

OSCAR MARDELL

**SAGE OF DISCORD;**

OR,

MELVILLE AT 200

A Revenge Tragedy in 24 Sections

The *grift* has a gentle touch. It takes its toll from the verdant sucker by means of the skilled hand or the sharp wit. In this, it differs from all other forms of crime, and especially from the *heavy-rackets*. It never employs violence to separate the mark from his money. Of all the *grifters*, the confidence man is the aristocrat.

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David W. Maurer, *The Big Con*

FOR JESSE SHEEHAN AND KIRI SPIOTTA  
IN TOKEN OF MY GRATITUDE FOR THEIR JSTOR LOGINS

## EXTRACTS

(SUPPLIED BY A COUNTRY SCHOOLMASTER PLAGUED BY THE THOUGHT OF HOW MUCH MORE EXTENSIVE THESE MIGHT HAVE BEEN HAD HE THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE EVEN TO A SUB-SUB-LIBRARIAN)

If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life, as from that dry and parching wind of the African deserts called the simoom, which fills the mouth and nose and ears and eyes with dust till you are suffocated, for fear that I should get some of his good done to me – some of its virus mingled with my blood.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

We were in Havana when I showed to Miss Lind a paper containing the conundrum on “for-getting” and “for-giving,” at which she laughed heartily, but immediately checked herself and said: “O! Mr. Bamum, this is not fair; you know that you really give more than I do from the proceeds of every one of these charity concerts.” And it is but just to her to say that she frequently remonstrated with me, and declared that the actual expenses should be deducted, and the thus lessened sum devoted to the charity for which the concert might be given; but I always laughingly told her that I must do my part, give my share, and that if it was purely a business operation, “bread cast upon the waters,” it would return, perhaps, buttered; for the larger her reputation for liberality, the more liberal the public would surely be to us and to our enterprise.

P.T. Barnum, *Life*

Master would keep this lacerated young woman tied up in this horrid situation four or five hours at a time. I have known him to tie her up early in the morning, and whip her before breakfast; leave her, go to his store, return at dinner, and whip her again, cutting her in the places already made raw with his cruel lash. The secret of master's cruelty toward “Henny” is found in the fact of her being almost helpless. When quite a child, she fell into the fire, and burned herself horribly. Her hands were so burnt that she never got the use of them. She could do very little but bear heavy burdens... Finally, my benevolent master, to use his own words, “set her adrift to take care of herself.” Here was a recently-converted man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and die! Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them.

Frederic Douglass, *Life of a Slave*

## I.

## BYGONES

THEY CALL HIM INSANE. In August 1852, *The Boston Post* names *Pierre* – Herman Melville’s seventh, and latest, book – “the craziest fiction extant”.<sup>1</sup> A month later, *The Southern Quarterly Review* calls him “clean daft” and advises, moreover, “[t]he sooner this author is put in ward the better”. *The American Whig Review* asserts that “his fancy is diseased” and describes *Pierre* as “precisely what a raving lunatic who had read Jean Paul Richter *in a translation* might be supposed to spout under the influence of a particularly moonlight night.” And in *The New York Day Book*, the headline “HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY” introduces the view of one “critical friend” – that the book “appeared to be composed of the ravings and reveries of a madman”. The accompanying article only adds insult:

We were somewhat startled at the remark; but still more at learning, a few days after, that Melville really was supposed to be deranged, and that his friends were taking measures to place him under treatment. We hope one of the earliest precautions will be to keep him stringently secluded from pen and ink.

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## CARITOLOGY

It will soon become evident that this piece is absurdly long – far more so than its narrow subject could ever warrant. I find not justification but challenge in Chapter CIV of *Moby-Dick*: “To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it.”\* I am not so deluded as to think this particular work “enduring”, nor that handful of passages which Melville happened to write on the subject of charity a “mighty theme”; on the contrary, those passages occupy such a minor strand of Melville’s *oeuvre* as to be of scant interest to any but the most pernicious gadfly. Foremost, then, this piece is intended as the “revenge”, or at least a defence, of that chronically underestimated insect, whose thirst, in my not insignificant experience as a country schoolmaster, the blood of a thousand spermaceti bulls would seldom quench.

\*This is doubtless a dig at the English poet, and eventually Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, John Donne (1572 – 1631), whom Melville had certainly read,\*\* and whose poem “The Flea”, while not “great” in terms of scale, is certainly one of the most “enduring” works of the metaphysical school.

\*\* In Chapter XCIII of *Moby-Dick*, Melville describes the sea “flatly stretching away, all round, to the horizon, like gold-beater’s skin hammered out to the extremest.” The passage is a clear echo of the following lines from Donne’s poem “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”:

Our two souls therefore, which are one,  
Though I must go, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

<sup>1</sup> This and the following references are lifted wholesale from *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews* eds. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker\* (1995) – a gargantuan collection, which replaces *Melville: The Critical Heritage* ed. Watson G. Branch, (1974), which, in turn, replaces *Melville’s Reviewers* ed. Hugh W. Hetherington (1961). Commentary on Melville is so vast, it has itself become a subject of commentary.

\*Parker’s is a ubiquitous name in Melville studies. Indeed, there is hardly a paper on Melville that does not cite some aspect of his Ahab-like hunt for every scrap of Melvilleana. His most celebrated work is doubtless the two-volume, Pulitzer-Prize-winning biography of Melville which, at four times the length of *Moby-Dick*, most certainly qualifies as a “mighty book”. In his retirement, he blogs at “Fragments From A Writing Desk” – which takes its name from piece of Melville juvenilia.

Six years, and six books, prior, *Typee* had made “Melville” a byword for the exotic – “the man who lived among the cannibals”;<sup>2</sup> now, after the publication of *Pierre*, that name is so tarnished that the next manuscript to bear it will not only be rejected, but discarded, and forever lost by his long-time publishers, the Harpers.<sup>3</sup>

But at this point in his career, Melville is no stranger to this kind of slur. Reviewing *Moby-Dick* five years earlier, *The Boston Post* had called the novel “a crazy sort of affair”, while *The New York Albion* had declared that there was “no method in his madness”. On the other side of the Atlantic, *The London Literary Gazette* had urged him “not to waste his strength on such purposeless and unequal doings as these rambling volumes about spermaceti whales”, while in *The London Athenaeum*, Henry Chorley had dismissed the book as a “species of Bedlam literature”, scoffing at its “mad, as opposed to bad, English”.<sup>4</sup> The nineteenth century dislike of Realism”, wrote Oscar Wilde, “is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass”; “The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism”, Wilde added, “is the rage of Caliban *not* seeing his own face in a glass”.<sup>5</sup> *Moby Dick* – for Chorley, “an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact” – had provoked both of these rages; readers had seen and not seen.<sup>6</sup> But after *Pierre*, they hardly look again. Melville falls so deeply into obscurity that even his obituarist misspells the title of his masterpiece, “*Mobie Dick*”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) is a heavily romanticised rendering of the time that Melville spent on the Island of Nuku Hiva in the South Pacific Marquesas Islands. It was by far the most popular of Melville’s works during his lifetime. Today, it is famous for being the book for which Herman Melville used to be famous.

<sup>3</sup> *The Isle of the Cross* was probably a version of the story of Agatha Hatch – the deserted wife of an adulterous sailor whom Melville heard about whilst visiting Nantucket with his father-in-law in July 1852. The most thorough weighing of this grievous loss takes place in Hershel Parker, “Herman Melville’s *The Isle of the Cross: A Survey and Chronology*” (1990).

<sup>4</sup> The Victorian novelist and critic Henry Chorley (1808 –1872) is well-nigh entirely forgotten these days, except for this review, for a song he wrote with Arthur Sullivan, and for being the subject of a satirical composition by Charles-François Gounod which was later used as the theme music for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

<sup>5</sup> This particular witticism is taken from the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In light of n.4, however, it might have been appropriate to supplement it with another, from the same Preface: “Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself”.

<sup>6</sup> This said, if any one thing was made clear by *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews* [see n.1, above], it was that the Melville “revival” had a tendency to overstate the extent to which *Moby-Dick* was underappreciated by its first readers. True, the novel was not commercially successful, selling only 3,175 copies within Melville’s life [compare to *Typee*, 16,300, and *Omoo*, 13,300]; among critics, however, Melville was not unanimously despised but, at worst, polarising.

<sup>7</sup> There is an urban [or perhaps marine] legend which holds that Melville’s *New York Times* obituary named him as “Henry Melville”. Though it certainly captures the obscurity to which Melville had sunk, the anecdote, as Parker has shown, is apocryphal. On Oct 6, an article in the *Times* called him “the late Hiram Melville”, but this appears to have been a mechanical error on the typesetter’s part. See Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography. Volume 2, 1851-1891* (2002), 921.

## II.

## **THUNDER. ENTER DEVILS.**

And then they call him a pioneer. The stage had been set for the “revival” by the revered Columbia lecturer, and literary editor at *The Nation*, Carl van Doren, who had included an entry on Melville in the 1917 edition of *The Cambridge History of American Literature*.<sup>8</sup> It is Melville criticism’s equivalent of Faustus’ magic circle:

Figures of every adjunct to the heavens  
And characters of signs and erring stars,  
By which the spirits are enforc'd to rise

And, like Faustus, van Doren had little inclination that all Hell is to break loose. Two years later – so, on the hundredth anniversary of Melville’s birth – and at van Doren’s behest, a young Columbia instructor named Raymond Weaver publishes a commemorative piece in *The Nation*, describing *Moby-Dick* as “an allegory of the demonism at the cankered heart of nature”, one which was “born in hell-fire, and baptized in an unspeakable name” and which “reads like a great opium dream”; Weaver claims of Melville, moreover, that “if he does not eventually rank as a writer of overshadowing accomplishment, it will be owing not to any lack of genius, but to the perversity of his rare and lofty gifts.” A week later, Frank Jewett Mather Jr. writes in *The New York Review* that “[i]n sheer capacity to feel, most American writers look pale beside him”, adding, in a vein reminiscent of his colleague, that reading him is “like eating haseesh”.<sup>9</sup> In 1920, *Moby-Dick*, prefaced with a superlative-laden introduction by the English writer Viola Meynell, becomes the first American title in the Oxford World’s Classics series; and the year after that, Weaver publishes the first full-length biography,

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<sup>8</sup> In *The American Novel* (1921), van Doren would devote a whole chapter to Melville, writing that “the immense originality of *Moby Dick*” while “[t]oo irregular, too bizarre, perhaps, ever to win the most popular suffrage” must nevertheless “warrant the claim of its admirers that it belongs with the greatest sea romances in the whole literature of the world”. Nevertheless, van Doren refused to pay what he considered to be the extortionate price of \$1 apiece for first editions of *Moby-Dick*. Today, those same volumes would fetch in the region of \$60,000 US.

<sup>9</sup> Jewett Mather Jr., however, is not all good news. In the same piece, he established the view that “*Moby Dick* exhausted Melville’s vein” – a view which, until relatively recently, continued to impede the reception of Melville’s later works [see Interjection 1. in Section VII.].

*Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic*, replacing the image of a travel writer who went insane with that of a wild genius who “sinned blackly against the orthodoxy of his time”.<sup>10</sup> But even these are soon surpassed. In 1922, Carl van Vechten writes a piece for *The Double Dealer* comparing *Moby-Dick* to *Hamlet* and *The Divine Comedy*, and calling Melville:

a cosmopolitan, a sly humourist... who ballyhooed for a drunkard’s heaven, flaunted his dallies with South Sea cuties, proclaimed that there was no such thing as truth, coupled ‘Russian serfs and republican slaves’ and intimated that a thief in jail was as honourable as George Washington.<sup>11</sup>

The following year, D.H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* dedicates two whole chapters to Melville, “a master of violent, chaotic physical motion”:<sup>12</sup> the first covers *Typee* and *Omoo*; the second, *Moby-Dick*, calling it “the last great hunt”. The latter concludes:

Oh God, oh God, what next when the *Pequod* has sunk?  
She sunk in the last war, and we are all flotsam.

Here, then, was a writer who had foretold not only the hatred which had just driven the whole world to arms, but the moral uncertainty which had followed. Concealed within a body of

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<sup>10</sup> Like Jewett Mather Jr., Weaver was also guilty of propagating the idea that Melville peaked at *Moby-Dick*.<sup>\*</sup> Nevertheless, *Mariner and Mystic* remains an astonishing achievement, especially so given that Weaver had no precursor.

<sup>\*</sup> For this reason, Weaver’s biography is, nowadays, almost totally eclipsed by his other contribution to Melville studies: his discovering, editing, and eventually publishing Melville’s last work, “Billy Budd the Sailor”. Weaver obtained access to the manuscript from Melville’s granddaughter, Eleanor Melville, who had kept it stashed away in a bread tin, of all places. Weaver had it transcribed at the request of an English editor who was arranging a uniform edition of Melville’s works, and brought it to print in 1924. Weaver’s preconceived view of Melville’s trajectory, however, appears to have prevented him from appreciating this contribution: he later wrote of *Billy Budd* that it made him miss the “sparkle, the verve of earlier Melville”.

Some of Weaver’s view was remedied in 1926, when John Freeman published the first British biography, *Herman Melville*. Freeman paid much closer attention to Melville’s shorter pieces, “Bartleby the Scrivener”, “Benito Cereno”, and “Billy Budd”; he also proposed that, in his final work, Melville made peace with the philosophical, religious and artistic questions which had hitherto irked him.<sup>\*\*</sup> Freeman thereby rejected Weaver’s view that Melville remained bitter to the end of his days, but it is worth noting that he could only do so because Weaver had himself made “Billy Budd” available to the world.

<sup>\*\*</sup>This view was remedied, in turn, in 1929, when Lewis Mumford published Melville’s third biography, *Herman Melville: A Study of his Life and Times*. Mumford avoided the errors of Weaver and Freeman by drawing up a totally new trajectory: Melville did not peak at *Moby-Dick*, but continued an anguished quest for meaning that lasted right up until the final scene of *Billy Budd*.

For the cynical reader (and for the historicist) what unites all three of Melville’s first biographies is the virtual absence of any real research on the topic of Herman Melville’s actual life.

<sup>11</sup> Carl van Vechten (1880 –1964) was a writer, photographer, and patron of the intellectual, social, and artistic flourishing which has become known as The Harlem Renaissance. For his fans, van Vechten is an advocate, for others a racist exploiter, of Black culture; I like to think of him as something akin to a real-life participant in Black Guinea’s “game of charity” [see Section XIX.].

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence is certainly not the only commentator of this era to have seen Melville as a chronicler of human vice. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), for example, E.M Forster wrote, “The white whale is evil, and Captain Ahab is warped by a constant pursuit until his knight errantry turns into revenge”. In the 1929 biography, meanwhile, Lewis Mumford described Ahab as one who “in battling against evil...becomes the image of the thing he hates”.

work from the Nineteenth Century was the uncanny reflection of the early Twentieth. Again, readers had seen and not seen, and this time the result was ecstasy.

### III. IN WHICH A VARIETY OF MELVILLES APPEAR

For the remainder of the Twentieth Century, all manner of monikers are bestowed upon him: Semiotician; Pacifist; Queer; Environmentalist; too many to list even here.<sup>13</sup> A tradition emerges wherein commentators read his work – and *Moby-Dick* in particular – as mirror, as a reflection of the concerns *du jour*. A handful of examples:

- While the shadow of Fascism is looming over Europe, R. E. Watters proffers this interpretation:

man is internally divided...There is a dark unknown realm of his being which he is fearful of fathoming; elements in his own nature frighten him. He struggles to integrate his energies, to bend his powers towards ends he thinks good, despite his half-conscious awareness of ambiguities in his own nature which corrupt that good; but all the while he is uncertain whether he is bound or free, agent or principal...This, as I conceive it, was Melville's majestic theme.

- A decade later, the Trinidadian writer C.L.R. James sees in *Moby-Dick* an allegory of cold war ideologies: Ishmael, a proto-liberal intellectual; the *Pequod*, a mechanised factory; its captain, Ahab, a totalitarian despot; and his crew, America's melting pot of workers.
- In 1986, Anthony Lewis calls Ronald Reagan "a political Ahab", and the Sandanista Government in Nicaragua, "his Moby Dick".
- In 1999, a former White House counsel, Lanny Davis, likens the prosecutor Kenneth Starr to "the obsessive Captain Ahab" in his quest to bring down the presidency of Bill Clinton.

Calibans seeing their own faces.

And at the dawn of the Twenty First, this tradition shows few signs of halting. Shortly after 9/11, none other than Edward Said writes in *The Observer*:

Osama bin Laden's name and face have become so numbingly familiar to Americans as in effect to obliterate any history he and his shadowy followers might have had before they became stock symbols of everything loathsome and hateful to the collective imagination. Inevitably, then, collective passions are being funnelled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick, rather than what is going on, an imperial power injured at home for the first time, pursuing its interests systematically in what has become a suddenly reconfigured geography of conflict.

Melville, it might seem, is evoked by every appellation *except*, that is, for "Herman Melville" – the flesh-and-bone man from Nineteenth Century New York and Massachusetts whose father was an importer of dried goods from France.

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<sup>13</sup> I can, however, steer you toward what is undoubtedly the best overview of the various trends to have swept Melville criticism, which is Brian Yothers' *Melville's Mirrors* (2011).

#### IV.

#### IN NOMINE SUO

Lest this should be the case, a parallel tradition emerges wherein Historicist critics attempt to situate Melville firmly in his own day. Another handful:

- If Columbia was chiefly responsible for the resurgence of interest in Melville's works in 1919, then the fact that we can discuss the facts of his life with any degree of certainty is due to an effort begun at Yale in the early 1930s. There, Stanley Thomas Williams supervises more than a dozen dissertations on Melville which are eventually published as books, most of them focusing on Melville's biography, compositional processes, and textual history.
- In 1951, Jay Leda, the film maker and historian, publishes his *Melville Log* – the result of more than a decade spent in archives and small-town libraries gathering documents and records pertaining to Melville.
- Suffice it to say that, where Melville is concerned, the so-called “New Historicism” has been every bit as thorough as its precursors.

Calibans *not seeing* their own faces.

**Definitely a stupid question:** Which tradition is *right*? Do Melville's works better reflect his own day or his readers'?

**Probably a stupid answer:** Each era after Melville's continues to mirror his. The problems created at the dawn of American industrialism [race-relations, large-scale warfare, corporate exploitation, environmental degradation, etc.] are those which continue to define its subsequent incarnations. So Historicist critics have actually made it easier and not harder for us to read Melville as mirror. Helen P. Trimpi, for example, sees *The Confidence-Man* as a series of specific caricatures of Melville's contemporaries – Thoreau, Emerson, Poe, etc.; but even if we are persuaded by this interpretation, the novel still resonates because those very figures – the self-righteous hermit, the unworldly philosopher, the melancholy poet, etc. – continue to make regular appearances upon our own stage. And it is this which makes reading Melville such an *uncanny* experience, which enables an author so *dead* to continue to speak with such clarity and relevance – that is, with such *life*.

## V.

## THE TRITENESS OF THE WHALE

Of course, the more obvious development of the last hundred years is the overwhelming success of that initial “revival”. Since van Doren’s fateful entry in *The Cambridge History*, Melville has gone from almost total obscurity to being, as one scholar has worded it, “the unavoidable centrepiece of the American tradition”.<sup>14</sup> The Melville Society, established in 1945, numbers over 400 institutional and individual members. Three times a year, it publishes *Leviathan* – one of America’s oldest, and most highly respected, sole-author journals, while *Sky-Hawk*, a second journal dedicated solely to Melville studies, is published by The Melville Society of Japan. The New Bedford Whaling Museum annually hosts a “*Moby-Dick* Marathon” – a 25-hour nonstop reading of the book during a weekend of Melville-themed activities and events. And since the 1930s, when the poet Charles Olson first started to hunt down the surviving volumes from Melville’s personal library, a fleet of scholars have been on the hunt for Melville’s every pencil mark. New theses and books are published on him each year, and, of course, there are countless conferences. This year will be no exception.

Here is a heavily abridged and highly personal selection of some other things which Melville has bequeathed to posterity:

**ITEM:** Two paintings by Jackson Pollock, undertaken in 1943 and in response to *Moby-Dick*.

**ITEM:** 138 works by Frank Stellar, undertaken between 1985 and 1993, each in response to a different chapter from *Moby-Dick*.

**ITEM:** 552 works by the self-taught artist Matt Kish, undertaken between 2009 and 2011, and each illustrating a single page from the Signet edition of *Moby-Dick*.

**ITEM:** One painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat, undertaken in 1987, and nine pages of his notebooks, both reproducing the contents pages of *Moby-Dick*.

**ITEM:** *The Sea Beast*, a 1926 silent film directed by Millard Webb, which attempts to improve on its source by having Ahab kill the whale and get the girl.

**ITEM:** Numerous other film adaptations of *Moby-Dick*, the most watchable of which is doubtless John Huston’s 1956 version, which stars Gregory Peck as Ahab, and whose screenplay was written by none other than Ray Bradbury.

**ITEM:** Also, *Sansom & Sally: Song of the Whales*, a 1984 animated film about a young white whale named Samson who searches for *Moby-Dick*.

**ITEM:** *The Whalers*, a 1938 Mickey Mouse cartoon whose plot is a parody of *Moby-Dick*.

**ITEM:** Numerous other cartoon parodies by shows as diverse as *Rocky and His Friends*, *Woody Woodpecker*, *Tom and Jerry*, *Mr Magoo*, *The Flintstones*, and *Futurama*.

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<sup>14</sup> For the fellow gadfly, the critic in question is Michael T. Gilmore, and he does so in *Surface and Depth: The Quest for Legibility in American Culture* (2003).

- ITEM:** *Hakugei: Legend of the Moby Dick*, a 1997 science-fiction anime about a sentient, whale-shaped spaceship that destroys planets.
- ITEM:** *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, the 1982 film whose eponymous “Khan” quotes Ahab in his dying breath.
- ITEM:** Sena Jeter Naslund’s 1999 novel *Ahab’s Wife*.
- ITEM:** Bernard Herrmann’s 1938 *Moby Dick* cantata.
- ITEM:** Jake Heggie’s 2010 *Moby-Dick* opera.
- ITEM:** The eighth track on Led Zeppelin’s 1969 album “Led Zeppelin II” whose title is “Moby Dick”.
- ITEM:** The secret code used by the Baader-Meinhof Group which consisted of names drawn from *Moby-Dick*.
- ITEM:** A strain of marijuana called ‘Moby Dick’, which is a cross between the indica-dominant hybrid White Widow and the sativa Haze, and which is currently bred by Dinafem Seeds.
- ITEM:** The name of the Starbucks coffee franchise, which is taken from that of the first mate of the *Pequod* [to this, the Melville Society took some offence, promptly informing the company that Starbuck doesn’t drink coffee anywhere in *Moby-Dick*].
- ITEM:** A brothel in Ghent named “Moby Dick Fun Pub” [The Melville Society has been much bemused, but not, to my knowledge, greatly offended by this].<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This establishment, however, is the only item (bar one) on this inventory to whose existence I cannot testify first hand.\* I visited Ghent but, I confess, did not manage to find it: “It is not down on any map; true places never are.”

\* Hopefully it goes without saying that I was not a member of the Baader-Meinhof Group.

VI.

AN[OTHER] EPITAPH

HERMAN MELVILLE,  
who *sinned blackly against the orthodoxy of his time*  
the Patriarch of our own.

## VII. IN WHICH IT IS ASKED: IS THIS INHERITANCE OF ANY REAL VALUE?

□ YES: There is no doubt that these dynasties of readers before us have only brought us closer to Melville, granting us a better knowledge of his works, his life, one's own life, and the web of relations that exist between the three.

See **CARITOLOGY**, which attempts to give some indication of the magnitude and complexity of that web.

□ NO: Because our experience of Melville is, therefore, mediated by those readers, we are every bit as distant as we are close. Melville has been so thoroughly canonised that reading him today he feels like staring blankly into the face of the Mona Lisa, or Che Guevara – his ubiquity makes it virtually impossible to see what he has to *say* through what he has come to *symbolise*. The old heretic is near-totally obscured by the blinding spectre of the Great American Novelist, and the most common experience of Melville, therefore, is that which Durga Chew Bose describes in her essay collection *Too Much and Not the Mood*:

Plowing through *Moby-Dick* my senior year of college [sic]...I found a reading chair in a well-lit corner of the library where I could sit uninterrupted for hours, readjusting my posture at various times, convinced that with each redistribution of my weight on one leg, one side, I might experience improved focus...I considered leaving at one point because reading so much, so closely, and not merely for pleasure is deranging. Sentences begin to float off the page and my focus becomes unfaithful, and the book starts to flop like a fainted body.

If, at the first centenary, Melville was in need of a “revival” because he was under-read, then today, the opposite is true: Melville is dead again [or has at least “fainted”] because he is so chronically over-read, suffocated by those sadists among us who continue to prescribe him on school curricula. On the centenary of the centenary, then, the question facing Melville's devotees is this: how to restore his original “sin”?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps my favourite attempt to make Melville “sin” again is the *Moby-Dick*-inspired concept album *Leviathan* by the American metal band Mastodon.\* Far more than any scholarly analysis, *Leviathan* is sensitive to the anger and disillusionment which permeates virtually every page of Melville's whaling epic. The album has inspired a surprising amount of critical discourse, almost all of which has focussed on its lyrics; what has not been properly acknowledged, however, is how close the album's rhythms come to the anarchic time signatures of early jazz, whose initial listeners were the first to recognise in Melville an apocalyptic vision of their own era. See, for example, Bernardini, Craig. “Heavy Melville: Mastodon's *Leviathan* and the Popular Image of *Moby-Dick*.” *Leviathan*, vol. 11 no. 3, 2009, pp. 27-44.

\* Other metal tributes to Melville include the track “Beneath These Waves” by Demons & Wizards [a side project of two power-metal heavy-weights, Blind Guardian vocalist Hansi Kürsch, and Iced Earth guitarist Jon Schaffer], as well as the doom-metal band Ahab, many of whose lyrics are inspired by *Moby-Dick*. What causes these tributes to fail, however, is that no matter how heavy they are on the ears of the Melville establishment, by drawing inspiration only from *Moby-Dick*, they are inevitably dulled by what I have [perhaps unfairly] dubbed “The Triteness of the Whale”. I am doubtful that I will see, in my lifetime, an album inspired by *The Confidence-Man*\*\* nevertheless, that novel – of which the scholar John W. Shroeder once wrote, “The legions of Satan, patently, are loose about the deck of the *Fidèle*” – would not, I feel, be a wholly unsuitable subject for a black-metal act.

\*\*I am aware, however, that the novel was the subject of an opera by George Rochberg which was premiered by the Santa Fe Opera in 1982.

## VIII. MAKE THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL DEPRAVED AGAIN

In *The Plot Against America*, the late Philip Roth had the presidential election of 1940 result not in a third term for Franklin D. Roosevelt, but in a victory for Nazi sympathizer, and spokesman of the America First Committee, Charles A. Lindbergh. “All I do,” explained Roth in the *Times Book Review*, “is defatalize the past – if such a word exists – showing how it might have been different and might have happened here”. When, in January of 2017, the *New Yorker* asked Roth if it *had* happened here – if the persecution imagined throughout *The Plot* had become a reality under the latest proponent of “America First” – the novelist replied:

It is easier to comprehend the election of an imaginary President like Charles Lindbergh than an actual President like Donald Trump. Lindbergh...had character and he had substance and, along with Henry Ford, was, worldwide, the most famous American of his day. Trump is just a con artist.

“The relevant book about Trump’s American forebear”, claimed Roth, isn’t *The Plot*, but Herman Melville’s “darkly pessimistic, daringly inventive *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*”. The novel – Melville’s last – traces the southward journey of the *Fidèle*, a Mississippi steamer peopled with tricksters and swindlers competing to win the “confidence” of their all-American public; it “could”, said Roth, “just as well have been called ‘The Art of the Scam.’”

Here, Roth showed that the “mirror” tradition was alive and well, that, even as he approached 200, Melville could still show us our own faces. But by referring to *The Confidence-Man*, Roth bypassed the layers of cliché which have submerged *Moby-Dick* [and to which, it must be noted, Roth himself once contributed – his 1973 novel, *The Great American Novel* begins with the words, “Call me Smitty” – a name combining the first sentence of *Moby-Dick* with the eponymous character from a comic strip about a young office boy which Walter Berndt begun in the 1920s, and for which he won the prestigious Reuben Award in 1969].

### Interjections:

1. In referring to *The Confidence-Man*, Roth was also consistent with one of the more significant changes to affect in Melville studies in the last few decades: a remapping of the novelist’s trajectory which refuses to see works after *Moby-Dick* as a decline. Van Vechten predicted that as much would happen in his piece for *The Double Dealer*:

In spite of all the detractors, I think...the day may come when there will be those who will prefer the later Melville just as there are those who prefer the later James, those who will care more for the metaphysical, and at the same time more self-revealing works, than for the less subtle and more straightforward tales.

2. Perhaps more importantly, Roth might have been correct:

- i. The con-artistry and double-dealing which takes place throughout *The Confidence-Man* has a resounding echo in Trump's frequent [and frequently discussed] equivocations: condemning former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke in 2000 and knowing "nothing" about him in 2016; having "a relationship" with Vladimir Putin before wondering if the two will "get along"; calling NATO both "obsolete" and "important" within a single interview; threatening to "blow the shit" out of North Korea one month, and attempting peace negotiations the next; etc.; etc.; etc.
- ii. *The Confidence Man* represents the pinnacle of two particular threads running through Melville's work, and particularly through his work of the 1850s. These are "charity" and "self-reliance", and they are, moreover, absolutely central not only to Trump's "masquerade", but, I think, to his popularity.

HERE THEN WAS A CHANCE TO MAKE MELVILLE  
BLASPHEME AFRESH

## IX.

## LOVE NOR MONEY

Even in our post-theological age, “charity” is set aside as holy, retaining the power to bestow sanctity upon even the vilest of its practitioners [and this, I think, is self-evident: one only has to walk into one of the aforementioned coffee franchises, and to heed their particular brand of “ethical” capitalism, in order to see that “charity” offers even the most passive consumer an opportunity to purchase something tantamount to sainthood]. And yet, in the pantheon of American values, charity is the antithesis of what Harold Bloom has dubbed “[t]he fundamental premise of the American Religion”<sup>17</sup>— the Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance. Acting in accordance with one’s own interests is inherently at odds with caring for, or receiving care from, one’s peers. Emerson made the dichotomy explicit when, outlining his views on “Self-Reliance,” he found this to say about charity:

I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies; - though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.

For Emerson, charity— in all of its forms — is totally incompatible with the individualism by means of which, he reckons, each of us might realize our personal “genius”. Readers are not encouraged, say, to love or assist their neighbours, but to heed instead the great American imperative: “Trust thyself”.<sup>18</sup>

Knowingly and unknowingly, many have abided by the Emersonian doctrine: from Henry Thoreau to Henry Ford, from Forrest Gump, and now, to Donald Trump, who, from the outset, marketed his presidential campaign on the promise that it was “self-funded,” and that he was not, therefore, beholden to anyone. At Trump events, supporters repeatedly told news

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<sup>17</sup> In *The American Religion* (1992) Harold Bloom\* argues that religious life in America is characterized by a belief in the inherent divinity of the self and, as such, is entirely compatible with the views expressed in Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”.

\*Bloom’s is another ubiquitous name, not only among Melvilleans, but within Literary Studies in general. His renown as a prolific author of some twenty volumes of criticism is overshadowed somewhat by the notoriety of his role in the so-called “canon-wars” of the Nineties, during which Bloom branded all politically-minded criticism “the school of resentment”, and constructed [at the behest of his publisher, it must be said] a definitive list of works which he considered to be fit for study. Today, Bloom regrets and refuses to discuss the latter.

<sup>18</sup> Nineteen years later, Emerson had not greatly changed his views on the subject. “Considerations by the Way” contains the particular nasty line: “The worst of charity is that the lives you are asked to preserve are not worth preserving”. Melville’s views towards Emerson’s lectures and essays are probably best described as equivocal, and they have been, like every other aspect of Melville’s life, obsessively documented. See, for example, F. O.

Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), 184, 401; Laurie Robertson-Lorant, *Melville: A Biography* (1996), 183; Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography. Volume 1, 1819-1851* (1996), 617; and *Volume 2, 1851-1891* (2002), 389, 501, 723. On the influence of Transcendentalist thought on Melville, see Michael McLoughlin, *Dead Letters to the New World: Melville, Emerson, and American Transcendentalism* (2003); and John Williams, *White Fire: The Influence of Emerson on Melville* (1991).

outlets that his refusal to accept contributions was a major selling point, and when Trump did begin to court donors, there was outcry. But even before he had set his sights on the general election, more than a quarter of Trump's initial funding had come from contributions. Moreover, as *The New York Times* reported in February of 2017 year, a substantial portion of the money that Trump did spend on his campaign was paid "to companies Mr. Trump owns or to people who work for his real estate and branding empire, repaying them for services provided to his campaign". Trump, it seems, was not only his backers' but his very own beneficiary.

Self-reliance was not some temporary pose adopted for the sake of rallying political support; it has been a staple routine in Trump's public persona all along. In particular, he has constantly underplayed the decisive role which his father, Fred Trump, played in his fortunes. *The Art of the Deal* makes no mention of the loans and guarantees, nor the connections, which enabled the young Trump to move into Manhattan; no mention of the lucrative trust funds that provided him with steady streams of income; nothing about the \$9 million borrowed against his future inheritance; nothing of the \$7.5 million borrowed to pay off debts accumulated in planning for Atlantic City; still less of the notorious \$3.5million casino-chip loan. Instead, *The Art* proffers the following anecdote:

I still remember a time when my father visited the Trump Tower site, midway through construction. Our façade was a glass curtain wall, which is far more expensive than brick. In addition, we were using the most expensive glass you can buy – bronze solar. My father took one look, and he said to me, "Why don't you forget about the damn glass? Give them four or five stories of it and then use common brick for the rest. Nobody is going to look up anyway." It was a classic, Fred Trump standing there on 57<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue trying to save a few bucks. I was touched, and of course I understood where he was coming from – but also exactly why I'd decided to leave.

Fred Trump's principal function is to serve as counter-example: an old-world penny-pincher, who teaches his son a few tricks here and there, but from whom the latter is emphatically *independent*. Donald Trump, *The Art* would have us think, is the archetypal self-made man, the very model of Emerson's "genius".

To complicate matters, Trump has also stressed that he is a *charitable* man. The 2016 edition of *The Art* assures us that he's "involved with numerous civic and charitable organisations". At the outset of his campaign, moreover, Trump claimed to have personally donated a staggering \$102 million between 2011 and June 2015. But, as *The Washington Post* discovered in October of 2016, none of this money actually came from Trump's own pocket. Many donations took the form of free rounds at his golf-courses, or rides in his limousine, and the value of these, moreover, was determined by Trump himself. Gifts were presented by the Donald J. Trump Foundation, but Trump himself did not actually contribute anything to this charity between 2009 and 2014. Trump also vowed to contribute \$1 million to veterans' causes in January of 2016, but didn't stump up until *Post* reporter David Farenthold pressed him on the details four months later. Even then, Trump made sure to inform Farenthold, "You're a really nasty guy. I give out millions of dollars that I had no obligation to do". Trump, it seems, only donated if it didn't cost him to do so, and was visibly distraught when it did.

**Some slightly less stupid questions:** Does the fact that Donald Trump has been a beneficiary undermine his claims to self-reliance? Does the fact that he has incurred no loss on his charity disqualify him from the mantle of philanthropy? Is the forty-fifth President of the United States *just*, in Roth's words, "a con-artist"?

It's unlikely that Trump would answer "yes" to any of these: he doesn't lie, claims *The Art*, but merely "play[s] to people's fantasies". But what "fantasies" is he playing to when he purports to be, as his company website put it, both "a deal maker without peer" *and* "an ardent philanthropist"?

## X. “SOME SNEAKING TEMPERANCE SOCIETY MOVEMENT”

“Charity” – and, particularly, its potential to serve malevolent ends – had been a concern of Melville’s from the very outset of his writing career, when, in *Typee*, he documented the damaging effects of missionary activity in the Pacific.<sup>19</sup> Four years later, in a minor – and often overlooked – passage from Chapter XX of *Moby-Dick*, Melville initiated a decade long examination of the instability of that word. To the crew of the *Pequod*, Captain Bildad’s sister administers the following version of “charity”:

At one time she would come on board with a jar of pickles for the steward’s pantry; another time with a bunch of quills for the chief mate’s desk, where he kept his log; a third time with a roll of flannel for the small of someone’s rheumatic back. Never did any woman better deserve her name, which was Charity – Aunt Charity, as everybody called her. And like a sister of charity did this charitable Aunt Charity bustle about hither and thither, ready to turn her hand and heart to anything that promised to yield safety, comfort, and consolation to all on board a ship in which she herself owned a score or two of well-saved dollars.

Worth noting here is that the repetition of the words “charitable” and “charity” has what Bertolt Brecht might have called an *alienating* effect. Like a child with echolalia, Melville highlights the arbitrary relationship between the word “charity” and the phenomena to which it would usually refer: here that word doesn’t denote some simple act of generosity, nor some purely altruistic concern for the sailors’ wellbeing, but an enterprise which is at least partially motivated by the desire to make a profit for oneself. Quite simply, Aunt Charity gives to the crew of the *Pequod* because she knows that she will make money if its voyage is successful. Later in the novel, Melville confirms that her assistance is driven by a concern for her own finances, and not just the crew’s “safety, comfort, and consolation”. When asked why he has brought Queequeg [the Pacific prince employed aboard the *Pequod* as a harpooner] a ginger drink rather than some stronger beverage, the deckhand replies, “it was Aunt Charity that brought the ginger on board; and bade me never give the harpooners any spirits, but only this ginger-jub – so she called it”. As Stubb, the ship’s second mate, explains, the gift is insufficient to “kindle a fire in this shivering cannibal”. Aunt Charity appears to have

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<sup>19</sup> Or, more accurately, attempted to document. The most critical parts of *Typee* were censored from the first editions.

donated the “jub” to keep the harpooners sober, and so maximize their economic efficiency, instead of permitting them relief.<sup>20</sup>

This isn't to suggest, however, that Captain Bildad's sister is some sort of ruthless, proto-Trumpian, venture capitalist. Earlier in the novel, Melville provides a brief sketch of the kinds of people who, besides the ship's Captains, have invested in the *Pequod*:

the other shares, as is sometimes the case in these ports, being held by a crowd of old annuitants; widows, fatherless children, and chancery wards; each owning about the value of a timber head, or a foot of plank, or a nail or two in the ship.

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<sup>20</sup> In solidarity, I brew an alcoholic version called “Queequeg's Respite”. The recipe is as follows:\*

20l water/ 1.5kg ginger root\*\*/ 6 cinnamon quills/  
juice and peel (but not pith) of 4 lemons/ 8 pears/ 4.2kg dextrose sugar/  
2 sachets of champagne yeast//

Mince the ginger root, lemon peel, and pears in a food processor./ Empty the resulting pulp into a mesh bag. Add the cinnamon quills and then seal./ Submerge the bag in 20l of water./ Add lemon juice and 4kg of dextrose./ Bring to the boil and keep there for an hour./ Remove from heat and discard the bag./ Cool the wort overnight./ Pour the wort into a sterile carboy and pitch the yeast before affixing an airlock.//

After 1 week, or when fermentation is complete, mix in the remaining 0.2kg of dextrose sugar./ Pour the solution into sterile bottles and seal./ Open and consume after 2 weeks.//

With an abv. of about 10%, the result will stoke an inferno in even the most seasoned man-eater.

\*If this seems an unnecessary inclusion, let it be said that it is certainly not the first recipe to be cited in a critique of Melville. One of my favourite allegations brought against *Moby-Dick* comes from Richard James Hooker, *The Book of Chowder* (1978):

Nantucket Island, saturated with seafaring ways, had the simplest chowders, for here, crackers, potatoes, milk, and tomatoes were all omitted. The fish, or clams, were joined with pork, onions, salt, and pepper, and thickened with flour and water [a more detailed recipe follows]...When Herman Melville had Ishmael and Queequeg enjoy a clam chowder that contained pounded ship biscuits at the Try Pots Inn in Nantucket, he was either in error or reporting an aberration in that fishiest of all places.

Of course, what Hooker's criticism overlooks is something well known to every New Zealand home-cook: chowder signifies, as it were, a *mingling* of all sorts, and the more varied the ingredients, therefore, the stronger the dish's power to unite its diners. Six years after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, this truth was impressed upon the crew of the New Bedford whaler *Pacific* whose members, as Hooker describes in that same volume,

went ashore in a quiet cove in New Zealand...they took with them potatoes, biscuits, and a piece of salt pork. A fire was started, friendly Maoris [sic] collected mutton-fish, warreners, and limpets – all shellfish new to the crew – one man volunteered to act as cook, and all soon enjoyed an “excellent dinner” of chowder.

Few treaties, I think, have procured such a successful mixing.

\*\* This ingredient, I posit, was vaguely connected, in Melville's thinking, with invisible exploitation. One of the funniest scenes in “Bartleby the Scrivener” occurs when a savagely underpaid employee in a legal office absentmindedly seals a mortgage-bond not with wax but with a gingernut biscuit. On the face of it, his doing so is merely a nuisance; what it actually threatens, however, is to physically unite a legal/economic document with the domestic comforts of home-baking – elements whose separation, as we will see, enable the continued exploitation of that very employee.

Aunt Charity, then, appears to be among those who should be not the donors but the recipients of alms, and is perhaps even as destitute as the “wage-slaves” to whom she donates.<sup>21</sup>

### **Mysteriae Americae**

[Bene]factor/ficiarie  
Phil/Mis[anthropy]

Closer  
For this canny widow  
Than the old sage foretold

Though the scenes which feature her gifts are intended to be comic, their humor nods towards a more serious critique – not so much of charity *per se*, but of the orthodox view that it constitutes a purely selfless position, or is an act administered by the wealthy to the poor solely for the sake of relieving the latter’s plight.

Countless explanations have been proposed for Trump’s electoral victory. Can we add to these that, in spite of their vastly different economic statures, he and Bildad’s sister make the same promise, offering to unite greed and godliness?

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<sup>21</sup> The term “wage-slavery” – which tends to pepper Marxist [and quasi-Marxist] discourse – typically refers to employment situations in which workers only differ from slaves in that they are *rented* instead of *owned*. On the prevalence of this situation in *Moby-Dick*, see Ian Macguire, ““Who Ain’t a Slave?”: *Moby Dick* and the Ideology of Free Labor.” *Journal of American Studies* 37.2 (2003): 287-305.

## XI.

## “A TALE OF WALL STREET”

By 1853, we find Melville exploring the instability of the word “charity” in greater detail. The critique resumes in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” – a short story written for *Putnam’s Monthly* in which the narrator, a Wall Street lawyer, details his experience of the eponymous “Bartleby” whom he had employed as a scrivener [a far cry from Berndt’s ‘Smitty’; more like a human xerox machine]. When Bartleby is asked to perform the tasks for which he is employed, he responds with the famous refrain, “I would prefer not to” – not so much a refusal to work, for which he could have been simply fired, but a passive withdrawal of agency itself.<sup>22</sup> Exasperated, the narrator is thinking of killing his employee:

But when this old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him. How? Why, simply by recalling the divine injunction: ‘A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.’ Yes, this it was that saved me. Aside from higher considerations, charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle – a great safeguard to its possessor. Men have committed murder for jealousy’s sake, and anger’s sake, and hatred’s sake, and selfishness’ sake and spiritual pride’s sake; but no man, that ever I heard of, ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity’s sake. Mere self-interest, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should, especially with high-tempered men, prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy.

With this “new commandment” in mind, the narrator declares it his “mission” to “furnish [Bartleby] with office-room for such period as [he] may see fit to remain”. Here, Melville introduces two more versions of “charity”. The first is associated with “higher considerations” and is here put “[a]side”. It will concern us shortly. The other, as Elizabeth Barnes has written, “is obscured by the narrator’s translation of giving into a form of self-centered exchange”.<sup>23</sup> It is bestowed because the narrator is exasperated by his employee, and because he is concerned instead for his own safety. Here, as in *Moby Dick*, then, “charity” doesn’t refer to some simple altruism but to a phenomenon which, as the narrator recognizes, is also motivated by the “self-interest” which would ordinarily be its antithesis. In *Bartleby*, however, the instability of the word permits more than just a joke: it provides the narrator with a means of resisting the murderous temptation posed by the “old Adam of resentment”.

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<sup>22</sup> In a stroke of pure genius, protestors at “Occupy Wall Street” had this same refrain printed on their banners. It also makes a regular appearance on t-shirts donned by the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek.

<sup>23</sup> In “Fraternal Melancholies,” Barnes argues that the narrator experiences *too much* sympathy for Bartleby, and so identifies [falsely, it must be added] his employee’s suffering as his own. In this way, he bridges the divide between the selflessness which characterizes Christian charity and the self-interest which is central to capitalist ideology. See Elizabeth Barnes, “Fraternal Melancholies: Manhood and the Limits of Sympathy in Douglass and Melville” in *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*. eds. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter. (2008), 237. On the other functions of sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American literature, see: Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (1985); Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy* (1997); and Glenn Hendler. *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2001).

## XII.

## SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL: A SERMON

“[Judas] then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night.”  
- John, 13:30 [just before Christ gives the “new commandment”]

Fellow sinners,

Let us scrutinise, and so learn from, this resentment. Melville’s narrator confesses to experiencing a curious sympathy for John C. Colt – the real-life businessman [and brother to the founder of the firearms company] who brutally murdered the printer Samuel Adams with a hatchet at the latter’s office in 1841, before salting the body, wrapping it up in a shop-awning, and loading it on a merchant ship.<sup>24</sup> For this, the narrator offers the following explanation:

Often it had occurred to me in my ponderings upon the subject, that had that altercation taken place in the public street, or at a private residence, it would not have terminated as it did. It was the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, up stairs, of a building entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations – an uncarpeted office, doubtless, of a haggard sort of appearance – this it must have been, which greatly helped to enhance the irritable desperation of the hapless Colt.

The apology isn’t unlike Trump’s infamous insistence that there were “some very fine people” present at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville. Of course, to love *all* is Christianity’s most radical tenet; but to do so means nothing, surely, if you complain the while that poor Judas had been treated “absolutely unfairly”.

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<sup>24</sup> All of New York was enthralled by this murder.\* For more on its relation to Melville’s tale, see T. H. Giddings, ‘Melville, the Colt-Adams Murder, and “Bartleby”’ *Studies in American Fiction*, 2.2 (Autumn 1974): 123-132. Giddings, however, does not address the moral implications of the fact that the narrator’s principal sympathies lie with the “hapless” murderer, and not, as the reasonable reader might expect, his victim. For a thorough [and, moreover, highly readable] account of the case, see Harold Schechter, *Killer Colt: Murder, Disgrace, and the Making of an American Legend* (2010).

\* The literary establishment was no exception. Walt Whitman covered the case as a reporter for *The Aurora*; for Edgar Allen Poe, meanwhile, it provided the inspiration for a short story, “The Oblong Box”.

### XIII. IN WHICH THE COUNTRY SCHOOLMASTER ATTEMPTS TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THE VERY NOTION OF “WORK-LIFE BALANCE” IS A FALLACY

But most significant about this apology for Colt, I think, is that a “solitary office” doesn’t really explain the intensity of the narrator’s resentment at all. On one hand, the narrator of “Bartleby” is well aware that his workplace lacks the “domestic associations” of a living space. He describes it in the following passage:

At one end, [my chambers] looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft...This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call ‘life’. But, if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction, my windows commanded an unobstructed view on a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up within ten feet of my window panes.

Melville, we know, was keenly attuned to the influence of the domestic sphere;<sup>25</sup> here, its absence isn’t a source of “irritable desperation” but of ironic humor. It is with tongue firmly in cheek that the narrator refers to the “lurking beauties” of this architectural monstrosity.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the narrator also understands that “domestic associations” are *exactly* what his employee ends up bringing to this space. When he discovers Bartleby camping out in the office one Sunday morning, he claims, “Yes, thought I, it is evident enough that Bartleby has been making his home here, keeping bachelor’s hall all by himself”.

**NB:** Given the narrator’s acute awareness of these things, a **question** remains: why might he be so angry?

A CLUE to the narrator’s resentment lies in his ultimate solution to this conflation of home and workplace. Having found Bartleby “making his home” in the office, he makes this following proposition:

Despairing all further efforts, I was precipitately leaving him when a final thought occurred to me – one which had not been wholly unindulged before.

‘Bartleby,’ said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, ‘will you go home with me now – *not to my office, but my dwelling* [my emphasis] – and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure?’

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<sup>25</sup> What might be surprising about Melville’s own domestic circle [especially, given the prevalent, albeit grossly unjust, image of Melville as a writer “for men”] is that, for many years, it was almost exclusively female. Less surprising is that it too has been obsessively documented. See, for example, Hershel Parker, “*Moby-Dick* and Domesticity,” in *Critical Essays on Herman Melville’s Moby Dick*. eds. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker. (1992). On the influence of domestic fiction on Melville, see Sheila Post-Lauria, *Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace* (1996), 82, 140; Lora Romero, “Domesticity and Fiction,” in *The Columbia History of the American novel*, ed. Emory Elliott (1991), 110-29; and William C. Spengemann’s “Introduction” to the Penguin Edition of Herman Melville, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (1996).

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Friedman’s 1970 film sets Melville’s story in modern [well, Seventies] London; what makes the transposition so effective [and Friedman’s treatment so much more watchable than the other film versions of “Bartleby”] is its acute awareness that, for Britain in the latter half of the Twentieth Century, office architecture remained every bit as monstrous as it had been for New York in the Nineteenth.

In this way, the narrator attempts to redefine his “home” by asserting an absolute distinction between his “office” and his “dwelling”. It’s also worth noting that he senses something approximating blasphemy where that distinction is blurred. Having left the office, he confesses, “I did not accomplish the purpose of going to Trinity Church that morning. Somehow the things I had seen disqualified me for the time from church-going”. It appears, then, that the narrator is incensed not, like Colt, by the absence of domesticity from his workplace, but by a quasi-religious desire for that absence to prevail. The “charity” which he administers to his employee provides an outlet for that desire within the ethical code of the official religion – the perfect marriage, in other words, of what Max Weber would later call “the protestant [work] ethic and the spirit of capitalism”.

**NB:** It is curious that the narrator of “Bartleby” should experience this desire in the first place. When introducing himself, he declares, “I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but, in the cool *tranquillity* of a *snug* retreat, do a *snug* business among rich men’s bonds, and mortgages and title deeds [again, my emphasis]” Clearly, then, the narrator is attracted to his line of work for the sense of domesticity which he finds within it. It’s uncharacteristic of him to want to sustain a distinction between his home and his work when, in this respect, the latter functions as an extension of the former. A **further question** remains, then: what moves the narrator, perhaps in spite of himself, to want to enforce their separation?

## XIV.

## HOME/ECONOMICS: A MANIFESTO

ETYMOLOGY (SUPPLIED BY THE SAME COUNTRY SCHOOLMASTER):

**Economics, *n.* and *adj.***

Late Middle English via Old French and Latin from Ancient Greek *ἡ οἰκονομική*: art or science of *household management*, person responsible for expenditure in a *household*, person who understands the art of *household management* [all my emphases].

A spectre is haunting the market – the spectre of the hearth.

We acknowledge that in “Bartleby”, the opposition between domestic and economic spheres serves specific ideological purposes. Gillian Brown has identified the first of these, discussing the significance of “agoraphobia” within the story:

The antagonism between self and world manifest in agoraphobia reflects and replays the opposition between home and market that is upheld by domestic ideology. By maintaining the integrity of the private sphere, this opposition sustains the notion of a personal life impervious to market influences, the model of selfhood in a commercial society.<sup>27</sup>

It is for this reason that Bartleby, having screened off a domestic sanctuary within the heart of the office, is said to be “self-possessed”: the partition enables him, at least temporarily, to hold on to that last refuge of the disenfranchised, the sense of a non-exchangeable self. We further acknowledge, however, that this mechanism is double-edged, that the opposition between domestic and economic realms (or “home” and “market”) also creates an alibi for the absence of “personal life” and “selfhood” from the scribes’ labor. Cindy Weinstein has aptly described that labor:

The presumably intellectual, promisingly original act of writing – that which is meant to be distinguished from working-class manual labor – takes on the structure of mechanical reproduction ruinous to the minds and bodies of workers. Writing, as it is practiced in the law office, turns out to be the most manual labor imaginable.<sup>28</sup>

The lifeless nature of this work is lent a semblance of legitimacy by the absence of domesticity from the site at which that work takes place. Naturally, it is in the firm’s interest for that semblance to prevail: the narrator must extort a sizable profit for the “rich men” who

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<sup>27</sup> In *Domestic Individualism*, Brown argues that Bartleby, with his fondness for walls and his tendency to assume wall-like poses [whilst employed on “Wall-Street”, no less] embodies the characteristics typical of Nineteenth-Century “agoraphobics” who surround themselves with partitions as a defence from the excess *mobility* – of workers, capital etc. – of the *agora*, or marketplace. See Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth Century America* (1990), 170-195.

<sup>28</sup> In “Melville, Labor, and the Discourses of Reception,” Weinstein argues that the narrator’s downfall occurs precisely because his authority depends on the division of these two kinds of work, and because this division is undermined by the persistence of Bartleby’s *originality* – his refusal to act as a *copyist*. See Cindy Weinstein, ‘Melville, Labor, and the Discourses of Reception’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*. ed. Robert S. Levine. (1998), 202-223. For other representations of labor in Melville’s work, see Cindy Weinstein, ‘Melville’s Operatives’ in *The Literature of Labour and the Labours of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (1995), 87-128.

employ him given that one of his workers, for example, is paid the criminal salary of “one dollar a week”. By allowing his employee to inhabit his office free of charge, the narrator’s “charity” validates an ideological apparatus which enables New York’s rentiers to squeeze even more wealth out of the city’s poor. His vampiric employers, then, are the chief beneficiaries of the aid which he administers to Bartleby.

Today, the opposite is happening. The Google-led fad for workplaces resembling infants’ playpens has infiltrated even my own classroom – an open-plan “environment” containing, at any one time, some sixty students equipped with little more than beanbags, and only capable, therefore, of achieving rest within school hours. The increasing prevalence of portable devices, meanwhile, necessitates more and more to be done, by worker and student alike, “for homework”. If the conflation of home and work posed a threat to Nineteenth Century industry, that same conflation is swiftly becoming the basis of our own in what is clearly a move towards having us work 24/7.

We would prefer not to.

We also put forward the wildly unverifiable theory that this issue lies at the heart of Trump’s war on The Edgar J. Hoover building, that he despises that structure it for its stately grandeur, for its sublime weight, for the frankness with which it presents its own materials, for its functionalism – in short, for its honesty, for its being a government building, where government work is done, and which resembles a government building, rather than some chrome-plated casino or glass-clad hotel.

## XV. IN JOKE: ON FAILING TO ATTEND, SPECIFICALLY, *TRINITY CHURCH THAT SUNDAY MORNING*

Q: Did you hear about the controversy of 1846-1847 concerning the diocese's management of its real estate?

A. While its wealthy lessees prospered from its land, Trinity itself ran into financial difficulties in meeting its religious obligations... For a business corporation, retrenchment to assure payment of a debt was sound practice, but it left the church open to the charge that it had sacrificed the souls of the poor to the interests of the rich.<sup>29</sup>

By offering aid to Bartleby, and thereby sanctioning an economic system which enables the wealthy to profit on his worker's suffering, Melville's narrator opens himself to this very charge.

The three sets of bronze doors on this church, still extant, were gifted in 1896 by William Waldorf Astor, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Astor (1848–1919) in memory of his father, John Jacob Astor III (1822–1890) – which is funny, because *his grandfather*, John Jacob Astor (1763–1848), was one of the chief beneficiaries of the Trinity scandal and William Waldorf's donation, therefore, even if it was fifty years late, seems a particularly conspicuous contribution.

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<sup>29</sup> Here I quote the late Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (1981), 229-230. Doubtless, there are more current histories of the city, but Spann's remains a personal favourite, with Mike Wallace's *Gotham* (2001) a close second. Excitingly, Hat & Beard Press are to commemorate Melville's second centenary by publishing an edition of *Moby-Dick* replete, not only with illustrations by the mural painter Gilbert Wilson (1907–1991), but with Spann's biography of Wilson as well. The latter, Hat & Beard assure visitors to its website, "can be available for purchase beyond this special edition".

## XVI.

## “JUST SELLS”

The fact that the narrator isn't making monetary gains for himself doesn't pardon him of this charge. He also makes a personal profit, albeit in another, perhaps more valuable, currency: the trust of New York's rentier class. He describes his acquaintance with the abovementioned John Jacob Astor (1763–1848), the city's wealthiest [and most reviled] property tycoon [after whom Astor place is named, as well as Astoria in Queens] and, for more than one commentator, Trump's Nineteenth Century precursor:<sup>30</sup>

The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact that I was not unemployed by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion.

But for Wyn Kelley, the narrator “*is* insensible...at least to the degree that he doesn't recognize how his prudence and method serve Astor's ends rather than his own.”<sup>31</sup> Even if the narrator were to recognize this, however, it doesn't seem that he would be greatly

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<sup>30</sup> For a convincing reading which places Astor at the center of “Bartleby,” and which views the story as a covert apology on Melville's part for his condemning the Astor Place Riots of 1849, see Barbara Foley, “From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville's “Bartleby”” *American Literature* 72.1 (2000), 87-116.\* But for a almost tangible sense of the social fabric in which those riots took place, read *Low Life* (1991) by Luc Sante. Fuck it, find any excuse to read Luc Sante.

\* In any case, Foley's interpretation is certainly more insightful than the oft-repeated reading which views “Bartleby” as a complaint on Melville's part for the fact he was unappreciated and poor.

<sup>31</sup> In *Melville's City*, Kelley situates “Bartleby” amid the housing disputes of the 1840s, reading the conflict between lawyer and scrivener as a competition to occupy the same property. For Kelley, the former's boasting about his relation to Astor should be taken in light of the fact that he is himself a renter. See Wyn Kelley, *Melville's City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century New York*. (1996), 201-209.

For a more pedestrian insight into the intersection between Melville and urbanity, an excellent walking tour was prepared by the former director of the Academy of American Poets, the legendary Elizabeth “Betty” Kray in 1981. Its stations are these:

7 State St / 6 Pearl St / The Battery / Fraunces Tavern: 54 Pearl St./ Coenties Slip /  
71 Pearl St / Hanover Square / 55 Wall Street /  
16 Pine St: Law offices of Gansevoort and Allan Melville /  
Federal Hall National Memorial / Trinity Church/\* 10 Wall St /  
97 Nassau St: Gowan's Antiquarian Bookstore / Broadway & Liberty St /  
109 Nassau St: The Literary World Journal / 55 Cortlandt St /  
82 Nassau St / 103 4th Ave / Beekman St & Nassau St /  
10 Park Row: Putnam's Monthly / The Tombs / 104 E 26th St / 470 West St //\*\*

\* The Astor enthusiast will note that many members of many generations of that family in the grounds of this church – excepting, of course, John Jacob Astor IV, who died aboard the *H.M.S. Titanic*. For the true wanderer, Kray's tour is easily supplemented with a trip the Titanic Memorial on Fulton and Pearl streets.

\*\* Given Foley's reading of “Bartleby” [see n.30, above], the station that I would add is, of course, Astor Place. Little trace of Melville remains there now; there is, however, on the very site where the riot began, a Starbucks.

perturbed: the value which he places on his connection to the metaphorical “bullion” of Astor’s name clearly exceeds the value of the actual money which he has received from him. By protecting the interests of the likes of his former employer, the narrator is able to sustain an extra-monetary association with the social class by whom he’s employed and from whom, as Kelley points out, he rents his own office space. His “charity” doesn’t inhibit but instead permits, in Emerson’s words, a “spiritual affinity” with the “class of persons” by whom he’s “bought and sold”.

Perhaps Trump’s name – a name which he once valued at \$2.5 billion, and which, as he put it in an interview in 1999, “just sells” – has a similar effect: luring working Americans to put aside their own economic interests for a chance to be associated with his personal brand.

## XVII.

## DEAD ENDS

Much of this is to side with what the scholar Dan McCall mockingly dubbed “the Bartleby Industry” – the body of criticism which holds that the lawyer is simply a tool of capitalist society, hopelessly unaware of his own shortcomings and largely unconcerned by his employee’s suffering.<sup>32</sup> A subtler view, I think, is offered by Andrew DelBanco, for whom the tale isn’t just a tragedy of class oppression, nor the narrator merely a puppet of economic forces invisible to him, but the “portrait of a morally vexed man” – one torn between “the moral truth that we owe our fellow human beings our faith and love” and “the psychological and social truth that sympathy and benevolence have their limits”.<sup>33</sup>

There can be little doubt, the “wise and prudent” version of “charity” which the narrator administers to his employee *does* serve his own – and his employers’ – ends; moreover, it’s clear that it helps to sustain an economic structure that dehumanises his employee. Nevertheless, in light of these more “charitable” assessments, it’s important not to overlook the narrator’s acute awareness of the fact that this “prudent” version of “charity” is ultimately “[a]side” from that of “higher associations” – or secondary to charity’s pure form.

It is the tension between these two versions of “charity” that makes the word’s final destination within “Bartleby” significant. Towards the end of his tale, the narrator recounts a report that “Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington”. He ruminates on that report:

Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring – the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest *charity* (still my emphasis) – he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On the errands of life, these letters speed to death. Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

The narrator admits that he considers this report to be of “suggestive interest”, though, perhaps uncharacteristically for one so self-aware, he offers little insight as to why.

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<sup>32</sup> In “The Reliable Narrator,” McCall argues that the lawyer is more generous than he is typically given credit for, and that the majority of his critics, though they accuse him of lacking self-awareness, merely rephrase the arguments which he has brought against himself.\* See Dan McCall, “The Reliable Narrator” in *The Silence of Bartleby* (1989), 99-154.

\* Anticipating disciplinary action, some of my more trying students will deploy the following strategy: 1) complain that they haven’t received sufficient praise for good behaviors done on previous occasions; 2) pre-empt my case by bringing against themselves the accusations which they expects me to raise. This twofold course enables them to wallow in self-pity *in addition to*, and not in penance for, their wrong-doing. To my way of thinking, McCall’s case isn’t substantially different.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (2005), 220-221.

DIAGNOSIS: the report plays upon a latent anxiety that Christian charity has itself been reduced to a “dead-letter” – a gesture which, though issued with good heart, is powerless to effect any sort of consequence because the intended recipient is, in a manner of speaking, dead. Where *Moby Dick* playfully mocks the view that charity and self-preservation are mutually opposed, the view suggested here is one of, at once, more and less optimism: though charity might, in principal, be driven by “higher” intent, when issued to Bartleby [who is routinely described as “cadaverous”], the victim of an economic system which has little place for Christian kindness but which requires instead that the meek be exploited, not only is it powerless to assist that recipient, instead it manages to uphold that very system.

When Trump Tweets, for example, “I love Hispanics”, the correct response, according to “Bartleby”, is not to attempt to demonstrate that he doesn’t *truly* love them – not to argue, say, that Taco Bell is not only unrepresentative but exploitative of Hispanic cuisine. Instead, the “tale” forces us to acknowledge that, for as long as the White House continues to implement policy which is damaging to those communities, it doesn’t matter a jot how the President *truly* feels – especially when his “love” can itself facilitate that very exploitation.

## XVIII.

## THE MOB; THE MARK

But Bartleby is not Hispanic – nor Muslim, nor Black, nor Jewish, nor, for that matter, any racial or religious minority. And the story, therefore, shines limited light on what has doubtless become the most visible aspect of Trump’s public persona: in addition to 1) his fame as a “self-made” tycoon, and far beyond 2) his reputation for philanthropy, Trump, today, is best known [and among certain of his supporters, most admired] for 3) his often-blatantly xenophobic rhetoric. Melville’s most thorough anticipation of 3) occurs within his 1855 novella *Benito Cereno* – whose narrator, describing a slave revolt aboard the *San Dominick* – demonstrates the blinding power of prejudice with what today seems like prophetic accuracy; even more extraordinary, however, is that on April Fool’s Day in 1857, *The Confidence-Man* demonstrated to the world that 1), 2), and 3) were connected.

At the outset of that novel, the passengers aboard the *Fidèle* demonstrate further confusion towards the meaning of the word “charity”. Firstly, a “deaf mute” presents them with the definitions prescribed by I Corinthians 13. According to a sign in his hands, “Charity” “thinketh no evil”, “suffereth long, and is kind”, “endureth all things”, “believeth all things”, and “never faileth”. The passengers disapprove of him, however, taking his aspect to be “somehow inappropriate to the time and place”, and “inclining to the notion that his writing was of much the same sort”. Soon after, a passenger with a wooden leg finds this to say on the matter:

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

Though this condemnation of charity is unlike anything to be found in Corinthians, the man with the wooden leg receives the same disapproval as the mute: the other passengers applaud when a Methodist minister gives him a violent shaking, reckoning he might in this way teach him “charity on the spot”. While this “representative of muscular Christianity”, writes Hershel Parker, might be “admirable by secular standards...by Melville’s Biblical standards he is weighed and found wanting”.<sup>34</sup> The minister’s “charity” is the very antithesis of Christian kindness, and it appears to be for this very reason, moreover, that the other passengers congratulate him so heartily.

### A Vaudeville

An irony surrounds the mute therefore,  
Whose writing is described:  
*The word charity, as originally traced,*  
*Remained throughout uneffaced,*  
*Not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date,*  
*Otherwise left for convenience in blank.*

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<sup>34</sup> Hershel Parker, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer (1971), 12n.

While one is so esteemed, wherefore  
The other is so despised?  
The minister, whose *charity* is hate;  
And the mute, whose sign, then, is most appropriate  
To this particular *time and place*  
Where *the word charity* might itself have been *left for convenience in blank*.

Aboard the *Fidèle*, “charity” functions as a floating signifier to which, it seems, any number of contradictory meanings might be attached.

## XIX.

## NUMISMATICS

the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens.

-Frederic Douglass, on the Blackface Minstrels

### Obverse

“Black Guinea” – a Black and, moreover, disabled beggar aboard the *Fidèle* – subsequently hosts a “game of charity” in which the White passengers throw coins for him to catch. Within this game, almsgiving doesn’t diminish but strengthens the distinction between those who donate, and Black Guinea, who depends [or at least appears to depend] on their donations.<sup>35</sup> The particular moment at which those donations start to flow freely is described:

Thus far not many pennies had been given [Guinea], and used at last to his strange looks, the less polite passengers of those in part of the boat began to get their fill of him as a curious object; when suddenly the negro more than revived their first interest by an expedient which, whether by chance or design, was a singular temptation at once to *diversion* and charity, though, even more than his crippled limbs, it put him on a canine footing. In short, as in appearance he seemed a dog, so now, in a merry way, like a dog he began to be treated.

The donations cease, however, when Guinea is accused by the man with the wooden leg of being “some white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy” – that is, an imposter. While there might be good basis to the man’s suspicion, what is more important is what it overlooks.<sup>36</sup> Regardless of whether or not Guinea is literally “a white masquerading as a black”, as the wooden-legged man puts it, his “game” is still a performance: only when he enacts something which he resolutely isn’t – a dog – do they start to give him money. The minister later donates (albeit by proxy) to Guinea, but the comments which he makes when he does so demonstrate that he is profoundly ignorant of the performative element in Guinea’s “game”. The minister instructs a passenger called “the man in gray”: “Take this mite. Hand it to Guinea when you see him; say it comes from someone who has full belief in his honesty, and is sincerely sorry for having indulged, however transiently, in a contrary thought”. By placing “full confidence” in Guinea’s “honesty”, the minister wholly accepts

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<sup>35</sup> For a fascinating paper which situates the malevolent uses of charity within the economic climate of Andrew Jackson’s America, and which focuses on the prevalence of the disabled body within these exchanges, see David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, ‘Masquerades of Impairment: Charity as a Confidence Game’ *Leviathan* 8.1 (2006): 35-60, after which, it will be difficult to look at Trump’s derogatory impression of Serge Kovalski, the Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist who has arthrogyriposis, in quite the same way - especially when Trump keeps a painting of that very Andrew Jackson on his wall in the White House.

<sup>36</sup> It is widely accepted that “the deaf mute”, Black Guinea, the man with the weed, and the representative of the Widow and Orphan Asylum, are all avatars of the eponymous Confidence-Man. See, for example, Tom Quirk. *Melville’s Confidence Man: From Knave to Knight* (1982), 49-73; Helen P. Trimpi, *Melville’s Confidence Men and American Politics in the 1850s* (1987); Jean-Christophe Agnew ‘Epilogue: Confidence and Culture’ in *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (1989), 195-203; and Tony Tanner, “Introduction” to Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. ed. John Dugdale. (2008), vii-xl.

the false front which Guinea has been putting on, equating his true essence with the jolly canine which he merely impersonates. In this respect, the minister's use of the word "mite" is suggestive. On one hand, "this mite" refers to the smallness of his contribution, and indicates an apology, therefore; on the other, "mite" also denotes a parasite which hosts on, among other animals, dogs. In this way, Guinea, like the infamous "negro-minstrels" [which, incidentally, are referred to in the same chapter] receives payment for fulfilling his White audience's derogatory idea of Blackness. The "charity" given to him doesn't, in Emerson's words, put "poor men in good situations"; it doesn't reduce the difference between the ship's White passengers and the antebellum Negro; it effectively purchases those differences.<sup>37</sup>

## Reverse

It probably goes without saying that the money given to Guinea can have this effect because it possesses – or, at least, appears to possess – genuine value. Guinea would be less inclined to partake in this degrading sport if the coins thrown at him were known – or even suspected – to be counterfeit. Indeed, when some land "inconveniently nigh to his teeth", the "unwelcomeness," we are told "was not unedged by the circumstance that the pennies thus thrown proved buttons". Fear of counterfeits, however, looms large aboard the *Fidèle*: a "herb-doctor" assures a "sick-man" that his "Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator" isn't "counterfeit"; a pedlar of money belts presents a passenger called "the cosmopolitan" with a complimentary "*Counterfeit Detector*"; "the cosmopolitan" puts the detector to use, and begins to suspect that his own money might be "counterfeit"; his confidence is only restored, moreover, when an old man persuades him that the detector is itself a counterfeit. Guinea plays on this same fear. Like the stump-speech of the minstrel show, his language is thick in entendre: a "Guinea" was a common British coin, equal to the value of one pound and one shilling; a "black" guinea, or a "black dog", moreover, one which has been debased, and which has darkened because of the tarnishing of the non-precious metal content. When Guinea describes himself as "der dog widout massa", he likens himself to one such coin without "mass" – that is, the weight appropriate to the authentic article.

Of course, what any suspicion of counterfeit currency overlooks is the fact that all money is, in a manner of speaking, false. Coins and notes possess no inherent worth of their own; their value is sustained by what Michael LeBlanc has described as "the logic of gold" – "the excessive confidence placed in some general equivalent, such as 'gold,'...a 'material' object

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<sup>37</sup> For more detailed discussions of the construction and performance of racial difference in *The Confidence-Man*, see Edward Grejda, "The Confidence-Man." *The Common Continent of Men: Racial Equality in the Writings of Herman Melville*. (1974). 123-134; Susan M. Ryan, 'Misgivings: Melville, Race, and the Ambiguities of Benevolence' *American Literary History* 12.4 (2000), 685-712; and James Salazar, 'Philanthropic Taste: Race and Character in *The Confidence-Man*' *Leviathan* 7.1 (2005), 55-74. For an account of the interplay between monetary and racial 'value' in American culture at large, see Michael Germana, *Standards of Value: Money, Race, and Literature in America* (2009).

that has been arbitrarily identified with the symbolic position of universal value.”<sup>38</sup> On one hand, the minister’s donation allegorises this logic: by placing “full confidence” in the face value of a “black dog”, he replays the ideological leap of faith which lends all money its worth. On the other, by effectively paying the “negro cripple” to occupy what LeBlanc calls the “symbolic position” of counterfeit currency – “der [black] dog widout massa” – the minister’s “charity” equates his own Whiteness with that of “universal value” – for LeBlanc, “a disembodied abstraction much like money that gives...privileged access to the economic realm”. The minister, in other words, is the real winner of Guinea’s “game”.

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<sup>38</sup> In “The Color of Confidence,” LeBlanc’s focus is not limited to *The Confidence-Man*, but includes discussions of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*\* and David Mamet’s *The Spanish Prisoner*. LeBlanc finds an explanation for their ability to procure faith in Jean-Joseph Goux’s notion of the general equivalent: “a privileged, idealized signifier that serves as a standard that other signifiers either correspond to or diverge from”. See Michael LeBlanc. “The Color of Confidence: Racial Con Games and the Logic of Gold” *Cultural Critique* 73 (Fall 2009): 1-46; and Jean-Joseph Goux. *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage. (1990).

Similar to the donations given to Guinea is that which is subsequently elicited from a passenger called Mr. Roberts, a merchant, by a passenger described as “the man with the weed”. Within this exchange also, “charity” allows a White benefactor to stabilize racial difference. In response to the merchant’s claim, “A poor negro aboard here referred to you, among others, for a character”, the man with the weed introduces himself as Guinea’s superior:

Oh the cripple. Poor fellow, I knew him well. They found me. I have said all I could for him. I think I abated their distrust. Would I could have been of more substantial service. And à propos, sir ... now that it strikes me, allow me to ask, whether the circumstance of one man, however humble, referring for a character to another man, however afflicted, does not argue more or less of moral worth in the latter?

In this way, the man with the weed creates a subtle opposition between the “character” of “the cripple” which he’s asked to prove, and his own “moral worth” which, he suggests, has thereby been proven. Because the Negro’s is relative, the White’s, apparently, is absolute.<sup>39</sup> Thereafter, the man with the weed plays up the signs of his being the equal of the merchant: he claims to be personally acquainted with his friends, professionally involved with his business, and a member of a fraternal organisation to which the merchant also belongs. And it is for this reason, no doubt, that the latter subsequently donates “with an air studiously disclamatory of alms-giving”. The logic is made clearer in Chapter 39, when a passenger called Charles Noble refuses to lend money to another called Frank Goodman, drawing “a red-ink line” between his “commercial acquaintances” and his “friends in the true sense... social and intellectual”. The point in that exchange, as John Ronan has noted, is that “the creditor’s power over the debtor...created by a single loan cancels a friendship because true friendship is a bond that must be absolutely equal and free.”<sup>40</sup> The same is true of Mr Robert’s donation: he takes pains to distinguish it from those given to Guinea precisely because he wants to establish a relationship which is the very antithesis of those secured within Guinea’s “game”. However, by equating himself with a figure whose “worth” is defined in opposition to Black Guinea’s, the merchant, like those who donate directly to Guinea, also asserts that his own worth exceeds that of the “negro cripple”. As in “Bartleby”, securing an “affinity” with the members of an exclusive “class” and giving “charity” to the “poor” prove again to be less distinct than Emerson had suggested.

The exchange between the merchant and the man with the weed has an important consequence. Having accepted the merchant’s charity, the man with the weed describes the

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<sup>39</sup> The fallacy, I hope, is self-evident: only via its own relation to the relativity of Guinea’s worth is the absoluteness of the minister’s established. The equation is doubly flawed if we accept that both Guinea and the minister are different guises of the same operator.

<sup>40</sup> In “Hawthorne, Melville, and Emersonian Character,” Ronan demonstrates that this logic is wholly antithetical to Emerson’s views on friendship: “Emersonian friendship is a relation in which the self-reliant stimulate each other to better their characters, not an alliance defined by perfect equality and freedom.” For Ronan the antithesis between “charity” and “friendship” actually has its origin in the “Wednesday” chapter of Thoreau’s *A Week*. See John Ronan, ‘Hawthorne, Melville, and Emersonian Character’ *Leviathan* 16:2 (2014): 38-56.

fluctuations in the shares of one “Black Rapids Coal Company” until the merchant decides to invest. In no way does this story disprove Elizabeth Renker’s observation that “*The Confidence-Man* is replete with tautological devices”:<sup>41</sup> within this virtual market, money is used to make money, and the value of shares is determined by the confidence invested in them. Here as well, the fact that money possesses no inherent worth of its own is unsettlingly clear.<sup>42</sup> And for this reason, we are told, the merchant had hitherto “avoided having to do with stocks of any sort”. Via his exchange with “the man with the weed”, however, the merchant has pre-empted the problem. By procuring an allegiance with one whose “moral worth” is defined in opposition to Guinea’s, the merchant’s donation lent his money a non-monetary exchange value. It secured his money’s “worth” by locating it in the ability to stabilise the otherwise fluid distinction between himself and the “negro cripple” – to quell the “Black Rapids”, as it were. As the course of the Mississippi takes the *Fidèle* further into the slave states of the South, and as more is staked on racial difference, therefore, that difference provides, increasingly, the standard by which money’s value is assured. Aboard the *Fidèle*, racial difference doesn’t just conform to LeBlanc’s “logic of gold”, then; in a further tautology, it also enables that logic to function, providing the monetary economy with a fixed reference which prevents it from becoming yet another meaningless play of floating signifiers. Like the minister’s donation to Guinea, the merchant’s is an expenditure of money which secures the power of capital, and of Whiteness, more generally.

Is *The Confidence-Man*, then, as Roth proposed, Trump’s “literary precursor”? The theory accumulated over these exchanges is this: White privilege is what results of an attempt to resolve racial difference by means of the same “logic” which enables the monetary economy to function, and that “charity” – regardless of who actually receives it – often facilitates that attempt. 160 years later, it is a theory which retains an unsettling ability to explain.

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<sup>41</sup> For Renker, tautology is one of a number of elements which make *The Confidence-Man* “unreadable” – a strategy via which the author takes his own frustrations with the written page and transposes them onto the reader. See Elizabeth Renker. “‘A-!’: Unreadability in *The Confidence-Man*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*. ed. Robert S. Levine. (1998), 114-134. Further tautologies in the Indian-Hater story are discussed in William M. Ramsey, “The Moot Points of Melville’s Indian-Hating.” *American Literature* 52.2 (May, 1980): 224-235.

<sup>42</sup> Few felt this as deeply as Herman Melville, whose father was ruined in the financial crash of 1837.

## XXI. APPENDIX A: CONSISTING MORE OF PARENTHESES THAN OF LOGIC

The free/slave divide isn't the only political boundary marked by the course of the *Fidèle*. *The Confidence-Man* was published in the penultimate year of the Third Seminole War (1855-1858) – the last in a series of conflicts between the army of an aggressively expansionist United States and the predominantly indigenous peoples of Florida which eventually saw the latter removed westward across the Mississippi. As the *Fidèle* journeys down that river's course, the Seminoles are repeatedly enlisted to serve as a test of genuine charity – to function as a moral counterfeit detector, as it were.

Immediately after the minister has donated to Guinea “the man in gray” requests another donation: “And, by-the-way, since you are of this truly charitable nature, you will not turn away an appeal in behalf of the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum?” After some hesitation, the minister donates: “Here is something for your asylum”, he claims, “Not much; but every drop helps”. Though his donation is small, and though it will do virtually nothing to relieve the plight of the Seminoles, its immediate effect is powerful. It signifies not only to the man in gray, but to the other observers as well, that he's of that “truly charitable nature” – that he's given the version of charity which, in “Bartleby”, is associated with “higher considerations”. A donation to Guinea is able to yield great reward to the benefactor, and to inflict significant damage upon the beneficiary; a donation to the Seminoles, by contrast, can serve no ulterior motive, and is the sign of a pure charity, therefore, performed only for goodness' sake. So runs the logic of this test.

[AS A SCHOOLMASTER, I feel it my duty to point out that the novel further hints towards the origins of this logic. Having sketched a whole list of racist ideas which “the backwoodsman” takes to be true of “the Indians”, and which I don't feel the need to repeat, the passenger Judge James Hall proffers the following insight:

all this is less advanced as truths of the Indians than as examples of the backwoodsman's impression of them—in which the *charitable* [emphatically, my emphasis.] may think he does them some injustice. Certain it is, the Indians themselves think so; quite unanimously, too... At any rate, it has been observed that when an Indian becomes a genuine proselyte to Christianity...he will not in that case conceal his enlightened conviction, that his race's portion by nature is total depravity; and, in that way, as much as admits that the backwoodsman's worst idea of it is not very far from true; while, on the other hand, those red men who are the greatest sticklers for the theory of Indian virtue, and Indian loving-kindness, are sometimes the arrantest horse-thieves and tomahawkers among them.

According to this mode of thought, to be *charitable* toward the Indians – in this case, to berate the backwoodsman for underestimating their capacity for virtue – is an act so futile that even the Indians themselves would recognise it as such. They are universally acknowledged to be so depraved as to be wholly beyond the reach of all benevolence. This view appears, in turn, to stem from a distinctly Emersonian inclination on the Backwoodsman's part. The Judge further explains:

The backwoodsman is a lonely man. He is a thoughtful man. He is a man strong and unsophisticated. Impulsive, he is what some might call unprincipled. At any rate, he is self-willed; being one who less hearkens to what others may say about things, than looks for himself, to see what are things themselves. If in straits, there are few to help; he must depend upon himself; he must continually look to himself. Hence *self-reliance* [at the risk of over-emphasising: this too is my emphasis], to the degree of standing by his own judgment, though it stand alone.

The backwoodsman's absolute distrust of the Indian, then, seems an extension of his excessive trust in his own self. Parker has documented "the similarity of the dedication to Indian-hating to the dedication to Christianity";<sup>43</sup> equally unsettling is the extent to which that "similarity" is reciprocal. The notion that offering charity to the Seminoles can serve no ulterior motive is alarmingly compatible with the Backwoodsman's presumption that the Indians are irrevocably depraved. Both assume that the Indians are somehow *beyond* the reach of charity, and that offering them charity would be void of consequence, therefore. The minister gives money to the Seminole Asylum, but this is no guarantee that he's of "that truly charitable nature". On the contrary, his donation might well be motivated by the distrust – even the self-interest – entertained by the Backwoodsman. As a moral counterfeit detector then, the test offered by the Seminole Asylum is hardly infallible.]

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<sup>43</sup> Hershel Parker. "The Metaphysics of Indian Hating" *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer. (1971), 327. For similar assessments, see John W. Shroeder's essay, "Sources and Symbols for Melville's *The Confidence-Man*." in the same edition, 298-316; Merlin Bowen, "Tactics of Indirection in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*." *Studies in the Novel* 1.4 (Winter 1969): 413-416; William Ellery Sedgwick, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind*. (1944): 190-193. For an overview of approaches to the Indian-Hater story, see John Bryant, "*The Confidence-Man*; Melville's Problem Novel," in *A Companion to Melville Studies*, ed. John Bryant. (1986).

## XXII. APPENDIX B: IN WHICH IS PROVEN THE ABSURDITY OF THAT LOGIC

The donation which “the man in gray” subsequently elicits from a passenger known as “the gentleman with the gold sleeve buttons” proves that this test is an outright sham – that the counterfeit detector isn’t merely suspect but is itself a counterfeit. The gentleman donates to the Asylum, but it’s abundantly clear that his attitude toward race-relations isn’t substantially different from those entertained by the participants in Guinea’s “game”. Before he has even donated, the gentleman embodies an absolute Whiteness which is taken, in turn, as a symbol of pristine virtue:

The inner-side of his coat-skirts was of white satin, which might have looked especially inappropriate, had it not seemed less a bit of mere tailoring than something of an emblem, as it were; an involuntary emblem, let us say, that what seemed so good about him was not all outside; no, the fine covering had a still finer lining... Upon one hand he wore a white kid glove, but the other hand, which was ungloved, looked hardly less white”

We soon learn, moreover, how this “emblem” is maintained:

But, if you watched them a while, you noticed that they avoided touching anything; you noticed, in short, that a certain negro body-servant, whose hands nature had dyed black, perhaps with the same purpose that millers wear white, this negro servant's hands did most of his master's handling for him; having to do with dirt on his account, but not to his prejudice

As Jonathan A. Cook has observed, “for the reader alert to antebellum stereotypes, the reference to a Negro servant as better adapted to demeaning labor would evoke a current Southern justification for slavery.”<sup>44</sup> The gentleman’s donation to the Seminole’s certainly suggests that his “fine coverings had a still finer lining” – that his spotless exterior signifies an inward purity – but it’s painfully obvious that this suggestion is false, and that he has little sympathy for the Abolitionist cause. Or as Melville puts it: “Not that he looked as if he were a kind of Wilberforce at all”.

It soon becomes clear, moreover, that the gentleman doesn’t particularly care for the Seminoles either. Having received the gentleman’s donation, the man in gray goes on to describe his hopes for “The World’s Charity” – “one grand benevolence tax upon all mankind” – which, if successful, would ensure that “not a pauper or heathen could remain the round world over”. Of course, any such rationalisation of alms would destroy the ethical component of charity: a compulsory taxation scheme contains no room for the individual to exercise the “moral worth” which the man with the weed, for example, purports to possess. Moreover, as Salazar has observed, “the agent’s plan for a global charity system satirizes the civilizing mission’s colonizing violence under the name of philanthropy.”<sup>45</sup> The satire here is particularly biting given that it was precisely this kind of mission which ensured the removal of the very people whom the agent purports to represent. While such a scheme might

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<sup>44</sup> Jonathan A. Cook. *Satirical Apocalypse: An Anatomy of Melville's The Confidence-Man*. (1996), 37.

<sup>45</sup> Salazar, 61.

eliminate “paupers”, then, “heathens”, presumably, would abound. The gentleman with the gold sleeve buttons lists several objections to “The World’s Charity”: he outlines potential difficulties in the logistics of collecting such large sums; he worries that people would be reluctant to donate; he claims that the scheme doesn’t offer any improvement on existing charities. Importantly, however, the notion that “The World’s Charity” might prevent a benefactor from exercising some sort of “moral worth” is wholly absent from his complaint. His own donation, Melville suggests, features nothing of the sort.

That this is the case is confirmed within the exchange which immediately follows. Having received the gentleman’s donation, the Asylum representative:

was about expressing his thanks when the gentleman in his pleasant way checked him: the gratitude was on the other side. To him, he said, charity was in one sense not an effort, but a luxury; against too great an indulgence in which his steward, a humorist, had sometimes admonished him.

On the face of it, the steward’s “humor” plays on the fact that his master’s “charity” isn’t a luxury in itself, but an activity in which he’s able to partake because he can already afford such luxuries as a steward. But this “humor”, too, nods towards a more serious critique: that the gentleman’s “charity” reflects no “moral worth” precisely because it really does function as a “luxury”. While the gentleman is no confidence-man *per se*, and certainly not an avatar of the eponymous Confidence-Man, his “charity” is still a “masquerade” – one which enables “some white operator” to occupy a position of power. Where in “Bartleby”, “charity” is imagined as a “dead-letter,” here it’s imagined as routine in a con – a trick within a nationwide swindle which enables Whiteness to function as an “emblem”, signifying inner value even where none is present.

### XXIII.

### USURY AND ABUSURY

“The man in gray” subsequently elicits an additional donation from a passenger known as “the charitable lady”.

□ This donation, however, is different from the “charities” hitherto described:

- UNLIKE the passengers who applaud the man with the wooden leg, she appears to have heeded the mute’s message, and is found reading the Corinthian verses named on his sign.
- UNLIKE the merchant, she’s initially unwilling to give money to a man whom she believes to be her socio-economic equal; only when he tells her that he requests on behalf of “the Seminoles” does she donate, claiming, “Poor souls – Indians, too – those cruelly used Indians. Here, here; how could I hesitate. I am sorry it is no more”.
- UNLIKE Guinea’s benefactors, the lady doesn’t attempt to demonstrate that she’s worth more than her beneficiary; instead, she appears to have genuine sympathy for the Seminole people, and openly confesses that her donation isn’t very large.

For this reason the lady tends to be viewed [that is, if she’s discussed at all] as a virtuous fool – a kind-hearted dupe, for whom the best we might say, as was said in response to the victims of the original Confidence Man [on whom Melville’s tale is based], is that “It is a good thing, and speaks well” that she “*can be swindled*”.<sup>46</sup> The lady has given the charity which, in *Bartleby*, is associated with “higher considerations” and there is hope for us all yet.

*FIN.*

□ As Beverly A. Hume has argued, the charitable lady “remains too self-absorbed, too much a lady, to question whether this confidence-man is merely attempting to further exploit well-known accounts ‘in the popular press’ of the Seminoles as victims of war”.<sup>47</sup> The lady’s donation, like that which the minister gives to the Seminoles, will do little to reduce the plight of its intended recipients. She donates just after the Asylum representative has described the “eleven thousand two hundred millions” which he calculates to be necessary to rid the world of poverty. By comparison, the lady’s twenty dollars seem an ineffectual sum. Nevertheless, to her apology, the Asylum representative responds,

Grieve not for that, madam... This is an inconsiderable sum, I admit, but... though I here but register the amount, there is another register where is set down the motive. Good-bye; you have confidence. Yea, you can say to me as the apostle said to the Corinthians, “I rejoice that I have confidence in you in all things.”

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<sup>46</sup> Edward A. Duyckinck. “The New Species of the Jeremy Diddler” *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer (1971), 228.

<sup>47</sup> Beverly A. Hume. “Of Cuttle-Fish and Women: Melville’s Goneril in *The Confidence-Man*” *Melville and Women* ed. Elizabeth Schultz and Haskell Springer, (2006), 207.

The Asylum representative thus implies that the lady has given the charity of “higher considerations”. Her Christian kindness, he suggests, doesn’t simply serve but genuinely transcends worldly economics. Of course, we can never know whether or not this is the case – we will never have access to that other “register” wherein we might discover if the lady’s “motive” amounts to something more significant. This, however, is secondary to the fact that she appears to have atoned for the tragedy of the Seminole people simply by giving a few dollars away. In light of this, Melville’s ironic play on the phrase “cruelly used” becomes clear. The lady, whether with good intention or ill, has also *used* the Indians for her own gain, paying a penance for her privilege that does nothing to settle the imbalance. As in the donation made by the man with the gold sleeve buttons, “charity” here is a “masquerade” – a routine which yields the outward appearance of godly grace, in spite of the fact that it doesn’t here alleviate, but in other instances stabilises, the hegemony between the beneficiaries and the victims of antebellum America’s westward expansion.

## XXIV.

## DIABOLIS EX MACHINA

SCENE: The underworld, where we have been consigned to bicker for all eternity.

CHORUS, CONSISTING OF DIVERSE SCHOLARS: A passenger called “Mark Winsome”, a.k.a. the “Mystical Master” who enters the novel in Chapter 36, represents, at least in part, a staging of Emersonian positions.<sup>48</sup>

COUNTRY SCHOOLMASTER: Agreed, Winsome’s stance on “charity” clearly echoes Emerson’s views on the subject. When approached by a crazy beggar “asking alms under the form of peddling a rhapsodical tract”, Winsome

sat more like a cold prism than ever, while an expression of keen Yankee curtness, now replacing his former mystical one, lent icicles to his aspect. His whole air said: ‘Nothing from me.’

Reproached by the Cosmopolitan, who notes that the beggar’s tract is “in the transcendental vain”, Winsome, in what seems like a fairly straightforward satire of the passages from “Self-Reliance” quoted at the outset of this piece, explains: “I never patronize scoundrels”.

JOEL PORTE: Melville is suggesting that Emerson is Transcendental only north-north-west; when the wind blows from State Street, he knows how to hang onto his coins.<sup>49</sup>

COUNTRY SCHOOLMASTER: Indeed. While Winsome is no confidence man *per se*, the individualism which he peddles seems no less of a “masquerade” – the shallow façade of an unbridled selfishness which is the antithesis of Christian charity.

HERSHEL PARKER (Scoffing): This caricature seems savagely one-sided...in other moods, Melville found much in Emerson to admire.<sup>50</sup>

COUNTRY SCHOOLMASTER: True. Although Melville *does* admonish Emersonian individualism for the fact that it constitutes –

ELIZABETH FOSTER: – a rarefied form of enlightened self-interest –<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Egbert S. Oliver first observed this in “Melville’s Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in *The Confidence-Man*.” *College English* 8 (Nov. 1946): 61-72. See also Elizabeth S. Foster “Introduction.” *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Ed. Elizabeth S. Foster. (1954). lxxiii-lxxxii; Hershel Parker, “Melville’s Satire of Emerson and Thoreau: An Evaluation of the Evidence.” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 7 (1970), 61-70; Brian Higgins “Mark Winsome and Egbert: ‘In the Friendly Spirit.’” *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer. (1971), 339-343; Helen P. Trimpi *Melville’s Confidence Men and American Politics in the 1850s* (1987), 200-208.

<sup>49</sup> Joel Porte. *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time* (1979), 267. Cook takes the critique a step further, arguing that much of Winsome’s speech parodies Christ’s Sermon on the Mount. See Cook, 47-48.

<sup>50</sup> Hershel Parker, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer (1971), 161n.

<sup>51</sup> Foster, 338.

COUNTRY SCHOOLMASTER: – crucially, he only does so after he has demonstrated, in a critique which originated almost a decade earlier, that the very position which purports to bypass that self-interest is merely an alternative “masquerade” – a routine within an elaborate ruse which enables the White passengers aboard the *Fidèle* to retain an exclusive hold on social, economic, and religious power.

By 1857, then, Melville’s critique has become unsettlingly ambivalent: the Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance, *The Confidence-Man* suggests, provides only a thin veil for a deplorable lack of charity; charity itself, meanwhile, is conspicuously complicit in that doctrine. If Winsome represents --

JONATHAN A. COOK: – a kind of burlesque Antichrist<sup>52</sup>

JOHN W. SHROEDER: Prince Beelzebub<sup>53</sup>

COUNTRY SCHOOLMASTER: – then his ungodly sermonising carries an uncanny resonance aboard not only this “ship of fools” but our very own.

#### EXEUNT

*Oscar Mardell works as a schoolteacher in New Zealand, where Herman Melville might have ended up had he, like his friend and fellow deserter Richard Tobias Greene, boarded the Nimrod out of Nuku Heva in 1842. A plaque [in truth, a sheet of xerox paper pinned to a corkboard] in the Butler Point Whaling Museum, Mangonui, commemorates this alternative history.*

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<sup>52</sup> Cook, 37.

<sup>53</sup> Shroeder, 307.