

1. A Prologue to Ethnic Modernism

Melville's Confidence Man

Yes, we golden boys, the moderns, have geniality everywhere — a bounty broadcast like noonlight.

Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man*

In short, the entire ship is a riddle.

Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man*

After the initial, and at best, puzzled reviews, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857) did not receive a favorable critique until the modernist Melville revival in the 1920s and 1930s when a renewed interest was sparked in Herman Melville by both readers and academics in search of an “authentic” American literature.¹ As a result, Melville’s works became the center of literary interest and the symbol of a new confident voice of “home-grown” literature. Carl Van Vechten, a patron and friend to Gertrude Stein and Nella Larsen, was one of the first admirers of *The Confidence-Man*. In Vechten’s interpretation Melville was satirizing Emersonian transcendentalism as a philosophical confidence game. During the 1920s, however, there were only a few commentaries, most often by nonacademic literary people who were puzzled by the enigmatic structure and lack of plot, calling it an “abortion.” In the 1940s the academic study of Melville burgeoned, and Elizabeth Foster’s Yale dissertation (1942) was the first sustained interpretation of *The Confidence-Man*. Richard Chase’s *Herman Melville* (1949) called the novel a “supreme achievement” and read it as a coherent unified work as opposed to a collection of disorganized fragments.²

The coincidence of the modernist literary movement and the recovery of Melville as a major American author is of interest to my argument on ethnic modernism since Melville’s modernity found a new audience at a time when American modernism was trying to find its own roots on the American continent as opposed to in Europe. For example, *Billy Budd*, a short novel written in Melville’s last years, was not published till 1924. Melville was brought forth at the

height of the modernist movement and was read increasingly as a forebear of twentieth-century sensibilities. By including Melville in my study of American ethnic modernism, I would like to suggest a rather different understanding of his work. I am arguing that Melville had already foreseen what would become the dominant factor in the American union: not its revolutionary heroic beginning and religious tolerance, but its ambiguity toward racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural otherness. *The Confidence-Man* conveys an apocalyptic vision of the union and is sometimes compared to the twentieth-century apocalyptic text, Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), with which I conclude my argument.³ In terms of literary periodization, they are both border texts: Melville's novel forecasts a new multicultural and modernist paradigm, while Ellison's points forward to a postmodern approach to subjectivity that reflects shifting power relations and intensifying political conflict. They both critique American nationalism, and they both argue, indirectly, for a more inclusive and tolerant — that is, a truly democratic — multicultural state.

My purpose in rereading Melville's novel is to show how it could be viewed as an emergent modernist text that critiques the homogenizing tendencies of the expansionist nation-state, a critique it shares with ethnic modernist texts of the first part of the twentieth century. The novel's interpolated tales and metanarrative chapters function as counterdiscourses and alternative critical voices to an emergent American modernity.⁴ Most critics have focused on the central narrative of the novel and have debated the confidence man's identity and message. In my reading, there is another important narrative that runs through the five connected interpolated tales and the three metanarrative chapters. While the central story of the confidence man exposes a general lack of trust and confidence in metaphysical terms, the interpolated tales and metanarrative chapters make that theme culturally, racially, ethnically, and historically specific.

The Confidence-Man was Melville's last prose fiction published in his lifetime. He wrote the book during the course of 1855 and 1856 at Arrowhead, his farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Published on April 1, 1857, the novel was a failure and did not bring the financial and critical response Melville expected. It is also his most obviously American book and, in its tone and form, the most modern. The novel resists critical consensus or simple deciphering. Numerous readings approach it from different methodological and philosophical perspectives, each trying to grasp its "meaning" and contain its structural disintegration.⁵ Formally, its modernity is manifest in a narrative complexity that deliberately lacks action. The novel also interrogates the rhetoric of racial and ethnic difference in the emerging American nation that is founded on violence — genocide and slavery. The stylized and theatrical plot is set at the western boundary of the American colonial expansion: the narrative opens on April Fool's Day aboard

a Mississippi steamboat named *Fidèle*, moving downstream from St. Louis to New Orleans.

Structured around a twenty-four-hour journey down the Mississippi, the narrative depicts a frontier citizenry as tested by successive incarnations of a confidence man aboard the riverboat *Fidèle*. The central story, in which a standard of “confidence” is set against that of “No Trust,” also includes the five intertwining interpolated tales involving Goneril, who is the wife of a man with a weed on his hat (which is a sign of mourning); an alms-seeking “Negro” cripple; the Indian-hater John Moredock; the prodigal son Charlemont; and the candle maker China Aster. In chapters 14, 39, and 44 authorial metanarratives interrupt the story, discussing the way fiction relates to reality. Critics agree that halfway through the novel the different confidence men merge into a single “cosmopolitan” figure, a composite confidence man. Repeatedly, the confidence man preaches charity but, instead, plants distrust. The different confidence men are unified as one protean supernatural character: variably, he is thought to be god-like (Jesus, the Inca Sun God, a trickster god, or the Hindu gods Vishnu and Siva) and is sometimes compared to Satan (see Bryant 335).

The novel’s plot is only the external structure to the allegorical flow of the narrative contained within the five interpolated tales. *The Confidence-Man* opens with an allusion to the founder of the Inca Empire: “At sunrise on a first of April, there appeared suddenly as Manco Capac at the lake Titicaca, a man in cream-colors, at the water-side in the city of St. Louis” (3).⁶ The “man in cream colors” is a stranger and a pilgrim with no clear origins besides the recurring theme that he might be the “mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East” (3). The allusion to Manco Capac is a reference to origins and founding — both individual and national.⁷

The reference to the mythical founding of the Inca empire at the opening of Melville’s novel is interesting to us when put into the context of American imperialism. For example, the origin of a new “civilized” Inca empire is connected to water: a new generation of Incas, a man and woman assumed to be brother and sister, emerges from the waters of Lake Titicaca but are descendants of the sun, thus bringing an alien culture and a new paradigm of law and order to a previously barbarous population. Secondly, Manco Capac is the founder of a new race with his sister, who is also his wife.⁸ This incestuous relationship and the reference to a new race imply that they either repopulated the land with their offspring or that they mixed with the original population. Thus, the founding is closely connected to colonization, genocide, incest, and miscegenation.⁹

Melville’s confidence man also represents the coming of a new social order and culture. He seems to have supernatural powers: he is omnipresent, overhears conversations, and disappears and reappears without logic or trace. His message is simple and this-worldly: his preaching of trust and confidence always

involves monetary exchange. The protean confidence man appears on different decks, which represent segregation based on class status and on cultural and gender differences. While his supernatural features connect him to an earlier world of enchantment, his message is invariably connected to money. In an egalitarian manner of susceptibility to deceit he “whitewashes” the differences between the boat’s passengers: they all become knaves or fools. But if we accept the assumption that the confidence men are only another manifestation of the same character in different guises, then everyone is a fool but him, and the lowest common denominator is money — and white or western values. The confidence man represents a paradigm shift from the republican ideal of national unity to a new monetary unity that can hold the diverse populations and ideas of the expanding nation together during the Jacksonian era. The Ship of Fools of America is a cross section of mid-nineteenth-century American citizens: merchants, investors, clergymen, beggars, immigrants, middle-class women, an elderly gentleman from the countryside, the barber, and other travelers are assembled on the *Fidèle*, the ship of devotion to and faith in the nation. Anxiety over racial and cultural difference is a constant feature of the narrative.

While the narrative begins with a description of cultural diversity on the ship and in the nation, alterity soon conglomerates into sameness and uniformity.¹⁰ The multitude of people becomes unified in the “cosmopolitan and confident tide” of the Mississippi River on the riverboat of America at the western boundary of the expanding nation. The multiplicity of cultures, religions, races, and national origins on the ship of pilgrimage is juxtaposed with the unifying cosmopolitanism of whiteness, the market economy, and Christianity. The new Mecca or Holy Land is America, and the unifying religion is that of money.

The next figure to appear on the ship is the “Negro” cripple, Black Guinea: his identity as black or crippled is immediately questioned by a former custom house inspector fired from his job and who now limps along on a wooden leg.¹¹ Later the wooden-legged man reappears and questions Black Guinea’s authenticity, calling him a “painted decoy” (15). The gatekeeper of the nation, even though himself not a legitimate figure of authority anymore, tries to keep Black Guinea from the charity of the traveling citizens. Another, more elaborate, reference to racial diversity is told in the next interpolated story of the “Indian-hater” John Moredock, in chapter 26, “The Metaphysics of Indian-hating.” But the storyteller leaves the question of race distant and abstract — at the level of “metaphysics.” Moreover, racism is referred to as general “misanthropy,” as opposed to the confidence man’s “philanthropy.” Racial difference is repressed to the unconscious of the American republic. Melville brings to surface the “political unconscious” of racial and ethnic pluralism of the seemingly unified nation-state in his novel.

In chapter 15 the narrator describes the ship's "emigrant quarters" as a descent to "purgatory" or "Tartarus" (72–73). The dormitory is a Foucauldian "disciplinary space": the beds resemble the "cradle of the oriole" or, "on a large scale, rope book-shelves" that swing wildly: "upon the provocation of a green emigrant sprawling into one, and trying to lay himself out there, when the cradling would be such as almost to toss him back whence he came. . . . Procrustean beds, on whose hard grain humble worth and honesty writhed, still invoking repose, while but torment responded" (73). The allusion to Procrustes, the mythical Greek robber who made all his victims fit his bed by either stretching or cutting off their legs, supports the previous homogenizing and standardizing image of the American nation-state — but in the particular context of immigration, a topic I return to in a later chapter on immigrant writing. The opening tableau of diversity comes to an end in the last image in the novel: just before the light goes out, we see the cosmopolitan and the elderly gentleman frozen in time and space. The narrator promises, "Something further may follow of this Masquerade" (251). From the opening image of the sunrise to the ominous darkness of the night, the novel encompasses the figurative evolution of a day: from diversity to an absence of light and cultural difference.

When Melville describes the traveling crowd as "one cosmopolitan and confident tide," the image mobilizes conflicting interpretations: in Enlightenment terminology cosmopolitanism refers to freedom from nationalistic ties and religious dogma, but in the modernist context of "possessive individualism" the expression takes on a new meaning. "Confidence" can mean "trust for sale," and as Susan Rubin Suleiman points out in *Exile and Creativity*, under certain circumstances "cosmopolitan" can be also a racial slur for Jews. The novel's claustrophobic setting carefully leaves out almost all references to nature or individuality: the *Fidèle* becomes an allegory for the "all-fusing" spirit of American expansion, just a decade after the Mexican War in which western territories were annexed and added to the Union.¹² The colonial expansion, which coincided with an emerging market economy, brought about uniformity in several aspects of life: it wiped out the differences in class and the differences between town and country, and also between heterogeneous cultures and peoples. The initial multiplicity of individual differences gave way to the generic "wood-color" of "blended . . . varieties of visage and garb" (9). Westward expansion and the new ethic of exchange value wiped out individual and cultural differences.

The last scene of the novel is a furtive glimpse at the coming of a paranoid system of American monopoly capitalism and imperialism in the twentieth century: "The next moment, the waning light expired, and with it the waning flames of the horned altar, and the waning halo round the robed man's brow; while in the darkness which ensued, the cosmopolitan kindly led the old man away." (251). The "waning light" and the submersion of the religious icons of

the “horned altar” and “halo” in darkness carry uncanny similarities to Marx’s description of the “profanation” and rationalization of the world: bourgeois “naked self-interest” and “callous ‘cash payment’” strip away the “halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe” (Marx 223).

Michael Paul Rogin situates the character of the confidence man in a larger historical context. In his interpretation, the political atmosphere after the Compromise of 1850 and the marketplace ethos of the antebellum era spawned confidence games, conspiracies, general distrust, and “persuasive role-playing in a mobile, acquisitive society” (241). Masquerade became a part of American life, and the character of the “confidence man exposes the absent core of marketplace reality itself”: modern strangers come together to buy, to sell, and to persuade, revealing themselves only “by their performances” (238–39). Rogin, citing David B. Davis, describes an antebellum America in which there was a sharp increase in confusion over social roles, so that the freedom that allowed each citizen “to become a self-made man, also opened the way to mass deception” (239).

In the psychic economy of antebellum “mass deception” the nation becomes a paranoid and psychotic space that Melville allegorizes as a floating ship. In his fictional and private writings Melville had noted that life might be allegorized as a practical joke (see Cohen 221–45). Combining the allegory of the nation as a floating ship with the allegory of life as an April Fool’s joke, the riverboat *Fidèle* becomes an ominous and claustrophobic space. The ideology of liberty combined with an increasingly exclusionary and racist rhetoric in the service of the expanding nation-state created a maddening and contradictory public discourse in antebellum America. The riverboat allegory expresses a telling picture of the Model Republic as a nation of strangers thrown together within the finite bounds of the nation-state slowly moving on its course from the north to the south along the western frontier. As a consequence to the mad project of creating a unified nation, the conflicting rhetoric of expansion and exclusion resulted in an ideological crisis best described by a moving vessel — reminiscent of the Renaissance image of the *Narrenschiff*, or the Ship of Fools. Melville literalizes the westward expansion of the Jackson era in American history. By recalling the Renaissance imagery of the Ship of Fools, he connects the allegory of the nation-state to its history of violent disciplinary and exclusionary technologies. The ironic allegory of the nation as the Ship of Fools exposes the Model Republic as born in violence, domination, racial and ethnic difference, and inequality.¹³

The mythic connection between water and madness in the case of the Ship of Fools allows for a more politicized and spatially specific reading of the metaphor: the boat is the locus of confinement, but its mobility also signifies freedom from communal and national ties. Like modern airports, these confined places of no one’s and everyone’s land serve as neutral grounds where political and national borders are deemed meaningless — everyone is mad or a stranger. The

trope of the Ship of Fools invaded the literary landscape in the fifteenth century; Melville's confidence man is the traveling madman on a new, a modern Ship of Fools.

Melville's confidence man, especially in his first appearance in the novel, signifies radical otherness and estrangement. His most striking attribute is his solitude. He has no history, no family connections, and no stable identity beyond the roles he plays and the costumes he wears: "He had neither trunk, valise, carpet-bag, nor parcel. No porter followed him. He was unaccompanied by friends. From the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wondering of the crowd, it was plain that he was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger" (3). The new notion of the nation is not maintained by an imagined common culture, instead America is re-created as a common space inhabited by strangers.

According to Benedict Anderson, the imagined community of the nation is held together linguistically and culturally by shared myths of origin. Thus, the history of the nation, on a narrative level, parallels individual biography. He sees both as narratives of identity that spring from oblivion, estrangement, and a loss of the memory of home and origins. For Anderson the nation is a product of a national imagination that combines individual biography with collective myths. Svetlana Boym, however, questions the relevance of such project for the modernist period since Anderson treats biography as a particularly nineteenth-century popular genre, such as the confessional narrative, that begins with the narrative of parents and grandparents. According to Boym, the stories of internal and external exiles, misfits, and mixed-bloods are left out. Their narratives would offer "digressions and detours from the mythical biography of a nation . . . by resisting a coherent narrative of identity" (242). Such alien digressions refuse to allow the life of a single individual to be subsumed in the destiny of a collective. Instead of curing alienation, which the imagined community of the nation proposes, "they use alienation itself as a personal antibiotic against the ancestral disease of home in order to reimagine it, offering us new ways of thinking about home, politics, and culture" (242). In Boym's critique, modernist texts have no place in Anderson's account of the national literary imagination. What characterizes the imagined community of the nation in Anderson's account is "a desire for the nonarbitrariness of the sign . . . a search for a sacred or private language proper to that community" (242).

Following Boym, I suggest that Melville's *Confidence-Man* and the texts I discuss in the following chapters function as "digressions" to the national narrative. They disrupt the national literary canon by telling the stories of others. Ethnic modernists appropriate the shared language of the nation to their own needs, and they add their own dialects and accents. The Melville revival of the 1920s looked back to what at the time was a marginal writer to find the roots of American national literature, but in doing so, it failed to notice how this

attention to the racial and ethnic diversity of the nation-state upset the sense of modernity that Melville was supposed to represent.

The confidence man is a stranger and a modern cosmopolitan who represents the ambiguity of values — of reason and national belonging — but does not resolve it. Melville's *Fidèle* is the Ship of Fools of America, an allegory for the nation of strangers: it floats between geographical, cultural, and political boundaries, keeping those aboard in limbo and incognito. The personal, social, and ethnic specificity of the passengers dissipates once they are on the ship: all become homogeneous in their roles as passengers and strangers. Membership in the nation is as ephemeral, elusive, and impersonal as being a passenger on the riverboat *Fidèle*.

In the 1850s the expanding Model Republic had to come to terms with racial and cultural diversity, and it had to reconcile its democratic ideals with the violence of its expansionist politics. During the modernist era, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the United States faced similar conflicts: an increase in ethnic and racial diversity because of immigration and the dilemma of exporting the ideology of democracy globally while turning the nation-state into an imperialistic megapower. Melville's novel allegorizes the gap between official patriotic language and the unresolved issues of slavery and Indian relocation and genocide as a project gone mad. His novel further describes the coincidence between the deflation of political language and an expanding market economy that turned everything into a commodity.

Melville's novel assumes a loss delegated to a mythic past. The reader is led into a world from which confidence and charity are absent. Moreover, since no authentic self hides under the masks and costumes of the confidence man to guarantee self-identity, we are left with a confidence game on the stage of life instead. The characters in the novel are constantly at a loss about the authenticity and identity of the people they speak with, and the reader is at a loss to know who anybody is. For example, in chapter 36 a mystic, Mark Winsome, warns the cosmopolitan confidence man Frank Goodman of Charlie Noble. To Frank's question of what he thought of Charlie Noble, Mark Winsome responds with more questions: "What are you? What am I? Nobody knows who anybody is. The data which life furnishes, toward forming a true estimate of any being, are as insufficient to that end as in geometry one side given would be to determine the triangle" (193). In chapter 41 Frank Goodman and Winsome's disciple Egbert reenact the encounter between the cosmopolitan and Charlie Noble concerning a "friendly loan." At the end of the role-playing scene the twice refused Goodman storms off enraged:

With these words and a grand scorn the cosmopolitan turned his heel, leaving his companion at a loss to determine when exactly the fictitious character had been dropped,

and the real one, if any, resumed. If any, because, with pointed meaning, there occurred to him, as he gazed after the cosmopolitan, these familiar lines:

'All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players,
Who have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.' (223)

It is an impossible task to determine authentic identity not only for the reader but also for the novel's fictitious players. Prefiguring a theme to which I will return later in a discussion of Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* (1927), identity here is as deep or authentic as a costume change.

Melville further develops the political allegory of the Ship of Fools by adding a sense of theatricality and confusion about authentic identity as a general commentary on the condition of modernity. Some of his characters do not have names but are identified only by their clothes and appearance. For example, in the first four chapters of the novel, costumed characters walk in and out of the "stage": among them "a man in cream colors" (3), "a grotesque negro cripple" (10), "the wooden-legged man" (12), and finally the confidence man in his first attire or identity, "a man in mourning clean and respectable, but none of the glossiest, a long weed on his hat" (18). In the confusion of who each traveler is, an argument develops in chapter 6 in which "the wooden-legged man" plants the suspicion that the "negro cripple" is just "some white scoundrel": "A white masquerading as a black" (31). The ensuing discussion between "the man in gray" and "the young clergyman" focuses upon the connection between being and acting, between authentic identity and its performance:

"Tell me, sir, do you really think that a white could look the negro so? For one, I should call it pretty good acting."

"Not much better than any other man acts."

"How? Does all the world act? Am I, for instance, an actor? Is my reverend friend here, too, a performer?"

"Yes, don't you both perform acts? To do, is to act; so all doers are actors." (31)

The allegoric narrative's theatrical setting allows Melville as the stage manager to be both present and absent from his narrative. His interactions are limited to reflections that are mediated through language. He writes of "mere phantoms which flit along a page, like shadows along a wall" (69). Following Baudelaire, Paul de Man uses the term "*dédoublement*" as the characteristic that sets apart a reflective activity, such as that of the philosopher," from everyday consciousness (de Man, *Blindness* 212). The confidence man's masquerade of different identities makes personal the division of the unified subject into multiple perspectives while containing each within the catch-all entity of the modern

“stranger.” Difference on the ship is channeled through his baffling and homogenizing consciousness — which is already a mere reflection of reality in fiction. Some critics have argued that *The Confidence-Man* is a thinly veiled parody of Emersonian transcendentalism and Thoreau’s writings on friendship.¹⁴ More generally, it is also a self-conscious critique of realist mimetic representation.¹⁵ Melville’s allegorizing of the nation as the Ship of Fools and personifying modern subjectivity as being a stranger, or a shape-shifting confidence man, register a discomfort with the past in the national discourse. By painting a tableau of travelers moving downstream along the western frontier of the Mississippi, he juxtaposes the allegorical timelessness of the plot, the lack of action and character development, with the inevitable movement of temporal and social changes. Since the past is only accessible through memory construed in the present, fiction and reality are intimately connected. Melville’s narrative solution for representing the past within the present is using the narrative device of theater. Drama is the in-between genre of life and fiction, the blurring of the boundaries between action and acting.¹⁶

Through the discussion of the relationship between fiction and reality, Melville addresses a more general question. He asks, What is the relationship between nature and artifice, between life and its fictional reproductions? In *The Confidence-Man* everything seems to be borrowed, from costumes to language. Melville sometimes parodies his predecessors Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Milton when drawing up his characters. “Original characters” in fiction are rare, laments the narrator of the last metanarrative chapter: “But they can hardly be original in the sense that Hamlet is, or Don Quixote, or Milton’s Satan” (238). The aesthetic and political questions Melville asks point toward the puzzling issues of modernity: How is one to cope with the new market economy? And, how to represent it in language? Melville also grapples with issues of identity and citizenship in a growing and diversifying nation that still holds dear its republican ideal of homogeneity. His struggle is akin to that of his contemporary, Karl Marx, who conceptualized the problem of representation through the fetishism of the commodity, which also takes the form of a masquerade (see Marx 436–37). Marx’s notion of “[t]his Fetishism of commodities” (436) is also a blueprint for a larger fetishization of reality: with the cloaking of actual material and social relations, life itself becomes opaque as do language and narrative expression. Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* reenacts the opacity of social life as a masquerade of the nation-state. A common thread in the narratives of modernity is a sense of loss in the world, a loss of something profoundly authentic and meaningful in itself. Walter Benjamin calls such mystery an “aura.” Melville’s own concerns with loss are specifically ethical and political; he sets aside aesthetic considerations and addresses them in the metanarrative chapters. The novel’s