

Article

The Enjoyment of Being Had: The Aesthetics of Masquerade in *The Confidence-Man*

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Abstract: Impostors, confidence artists, and artful deceivers seem to have achieved a strange kind of popularity and even prestige in our contemporary political landscape, for reasons that remain elusive, especially given how harmful and socially unwanted such behaviors ostensibly are. Herman Melville's 1857 novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, helps us shift our perspective on this seemingly irrational phenomenon because it points out how being susceptible to dupery is linked to the enjoyment of fiction itself. This insight also highlights the importance of epistemological failure in the recent "return to aesthetics" in literary studies, where the positive dimension of unconsciously "willing one's dupery" directly links aesthetic form to politics. The logic that connects aesthetics to unconscious enjoyment is then elaborated in the work of psychoanalytic thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Helene Deutsch and others to raise particular questions about how and why the enjoyment of being duped has been associated with feminine sexuality. Reading Melville's novel while considering psychoanalytic concepts such as the "as if" personality, imposture, and interpassivity illuminates how confidence games play upon the ruses of sexuality, which have profound implications for why the public remains in thrall to the workings of known deceivers.

Keywords: susceptibility; lying; seduction; political aesthetics; Herman Melville; Jacques Lacan; psychoanalysis; feminine sexuality; formalism; interpassivity



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1. Introduction

Near the end of an interview with the notorious fake heiress Anna Delvey, CNN's Jake Tapper poses a question that, in the spirit of the psychoanalytic notion of transference, seems addressed to a "subject supposed to know": "Do you think there's something about the United States where we are fascinated by con artists, grifters, liars? Is there something that we like, that we find interesting?" Delvey, faintly bemused, agrees, comparing the US to Germany, where if she were prosecuted for similar crimes, "I don't think anyone would really care". Giving Tapper his desire back in inverted form, Delvey's allusive response suggests a distinctly American style of susceptibility, a uniquely potent decoction of media, law, and enjoyment that makes fraudsters like her into public icons. Indeed, having earlier asked Delvey what she thought of imitations of her false accent or the portrayal of her in the popular Netflix series *Inventing Anna*, Tapper had already answered his own query [1]. The question that he should have asked but that remained unsaid is: "why do Americans enjoy being duped?"

At a time when institutional support for the arts and humanities is in steep decline, there seems to be a perilous irony in the fact that the American public is more in thrall to fabulation than ever. When "fake Russians" invade virtual spaces in support of real invasions, when news services race between outrageous spectacle and obsessive fact-checking, and when Donald Trump and George Santos amass support not despite but *because* of their fictitiousness, one would think that the need to navigate non-evidentiary truth claims would lead to calls for a new standard of cultural literacy. Yet if the media discourse on the pleasures of scandal is any indication, perhaps being hopelessly awash in illusion is the point.

What is it, then, that conditions this susceptibility? While it is tempting to put the emphasis on the fraudsters' cunning, the target of the grift undoubtedly gives them something to work with, even when this "collaboration" ends up only in loss and humiliation for the latter. Something, in other words, aligns the mark with the deceiver, a seduction whose danger remains veiled by its attendant pleasures. Enjoyment, in turn, entails complicity; hence, the attempt to merely "correct" falsehood and denounce illusion misses the point. Vulnerability, too, becomes a complicated question when the source of injury is not strictly external but colludes in some sense with what we are unconscious of. Such complicity changes the way we are accustomed to think of consent: Rather than a rational choice, the question becomes whether you consent to what fascinates you.

There is a lexical precision to "susceptibility" that suggests the *disposition* to deceptive influence without *awareness* of deceit. Notably, almost every definition of "susceptible" in the Oxford English Dictionary includes the word "capable", as in "capable of receiving and being affected by", "capable of . . . conceiving, or being inwardly affected by (a thought, feeling or emotion)", or "capable of being . . . easily moved to feeling; subject to emotional (or mental) impression; impressionable". Etymology reveals how profoundly the word cleaves to the heart of moral philosophy, as in the obsolete noun *susception*, defined as "the action of taking up, or taking upon oneself (in various senses): taking, assumption, reception, acceptance, undertaking" [2]. The material history of the word thus preserves a vague sense of propensity in subjection: an ontological *capability* that standard notions of vulnerability and consent tend to overwrite with a more clear-cut opposition between subject and object. To be deceived in this sense does not simply mean I have been cheated, but it also opens up the possibility that I played the accomplice to my subversion.

The alibi of the lie thus turns out to be the truth that would dispel it. As Freud observes, "He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore" ([3], 77–78). Psychoanalysis reminds us that the only thing we ever really master is the art of the "self-own". My symptom trips me up, but it also leads me down a strange path that, despite my judgment of what might be for my own "good", ends in another kind of satisfaction altogether. This is how our failures are, at a certain level, really successes: We succeed in getting into a mess that we have created for ourselves, in which pain is barely distinguishable from pleasure. We are susceptible, in this sense, because we remain on the hook for illusions that represent, however crudely or incoherently, what we actually want.

Strange as such a formulation might sound, the dynamic is quite familiar to literature, where the lure of deceit is openly avowed as a willing suspension of belief. It is just that what we *consciously* experience as enjoyment when reading fiction is *unconscious* when we are dealing with real-life con artists. Indeed, the self-subversion of willing one's own deceit is nothing new either to literary writers or psychoanalysts, which suggests that orienting ourselves to the intersection of literary aesthetics and the unconscious could be useful for navigating the bewilderment of our "post-truth" moment. An investigation into the logic of aesthetic enjoyment might give shape to what otherwise goes without saying in our contemporary political and media landscape—that desire makes us susceptible subjects.

As a propaedeutic for this aesthetic logic, it makes sense to turn to one of the most profound meditations on what a society overrun by impostors and frauds looks like: Herman Melville's 1857 novel *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*. It is not for nothing that discussions of this novel have resurfaced in recent times. Philip Roth recommended Melville's "darkly pessimistic, daringly inventive novel" over his own oft-cited *The Plot Against America* as a key text to understanding Trump's allure [4]. Likewise, Chilean-American novelist Ariel Dorfman, alarmed by how uncannily the book conjures his memories of the Pinochet regime, calls it the best "primer" for our age of "truthful hyperbole". The relentless assault of "spurious lies disguised as moralistic truths, grandiose charitable undertakings that never materialize, financial hustles and deceptions" lends itself to tyranny because it shifts the ground under our collective sense of reality [5].

Indeed, the novel's atmosphere of rumor and opaque insinuation, well calculated to induce a sense of disorientation, seems intended as both seduction and warning. It is notoriously difficult to describe the plot of *The Confidence Man* without risking errors of commission or omission. Framed through a third-person narration that may or may not "know" the thoughts, and therefore secret designs, of its characters, the novel consists of a series of vignettes that revolve around a series of passengers aboard the *Fidèle*, a steamer heading south on the Mississippi River, aboard which there are rumors of a "mysterious impostor" who defrauds strangers. However, the identity of the "confidence-man" is never directly confirmed, and even his titular appellation is only ever uttered in the final chapter. Instead, the title character seems to appear in numerous scenarios where a character plies another to believe in him, or else to believe in the idea that one should have "confidence" in strangers. "He" (it is also possible there is more than one confidence-man) approaches his quarry from an oblique angle, arriving as an unexpected visitor who strikes up a conversation wherein he discerns and carefully leans into the object the seeker seeks, so as to encourage them to speak about their desire. The "marks" or "victims" (granted, their ambiguity as such is precisely the question), in turn, usually begin with a posture of reserve and then, after listening to the Con, open up and tell him their secret hopes, fears, or even unsounded passions. Readers do not always know the extent of the effects of the routine beyond the moment where money changes hands, but quite often the pleasure invoked by the Con's palaver seems to induce profound transformations that suggest more is at stake than the aim of money-getting. A long-distrustful miser becomes eager to have a "guarddean" in whom he can confide, an idealistic collegian transforms into a brazen opportunist, a good-natured country merchant gives vent to existential anguish, and a philanthropist in "gold sleeve buttons" expresses his world-weary cynicism when he awards the Con for his vision of world charity and "dreams of enthusiasm" ([6], pp. 24–27, 42, 46–51, 66–67, 102). In short, each mark testifies to a deluge of unsatisfied longing whose implication is the self-betrayal of a life beset by unhappy compromises.

There is a tragic implication here, yet Melville distorts its tonal impact with the offhanded levity of the narrative voice. As Sianne Ngai notes, part of the reader's delirium comes from a "meta-ironic feeling of an irony intended for and available to everyone but oneself", a kind of trompe l'oeil effect in which a secret truth is intimated to lie just beyond the veil of deceptive appearances [7]. In fact, of course, there is nothing there but the *appearance* of truth, which reminds us that truth has an appearance. Repeated in each encounter with a mark, the "inside joke" insinuated by the very presence of the confidence-man withholds the import, but not the sting, of this meta-irony. Melville positions the reader to apprehend an indistinct *enjoyment being had* without knowing who or what can be said of it. Hence, although Ngai well emphasizes the tonal dissonance of this position—the sense of being excluded—it is important to acknowledge its centripetal side and how this effect implies an erotic invitation to become more intimate. This element of hidden enjoyment evokes "the Other" in its most enigmatic dimension, as a desiring body. In being curious about what the Other enjoys, the reader, in turn, desires to know more from the book, coming into greater acquaintance with it. In other words, Melville uses this lure to position readers as susceptible subjects open to receiving an answer from an equivocal narrator who ambiguously colludes with an avowedly unreliable primary character. Here, the tease of hidden truth elicits our participation in fraud.

Such occurs, for example, in several places throughout the novel where Melville's narrator addresses the reader in a dramatic *aside* apparently meant to initiate them into the similarities of confidence-men to creators of fiction. In one of them, Chapter 33, "Which May Pass For Whatever It May Prove To Be Worth" (a title whose suggestive yet noncommittal construction is an example of the meta-irony Ngai describes), the narrator thinks he hears a "certain voice" who complains that the confidence-man's capers are too bizarre to be believed and then replies that what is even more "strange" is the "severe fidelity to real life" demanded from a work of fiction. Why should anyone "clamor for the thing he is weary of"? Beyond this feigned offense over art's impropriety, the demand for realism from

fiction seems to have another goal: the creator is asked “not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality than real life itself can show” ([6], p. 182).

It is tempting to make this observation a directly social one. Recall that flamboyant grifters like Trump or Delvey do not simply dupe the naive, but they entertain. Furthermore, their performance of the untrue seems to promise another order of reality, which is seductive in its own right. As Melville’s narrator continues, “it is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, but yet one to which we feel the tie” (p. 183). The true misalignment, as it turns out, is not between fiction and reality, but the appearance of truth versus the truth of appearance. To expect reality *from* art is not only to forget that the world “as it is” is already composed of illusion, but, more significantly, it presumes that by taking us to *another world*, the writer will somehow finally put into perspective the genuine reality of our own. The demand for verisimilitude, therefore, has nothing to do with a demand for objectivity or positive knowledge of experience. Rather, it is about making present to awareness something that reality conceals, as if there were some “unknown knowledge” that might only be accessed through the conceit of a fictional “world not unlike our own”. And to suggest that a new experience can be reached by initiation into what feels unconsciously “familiar” is the heart of the con’s operation. The art of eliciting susceptibility lies in its subtle evocations of the uncanny.

Learning from Melville how to orient ourselves in this zone could help to clarify a current impasse around the politics and epistemology of literary aesthetics. In recent years, a resurgent interest in formalist studies of aesthetics has emerged in opposition to the narrow Foucauldian interpretative rubrics of power that have dominated the academic humanities for the last three decades. The weight of this dominance has been felt acutely in the case of literature, which is often reduced to being merely “indexes to empirical realities or discursive sources of sociopolitical ideologies and identities”, as Edward Cahill and Edward Larkin put it [8]. Against this overdetermination of the aesthetic by the historical and political, a growing number of critics have attempted to reclaim a language for structures of feeling and sensibility in relation to formal objects. Yet perhaps because aesthetics is so often associated with political quietism or as a resource for ideological mystification, part of the pushback has often involved re-positioning aesthetic experience in clear distinction from the political, “behind” or “before” it, in order to clear a space for an autonomous framework for study. This move has enabled much important and innovative work, but my concern is that it presupposes a methodological opposition between aesthetics and politics that is unnecessarily limiting. As Anna Kornbluh notes, such a tendency at worst undermines the very project of aesthetic study it purports to preserve, since by rejecting the identification of art with power, many scholars end up demonizing constitutive forms *tout court*, leaving little else to say but a continuous iteration of a formless “anarcho-vitalism” that unmakes any position from which aesthetics might be intelligibly distinguished [9].

What seems especially problematic in this context is the vacillating role of epistemology—on the one hand, the return to aesthetics reacts to the tendency to reduce artistic forms to mere illustrations of a “larger” regime of power-knowledge; but on the other hand, aesthetic form cannot be considered without cultural traditions, generic conventions, and audience expectation, all of which rely upon non-aesthetic discourse. In other words, art becomes unavoidably epistemological—hence discursive—as soon as form is engaged. To forget that form includes knowledge, then, is to act as if knowledge extraneously “pins” art to representational values that exclude aesthetic consideration and recirculate it in an “ideological” register at a supposed distance from the formal and affective concerns of authors and readers. To be sure, aesthetic forms already inhabit our knowledge. But there is a way of doing political critique *from* an aesthetic perspective that does not require the supposition that ideology overwrites artistic signification nor that aesthetic-affective experience can be neatly separated from epistemology. Instead, the language of artistic form shows us how knowledge can be traversed or subverted from within.

Here, Vera Tobin's *The Elements of Surprise* provides us with a suggestive insight: taking up the notion of the "curse of knowledge" that cognitive scientists use to describe how expectation based on knowledge of one context "contaminates" new information, Tobin points out how literary writers re-energize the sense of novelty by subverting this overdetermined knowledge by means of plot twists and red herrings. Here, Tobin argues, what delights readers in being "surprised" is the *subversion of knowledge*, where the "success" of a plot twist lies in the failure to anticipate it. Rather than making readers feel disappointed or betrayed, the failure makes sense in retrospect by recasting what came before it in a new light. So the surprise comes with an added "gift": one learns what one was initially unaware of, and everything makes sense again [10].

What Melville's novel adds here is that this subversion of knowledge, the trademark "confidence trick", could just as well provoke enjoyment *without* leading to any such retrospective recasting. As repeatedly demonstrated by the breathless fascination of the confidence-man's dupes, the subversion of knowledge is *in itself enjoyable*. What radically distinguishes this enjoyment from simple pleasure, however, is the disturbing sense that being "had" provides no gift of new knowledge but only an experience of *privation*. This experience is crucial because it orients us to the confidence trick's unconscious significance. Privation emphasizes the "specialness" of the thing of which I am deprived, which has to do not with its physical attributes but with the feeling of its worth for me. In the case of fraud, it is, therefore, not just a matter of material loss, but that something precious has been taken from me. Or, in the case of susceptible encounters, I have *unwittingly and yet willingly* given away the thing whose loss I feel. Unconsciously, then, I not only imagine that the grifter has what rightfully belongs to me but that he *enjoys it in my place*.

This dialectic is familiar to psychoanalysis as the thematic of the phallic gift. The phallus, which imagined X that makes me special to the Other, is what I willingly *give* in love and also what I feel *deprived of* when I suffer a subjective loss. But the phallus does not exist; no special X could once and for all define my value or make me unconditionally acceptable to the Other.¹ It is an illusion, and one that, as far as I expect that there is something actually *there*, makes me the dupe of my unconscious. That leads us to aesthetics because what it confronts us with is the enigma of the Other's erotic satisfaction, which is *felt* but cannot be directly known. All I have are suggestions that do not directly represent that enigma but that seek it, as if to tease it out. As Lacan puts it, the phallus is an "ultimate signifier" that remains "veiled to the end of time" because its sole function is to be the "signifier of the signified in general" ([12], p. 223). As the "ultimate" signifier, the phallus is sovereign; it would seem to tie up all the loose ends of our messy existence and give language an overriding meaning that would eliminate ambiguity. Yet, ironically, it is precisely the ambiguity of the phallus that evokes this mirage of total meaning: we start to believe in the phallic signifier once we begin to follow its traces, its loaded suggestions or pregnant intimations, which is why we so often look for it in the language of aesthetic experience. The importance of the confidence-man in this formulation is precisely that, aesthetically regarded, he has a manner of speaking or behaving that suggests that he knows how to find the truth of the Other's desire. Once this is supposed to happen, he becomes seductive in his own right.

Such erotic power is familiar in the history of the novel. Not just the seduction plot of Richardson or Fielding but also the metacommentary, prefaces, and public declamations of their writers initiated early novel readers into the sex and power games of reality by counterfeiting that reality. The success of the simulacrum in evading the censors proved that fiction could bypass the simple opposition of truth and falsehood precisely by enlisting the susceptible reader as its gratified dupe. As Catherine Gallagher puts it, "Although consistently contrasted with the veridical, fictional narration ceased to be a subcategory of dissimulation as it became a literary phenomenon. If the etymology of the word tells us anything, fiction seems to have been discovered as a discursive mode in its own right as readers developed the ability to tell it apart from both fact and (this is the key) deception" ([13], p. 338). In other words, the rise of novelistic fiction generated a form of knowledge

that was neither veridical nor maliciously false but that concerned the reality of aesthetic experience. Thus began a new chapter in subjectivity.

Between readers and authors, a pact was arranged, less a social contract than a mutually desired breach of decorum, where a peculiar kind of truth might be glimpsed by first accepting the bold premise of an open lie. This almost brazen conspiracy is signaled by the famous opening line of *Moby-Dick*: “Call me Ishmael”. As Kenneth Dauber has observed, this line comes from a place of profound silence, where Melville, perhaps exasperated by the stubbornness of reviews of his early work in demanding verisimilitude, drops the pretense of referentiality altogether and communicates to the reader an offer to play by a different set of rules. “Ishmael” tells us to take his word for it that he is who he says he is, or at least to accept that, in proffering this name, a gesture is made, a nomination that will henceforth be “true” in the mode of its fictitious narration [14]. To read past this line is to accept the bargain that you are no longer in a space where truth can be verified by knowledge, the alternative being simply to close the book. Suspending one’s disbelief therefore licenses the gambit that what manifestly *is not* might yet *come to be*. Such a gambit is precisely what primes the subject’s susceptibility, conditioning their assent to a fabricated “truth” that has nothing to do with empirical knowledge.

This intimate pact with a nonexistent object teases a further erotic implication: the real scandal of the novel was not just that one might be fooled by a dissimulated reality, but that being susceptible to the false charms of the fabulist might align with the *wish* of its victim. At a time when hysteria had become a fixation of psychologists, it is no coincidence that this “victim” of corruption by novels was predominantly imagined as a young female. The panic around Bovaryism in the mid-nineteenth century only confirms that the perils of novel *reading* were linked to the novel *enjoyments* of the fairer sex. Here, the status of the phallus as the preeminently desirable object becomes radically destabilized by the question that Freud himself admitted left him utterly perplexed: “*what does woman want?*” Hence, another more mysterious agency is faintly outlined, both by the women who read novels as much as the “feminine” characters who appear in them, a desire that did not seem to follow the plotted lines of normative (that is to say, phallic) sociality.

In terms of this mysterious “other enjoyment”, the novel’s game of seduction involves not just penetrating the truth behind a deceptive veil but an entirely different set of erotic interests, including the pleasures implied by feigning such overtures. I refer here to that mode of unconscious agency that the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere and later Lacan formulated as the “feminine masquerade”, where the subject enjoys playing along “as if” they were participants in a discourse, while in fact subverting its semblances. Indeed, the author of fictional truths has this in common with the masquerader: (s)he can play this part while *suspending belief* in its veracity.

Written at a time when professional working women were still considered an “anomaly”, Joan Riviere’s essay, “Womanliness as Masquerade”, broke new ground in observing how many women would adopt the feminine roles expected of them as a cover while they (often unconsciously) undermined the phallic authority of their male coworkers and sexual partners. But rather than submit to the pathologization of her examples, Riviere stated that she could find no difference between the role of “womanliness” as such and the masquerades of her patients ([15], p. 306). This statement has an ontological implication. As Pascale Fari puts it, the “radical subversion” of femininity involves “questioning beliefs, values and identities, all the way to questioning being itself” ([16], p. 39). The work of psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch, which will be examined later in this essay, develops this ontological implication in terms of being “as if”, an existential imposture that takes us directly to the heart of the masquerade in Melville’s novel. Being “as if” is not a special class of being but highlights the fiction that “there is”, in some ultimate sense, Being.

As-if being passes for the “being” that we think we know, which subverts the latter while seeming to sustain its myth. As Jacques Lacan suggests in his seminar on feminine sexuality, there is an “enjoyment of being” that is opposed to the “concept of being”, and the former is what dupes the latter, revealing that it is only a thought.

But it cannot be ambiguous that I oppose to the concept of being—as it is sustained in the philosophical tradition, that is, as rooted in the very thinking that is supposed to be its correlate—the notion that we are duped [joues; alt. “had”] by enjoyment [jouissance]. Thought is enjoyment. What analytic discourse contributes is the following, already hinted at in the philosophy of being: there is enjoyment of being.

([17], p. 70)

Here, in one of his characteristic swipes at philosophical self-reflection, Lacan identifies the unconscious “enjoyment of being” as proof of an incongruity that belies any assertion I might make about the being that I think I am. For the long tradition that follows the maxim “know thyself”, such subversion can only indicate a scandal.

Yet consider the famous anecdote of Thales, the first philosopher and author of the maxim. In the version of Thomas Aquinas, Thales was strolling along one night, contemplating the stars, when he suddenly fell into a ditch. Then, while “bemoaning” the mishap, an old woman mocks him: “You, O Thales, cannot see what is at your feet and you expect to see what is in the heavens”. Aquinas, commenting on a passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, takes the apologue as illustrating how Aristotle means to distinguish (l. 1141b2-3) between wisdom and prudence. Thales, like other philosophers, is perceived as ignorant of prudential knowledge, or “things useful to themselves”, while wisdom comes as the reward of perceiving lofty and useless things, such as the astronomical study of stars [18]. Thales’s pratfall illustrates Lacan’s point—the thought of a being that can be thought, enjoyed in the activity of its contemplation, is here subverted by the material reality of the being that thinks it. In the mirth of the onlooker, the winking glee with which a long line of commentators, from Cicero to La Fontaine, have treated the tale, or, ultimately, in the “bemoaning” of the victim himself, we can detect an enjoyment that only becomes available through the effect of a surprise that does not so much grant insight as subvert the self-conscious subject and its presumption of phallic mastery.

Truth, for psychoanalysis, appears in the dimension of castration. It is what cuts the subject, what separates him from the position he would prefer to occupy in fantasy. For this reason, the thematic of the phallus often appears in psychoanalytic writings as a tragic story, a “paradise lost”. But this assumes that the phallus was once there or that it might be there in the future, whereas for subjects oriented to the premise that it was never possible to fully “be” (a man), the tragic dimension implied by the *loss* of manhood can be seen as a farce. To put it differently, those who knowingly lack the phallus “a priori” find themselves in a better position to pull off the kinds of charades that men who naively fear to lose what does not exist hesitate to venture. If we can accept such a precept, things might become possible for desires that would otherwise be foreclosed. It is in this respect, moreover, that despite its near total absence of female characters, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* turns the tables on one of the originating premises of modern fiction by making non-phallic enjoyment the organizing principle of its narration. The confidence-man’s masquerade works not merely as a caution against falsehood but demonstrates how susceptibility to dupery and to castration is an enabling condition for desire.

If Melville’s *Confidence Man* gives us a glimpse of what moves us, as a culture, in the direction of its avatars, then perhaps the pleasures of the text can be understood as part of that lesson. These pleasures, which are based on the fictional suspension of truth, are integral to what Melville critics call the book’s didactic import. Melville invites us to “read” the scenarios in which cons fascinate us and thereby learn what gains we might be making through our willingness to be played. That is why *The Confidence-Man* is such a ready-made text for a psychoanalytic investigation: it makes apparent how our most intimate truths take shape as fictions and, in doing so, shows what choices we have in how to take them. We can choose to position ourselves in the phallic mode, for example, as inquirers into the question of what ultimate reality might be at stake in *The Confidence-Man*, and therefore see its protagonist as a figure presumed to have access to the secret that will give us insight into (Melville’s, or our own) desire. To read him this way tends, however, toward a kind of

indeterminate skepticism, since there is no evidence either that the Con delivers on what he promises or that his bargains are *merely* deceptive, since the least that can be said is that they do seem to induce a change in the interlocutor. Following this premise of indeterminacy, the popular opinion among critics remains that the book underscores the failure of confidence, hope, trust, or charity in maintaining human community.² In other words, by failing to satisfy our desire for knowledge about desire, *The Confidence-Man* serves to show that truth, for Melville, is empty. As far as this assertion agrees with the basic premise that the book is a fiction about the fictions of truth, such a conclusion may seem warranted. Yet, as is shown in the extended sequence in which the Con deals with Pitch, the philosophical misanthrope, the hypothesis of the indeterminacy of truth does not accommodate the exigency of fantasy, wherein the consciousness of being becomes subverted by the erotic enjoyment of being. In this subversion, the very peculiar status of truth in Melville's novel shows itself in the surprise revelation of self-conceit. Truth-in-fiction exposes itself as a topology of sexual being, which throws into question both the epistemological and ethical claims of "knowing thyself" in the tradition of Western reason.

There is, however, another way of reading the novel: we might choose to altogether disregard the question of "confidence in man" and instead simply play along with the mode of masquerade.³ Here, the truth of desire is not simply ignored or forsaken but comes in by way of the logical impasses in which it ensnares the novel's characters. The point is not that Melville resolves these impasses, but rather that they are the conditions in which a certain kind of enjoyment is grounded. By reading the novel in terms of the ontological implications of feminine masquerade, we can thus begin to make sense of the fictitiousness of truth in a way that does not resolve into nihilistic indeterminacy. At the end of this essay, this alternative will be examined in light of the novel's notoriously inconclusive conclusion.

2. Being Duped/Being Beaten: The Case of Pitch

If one thing appears as a constant in *The Confidence-Man*, it is that each of the Con's targets, or "marks", become "marked" by their encounter with him. That is, the dialogue has a noticeable effect on the way the interlocutors speak or conduct themselves. More is therefore at stake than the all-too-rational game of spotting a fallacious premise or an erroneous claim. As testimony, one of the Con's toughest targets, a misanthropic frontiersman named "Pitch", a man who prides himself on his philosophical outlook, has to confess to himself that the insinuator had "wormed his way" into him: "Like one beginning to rouse himself from a dose of chloroform treacherously given, he half divines, too, that he, the philosopher, had unwittingly been betrayed into being an unphilosophical dupe" ([5], p. 172).

Searching himself for "where was slipped in the entering wedge", he discovers the subterfuge happened not by way of rational argument but that "the enemy stole on the castle's south side, its genial one, where Suspicion, the warder, parleyed" ([5], p. 173). The trick had occurred, Pitch realizes, with the assistance of the mistrust he habitually adopts to guard himself against such intimate invasions. In "parleying" about the cause of his misanthropic suspicion, some other desire (coming from his *génial* side, as in the old French word for procreative sex) had entered by way of the pleasures of such speech.

What had made him susceptible was his inclination to speak candidly at first, then confidentially, with an interlocutor, who thus became by turns a more and more intimate stranger. He had *opened up* to the confidence-man, thereby allowing himself to be *taken in* by him. The "trespass" evokes the topology of an inverted surface, where the inside is exposed to the outside, turning inward again on the side of the Other, who seems to take something away. Yet his sense of loss pertains only secondarily to the confiscation of property; the actual amount of money the Con took from him was in fact quite meager. The "theft", rather, is not really a theft at all since it ultimately concerns an intangible object, an unconscious wish that the Con is presumed to have somehow become cognizant of if only to withdraw this acquired knowledge back behind the veil of ineffable secrecy. Paradoxically, Pitch cannot in fact deny that he has participated in a "fair" economic

exchange (nor does he have certain proof that the deal was made on erroneous premises), but his sense of profound disturbance has to do with the violation of that social contract by means of its perversely literal enactment. The Con “contracts” Pitch, taking him in and nudging his desire within the field of the discourse of confidence in which the Con is the undisputed master. In a susceptible state, Pitch vacillates uncertainly between subjection and subjectivity—something escapes him that seems determinative of the outcome of the exchange, but he cannot exactly name it. No doubt, the Con’s actions profane something difficult to pinpoint about the liberal frame of consent and rational exchange between self-interested parties. But most disturbing of all is the fact that Pitch cannot deny that he welcomed this abuse.⁴

When we consider this scenario psychoanalytically, we are further struck by how far Pitch as well as, perhaps, the other marks in the novel, seem to enact Freud’s hypothesis in “A Child Is Being Beaten” that a perverse masochistic enjoyment very often accompanies fantasies of being physically punished or dominated [28]. In the essay, Freud attempts to construct the logical connection between a common daydream in which children are being beaten by their schoolteacher and a childhood masturbatory fantasy, uncovered by analysis, in which the analyst imagines his or her father is “beating the child”. Rather than assume the scenario imagined is simply a sadistic wish, Freud questions the ambiguity of the connection. Why is it that only one child is initially imagined receiving the corporal blow, only to later give way to an “indefinite number” of children? The only solid clue from the school-age daydream, as it turns out, has to do with the effects of reading fiction. Indeed, in an incredible aside too often overlooked by readers of the essay, Freud reports that analysts regularly reported a resurgence of these “beating fantasies” after perusing such works as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In reading of repeated and serial episodes of torture by slave masters of their slaves, “the child began to compete with these works of fiction by producing his own phantasies and by constructing a wealth of situations and institutions in which children were beaten, or were punished and disciplined in some other way, because of their naughtiness and bad behaviour” ([28], p. 180). And yet, these fantasies never seemed to give pleasure when an actual punishment was given to their classmates; *real* violence tended to *inhibit* rather than give vent to the pleasure, which complicates the idea that sadism (at least in the voyeuristic mode of observation) is a sufficient motive for its enjoyment. Was it that the child wanted to imagine themselves actively meting out the violence in place of the teacher, or was it that the correspondence of fiction and fantasy suggested that the scenario needed to be kept within the space of the child’s inner world? Freud could at first find no means of navigating this problem; upon questioning the analyst further about the fantasies, he was met with “only the hesitant reply: ‘I know nothing more about it: a child is being beaten’” ([28], p. 181).

What turns out to be the deciding factor in the motives for the fantasy revolves around the love wished from the father. When he is imagined beating another child, it is because the father “hates” that child and therefore loves only the fantasizing subject “exclusively”. Yet after the initial bout of incestuous love inevitably comes to grief, Freud surmises that guilt enters the equation. That is, the child’s perceived failure to be the exclusive love object of the father must fully register as a new fact in the psyche, which means that the persistence of love beyond this fatal turn now appears as something unwanted, something that risks rejection or loss of love from him. And so Freud attempts the construction of a new phase of the fantasy in light of castration, which is as a rule not remembered by the majority of patients but only retroactively links up with the drift of their associations and is confirmed by the pleasure which the construction recalls: “I am being beaten by my father”. In the style of a certain approach to Catholic confession (see, for example, Freud’s essay on Dostoevsky), guilt transacts the punishment for a forbidden fantasy such that it permits the continued indulgence in it [29]. The very thing that is lamented and scorned is free to be enjoyed, so long as that (phallic) enjoyment is alloyed with redemptive pain.

Marie-Helene Brousse recognizes another element that ties together the sadomasochism of the fantasy with an axis of voyeurism and exhibitionism: the structure of extimacy [30].

What Lacan calls *extimité*, or “extimacy”, is when something intimate, part of one’s interiority, appears as something excluded, outside, or vice versa, when something external appears to coincide with intimate experience [31]. In either case, there is a sense of opacity or ambiguity, a piece of the unconscious that appears as if it were alienated from the Other. In the case of the beating fantasy, there is, in addition to a passive “being beaten” and an active “beater”, also an extimate witness who observes what is physically enacted upon the body of the beaten child. This onlooker—whether imagined as a studious observer, a judge, or a surprised bystander, whether looking on with amusement, envy, lust, or rage—is ambiguous with respect to its agency, a figure who does not passively or actively participate in the fantasy but to whom the spectacle is given over.

In Pitch’s testimony, this third position is evoked in two ways: first, as Melville’s reader who anonymously witnesses and enjoys the spectacle of Pitch “being beaten” when the Con successfully overcomes Pitch’s suspicion and deceives him. Second, Pitch’s own retrospective review of the “weakness” for which he castigates himself supposes a point from which he can “see” himself being “had”. It would therefore not be sufficient to say that the Con’s deception is directly experienced by its victim as masochistic enjoyment. Rather, the inclusion of the gaze is essential; masochism only truly comes into play when the dupe begins to register his susceptibility—as in Pitch’s observation and subsequent judgment of himself for being “made”, as he says, “an unphilosophical dupe”. There is nothing worse for Pitch than to be reduced to being the instrument of another’s will, and yet, as he also begins to perceive, such subjection works precisely because of his compliance. Recall the extimate topology of the fantasy: He *opened up* and thus allowed himself to be *taken in*. The masochism of susceptibility answers the guilt of discovering one’s complicity in subordinating one’s desire to the will of the Other.

Yet the circuit of fantasy is not exhausted by its sadomasochistic implication but also hints at another mode of enjoyment. When he bears witness to his complicity, Pitch becomes ungrounded; the “entering wedge” within him widens, and he loses the certainty of self-knowledge. This happens in two moments or acts of the Con’s masquerade. In the first act, Pitch happily observes as someone else is tricked: he watches an herb-doctor (the Con in disguise) successfully persuade a sickly miser to give over his hoarded treasure in exchange for an Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator. Accosting the miser, Pitch seems to delight in his naivete, seemingly aware of the herb-doctor’s imposture: “He diddled you with that hocus-pocus, did he? Yarbs and natur will cure your incurable cough, you think” ([5], p. 140). What amuses Pitch is that the spectacle of a fool being “beaten” provides proof for his own categorical distrust in the ruses of confidence.

When the Con then questions Pitch about his cynicism, however, Pitch loses the position of an unaffected observer as he reveals numerous betrayals that he has taken as proofs: His confidence in Nature proved unreliable when the soil of his plantation gave way to a sudden shift in the embankment and drifted downstream; his once-held belief in meritorious labor proved illusory when numerous boys he had hired on his farm repeatedly abandoned their work; even from birth, “motherly” Nature had made him blind (a supposed defect that an oculist later corrected), all of which disposed him to doubt any benign order of things ([5], pp. 142–144). Collecting this information while ostensibly seeking to refute the misanthrope’s views of nature, the Con only finds that Pitch will not be swayed by direct arguments, and so the operator withdraws to try a different tack.

Then, in a second moment, the Con reappears, giving us a taut demonstration of the logic of his dramatic physical transfigurations. Presenting himself as an agent of the fictitious Philosophical Intelligence Office, the Con mimes qualities the misanthrope admires in himself, namely his philosophical reasoning, but with “a sort of canine deprecation”, like a curious supplicant liable to be wowed by the masterful demonstrations of an independent thinker ([5], p. 151). Here, the Con mirrors his mark but asymmetrically; he initially makes himself appear as a somewhat naïve, indeed, susceptible subject who lets Pitch think he is in command of the conversation. He then crafts a pitch to Pitch that builds on the details gleaned from the story of his various perceived betrayals.

Offering to hire out a suitable boy to work as a laborer on Pitch's plantation, the Con-as-PIO officer assures the misanthrope that this laborer will have received a proper philosophical education. Pitch airs the reasons for his doubts: he had hired, one by one, thirty-five boys, each of whom he initially believed would be "good boys", only to discover that they made use of Pitch's private possessions or refused to carry out difficult tasks ([5], pp. 116–118). These accumulated experiences convince Pitch that having confidence in a "good boy" is foolish; having been duped so many times, he thinks he has learned to guard himself against becoming a fool yet again, and so he adopts the misanthropic conviction that all men are innately depraved. All of this sounds reasonably grounded in empirical evidence, but the Con observes the *sine qua non* that conditions Pitch's lament. What his story really tells is that his failure to attain a desired object (the "good boy") is the motive that sustains him. One-by-one, a procession of pleasing or hopeful appearances proved false, and each time Pitch was met with an unpleasant discovery that humiliated him and signified that he was not master in his own home, so the upshot was that he was confirmed in his beloved cynical "philosophy" only to again feel the lack that makes him want to try again. Without one of these elements, the others do not hold up—the entire edifice of Pitch's construction depends upon his avoidance of considering that failure is what he actually desires: He *wants* to be beaten.

The Con then proposes a hypothesis that Pitch had not considered. Perhaps a boy is not merely a little man but grows into manhood secretly, ripening "like the ear of Indian corn" ([5], p. 168). The metaphor excites Pitch, who himself offers that he might have focused too much on the "sickly, half-eaten sprouts" of immaturity and so had overlooked how that boy might yet "thrive into the stiff, stately spear of August". As he often does, Melville here insinuates queer desire *sotto voce* and in plain view at the same time. The resemblance of the "stiff, stately spear" of corn to a penis coming into tumescence is neither incidental nor a throwaway joke. Philosophically, Pitch's error is that he has overlooked becoming; he conflates "rascally" boys with knavish men rather than seeing a process of growth and individuation. What the double entendre adds is how his own desire underlies that position. What Pitch does not consider is that failing to be ideal, being tricked by a naughty rascal, or passively yielding to the desire of another might all be part of what he wants to experience. More significantly, by highlighting the subversion of Pitch's "confident" virility, Melville allows us to glimpse the interior subversion of phallic fantasy—what it means to "be a man", or a master in one's own home, secretly opens onto the enjoyment of being unmanned.

As the scenes with Pitch illustrate, the active agent of violence or deception is liable to change places with the passive recipient through a shift in the perspective of the third element, the observer. By taking up this latter position, the Con offers a different view of Pitch's fantasy, and in the monologue where Pitch searches himself, we are also given the chance to alter the viewpoint: to see in our reading of scenes of knaves and dupes, conmen and marks, another kind of satisfaction than the sadomasochistic one where truth triumphs over deception or deception overpowers truth. Suppose, instead, that we understand truths as constructions of fiction. What, then, would our susceptibility entail?

3. Imposture and Interpassivity

If to be or become a "confident man" in a society held together by such assurances is, at bottom, the aim of Confidence-Man's discourse, the funny thing is that this does not necessitate belief that such surety is possible. Because of the ambiguity introduced by the narrative voice, a reader might suspect that the Con knowingly lacks the confidence he extols, even as there is reason to think that, beyond the accumulation of cash and credit, self-belief is his object. Given this irony, we can understand why the kinds of popular deceivers that besiege us in our unhappy era do not exactly resemble Melville's operator. *Our* swindlers and demagogues are much coarser and hamfisted than Melville's masqueraders because they really think that they can be what they want merely by insisting on the performance. The imposture of the phallic signifier is not, for them, a mere charade

but is securely rooted in their being. By contrast, Melville's hero, particularly in light of the ironic subtleties of the narration, is engaged in the deep play of language, the exploitation of paradoxes and ambiguities that so often appear to drift from their ostensible goal. This wandering at the limits of language allows us to observe that the most committed frauds are all the more imprisoned in their performances; the impostor in himself is wholly taken in by the exigencies of his delusion. That is why, despite their self-insistence, it might be noticed that nothing in fact constrains them to their word about who they are or what they say they want, but they drift interminably from association to association, position to position, lie to lie, until the time comes (if it comes) when they cannot evade themselves (and by then they are ill-equipped). All that remains steadfast is their sacred instrument, the duplicity of language.

Right from the first page of the novel, Melville initiates readers in the unfolding of logical paradoxes that are inseparable from the narrated content: The *essence* of the Con is presented as his *appearance*. By the dawn of April Fool's Day, the Con simply "appear[s] suddenly as Manco Capac at the lake Titicaca", like the personification of the sun in the Incan legend. Depicted as a mute dressed in cream colors, without packages or companions, we come to know him in the nude, as it were, as "a stranger in the extremest sense of the word". Passing by a crowd assembled around a Wanted poster, he reads its notice of a "mysterious impostor [. . .] quite an original genius in his vocation, as would appear, though wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given", which is nonetheless followed by what announces itself as a "careful description" ([5], p. 1). In other words, the Con is an *authentic* sham, whose appearance is absolutely distinctive in that it is impossible to distinguish him. As several critics have noted, it may even be that there is no original, no single Confidence-Man. Yet there *is* something unmistakable in the passion that is his calling card, his commitment to imposture. He commits to being "as if" rather than simply being. Indeed, what makes the Con "an original genius in his profession" is that he motivates a reappraisal of belief in the standards by which people can be recognized as credible.

The question of originality as a predisposition to being puts us in mind of psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch's concept of the "as if" personality [32]. These types, according to Deutsch, are individuals who present the appearance of normality but are nonetheless psychotic. That is, they construct their delusions from *reality* rather than the imaginary, thus breaking all the rules of psychiatric nosology. As Deutsch explains,

every attempt to understand the way of feeling and manner of life of this type forces on the observer the inescapable impression that the individual's whole relationship to life has something about it which is lacking in genuineness and yet outwardly runs along 'as if' it were complete. . . . But despite all this, something intangible and indefinable obtrudes between the person and his fellows and invariably gives rise to the question, 'What is wrong?' ([32], p. 326)

The outward show of "completeness" is the compensatory obverse of what Deutsch describes as an "emptiness within", a destitution of object-libido that, rather than internalizing relations with others, depends upon a series of external intermediaries that the "empty person" continuously mirrors. In moments of acute crisis, as-if types expose the schizophrenia that underlies their condition when their too numerous and conflicting identifications break down, threatening to make them fall into the abyss they work so hard to conceal from themselves.

Similar to this definition of as-if types, but without the schizophrenic tendency to entropy, Deutsch also describes "impostors", narcissistic characters who waver between states of profound emptiness, where they feel they are "nobody", to complete immersion in an assumed role, often under someone else's name. In her famous essay, "The Impostor" [33], Deutsch presents the case of Jimmy, who, from an early age, made up stories about himself and attempted to convince others of their veracity. Much of Jimmy's case history includes paradoxes that remind us of Melville's impostor. Like him, Jimmy assumes many guises, picking up and dropping identities as easily as changing clothes: he becomes a farmer, a

writer, a movie producer, an inventor, and a physicist, all without credentials or disciplinary training. In each case, he “is” his pseudo, with no recognition of a symbolic authority that would separate him from his role. Yet, remarkably, Jimmy pulls around himself a social circle of admirers, including respected scientists, who believe in his “genius” and adopt his ideas. It might be tempting to borrow from the lexicon of contemporary self-help and say that Jimmy “manifests his reality” through his performances, but such a description would obscure the extremity of his dependency: “reality. . . to him was a stage on which he was destined to play the leading role with the rest of humanity as an admiring audience” ([33], p. 491). Indeed, the cost of keeping up this facade is that none of his relationships have much substance, and his sole emotional tie with others involves instrumentalizing them for his narcissistic pleasure.

The background of Jimmy’s history gives intriguing clues as to the constitution of his paradoxical character. As the son of a proud “self-made man”, Jimmy was both tyrannized by his father and delighted in emulating him. One of his father’s sayings became a keynote in Jimmy’s existence: “We will show the world” ([33], p. 488). In adulthood, when he takes up his life under many guises, Jimmy is always echoing this sentiment of private solidarity—he *shows* the world and thereby makes of his life the “show” that his father gave him in lieu of genuine affection.

But Jimmy’s identification with his father also suffers a fateful reversal. When Jimmy was a teenager, his father succumbed to a paralyzing illness that dragged out for several years until it culminated in his death. No longer the paragon of manly confidence that he once telecast to the world, Jimmy’s father was now “castrated”. He lost all the ideal qualities he once had in his son’s eyes. So drastic was this transformation that after his father’s death, Jimmy gave no indication of grief but instead rejoiced that “now I am free to do whatever I want” ([33], p. 486). As Deutsch interprets it, the “brutal attack of separation” caused by his father’s illness and death traumatized Jimmy and broke up his identification with his father, but rather than mourn the fracture, he doubles down on his commitment to imposture ([33], p. 501).

Henceforward, Jimmy’s desire to “show the world” provides him with a series of what Deutsch calls “reality-adapted fantasies” rather than any stable identification with a single person (let alone a stable “genius”!). Deutsch describes him as reduced to sending out “‘pseudopodia’ . . . only to retract them laden with gifts from the outside world”, while remaining at some default level, a “nobody” ([33], p. 491). Effectively, Jimmy’s internal experience was channeled into a kind of continuous acting out. Perpetually “showing the world”, he acts “as if” he is who he pretends to be without ever feeling confirmed. As ironic proof of this, during his treatment, Jimmy finally starts to do hard work, and it is only then that he feels he is an impostor and fears exposure. The lie of his life had so completely enveloped him that truth could only come in the form of self-effacing fiction. Yet his perplexity leads him to the impossible reality (what Lacan would call “the real”) that sums up his unanswerable quandary. Here, the analyst is a subject supposed to know the truth about the feeling of insubstantiality that Jimmy has spent his life both courting and evading. Thus, he asks his analyst in despair, “Who am I? Can *you* tell me that?”.

Deutsch concludes: “All impostors. . .hide under a strange name to materialize a more or less reality-adapted fantasy. It seems to me that the ego of the impostor, as expressed in his own true name, is devaluated, guilt-laden”. ([33], p. 497). Yet despite the debasement of the proper name (the name he shares with his father), Jimmy never commits to its erasure. Rather, it is the fixity of the name to a particular feeling of emptiness that he seeks to avoid; to fill it with a different name would not remove that feeling. Yet the fixity also anchors the put-upon personas, which are dispensable and substitutable, temporary occupants of that space of emptiness around the missing proper name. By taking on another name, the impostor does not really identify with another person but, in a strange way, almost avoids identification, or, more precisely, seeks another route to it. He asserts a distance, passively observing others and what they respond to, and then actively concentrates on manipulating

that appearance. Identification, in other words, happens by way of an initial avoidance and only at second hand. Like Melville's Con, the impostor is a "hunter of hunters".

The Lacanian psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni conceptualizes "disidentification" in a way that parallels the "as if" of the impostor [34]. He gives the example of an actor who, while playing a dead man, gets a tickle in his nose and sneezes. The audience, of course, laughs, but Mannoni asks, Why? They knew very well that the actor was not really dead, so why laugh unless they imagined someone who *would* believe the actor was dead. By supposing a subject—in this case, another audience member—a spectator can enjoy a spectacle by splitting off part of themselves; they can vicariously enjoy a spectacle on a hypothetical other's behalf.

Robert Pfaller includes this effect of disidentification among the phenomena of what he calls *interpassivity*, when a subject experiences bodily enjoyment through delegation rather than through direct participation in an erotic activity [35]. Though examples of interpassivity typically range from scenarios involving two or three individuals (a teetotaler buys someone a beer to enjoy their drinking it, someone anonymously arranges an erotic encounter without being present) to the relation between individuals and autonomous objects (letting a Tibetan prayer wheel pray for you, hiring a professional mourner to attend a funeral, the satisfaction of using a copy machine to "read" a text), Pfaller also hypothesizes the broader constitution of social groups "held together by the pleasures provided by delegation" ([35], p. 45). That is, aside from the fact that groups could be held together by the mechanism of identification, as Freud argues, the concept of interpassivity shows how they could be held together by disidentification, where relations between people involve the disavowal of a direct connection and the splitting of the ego between anonymous others rather than intimate relations. The "glue", as it were, would be a form of enjoyment that is dispersed through networks of agents who remain detached from one another and rely on others to have encounters in their stead. As Pfaller explains, "delegation takes place . . . by acting *as if*. By the help of some other agent we create an appearance: we stage a small representation of our enjoyment, and this allows us to stay away from it" ([35], p. 51).

Pfaller's notion, in this sense, starts to resemble the society of impostors and dupes that Melville depicts in the *Confidence-Man*. All of the elements of masquerade we have been discussing are here: the theatrical "stage" wherein fantasy is enacted, the interpassive "agent" who supports the play of semblances (i.e., the creation of "an appearance"), the method of imposture that delegates enjoyment by means of disidentification, and the position of an "extimate" witness (such as a reader) who takes pleasure in the playing out of another's erotic scenario. Masquerade, in this way, bypasses some of the dangers of susceptibility by staging it in a series of "small representations" that assert a distance, or "stay[s] away" from the lure of getting "taken in" by a seductive Other. Instead, the interpassive agent only feigns her compliance, going along with the deception but without believing in it. By acting "as if" there is a phallus, masquerade acknowledges castration but also disavows it: the truth of the Other's desire becomes, strictly speaking, an aesthetic proposition—the truth of a fiction. This insight, whereby susceptibility to fiction is enjoyed for its own sake rather than as a means of acquiring ultimate satisfaction (which is to say, the futile pursuit of phallic mastery), is perhaps the key question of *The Confidence-Man*.

4. Being "Had": The Punchline of Masquerade

Interpassivity suggests a logic that accounts for how we as readers can enjoy, on the other hand, the dupery of the characters in a work of fiction. This is especially pertinent to *The Confidence-Man*, where, as we saw in the case of Pitch, Melville exposes the extimate position of the reader as a silent participant in the impostor's charades. This third position, whereby the reader is liable to experience their own confusion as if they were themselves being defrauded, relies upon the structural disjunction Melville carefully establishes between the novel's action and its narrative commentary. Throughout the novel, Melville incessantly reminds us of this gap by including, for example, three chapters (14,

33, 44) that stage a confidential aside with the reader as witness to the drama and four stories told “at second-hand” by characters within the novel through which the style of narration is explicitly underscored. Yet the final chapter, “The Cosmopolitan Increases in Seriousness”, goes a step further, where the narrator suggests to the reader a position in which the second-hand enjoyment of masquerade is included in the scene itself. Aside from the general expectation of revelation at the conclusion of a plot, what makes this chapter especially significant is the fact that it is the only place the words “confidence-man” and “Masquerade” appear other than the title of the book. The directive is clear: Melville wants his reader to attend extra carefully to the *mise-en-scène* that accompanies the dialogue and action, for therein the “seriousness” of the play will announce itself.

The chapter opens with the image of a “solar lamp” swinging in the darkness of the passengers’ sleeping quarters, casting a halo of light upon an old man reading a Bible and also producing a shadow that suggests “the image of a horned altar, from which flames rose”. At once illuminating the saintliness of the Bible reader and the gloom of its contrast, the setting maintains the ambiguity of moral extremes that the novel continually vacillates between. The attitude of the passengers toward enlightenment is likewise ambivalent: some of the occupants of the berth who “wanted to sleep, not see” are “annoyed” by the lantern’s glow, while others are grateful that “in a place full of strangers” this last bit of light offers security ([5], pp. 320–321). The Confidence-Man, in his final guise as the Cosmopolitan, enters in the dim light and engages the old man in conversation, irritating the would-be sleepers with his usual cant of confidence in man. The particular subject of his discourse is his objection to a passage from Ecclesiasticus that warns of an “enemy” who “speaketh sweetly with his lips”, and who says, “What wantest thou?” advising, “When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep”. At that moment, the Cosmopolitan indeed hears a voice awakening from sleep who correctly identifies him for the first time in the novel: “Who’s that describing the confidence-man?” Though the Cosmopolitan dismisses the speaker and the old man seems oblivious to the accusation, the reader has effectively been brought into the “joke”. Hence, the disembodied voice parallels the ironizing position of the narrator, and the reader for once feels let in on the real subtext of the novel. But then the ambiguities multiply: It is the “saintly” old man who observes to the Cosmopolitan that the offending passage is not official scripture but “apocrypha”, a text of questionable authenticity.

“‘Ah!’ cried the old man, brightening up, ‘now I know. Look,’ turning the leaves forward and back, till all the Old Testament lay flat on one side, and all the New Testament flat on the other, while in his fingers he supported vertically the portion between, ‘look, sir, all this to the right is certain truth, and all this to the left is certain truth, but all I hold in my hand here is apocrypha.’” ([5], pp. 323–324)

The metatextual allusion is unmistakable; for *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* has made it known from the beginning that the book is to be regarded as “something of uncertain credit”, as the old man defines it. It is neither certain truth, as in revelation, nor necessarily devoid of truth, for it has effects that are troubling. It lies in half-light; in fact, we *know* the book *lies* (its title even says, “I am lying to you”), but the question is, rather, as an urchin insinuates later in the chapter, whether it can “look a lie and find the truth” ([5], p. 329). This same urchin, dressed, as the narrator tells us, in flaming colors that make him resemble a victim of auto-da-fé, gives the old man a *Counterfeit Detector*, an illustrated guide that purports to identify spurious currency. (The irony, of course, is that such guides are themselves liable to be faked, and even when they are genuine, they are constantly out of date precisely because they are so widely circulated.) The implication of these textual moments is that the Con, who has been all the time proselytizing universal trust in man, not only aims to produce their susceptibility, but equally that he might, by *means* of his fiction, become a “counterfeit detector” and articulate a truth on a different level.

Though it is true, as John Bryant [36] observes, that any criticism of *The Confidence-Man* has to work out how the mimetic and didactic elements of the story work simultaneously, it is also crucial that we do not conflate them. It is not only that the Con dissimulates, but the narration of his simulation sets up a relationship with the reader, who can learn from

the dupery. Between these two registers, however, a third might be possible: an analytic reading that would follow from knowing one is (enjoying) being deceived. Such a reading would approximate a kind of feigning or “as if” relation to enjoyment; it would cause the reader to oscillate between the thought of being and the mishap that reminds us of actual being, between skepticism and idealism, tragedy and farce.

As the chapter unfolds, there is a tendency toward darkness. The urchin questions the Con, whether the wind blows East, signifying destruction; someone in the darkened berth hears “apocrypha” as “Apocalypse;” and, having reassured the old man to have unconditional faith in man, the Cosmopolitan puts out the last lantern, plunging the ship of faith (*Fidèle*) into a formless night in which, as Hegel might put it, all cows are gray. But at the same time, any tendency toward ending remains tendentious. Nothing is revealed; the Apocalypse is neither confirmed nor disproven; the apocrypha remains apocryphal. Such is confirmed by the novel’s infamous last line: “Something further may follow of this Masquerade” ([5], p. 336).

In that final sentence, the narrator’s insinuations, which had hitherto led the reader on with allusive hints at a larger subtext, now prophesies without force. To refuse to conclude at the end of the written text whether the story is over or just getting started inspires a sense that one has been cheated of something, not only narratively but thematically. Whatever “may follow” of the Masquerade, we, the readers, will never know any more of what it was about. After all the novel’s intimations and private scenes, we find ourselves unceremoniously shut out and without a key. There is no gift of new knowledge, no rewarding revelation, only the surprise of learning that the narrator either does not know or will not say what he knows about everything that has just happened. Imagine the text of *The Confidence-Man* as one long sentence: after pages and pages of suspense, we have finally gotten to the end, where we expect the last word and punctuation that will retroactively establish the grammar that we need to make sense of the sentence. But when the end finally approaches, the grammar turns out to be radically indeterminate. “Masquerade”, the last word, repeats part of the title and is never mentioned elsewhere. We learn thus what *this* book was all along; we were never *not* “in” the confidence-man’s masquerade. We were being led along all the time. No, we were letting ourselves be led. The very textual structure of the book turns out to have been a framework of susceptibility. When we opened the book, it took us in, and for a time we believed. . . or at least played along.

Here, I would argue that what seduces so many critics of the novel is precisely the effect of this structure of susceptibility on the critic’s desire to interpret. Like a trompe l’oeil illusion, Melville lures readers with vague insinuations of a larger picture so that it is often assumed that the novel has an occult dimension, a full-fledged allegory that might be carefully decoded: Is the Con actually Satan [25,27]? Or (at least sometimes) Jesus [37]? Some combination of Vishnu and Siva, by way of Manco Capac [38]? Is he secretly Black [39]? Does the novel, Melville’s last, cryptically bear out a final message about the hopelessness of writing serious works of fiction in a world entranced by commodity fetishism [40]? Is it a condemnation of liberal Christianity beyond the Puritan standards of America’s founding [41]? Or does it expose the ontological nothingness that belies the Puritan errand in the wilderness and the Adamic myths that sustain America’s imperialist ventures [42]? The list goes on. At the risk of offering only another small fruit to this interpretative cornucopia, I propose a different reading: Between the manifest text and its supposed allegory lies the “apocryphal” dimension of masquerade, the lie that points to the truth. If we are meant to decipher anything in the book, it is the shape that such fictional truths take in our language. This lesson is neither ideological nor does it let us off the hook with some relativistic or nihilistic premature conclusion. The indeterminate clause “something further may follow” tells us this and nothing more: that to read the masquerade is to pursue. However, indefinitely and haphazardly, an experience that takes us outside the domain of (phallic) assumptions regarding higher truths, including the altogether too simplistic “truth” that there is no truth. That the statement of such pursuit might occasion a surprise pleasure is, like the dupery of unconscious desire, the punchline.

By refusing to confirm conclusively the Con's direction, his purpose, or even his "crimes", the novel suspends us in the ambiguous space of susceptibility. We trace, nonetheless, the outline of three fates: Someone was prompted, somehow, to give more than he intended, and in the process, the offering doubled as a privation; another person wanted to be recognized as more than the impostor he has made himself, but his deceit precludes that chance; and amidst it all, someone else, an onlooker who cannot be sure of the truth of what he sees, gradually comes to realize that he was all along the one being seen. All of these positions are as frustrating as they are potentially gratifying. To read it in the Freudian grammar of fantasy, the indeterminacy of "being had" (like the phrase "being beaten") is a precise formulation that situates an act without specifying that the subject play the passive, the active, or the observing role. In any given scene, a reader might identify as the mark, the impostor, or the onlooker. In fact, the indeterminate enjoyment of susceptibility really consists of slipping from one position to another. To be susceptible is to risk being "had" and in a way that is neither fully assertive (hence it is not adequate to formal consent) nor entirely unassuming. Such positioning is vulnerable yet solicitous, open to novelty and yet suspended in expectation. The aesthetics of masquerade keep to that suspension and perpetuate it without an "end" that would resolve it. Would it not be possible, then, to speak of a *critical susceptibility* in the same sense we speak of the willing suspension of belief in a novel's reality? Could such a pose bring us closer to an ethics or even a politics of masquerade?

Such a question requires us to rethink the relationship between literary aesthetics and politics and to renew investigations of *fiction as a distinct epistemological category* in order to clarify the ways in which critical knowledge is grounded in pleasure and enjoyment. Such a project has implications for ideology critique that have somewhat gone fallow, it seems to me, to a degree whose extent we could measure by observing that in the domain of contemporary media spectacle nothing could be more obvious than that what calls itself (or accuses another position of being) "ideology" masquerades brazenly in the clothes of fiction, and yet we lack the language to situate those fictions within literary historical traditions or measure their impact aesthetically. Recall Frederic Jameson's [43] point in *Postmodernism* (a work that, ironically, feels as though it were an archaic reference today) that one of the hallmarks of our contemporary disorientation is the loss of a palpable sense that we are operating within the same symbolic order as our neighbors. The imaginary has flooded the field, leaving us without a stable means of cognitively mapping the impacts of the real that bear down so insistently upon us from our omnipresent political crises.

What novels like *The Confidence-Man* make clear is that the enjoyment of masquerade and the pleasure we obtain from reading fiction are one and the same. If, as Lacan often puts it, unconscious truth is "structured like a fiction", then do we not owe it to ourselves to restore aesthetics to its place as an object of scrutiny and appreciation, *especially* since doing so is indispensable to the operations of ideology? Falling short of that, we will, no doubt, continue to be duped without knowing it, but we might lose a chance to learn something about the position we find ourselves in when we "take" it.

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Notes

- ¹ On the phallic gift (“oblativity”) see, for example, Lacan [11].
- ² See, for example, Cawelti [19], Bellis [20], Sten [21], Hoffmann [22], Dryden [23], Schroeder [24], and Tichi [25].
- ³ Here, I follow Elizabeth S. Foster’s argument that the question “should one have confidence in man” is neither given a direct answer, yes or no, but that Melville also rejects the option of leaving the debate unresolved. Rather, “the debate serves to establish a dialectic, and the dialectic serves not to analyze the world that is but to create a new cosmos out of the materials of an old chaos” ([26], p. xvii–xviii).
- ⁴ This question is, of course, politically charged. In another essay, I have read this scene with Pitch in terms of its resonances with contemporary dilemmas of democracy in the face of incipient authoritarianism. See [27].

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