

The Eastern vs. the Western in *The Confidence Man*

Seung-Gul Czon

Although the critics of Melville have been divided in their opinion upon the merits of *The Confidence Man*, it seems that on one point there is agreement: that the novel is not a great success as a work of fiction. The greatest failure is to be found in the form of the novel, which is, in other words, his method of uniting ideas with action and character. We are almost bound to agree with Daniel G. Hoffman who says in his *Form and Fable in American Fiction*, "Melville had led himself into a maze of nondramatizable speculation to which none of the traditions he could make use of were fitted to give adequate form. ...He attempts allegory without a superstructure of belief, and dialectic without the possibility of resolution."¹ Ivor Winters thinks the novel, with all its importance and impressiveness, "unsatisfactory as philosophy and tediously repetitious as narrative," and some critics go so far as to say that the novel remains unfinished. In spite of its failure in the form as a work of fiction, however, the book is a great success in its powerful satire and sharp criticism upon the human nature and society.

Along with the form, ambiguity seems to be often pointed out as a flaw of the book. Many critics have differed as to what the book is really about: Richard Chase reads the novel largely as a work of social criticism and John W. Schroeder sees it as a religious allegory, while

1) Daniel Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 310.

Elizabeth S. Foster finds it to be a satire on optimism in its successive historical forms such as utilitarianism, the Deist's faith in Nature, and transcendentalism.² It is true that the book is very ambiguous. Its ambiguity, it seems to me, comes partly from his satire and irony turning toward so many directions at the same time, but mostly from the fact that what he tries to do is not to render ultimate answers nor declaim certainties, but to raise questions and suggest possibilities. His purpose considered, the ambiguity in the book seems to be inevitable or rather to come from his own intention. We should take it for granted that ambiguity is one of the major attributes of allegory, symbolism, satire, or irony, and that it can be and has actually been effectively employed in literature.

The meaning of the book, therefore, cannot be clearly and fully interpreted from any single point of view. The book is so complex in its meaning and thesis that it can be read as a work of social criticism in one sense, a religious allegory in another, and a satire on optimistic human ideas in the other.

The action of the story, a masquerade of charlatans, takes place on the steam-boat *Fidèle* which sails down along the Mississippi on April Fool's day. The setting itself is very ironical and at the same time very symbolic. The ship which is fraught and infested with infidelity is called *Fidèle* and the whole action of fooling and being fooled is operated on All Fool's day. *Fidèle* is not only a miniature of American society where Easterners and Westerners are aggregated but also a microcosm of the human world which carries all facilities for the public or private conduct of life and in which all kinds of passengers continuously meet and part just as in human life. And the Mississippi which is a great river at the heart of the continents, "uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide."³ It can be inferred from the very setting of the novel that Melville's major task

2) *Ibid.*, p. 282.

3) Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man* (New York: Norton, 1971),

is to inquire into the contradictions in man and the universe by going to the root of American society, which might well be a microcosm of the human world.

In this brief essay, I will focus my study on how Melville criticizes the dangerous and debasing moral tendency of America of his age by the contrast between the Eastern and the Western, and how he interprets it in terms of his major theme of human darkness. The major Western characters of the novel are Pitch the frontiersman, Colonel Moredock the Indian-hater, and Charles Arnold Noble a corrupt sharper, and the major Eastern characters are Mark Winsome a transcendental philosopher and Egbert, his disciple.

Toward the end of the first half part of the book, Melville introduces to us the Missourian bachelor, Pitch. Pitch who is "of Spartan leisure and fortune, an equally Spartan manners and sentiments, and not less acquainted, in a Spartan way of his own, with philosophy and books, than with woodcraft and rifles"⁴ is the first person the confidence-man cannot easily get the better of. When the herb doctor tries to start operating on him with the moral cant "slavery", he immediately counterattacks the confidence-man with the piercing words: "You are moderate man, the invaluable understrapper of the wicked man. You, the moderate man, may be used for wrong, but are useless for right."⁵

With his unusual wisdom from experience and strong will toward self-protection, Pitch succeeds in beating off the confidence-man in his first encounter with him. He is aware that to keep himself from being duped he should become machine-like, turn away from humanity and mistrust human beings. He praises the machine: "cider-mill, mowing-machine, corn-husker—all faithfully attend to their business. Disinterested, too; no board, no wages; yet doing good all their lives long; shining examples that virtue is its own reward—the only prac-

4) *Ibid.*, p. 91.

5) *Ibid.*, p. 97.

tical Christians I know.”⁶ And he tries to maintain his posture as a misanthrope by asserting cynically, “‘the child is father of the man;’ hence, as all boys are rascals, so are all men.”⁷ But Pitch, who can see nature as both good and evil with a balanced view of reality, cannot be, in his true nature, a complete misanthrope or a heartless machine. Here lies his fallibility. Although he suspects the con-man to be a “caterpillar in a gaudy cloak” of the butterfly, he cannot finally resist him when the con-man appeals to his latent humanity. After being duped by the con-man, he ponders the mystery of human subjectivity in general: “To what vicissitudes of light and shade is man subject!” And he comforts himself with the thought, “was the man a trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre. Two or three dirty dollars the motive to so many nice wiles?”⁸

When he is accosted by the cosmopolitan, another con-man, immediately after the Philosophical Intelligence officer departs, Pitch, now dimly perceiving the confidence-man is masquerading, retakes his posture as a misanthrope. But he, “the discomfited misanthrope,” is left to the “solitude he held so sapient.” His dilemma is that, as A. R. Humphreys suggests, “the cynic guards himself, but is not human; the humane man obeys his heart, but is duped.”⁹

On leaving Pitch, the “Coonskin”, the cosmopolitan is encountered by Charles Arnold Noble, another Westerner, who is, in Daniel Hoffman’s terms, “sly and venal, the Western promise rotted from within.”¹⁰ Being reminded of Colonel Moredock the Indian-hater by the “Coonskin”, Charles Noble begins to tell the story of Moredock’s Indian hating by describing what manner of man the backwoodsman is:

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 unprin-

6) *Ibid.*, pp. 99—100.

7) *Ibid.*, p. 102.

8) *Ibid.*, p. 113.

9) *Ibid.*, p. 120.

10) Hoffman, p. 301.

ciplid. At any rate, he is self-willed; Hence self-reliance... As with 'possum, instincts prevail with the backwoodsman over precepts. With few companions, solitude by necessity his lengthened lot, he stands the trial no slight one, since, next to dying, solitude rightly born, is perhaps of fortitude the most rigorous test. But not merely is the backwoodsman content to be alone, but in no few cases is anxious to be so. The sight of smoke ten miles off is provocation of one more remove from man, one step deeper into nature. Is it that he feels that whatever man may be, man is not the universe?...the backwoodsman is not without some fineness to his nature...beneath the bristles lurks the fur.

Though held in a sort of barbarian, the backwoodsman would seem to America what Alexander was to Asia-- captain in the vanguard of conquering civilization.¹¹

No doubt this picture of the backwoodsman is not only of Pitch, but also of Moredock. This is in some sense, a portrait of the typical Westerner. Yet there is an irony, almost a too heavy irony in this picture: it is this man who follows his natural instinct like a beast, is anxious to be alone away from human society, and feels man is not the universe that would seem to be the captain of civilization's vanguard and make the frontier safe for civilization.

Colonel Moredock's case is another illustration, though it is rather ambiguous, of the fate of this type of backwoodsman. After his family is slaughtered by the Indians, Moredock turns avenger rather than mourner and spends many years in the backwoods engaging in remorseless Indian killing, and even after he is restored to the ordinary family life he never gives up his strong passion for Indian-hating. He is "an example of something apparently self-contradicting": he is "no cold husband or colder father" and he is "courteous in a manly fashion, admired and loved." When he is urged to become candidate for Governor of Illinois, he refuses the offer. He is not unaware that "to be a consistent Indian-hater involves the renunciation of ambition, with its objects—the pomps and glories of the world." With this respect, "Indian-hating may be regarded as not wholly without the efficacy

11) Melville, *The Confidence Man*, pp. 125—6.

of a devout sentiment.¹²

John W. Schroeder concludes: "Melville's Indian-hater is held up against the confidence-man and so functions as a kind of hero. He is a dark and bloody hero, but a hero nonetheless—the only man in the novel who can resist the confidence-man and the satanism which makes him what he is."¹³ R. H. Pearce opposes this view: "Indian-hater can see nothing but the dark side of life. In that darkness he loses sight of his human self. The issue of blind confidence and blind hatred is in the end identical."¹⁴ Pearce seems to be right in alleging that Moredock's story, which is almost directly from James Hall's *Sketches of History, Life, and Manners in the West*, is "told from the point of view of the Indian-hater, hence all serving to justify that point of view."¹⁵ Hoffman, not quite agreeing with either of the views, suggests, "Moredock retains his human self, *except with Indians*; and his tragedy is that, still strongly feeling his 'humanities', to follow instinctual vengeance— even against red devils— requires that he secede from the human community."¹⁶

Each view seems to have some reason in its own way. However, Hoffman's view and Pearce's view, it seems to me, are not far from, or contradictory to, each other in their basic idea which underlies their statements. The significance of Moredock's story lies in the basic idea that although one can resist the confidence-man by seeing nature as entirely evil or dedicating oneself to extirpating that evil, one will destroy oneself or deny all one's human promise at the same time.

The narrator of this story, Charles Noble, is succeeded by Mark Winsome who seems "a kind of cross between a Yankee peddler and

12) *Ibid.*, p. 135.

13) John W. Schroeder, "Sources and Symbols for Melville's *Confidence-Man*," *PMLA*, LXVI (June 1951), 379.

14) Roy Harvey Pearce, "Melville's Indian-Hater: A Note on the Meaning of *The Confidence Man*," *PMLA*, LXVII (Dec. 1952), 947.

15) *Ibid.*, p. 945.

16) Hoffman, pp. 302—3.

a Tartar priest" and Egbert, his disciple, who is "a practical poet in the West India trade." The figure of Mark Winsome, who thinks of himself as "a man of serviceable knowledge, and a man of the world," seems to be a satire on Emerson. The description of Egbert as "a practical poet in the West India trade" immediately suggests the traditional Yankee character of dealing in abstract ideals and in tactful bargains at the same time. Now talking over friendship with Egbert, who assumes the role of Charlie (it is notable that Charlie, Westerner as he is, more closely resembles in many ways the Yankee peddler than the backwoodsman), Frank, the cosmopolitan, asks him for a friendly loan. Egbert inexorably refuses to lend money despite Frank's persistent pleading. Egbert's shockingly fiendish shrewdness is fully revealed in the debate. He says: "In the hour of need, a stranger is better than a brother;... if he want terrestrial convenience, not to his friend celestial (or friend social and intellectual) would he go; no: for his terrestrial convenience, to his friend terrestrial (or humbler business-friend) he goes."¹⁷ Later at the end of the debate he professes, "If you turn beggar, then, for the honor of noble friendship, I turn stranger."¹⁸ In order to verify his philosophy of friendship, Egbert tells Frank the story of China Aster, of which the moral is, in Egbert's phrase, "the folly, on both sides, of a friend's helping a friend." The story of China Aster is, as Hoffman points out, "a tart little allegory on the bloodless ethic of Yankee cuteness."¹⁹ China Aster, indeed, was ruined by his honesty in a society where money corrupts human relationship. The most fully sublimated form of confidence and charity is displayed in genuine friendship. But Egbert's philosophy as well as the stories of China Aster and Charlement only discloses the hollow friendship of a violently commercial world in which men base their morality on money and degrade the pure concept of charity into almsgiving. It is Melville's sharp criticism

17) Melville, *The Confidence Man*, p. 174.

18) *Ibid.*, p. 192.

19) Hoffman, p. 305.

upon the pretended philanthropical, but really selfish optimist, who might be called "genial misanthrope", of the East.

Toward the end of the book, the contrast between the Westerner and the Easterner becomes clearer. The Westerner, except with Charles Noble who is a corrupt sharper, is strong and unsophisticated, passionate and somewhat barbarous, impulsive and unprincipled, while the Easterner is crafty and sophisticated, passionless and civilized, rational and well principled. It won't be too much to say that the history of American culture is no other than the history of these contradictions between the East and the West. It is true that Melville looks with more favor on the Western, but he is not unaware that the true confidence and the true charity cannot be expected from the Western either. For though the Western is strong, brave, and heroic, he is fallible and easily doomed.

This book certainly speaks for Melville's disillusionment with the repulsive picture of American society of his time. As he can see the true confidence and the true charity nowhere in his society and the human world, he cannot delineate them. If we recognize that life is a meeting point of good and evil, trust and deception, we should acknowledge that there can be no ultimate answer to the process of living these contradictions. Therefore, what Melville tries to do in this book is to question conventional ideas of confidence and charity and to reveal the nature of these contradictions through the masquerade of the confidence man. As R. W. B. Lewis points out, "the Confidence Man is not the bringer of darkness: he is the one who reveals the darkness in ourselves."²⁰

20) R. W. B. Lewis, Afterword to *The Confidence Man* (New York: Signet, 1914), p. 276.