

CHAPTER 6

The Parasitic Cascade in *The Confidence-Man*

The Confidence-Man (1857) turned out to be the last piece of prose published by Melville in his lifetime. That the book—which is set aboard the Mississippi steamer *Fidèle*, travelling from St. Louis to New Orleans—has proved an enduring puzzle should come as no surprise to anyone who has had the dizzying pleasure of diving into this strange and intricate novel, described by Sianne Ngai as “more Bartlebyan than ‘Bartleby’ itself” in that it “takes the form not just of a single psychologically inscrutable character, but of *too many* psychologically inscrutable characters” (49, 50).¹⁹² And, as Nina Baym rightly points out, *The Confidence-Man* is “a work so paralyzingly self-conscious and so intricately engineered as to be unrecognizable as the product of the same sensibility that had produced *Typee* only a decade earlier” (921)—or, for that matter, the sensibility that had produced “Jimmy Rose” just a few years earlier. As different as these works are, there is nonetheless at least one thing that connects them, and that is the figure of the parasite. However, whereas *Typee* focuses on a single character’s parasitic quest for “plenty and repose,” and “Bartleby” and “Jimmy Rose” present a limited number of people sponging on each other, in *The Confidence-Man*, parasites seem to be *everywhere*.

192 I label *The Confidence-Man* a novel mostly for the sake of convenience. The work is a true *bricolage* of all sorts of forms and subgenres, including elements of Menippean satire, anatomy, comedy, farce, hoax, folk humor, allegory, philosophical dialogues, quest romance, picaresque, and experimental novel; in H. Bruce Franklin’s words: “In a sense it is a grand *reductio ad absurdum* of the novel form itself” (*The Wake* 153).

In fact, the figure is even there in the lyrical fragment called “The River,” which was likely intended to open the book.¹⁹³ Addressing how the Mississippi and the Missouri merge near St. Louis, the latter river is labeled as “a hostile element” and an “invader,” and is furthermore said to have two different procedures at its command in its persistent attempt to “sweep away” whatever is located on land: “open assault or artful sap” (CM 499). In the narrative of *The Confidence-Man*, where physical violence is limited to a single punch thrown at one of the characters, “open assault” is rarely to be seen. This lack, however, is more than made up for by the ever-present abundance of “artful sap”—a perfect description of the parasite’s tactics for nourishing itself on its host. The novel’s omnipresence of trickery, combined with the scarcity of outright violence, would come as no surprise to Michel Serres, who notes that “[p]reying and hunting need more energy and finesse than sponging. Thus the latter is more probable. This could also be translated: the more widespread, the more natural or the more native” (*Parasite* 165). While contemporary parasitologists—knowing well how much energy and ingenuity is needed for parasites to successfully adapt to their living hosts—might disagree with the first part of the claim, they are much more likely to agree with the rest. There is no doubt that the number of parasites in nature far exceeds that of predators, meaning, as Carl Zimmer puts it, that “the study of life is, for the most part, parasitology” (xxi).

In this chapter, I claim that a similar insight was, in a sense, already formulated in *The Confidence-Man*, a novel that not only contains a variety of characters with parasitic traits, but which is also full of references and allusions to literary works also concerned with the topic. This makes it even more fitting that the novel takes place on a steamer at one point described as “a human grain-bin” (CM 137). Even though only a few of the confidence men seem to be explicitly concerned with nourishment in a literal sense, this reference indicates two things. Those aboard the *Fidèle* are not only *part of* that pile of (human) grain that one of the more skeptical characters—the Missourian Pitch—fears is

193 On the genesis and removal of “The River,” see (CM 490–95). All quotes from “The River” are from Harrison Hayford’s transcription of Melville’s notoriously difficult hand-writing (CM 496–99).

being steadily nibbled by “sly, smooth, philandering rat[s]” (*CM* 137), but are also literally *next* to the grain. The passengers are *sitos*, as well as *parasitos*, in equal parts becoming food for others and feeding upon them. To a large degree, *The Confidence-Man* may thus be said to correspond to what Serres has claimed about Le Fontaine’s fable of the city rat and the country rat: “Parasitism is never mentioned, but it is really a question *only* of that” (*Parasite* 9; emphasis in the original).

On Begging, the Charity of the Crowd, and Sturdy Teeth

In *The Confidence-Man*, a nameless third-person narrator of the not excessively reliable kind takes the reader on a journey down the Mississippi River aboard the *Fidèle*, where a wide cast of characters do their best to trick and swindle each other, all in the course of a single April Fool’s Day.¹⁹⁴ Who exactly is being made a fool of is not always easy to tell. It is obvious that many of the figures in the story are, but readers will inevitably begin to suspect that they may be, too—a feeling that does not diminish upon learning that the novel was originally published in America on April 1, 1857. Indeed, as R. W. B. Lewis has put it, “the first and the most accomplished of the confidence men in the novel is the author; and his first potential victim is the inattentive reader” (65). It would perhaps be even more accurate to say that part of the fascination of Melville’s novel is how it instills in its readers—the attentive no less than the inattentive—a fear that they, too, are somehow being conned, but without allowing one to decide with certainty whether this really is the case. As such, maybe the act of reading *The Confidence-Man* can be said to qualify as one of those “queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life” invoked by Ishmael, “when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody’s expense but his own” (*MD* 226).

194 Or maybe not: Several scholars have argued that the novel’s last chapter—“The Cosmopolitan increases in seriousness”—most likely takes place just *after* midnight, meaning it is no longer April Fool’s Day, but April 2, see Franklin (*The Wake* 168), and Blackburn (165).

Still, some things can be said about Melville's novel with certainty. First, the term "confidence man" was new when he wrote his book. As critics have shown, he was undoubtedly familiar with the reputation of the well-dressed and smooth-talking crook known as William Thompson (as well as several other aliases). His *modus operandi* was to ask people he met on the street whether they had any confidence in him, requesting them to lend him their watches as proof that they did—those eager to prove their confidence of course never saw their timepieces again. Hence, upon his arrest in New York in 1849, newspapers dubbed him the "Confidence Man," and later, after he reappeared in Albany in 1855, the "Original Confidence Man," implying him to be the first, but far from the only one of his kind. A good candidate for the most famous confidence man was showman and hoaxer P. T. Barnum, who bragged to the public about his many scams in his immensely popular 1855 autobiography. Thus, a new generic type had been born, which Melville was among the first authors to draw upon for literary purposes.¹⁹⁵

Regarding structure, the novel can be divided into two parts, one taking place during the day and one during the nighttime. In the most action-packed part, spanning the first 22 chapters, the narrator focuses on a variety of episodes involving seven different characters and the people they encounter. With the possible exception of the first, these seven—1) a deaf-mute man in cream-colors; 2) a crippled black beggar; 3) a man in a mourning weed; 4) a man in a gray coat and a white tie, collecting donations for the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum; 5) a man in a tasseled travelling-cap who claims to work for the Black Rapids Coal Company; 6) a herb-doctor peddling his wares; and 7) a fawning man employed by the so-called Philosophical Intelligence Office—all seem to be swindlers,

195 On Melville's knowledge of William Thompson, see Bergmann, and Reynolds. On confidence men in American literature, society, culture, and politics, see Kuhlman, J. G. Blair, Lindberg, Haltunen, Quirk (*Melville's*), Lenz, Trimpi (*Melville's*), and Samuels. On the career of Barnum, see Harris; on the many references to Barnum in *The Confidence-Man*, see Ramsey. The anonymous reviewer in the London *Literary Gazette* on April 11, 1857 wondered whether *The Confidence-Man* might be "a hoax on the public—an emulation of Barnum" (Higgins and Parker 493).

many of them using tricks similar to those perfected by Thompson and other real-life con men.¹⁹⁶

The novel's second part follows a single character through a variety of encounters. This is the self-proclaimed cosmopolitan who goes by the name Frank Goodman. Although Goodman, who is first introduced at the end of Chapter 23, differs from his predecessors in important ways, he is probably also a confidence man, as are several of the other people with whom he becomes acquainted. It should also be noted that the exact relationship between the various swindlers in *The Confidence-Man* is far from clear. The reader will likely begin to suspect that all, or at least some of them, are the same person in different disguises, but all such definitive evidence is withheld by the narrator. Therefore, it cannot be decided with certainty whether some of them are acting as *shills* (accomplices) for the other con men or operating independently of them, or whether some might in the end be innocent of wrongdoings. Even though many of the attempts to empty the pockets of those they encounter are successful, in some cases they are not, while in others it is difficult to decide who has fooled whom, and what exactly (if anything) has been won. In addition to this main plot, the novel also includes several interpolated stories narrated by different characters, as well as three chapters—numbers 14, 33, and 44—where the narrator breaks off from his story to directly address his readers.

Now, to begin to explore in what ways the figure of the parasite can help illuminate Melville's puzzling novel, I would first like to look in some detail at the arguments of two of the three scholars who have previously attempted to do so, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell.¹⁹⁷ Their book *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006) features an original reading of *The Confidence-Man*, with a focus on how societal attitudes to disability, poverty, begging, and charity were changing in antebellum America.¹⁹⁸ Whereas previously, care of the disabled and others deemed

196 On the similarity between the tricks found in the book and those of real-life con men, see Pimple.

197 The third scholar is Alexander Gelley, whose two contributions ("Parasitic Talk" and "Talking Man") I will come back to later in the chapter.

198 The reading has also been published on its own as "Masquerades of Impairment: Charity as a Confidence Game." In addition, see Mitchell's "'Too Much of a Cripple,'" which pursues related questions about disability in *Moby-Dick*.

“unproductive” to society had primarily been the responsibility of local communities, Snyder and Mitchell argue that in this period, distributing charity to those in need increasingly came to be delegated to a new and blooming charity industry, made up of various private organizations and state and federal agencies. Or, to follow *The Confidence-Man*’s most vocal participant and supporter of this industry—the man in a gray coat and a white tie—one could talk of a “charity business,” meant to infuse missions “with the Wall street spirit” (CM 38, 40).

Important aspects of this endeavor toward what the man in gray calls “the methodization of the world’s benevolence” (CM 39) were principles and methodologies supplied by then popular “sciences of the surface,” such as phrenology and physiognomy, having in common “the belief that external body features functioned as reliable markers by which the identity of a person could be fixed” (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 38).¹⁹⁹ This belief led to the idea that the bodily and mentally impaired could be objectively classified, thus creating a scientifically grounded dividing line separating those deserving of charity from the undeserving. The emerging American charity industry can therefore be seen as a part of a larger process involving the professional management of human bodies on scientific principles, famously analyzed by Michel Foucault as a shift from an older “anatomy-politics of the human body” toward “a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race” (*Society* 243).

Whereas social historians of antebellum-era America have offered extensive analyses of this shift in societal approaches to charity, Snyder and Mitchell argue that the fate of those individuals who suffered from bodily or cognitive impairments have largely been ignored (*Cultural Locations* 42). To them, Melville represents an important exception from this tendency. The interesting thing about *The Confidence-Man* is not only that it features several disabled characters, but also the difficulty of deciding whether their impairments are real or faked, to trick the other passengers. Hence, Snyder and Mitchell approach the novel primarily in terms of how it thematizes the difficulty of deciding

199 On Melville’s attitude to such “sciences of the surface,” see also Otter (*Melville’s Anatomies* 101–71).

between real and faked disability, as well as between who deserves charity and who does not in a world where one can never be sure if others are telling the truth:

The Confidence-Man wages warfare on “sciences of the surface” for presuming, on behalf of scientific and national knowledge, the reliability of bodily appearance as a means to evaluate the social worth of persons. . . . Melville takes up these critiques of visual assessment practices to foreground the deceptions of bodies, and to evaluate capitalist charity exchanges that not only support, but also produce, socially inequitable bodies. (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 43)

From my perspective, the crucial aspect of this analysis is how it explicitly conceptualizes the relationship between disabled beggars—be they real or fake—and those who donate money to them in terms of parasitism:

Disabled people represent prototypical nonproducers in exchange economies because the terms of their social participation often exceed a system’s willingness to accommodate them. Consequently, disabled people become parasitical, or so runs the narrative of capitalism. (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 46)

To explain this in more detail, it is necessary to take a closer look at a few of the interactions between various beggars and donors in *The Confidence-Man*. The first example the novel offers is the deaf-mute man in cream-colors, who is the center of attention in Chapters 1–2. After he embarks in St. Louis, the narrator offers a brief description of him—for example pointing out that he was without luggage or friends—before turning his attention to the reactions caused by the deaf-mute’s presence amongst the other passengers: “From the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings of the crowd, it was plain that he was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger. In the same moment with his advent, he stepped aboard the favorite steamer *Fidèle*, on the point of starting for New Orleans” (*CM* 3).

After boarding, he begins inscribing a small slate with a string of anaphoric quotations from 1 Corinthians 13, all of which have to do with

charity: “Charity thinketh no evil,” etc.²⁰⁰ It is only when he thus makes known his quiet, but steadfast request for charity from his surroundings that these “shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings” are transformed into something more openly hostile:

it was not with the best relish that the crowd regarded his apparent intrusion; and upon a more attentive survey, perceiving no badge of authority about him, but rather something quite the contrary—he being of an aspect so singularly innocent; an aspect, too, which they took to be somehow inappropriate to the time and place, and inclining to the notion that his writing was much of the same sort: in short, taking him for some strange kind of simpleton, harmless enough, would he keep to himself, but not wholly unobnoxious as an intruder—they made no scruple to jostle him aside; while one, less kind than the rest, or more of a wag, by an unobserved stroke, dexterously flattened down his fleecy hat upon his head. (CM 4)

Meeting with no success, at the end of Chapter 1 the deaf-mute retires to have a nap. Chapter 2 then begins by presenting 19 different “epitaphic comments, conflictingly spoken or thought,” generated in the crowd of on-lookers by his presence, ranging from “ODD FISH!” to “Jacob dreaming at Luz” (CM 7). Thus, even aboard a floating society which is “always full of strangers” and where there is a constant influx of “strangers still more strange” (CM 8), the deaf-mute is an outsider. For Snyder and Mitchell, what makes him a stranger “in the extremest sense of the word” is precisely his disability, which, as they see it, “calls into action an interpretative social mechanism” (*Cultural Locations* 49). How this social mechanism functions, has been convincingly addressed by Jennifer Greiman in *Democracy’s Spectacle* (2010).²⁰¹ In her analysis of *The Confidence-Man*, she argues that the first three chapters make the crowd “a kind of protagonist, tracing its activities as it gathers, deliberates, forms consensus, and disintegrates once again” (*Democracy’s Spectacle* 196). Crucially, she points out that this protagonist only comes

200 For the argument that St. Paul’s enumeration of different types of members of the church in 1 Corinthians 12.28 served as a model for the succession of the different confidence men, see Quirk (“St. Paul’s”).

201 See also Greiman’s “Theatricality, Strangeness, and the Aesthetics of Plurality in *The Confidence-Man*,” where she further elaborates her argument.

into existence due to the advent of the deaf-mute, and that it only continues to exist in this state while it has a concrete object to hold its attention:

The mute is not a stranger before he meets the crowd, but neither are the passengers a crowd before they recognize a stranger. Instead, Melville places the man and the crowd in a dynamic relationship of definition and constitution, which, if not exactly “mutual,” is clearly dependent and simultaneous. (*Democracy’s Spectacle* 197)

In other words, the deaf-mute is simultaneously *not* himself part of the crowd and its *raison d’être*, his strangeness constituting “the internal outside that makes such collective formations as a ‘crowd’ or a ‘majority’ visible and viable” in the first place (Greiman, *Democracy’s Spectacle* 200). Although he subsequently falls asleep, he still holds together that social body his presence has unknowingly generated, and continues to do so for quite a while:

By-and-by—two or three random stoppages having been made, and the last transient memory of the slumberer vanished, and he himself, no unlikely, waked up and landed ere now—the crowd, as is usual, began in all parts to break up from a concourse into various clusters or squads, which in some cases disintegrated into quartettes, trios, and couples, or even solitaries; involuntarily submitting to that natural law which ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member. (*CM* 8–9)

Although the crowd has dissolved by the end of Chapter 2, no longer welded together by a foreign body sufficiently strange to capture its attention, in Chapter 3 it has found another object to focus on, thereby resurrecting itself. This is the novel’s next disabled character, the crippled black beggar Black Guinea, whom Snyder and Mitchell only mention in passing. Whereas critics disagree whether the deaf-mute is one of the novel’s confidence men, Black Guinea—who may potentially, the narrative hints, be neither crippled nor black—is the first character to come across as definitely up to no good.²⁰² The chapter’s first paragraph reads as follows:

202 For differing views of the identity of the deaf-mute, compare Elizabeth S. Foster’s opinion that “[u]pon him the stigmata of the true Christian, and even of Christ himself, are patent” (1) with

In the forward part of the boat, not the least attractive object, for a time, was a grotesque negro cripple, in tow-cloth attire and an old coal-sifter of a tambourine in his hand, who, owing to something wrong about his legs, was, in effect, cut down to the stature of a Newfoundland dog; his knotted black fleece and good-natured, honest black face rubbing against the upper part of people's thighs as he made shift to shuffle about, making music, such as it was, and raising a smile even from the gravest. It was curious to see him, out of his very deformity, indigence, and houselessness, so cheerily endured, raising mirth in some of that crowd, whose own purses, hearths, hearts, all their possessions, sound limbs included, could not make gay. (*CM* 10)

What happens is that this beggar, who introduces himself as Black Guinea, starts a “game of charity” to convince people to donate money to him (*CM* 10, 12). Acting like a dog, he catches coins tossed at him with his mouth. Amused by the diversion, people willingly throw pennies at him, but his success ends when “a limping, gimlet-eyed, sour-faced person” with a wooden leg tries to expose him for a fraud whose deformity is “a sham, got up for financial purposes” (*CM* 12). At first, those present are not sure whom they are to believe, but they end up requesting documentary proof or reliable witnesses from Black Guinea that his deformity is real. While he is unable to provide such proof, he claims that there are people aboard the *Fidèle* that can vouch for him:

“Oh yes, oh yes, dar is aboard here a werry nice, good ge'mman wid a weed, and a ge'mman in a gray coat and white tie, what knows all about me; and a ge'mman wid a big book, too; and a yarb-doctor; and a ge'mman in a yaller west; and a ge'mman wid a brass plate; and a ge'mman in a wiolet robe; and a ge'mman as is a sodjer; and ever so many good, kind, honest ge'mmen more aboard what knows me and will speak for me, God bress 'em; yes, and what knows me as well as dis poor old darkie knows hisself, God bress him!” (*CM* 13)²⁰³

Hershel Parker's claim that “[g]arbed to suggest Jesus, and traversing the deck with mottoes from I Corinthians 13 placarded on his slate, he is the Devil” (*Herman Melville* 2:258).

²⁰³ Black Guinea's list of the different gentlemen that can vouch for him helps shape the reader's expectations for what will come, but it only partially corresponds to the narrative. As such, it puzzles as much as it clarifies, and much ink has been spilt to account for its shortcomings. For a thorough discussion of these discrepancies, see Franklin (*The Wake* 157–65).

After a young Episcopalian clergyman sets out to find the gentlemen in question, people are still reluctant to trust Black Guinea, who becomes more and more desperate to find someone willing to place their confidence in him. In the end, a kind country merchant gives him half a dollar as proof that he does. When handing over the money, the merchant drops his business card, which the beggar secretly pockets, before “forlornly stump[ing] out of sight” (CM 17). In the next chapter, the merchant, whose name is Henry Roberts, is accosted by what seems to be the first gentleman on Black Guinea’s list, as if they were old acquaintances. This is the man with the mourning weed, who introduces himself as John Ringman. The reader soon realizes that most likely, he is the beggar in a new disguise, or the two are in league with each other to swindle Roberts with the help of the information from the pocketed business card.

How then should Black Guinea be understood? To the adherents of one influential critical tradition, the so-called “standard line” of interpretation, his identity is clear. As they see it, Melville’s novel is an allegory where all the different confidence men encountered in the text, including Black Guinea, are to be understood as the Devil in different disguises, out to test the state of contemporary Christianity.²⁰⁴ To me, however, the possible indications these scholars have offered in order to prove the beggar’s diabolical nature are far too ambiguous to be able to support this view.²⁰⁵ Moreover, it becomes much harder to uphold this conclusion when what

204 The label was originally introduced by Hershel Parker in his introduction to the 1971 Norton Critical edition of Melville’s novel, where he claimed that “[r]ecent criticism of *The Confidence-Man* is notoriously confused, yet in preparing this edition it seemed easy enough to discern a standard line of interpretation” (ix). Historically, this view has had many proponents, especially among the first generations of critics writing after Elizabeth S. Foster’s landmark 1954 Hendricks House edition of the novel, but it has also met with extensive criticism. While less commonly held today, it is still influential, in large parts due to Parker’s faithful championing of the argument (“The Metaphysics”; “Use of Evidence”; *Herman Melville* 2:257–58; Parker and Niemeyer). For other scholars who understand the novel’s confidence men as the Devil in disguise, see Shroeder, Foster, Miller Jr., Rosenberry (*Comic Spirit*), McHaney, and Urbanczyk; for those critical of this conclusion, see Drew, Wadlington (139–40), Bellis, Kamuf (167–69), and Ryan. For an overview of the conclusions drawn by one hundred and one different articles about Melville’s novel in the period 1922–1980, see Madison.

205 For possible indications of Black Guinea’s diabolical nature, see Parker and Niemeyer (17n6; 18n8; 22.4n6). For a critique of Parker’s notes in the 1971 Norton Critical edition, see Susan M. Ryan, who claims that they are “rife with . . . speculative annotations” (709).

the narrator has to say about the (potentially fake) crippled beggar is taken into consideration. Black Guinea's "game of charity" is said to come about when he realizes that his mere appearance is no longer enough to keep people's attention:

Thus far not very many pennies had been given him, and, used at last to his strange looks, the less polite passengers of those in that 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. Still shuffling among the crowd, now and then he would pause, throwing back his head and opening his mouth like an elephant for tossed apples at a menagerie; when, making a space before him, people would have a bout at a strange sort of pitch-penny game, the cripple's mouth being at once target and purse, and he hailing each expertly caught copper with a cracked bravura from his tambourine. (CM 11; emphasis in the original)

In other words, realizing that charity comes much easier to people when it buys them both amusement and a good conscience, Black Guinea adapts to the situation by voluntarily debasing himself for the spectators' viewing pleasure.²⁰⁶ Although coins are the concrete aim of the "pitch-penny game," through comparing Black Guinea to an elephant trained to catch tossed apples, the quoted passage also likens money to food. In other words, it is almost as if he is feeding on the pennies thrown to him, beginning to indicate his potential kinship with the classical figure of the parasite.

206 In my "Man or Animal?" I criticize David Livingstone Smith's claim that "dehumanizers always identify their victims with animals that motivate violence" (223) by showing how Captain Delano, even though he sees the black slaves aboard the *San Dominick* as resembling animals, in the first part of "Benito Cereno" only focuses on their *positive* animalistic traits. Melville's exposé of Delano's "benevolent" dehumanization proves that it is perfectly possible to dehumanize others without intending to harm them. Furthermore, contrary to what Smith holds to be the case, the portrayal of Black Guinea indicates that dehumanization is *not* only a strategy that allows people to harm others; His doglike behavior exemplifies how self-dehumanization might serve as a tactic for eliciting donations.

In addition, the following passage also deserves mention. In a work where the narrator for the most part offers very little insight into what (if anything) lies behind the words and actions of the characters, this description of the beggar's involuntary bodily reactions supplies information that can hardly be doubted:

To be the subject of alms-giving is trying, and to feel in duty bound to appear cheerfully grateful under the trial, must be still more so; but whatever his secret emotions, [Black Guinea] swallowed them, while still retaining each copper this side the œsophagus. *And nearly always he grinned, and only once or twice did he wince*, which was when certain coins, tossed by more playful almoners, came inconveniently nigh to his teeth, an accident whose unwelcomeness was not unedged by the circumstance that the pennies thus thrown proved buttons. (CM 11–12; emphasis added)

Here the narrator is describing the painful degradation gone through by someone who is forced to hide his “secret emotions,” and for the most part succeeds in doing so, to avoid alienating his donors, even though the “more playful” of these contribute to his additional degradation by feeding him valueless buttons, instead of coins.²⁰⁷ As Susan M. Ryan has put it, the novel draws our attention to “the donors’ unseemliness, their cruelty, and their quasi-erotic enjoyment of another’s humiliation” (698). For this reason, a more relevant literary model for Black Guinea than the Devil might be Saturio, the parasite from Plautus’ *The Persian*. Just like his forefathers before him, he claims to be willing to suffer blows and all kinds of abuse to fill his stomach—as he somewhat braggingly puts it:

The ancient and venerable vocation of my ancestors I continue, follow, and cultivate with constant care. For never a one of my ancestors was there who

207 Yoshiaki Furui has analyzed the same passage with a focus on the narrator’s preoccupation with “secret emotions,” but his conclusions differ somewhat from mine. As he sees it, while Black Guinea’s wince might be a result of pain and humiliation, it could also “be another theatrical performance by the confidence-man,” causing Furui to conclude that “[t]hus the private, interior space of Black Guinea is ultimately left inscrutable and unreachable” (66). As I see it, it is exactly through drawing the reader’s attention to the beggar’s *unsuccessful* attempt to hide or minimize an *involuntary* bodily reaction that the narrator here manages to convey something that it is difficult to doubt.

didn't provide for his belly as a professional parasite. My father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather, great-great-great-grandfather, and his father, too, always ate other folks' food, just like mice, and not a soul could beat 'em at edacity. Yes, and their family surname was Hardheads. It's from them I inherit this profession and ancestral position of mine. (*The Persian* 54–62)

By this I do not mean to imply that Black Guinea shares Saturio's high esteem of the vocation they have in common, or that his ancestors had been similarly "employed"—the text does not give any clues that could help decide on these issues. Rather, the parasite's surname is equally applicable to Melville's beggar. For those who nourish themselves on the largesse of others, a hard head (as well as sturdy teeth, in Black Guinea's case) is a necessity.

To return to Greiman's analysis, even more so than the chapters involving the deaf-mute, the Black Guinea-episode is evidence that crowds are precarious entities.²⁰⁸ This precariousness notwithstanding, once a crowd in an active state collectively decides to act, it can wield a lot of power. In this regard, *The Confidence-Man* gives a clear indication that facts might be far less important than emotions when it comes to what might push a crowd into taking action—for, as the narrator ironically describes Black Guinea's reactions to the accusations made against him by the one-legged man, "that Newfoundland-dog face turned in passively hopeless appeal, as if instinct told it that the right or the wrong might not have overmuch to do with whatever wayward mood superior intelligences might yield to" (*CM* 12).

With this in mind, it becomes possible to let Snyder and Mitchell's analysis of parasitism and Greiman's analysis of the constitution of the crowd in *The Confidence-Man* mutually illuminate each other.²⁰⁹ If the latter is indeed correct in arguing that "the crowd's energetic

208 A similar point is made by Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power* (1960), one of the classic works on crowds: "In its spontaneous form it is a sensitive thing. The openness which enables it to grow is, at the same time, its danger. A foreboding of threatening disintegration is always alive in the crowd" (16–17).

209 Greiman briefly refers to Snyder and Mitchell's work, yet without touching upon the question of parasitism (*Democracy's Spectacle* 250n7).

curiosity and noisy debate are little more than exercises in self-perpetuation” (*Democracy’s Spectacle* 198), as I think she is, it should be added that such “noisy debates” seem to have as their precise topic the question of who are to be defined as parasitic foreign bodies, as well as what to do about them. What becomes evident in the chapters where the deaf-mute and Black Guinea appear is that even systems with a high tolerance for “strangeness” cannot do without borders. Without an “internal outside” to ban, no such thing as a community or a system would exist in the first place. For individuals to come together in the communality of a crowd, no matter how short-lived, the outsider is a prerequisite.

One of the most famous attempts to analyze such general mechanisms is found in René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), which deals with the continuing cultural importance of the figure of the scapegoat. A staple ingredient in populist political discourse is that some sort of foreign element has destroyed the stability of a given society, meaning what is (supposedly) needed to regain what has (supposedly) been stolen or lost, is to expel, neutralize, or eradicate the intrusion in question.²¹⁰ Against this type of argument, Girard forcefully stresses that social cohesion can only be gained by channeling the inherent violence that continually threatens any feeling of community, and redirecting it toward a scapegoat—as he puts it, “society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a ‘sacrificeable’ victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect” (4). Hence, to Girard, the case is *not* that any foreign body has destroyed a pre-existing community, but rather that a social system continually threatened by “that natural law which ordains dissolution ... to the mass”—to repeat the narrator’s comments in *The Confidence-Man*—needs the scapegoat to become and remain a community.

As several critics have argued, Girard and Serres have mutually influenced each other’s work.²¹¹ Even though the former is only referred to by name a few times in *The Parasite* (80, 149), his analysis of the

210 For examples of specific groups—be it freemasons, Catholics, or communists—that have at some point been made to fill this role in an American context, see Hofstadter.

211 See for example Johnsen.

scapegoat mechanism is crucial for understanding a claim such as the following: “For unanimity to appear within a group, sometimes all that is necessary is to bring about general animosity toward the one who will be labelled public enemy. All that is necessary is to find an object of hatred and of execration. ... Union is produced through expulsion” (Serres, *Parasite* 118–19).

Following Steven D. Brown, one could even claim that in *The Parasite*, “Serres locates Girard’s argument within a state of generalized parasitism” (17). One reason the figure of the parasite is intimately linked to the scapegoating processes described by Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, is because those people deemed parasites on the social body have often ended up filling exactly this function, thereby helping create a community in the very act of being violently banned from it.

To now return to Snyder and Mitchell’s analysis, whereas several other (potentially fake) disabled characters appear in *The Confidence-Man*, they note that after these first chapters, the narrative seems to shift its focus from disability and pauperism, as such, to the question of societal responses to these phenomena. Through their analysis of this shift, they point out how Melville’s novel explicitly reflects upon how the new charity industry not only directly depends upon the continued existence of the suffering it is meant to alleviate, but also ends up hiding its own dependence under a mask of benevolence. In their words:

Charity ushers in a division between hosts (those who produce and consume in equal amounts) and parasites (those who consume without replenishing what they use up). While capitalism narrates social aid recipients as parasitic upon the productive labor and tax dollars of the majority, it does so while dissimulating the dependencies of the middle and upper classes on the poor. With the development of organized charity agencies in the nineteenth century, the management of “social dependents” became legitimated as an occupation and provided stable professional careers for middle-class professionals. In doing so, the management of charity cases buoyed the economic livelihood of numerous public and private administrators who were financially dependent on the oversight of those in “need.” In this sense, the distinction between host and parasite proves a fiction of exchange-based systems seeking to justify the capitalist

and working classes as appropriate beneficiaries of their own productive labor capacities. (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 56)²¹²

In *The Confidence-Man*, this hidden mutual dependence is most explicitly brought to light during an episode in Chapter 7, where the man in the gray coat tries to persuade a rich gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons to donate money to the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum. After the former cheerfully makes a donation, he suggests that it might be more efficient if different charitable societies were to coordinate their efforts. This is a view the man in the gray coat fully shares, and he takes the opportunity to inform the gentleman about his plans for what he terms “the World’s Charity,” to be made up of representatives from all known charities and missions, with the aim of eradicating poverty once and for all through the introduction of “one grand benevolence tax upon all mankind” (*CM* 39). Somewhat skeptical, the rich gentleman offers various objections, but this does not deter the man in gray, who goes on praising the project in enthusiastic tones. The narrator, for his part, does his best to build up the reader’s expectation that the latter will finally win over his new acquaintance to see things his way: “The master chord of the man in gray had been touched, and it seemed as if it would never cease vibrating. A not un-silvery tongue, too, was his, with gestures that were a Pentecost of added ones, and persuasiveness before which granite hearts might crumble into gravel” (*CM* 42).

This persuasiveness notwithstanding, and even though there is no doubt that the rich gentleman is indeed the owner of a charitable heart, rather than one made of granite, he is *not* convinced. To quote the ending of the chapter:

Strange, therefore, how his auditor, so singularly good-hearted as he seemed, remained proof to such eloquence; though not, as it turned out, to such

²¹² Snyder and Mitchell do not present Melville as a revolutionary aiming to get rid of capitalist society. Pinpointing the novel’s message is not easy, but the following suggestion is not implausible: “the exposé of parasitism in capitalism does not cast Melville as a budding Marxist seeking to overturn a culture based upon corrupt economic practices. Instead, the work calls for the cultivation of a consistent skepticism that recognizes we are all parasites operating within an impure social system” (*Cultural Locations* 64).

pleadings. For, after listening a while longer with pleasant incredulity, presently, as the boat touched his place of destination, the gentleman, with a look half humor, half pity, put another bank-note into his hands; charitable to the last, if only to the dreams of enthusiasm. (CM 42)

Some scholars have claimed that in order to qualify as a true confidence man, a swindler must not only make money out of his victims through criminal activities, but must also get the dupes to actively participate in their own swindling. John G. Blair has for example offered a “criminological definition” of the figure, stressing that “his identifying ploy is to cheat only those who are themselves ready to cheat. . . . A con man . . . offers his victims partnership in an illegal scheme, the more sure because it is illicit. The victim must agree in advance to participate in trickery” (12). The problem with this definition is that while some of the swindles in Melville’s novel follow such a pattern, quite a few do not, including the one between the man in the gray coat and his “victim.”²¹³

What the ending of Chapter 7 shows, is that even though the gentleman at first donates money to a charity that likely does not exist, when he afterwards supports “the World’s Charity,” he has absolutely no belief that it will ever come to anything, nor does he really care. When he offers that last banknote with a benevolent look of “half humor, half pity,” it is thus *not* because he has been fooled by his sweet-talking interlocutor or because he has any confidence in his grandiose plans, nor because he has been offered “partnership in an illegal scheme.” He donates not only because he can easily afford it, but he enjoys doing so—to him, charity is said to be “in one sense not an effort, but a luxury; against too great indulgence in which his steward, a humorist, had sometimes admonished him” (CM 37)—and clearly gets something out of it. Likely, this “something” is far more valuable to him than what he ends up donating, but it has nothing to do with being tricked into participating in anything illegal. What the donation does is strengthen his appearance as a charitable man, proving “a sweet morsel” for his conscience, akin to that sought by

213 Nor does Blair’s definition really cover William Thompson’s *modus operandi* of asking for his victims’ confidence. If even the “Original Confidence Man” fails to qualify as a proper confidence man according to Blair, this is a strong indication of the inadequacy of his definition.

the narrator in “Bartleby.”²¹⁴ Or, to borrow a phrase from Serres, in return for the gentleman’s donations, the man in the gray coat “feeds his greatness” (*Parasite* 194).

In other words, even more explicitly than in “Bartleby,” *The Confidence-Man* shows how the donor “nourishes” himself upon the act of charity, no less than the beggar or, for that matter, the professional middleman employed by the charity industry (or pretending to be so). As Snyder and Mitchell put it, perfectly capturing the gist of the interaction between the man in the gray coat and the rich gentleman:

The con game is not so much duplicity at the expense of the wealthy as conspicuous donation for the purchase of moral appearance. Thus, the con man does not commit the crime of fraud in Melville’s system; instead, he lets responsible citizens off the hook. He offers a rhetorical and monetary quick fix to entrenched social conflicts. (*Cultural Locations* 62)

To recapitulate the argument so far, one of the problems of exchange-based economic systems such as capitalism is that they tend to present a flawed view that only takes the dependency of the poor into account, all the while hiding the other half of the equation: the dependency of the rich donors and of the middle class employed in the charity industry. Serres’ analysis becomes useful to Snyder and Mitchell because, to them, it helps replace such a slanted economic model with one that is more attuned to this fundamental *mutual* dependency: “In the place of this exchange economy model, Serres proposes the paradigm of parasitic economies in which all relationships prove interdependent, and the division between those who produce and those who consume proves unviable” (*Cultural Locations* 57).

In addition, the natural sciences stress that parasites perform a crucial function within the ecosystems to which they belong. Snyder and Mitchell summarize one of Serres’ most important points:

214 William E. Lenz has claimed something similar about the charitable lady who donates \$20 to the man in the gray coat in Chapter 8: the narrator’s “extremely qualifying rhetoric . . . leads us to suspect her purity; the pleasure she experiences in reading the passages on charity from her ‘small gilt testament,’ which she holds ‘half-relinquished,’ and in giving twenty dollars to the man in gray is a kind of pleasure analogous to pitching pennies at Black Guinea—it is self-congratulatory, a sanitary gesture like those of the narrator in ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’” (125–26).

As an alternative to [standard, derogatory] representations of the parasite ..., a parasitic economy turns the tables on the power inequities between benefactors and “the needy.” Rather than locate the under- and unemployed as parasites on the labor of others, Serres’s definition promotes the function of the parasite as that which keeps systems fluid and flexible. Parasites are the forces of creative possibility; like the sacred guest of Greek myth, the parasite accepts material sustenance and returns the favor with stories of adventure that enliven the world of the host. Thus, the parasite represents a site of invention, bringing something new into a system of meanings that would otherwise tend toward homogeneity. ... Consequently, a parasitic economic model exposes the ways in which those who are marginalized within an exchange-based economy prove necessary to the maintenance of a dominant culture’s investment in its own benefactor status. Thus, the parasite continually threatens to surface and expose this hierarchy as a social fiction. (*Cultural Locations* 57)

In their attempt to elaborate more precisely how Melville’s novel is informed by and illuminates such a “paradigm of parasitic economies,” the two make the following claim:

The plot of *The Confidence-Man* depicts society aboard the steamship *Fidèle* as engaging in a series of parasitic economic relationships, in which con artists dupe marks, shills, and each other in a frenzy of corrupt exchanges. Yet the seemingly solid distinctions between cons, marks, and shills continually blur as all actively participate in a chain of parasitic duplicities. ... The book unseats the reader’s ability to cleanly distinguish between these familiar nineteenth-century social types by undermining the strict divisions between them. No character occupies a deterministic position with respect to the economic food chain that informs human relations on the ship ... The narrative plays a shell game with the location of an elusive economic host upon whom its parasitic clientele feeds. The role of host (that which exists at the origin of a food chain, upon which others feed for their survival) ultimately proves an absent center. In a profit-based economy, parasites infest every social interaction. (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 57–58)

While this is a relevant description, lacking from Snyder and Mitchell’s analysis is closer attention to the many of episodes in *The Confidence-Man* that have little or nothing to do with disability. Most importantly,

they barely mention the (non-disabled) cosmopolitan, Frank Goodman. Given the concrete analytical focus of their contribution, this is perhaps understandable, but it is still unfortunate. Not only is Goodman at the center of the narrator's attention throughout the second part of *The Confidence-Man*, but, as I will now go on to argue, he is also the character in the novel most clearly indebted to the classical figure of the parasite.

Enter the Cosmopolitan

Before introducing Goodman, a brief glance at what happens immediately prior to his entry at the end of Chapter 23, is necessary. In this chapter, which functions as a hinge between the novel's first and second part, the narrator focuses on the reflections of the Missourian bachelor Pitch, who in the two previous chapters has had the dubious pleasure of becoming acquainted with two strangers who correspond to the "yarb-doctor" and "ge'mman wid a brass plate" that Black Guinea had mentioned earlier. Pitch is described as someone who puts on a misanthropic air, but without really being a misanthrope at heart. This becomes evident when he, after first having managed to repel the advances of the herb-doctor, succumbs to those of the fawning man with the brass plate, who claims to work for the "Philosophical Intelligence Office," an employment agency that finds domestic help for its customers. Even though a frontiersman like Pitch could surely need this kind of help—in Chapter 21, he admitted as much to the herb-doctor—he first refuses the offer. The reason is that he has previously employed thirty-five boys, "[a]ll rascals, sir, every soul of them; Caucasian or Mongol. Amazing the endless variety of rascality in human nature of the juvenile sort" (*CM* 117). As a result, he has decided to get machines to do the work for him instead, but due to the persistence of the P.I.O. man he finally relents, paying a few dollars in advance to hire a fifteen-year-old boy claimed to be honest and trustworthy. Nevertheless, Pitch's new-won faith in humanity quickly evaporates after the P.I.O. man disembarks. Once he is on his own again, the Missourian begins to suspect that he has been duped, but without understanding why someone would take so much trouble for such a measly reward: "He revolves, but cannot comprehend, the operation, still less the operator. Was the man a

trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre. Two or three dollars the motive to so many nice wiles?" (*CM* 130). It is at this precise moment, when Pitch has just resolved not to be tricked again, that the cosmopolitan strikes up a conversation with him: "From these uncordial reveries he is roused by a cordial slap on the shoulder, accompanied by a spicy volume of tobacco-smoke, out of which came a voice, sweet as a seraph's: 'A penny for your thoughts, my fine fellow'" (*CM* 130).

The man speaking is the self-proclaimed cosmopolitan and philanthropist who goes by the name Frank Goodman. Not counting some minor characters, the second half of *The Confidence-Man* focuses on his encounters with Pitch (in Chapter 24); Charlie Noble (25–35); the mystic Mark Winsome and his "practical disciple," Egbert (36–41); the *Fidèle's* barber, William Cream (42–43); as well as an old man reading the Bible (45). As Henry S. Sussman has noted, whereas the swindlers in the novel's first part all seem to represent different spheres of society, through the cosmopolitan, "the universal man, the novel in effect sublates itself to a higher level of generality" (90). If *The Confidence-Man* has a protagonist, Goodman is the most obvious candidate, even though he is no less of a mystery than everybody else onboard. Unlike the characters that precede him, he "hawks no wares, promises neither cures nor riches nor aid" (Quirk, *Melville's* 71). Even so, scholars have usually read him too as a confidence man. While I do not want to contest this conclusion, some dissenting voices might still be mentioned. In "Quite an Original": The Cosmopolitan in *The Confidence-Man* (1973), Elizabeth Keyser for example concludes that Goodman opposes the swindlers that appear in the novel's second half. A somewhat related, but more convincing argument is offered by John Bryant, who problematizes the common assumption that Goodman must *necessarily* be a swindler. He not only points out that the cosmopolitan does not really correspond to any of the "ge'mmen" on Black Guinea's list, but, more importantly, maintains that the first part of the novel creates a stable pattern allowing the reader to recognize characters as confidence men, only to distort it in the second. As Bryant sees it, Goodman poses a problem to readers because he "follows some of the behavior patterns [of the previous con men] perfectly, some ambiguously, but many not at all. Our expectations thwarted, we warm to the

possibility that Goodman is not a diddler but a true believer in man” (*Melville and Repose* 238–39). He also points out that several of Goodman’s interlocutors—especially Noble, but possibly also the Emersonian mystic, Mark Winsome—fit this behavior pattern better than the cosmopolitan himself, and that it is far from clear what, if anything, he actually gets out of those he encounters.²¹⁵ Bryant therefore concludes that if Goodman is truly a confidence man, “he is a miserable specimen of con artistry” (*Melville and Repose* 238).

How should Frank Goodman be understood, then? Is he a third-rate swindler, as Bryant puts it, or “the subtlest and cleverest of foes” of mankind, as Elizabeth S. Foster argues (lxxi)?²¹⁶ Or perhaps neither? As the cosmopolitan remarks in Chapter 29, “I find some little mysteries not very hard to clear up” (*CM* 161). In the following I want to argue that this may hold for him, too, if he is understood as a modern version of the classical figure of the parasite. My attempt to explain why this is so will primarily focus on the chapters where he interacts with Charlie Noble, but first, a few points must be made about his encounter with Pitch in Chapter 24. The conversation between the two is of particular interest because the Missourian is often held to be one of the most perceptive opponents of the confidence man. Hershel Parker for example claims that along with the “invalid titan” who strikes down the herb-doctor in Chapter 17, Pitch—his moment of weakness in the encounter with the P.I.O. man aside—is the only passenger actually “worthy to oppose” the confidence man’s “blandishments” (*Herman Melville* 2: 258). Supposing that the assumption of Pitch being able to penetrate the confidence man’s disguises is correct, the question naturally arises: What does he see behind the mask?

At the beginning of Chapter 24, Pitch is far from pleased to once again be addressed by a stranger—especially one dressed in curious and colorful

215 The argument that Winsome is based on Emerson was first made by Egbert S. Oliver, who also claimed that his disciple, Egbert, is based on Thoreau (“Melville’s Picture”).

216 To those adhering to the “standard line,” Goodman tends to be understood as the novel’s most important incarnation of the Devil: he is the equivalent of Prince Beelzebub in Hawthorne’s “The Celestial Railroad” (Shroeder 370), “the climatic Confidence Man” (Foster lxxv), and the one who, at the end of the novel, “extinguishes a lamp that symbolizes the Old and the New Testaments, relegating Christianity to the row of religions that once burned but now swing in darkness” (H. Parker, *Herman Melville* 2: 258).

clothes, which leads his reluctant interlocutor to compare Goodman to a toucan and to somebody playing the part of a monkey in a pantomime.²¹⁷ Upon being asked whom he is by the angry frontiersman, he replies that he is “[a] cosmopolitan, a catholic man; who, being such, ties himself to no narrow tailor or teacher, but federates, in heart as in costume, something of the various gallantries of men under various suns” (*CM* 132). While these words begin to explain his unorthodox costume, they do not impress Pitch, who tells him to get lost, only to be met with the following reply:

Is the sight of humanity so very disagreeable to you then? Ah, I may be foolish, but for my part, in all its aspects, I love it. Served up à la Pole, or à la Moor, à la Ladrone, or à la Yankee, that good dish, man, still delights me; or rather is man a wine I never weary of comparing and sipping; wherefore am I a pledged cosmopolitan, a sort of London-Dock-Vault connoisseur, going about from Teheran to Natchitoches, a taster of races; in all his vintages, smacking my lips over this racy creature, man, continually. (*CM* 133)

The proponents of the “standard line” have generally read this passage as the Devil ironically professing his diabolical hunger for man under cover of being a philanthropist.²¹⁸ Yet, the statement can easily be seen as a sly version of the kind of speeches that literary parasites—be it Plautus’ Saturio, Lucian’s Simon, Udall’s Mathew Merygreeke, Jonson’s Mosca or Dickens’ Harold Skimpole—are known for, where they praise their own profession, as well as their own talent for sponging off others. Perhaps Frank Goodman, then, should be understood as a parasite turned cosmopolitan. He is not content to serve one or even a few select patrons, but considers the whole of humanity a fitting dinner-table. To nourish himself in this way, he knows that he will be required to offer services, flatter, or amuse those upon whom he feeds, but this he sees as unproblematic. To quote his stated philosophy of life: “Life is a pic-nic

217 The cosmopolitan’s strange dress is reminiscent of that of Harlequin, whom the narrator explicitly refers to in Chapter 33 (*CM* 182). For an analysis of the cosmopolitan as a modern-day Harlequin, inspired by the Italian *commedia dell’arte* and nineteenth-century English Pantomime, see Trimpi (“Harlequin”).

218 See Shroeder (370–71) and Rosenberry (“Ship of Fools” 607–8).

en costume; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool. To come in plain clothes, with a long face, as a wiseacre, only makes one a discomfort to himself, and a blot upon the scene” (*CM* 133).

Making a blot upon the scene earns no parasite a dinner: This is exactly what the title character of Denis Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, or *the Second Satire* (c. 1761–1772) discovers. This strange idler is described as “a compound of the highest and the lowest, good sense and folly” whose “first care when he gets up in the morning is to make sure where he will be dining; after dinner he thinks where to go for supper” (33, 34). Having attached himself to an extravagant host, he has found a perfect solution to the question of how to acquire his meals, only to suddenly lose his privileges after inadvertently offending his patron; as he puts it: “The stupidity of having shown a bit of taste, intelligence and reason! Rameau, old man, this will teach you to remain what God made you and what your patrons expected you to be” (Diderot 46–47). That it is better to play the fool “in a sensible way” than to be intelligent in an insensible way would thus seem to be an assertion Rameau’s parasitic nephew and the cosmopolitan fully share.

However, this philosophy of life gains the latter no favors from Pitch, as evident when Goodman proposes that they join the “dancing on the hurricane-deck tonight”—“I holding your watch,” in what is surely meant as a reference to the procedure that made William Thompson famous. Rather than consent, the Missourian asks him whether he is “Jeremy Diddler No. 3” (*CM* 135), Nos. 1 and 2 obviously being the two strangers he has already encountered: the herb-doctor and the P.I.O. man. This is the second time the protagonist of the British dramatist James Kenney’s popular farce *Raising the Wind* (1803) is mentioned in *The Confidence-Man*, a distrustful man in Chapter 3 already having claimed that he sees “no reason” why Black Guinea “may not be some sort of black Jeremy Diddler” (*CM* 16). Although the word “parasite” is never used in Kenney’s play, it is the perfect epithet for the main character, a charming and short-sighted idler who “borrows money of every body [sic] he meets” and “who lives by sponging,—gets into people’s houses by his songs and his bon mots. At some of the squires’ tables, he’s as constant a guest as the parson or

the apothecary” (Kenney 6). Or, in the words of the anonymous author of an 1843 article on “The Comedies of Plautus,” printed in the American edition of *The Foreign Quarterly Review*: “The jesting parasites, the men who earn their feasts by pleasantries, are the ancestors of a numerous race, of whom Jeremy Diddler, in Mr. Kenney’s ‘Raising the Wind,’ and the gastronome Sponge, in ‘Who wants a Dinner?’ are the most famous” (“The Comedies of Plautus” 113).²¹⁹

If Pitch’s assessment of Goodman is accurate, should it not then be concluded from the reference to Jeremy Diddler, Nos. 1, 2, and 3, that the Missourian has seen the cosmopolitan, the herb-doctor, and the P.I.O. man for what they are: parasites trying to feed on him? After all, this would begin to explain why Pitch later “launched forth into the unkindest references to . . . gouty gluttons limping to their gouty gormandizings” (CM 136), as well as his aforementioned reference to the *Fidèle* as “a human grain-bin,” as part of the following exasperated outburst: “Now the high-constable catch and confound all knaves in towns and rats in grain-bins, and if in this boat, which is a human grain-bin for the time, any sly, smooth, philandering rat be dodging now, pin him, thou high rat-catcher, against this rail” (CM 137).

In the end, Goodman’s attempt to befriend Pitch is therefore unsuccessful. Having been tricked once aboard the *Fidèle*, the Missourian is no less wary of being preyed upon again than Shakespeare’s professed hater of parasites, Timon of Athens, whom Goodman explicitly invokes. To the cosmopolitan, the complete solitude sought by this misanthropic recluse stands as the worst possible way of life. In a final attempt to persuade Pitch to accompany him, Goodman asks, “was not the humor, of Diogenes, which led him to live, a merry-andrew, in the flower-market,

219 In antebellum America, the figure of Jeremy Diddler lived on in popular culture. He had for example been commemorated in Edgar Allan Poe’s “Raising the Wind; or, Diddling Considered as one of the Exact Sciences” (1843), which *The Confidence-Man* likely alludes to (Pollin 18–20)—as Hayford has argued, the crazy beggar in Chapter 36 is also almost certainly modelled on Poe. Melville had previously used the verb “to diddle” in the chapter of *Moby-Dick* where Stubb tricks the French out of the dead sperm whale (MD 406). In August 1849, Evert and George Duyckinck’s *Literary World* had printed a piece on the arrest of William Thompson, where the confidence man was claimed to be “the new species of the Jeremy Diddler” (qtd. in P. Smith 334).

better than that of the less wise Athenian, which made him a skulking scare-crow in pine-barrens? An injudicious gentleman, Lord Timon” (*CM* 137). As Goodman sees it, if one cannot love mankind, it is at least better to be a cynic in the company of others than a cynic on one’s own. While cultivating a Timon-like misanthropy and keeping everybody at a safe distance might help one not get conned, the price to be paid for such an eternal vigilance is steep. As Neil Harris puts it: “To be human is to be cheated, to be victorious is to become inhumane” (223). Nonetheless, Pitch is deaf to the cosmopolitan’s arguments. When he continues to rebuff his advances, Goodman finally gives up, understanding that no matter what he does, no nourishment—either of the physical or the spiritual kind—is here to be had. When he moves on it is in a manner, as the narrator notes, “less lightsome than he had come, leaving the discomfited misanthrope to the solitude he held so sapient” (*CM* 138).

Although he has suffered a momentary setback, Goodman will not have to wait long for someone new and more cheerful to converse with, this being Charles Arnold Noble—“do call me Charlie” (*CM* 160)—whose encounter with the cosmopolitan stretches from Chapter 25 to 35, making it by far the longest of the novel. During the initial part of their conversation, the two express similar views concerning the nobility of man and their dislike of misanthropy; in the cosmopolitan’s words: “our sentiments agree so, that were they written in a book, whose was whose, few but the nicest critics might determine” (*CM* 158). When Noble invites him to continue their chat over a bottle of port wine and cigars, however, it turns out that their opinions differ more than what initially seemed to be the case. It also becomes evident that while his new acquaintance keeps filling up Goodman’s glass and tries to convince him to smoke freely, he hardly touches the port wine or the cigars himself. At the end of Chapter 30, the cosmopolitan suddenly requests a loan of 50 dollars from his companion, whereupon Noble tells him to “go to the devil, sir! Beggar, impostor!—never so deceived in a man in my life,” before undergoing some sort of transformation, “much such a change as one reads of in fairy-books” (*CM* 179, 180). In response, the cosmopolitan performs something described by the narrator almost as a magical spell, causing the “old” Noble

to reappear.²²⁰ Goodman then claims he was only joking when he asked for the loan, proceeding to tell the story of Charlemont, a “gentleman-madman” from St. Louis who withdrew from society after going bankrupt, only to return years later, after having regained his fortune. Reflecting upon Charlemont’s plight, he asks Noble whether he would ever “turn the cold shoulder to a friend—a convivial one, say, whose penilessness should be suddenly revealed to you?” (*CM* 187). Seeming to fear that Goodman is about to repeat his request for a loan, Noble hastily withdraws, claiming the wine has given him a headache. Their meeting ends with the cosmopolitan telling his new companion that “I will see you to-morrow” (*CM* 188).

The question, then, is who is fooling whom during the extended interaction between Goodman and Noble? The answer commonly given by scholars is that the cosmopolitan realizes that Noble is trying to get him drunk to swindle him, but that he cleverly foils his opponent by asking for the loan. Although he makes no money from the encounter, he at least has the pleasure of outfoxing the fox; in Elizabeth S. Foster’s words:

The cosmopolitan pretends to honor the new and perfervid friendship by asking for a loan, and thus foils the sharper and cleverly traps him into revealing that his profession of love of mankind is a masquerade for hatred and egoism, and that his trust is a pretense for the sake of business. (lxx)

While such a reading is not incorrect, it overlooks that in addition to the pleasure of outwitting Noble, Goodman gets something more concrete out of their interaction. To be more precise, while some critics have discussed whether the wine they drink is fake “elixir of logwood,” as Noble insinuates upon leaving his companion, or “genuine, mellow old port,” as Goodman insists (*CM* 187, 188), few have looked into the question of

²²⁰ Chapter 32, which describes Noble’s “metamorphosis” and re-transformation, is among the novel’s most puzzling. It is not clear what the narrator means when he says that “[o]ut of old materials sprang a new creature. Cadmus glided into the snake” (*CM* 185). Nevertheless, no matter if this is meant to be understood metaphorically or literally, it is Noble, and *not* the cosmopolitan who is said to glide “into the snake.” The difficulty posed by this encounter for the “standard line” argument was already noted by Shroeder, who acknowledged that “I have not offered any explanation as to why Noble and Goodman, if both are from the pit [i.e. Hell], should unknown to one another carry on their long conversation” (379).

who pays for it and for the cigars: who is the host, and who is guest of the symposium?²²¹ The novel gives several strong indications that it is Noble who acts as the (more or less) hospitable host for the evening. For example, it is he who invites the other to join him. Moreover, Goodman tells him that “you are my entertainer on this occasion” (*CM* 162); and finally, the cosmopolitan has the following to say to the next man he meets, Mark Winsome, who has warned him against the recently departed Noble, whom he accuses of being a “Mississippi operator” (*CM* 196):

My friend [Noble], whose seat is still warm, has retired for the night, leaving more or less in his bottle here. Pray, sit down in his seat, and partake with me; and then, if you choose to hint aught further unfavorable to the man, the genial warmth of whose person in part passes into yours, and whose genial hospitality meanders through you—be it so. (*CM* 190)

In other words, no matter if the wine is fake or genuine—a question which may not be all that important, as Goodman at one point alludes to “a kind of man who, while convinced that on this continent most wines are shams, yet still drinks away at them; accounting wine so fine a thing, that even the sham article is better than none at all” (*CM* 162)—it is Noble who is the source of its “genial hospitality.” In return for his time and conversation, the cosmopolitan—who drinks with relish and tells his acquaintance that he is on his “fourth or fifth [glass], thanks to your importunity” (*CM* 174)—thus ends up getting almost an entire bottle of port wine and cigars. In addition, he also gets an interesting specimen of “that good dish, man” to “smack” his “lips over,” or—to borrow a phrase from *White-Jacket*—to “study and digest” (*WJ* 185).²²² While these gains might appear insignificant from the perspective of a professional con man, from that of a parasite—and especially one who explicitly considers

221 On the wine as fake or genuine, see Renker (81).

222 Goodman is not the only character in Melville’s works trading stories for food and/or beverages. In Chapter 1, I quoted Redburn’s comments about offering stories about America in return for ale. Many other examples could be given, but one will suffice: In Chapter 54 of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael mentions how he once told “The Town-Ho’s Story” to “a lounging circle of my Spanish friends” in Lima (*MD* 243). As the story progresses, it becomes evident that his generous hosts keep refilling his cup with chicha while he is telling his story.

“man a wine I never weary of comparing and sipping”—they make much more sense.

The fact that the cosmopolitan embodies traits typically associated with the classical figure of the parasite has several interpretative consequences. First, the encounter between him and Noble appears as a tactical struggle between two characters trying to place each other in the position of the host. This perfectly exemplifies Snyder and Mitchell’s previously quoted claim that society aboard the *Fidèle* consisted of a “series of parasitic economic relationships” where the “role of host (that which exists at the origin of a food chain, upon which others feed for their survival) ultimately proves an absent center.” To be precise, it is an absent center because anybody can potentially end up in this position. This perspective makes the cosmopolitan appear as someone who repeatedly keeps trying to play the parasite in a game including “fools” (those not aware of the game, or only dimly so), “knaves” (those who actively play the game, even though their methods might differ from Goodman’s) and those somewhere in the middle. In so doing, he is sometimes successful—as in the episodes featuring Charlie Noble and the ship’s barber, William Cream—and sometimes not. Defeat is the outcome not only of his encounter with Pitch, but also with Mark Winsome and his disciple, Egbert, whose “inhuman philosophy” turns out to be too strong an opponent for Goodman’s combination of cosmopolitanism and philanthropy (*CM* 223).

In addition, Goodman sometimes encounters others who are playing the same game, but without coming into direct conflict with them, as is the case with the dirty peddler-boy in Chapter 45. This “juvenile peddler . . . of travelers’ conveniences” easily manages to prey on the fears of an old man with whom Goodman is discussing the Bible (*CM* 244). First he persuades him to buy a traveler’s patent lock and a money belt, meant to keep his money safe from burglars and pickpockets, then he offers him the dubious gift of a (potentially counterfeit) *Counterfeit Detector* to help him check the validity of his banknotes.²²³ This only ends up confusing

223 Under the American banking system at the time, local banks were allowed to print their own banknotes. As this led to a proliferation of different bills in circulation, it made it easier to counterfeit money. Hence, the need for periodicals such as *The Counterfeit Detector*, meant to

the old man as to their authenticity. As he puts it, after having checked two of his bills against the detector (a claim that holds just as much for the novel as for the banknotes): “there’s so many marks of all sorts to go by, it makes it a kind of uncertain” (*CM* 248). But when the boy asks Goodman whether he, too, would like to buy a lock, the latter declines, claiming he never uses “such blacksmiths’ things,” which prompts the following reply, accompanied by a comment from the narrator suggesting that here one rogue has recognized a kindred spirit: “‘Those who give the blacksmith most work seldom do,’ said the boy, tipping him a wink expressive of a degree of indefinite knowingness, not uninteresting to consider in one of his years. But the wink was not marked by the old man, nor, to all appearances, by him for whom it was intended” (*CM* 246).

Here it becomes evident that the parasitic chain is both longer and far more complex in *The Confidence-Man* than in the texts by Melville analysed in the previous chapters, and is even capable of including apparent truces between various parasites. This indicates that Serres oversimplifies matters when he claims that “the parasite has but one enemy: the one who can replace him in his position of parasite” (*Parasite* 107). What Melville here demonstrates is that sometimes parasites feeding on the same host may respectfully co-exist.

To summarize the argument thus far, much of what Frank Goodman says and does makes much more sense considered in light of the tradition of the literary parasite, than it does if he is understood as either the Devil, looking for souls, or a professional con man, looking for monetary gain. The same can also be said of many of the literary texts that are mentioned or alluded to in *The Confidence-Man*, either by the narrator, by the confidence men of the first half, or by Goodman and his interlocutors. Whereas scholars have offered detailed analyses of the importance of many of these references to the narrative, what has not previously been acknowledged is how many of the works in question fit into one of

help the public ensure that their bills were legal tender. This did not solve the problem, though. As Ted Weissbuch has pointed out, counterfeit detectors were sometimes counterfeited, too (16–18). For an analysis of the similarity between the disorderly American banking system and religious faith in the novel, see Imbert; for one concerning Melville’s strategy of “writing on credit,” see Kamuf.

the following two categories: either they feature memorable characters with recognizable parasitic traits, or they explicitly warn against trusting the type of false, flattering friends whose aim is to sponge off their host. Among the works already mentioned, James Kenney's *Raising the Wind* belongs to the first of these groups, whereas Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* belongs to the second. In the following, I want to look in more detail at some additional works referred to in *The Confidence-Man*, but let me first mention that scholars have identified other possible influences on Melville's novel that also fit within these two categories. For example, in describing the process whereby the confidence man first became a distinct type in American culture, Johannes Dietrich Bergmann notes that "besides being the first," the elusive William Thompson "seemed to be all over, in many places at once. He must have seemed like Ben Jonson's Mosca, a man who could 'be here, and there, and here, and yonder, all at once'" (576). As will be remembered from Chapter 2, the sly Mosca is explicitly listed as a parasite in *Volpone's* dramatis personae and labeled as such both by other characters and by himself. In *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (1944), William E. Sedgwick briefly compares *The Confidence-Man* to Jonson's play, as well as to his *Bartholomew Fair* (188). The former comparison was later investigated in more detail by Jay H. Hartman in "Volpone as a Possible Source for Melville's *The Confidence Man*" (1965), where he claimed that there are "striking similarities, especially in theme, characterization, and structure" between the two works (248).²²⁴

Moreover, two other possible influences are mentioned in *Melville's Humor* (1981), where Jane Mushabac argues that "if we are looking for prototypes for *The Confidence-Man*, we should look to *Lazarillo de Tormes* and Ben Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humor*" (139). As noted in Chapter 2, in the latter can be found the two parasitical characters Carlo Buffone and Shift. The former book, which Melville had borrowed from Evert Duyckinck in 1850, was originally published in Spain in 1553 or 1554

224 While I agree with Hartman, by almost solely focusing on the figure of Volpone, he overlooks that it is his parasite who is responsible for most of the mischief in Jonson's comedy. If there is indeed a link between *Volpone* and *The Confidence-Man*, it is Mosca that should be the primary focus, not his patron. On Melville's familiarity with Jonson, see Sealts Jr. (190).

by an anonymous author. It is often seen as the first picaresque novel, even though the concept of the *picaro* (rogue) was only introduced in a later work Melville was also familiar with, Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599/1604).²²⁵ Many narrators in picaresque novels—the eponymous Lazarillo included—are clearly indebted to the classical figure of the parasite.²²⁶ More specifically, their stories, which tend to be presented as autobiographies, are narrated in the first person by a low-born *picaro* looking back on his life, and usually consist of a number of loosely connected episodes where he has to use his wits and various dirty tricks in order to feed off others in a hostile environment.²²⁷ Lazarillo at one point explains his own cunning in this way: “Hunger is the mother of invention, and sharpens the wit as much as gluttony drowns it” (Anon. and de Luna 40).

After this brief look at the presence of the figure of the parasite in these potential sources of inspiration, it is time to turn to some of the texts explicitly mentioned in *The Confidence-Man*. First, in Chapter 30, when Noble brings up that he dislikes the advice Polonius offers his son, Laertes, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1600), Goodman admits that he, too, is on occasion troubled by the Bard of Avon, whom he finds “a queer man” (CM 171). To exemplify what troubles him, Goodman refers to Shakespeare's Autolycus, the happy-go-lucky jester who steals, cheats, and tricks his way through the last two acts of *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1609–1610):

225 Critics have argued that several of Melville's works incorporate picaresque traits. On picaresque traits in *Omoo*, see Sten (41–62); in *The Confidence-Man*, see Wicks (125–34), Malkmus, and Blackburn (158–77). The latter claims that “[t]he ingenuity of *The Confidence-Man* is that Melville discovers a way to reexpress his familiar tragic themes in a picaresque schema” (Blackburn 161). For a comparison of the picaresque traits of *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence-Man*, see Mushabac (122–42); for the Spanish *picaro* as a precursor of the figure of the confidence man, see J. G. Blair (22–27). Melville also referred to some of the most famous picaresque novels, for example praising Tobias Smollett's works in *Omoo*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket*, and—in the latter—Alain René Lesage's *The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santilane*, which Smollett had translated into English. On Melville's familiarity with these authors, as well as with *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Guzmán de Alfarache*, see Sten (43–44) and Sealts Jr. (25, 31, 50, 59, 61, 150, 193, 216).

226 For an analysis of the figure of the *picaro* in terms of Michel Serres' concept of the parasite, see Maiorino (30–35).

227 I say “he” because just like the parasites of classical comedy, protagonists in picaresque novels tend to be male. Exceptions can be found in Francisco López de Ubeda's *The Life of Justina, the Country Jilt* (1605) and Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722).

There's his Autolycus now, a fellow that always puzzled me. How is one to take Autolycus? A rogue so happy, so lucky, so triumphant, of so almost captivatingly vicious a career that a virtuous man reduced to the poor-house (were such contingency conceivable), might almost long to change sides with him. And yet, see the words put into his mouth: "Oh," cries Autolycus, as he comes galloping, gay as a buck, upon the stage, "oh," he laughs, "oh what a fool is Honesty, and Trust, his sworn brother, a very simple gentleman." Think of that. Trust, that is, confidence—that is, the thing in this universe the sacredest—is rattlingly pronounced just the simplest. And the scenes in which the rogue figures seem purposely devised for verification of his principles. (*CM* 172)

For someone like Goodman, who time and again stresses his belief in the profound goodness of man, such a character poses a serious dilemma:

When disturbed by the character and career of one thus wicked and thus happy, my sole consolation is in the fact that no such creature ever existed, except in the powerful imagination which evoked him. And yet, a creature, a living creature, he is, though only a poet was his maker. It may be, that in that paper-and-ink investiture of his, Autolycus acts more effectively upon mankind than he would in a flesh-and-blood one. Can his influence be salutary? True, in Autolycus there is humor; but though, according to my principle, humor is in general to be held a saving quality, yet the case of Autolycus is an exception; because it is his humor which, so to speak, oils his mischievousness. The bravadoing mischievousness of Autolycus is slid into the world on humor, as a pirate schooner, with colors flying, is launched into the sea on greased ways. (*CM* 172)

While Noble claims to agree with Goodman, the narrator hints that he is simply paying lip service, his real aim being to steer the conversation back to Polonius' advice to Laertes.²²⁸ However, more attention should be paid to the cosmopolitan's reflections on Autolycus than his interlocutor does. To begin exploring the importance of Shakespeare's rogue,

228 Noble's likely aim is to have the cosmopolitan openly admit to disagreeing with Polonius' advice to "[n]either a borrower nor a lender be" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.3.75), in order to trick a loan out of him. However, Goodman beats him to making the request, thus turning the tables on him.

here is the first part of Parker and Niemeyer's explanatory note in the second Norton Critical edition of *The Confidence-Man*: "After Autolycus the robber in Greek myth, Shakespeare's Autolycus is a cunning, cynical, heartless trickster, a peddler of trashy goods, his eye on the main chance and the big haul" (178n6). This assessment demands a few remarks. First, "trickster" here seems to be used in a derogatory sense, rather than in the precise mythological understanding that can be found in a work such as Paul Radin's classic, *The Trickster* (1956). Here Radin contends that tricksters are found in a variety of myths, legends, and folk tales, and belong "to the oldest expressions of mankind" (xxiii). Among the most famous examples are Hermes and Prometheus in Greek mythology, Loki in the Old Norse mythology, Eshu in the Yorùbá religion, as well as cunning animals such as Coyote and Raven for different Native American tribes, Brer Rabbit for African Americans, and Reynard the Fox in Europe. What these wanderers driven by their appetites have in common is that they are all mischievous and cunning creatures of the threshold. Breakers of rules, creators of disorder, introducers of newness, givers of gifts and players of tricks, tricksters are, to quote Lewis Hyde, "the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox" (7). Or, as Radin puts it:

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. . . . He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being. (xxiii)

Now, the Autolycus of myth is none other than the son of the greatest Greek trickster, Hermes.²²⁹ It is from his father that he has inherited his

229 Several critics have analyzed *The Confidence-Man* in terms of the figure of the trickster, including Baim, Wadlington, Cook (13–14), and Hyde (53–54). Similarly, Hermes has been invoked both as the model for the confidence man, and for the juvenile peddler whom the cosmopolitan encounters in the book's final chapter, see R. W. B. Lewis (69) and Dryden (*Melville's Thematics* 192–94), respectively. On Hermes as trickster, see N. O. Brown. This cunning god, whose name Michel Serres' early five-volume series bears, is also intimately related to the conceptual figure of the parasite, as the following quote begins to indicate: "Hermes is the father of eloquence, patron of orators, musicians, master of words, noise, and wind" (Harari and Bell xxxv).

talents for mischief, theft, trickery, lying, as well as singing and playing the lyre—many of which were later to reappear in his own grandson, the parasite *avant la lettre*, Odysseus.²³⁰ Rather than simply being a “robber,” as Parker and Niemeyer claim, the mythic Autolycus immediately brings to mind the figure of the trickster.

Moving on to Shakespeare’s Autolycus, he, too belongs to this tradition, as evident from the way he introduces himself in Act IV: “My father named me Autolycus; who being, as I am, littered under Mercury, was likewise a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles” (*Winter’s* 4.3.24–26). Since Mercury is the Roman equivalent of Hermes, *The Winter’s Tale* is explicitly asking its audience to consider Autolycus as a trickster. But him being “a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles” who uses wit, cunning and flattery in order to reach his amoral goals, and who expresses his pleasure in bodily nourishment—for example claiming that “a quart of ale is a dish for a king” (Shakespeare, *Winter’s* 4.3.8)—his traits are simultaneously those of the parasite; in the words of William Collins Watterson: “Like his counterpart Capnio in the play’s prose source, [Robert] Greene’s *Pandosto* (1588), Autolycus belongs to a familiar class of comic character, that of the *parasitus* or wily servant” (537).

This brings me to a final point. If one reads *The Winter’s Tale* thoroughly, Parker and Niemeyer’s view of Autolycus turns out to be too negative and one-sided. While I do not feel competent to draw any conclusions about the validity of Watterson’s claim that Autolycus is “the author’s self-parody” (536), it is fairly clear that Shakespeare must have had a certain fondness for his amoral but charming trickster-parasite, who, in William C. Carroll’s words, belongs to “the tradition of the merry beggar” (168). Given his selfishness and ruthlessness the audience *should* instinctively dislike Autolycus, but there is something about him that makes it difficult to do so: “Neither a sociopath like Richard III nor a ‘demi-devil’ like Iago, Autolycus more nearly resembles Falstaff and Cleopatra, heroic personifications of invention—and accommodation—whose comic energies manage to discourage the audience’s reflexive need to judge and condemn” (Watterson 536).

230 On the parasitic traits of Odysseus, see Tylawsky (7–16).

Moreover, as opposed to the harsh punishments awaiting many other Elizabethan parasites, including Jonson's Mosca, Autolycus is not only let off the hook, but is even rewarded for his selfish actions. True, he realizes that his last attempt to trick the Shepherd and his son, the Clown, has backfired, resulting in them becoming part of the gentry: "Here come those I have done good to against my will, and already appearing in the blossoms of their fortune" (*Winter's* 5.2.125–27). Even so, the Clown is remarkably forgiving of his misdeeds and tells him that "I will swear to the prince thou art as honest a true fellow as any is in Bohemia," in addition to promising—not entirely wisely, perhaps—that "we'll be thy good masters" (Shakespeare, *Winter's* 5.2.156–57; 174). In other words, at the end of *The Winter's Tale* the lucky parasite-rogue has suddenly found two *nouveau rich* gentlemen willing to be his patrons. It seems unlikely that such a handsome reward would be appropriate if he were truly nothing more than "a cunning, cynical, heartless trickster."

How should the cosmopolitan's puzzlement over Autolycus be understood, then? To answer this question, it is crucial to recognize that Goodman often make statements where it is unclear whether he means what he says or is lying through his teeth, but where the novel obviously intends what has been said to be understood in an ironic manner. The best example of such an utterance is his comment to Pitch that "irony is so unjust; never could abide irony; something Satanic about irony. God defend me from Irony, and Satire, his bosom friend" (*CM* 136). Perhaps he means it, and perhaps he does not, but the novel—ironic and satirical through and through—surely does not. Goodman's reflections on Autolycus can be read in a similar manner, uttered as it is by someone who undoubtedly has many parasitic traits in common with the character in question; in Tom Quirk's words the cosmopolitan "might just as well have been talking about himself" (*Melville's* 88). Himself part trickster, part jester and part parasite, as well as full of "comic energies" similar to those that make it so hard to judge Shakespeare's rogue, it is surely one of the novel's great ironies that Melville has Goodman doubt the possibility of the existence of someone "thus wicked and thus happy," not to forget the irony of him finding his "sole consolation . . . in the fact that no such creature ever existed, except in the powerful imagination which evoked

him.” Through the references to Autolycus, *The Confidence-Man* is thus slyly providing further means of understanding the cosmopolitan’s parasitic traits.

Just as the figure of the parasite helps illuminate Goodman’s reflections on Autolycus, it is also relevant for understanding another important literary reference in the novel. In Chapter 43, the *Fidèle’s* barber, William Cream, encounters the cosmopolitan, whom he ends up shaving, only to find himself tricked out of his payment.²³¹ During their conversation, Cream at one point quotes the book alternatively known as Ecclesiasticus and *The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach* to explain why he once refused to offer a free shave to a sweet-voiced man who claimed to be his distant relative: “I recalled what the son of Sirach says in the True Book: ‘An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips;’ and so I did what the son of Sirach advises in such cases: ‘I believed not his many words’” (CM 236). Goodman claims he has never come across these specific passages in the Bible. Finding it hard to believe that the Good Book should contain such cynical advice, he resolves to look it up for himself.

The last chapter of *The Confidence-Man*—“The Cosmopolitan increases in seriousness”—opens with Goodman’s attempt to clear up the matter. Entering the cabin, he finds most of the passengers sleeping in their berths, while under the room’s single burning lamp, an old man is quietly reading the Bible. After Goodman has a chance to inspect it for himself, the narrator describes how his expression turns from “attentiveness” to “seriousness,” and, finally, to “a kind of pain,” before asking whether his companion can help him resolve “a disturbing doubt,” which is like “gall and wormwood” to him, as a philanthropist:

I am one who thinks well of man. I love man. I have confidence in man. But what was told me not a half-hour since? I was told that I would find it written—“Believe not his many words—an enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips”—and also I was told that I would find a good deal more to the same effect, and all in this book. I could not think it; and, coming here to look for myself, what do

231 Scholars often hold the barber to be an innocent dupe, but Tom Quirk has argued that he, too, is a confidence man of sorts, and that the dialogue between him and Goodman “is a tissue of misunderstandings and double meaning, the wit of which largely derives from a punning with underworld jargon” (*Melville’s* 143).

I read? Not only just what was quoted, but also, as was engaged, more to the same purpose, such as this: “With much communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bare, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep.” (CM 242)

At this point, someone kept awake by their conversation interrupts them with the following question: “Who’s that describing the confidence-man?” (CM 242)—the title aside, this is the only time the term “confidence-man” is used in the novel. Goodman is then reassured when the old gentleman points out that Ecclesiasticus is not recognized as a canonical part of the Bible, but that, along with the other apocryphal texts, it has been included between the Old and the New Testament in the copy found aboard the *Fidèle*.²³²

At first glance, the verses from Ecclesiasticus quoted first by William Cream and then by the cosmopolitan, might seem to support the “standard line” argument. Ecclus. 12.16 reads as follows: “An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips, but in his heart he imagineth how to throw thee into a pit: he will weep with his eyes, but if he find opportunity, he will not be satisfied with blood.” No less diabolical-sounding are the following quotes: “If he have need of thee, he will deceive thee, and smile upon thee, and put thee in hope; he will speak to thee fair, and say, What wantest thou?” (Ecclus. 13.6); “Affect not to be made equal unto him in talk, and believe not his many words: for with much communication will he tempt thee, and smiling upon thee will get out thy secrets” (Ecclus. 13.11); and

232 The apocryphal texts were also included between the Old and the New Testament in Melville’s own, heavily annotated 1846 edition of *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments, Translated out of the Original Tongues, and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised, with References and Various Readings, together with the Apocrypha*. All quotes from Ecclesiasticus are taken from this edition. The old man’s claim about the official status of Ecclesiasticus is not entirely precise. As a deuterocanonical text (i.e. belonging to the second canon), it is considered canonical by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church, but not by Protestants. Therefore, it is a fundamentally problematic book; as Mark C. Taylor has put it: “for thoughtful readers, the apocryphal is uncontainable; the margin inevitably overflows its bounds and contaminates the whole book as if from within. The history of the Apocrypha shows the undeniable arbitrariness of the text: sometimes included, sometimes excluded, sometimes included as excluded” (613).

“Observe, and take good heed, for thou walkest in peril of thy overthrowing: when thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep” (Ecclus. 13.13).

Ecclesiasticus was written in Hebrew, probably in Jerusalem around 180 BC by the scribe Joshua or Jesus ben Sirach, sometimes referred to as Ben Sira. As these quotes indicate, he is trying to warn his readers against what he holds to be a grave danger, but what sort of danger exactly? Initially, one might think that he must be referring to the Devil. In a similar vein, Gail Coffler has argued that the passage Goodman quotes “might describe Satan, or perhaps the Cosmopolitan, or, Melville devilishly hints, it might refer to the false promise of the gospels, the ‘good news’ of Christianity” (66–67). Nevertheless, when the quotes are read in their original context—as did Melville, who had marked several passages from Ecclesiasticus in his Bible (Heidmann 385)—it turns out that ben Sirach has something wholly other in mind. An indication of just what is found in Ecclus. 13.4–5, which Goodman also partially quotes: “If thou be for his profit, he will use thee: but if thou have nothing, he will forsake thee. If thou have any thing, he will live with thee: yea, he will make the bare, and will not be sorry for it.” Here it becomes obvious that ben Sirach is *not* talking about how man should avoid eternal damnation in the afterlife, but about how to succeed *here and now*, while on earth. More precisely, the danger he is addressing is exactly the one that befell Timon of Athens: being taken advantage of by false friends. If there is one creature known for living off his host if there is something to be gained by doing so, but who will desert his benefactor the moment the latter is “bare”—just like Kooloo deserted the narrator in *Omo*—it is none other than the parasite.

As Seth Schwartz has argued in *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?* (2009), for all its religious content, large parts of Ecclesiasticus—including both chapters quoted in *The Confidence-Man*—are almost wholly concerned with worldly matters. More specifically, he notes that it contains an abundance of practical “advice on relations to one’s fellows, including friends, social superiors, hosts, guests or parasites (dining figures prominently in the book), dependents, family members, slaves, and women; reciprocity is a near-constant theme, and gift exchange is mentioned frequently” (Schwartz 48).

In addition, Schwartz has the following to say about ben Sirach's specific aims in Chapter 13 of Ecclesiasticus, where most of the quotes in *The Confidence-Man* are taken from:

In chapter 13 ... he warns his audience against falling into a state of dependency on the wealthy without any allusion to Pentateuchal norms or much significant use of biblical language ... In sum, Ben Sira here offers advice, based on a keen sense of its inherent danger, about the proper management of a social institution he did not yet have a separate name for but that following Roman precedent, we could call patronage. (69)²³³

One thing that should be clear by now, is that where there is such an institution as patronage, those trying to sponge off its benefits will always be close at hand. In the chapters quoted in *The Confidence-Man*, ben Sirach is thus *not* warning his readers against the Devil, but against exactly the type of false and flattering friends that were labeled parasites in the Greco-Roman tradition. As someone who incorporates many of the traits typically associated with the classical parasite, it is no wonder that Goodman takes offence at finding such words in the Bible, or that he rejoices when learning that Ecclesiasticus can be dismissed, due to its non-canonical status. As he remarks to his companion:

I cannot tell you how thankful I am for your reminding me about the apocrypha here. For the moment, its being such escaped me. Fact is, when all is bound up together, it's sometimes confusing. The uncanonical part should be bound distinct. And, now that I think of it, how well did those learned doctors who rejected for us this whole book of Sirach. I never read anything so calculated to destroy man's confidence in man. (CM 243)

Nor, perhaps, has he ever read anything so calculated to make a parasite go hungry, at least if its message were taken to heart by the reader. The irony is that the gist of ben Sirach's warning to his readers is almost

²³³ Worth quoting is also Schwartz' reflections on ben Sirach's warning of what will happen to those ignorant of the rules of gift exchange: Such a man has no real friends, only "parasites, people who eat at his table but are no true friends, whom he holds in contempt because they fail to reciprocate his benefits in a way he deems appropriate, while the parasites, for their part ... repay his abuse with raw hatred" (69).

identical to one of the main points of Polonius's advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*: Beware of false friends trying to sponge off you. The strong reactions of Goodman against Ecclesiasticus and Noble against Polonius can therefore be read as having their origins in a fear known to all parasites throughout history, namely that of being cut off from their nourishment.

The "Noise" of *The Confidence-Man*

To return to Snyder and Mitchell's analysis, the combination of the highly normative ideals of antebellum America and the new charity industry ended up excluding those perceived as nonproductive in a new and more dehumanizing manner than had previously been the case. As they see it, the portrayal of disability in Melville's novel counteracts this tendency because it exposes the violence at the heart of societal attempts to cope with such "parasitic" foreign bodies; in their words: "The radicality of *The Confidence-Man* is found not in its social vision of a more inclusive society, but rather in its anticipation of new forms of social violence" (*Cultural Locations* 65). This leads Snyder and Mitchell to discuss the narrator's reflections in the three chapters where he directly addresses the reader. To them, his is a far-reaching vision that aims to reflect life in its multiplicity, including the disabled that the charity industry attempts to speak *for*, all the while keeping them safely out of the public's view:

By thwarting charity's efforts to keep disability under wraps and out of the public eye, *The Confidence-Man* creates the interference that upsets bodily appearances as a reliable medium of interpretation. In this way the tactics of Melville's writing hinge on the deformation of aesthetics as a significant register for literary innovation. (*Cultural Locations* 67)

In this final section of the chapter, my aim is to further explore Snyder and Mitchell's idea that *The Confidence-Man* creates some sort of "interference" through a deformation of aesthetics. However, whereas they seem primarily to think of this in the sense of the narrator's willingness to portray what falls outside the purview of "normality"—that is, the disabled body—this is not what I have in mind. To me, the most important question is how to describe the enduring strangeness of Melville's novel.

Whereas the thematic level is no doubt of importance for any attempt to answer this question, the crucial thing in this regard is *how* the narrator tells his story—in other words, the question of literary form.

To approach this question, I would like to begin by quoting a point made by Wai-chee Dimock in *Empire for Liberty* (1989). As she sees it,

speech in *The Confidence-Man* has almost nothing to do with speakers: it is an autonomous phenomenon, not a communicative device. ... From the first scene till the last, disembodied voices are made to deliver oblique comments on the action of the story. All in all, we have the eerie sense that speech imposes itself on a character—rather than issuing from him—and that in the long run, it makes little difference who this character is. Characters are interchangeable. They are no more than the medium in which words circulate. (207–8)²³⁴

If Dimock's assessment is valid, as I think it to a large degree is, understanding this seeming lack of connection between the characters of the novel and their various utterances is necessary for coming to terms with the strangeness of *The Confidence-Man*. Now, what all the confidence men aboard the *Fidèle* have in common is their tool of choice: *words*. With the exception of the deaf-mute and his written words, they more specifically employ what Pitch terms “the crafty process of sociable chat” (*CM* 130)—an activity that in *White-Jacket* is claimed to be absolutely fundamental to Americans: “For chat man must; and by our immortal Bill of Rights, that guarantees to us liberty of speech, chat we Yankees will” (*WJ* 386). Whether the confidence men make promises (usually of a kind too good to be true) in return for a small investment; whether they offer sad stories of woe, meant to tweak their interlocutors' heartstrings, and open their purses; whether they try to manipulate their insecurities, fears, hopes, self-esteem, sense of charity, or their confidence—they do so through a constant stream of talk. Or as Pitch puts it, when he accuses the P.I.O. man of being “a talking man—what I call a wordy man. You talk,

²³⁴ See also Dimock's claim that “[p]eople do not use words [to tell the stories]; words use them. The receding authorship in the ... stories makes it impossible to say just who the storytellers are—and in the long run, it does not matter. The discrete segregation and mutual imperviousness between speech and speaker make words utterly free, utterly unaccountable. They go nowhere, illustrate nothing, and refer to nothing but themselves” (*Empire* 209).

talk” (CM 125). Thus, as Warwick Wadlington has noted, Melville’s novel truly gives “the impression of being stuffed with words” (140).

Hence, *The Confidence-Man* is a fundamentally *noisy* novel, filled with chatter that sometimes seems to border on the meaningless.²³⁵ The book is to a large degree made up of conversations between “nonsensical people talking nonsense,” as one contemporary reviewer put it (qtd. in CM 325), and the passengers are also said to constantly “buzz” on the *Fidèle’s* “decks, while, from quarters unseen, comes a murmur as of bees in the comb” (CM 8). To understand its peculiar effect, then, this noisy wordiness must be analyzed. This brings me to one scholar who has addressed these specific questions, the previously mentioned Alexander Gelley. His “Parasitic Talk” and “Melville’s Talking Man” deploy Serres’ concept of the parasite to analyze Melville’s novel.²³⁶ Central to both these texts is Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Gerede*, or “idle talk,” which Gelley uses to situate *The Confidence-Man* as part of an alternative literary lineage:

The Confidence-Man may be placed in a line of modern novels—including *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *L’Éducation sentimentale*, *Bouvard et Péuchet*, *Der Stechlin*, and *Ulysses*—that could be termed novels of idle talk, of *Gerede*. They are works whose sustaining principle, their red thread, is neither the action nor a central protagonist but rather a principle of discourse [that] can be shown, in each case, to manifest a continuous, cumulative pattern. (“Parasitic Talk” 88–89)²³⁷

235 A central premise for Michel Serres’ argument, is the fact that the word parasite in French refers not only to sponging among humans and in nature, but also to *noise*, as in the expression “bruit parasite” (static, distortion, or white noise). Drawing on the way information theory understands noise as anything that interferes with successful communication, in *The Parasite*, he constantly weaves these three meanings together. On this third meaning of the concept, as well as the importance of information theory to Serres’ thought, see Harari and Bell (xxii–xxviii), Paulson (53–100), and S. Brown (7–8).

236 Gelley’s texts have unfortunately not elicited much response from Melville scholars. One important exception is Sianne Ngai, whose chapter on “tone” in *Ugly Feelings* (2005) draws upon his contributions as part of an original reading of *The Confidence-Man*. While I support Gelley’s general conclusions, I do not agree with him when it comes to all details. For example, he states that when Noble and Goodman are drinking port wine, “each repeatedly urges the other to drink, while at the same time maintaining considerable reserve regarding the wine” (“Parasitic Talk” 96). As earlier indicated, this only holds for Noble, not Goodman.

237 As Gelley makes clear, the negative implications of the expression notwithstanding, for Heidegger, *Gerede* is not to be understood as referring to a failure of communication: “The expression ‘idle talk’ is not to be used here in a ‘disparaging’ signification. Terminologically,

The constitutive traits of this principle of discourse are easier to discern in a later text where Gelley approached similar questions without reference to Melville: “Idle Talk: Scarcity and Excess in Literary Language” (2001). Here he analyzes works by Louis-René des Forêts and Henry James to highlight how spoken utterances in narratives may be crucial, even when no specific information is conveyed:

What I am looking for are instances where there is a hollowing out of *what* is said, but the act of talking remains. One way to focus on this issue is to pay particular attention to language that is deemed low, formulaic, or “empty”—gossip, chatter, prattle, *idiotismes*. It is this kind of inadvertence in language that I think of as speech in an “idling” state. (“Idle Talk” 30)

That is to say, the central question Gelley is addressing is what it means when language “happens” in works of literature, but without having an obvious meaning. Or, as he has also written: “When language is idling, it is still running, like a motor in neutral. It goes nowhere, we say, which means that we haven’t yet found a way to make sense of its noise” (“Talking Man” 249).

One way to make sense of the unwonted wordiness of *The Confidence-Man* would therefore be through interrogating its peculiar form of noisy “idling.” To offer a tentative initial analysis of this aspect, the various utterances made by the different con men can never be taken at face value. There is no way of knowing when they are telling the truth (if at all), and when they are not, or of separating their truths from their lies. What is important about the conversations in the novel is not so much *what* is said at any given moment—when the cosmopolitan at one point asks Noble what they should talk about, the latter’s reply is fitting: “Oh, anything you please” (*CM* 181). Substituting “Confidence” for “Leviathanisms” in the following quote from Ishmael would therefore supply a good description of the status of the words uttered aboard the *Fidèle*: We “can hardly help suspecting them for mere sounds, full of Leviathanisms, but signifying nothing” (*MD* 145).

it signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of Being of everyday Dasein’s understanding and interpreting” (Heidegger qtd. in “Parasitic Talk” 87).

Instead, three other aspects should be highlighted. The first is the simple fact that words are continually being uttered. This is not only for existential reasons, since “the skills of the confidence man always require a partner” (Gelley, “Talking Man” 256), but also for utterly pragmatic ones, since a lull in the conversation would mean a chance for the intended victim to get away. The second is that regardless of their truth-value, these words that are uttered have effects; as Gary Lindberg has claimed: “Throughout his novel Melville urges us to distinguish between the truth of a statement and the effects of it” (18). Put differently, everything that is said is meant to ensure that the intended victim ends up and remains in the position of the host. The third is that this aim must remain hidden from those being addressed: Tricking people who suspect that they are being conned is obviously much more difficult than duping the unsuspecting ones.²³⁸ This means that “idle talk,” as Gelley sees it, “is both pervasive and unnoticed,” or at least “nearly unnoticed” (“Parasitic Talk” 99–100). To him, what circulates in the novel “is idle talk, talk that systematically conceals what it means. . . . It is not in the content, the referential element, but in the process, the discourse itself that the narrative dynamic is concentrated” (“Talking Man” 250, 253).

To conceptualize this defining function of language in *The Confidence-Man*, Gelley refers to communicative circuits:

In this novel Melville undertakes to foreground the dialogic situation itself while underspecifying the narrative posts or agencies. In terms of the communicative circuit . . . we may note a radical instability in all three narrative posts, that of sender, receptor, and referent. The referent or subject matter is a reiterated appeal for “confidence” (or one of its analogues like “charity” or “trust”). But this notion is no more than a lure, a concept emptied from the start so as to serve as a means of manipulation. The receptor is inconsequential in terms of personality or individuality but interesting only insofar as he is more or less of a

238 This, however, does not mean that it is impossible—to some, it might even be an opportunity. Neil Harris has for example argued that P. T. Barnum was so successful because he mastered the art of exposing his own cons: “Barnum . . . and other hoaxers didn’t fear public suspicion; they invited it. They understood . . . that the opportunity to debate the *issue* of falsity, to discover how deception had been practiced, was even more exciting than the discovery of fraud itself. . . . when people paid to see frauds, thinking they were true, they paid again to hear how the frauds were committed” (77; emphasis in the original).

dupe The sender, finally, the confidence-man figure, is by no means a stable, consistently successful master of the game. ("Parasitic Talk" 89)

If sender, receptor, and referent are all thus tainted with a "radical instability," how does this affect the readers' understanding of the novel's various communicative circuits? As Gelley argues, one possible answer is that it redirects our attention to the "problematic nature of the channel" the message passes through—that is, toward the precarious state of the very words being uttered ("Parasitic Talk" 90). This might be understood in light of Roman Jakobson's concept of *phatic speech* or *communion*, which basically communicates a readiness to communicate, as when people ask "How are you?" or when they clear their throats to get someone's attention.²³⁹ In Bernhard Siegert's words: "'Phatic communion,' ... denotes a linguistic function in the course of which words are not used to coordinate actions, and certainly not to express thoughts, but in which a community is constituted by means of exchanging meaningless utterances" (34). Usually such "meaningless" utterances are just one of many necessary ingredients for successful communication. However, since it is impossible to know whether the words uttered in *The Confidence-Man* have a deeper meaning at all, or whether they are simply intended to keep the channel of communication operative, it is as if they are threatening to completely take over, potentially turning Melville's novel into one extended phatic speech act.

This is where Serres' concept of the parasite becomes relevant; positing two people talking to each other, Gelley makes the following claim:

Such a dual or specular communicative model constitutes a closed system and assumes the possibility of maximal communication, of a nearly perfect transmission between two poles. But such an exchange would also be tautological, since the model ignores a basic factor in any communication, the channel of transmission. In order to complete the model we need to posit an agency capable of accounting for the resistance inherent in the medium of transmission. Such an agency may be conceived as operating either through force, through a violent intervention in the system, or through a tactical maneuver that would

239 On the phatic function, see Jakobson (18–51).

arouse minimal resistance and yet still modify or transform it. The parasite is such a mobile agent ... It is the tactician of the quotidian. It saps, not combats, the system that serves as its host. ("Parasitic Talk" 91–92)

Rather than resort to violence, which would mean to draw unwanted attention to itself, the parasite intercepts the relations of others, transforming them to divert nourishment in its own direction; as Serres puts it in order to explain why goods do not always arrive where they should: "There are always intercepters who work very hard to divert what is carried along these paths. Parasitism is the name most often given to these numerous and diverse activities, and I fear that they are the most common thing in the world" (*Parasite* 11). At least, such activities are surely the most common thing in the floating world of *The Confidence-Man*. No less than the characters he describes, Melville's narrator is someone who intercepts and latches onto relations, in his case through constantly diverting, problematizing, and undermining the meaning of his narrative. To take a closer look at his role, it is crucial to turn to the novel's many interpolated stories, as well as at the three chapters where he directly addresses his readers about the nature of literature.

The Confidence-Man contains five longer embedded narratives, as well as several shorter tales told by different characters to their interlocutors.²⁴⁰ While many of these stories are concerned with various types of misfortune, there is little in terms of direct content to tie them all together, nor is it always easy to understand exactly why they are told and what they are supposed to mean. Might there be a different sort of red thread connecting them, one that has more to do with their function within the novel than with their explicit subject matter? To answer this question, one might begin by inquiring into who narrates them. The first major story is originally brought to the reader's attention in Chapter 4, after John Ringman has tricked the merchant, Henry Roberts, into

²⁴⁰ The five longer tales concern the evil Goneril (in Chapter 12); the crippled Thomas Fry (19); Colonel John Moredock, the "Indian-hater" (25–27); Charlemont, the gentleman-madman (34); and the ruined candle-maker China Aster (40). The shorter narratives include the tale of the man who refused to think his wife was unfaithful (6); that of the moral old woman of Goshen who did not drink alcohol (24); as well as a poetical eulogy of the press (30).

thinking him an old acquaintance. After having asked the latter whether he, too, is a freemason, and whether he would loan money to a brother in need, Ringman proceeds to tell his story: “In a low, half-suppressed tone, he began it. Judging from his auditor’s expression, it seemed to be a tale of singular interest, involving calamities against which no integrity, no forethought, no energy, no genius, no piety, could guard” (*CM* 21). Even though the reader at this juncture has no idea what this “tale of singular interest” is about, it evidently leads to what Ringman had been hoping for:

At every disclosure, the hearer’s commiseration increased. No sentimental pity. As the story went on, he drew from his wallet a bank note, but after a while, at some still more unhappy revelation, changed it for another, probably of a somewhat larger amount; which, when the story was concluded, with an air studiously disclamatory of alms-giving, he put into the stranger’s hand; who, on his side, with an air studiously disclamatory of alms-taking, put it into his pocket. (*CM* 21)

Put differently, the performative effects of the story—Roberts making not only a donation, but a larger one than he had originally intended—are made familiar before its subject matter. In fact, it is only in Chapter 12 that its sad (but probably false) content is revealed, concerning Ringman and his evil wife, Goneril, who takes his daughter away from him, ruins him and tries to have him committed to a lunatic asylum. What deserves mention is who is doing the telling. The immediate cause of the narration is a disagreement between Roberts and John Truman, the agent from the Black Rapids Coal Company, from whom he has just bought what is likely bogus stock. Whereas the agent holds that misfortune in life is probably deserved and that those who observe the suffering of others tend to overrate its severity, the merchant is more charitably inclined. To argue his case, he first mentions a sick, old miser he has seen aboard (whom Truman will proceed to trick out of \$100 in Chapter 15, and the herb-doctor will convince to buy a box of his “Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator” in Chapter 20), then Black Guinea, but neither example changes his companion’s opinion about the reality of suffering. Finally, he mentions Ringman’s sad story:

Foiled again, the good merchant would not desist, but ventured still a third case, that of the man with the weed, whose story, as narrated by himself, and confirmed and filled out by the testimony of a certain man in a gray coat, whom the merchant had afterwards met, he now proceeded to give; and that, without holding back those particulars disclosed by the second informant, but which delicacy had prevented the unfortunate man himself from touching upon.

But as the good merchant could, perhaps, do better justice to the man than the story, we shall venture to tell it in other words than his, though not to any other effect. (*CM* 59)

In Chapter 12 readers are thus presented with a story first told by someone who corresponds to the first gentleman on Black Guinea's list (Ringman) to Roberts in Chapter 4; then "confirmed and filled out" by someone who corresponds to the second person on the list (the man in gray); then retold by the merchant to someone who corresponds to the third person on the list (Truman); but where the narrator, who does not feel that Roberts does the story justice, finally proceeds to tell it in "other words than his, though not to any other effect." For this reason, assigning ultimate responsibility for the story becomes a tricky task, indeed.

Similar tactics are at work in the narration of many of the novel's other interpolated tales. The story of Colonel Moredock, for example, is told by Charlie Noble to the cosmopolitan, but responsibility for its content is passed on to his father's friend, Judge James Hall. Noble claims to have heard it from him so many times that he knows it by heart:

In every company being called upon to give this history, which none could better do, the judge at last fell into a style so methodic, you would have thought he spoke less to mere auditors than to an invisible amanuensis; seemed talking for the press; very impressive way with him indeed. And I, having an equally impressible memory, think that, upon a pinch, I can render you the judge upon the colonel almost word for word. (*CM* 142)

Later, after the cosmopolitan points out that he does not seem to be drinking his port wine, Noble offers a second digression that he cannot ultimately be held responsible for:

“By-the-way, Frank,” said he, perhaps, or perhaps not, to draw attention from himself, “by-the-way, I saw a good thing the other day; a capital thing; a panegyric on the press. It pleased me so, I got it by heart at two readings. It is a kind of poetry, but in a form which stands in something the same relation to blank verse which that does to rhyme. A sort of free-and-easy-chant with refrains to it. Shall I recite it?” (*CM* 165)

Different sorts of evasive procedures are also involved in the story of Charlemont, told by Goodman to Noble. When asked by the latter whether it is true, the cosmopolitan replies “[o]f course not; it is a story which I told with the purpose of every story-teller—to amuse” (*CM* 187). And when Egbert, acting the part of “Charlie,” tells Goodman, acting the part of “Frank,” the story of China Aster to legitimize his decision not to give him a loan, he introduces it in the following manner:

I will tell you about China Aster. I wish I could do so in my own words, but unhappily the original story-teller here has so tyrannized over me, that it is quite impossible for me to repeat his incidents without sliding into his style. I forewarn you of this, that you may not think me so maudlin as, in some parts, the story would seem to make its narrator. It is too bad that any intellect, especially in so small a matter, should have such power to impose itself upon another, against its best exerted will, too. However, it is satisfaction to know that the main moral, to which all tends, I fully approve. (*CM* 207)

The different stories fall into two categories. Some, like Noble’s panegyric on the press, seem to be told with the explicit attention of diverting the current interlocutor’s attention. Here the fact that *something* is said is more important than what is uttered. Some of the other stories seem to be conveying a specific message, such as “the folly, on both sides, of a friend’s helping a friend” implied by the story of China Aster (*CM* 221). Yet, no matter what category the stories belong to, they are all narrated in such a manner that whoever is doing the telling can feign innocence or pin the responsibility for the content on someone else, if need be; as Noble tells the cosmopolitan after having finished the story of Colonel

Moredock: “There, I have done; have given you, not my story, mind, or my thoughts, but another’s” (CM 155). Gelley therefore concludes that “[s]tories are generated in the course of the encounters, but responsibility for them is evaded, and their significance, their illustrative function, is repeatedly obscured. At the level of narrative voices an elaborate ventriloquism is at work” (“Parasitic Talk” 97). To him, this can be said to constitute “a principle of narrative displacement along a parasitic chain” (“Parasitic Talk” 99). Serres’ concept of the parasitic chain might therefore not only be relevant to the relationships between the various characters in *The Confidence-Man* but can also help explain how the stories told by these characters—more likely than not with the intent of nourishing oneself on somebody else—are constantly being reiterated and modified, meaning that it becomes increasingly difficult to say who is responsible. The only thing I would add to Gelley’s claim is that here the simple parasitic chain has been transformed into a much more complex and convoluted parasitic cascade.

Crucially, at the end of this parasitic cascade is none other than the narrator. Even more important than his tendency of interfering in the retelling of his character’s stories, is his habit of offering various digressions that move readers out of the narrative proper. This can most clearly be seen in Chapters 14, 33, and 44, all bearing titles equally unfalsifiable and devoid of useful information: “Worth the consideration of those to whom it may prove worth considering”; “Which may pass for whatever it may prove to be worth”; and “In which the last three words of the last chapter are made the text of the discourse, which will be sure of receiving more or less attention from those readers who do not skip it,” respectively. Apart from the tautological character of their titles, what these short chapters have in common is that in them, the narrator breaks off from his story of what goes on aboard the *Fidèle* to directly address his readers by means of what Gérard Genette has labeled “commentarial discourse,” where the narrative “interrupts itself to give up its place to another type of discourse” (36–37), thereby bringing its own progression to a standstill. In all three cases, the narrator’s aim in doing so seems to be to clarify something that he has just said that he fears might confuse or annoy people if left uncommented, and in all three, his remarks concern the nature

of works of literature, providing what can perhaps be seen as fragments of a poetics.²⁴¹

Before addressing these chapters and their function within the narrative, the brief story at the beginning of Chapter 13 must be mentioned. This anecdote concerns an unnamed American scholar in London who encounters someone he believes to be a fool, only to learn that it was none other than the great British scientist Sir Humphrey Davy, “almost as great a savan as himself” (*CM* 64). Since the story is only a quarter of a page long and seems to add little to the narrative, it is all too easy to overlook its significance. However, it should be noted that the story differs from the interpolated stories previously referred to in one crucial manner. Whereas all these stories are (ostensibly, at least) told by different characters aboard the *Fidèle*, in this case, neither confidence men nor their victims are involved. As becomes clear from the narrator’s convoluted explanation, there is no doubt it is told *by him, to the reader*:

The above anecdote is given just here by way of an anticipative reminder to such readers as, from the kind of jaunty levity, or what may have passed for such, hitherto for the most part appearing in the man with the travelling-cap [John Truman], may have been tempted into a more or less hasty estimate of him; that such readers, when they find the same person, as they presently will, capable of philosophic and humanitarian discourse—no mere casual sentence or two as heretofore at times, but solidly sustained throughout an almost entire setting; that they may not, like the American savan, be thereupon betrayed into any surprise incompatible with their own good opinion of their previous penetration. (*CM* 64)

I will return to the anecdote and the narrator’s explanation, but for now, I simply want to stress that in combination, they in a sense function as a bridge between the different stories told *in* the novel and the three chapters where the narrator directly addresses the reader.

241 The pieces of this potential poetics should not necessarily be ascribed to Melville himself. As Dimock has rightly claimed, due to the constant slippages of meaning and inconsistencies in and between the meta-literary chapters, organizing the pieces into a coherent whole is far from easy: “Melville’ is simply not available for our enlightenment. Or rather, he is too available. He appears in too many shades and forms of ideas. He cancels himself out . . . in his very plenitude of utterance. He is at once manifest and unaccountable” (*Empire* 206–7).

The first of the latter is occasioned by the ending of Chapter 13, where the good merchant, who up to this point has come across as cheerful and full of faith in others, proves that he is capable of distrust, after all. Having had several glasses of wine in the company of Truman, he suddenly begins to question whether “wine or confidence [can] percolate down through all the stony strata of hard considerations, and drop warmly and ruddily into the cold cave of truth?” (*CM* 67). This reaction seems to come as a surprise both to the merchant himself, as well as his present companion, causing Roberts to withdraw “with the air of one, mortified at having been tempted by his own honest goodness, accidentally stimulated into making mad disclosures—to himself as to another—of the queer, unaccountable caprices of his natural heart” (*CM* 68). It is at this juncture the narrator takes the opportunity to address the question of consistency, and more specifically whether this is something one should expect from characters found in works of literature. As he puts it in Chapter 14, which he opens by way of an analeptic reference to the previous chapter’s “anticipative reminder” to readers not to judge Truman too hastily:

As the last chapter was begun with a reminder looking forwards, so the present must consist of one glancing backwards.

To some, it may raise a degree of surprise that one so full of confidence, as the merchant has throughout shown himself, up to the moment of his late sudden impulsiveness, should, in that instance, have betrayed such a depth of discontent. He may be thought inconsistent, and even so he is. But for this, is the author to be blamed? (*CM* 69)²⁴²

Whereas the narrator thus freely admits to the inconsistency of the merchant’s behavior, he refuses to consider this a shortcoming of the author. If it is a shortcoming, it is one resulting from the endless, inventive inconsistency of life; for, as he asks, “is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent

²⁴² Another occasion where the narrator makes oblique references to his own discourse can be found in Chapter 33, which he ends by referring his readers back to Chapter 14: “all such readers as may think they perceive something inharmonious between the boisterous hilarity of the cosmopolitan with the bristling cynic, and his restrained good-nature with the boon-companion, are now referred to that chapter where some similar apparent inconsistency in another character is, on general principles, modestly endeavored to be apologized for” (*CM* 183).

character is a *rara avis*?" (CM 69). Or, as he then notes: "If reason be judge, no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature herself has. It must call for no small sagacity in a reader unerringly to discriminate in a novel between the inconsistencies of conception and those of life" (CM 70).

Moving on to "Which may pass for whatever it may prove to be worth," the shortest of the three chapters, it is occasioned by what happens prior to Goodman's offer to tell Noble the story of Charlemont, namely the latter's (seeming) transformation into a new shape and the cosmopolitan's (seeming) use of magic to transform him back again. Chapter 33 opens as follows:

But ere be given the rather grave story of Charlemont, a reply must in civility be made to a certain voice which methinks I hear, that, in view of past chapters, and more particularly the last, where certain antics appear, exclaims: How unreal all this is! Who did ever dress or act like your cosmopolitan? (CM 182)

This "certain voice" that the narrator thinks he hears is the voice of the critical reader who not only expects consistency from characters in works of literature, but also what is termed a "severe fidelity to real life" (CM 182). As a reply to this imagined critical voice, the narrator highlights that he finds it strange that anyone sufficiently in need of diversion from quotidian existence to be willing to spend time reading a book, should expect such "a work of amusement" to correspond closely to the "real life" the book was meant to offer refuge from (CM 182). As opposed to this type of reader, the narrator favors those that are willing to "sit down to a work of amusement tolerantly as they sit at a play, and with much the same expectations and feelings" (CM 182). According to the narrator, it is for such readers as these that his narrative is intended: "If, then, something is to be pardoned to well-meant endeavor, surely a little is to be allowed to that writer who, in all his scenes, does but seek to minister to what, as he understands it, is the implied wish of the more indulgent lovers of entertainment" (CM 183).

Finally, Chapter 44 aims to discuss the expression "QUITE AN ORIGINAL," which William Cream's friends had all thought a fitting description of the cosmopolitan. But, as the narrator points out, the notion of originality is problematic because most often, it is invoked by

those with the least experience in life: “Certainly, the sense of originality exists at its highest in an infant, and probably at its lowest in him who has completed the circle of the sciences” (*CM* 238). Hence, the more one has seen, the less likely one is to consider anything original. The chapter, then, can be understood as an attempt to decide whether Goodman truly deserves this epithet or not. If he does, the narrator indicates that this would mean that he belongs to a *very* select category of literary characters:

As for original characters in fiction, a grateful reader will, on meeting with one, keep the anniversary of that day. True, we sometimes hear of an author who, at one creation, produces some two or three score such characters; it may be possible. But they can hardly be original in the sense that Hamlet is, or Don Quixote, or Milton’s Satan. That is to say, they are not, in a thorough sense, original at all. They are novel, or singular, or striking, or captivating, or all four at once. (*CM* 238)

According to the narrator, then, true originals must be distinguished from characters that are merely “singular.” To substantiate this claim, he discusses how authors come to create characters that belong to either of the two categories:

For much the same reason that there is but one planet to one orbit, so can there be but one original character to one work of invention. Two would conflict to chaos. In this view, to say that there are more than one to a book, is a good presumption there is none at all. But for new, singular, striking, odd, eccentric, and all sorts of entertaining and instructive characters, a good fiction may be full of them. (*CM* 239)

What defines true originals is not only how rare they are, and how hard they are to create—in order to create “singular” characters, an author “must have seen much, and seen through much: to produce but one original character, he must have had much luck” (*CM* 239)—but also their effect on their surroundings: “the original character, essentially such, is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it—everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it (mark how it is with Hamlet),” causing “an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things” (*CM* 239). That is to say, to the

narrator, characters are only truly original insofar as they bring a world into being; as Branka Arsić puts it, “they imply a new life that hasn’t yet been formed. . . . Originals are formless life, impersonal atmospheres, figures without form” (*Passive* 7).²⁴³

How should these three digressive chapters, as well as of the narrator’s preliminary address to the reader in Chapter 13, be understood? First, there is a marked discrepancy between the form and the content of what is said, where the form casts doubt upon the validity of the message that is seemingly conveyed. The anecdote of the American savan, for example, puts forward the simple idea that readers should avoid judging literary characters too hastily. However, given the narrator’s *modus operandi* in the rest of the novel, one might ask why would he bother breaking off from his narrative if all he wanted to convey was something as commonsensical as this? With the confidence men’s tactics of “idle talk” in mind, and considering that the intricate addendum to the story is slightly longer, as well as a lot less straightforward than the actual anecdote it comments upon, one might begin suspecting that the story of the American savan has been told as little more than an excuse for the narrator to directly address the readers of *The Confidence-Man*. What the narrator does here is in many ways reminiscent of what the confidence men do to their intended victims. In both cases, it is a question of making sure that a channel of transmission is set up between the sender (confidence men/the narrator) and the intended receptor (potential victim/the reader), and then that it remains operative through the continual flow of (more or less) “idle” words, even though it is difficult to tell what exactly they are meant to convey. Here as in the rest of the novel, the fact that communication is going on might be more important than *what* is said.

A similar discrepancy between form and content also informs Chapter 14, where the narrator, as Deleuze puts it, claims “the rights of a superior irrationalism” for authors (81). Although the chapter seems to offer the vitalistic argument that authors who embrace multiplicity and change, rather than seeking too strictly to adhere to a limiting

²⁴³ For a productive analysis that applies the distinction between singular and original characters to Melville’s *oeuvre*, see Deleuze (81–84).

consistency, may be the ones that are truer to nature, it would be hard to claim that this is its ultimate message. Among other things, this is due to the way the narrator keeps digressing, adding layer upon layer of information—in the space of little more than two pages, he touches upon such issues as the resistance to newness found in scientific communities, as exemplified by the skepticism originally shown by British naturalists toward the Australian duck-billed beaver; different aspects of the psychological novel; the status of various quasi-sciences; and the finer points of human nature. In so doing, he effectively blocks any attempt to narrow down the “true” meaning of the chapter. What exactly the narrator is trying to tell his readers therefore remains just as unclear as his given reasons for breaking off from the story, which may or may not be believable. Hence, it is difficult to know whether he goes on talking because he has something specific to say, or simply to keep the words flowing. The feeling that the latter may be the case does not diminish upon reaching the end of the chapter, where it is almost as if the narrator suddenly realizes that he is, in fact, rambling, and somewhat reluctantly decides to return to the narrative proper: “But enough has been said by way of apology for whatever may have seemed amiss or obscure in the character of the merchant; so nothing remains but to turn to our comedy or, rather, to pass from the comedy of thought to that of action” (CM 71).

A similar tactic of deferral can also be found at work in Chapter 44, where the narrator offers an oblique non-answer to the question of whether Goodman is an original literary character in the strict sense of the word. On the one hand, he indicates that his aim has been to show that the question should be answered in the negative—in other words, that Goodman is not original in the same sense as Don Quixote, Hamlet or Milton’s Satan—but, on the other, this conclusion is formulated in a manner that draws its own validity into doubt, indicating that perhaps the cosmopolitan does qualify, after all. Not only does the narrator thus avoid answering his own question, but he also explicitly uses the uncertainty he has created as an excuse to return to his narrative:

In the endeavor to show, if possible, the impropriety of the phrase, *Quite an Original*, as applied by the barber’s friends, we have, at unawares, been led into a dissertation bordering upon the prosy, perhaps upon the smoky. If so, the best

use the smoke can be turned to, will be, by retiring under cover of it, in good trim as may be to the story. (*CM* 239)

In other words, the narrator seems to love the sound of his own voice no less than his parasite-like characters love their own “idle talk,” manipulating his readers much like the confidence men cozen their victims.

For the longest time these manipulative attempts were entirely unsuccessful. Upon its publication in 1857, *The Confidence-Man* was a resounding failure, commercially as well as critically, and so it remained for almost one hundred years. Even after the “Melville Revival” of the 1920s, there was a long period where it was hardly read, and it was only with Elizabeth S. Foster’s 1954 critical Hendricks House edition that the tide really started turning. Today, the novel is among Melville’s most popular works, generating a steady abundance of critical attempts to come to terms with the peculiar noisiness of the floating world of the *Fidèle*. Accordingly, Jim Lewis might be onto something when he makes the following claim:

The Confidence Man is wasteful, ornery and unkempt: the book is a barnacle, a stubborn and inert parasite on the hull of the great, gliding culture above it, fastened there by a drowning man. You can’t outsmart it, you can’t lose it, you can’t even criticize it; it seems to defy every attempt at understanding. It takes you as the confidence man takes his victims: with a patience and tenacity that will wear you down if it can’t win you over. (“Melville”)

If it is indeed a stubborn parasitic growth on American culture, the still ongoing attempts to understand and come to terms with its strangeness prove that parasites sometimes function as generators of newness. To finally address *The Confidence-Man*’s famous last sentence, uttered by the narrator after the cosmopolitan has extinguished the last lamp in the cabin and “kindly” led his last companion, the old man with whom he discussed Ecclesiasticus, into the ensuing darkness: “Something further may follow of this Masquerade” (*CM* 251). If the figure of the parasite is proof of anything, it is that something surely will; in Serres’ words: “A microscopic parasite can be introduced into an equilibrated pathological environment, or a good-sized parasite into an economically stable system, or a noisy parasite into a dialogical message; in any case a (hi)story will follow” (*Parasite* 182–83).