

THE CONFIDENCE-MAN'S COLOURFUL-COLOURLESS  
MASQUERADE:  
MELVILLE'S THEATRE OF THE ABSURD "IN BLACK AND WHITE"

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In his first appearance aboard the *Fidèle*, The Confidence-Man emerges as a celestial incarnation of light and whiteness. Like the advent of Manco Capac, the divine Child of the Sun, "a man in creamcolors", who seems "to have come from a very long distance", and is "in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger", suddenly appears at sunrise:

His cheek was fair, his chin downy, his hair flaxen, his hat a white fur one, with a long fleecy nap.<sup>1</sup>

If the reference to Manco Capac establishes the celestial, though legendary, perhaps fictitious origin of the "man in cream-colors", the description of this dumb "lamb-like figure", with his "singularly innocent" aspect, his mild, inoffensive reaction to the hostility of the crowd, recalls the Biblical presentation of the lamb of God in *Isaiah*: "He was oppressed, yet he humbled himself

<sup>1</sup> *The Confidence-Man* [1857], Elizabeth S. Foster, ed. 1954: Ch. I, p. 1. All subsequent chapter and page references to *The Confidence-Man* in the text are to this edition. According to the legends recounted by Garcilasso de La Vega in *First Part of the Royal Commentaries of the Incas*, Manco Capac was sent down from heaven to the human race "to instruct them in the knowledge of our Father the Sun, that they might adore Him, and adopt Him as their God; also to give them precepts and laws by which to live as reasonable and civilized man..." Quoted in Elizabeth Foster's "Explanatory Notes" to the Hendricks House Edition of *The Confidence-Man*, op. cit., pp. 289-290. In his *History of the Conquest of Peru* (1847), William H. Prescott analyzes this legend, maintaining that "The fiction of Manco Capac ... was devised, no doubt, at a later period, to gratify the vanity of the Peruvian monarchs, and to give additional sanction to their authority by deriving it from a celestial origin" (1888:5). Melville's knowledge of the legend of Manco Capac came to him, most likely, from *Conquest of Peru*. Written by a noted historian who was well known in the literary circles of New York, the book had its share of popularity; Edward Everett cited Prescott's book together with Melville's *Omoo* as recommended additions to Lady Ashburton's "American Library" (Leyda 1969:264).

and opened not his mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her shearers is dumb; he opened not his mouth" (53:7). Yet, there is the disturbing suggestion that his Christ-like celestial appearance is only an elusive guise that camouflages the desperately sought, mysterious identity of the "man in cream-colors" (I: 1-5).

The white revelation of the deaf-mute is reminiscent of the portrayal of "the Holy One that sitteth there white like wool" in the chapter entitled "The Whiteness Of The Whale" in *Moby-Dick* (1851), suggesting "whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime...". However, "there yet lurks", the argument goes on, "an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood" — a panic intensified by the appalling muteness of this hue. Similarly, there is something weird in the white "abstraction" of the deaf-mute, "as some sugar-snow in March, which softly stealing down overnight, with its white placidity startles the brown-farmer peering out from his threshold at daybreak". Or, to carry the argument a step further by borrowing another of Ishmael's explanations, the appalling sensation in "such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows — a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?"<sup>2</sup>

Whiteness shrouds the character of the "man in cream-colors" with ambiguity. On the one hand, he seems to be a heavenly messenger of light and salvation; on the other, he appears to be a configuration of death — an "enchanted man in his grave". Is the deaf-mute a figure of benevolence, love, and grace? Or, is he an appalling revelation of counterfeit and deception — evil parading as good, death as life? Our statements can be as "conflictingly spoken" as those of the Fidèle passengers: If there is the indication that he is an apostle of "Charity" that has come to redeem the world of "No-Trust", there is also the suggestion that he is that "mysterious impostor" who may be hiding his devilish atheism underneath a legendary veil of divinity (I:1-5; II:6).

In his next appearance, The Confidence-Man shifts to the other extreme of colour, impersonates the character of the "grotesque negro cripple", and introduces the problem of slavery that "Benito Cereno" raises. Cut down "to the stature of a Newfoundland dog; his knotted black fleece and goodnatured, honest black face rubbing against the upper part of people's things as he made

<sup>2</sup> *Moby-Dick*, [1851] Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker, eds. (1967: 163-170 Ch. 42). All subsequent chapter and page references to *Moby-Dick* in the text are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> This description of the Negro recalls the characterization of Babo in "Benito Cereno" (1856): "a black of small stature, in whose rude face, as occasionally, like a shepherd's dog, he mutely turned it up into the Spaniard's, sorrow and affection were equally blended". *Great Short Works of Herman Melville*, Warner Berthoff, ed. (1970: 243-244).

shift to shuffle about", Black Guinea appears like a dog<sup>3</sup> and is being treated like one. Subjected to the humiliating game of charity aboard the deck of the Fidèle, the Negro's apparent stereotyped cheerful endurance and grateful gestures, regardless of his "secret emotions", evoke attitudes in the crowd similar to, if not worse than that which Delano had for Babo and the blacks in "Benito Cereno".<sup>4</sup>

Yet, like Babo, Guinea is another impostor, in the words of the wooden-legged man, "some white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy", who plans the masquerade aboard the ship. Consequently, writes Elizabeth Foster, "it seems that Melville carried over from 'Benito Cereno' the dog-like black man as a symbol for the black, deceitful, universal malice masquerading as fidelity and love".<sup>5</sup> However, and very roughly speaking, if we are going to condemn the blacks as the embodiment of universal evil, are we not overlooking, or condoning the initiation of the evils of slavery by the whites? "Benito Cereno" does not provide definite answers, but leaves the question suspended; the intricacies of the white-and-black symbolism are highlighted through the gray atmosphere that envelopes the action — "Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come".<sup>6</sup>

In addition to its explicitly negative and satirical portrayal of the "white flock" that is duped by the "black sheep", *The Confidence-Man*, quite emphatically, goes beyond the sociological implications of the white-and-black symbolism to the metaphysical. Asked about "that too charitable baker" who "bakes such black bread in his oven, alongside of his nice white rolls", Guinea points, with his "old coalsifter of a tambourine",<sup>7</sup> to the sun — "Dar he be" (III:9-18). Thus, if Black Guinea is the devil, is he not the other manifestation of the celestial deity — the black child of the sun? To be more specific, is not Black Guinea another appearance of the "white operator". This marks the importance of what The Confidence-Man, parading significantly

<sup>4</sup> "In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs". *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>5</sup> "Introduction" to the Hendricks House Edition of *The Confidence-Man*, op. cit., p. lii. This interpretation of Guinea's character — a devil juxtaposed against the Christ-like deaf-mute — is in line with Foster's claim that "In *The Confidence-Man* whiteness and blackness carry their conventional suggestions of good and evil respectively...". "Explanatory Notes", *ibid.*, p. 296. In *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville*, James E. Miller, Jr. echoes this opinion, alleging that whiteness is the benign colour of Christ (deaf-mute), blackness the infernal colour of the devil (Black Guinea) (1962: 176-177).

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 239. See: G. A. Cardwell 1959:154-167.

<sup>7</sup> In Melville's fiction, coal is often employed as an infernal image; Guinea's "coal-sifter", as has been observed by critics, is related to the fiery pit. See: John W. Shroeder 1951: 368.

as a "man in gray", says in defense of Black Guinea: "the devil is never so black as he is painted" (VI:35).<sup>8</sup>

Such inexplicable socio-metaphysical ramifications of the white-and-black symbolism find further expression in the portrait of "A Gentleman With Gold Sleeve-Buttons", who appears exempt from the knowledge and experience of "ill, physical or moral":

The inner-side of his coat-skirts was of white-satin, which might have looked especially inappropriate, had it not seemed less a bit of mere tailoring than something of an emblem, as if it were; an involuntary emblem, let us say, that what seemed so good about him was not all outside; no, the fine covering had a still finer lining. Upon one hand he wore a white kid glove, but the other hand, which was ungloved, looked hardly less white.

With his emblematic whiteness, this Gentleman seems, and has been taken to represent "God without the knowledge of evil", in Richard Chase's terms (1949: 190).<sup>9</sup> Yet, it is not only amazing, but also shocking to observe how, in spite of "a little soot-streaked here and there", the spotlessness of this whiteness is maintained:

But if you watched them [his hands] a while, you noticed that they avoided touching anything; you noticed, in short, that a certain negro body-servant, whose hands nature had dyed black, perhaps with the same purpose that millers wear white, this negro servant's hands did most of his master's handling for him; having to do with dirt on his account, but not to his prejudice.<sup>10</sup>

Though this Gentleman "could also sin by deputy", he "knew how to keep his hands clean"; despite the fact that the whiteness of this Gentleman makes him appear "very good", he "is much below being righteous..." (VII: 39-41). In fact, the portrait of this Gentleman presents one with the inevitable consequential inference that the spotlessness of God is preserved through the indispensable employment of a co-existing, so called, black-dyed devil.<sup>11</sup> Hence,

<sup>8</sup> If it is relevant to view Guinea's character in the light of Babo's and dismiss both blacks as the incarnation of evil, it is also engaging to study the former's character in the light of the latter's -- a critically overlooked comparison which yields a different deduction. Keeping in mind that Black Guinea may as well be a "white operator" impersonating a black's role, the retrospective analysis substantiates Jean F. Yellin's claim that in "Benito Cereno", the black is never seen as he is, but as presented by whites -- through their own perspective, vision, and point of view. (1970:678-689).

<sup>9</sup> To Foster, this Gentleman symbolizes "the ideal, the allgood, the sound in both mind and heart..." "Explanatory Notes", op. cit., p. 305.

<sup>10</sup> The association of this Negro's blackness with soot relates him to Guinea and his "old coal-sifter of a lambouring".

<sup>11</sup> See Stubb's ramblings in *Moby-Dick*: "'Damn the devil, Flask; do you suppose I'm afraid of the devil? Who's afraid of him, except the old governor who daresn't catch him, and put him in double-darbies, as he deserves, but lets him go about kidnapping people; aye, and signed a bond with him, that all the people the devil kidnapped, he'd roast for him? There's a governor!'" (73:277).

if the devil is not as "black" as he is painted, God is not as "white" as he appears; the two extremes of colour do not so much contrapose as much as they do supplement each other.

This iconoclastic presentation of the two polar archetypes, of what is white and what is black, what is good and what is evil, what is benevolent and what is malevolent, what is heavenly and what is infernal -- not only results in a universe without norms, standards, or measures in which blackness is the obverse side of whiteness, and where the counterpart of Christ is the Devil, but also reflects the irresolvable complexity of The Confidence-Man who is often associated with whiteness and blackness, and whose first two appearances as the "man in cream-colors" and Black Guinea are respective embodiments of the two poles of colour. This elucidates the reply of the Cosmopolitan, whose eyes are indifferent to light and darkness (XLV: 286), to the barber,<sup>12</sup> when the latter refers to him as "only a man":

'Only a man? As if to be but man were nothing. But don't be too sure what I am. You call me "man", just, as the townfolk called the angels who, in man's form, came to Lot's house; just as the Jew rustics called the devils who, in man's form, haunted the tombs. You can conclude nothing absolute from the human form, barber' (XLII: 254)<sup>13</sup>.

#### *The theatre of coloured costumes*

In his triad-human, divine, devilish-nature, the only definite knowledge that one can assume about The Confidence-Man is, paradoxically enough, his apparently perpetual shape-shifting form. Besides, whether as the deaf-mute, Black Guinea, the man with the weed, the "Widow and Orphan Asylum" agent, the "Black Rapids Coal Company" president, the herb-doctor, the "Philosophical Intelligence Office" man, or the cosmopolitan, The Confidence-Man is always presented in terms of clothing imagery modified by colour. In his first two appearances, he emerges as a respective embodiment of whiteness and blackness; the man with the weed looks to be "in mourning" (probably dressed in black, or black and white) (IV: 19); the "Widow and Orphan Asylum" agent parades as "a man in a gray coat and white tie" (VI: 31); the "Black Rapids Coal Company" president appears as "a brisk, ruddy-cheeked man in a tasseled travelling cap" (IX:51-52); the herb-doctor ("Dr. Green") is dressed in "a

<sup>12</sup> The "oracle" of "No-Trust" (whose "dealing in macassar oil, hair dyes, cosmetics, false moustaches, wigs, and toupees" has taught him that appearance is deceptive) insists on concluding an agreement "put in black and white" with The Confidence-Man, before accepting to remove his placard. The irony is supreme (XLIII: 262-267).

<sup>13</sup> Various suggestions in the novel imply that the Confidence-Man is a Christ-figure (advent, message, throne image) as well as Satan (snake imagery). See: Merlin Bowen 1969:407-408.

snuff-colored surtout" (XVI:86); the "Philosophical Intelligence Office" man wears an emblematic yellowish "brass plate", "collar wise" (XXII: 129); and what we basically know from Guinea's list about two of the other seemingly untraced appearance of The Confidence-Man aboard the *Fidèle*<sup>14</sup> is that in one of them he is to appear as a gentleman in a yellow vest, in the other a gentleman in a violet robe (III: 13).<sup>15</sup>

The symbolism of coloured costumes characterizes not only the various appearances of The Confidence-Man, but also all the passengers aboard the *Fidèle* subjected to his operations. If we were to find a literal presentation of Teufelsdröckh's Society which "is founded upon Cloth",<sup>16</sup> the *Fidèle* society provides a perfect illustration; if we were to witness a gathering of Dandies — "A Dandy is a Clothes-wearing Man, a man whose trade, office, and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes",<sup>17</sup> then the *Fidèle* board is the scene of such an occasion. In this respect, few examples will suffice: The young Episcopal clergyman who champions Guinea's case is dressed "in a long, straight-bodied black coat" (III:12); "a young gentleman with a swan-neck, wearing a lady-like open shirt collar, thrown back, and tied with a black ribbon", who appears to be a sentimental collegian at first encounter, invests in the "Black Rapids Coal Company" (V: 27); "a well-to-do gentleman in a ruby-colored velvet vest, and with a ruby-colored cheek, a ruby-headed cane in his hand" disgustingly dismisses the "Widow and Orphan Asylum" agent as a beggar (VI: 31); a lady in a "twilight dress; neither dawn nor dark", who seems to be a "widow just breaking the chrysalis of her mourning", is approached by this agent for a practical application of her reading of "the XIII of 1st Corinthians" (VIII: 48—50); an apparent labourer in "red-flannel shirt-sleeves", "with a white bandage across his face", proceeds to collect the herb-doctor's charitable contributions after an "unhappy-looking woman, in a sort of mourning" hesitates (XVIII: 102—103); the Missouri bachelor, Pitch, who seems to be uncompromising in his distrust of nature and boys, sports "a shaggy spencer of the cloth called bear's skin", and looks "somewhat ursine in aspect" (XXI: 120—121); a man (Charlie Noble)

<sup>14</sup> For an engaging study of the untraced appearances, see: Bruce H. Franklin, 1966: 157—168.

<sup>15</sup> The identification of the Confidence-Man by the colour and design of the garment he is wearing brings to mind *Redburn* (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850) where the colour of the hero's garment becomes his main identity.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* [1836] (1973: 45). To Carlyle's Professor, "Clothes gave us individuality, distinctions, social policy; Clothes have made men of us"; "the whole External Universe and what it holds is but Clothing..." pp. 30, 55. Teufelsdröckh emphasizes the significance of the colour of the garment: "if the Cut betoken Intellect and Talent, so does the Colour betoken Temper and Heart", p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> If one does not view a Dandy as "a living object", he must not fail to recognize that he is "a visual object, or thing that will reflect rays of light". *Ibid.*, pp. 204—205.

dressed "in a violet vest" that flushes his cheek in a "fictitious way" (XXV: 158—159) relates the history of Colonel Moredock as narrated by Judge Hall, and invites the cosmopolitan for an alleged friendly drink; and "the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo", who reads the Bible beneath the last "solar lamp", and buys a money Detector from a mysterious boy in "a red flannel shirt" and a "yellow coat", is kindly led away by the cosmopolitan (XLV:272—286).

If the delineation of Charlie Noble's fictitious appearance reveals, quite clearly, that he is an imposter who, under the guise of friendship, tries to intoxicate and dupe the cosmopolitan, and who admits, when outplayed, to have been an amateur actor (XXXII:205), a thorough analysis of the numerous portraits of the various passengers encountered by The Confidence-Man, say, through a careful study of a few of the many dialogues that take place between the stimulating Confidence-Man and his responding audience, reveals that the other person, as well, is not what he appears to be, that "Looks are one thing, and facts are another..." (III:14). Even the Episcopal clergyman, that configuration of "innocence, tenderness, and good sense" (III: 12), hides his own suspicions under his clerical robe; even the celestial figure of the apparently clean and untainted "robed man" proves to be a mere veneer when subjected to the test of confidence. As all the characters owe their fictive existence to that of The Confidence-Man, in the sense that they exist in the realm of the novel because they revolve within his illuminating orbit, they also partake of the veiled identity of the great masquerader.

In the *Fidèle* world, people "appear", "seem", "look", to be, a phenomenon characteristic of a "Masquerade". While watching "two cream-faced, giddy, unpolished youths, the one in a red cravat, the other is a green, opposed to two bland, grave, handsome, selfpossessed men of age, decorously dressed in a sort of professional black "playing a game of whist, the merchant betrays his suspicion of the players' attempt at counterfeit and deception through wearing coloured costumes. To this, The Confidence-Man replies in his usual equivocal diction that preaches confidence and faith and insinuates distrust and disbelief:

"A fresh and liberal construction would teach us to regard those four players — indeed, this whole cabin — full of players — as playing at games in which every player plays fair, and not a player but shall win" (X: 59—60).

The various references to acting and playing<sup>18</sup> substantiate viewing the

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the conversation between The Confidence-Man and the wooden-legged man that the Episcopal clergyman witnesses:

The Confidence-Man: 'How? Does all the world act? am I, for instance, an actor? Is my reverend friend here, too, a performer?'

The wooden-legged man: 'Yes, don't you both perform acts? To do, is to act; so all doers are actors' (VI: 35).

world of *The Confidence-Man* as a "Masque", a play of costumes, where every character wears a veil and plays a part, and where The Confidence-Man operates like a touchstone that reveals the others' veils. In a world of amateur actors, The Confidence-Man is the only professional who dictates the play, directs the action, and pervades the Fidèle stage. Stunned by the subtlety of his dazzling performance, and "at a loss to determine where exactly the fictitious character had been dropped, and the real one, if any resumed", the mystic's disciple, Egbert, unconsciously quotes the following passage from *As You Like It*:

"All the world's a stage  
And all the men and women merely players,  
Who have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts'" (XLI: 253).

In his "many parts", The Confidence-Man illuminates the various casts played by the Fidèle passengers, for even Pitch's seemingly solid, impenetrable nature proves vulnerable, as he admits, to the operator's "vicissitudes of light and shade..." (XXIII:147). By putting on an adequate mask, The Confidence-Man reveals the masks of the people subjected to his operations; by performing a relevant role, whether equivocally advocating, evoking, or demanding charity, confidence, love, faith, friendliness, regardless of the reaction to his performance, be it negative, positive, or indifferent, he reflects not his own "colour" but the "colours" of the minor impostors and masqueraders of the Fidèle world where "Life is a pic-nic 'en costume'; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool..." (XXIV: 152). The more colours The Confidence-Man displays, the more panoramic his revelation becomes, and the more universal he emerges as the character of the cosmopolitan, that "ambassador from the human race", who "federates, in heart as in costume, something of the various gallantries of men under various suns" (XXIV:157, 151), illustrates.

In his cosmopolitan role, The Confidence-Man incorporates all his previous appearances: Sporting "a vesture barred with various hues, that of the cochineal predominating, in style participating of a Highland plaid, Emir's robe, and French blouse; from its plaited sort of front peeped glimpses of a flowered regatta-shirt, while, for the rest, white trousers of ample duck flowed over maroon-colored slippers, and a jaunty smoking-cap of regal purple crowned him off at top", with his emblematic pipe.<sup>19</sup> The Confidence-Man reflects all veils, masks, appearances, costumes — all colours. His "parti-hued" costume embraces all the issues of the theatrical Fidèle world — ethical, emotional, financial, social, racial, political, educational, artistic, psychological, and

<sup>19</sup> The "great porcelain bowl" of the cosmopolitan's pipe is "painted in miniature with linked crests and arms of interlinked nations..." (XXIV:149—150).

metaphysical.<sup>20</sup> As the narrator explains it, The Confidence-Man is dressed like a "harlequin" and acts like one, because "the people in a fiction, like the people in a play, must dress as nobody exactly dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks, act as nobody exactly acts. It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie" (XXIII:206—207). And it is through the masquerade of this realistically fictitious, over-all universal representative that the theatrical world of the microcosmic Fidèle — "a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man" (II:8) — is presented. Clearly the Fidèle world, like the microcosmic man-of-war in *White-Jacket*, is "a continual theatre ... playing by night and by day, and without intervals between the acts..."<sup>21</sup>

#### *The creator and his creation*

In his multifarious guises and metamorphoses, the term "Original" is consistently ascribed to The Confidence-Man. The deaf-mute appears to be "quite an original genius in his vocation" (I:1); the herb doctor might be called by others "an original genius" (XVIII:104); the cosmopolitan is thought to be all the barber's friends (they are many) "Quite An Original" (XLIII:269). This recurrence of the term at the beginning, at approximately half way, and towards the end of the novel should receive, the narrator points, "More Or Less Attention From Those Readers Who Do Not Skip it".<sup>22</sup> In the last of his three appearances on the stage, the observing narrator steps from behind the narrative screen, interrupts the "Masquerade" to discourse on the term "original".

In fiction, the narrator writes, "the original character, essentially such, is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it — every-

<sup>20</sup> The binding issue remains, as has been elaborated by R. W. B. Lewis in his "Afterward" to the Signet Classic Edition of *The Confidence-Man* (New York, 1964), the mercantility of a world of hatred and suspicion permeated by "The Wall street spirit".

<sup>21</sup> *White-Jacket*, [1850] Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, eds. V. 5 (1970:Ch. 23. p. 91).

<sup>22</sup> Johannes D. Bergmann convincingly demonstrates that the prototype for Melville's hero is Thomas McDonald, first arrested in New York on the seventh of July 1849, and known to his contemporaries as the "Original Confidence Man". By tracing the numerous items, reports, commentaries and articles which appeared in various newspapers, journals, and periodicals (1849—1855), many of which Melville had access to, Bergmann studies the "Original Confidence Man" saga, concluding: "The point undoubtedly is that 1857 readers thought of 'The Confidence Man' in a singular sense, that the impression grew that the 'Original Confidence Man' of 1849 appeared and reappeared, ubiquitously and almost supernaturally" (1969:560—577). Thus, as Melville ingeniously transformed the various stories and legends of a white whale into *The White Whale*, he likewise drew upon the literature of the "Original Confidence Man" in his creation of *The Confidence-Man*.

thing is lit by it, everything starts up to it ... so that, in certain minds, there follows upon the adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things" (XLIV: 270—271). As in "The Whiteness Of The Whale", this is another instance where Melville resorts to the scientific (philosophical) theories of light in presenting his themes. Invented by Thomas Drummond (1797—1840), the Drummond light's "action depends on the fact that lime emits an intense white light when heated in an oxyhydrogen flame". It is relevant to note that this "white light" was mainly used "in the theatre".<sup>23</sup>

The Confidence-Man is this "Drummond light" that rays away from itself the microcosmic world of the Fidèle; his masquerade is that of "the great principle of light", which "forever remains white and colorless in itself..." (*Moby-Dick*, 42:170). If the emphasis is on the theatricality of The Confidence Man's stage-like world of costumes and colours, it is because, to quote the white chapter again, "all other earthly hues" are "subtile deceits not actually inherent in substance, but only laid on from without...". That is why in his original appearance as light and whiteness, The Confidence-Man is a deaf-mute, a "blankness, full of meaning" that takes the form of the "earthly hues" it reflects. And regardless of the colours which he projects in his various appearances, even in his all-colours cosmopolitan appearance, The Confidence-Man remains elusively colourless at heart, for "in essence, whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of colors, and at the same time the concrete of all colors..." (*Moby-Dick*, 42: 169—170). The Fidèle (confidence) world projected by The Confidence-Man partakes, as its name indicates, of his essence, and is, in spite of its universal hues, basically white: "Pierced along its great white bulk with two tiers of small embrasure-like windows, well above the waterline, the Fidèle, though, might at distance have been taken by strangers for some whitewashed fort on a floating isle" (II: 7).<sup>24</sup>Hence, The Confidence-Man's masquerade is life in action (Fidèle) whose steering power remains colourless: "Here reigned the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one *cosmopolitan* and *confidant* tide" (II:8, italics added).

This creative light<sup>25</sup> does not present us with soothing and sweet illu-

<sup>23</sup> Trevor I. Williams, ed. 1969: 151—152.

<sup>24</sup> Like the whiteness of the deaf-mute which is associated with snow, the Fidèle is referred to as "snowy" (XX: 114).

<sup>25</sup> To Carlyle's Professor, "'the beginning of Creation is — Light!"; "'Creation ... lies before us, like a glorious Rainbow; but the sun that made it lies behind us, hidden from us'". The "prismatic hues" of the Creator manifest their invisible origin in their visible, though extrinsic form. Since "all Symbols are properly Clothes ... all Forms ... are Clothes", then Creation is "'the living visible Garment of God'". *Sartor Resartus*, op. cit., pp. 148, 39, 165, 203, 41.

sions — "every stately or lovely emblazoning — the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvet of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls" that make life possible, perhaps enjoyable, when we are wearing the terrestrially essential "colored and coloring glasses" (*Moby-Dick*, 42:169—170), but the "glazed colors on stoneware" of the "cactus-like" beauty of Goneril (XII:65), that fictive creation of *The Confidence-Man* (the story of Goneril is first related by the man with the weed). *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* demonstrates not only the impossibility of reaching any absolute knowledge of the all-inclusive, white and black nature of this creative colourful light that remains in essence colourless, but also that the projected hues of the creator, the creation (God's Garment), in addition to being void of any intrinsic form, value, or spirit — a subtile deceit, has no soothing conceits, no tranquilizing manifestations, no "glorious Rainbow". This is emphasized by the numerous interpolated stories which elaborate the false reality of all our emotional, social, and religious illusions: our colourful masks of charity, confidence, faith, belief, friendship, love, etc. — all the possibly redeeming "earthly hues". If Melville drew upon *Sartor Resartus*, as has been suggested, then *The Confidence-Man* could well be viewed as a *Sartor Resartus* in reverse: a negation of "The Everlasting Yea" and a re-affirmation of "The Everlasting No".

Perhaps the greatest illusion that the novel denies us is that of itself, of fiction. Asked after his fabrication of the story of Charlemont whether it is true, The Confidence-Man replies: "'Of course not; it is a story...' Hence, if it seem strange to you, that strangeness is the romance... it is the invention, in brief, the fiction as opposed to the fact" (XXXV:211). In addition to such explicit references to the interpositioned stories as being art opposed to artlessness, a fact implicit in their hypothetical narration, and besides the narrator's persistent reminder in his three discourses (Chs. XIV, XXXIII, XLIV) that the world of *The Confidence-Man* is a fictitious creation, the limited timing of the masquerade to All Fools' Day — a time of deception and bluffing where all issues are false and all statements untrue,<sup>26</sup> makes the novel an ironic no-statement, a negation of the fictitiousness of its own world that is implied in the stylistic negativism of the prose.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Was Melville drawing on Nathaniel Hawthorne's surprisingly neglected article, "April Fools", which appeared in *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, II (April, 1836), where Hawthorne perceives in the All Fools' Day tradition the reality of the human situation: "And now let the whole world, discerning its own nonsense, and humbug, and Charlatanism, and how in all things, or most, it is both a deceiver and deceived — let it point its innumerable fingers, and shout in its own ear — oh, World, you April Fool!" pp. 339—340.

<sup>27</sup> "Stylistically", Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. observes, "negativism recoils upon itself in the extraordinary frequency of double-negative litotes, of which any given chapter will furnish examples like 'not unsusceptible', 'less unrefined', 'not wholly without', 'less inexperienced', 'not unprovided for'". (1969:430).

However, this fictitious masquerade is the only world we have; its false timing is our only "Horlogue". Consequently, man is left in the overwhelming circle of the absurd.<sup>28</sup> He can neither resort to an "earthly hue", for all illusions (costumes), though false, are denied their redemptive, though fictitious connotations; nor can he perceive the ultimate reality of the colourless creative principle that is presented in terms of the colourful illusions (fiction). Nevertheless, "to be" in the Fidèle universe implies that one is always wearing a veil that is false as well as unredeemptive, that one lives in a chaotic masquerading universe without significance or meaning (either inherent or illusory, real or fictitious), where blackness is another appearance of whiteness, and that one owes his identity and colour to an everlastingly unidentified, colourless principle. No wonder that this universe, our universe, is referred to as a "ship of fools" under a "captain of fools" inhabited by "a flock of fools" (III:15). Even the Ishmael who is ready to take "this whole universe for a vast practical joke" at his own expense (*Moby-Dick*, 49:195-196) could no longer indulge in its narrative hues. The joke is no longer enjoyable and redeeming; it is hollow and absurd.

*The Confidence-Man*, the masquerade of light, ends "in the darkness which ensued..." If "there be no truths, nothing well said, nor worth saying", Hawthorne ponders in "April Fools", "we shall find it out anon; and whisper it to ourself, — 'Mr. Editor, you are an April Fool'". Herman Melville advocated in silence the whisper which Hawthorne had contemplated — "what a fool are we, to waste our ink and paper in making out a catalogue of April Fools".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See: Leon F. Seltzer's comparative study "Camus's Absurd and the World of Melville's Confidence-Man" (1967:14-27)

<sup>29</sup> Hawthorne, op. cit. pp. 339-340.