

Dialogue between Cornel West & D. Graham Burnett

Metaphysics, money & the Messiah: a conversation about Melville's "The Confidence-Man"

Reality used to be a friend of mine . . .

– P.M. Dawn

Editor's note: This spring, the Princeton historian D. Graham Burnett sat down with his colleague Cornel West to discuss their responses to a quintessentially American parable, "The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade," the last long-form work of prose fiction by Herman Melville (1819 – 1891). This strange tale of performance, deception, and sudden intimacies is built out of a sequence of glancing encounters among the passengers of a Mississippi riverboat bound for New Orleans. Who is who in the story is never quite clear, and when money changes hands (as it often does), there are usually reasons for concern – not least because of the shadowy presence of the title character, whose rosy promises entrance even the cautious. Set on April Fool's Day (and published on April 1, 1857), "The Confidence-Man" – though a critical and commercial disaster at the time – has now puzzled, beguiled, and inspired Melville readers for a century and a half.

Cornel West, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1999, is Class of 1943 University Professor at Princeton University. His published works include "Race Matters" (1993), "The Future of the Race" (with Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1997), and "Democracy Matters" (2004). West recently released a new album, "Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations."

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D. GRAHAM BURNETT: Cornel, it feels like a good time to have a serious conversation about a difficult text. And I figured we could dig right in, since it is a premise of Melville's *The Confidence-Man* that here in the United States perfect strangers can walk right up to each other and start on a serious conversation.

CORNEL WEST: We're hardly strangers, though, brother Graham.

DGB: So true – it is almost twenty years now since I sat as a sophomore in your course on "Cultural Criticism," weeping like a baby, along with about three hundred other impressionable youths, at

your lecture on the death of Socrates. Many years gone by, and now our offices are a hundred yards apart. Even so, it is a conceit of this book that in some sense we are *all* fundamentally strangers, no?

CW: That's right, that's true.

DGB: So let's dive in, and start with a scene that sets the stage for everything that follows, namely, the introduction of the character called 'Black Guinea.' You will remember that Melville offers us the pathetic picture of an apparently crippled Black beggar pleading for alms aboard the Mississippi steamer, *Fidèle*, where all the action of the novel will unfold. Guinea and a "purple-faced drover" strike up a conversation. And the drover asks the supplicant, "But where do you live?" And Guinea replies, "All 'long shore, sar; dough now I'se going to see brodder at der landing; but chiefly I libs in der city." And the drover replies, "St. Louis, ah? Where do you sleep there of nights?" and Black Guinea replies, "On der floor of der good baker's oven, ser." And the drover replies, "In an oven? Whose, pray? What baker, I should like to know, bakes such black bread in his oven, alongside of his nice white rolls, too. Who is that too charitable baker, pray?" "Dar he be," replies Black Guinea, "with a broad grin lifting his tambourine high over his head." "The sun is the baker, eh?" replies the drover, a supposition Guinea confirms: "Yes sar, in der city dat good baker warms der stones for dis ole darkie when he sleeps out on der pabements o' nights."

What's going on here? I'm not sure, but I propose that we consider this curious exchange in light of the following excerpt from Aristotle's *Parts of Animals*, famously cited in Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*:

We are told about something Heraclitus said to visitors who wanted to get to see him. Approaching, they found him warming himself in an oven. Surprised, they stood there in consternation – above all because he encouraged them to come in without fear, saying: "Even here the gods are present."¹

Now the juxtaposition may seem a little far-fetched, but Heraclitus is mentioned by name in *The Confidence-Man*, so we know that Melville is engaged with this character, and the circumstantial consonances in the scenes are not trivial. Moreover that last line – "even here the gods are present," "*einai gar kai entautha theous*" – resonates in a powerful way with the larger themes of this novel. Indeed, I want to suggest that this tagline – here tacitly cited, we might say, by Melville – amounts to an antithesis of the traditional trope *et in arcadia ego* ...

CW: Even here in the garden the devil is present ...

DGB: Right. And as you know, the dominant thread of twentieth-century criticism of *The Confidence-Man* reads the story's central figure – the shape-changing huckster-demiurge who promenades through this 'masquerade' in different incarnations, selling dreams and preaching hope – as a Satanic presence. Black Guinea would appear to be the first of

1 For an account of the translation problems this passage offers, as well as a comprehensive discussion of interpretations of its significance, see Pavel Gregoric, "The Heraclitus Anecdote: *De Partibus Animalium* i 5.645a17 – 23," *Ancient Philosophy* 21 (2001): 73 – 85. Gregoric joins the preponderance of modern commentators in rejecting Heidegger's glossing of "*pros tōi ipnōi*" as 'in the oven,' preferring 'at' or 'by'; admittedly, these latter were also preferred by Aristotle's early-nineteenth-century English translators.

these incarnations, as well as the point of departure for the whole tale: his invocation of a list of “good, kind, honest ge’zman” who will vouch for his *bona fides* becomes the roster of con men (or, perhaps more precisely, the roster of disguises for Black Guinea himself) we will encounter in the pages that follow.

But against this diabolical reading I offer the Heraclitan apothegm: “Even here the gods are present.” Even here, as in ‘even in this broken black body’; even here, as in ‘even here in the heart of the Americas.’ I would like to believe that at this moment Melville is self-consciously offering us this lowly figure as a kind of profound metaphysician, and asking us already, from the outset, to be worried about our inability to see philosophical profundity where we least expect it. At the same time, I see Melville staking a claim to America as a place for philosophy and theology, not merely a place for commerce and wilderness – even here, the gods are present, even here on a riverboat in the muddy middle stretches of the Mississippi.

The most radical claim, then, would be that this Heraclitan invocation of Black Guinea signals the high ambition of the text: to serve as the evangel of a distinctively American metaphysical posture. This is a book about what America offers to the problems of thought and being: space, movement, destabilized social hierarchies, perpetual and sequential opportunities for self-invention. At one point, in an irruption of authorial voice, Melville writes that there are only a handful of ‘original’ characters in all of literature: original like a Hamlet, or a Don Quixote. And yet it is clear that the confidence-man is such a character – our autochthonous philosophical persona. America itself is the condition of possibility for this figure.

CW: It’s a fascinating reading. I mean right off we have to keep in mind that Melville has a history of using Black characters as a way of concealing an existential profundity *vis-à-vis* supposedly sophisticated society. You think right away of Pip, for example, in *Moby-Dick*. And when Sterling Stucky talks about the crucial role of Black characters and Black culture in Melville, he makes you think of the Black church at the very beginning of *Moby-Dick* that becomes a kind of prefiguration of that blackness of blackness that Melville is going to be wrestling with in the novel as a whole.

This is the grand Melville saying, ‘Well, let’s look at those on the *underside* of American civilization, the Pips and the Black Guineas, who not only have much to say, but have a power of disclosing and revealing a certain kind of shallowness and hollowness at the heart of a civilization that claims to be thick with plenitude and girded with certainty.’

But when you point to this business with Black Guinea and the oven, the stove, you get me thinking of Descartes as a *stove* philosopher: Descartes in Germany at his stove, wrestling with skepticism, wrestling with doubt – this is a figure who is dealing with the grounds of confidence, the problem that lies at the center of Melville’s text.

See, I think it’s key to read *The Confidence-Man* against two other literary texts in American culture: *Miss Lonelyhearts*, by Nathanael West; and Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*. I think of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, where you get the hero/antihero who comes in and reveals that we have no grounds for our confidence in the world – not in the arts, not even in religion. He becomes a Christ figure who is simultaneously, in a sense, an Antichrist. He is not the devil, exactly, but he is a kind of veiled figure, a Christ

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in disguise who is unable to *deliver* like the traditional Christ figure *delivered*.

Similarly so with that extraordinary character Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*. Hickey too is a kind of problematic Christ figure – not simply an Antichrist, but really a Christ who can't deliver, a Christ who sells dreams. But it is even stranger than that: he sells the death of dreams too. He sells confidence but spawns a lack of confidence. He sows hope and transformation, but in the end he spawns radical distrust, even destruction.

These figures, these prophets of the pipe-dream, are deeply rooted not just in Melville as a whole, but particularly in this text.

Now another way of talking about all this is to look to Luke 18:8, and that famous question, "When the son of man comes will he find *faith on earth*?" Now by "faith" here we're not talking about just faith in God – we're talking about the fiducial constitution of our existence, the fiduciary dimension of the human condition. The kind of thing Michael Polanyi talked about with great insight in *Personal Knowledge* back in 1958.

DGB: I'm struck by your reference to the fundamental preoccupation with faith in this text. It has seemed to me at different moments that *The Confidence-Man* might plausibly be read against Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in the following way: Melville is acutely aware of the necessity of using distrust as a method for the production of knowledge – "I have confidence in distrust" or "I have trust in distrust," his characters say, parroting the stove philosopher himself – and yet this text seems steeped in the awareness that knowledge itself cannot save us.

CW: Yes, that's right, to be sure.

DGB: And so I think of Kierkegaard, who wants us to begin by remembering that belief – faith – is *not* knowledge, that there is a condition of "waiting to have revelation of what was in fact the case," and that's the experience of our lives. We *do not know* what follows our immediate perceptual existence, and it is *only once we know* what follows that the life we have lived can be understood under its proper aspect, under the aspect of eternity. This is the central problem of the small volume Kierkegaard published in the same year as *Fear and Trembling*: the book called *On Repetition*. So we are cursed, required, to live in this suspended state, without knowledge of that which is determinative of our condition. Can Melville's text be read as an account of the necessity of faith in a Kierkegaardian, or existential, mode?

CW: Yes, you're right on the mark in terms of shifting from the more Cartesian conception of 'epistemology' to the more existential conceptions of what the great H. Richard Niebuhr, the finest American theological mind of the twentieth century, called "pistology" in his posthumous volume *Faith on Earth*. By pistology he means this existential belief you are talking about, the business of trying to find some kind of meaning in a world of overwhelming chaos, in the world that Samuel Beckett calls "the mess." Pistology means imposing some order on *the mess*.

Now take that wonderful line about Melville in Hawthorne's diary entry of November 20, 1856: "He can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief." That says a great deal. Here's Melville contemplating annihilation; he's wrestling to find some meaning – now, here.

This is an existential struggle; this isn't an epistemological problem in the more technical sense used by our colleagues over in the philosophy department. This is a Kierkegaardian struggle, to be sure. We are in the realm of *pistology* here, since what H. Richard Niebuhr had in mind is that Greek word *pistis*, a term in the Koine Greek of the New Testament that usually gets translated 'faith.' Pistology has to do with self-involved, self-invested, self-immersed conceptions of belief. It is what William James talks about in *The Will to Believe*: you're actually putting your *life at stake*, you're on the edge of the abyss, you're trying to find some meaning that sustains you in your trajectory from womb to tomb. So this is existential in the deepest sense.

DGB: And if we ask 'what's the difference between faith and confidence?' we get – etymologically speaking – just that little particle at the front end, 'con,' which has come to mean deception, but has a prior sense of 'with or among.' In that latter sense at least, though perhaps in both, we catch a glimpse of the desire for each other – the spiritual and material need for each other, the appetite for each other – that is so important to this book.

CW: Absolutely. We are hungry for cultivated fellowship. This is a book about *paideia*, but it is a book that is uneasy about that too – in every 'con' there's a little 'con,' if you know what I mean!

DGB: Let's talk about Emerson for a moment. Emerson is one of your heroes, but Melville can be read to offer a pretty damning indictment of the Sage of Concord.

CW: Yes, well, as we know, Melville stood in a very complicated relationship to Emerson. We know from the letters that he characterized him as a great man – as a *diver*, as a man who could *dive*. Melville said you can always see something in a man when he goes beyond mediocrity, when he goes beyond easily discernible qualities, and Herman Melville saw that in Ralph Waldo Emerson. On the other hand, though, maybe Waldo's just a Plato who talked through his nose. That is to say, maybe in the end he's someone who really didn't have an understanding of the depth of the darkness of the human condition – he refused to linger on the darkness. It's like Goethe's relation to Von Kleist, you know: "I don't want to deal with the darkness too long; I'm going to push the fearsome text aside, and move toward the cloudless sky."

DGB: So what about the part of *The Confidence-Man* that has been interpreted as directly satirical of Emerson and Thoreau both, namely, the encounter between the protean 'cosmopolitan' and these two bizarre characters: the 'mystic' Mark Winsome (usually read as Emerson) and his 'practical disciple' Egbert (usually read as Thoreau). The subject of their encounter is – as always in *The Confidence-Man* – money.

CW: Part of the genius of Melville is that he understood William James's insight: that the core of the religious and existential problem for human beings is the *call for help*. It's no accident that *Miss Lonelyhearts* begins with that call: the Christ figure there has to answer all these terrible anonymous letters written to the newspaper, where people bare their hearts and cry out in their pain – there is the girl with no nose, there is the

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victim of sexual abuse, and on and on. A suffering humanity, calling for help: that is who we are.

It is clear that Melville understood a certain version – yes, maybe a dominant version – of Emerson’s conception of ‘self-reliance’ as ultimately a philosophy that didn’t allow persons authentically to call for help. On this view human beings were autonomous enough, self-sufficient enough, to make their way.

We know that Melville couldn’t accept the dogmatic and orthodox Christian conception of that call for help, and of the obligation to respond. But he nevertheless believed that the call was real, that it was inescapable, and that a reply was indispensable. In his view anybody who plans to fly from cradle to grave without ever calling for help – at the most profound level – is somebody who is deeply confused, somebody whose philosophy has a gaping hole in the middle, a hole in its *soul*. And so Winsome ends up being this surface-like figure.

Yes, for sure, it’s an indictment of Emerson, but we have to keep in mind that Melville also had some appreciation of the real Emerson, so we don’t want to confuse Winsome with Emerson himself. In the end Melville’s argument is that Emersonian confidence in ‘self-reliance’ is too easily earned, that this solipsistic trust is too lightly assumed, too glibly presupposed. It skipped the struggle and the call for help that Melville understood to be at the core of the human experience.

DGB: You make the call for help sound like a dark night of the soul, but in *The Confidence-Man* that call often bleats from the dark night of the wallet. What about the money? You remember that when Winsome introduces his disciple Egbert, we get this strange line: Win-

some says, “For to every philosophy there are certain rear parts, very important parts, and these, like the rear of one’s head, are best seen by reflection.” Yes, there’s something scatological about this, as critics have been quick to point out, but I want to argue that ultimately in this text the ‘rear part’ of philosophy is money. Cornel, you know the expression ‘money-shot’?

CW: Yes I do.

DGB: Well we might say that what Melville does to Emersonian transcendentalism is hoist it in front of the camera for its money-shot. And the money-shot is a tight shot on an open wallet. My sexualized term isn’t gratuitous. It’s explicit in the ‘hypothetical’ disputation between the cosmopolitan and Egbert in this same scene: the cosmopolitan says (it’s the refrain of the whole novel), “I am in want – urgent want of money,” to which Egbert replies dismissively that to call for a loan on the basis of friendship is “in platonic love to demand love rites.”

So we come to the metaphysical money-shot: ‘I know that you have a great deal to say about God, and Jesus, and Love, and Truth, but here is the thing: I’m in want, I’m in urgent want, of *a hundred dollars*.’ At this point it doesn’t matter what book is on the table, what vast pronouncement is on the lips, what Buddha or Mahatma or carpenter’s son is at the front of the room – we are going to see the philosophy in *action*.

I take it to be a lemma of *The Confidence-Man* that you should never have a prophet or a guru or a priest or a savior to whom you have not owed actual money. When you see a promising messianic candidate on the horizon, you have to walk right up and ask to borrow *one hundred dollars*, by way of opening overture.

CW: That's a fascinating read. But I've got a different take on all this. You remember at the end of Vico's *The New Science*, where he says that one cannot be a wise man without piety, that piety is a precondition of wisdom? By piety he means what Plato is talking about in the *Euthyphro*, which is indebtedness to the sources of good in one's life. So piety really means acknowledging what was in place or antecedent to you as you made your entrée and as you attempt to sustain yourself.

Another way of putting it is this: when Melville writes, "to every philosophy there are certain rear parts," I am thinking of Heidegger, and of the implicit background conditions that are tacitly presupposed in any philosophical articulation or expression. Gadamer has made much of this. Polanyi also has made much of this, in terms of the tacit dimension of epistemic claims. It goes all the way to Edmund Burke, where prejudices are actually positive things, the very things that enable us to make the kind of knowledge claims that we make. These background conditions have to be made explicit by means of serious interrogation, reflection, and so forth, and therefore there's no such thing as a legitimate autonomy independent of a piety – a piety that must be enacted; there's no such thing as a legitimate autonomy independent of an acknowledgement of that which came before. Charles Taylor, of course, has offered profound insights in this regard, and Rorty and others have picked it up.

If all this is true, then it means that some kind of historicist sensibility – in the form of a pietistic invocation or acknowledgement of what was in place prior to any kind of philosophical claim – cannot be avoided. This means that philosophy becomes tied to history, society, tradition, the existential condition

of the author, and even biographical details – so we are back with Melville, terrified of financial ruin, wrestling with death, and struggling with his complex relations to his father . . .

DGB: So let's fit that back with what we were saying earlier about the limits of knowledge. I said before that this text knows knowledge cannot save us. And so we drew out Descartes and Kierkegaard, and suggested that *The Confidence-Man* understands the problem: 'OK, there are certain moves that you can make to try your claims to truth using radical doubt, skepticism, and so forth, but when you are finished razing the castles of deception, you are still going to need ground under your feet, and a roof over your head.' This is the foundational problem, and it remains a problem of belief. Are the 'hinder parts of a philosophy' legible as the problem of belief?

CW: Well, the real question is whether Melville believes *anything* can save us. Can belief really save us? What if your life preserver doesn't float? Melville might be precluding any sources of salvation here, and this is where the issue of the godhead becomes important. Remember that one line, brother, where he talks about maybe the devil understands who we are better than the creator does? It jumps out . . .

DGB: It's chapter 22, "Tusculan Disputations," toward the end. And the line is – what an amazing line! – I'll read it: "The devil is very sagacious. To judge by the event, he appears to have understood man better even than the Being who made him."

CW: Yes, that's the one!

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DGB: Being with a capital B? I hadn't noticed that. Talk about a Heideggerian moment . . .

CW: Reminds me a little bit of Schelling's great essay of 1809 on the essence of human freedom, where the very godhead itself becomes the center of a civil war between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. It's a poetic text, and it has to do with whether the Satanic forces are actually more insightful regarding who we are as human beings than the being who supposedly created Lucifer himself. So you get this battle in the godhead, and this is part of the problem of evil. You know Heidegger has great lectures on this, the lectures shortly after he left the Nazis, in the summer of 1936 at Freiburg, where he says that Schelling is the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century – other than Nietzsche, of course.

DGB: This goes beyond a traditional story of Manicheism, where the issue is mere strength. The issue here is something much stranger: it's a Manicheism of savvy, of intimacy, of even something like sympathy. Terrifying!

You put me in mind of the apocalyptic conclusion of this book, where, by the sputtering light of that histrionically allegorical “solar lamp” – with its two sides, one showing a “horned altar, from which flames arose,” the other “the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo” – our possibly diabolical cosmopolitan leads the doddering, white-haired, Bible-reading father figure into the labyrinth of scriptural apocrypha before whisking him off the stage and into the darkness. This is worrisome, to be sure!

CW: So you admit to the diabolism now!

DGB: It's worrisome, I can't lie. And yet I am still resistant to interpreting the scene as a victory for the powers of darkness. I see the extinction of the solar lamp as the extinction of the whole business of truth and falsehood, the extinction of the adolescent preoccupation with epistemology, with the ‘really-real’ and how we know it. We are being led – to invoke Nietzsche – out of the ‘bad air’ of a cabined theology into a perfectly perspectival universe – and being led by a new kind of savior: the player, the silver-tongued belief-maker, the tambourine man of dreams. We could do a lot worse! This is no descent into blasphemous despair. Ultimately, the text presents a powerful account of faith: genuinely prohibit any gesture toward ontological fundamentals, and you have changed the game; cling to your faith right up to the moment you die, and *you have made it*. There is no place from which the rightness or wrongness of your view can be assessed. The notion of your ‘wrongness’ trades on an implicit – and formally illegitimate – God's-eye view.

CW: That is too rosy, brother – too rosy. The text is so fundamentally open-ended. It isn't going to save conventional Christianity for you. After all, even when you wander out into this new world, you're still in the hold of a ship of fools – and this takes us back to Sebastian Brandt's great work of 1494, *Das Narrenschiff*. Melville is deeper than Nietzsche here. Perspectival? Brother Nietzsche closed a lot of questions. He was nothing if not sure about many answers . . .

DGB: Christianity's wrong, Judaism's wrong, Democracy's wrong, science is wrong . . .

CW: And Melville is deeper than that. There is a level of existential interrogation here, and a Socratic questioning that keeps things open. Which doesn't mean the text is unreadable. I don't like it when the critics say it's unreadable; I think it's very readable. There is play here, but it's not a Derridean free play, because it is too earnest and serious to be Derridean. And in fact the comedy has difficulty surfacing. We get it at the very end, with the laughing of the little flame-colored boy in the last chapter, but the laughter is so tear-soaked and hard-earned that it is very different from what we associate with deconstructionist readings, it seems to me. This is certainly not just about language or textuality; this is really all about the humanist notion of the soul, and the heart, and our tragic choices. Melville recognizes the price you have to pay for each option you chose, and isn't that the truth?

DGB: You have to pay to play, the cosmopolitan might say. Are we back to money, the fundamentally transactional character of the call for help?

CW: Do you remember that wonderful line in *Miss Lonelyhearts* when Nathaniel West says something like, "The commercial spirit is the father of lies"? There's always a whiff of death when we talk about lies and mendacity, so you get this existential connection with the economic, just as we have the link between epistemology and the state of one's soul. Yes, this is all a kind of Socratic questioning, an open investigation of what it means to be human – but at the same time you're right that there is something very American here, in terms of the ubiquitous character of market relations and business transactions.

DGB: What about truth? Melville puts in the mouth of a forbidding character – the 'ursine' Missourian, clad in skins – one of the most memorable lines of the whole book:

[W]ith some minds truth is, in effect, not so cruel a thing after all, seeing that, like a loaded pistol found by poor devils of savages, it raises more wonder than terror – its peculiar virtue being unguessed, unless, indeed, by indiscreet handling, it should happen to go off of itself.

This image is a notch more complicated than the later business about truth as a 'thrashing-machine.' *That* we get: truth is dangerous, but used correctly, it feeds us – it's a tool. Much more unsettling is this business about the loaded gun. Because what we have here is truth that is in fact *not* scary or dangerous at all at first. Rather, it's fascinating – until we screw around with it just a little too much, ignoramuses that we are. At which point it may or may not be fatal, but its real 'virtue' – death-dealing – we only realize too late. Moreover, once it has 'gone off' it is, it would seem, perfectly inert forevermore. And this feels to me like a powerful way of understanding the 'loadedness' of the epistemological enterprise, of the whole Western philosophical tradition since Descartes...

CW: I think of the final scene again, and the voices calling from the darkness: "To bed with ye, ye divils, and don't be after burning your fingers with the likes of wisdom." We get truth as a gun that could go off at any moment and wisdom as a consuming fire better left untouched.

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DGB: What do we make of these ways of accounting for the humanist's cherished ideals of truth and wisdom?

CW: Well, there's a sense in which you have to go back to *Hamlet*. One of the things that is so distinctive about that play is the sense you get that Shakespeare has seen so much, and seen *through* so much, that his wisdom is indeed loaded – that it's deadly. And, sure enough, we see the pile of corpses at the end, and we see the death-in-life in the characters themselves, and we know that without the right kind of handling the truth could go off in us, and it just might do us in. At that point – and this is really what *The Iceman Cometh* is all about – the logic of *paideia* is self-destruction.

DGB: I think I'm going to be sick...

CW: Now this is unsettling to humanists like myself, like you. We get a resonance here with Melville, because if you really see too much, see through too much, the danger is not just the darkness but *the inability to get out of the darkness*. Paul Tillich used to always say, "You can't talk about truth without talking about *the way to truth*; you can't talk about wisdom without talking about *the path to wisdom*."

DGB: Suddenly I am more interested in talking about *the way back*...

CW: You have to be wise in your quest for wisdom. It sounds paradoxical, but you do.

DGB: It makes me think of Descartes again. Since we sometimes forget that he doesn't simply embark on his scorched-earth campaign of radical doubt. First, he sets up his *morale provisoire*, a 'provisional morality' to which he will adhere

doggedly in that dangerous interval during which he intends to place all accepted ideas in the crucible of skepticism.

And that 'placeholder' morality was, naturally, precisely conformal with quotidian ethical practices – the Jesuits at La Flèche had trained their pupil well! I had a student when I was teaching at Columbia who described the *moral provisoire* as Descartes' "ethical bungee-cord": before leaping into the abyss of doubt he harnesses himself on a long, elastic tether to the bridge of conventional, bourgeois Christian morals.

CW: It's the perfect image. Now with all these warnings about truth and wisdom, there's clearly a sense in which Melville is talking about his own text – *The Confidence-Man* – and telling us that his book is explosive, and that if it's not handled delicately, it could lead to a cynicism, a misanthropy, and so forth. There's a mature way of wrestling with this darkness, and there's an immature way of wrestling with this darkness. Where does the maturity come from? Well, it's the same issue as where we learn the wisdom to deal wisely in our quest for wisdom. There's a paradox here. There's a circularity here – a hermeneutical circle.

DGB: I want to go back to the business about the convergence of the logic of *paideia* and the logic of destruction.

This puts me in mind of a certain character who means a great deal to both of us. Isn't the intersection of *paideia* and death exactly the story of Jesus Christ? Let me press for a moment on the personal side of all this: you and I, Cornel, we are believers, we are Christians.

CW: Oh, absolutely. Of a certain sort, a self-styled Christianity, absolutely.

DGB: And I keep insisting that *The Confidence-Man* is, fundamentally, a hopeful text – and I think that is a reading conditioned by my sense . . .

CW: That you know where you have placed your bets . . .

DGB: Exactly. I read this book as a parable about the necessity of faith. When someone comes into the room and says, ‘Knowledge cannot save you,’ I say, ‘Amen, I know that story . . .’

CW: You affirm it, recognize it, and say yes.

DGB: Cornel, I think that ultimately the confidence man is a messianic figure, that the apotheosis of the con-man is a messiah. Whoever can make us believe *all the way to the end* has saved us. That is what this book is about. Is that too simpleminded?

CW: Do you know that wonderful line in T. S. Eliot’s introduction to Pascal’s *Pensées*, where he says the demon of doubt ought to be part of one’s faith, ought to be always already there? Now what does that mean? Well, W. H. Auden draws this distinction between the tragedy of fate and the tragedy of possibility. The tragedy of fate is found in the Greeks – Sophocles, let’s say. And the tragedy of possibility is very much the Christian story, with Good Friday, the crucifixion, and then that Beckett-like space of Saturday, waiting for God, waiting for Godot, and then *surprised by joy*: Easter.

But then on Monday, when the resurrection has taken place, the world is still a hellish place, right? It’s not as if the resurrection has made any real difference in the ‘City of Man.’ Yes, for Christians it prefigures something to come.

Yes, for the Christian “He is risen, hal-lelujah, He is risen.” But there are still children in the gutter, eating garbage.

So for me, reading *The Confidence-Man* as a devotee of that first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus – and my Christian sensibility is profoundly Chekhovian – for me, reading this text, I am so radically *unhoused* as a Christian. I am pushed to the wall by Melville’s Saturday-sensibility. Which is to say, the crucifixion has taken place, catastrophe has already occurred – and we’ve already noted the degree to which Melville is an artist of catastrophe. Hope? I don’t think that for him, whatever threadbare possibility there is – I don’t think there’s anything like what we need to get to *Sunday*, to get to *Easter*.

Now yes, Melville is wrestling with the angel of meaning, he’s wrestling with the angel of death the way Jacob did – but he can’t get a new name, you know? He’s a *god-wrestler* like Israel, but he remains a god-wrestler *all the way down*. Am I attracted to him? Yes. But I don’t see the object of faith there for him. I don’t see the end and the aim – the *telos* of faith. Or at least it isn’t ever going to be what we Christians would want. His skepticism is too deep; for him, that demon of doubt that Eliot talks about *stands at the center*. And this is what that Hawthorne letter was about, the one I quoted before: “He can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief.” Wittgenstein faced the same predicament, right?

DGB: Let’s go back to Auden. You know the great line from his *Christmas Oratorio*:

*Joseph, you have heard
What Mary says occurred;
Yes, it may be so.
Is it likely? No.*

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CW: Right! [Laughs]

DGB: [Laughs] Well there is the beauty of it! Remember when Melville writes that the true ‘original character’ is like a “revolving Drummond light” – basically a stage spotlight?

CW: The *As You Like It* formulation of the world in general ...

DGB: Yes, perhaps – though the reference is here mediated by technology in a strange way. But anyway, my point is this: you know the way that every Catholic church organizes the sacred space of the altar in the center of a threefold figuration of the Holy Family: the crucifix behind, Mary usually stage right, Joseph stage left?

CW: Yes.

DGB: I feel as if the Drummond light of the confidence man bathes this triptych in its own distinctive glow. There could hardly be a more fantastic confidence game than the fundamental, foundational Christian mythology: a story about parturition without sexual contact, a story of God made man, a story of death that gives life. What we’ve got here is a project to look the most basic truths about human existence – logical, empirical – right in the face, and then to deny them flat. And it was carried off with such aplomb, with such sublime confidence, that it succeeded in changing the shape of the world and bringing radical novelty to the experience of the human across seven continents and two thousand years.

CW: I hear you.

DGB: Here’s the thing: it doesn’t scare me to have that Drummond light set up

square on the very altar – to have it illuminate that threefold figuration of our faith for a moment, and to have Melville remind me that this is a kind of conjuration, possibly the most spectacular conjuration known to humanity. I’m not worried. After all, there we are enacting that faith in yet another conjuration: ‘This is my body ...’ It is? A fitting sacrament for the altar of such a faith. Perfect! And anyway, where are you going to stand and tell me that it’s all ‘wrong’?

CW: But it’s not that simple. Once you let loose a lie in the world, it can easily take on a life and logic of its own. So that it may initially have been sustaining or whatnot, but the canker works gradually. The danger is that lies can become habit-forming. [Laughs] That’s part of what Melville is saying here too, you see?

DGB: Well now, after all, the truth has been so much our friend – the truth has done us so many favors. If I sound a little acidic here, I am borrowing Melville’s acid. The truth? Oh, you want to play with the truth, well hang on, I’ve got it for you right here – Oh my! It’s a loaded gun and you don’t know what to do with it ...

CW: If not delicately handled, you’re right. I mean there’s a certain practical wisdom that goes together with truth telling, but the same is true for lie telling. Think of Plato’s “Noble Lie” ...

DGB: Truth? Lies? The necessity of faith is what we are left with in this world. We have extinguished the epistemological questions – out they went with the solar lamp of the final scene. All that business of proof and evidence doesn’t apply here. The tools of propositional calculus or the techniques for

making a taxonomy of the cryptograms – all that stuff is irrelevant now. We are now talking about final things . . .

CW: But on the other hand, Melville is here to remind us that our attempt to extinguish metaphysical questions in a move toward the existential may *itself* be another illusion, another masquerade, another mode of evasion, another kind of distraction. Because maybe – maybe the truth is death. You hear what I'm saying? Eternal death, eternal darkness, absolute tragedy. You see what I mean?

DGB: You say the truth may be death, but I'm holding the gun very, very carefully . . .

CW: Exactly. I hold it carefully with you, brother, absolutely. But intellectual integrity requires pushing as far as you can; you have to try to sort things out; you have to try to achieve some coherence, some consistency.

DGB: Really?

CW: Oh yes, I think so.

DGB: Well you go ahead. I don't buy it. This is the game the folks play over in the philosophy department. They have made intellectual integrity into a little ring, a little agonistic space where there is basically one rule: the law of noncontradiction. You can't have A and not-A. And if they can maneuver you into that arena, they'll kick your tail.

CW: But that agon is *indispensable* . . .

DGB: Really? It has nothing to do with human life. To be human is A *and* not-A – that is our fundamental condition.

CW: OK, but what about cell phones and bridges? I mean science and technology you have to acknowledge, right?

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DGB: The desire to transcend the human condition can take several forms: we can aspire to be angels, or we can aspire to be machines. I prefer the former.

CW: Well, see, for somebody like myself, a Chekhovian Christian, I don't want to transcend the human at all. I want to revel in the human, acknowledge the call for help, connect back to the human sources that sustain me in space and time and human history. I don't think the transcendence of the human is a positive move in any direction.

DGB: So interesting. But what about Christian transcendence? What about *Sunday*?

CW: We *wait* for Sunday. See, you've got two levels here. Oh, this is very good stuff – this is powerful stuff! There are two levels here: one is the Dostoyevskian level, which is the inability to *live* Christianity – the simple impracticability of real Christian life. I'm thinking of the Sermon on the Mount, yes, but also of the Sermon on the Plain, the sixth chapter of Luke. I'm thinking of the wrestling in *The Brothers Karamazov*. So we Christians, who have the audacity to say that the seemingly weakest force on earth – love – will ultimately transform a world of hatred and bigotry and cruelty and xenophobia and domination and oppression, we also seem to make the best haters!

And then, on top of that, here comes Melville, saying, 'But anyway, what difference does the practical part make? Since y'all are just enacting a *masquerade*

anyway, with various kinds of masks that hide the incongruity and the dubitability of this set of *illusions* that you call the Christian story.' See, here is where Melville pushes a Christian like me up against the wall. Dostoyevsky already worked the gut pretty hard, and here comes Melville swinging for my head!

DGB: Oh, but Cornel I don't buy it. You're way too smooth! These guys haven't got you against the wall...

CW: [Laughing] I'm swinging back, I'm like Ali on the ropes. I'm saying to myself, you know, "Foreman's not going to do me in..."

DGB: [Laughing] There's no way!

CW: That's right, I'm coming off the ropes!

DGB: To be sure! Because if there was ever a character who had the moves, who had the silver tongue...

CW: Who's moving all the time...

DGB: Who can come back for Jesus – *it would be you!*

CW: Ha!

DGB: Let me just say it again: If, in the end, as this book suggests, it's smoke and mirrors *all the way down*, then I would want the smoke and the mirrors in your hands, brother.

CW: But you have to understand, that grotesque Negro cripple with whom we started – he is part of my own heritage. Because what you actually have there is a jazz-like figure, an improvisational figure on the ropes, a figure who's able to

use smoke and mirrors not just to survive catastrophe but to try to maintain a certain kind of sanity and dignity, a certain kind of compassion, and a certain kind of hope. And Melville sees that in his grotesque Negro cripple – who signifies all those Black folks in America, on the *underside* in America, always on the ropes, preserving a hope against hope, but doing it in such a way that they're not trying to trump somebody else's options and alternatives. That's why Black Guinea inspires me to try to be a blues man in the life of the mind, to play jazz in the world of ideas. And Melville? He's my agnostic comrade and democratic companion!

DGB: Cornel, I'll tell you what, do you remember what I said about a lesson of *The Confidence-Man* being that you should never have a philosophical champion or a prophetic hero to whom you have not owed money? Well here is the thing: Cornel, I am in need – I am in desperate need of *a hundred dollars*...

CW: [Laughing, taking a roll of bills from his vest-pocket] Oh, that is marvelous! Lord! Oh, this is a good *time*, man!

DGB: [Laughing] Oh! My! Look at all that green! Oh! That *is* the money shot! Oh, that is too good! OK, we'll stop, we've got to stop, stop the tape...

[Both continue laughing...]