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The Confidence Man and Stoicism in *The Confidence-Man*

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I

The title character in *The Confidence-Man*, while spending a whole April Fools' Day in testing Christians by preaching or parodying Biblical Christianity, is in his successive disguises delineated with reference to the New Testament. Not without significance is continual reference made to John and Paul. In both John and Paul the eschatological salvation event is understood as already taking place in the present.¹ Paul can write to the church members in Corinth to say that the end of the ages has come upon them (I Cor. 10:11). If anyone is in Christ, he is "a new creation; the old has passed away; behold, the new has come (II Cor. 5:17). So it is according to Paul. The eschatological now takes place. "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (6:2). For John the judgment of the world is not a cosmic event that is still to happen but is the fact that Christ has come into the world and issued the call to faith. "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out" (12:31). "Truly, truly I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (5:25). Those who believe are "born anew" (3:3); they no longer come from the world or belong to it, but in faith have overcome it (I John 5:4).

Is the Confidence Man Christ or the Devil? The Confidence Man in the disguise of the herb-doctor says to the sick man, encouragingly, "I told you, you must have confidence, unquestioning confidence, I meant confidence in the genuine medicine, and the genuine *me*", and the sick man replies, "But in your absence, buying vials purporting to be yours, it seems I cannot have unquestioning confidence". Then the herb-doctor advises him to "Prove the vials; trust those which are true".² ("Prove" means "test") "Test all things; hold fast that which is good" (I Thess. 5:21). Rather, "Behold, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God; every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already" (I John 4:1-3). Indeed, it is possible that the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:7, who is likened to "a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and...a sheep that before its shearers is dumb", influenced Melville in his description of the "lamb-like" mute (p. 4), but there is a noteworthy passage from the Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15).

II

"The grand points of human nature", writes Melville himself, "are the same today they were a thousand years ago. The only variability in them is in expression, not in feature" (p. 60). What is it that makes a man? Man is double. It belongs to man's nature to have a relationship to himself. Or rather, if man no longer had a relationship to himself, he would no longer be man.³ Paul writes to the Romans: "I do not understand my own actions. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it..."

For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind....” (Rom. 7: 15, 18, 22-23) Paul pommels his body and subdues it, lest after preaching to others he himself should be disqualified (I Cor. 9: 27). He never forgets to say, “I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle.... By the grace of God I am what I am.... On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me” (15: 9-11). This is why “the iron Paul” is so called (p. 144). In the character of John Truman, the man with the ledger, which may, like the Bible itself, be “the true book” (p. 48) Melville, it would seem, has in mind Rom. 7: 14-25 when he writes:

...it is best...that whoever had the true light should stick behind the secure Malakoff of confidence.... Therefore, he deemed it unadvisable in the good man, even in the privacy of his own mind, or in communion with a congenial one, to indulge in too much latitude of philosophizing, or, indeed, of compassionating, since this might unexpectedly betray him upon unsuitable occasions. Indeed, whether in private or public, there was nothing which a good man was more bound to guard himself against than, on some topics, the emotional unreserve of his natural heart; for... the natural heart, in certain points, was not what it might be [p. 56].

And the man from the Philosophical Intelligence Office with the brass plate advocates a more generous view of human nature. Pitch, the Missourian, is on his way to New Orleans to get him made some sort of machine to do his work. He cannot have any confidence in boys. Pitch says: “My experience, carried now through...a course of five and thirty boys, proves to me that boyhood is a natural state of rascality.... I speak from fifteen years’ experience.... Amazing the endless variety of rascality in human nature of the jubenile sort” (p. 101). When he says, “Sir, a corn-husker, for its patient continuance in well-doing, might not unfitly go to heaven. Do you suppose a boy will?”and judges boys, he seems to be ignorant of “storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.... To those who

by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (Rom. 2:5-7).

"In the natural advance of all creatures", says the man with the brass plate, "do they not bury themselves over and over again in the endless resurrection of better and better?" (p. 108). For Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ are one and the same thing. To believe in the death of Christ means to Paul to accept the death as one's own and to allow oneself to be crucified with Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:19-20). Paul carries in his body the death of Jesus, "so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (II Cor. 4:10-11). Thus, whatever gain he has, Paul counts as loss for Christ's sake, "in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:7-11). "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above" (Col. 3:1). To Matthew Arnold's mind identification with Christ "shows a profound practical religious sense, and rests upon facts of human nature which experience can follow and appreciate. The three essential terms of Pauline theology are not, therefore, as popular theology makes them: *calling, justification, sanctification*. They are rather these: *dying with Christ, resurrection from the dead, growing into Christ*"⁴

The young clergyman says of the Confidence Man masquerading as the Negro Black Guinea, "I saw him, and put trust in him" (p. 25). Melville is probably alluding obliquely to John 20:29: "Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe'". To be sure, even Paul himself once tries to guarantee the wonder of resurrection as a historical event by enumerating eye-witnesses (I Cor. 15:3-8). But Faith cannot be developed at all if it is made the object of pure seeing. "For we walk

by faith, not by sight" (II Cor. 5:7). "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (4:18). "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (I Cor. 13:12). The Confidence Man in the guise of the cosmopolitan Frank Goodman says to the misanthropic Pitch:

Trust me, one had better mix in, and do like others.... 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. To come in plain clothes, with a long face, as a wiseacre, only makes one a discomfort to himself, and a blot upon the scene.... All they...who, to the yearning of our kind after a founded rule of content, offer aught not in the spirit of fellowly gladness based on due confidence in what is above, away with them for poor dupes, or still poorer imposters" [pp. 116-117].

The resurrection of Christ is an object of faith because it is an eschatological act. So "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14); "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:26-27); "Put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24).

III

The herb-doctor hawks the Samaritan Pain Dissuader, which is Christian salvation, against the background of eschatology. The "scales of indifference or prejudice fell from their eyes" (p. 74; Acts 9:18). In Rom. 13:8-10 Paul begins with Lev. 19:18: "The commandments...are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed". The herb-doctor hopes "the Samaritan Pain

Dissuader stands unshaken in the confidence of all who hear me!" when, suddenly interrupting himself, he says hurriedly, "I come, I come",—words reminiscent of John 7 : 27-28,—and disappears (p. 75-76).

The historical man Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal Logos, the Word. "And the Word became flesh" (1 : 14). The Jews, knowing Jesus' birth-place and his parents, are not in error as to the facts, but err in denying the claim of this Jesus who come from Nazareth in Galilee to be the Messiah or Christ. "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee" (7 : 52). "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" (6 : 42). So the Jews tell him, "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly". Jesus, of course, has been telling them for a long time, and he says, "I told you, and you do not believe" (10 : 24-25). Why not? Because they do not know God. Jesus proclaims, "You know me, and you know where I come from. But I have not come of my own accord; he who sent me is true, and him you do not know" (7 : 28). And the Father who sent him has himself borne witness to him; so he says. "His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen; and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe him whom he has sent" (5 : 37-38). Jesus says that he does not bear witness to himself; if he did, his testimony would not be true (5 : 31). But he is constantly bearing witness to himself by claiming to be the Christ, and can assert that his testimony is true when he does so (8 : 11). Jesus also says, "I bear witness to myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness to me" (8 : 18). By the Jews this cannot be considered true testimony. They tell Jesus, "You are bearing witness to yourself; your testimony is not true" (8 : 13). The unity of Jesus and God is constantly insisted upon: "I and the Father are one" (10 : 30). Jesus is found declaring "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my authority but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (14 : 10). He speaks and teaches not of his own

accord, but only speaks the words which the Father has bidden him speak (7:17-18; 12:49; 14:10, 24; 17:8, 14). Just because he does not speak of his own accord it can be said that he speaks the word of God (3:34), or that whoever hears him hears the word of God unless his mind is hardened (8:47), or that whoever hears his word has life insofar as he believes (5:24). The Jews are largely justified in being raged at Jesus' words: "My Father is working still, and I am working (8:17). Regarded from the human standpoint his words would be blasphemous presumption; for Jesus not only breaks the sabbath but also calls God his Father, thus making himself equal with God (5:18). The paradox is that a historical man speaks the word of God.

Furthermore, Jesus knows what is to befall him. He knows "the hour": "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified" (12:23). "And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, for this purpose I have come to this hour" (12:27). "Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee" (17:1). In a similar strain does Goodman say:

If ever, in days to come, you shall see ruin at hand, and...shall resolve to be beforehand with the world, and save it from a sin by prospectively taking that sin to yourself, then will you do as one I now dream of once did....

And he adds, "I rest it with your own heart now, whether...such a motive, I say, were a sort of one at all justified by the nature of human society?" (p. 160) Melville himself says that books of fiction, though they want novelty, "want nature.... It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie" (p. 158). So Melville has made the wooden-legged man say, "To do, is to act" (p. 27).

IV

Faith works through love (Gal. 5:6). The righteous man, that is, the man with the gray coat, has "confidence to remove obstacles, though mountains" (p. 36). "And if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (I Cor. 13:2). For the woman in the ladies' saloon who donates twenty dollars to his cause the man in gray also quotes Paul, "I have confidence in you in all things" (II Cor. 7:16). The philosopher with the brass plate characterizes the Last Supper as table-talk: "It is the peculiar vocation of a teacher to talk. What's wisdom itself but table-talk? The best wisdom in this world, and the last spoken by its teacher, did it not literally and truly come in the form of table-talk?" (p. 108) "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34). "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (15:12). "This I command you, to love one another" (15:17). But one must remember that all but the twelve had left Jesus (see John 6:66).

"We, though many, are one body in Christ"; therefore, "love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:5, 10). But one hates Indians, and will continue to, so long as Indians exist (p. 124). It is surprising that one should hate Indians who are believed to be "red from a cause akin to that which makes some tribes of garden insects green." "A brother is to be loved, and an Indian to be hated" (p. 127). Thus, the words of Paul sound strange: "Concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have any one write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another" (I Thess. 4:9).

Frank Goodman observes in the mystic Mark Winsome, who is said to be modeled on Ralph Waldo Emerson, "one-knows-not-what of shrewdness and mythiness, strangely jumbled; in that way, he seemed a kind

of cross between a Yankee peddler and a Tartar priest" (pp. 161-162). Winsome himself says: "If, hitherto, you have supposed me a visionary, be undeceived. I am no one-ideaed man, either.... Along with whatever else it may be given me to be, I am a man of serviceable knowledge, a man of the world" (p. 170). When Goodman asks him if the study of his philosophy "tends to the same formation of character with the experiences of the world", Winsome replies:

"It does; and that is the test of its truth; for any philosophy"... being in operation contradictory to the ways of the world, tends to produce a character at odds with it.... [p. 170]

Then introducing his Thoreauvian disciple Egbert to Goodman, Winsome says, "Egbert was the first among mankind to reduce to practice the principles of Mark Winsome—principles previously accounted as less adapted to life than the closet" (p. 169). In his essay "Friendship" Emerson writes: "Let us even bid our dearest friends farewell, and defy them, saying 'Who are you? Unhand me. I will be dependent no more'".⁵ Thoreau built himself a hut at Walden Pond, where he lived from July 4, 1845, to September 6, 1847, of which he wrote in *Walden*. There is something human about him when he writes: "I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthful life. To be alone was something unpleasant"; and continues: "But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery".⁶ Egbert says a man who wants help has a defect and so does not deserve help (p. 177). Since nature labels her harmful creature, putting rattles on rattlesnakes, says Mark Winsome, it is the victim's own fault if he is destroyed; and "for a man to pity where nature is pitiless, is a little presuming" (p. 163). After Egbert has told the story of China Astar to prove "the folly, on both sides, of a friend's helping a friend", Goodman declares that he has

had enough of his "inhuman philosophy" (pp. 190, 192). After all Thoreau was too honest a disciple. It is in Emerson's recollection that "Thoreau was sincerity itself..... It was easy to trace to the inexorable demand on all for exact truth that austerity which made this willing hermit more solitary even than he wished. Himself of a perfect probity, he required not less of others. He had a disgust at crime, and no worldly success would cover it. He detected paltering as readily in dignified and prosperous persons as in beggars, and with equal scorn. Such dangerous frankness was in his dealing that his admirers called him 'that terrible Thoreau'.... I think the severity of his ideal interfered to deprive him of a healthy sufficiency of human society".⁷ "A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher" (Lk. 6:40). China Astar's epitaph reads in part: "Here lies the remains of China Astar...whose career was an example of the truth of scripture, as found in the sober philosophy of Solomon the wise...." (p. 189) "In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing. Be not righteous overmuch.... Be not wicked overmuch.... It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand; for he who fears God shall come forth from them all" (Eccles. 7:15-18).

In its relations to Emerson's essay "Friendship", the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and of Apocrypha is set against the New Testament. Emerson writes: "...love is only the reflection of a man's own worthiness from other men. Men have sometimes exchanged names with their friends, as if they could signify that in their friend each loved his own soul"; "By persisting in your path, though you forfeit the little you gain the great"; "A friend is Janus-faced; he looks to the past and the future. He is the child of all my foregoing hours, the prophet of those to come, and the harbinger of a greater friend"; "So I will owe to my friends this evanescent intercourse. I will receive from them not what they have but what they are.... But they shall not hold me by

any relations less subtle and pure. We will meet as though we met not, and part as though we parted not".⁸ One should choose one's friends, says Egbert, as one chooses one's mutton, "not for its leanness, but for its fatness", and this is not vile prudence but the means of preserving the delicacy of friendship. For one even to help his friend, or to lend him money—that would violate the delicacy of the relation. No true friend will ask it, as no true friend will, in platonic love, require love rites (p. 176).

It is Mark Winsome who first quotes from *Ecclus.*, "Who will pity the charmer that is bitten with a serpent?" (12:13). William Cream, the barber, also quotes from the book of Jesus the son of Sirach, and upon an old man's recommendation Goodman reads for himself: "Believe not his many words; an enemy speaks sweetly with his lips; with much communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou?; If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bare, and will not be sorry for it; Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep" (p. 208; *Ecclus.* 13:11, 6, 4, 5, 13). And again, "Take heed of thy friends" (p. 209; *Ecclus.* 6:13). "Ah, my way now", cries the old man, "where lies my way to my state-room?" (p. 217). Then Goodman leads the old man away in the darkness. "He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (I John 2:9-11).

What then?

We come to predestination. Here again Matthew Arnold is worth quoting: "The important thing to remark is, that Calvinism, which with the Calvinist is primary, is with Paul secondary, or even less than secondary. What with Calvinists is their fundamental idea, the centre of their theology, is for Paul an idea added to his central ideas, and ex-

traneous to them".⁹ For "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13); "God is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe" (I Tim. 4:10). Paul's central idea of identification with Christ through dying with him is "as natural as the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination is monstrous".¹⁰ Melville has inserted it in his chapter on the "Metaphysics of Indian-hating" the other way, as it seems. An Indian:

will not conceal his enlightened conviction, that his race's portion by nature is total depravity.... And...knowing the Indian nature, as he thinks he does, he fancies he is not ignorant that *an Indian may in some points deceive himself almost as effectually as in bush tactics he can another.* [my italics; pp. 127-128]

While an Indian is identified with the Devil, the nature of Indians who have been converted to Christianity is shown to be applicable to all Christians; that is, among Christians—Indian or not—is there the imitation of evil as well as of Christ; and, as it turns out, the imitation of evil is rather easier to live in when Melville writes: "...while, on the other hand, those red men who are the greatest sticklers for the theory of Indian virtue, and Indian loving-kindness, are sometimes the arrantest horse thieves and tomahawkers among them" (pp. 127-128). The same thing is true of the late Colonel John Moredock, the Indian-hater. "With the solemnity of a Spaniard turned monk, he takes leave of his kin; or rather, these leave-takings have something of the still more impressive finality of deathbed adieus.... He commits himself to the forest primeval; there, so long as life shall be his, to act upon a calm, cloistered scheme of strategical, implacable, and lonesome vengeance" (p. 130). "Soft enticements of domestic life too often draw him from the ascetic trail; a monk who apostatizes to the world at times" (p. 131). Herein lies the "metaphysics" of Indian-hating.

It seems as if Paul were doing his work of mission freely. Paul himself writes: "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself

a slave to all, that I might win the more.... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men” (I Cor. 9:21-22). But what does concern the Confidence Man is putting on the new man, the imitation of Christ, not the imitation of evil, lest he might fall into self-imitation.

In any case, for the Confidence Man, “Paul’s idea of dying with Christ the *Imitation* elevates more conspicuously than any Protestant treatise elevates it”.¹¹ This is what the Confidence Man is taught by Paul to do. He interprets it so. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (I Cor. 11:1).

Notes

- 1 Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, tr. Kendrick Grobel, (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), Vol. II, 12.
- 2 Page 71. All page references in the text hereafter are to Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Reviews and Criticism, An Annotated Bibliography*, ed. Hershel Parker, W. W. Norton, 1971.
- 3 Bultmann, Vol. I, 198.
- 4 Matthew Arnold, *St. Paul and Protestantism with an Essay on Puritanism and the Church of England and Last Essays on Church and Religion* (Ams Press, 1970), pp. 75-76.
- 5 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Friendship”, *The Complete Works of RWE* (Houghton Mifflin, 1903), Vol. II, 214.
- 6 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience: Authoritative Texts, Background, and Essays in Criticism*, ed. Owen Thomas (W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 88.
- 7 Emerson, “Thoreau”, Vol. X, 478-479.
- 8 Emerson, “Friendship”, Vol. II, 212, 214, 215-216.
- 9 Arnold, p. 93.
- 10 Arnold, p. 95.
- 11 Arnold, p. 108.