

Elements of the Metaphysical Detective in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*: Questioning the Notion of Evidence

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Abstract :

In the Melville's Confidence-Man will be taken as a starting-point for presenting these themes in 19th century literature. As will become clear, the novel has very little in common with traditional detective stories. The reason why it is included is that it resembles the genre of metaphysical detective fiction in its overall effect. The boat in Melville's novel provides a setting where no meaning is stable, where we can never be sure of a person's true identity, where any attempt to attain any sort of proof or evidence is futile.

Key: *Detective, boat, metaphysics.*

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The metaphysical detective story is a type which is postmodern in all its features. It is described by “disintegration, indeterminacy, and penetrating disbelief of all worldwide or ‘totalizing’ discourses which are the hallmark of postmodernist thought” (Harvey 9). The detective in the postmodern era has a firm time examining through numerous opposing signs without any chance of receiving to the solution merely because there is not any such modest, unified truth to be found. It is only the effortlessly created world of the traditional detective story that gives suggestions such solutions.

Sorting Melville’s *Confidence-Man* as a detective story would be widening it slightly too far. There is no symbol of a detective of some kind, no murder, and no search. According to a modern critic it is barely even a novel, since he wrote in 1857: “A novel it is not, unless a novel means forty-five conversations held on board a steamer, conducted by passengers who might pass for the errata of creation” (qtd. in Tanner, “Melville” 90). However, there are numerous features which link the book to the field of the metaphysical detective story such as shifting characters, ambiguity, open-endedness of the text, no gladly recognizable result. Due to the mysterious nature of the main character, it is the novel itself which becomes a mystery to be solved by a detective/the reader. The fact that there is no pact between the critics as to its sense/result serves to exemplify this point. It is only natural that words like “conflicting clues” and “evidence” appear in such criticism (Cawelti).

While Melville may not have been determinedly conveying these ideas, there are surely many of them to be found in his works. The efforts of numerous critics at providing a pure construction of the novel, annoying to scheme harmony onto it, essentially came up in contradiction of problems (Seltzer 15). The most noticeable one being that it is not as simple to unify all the apparent confidence-men beneath one persona as it would seem at first. As the chapters follow one another there appears to be a line of avatars of the same ‘confidence man,’ part of whose achievement lies in generating a kind of system of alter-egos, each character declaring the name of alternative that seems in a later chapter and therewith vouching for their integrity. This neatly woven network is torn apart once there seem two dissimilar confidence-men at the same time. The disturbance of the design makes the reader question the individuality of the earlier avatars.

The speaker himself does not give any sign of these characters being the same individual; it is the reader who takes this for granted. Based on the title of the book (confidence-man singular, not confidence-*men*) and based on common narrative conventions we are led to assume that everything will fit together in the end. There appears to be a similar pattern as in the metaphysical detective story where everything

seems to go according to plan at first: the detective finds various clues which lead him to more clues and so forth, only to be finally leads completely astray. The reader then has to reconsider the previously made assumptions, approach the text more critically.

The simple idea that all characters who have trust in the confidence-man are fools and only the sage are able to repel him is also contested by critics (Drew 418-9). The reader is tempted to apply these binary converses (foolish/wise, moral/immoral) to the characters, however, once applied, there arise facts which contradict these simple labels. John G. Cawelti termed this the “incomplete reversal”:

Something is presented, a character, an incident, an idea, anything which might give the reader some clue to the interpretation of the represented reality; then a counter incident or idea appears, powerful enough to destroy the usefulness of the first clue, but insufficient to provide a foundation for a new interpretation of what has been presented. We are left in the air with no way of resolving two mutually exclusive possibilities. (282-3)

Leon Seltzer finds in *The Confidence-Man* resonances with Camus’s idea of the absurd.

The first chapter looks to portray clear differences; it contrasts the two main themes of the text: confidence and doubt. There are two characters that signify each of these ideas, both stating them in the method of a written sign. The first one is the deaf-mute (by most of the critics believed to be the first personification of the confidence man, rendering to others he symbolizes Christ, while the other confidence-men are destined to be the personifications of Satan) displaying his slate with documents from the book of Corinthians concerning charity, the second is the barber displaying the sign “No Trust” on his shop window. Both these equally special views are shown to the travelers of the boat so that everyone can see them. While the deaf-mute is received with contempt and strapped aside, the barber’s sign is observed as only natural:

An inscription which, though in a sense not less intrusive than the contrasted ones of the stranger, did not, as it seemed, provoke any corresponding derision or surprise, much less indignation; and still less, to all appearances, did it gain for the inscriber the repute of being a simpleton. (4)

The usual approach of the crowd aboard the ship is evidently presented in this passage. One of the examples of Cawelti’s incomplete reversal can be seen in Melville’s use of the melodramatic unities. The unities of time and space are introduced in the first chapter. Though they are tracked, each of them creates a certain struggle. The setting is a boat, dryly called *Fidèle* (faithful). Melville uses the customary theme of

the voyage. The narrator suggests Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, making a complete list of the several people, professions, characters "all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man" (8-9). This kind of setting makes it possible for characters of several postures from numerous parts of the country to meet and relate. The boat assists as a miniature of society, with all its ranges. Yet, the fixity of a single setting is only seeming and superficial since the boat is in constant motion. The fact that there is no stable ground serves as a reflection of "the idea of trust as essentially baseless" (Seltzer 18).

Tanner also observes Fidèle as a miniature of America and in his outline he affords a societal upbringing to the novel. He sees the continent as categorized by everlasting movement, emergence of still new visitors, unfettered of their previous and of former class dissection. From this there arise difficulties of individuality, communication, and of course belief. It is therefore natural that out of such a society, where everyone is a stranger to one another, several 'confidence men' are easily born (Tanner, "Introduction" xvi-ii).

Each of the characters with whom the confidence-man involves in a discourse wants to be convinced to have confidence in him. One of the things that makes them succumb to him is written proof. The consultant of the written word is very strong here. When the priest asks John Ringman "Of course you have papers?" (44), he creates a memorandum book in which he takes down his name. If he did not have such a prop, it would probably provoke the priest's doubt. The deaf mute is not taken extremely by anybody because he does not have any "badge of authority about him" (2). The Black Guinea is asked for some "documentary proof" (14) evidencing that he is crippled. Then he does not have any, he inquired if there is somebody existing on the boat that would swear for him. The Black Guinea produces a list of people, most of them matching the following incarnations of the confidence-man, none of them, of course, present at the time. The sophomore also trusts on the authority of the printed word. When sighted the transmission agent's book with the gilt writing, he adopts to buy some shares of the Black Rapids Coal Company. He demands a "statement of the condition of [the] company" (62), believing himself not to be easily deceived by appearances. The small printed leaflet that the transfer agent gives him, but, it is sufficient for him to cast away all his suspicions. When Mr. Roberts sees the book of which he had been informed by the man with the weed, he also addresses the transfer agent, ready to buy shares. Being open to inspect the transfer-book and to judge whether it is not fake, he responds:

Doubts, may be, it might suggest, but not knowledge; for how, by examining the book, should I think I knew any more than I now think I do; since, if it be the true book, I think it so already; and since if it be otherwise, then I have never seen the true one, and don't know what that ought to look like. (73)

Unlike the sophomore, he is conscious of the point that there is no mode of knowing whether the transfer-book is genuine. He understands that he merely has to select whether to have belief in it or not. And he does have belief, for he does not trust that believing Mr. Goodman might result in the loss of his investment. There is an obvious parallel to religion, also liable on people's belief in its scriptures.

Through Mr. Roberts's words, Melville expresses the view of the nonstarter of reaching the truth. There is just no proof, however real it looks, that can be really announced as dependable. All proof is "potentially suspect, synthetic, improvised" (Tanner, "Introduction" xxviii). Even if there is proof that the paper is not phony, there is a requirement of a person who promises for its validity, whose own legitimacy needs to be additional verified. This chain can go on ceaselessly, making multiple layers of phony identities.

The confidence-man makes use of this method with his various covers. While he is in one disguise, he remarks one or more of his other personifications, creating it more and more difficult for the other characters to realize that any of these different people is a fraud, let alone all of them. The very term "counterfeit detector," an aid to result out whether a bank note is real which seems in the final scene, is paradoxical in itself since even the detector itself could be a counterfeit (Tanner, "Introduction" xxxii).

The confidence-man can be realized as a kind of authorial figure in the novel. He is the author of others' points of view, even of their own involvement. We can see this occur in chapter IV, where he controls Mr. Roberts into trusting that he is an old associate of his, only Mr. Roberts forgot they had met due to his brain fever. That "mind is ductile" (24) is both of his argument and the purpose why he is alleged by Mr. Roberts. The chance of easy manipulation of one's mind even to the point of enquiring their own individuality is an essential theme of the metaphysical detective story, where the detective may end up somebody else, dropping his own sense of self during the process of examination even determining that he himself is the murderer in some cases (Ewert 185). Melville somewhat points to such a chance in the scene where John Ringman asks Mr. Roberts to look at one of his own business cards to make sure that he is the person for whom he takes him. Mr. Roberts, puzzled, responds:

'I hope I know myself'

'And yet self-knowledge is thought by some not so easy. Who knows, my dear sir, but for a time you may have taken yourself for somebody else? Stranger things have happened.' (22)

At other times the confidence-man plants an idea in a person while in one disguise and in alternative he sentinels how it takes root. When the man with the weed attitudes the sophomore, he remarks on his reading Tacitus, criticizing the depressed nature of his philosophy. In chapter IX, the sophomore is already enthusiastically supporting this very same view, not knowing he is chatting to the same man, only now in the façade of the transfer agent.

Many critics have pointed out that there is no proof in the book of the several confidence-men sharing a single identity. Some have taken it even more in signifying that there is nothing in the book that would evidence that any act of duplicitous really takes place and all of the events are not totally innocent in their nature:

We may search in vain for the episode which establishes that any of the confidence-men is a swindler. Every incident narrated is innocent in itself and innocent to a trusting eye, but filled with dubious circumstance to the reader who is himself without confidence. (Drew 441)

Most of the critics approve that the readers would most undoubtedly think that there is a cheat existing on board (Drew suggests that it is the reader himself who is guilty of having no confidence). It is the clarification that proposes itself most readily: "suspicion has its origin not in the book but in the reader" (440). Certainly the storyteller does not give away anything other than is apparent. There is no remark on the enthusiasm of the confidence-man nor are any of his beliefs exposed. Walter Dubler highlights the absence of any remarks or moralization on the part of the narrator as one of the dramatic agreements that are characteristic of Melville's style (308).

There are, however, three chapters (XIV, XXXIII, XLIV) where the author abruptly steps into the focus. These chapters deal with the problem of characterization in the novel. Melville comments on the problems in making unique characters in fiction. In the first chapter he deals with the discrepancy in the depiction of one of the characters. He defends this inconsistency by saying that what is predictable of fiction is reliability yet at the same time the characters are required to be true to life, which is incompatible with the first demand. It is only for the sake of fiction that a character can be made to appear as consistent. The unity in the characters' actions, similarly as the unity of the whole novel, is only artificial:

He, who in view of its inconsistencies, says of human nature the same that, in view of its contrasts, is said of the divine nature, that it is past finding out (...) evinces a better appreciation of it than he who, by always representing it in a clear light, leaves it to be inferred that he clearly knows all about it. (91)

The author claims that although varying, the character is more true to life, while at the same time, by speaking of his role in the course of writing the novel, he reminds us of the fact that what we are reading is nothing but the work of his imagination, “the process of story is in itself a confidence game requiring acts of faith from both author and reader” (Hauck 120). Melville is saying here that the inconsistency in the characters is deliberate which suggests that there might be more such problems when considering the whole novel, since Melville is talking about human nature in general, which could include the notions of confidence and trust as well. The character of the “confidence-man,” if there is such a single character, is far from consistent, not only his appearance, but also his motivations. While some of his avatars want to rob the victims of their money, in other cases money does not seem to be of that much importance; he is trying to swindle them for the pleasure of exposing them as vulnerable, easily manipulable, all through the use of language. Cecelia Tichi talks of Melville’s “conviction that language had become the meanest stuff of swindle because it was severed from its ethical and communicative functions” (640).

The distorting power of language is an important motif of postmodern literature, including the metaphysical detective story. The character of the confidence-man seems to have a power over the other characters, changing their opinions, “rewriting” their experience, turning over the meanings of ethical terms such as charity and confidence. The book does not allow for an easy interpretation, one of its aims being to show that such consistency would not be true to life.

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