

Zeitschrift: Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne
Herausgeber: Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres
Band: - (1987)
Heft: 4

Artikel: "Something Further" : The Confidence Man and writing as a disinterested act
Autor: Overmeer, Roelof
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870637>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 30.12.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

“SOMETHING FURTHER”

The Confidence Man and Writing as a Disinterested Act

L'écriture a rendu Herman Melville conscient que, pour lui l'écrivain, elle seule importait et que l'écrit, le produit final, ne le concernait plus. Cette conscience a transformé son écriture, et elle aurait pu changer l'écriture romanesque en Amérique. Ses successeurs, avec des exceptions importantes mais trop peu nombreuses, ont cependant continué à produire des textes en ignorant ce travail diabolique de l'écriture. *The Confidence Mann*, le dernier roman de Melville, reste un des très rares romans américains qui impliquent cette conscience.

1. Melville the Writer: Leaving Paradise

Just thirteen years of intense work (*Typee* was begun in 1844 and *The Confidence Man* was finished in 1856) taught Herman Melville more about writing than any American novelist had ever known and — with the exception of Henry James — as much as any have come to know since. The knowledge was hard won. Melville paid for it by having to abandon all hope of an audience, all hope not only of his contemporaries understanding the significance of what he had discovered through his writing, but even all hope of their simply being sympathetic to his experience, and for that natural “bosom friend” whose life and early work express such a passionate desire and need to share his discoveries with a kindred spirit,¹ that loss of hope at first contributed to driving him to the verge of insanity. It also, however, resulted in Melville’s finally ceasing to resist his writing, and this made possible a new relationship between him and it,² which is expressed in a novel whose modernity no twentieth century American novelist has yet surpassed and, judging from the little non-derivative critical writing it has inspired, whose importance — even though Melville criticism has been a thriving industry since the “revival” in the early twenties — too few readers have tried to come to terms with. But like all labels, “modern” is an empty space where all is possible and nothing is possible until we determine something of

the form it has. This article's limited ambition is to reflect upon the shape of some of those parts of "modern" (as I understand it) which might benefit and benefit from a reading of Melville's *The Confidence Man*.

An English publisher agreed to publish *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life During a Four Months' Residence in A Valley of the Marquesas* (though it had been liked by the editors of Harper brothers in the United States, they refused it, suspecting it to be fiction) on the condition that Melville leave out some passages "on the score of taste" and add others about native life and customs. The twenty-seven year old first-time author grudgingly complied. Those modifications did not keep the book from being very enthusiastically received by the public. Before bringing it out in the United States, however, the American publisher quickly made some additional changes himself, and when the first edition was sold out just a few months later, he had Melville extensively "revise" it for the second edition, expurgating passages some readers had considered too explicitly sexual or too critical of missionaries. Once again, Melville acquiesced. The young Melville was obviously not yet very clear about his relationship with his art and his readers. He was just happy to have so many people take an interest in his story, but he was still incapable of distinguishing between the "story" which so appealed to readers: the "story" he had told (which *they* mistook for the "story" of his experience) and the "story" which was most important to him — as a remark made a few years later to Hawthorne saying that he dated his life from 1844 suggests³ — the story of the adventure that writing had become for him. He was just beginning to become conscious of the conflict in himself between his need for the approbation of his public and his desire to be uncompromising in his fidelity to his writing. It is not surprising that *Typee* is a story about a paradise in which its hero feels he cannot remain.

It was the hostile reception of *Mardi* which shocked Melville into the suspicion that no conciliation was possible between writing as he was beginning to understand it, and having a public, which meant, he thought, filling his empty pocket, but which more significantly filled his need to have the community recognize the importance of the role that his writing, which he confused with himself, played in it. This frightened him enough to make him write *Redburn* and *Whitejacket*, but he no longer believed in writing as a substitute for adventure, as his well-known remark equating those two novels with "sawing wood"⁴ clearly indicates.

But the urge of continuing the adventure of writing he had embarked on would not let go of him, and he started work on a project which was to attempt to fuse a tale of adventure with the adventure of telling, for by now he was wholly conscious at least of the existence of the conflict he was faced with, if not of all its implications. In June of 1851 he wrote to Hawthorne:

Dollars damn me.... What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, — it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.... What's the use of elaborating what, in its very essence, is so short-lived as a modern book? Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter.⁵

However, the dimension of *Moby Dick* resulting from the writing he felt “most moved” to do doomed the novel in spite of Melville's making of it an adventure tale as well.⁶ More and more desperate, Melville made a last attempt to write a salable book without totally betraying his writing, but he was now too hurt and too bitter to keep on the mask he intended to wear for his public for long, and *Pierre* ends by spitting his frustration and anger and contempt — directed against himself as much as against them — into his horrified public's face.

Biographical facts suggest that Melville's attitude toward his public changed after *Pierre*. First, though he continued writing for magazines, his stories were published anonymously. Then, up until the writing of his last novel, having written a book was not for Melville having done with it; publication was for him part of his relationship to his work, and consequently, he had always himself hawked his wares in publishing houses on both sides of the Atlantic. For example, when he sailed for England in 1849 with the manuscript of *White-Jacket* in his trunk, an anonymous observer wrote that he had gone from “Piccadilly to Whitechapel, calling upon every publisher in his way.”⁷ However, when, having finished *The Confidence Man*, he left for Europe seven years later, the contract for the publication of the novel in the States had not even been signed — Allan Melville signed it three weeks after his brother had left — and it was not Melville who took care of the publication in England. All this seems to suggest that during the writing of *The Confidence Man* Melville no longer gave importance to selling his work. If this is indeed the case, then his relationship to his reader — and consequently to his writing — must have changed, and *The Confidence Man* expresses this change.

2. "Who Is The Confidence Man?"

Most commentators dealing with *The Confidence Man* raise the question of the "identity" of the character the title tells us is at the center of the novel. The possible answers belong to two categories: they are either extratextual referents or intratextual referents. God, the Devil, Emerson, Plato, just to name those most obvious candidates, have all been pointed to as extratextual referents. The intratextual referents are the deaf mute, Black Guinea, John Ringman, the man with the weed, the man in gray, the transfer-agent, the herb-doctor, the man with the brass plate, the cosmopolitan, and the narrator, according to my count. Even if, for argument's sake, we ignore the fact that these answers are not unproblematic and cannot simply be advanced without further comment, they do not solve the problem of identity. The question remains: who is *the* confidence man? Is the definite article a sign suggesting that behind the various intratextual victimizers lurks one identity? And should we choose just one from among the extratextual referents? The novel foils any attempt to argue either of these positions. On the contrary, the fact that it is impossible to point to any one identity of which all the others are disguises is clearly part of its strategy. So, if the potential extratextual referents are multiple, and the problemativeness of the intratextual referents part of the novel's overall design, seeking to identify "the confidence man" referentially cannot help us get beyond a first-level reading. It remains, then, to leave the vertical axis for the horizontal axis, to no longer seek identity, but rather to seek his function. Instead of asking "*Who* is 'the confidence man'?" let us ask "*What* is 'the confidence man'?"

Up until the arrival of the cosmopolitan, the function of the various victimizers on the narrative level, though unprovable, appears to be obvious: they are swindlers after their victims' money, and either dupe them themselves or prepare them for subsequent reaping. All participate in some way in wheedling money from more or less credulous victims. However, the sums obtained are often so small that at least one character/observer believes the particular confidence relationship he witnesses to be legitimate, arguing that the elaborate disguises and acting implied were it a confidence game would be too greatly disproportionate with the meager winnings. His argument is countered by a more skeptical onlooker who says, "Money, you think, is the sole motive to pains and hazard, deception and deviltry, in the world. How

much money did the devil make by gulling Eve?"⁸ Moreover, if obtaining money were the goal of the confidence game, one would have to admit that the cosmopolitan is a miserable confidence man, since he does not get a cent out of the Missourian, Charlie Noble, or Winsome and Egbert, and just the price of a shave out of the barber. Clearly, if obtaining money may signal the success of the Melvillian confidence game, it is not its goal. But of what does obtaining money signal the success?

When the good merchant decides, in spite of the general distrust in the beggar's authenticity, to give money to Black Guinea, his action indicates that he has confidence that the black cripple is what he appears to be and who he says he is. Giving money is for him the sign of the referent "trust"; and in every instance where money is handed over in the novel, this is the case. All the victims of the confidence man are victims because they are forced to perform an act of faith intended to be a sign indicating that they trust that their interlocutor is what he seems and who he says. None, not even the charitable lady, the most gullible of the victims, believe that the relationship between appearance and essence, between the referential meaning of language and its intention is necessarily one of simple correspondence. On the contrary, in the universe of the *Fidèle*, where so many signs continually warn against thieves and operators, all are wary and some — like the misanthropist — are very wary of the potential impostor. Yet all end up by being conned.

Immediately after the opening paragraphs of the novel, in which the first avatar of the confidence man appears, people are crowded around a poster "offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor." According to the warning, says the narrator, the confidence man is "quite an original genius in his vocation... though wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given."⁹ It is exactly because they, like the authorities who had issued the wanted poster, cannot solve the problem of the "originality" of the confidence man that his interlocutors are victimized. Varying meanings of "originality" are played with — if we did not already suspect it, chapter 44, a commentary on the phrase "quite an original" makes this at least quite clear. One of the meanings is undoubtedly that which it has in the Platonic conception of originals and copies, which inevitably engenders the problem of how to judge whether an appearance of a thing or concept is a true or false representation of the original. Plato deals with this problem especially in *The Sophist*, where he very

systematically uses the dialectic method to come to a definition of the "sophist." However, when he arrives at the conclusion that the "sophist" is the man who "in private, using short speeches, forces his interlocutor to contradict himself," he found himself staring into the abyss he was trying to bridge.¹⁰ Against his apparent (but Melville was right in considering Plato one of the wiliest of confidence men) intentions, he demonstrates that between Socrates and the "sophist," between the true philosopher and the false wise man, between a "good" copy and a "false" copy, there is no formalizable difference.

All of the confidence man's victims are faced with a dilemma similar to Plato's at the end of *The Sophist*. No matter how suspicious they are, they are incapable of determining the "originality" of their interlocutor. Is John Ringman a man who rings true or a "ringer"; is Truman, the man with the ledger book, "true"; is Frank Goodman the cosmopolitan a man who is "frank" and "good"? Their victims can never know for sure, and their incapacity to distinguish between the true and the false is used by the confidence man to dupe them. He counts on the fact that his victims will not admit to themselves that they do not know whether their interlocutor is authentic or an imitator, for that is tantamount to admitting that ultimately it is not possible to distinguish between the two. This is a knowledge that they cannot bear being conscious of, for it totally undermines their basically Platonic and reassuring understanding of the world. Consequently, when the confidence man forces them to make a decision — which significantly in practically every case they do not want to have to make — between having confidence in him or calling him an impostor, they have no alternative but to pretend they are capable of distinguishing the false from the true. That each of the victims pretends to recognize in the confidence man the authentic rather than the spurious is predictable, for when someone is forced to voice an opinion he is not sure of, he tends to avoid the opinion which will create conflict. Furthermore — and this strategy is of course that of the "confidence man" in the primary sense — when necessary, the confidence man leads his victims on with the hope of some sort of material or moral gain as retribution for their trust. Finally, opting for the belief that the world described is the world that is, is opting for the alternative which is psychologically easiest to accept.

When Mr. Roberts the merchant does not recognize his interlocutor, who claims to be an old acquaintance, the latter calls him

by his name and asks him to look at one of his own business cards to see if he is not the man behind that label. The future victim answers, “I hope I know myself.” To which the confidence man replies, “And yet self-knowledge is thought by some not so easy.”¹¹ On the surface level, kidding and pleasantries on the part of the confidence man; for the listener who is aware of the complexities of his wiles, however, the remark is as usual strategically polysemic. If some of the confidence man’s victims seem troubled by the growing — though repressed — realization that they are incapable of judging whether appearances correspond to essences or not, none, because of the very fact that they prevent the knowledge from reaching consciousness, realize that the same reasons which make knowledge problematic, make self-knowledge problematic as well. Mr. Roberts may know his own name and his profession, but do these labels allow him to “know” himself? The fact that he is swindled three times by the confidence man suggests that the latter knows the merchant much better than he does himself, and this seems to be generally the case. The collegian thinks himself a hard-dealing, practical business man; the confidence man flatters this self-image, then proceeds to fleece him. The “gentleman with the gold sleeve-buttons” in his dress and in his speech exudes the conviction of his goodness and generosity, and the confidence man makes him pay in order to be able to continue to believe in this illusion — and it is an illusion as the rich man’s relationship with his black body-servant shows. The Missourian who aggressively asserts that he is unwavering in his misanthropy and his distrust of man turns out to desperately need to be proven wrong, and his nemesis exploits this need. As signs, the various victims are not different from any one of the confidence man’s disguises. It is in this perspective that it is significant that if the different avatars of the confidence man are practically always referred to by an outward appearance or name or epithet which serves as a sign whose purported referent is clear: “the man with the weed,” “the man with the ledger book,” Black Guinea, Frank Goodman, Mr. Truman, the cosmopolitan, etc., this is also the case for “the Methodist,” “the good merchant,” “the charitable lady,” “the miser,” “the misanthrope,” to name only those victims. The difference is that that which makes the confidence man a sign: his name, his dress, his speech, his actions, never gives his interlocutor access to a knowledge of how he will act. He, on the contrary, once he has found out what a prospective victim takes himself to be a sign of, knows exactly what it will

take to have him or her act in the way that he desires, and he plans his strategy accordingly.

The different avatars of the confidence man are signs whose appearances do not correspond to an essence but to a strategy; his victims, on the other hand, are all appearances from which it may be deduced what they think their essence is. They represent the belief that a surface corresponds to an essence; the confidence man represents the knowledge that a surface is a fiction that translates a strategy. All the disguises of the confidence man are fictions, they are contrived identities that serve a purpose. His victims are also contrived identities, like him created by dress, actions, discourse, and they also serve a purpose. The difference is that they all believe that their surface corresponds to an essence, to an ego, to an identity, to the identity they think is theirs. The confidence man pushes them until this fictional identity becomes a constraint, thus proving that it is a fiction. Those who become vaguely aware of this recoil from the realization that what they take to be their essence is in fact a fiction, just as they recoil from the knowledge that they are incapable of distinguishing the authentic from the spurious.

3. “The Confidence Man” and *The Confidence Man*

The surface in a work of literature is of course language. Other elements of surface in reality only exist in literature as referents of language, and as such are part of the language — in the sense of the ensemble of codes used to communicate — of each character. All the avatars of the confidence man in the novel are men of words — even the deaf mute is a man of the written word — and their words can never be related to an essence, to the irreducible which resists and nourishes all fictions, but is not a fiction itself.

At first this relationship to language seems to be represented by the victimizer(s), but with the advent of the cosmopolitan, it becomes clear that the confidence game in *The Confidence Man* is more than just an example of an illicit use of language imputable to one category of characters. Melville’s “confidence man” does not simply misrepresent “reality” for the purpose of some sort of gain — as his encounter with Charlie Noble illustrates, he is not just a common “operator” — nor does he trap his victims in their own fictions in order to work their destruction like the devil in a Christian allegory. He is part of a strategy whose purpose is to get

at the nature of those fictions. The language of the confidence men does not correspond to an essence, but neither does the language of any other character. This is not so because they all misuse language, but because it is in the very nature of language to create fictions.

Language cannot be the image of an essence, it is always a strategy. Moreover, this strategy is not just the strategy of an ego, a trace one can retrace in order to get back to an origin, the inner being of the speaker — this would be making the model/copy pair into a model/strategy pair, thus letting Plato come back in by the back door. In *The Confidence Man*, speech acts are not the strategies of an ego, they are the strategies of a role. There is no being, no “confidence man” who can be reconstituted thanks to his speech acts, there are only the speech acts; and this is also true for his interlocutors. When the cosmopolitan converses with Mark Winsome, for example, and the text does not indicate clearly who is speaking, but either simply juxtaposes remarks or attributes a remark to “the other,” which sometimes refers to the cosmopolitan and sometimes to Winsome, it is not possible solely from the speech act itself to know who is speaking. Playing identical roles in an argument, they use identical rhetorical devices, identical strategies, and consequently their speech acts are indistinguishable. Similarly, though the cosmopolitan and Egbert agree to assume roles, when they speak, it is impossible to draw a line between role and real, as is suggested by the cosmopolitan stalking off at the end “leaving his companion at a loss to determine where exactly the fictitious character had been dropped, and the real one, if any, resumed.” The referential level of language does not give us access to reality, it gives us access to the fictions of its users and allows us to create our own. Of all the roles played in the novel, only that of “the confidence man” implies an awareness of this. This is why he is often in the novel likened to the serpent of the allegory, for his role is also a consciousness-creating role. However, this consciousness-creating role very fittingly is not represented. No character in the novel is any wiser for having been conned. The only “characters” who might come away from *The Confidence Man* more conscious beings are those who play the roles of the text rather than the roles in the story.

4. Melville the "Disinterested" Writer

The first is of course that role-player called the writer. *The Confidence Man* suggests that in writing it, Melville came to understand that man's speech acts reproduce the fictions he has inherited with the language, and allow these fictions to engender others; he ceased to believe that what he said or what he wrote was a sign of which his innermost being was the referent, and that an attitude towards it was an attitude towards him. He realized that in writing he created a fictional Herman Melville, Melville the writer, implied in the texts he produced. For the empirical author of *The Confidence Man*, once the act of writing was finished, his interest in it was finished as well, for his interest was in the process not the product.

This, for Melville, new attitude towards his writing is what I call "disinterested." In a sense, it is impossible for our acts and our speech acts not to be interested, for they always serve us in one way or another. However, in what I think is a modern attitude, growing out of a modern understanding about man's relationship to his speech acts, the interest of writing is for the writer in the act itself insofar as it is an act of exploration, of discovery, an act which changes its agent; its interest is not in how that act is perceived and experienced by others once it is finished. As writing, *The Confidence Man* is a universe away from the popular writing that *Typee* is. *Typee* demands a naïve reader, one who at least wonders how true the story is. *The Confidence Man* demands a reader who is aware that a story is never true but always strategic, one who has no vested interest in the "truth," but a fascination with the diabolical power of fiction. *Typee* demands little but expects alot; *The Confidence Man* demands alot, but expects nothing. If "something further [is to] follow of [the] masquerade" the novel is, that is solely the affair of he or she who assumes the other role implied by the text: the reader.

Roelof OVERMEER

NOTES

¹ D.H. Lawrence apparently felt the same way about Melville. He says in the chapter "Herman Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo*" of his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, "... to the end [Melville] pined for this: a perfect relationship: perfect mating: perfect mutual understanding. A perfect friend."

² I am not of course suggesting that an artist *cannot* be true to his art and sell. When asked at Cannes after the showing of his most recent film *Le roi Lear*, which was financed by American fast-food money, about his relationship with his sponsors, Jean-Luc Godard answered: "I can be bought anytime, but it's not because you've bought me that I've sold myself." ["Vous pouvez m'acheter du jour au lendemain. Mais ce n'est pas parce que vous m'achetez que je me suis vendu."] It is self-evident that an artist need not necessarily devalue his work in order to sell. The relationship between being faithful to one's art and making a living from it depends on the medium, the period, the public, and the deviousness of the artist. Melville, it seems to me, was particularly unfortunate — as far as the question of making a living from his art is concerned — on all those counts.

³ "From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself." Herman Melville, "To Nathaniel Hawthorne," 1? June 1851, letter 84 of *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), p. 130.

⁴ Herman Melville, "To Lemuel Shaw," 6 Oct. 1846, letter 65 of *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), p. 91.

⁵ Herman Melville, "To Nathaniel Hawthorne," 1? June 1851, letter 84 of *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), pp. 126-127.

⁶ Cf. the review (in *Literary World*, November 15 and 22, 1851) by Edward Duyckinck, whose relationship to Melville and his works interesting mirrored that of the public — they were close friends at the time of *Typee* and completely estranged by *Pierre*.

⁷ Anonymous letter in the *London Times*, 22 January, 1850. Partially quoted in Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville: 1819-1891*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt, 1951), I, p. 362.

⁸ Harrison Hayford, ed., *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* by Herman Melville, vol. 10 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1984), p. 32.

⁹ *The Confidence Man*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, "Platon et le simulacre," in *Logique du sens* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1969), pp. 292-307.

¹¹ *The Confidence Man*, p. 19.

R.O.

