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TOWARD AN ETHIC OF FAILURE IN THREE NOVELS BY HERMAN MELVILLE

by

ELINORE FAUSTINO

Under the Direction of Mark Noble

ABSTRACT

Herman Melville's final novel *The Confidence-Man* destabilizes conventional Western models of ethical behavior, particularly Kantian notions of moral agency, by exposing and challenging their basis in rationality and a progressivist model of history. *The Confidence-Man* shows rationality to be nothing more than one way, among many other possible ways, that human beings attempt to fix the world in their understanding and justify their moral choices. I use these insights from *The Confidence-Man* to illuminate Melville's opposition to the missionaries' work of civilizing and Christianizing the South Seas islanders in his earlier travelogues. In *Typee*, his first novel, Melville demonstrates that layers of existence—in fact, real human lives—are denied when the story of human relations is framed as a narrative of progress. This thesis concludes by proposing that Melville reworks the idea of failure as a potential strategy against the totalizing narrative of advancing rationalism.

INDEX WORDS: Herman Melville, *Typee*, *Pierre*, *The Confidence-Man*, Ethics, Morality, Charity, Rationalism, Civilization, Conversion, Reform, Missionaries, Failure

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1 Introduction

The novels of Herman Melville demonstrate a remarkable preoccupation with narrative constructs that claim to represent identity and with the limits of what can be known about self and other. Beginning with Melville's first publication, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), we see the signs of a profound unease on the author's part with regard to the capacity of literature to express some truth about identity. This concern is amplified within this fictionalized account of Melville's stay on the Polynesian island of Nuku Hiva, as it describes a group of people, the Typees, who are known to the vast majority of Melville's readers only through textual documentation—certainly not through any direct contact. *Typee*'s borrowings from travel literature and missionary pamphlets at once articulate the knowledge of the non-Western "savage" that circulated among Melville's contemporaries and challenge the assumptions that shaped these perceptions. *Typee* is a key text that provides a simplified exposition of the larger problems of representation that become more and more complex as one follows the movement of Melville's literary output.

The novels and short stories of the 1850s expand Melville's inquiry into the limits of representation. The texts of this period, most notably *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852), "Benito Cereno" (1855), and *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), reveal human knowledge and understanding—indeed the potentiality of meaning—to be nothing more than a culturally enforced system for reading and categorizing what Wai Chee Dimock has termed the "layer upon layer of imposition and supposition" (406) that is available to consciousness. The "Etymology" and "Extracts" sections that precede the main narrative of *Moby-Dick*, for instance, seem to offer an abundance of information—facts about the whale,

along with observations and interpretations carefully amassed by the narrator. In the end, however, the reader is made to notice that this profusion of knowledge ultimately fails to unlock the significance of the whale itself. Though Ahab urges one to "strike through the mask" (140)—to puncture the surface and get at the truth behind appearances—he nonetheless introduces Melville's reader to the suspicion that beneath the layers of meaning, one finds, after all, nothing.

Pierre, Melville's unorthodox take on the domestic novel, enacts a bizarre family drama and love triangle as a means of depicting as inessential those labels, masks, and names typically used to classify human relations. *Pierre* adopts terms that would seem to signify permanent, natural relations—"mother" and "sister," for instance—and complicates the meanings assigned to them, sabotaging, in turn, any easy assumptions we might have about "right" and "wrong" in its treatment of Pierre's resolve to marry his half-sister. In *Pierre*, the terms of familial relations and, subsequently, of moral values are evacuated of the potential for referentiality to any underlying or essential truth.

The Confidence-Man takes this lacuna as its starting point. It takes for granted a lack of truth behind the many facades of its title character and of humanity in general, presenting a world that is thoroughly artificial. It seems that at some point between the writing of *Typee* and the novels of the late 1850s, the object of Melville's interrogation shifts from issues of epistemology to those of morality, and it is possible to distinguish the set of questions being raised in *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* from those raised within the travelogues of the decade prior. The narrator of *Pierre*, for one, demonstrates an acute awareness of a fundamental divide between the issues that trouble the novel's protagonist and the questions posed by a priest to which he is compared: "with the priest it was a matter, whether certain bodiless thoughts of his were true or not true; but with Pierre it was a question whether certain vital acts of his were right

or wrong" (205). Melville's novels up to and including *Moby-Dick* seem, like the priest, preoccupied with the question, Is there truth behind appearances?—whereas *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* rather dispense with this epistemological question and replace it with an ethical question. These final novels presuppose a universe that either contains no truth or allows no possibility of accessing any truth behind appearances, and from here they probe what the impossibility of knowing truth might mean for conceptions of human agency and moral values.

My study examines *Typee*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence-Man*, tracking the unfolding of a sustained, though not always consistent, interrogation of the complex interplay of morality, the interpretation of surfaces, and the construction of power in Melville's writing. Essaying to clarify Melville's hypotheses regarding the ethical implications of a universe emptied of truth, I begin with a discussion of *The Confidence-Man*. Chronologically the last of Melville's novels, it in many ways instructs on how to read the earlier texts, providing a lens through which the author's findings in his earlier works may be brought into greater focus. I suggest that *The Confidence-Man* theorizes many of the experiential discoveries of the narrator of *Typee* with regard to the ethical questions that both novels raise. I demonstrate, for instance, the ways in which *The Confidence-Man* critiques the theoretical assumptions upon which are founded conventional models of benevolence, such as those described in *Typee*; it explains what in the earlier text is simply felt as a vague discomfort on the part of Tommo, the narrator, as he observes the modes of Western philanthropy at work in the Marquesas. It is therefore important to begin by clarifying just what these assumptions entail and to identify the questions raised by Melville as a challenge to them.

Following this discussion, I describe the manner in which Melville opens up his examination of the triangulated relation of ethics, reading, and power in *Typee*. *The Confidence-*

Man teaches us to see in Melville's first novel the problems inherent in substituting text for truth; it orients us towards a richer understanding of *Typee* by revealing the novel's opposition to traditional modes of representation and, more importantly, the injustices that these literary artifices help to sustain—whether directly or indirectly. I argue, for example, that *Typee* resists the bias towards the chronological mapping of cultures, the habit of describing the history of human relations along a trajectory of progress (from savagery to civilization), and the custom of writing about non-Western cultures as falling somewhere behind civilization along this line. With this reading, I hope to contribute to a recognition of the ways in which Melville, from the beginning of his writing career, yearned to see literature as a vehicle for provoking a dialogue about the implications of representational norms. Melville shows that layers of existence—in fact, real human lives—are denied when the story of human relations is framed as a narrative of progress.

For all its concern with scrutinizing the meaning of morality within this framework, *The Confidence-Man* finally ironizes the possibility of real benevolence. It not only insists upon the absence of truth, it also turns the construction of any ethical program into a joke—laughing, it seems, in the face of a profound failure. In order to locate in Melville's writings a viable alternative to this nihilistic perspective, I turn to *Pierre*. In the final section of my paper, I discuss the ways in which Melville's penultimate novel presents not a means of avoiding moral failure, but rather a way of understanding failure differently. Targeting the domestic novel in particular, *Pierre* uncovers the imperialistic tendencies of Western narrative practices and explores possible modes of resistance and a different way of restoring moral agency. It presents failure as a moral option, a means of refusing to participate in the machinations of empire and the enforcement of sanctioned truth. So much of *Pierre*, ironically a novel about a novelist, rails

against novel-writing because of the way it cleans up the contingencies of individuals' lives and requires them to fit into an overarching pattern or system. Combined with the insights gained from *The Confidence-Man* and *Typee*, my reading of *Pierre* suggests that what matters for Melville is not merely the artificiality of these narrative constructs, but rather the manner in which they help to sustain the unjust treatment of those who fall outside of the prevailing norm. *Pierre* brings to the fore its own insufficiency at fulfilling its readers' expectations and, in doing so, makes a claim for the value of choosing failure in the face of the totalizing mechanism of a progressivist history.

2 Reading and ethics in *The Confidence-Man*

The Confidence-Man is composed of a number of episodes, all of which may be interpreted as the various encounters of one trickster with the other passengers on board the riverboat Fidèle. Using an array of disguises, the trickster mingles among the "multiform pilgrim species" (17) traveling along the Mississippi, soliciting the charity—and just as often provoking the ire—of his accidental companions. As he trots out one bogus exterior after another, the con-man makes it impossible to ascertain whether or not any of these facades reveals his true self, or whether there is anything at all resembling our common notion of a fixed identity beneath these artifices. For this reason, it is possible to read *The Confidence-Man*, alternatively, as a discontinuous cluster of vignettes, each one self-contained, and each involving a completely different set of personae altogether. The text is replete with clues, however, that support a reading that follows the chicanery of one confidence man, as in the third chapter, in which the con-man, disguised as Black Guinea, describes many of the incarnations he will later take on (21), or the many instances in which a piece of intelligence about one of the benefactors is garnered by the con-man under one disguise only to be used to his advantage later on as he takes on a different persona. Peter Bellis points out, for instance, that the evidence in the text identifies and characterizes a single confidence man; "[b]ut," he writes, "the contexts in which such 'evidence' appears work to undermine rather than sustain interpretive certainty" (550). The fundamental ambiguity of the text with regard to the singularity of the confidence-man's identity bears mentioning as it contributes to a more general point about selfhood that the narrative strives to establish. The con-man may well be Black Guinea, or the gentleman with the mourning weed, or the employee of the Black Rapids Coal Company, or the herb-doctor, or Frank

Goodman—or he may be all of these, one individual assuming these surface transformations in series. In any case, the uncertainty built into his characterization serves to create a disconcerting sense of the unreliability of any outward evidence in substantiating one's identity.

The microcosm of mid-nineteenth-century American society depicted by *The Confidence-Man* is likewise unstable—an ever-shifting world. The fluid Mississippi River provides the volatile and meandering backdrop to the con-man's dialogue with his fellow passengers. The setting is described by the narrator thus:

> As pine, beech, birch, ash, hackmatack, hemlock, spruce, basswood, maple, interweave their foliage in the natural wood, so these varieties of mortals blended their varieties of visage and garb. A Tartar-like picturesqueness; a sort of pagan abandonment and assurance. 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. (17)

The positioning of the novel's operations upon the serpentine waters of the Mississippi accentuates the instability of characterization and setting, which is significant both in terms of the point about the nonessential quality of "visage and garb" that the narrative makes, but also in terms of the possibilities this affords the con-man as he engages his exploits. An exchange between the cosmopolitan and the mystic Mark Winsome reveals, indeed, that a "Mississippi operator" is a term for an "equivocal character" (198)—a synonym for "confidence man." Moreover, the novel shows strangeness to be an important feature of riverboat travel—"at every landing, the huge Fidèle still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or

replaces them with strangers still more strange" (15)—and the confidence man, as much as the narrator, uses it to his advantage. Rick Mitchell's description of the Fidèle is apt: "Constantly in flux as it prepares to land in the next port, and the next one, where it embarks and disembarks passengers, the riverboat is also a liminal space which, in *The Confidence-Man*, is conducive to strange, ephemeral interactions where instability and deception is the norm" (52). As much as its passengers, the boat itself may be mistaken for something other than what it is—according to the narrator, "the Fidèle . . . might at distance have been taken by strangers for some whitewashed fort on a floating isle" (15)—and the con-man avails himself of the facility for dissimulation that such strangeness affords.

The constant loading and unloading of the riverboat's passengers allows for discontinuity in their characterization, and the novel hyperbolizes this notion of the fluidity of identity to such a degree that finally every character may be assumed to be affected. So much of the con-man's energies must be spent in dispelling doubt precisely because doubt is everywhere. We see this, for instance, as the man in gray speaks with the wooden-legged man, who is leery of Black Guinea:

> "Tell me, sir, do you really think that a white could look the negro so? For one, I should call it pretty good acting."
>
> "Not much better than any other man acts."
>
> "How? Does all the world act? Am *I*, for instance, an actor? Is my reverend friend here, too, a performer?"
>
> "Yes, don't you both perform acts? To do, is to act; so all doers are actors." (40)

The reference, of course, is to Shakespeare's lines in *As You Like It*, which are recalled, later on,

by Frank Goodman as he watches his new acquaintance Charlie Noble suddenly drop the pretense of friendliness when asked for money:

> "All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players,
> Who have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts." (Qtd. in *CM* 224)

Playing on the interchangeability of the verbs "to do" and "to act," these characters undermine the notion of any sincere "doing"—all the world acts, because it cannot do anything else. The cosmopolitan says to the misanthrope bachelor, "Life is a pic-nic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character" (139), and later on to the barber, "[D]on't be too sure what I am. You call me *man*, just as the townsfolk called the angels who, in man's form, came to Lot's house; just as the Jew rustics called the devils who, in man's form, haunted the tombs. You can conclude nothing absolute from the human form" (225). Neither physical features nor any other material evidence authenticates the identity of any of the actors on the Fidèle.

As central to the novel as its title character's efforts to convince others of the "transparency" of identity is the work that the novel does to replace this "transparency" with obscurity—what in *Moby-Dick* is represented by the inscrutable "whiteness of the whale." With regard to the truth of identity, the novel trades description or explanation for a series of questions: "What are you? What am I? Nobody knows who anybody is. The data which life furnishes, towards forming a true estimate of any being, are as insufficient to that end as in geometry one side given would be to determine the triangle" (194). When Frank Goodman's appeal to Charlie produces no monetary boon, Charlie's departure shows him "seeming disdainfully to throw off the character he had assumed," leaving Frank to wonder "where exactly

the fictitious character had been dropped, and the real one, if any, resumed" (223-24). Character is something that can be assumed and dropped at will, and a reading of some critical responses to the novel is helpful in developing a sense of the wider significance of this lack of authenticity.

Susan Ryan focuses her examination of the novel's "ambiguities of benevolence" on moments in *The Confidence-Man* in which charitable acts are destabilized precisely through Melville's emphasis on the nonessential quality of surface appearances. The concept and practice of charity is of central importance in the novel, and the trickster's multifarious dealings with the other passengers on the Fidèle invoke an array of definitions for the word. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer's annotations for the opening chapter, for example, point out the ways in which "Melville blurs the New Testament sense of charity (love) into something like the common sense of benevolence or generosity toward the poor" (11). Instances of charity-seeking include Black Guinea's "pitch-penny game" (19), the merchant who spins a tale of sorrow to prevail upon Mr. Roberts to "[draw] from his wallet a bank note" (30), and the importunities of the man in gray on behalf of the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum as well as his proposal of the World's Charity at the London fair, to cite only a few. In fact, the novel proffers so many different manifestations of charity that ultimately it seems the only feature common to all the distinct enactments of the word is the way in which the choice whether or not to engage in a charitable gesture is always contingent upon the potential benefactor's reading of the confidence man.

Charity is thus revealed to have a fraught connection with the problems of reading the world of appearances, as the confidence man elicits the largesse of the other passengers through multiple surfaces of seemingly intelligible identities. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that "Melville takes up these critiques of visual assessment in order to foreground the deceptions of bodies" (37), and Ryan describes the anxieties produced by the potential for dissimulation that

the text presents. According to Ryan, antebellum white Americans "tended to see the intrusion of artifice into their acts of benevolence as troubling, even malignant," suggesting that the "possibility that one might be tricked into aiding the unworthy often occasioned an anxious interrogation of charitable practices" (685). There is much at stake in determining the true identity of a supplicant, since a misreading of a supplicant could potentially turn the tables on those who considered themselves "arbiters of need" (693). In Ryan's formulation, the duplicity of someone like the confidence man, "because it called into question the validity of donors' perceptions and judgments, worked to unsettle the hierarchies structuring benevolent exchange" (692). Thus, within each character solicited by the con-man, the novel makes palpable a "natural struggle between charity and prudence" (*CM* 53), the feeling of being obliged to demand the vouchsafe of "documentary proof, any plain paper" (21) before giving alms—for if a benefactor could be duped into aiding the unworthy, then the management of this exchange would no longer be in his or her power. It falls under the control of the vagrant, the one who possesses the ability to manipulate appearances.

Melville's particular unease with conventional morality is seen to derive from an anxiety that is concomitant with our reading processes. If, as Bellis points out, the body of a beggar such as Guinea is "a *text* whose interpretation will establish its reality as a *body*" (559), then it follows that enacting charity—in the sense of "benevolence or generosity," as well as "tolerance" and "trust," or, more generally, "goodness"—is, in *The Confidence-Man*, completely reliant upon our interpretations of surface appearance. The novel shows that any attempt to answer the question of the practicability of charity—the possibility of doing any real good—must grapple with the potential of misinterpretation.

Elizabeth Renker draws a suggestive parallel between the character of the confidence man and the novel of the same name. She suggests that the two "operate analogously: just as the Confidence-Man's constant changes of identity baffle the perceptions of the other characters, *The Confidence-Man* baffles the reader with a bewildering proliferation of characters and descriptions" (117)—that is, they perform the same sort of work, as the body of the confidence man and the body of the text, in a similar fashion, produce readers. Insofar as we can see that charitable actions and our ability to navigate through textual material are fast entwined, we can also see that both charity and reading have a powerful way of luring us into believing that it is possible to perform a "correct" reading of a text or of another's identity—that in the profusion of data and sense impressions available to us, some underlying truth awaits our recognition. The bait, however, is set only in order to expose how readily we are conned by this fiction.

At several moments, *The Confidence-Man* conducts the reader to a recognition of the textual quality of itself—of itself as a novel—as well as the reader's position *as* the reader of that text. Chapters 14 and 33, in particular, call attention to this relation of reader to text, chiefly by anticipating the reader's objection to the novel's failure to satisfy readerly expectations for the novel with regard to consistency of characterization. "It may be urged," the narrator offers, "that there is nothing a writer of fiction should more carefully see to, as there is nothing a sensible reader will more carefully look for, than that, in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved" (75). In addition, the narrator suggests, the reader looks for realism, exacting a "severe fidelity to real life" and objecting, he imagines, to "[h]ow unreal all this is" (186). One implication that emerges has to do with the common assumption that consistency is a mark of truth—the more consistent a character is, the more we see him as being "realistic," as "telling the truth"—as well as the reciprocal notion, that inconsistency signals untruth. These

equations are inverted in the novel, as the narrator challenges novelistic portrayals that seek to convince readers of their realism by describing characters that are unchanging, whose actions and words always hold together:

> That fiction, where every character can, by reason of its consistency, be comprehended at a glance, either exhibits but sections of character, making them appear for wholes, or else is very untrue to reality; while, on the other hand, that author who draws a character, even though to common view incongruous in its parts, as the flying-squirrel, and, at different periods, as much at variance with itself as the caterpillar is with the butterfly into which it changes, may yet, in so doing, be not false but faithful to facts. (75)

For Melville, the "revelation of human nature on fixed principles" (76) is a lie, and not the merely amusing and mostly irreproachable kind of lie that fiction might be taken to be, but an insidious and, as we shall see, destructively totalizing kind of lie. Ryan's analysis of the system of benevolent exchange, set alongside Melville's critique of representation—and the accountability that he attaches to it—brings to the surface the extent to which the notion of charity in his last novel is imbricated with our readerly expectations and, moreover, with our investment in hierarchies of power within human relations. In calling attention to this process of reading and responding to the text, the novel indicates not just the complexity of the relationship between reader and text—not just the problems of reading—but also the attendant implications when that readerly relationship forms the foundation of a metaphysics of morality.

At bottom, Melville is grappling with the Kantian project of grounding a system of benevolent exchange upon the assumption that truth exists and that we can know it. By pointing out the inescapability of misreading the available "evidence" and mistaking our reading for truth,

Melville complicates this founding assumption. If it is true, as Bellis has argued, that "[b]odies and texts are . . . inseparable, indistinguishable, and equally inconclusive" (559) in the world of *The Confidence-Man*, we are faced with the following question: What does it mean to be good—or, to use the novel's vocabulary, charitable—in a world comprised of surfaces that must be read?

Melville's body of work demonstrates a deep suspicion of Kantian ethics, which places the argument for an *a priori* basis for morality within just such a problematic system of (mis)representation and (mis)reading. For Kant, if ethics is at all possible, it must be derivable from a universal principle—"the *supreme principle of morality*" (5)—meaning that "our knowledge of it is independent of any particular experience." In other words, ethics cannot be based on experience, "for we can have no experience of every possible event"—it can be known "on the basis of reasoning alone" (ix-x). *The Confidence-Man* complicates the basis of this ethical system because reason is revealed in the novel to be just one of many possible (mis)readings that we perform on the world as it appears to us. As Christine Korsgaard explains, for Kant, "the laws of reason are not something we find in the world, but rather something we human beings impose upon the world" (xxiv). Inasmuch as Melville's last published novel expresses a cynicism towards charitable acts, the real thrust is directed at the artifice—rationality—that motivates the enactment of philanthropy. If we impose labels, masks, and names upon the raw material of subjective experience—and I argue below that Melville insists upon not only the reality, but indeed the violence, of this imposition, as early as *Typee*—and if all we have access to are surfaces and appearances, then reason cannot be anything more than another interpretive method or reading process with which we attempt to fix the world in our understanding and then justify our moral choices.

This may go some way towards explaining the joke in *Moby-Dick*, which advocates dispensing altogether with Kant, who is represented as the ponderous whale's head hoisted upon the ship's side along with another head representing John Locke, also a rationalist:

> So, when on one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds for ever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right. (261)

Jokes aside, Melville takes it rather seriously that Kantian ethics applies only insofar as we are rational beings. "In a practical philosophy," writes Kant, "where we have to do not with assuming grounds for what *happens* but rather laws for what *ought to happen* even if it never does, that is, objective practical laws," it is unnecessary to take into account any aspects—for example, pleasure or displeasure—that belong "to an empirical doctrine of the soul." He is concerned only with the "question of objective practical laws and hence of the relation of a will to itself insofar as it determines itself only by reason" (36). In Melville's novels, we detect numerous signals that this rationalist account of moral compulsion is inadequate.

Rather than a direct censure of rationality as such, *The Confidence-Man* achieves its critique of Kant's ethics through a rascally method—an indirect and illogical one, even—that unsettles rationality's bias in favor of objectivity and logical consistency. Already, we have noted the narrator's summary dismissal of the reader's demand for consistency, in his arch commentary on the lack of consistency with regard to human character in reality. According to Mitchell and Snyder, "the narrator cites the non-normative productions of nature as his proof that consistent characterization is nothing more than literary market convention" (57). The novel favors the creation of "duck-billed characters"—illogical and inconsistent figures that express

the complexity and downright unreadability of identity—and argues: "he, who, in view of its inconsistencies, says of human nature . . . that it is past finding out, thereby evinces a better appreciation of it than he who, by always representing it in a clear light, leaves it to be inferred that he clearly knows all about it" (76). Likewise, Charlie rebuffs Frank's entreaties for a loan because, he asserts, there is no consistency in individuals—though his wording contrives to make it seem as though he refuses to grant the loan rather for Frank's sake than his own:

> "Would you, in your present need, be willing to accept a loan from a friend, securing him by a mortgage on your homestead, and do so, knowing that you had no reason to feel satisfied that the mortgage might not eventually be transferred into the hands of a foe? Yet the difference between this man and that man is not so great as the difference between what the same man be to-day and what he may be in days to come. For there is no bent of heart or turn of thought which any man holds by virtue of an unalterable nature or will." (222)

Charlie's report of the misfortunes of China Aster corroborates his opinion that the illusion of consistency in human characterization is not to be trusted. China Aster turns victim through a "friendly loan" (221) from Orchis, as Orchis changes from generous benefactor to merciless usurer, demonstrating what he himself calls "the unstableness and deceitfulness of the human heart" (217).

In *The Confidence-Man*, if anyone could be described as at all objective and consistent, we could only point to those "practical Christians" designated by the Missourian bachelor, which are, of course, machines. The man from the Philosophical Intelligence Office—yet another of the con-man's incarnations—solicits the Missourian, marketing, as he claims, some trustworthy boys and men of whose dependable labor the farmer could avail himself on his fields. The Missourian

proves "a hard case," having "[n]o confidence in boys, no confidence in men, no confidence in nature": "I have confidence in distrust," he declares (113). For the Missourian, the inconsistency of human character renders all individuals unworthy of trust—rascals all, in his view—and therefore he places his confidence instead upon machines:

> "[C]ider-mill, mowing-machine, corn-husker—all faithfully attend to their business. Disinterested, too; no board, no wages; yet doing good all their lives long; shining examples that virtue is its own reward—the only practical Christians I know." (120)

Besides providing a sardonic commentary on the superiority of machines to human beings in terms of providing constant and reliable service, this passage makes it clear that objectivity and consistency, the markers of moral value under a rational philosophy, belong in the realm of machines, not man. As I suggest below in the discussion of *Typee*, Melville often equates the mechanical "virtue" of constancy with the overarching ambition of Christianizing the entire world, which clarifies further why Christians are targeted in this passage. For now, suffice it to say that the Missourian's caustic praise of machines promotes a re-evaluation of the linearity of objective that a rationalist ethics demands.

Martha Nussbaum has pointed out that one of the limitations of Kant's ethics has to do with the notion that a moral law or principle "can never conflict with another moral rule" (31). According to Nussbaum:

> The requirement that objective practical rules be in every situation consistent, forming a harmonious system like a system of true beliefs, overrides for Kant our intuitive feeling (which he acknowledges) that there is a genuine conflict of duties. . . . To say anything else would, for Kant, be to weaken the strong

> conceptual bond between duty and practical necessity, and between both and logical consistency. (31-2)

Interestingly, Nussbaum advocates attending to "our intuitive feeling" when it comes to making moral judgments as an alternative to relying solely upon the principles of logic and consistency. For Nussbaum, as for Melville, a truly viable ethical program has to take seriously the multiplicity of allegiances, the multifarious and often contradictory commitments possessed by an individual at any given moment.

Melville makes it clear, particularly in the exchanges between Charlie and Frank, that "the best man, as the worst, is subject to all mortal contingencies" (*CM* 222). Morality is a difficult matter precisely because individuals have many allegiances—moral commitment is never a matter of following a straight line leading to a single objective. Charlie and Frank demonstrate the conflict that ensues as one attempts to reconcile the demands of friendship and those of business, for example. Frank presses on with his supplication for a loan from Charlie—now that they are "business friends," he pleads, surely Charlie will trust him with a sum of money. In return, Charlie pointedly asks him, "Are you a centaur?" (206) by way of implying the flight of fancy it takes to reconcile the dictates of business with those of true friendship. Frank objects:

> "Oh, Charlie! you talk not to a god, a being who in himself holds his own estate, but to a man who, being a man, is the sport of fate's wind and wave, and who mounts towards heaven or sinks towards hell, as the billows roll him in trough or on crest." (207)

Frank ends up confirming, rather than contradicting, Charlie's position, that an important feature of being human—rather than a god or a machine—is being unceasingly compelled by multiple

loyalties, many of which conflict with one another. And if this is true, then an ethical system that glosses over the multiplicity of ties proves impracticable.

A further critique of rationalist ethics is found in the exchange between the man in gray and the gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons, in which the con-man purports to have devised a logical solution to the problem of want. He describes his prospectus for an institution that will impose the universalization of benevolence:

> "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 . . ." (47-8)

The con-man's proposition carries to its logical extreme the notion of an ethics that applies only insofar as we are rational. In his justification of a society in which charity will be universally enforced, he appeals to reason to validate the practicability of such a project—but the gentleman responds in a manner that again serves to undermine our assumptions regarding the rationality of individuals:

> "[A]dmit, as you must, that mankind is not mad, and my project is practicable. For, what creature but a madman would not rather do good than ill, when it is plain that, good or ill, it must return upon himself?"
>
> "Your sort of reasoning," said the good gentleman adjusting his gold sleeve-buttons, "seems all reasonable enough, but with mankind it wont do."

> "Then mankind are not reasoning beings, if reason wont do with them." (49)

The argument of the man in gray in favor of the World's Charity is founded on the assumption that human beings are rational—he resembles Kant maintaining that benevolence is the product of reason. The gentleman, however, questions the validity of this assumption. The gentleman's retort, and finally the confidence man's conclusion as well, illustrates the absurdity of installing our set of expectations regarding individuals' capacity for benevolence within the premise of an inherent rationality.

Significantly, the continuation of this exchange makes it clear that the logical end of a universalizing institution of benevolence is ultimately its own demise, as the trickster figures:

> "[I]n fourteen years, as I estimate, there would have been devoted to good works the sum of eleven thousand two hundred millions; which would warrant the dissolution of the society, as that fund judiciously expended, not a pauper or heathen could remain the round world over." (48)

Surmising that all citizens the world over—being rational persons, all—will readily submit to the methodization of charitable giving that he proposes, the con-man envisions a time when the World's Charity will have amassed and re-distributed such wealth that it will have eliminated poverty altogether and thus rendered itself obsolete. Paradoxically, as the con-man projects the logical end of the institution's project of universal benevolence, he arrives at the inevitability of its dissolution.

The critique of universalism here prefigures the section in which Frank expounds to Charlie the necessary ubiquity of "geniality" in the modern world:

> "By the way, talking of geniality, [remarks Charlie,] it is much on the increase in these days, ain't it?"
>
> "It is, and I hail the fact. Nothing better attests to the advance of the humanitarian spirit. In former and less humanitarian ages—the ages of amphitheaters and gladiators—geniality was mostly confined to the fireside and table. But in our age—the age of joint-stock companies and free-and-easies—it is with this precious quality as with precious gold in old Peru, which Pizarro found making up the scullion's sauce-pot as the Inca's crown. Yes, we golden boys, the moderns, have geniality everywhere—a bounty broadcast like noonlight."
>
> "True, true; my sentiments again. 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." (181)

The discussion takes an interesting turn as the cosmopolitan protracts the idea of a merely prevalent geniality all the way, again, to its logical extreme—it now "has *invaded* each department and profession" as a universal principle and everyone in the world is genial. And, as with the institution of the World's Charity, the universalization of the quality of geniality results in a certain dissolution:

> "As to the last-named sort of person," said the cosmopolitan, "I trust that the advancing spirit of geniality will at last enable us to dispense with him. No murderers—no hangmen. And 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." (182)

One has to wonder what exactly it means to "dispense with" the hangman altogether—must we hang the hangman? In its elimination of difference, the universalizing principle that undergirds both the World's Charity and the "genialization" of all men ultimately follows the trajectory of dissolution or death, though this time not of the system itself, but rather of human beings. Charlie seems on the verge of apprehending this inevitability, as he ruminates, "[E]very blessing is attended with some evil, and—" (182), at which point the cosmopolitan cuts him off before he can finish the thought.

What Charlie is prevented from articulating—the evil that attends the "blessing" of a thoroughly genialized society—is, I wish to argue, the vision of colonial depredation that Melville describes in *Typee*. The cosmopolitan's hope for an entire world that has been genialized echoes the mission of converting and civilizing the inhabitants of the South Seas islands. *The Confidence-Man* invites us to recognize that a project aimed at universally enforcing some idealized characteristic will likely be accomplished at the cost of many individuals' lives. Thus, the treatment of the world's genialization in this section works to unsettle what we might routinely think of as the promise of conversion and reform.

Augmenting these disturbing observations, *The Confidence-Man* discloses an undercurrent of violence that often bears up the commitment to refashion individuals. Melville suggests that remaking "natural man"—the project undertaken by the missionaries in the South Seas and other places—more often than not involves some enactment of violence. In an early episode, the character of the Methodist threatens to "teach charity" to the wooden-legged man, and makes clear his meaning by "suddenly catching this exasperating opponent by his shabby coat-collar, and shaking him till his timber-toe clattered on the deck like a nine-pin" (23). Similarly, the story of Goneril—particularly the analysis of her tale by the man from the Black

Rapids Coal Company—demonstrates a connection between violence and conversion, as he remarks, suggestively:

> "The truth probably was that she was a wife with some blemishes mixed with some beauties. But when the blemishes were displayed, her husband, no adept in the female nature, had tried to use reason with her, instead of something far more persuasive. Hence his failure to convince and convert." (71)

Violence, the con-man implies, is the expedient required for a hasty and thorough modification of Goneril's deficiency of virtue. Even more extreme, the Missourian farmer, denouncing all manservants and boys as rascals, calls for their annihilation outright—he longs for the day when machines will finally "announce the era when that refractory animal, the working or serving man, shall be a buried by-gone, a superseded fossil." He continues, fantasizing:

> "Shortly prior to which glorious time, I doubt not that a price will be put upon their peltries as upon the knavish 'possums, especially the boys. Yes, sir (ringing his rifle down on the deck), I rejoice to think that the day is at hand, when, prompted to it by law, I shall shoulder this gun and go out a boy-shooting." (121)

Indeed, the tacit as well as the unequivocal affirmation of violence as a condition of reform or conversion can be found in many exchanges throughout the text. As the confidence man propounds the excellence of a project of universal benevolence, he suggests rather than describes the exclusionary vehemence that such a project would entail. "You see," he says,

> "this doing good to the world by driblets amounts to just nothing. I am for doing good to the world with a will. I am for doing good to the world once for all and having done with it. Do but think, my dear sir, of the eddies and maëlstroms of pagans in China. People here have no conception of it. Of a frosty morning in

> Hong Kong, pauper pagans are found dead in the streets like so many nipped peas in a bin of peas. To be an immortal being in China is no more distinction than to be a snow-flake in a snow-squall. What are a score or two of missionaries to such a people? A pinch of snuff in the kraken. I am for sending ten thousand missionaries in a body and converting the Chinese *en masse* within six months of the debarkation. The thing is then done, and turn to something else." (50)

This picture of rapid conversion sits comfortably only with one who expects to find the Chinese willing—absolutely yearning—to be converted. Such an ambitious undertaking in reality would always entail the use of force to suppress those who resist conversion, and the project of "doing good to the world with a will" and "having done with it" is ultimately a project of destruction.

In his reading of *Typee*, Mitchell Breitwieser suggests that "Melville feels special resentment toward the missionaries who, pretending to exercise Christian sympathy for the victims of power, are actually rendering the islanders pliable by shaming them out of indigenous and cultural traditions" (18). But more so, *The Confidence-Man* makes it clear that Melville takes issue with the outright violence that the mission seems to require. The con-man's numerous exchanges with the other passengers suggest that a universalizing principle—whether it aims at a telos of universal benevolence, or geniality, or reason—seems to arc deathward. I argue that this deathward arc indicates an important link between *The Confidence-Man* and Melville's portrayals of the missionary program in *Typee*. The real problem with the "*nominal*" conversion of the Marquesans is that it covers over the deaths of thousands of islanders and the brutal expropriation of their territory by "the rapacious hordes of enlightened individuals who settle themselves within its borders, and clamorously announce the progress of Truth" (*Typee* 195).

3 Fictions of reform in *Typee*

Claiming to represent "the unvarnished truth" (2) about the Marquesas and their inhabitants, indeed presenting itself as an autobiographical or even an anthropological account of the author's sojourn in Nuku Hiva in 1842, *Typee* contests the primacy of Enlightenment-inspired descriptions of the civilizing mission in the remote islands. Early on, Melville demonstrates an awareness of "something decidedly wrong" (198) in the depictions of the South Seas islanders and the practical operations of the Polynesian Mission. His stay on Nuku Hiva has allowed him to discern a troubling discrepancy between published accounts of the Mission and what he witnesses on the island directly. "To read pathetic accounts of missionary hardships, and glowing descriptions of conversions, and baptisms taking place beneath palm-trees, is one thing," he writes, but to go there "and see the missionaries dwelling in picturesque and prettily-furnished coral-rock villas, whilst the miserable natives are committing all sorts of immoralities around them, is quite another" (198). Furthermore, he contrasts his own observations of the Typees' daily practices and ceremonial rituals with "horrible descriptions of Polynesian worship which we have received in some published narratives, and especially in those accounts of the evangelized islands with which the missionaries have favored us." Tongue firmly in cheek, Tommo, the narrator of *Typee*, inveighs, "Did not the sacred character of these persons render the purity of their intentions unquestionable, I should certainly be led to suppose that they had exaggerated the evils of Paganism, in order to enhance the merit of their own disinterested labors" (169).

Melville's writing career begins at a time when the literary market, as much as the American imagination, is dominated by accounts of the progress of civilization in the New

Worlds. It is helpful to turn briefly to John Samson's study of Melville's "factual" narratives—the travelogues of the 1840s—in which he describes the influence on *Typee* of explorers' and missionaries' accounts of the Pacific paradise. From these narrative models, it appears Tommo borrows the assignation of a "chronological condition" upon the native inhabitants he encounters. Samson suggests that for the sailors and missionaries, the Marquesas represented a kind of Eden, signifying "the time and characteristics of man before the Fall, to be regained only through the Christianization of the New Worlds" (35). Implicit in this view is the idea that the movement of history favors the direction of progress, of better and better—"a line progressing from Eden lost to Eden regained" (35). As Melville's contemporaries attempted to figure out how to map their contact with other peoples in remote settings, their writings were largely informed by—and helped to sustain, in turn—a progressivist model of history. Thus, for example, assigning the terms "primitive" and "savage" to a native of non-European locales comes to be a common practice, indicating a notion of "people in their first state, somewhere back of 'civilized' people on the line of history" (37).

While Melville borrows heavily from travel literature and popular first-hand accounts of the missionary undertaking in the South Seas, he does so in a manner that complicates many of their assumptions. *Typee* has an ambivalent and often confused relationship with these narrative models: it at once assimilates and resists their assumptions, particularly with regard to the meanings of "civilized" and "savage." For instance, upon landing on Nuku Hiva, the narrator and his companion cycle through reports they have heard and read about the inhabitants of the island: the Happar are said to "cherish the most friendly relations with the inhabitants" of the island, and the Typee are known as dreaded savages who "appear to inspire the other islanders with unspeakable terrors" (24). Thus, when they encounter the native couple who lead them through

the valley, the question foremost on their minds is "Typee or Happar?"—both believing that the answer promises either their good fortune, if Happar it is, or the realization of their greatest fears, if Typee (69). But the Typee they are finally faced with upends all of their expectations; Tommo is astonished by their kind hospitality and the attentions they generously lavish upon the visitors.

In other ways, too, *Typee* inverts the notion of a progression "from Eden lost to Eden regained"—the concept of history tracing a predominantly linear movement towards universality, coherence, and perfection. For instance, its depiction of Tommo and Toby's fall into the Edenic valley of the Typees reverses Adam and Eve's fall *out* of Eden: rather than looking forward to a life of toil following the fall, Tommo and Toby instead look backward, in Samson's words, "to the 'labors' that brought them to Typee" (37). For Melville, the story of progress—the goal of which, according to Bernhard Radloff, is "the ever more thorough rationalization of the world" (1)—needs to be re-assessed because it determines, in many instances, the manner of our interaction with others whom we place elsewhere along the line of progress, particularly those whom we regard as being chronologically behind the civilized world and therefore inferior. Melville takes on this particular misreading of human relations because he has witnessed first-hand the ways in which it serves to justify the subjugation of populations such as the inhabitants of the Marquesas. By reversing the prevailing mythologies and subverting the standard categories used to define other communities, Melville seeks to establish an alternate method of intercultural engagement.

Additionally, *The Confidence-Man* makes clear the manner in which the teleological model of history is closely allied with the rhetoric of reform. The myth of progressive man calls for the emancipation of "primitive" peoples from their unenlightened state in the name of advancing civilization. As I suggest above, Kant locates the terms of this emancipation within

the teleology of reason. Believing, as Radloff puts it, in the "emancipatory power of the project of a universal history" (122), Kant understands modernity as the program of advancing rationalism. In contrast, Melville ironizes the mere possibility of emancipation in *Typee*, identifying instead a relationship of victimization and contamination as the primary consequence of the teleological principle of historical process.

One recalls Tommo's embittered injunction against the imposition of the French upon the Marquesas and their manner of "reforming" the inhabitants:

> The French had then held possession of the Marquesas some time, and already prided themselves upon the beneficial effects of their jurisdiction, as discernible in the deportment of the natives. To be sure, in one of their efforts at reform they had slaughtered about a hundred and fifty of them at Whitihoo—but let that pass. (7)

Stephen de Paul, writing on Melville's depiction of the Christian mission in Tahiti in the sequel to *Typee*, similarly points out that while "[t]he purpose of the missionary program of 'denationalizing the Tahitians' was moral improvement," the practical consequence of it is, from Melville's perspective, "the erosion of a whole society" (56). The aspiration for universality, coherence, and perfection that informs the rhetoric of reform is insupportable in Melville's early novels—not only because it ends in an eradication of difference in the abstract, but because it results in, as well as justifies, the annihilation of entire populations of people.

Therefore, against the model of a progressive history, Melville's travelogues deploy—as does *The Confidence-Man*—what some critics have termed a "rover" ethic, a wandering perspective that resists linearity, resists being governed by the norms of any particular trope or genre. These texts, moreover, refuse any serious political or religious allegiance, and likewise

repudiate reductive hierarchic binaries, as we have seen in the treatment of the terms "civilized" and "savage." Tommo protests, "How often is the term 'savages' incorrectly applied!" (27), in a manner that serves both to loosen the customary attachment of the term to any non-European and to recast his own countrymen under the same designation. He points out a fallacy in many accounts of "cold-blooded robberies, kidnappings, and murders" perpetrated by natives upon travelers in the Pacific:

> [H]ow we sympathize for the unhappy victims, and with what horror do we regard the diabolical heathens, who, after all, have but avenged the unprovoked injuries which they have received. We breathe nothing but vengeance, and equip armed vessels to traverse thousands of miles of ocean in order to execute summary punishment upon the offenders. On arriving at their destination, they burn, slaughter, and destroy, according to the tenor of written instructions, and sailing away from the scene of devastation, call upon all Christendom to applaud their courage and their justice. (27)

The reports of native brutality that infuse Americans' imaginings of foreign encounters often conceal the abominable actions of the visitors that provoked them in the first place. Ruefully, Tommo surmises in another chapter, "The missionaries may seek to disguise the matter as they will, but the facts are incontrovertible; and the devoutest Christian who visits that group with an unbiased mind, must go away mournfully asking—'Are these, alas! the fruits of twenty-five years of enlightening?'" (124) This passage, moreover, pointedly observes that the destruction of the natives' habitation is authorized by "written instructions," reminding one of the manner in which Melville connects moral behavior and textuality in *The Confidence-Man*.

In *Typee*, Melville's attack against the missionary endeavor seems founded upon the very same anxieties that inform the system of benevolent exchange depicted in *The Confidence-Man*. In part, the text serves a cautionary purpose, warning western philanthropists, who buy into the published testimonies of conversion and the progress of civilization, against the instability of charitable offerings, which results from the problems of misrepresentation, both intentional and unintentional. "Those who from pure religious motives contribute to the support of this enterprise," urges Tommo, "should take care to ascertain that their donations, flowing through many devious channels, at last effect their legitimate object" (198). More than a cautionary tale, however, *Typee* activates what seems to be an incipient awareness of the problematic connection between our practices of representation and reading on the one hand, and the possibility of enacting our good intentions on the other. Examining the early development of this particular awareness, it is evident from the beginning of his writing career that Melville is intensely preoccupied with the potential of a text to manipulate the philanthropic impulses of its readers.

Typee thus paints a picture of civilization as a text upon which the problems of reading and of ethics intersect, and often collide. It is clear at this point that Melville's critique of confidence in his final novel is ultimately—to use Radloff's phrasing—"directed against the fundamental lie of philanthropy, and the 'bene-volence' it claims to represent" (4). In *Typee*, as in *The Confidence-Man,* whether it is being called "charity" or "benevolence"—philanthropy, in any particular instance, is always imbricated with the ideology of reform and the progressivist assumptions that buttress it. Radloff emphasizes, "The cosmopolis of *The Confidence-Man* . . . signifies an order of instrumental rationality which appeals to reason, 'benevolence,' 'confidence,' as cultural values that serve the secret fanaticism of a public opinion in turn devoted to the 're-formation' of the 'natural' man" (2-3). Because it privileges the commitment

to reform above all else, the predominant reading of intercultural contact has the function of occluding the deaths of thousands.

For this reason, Melville troubles the notion of reform in his novels. The confidence man's exchanges with the Missourian farmer, for example, lampoon a strong cultural bias towards narratives of reform: young boys—all rascals, in the farmer's opinion—are presented by the con-man as "incipient creatures" that, with the proper instruction, will transform into efficacious laborers. To an imagined person who proposes to return an adult servant to the Philosophical Intelligence Office upon hearing "something unfavorable concerning [the servant] from some gentleman who employed said adult long before," the con-man argues—"Madam, or sir, would you visit upon the butterfly the sins of the caterpillar? In the natural advance of all creatures, do they not bury themselves over and over again in the endless resurrection of better and better?" And against the Missourian's protests, the con-man counters with several examples of "caterpillars" transformed into "butterflies," rakes who later prove to be "crude material for the saint": "There's the founder of La Trappe, and Ignatius Loyola, in boyhood, and someway into manhood, both devil-may-care bloods, and yet, in the end, the wonders of the world for anchoritish self-command." In addition, he proffers the example of St. Augustine, who himself "confesses that, until his thirtieth year, he was a very sad dog" (129-30). All of these examples demonstrate the cultural predilection to overlay the story of human life with an account of reform—the story of "the endless resurrection of better and better."

Typee and *The Confidence-Man* render the close alliance of practices of benevolence with the narrative of progress in a disturbing light. It makes sense that *The Confidence-Man* takes up an ironic panegyric of the American press, as it is, after all, "one of the most powerful human agencies that can be employed in forming the mental and moral character of the inhabitants"

(Suzuki 369) both of the South Seas as well as of North America—in other words, it is one of the most serviceable tools of human "improvement" within the homeland, as well as an effective means of shaping how Americans regarded those outside. Frank Goodman engages in exuberant praise of the American press and is applauded enthusiastically by Charlie Noble. In Frank's tribute, we find the following:

> [W]hat the sovereign of England is titularly, I hold the press to be actually—Defender of the Faith!—defender of the faith in the final triumph of truth over error, metaphysics over superstition, theory over falsehood, machinery over nature, and the good man over the bad. (171)

Within Frank's categorization of the triumphs of the press is a subtle and ironic linking-together of the good man with machinery, with theory, with metaphysics, and with truth. The suggestion, again, is that the notion of goodness—if founded upon a certain faith in our practices of reading or reasoning—is no better than machinery, no more substantial than the emptiness that we find behind the impositions that we call "theory" and "metaphysics" and "truth." Similarly, Breitwieser's analysis of the diminution of human volatility and agency under the auspices of civilization in *Typee* provides an apt description for the reductive operations of the cosmopolis in *The Confidence-Man*: "America," he writes, "means both the superstructural promise of self-reliant masterlessness and the infrastructural reduction of persons into units of labor" (17). Therefore, when Frank eulogizes the press as "the iron Paul" (171), we get the sense of something utterly discomfiting about the way the press is often used to advance the depredations of the civilizing mission.

The reach of the influence of the press proves difficult to evade. Often, we see in Tommo's expressions the manner in which he seems inadvertently to replicate the missionary

rhetoric of conversion in the abstract, even while condemning its practical execution (in more than one sense of the word). For instance, he implores, "Let the savages be civilized, but civilize them with benefits, and not with evils; and let heathenism be destroyed, but not by destroying the heathen" (195). His designation of savagery and heathenism adheres to the common usage of these terms, imbued as they are with an inferior status, and promotes our duty to ameliorate the natives' benighted condition—even though, paradoxically, his plea is for a more tolerant manner of relating to these individuals. Surely, *Typee* goes some way towards exposing and challenging the fiction of human improvement that sustains the Polynesian Mission; but in many ways, the novel also repeats the very same rhetoric that it problematizes so well. *Typee*, it might be argued, is a much easier novel to swallow—certainly, it achieved a level of popularity that far surpassed any of Melville's subsequent works—because it confirms many of the assumptions already held by his reading public, governing their perceptions of foreign cultures. The novel satisfies readerly demands as they are understood by the narrator of *The Confidence-Man*: "in books of fiction, [readers] look not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality, than real life itself can show. Thus, though they want novelty, they want nature, too; but nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed" (186-87). The problem is that, like the man with the mourning weed who tricks the country merchant by offering to "supply the void in [his] memory" (28), the author of the novel also aids in proliferating the fiction that sustains the lie of philanthropy.

"Lies, lies, sir," declaims the barber near the end of *The Confidence-Man*, "brave lies are the lions!" (231)—expressing a somewhat disheartening persuasion which, I would argue, motivates the writing of Melville's strange final novel. By 1857, Melville has experienced the immense commercial success of *Typee*, which made him one of the most well-known authors in

America seemingly overnight. Yet the insights we garner from *The Confidence-Man* suggest Melville's keen awareness of the ways in which his first novel also embodies a kind of failure. Though seeking to re-write the terms of his nation's contact with others, *Typee* often ends up rather affirming the very structures that it strives to undermine. According to Samson, "[Tommo's] condescending narrative, which labels the natives 'poor savages' who are 'unsophisticated and confiding,' does as much as the sailors' promiscuity to foster the 'contaminating contact'" (56). As much as *Typee* tries to work against the structures of power, it often reproduces the terms of oppression. The wise barber, again, makes the astute summation: "you see, sir, the truth is, that every trade or pursuit which brings one into contact with the facts, sir, such trade or pursuit is equally an avenue to those facts" (231). With this in mind, *The Confidence-Man*'s critique of narrative conventions resembles a form of protest against the colonial exploitation in which *Typee* is complicit. In its perplexing disjointedness, its constantly bringing the reader to the awareness of itself—and of all texts—as a lie, *The Confidence-Man* offers perhaps one method of circumventing this double-bind. In what follows, I suggest a different solution is offered in *Pierre*.

4 The failure of literature in *Pierre*

The struggles endured by Melville as a result of the commercial failure of his final novels have been well documented. Certainly, the novels of the latter half of the 1850s fall short of winning the approval of Melville's reading public, and it may be argued that this is at least partly due to their repudiation of novelistic conventions that his contemporaries had come to rely on. But it is possible to identify in *The Confidence-Man* as well as in *Pierre*, Melville's penultimate novel, a different kind of failure at work. It may be obvious by now, at least in the case of *The Confidence-Man*, that Melville seems to evade the endorsement or proposal of any practicable system of morality. The novel places the reader in a position similar to that of the man described by Frank Goodman, "who, while convinced that on this continent most wines are shams, yet still drinks away at them" (167) for, in *The Confidence-Man*, the "sham" is all the reader is permitted to access—he is immersed in a world of misreadings. Amid the impossibility of constructing a viable ethics within such a world, it seems there is nothing to do but succumb to the duplicitous influence of the masquerade.

If this is a demoralizing conclusion to draw from *The Confidence-Man*, it certainly reflects the somewhat disconsolate view of Melville's later novels that many of his readers have adopted. Elizabeth Renker, for example, deems that "writing failed Melville in a most crucial sense, in fact in the sense that mattered most to him: in enabling him to penetrate the world of the material in order to attain a transcendent realm of Truth" (132). Along similar lines, John Carlos Rowe's analysis of *Pierre* recognizes in the novel a demarcation of the limits of what literature can do: "Intricately worked out in the very novelistic form Melville had come to detest, his critique of ideology in *Pierre* remains a testament to the limits of literature as a force for political

reform." According to Rowe, Melville's disillusionment with the novel form is evident, as he registers "how powerfully these forms contribute to the social forces of domination they so often claim to contest" (196). The resistance to coherence and to any pretension to realistic characterization that we have identified in *The Confidence-Man* would seem to be motivated by the same persuasion. In many ways, Melville does seem to repudiate the conventional novelistic operation, as it tends toward a kind of rationalization, a method of regulating the contingencies of subjective experience. Melvillean scholars have made much of the fact that he turns exclusively to writing poetry following the failure of *The Confidence-Man*, interpreting this shift as a sign of the author's final disillusionment with the novel form.

Given the commercial failure of *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* in the literary marketplace, I hold nonetheless that in these two novels Melville works through a conception of failure that differs from our conventional understanding of the term. *Pierre*, in particular, offers many clues that suggest a controlled reworking of the idea of failure in its depiction of the life of its protagonist, the author Pierre Glendinning. At the center of Pierre's relation to his own failure is an interrogation of how much, and whether, literature can actually resist the social forces that it purports to challenge through its exposition. If, as I have claimed, the travelogues that made Melville's name among his contemporaries frequently end up restating the terms of exploitation even as they strive to undermine them, then *Pierre* becomes a vehicle for an important re-examination of the meaning of literary success.

A more or less constant pessimism regarding novels and what they can do pervades the text of *Pierre*. Its protagonist recognizes an attitude of deception in novels' "false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystemizable elements; their audacious, intermeddling impotency, in trying to unravel, and spread out, and classify the more thin than gossamer threads

which make up the complex web of life" (141). Pierre inveighs against the traditional formula of the domestic novel, popular among his contemporaries, having pierced through "all the speculative lies in them":

> By infallible presentiment he saw, that not always doth life's beginning gloom conclude in gladness; that wedding-bells peal not ever in the last scene of life's fifth act; that while the countless tribes of common novels laboriously spin vails of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last; and while the countless tribe of common dramas do but repeat the same; yet the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life; these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings, but in imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as mutilated stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides of time and fate. (141)

The novel *Pierre*, as much as the character of the same name, foregoes the neat trajectory of gloom to gladness in favor of the bizarre and largely inscrutable "mutilated stumps" that represent the life of Pierre. Far from clearing up any mystery about human nature, the narrator of *Pierre* operates much in the manner of the author described in *The Confidence-Man*, who, "in view of its inconsistencies, says of human nature the same that, in view of its contrasts, is said of divine nature, that it is past finding out" (76).

Melville goes further in disrupting the assumptions of traditional literary representation. Having witnessed first-hand the harm done to the Marquesans and the role played by travel narratives and missionary propaganda in perpetuating the unjust treatment of these individuals under the guise of philanthropy, Melville places a measure of blame upon popular literature for helping to sustain injustice. As we have seen, real people's lives are at stake in the authorial

decision to simplify the "truth" of human nature by measuring it along a scale of fixed and universal principles. What in *The Confidence-Man* is treated with frivolity and is rendered in such a way as to invite laughter is, in *Pierre*, laid out with a rather graver sense of culpability.

Indeed, Melville places a heavy burden of responsibility upon the author. A revealing passage in *Pierre* allows us to identify the imperialistic tendencies of knowledge, along with the author's moral obligation, as Melville sees it, to combat them. Pierre's meditations upon the production and cancelation of truth convey the vision of an endless struggle:

> For it is only the miraculous vanity of man which ever persuades him, that even for the most richly gifted mind, there ever arrives an earthly period, where it can truly say to itself, I have come to the Ultimate of Human Speculative Knowledge; hereafter, at this present point I will abide. Sudden onsets of new truth will assail him, and overturn him as the Tartars did China, for there is no China Wall that man can build in his soul, which shall permanently stay the irruptions of those barbarous hordes which Truth ever nourishes in the loins of her frozen, yet teeming North, so that the Empire of Human Knowledge can never be lasting in any one dynasty, since Truth still gives new Emperors to the earth. (167)

Truth, it appears, is neither absolute nor essential; rather, "truths" foist themselves by turns upon mankind, doing so with the vehemence of a barbarous attack. The primacy of any particular category of knowledge is established much in the same manner by which empires are established—with the use of force.

In the novel, Pierre finds a mysterious pamphlet in the coach that bears him away from his ancestral home. The pamphlet, a strange disquisition on what it calls "Chronometricals and Horologicals," reinforces the Melvillean suspicion that the chronometrical virtues (those based

on celestial, universal principles) are fundamentally incompatible with the horological (that is, the terrestrial and contingent) existence of individuals. According to the pamphlet, "[t]he undiluted chronometrical doctrines hitherto taught to mankind" rather produce more vice than promote virtue. In other words, the pamphlet serves to critique the predominant ethical system that has no regard for what is contingent and leaves no room for difference.

Within the abstract exposition of the pamphlet, Melville plants a rather concrete image of what it means for the chronometrical to overrun the horological, and it is a picture replete with blood:

> [I]f any man say, that such a doctrine as this I lay down is false, is impious; I would charitably refer that man to the history of Christendom for the last 1800 years; and ask him, whether, in spite of all the maxims of Christ, that history is not just as full of blood, violence, wrong, and iniquity of every kind, as any previous portion of the world's story? (215)

Melville reads the political dimension of literary representation not in any abstract way. He recognizes that not only has the moral doctrine of Christianity "proved entirely impracticable" (215), it has been used to mask incalculable brutalities.

Melville then follows his vision of "the Empire of Human Knowledge" with an appeal to action:

> If among the deeper significances of its pervading indefiniteness, which significances are wisely hidden from all but the rarest adepts, the pregnant tragedy of Hamlet convey any one particular moral at all fitted to the ordinary uses of man, it is this:—that all meditation is worthless, unless it prompt to action, that it is not for man to stand shillyshallying amid the conflicting invasions of

> surrounding impulses; that in the earliest instant of conviction, the roused man must strike, and, if possible, with the precision and the force of the lightning-bolt. (169)

It is the author's duty, the narrator of *Pierre* seems to argue, to *act* on his convictions. However, the author's position is one steeped in paradox. All the world "acts," as we have seen in the above discussion of *The Confidence-Man*, yet there is the sense that any action inevitably fails to strike through the mask of righteousness. Being itself a novel, *Pierre* ultimately is faced with its own limitations—its fundamental inability to actually resist the lie that inheres in the method of representation. The efforts of Pierre as a novelist—like those of Melville—reveal a self-conscious awareness of the manner in which novels only add to the artifices that sustain power:

> For the more and more that he wrote, and the deeper and deeper that he dived, Pierre saw the everlasting elusiveness of Truth; the universal lurking insincerity of even the greatest and purest written thoughts. Like knavish cards, the leaves of all great books were covertly packed. He was but packing one set the more; and that a very poor jaded set and pack indeed. So that there was nothing he more spurned, than his own aspirations; nothing he more abhorred than the loftiest part of himself. (339)

Pierre's activity resembles Melville's own writing of *Typee*, insofar as it represents a process that ensures the unceasing rehearsal of the conditions of power. Paradoxically, the more intensely Pierre attempts to get at the truth behind appearances through his writing, the more his pages end up merely adding to the strata of misperceptions, thus effectively rendering the attainment of that truth ever more out of reach.

In the end, like the pamphlet on "Chronometricals and Horologicals" that Pierre finds on his journey, the novel *Pierre* is "more the excellently illustrated re-statement of a problem, than the solution of the problem itself" (210). Given that advancing any solution or any truth would only serve to pack "one set the more" of knavish cards, the narrator of *Pierre* rather opts for a kind of failure. At several moments, the novel declines to fulfill its narrative function—it refuses to narrate, for example, Pierre's wrangling with his extraordinary predicament: "[H]ere," the narrator states, "we draw a vail." Rather than describing or explaining Pierre's struggles, he maintains, "Some nameless struggles of the soul can not be painted, and some woes will not be told. Let the ambiguous procession of events reveal their own ambiguousness" (181). The "reason-originating heart and mind of man" longs for explanation within the "imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing" text, but the text withholds explanation—the mysteries of Pierre's life, it claims, "are not so easily to be expounded" (209). Desisting from using words or reason to attempt to clear up these mysteries, the text instead renders the impression of "a divine unidentifiableness" (89).

Self-consciously, the narrator describes the method of his own narration: "This history goes forward and goes backward, as occasion calls" (54). He depicts the life of Pierre as "mutilated stumps" because, as we have seen, the effort to fit the contingencies of human life into an overarching pattern amounts to mere pretension and even to a kind of imperialism. In this manner, the narrator evades the work of conventional literature, in which "all objects are deceptively foreshortened, . . . each object is viewed as detached, so that essentially and relatively every thing is misseen" (175). Bearing in mind the failure of literature to do anything but re-present—to reproduce, at bottom—the terms and conditions of power, I interpret *Pierre*'s refusal to narrate as a manner of opting out of the confidence game of modernity. In bringing to

the fore its own insufficiency as a novel, *Pierre* affirms failure as a way—perhaps the only way—to avoid participating in the inhumanities of empire.

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