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[redacted]VANKER PUNSTER CON MAN QUEER: Melville's *The Confidence-Man*

by

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ABSTRACT

Although critics have finally recognized the textual complexities of Melville's proto-post structuralist 'novel,' *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, there has been no effort to link the its avant-garde narrative strategies with the novel's plentiful homo- and autoerotic content. The sexual and the textual converge in several of his works to give us a texts that are deeply 'homotextual' in nature, exhibiting a writing style that is as subversive of bourgeois literary expectations as it is of bourgeois heterocentric norms.

In this thesis I examine how Melville 'queers' a very complex set of cultural vectors on the levels of both form and content. On the one hand, Melville's writing challenges late nineteenth-century notions of literary realism by pointing out that any attempt to 're-present' 'reality' pretends that one has access to a kind of metaphysical 'truth' that post-structuralist criticism has worked to discredit.

On the other hand, Melville criticizes essentialist notions of (hetero)sexuality by injecting same-sex desire into his texts. 'The homosexual' in this novel, though, is as undetectable as the confidence man himself, exhibiting an uncanny ability to 'pass' without being recognized, an invisibility which works to his advantage as he picks the pockets of his fellow passengers. This ability to 'masquerade,' has the effect of 'dragging' identity in a manner which undermines the essentialized nature of liberal humanist notions of identity which promise a centred, knowable 'self.'

Melville's *The Confidence-Man* is especially relevant to us now in the context of an academic atmosphere which is becoming increasing resistant to post-structuralist criticisms of Western metaphysics as they relate to political practice.

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when he didn't have to, and to Meesha Grubisic for

all the trips to the library.

I love you both.

▼

▼

With love
to
Christopher Lefler - Activist, Hero, Queer
and
Sylvia Fedoruk - Politician

▼

Introduction: Reading the (pre-)Queer

"This history goes forward and goes backward, as occasion calls.
Nimble center, circumference elastic you must have."
- Herman Melville[1]

AS I WRITE THIS, a million people are gathered in New York for the Gay Games, where a Rainbow Flag a kilometre-and-a-half long is snaking its way through the streets, a testimony to the advances made since the Stonewall Riots in 1969, an event chosen as the starting point for 'our' imagined community's fight for civil rights.[2] The Rainbow Flag is a paradoxical thing, evocative, on one hand, of the pledge to honour 'diversity' amongst gays, lesbians and bisexual people, while on the other evoking a nationalist discourse—which is by nature exclusionary—for that impossible entity: the Queer Nation.

With this late twentieth-century context in mind, I propose a reading of Herman Melville's 1857 novel *The Confidence-Man* that is inspired by the advances that this signifier of nationhood represents, but one that moves beyond its essentialisms in an attempt to both embrace *différance*, and argue for an interpretation of the novel which shows us a Melville who espouses a 'politics of queerness.' In doing so, I am not unaware of the

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1. Herman Melville, *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (New York: NAL Penguin, 1988), 79.
2. The phrase comes from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition. London: Verso, 1991. Considered by many to be an early first text in what has now been enshrined as Post-colonial Theory.

radically different socio-historical context Melville was writing out of in the imposition on him of a term that has a distinctly AIDS-era set of reference points. Rather, I mean to evoke a set of meanings for queerness that resonates in both contexts. Melville's writing is 'queer' in three related senses. First, his writing is queer in the sense that it was marginalized because of Melville's inability or unwillingness to write a novel which followed the precepts of realism. After *Moby Dick,* he sank from notoriety, alienating his public with a writing style that was considered by many critics to be unreadable and overly-philosophical, if not scandalous and downright immoral. *The Confidence-Man*, moreover, was not respected as more than mere nonsensical gibberish until after Richard Chase's laudatory essay of 1949.[3] Second, there is ample evidence of a sexual dissidence in his writing that makes him doubly marginal in the context of a society that was defined by an ethic of bourgeois (re)productivity. Luckily, critics were not sensitized to Melville's dense webs of homosexual and masturbatory allusions as critics of Oscar Wilde would be only a few years later. Third, Melville's approach to writing combines a sexual and textual dissidence to create a highly-developed cultural critique which 'queers' Western metaphysical notions of essentialized identities in a manner oddly parallel to work being done today by such practitioners of Queer Theory as Judith Butler and Eve K. Sedgwick.[4]

In part, this project is an attempt to write against the unqueerness of essentialized lesbian and gay identities, in a way that echoes the resolute

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3. Richard Chase, "Melville's Confidence Man," *Kenyon Review* 11 (Winter 1949): 122-40.

4. See Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet.*

sexual ambivalence of Melville's deeply homoerotic but pre-homosexual writing. As I hope to evoke with the epigraph above, I would also like to attempt a reading of *The Confidence-Man* whose direction and structure echo Melville's own brilliantly and, at times, frustratingly analogical style of writing. *The Confidence-Man* represents, I believe, the apotheosis of Melville's analogical mode, forsaking as it does attention to such realist hallmarks as plot and characterization for a writing that is so densely poetic that it seems to call for a reader who is floating somewhere between sleep and reason. To tailor the story of the flag that I began with, the unitary vision that the rainbow represents, needs, in the case of (my reading of) *The Confidence-Man* to be refracted into its many bands of color to be allowed to travel in a manner which more accurately reflects the non-linear nature of this work. If I were to give the reader any kind of road map, I would pass along the one that Melville gave me which does not form a grid, but is instead a swirling mass of crooked lines, many of which meet at important intersections and some of which don't go anywhere at all.

I have broken this project down into three chapters which are distinct in that I do not carry through every theme from chapter to chapter, but, like the many-colored flag, exhibit a unity which operates analogically. In the first chapter I contextualize the project, concentrating on four texts written from gay or queer (the two not synonymous) approaches. Although the works are divergent in their theoretical leanings, my reading of *The Confidence-Man* draws on all four in an attempt to provide a post-structuralist account which is sensitive to the historical specificity of Melville's work and social context.

In Chapter 2, I launch into an interpretation of a key episode in the novel where the stalwart "Missouri Bachelor," also known as "Pitch"

encounters the feline "Philosophical Intelligence Officer," readable as an official from a kind of employment agency, or a pimp for a pool of male prostitutes. Central to this chapter is the masturbatory subtext of their encounter which serves as a metaphor for the subversion of the patriarchal and capitalist milieu that Melville is writing both from and against.

In the final chapter, I jump to an analysis of *The Confidence-Man*'s last few pages in which the Cosmopolitan cons an old man out of his belief in the christian god by blurring the line between canonical and apocryphal versions of the Truth. Like the pun--a theme that is important to the discussion of the PIO's means of subversion--'the wedge' splits unitary, essential meaning in two, creating a moment of anxiety made manifest by a laugh, if the moment is small in effect, or psychosis, if it is extreme. It is the movement of the wedge which becomes important in Chapter 3 as the most powerful organizing metaphor for the mechanics of subversion that the punster, con man and queer undertake in a radical cultural critique whose breadth has not yet been understood.

Finally, I chose *The Confidence-Man* over other texts in part to demonstrate, if only to myself, that there is a way in which homosexuality is linked to textuality in the challenge it poses to logocentricity as it relates to both sex and text. I wanted, furthermore, to be able to establish that homosexuality is so interwoven into Euro-North American culture that it is inextricably related to such seemingly disparate cultural vectors as capitalism, liberal humanist notions of identity, and Western metaphysics. This is a tall order, and one that I do not in any way 'fill.' But I do make an attempt, however cryptically, to make these links known, if only by analogy.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Moorings

MY TASK in this first chapter is to provide an overview of the four works that have been most important in the development of this project. To be sure, the influences are myriad, but the four texts I would here like to discuss best summarize the theoretical moorings that I am indebted to. Moreover, these four works divide quite nicely into pairs: two are attempts to bring to light homoerotic content in Melville's writing, while the other two are more theoretical in orientation. The first of the theoretical works is Ed Cohen's *Talk on the Wilde Side.* It is an examination of the various cultural technologies that informed the nineteenth-century formation of what we now know as the modern homosexual, arguing that Oscar Wilde became the first man to be interpellated as *a* homosexual.[1] His thesis is not insignificant if we consider that the Wilde trials took place only four years after Melville's death in an era which is characterized in part by gender anxiety. The second of the theoretical works is Lee Edelman's *Homographesis,* a collection of essays opened by the essay of the book's title.[2] Edelman picks up where Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics leaves off, demonstrating a striking and productive parallel between the secondary, supplemental nature of both writing and homosexuality under the essentializing sign of Western logos. Besides its mere convenience, I am setting up an opposition between these two pairs for quite another reason as well. The other two

1. Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993). All further citations appear parenthetically.
2. Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994). All further citations appear parenthetically.

works, especially Creech's *Closet Writing/Gay Reading,* are structuralist in their approaches, and the latter two are largely post-structuralist.

Although I criticize both Creech and Robert K. Martin (*Hero, Captain and Stranger*) for their tacks, it is Creech whom I will take to task for his almost opprobrious criticism of post-structuralist theory on grounds that have been too trammeled of late by reductive generalizations about what that allegedly unified monster 'Post-structuralism, Inc.' is setting out to do. A defense of post-structuralist approaches is necessary in an academic climate that has become increasingly hostile to the challenges it has posed to the academy. I find it especially alarming that an increasing number of lesbian and gay scholars are jettisoning the possibilities of post-structuralist theory for what amounts to a neo-esssentialist position, at a time when a post-modern critique of liberal humanist notions of identity is being formulated.[3] To be sure, there are abuses, but these abuses have taken centre stage, leaving post-structuralist academics all tarred with the same all-too-reductive brush.

This defense is also necessary in the context of my project because there have been no accounts of Melville done by scholars which take into account *both the proto-post-structuralist radicality of his writing and the radicality of his (homo)textual erotics.* I believe the two to be inextricably tied and sorely underdiscussed in academic criticism on Melville. Scholars have been slow to acknowledge, let alone explore, the role of same-sex desire in Melville's work. This is puzzling given the explosion of writing around gender and homosexuality in the past decade. But there are indications that this situation is experiencing the first tremors of

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3. Eve K. Sedgwick, Judith Butler and Teresa De Lauretis have been instrumental in this regard. It is this post-structuralist-inflected 'gay and lesbian' theory which is operating under the name 'queer theory.'

transformation as younger academics are finding a more receptive audience for their concerns. It is always surprising to peruse the on-line catalogues for critical writing on nineteenth-century literature using the keywords "homosexuality," or "gender" with authors like Henry James or Kate Chopin, because of the paucity of writing on what seem (to gay and lesbian-interested scholars, at least) as utterly obvious lines of inquiry. If there *are* articles or books, they will almost always have been written in the past ten, maybe fifteen, years. The bewilderment and frustration people of my generation and inclination face is perhaps mitigated by the oft-forgotten fact that it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to write about homosexuality more than fifteen years ago—let alone expect to be published.

Unfortunately, in a field that has been as conservative as nineteenth-century American literature (up until now), radical reassessments of canonical writers like Melville which take sexuality seriously have been lacking, and are greatly overdue. But Melville, it seems to me, is easy picking because of the overwhelming evidence, both literary and biographical, that (male) homosexuality is a very important element in *all* his work. The inclusion of homosexuality as a consideration in Melville studies must be factored into any assessments of his work and his life, just as the facts of nationality or socio-economic background are crucial for any assessment that hopes to be holistic in approach. What's more, issues of gender and, more specifically, homoeroticism should not be considered as part of a particular 'approach' to Melville studies, since these are central issues to the production of his literary output. To say that scholarly work by those writing about sexuality in Melville's writing is just another literary approach is to deny the significance of these issues in both a

contemporary and nineteenth-century context. At root, this view seems indicative of a heterosexist ignorance of the non-essential nature of sexuality and the inter-relatedness of sexuality-based subjectivities to eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century history.

An equally unhealthy but oddly parallel move, however, is the approach taken by some gay and lesbian scholars who deracinate homoerotic elements in literature from the socio-historical context in which it was produced in a move which essentializes *homosexuality* as fixed, pretending its construction was not contingent on issues of class, race, and historical circumstance. It is this rigidly binaristic interpellation of subjects as either heterosexual or homosexual that I am writing against, because this sort of identity constitution is very problematic when we leave a particular temporal *or* spatial frame. Besides being absurdly reductive, this approach is also *boring*, providing us with a tour bus view of homoerotically-themed literature that transforms the historical landscape into a readily digestible theme-park of gay men in period drag. It is for these reasons that I see the occlusion of the role of same-sex desire in nineteenth-century literature as being just as unproductive as the overzealous application of a decidedly twentieth-century Euro-North American construction of homosexuality to periods and places beyond our own. There has been a tendency of writers on homosexuality to participate in this kind of essentialism, and why shouldn't they, when heterosexuality, and therefore sexuality, are constructed as essential?

Being in the vanguard as they are, the works of lesbian and gay scholars are in an awkward position of being first forays, and as such are particularly vulnerable to retrospective criticism by writers whose way has been paved, to some extent, by these pioneering works. It is important,

nonetheless, for me to take these works to task, not only as part of an ongoing academic dialogue, but also as a way of outlining the theoretical biases which inform my own first foray.

First forays: Robert K. Martin & James Creech

Two monographs have been published on Melville's writing which make homosexual desire central.[4] Robert K. Martin's *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* focuses on the changing relationships between hero, captain, and stranger archetypes in Melville's writing. Martin argues that by charting the changes in these patterns of relationships, he finds that Melville's early works are optimistic about the possibilities of a balanced, non-patriarchal society which finds the male-male dyad as its salient metaphor. His later works, on the other hand, are, according to Martin, deeply pessimistic about the revolutionary possibilities of Melville's own brand of brotherly love to effect positive change in nineteenth-century American society. James Creech's *Closet Writing/Gay Reading* is more recent, and follows a tack which attempts to take into consideration recent influences of post-structuralist criticism on gay and lesbian studies, while at the same time providing a very interesting analysis of Melville's *Pierre* informed by his avowed suspicion of post-structuralist thinkers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

Published only within the past ten years of this writing, these works cannot help but be touchstones for scholars who are interested in gay and lesbian studies. But this is not to say that they are problem-free

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4. James Creech, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's Pierre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), and Robert K. Martin, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). All further citations will appear parenthetically.

negotiations of new territory, since both are marked by their own reductivisms vis-à-vis Melville's 'homosexuality.' There is a tendency in the studies by Creech and Martin to overstate the centrality of Melville's same-sex desire in a manner which occludes the vast array of social, cultural and historical factors which condition and, to a very significant extent, determine the range of possibilities available for Melville's gendered subjectivity. Both studies emphasize the role of same-sex desire to the extent that other dimensions to Melville's work disappear, something I hope to partially redress by linking Melville's sexuality not only to a political ideology, as Martin does, but to modern homosexuality as it fits into nineteenth-century bourgeois, capitalist, patriarchal culture. Admittedly, Martin is far more careful in this respect because several socio-economic factors of the period are central to his epistemological construction of a particularly Melvillian homosexuality. In his preface, Martin says that Walt Whitman and Melville "share not only a common time and place but also a common vision of an America in which sexuality and politics might be joined" (ix). Martin's vision of Melville's marriage of sexuality and political ideology is parallel to his perception that male comradeship for Whitman had the potential to renew an America which had become increasingly competitive and aggressive in its pursuit of wealth (ix). Moreover, Melville's textually articulated homosexuality is for Martin inseparable from discussions of American imperialism and race relations:

> White European culture has regularly conquered and enslaved those of a different culture—in Melville's time this process was being continued in American westward expansion, in the "conversion" of the South Seas and the conquest of Hawaii, as well as in the colonial divisions of Africa. The subordination of women by men, of colored nations by white, and of nature by law are historical facts that are related to each other and feed each other. They must be combated together. I am convinced that Melville saw these connections, that he saw the evil inherent in the social order, and that he was groping (Melvillean pun) for a solution . . . . The male couple, as Melville imagined it, can serve as the basis

> for a reexamination of the way men are called upon to assume roles of power and authority. (xi)

Many scholars, even recently, have criticized writers like Martin for claiming that Melville's idealization of male friendship was homoerotic in nature. In a recent collection of essays, Donald Yacavone, who takes advantage of a radically constructionist position to occlude the possibility of homosexuality in nineteenth-century America, says:

> In *their* legitimate quest to recover a usable past, many historians of gay and lesbian life have *distorted our* [?] *view* of pre-modern and pre-Freudian sexuality and culture by *mistaking* the language of religious ecstasy and sincerity, or agape, for homoeroticism or outright homosexuality.
>
> We must remember, as Robert B. Martin [not Robert K. Martin] has written, that "many Victorians managed what seems to us the difficult balancing act of believing that love between men which had no overt physical consequences was therefore untouched by physical motivation." For some individuals of the nineteenth century there may indeed have been ambivalent, disturbed, or incomprehensible sexual drives behind their friendships. But the tradition of agape and its secular manifestations are too ingrained in Western culture for historians to ignore, and the preoccupation with elemental sex says more about the twentieth century than about the nineteenth. (my emphasis; 94)[5]

In a footnote to the above, Yacavone cites Robert K. Martin as one of the culprits responsible for such 'perversions' of "our view" of history, making one wonder what Yacavone's investment is, in ignoring the fact that male sexuality became increasingly subject to scrutiny after the 1850s (reflecting a crisis in self-definition) and that in Melville's literature, at least, there is enough evidence of coded and scarcely coded auto- or homoerotic activity to make Yacavone's confident claims highly suspect. The appeal to an imperial 'we' (i.e., "our view") is enough to make it clear to me that for all his politesse about the legitimacy of gay and lesbian searches for a hidden history, the nineteenth century is not a place where the other "we" should be looking. What's more, he is naïve in thinking

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5. Donald Yacavone, "Abolitions and the 'Language of Fraternal Love'." *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America.* Eds. Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1990.

that his nineteenth century is *not* the place to look, since homosexuality has often found a safe haven in poetic rhetoric and analogical expression.

Yacavone's point, however, that there was a range of socially acceptable possibilities of homosocial expression for men that would not be acceptable for heterosexual men today, is a very good one, but I think Martin would concur that male-male relations were very differently articulated in the nineteenth century. Martin admits, moreover, that Melville "distinguished between homosexual practices and what we might call homosexual being, or identity" (7). On this score, Yacavone dismisses all too easily the existence of genital homosexuality and the possibility that some men, especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, identified themselves *as* homosexuals.[6]

Where Martin fails, however, is in his structuralist approach to a view of Melville's literary output which he interprets as an attempt to work out the utopian vision of an egalitarian society that uses a male-male homosexual relationship as its central metaphor. Martin tells us in his introduction that

> [Melville's] novels are *structured around* the possibility of the Hero's discovery of his own capacity for love, through love of the Dark Stranger, and the consequent discovery of the strength to oppose the rule of the Captain. (my emphasis; 6)

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6. See Duberman's "'Writhing Bedfellows' in Antebellum South Carolina and the Politics of Evidence" for compelling documentary evidence that rhapsodic talk between men meant more than a devotion to 'god'. Also Burg's *An American Seafarer in the Age of Sail: The Intimate Diaries of Philip C. Van Buskirk* provides a fascinating look at same-sex relations and homosexual identity from the perspective of an awed young middle-class diarist. Weeks's "Inverts, Perverts, and Mary-Annes: Male Prostitution and the Regulation of Homosexuality in England in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" uncovers anecdotal testimony from the late nineteenth century which proves the existence of a highly coded network of homosexual relations. Weeks's anecdotal information makes it clear that *by* the late nineteenth century, a consolidation of types of male-male behaviour around the notion of a homosexual identity was well under way. The latter two sources will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Although this 'template' provides a useful and often compelling anchoring point for Martin's exploration of homosexuality in Melville's work, its application over every novel from *Typee* to *The Confidence-Man* has a homogenizing effect, fitting each work far too neatly within the confines of a single, unitary vision. Furthermore, Martin's structuralist approach has the tendency to impose a teleological trajectory on Melville's work which begins with *Typee* as the representation of Edenic optimism about the possibilities of a politics of fraternal love, to a deeply pessimistic stance in later works like *Pierre*, *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd.* I propose a more holistic approach which examines sexuality in Melville's texts *as it relates to* other aspects of his thinking and writing. This has the advantage of making the exposure of homosexuality in Melville's writing not simply a reclamatory project, but one that points to the inextricable connections in his works between sex and text, between subversive sexualities and subversive textual practice. The purpose of this project is also to probe more deeply into the construction of Melville's textual homosexuality, in a way that Martin does not, partly because the structuralist nature of his project prevents him from erring from a thesis which makes central the theme of unfound brotherly love. If, according to his thesis, "*Moby-Dick* was Melville's last hopeful fiction," then *The Confidence-Man* is reducible to being simply a work written by a disillusioned and broken man (95). To be sure, *The Confidence-Man* is a "dark" vision of Melville's America, but Martin gives this darkness a too-pejorative emphasis (95). As I will discuss in Chapter 3, darkness is one of the names given to that which is in opposition to light. Light is associated in *The Confidence-Man* with a whole nexus of bourgeois, christian and realist values that Melville is criticizing. By dismissing this last full novel by Melville as "dark" in the

traditional sense of the word, Martin is associating himself with that very system of values that Melville sets out to indict. What I hope to do is move beyond Martin's initial reclamatory act by reclaiming not only the text's homoeroticism, but also the greater radicality of Melville's writing as it includes sexual subversion.

James Creech's more recent account continues in the recuperative vein, (re-)mapping the Melville corpus along queerer lines in a very compelling interpretation of *Pierre* wherein the incest theme becomes a heavily-coded same-sex relationship. For Creech, *Pierre* is an example of what he terms "closet writing," which he subjects to a decoding that reveals its hidden homosexual content. In the first half of the book, Creech outlines his theoretical position, making a very strong case for the reading of periphrasis in literature by writers like Stendhal or Melville as attempts to encrypt same-sex desire. Creech says "[his] point is that politically and ideologically enforced blanks are not, in the first instance, a sign of literature. Rather, it is legitimate to see them as signs of repression" (21). This comment comes after a rather lengthy criticism of Barbara Johnson's elegant article "Melville's Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd," published in 1980. Creech points out, quite rightly I think, that Johnson quite suspiciously elides any discussion of sexuality in her treatment of *Billy Budd,* in favour of an interpretation that allows, paradoxically, only the one conclusion that this last Melville fiction is "a particularly legible example of the blurring operated by chiastic indeterminacy" (Creech, 17). Johnson only deals with the text's manifest homoerotic content when she says,

> According to this perspective, Claggart's so-called evil is thus really a repressed form of love. But it is perhaps even more interesting to examine the way in which the psychoanalytical view treats Billy's so-called goodness as being in reality a repressed form of hate . . . (Johnson, 89)

And so, the window of opportunity closes with Johnson's criticisms deflected away from the not-sufficiently-"interesting" homoerotic content of the story to the psychoanalytical position which she views with equally disinterested detachment. Johnson has since "come out" as lesbian, raising the possibility that this textual elision is not a product of heterocentricity or homophobic malice, but involuntary blindness. Creech speculates, moreover, that Johnson was unable to speak freely on the homotextual elements of the story because of the same institutional and societal constraints faced by Melville himself. In this context, then, the unsaid begins to speak as an ellipsis or absence not only in Melville's text, but in Johnson's as well.

Other very useful contributions Creech makes to the 'queering' of Melville, which I wish here to extend, are his thoughts on camp recognition and the coded "wink" which is recognized only by the gay reader of this subliminal code. Creech quotes the queer theorist (who is openly straight), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for her recognition of the camp gaze:

> The typifying gesture of camp is really something amazingly simple: the moment at which a consumer of culture makes the wild surmise, "What if whoever made this was gay too?" Unlike kitsch-attribution, then, camp-recognition doesn't ask, "What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?" Instead, it says *what if:* What if the right audience for this were exactly *me?*. . . And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognize can see it from the same "perverse" angle? (*Epistemology*, 156)

In the case of Melville's writing, Creech recognizes the camp gaze at work in *Redburn.* The hero of the title describes these moments of recognition which are parallel to the ambivalently hostile/adoring gaze that Claggart casts on beautiful Billy:

> As I am sometimes by nature inclined to indulge in *unauthorized surmisings* about the thoughts going on with regard to me, in the people I meet; especially if I have reason to think they dislike me; I will not put it down for a certainty that what I suspected concerning this Jackson relative to his thoughts of me, was really the truth. But only state my honest opinion, and how it struck me at the time; and even now, I think I was not wrong. And indeed, unless it was so, how

> could I account to myself, for the *shudder* that would run through me, when I caught this man gazing at me, as I often did [?]. (as qtd. in Creech; 102)

As indicated by the bracketed question mark, Creech is picking up on a classic Melvillian double-entendre, which makes available to the reader one of (at least) two meanings, the first being that Redburn does often catch the "Jackson relative" gazing at him, and the second (camp) reading which has Redburn's "often" cast gaze being received by the "Jackson relative" in the same manner as the other man's gaze is received by him, a formula which has implications as "unauthorized" as Redburn's cryptic "surmisings."

This is how the homosexual gaze or camp "wink"[7], as Creech calls it, creates both an authorized and unauthorized version of the text, operating much as it does now in sites where homosexual interaction is subject to censure.[8] In the case of Melville's writing, the authorized versions of his texts are a passable but perplexing "rural bowl of milk"[9] intended for bourgeois (by definition heterosexual) consumption. Alternately, Melville's texts conceal a level of homo- or autoeroticism and rabidly anti-christian views rich enough to make them absolutely heretical to the very same people who thought they were getting yet another (slightly askew) testimony to the greatness of triple-decker bourgeois realism. Creech points to a letter Melville wrote to his dear friend Nathaniel Hawthorne which expresses the doubleness, or duplicity, of his writing:

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7. Creech, 101 passim.

8. I think here of an example familiar to many gay men today. The civic park is an ostensibly heterosexual site, marked by strolling opposite sex couples and families. But it is doubly mapped with an invisible overlay of a completely different, completely queer, mapping of space. Glowing cigarette embers, solo men, slowly trolling past areas known to gay men, all a contemporary version of the camp wink, invisible to those who do not suspect or do not desire.

9. Melville told Sophia Peabody (Hawthorne's spouse) in a letter that *Pierre* was to take this innocuous form (as qtd. in Creech from Melville's *Letters*, 146).

> In June 1851, while working on *Moby-Dick*, Melville wrote Hawthorne in a resonant vein, "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, —it will not pay. Yet, altogether write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botched" (Melville, *Letters*, 128). I would suggest that the appositive to "banned," glossing it as "will not pay," is a textual knotting of public and private meanings which are incompatible. "Banned" is hardly the appropriate adjective for describing writing the public would reject on matters of literary taste. Rather, it emerges from the same source as the ban which prevents Claggart from loving Billy Budd "except for fate and ban". . . (173, n. 16)

If one examines the critical reception of Melville's books and the texts themselves, the above makes it obvious that Melville knew what he was doing, even though he alienated more and more of his audience with each published "botch." By the time Melville wrote *The Confidence-Man*, his style went 'against the grain' of bourgeois expectations, leaving the work largely ignored and unenjoyed until recently. Critics would repeatedly state their yearnings for yet another volume of digestible south sea exotica, over texts like *Pierre* or *The Confidence-Man,* which the vast majority of critics found either totally obscure or outright blasphemous on both textual and ethical levels.[10]

Creech's volume is, as I indicated earlier, a very valuable continuation of Robert Martin's recuperation of homosexual desire in Melville's texts. Most insightful is his forceful claim that such a historical reconstruction, while violating post-structuralist claims about the indeterminacy of meaning, fills in 'gaps' which exist as a product of repression.[11] These are the darkened, invisible layers of the text where Melville encodes his most seditious, most 'perverse' messages, ones that we shall discuss in the following two chapters as I graft Creech's most useful notions onto my own analysis of the homotextual in *The Confidence-*

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10. I discuss the reception of *The Confidence-Man* in Chapter 2.

11. In a translation of a quotation from Gérard Genette, Creech says that "Lacunae, interruptions of the text, are not simple absences, or pure non-texts: they are lacks, active and palpable as lacks, as unwriting, as unwritten text" (20).

Man. But there is an aspect to his analysis that would not graft so easily alongside the post-structuralist criticism I employ, like the work of Lee Edelman and Jacques Derrida, for example. Before turning to a discussion of Ed Cohen's work on nineteenth-century male homo- and heterosexuality and Edelman's Derridean-inflected queer theory, I would like to take Creech to task for his at times shrill dismissals of post-structuralist theory as they relate to the reclamatory aims of his version of gay and lesbian studies.

Evidence of his hostility to post-structuralism appears from the outset in swipes that Creech takes at Michel Foucault, but it is not until his long afterword, "Essaying a Different Voice," that Creech makes the full extent of his antipathy known. And Creech has good reason to be defensive, because his often insightful analysis of *Pierre*'s homoerotic content *does* go too far by claiming that the flawed textual surface of the novel—the one intended for bourgeois consumption—is merely a "cover story," for the 'real' story of homosexual desire underneath (157). Here, my criticisms echo those I made of Martin, who subordinates the *textual* radicality of Melville's writing to the exigencies of his structuralist approach. Creech, however, does not even make an attempt to contextualize Melville's 'homosexuality' within nineteenth-century cultural technologies *out of which the whole notion* of modern homosexual subjectivity evolved.[12] Speaking as a 'recovering deconstructionist,' he complains of having been

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12. My single quotes are meant as a gesture of post-structuralist humility, uncomfortable as I am with the distinctly modern connotations to the word. Were Melville living fifty, or even twenty-five years later, my anxiety would be lessened. Creech however refuses such humility, referring to single quotes merely as "[d]econstructive scare quotes," going on to say that "perhaps I am not yet able to forgive such theoretical articulations, with their near-ethical [?] justification and near-political requirement to live in that kind of suspensiveness" (191, n. 7).

> . . . hobbled by the awareness, frequently shared by French-inspired theorists, that any specification or declaration of lesbian or gay identity, strategic usefulness aside, necessarily participates in an exclusionary logic. (187)

The threat of post-structuralist theory according to Creech is that it apparently hinders his ability to define himself or others like Melville as gay or homosexual. Here Creech echoes the all too often heard criticism that 'post-structuralism' (as though one could essentialize) denies the possibility of agency because of post-structuralism's avowed denial of the centredness of the subject. This particular generalization is very odd given Creech's obvious predilection for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and to a lesser extent, Judith Butler, both of whom are strong supporters of post-structuralist strains of feminism and gay and lesbian theory—or, it's more progressive, post-structuralist manifestation, "queer theory." Especially puzzling are Creech's criticisms of "gender performativity," an idea central to the work of Butler, and more recently, Sedgwick herself.[13] Creech tells us, for instance, that

> At its most parodically reductive, 'gender as performance' resonates too intensely with performing, precisely, a sexuality that was not mine and which I did indeed enact as a kind of gender quotation from a ready-made script. It is thus difficult for me to respond to the intellectual allure of 'citationality,' with its excruciatingly refined diacritical sense that what one 'is' is 'not really me.' (190)

The problem here is that he is criticizing Butler's notion of performativity on the basis of a cardboard cutout rendition which he admits is "parodically reductive." It is no wonder that Sedgwick, in the article noted below, defends Butler against her bowdlerizing critics for their "premature domestication of a conceptual tool [performativity] whose powers we really have barely yet begun to explore" (15). I would suggest that Creech take

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13. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's The Art of the Novel," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 1/1* (1993), 1-17.

responsibility for the fact that "performativity" sounds awfully like "performance," just as over-zealous fundamentalist lesbian feminists need to remember that the Lacanian phallus is not simply a penis.

As I will discuss in the two subsequent chapters, the final irony in all this is that Melville's *Confidence-Man* engages in a radical proto-queer critique of bourgeois liberal humanist notions of centred, essentialist identity that greatly predates and anticipates Creech's scare quotes and pooh-poohed performativity. Nevertheless, he makes very serviceable contributions to what has been up until recently a very unqueer area in American literary studies.

Queering the manly man: Ed Cohen & Lee Edelman

Although not discussions of Melville, recent works in queer theory by Ed Cohen and Lee Edelman have become foundational to my interpretation of *The Confidence-Man*. Cohen has been instrumental in helping me to formulate a homosexuality in *The Confidence-Man* which is linked, as I will discuss, to aspects of the broader culture that Melville is criticizing. Though Edelman's *Homographesis* is not historical in approach, it has been just as crucial for me in developing a position on Melville's writing that gives justice to the radicality of his textual practices. Hence, the useful term "homotextual" which I use here to describe a homosexually-inflected writing practice that forms the basis for a radical critique of bourgeois heterocentric society as it defines, is defined by, a broad complex of cultural vectors, including among others (re)production—as Cohen deftly calls it—and literary realism.

Ed Cohen tells us in his prologue that

> By 25 May [1895], when Wilde was sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labor, after having been tried twice and finally convicted on seven counts of engaging in "acts of gross indecency with another male person," his case was already so well known that it had significantly altered the shape of the Victorian sexual imagination. For, by the time of his conviction, not only had Wilde been confirmed as *the* sexual deviant for the late nineteenth century, but he had become the paradigmatic example for an emerging public definition of a new "type" of male sexual actor: "the homosexual." (1-2)

Cohen goes on to say that documentary evidence makes it clear that Wilde put up an excellent defense against "the monologic forces of law and state . . . armed only with the blades of wit and witticism" (2). But he was defenseless, however, against the allergic reaction he had prompted among "Crown prosecutors, who saw themselves as defending the unequivocal values of 'home,' 'class,' 'sex,' and 'art' against Wilde's willful and exemplary defiance" (2).

Middle-class bourgeois masculinity and the body that bore its markings became the crucible for imperial and economic anxiety which demanded a subject who was a vigorous and (re)productive head of a family, a member of a parallel body politic which, in a similar way, vigorously and productively powered the ship of state. As an analogy of empire and capital expansion, then, it was important that the middle-class male body, that ascendant unit of national economic wealth, become marked in a way consistent with national objectives. During a period which Cohen claims was marked by a hyper-sensitivity to the instability of essentialist notions of gender roles, the Oscar Wilde trials marked an attempt to consolidate a definition of what it meant to be unmanly around the figure of Wilde himself. In his discussion of the importance of a male body, marked and articulated in such a way as to represent the aspirations of bourgeois masculinity, Cohen cites Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*:

> [O]ne of [the bourgeoisie's] primary concerns was to provide itself with a body and a sexuality—to ensure the strength, endurance and secular proliferation of that

> body through the organization of a deployment of sexuality. This process, moreover, was linked to the movement by which it asserted its distinctiveness and its hegemony. There is little question that one of the primordial forms of class consciousness is the affirmation of the body . . . . (as qtd. in Cohen, 23)

Constituted by the public as the narcissistic dandy with effeminate manners and a deadly penchant for epigram, Oscar Wilde became a lightning rod for the negative attributes of possible male behaviour that could not be borne by the middle class bourgeois male body as it came to be constructed late in the nineteenth century. It must not be forgotten that Wilde's subversive use of language played an important role in his castigation whereby his employment of paradox synthesized a perversion of language with a perversion of manliness.[14] Exemplary of this many-tiered ontological crisis, Cohen cites a review of Max Nordau's controversial book *Degeneration,* which appeared only three weeks after Oscar Wilde's conviction in the then-popular Sunday paper, the *Weekly Sun* (15). While the *Zeitgeist* loomed large in the public imagination, Cohen claims that Nordau's work could not help but have resonated with cultural anxieties that were at their height at the time of the Wilde trials:

> Indeed, the topicality of Nordau's book was frequently made explicit in the course of the press reports on the trials, so that it became a familiar reference for the general condition of which Wilde was increasingly deemed a specific and noteworthy example. It should come as little surprise, then, that in concluding the *Weekly Sun's* front-page treatment of *Degeneration* with an unqualified affirmation of the book's "healthy" masculinity, the author appears to capitalize on these connections by implicitly juxtaposing the latter to the diseased unmanliness so recently made evident (on other front pages) by Wilde:
>
> > [It] is manly, healthy, and badly-needed protest against some of the inanities and—the word is not too strong—bestialities *which raise their brazen and brutal heads in the literature of our time*; and it is entitled, therefore, to the admiration of every honest, pure, and manly man. (my emphasis; 17)

As Cohen points out, the defect in that highly-essentialized construct called the Victorian Man, glares at us through the crack patched over with the

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14. See Gregory W. Bredbeck's "Narcissus in the Wilde: Textual Cathexis and the Historical Origins of Queer Camp," *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994) 51-74.

qualifying adjective "manly," poorly concealing that what it was to be a man could no longer be taken for granted:

> In rhetorically attempting to suture the attributes signified by the reiterative formulation "manly man" to the bodies of those men who would claim (or aspire) to possess such "manly" qualities as their own "property," the newspapers produced a way of stabilizing "proper" masculinity by defining it in opposition to another kind of masculinity which seemed to threaten it—if only by having different "properties." Nevertheless, the ambiguities contained in this oppositional construction of male "propriety" were not easily resolved, semantically or otherwise, since by the 1890s it proved impossible to sustain the unqualified affirmation of the "manly man" without simultaneously castigating those who had come to be defined as his "other(s)." (18)[15]

There were, then, new codes which had to be learnt, and manners one had to assume to avoid being marked as "a homosexual," the perverted, inverted, antonym of the "manly man." This is a pattern which is still, no doubt, familiar today as men, heterosexual and homosexual, still feel an urgent need to "pass" as straight (read: real) men.

But the unmanly man, as Cohen (re)constructs him, was in gestation long before the Wilde trials made the crisis undeniably public. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, a defining characteristic of unmanliness was any aspect of male behaviour or endeavor which resonated with a lack of productivity. In effect, any behaviour not in line with a community's aspirations could be deemed unproductive, since unsanctioned activities undermine the 'collective' goals of the imagined community, be it a nation or a race. To write 'against the grain' as Wilde or Melville did was to risk the ostracization that both men experienced to varying degrees. In the case of Melville's or Wilde's writing, however, it was more than a writing style which banished them to the margins of propriety, since there was a

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15. In Chapter 3, I will discuss "property"/"propriety" as it relates both to Jacques Derrida's play on the word, and to liberal humanist notions of identity.

powerfully subversive sexual element to their writing which fell under the scrutinizing gaze of readers and critics alike.

Sexual behaviour, of course, becomes a national asset in an imperial setting like nineteenth-century England or America since it guarantees (so goes this line of thinking) the economic and demographic hegemony of empire. It is in this context, then, that homosexual behaviour begins to mingle with the nineteenth century's pet anxiety in the West—masturbation. "Onanism," as it was then called, generated an enormous amount of public attention, since it was believed that the spilling of seed would sap a man's vital energy, thereby making him a poor producer of capital, demographic or financial. Etiologies for the 'disease' masturbation became extremely refined, and there was, for example, much debate in anti-masturbatory literature—medical or popular—over the exact amount of blood loss the male body incurred for each ounce of spent semen.[16] The popularity of books and pamphlets which warned against the 'scourge' cannot be understated as public concern/fascination was obsessional.[17] Hard work and exercise were strongly advocated as preventions, with strict attention paid to diet. Also ubiquitous in the literature were profiles of 'the masturbator' which cast him as: "'nervous, and suspicious, his dress often untidy or slovenly,'" having "'extravagant pretensions,'" or "'offensive egotism,'" being "'indolent,'" "'self-brooding'" or "'selfish'" and known for his lies, narcissism, deceit and "'moral insanity.'"[18] As we shall see,

16. One seminal text—pardon the pun—on masturbation was in print almost continuously from its publication in 1760 under the title *L'Onanisme, ou Dissertation physique sur les maladies produit par la masturbation* by the Swiss physican Samuel Tissot. Cohen remarks that "his famous maxim that 'the loss of one ounce of it [seminal fluid], enfeebles more than [the loss of] forty ounces of blood' was repeated popularly over the next century and a half" (45).

17. See Barker-Benfield, 1976 and Cohen, 35-68 for excellent discussions on the popularity of anti-masturbation literature.

18. Culled from Cohen, 59-63.

all of the above are suitable epithets for our consummate wanker, the confidence-man—terms which only forty years later became founding characteristics for the modern homosexual man.

Given the analogical nature of this phobia, however, a man could be marked as an "Onanist" not simply for what he did with his penis, but in the case of Oscar Wilde, he could be so branded for what he did with his pen. In a nineteenth century where bourgeois preoccupations with the generation or loss of wealth permeated culture at every level, a bourgeois reader classified literature according to an economy of thrift and balance. As G. J. Barker-Benfield has discovered,

> Words, books, sperm, money—all were construed as resources, hoarded or expended, vital to the young man's perpetually challenged energy system, and in that system's terms, exchangeable with one another. (1978, 184)

Words considered as resources had to be thriftily employed in the interests of a goal that was analogically consistent with bourgeois participation in projects of imperial or capital expansion. As wordy men, both Wilde and Melville (as we will see later) became implicated as wordy wankers, adorning the word with the colors of the harlot, debasing language in the description of the unreal. The latter became a serious indictment against the work of Melville as critics attacked him for his lack of fidelity to realism (a lovely irony, given the name of the vessel the *Fidèle*, in *The Confidence-Man*), the literary analog of the bourgeois essentialist. Paradox, irony, pun: all subvert the clean linearity of language, and all were at the heart of both Wilde's and Melville's literary practice. Pun, as we will discuss in greater depth in the next chapter, splits the monological word in two, unmooring it from its essentialized meaning. It is the slippage pointed out so effectively by the pun that necessitates such makeshifts as "manly man," an ontological stutter that is at the heart of

language and at the heart of nineteenth- (and twentieth-) century constructions of gender and sexuality. In the following chapters, I will point out how sex and text become in Melville interpenetrated in such a way that money becomes analogical with sperm, and theft of property parallel to an act of homosexual seduction.

It is the kind of slippage represented by the nineteenth-century binary "manly" versus "unmanly man" that is also at the heart of Lee Edelman's "Homographesis," an essay which embraces rather than rejects out of hand the possibilities of post-structuralist theory for gay and lesbian political practice. Edelman begins with a narrative which describes a panel he had been invited to attend in 1987 which set out to establish criteria for a distinct branch of criticism that focussed on gay and lesbian themes. Its title, "What's Gay about Gay Literature? What's Lesbian about Lesbian Literature?" frustrated Edelman because of the questions it left *unposed* about the nature of gay and lesbian identities:

> The questions, in short, demanded of us a willingness to assert and affirm a singular, recognizable, and therefore reproducible critical identity: to commodify lesbian and gay criticism by packaging it as a distinctive flavor of literary theory that might find its appropriate market share in the upscale economy of literary production. In the process these questions directed us to locate "homosexual difference" as a determinate entity rather than as an unstable differential relation, and they invited us to provide our auditors with some guidelines by which to define "the homosexual" or "homosexuality" itself. (3)

While acknowledging the role that this "determinacy" has played in the crucial advances of gays and lesbians in securing rights in the Western context, Edelman criticizes this kind of essentialism because it "participates in a heterocentric 'homophobic insistence' which valorizes the codification and registration of sexual identities," a tack Creech has invested in heavily, if we remember his stance vis-à-vis post-structuralist critiques of identity (4). Edelman remarks, furthermore, that

> Though pursuing radically different agendas, the gay advocate and the enforcer of homophobic norms both inflect the issue of gay legibility with a sense of painful urgency—an urgency that bespeaks, at least in part, their differing anxieties and differing stakes in the culture's reading of homosexuality and in its ability to read *as* homosexual any given individual. (4)

And this, of course, was the crisis that Cohen recounts in his account of the Wilde trials: there was a crucial need on the part of anxious men to recalibrate maleness by splitting it in two, the heterosexual and the homosexual—the first the original, the real, and the true; the second was the copy, the fake, the impostor. As a corollary to this bifurcation of 'man' into two, there had to be a system whereby each body could be distinguished by 'markings' which determined whether the subject was 'real' or 'counterfeit.' The project was a brilliant success, and what began as a body marked by the sin of Onan, evolved into a body marked with the sins of Sodom. Ironically, the attempt to mark and therefore marginalize the homosexual, enabled other men and, soon after, women who felt same-sex desire to learn to identify others who were similarly interpellated.

But for Edelman, legibility—articulated today in terms like "visibility"—ignores the other, more radical possibilities presented by queerness,[19] ones that resonate very strongly with the queering of identity

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19. Edelman doesn't use the term "queer." Perhaps this is because queerness as a politics has become too essentialized for him, absorbed just as "gay" or "lesbian" have become absorbed as identities. I remember my own "coming out"—yet another example of a highly mediated so-called 'personal' process—and being very conscious that I was going to take this outside word—"gay"—and apply it to myself, much as one would put a shirt against one's chest to see if it fit. Although the new appellation didn't quite fit (national identities never quite fit, we are always from 'somewhere else'), it fit better than the only other available option—"heterosexual." I made a decision to fit into that clothing, and after that point, it defined me as much as I defined it, as I took on some of the signifiers and interests of 'my' nation.

But, returning to the word "queer": of course all terms naturally 'lapse into presence,' to throw out a Derridean maxim, but I have chosen to keep the window of opportunity open a little longer on "queer," because I believe that queerness still speaks the possibility to challenge liberal humanist notions of identity. This implies, furthermore, a challenge not only to liberal humanist notions of heterosexual identity as essential and fixed, but also of gay and lesbian identity as well.

that Melville undertakes in *The Confidence-Man.* Edelman claims that "homosexuality's unnerving . . . capacity to 'pass'" has been forsaken as a part of gay and lesbian political practice; the various, indeterminately characterized confidence men of the *Fidèle* escape legibility in similar ways, eluding the detection of victims who fail to remember that appearances deceive (4). In order to be detected, Edelman tells us, "the crime [must be] written on the body" (5).

As a counterpoise to essentialist notions of hetero- and homosexual binaries, Edelman proposes the "homographesis" to explain the simultaneous effects of dissonance and assonance between what Cohen calls the manly and the unmanly man. As I mentioned briefly above, the notion of homographesis is predicated on Derrida's idea that writing in Western metaphysics is subordinate, or supplemental, to speech:

> I want to call attention [Edelman says] to the formation of a category of homosexual person whose very condition of possibility is his relation to writing or textuality, his articulation, in particular, of a "sexual" difference internal to male identity that generates the necessity of reading certain bodies as *visibly* homosexual. This inscription of "the homosexual" within a tropology that produces him in a determining relation to inscription itself is the first of the things that I intend the term "homographesis" to denote . . . . Following . . . from Derrida's post-Saussurean characterization of writing as a system of "différance" that operates without positive terms and endlessly defers the achievement of identity as self-presence, the "graphesis," the entry into writing, that "homographesis" would hope to specify is not only one in which "homosexual identity" is differentially conceptualized by a heterosexual culture as something legible written on the body, but also one in which the meaning of "homosexual identity" itself is determined through its assimilation to the position of writing within the tradition of Western metaphysics. The "writing," in other words, as which homosexuality historically is construed, names . . . the reduction of "différance" to a question of determinate difference; from the vantage point of dominant culture it names homosexuality as a secondary, sterile, parasitic form of

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Located as he is just on the other side of the moment when "the homosexual" came into being, Melville occupies a position vis-à-vis homosexual identity that mirrors my own position, in a post-modern context after the consolidation has reached its fullest expression in large parts of the Western world. Both of us stand at opposite but parallel thresholds, at odds with the dangerous essentialisms that make nation-states and divide individuals into their alloted spaces.

> social representation that stands in the same relation to heterosexual identity that writing . . . occupies in relation to speech or voice. (9-10)

The relationship of writing:speech, or homo:hetero, furthermore is analogous to the relationship between two homographs. I will use here, to help establish links between Edelman and Cohen, two men as examples here, the one heterosexual and the other homosexual. They are the same to the eye, but different because of their gender orientation. Within a gender economy which articulates itself by appealing to determinate sexual identities, the 'impostor' mimics heterosexual male identity in a manner which foregrounds the highly-constructed nature of manliness, to refer back to the example Cohen provides. So on the one hand, we have a homosexual identity that is successfully inscribed as such, legible and subject to either surveillance or nation-making, but on the other hand, we have an excess of signification, a 'drag' in signification which causes the double-take, that often uncomfortable aporetic moment when the eye is not certain—in short a moment when logocentric notions of identity are queered:

> Like writing . . . homographesis would name a double operation: one serving the ideological purposes of a conservative social order intent on codifying identities in its labor of disciplinary inscription, and the other resistant to that categorization, intent on *de*-scribing the identities that order has so oppressively *in*-scribed. That these two operations, pointing as they do in opposite directions, should inhabit a single signifier, must make for a degree of confusion, but the confusion that results when difference collapses into identity and identity unfolds into différance is . . . central to the problematic of homographesis. (10)

The Confidence-Man is full of these moments of rupture, or as Freud would call them moments when the *unheimlich*, or the "uncanny" haunt us with its ambivalent multiple inscriptions of identity. But similitude and difference cannot be separated: the double operation of the word "queer" recounts to us the simultaneous facts of queerness as illegibility, or radio static and a queerness that when read by looking awry travels to us across

the centuries, creating a feeling of community realized in a recognizing wink. I ask then that we tilt our heads to an angled expression, in order to see what I mean.

Chapter 2. "There's a Sucker Born Every Minute"

"It is the hand of the diligent which maketh rich."
- Reverend John Todd[1]

MELVILLE'S short piece, "The Lightning-Rod Man," which was first published anonymously in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in August 1854, is said by a few notable critics to be a satire of Reverend John Todd's over-zealous anti-masturbatory fervor which infected the minds of many a young man throughout the nineteenth century, if sales of his books are any indication.[2,3] Published in 1835, *The Student's Manual* went through twenty-four editions by 1854, and continued to be a bestseller until the end of the century.[4] But Todd's admonitory rhetoric against masturbation bears the markings of intimate knowledge, and his prose—purple though it may be—over-flows with penile vascularity. The hand that picks the pocket and pulls the rod is the central focus of Todd's *Manual*, and betrays a double action, warning its male auditors against the dangers of an unrestrained hand, while the hand of its author, holding a prolific pen, passes across the page leaving us with an efflorescence of masturbatory prose. Pater Todd tells us:

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1. As quoted in G. J. Barker-Benfield, Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1976), 376 n. 30.
2. Herman Melville, "The Lightening-Rod Man," *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces: 1839-1860*. Ed. Harrison Hayford, et al. Chicago: Northwestern University Press & The Newbury Library, 1987. All further citations to this short story appear parenthetically.
3. See G. J. Barker-Benfield, "The Spermatic Economy. . .," *The American Family in Social Historical Perspective* (2nd Edition), ed. Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 375 and Egbert S. Oliver, "Explanatory Notes," *Piazza Tales* (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), 238-241.
4. Barker-Benfield 1978, 375.

> You must not only read, and make books the fountain from which you draw your knowledge, but you must expect to draw from this fountain through life. What you read to-day, will soon be gone—expended, or forgotten; and the mind must be continually filled up with new streams of knowledge. Even the ocean would be dried up, were the streams to be cut off, which are constantly flowing into it. How few read enough to stock their minds! And the mind is no widow's curse, which fills with knowledge as fast as we empty it. It is the hand of the diligent which maketh rich. (qtd. in Barker-Benfield 1976, 168)

Melville catches these ironies neatly in "The Lightning-Rod Man," a short short story about a lightning rod salesman who travels the countryside during storms. Ostensibly seeking shelter from the rain, he takes advantage of his charitable hosts by preying upon their fear of the destructive potential of lightning bolts to sell his wares. The story is replete with phallic and seminal references. Soaked from the rain, his host implores the stranger to stand with him by the fire. But the hearth, he tells the host, is "by far the most dangerous part of a house" during a storm and so remains in the middle of the room, and suggests that his dry host join him in the safety of his puddle (1987, 119). The Rod man's finger-wagging admonitions have the opposite effect, however, and he responds to the stranger's evangelisms by "involuntarily" stepping closer to the heat of the "fire." Perturbed by the Rod man's tone, he "threw [him]self into the erectest, proudest posture [he] could command" demanding to know who this knave be (120). The stranger then reveals his identity as a "dealer in lightning-rods" and proceeds to seduce his client into a purchase, by showing him his "specimen-rod" while "fumbling in his pockets" for his credentials (120). Ironically, the lightning-rod man, cum anti-masturbation evangelist Todd, is in his element when soaking in the tempest's cloudy discharge. As the host (Melville?) rightly points out to the Rod/man, "Who has empowered you, you Tetzel, to peddle around your indulgences from divine ordinations?" (124). If we assume, as several critics have, that

Melville had Todd in mind in the characterization of the Rod man, this question is then a scathing indictment of Todd as a peddler of books.

Simply on the level of metonymic action, the Rod man indicates that he will (like Todd) provide protection from the "current" if the host (or auditor of Todd's words) is standing alongside the Rod man, in his puddle of wetness. The more permanent solution for the host, is the purchase of one of the Rod man's "specimens" (or Todd's books, in which case they then become phallically-figured). If we connect the terms of association bracketed above, a metaphoric reading would position Todd's books as erect phalli, and his authorial voice as permeated with the wetness perpetrated by electric discharge. Remembering that "current" in nineteenth-century masturbatory parlance indicated masculine energy, and that spermatic fluid was the vehicle of masculine energy par excellence, Todd's books become conduits for this energy, taking it through their spines and safely into the ground leaving the customer unscathed. How is it possible, given the presence of highly auto(homo)erotic tension for these "rods" to protect their owners from the dangers of discharge when the reader, let alone the author/salesman, is implicated in the whole messy business? The Rod man's sophistry provides us with the answer: Asking his guest why he chooses to remain wet, rather than heat himself by the fire, he responds that wet clothes conduct electrical current better than does the body. If struck, goes his pseudo-scientific argument, the lightning will pass through one's clothing, directly to the ground. Like the Rod man, Todd's close knowledge of the subject in hand leaves him at some apparently removed Archimedian point outside (his somatic reality), enabling him to pass on his intimate knowledge to his cherished clients. At the same time, the host/reader is not at risk when standing next to the

Rod/man, as any electrical discharge will be conducted through his tensile wetness to the ground, and out of harm's way. In this way, a reader whose proximity to prose which could incite his own discharge, is exonerated because the Rod man's copper poles/Todd's books are imbued with the power to absorb this energy. (Again, we might ask, as Melville does, how and why has Todd empowered himself with this power?) But this story's client is wise to the Rod man and sees through his convoluted logic. Unseduced, he kicks the Rod man from his house and back into the rain to peddle his indulgences elsewhere.

I start with this story as a preface to a discussion of the Missouri Bachelor and the Philosophical Intelligence Officer (henceforth referred to as the PIO) for several reasons. On the simplest level, the two narratives have masturbation and homoeroticism as subtexts. Within this subtext, though, is a complex relationship between a male author and a male reader which has a clearly erotic valence in terms of the power positions of the partners, and the seminally-suggestive nature of the energy transfers between reader and writer, or, as in the case of the Bachelor and the PIO, interlocuters. These subtextual eroticisms both take place below the proairetic level, and in the case of *The Confidence-Man*, the subtext forms its own "plot" below the surface of a plot whose hermeneutic content seems secondary. But the ease with which the host is able to rebuff the huckster's advances compared with the subtlety of the seduction/counter-seduction dynamic in *The Confidence-Man* gives credence to Daniel Hoffman's argument that Rod Man "is a preliminary sketch" for the confidence men we meet two years later.[5]

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5. Daniel Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1961), 290.

In *The Confidence-Man* itself, the de-con games reach an ejaculatory crescendo in Chapter 21 with the encounter between the Missouri bachelor and the Herb doctor and in the following chapter where the Bachelor—or "Pitch" as he calls himself, after the sticky resin that runs through trees—and the Philosophical Intelligence Officer, described as a "round-backed, baker-kneed man, in a mean five-dollar suit" (114). What follows is a highly complex rhetorical seduction, and at a subtextual level, erotic seduction of the gruff, stalwart Bachelor, Pitch by the obsequious, slouching PIO. In Chapter 21, Pitch warns the old miser against his confidence in the doctor's herbs as a palliative to his illnesses. The miser returns that the herbs are natural, and therefore good, while Pitch counters by saying that deadly-nightshade, too, is an herb, but one that kills. Pitch's cynicism is born out of his frontier experience which has seen him lose his land to the elements. This loss is spoken of in terms which figure nature as evil in a manner which, as we will soon see, parallels an equally 'natural' auto- or homoerotic desire:

> "*I* have confidence in nature? *I*? I say again there is nothing I am more suspicious of. I once lost ten thousand dollars by nature. Nature embezzled that amount from me; absconded with ten thousand dollars' worth of my property; a plantation on this stream, swept clean away by one of those sudden shiftings of the *banks* in a freshet; ten thousand dollars' worth of alluvion thrown broad off upon the waters." (excepting the personal pronouns, emphasis mine; 108)

Nature is posited as a thief who steals a man's property, or capital, as Pitch likes to frame the matter. This "sudden shift" in the "banks" (or markets, under democratic capitalism) is 'natural,' but certainly not without risk of loss. A "freshet," as defined by the *OED* is defined as "a rush of fresh water flowing into the sea" often after "heavy rain." The laws of economics are placed on the same register with the laws of nature, consistent with the social Darwinist world view which justified capitalism and imperialism by recourse to their apparently "natural"—and in other

words, essential—antecedents. Nature to Pitch is a dangerous power which must be "barred" or "bolted out," in other words, kept cleanly distinct from culture, which in his metaphor, is represented by the domestic metaphor of the home whose windows are vulnerable to the "hailstones" which have smashed his windows (109). Yet because his rhetoric is infused with capitalist metaphors, he implicates nature in culture, making the clean distinctions he wants so desperately to make impossible to sustain. Pitch is even wise to the double nature of the gift—*le don*, to invoke Derrida's gift-giving economy from "Plato's Pharmakon."[6] Although he wins this particular round, the encounter with the PIO in Chapter 22 brings the problematic logocentricity of Pitch's inside/outside ontology to crisis.

The string of chance encounters continues with the chance encounter between the PIO and the Missouri Bachelor. Between the two, the contrast is stark: the slinking, deprecatory and feminized functionary from what might seem to be an employment agency for the placement of boys and men, with the aggressively masculine frontiersman Pitch. But as I would like to point out, it is his aggressive masculinity that gives him away,

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6. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981). I will be discussing the gifts the confidence men give to their victims later on. But consider, if only as a foreshadowing movement, the following moment in this context:

> "... I present you with this box; my venerable friend here has a similar one; but to you, a free gift, sir. Through her regularly-authorized agents, of whom I happen to be one, Nature delights in benefiting those who most abuse her. Pray, take it."
>
> "Away with it! Don't hold it so near. Ten to one there is a torpedo in it. Such things have been. Editors been killed that way. Take it further off, I say." (109)

Pitch does not believe the PIO when he tells us that despite the proximity of contagion, of vice, that we are immune. But as the editors know, we are not immune, when we read, the words travel inside us, like serum, and this *pharmakon* will make us delirious with fear, or giddy with delight. How we handle this intrusion depends, of course, on how we feel about inhabiting so indeterminate a space.

implicating him in an unmanliness he impetuously refuses, usually by stamping his gun on the deck of the boat, or clicking its trigger! With the PIO, we are again in the realm of connotation as the feminized-version of the PIO is constructed on the semic level of association and agrammatical linkages between signifiers. The PIO's non-erect, "round-backed" posture is our first clue that he is an "unmanly man," suggestive of the decayed physiology of the masturbator. He bears a "canine deprecation" slinking "obliquely behind" (114). On a rhetorical level as well, the PIO is suspect because his method of argument is analogical, not logical. "You are a punster," Pitch tells the PIO, in a manner that suggests this to be an indictment, rather than an idle observation (124). As we will discuss later, the pun has not always been a respectable form of language and the PIO, then, becomes indicted as the user of debased, vulgar language, one Pitch believes is distinct from the straightforward linearity of 'rational' discourse. What's more, the PIO comes, therefore, to occupy the same plane as Wilde and Melville, whose homotextual writing subverted bourgeois norms. The PIO, in contrast to Pitch, is circular, snakey, feminine and his behaviour "plaintive" or whining (119). His first attempt to seduce Pitch into having faith in the goodness of his agency's boys, furthermore, is characterized as "his maiden essay," further placing him on a 'feminine' register (119). Consistent with nineteenth-century ideas relating to the relationship between the mind and the body, the PIO's "oblique" bodily movement mirror his "oblique" rhetorical manoeuvres which rely on the poetic force of analogy to move the initially rigid Pitch. But Pitch *is* moved, and so much so that he is moved to ontological crisis and a parallel sexual climax by the end of the chapter.

I chose to focus on this encounter because it seems to represent most richly many of the interconnected thematic webs I have been able to discern in the novel. In some respects this is an arbitrary move, but a not altogether unfruitful one, as this particular ground can be worked in ways that provide a significant vantage point on the rest of the novel—a vantage point that, to my knowledge, has not yet been attempted. It is always surprising how few critics have taken on the (homo)sexual themes in Melville's work. Even a recent publication by the late Phillip Young, which treats Melville's deeply masturbatory short stories, like "The Lightning-Rod Man," "Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!" and "I and My Chimney" fails to even mention the word "masturbation" in his discussion. Instead, Young's interesting discussion is marred by his polite ellipsis of the words themselves, thereby ceding to the legislation of discussion around issues of sexuality. Is it for fear that critics have not touched *The Confidence-Man,* with its abundance of homoerotic subtextual material and masturbatory prose? Whatever the case, I think it very important that these issues be discussed as they relate to Melville, as critics thus far have largely ignored the full extent to which Melville was radically subversive to middle-class bourgeois American values. And *The Confidence-Man* is an act of subversion par excellence, placing dynamite under beloved middle class icons like fictional realism, and compulsory reproductive heterosexuality. The novel is a *tour de force* celebration of the unreal and the queer, of reverie and masturbation.

It was not until reading John Blair's chapter on *The Confidence-Man* that I realized the more banal reading of the PIO as simply a representative

from an employment agency which provides clients with workers.[7] Up until that time, the "Philosophical Intelligence Officer" had seemed wonderfully obscure. Under the influence of Jeffrey Weeks's historical essay on nineteenth-century male prostitution in England, the PIO seemed to be more of a pimp than an employment officer of the 'legitimate' sort.[8] But, given the close alliances between sexuality, economic activity and prohibition, the two options are not at all irreconcilable. Prostitution is employment, and homosexual relations in the nineteenth century were overwhelmingly imbricated in an economy of pecuniary exchange, something I choose to assume Melville knew, given his wide-ranging experiences on the sea and abroad, particularly in London. Two instances come to mind in this regard. In *Redburn*, for example, we witness the hero's pal, Harry Bolton, come back "rather flushed"—a word used repeatedly to signal a homo/autoerotic subtext, as Creech convincingly argues—from a mysterious trip to one of the back rooms of the men's club he and Redburn visit.[9] A little later, Bolton reveals to Redburn that he has mysteriously come up with the funds needed to continue their trip, which Creech alleges he procured in exhange for sex with another man (224). Creech corroborates my suspicion that "Aladdin's Palace," the men's club they visit in Chapter 46, "A Mysterious Night in London," is significantly coded enough to be convincingly read as a male brothel or at least a site where men desiring other men could gather (Melville, 221; Creech, 100-8).

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7. See John G. Blair, *The Confidence Man in Modern Fiction: A Rogue's Gallery with Six Portraits* (London: Vision Press, 1979), 40.

8. See Jeffrey Weeks, "Inverts, Perverts, and Mary-Annes: Male Prostitution and the Regulation of Homosexuality in England in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries." *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past.* Ed. Martin Duberman, et al. (New York: Meridian Books, 1990), pp. 195-210.

9. Creech, 81; Melville, 221 and 224.

Jeffrey Weeks lends credence to this argument in his descriptions of nineteenth-century "Molly houses" in London which were also known as "markets" where one could procure "trade"—note how infused these (business) relationships are with mercantile parlance (202). One such meeting place was at 19, Cleveland Street, becoming so well known as a bawdy house that the story of its infamy broke in 1884 after a police raid, resulting a year later in the famous Labouchère Amendment which officially recognized the existence of a developed homosexual underground by enacting legislation to secure its prohibition in England. Narrating the historical background to the Cleveland Street scandal of the early 1880's, Weeks states that,

> Even in larger European cities. . . the "boy-houses" were rare, though numerous places of rendezvous existed under the guise of literary clubs and athletic societies. . . . Labouchère [a driving force behind the amendment] claimed in 1889 to have in his possession "a short list of house, some in fashionable parts of the city". . . .
>
> Such establishments had dozens of clients. Soldiers, MPs, peers, members of the National Liberal Club, a tailor, and a banker all frequented 19 Cleveland Street, for example. . . . One customer tells how he met one Guard several times: ". . . and then he said, well do you want anybody else . . . I can bring them along . . . So I said . . . have you got one with ginger hair . . . And then of course (he) procured me—oh—dozens. Dozens of them." (208)

Notice the specificity with which a man, given his class privilege, could select the "trade" of his choice, not unlike the specificity of the boy Pitch desires for his farm. Likewise, the PIO—in the service of an equally privileged clientele—can secure the boy of his clients' likings. Pitch seems wise to the nature of the PIO's business in the following exchange:

> "How did you come to dream that I wanted anything in your line, eh?"
>
> "Oh, respected sir . . . oh, sir, from long experience, *one glance* tells me the gentleman who is in need of our humble services."
>
> "But suppose I did want a boy . . . how could your absurd office help me?—Philosophical Intelligence Office?"
>
> "Yes, respected sir, an office founded on strictly philosophical and physio--"
>
> "Look you . . . how, by philosophy or physiology either, make good boys to order? . . . . Tell me, how put the requisite assortment of good qualities into a boy, as the assorted mince into the pie?" (italics mine; 114)

And a little further on, in a wink to the PIO, and to the alert reader, Pitch tells him, "Pray, no doubt you could accommodate me with a bosom-friend too, couldn't you?" (116) Bearing in mind that a "bosom-friend" in a nineteenth-century context had homoerotic connotations (I am thinking here of Whitman), Pitch is tentatively identifying the PIO as a pimp operating under the cover of an employment agency that is guided by "principles wholly new" (115). But sex between men for money is not a theme unique to *The Confidence-Man.* As Eve Sedgwick points out in her discussion of *Billy Budd,* the invitation to mutiny that Claggart and Co. so seductively proffer to the innocent and stuttering Billy is also a sexual invitation whereby it is somewhat coercively suggested that he have sex with the "gang" in exchange for two twinkling coins:[10]

> In his retired nook the stranger soon joined Billy Budd. There was no moon as yet; a haze obscured the starlight. He could not distinctly see the stranger's face. Yet from something in the outline and carriage, Billy took him, and correctly, for one of the afterguard.
>
> "Hist! Billy," said the man, in the same quick cautionary whisper as before. "You were impressed, weren't you? Well, so was I"; and he paused, as to mark the effect. But Billy, not knowing exactly what to make of this, said nothing. Then the other: "We are not the only impressed one, Billy. There's a gang of us.— Couldn't you— help— at a pinch?"
>
> "What do you mean?" demanded Billy, here thoroughly shaking off his drowse.
>
> "Hist, hist!" the hurried whisper now growing husky. "See here," and the man held up two small objects faintly twinkling in the night-light; "see, they are yours, Billy, if you'll only—" (35)

Ostensibly, they are offering Billy a bribe to join in on their mutiny on the *Bellipotent,* and the question (for both Billy and the reader) is left

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10. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 101:

> The particular form of the open secret on the *Bellipotent* is the potential among its men for mutiny. Not an alternative to the plot of male-male desire and prohibition in *Billy Budd,* the mutiny plot is the form it takes at the (inseparable) level of the collective. The early evocations of mutiny in the novella suggest that the difficulty of learning about it is like the difficulty of learning about such scandalous secrets as proscribed sexuality. Both are euphemized as "aught amiss." . . . [T]he terms in which mutiny can be described must be confined to references that evoke recognizant knowledge in those who already possess it without igniting it in those who may not . . . (101)

tantalizingly dangling. But like the case of the PIO officer, who can be seen as a *kind* of employment agent (subgenus: *pimp*), is illicit desire in the context of a the bellicose potency of this warship not, itself, a *kind* of mutiny (subgenus: *queer*)? Yes, Billy is hanged for murder, but he is also an admired erotic object who is ritually sacrificed to save the ship from the contagion of male-male desire that he both elicits and represents.[11] This is not to say that homosexual desire was always subject to censure, because it is widely known that sailing and sodomy were familiar bedfellows.[12] In homoerotic relationships on board American sailing ships in the nineteenth century, it was common practice for older men to give gifts or money to their younger partners. In his account of life aboard the American sailing ship *Plymouth,* B. R. Burg reports that

> Sexual associations on board the *Plymouth* flourished as formalized relationships between either men and boys or older and younger boys. The junior partners in these pairings were called "chickens," and the arrangement was know as "chickenship." . . . Not only did mentors frequently ply their boys with gifts and cash, but they customarily provided them with treats to vary the monotonous shipboard fare. (79)

This older-younger dynamic becomes central to a queer analysis of the encounter between the PIO and Pitch for two reasons: firstly, the

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11. Note especially Captain Vere's paternal "This-is-going-to-hurt-me-more-than-it's going-to-hurt-you" speech to his men:

> "But let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool. Ashore in a criminal case, will an upright judge allow himself off the bench to be waylaid by some tender kinswoman of the accused seeking to touch him with her tearful plea? Well, the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must here be ruled out." (60)

12. Berg's account of the mid-nineteeth-century diaries of the young sailor Philip C. Van Buskirk is unambiguous on this count:

> Van Buskirk knew precisely what occurred on board the *Plymouth*, but his upbringing prevented him from accepting it with the aplomb that others did [Van Buskirk came from an avowedly middle-class family]. He regularly lodged complaints in his diary about the high level of mutual masturbation on board ship. Of the six white boys on the *Plymouth*, he grumbled in an early diary entry, all but one had a reputation tarnished by immorality. He later expanded his estimate of immorality to include the entire United States Navy. Of all the boys he met during his military career, he claimed that only one did not engage in sex with shipmates. (80-1)

Bachelor—an older man—is in the market for a boy, and secondly, a quasi-philosophical discussion of the possibility of making a distinction between boys and men (the bad and the good) takes up most of the chapter. I would like, now, to focus our attentions on an extended analysis of both the homo- or autoerotically-marked tropes which stir beneath the sheets of this section.

"My name is Pitch"

The tip-offs come early enough for the reader to become suspicious—a wise stance for the reader who has possibly been a victim of Melville's con games for the first half of the book. Early in the conversation which begins before we are privileged to witness its inception, the PIO is expounding the philosophical foundations upon which his "agency" has been founded, after which Pitch declares in no uncertain terms,

> "To the devil with your principles! Bad sign when a man begins to talk of his principles. Hold, come back, sir; back here, back, sir, back! I tell you no more boys for me. Nay, I'm a Mede and Persian. In my old home in the woods I'm pestered enough with squirrels, weasels, chipmunks, skunks. I want no more wild vermin to spoil my temper and waste my substance. Don't talk of boys; enough of your boys; a plague of your boys; chilblains on your boys! (115)

The force with which he delivers his rebuke would lead us to believe that Pitch speaks "in no uncertain terms," yet like his later claim—"Yes, sir, yes. My name is Pitch; I stick to what I say"—we know that his terms are far from certain (117). On the face of it, Pitch has faith in an unproblematized relationship between his name *qua* signifier and the quality of stickiness of his essential being. In the formula above, "Pitch" (the person and the substance) sticks to the words he/it utters. Aphoristically stated, "he is true to his word," or, similarly, "his word is his bond." Pitch's declared faith in the what amounts to the singularity of meaning—that what he says = what he means—is undermined by an ambivalence

which intrudes into even the short passage above. The scene can be translated into a middle-class moment thusly: You are walking down the street. You are accosted by a disreputable-looking street vendor. At first you listen, but quickly you reject the vendor's offer with a stern rebuke which begins to have its effect: the vendor moves away from the source of the invective, and you are free to go on your way. But in the above-quoted scene, Pitch does not take advantage of the threatened withdrawal of the 'vendor'. Upon the inferred withdrawal of the PIO, Pitch calls the man back, knowing full well, I must assume, that our vendor will keep on vending. This creates the following problem: how are we, then, to interpret Pitch's actions and his character if his performative utterance "I am what I say; I say what I mean." is untrue? Why, in more general but parallel terms, does Pitch express interest in procuring another boy when it has been proven over "a course of five and thirty boys" that all boys are "rascals" (117;118)? Sadly for Pitch, his desire for self-presence (I am what I say) collapses under the weight of the trace which leaks in like sea-water through the planks of his boat, despite his vociferous attempts to bar them from intrusion. In his desire for coherency, incoherency reveals itself to Pitch on the level of self and "Other." Not only do the words of others fail to correspond with interior, inaccessible motivations, but his own words—which he considers to be selfsame with his identity—are "Othered" as the meaning of his utterances becomes multiple. Pitch's performed insistence against having anything more to do with boys, moreover, is concurrent with a visible ambivalence to them; but more importantly, to allude to a point I would like to explore in some depth, his declarations about boys are in conflict at a rhetorical, or tropological level with his

homoerotic attraction to and complicity with the "rascalian" nature of boyness.

". . . waste my substance."

At issue for Pitch on a most basic level is the untrustworthy nature of the boys he hires to work on his farm. His "experience" with thirty-five such boys enables him to make the universal claim that "all are rascals" (117; 118). His solution to the problem is to automate:

> "Look you, as I told that cousin-german of yours, the herb-doctor, I'm now on the road to get me made some sort of machine to do *my* work. Machines for me. My cider-mill—does that ever steal my cider? My mowing-machine—does that ever lay a-bed mornings? My corn-husker—all faithfully attend to their business." (italics mine; 116)

The over-riding concerns here are economy and property. Boys who don't perform their jobs well, waste Pitch's "substance" in financial terms, while the boys who take his property, *steal* his substance. Harking back to the passage quoted earlier, we notice that nature was represented as embezzling Pitch of his land, this loss calculated in terms of dollar value. If all losses are calculated in financial terms, and "wasted substance" is meant (by Pitch) as a reference to property, then what are we to do with this chain of signification which leads us into a field that is highly charged with sexual metaphors? If we remember our discussion from Chapter 1 which charted (via Cohen) the relationship between the growth of capitalism and an increasing vigilance over the body in a nineteenth-century context, the confluence of these tropological chains should not be surprising. What is surprising, however, is how well-designed this sub-proairetic code is,

mapped as it is with startling clarity, once one becomes sensitive to the subtlety of its language.[13]

By putting pecuniary loss in terms of wasted substance, Melville is invoking the nineteenth-century discourse to which both fiscal and somatic economy belong. If this is so, then, not only can the seminal valence of this phrase not be discounted, but—more than that—we must follow this string of signification where it takes us.

To proceed: Pitch is recounting his hard times finding good help, when he tells the PIO about an especially rapscallion "Lascar boy from Bombay" who he terms a "Thug!" because he "found him sucking the embryo life from [his] spring eggs" (117). The fact that he calls him a thief has, I believe, profound significance which I will consider in Chapter 3 in a discussion of thievery, Genet and subversion, but for now let us concentrate on the "substance" the boy apparently "sucks" from Pitch. As

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13. In one of his brilliant authorial intrusions into the text, teasingly subtitled "Worth the consideration of those to whom it may prove worth considering," Melville launches an attack on Western metaphysics startling for its prescience in a pre-Derridean frame. Part anti-realist assault, part attack on the nineteenth-century's religious faith in rationalism, Melville is writing against a tide of scientific discourse which sought (seeks, yet still!) "the revelation of human nature on fixed principles" (71).

> . . . after poring over the best novels professing to portray human nature, the studious youth will still run the risk of being too often at fault upon actually entering the world; whereas, had he been furnished with a true delineation, it ought to fare with him something as with a stranger entering, map in hand, Boston town; the streets may be very crooked, he may often pause; but, thanks to his true map, he does not hopelessly lose his way. (70)

Clue to the novel? Yes, but beware to those who expect the crooked streets to follow the teleologies of realist/normative principles. Yet, there is a way in which the novel's apparent indeterminacy or agrammaticality on one level bears within it a comprehensible grammar that resides at different levels other than the one a realist reader expects -- likewise in my reading and (re)construction of the novel's sexual tropes whose "crooked" nature has been relegated to a level below that of bourgeois heterotextual legibility. I am not suggesting that this queer reading provides a *key* to what is *essentially* a queer text, but that the homo/autoeroticism of this text is marked in such as way as to obfuscate and confuse those readers who do not understand its particular grammar. After all, a pink triangle is just a pink triangle, just as a purple light outside the men's club in *Redburn* is just a purple light. Right?

the egg stands out as a potent metaphor for reproductivity, the boy is stealing potential capital from Pitch in the form of livestock. But it is not quite so simple. Imbricated in the nineteenth-century hysteria over masturbation, we find a male body that had become increasingly marked in terms of class, race, nationality, and towards the end of the century, unmanliness, which was the unhealthy inversion of the (re)productive, middle class, white male bourgeois body.[14] Given the links between state-governance, imperialist/capitalist expansion, and individual surveillance over one's own body, focusing as it did on the wasting of imperial seed, the sucking of (re)productive potential out of Pitch (I am what I own) has an added valence which implies at the tropological level (the one that ultimately moves our devout rationalist Pitch) that Pitch's boys are both masturbating themselves and their employer in a perverse realignment of bourgeois hierarchies at several important levels. Not only is this a gender-fuck, but it is also a class-fuck as well, as man merges with boy and master fades into slave ("boy").

I have argued for a kind of coherency beneath what I might seem to be claiming as a superficial indeterminacy that is easily decoded given the *correct* formula. But at the level of the homotextual, it is impossible to tell one body from another in the dark ambiguities of the crooked streets Melville has laid out for his readers. Given the proximity of *"head/state/master/father":"penis/subjects/slave/family,"* the relationship between *"Pitch":"labour (his body's or his hand's)/(farm)hand/boy"* makes a simple distinction between one character/self and an other impossible to make. In the relationship between employer and employee, the former

14. This ugly configuration is agonizingly familiar over a century later.

owns the labor of the latter—it is his property[15], and to make my direction here more clear, the "hand's" labour is Pitch's own labour, and it is then Pitch's own hand, proper to himself, that is wasting his substance.[16] Alternately, the hand can be seen as acting autonomously, out of the purview the master's gaze, unknown to him. But Pitch does *see*, however obliquely, what these boys are up to, and this kind of sight is best characterized as "unacknowledged conviction" or, a recognition (of something) that is unseen or unsaid, but nevertheless there, acting in the absence of volition or direct awareness, much in the same way that the hand acts independent of the will of its master (123). Pitch's multiplicity, or the conscious and unconscious structure of his utterances, puts him in a position of only partial self-control and self-awareness. During their debate, this multiplicity figures importantly throughout, but one example shall serve as a wedge for the others: "'Very philosophical again,' was the contemptuous reply [to a point scored by the PIO]—the *outward contempt*, perhaps, proportioned to the *inward misgiving*" (emphasis mine, 123). The realm of the outward is what we get from Pitch on the literal level of his simplest speech. His words, he claims, are selfsame with his identity, leaving no room for ambiguity or unconscious desires that would contradict his conscious ones, manifest also as words. But here, what is on the

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15. The addition of an "or hers" at this point seems ridiculous given the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of these formulations.

16. I refer here Derrida's use of *propre* as it relates to a deconstruction of the borderlines between two terms and their inter-relatedness in a circular economy of *différance* -- "economy" coming from the Greek *oiko-nomia,* "the law of the house/the proper". The proper, the correct, the possessive (as in "*mon propre stylo*" ["my own pen"], and the clean (in the sense of *propre* meaning also 'clean' in the French) all become tainted by the dirt ("blemish" [123]) and otherness of the drift in signification brought on by the transgressions of *différance.* It is these unclean distinctions -- between nature and civilization, inside and outside, rascal boys and non-rascal men -- that Pitch panics to cover up throughout.

outside is in clear contradiction with the inside, revealing the very linguistic/ontological aporia he tries to repress. Anger toward the PIO, then, can be re-read to be *not* a reaction against a claim he feels is unfair or untrue, but, rather as a defense against the dangerous truth that Pitch recognizes at a level below his conscious utterances. This comes across very clearly in Pitch's figural violence against the body—more particularly, against the mature penis which is capable of inducing ecstasy with the help of the hand, figured dually as both manual appendage and manual labour. In a moment of brilliant insight, Pitch says to the PIO, ". . . sir, now that it occurs to me, your talk, the whole of it, is but a wet sheet and a flowing sea, and an idle wind that follows fast, offering a striking contrast to my own discourse." (120)[17] It is at this point that the seduction-in-progress takes on a decidedly sexual valence. A dexterous (or sinister) act of fleecing, Pitch's pockets are being successfully picked of the substance he values most highly—his money/sperm—because of the gap between conscious and less-than-conscious level of cognition. As the debate progresses, Pitch occasionally awakens to what is going on, and spits out an invective remark to the PIO. He responds in one instance by saying "Sir, if passion is to invade, surely science must evacuate. May I proceed?" (121) A highly ironic comment, this one, as the PIO's discourse is far from being a scientific study of boys. Passion is exactly what the PIO is looking for; this is how he is able to con Pitch into parting with his substance in exchange for yet another "rascal." With Pitch's grudging consent, the PIO does, indeed, proceed with his speech on the development

17. "Wet sheet" : involuntary, nocturnal emission
"idle wind" : idle talk, the mark of the wanker.
"words" : white ink, invisible but 'present'

of boys into men. The development of the boy is framed in decidedly penile terms, proceeding in size from small/flaccid to large/erect:

> "The idea, you see, respected sir, is there; but, as yet, wants filling out. In a word, respected sir, the man-child is at present but little, every way; I don't pretend to deny it; but, then, he *promises* well, does he not? Yes, promises very well indeed, I may say. . . . But to advance one step further," extending his thread-bare leg, as he drew a pace nearer, "we must now drop the figure of the rag-paper cartoon, and borrow one [an analogy]—to use presently, when wanted—from the horticultural kingdom. Some bud, lily-bud, if you please. Now, such points as the new-born man-child has—as yet not all that could be desired, I am free to confess—still, such as they are, and palpable as those of an adult. But we stop not here," taking another step. "The man-child not only possesses these present points, small though they are, but, likewise—now our horticultural image comes into play—like the bud of the lily, he contains concealed rudiments of others; that is, points at present invisible, with beauties at present dormant." (121)[18]

In yet another moment of panic, Pitch responds to this teasingly suggestive language with an abrupt "Cut it short, cut it short," at a point in the PIO's masturbatory incantation when he cannot turn back, Pitch having given passive consent to this course of events (121). The PIO, as polite as the Lascar boy who sucked his eggs, responds:

> "Respected sir . . . when deploying into the field of discourse the vanguard of an important argument, much more in evolving of the grand forces of a new philosophy of boys, as I may say, surely you will kindly allow scope adequate to the movement in hand, small and humble in its way as that movement may be. Is it worth my while to go on, respected sir?" (122)[19]

Pitch's ambivalence continues as the cycle of consent and protest continues, the latter invoked at a point when the PIO's rhetoric has had an especially marked effect on Pitch. The "small and humble" movements of

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18. "lily-bud": Billy Budd. Billy's young, beautiful body is figured phallically as he hangs like a "Pendant pearl from the yardarm-end" (78). Although it is the "yard-arm" (itself archaic mariners slang for "penis") that is denominated most clearly as penis in the poem at the end of Billy Budd, the title-character's ritually-sacrificed body is also represented as turgidly phallic, its power transferred at the moment of death into Captain Vere who is described at this point as standing "erectly rigid as a musket" (71).

19. Melville's insistent repetition of "respected sir" in the PIO's speech mirrors the story Pitch tells him about an especially notorious boy he had whose politeness grew in direct proportion to the audacity of his deceptions.

the PIO's hand/tongue continue until his descriptions of the ideal boy send Pitch into a fit of passionate outburst:

> "Yes, yes, yes," excitedly cried the bachelor, as the light of this new illustration broke in, "yes, yes, and now that I think of it, how often I've sadly watched my Indian corn in May, wondering whether such sickly, half-eaten sprouts, could ever thrive up into the stiff, stately spear of August." (126)

Remembering the indeterminate nature of the *propre*, the "Indian corn" can be read literally, as a food crop that provides sustenance, or metaphorically in one of two ways: as one of Pitch's boys, whose labour is proper to him, an extension of himself, or as a phallic extension of himself, a partly disembodied Other, which he can watch as it moves from flaccidity in May to the stateliness of a "glorious guerdon" in August (126). Only a few pages earlier, Pitch is ambivalent about allowing 'things' to get to this point of no return. Parallel to his earlier command to "cut it short," Pitch recommends that the PIO's oft-stated "noble quality" be "mow[n] down as soon as it shoots" (122). Notice here that the PIO is permitted room for further rhetorical advances since Pitch allows the "noble quality" to "shoot" just as he allows the PIO enough time bring Pitch to abandon himself to his interlocutor's dexterous tongue.

The dangerous aporia between the seen and the half-seen is operative in the phrase "unrecognized conviction" that we discussed above, where what is recognized by both speaker and auditor is identified closely with what Pitch *is* at an essential level. But the fact that Pitch's scrutiny of himself has blindspots shows up in this split between the recognized which is within Pitch's ability to control, and the "unrecognized" which is almost wholly out of his control. Pitch's ambivalence to his partner's 'advance' is located precisely between the conscious and the less-than-conscious. In the in-between of this nebulous space anxiety and ecstasy are in inextricable tension with one another. Yet another example of this the (at

least) double valence of Pitch's words and actions comes in Melville's own description of Pitch as "going off . . . like a rocket," which signifies both anger and desire in one breath (116). Likewise when Pitch recounts his "having discharged, one after another, twenty-nine boys," how can we not simultaneously see both dismissal and ejaculation as operative on parallel and oft-convergent levels of this web-like text (117)?

I do not mean to say that Pitch is utterly *un*conscious of meanings that stir beneath the literal level of the discussion between him and the PIO; as I indicated earlier, Pitch's ambivalence to engaging the PIO is clear from the outset. Like his "scrutinizing" recognitions of the herb-doctor as a "queer sort of chap," or his suspicious estimation that the PIO would be capable of providing him with a "bosom-friend," Pitch has *some* insight into the unnerving ambiguities in his own heart, ones that he refuses to at first admit, much in the same way that he sternly repudiates the PIO's more insistent rhetorical advances (108; 116). To deal with this own unnerving inscrutability both within and without, he seeks to find a "hand" which has no will of its own; this is the promise held by the mechanization of his farm, which would free him from a dependence on unpredictable manual labour. The mechanized, obedient hand parallels the white-gloved hand of the unnamed man with the gold-sleeve buttons in Chapter 7. For fear of soiling his hands, he "avoided touching anything," instead allowing his black "hand"—a "negro body servant"—to act as what was intended to be an inert mediating substance between the white man and his (naturally) dirty world (36). Noting the impossibility of 'keeping one's hands clean,' Melville wryly comments: "But if, with the same undefiled-ness of consequences to himself, a gentleman could also sin by deputy, how shocking would that be!" (36). What is perhaps more shocking for Pitch

would be the failure the above line predicts for his efforts to distance himself from a naturally dirty world through his farm's mechanization. What's more, his ability to identify 'queerness' in others implicates him in a too-close knowledge of that which he suggests. Consistent with the schoolyard aphorism, "It takes one to know one," Pitch's astute estimations of the PIO reveal a complexity of character that runs counter to his oafish "My name is Pitch; I stick to what I say" (117). Well into his seduction, for example, Pitch's identification of the PIO's rhetorical style as analogical, and therefore somehow under-handed, is a selective acknowledgment, because Pitch employs analogy throughout his discussions with the PIO. Fully aware of Pitch's hard exterior in the face of a perceived threat, the PIO drops yet another bundle of tiny dynamite into Pitch's lap when he observes: "'Still, respected sir,' altering his air, 'permit me to hint that, had not the force of analogy moved you somewhat, you would hardly have offered to contemn it'" (124). Ironically, it is Pitch's defensiveness that is revealed to be the chink in his armour—or the leak in his roof, to continue the domestic metaphors Pitch employs earlier. By proceeding analogically, the PIO is able to read through Pitch's defenses with the ease of a magician passing through walls. Pitch, our rationalist wanna-be, is lulled by the PIO's circuitous, poetic manoeuvres to the point where he is (de)conned into hiring yet another right-hand man for his farm.

Talkers, punsters, wankers

Pitch makes two very interesting observations about the PIO that I would like now to examine in detail. I referred above to Pitch's objection that the PIO was employing analogy as a means of swaying Pitch and that he refers to him as a "punster" (124). His second important and related observation is the sly recognition that the PIO is a "wordy man," an attribute which places the nineteenth-century man in the realm of the uneconomical Onanist (125). In a more commendatory vein, Jonathan Culler says in a discussion of pun in Shakespeare that,

> Punning frequently seems not so much the act of a character, expressive attitude, as a structural, connecting device that delineates action or explores the world, helping [his] plays (and also the sonnets) to offer the mind a sense and an experience of an order that it does not master or comprehend. We do not know what is the relation between 'guilt' and 'gilding' [an example he uses from Macbeth], or between the straining of exertion and of filtering, but we are urged to conceive an order in which they go together. Insofar as this is the goal or achievement of art, the pun seems an exemplary agent. . . . What, then does the pun teach? I have suggested that it foregrounds an opposition that we find difficult to evade or overcome: between accident or meaningless convergence and substance or meaningful relation. We treat this opposition as a given, presuming that any instance must be one or the other. But puns, or punning, may help us to displace the opposition by experiencing something like "meaningful coincidence" or "convergence that affects meaning, convergence that adumbrated an order to be comprehended or explored. (8; 16)

From a post-structuralist perspective, the pun provides endless territory for a more than merely amusing play of signification which acknowledges at its most basic level that the drift of between signifier and signified is natural without being necessarily evil. Culler provides some amusing history of the practice from the *OED*, like Pope's grumpy comment charging "He that would pun would pick a pocket" (as qtd. in *OED*), but we also have Pope's comment, not mentioned by Culler, that the pun is "like the tongue of a jackdaw, [which] speaks twice as much by being split" (ibid.). A subgenus of the crow, the jackdaw is known for its "furtive moves" and "secretive habits" (ibid.). Also considered a pejorative attribute meaning "loquacious person," Pope's comparison creates a web of signification that

comes uncannily close to a description of the PIO. But having already generated too many very suggestive associations, I would like to spend the remainder of this chapter pulling apart the various strands of this sticky web.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the threads of power—in this case defined as a hegemony consisting of masculine, middle class, heterosexual male values—are woven through every aspect of individual and collective life. The effects of our individual socialization are felt through every stratum of our being, in much the same way that puns are able to move through doors, disregarding efforts at their containment. So, here, we have a character who is called both a "punster" and a "wordy man," two seemingly disparate and insignificant appellations. Yet, the technologies which hail the subject into being are vastly complex, working as Pitch's dreaded analogy does, bringing apparently disparate elements into close association, implicating them as co-conspirators in the creation of aberrant subjectivities, as subject to linguistic censure as they are to physical censure and incarceration. I would like to frame the PIO as "aberrant," a wanker in a culture for whom the waste of capital in whatever form is a heinous sin, a de-con man in a society of essentialist sycophants to the edicts of realism, common-sense and Truth, and a "queer" both in the sense Pitch means—eccentric, strange, outlandish—but also as expressive of homosexual desire in a culture coming to grips with the real threat of queerness to the cogency and (re)productivity of a violently insistent hetero-patriarchal bourgeois technology of power. The PIO is disease, much as any social problem is figured in pathogenic terms: "The Decay of American Values" reads this week's *Newsweek* cover. Yesterday's masturbation is today's homosexuality, is today's 'race problems' ("If only

they would go away."). A queer is a queer is a queer in whatever century, and the curvy-spine of this wordy wanker snakes through the suffocating straight-forwardness of the triple-decker novel, whose much-flaunted values—and the context in which they exist—Melville sharply criticizes.[20]

The danger of the PIO lies in his ability to "move" Pitch, against his 'better,'—i.e.: his rational, level-headed—judgment. The split tongue of the jackdaw speaks to Pitch's anger as much as it speaks to his desire. Working both ways, the PIO finds yet another sucker, on his knees,

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20. Chapter 14 is exemplary in this regard. After creating in the preceding two chapters the moustached female Goneril -- as much a snub at normative expectations as Marcel Duchamp's *L'HOOQ* -- Melville goes on to spew his understated invective at the bourgeois reader who expects "consistency":

> True, it may be urged that there is nothing a writer of fiction should more carefully see to, as there is nothing a sensible reader will more carefully look for, than that, in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved. But this, though at first blush, seeming reasonable enough, *may*, upon a closer view, prove not so much so. For how does it couple with another requirement -- equally insisted upon, *perhaps* -- that, while to all fiction is allowed some play of invention, yet, fiction based on fact should never be contradictory to it; and is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is a *rara avis*? Which being so, the distaste of readers to the contrary sort in books, can hardly arise from any sense of their untrueness. It *may* rather be from perplexity as to understanding them. . . . When the duck-billed beaver of Australia was first brought stuffed to England, the naturalists, appealing to their classifications, maintained that there was, in reality, no such creature; the bill in the specimen must needs be, in some way, artificially stuck on.
>
> But let nature, to the perplexity of the naturalists, produce her duck-billed beavers as she may, lesser authors, *some may hold*, have no business to be perplexing readers with duck-billed characters. Always, they should represent human nature not in obscurity, but transparency, which, indeed, is the practice of most novelists, and is, *perhaps, in certain cases, someway* felt to be a kind of honor rendered by them to their kind. But whether it involve honor or otherwise might be mooted, considering that, if these waters of human nature can be so readily seen through, it *may* be either that they are very pure or very shallow. (my emphasis; 70)

Have we not here a Melville whose obsequious politeness mirrors that of the rascal who stole Pitch's precious spring albumin, or the PIO who punned him into the purchase of a boy? Politeness does indeed seems proportional to the level of insubordination. As a "lesser author," we might wonder whether or not Melville is perhaps also a platypus, like his freakish creations. In a culture whose categorizing apparatus has no place for his "grotesque," "rambling," "indigestible," perversion of the realist form, or for the perverse content therein, the freakish animal, the unimaginable creation, the "aberration" is a trope for the marginalized outcast and dissident.

pulling the substance from his penis and the penises of his boys, that he has discharged one after another like cannons in a salute—or Melvillian wink—to 'brotherly love.'

Chapter 3. Reverie & Robbery

"Writing is dangerous. . ." - Jacques Derrida[1]

"Thus the name for Genet's chosen crime, theft, le vol, *the crime against property, departs constantly from its "proper" sense to become the flight of the word,* le vol*: as words become unstuck* (décollés) *from their proper sense, they take off upon a trajectory of deterritorialization in which meaning oscillates in perpetual ambivalence. Ambivalence is the constant semantic and moral characteristic of Genet's writing, becoming a scandalous gesture which confuses identities and collapses distances, between cop and criminal, palace and prison, with gay abandon."*

- David Lloyd[2]

"But where was slipped in the entering wedge?" - Melville[3]

DANGER takes on various shapes and disguises on board the *Fidèle*. In the last chapter, I argued that danger appears in the form of the Philosophical Intelligence Officer, unseating—or, to be more specific, unmanning—Pitch's linear rigidity. Elsewhere danger takes on the guise of the Herb-Doctor, and the Merchant, amongst others, but in the dark half to an unlight masquerade, we are presented with the Cosmopolitan, who faithfully stays with the reader until the novel's mysterious fade into darkness. But the loci of danger in *The Confidence-Man* are multiple, and I would like to focus on the multiple nature of danger as it is presented to the "victims" the *Fidèle* leaves in its wake. Any exploration of multiplicity in a text (especially one that is written by such a multiple man as Melville) is fraught with difficulty for both reader and

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1. Jacques Derrida, ". . . That Dangerous Supplement . . .", *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 144.
2. David Lloyd, "Genet's Genealogy: European Minorities and the Ends of the Canon," *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987), 176-77.
3. 1984, 130.

writer, because the smooth trajectories of expos-itory prose are complicated and undermined as each tropological node spins out connecting fibres in all directions. Where to cut, Doctor? Where to cut?

Now, we leave the novel's mid-point for its end—the chapter ominously subtitled "The Cosmopolitan increases in seriousness"—where it is quieter, but not necessarily less complex. As the *Fidèle* heads into darkness, it becomes ever more difficult for us to make distinctions, yet from this aweful 'failure' of eyesight comes a *different* kind of vision—a dark knowledge—out of the hetero-patriarchal-capitalist line of sight that propels the steamboat to a goal that reveals itself to be, to the horror of some readers, unnervingly indeterminate. But this absence of light is not without its own 'plenitude'—a kind of plenitude shunned by a bourgeois American logos allergic to *différance.* What I, and possibly you, my phantasmatic audience, will now do is explore the abundance of Melville's onanistic (admittedly excessive, ironically economical) prose in a manner akin to the one Melville himself recommends in Chapter 14: the following of a road map whose streets are irregular and bent. The rebus-like roads of my imaginary city connect at nodes around which this discussion will now wind and circulate. I refer to "multiplicity" and "webs" as though they were antitheses to the phallogocentric teleologies (and resultant textualities) which come to define American bourgeois middle-class patriarchal values. The contrast I am attempting to set up both here and throughout is not unlike the relationship between Roland Barthes notion of *plaisir* and *jouissance,* somewhat feebly translated as pleasure and bliss.[4] I choose to

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4. See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975). The feebleness of the translation is no fault of the translator, of course; it is a natural feebleness, that is more productively called something with less of a sickly connotation, since this same sickness of language is a gift which provides us with metaphor in all its double pleasure and duplicity. We do, however,

frame this chapter as my own increase in seriousness, a plunge into the dense tropological webs that come into crisis in the novel's last chapter.

". . . rippling off with ever diminishing distinctness . . ."

It is night, and we are presented with the image of a lamp above a white marble table whose light falls away in ever dimmer ripples as it reaches the edges of the steamer's only lit cabin. We are also presented with "a clean, comely, old man" who seems happy, reading a bible at the table under the brightest of the lamp's light. In comes the Cosmopolitan, after his encounter with the cynical barber whose mistrust of humankind has been unequivocally (until a better con man comes along) reconfirmed. The Cosmopolitan has come from the barber with a question that he will ask the happy, faithful old man whose knowledge of the word of god will most certainly provide our noble Charlie with an answer . . .

But we must first go back a few steps to the barbershop to the 'germ' out of which grew the Cosmopolitan's question to the old man. In defense of his mistrust of the Cosmopolitan, the barber quotes a passage from the

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miss the associations *jouissance* has in the French with the verb *"jouer"* which means to play. Additionally, *jouissance* also means "to come." Barthes applies these binary but not mutually exclusive terms to the relationship of the reader to the text. "The text of pleasure offers confirmation of the readers knowledge, beliefs and expectations; the text of bliss brings loss, rupture and discomfort." (*Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Terms*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk [Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993], 607). More specifically, Barthes says the following:

> Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the readers historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his [or her] tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his [or her] relation with language. (14)

The critical reception of Melville's work certainly attests to the opening up of such spaces of cultural anxiety over the site where reader and text converge, clash, come. Is not Pitch our best example of the straight, forward American man who becomes bent by the force of rupture/rapture provided by the "freshet" of *jouissance*?

christian bible that the former does not recognize. He tells him: ". . . I recalled what the son of Sirach says in the True Book: 'An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips;' and so I did what the son of Sirach advises in such cases: 'I believed not his many words'" (236). Once in the cabin with the old man, the Cosmopolitan sits down across from him, and is given the bible after the old man has apparently finished with it. He begins poring over the section quoted by the barber, and then tells the old man that he has "a disturbing doubt" which the Cosmopolitan asks him to help resolve—given what seems to be his strong faith and vast knowledge (242). To his initial query, the old man answers as consolation that doubts are not resolvable by man, after which the Cosmopolitan goes on to explain the nature of his doubt, quoting more from the Book of Sirach which he has just read:

> "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." (242)

Like the sleeping man who muses from slumber "Who's that describing the confidence-man?" we too, wary of a stranger's approach by the novel's end, recognize the smiling face of the jackdaw jester or wordy wanker. But is this confidence-man of Sirach's also not Jesus Christ, whose beatific smile now holds a double promise to those who believe his words? What is this poison the Cosmopolitan proffers? But—as we are soon told—this crisis is 'real' only if we admit Sirach's words as holy writ, which the old man claims they are not. Let me quote this crux moment in the text, the point where the old man's established belief moves to doubt and back:

> ". . . tell me truly, did you, indeed, read from the book just now?"
> "I did," with changed air, "and gall and wormwood it is to me, a truster in man; to me, a philanthropist."

> "Why," *moved*, "you don't mean to say, that what you repeated is really down there? Man and boy, I have read the good book this seventy years, and don't remember seeing anything like that. Let me see it," rising earnestly, and going round to him.
>
> "There it is; and there—and there"—turning over the leaves, and pointing to the sentences one by one; "there—all down in the 'Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach.'"
>
> "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." (my emphasis; 243)

Notice above that the old man is "moved" by the possibility that the Cosmopolitan's citation is the word of a cynical 'God', thereby creating a profound crisis of faith—not unlike the *move*ment of Pitch by analogical means from a position of *plaisir* to one of *jouissance*. But here the disturbing moment appears as a momentary flash, a hole in space which is glimpsed, then, at the moment it is perceived (or because it is perceived?), the aporia disappears, and seamless time—the space of a faith in logos—reinaugurated. Light dims, then brightens up and the old man is whole once again (243). A brown out, gentlemen—not to worry.

Yet, our curious friend, the Cosmopolitan, still seems to harbour doubts. While he thanks the old man for "reminding [him] about the apocrypha," he proceeds to express his reservations. Explaining himself, the Cosmopolitan tells him: "Fact is, when all is bound up together, it's sometimes confusing. The uncanonical part should be bound distinct" (243). Then the Cosmopolitan goes on to recite to the old man passages he read that make the excision of the Book of Jesus Son of Sirach from canonical writings:

> "I never read anything so calculated to destroy man's confidence in man. This son of Sirach even says—I saw it but just now: 'Take heed of thy friends;' not, observe, thy seeming friends, thy hypocritical friends, thy false friends, but thy *friends*, thy real friends—that is to say, not the truest friend in the world is to be implicitly trusted. Can Rochefoucault equal that? I should not wonder if his view of human nature, like Machiavelli's, was taken from this Son of Sirach. And to

> call it wisdom—the Wisdom of the Son of Sirach! Wisdom, indeed! What an ugly thing wisdom must be! Give me the folly that dimples the cheek, say I, rather than the wisdom that curdles the blood. But no, no; it ain't wisdom; it's apocrypha, as you say, sir. For how can that be trustworthy that teaches distrust? (243)

Rhetorically speaking, the Cosmopolitan's technique here is not without effect on the old man. The Cosmopolitan first expresses mock horror at the implications of an uncanonical work which he has been told can be disregarded on that very basis. Then he splits wisdom in two, revealing an unproblematic wisdom that "dimples the cheek" and another that "curdles the blood" (243). After these words/seeds have already passed into the old man's ears, he returns with the retractive statement, "But no, no; it ain't wisdom; it's apocrypha, *as you say*, sir," the latter part emphasizing the fact that the Cosmopolitan's feigned confidence in 'the word of god' originates in the old man, who has been set up as a voice of authority in this exchange (my emphasis, 243). With dexterous economy, the Cosmopolitan's "as you say" creates a disturbing, dissonant echo with the doubt that the discussion has generated in the old man, however fleetingly. The Cosmopolitan has opened up the space of the *unheimlich*, one that is enlarged with the appearance of the boy (yet another "rascal," this one selling locks to wary passengers) precisely at a moment in the old man's speech where the seam of doubt exhibits itself.[5] The boy's appearance

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5. For Freud, the unheimlich, or "the uncanny," represents that psychological moment when the familiar returns to consciousness as the monstrous. Freud said that the *unheimlich* is "the name for everything that ought to have remained. . . secret and hidden but has come to light" (qtd. in Bhabha 1994, 10). This coming to light creates a split or rupture in the subjects perception. Post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha has appropriated the term quite fascinatingly, spatializing the term in his literal translation of the word as the "unhomely." The unheimlich for Bhabha (and for Melville it seems) is a productive site -- a view quite at odds with a Western logos, which seeks to conceal those aporetic moments of its ever-present failure. I quote him here at some length from his introductory essay to *The Location of Culture* to help clarify the valence I wish to bring to this argument.

> The negating activity is . . . the intervention of the beyond that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where presencing begins because it captures something of the

itself is uncanny, since it occurs in the near absence of cues from a/the narrator of the story; we are not privy to this information until after the old man has acknowledged his appearance. Let us focus on the relevant lines:

> ". . . To resume: taking the thing as I did, can you be surprised at my uneasiness in reading passages so charged with the spirit of distrust?"
>
> "No, sir, I am not surprised," said the old man; then added: "from what you say, I see you are something of my way of thinking—you think that to distrust the creature, is a kind of distrusting of the Creator. [▼] Well, my young friend, what is it? This is rather late for you to be about. What do you want of me?" (244)

Shortly, I will consider the events that unfold in the encounter between the boy and the two men, but first I would like to discuss the *function* of this encounter as represented by the lines addressed to the boy. This 'interruption' creates a displacing temporal shift, making the appearance of the motherless boy seem like an apparition outside of time—time in any real(ist) sense, at least. 'Real time' is reinstated upon the boy's departure when the Cosmopolitan—picking up the almost lost thread of their conversation (and the reader's narrative)—says to the old man,

> "But if you remember, sir, you were saying something, when the boy interrupted you with his door."
>
> "So I was.—Let me see," unmindful of his purchases for the moment, "what, now, was it? What was that I was saying? Do *you* remember?"
>
> "Not perfectly, sir; but, if I am not mistaken, it was something like this: you hoped you did not distrust of the Creator."
>
> "Yes, that was something like it," mechanically and unintelligently letting his eye fall now on his purchases." (247)

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estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world -- the unhomeliness -- that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the unhomely be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James's Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of "incredulous terror". . . . In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.

Although the unhomely is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites. (1994, 9)

It is the Cosmopolitan who brings the old man—and the reader—back into a dialogue that is suspended when the boy enters the scene. This 'suspension' occurs precisely at the moment when the old man seems to waver: able, on the one hand, to understand the idea that a distrust of a fellow human reflects a distrust in the christian god, and susceptible, on the other, simply *because* he is able to understand this decidedly un-christian, apocryphal position. Instead of a verbal demonstration of faith or disbelief, the old man demonstrates disbelief quite unwittingly in his eagerness to purchase a lock and money belt, and reception of the counterfeit detector—a 'gift' from the boy in acknowledgment of his purchases. The contrast is made glaring by the repeated ideas marked by the phrases "distrusting the Creator" and "distrust the Creator" which stand as bookends on either side of the rift/inter-ruption generated by the appearance of the boy; it is the similarity on either side which creates that jarring moment of the *unheimlich*, with the return of the familiar (represented in part by a one-tongued god) as the monstrous (the double-talking god). We could say that the encounter has profound impact on the old man, which seems true, but what is also interesting is the potential impact the encounter has on how *we as readers see the old man*—opening up a doubleness in our own vision of the text. Melville presents us with a kindly old christian man at the end of a novel filled with guile and deception; the 'good novel,' the one the bourgeois reader expects, ends with a glimmer a hope, a peek at the sunset rising on the port side of *Fidèle*.[6] Instead, the bourgeois reader who longs for affirmation is denied,

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6. Of *The Confidence-Man*, one unsigned review in the New York *Times* Supplement said:

> The author of *Typee* has again come upon us in one of his strange vagaries, and calls himself *The Confidence-Man*. . . . It is, in short, a Rabelaisian piece of

and left with an old man being led away into darkness by the 'thief' who robbed him of his faith. But what the reader may not realize is that the Cosmopolitan did very little except point to a few verses in an illegitimate book of the christian bible, making the old man his own worst enemy. The doubts were not planted by the Cosmopolitan, they were already seeded within, dormant and invisible to the old man—*or* the reader. Our Cosmopolitan—and Melville—merely provide the conditions for a crisis, for an exposure of aporetic space.

I have pointed to the conditions surrounding this aporia as it appears for the old man and the reader in this section of *The Confidence-Man*, but what remains is an exploration of that agrammatical or, as Pitch may call it, analogical space. I choose as a starting point for this discussion an analysis of the trope of the wedge in its various manifestations as it appears in the final chapter of *The Confidence-Man*.

". . . that dangerous wedge . . ."

> *Apocrypha*: "of unknown authorship, spurious" "Of doubtful authenticity, spurious, fictitious, false; fabulous, mythical" "Unreal, counterfeit, sham, 'imitation'" - *OED*

There are many ways in which a hegemonic power deals with dissidence. On the most basic level, the foreign term is made strange to the collective. There are strings of related names for different occasions,

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patchwork without any of the Rabelaisian indecency. And here it may be well to remark that one of the distinguishing traits of the Young American literature is its perfect decency. You can read any of these books aloud to your grandmother or your daughter, which is more than can be done by the majority of British books. (qtd. in Branch, 378)

The possibility of a Rabelaisian *decency* boggles the mind; it is reassuring, for Melville's sake, that they didn't see the indecency of the novel in its full splendor.

contexts, which all mean the same thing, refer to the same 'queering' process: freak, monster, invert, pervert, criminal, heretic. These are all simple tools of delegitimation which, if they do not neutralize the pathogenic power of the dissident term, certainly help to deny that term access to the privileges of membership in a given collective.

This is not to say that dissidence is without its effects. Even while the defensive reflex of a hegemonic power enacts censure, the dissident term creates echoes which, if loud enough, have the power to significantly displace, disturb, dislodge the fixity of hegemonic norms. Likewise, Melville—marginalized as he became—certainly ruffled the feathers of those readers and critics who wanted yet another innocuous (seeming) tale of South Sea exotica and when disappointed, chastised him when he brought the strange back to more familiar, more domestic settings.[7] In his writing, moreover, the mechanics of his dissidence are extremely complex because they are at work on so many levels of the text, most of which escaped the 'surveilling' gaze of the bourgeois reader and critic.

The 'definitions' for "Apocrypha" which I have selected above are an interesting case in point. Several of the words resonate with bourgeois estimations of Melville's writing, attacked for its lack of fidelity to 'reality.' And if his writing was not 'real', then Melville's writing was 'false', and therefore counterfeit, merely masquerading as though it were real, when it is in fact spurious—representing aberrant, not normative, bourgeois, heterosexual, middle-class values. Melville's writing operates like the caret that sticks like a metal burr in the middle of the clean

7. The reviews to Pierre are unequivocal in their condemnation of the work as: "trashy," "crazy," "insanity," "horribly unnatural," and "palpably astray," just to name a few (qtd in Branch, 294-98).

sentence, clouding the meaning of its pretended plenitude.[8] How does this supplementary 'wedge-that-comes-between' operate? Where is it in the text? I suppose the best way to answer these questions is to return to the map Melville provides, and follow the many-coloured threads which travel between several of the nodes which are planted in the text. We have already encountered the trope of the wedge, most recently, in our discussion of the conversation between the old man and the Cosmopolitan over the apocryphal section of the bible that the barber recites. The wedge also appears as that inter-ruption afforded by the mysterious appearance of the boy who sells the items of personal insurance to the old man. It is to a discussion of these two textual events that I will now turn.

Let me partially repeat an earlier quotation, central here to the argument:

> "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." (my emphasis; 243)

The image is quite beautiful in its economy, because Melville accomplishes so much with it: precisely in the middle of the writings of the 'word of god' is a caret, a wedge, an aberrant penis which occupies a highly ambiguous position vis-à-vis the Old and New Testaments, which lie on either side the fictitious/false/spurious truth which is *bound* between. The Cosmopolitan is quite right when he says with feigned conviction that "The uncanonical part should be bound distinct," because in its 'complete' form, the apocryphal sections of the bible have a poisoning effect on the

8. "Caret" comes from the Latin "is lacking": i.e.: the thing added to requires supplementation, it is incomplete.

purity of the truths which lie on either side (243). It is impossible to stop the cross-pollination between the illegitimate and legitimate strains of holy writ, as is demonstrated in the crisis that is created once the 'false wisdom' is disseminated by the barber. The word of the Son of Sirach poisons the old man's faith in his unified god, just as the reader's faith in the go(o)dliness of *The Confidence-Man*'s last character is contaminated with the realization of his own inscrutability and multiplicity. The apocrypha, like the cutting wedge, splits the tongue of god in two making it speak like the split tongue jackdaw, a separate truth on either side. Sadly for the old man, the apocrypha are *not* bound distinct, and the bifurcation of the 'word of god' creates a most disturbing *unheimlichkeit* or 'unhomeliness' that the Cosmopolitan capitalizes on when he speaks of the Book of Jesus Son of Sirach as a "wisdom that curdles the blood" (243). Directly after he says this, an annoyed cabin-mate who can't sleep for all the late-night philosophizing, says to the two men, "if you two don't know enough to sleep, don't be keeping wiser men awake. And if you want to know what wisdom is, find it *under your blankets*" (emphasis mine; 243).

We have here, first of all, the production of at least two *kinds* of wisdom, a move which signals the splitting of a universal form, namely, the christian 'God,' into two parts, since "wisdom" in a christian context signifies holy knowledge, knowledge of the wisdom of god. But the Cosmopolitan reveals another wisdom, one which is "ugly," but one that, nonetheless comes from god. If the christian god is capable of ugliness, 'he' is also capable of evil and darkness, thereby compromising the clear distinctions in christian eschatology between 'good' and 'evil'. The Cosmopolitan's line of inquiry proceeds by raising these doubts, and allowing the old man to ponder their implications, a pondering which

becomes the following destabilization of faith: Are not the apocrypha, as part of the christian bible, also part of the word, the wisdom of god? If the apocrypha are illegitimate, spurious, false, fictitious, or incredible as holy writ, then why, the Cosmopolitan insists, are they *in* there? God, in the Cosmopolitan's deconstruction of christianity becomes as much a con man as Jesus Christ, implicated in a quotation above. No one, moreover, is spared; the old man—himself a figure of beatific benevolence at the beginning of the chapter—is led away with his lock, money belt and counterfeit detector into the darkness, safe with the tokens of his confidence in hand.

Apocryphal wisdom: theft, dream, identity

The con, or decon, operates in this novel by the apposition of two characters, or two concepts. In each case, Melville deliberately complicates the relationship between the two by subverting the borderlines between the two terms. We have seen this in the case of Pitch and the PIO, and we have seen this in the case of the Cosmopolitan and the old man. Melville's imagery also produces this effect, a point I hope was clearly made in the example of the apocrypha's position within the christian bible as highly ambiguous and subject to drift. Melville's proto-Derridean manoeuvres alienate what is 'proper'—both in the sense of appurtenance and propriety—from the normative terms he sets out to (de)con. His criticisms of centred identity, realism in literature, and the purity of the word of god are all examples of a larger project which mirrors Derrida's own critique of Western metaphysics. For Derrida, the central trope of this critique is the privileging of speech over writing for its alleged closer

proximity, immediacy or 'presence' to the speaker. Reflecting back, this is what is behind Pitch's "I am what I say" and the christian bible's insistence that 'God' left words—droppings—in the form of typographical impressions on paper.

While proximity of voice to speaker is the subject of Derrida's critique, he also exposes the proximity of *différance* to terms which under the sign of logos are thought to be autonomous and immutable. This latter "proximity" operates in the sleight of hand perpetrated by the con man, whose very proximity to a victim undoes what is proper/*propre* with a deft movement of the hand into the pockets of his unsuspecting (half-awake) victims. In the case of Pitch, it is the notion of unitary, whole identity that is brought to crisis, so to speak, in the big man's seduction in Chapter 22. On at least one level, Melville's critique of logos takes place on a somatic level, particularly, and exclusively, in fact, on the level of the male body that was made familiar in our earlier discussions of Ed Cohen and Lee Edelman. With the inter-ruption of Western metaphysical notions of identity and self-presence comes the possibility of a split in the self, a bifurcation which creates the possibility for a double language, a double-entrendre which is only half-*entendu* by the speaking subject. This creates a crisis that Pitch must face—one that re-appears throughout the novel in analogical form, and in the final chapter in ways that bear directly on nineteenth-century concepts of identity (by definition, male), and the function of the subject within the collective. I would like now to return to these considerations as they centre on male identity and desire from our more analogically relevant discussion of the presence of the apocryphal, the counterfeit, the sham as they are bound to the normative, the true, and the real.

Here I would like to make an apparent digression in a consideration of the epigram evoking Jean Genet that appears at the beginning of the chapter. I am hoping that the logic (or analogic) which marks David Lloyd's treatment of Genet has resonated through what I have thus far said concerning theft of the proper. Perhaps other seeds have been more successful in conjuring up associations in your mind, but this is one that has taken root for me as an important connection between Genet's writing and Melville's *The Confidence-Man.* The metaphor of "theft" pervades the operations of the text at the levels of both plot (characters fleecing each other) and language (proper meaning being appropriated to other than normative uses: onanistic prose, plurality of meaning). The first, has its first effect *primarily* on the character who is being conned, the latter has its effect on the reader. In this way, form and content enact the same thieving operation, leaving both reader and character in the same boat, subject to and agents of the same inexorable drift.

It is this same drift that the old man seeks to insure himself against in the purchase of the money belt and the lock from the young boy. The lock and the belt will, he thinks, separate him from danger. But more than that, it is his inter-ruptive experience with the wisdom of the son of Sirach that motivates his purchase of something that he thinks will separate truth from lie. But the boy, himself a thief figure, robs his customers of confidence in exchange for renewed confidence that they must buy from him. The gift of the counterfeit detector is, of course no gift at all. The poison of all poisons, the old man becomes unable to separate the real and true from the sham and counterfeit, the latter able to "pass" for the former, unmarked, unrecognized, undetected. To evoke the double meaning of *pharmakon* which Derrida explores in "Plato's Pharmacy" (signifying, as

he deftly points out, both "remedy" and "poison") in the transaction between boy and man, the gift is proffered as a remedy against a future con, but operates as a poison to the old man's confidence.[9]

The act of poisoning is, furthermore, a wonderful metaphor for the effects that parody and its cousin, pun, have on normative constructs. Melville's masquerade is, of course, preoccupied with the 'dragging' of identity via the obfuscation of the characters he draws and redraws throughout the text.[10] The example of Goneril discussed earlier is a case in point; a moustached figure of ambiguous sexuality, s/he is more a palimpsest of tangled lines than a 'real' character. In *The Confidence-Man* there are no 'fully drawn' characters—in any realist sense, at least. Parody and masquerade have the effect of creating that unnerving echo, the uncanny moment, which denaturalizes fixed identities. Similarly, punning works away at the propriety of names, destabilizing their essentialized qualities. It is this same dragging of identity that we see in Genet's

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9. See Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) 95-117. Derrida points to the violence of the interpretive translation of *pharmakon* in the Greek of Plato's writing to the word "remedy," a choice which has a profound effect on how Plato's thoughts are understood.

> All translations into languages that are the heirs and depositaries of Western metaphysics thus produce on the *pharmakon* an *effect of analysis* that violently destroys it, reduces it to one of its simple elements by interpreting it. . . . Such an interpretive translation is thus as violent as it is impotent: it destroys the *pharmakon* but at the same time forbids itself access to it. . . . (1981, 99)

10. There is a paper waiting to be written on the homographic resonances between the two senses of drag I hope to evoke here. First of all there is the basic transvestic act of gender-play in the donning of clothes which signify a sex different from the wearer's. Lately, the term has broadened to highlight the costuming nature of all clothing. This makes going to work in a suit, for example, a transvestic act where the wearer is in office drag. The possible self-awareness of the feminist lesbian who wears lipstick denaturalizes normative female heterosexual costuming practices (to herself at least) to create a rupture, however small, however temporary, in naturalized gender constructions. The second sense in which I mean drag refers to the play in a rope, or the play of signification, as meaning slides, offering a glimpse of ruptures in essentialized identity & meaning.

writing, where drag plays a very important part of prison life in *Our Lady of the Flowers*:

> It is customary to come in drag, dress as ourselves. Nothing but costumed queens rubbing shoulders with child-pimps. In short, not a single adult. The make-up and the lights distort sufficiently, but often we wear black masks or carry fans for the pleasure of guessing who's who from the carriage of a leg, from the expression, the voice, the pleasure of fooling each other, of making identities overlap. (218)

In the company of other thieves, murderers and con men, these violators of the *propre* transgress multiple boundary lines, here committing the crime of class and gender-fuck in one sweep. Genet writes:

> I continue my reading of cheap novels. It satisfies my love of hoodlums dressed up as gentlemen. Also my taste for imposture, my taste for sham, which could very well make me write on my visiting cards: "Jean Genet, bogus Count of Tillancourt." (258)

But these dragged identities are not simply veils for a 'real' identity hidden beneath. Critical of Sartre's notion that an essentialism lay behind Genet's dragged identities, David Lloyd says that

> Such erosions of propriety and authenticity are crucial to Genet's writings, constantly preventing his works from falling back upon the constitution of a counter-identity such as Sartre seeks to evoke.
>
> Divine's tranvestitism is crucial here: the "truth" is not that she is a man in drag, the truth lies not in reversion to an original more authentic than the appearance, but rather in the "poetic conclusions" which we know to be flights stealing away from their pretexts. . . (179)

Lloyd goes on to quote the following passage from *Our Lady of the Flowers* which makes explicit his assertion:

> For, though she felt as a "woman," she thought as a "man." One might think that, in thus reverting spontaneously to her true nature, Divine was a male wearing make-up, disheveled with make-believe gestures; but this is not a case of the phenomenon of recourse to the mother tongue in times of stress. . . . Her femininity was not *only* a masquerade. But as for thinking "woman" completely, her organs hindered her. . . . And all the "woman" judgments she made were, in reality, poetic conclusions. Hence, only then was Divine true. (225)

What are we to make of the 'child's play' of these thieves/children playing with make-up and flowers? I think here of an unsigned review to *The Confidence-Man* which scathed the work for its "puerilities"—a very

effective way of consigning a work to oblivion. To call *The Confidence-Man* a product of boyish arrested development is an interesting move, since it marks an attempt to delegitimate its authority by placing the work and its author in a subordinate position: Melville is given minority status both as a boy who writes "puerilities" and as a minor writer. No doubt one could further conjecture that Melville's 'apocryphal' writing places him within the boundaries of what we would call now a homosexual subject position, but this kind of essentialism, though tempting, must be avoided since Melville is writing from a point which directly precedes the full articulation of homo- or hetero-defined gender/subject positions. Nonetheless, Melville is within the ken of homoerotic possibilities, and it is this that makes an elaborate reading of his writing as "queer" possible. Like Genet, Melville is writing—by the time he came out with *The Confidence-Man*, at least—from a twilight space of the literary margins.

With every novel he wrote after *Omoo*, criticisms against Melville's writing gathered, reaching a crescendo of asperity with *Pierre*, the novel which preceded *The Confidence-Man*. This is why the scores of nasty reviews to his work are so fascinating to read: they are attempts at discipline the artist with the aim of bringing his recognized genius back into the ken of bourgeois domesticity. One reviewer to *Pierre*, for instance, wrote that Melville had gone "palpably astray," while another complained "Mr. M. [had] evidently taken hold of a subject which [had] mastered *him*," the italicized emphasis indicating that an author (read: "authority") must properly have mastery or control over his subject in bouregois conceptions of artistic production—an image of imperial heterosexual masculinity if there ever was one (Branch, 298; 297). Yet another commentator alleged that Melville was "abusing his genius" in the

creation of what a reviewer to *The Confidence-Man* called further "monstrosities" (294, 374).

I give you this brief collage of pejoratives because they help to delineate the terms with which his later writing was viewed. What's more, the terms I have selected *do* have a decidedly *masculine,* if not clearly sexual valence to them. We begun with "puerilities," which suggests a kind of immaturity that is pre-virile, and in a sense, impotent. Then we have the notion that he has gone "astray," this carrying with it a heavily moral connotation, one often applied to the errant teen—or "rascal", to harken back to the boys from Chapter 2. That Melville has been "mastered" by his work indicates a loss of manly self-control vis-à-vis his artistic progeny. In the context of bourgeois nineteenth-century masculinity, Melville is here accused of not being a good (i.e.: assertive) 'father' to his wife and children. Finally, that Melville is "abusing his genius" is perhaps the biggest of the mortal sins a man can commit against bourgeois masculine norms. 'Self-abuse' in this context has very strong resonances with the paradigmatic self-abuse—masturbation. This particular reviewer seems to have understood, if only by analogy (that language between sleep and reason), that Melville's prose speaks an 'onanistic language' which violates the capitalist imperatives of bourgeois manliness. The threat he presents is parallel to the threat presented by writing to speech, or of the homosexual to the heterosexual "manly man," to echo both Ed Cohen and Lee Edelman. The essential anxiety arises from Melville's critique-via-dissolution of bourgeois/humanist notions of identity. Or, as is the case with Genet's writing as seen by David Lloyd, "The anxiety of major, 'male' theory stems from the recognition that the dissolution of identity is a model of pleasure, pleasure of performance, imitation, inauthenticity"

(180). The solitary act of masturbation, or the efflorescence of masturbatory prose is censured both for its narcissistic self-indulgence and its failure to take part in a (re)productive economy in the context of the larger community, be it a readership or nation of allied citizens. Melville's novel, furthermore lacks fidelity to 'reality', and therefore occupies a position that is analogous to the of the apocrypha in the christian bible. The bible as transcendental word is, in this context, a fitting analogy for realist fiction and the fidelity with which *it* claims to represent reality. Moreover, Melville's deconstruction of this analogized form of realism in the final chapter is unequivocal in its claim that the solar lamp as a metaphor for this 'truth' at the centre of the cabin is no guarantee against a darkness which, ultimately, cannot be separated from the light. The trick, it seems, is to be able to see in the darkness; the old man is blind when the lamp sputters out and cannot navigate an unfamiliar territory that the Cosmopolitan—with his "indifferent eyes"—is deftly able to travel in. And it is this apocryphal wisdom/vision that enables the Cosmopolitan to "kindly" lead the old man away to his room.

"When thou hearest these things awaken in thy sleep"

As the light begins to fail, the old man, shaken by the night's events panics and says to the Cosmopolitan, "I must go to bed, to bed!" hoping, rather ironically, to find refuge in the darkness of sleep (250). This same darkness is the abode of the wisdom of the son of Sirach, and, in fact, the wisdom of the

PIO, one that can also be found in the darkness of one's room, *under the blankets*, as one wise cabin mate tells the old man and his nocturnal friend.

It is in sleep that vigilance is most needed, but most absent, leaving the man in reverie vulnerable to the diligent hand of the Mississippi pickpocket (246).

But what of the locks? What of the moneybelts? The old man does not learn Pitch's lesson that the wedge finds ways to violate these containment fields, to infiltrate our best defenses, to, in fact, be already inside before we realize that the intruder has come in from behind and infected us to a point beyond our control.

Against our will the hand moves to the pocket, panning for silver, as we toss, half-there, half-asleep. With our resistance immobilized by a wisdom that has stolen in under our blankets, the door is open for more theft, for the *unmanly* movement of *différance*.

Our thieves have the best cover of all: darkness. But this is a particular kind of darkness, one that makes difference invisible: everything looks 'the same,' but at some level we intuit a difference which is frightening and smells like the stench of extinguished light that the old man perceives when he is walked out of the darkened cabin. Like the operation of the homograph, we do not see the difference, undetected by eyes that are not tuned to the dark. But it is this ability of the homographic thief to pass undetected that creates that moment of panic, that moment when you see that the thief is the same but

different. Between the two is the uneasy space of the *unheimlich* where property/*propre*-ty is dissolved in a moment of non- phallogocentric *jouisssance*.

The blacksmith's forked tongue is kept busy twisting 'god's word'; this is the pledge of all in the guild, to twist, to bend, to point to the endless movement of signification, concealed by the pretense of the static, impossible, tyrannical 'word of god.' But he'll get his, they say. Go up to this man-god, and jerk the truth out of his pockets. He won't know what has happened until he starts, awake.

At the same time there is an 'us' which *recognizes* the thief at the door. For us, the criminality of a politics of *jouisssance* is acknowledged as a possibility. Despite the presence of pickpockets, we carry our money loose, like the Cosmopolitan, and are prepared for the dragging of meaning, the queering of sense (247). And there is a brotherhood of thieves who can see the sameness of otherness in the dark. Boy thief and man thief cross the line of difference to catch a glimmer of similitude that we as readers either see or half-see. The boy offers a lock to the Cosmopolitan, their eyes flicker light across the darkness, the morse of recognition:

> "Sell you one, sir?"
> "Excuse me, my fine fellow, but I never use such blacksmiths' things."
> "Those who give the blacksmith most work seldom do," said the boy, tipping him a wink expressive of a degree of indefinite knowingness, not uninteresting to consider in one of his years. But the wink was not marked by the old man, nor, *to all appearances*, by him for whom it was intended. (my emphasis; 246)

What we have been told thus far about "appearances" in *The Confidence-Man* makes suspect the meaning of this quotation. "To all appearances" this man is like any other man, but some of us know that he casts a different shadow, legible only to the punster who thinks along those lines. The wink, like the gay gaze passes unremarked because it is *illegible* to the old man whose vision makes the unlit periphery of the cabin dark—a space of absence. But this "absence" is alive with a community of thieves winking to each other in the darkness, undetected, unseen.

> In his retired nook the stranger soon joined Billy Budd. There was no moon as yet; a haze obscured the starlight. He could not distinctly see the stranger's face. Yet from something in the outline and carriage, Billy took him, and correctly, for one of the afterguard.
> "Hist! Billy," said the man, in the same quick cautionary whisper as before. "You were impressed, weren't you? Well, so was I"; and he paused, as to mark the effect. But Billy, not knowing exactly what to make of this, said nothing. Then the other: "We are not the only impressed one, Billy. There's a gang of us. -- [dash, dash] Couldn't yo -- [dash, dash] help -- [dash, dash] at a pinch?"
> "What do you mean?" demanded Billy, here thoroughly shaking off his drowse.
> "Hist, hist!" the hurried whisper now growing husky. "See here," and the man held up two small objects faintly twinkling in the night-light; "see, they are yours, Billy, if you'll only -- [dash. dash.]"[11]

▼

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