suspicious person to fancy that every stranger, however absent-minded, he sees so much as smiling or gesturing to himself in any odd sort of way, is secretly making him his butt. In some moods, the movements of an entire street, as the suspicious man walks down it, will seem an express pantomimic jeer at him.

In short, the suspicious man kicks himself with his own foot" (33). Later, the "man in gray" asserts that a suspicious man should be "put down in any Christian community." His advice to another passenger: "Ah, we should shut our ears to distrust, and keep them open only for its opposite" (36). When the "man in gray" is repulsed by a man from whom he sought a charitable contribution, he says, "Heaven give you more charity, sir" (32). In this chapter, "confidence," "charity," and "trust," are all associated, and they are frequently used with double, or perhaps triple, meanings: confidence-trust; charity-philanthropy-caritas; and trust-reliance-caritas.

In Chapter VII, trust and charity are again joined by association as the "man in gray" remarks, "I always will be, I trust, in the charity business" (43). He follows up with an account of a fantastic scheme which he calls "The World's Charity," a "methodization of the world's benevolence . . . empowered by the various governments to levy, annually one grand benevolence tax upon all mankind" with the result that "not a pauper or heathen could remain the round world over" (44). The "man in gray" then parodies I Corinthians 13.2: "Obstacles? I have confidence to remove obstacles, though mountains" (47). He succeeds, for the chapter ends with the "man in gold sleeve-buttons" giving him an additional bank note for his charitable work.

The next chapter, a brief one of three pages, concentrates the caritas theme with references to "xiii. of 1st Corinthians" being read by a "charitable lady" and with a final paragraph which quotes directly from II Corinthians 7.16: "I rejoice that I have confidence in you in all things." Although the original scriptural quotation uses the word "confidence" in the sense of "having faith in," the additional meaning of the word confidence as "charity" is here implicit because of the numerous references to charity as meaning caritas in preceding paragraphs. After undergoing a "natural struggle between charity and prudence," the charitable lady hands over a twenty-dollar bank note to the "man in gray," the traveling agent of the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum.

Chapter XIII contains an involved discourse between the "good merchant" and the "man with the traveling-cap." The former is apparently the "country merchant" of earlier chapters, and the latter is undoubtedly another manifestation of the Confidence-Man. After sharing champagne, the merchant bursts out, "Ah, wine is good, and confidence is good; but can wine or confidence 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 dear 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!" (74).

The "man with the traveling cap" seems amazed at this pessimistic outburst and chides the merchant: "For all the fine confidence you professed with me, just now, distrust, deep distrust, underlies it" (74). He concludes: "Wine was meant to gladden the heart, not grieve it; to heighten confidence, not depress it" (74). Thus, confidence and charity and trust are all linked together in this exchange. The merchant exhibits a lack of confidence in his fellow man, and he leaves, "mortified at having been tempted by his own honest goodness, accidentally stimulated into making mad disclosures--to himself as to another--of the queer, unaccountable carapices of his natural heart" (75).

Chapter XXVIII follows three chapters devoted to the story of Colonel John Moredock, the Indian-hater. The Cosmopolitan and Charlie Noble continue to discuss the implications of the Indian-hating story as the chapter begins: "'Charity, charity!' exclaimed the cosmopolitan, 'never a sound judgment without charity. When man judges man, charity is less a bounty from our mercy than just allowance for the insensible lee-way of human fallibility'" (177). The Cosmopolitan continues: "Charity, like poetry, should be cultivated, if only for its being graceful" (177). He goes on to associate charity with religion: "Set aside materialism, and what is an atheist, but one who does not, or will not, see in the

universe a ruling principle of love; and what a misanthrope, but one who does not, or will not, see in man a ruling principle of kindness? Don't you see? In either case the vice consists in a want of confidence" (178). In this, and the subsequent Chapter XXIX, entitled "The Boon Companions," Frank Goodman and Charlie Noble discuss the charitable man, using these descriptive terms: "brotherly love," "conviviality," "geniality," "friendship," "convivial geniality," "sincerely-genial souls," "heart-warm," "princely kindness." Over the bottle of champagne, they ring the changes with the foregoing affirmative words, but with a general tone of irony underlying it all. They eventually agree that "geniality . . . is much on the increase in these days" (199). Frank Goodman says, "Yes, we golden boys, the moderns, have geniality everywhere--a bounty broadcast like moonlight," and Charlie Noble rejoins, "Geniality has invaded each department and profession. We have genial senators, genial authors, genial lecturers, genial doctors, genial clergymen, genial surgeons, and the next thing we shall have genial hangmen" (199). Frank Goodman, however, replies, "Surely, when the whole world shall have been genialized, it will be as out of place to talk of murderers, as in a Christianized world to talk of sinners" (199).

Melville's reference to a "Christianized world" in an ironic context is typical of much of his earlier works;

indeed, it is a major theme in his first novel, Typee (1846). While the Pauline passage about caritas is introduced clearly and explicitly, many other biblical allusions occur in The Confidence-Man.<sup>5</sup> Nathalia Wright remarks that "parts of Moby-Dick, Pierre, The Confidence-Man, and Clarel seem to have been written with one of these [personally marked] Bibles open beside the author."<sup>6</sup> She states that the "words which Melville used to describe the Gospels are, in fact, the same which he applied to the sanctuary of the shore, the fertility of the field, the fixity of the isle, the fellowship of society. They are his words, too, for describing Eden when it is employed as a symbol for man's life of innocence before the fall." For Melville, Christianity "offers escape to all those who would linger fearfully in its arms. But all intrepid spirits must press on into what were to Melville greater complexities of thought and experience. In themselves the Gospels remained for him the record of a simple life."<sup>7</sup> Wright concludes that, in The Confidence-Man, "the message of the Gospels and of Paul is worse than impractical; it is a deceiving and a misleading message, precisely as it is in the hands of the Confidence-Man."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Nathalia Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1949), pp. 101-06; and Foster, pp. 288-365.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, pp. 113-14.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, p. 125.



In discussing Melville's understanding of Christian caritas, the same critic considers The Confidence-Man in further detail. In his use of the Bible, she believes that "as he probed thus beneath its surface he arrived almost inevitably at what was for him the true religious significance of the Bible: its mythology, or its allegorical representation of metaphysical truth."<sup>9</sup> Because for Melville, "myth was superior to science, as the heart was to the head. In much the same way he allegorized the New Testament. No strictly historical Jesus, as revealed by the Markan tradition, could be as moving as what the mind had made of him: a perfect nature, the idealism of whose ethic commanded adoration if not imitation."<sup>10</sup> By the time that Melville came to write The Confidence-Man, the "wistfulness of the Gospel theme is largely absent. . . . So bitterly ironic is its introduction, in the characters of Black Guinea, Ringman, the man with the gray coat, and all the sharpsters who glibly quote the charitable words of Paul, that it hardly appears as a serious way of life, even for one corner of the world." Wright further declares that the "mean appearance of the New Testament ethic" in The Confidence-Man is due not

<sup>9</sup> Wright, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, p. 18.

only to Melville's belief in the "innate, ineradicable selfishness of human nature," but to the "harshness of un-human truth," as well.<sup>11</sup>

One may conclude, then, that according to Nathalia Wright's interpretation of Melville's use of the Bible, he was unable to reconcile his own idealized version of the Gospel ethic with his comprehension of the nature of man.

Elizabeth Foster also considers Melville's use of the caritas theme in her introduction to The Confidence-Man: the wooden-legged cynic's remark to Black Guinea that "Charity is one thing, and truth is another" (13), is a "proposition . . . which the novel debates . . . [and which is] illustrated many times in the succeeding incidents."<sup>12</sup> Foster believes that the major part of the novel, after the Black Guinea section, "dramatizes, as a religious allegory, the last verse of the chapter from First Corinthians with which the novel began: 'And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.'"<sup>13</sup> Again, the Cosmopolitan is "apparently the very incarnation of charity and brotherly love," but "in the end Pitch spots the misanthrope under his genial mask" and identifies him as

<sup>11</sup> Wright, pp. 124-25.

<sup>12</sup> Foster, p. liii.

<sup>13</sup> Foster, p. lvi.

"Diogenes in disguise."<sup>14</sup> Foster concludes, too, that in The Confidence-Man, "St. Paul's doctrine of charity is at odds with the truth of our world as we know it, since there is evil in the universe and in human nature, and since some things are lies"; thus, the doctrine is "vicious, since it operates ultimately to undermine and destroy the small quantum of faith and love of which human nature is capable;" however, she asserts that not "Christianity alone is to blame for this, but all optimistic philosophies which assume that the universe is benevolent and human nature good."<sup>15</sup> She concludes that Melville does not, in effect, wholly reject the idea of caritas, because "he gives us an unforgettable picture of a society without faith or charity . . . [and the alternative,] if we jettison charity--[is] a world of solitary, dehumanized Indian-haters."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, while the novel seems to express the "hopelessness of Christian hope," yet, "much stronger and more continual is the emphasis upon charity . . . [and what] moved Melville was the prospect of a world without charity."<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Foster believes that the satire on Emerson in the Winsome-Egbert episode is

<sup>14</sup> Foster, p. lxv.

<sup>15</sup> Foster, p. lxix.

<sup>16</sup> Foster, p. lxx.

<sup>17</sup> Foster, p. lxxxviii.

Melville's "one argument for the necessity for charity--the intolerable heartlessness and inhumanity of Winsome-Egbert's world of complacent egoists."<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Foster argues that The Confidence-Man does not express a rejection of the concept of caritas, but rather that it affirms its necessity by the way in which the novel shows the reader what the world is like when it is absent.

R. W. B. Lewis shares the preceding interpretation insofar as it reveals the substantial role of the caritas theme in the novel. He also believes that caritas is indicated through "bleakly negative demonstrations," such as the stories of Charlemont and China Aster (see p. 45). Lewis points out that the novel ends with a portrait of a "darkened world . . . radically devoid of the one human impulse that might relight it and redeem it: the impulse of charity."<sup>19</sup> He maintains that "charity in its traditional Christian or Pauline sense--the self-giving love between man and man--had always been for Melville the supreme human resource."<sup>20</sup>

Nathalia Wright, Elizabeth Foster, and R.W. B. Lewis all emphasize the thematic importance of charity in The Confidence-Man. While the latter two would insist on the significance

<sup>18</sup> Foster, p. xci.

<sup>19</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, Trials of the Word (1965; rpt. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1966), p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, p. 73.

of ameliorative elements in the novel--a world without charity is dehumanized--even Wright, who declares that "the Gospel theme is largely absent" from The Confidence-Man, would grant that "a vestige of the old sweetness of the Gospel theme remains."<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, Lawrance Thompson devotes an entire chapter to the novel, entitling it "Swindler as God's Agent." Quoting from the same passage in I Corinthians which introduces the charity theme in the novel, Thompson states:

"There in a chestnut shell, Melville believed, lay the kernel of that shallow Christian dogma which he had come to loathe; the kernel cultivated from the teachings of the so-called Son of God, and stupidly employed by Melville's enemies to prove him 'mad' and 'misanthropic' whenever he suggested that such nonsense merely served God as pasteboard masks, behind which He could perpetrate His malicious and humiliating deceptions."<sup>22</sup> Thompson believes that Melville's intent in The Confidence-Man is to show that "the swindling initiative of a confidence-man is, in the Melvillian sense, God-like."<sup>23</sup> His analysis necessitates attributing ironic intention, or even, in some cases, "cabalistic symbolism," to the entire

<sup>21</sup> Wright, pp. 124-25.

<sup>22</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), p. 298.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, p. 299.

novel. Through the use of no less than three levels of meaning, Melville is thus enabled to represent his "own sinister and darkly private thoughts concerning the unjust ways of God to man."<sup>24</sup> Although Thompson quotes from the novel at length in his examination of the "occult insinuations" of the "equivocal and ambiguous words" in it, he does not consider the specific theme of charity in any significant detail, nor does he comment on the conjunction of "confidence" and the charity theme as it appears throughout the work. Thompson's interpretation, however, is logically reached through his thesis that Melville "took wry and sly pleasure in the irony of disguising his riddle-answers behind the self-protective riddle-masks of his ingenious art; behind various subterfuges of rhetoric and symbol; behind naughty uses of Bible quotations or allusions which may have one meaning in a Christian context and quite a different meaning as controlled by Melville's anti-Christian context."<sup>25</sup>

However, Melville's concern with the charity theme is well established by many critics.<sup>26</sup> In the introduction to Pierre, a novel published five years earlier than The Confidence Man, Henry Murray contends that the novel is autobiographical and that "the author wittingly set out to write

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, p. 301.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Lewis, p. 73; and Edwin T. Bowden, The Dungeon of the Heart (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 172.

the legend of his heart, the biography of Eros."<sup>27</sup> He continues: "Many other quotations could be offered to show that Melville's conception of Pierre after Isabel has stirred him is a composite of the Platonic lover, the Christ of God, and the benevolent man of 18th century philosophy." Rather than the "Socratic mythus," writes Murray, "we find the New Testament motive of compassion and the medieval idea of serving the beloved by championing her cause. Thus Pierre's passion is a fusion of Eros (Romantic love or Enthusiasm) and Agape (St. Paul's caritas, or Christian love)."<sup>28</sup> The foregoing may lend weight to the assertion earlier in these pages that Melville's artistic and emotional involvement with St. Paul's concept of caritas determined much of his thematic concern in stories that he wrote during the 1850's.

In his exegesis of I Corinthians 13 in The Interpreter's Bible, Clarence Tucker Craig writes:

The English rendition [of agape] has had a strange history. Influenced by the Latin caritas, Wycliffe had used charity in all cases, and in this he was followed by the Roman Catholic translators. Tyndale used the Anglo-Saxon word love, and was followed in this by Cranmer and the Geneva Bible. . . . The KJV made a curious compromise. Though it retained the noun love in forty-eight passages in Paul, and always used this verb, in twelve instances (half of them in this chapter [13]) it inconsistently translated

<sup>27</sup> Henry Murray, ed., Pierre by Herman Melville (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), p. xxiii.

<sup>28</sup> Murray, p. lxii.

the noun as charity. Many Christians who would be quite surprised to hear 'Who shall separate us from the charity of Christ,' still feel that charity is desirable in this chapter. But that obscures the unity of Paul's conception of ἀγάπη. What he is talking about is not the human quality of benevolence, but the divine graciousness revealed in Christ. It is quite true that the English word love has many lower associations. Agape is not to be confused with sensual attraction for the opposite sex. It is much more than the sentimentality which binds together those who are kin or of kindred interests. The 'mutuality' which our pragmatists recommend falls short of agape; for the height of this love is love for enemies, which is anything but an experience of mutuality. Agape is another kind of love which roots in the undeserved goodness men have received in Christ.<sup>29</sup>

In an article on "Charity" in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, William Davidson emphasizes the theological dimension of Christian charity. He writes, "Christian charity draws its inspiration from a religious source: it is not begotten of men, but of God."<sup>30</sup>

The two writers just quoted distinguish carefully between the "human" element and the "divine" element in Paul's concept of love. They assert that the Greek word agape (translated charity in the English Bibles) carries a special theological meaning. That is, agape is operative in man only through the gracious action of God. A contemporary Biblical scholar, John L. McKenzie, points out that the Greek language

<sup>29</sup> Clarence Tucker Craig, "Introduction and Exegesis," The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The Interpreter's Bible, X (New York: Abingon-Cokesbury Press, 1953), 166-67.

<sup>30</sup> William L. Davidson, "Charity," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, III (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), 374.



uses eros, philia, and agape and their cognates to designate love: "Eros signifies the passion of sexual desire and does not appear in the NT. Philein and philia designate primarily the love of friendship. Agape and agapan, less frequent in profane Greek, are possibly chosen for that reason to designate the unique and original Christian idea of love in the NT." Further, "'charity is used to show the unique character of this love, and is used in most English versions of the Bible to translate agape and agapan."<sup>31</sup>

It seems clear that the word charity, as it is used in the King James Version of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, followed by Melville, conveys a "unique character;" charity is specifically a theological virtue and, of course, has been traditionally considered as such throughout Christian theological discourse.

Melville's wide reading in theological writings is well known.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, it seems highly probable that he was aware of the traditional Christian understanding of the concept of charity. His use of word-play on charity suggests that in The Confidence-Man he may have been dealing with not a single aspect of charity, but with multiple aspects.

<sup>31</sup> John L. McKenzie, "Love," Dictionary of the Bible (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965), pp. 521-22.

<sup>32</sup> Merton M. Sealts, Jr., Melville's Reading (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 133.

The relationship of charity to philanthropy or benevolence is an important sub-theme. During the mid-1850's, the topic of charity and charitable organizations was a popular one in America. Merle Curti writes of the "growth of an ethic of philanthropic humanitarianism" beginning about 1820, when many wealthy men established training schools and contributed to religious missionary work in the poorer sections of New York City and Boston. He attributes the movement to the "Christian doctrine of the stewardship of great riches, which taught the responsibility of the rich for the poor."<sup>33</sup> In discussing the same phenomenon, Perry Miller suggests that one of its antecedents was the "concept of the benevolent man . . . [which] figured largely in British literature of the late eighteenth century. . . . It was raised to the status of a cult by the literature which historians call 'Sentimentalism,' all of which was reverently read in America. A man could no more safely, in America of 1820, publicly come out against benevolence . . . than he could advocate sexual promiscuity."<sup>34</sup> Miller continues: "Throughout the literature, which mounts to an intoxication of joy that missions and millennium may at last be joined, there runs a confident assurance that the goal is attainable because it draws strength from an invincible urge toward benevolence."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought, 3rd ed. (1943; rpt. New York: Harper, 1964), pp. 290-91.

<sup>34</sup> Perry Miller, The Life of the Mind in America (New York: Harcourt, 1965), p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Miller. n. 80.

He writes further that "the feasibility of reaching the millennium through missionary benevolence is so insistent that one concludes it had become a national obsession."<sup>36</sup> Yet, before mid-century, many voiced disenchantment with the efficacy of benevolence, and some, according to Miller, "mourned that such activities implied no essential change in the heart of the participants."<sup>37</sup>

John Webb Pratt, in a book sub-titled "The Church-State Theme in New York History," documents the proliferation of private charitable societies which were "organized to relieve special classes of unfortunates" in Melville's home state during the early decades of the nineteenth century. "During the 1830's," he writes, "several special homes for dependent children were established in Albany, Brooklyn, Troy, Utica, Buffalo, and Rochester." Also, the "private New York Juvenile Asylum was opened in New York City in the early 1850's to care for neglected and abandoned children, the flotsam tossed upon the streets of the city by the heavy waves of immigration in the 1840's."<sup>38</sup> Chapter VI of The Confidence-Man, titled "At the Outset of which certain passengers prove deaf to the call of charity," shows the Confidence-Man making a plea on behalf of the "Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum" (37).

<sup>36</sup> Miller, p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> Miller, p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> John Webb Pratt, Religion, Politics, and Diversity (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 206-07.

Melville satirizes the benevolent man who gives to charitable societies for egotistical reasons: "Let me take down name and amount [says the Confidence-Man after receiving a contribution]. We publish these names. And now let me give you a little history of our asylum, and the providential way in which it was started" (38).

Pratt lists the Albany Argus as one of the "very important sources" for "attitudes toward specific church-state issues" relating to charitable organizations and the humanitarian movement of the nineteenth century in general.<sup>39</sup>

Melville was very familiar with the Albany newspaper. Melville lived in nearby Lansingburgh and in Albany itself throughout his early youth. The Albany Argus reviewed Typee in 1846; Melville wrote to its editor in 1847; he mentions reading it in 1877; and his cousin, Catherine Lansing, sent copies of it to the family on at least one occasion in 1885.<sup>40</sup> In September, 1855, the probable date for the beginning of the composition of The Confidence-Man, the New-York Daily Times published an article entitled "Our Charities," in which charitable acts were lauded because they "exhibit a natural benevolence, which is a crown of glory to any nation; and while we continue to send the surplus fruit of our labors in

<sup>39</sup> Pratt, p. 318.

<sup>40</sup> Jay Leyda, The Melville Log (New York: Harcourt, 1951), I, 208 and 240; II, 759 and 791.

such channels, it will be well enough if our ardor to obtain the almighty dollar increases beyond even the present heat." The article praises those who give but "are generally marked by an aversion to notoriety."<sup>41</sup> On September 15, 1855, the Daily Times reported a sermon preached by the Reverend Nehemiah Adams at a meeting of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The Reverend Mr. Adams reported that Napoleon, while in exile, said, "The reign of Charity was Christ's greatest miracle and proved his Deity."<sup>42</sup> During the period in which Melville was writing The Confidence-Man, the idea of almsgiving as a Christian duty was very much in the air.

The sub-theme of Christian charity and its relationship to philanthropy or almsgiving is thus a natural subject for satire in the most satirical of Melville's works. Many Christian writers pursue this theme of the almsgiver who acts for the wrong motives. Jeremy Taylor in The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living writes that "alms, without mercy, are like prayers without devotion, or religion without humility."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> "Our Charities," New-York Daily Times, 6 September 1855, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> "Charity," New-York Daily Times, 15 September 1855, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Jeremy Taylor, The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying, IV, ed. Reginald Heber (London: Ogle, Duncan, 1822), 233.

Melville's fondness for seventeenth century writers is well established, and Jay Leyda notes that Melville and George Duyckinck shared an interest in Jeremy Taylor.<sup>44</sup> Taylor devotes a lengthy section of Holy Living to the subject of charity and almsgiving and the right motives proper to the Christian. Melville mentions Jeremy Taylor on page 154, The Confidence-Man.

In Chapter III, a Methodist minister and a wooden-legged man discuss charity: "To where it belongs with your charity!" snaps the wooden-legged man, "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" (14). The dialogue ends when the Methodist minister loses his temper and shakes the wooden-legged man. The interest in charitable institutions during the period provides Melville with an opportunity to ridicule the professional philanthropist, the pharisaical almsgiver, and the humanitarian movement in general.

The "man in gray" solicits money on behalf of the "Seminolte Widow and Orphan Asylum." He approaches the young

<sup>44</sup> See F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (1941; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 101-102; and Jay Leyda, The Melville Log, I, xxv.

Episcopal clergyman, first warning him against the "baneful effects of "the spirit of distrust [which] works something as certain potions do" (36). After getting the clergyman's contribution, the "man in gray" carefully takes down his name and the amount so that they may be published. He uses the same tactic with a widow in the ladies' saloon whom he finds reading from a small testament, marked at I Corinthians 13. After testing her confidence (trust) by asking baldly for twenty dollars and observing her demurral, he reveals himself to be the traveling agent for the "Semiole Widow and Orphan's Asylum." She immediately gives him the money, and he tells her that he will write her name in the register of contributors, but her motive will be set down in "another [heavenly] register."

Elizabeth S. Foster draws attention to the possibility that Melville is satirizing not merely the humanitarian movement of the nineteenth century but the entire school of eighteenth century optimistic philosophers. The concept of the "benevolent man" undoubtedly provided the impetus for much of the later movement which extolled organized charitable undertaking as the hallmark of the good Christian.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Foster, pp. liii-iv.

Carrying this idea further, Fred E. Brouwer asserts that Melville intended for his novel to be a satire on certain philosophical positions, particularly the group of eighteenth century philosophers who wrote in opposition to Thomas Hobbes' ethical theories as he propounded them in Leviathan.<sup>46</sup> Brouwer proposes the specific identities of Shaftesbury (John Ringman), Berkeley ("the man in gray"), Butler (Mr. Truman), Schelling (Herb Doctor), and Paley ("the man with the brass plate"). He also suggests that the name of the distrustful barber, William Cream, is a play on Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury because "Malm is a creamy colored chalky lime."<sup>47</sup> In documenting his article, Brouwer quotes from a nineteenth century historian, James Mackintosh, who had traced the dialectical development of Hobbes and his antagonists in detail.<sup>48</sup> One philosopher mentioned by Mackintosh, but not pursued by Brouwer, is Tucker, who is mentioned alongside Paley. This Tucker is undoubtedly Abraham Tucker (1705-1774), who is known chiefly for his seven volume work entitled The Light of Nature Pursued. His work may have given Melville some ideas which he used in The Confidence-Man. In his biographical sketch of Tucker, Leslie Stephen points out that on "purely

<sup>46</sup> Fred E. Brouwer, "Melville's The Confidence-Man as Ship of Philosophers," Southern Humanities Review, 3 (Spring 1969), 159.

<sup>47</sup> Brouwer, pp. 160-62.

<sup>48</sup> Brouwer, p. 159 and p. 164.



metaphysical points" Tucker "accepts Locke as his great authority" and his doctrines are substantially the same as those of Paley.<sup>49</sup> In other words, Tucker belongs to the same anti-Hobbesian school of writers which included Shaftesbury, Berkeley, Butler, and others. Neither Foster nor Brouwer discuss Abraham Tucker as a possible source of ideas for Melville's "comedy of philosophy."<sup>50</sup> Melville, however, gave a copy of Tucker, in Hazlitt's 1807 abridgement, to his distant relative Richard Lathers. Melville and Lathers often enjoyed literary conversations together.<sup>51</sup> The Tucker volume Melville gave Lathers is inscribed: "Richard Lathers Esq from his friend Herman Melville. Pittsfield Aug: 1853."<sup>52</sup> This date is only a little over two years before he began writing The Confidence-Man. The first four volumes of Tucker's work were published in 1768; his daughter published the final three volumes in 1778, four years after his death. It was republished, together with a brief biography, by his grandson in 1805.<sup>53</sup> William Hazlitt abridged the work

<sup>49</sup> L[eslie] S[tephen], "Abraham Tucker," Dictionary of National Biography, XIX (1882; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1921-1922), 1205.

<sup>50</sup> Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man, p. 392, Appendix.

<sup>51</sup> Leon Howard, Herman Melville (1951; rpt. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), p. 207.

<sup>52</sup> Sealts, Melville's Reading, p. 101.

<sup>53</sup> Leslie Stephen, Dictionary of National Biography, XIX, 1205.

because Tucker's writings are "encumbered and weighed down with a load of unnecessary matter. . . . The work is swelled out with endless repetitions of itself."<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, according to Hazlitt, "If he was surpassed by one or two writers in logical precision and systematic profundity, there is no metaphysical writer who is equal to him in clearness of apprehension, and a various insight into human nature."<sup>55</sup> Hazlitt considers Tucker's ideas about self-love and motives to be the best part of his work.<sup>56</sup>

It is probable that Melville read Hazlitt's abridgement of Tucker before he gave it to his friend Richard Lathers. Tucker devotes three chapters consecutively of the sixth volume of The Light of Nature Pursued to faith, hope, and charity. He also discusses benevolence in a chapter in the second volume.<sup>57</sup> Tucker's sixth volume includes much on charity, almsgiving, and the almsgiver's motives.<sup>58</sup> The latter, as has been demonstrated, is a major theme in Melville's novel.

<sup>54</sup> William Hazlitt, "Preface to an Abridgment of Abraham Tucker's Light of Nature Pursued," ed. P.P. Howe, The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, (1930-34; rpt. New York: AMS, 1967), I, 121-22.

<sup>55</sup> Hazlitt, p. 124.

<sup>56</sup> Hazlitt, p. 130.

<sup>57</sup> Abraham Tucker, The Light of Nature Pursued, 2nd ed. Revised and corrected by Sir H. P. St. John Mildmay (1768-1778; rpt. London: R. Faulder, 1805), II, 354-93; and VI, 1-224.

<sup>58</sup> Tucker, VI, 143-224.

The ideas which Tucker set forth in The Light of Nature Pursued are not so easily satirized because of their "unsettled and wavering" quality as Hazlitt noted; however, the subject matter and the gently skeptical tone -- James Mackintosh called him a "metaphysical Montaigne" -- are echoed in The Confidence-Man.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, there are at least two examples of identical word choice in discussions of similar themes. The first example is Melville's play on the word "relieve." The Black Rapids Coal Company transfer agent (the Confidence-Man) attempts to sell worthless stock in his company to the young collegian. The transfer agent inquires first about a "saddish gentleman," the gentleman with a weed (his earlier disguise, if it is assumed that all are actually the same Confidence-Man), and says, "That unfortunate man, did you relieve him at all?" (53). He responds: "Let the unfortunate man relieve himself" (53). A few moments later, the transfer agent complains of "gloomy philosophers [Hobbesians?] of the stock-market" (53). The general subject here is the relationship of faith-trust and one's digestion. Abraham Tucker, earlier, plays on the same word. In a discussion of "weakly pious people who disturb themselves for that they cannot raise a fervent glow of faith," Tucker suggests, "they may laudably do what they can to help

<sup>59</sup> Stephen, Dictionary of National Biography, XIX, 1205.

themselves, but for that purpose might better have recourse to their horse or apothecary, than to their gospel-minister: for air, exercise, proper regimen of diet, and aperients may relieve them."<sup>60</sup> [Italics added] An aperient is a laxative. In both instances, the writers insinuate that man's spiritual health is related to his digestion.

In view of the opinion of Elizabeth Foster that the Herb Doctor represents hope, it is interesting to note that in his chapter on hope, Abraham Tucker writes, "Chance and external circumstances have no power over thee, disaster, sickness, and adversity make us cling closer to thee."<sup>61</sup> Melville uses this theme in his chapters about the Herb Doctor and the Miser. The latter is very ill, and the Herb Doctor plays on his invincible hope for a cure in order to sell him a patent medicine. The Herb Doctor attempts to sell the Miser a box of "Omni-Balsamic Reinvalidator" (83). The word balsamic was used as early as the seventeenth century to mean "balmy, soothing, restorative."<sup>62</sup> [Italics added] Tucker writes, "[hope is the] sole remedy of pressing evils, the balmy salve to heal our sores, the security in danger that no intolerable evil shall befall."<sup>63</sup> [Italics added] Both writers

<sup>60</sup> Tucker, VI, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Foster, p. lx; and Tucker, VI, 102.

<sup>62</sup> Oxford Universal Dictionary, ed. C. T. Onions, 3rd ed. (1933; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 141.

<sup>63</sup> Tucker, VI, 102.

characterize hope as a balmy, soothing restorative that cures. In both instances, the writers use the related words balmy and balsamic. In the opening pages of Melville's chapter involving the old miser and the Confidence-Man, it is possible to see still another echo of Tucker's work, albeit a very faint one. However, since hope is the subject of both sections in which the similarity occurs, the relationship may be more than coincidental. Tucker refers to his wife as "Euridice."<sup>64</sup> In the parallel chapter in Melville, the stranger (Confidence-Man) advances into the passengers' quarters "like Orpheus in his gay descent to Tartarus" (81). Eurydice, of course, was the wife of Orpheus. The parallel is strengthened in this case by the two additional parallels noted above.

The importance of Abraham Tucker's work to the conception of The Confidence-Man gains a greater degree of probability through the realization that Tucker's work alone, of the English moral philosophers, was in Melville's library prior to the publication of the novel, insofar as can be ascertained. While several critics, specifically Brouwer and Foster, assert that The Confidence-Man is, in part, a satire on the English moral philosophers of the eighteenth century, there seem to be no direct references to the other

<sup>64</sup> Tucker, VI, 165.

members of the philosophical school during the period immediately preceding the publication of the novel in April, 1857. Jay Leyda's Melville Log does print a marginal notation made by Melville in 1862 to the effect that he experienced an early "revulsion from the counting-room philosophy of Paley."<sup>65</sup> Assuming that Melville did have this particular philosophical school in mind, Tucker is an excellent choice to serve as a representative figure. One historian, Ernest Albee, writes that "the Light of Nature probably contains a better account than any other single work of the psychological views held practically in common by the older school of Utilitarians."<sup>66</sup> Albee's summation of Abraham Tucker's moral theory places him in the school which upholds the "selfish theory of morality," but, nevertheless, Tucker "has much to say in praise of benevolence."<sup>67</sup> Still another historian of philosophy points out that "Tucker informs his readers that he has examined human nature and has found that satisfaction, each man's own private satisfaction, is the ultimate spring of all his actions. But he also tells his readers that he has aimed at establishing the rule of universal charity or benevolence, directed towards all men without exception, and that the

<sup>65</sup> Leyda, p. 651.

<sup>66</sup> Ernest Albee, A History of English Utilitarianism (1901; rpt. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 132.

<sup>67</sup> Albee, p. 154 and p. 160.

fundamental rule of conduct is to labour for the common good or happiness; that is, to increase the common stock of satisfaction."<sup>68</sup> In The Light of Nature Pursued, Tucker writes of benevolence: "If we had a proper regard and concern for all mankind I do not imagine we could ever deal unjustly with anybody."<sup>69</sup> In discussing benevolence further, Tucker asserts: "I think it may be called a diffused love to the whole species. . . ."<sup>70</sup> In The Confidence-Man, the "man in gray" reveals his grandiose charitable scheme to the "gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons," saying:

The World's Charity is to be a society whose members shall comprise deputies from every charity and mission extant; the one object of the society to be the methodization of the world's benevolence; to which end, the present system of voluntary and promiscuous contribution to be done away, and the Society to be empowered by the various governments to levy, annually, one grand benevolence tax upon all mankind. . . . This tax, according to my tables, calculated with care, would result in the yearly raising of a fund little short of eight hundred millions. . . . In fourteen years . . . not a pauper or heathen could remain the round world over (44).

He brushes aside his listener's practical objections and informs him that he also plans to "reform . . . [and] quicken [Missions] with the Wall street spirit" (45).

<sup>68</sup> Frederick C. Copleston, A History of Philosophy (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1959), V, 193.

<sup>69</sup> Tucker, II, 357.

<sup>70</sup> Tucker, II, 358.

His plan includes sending ten thousand missionaries to the Orient "and converting the Chinese en masse within six months of the debarkation" (46). The "gentleman with the gold sleeve-buttons," however, "remained proof to such eloquence" and, "after listening a while longer with pleasant incredulity," put another sum of money in the speaker's hand. He was "charitable to the last, if only to the dreams of enthusiasm" (47). Melville cannily parodies the tone of "sweet reasonableness" used by Tucker and other eighteenth century moral philosophers in the optimistic and idealistic speeches made by the "man in gray." In view of Melville's association with the writings of Tucker, it is more than probable that he had that English philosopher in mind.

In Chapter VIII, following, the "man in gray" collects money from the "charitable lady" for a specific charitable organization, the Widow and Orphan Asylum, "recently founded among the Seminoles" (50). Melville undoubtedly intends additional irony here, inasmuch as the widows and orphans of the Seminole Indians were recently brought to that condition by the armed forces of the United States Government. The United States waged war against the Seminole Indians throughout most of the second quarter of the nineteenth century. All through the novel Melville satirizes his own century's obsession with the idea that benevolence, in the



form of organized "charity," is the mark par excellence of the Christian man. His satirical technique is the common one of pretending to advocate a point of view, but at the same time, exaggerating the programs and schemes to the point of absurdity.

Melville's satiric range in The Confidence-Man is wider than an emphasis on the wryly humorous possibilities presented to him by the "benevolent man." It is possible to read the novel as an extended commentary on the Pauline passage about faith, hope, and charity in I Corinthians 13. While the foregoing pages deal with the relationship of charity (caritas) to benevolence, he expands his commentary to encompass a multipartite view of the caritas theme. The novel comments on various aspects of caritas. Melville may or may not have been aware of the customary triple division of love into eros, philia, and agape; however, examples of all three are present in the book.

Erotic love, of course, may be considered a sub-theme of the general theme of caritas. Though Melville does not deal with erotic love to any substantial extent in his novels, with the exception of Pierre, and perhaps Typee, it is the subject of one very brief chapter in The Confidence-Man, Chapter XII, in which the narrator intrudes and announces that "we shall venture to tell it in other words than his,

though not to any other effect" (64). This is the first of four interpolated anecdotes which appear in the novel; all are didactic and parabolic. The first tale is about a woman named Goneril, described by Melville in highly ambiguous language: "young, in person lithe and straight," with a "complexion naturally rosy," yet finally characterized as having "a style of beauty rather peculiar and cactus-like." Her personal habits are eccentric; she carries dried sticks of blue clay in her pocket and eats them like candy. Her social behavior is perverse; she finds it "but honesty, to fling people's imputed faults into their faces" (66). Her behavior towards young men, however, is the motivating action of the story. Goneril has "a strange way of touching, as by accident, the arm or hand of comely young men, and seemed to reap a secret delight from it" (66). Her husband, observing this, is caused such embarrassment that he can not look any of the young men in the eye; in this way, "to the husband, Goneril's touch had the dread operation of the heathen taboo" (67). When he confronts Goneril about her propensities "in a wary manner, and not indelicately," she replies that it is "witless to be telling one's dreams, especially foolish ones." However, "if the unfortunate man liked connubially to rejoice his soul with such chimeras,

much connubial joy might they give him" (67). Eventually, her actions lead to his "retirement from the joys of wedlock," and he becomes "an innocent outcast, wandering forlorn in the great valley of the Mississippi, with a weed on his hat for the loss of his Goneril" (68). The story concludes: "Now all of this, from the beginning, the good merchant could not but consider rather hard for the unfortunate man" (69). This story of a very ugly woman who forces her husband to desert her because she insists on caressing young men publicly and without compunction remains enigmatic because of its weird imagery. This is the single depiction of erotic love in The Confidence-Man, and it is profoundly negative and bitter. The probable double-entendres are astonishing in a novel published in America in 1857.

Philia, another sub-theme of caritas, is expressed through a number of instances in the novel; indeed, the philia sub-theme underlies most of the passages about confidence and trust. The Confidence-Man depends on the kind of confidence and trust which ordinarily leads to friendship (philia) in order to carry out his duping schemes. Two of the interpolated stories, China Aster and Charlemont, may be seen as reflections of the underside of friendship.

Both stories begin much in the manner of folk tales. The first story commences: "Charlemont was a young merchant

of French descent, living in St. Louis--a man not deficient in mind, and possessed of that sterling and captivating kindness, seldom in perfection seen but in youthful bachelors, united at times to a remarkable sort of gracefully devil-may-care and witty good humor. Of course, he was admired by everybody, and loved, as only mankind can love, by not a few. But in his twenty-ninth year a change came over him" (208). Charlemont changes because he loses his fortune and he does not believe that his friends will remain with him when he is poor. Consequently, he disappears suddenly and returns only when he has gained a second fortune. He never quite returns to his old self; he confides to a dinner guest that if he (the guest) should ever see "ruin at hand" he should be "fortunate and grateful," if like Charlemont, after all that has happened, he "could be a little happy again" (210). Melville, perhaps, means for this poignant little anecdote to be a parable about the fragility of friendship (philia).

The second anecdote, told in Chapter XL, also begins like a folk tale: "China Aster was a young candle-maker of Marietta," and the second paragraph commences, "Now, China Aster, it so happened, had a friend, Orchis, a shoemaker" (234). The two characters address each other as "friend China Aster" and "friend Orchis." In this tale, however,

the theme of the fragility of friendship is explicit. The friendship collapses over money, a personal loan forced on China Aster by his prosperous friend, Orchis. Unable to pay back the loan, the plight of China Aster in this longer, more involved story, moves inexorably from hardship to bankruptcy to death. The story concludes with the epitaph on China Aster's tombstone: "the root of all was a friendly loan." In both stories, money destroys friendships.

The story of Colonel John Moredock also embodies the caritas theme. Melville took the tale from a well-known piece of Western frontier lore. Believing it to be the "apex of the whole argument," Elizabeth Foster discusses the anecdote at length in her introduction and also prints the original source in full in her explanatory notes to The Confidence-Man.<sup>71</sup> The meaning of the anecdote itself and its relationship to the rest of the novel have aroused divergent critical opinions.<sup>72</sup> For the present purposes, it is necessary to consider only the theme of caritas and its possible sub-themes embodied in the narrative. In brief, the Indian-hater story is about a frontiersman who, after losing his family

<sup>71</sup> Foster, pp. lxxiii-lxxv.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Foster, pp. lxvi-lxx; Roy Harvey Pearce, "Melville's Indian-hater: A Note on a Meaning of The Confidence-Man," PMLA, 67 (October 1952), 942-48; and Hershel Parker, "The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 18 (September 1963), 165-73.

in an Indian massacre, devotes the remainder of his life to the systematic tracking down and relentless extermination of all Indians. Foster points out that Melville made a number of crucial changes from his original source; the tale as used in the novel deprives the Indian of all humanity, making him a symbol of evil. The reader focuses, then, not on the primeval story of hunter and hunted, nor on a frontier narrative of violence and death, but rather, on the tale of the revenger and how he changes. The Confidence Man, in the form of the "man with the violet vest," relates the story and introduces his "hero," Colonel John Moredock, by comparing him to Alexander the Great and Moses: "Captain in the vanguard of conquering civilization. Whatever the nation's growing opulence or power, does it not lackey his heels? Pathfinder, provider of security to those who come after him, for himself he asks nothing but hardship. Worthy to be compared with Moses in the Exodus . . ." (164). The Confidence Man achieves a Swiftian touch as he discusses the frontiersman's implacable hatred of Indians: "the charitable may think he does them some injustice. Certain it is, the Indians themselves think so; quite unanimously, too" (166). The caritas theme appears throughout the story: "The intense solitude to which the Indian-hater consigns himself, has, by its overawing influence, no little to do with relaxing

his vow. He would relate instances where, after some months' lonely scoutings, the Indian-hater is suddenly seized with a sort of calenture; hurries openly towards the first smoke though he knows it is an Indian's, announces himself as a lost hunter, gives the savage his rifle, throws himself upon his charity, embraces him with much affection, imploring the privilege of living a while in his sweet companionship"

(171). [Italics added] Near the conclusion of the story, Moredock is depicted as "not without humane feelings."

Melville, through the story-teller, emphasizes the ironic possibilities by describing Moredock in a passage which parodies a Pauline passage on brotherly love: "Hospitable, not backward to help a neighbor; by report, benevolent, as retributive, in secret; while, in a general manner, though sometimes grave" (175). From Romans 12.8-11: "Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord."

The Pauline language mimicry contributes to the satirical tone of the story of brotherly love (philia) in Moredock, the

Indian-hater. Melville also compares Moredock to a monk: "With the solemnity of a Spaniard turned monk, he takes leave of his kin" (170). As some young men are called to a monastic vocation to serve God, Moredock is called to a lonely vocation to exterminate all Indians. He dedicates his entire life to their pursuit, renouncing all worldly and human contacts. The Indian-hater who is drawn to the soft "enticements of domestic life . . . away from the ascetic trail" is like a "monk who apostatizes to the world at times" (170). Melville emphasizes the Indian-hater's dehumanization through animal imagery: "Harry Orson [word play on hairy ursine]," "sword-fish," "deep-sea denizen" (164-170). The philia sub-theme appears in the episode in which the Indian-hater risks his life to enter the Indian campfire to seek human companionship. The ironic narrator, however, clearly states that those Indian-haters who succumb to "enticements of domestic life" are flawed. Within the satirical framework of the story, the perfect Indian-hater is totally withdrawn from the human community, totally dedicated to his vocation. He is one with the animals of the forest.

There are three further episodes in the novel which deal with the philia sub-theme. They are the "Boon Companions," the "Mystical Master introduces the Practical Disciple," and



the "Hypothetical Friends." These are Chapters XXIX, XXXVII, and XXXIX, respectively, and as the titles indicate friendship is the common theme. All three episodes are heavily ironic and imply the impossibility of human friendships.

The "Boon Companions" chapter actually begins with Chapter XXVIII and continues through Chapter XXXII. It is in the form of a dialogue between Frank Goodman, called the "cosmopolitan," and Charles Arnold Noble, sometimes called "the stranger," and at other times "the boon companion." The section commences with a tribute to charity by Frank Goodman: "'Charity, charity!' exclaimed the cosmopolitan, 'never a sound judgment without charity. When man judges man, charity is less a bounty from our mercy than just allowance for the insensible lee-way of human fallibility'" (177). He continues: "'Charity, like poetry, should be cultivated, if only for its being graceful'" (177). The two men discuss misanthropy; the cosmopolitan asserts: "Misanthropy, springing from the same root with disbelief of religion, is twin with [infidelity] . . . set aside materialism, and what is an atheist, but one who does not, or will not, see in the universe a ruling principle of love; and what a misanthrope, but one who does not, or will not, see in man a ruling

principle of kindness?" (178). Frank Goodman, the cosmopolitan, agrees with his new friend, Charlie Noble, that "man is a noble fellow." Chapter XXIX offers a portrait of gentlemanly conviviality over a bottle of wine and some tobacco, yet the reader, by now sensitive to the novel's reversals of meaning and sinister undertones, detects that some aspects of the drinking party have gone awry. The wine bottle is served in a "little bark basket, braided with procupine quills, gayly tinted in the Indian fashion" (181). Heretofore, the Indian has been a symbol of treachery and murderousness in the novel, as he had been in much Puritan literature.<sup>73</sup> There is also an ominous reference to the Marquise de Brinvilliers, a famous French poisoner of the seventeenth century.<sup>74</sup> The words "genial" and "convivial" occur in nearly every paragraph. Indeed, Merton Sealts notes that Melville has an especial attachment to the word "genial" and its cognates, but Melville uses it with greatest frequency in The Confidence-Man.<sup>75</sup> The atmosphere of

<sup>73</sup> Parker, p. 168.

<sup>74</sup> Foster, p. 345, n. 182.17.

<sup>75</sup> Merton M. Sealts, Jr., "Melville's 'Geniality,'" in Essays in American and English Literature Presented to Bruce Robert McElderry, Jr., ed. Max F. Schulz with William D. Templeman and Charles R. Metzger (Athens, Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 3-4.

conviviality is shattered when the cosmopolitan admits to Charlie Noble: "I am in want, urgent want, of money" (202).

Critics generally agree that Chapter XXXVII, titled "The Mystical Master introduces the Practical Disciple," is a satirical portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.<sup>76</sup> Chapters XXXVII and XXXIX continue the satire, using the names Winsome and Egbert. The subject of the conversation among Winsome, Egbert, Frank Goodman, and Charlie Noble is friendship. The ironic speeches finally attain a climax with Charlie Noble's assertion that there is "something wrong about the man who wants help. There is somewhere a defect, a want, in brief, a need, a crying need, somewhere about that man" (232). Charlie admits that it is Mark Winsome's philosophy of friendship that he is espousing. The basic elements of the story remain the same: the characters discuss human friendship (philia) in warm, often sentimental terms; friendship is highly valued by all; ultimately, one character or another attempts to borrow money from another, and the lofty talk about the riches of friendship ends abruptly. As Elizabeth Foster points out, both Frank Goodman and Charles Arnold Noble are "fraudulent" and "spurious."<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Foster, pp. lxxiii-lxxv.

<sup>77</sup> Foster, p. lxxii.

The various meanings are complicated in The Confidence-Man, but it must be asserted, nevertheless, that charity, as R. W. B. Lewis notes, is "the emergent theme."<sup>78</sup> Using the Pauline passage on charity in I Corinthians as an epigraph, Melville organizes his novel very much in the way that a composer organizes a musical composition of theme and variations. Melville returns to his central theme again and again through the frequent use of the word charity and cognate words; through word-play and allusion; and through parabolic stories, which all share a common caritas theme.

The conceptual variations express the multiple facets of caritas. The convenient tripartite division developed by the Greeks is, of course, valid because it conforms to human experience. The tripartite division of caritas into eros, philia, and agape is used here as a device to explicate the caritas theme in The Confidence-Man. It is also a means of examining the contention of some critics that Melville's theme of charity is caritas in the Christian sense of the word.

Eros, a sub-theme of caritas, appears in the novel only in the most peripheral way. The Confidence-Man, in common with nearly all of Melville's works, presents an almost entirely masculine world. Sexual love (eros) is almost totally absent from the novel. The story about Goneril and her unfortunate husband who is mortified by her "mysterious

<sup>78</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, Trials of the Word, p. 63.

touchings" of handsome young men contains erotic elements. the probable double-entendres have sexual connotations. It is a portrait of the darker side of eros. Goneril (Greek goneus means "begetter") may be understood as a generic name for woman or mother. She is described in inhumanly ugly terms, and her actions seem to be motivated as much by malice and perversity as by human passion. It may be added here that The Confidence-Man is also devoid, apparently, of the ambiguous male relationships found in Melville's preceding novels.

The philia sub-theme seems to be dominant over eros and agape. Although the general caritas theme underlines all of the interpolated stories, philia emerges clearly in the Charlemont and China Aster stories, the Indian-hater story, the "Boon Companions" segment involving Goodman and Noble, and the subsequent segment which presents the probable satirical portrait of Emerson and Thoreau. Of course, the continual mention of the words confidence and trust may also be related to the philia theme. The Confidence Man, in his various masks, uses friendship as a ploy to dupe his victims.

The sub-theme of agape is more difficult to discover in The Confidence-Man. Agape does not appear explicitly in the novel in the sense of self-giving love inspired through the divine grace of God, as it is broadly defined by Christian

theologians. In Chapters XXI through XXIV, the Missouri Bachelor, Pitch, makes speeches which are curiously theological in tone: "St. Augustine on Original Sin is my textbook" (142). He moralizes with the Herb Doctor: "You are the moderate man, the invaluable understrapper of the wicked man. You, the moderate man, may be used for wrong, but are useless for right" (127). Pitch is the only character in the novel who sees through the Confidence Man's guise, and, perhaps, he is the only one who may perceive that all the guises really conceal one person. He says, "You are another of them [speaking to the cosmopolitan]. Somehow I meet with the most extraordinary metaphysical scamps to-day. Sort of visitation of them. And yet that Herb-doctor Diddler somehow takes off the raw edge of the Diddlers that come after him" (155). The cosmopolitan inquires, "Herb-doctor, who is he?" Pitch replies, "Like you--another of them" (155). On the surface, Pitch seems to be the misanthrope, but he perceives that the cosmopolitan is actually the misanthrope.

It is in such a manner that Melville thoroughly explores the satiric possibilities of "benevolence" and "charity" in The Confidence-Man, and his reading in Tucker and in the newspapers of the period apparently supplied him with much of his material.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ISOLATION-CARITAS POLARITY

Polar themes, working in contrapuntal interaction, invariably mark the fiction of Herman Melville. Ralph Gabriel is only one of many who direct attention to the novelist's use of polarity in his fiction. Gabriel writes, "The theme of dualities in unities runs through most of his writings. His method was to state problems through juxtaposing opposites with the understanding that the opposites were somehow part of the same circle, one."<sup>1</sup> Richard Chase and Elizabeth Foster point out this characteristic, as earlier noted (see p. 16); R. E. Watters devotes a pair of articles to Melville's contrasting themes of "isolatoes" and "sociality"; Edwin T. Bowden traces the polar themes of human isolation and human love in Moby-Dick (see p. 18); Charles Feidelson compares Melville with Emerson, who was also deeply concerned with the concept of polarity; and Scott Donaldson examines polar themes in the short fiction.<sup>2</sup> Feidelson writes, "Emerson

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Henry Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought, 2nd ed. (New York: The Ronald Press, 1956), p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> See R. E. Watters, "Melville's 'Isolatoes,'" PMLA, 60 (1945), 1138-48; and "Melville's 'Sociality,'" American Literature, 17 (1945), 33-49; Charles Feidelson, Jr., Symbolism and American Literature (1953; rpt. Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1959), pp. 119-61; and Scott Donaldson, "The Dark Truth of The Piazza Tales," PMLA, 85 (1970), 1084.

could never feel the potential disunity of thought, word, and object as a tragic dilemma: this was Melville's discovery."<sup>3</sup> Further, "the world of contradictions, which he regarded as 'secondary' became the primary fact of Melville's experience."<sup>4</sup> The same critic believes that the "tension" in Melville's works "comes [from] his awareness of universal paradox, his sense that 'opposite or discordant qualities' are equally as real as the power of reconciliation."<sup>5</sup>

Several writers allude to the concept of polarity in their consideration of Melville and transcendentalism. Herbert W. Schneider devotes an entire chapter to Melville in A History of American Philosophy. According to Schneider, Melville's "chief transcendental insight consisted precisely in his realization that absolute and relative standards are necessary to each other, neither being intelligible in itself," although he insists that Melville "had only contempt for thinkers like Emerson" who believe in compensations and "correspondences."<sup>6</sup> In a study of Melville and Emersonian transcendentalism, Barbara Blansett states that the novelist made a transition from transcendentalist to anti-transcendentalist in the period between Mardi and Pierre,

<sup>3</sup> Feidelson, p. 160.

<sup>4</sup> Feidelson, p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> Feidelson, p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert W. Schneider, A History of American Philosophy, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), p. 257.



1849-1852. She interprets Pierre the man as a transcendentalist but the novel Pierre as an "indictment of transcendentalism."<sup>7</sup> She remarks that "one of the qualities Melville found unforgivable in the transcendentalists was their cheerful lack of misgivings--he had many misgivings himself, especially concerning Emerson's theory of 'Compensation.'"<sup>8</sup> Yet, Melville almost echoes Emerson in his view of the duality of the universe. Another study of Melville and transcendentalism relies heavily upon Emerson's writings in relating the novelist and his first six novels to the thought of Emerson, especially as expressed in the latter's "The American Scholar" and "Compensation." In both essays, the concept of polarity is asserted as a universal attribute. J. B. Williams states that Emerson, "in addition to prophesying the emergence of a literary giant from the primitive forces of nature . . . described the polarity which would typify his [Melville's] art."<sup>9</sup> "For Melville," writes Williams, "the 'great principle of Undulation' was central to his art," and he quotes from "The American Scholar," in which Emerson describes "the great principle of Undulation in nature, that shows itself in the inspiring and expiring of

<sup>7</sup> Barbara R. N. Blansett, "Melville and Emersonian Transcendentalism," Diss. The Univ. of Texas, 1963, pp. 153-187.

<sup>8</sup> Blansett, pp. 115-16.

<sup>9</sup> J. B. Williams, "The Impact of Transcendentalism on the Novels of Herman Melville," Diss. Univ. of Southern California, 1965, p. 4.

the breath; in desire and satiety; in the ebb and flow of the sea; in day and night; in heat and cold; and, as yet more deeply ingrained in every atom and every fluid, is known to us under the name of Polarity,--these 'fits of easy transmission and reflection,' as Newton called them, are the law of nature because they are the law of spirit. ("The American Scholar," p. 54)."<sup>10</sup> In his concern to link Melville and transcendentalism, Williams also suggests the possible influence of the German transcendental philosophers on Melville's writing: "Furthermore, Hegel's conception of an evolutionary progression from initial idea through contrasting parts toward wholeness corresponds to Emerson's idea of polarity, or dualism in nature, in which the mind grows by resolving contradictory qualities into a synthesis or total view of nature." In his first novel, Typee, "Melville provides a structure of unreconciled contrasts of civilized and primitive man that are parallel to the first step in Emerson's doctrine of polarity."<sup>11</sup> Williams also refers to Emerson's essay "Compensation," which discusses polarity: "Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the

<sup>10</sup> Williams, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, p. 71 and p. 73.

inspiration and expiration of plants and animals; in the animal body; in the systole and diastole of the heart; in the undulations of fluids and of sound; in the centrifugal and centripetal gravity; in electricity, galvanism and chemical affinity."<sup>12</sup>

According to Williams, "Melville's sense of the polarity in human nature is suggested by the contrast between Fayaway and Kory-Kory" in Typee.<sup>13</sup> Williams, as opposed to Barbara Blansett, names "Benito Cereno" rather than Moby-Dick as the last of the transcendental works. He believes that "Benito Cereno and Babo represent polarities in human nature."<sup>14</sup> In their respective discussions of Melville and transcendentalism, in which both single out Melville's use of polarities, neither Blansett nor Williams considers The Confidence-Man as a work embodying polarities. While Blansett ignores The Confidence-Man altogether, Williams believes that its "unrelieved pessimism . . . indicates Melville's failure to detach himself from his work, to see his subject whole in terms of moral alternatives held in delicate balance by an aesthetically satisfying structure."<sup>15</sup> The novel "does not

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Williams, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, p. 236.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, p. 243.

allow for the existence of a positive value. . . . [It is an example of the] anti-transcendental fiction . . . [which Melville wrote in his] period of decline from 1852 to 1857."<sup>16</sup>

While these two writers ignore the polarities present in Melville's last full-length work, others note several examples of polar themes in it. John Cawelti draws attention to the "antitheses" of confidence-suspicion, isolation-sociability, love-hate, and philanthropy-misanthropy" in the Noble-Goodman section.<sup>17</sup> In Colonel John Moredock, the Indian-hater, he sees "an examination of the love-hate polarity, illustrating the growth of hate out of love, and then the co-existence of the two in the same personality."<sup>18</sup> Charles Feidelson believes that Melville's *Confidence-Man* suggests a "modus vivendi [in] the instinctive repudiation of 'consistency.'" Since life is inconsistent, "Confidence is the process of living these contradictions."<sup>19</sup>

The Confidence-Man may represent one part of a descending curve in Melville's works of the 1850's insofar as pessimistic literature is concerned. "Bartleby the Scrivener," "The Encantadas," The Piazza Tales--all written between

<sup>16</sup> Williams, p. 244 and p. 245.

<sup>17</sup> John Cawelti, "Some Notes on the Structure of The Confidence-Man," American Literature, 29 (1957), 286.

<sup>18</sup> Cawelti, p. 286.

<sup>19</sup> Feidelson, p. 210.

Moby-Dick and The Confidence-Man--present a bleakly negative view of human possibilities. Leon Seltzer writes that "the fiction succeeding Moby-Dick . . . moved steadily toward unbelief about the whole notion of ethical progression. In conscientiously giving himself up to his truer but bleaker vision, Melville was obliged to give up his audience as well. The dark pattern of his images and symbols, his hopeless view toward his heroes, and the disastrous conclusions of his plots were all unacceptable to a public full of faith in man's ability to improve himself--and the world--by degrees." Seltzer believes that Melville, "probing the heart of man and the universe . . . , could find cause only for skepticism--both of man's powers to perfect himself and of nature's inherent charity and justice."<sup>20</sup> In his comparative study of Joseph Conrad and Melville, Seltzer believes that "the moral ambiguity of the two writers' most exploratory fiction at last undermines the whole concept of morality, and nothingness itself becomes an almost visible presence--as radiant as the 'heart of darkness.'"<sup>21</sup> Seltzer relies to a great extent on The Confidence-Man in his discussion and considers that novel as exemplary of Melville's "most exploratory fiction." He

<sup>20</sup> Leon F. Seltzer, The Vision of Melville and Conrad: A Comparative Study (Athens, Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1970), p. 115.

<sup>21</sup> Seltzer, p. 117.

concludes that the "moral uneasiness underlying much of Melville's and Conrad's fiction is easily identifiable with their perception of the final arbitrariness of human behavior, of 'the horror' of having to act out one's accidental part in a spiritual vacuum."<sup>22</sup> Kingsley Widmer, taking a similar but more extreme view, labels Melville an "American existential nihilist."<sup>23</sup> Although his study focuses primarily on the short fiction, "Bartleby," "Benito Cereno," and "Billy Budd," Widmer writes that Melville, in The Confidence-Man, "plays, in imitation of the non-existent deity-joker, with meanings and reasonings and sanctities to find being in nothingness."<sup>24</sup> In his consideration of the long novel, he concludes: "The evidence for Melville-as-Nihilist, the only attitude that makes sense of much of his work, seems overwhelming, for those willing to apprehend it, and one cannot easily go beyond it."<sup>25</sup>

For sheer mood of desolation, The Confidence-Man, however, is more than matched by "The Encantadas," especially Sketch Eighth, "Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow." Richard Chase asserts that the stories in "The Encantadas" constitute

<sup>22</sup> Seltzer, pp. 117-18.

<sup>23</sup> Kingsley Widmer, The Ways of Nihilism: A Study of Herman Melville's Short Novels (Los Angeles: The California State Colleges, 1970), p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Widmer, p. 126.

<sup>25</sup> Widmer, p. 126.

a "beautifully conceived and executed series of sketches," yet "the author continually returns by a variety of paths to a single question: at how low a level, in point of vitality, can existence still go on?"<sup>26</sup> "Benito Cereno" graphically portrays cruelty, violence, and death in a manner unrivaled by anything in The Confidence-Man. On a smaller scale, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," is a miniature exercise in polarity: the geniality of the care-free bachelors and the suffering and brutalization of the women factory workers. The latter are described as "blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper."<sup>27</sup> All of the preceding works referred to were published before The Confidence-Man. The novel's reputation as a work of unrelieved pessimism, the bleakest of Melville's writings, may be unwarranted. This estimate may be ascribed to the fact that Melville denies the reader the usual pleasures of landscape description, colorful details of life aboard a Mississippi steamboat, or delineation of quaint characters. The form of the novel develops through a nearly continuous series of conversations

<sup>26</sup> Richard Chase, "Introduction," Selected Tales and Poems by Herman Melville (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. xii.

<sup>27</sup> Herman Melville, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," in Selected Tales and Poems, ed. Richard Chase (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 220.

joined at times with commentary by an invisible narrator and interspersed with four anecdotes--five, if the "Soldier of Fortune" story is included. The reader thus experiences an impression of relentlessness in reading the novel, and this, together with its dense ambiguities, undoubtedly leads the reader to focus more than ordinarily on the darker aspects of the book. To those who are in possession of it, the biographical data indubitably adds to the overall impression. Melville's family was seriously concerned about his mental health at the time he finished the novel, and he was sent on a cruise to the Mediterranean countries and the Holy Land, "delivering the manuscript to the publishers the next morning before his departure."<sup>28</sup> A rather drastic example of the biographically-oriented interpretation is Alexander Cowie's assertion that there are "strains of autobiography in The Confidence-Man" and that "the lover of Melville must be saddened by the transformation it betoken in the author. The playfulness, the boyish enthusiasm, the bold flights of imagination that characterized Melville when he was in health, are . . . largely gone."<sup>29</sup> Cowie is mistaken, perhaps, only

<sup>28</sup> Leon Howard, Herman Melville: A Biography (1951; rpt. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), p. 237.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Cowie, The Rise of the American Novel (New York: American Book Company, 1951), p. 393.



in degree. Richard Chase writes that The Confidence-Man and Clarel are "the two later works which tell us most about Melville's mind."<sup>30</sup>

In a perceptive biographical essay on Melville published in 1938, Willard Thorp writes:

Between 1851 and 1856 Melville apparently passed through the bitterest days of his life. Rejected by critics and public, unable to find an answer to his spiritual problems, he deserted the qualified democracy of his earlier years and became the misanthrope of The Confidence-Man (1857). Yet his mood is not Timonism, as it has been named, for he does not rail at mankind as Shakespeare's Athenian did. He exhibits his sorry examples of fraudulent humanity with a grim detachment that is more harrowing than a diatribe.<sup>31</sup>

Lawrance Thompson blames Melville's problems in his spiritual life for his failure (as far as Thompson is concerned) as an artist: "Melville's range was limited by his inability to achieve some mature and working reconciliation of his confused inner conflicts."<sup>32</sup> "Melville seemed compelled," writes Thompson, "to devote most of his art to the emblematic telling and retelling of his spiritual autobiography, with the main emphasis on disillusionment."<sup>33</sup> Melville's concern with his spiritual life and the effect of that spiritual life on his writings may not necessarily be an artistic limitation.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Chase, Herman Melville: A Critical Study (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), p. xi.

<sup>31</sup> Willard Thorp, ed. Herman Melville: Representative Selections (New York: American Book, 1938), p. cxvi.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Creative Mind, p. 101.

In approaching the work of Melville, Merlin Bowen states:

"It may be questioned whether his books are stories or novels at all, in the customary meaning of those words: certainly plot and character are not their strong points. Nor do all of them have to do with the sea. But there is one thing that all of them have in common, and that is a concern with the problem of self-discovery, self-realization. And here-- however different he was in other respects--Melville was at one with his age, with such men as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and his exact contemporary Whitman." Bowen believes that "if we are to understand him, we must meet him on this, the ground of his principal concern, and survey his work from here."<sup>34</sup> He sees in all of Melville's major works the encounter of "the single individual against the universe," but he makes an exception of the "heroless Confidence-Man."<sup>35</sup> The Confidence-Man, it is true, may not have a "hero" in the commonly accepted sense, but the dominance of the isolation theme in the first half of the book is surely emblematic of Man, if not the single individual, against the universe. For Bowen, the concern of Melville for the "concept of selfhood . . . helped to determine his subject matter, his imagery,

<sup>34</sup> Merlin Bowen, The Long Encounter (1960; rpt. Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1963), p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Bowen, p. 3.

his view of character, the shape of his narratives, and his at times equivocal attitude toward his material."<sup>36</sup>

Conceptual polarities in literature can be seen as a reflection of the writer's "equivocal attitude toward his material." Bowen says as much when he writes: "Reality wears always for him, in the most light-hearted as in the bitterest of his books, the double aspect of bright and dark." He continues, "But this is not to say that Melville sees the dark and bright in equal balance. If we are to judge by the quality of his imagery, his treatment of characters, the outcome of his plots, and the explicit comment of his narrators, it is clear that the dark far outweighs the bright. Still, the two compose, for the judicious viewer, a single picture."<sup>37</sup>

The dark and the bright relates to the "familiar dualism of the Platonic-Christian tradition [which] underlies, it is true, nearly everything that Melville wrote." Salvation for Melville, according to Bowen, "will lie not in purification by the exclusion of a large part of life but in wholeness approached through a generous inclusiveness; it will consist not in an unconditional surrender of body to soul, but in a development and balance of the powers of heart and head."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Bowen, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Bowen, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Bowen, pp. 22-23.

This balance was evident in Melville's 1851 masterpiece, Moby-Dick. Howard P. Vincent remarks about that novel: "Ishmael learned the law of aloneness and the law of companionship, the psychological duality."<sup>39</sup> He traces the theme of man's isolation back to the crucifixion of Jesus and Buddha's "lonely wanderings across India." He notes that with the Renaissance, "the split between the individual and his society--and the urgent necessity for their union--becomes increasingly apparent."<sup>40</sup> In Moby-Dick, the "Right Whale thus stands for the concept of the Social, the Sperm Whale for the Individual--a polarity central to American history."<sup>41</sup> Merlin Bowen declares that that which "returned Melville again and again to this concept of head and heart... was his sense of an inescapable division within the soul itself--a duality within a duality. . . . Man is pulled two ways, not merely between good and evil but between two antithetical goods, each a necessary part of his very nature."<sup>42</sup>

In The Confidence-Man, Melville continues the head and heart concept which is basic to so much of American fiction. This double aspect is less clear in his last novel, perhaps because of its unusually mordant humor and ironic tone.

<sup>39</sup> Howard P. Vincent, The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 390.

<sup>40</sup> Vincent, p. 60.

<sup>41</sup> Vincent, p. 251.

<sup>42</sup> Bowen, p. 24.

An apprehension of the thematic polarities in The Confidence-Man enables the reader to understand that the novel is not a sport--totally unlike all that has gone before; but a novel which embodies concerns pivotal to all of Melville's work. Further, through apprehension of the isolation-caritas polarity in the novel, the reader may discover a more balanced structure and thematic content than most critics are inclined to grant. Just as Melville utilized polar themes in all of his earlier work, so he continued in The Confidence-Man to balance one aspect over against another. A separate examination of the themes of isolation and caritas in the preceding two chapters reveals that the first half of the novel is heavily weighted with the theme of isolation while the last half of the novel focuses more heavily on the caritas theme. Superficially, the polarity seems to be that of confidence-distrust, but this interpretation does not take into account the repletion of isolation imagery which connotes much more than human distrust, nor does it take into account the considerable amount of word-play on confidence, the clear announcement of the caritas theme in the scriptural quotation at the beginning of the book, and the extraordinarily full use of a theme and variations technique in the author's pondering over the multiple aspects of caritas.

Henry Murray remarks in his introduction to Pierre: "It would be well if critics were protected from the mistake of dealing with Melville's thought on a rational level as if he had arrived at his conclusions by inductions after an impartial survey of the universe; and from the mistake of supposing that Melville was searching for Truth, as science defines it, and that his tragedy, therefore, was an intellectual one." These remarks may apply equally to The Confidence-Man. He continues: "A man in his position, who is incapable of willing his way out of inner discord, is likely to find the unsolvable problems of traditional philosophy irresistibly alluring."<sup>43</sup> His "inner discord" is characteristically expressed through a fiction structured in contrarities. R.W. B. Lewis points out that "Melville's statement of the rending forces that beset his imagination would find expression [after the publication of The Confidence-Man] only in lyric and narrative poetry until thirty years later when he began the novella Billy Budd."<sup>44</sup>

As a counterpart to Murray's statement, Merlin Bowen writes, "to say he was not a philosopher is not to condescend

<sup>43</sup> Henry A. Murray, "Introduction," Pierre: or The Ambiguities by Herman Melville (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), p. xvii.

<sup>44</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, Trials of the Word (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965), p. 61.

to him (an impertinence of which more than one aspiring critic has been guilty) nor in any way to deny the seriousness and importance of his ideas. The ideas are there as part of the very substance of his art. But any attempt to fix and systematize them ends only in a weakening of one's sense of the dynamic complexity of Melville's attitude toward life, of his refusal of all static positions, and his acceptance (as Charles Feidelson, Jr., has so well put it) of 'the problematic, the inconclusive, and the contradictory' and the true and only face of experience."<sup>45</sup>

Robert Penn Warren also discusses polarity in Melville. He writes that the "deep divisions of Melville's inner life, from the struggle between his natural skepticism and his yearning for religious certitude, to his sexual tensions [all] . . . found expression in [his] previous work."<sup>46</sup>

The frequently quoted tortoise section from Sketch Second of "The Encantadas" expresses symbolically Herman Melville's polar view of man's experience: "Even the tortoise, dark and melancholy as it is upon the back, still possesses a bright side." And, he directs his fellow man:

<sup>45</sup> Merlin Bowen, The Long Encounter (Chicago: Phoenix Books, The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Penn Warren, "Introduction," Selected Poems of Herman Melville (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 9.

"Enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can, but be honest, and don't deny the black. Neither should he who cannot turn the tortoise from its natural position so as to hide the darker and expose his livelier aspect, like a great October pumpkin in the sun, for that cause declare the creature to be one total inky blot. The tortoise is both black and bright."<sup>47</sup>

Edward H. Rosenberry's study, Melville and the Comic Spirit, is an attempt to draw attention once again to Melville's bright side. "An unnatural cleavage has developed," claims Rosenberry, "between that merry figure and the tragic titan that has reached mythic proportions in modern criticism."<sup>48</sup> Melville, himself, was aware of, even relished, the doubleness of his own nature. Rosenberry calls attention to Melville's remark about a photograph of himself: "What the deuce makes him look so serious, I wonder. I thought he was of a gay and frolicsome nature. Explain the inconsistency, or I shall begin to suspect your venerable friend [Melville] of being a two-faced old fellow and not to be trusted."<sup>49</sup> As concerned as Rosenberry is to rehabilitate Melville as a comic artist, he sees very little that is bright in The Confidence-Man. His chapter on the novel is entitled "The End of the

<sup>47</sup> Herman Melville, "The Encantadas," Billy Budd and Other Tales (New York: The New American Library, 1961), p. 238.

<sup>48</sup> Edward H. Rosenberry, Melville and the Comic Spirit (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1955), p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted from Journal up the Straits in Rosenberry, p.4.



Comedy."<sup>50</sup> In the introduction to his book he suggests that The Confidence-Man marks the "death of the comic spirit."<sup>51</sup>

If the novel is to be seen as a continuation of Melville's characteristic themes, rather than a final descent into nihilistic despair, then the "bright side," if it exists, must be taken into account. Merton M. Sealts, Jr., encourages a more balanced view of the novel in his essay on Melville's "geniality." For Sealts, Melville's use of the term "deserves careful attention, for it reveals one persistent strain of sensibility linking his years at sea, his career as an author, and the retrospective musings of his late private writing."<sup>52</sup> Geniality, for Melville, according to Sealts, was "to be affable, comradely, even fraternal, enjoying the good drinking and good living that foster good feeling and good talk."<sup>53</sup> Yet, he was also aware of the negative side of geniality, that is, the possibility that it implies "a denial of the responsibilities and grimmer realities of mature life." This "double evaluation" is present in The Confidence-Man, where the geniality is often "spurious."<sup>54</sup> The cosmopolitan in

<sup>50</sup> Rosenberry, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Rosenberry, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Merton M. Sealts, Jr., "Melville's 'Geniality,'" in Essays in American and English Literature (Athens, Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1967), p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Sealts, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Sealts, pp. 7, 8.

the novel remarks that "one must either love man or hate him, as in religion one must either believe or disbelieve." In everyday affairs, "a man must be altogether genial or else turn not merely suspicious but a thoroughgoing misanthrope."<sup>55</sup> Sealts declares that many critics write off the book as "the despairing outcry of a confirmed misanthrope--thus ascribing to Melville himself the all-or-none philosophy put forth in turn by such dubious speakers as Frank Goodman and Charlie Noble. But it is clear from Melville's writing after The Confidence-Man that he neither renounced mankind nor forswore geniality, despite the obvious reservations he had expressed there about both."<sup>56</sup> The error stems from identifying Melville with the cosmopolitan, although by the end of the book the cosmopolitan "is revealed as probable surrogate for Satan." The true Melvillean speaker, according to Sealts, is the anonymous "person of less genius than grotesqueness" (183). He illustrates how a "man of disposition ungovernably good-natured might still familiarly associate with men, though, at the same time, he believed the greater part of men false-hearted--accounting society so sweet a thing that even the spurious sort was better than none at all" (184). The cosmopolitan, "with a

<sup>55</sup> Sealts, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> Sealts, p. 18.

slight fidget," remarks that it is a "most singular theory, indeed . . . a most slanderous thought" (184). The "person of less genius than grotesqueness," according to Sealts, "bears a distinct family resemblance to other Melvilleian [sic] characters . . . minor figures often described as eccentric who turn up in works from Mardi to Billy Budd as spokesmen for points of view Melville preferred not to espouse directly through flat authorial comment."<sup>57</sup> In his later years, Melville "never ceased to value good fellowship and good feeling, in the company of a few convivial intimates or else in memories of the past." He was "at bottom no more a misanthrope than a philanthropist, or no less; he was plainly something of both." Sealts declares, "There is nothing in The Confidence-Man to align Melville himself with these spurious figures [Frank Goodman and Charlie Noble] or with their dubious propositions on either side of the argument."<sup>58</sup>

John Cawelti takes a similar point of view: "In Melville's world the philanthropist is bound to be surly and isolated from other men, for his love of his fellows makes his expectations too high. Being cut off from society, however, he is cut off from life. On the other hand, the

<sup>57</sup> Sealts, p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> Sealts, pp. 22, 23.

misanthrope, hating his fellows, can at least accept them and be sociable." Cawelti concludes that "Melville, himself, feels that he has passed through the state of surly philanthropy and has reached a kind of passive acceptance of things in the role of the genial misanthrope, that man described by the cosmopolitan's unnamed friend in the parable of the wine-drinker."<sup>59</sup>

Admittedly, much of the difficulty in interpreting The Confidence-Man is due to Melville's purposeful indirectness and playfulness, as well as the modern tendency to see him as a profoundly tragic, if not nihilistic, writer. The Confidence-Man, however, belongs to a traditional literary genre--the satirical novel--that has always given rise to confused readings. Ian Watt notes the problem that irony creates: "Irony in its extended sense expresses a deep awareness of the contradictions and incongruities that beset man in this vale of tears, an awareness which is manifested in the text's purposeful susceptibility to contradictory interpretations."<sup>60</sup> Melville was certainly sensitive to the contradictions in human experience, and it is unlikely that he would forswear this sensitivity in The Confidence-Man in spite of the depressed state of mind that afflicted him in the

<sup>59</sup> John Cawelti, "Some Notes on the Structure of The Confidence-Man," American Literature, 29 (1957), 286-87.

<sup>60</sup> Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), p. 126.

mid-1850's. As Sealts points out, "skepticism is not cynicism, and a nonbeliever in 'confidence' and 'progress' who disliked mankind in the mass could nevertheless remain a realist, a democrat, and a confirmed lover of 'good living, good drinking, good feeling, and good talk.'"<sup>61</sup>

The polarity of isolation-caritas, as it appears in The Confidence-Man, saves the novel from being a wholly despairing view of man and his world. Merlin Bowen interprets the China Aster parable to mean that he "who wholly commits himself into the hands of either God or man courts the sad fate of China Aster. . . . The implication is clear that both the bright view and its opposite are to be heeded."<sup>62</sup>

Edward Rosenberry seeks to counteract the excessive emphasis on the darker side of Melville and his work, but he sees the lighter side of The Confidence-Man only insofar as it seems to lie in the tradition of nineteenth century frontier humor. On the other hand, Merton Sealts draws upon The Confidence-Man for the bulk of his documentation in his essay on Melville's "geniality."

The novel is full of talk about charity, much of it heavily ironic talk; nonetheless, the identification of the author with the various guises of the Confidence Man who speaks ironically of charity necessarily means that one must also identify the author with the Satanic. Melville invariably uses Satanic imagery in connection with the figure of

<sup>61</sup> Sealts, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> Bowen, pp. 62-63.

the Confidence Man. However, both Pitch, the Missouri Bachelor, and the anonymous character in the fable would seem to be the real spokesmen for Melville's views. One may conclude then that charity was still affirmed as a life-sustaining virtue by Melville.<sup>63</sup> To ignore this is to ignore the contrapuntal structure of the book with its isolation-caritas theme weaving and inter-weaving throughout the novel as a whole.

<sup>63</sup> Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, ed. Elizabeth S. Foster (New York: Hendricks House, 1954), p. 184.

## CHAPTER V

### MELVILLE AND THE CONVICTION OF SOLIDARITY

The Confidence-Man, initially neglected and long considered a failure, holds an extra-literary dramatic interest. Herman Melville's career as a writer drew to a close upon its publication in 1857. Though still a young man of thirty-six, he attempted no more full-length novels during the thirty-four years remaining in his life. What little he published--he turned to poetry--he published privately. The novella Billy Budd was discovered after his death and published thirty-three years later. Far from being considered the crown of his literary career, The Confidence-Man is generally considered sui generis.

An examination of the novel's themes reveals the emergence of two, in particular: isolation and caritas. They constitute a thematic polarity inasmuch as the former is a negative concept and the latter is affirmative. Isolation connotes withdrawal, escape, aloneness, passivity. Caritas connotes life within the human community, confrontation with reality, compassion. Isolation may express distrust of mankind, even misanthropy; caritas (the Latin word is used for its greater breadth of connotation than the English "charity") usually expresses a delight in the community of man, an

appreciation of shared friendship, a deep concern of man for all men.

Although the novel begins with a figure bearing the message of caritas from Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, the atmosphere of the first half of the book is predominantly that of isolation, as expressed through imagery, allusion, and vocabulary. The isolation theme breaks off, however, almost exactly in the middle of the work (Chapter XXIII) with the introduction of Pitch, the Missouri Bachelor, the single affirmative character in The Confidence-Man.

The bitter satire continues all through the novel, but the preceding pages clearly demonstrate Melville's overwhelming concern with the ideas of caritas. "All the short stories," according to Elizabeth Foster, "are irradiated by Melville's pity for man," and she points out that The Confidence-Man was written during the same period. In the latter work, "his choice of little men for characters is the outward sign, neither of mental decline from concern with the grand to concern with the petty, nor of misanthropy, but of an immense compassion."<sup>1</sup> If Pitch is meant to be a spokesman for the author, he expresses a pessimistic realism. Pitch knows that man, being flawed, will often disappoint him, yet man must be granted trust, though the price to pay is vulnerability.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth S. Foster, ed., The Confidence-Man by Herman Melville (New York: Hendricks House, 1954), p. xc.



Joseph Conrad, a writer often linked with Melville, voices their mutual concern for the human community. In his preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, he writes:

The artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition--and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks . . . to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation--and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity--the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.

The Confidence-Man reveals bitterness close to despair, but the latter half of the novel may describe a partial ascent. Certainly, Melville's tragic view of man does not encompass the Christian understanding of caritas as the crowning theological virtue infused into the soul of man by God's sanctifying grace, but he shares with Conrad the "latent feeling of fellowship with all creation . . . the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity . . . which binds together all humanity."<sup>2</sup> This conviction did not desert him during the writing of the last novel of his career. The polarity of isolation-caritas creates a tension, a nexus of themes: the desire to withdraw from a society in which as "the wolves are

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the Narcissus (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1924), p. xii.

killed off, the foxes increase" (2); and, yet, the will and the hope to endure, to account "society so sweet a thing that even the spurious sort was better than none at all" (184). After all, "Something further may follow of this Masquerade" (286).

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