

abbott lawrence in *the confidence-man*

american success
or american failure?

william norris

“Where does any novelist pick up any character? For the most part, in town, to be sure. Every great town is a kind of man-show, where the novelist goes for his stock, just as the agriculturist goes to the cattle-show for his.”¹ So the narrator of Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* candidly observes in an interpolated chapter distinct from the narrative itself. There is little need to be leery of accepting such a statement as a part of Melville’s artistic credo, for we know how heavily he draws on characters from life. In this novel he unquestionably shanghai’s Emerson, Poe, and the “original confidence man” (a canny operator probably named William Thompson) aboard the steamship *Fidèle*, and many scholars have made cases for his having relied upon a host of other figures.² I wish to identify yet another character, the “gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons” of Chapter 7: I believe he is based on Abbott Lawrence, an eminent merchant-statesman-philanthropist of the period.

Yet Melville’s use of Lawrence and other contemporaries as character models illustrates much more than a habit of composition. Their function, however, is not simply to act out roles in a story in the traditional sense of fiction; in this novel, they serve to reflect Melville’s consciousness of his period’s social issues and problems, and his continual concern with ambiguities inherent in the total fabric of American life and the American experience. Moreover, for the discipline of American Studies, Melville’s use of characters from the “man-show” around him illustrates well how a writer can make use of cultural materials for artistic purposes, and incidentally, how the pursuit of what at first may seem a strictly literary matter (a source study) can actually provide significant insight into American cultural history—for Melville’s use of

Lawrence reveals a number of social, economic and political ramifications.

Abbott Lawrence and his elder brother Amos owned the firm of A. & A. Lawrence, which in the 1830s became a highly successful mercantile business in Boston. To increase profits the brothers entered the textile industry, operating looms at Lowell before building their own manufacturing center of Lawrence, Massachusetts (Lawrence, Kansas, is named for the elder brother's anti-slavery efforts). Abbott branched out into politics, serving two terms in the House, and only narrowly missing the nomination for vice-president on the Whig ticket in 1848. For his work in the election that year he was offered a choice of several cabinet posts, but chose instead to become Minister to Great Britain, where Melville met him in London in November 1849. Both brothers were famed throughout the United States for their philanthropy—indeed, were heralded as the highest type of the merchant prince, with Abbott especially well-known as an exemplar of the American Success Story. Abbott Lawrence died August 18, 1855, and his death made headlines not only in the larger newspapers, but was also duly noted by Melville's local journals, the *Pittsfield Sun*, the *Culturist and Gazette* and the *Berkshire County Eagle*. Apparently these obituaries of a famous man he had once met himself, coming when Melville had just begun *The Confidence-Man*, set him to thinking of including Lawrence in the novel.

Why might Melville have considered Lawrence as worthy material? Although we cannot be certain of Melville's frame of mind when he began his novel, we do know several facts which offer perspective. His physical health was none too good and his mental health had been questioned by some of his relatives. His serious works were largely failures, the aspiring young author of *Typee* having by 1855 found that the public taste and his artistic temperament were decades apart. In this context Melville wrote *The Confidence-Man*, and whatever else may be going on in this perplexing book, Melville is taking a rather cynical look at his fellow Americans. Interpretations of this novel are incredibly diverse, but it is hard to ignore Melville's repeated satire on society of the 1840s and 1850s. Sometimes the satire is aimed at a social type in general, as in the case of the merchant or the miser; at other times, Melville has a specific target. Emerson and his optimistic philosophy come under attack, and Poe is treated as a purveyor of an unsound philosophy of confidence.

The portrait of Lawrence fits this second category. Clearly the "man with gold sleeve-buttons" is a philanthropist, but as with Emerson and Poe and their philosophies, Melville saw curious anomalies in Lawrence and his philanthropy; and it is these anomalies, rather than simply a broad class, "philanthropists," which the chapter explores.

At first glance, Abbott Lawrence seems a pre-eminent exhibit of American Success. At age 15 he had come to Boston with three dollars

in his pocket; at 21 he was an equal partner in a highly successful business; at 42 he was a member of Congress, serving on the influential Ways and Means Committee; and at 56 he had become a respected statesman at the Court of St. James. Yet for all his wealth and achievement, he was hailed as one who did not neglect his responsibilities to his fellow man—his gifts to various charities were well-known in New England, and his donation of \$50,000 to Harvard in 1847 not only brought his name to a scientific school of the University, but gained him nation-wide fame as a philanthropist. He was indeed, as an 1846 pamphlet regarded him, one of “Our First Men.”³ His career seemed proof of the traditional American values of hard work, enterprise, thrift and humility (a few months before his death, Lawrence impressed a young visitor by reaching into his pocket and pulling out a *momento humilitas*—a pair of blunt scissors with which he had cut dry goods as a youth in his brother Amos’ store). He was regarded by his peers as a model citizen, and his life could have made a plot worthy of Horatio Alger.

But Melville was a man never easy with appearances, and when he looked beyond the surface of Lawrence’s life, penetrating “through the mask,” he raised trenchant questions about this “First Man,” this frequently praised philanthropist. Melville seriously questions a philanthropy that seems only a façade for a false humanitarianism—false because the economic base for the philanthropy is ultimately the inhuman institution of slavery; false because the motivation behind the philanthropy may be more of guilt than of charity; and false because the pervasive spirit of the philanthropy is not that of simple sympathy for mankind but of Wall Street.

As Harrison Hayford notes, we can identify the personages on Melville’s fictional voyages “by conspicuous details of their physical appearance, of their previous careers, and of their known attitudes and philosophies.”⁴ All three types of evidence, as I will show, point to Abbott Lawrence as the particular philanthropist Melville had in mind when he wrote the novel, and seeing Lawrence as the model for this character makes for a much clearer reading of Chapter 7 and indicates Melville’s deep concern about America’s superficial definitions of success and goodness.⁵

This chapter opens with the confidence-man explaining his Seminole widows and orphans charity to a young clergyman he has just bilked. He is beginning to be smoked and breaks off his story to con another man nearby—the gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons. Melville gives a brief physical description of him: “he might have been five and fifty, perhaps sixty, but tall, rosy, between plump and portly, with a primy, palmy air. . . .”⁶ Though sketchy, this agrees perfectly with what we know of Lawrence. In 1854, for example, he was described as “a tall, portly, noble and dignified-looking man, about sixty years of age.”⁷

Melville also adds an unusual point about the man's dress: "The inner-side of his coat-skirts was of white satin, which might have looked especially inappropriate, had it not seemed less a bit of mere tailoring than something of an emblem, as it were; an involuntary emblem, let us say, that what seemed so good about him was not all outside; no, the fine covering had a still finer lining." Several contemporary sources make virtually the same observation, i.e., that the outer Lawrence reflected the inner man. The *Independent*, a New York newspaper, noted that while Lawrence had "an open and happy, rather than an intellectual countenance, his exterior fairly expressed the candid and catholic dispositions of his heart"; similarly, George W. Bungay (with perhaps a wry humor) recorded that "his head is bald, and shines as though it came fresh from the hands of a skilful varnisher and polisher; and it is quite evident that the shining qualities of the head are not so confined to the exterior of the skull, but seem rather to result from something brilliant within."⁸

Even more relevant is the overall impression given by the gentleman's presence:

The stranger was a man of more than winsome aspect. There he stood apart and in repose, and yet, by his mere look, lured the man in gray from his story. . . .

But, considering that goodness is no such rare thing among men—the world familiarly knows the noun; a common one in every language—it was curious that what so signalized the stranger, and made him look like a kind of foreigner, among the crowd (as to some it may make him appear more or less unreal in this portraiture), was but the expression of so prevalent a quality. Such goodness seemed his, allied with such fortune, that, so far as his own personal experience could have gone, scarcely could he have known ill, physical or moral; and as for knowing or suspecting the latter in any serious degree (supposing such degree of it to be), by observation or philosophy; for that, probably, his nature, by its opposition, was imperfectly qualified, or from it wholly exempted.

Melville's major point is that this man's distinction results from this aura of incredible "goodness." Certainly his own brief jottings about Lawrence in his 1849 journal suggest he had received something of this impression: "Mr. Lawrence was very kind, unaffected & agreeable. I like him much. He is a fine looking benevolent-seeming man."⁹ Melville met him only twice, and both meetings were short—but he caught the essence of the man. Actually, this is not surprising; the truth is that it is rare to find a contemporary description of Lawrence that does *not* allude to his captivating qualities.

To F. W. Ballard, for example, "none who ever saw him, or heard him speak, will be likely to forget the genial smile, the fascinating address, the impressive presence, and the abounding *bonhomme* of this natural nobleman."¹⁰ To Sarah M. Maury, "this accomplished gentleman and princely merchant" was "of graceful address; the expression of his face

highly intelligent and amiable, and his features very handsome. . . . No bigotry, intolerance, party feeling or blind passion could ever darken a mind so patient in reflection, so scrupulous in inquiry, and so just and generous in its conclusions. The name of this excellent man is known and respected throughout the Union, and strangers esteem it a privilege to be admitted to his intimacy; they are ever justly appreciated and hospitably entertained."¹¹ The *New York Daily Tribune* stressed the same qualities: Lawrence was "a man of generous impulses, courtly manners and a commanding presence. Were men of wealth usually guided by a consciousness of their duties, their responsibilities and their true interests, he would not have risen manifestly above his class; it was their shortcoming which made him tower so palpably and so grandly."¹²

Even his famous historian son-in-law, William Prescott, saw him much the same. Lawrence, "by the energy of his character and the winning frankness of his manners, acquired a remarkable ascendancy over all with whom he came in contact." Prescott noted that after negotiations with Lawrence, a foreign minister remarked that he "had so much frankness and cordiality in his address, and impressed one so entirely with his own uprightness, that he could do much in the way of negotiation that others could not."¹³ And finally, while joining this chorus of praise, Nathan Appleton's ironic choice of words suggests—at least partially—why Melville might have found Lawrence so suitable for a novel which questions basic American values and assumptions: "Prompt, energetic, with an intuitive insight into the characters of men, with sound judgment and an openness of character which won favor on the slightest acquaintance, he acquired the *confidence* [my italics] of the community in the highest degree."¹⁴

Reading contemporary accounts of Lawrence's career makes it clear that the confidence Abbott Lawrence inspired in part was simply the confidence that the American Dream was viable, that it was possible, by dint of one's own ability, to rise manifestly in the world. But even more importantly, what also seems to have caught the attention of Lawrence's contemporaries was the man's apparently successful resolution of the old dilemma all too often found concomitant to the acquisition of great wealth, i.e., the decline of the individual and social conscience. Through his own character and his benevolence, Lawrence served as a model. One may become rich, yes, and one does not have to neglect his own conscience or his fellow man in the process—witness Abbott Lawrence.

Thus we can see what Melville had in mind in the overblown description of the gentleman. Of course, many of these glowing testimonials are by Lawrence's personal friends—yet it is precisely this sort of sanctimonious idealizing that would irritate Melville the more if he saw something less than ideal behind such pious remarks. And actually,

it is a façade of total goodness that is carefully undermined as the chapter develops.

The unmasking begins when the narrator notes that on one hand this good gentleman

wore a white kid glove, but the other hand, which was ungloved, looked hardly less white. Now, as the *Fidèle*, like most steamboats, was upon deck a little soot-streaked here and there, especially about the railings, it was a marvel how, under such circumstances, these hands retained their spotlessness. But, if you watched them a while, you noticed that they avoided touching anything; you noticed, in short, that a certain negro body-servant, whose hands nature had dyed black, perhaps with the same purpose that millers wear white, this negro servant's hands did most of his master's handling for him; having to do with dirt on his account, but not to his prejudice.¹⁵

Apparently this gentleman is spotless because he does not touch any dirt, "good" because someone else buffers any unpleasantry he may contact. If we have any doubts about this interpretation, Melville quickly resolves them when he goes on—quite ingenuously—to compare the man with Pontius Pilate: "This gentleman, therefore, there is reason to affirm, was one who, like the Hebrew governor, knew how to keep his hands clean, and who never in his life happened to be run suddenly against by hurrying house-painter, or sweep; in a word, one whose very good luck it was to be a very good man." This second "clean hands" image, of course, assures us that Melville is chuckling in his beard.

Yet Melville is not through. Consider what happens in the next paragraph, perhaps the most devious in syntax in the entire novel:

Not that he looked as if he were a kind of Wilberforce at all; that superior merit, probably, was not his; nothing in his manner bespoke him righteous, but only good, and though to be good is much below being righteous, and though there is a difference between the two, not yet, it is to be hoped, so incompatible as that a righteous man can not be a good man; though, conversely, in the pulpit it has been with much cogency urged, that a merely good man, that is, one good merely by his nature, is so far from thereby being righteous, that nothing short of a total change and conversion can make him so; which is something which no honest mind, well read in the history of righteousness, will care to deny; nevertheless, since St. Paul himself, agreeing in a sense with the pulpit distinction, though not altogether in the pulpit deduction, and also pretty plainly intimating which of the two qualities in question enjoys his apostolic preference; I say, since St. Paul has so meaningly said, "scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die;" therefore, when we repeat of this gentleman, that he was only a good man, whatever else by severe censors may be objected to him, it is still to be hoped that his goodness will not at least be considered criminal in him. At all events, no man, not even a righteous man, would think it quite right to commit this gentleman to prison

for the crime, extraordinary as he might deem it; more especially, as, until everything could be known, there would be some chance that the gentleman might after all be quite as innocent of it as he himself.

In *Trials of the Word*, R. W. B. Lewis clarified and commented on this convoluted passage:

He had, Melville tells us with a straightforward air, the “very good luck to be a good man”; although, Melville adds, he could not perhaps be called righteous. . . . Still, Melville goes on, the gentleman’s goodness, if falling short of righteousness, should even so not be regarded as a *crime*; or anyhow (pressing the argument onward) not a crime for which the poor fellow should be sent to jail, since after all he might have been innocent of it. This is mental and moral sabotage. . . . Melville is of course insinuating that the gentleman with the gold buttons is not good at all: that his alleged goodness is no more than willful, self-protective innocence, thus reinforcing an earlier hint that the gentleman was the kind who refused to dirty his hands in the dilemmas of ethical choice, and was moral brother to history’s most notorious hand-washer, “the Hebrew governor”—Pontius Pilate. Before Melville’s prose is through with him, this very good man is lumped with those responsible for the crucifixion of Christ; and Melville has delivered himself of a very searching moral insight.¹⁶

But naturally the question is, what has all this to do with Abbott Lawrence? On what grounds does Melville question Lawrence’s right to respect and praise? The thread to pull is in Melville’s remark that the gentleman did not look “as if he were a kind of Wilberforce at all.” Since William Wilberforce was a famed abolitionist, and since it is a Negro who does the gentleman’s handling for him (thus allowing his hands to remain lily white), the clues suggest that the man’s lack of righteousness is somehow tied in with slavery. And if we examine Lawrence’s career, we find that this great moral question was indeed his Achilles heel.

Put baldly, Lawrence gave thousands for charity—but those thousands came from profits of textile mills fed on southern cotton, some 65,000 pounds a week in 1845.¹⁷ True, Lawrence kept no slaves; but then, he had no need to, for he could keep his moral hands clean while southern planters dirtied theirs. Yet to understand how this could be so damning, and to appreciate the irony of Melville’s vision, it is necessary to review the political polarization that took place in the 1840s and 50s.

Lawrence was a “Cotton Whig.” His party brethren, the “Conscience Whigs,” were antislavery and gagged at Whigs like Lawrence because such men placed other considerations—the preservation of the Union, good business or whatever excuse was handy—above the moral issue. In the black-white logic of this troubled era, Cotton Whigs—because they did not *oppose* slavery—therefore *defended* slavery.

His Negro problem began when he ran for Congress in 1834. Appar-

ently Lawrence tried to play both sides, roundly condemning slavery as a Great Moral Evil, but adding that he wanted to go down to Washington with no restraints on his opinions. William Lloyd Garrison was so outraged (although being a testy man he outraged easily) with Lawrence's waffling that he supported Lawrence's opponent and, after Lawrence won, even berated the Negroes of Suffolk for voting for him.¹⁸ The next year Lawrence was vice-president of the Faneuil Hall meeting that attacked abolitionists for supposedly endangering the Union. This position was actually a turnaround for Lawrence. Only two years earlier he had felt that the dissolution of the Union was better than giving in to southern demands on the tariff. Hannah Josephson suggests that he switched because of southern talk of a boycott of the products of Lowell, where Lawrence had extensive interests. She points out that after he actively participated in the Faneuil Hall meeting which castigated abolitionists, he was a favorite of the southerners in Washington—and he further endeared himself to them by helping sidetrack a congressional consideration of slavery in the District.¹⁹

As years passed Lawrence's name was increasingly linked with the peculiar institution. In 1836 Charles Francis Adams attacked him and other Boston merchants for their "businessman's acceptance and defense of slavery."²⁰ By 1848 Edmund Quincy noted he was "the acknowledged head of the cotton interest" in Boston, and relates a telling anecdote about Lawrence wining a group of southern congressmen (up to Boston for John Quincy Adams' funeral) because the city was on a prohibitionist binge at the time and the southerners were exceedingly dry.²¹ Yet the most biting indictment is Emerson's use of his name in an 1846 reflection on the power of cotton in America: "Cotton thread holds the Union together; unites John C. Calhoun and Abbott Lawrence."²² The incongruity is startling, but it is precisely this kind of American paradox Melville is wrestling with throughout *The Confidence-Man*.

The climax to this aspect of Lawrence's career came at the Whig convention of 1848, where Taylor's backers tried to woo the North by selecting a New Englander for vice-president. They chose Lawrence because he was "safe" on the slavery issue.²³ Ironically, his closeness to the South tainted him: he lost the nomination because Clay's supporters would not have "king cotton both ends for the ticket."²⁴

In fairness, however, there is no evidence that Lawrence actually advocated slavery; it was simply his apparent placing of profits above morals that was disturbing. And to explain this required deft thinking. For example, one admirer of Lawrence wrote an ingenious defense based on the premise that wealth so often corrupts absolutely that it was a glory Lawrence was good at all. Shortly after Lawrence's death, *The Independent* (a Congregationalist antislavery newspaper) printed an anonymous "Letter from Boston" which read in part:

To have expected of Mr. Lawrence that on all great social and moral questions, he would show the perfect clear-sightedness of a moral philosopher, or act with the single reference to the abstract rights and equities of humanity, which is illustrated in the reformers and public opinion and innovators on old abuses [i.e., slavery], would have been to look for a hero or apostle, instead of a liberal-minded, upright, intelligent, devout citizen. Mr. Lawrence sustained the latter character in a very unusual measure, but not the former. He was not technically at least, a "Higher-Law" man; and that he was not, comprises the sum total of all that the severest judgment, by a Christian standard is likely to bring against him. He was a conservative by habit, by association, by the instincts of property, and probably by principle. If anything can be known of men, he was conscientious, he was generous, he feared God, and steadily sought to follow Christ. Is goodness so very cheap in this world that we can afford to withhold our cordial tribute of admiration and thanksgiving from attributes like these, triumphantly outliving the accumulation and possession of three million dollars!²⁵

If we equate "Higher-Law" with "righteousness," we have in essence the same kind of argument that Melville advances (in the paragraph citing the Pauline text). But the implication of Melville's concluding sentence is, of course, not that it is marvelous that Lawrence retained his goodness despite his wealth, but that Lawrence may, in fact, have been completely innocent of goodness. Certainly Melville himself was no rabid abolitionist, but he was definitely opposed to slavery. And since one of his greatest strengths as a man and as an author is his tenacious striving for truth, his persistent refusal to compromise his values for the sake of personal gain, it is not difficult to see him viewing as hypocritical a philanthropist who received his funds, even indirectly, from slavery—particularly if that philanthropist were so widely touted for his benevolence and humanity as was Abbott Lawrence.

Nor should we forget a second point about Lawrence that Melville would have seen as unsavory—the textile mills at Lawrence and Lowell. Melville pictures paper-mill life as (among other things) a hell for female labor in "The Tartarus of Maids," and it is unlikely he would be sympathetic toward the owner of mills of a similar kind. To be sure, there are indications that Lawrence's mills were slightly above average, but it is also true that New England mill life of any sort in this period was wretched. An Albany editor had pondered the irony of a philanthropy financed by sweat shops when Lawrence gave \$50,000 to Harvard in 1847:

That prince of manufacturers, Abbott Lawrence, has made a donation of \$50,000, for the purpose of erecting suitable buildings, and endowing professorships, for a new department of education in the University of Harvard. . . . And the inquiry has involuntarily arisen in our mind, from whence came this vast wealth? . . . Was any of this trumpet-tongued charity made up from the

sixpenny-a-week clippings from the wages of the weavers and spinners at Lowell? How many, many thousand extra hours of wearisome, life-wearing toil did it add to the overwrought limbs and hands of the operatives, in order that *one man* may be gazetted as a great public benefactor?²⁶

The same questions which occurred to this Albany editor apparently occurred to Melville as well.

At any rate, after impugning Lawrence's moral nature, Melville moves on to his repeatedly praised benevolence. The man in gray (who ironically now becomes "the righteous man") makes his pitch for the Seminole widows and orphans charity, and, "to the plea . . . the gentleman, after a question or two duly answered, responded by producing an ample pocketbook in the good old capacious style, of fine green French Morocco and workmanship, bound with silk of the same color, not to omit bills crisp with newness, fresh from the bank, no muckworms' grime upon them. Lucre those bills might be, but as yet having been kept unspotted from the world, not of the filthy sort."

Like the rest of the chapter, this paragraph is loaded. The gentleman responds readily to the request of the man in gray; Lawrence was unquestionably famous for his liberality. Yet there was something not quite right about Lawrence's benevolence, something not quite fitting with the generosity, an anomaly Melville subtly hints at by his observation of the "clean" lucre. Melville actually has lifted a quirk of Amos Lawrence, Abbott's brother: it was Amos who was known for giving away "clean" money (in his lifetime, over \$700,000—all very carefully recorded), most of it "donated in small sums, in . . . 'crisp, new bills' " which Amos specifically requested from his banker.²⁷ Obviously Melville makes this point to reinforce the earlier "clean hands" imagery; still, it is close enough to a foible of Abbott's to warrant a little artistic legerdemain. For "no muckworms' grime" fits a curious aspect of Lawrence's charity remarked by several of his contemporaries. In the words of Bungay, Lawrence "is a liberal to the poor, though he will not allow his funds to filter through his own hands to the needy. He prefers giving a large sum when he gives anything, but it must be distributed by those who are willing to come in contact with the sorrowing and distressed."²⁸ The issue Melville slyly raises, of course, is how genuinely humanitarian is the benevolence of a man concerned as much with avoiding unpleasantness as with mitigating misery? Just how sincere is antiseptic almsgiving?

The chapter now moves to a more specific level—the "World's Charity," which turns into a sardonic examination of the mingling of capitalism and Christianity. After some conversation, "the gentleman expressed his regrets that so many benevolent societies as there were . . . should not act in concert by coming together." This well suits the businessman Lawrence (and moments later the good gentleman refers to

charity as a “business”), who throughout his career was noted for his large-scale operations. The confidence-man smells opportunity and begins to develop this idea of magnitude and unification: “‘Sir,’ said he eagerly, ‘I am before you. A project, not dissimilar to yours, was by me thrown out at the World’s Fair in London.’” Strangely, however, the good gentleman interrupts him: “World’s Fair? You there? Pray how was that?” “First, let me—” “Nay, but first tell me what took you to the Fair?”

This dialogue creates an obvious question—why does Melville choose this roundabout way of narrative development? i.e., why is the gentleman so interested in the Fair? He himself had raised the subject of a union of charities—why is he the character insisting on a digression? Once more, seeing Lawrence as the gentleman gives an answer: he is interested in the World’s Fair because of his involvement with it. Indeed, according to S. G. Drake “the credit of American skill and industry in the Great Exhibition of 1851, was saved from public disgrace, and a large number of American inventors, mechanics, manufacturers, from sore disappointment by the prompt and liberal advances of Mr. Lawrence and Mr. George Peabody.”²⁹

What had taken the man in gray to the Fair was his “Protean easy-chair”—a truly remarkable invention. In the confidence-man’s oily words, in it “the most restless body, the body most racked, nay, I had almost added the most tormented conscience, must somehow and somewhere, find rest.” The good gentleman readily blesses this invention, and Melville’s probable reason for this tangential conversation is gently to hint that some philanthropists are motivated not by genuine humanitarianism but by guilt feelings. Lawrence’s often-praised donation of \$50,000 to Harvard provided for, among other things, chairs of natural science (Louis Agassiz accepted the first). Perhaps Melville is suggesting that Lawrence was aware of the issue raised by the Albany editor, and that such gifts stemmed partially from a conscience which did indeed recognize the ultimate source of the \$50,000.

The confidence-man then describes his “World’s Charity,” a grandiose scheme to wipe out both poverty and heathenism in fourteen years, advancing an idea, rooted in the free-wheeling principle of capitalism, that would appeal to Lawrence the merchant. The good gentleman had called charity a business. Now the confidence-man says he would energize missions “with the Wall Street spirit” by letting out conversion contracts to the highest bidder: “So much by bid for converting India, so much for Borneo, so much for Africa. Competition allowed, stimulus would be given. There would be no lethargy of monopoly. . . . I am for doing good to the World once for all and having done with it. . . . I am for sending ten thousand missionaries in a body and converting the Chinese *en masse* within six months of the debarkation.” Such a scheme is most appropriate to Lawrence’s character. Bungay noted that Law-

rence did “everything by wholesale and nothing in the retail line,”³⁰ which is apparently the point behind the confidence-man’s gibe that his scheme would “frighten none but a retail philanthropist.” And perhaps one of Lawrence’s last projects can clearly illustrate the concept of a “Wall Street spirit” charity. Lawrence “gave \$50,000 for the erection of model lodging-houses for the poor of Boston, his will directing ‘that of the net annual income . . . one-half should be distributed to organized public charities, not to individuals, and that the other half should be reserved by the trustees for the increase of the system of buildings’ ”; by 1884 the property was worth \$150,000 and had generated \$20,000 for charity.³¹

Also with regard to this Wall Street spirit, Johannes Bergmann quotes contemporary reactions to the “original confidence man” which draw interesting parallels between various “operators” on the American scene. For example, the New York *Herald* saw little distinction between the confidence man and financiers: “His genius has been employed on a small scale in Broadway. Theirs has been employed in Wall Street. That’s all the difference. He has obtained half a dozen watches. They have pocketed millions of dollars.” And Duyckinck’s *Literary World* excerpted an article from the *Merchants’ Ledger* making a similar case. It asks its readers to recall “the middle-aged gentleman with well-developed person and white waistcoat, who lays down the law in reference to the state of trade, sub-treasury and the tariff. . . . This is the confidence man of merchandise.”³² Lawrence had spoken on these issues many times and of course was very much a “man of merchandise”—and is a very good fit for the stereotyped description.

This, then, is the case for Abbott Lawrence as Melville’s “gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons.” He matches with regard to his physical appearance, deportment, manners and intellectual attitudes. Most importantly, facts of his life and career provide us with a reasonable and consistent interpretation of the entire chapter in which he appears, clearing up most of its puzzling features; moreover, this interpretation in turn meshes harmoniously with views of the work as a social satire and a questioning of American values and character.

Did Melville intend for his readers to recognize Lawrence? Probably not. I suspect that all these portraits of Lawrence and Poe and Emerson (and God only knows who else is aboard the *Fidèle*) were simply one of Melville’s ways of getting back at, putting one over on, *conning* the reading public which denied him economic success and artistic recognition and respect. Lawrence was a particularly fine symbol of this Establishment with which Melville—as an artist—never came to terms. Economically, this man was the money-hungry, penny-pinching power that made whaling ships a sort of hell; spiritually, he was the funder of the “civilizing” missionaries of *Typee* and *Omoo*; morally, he was a partner of the peculiar institution which hung over America like a curse of

doom; politically, he was an important representative of the faction-oriented political system of *Mardi's* Vivenza; and socially, he was the aristocrat in Melville's equalitarian vision of America. The American Establishment rejected Melville; in *The Confidence-Man* he rejected it.

Naturally we can call Melville's portrait of Lawrence unfair. Lawrence was not the first nor only man in that time or ours to make fantastic profits from the sweat of his fellow and then give some of the money to charity. But Melville's sympathy for man, and his own honesty and courage in facing the issues of the heart and mind made him, like the Albany editor, see the ironic hypocrisy in Lawrence's benevolence. By 1855 he was in no mood to accept appearances such as Lawrence presented or the naive traditionally optimistic American qualities he symbolized so well. I doubt that Melville felt any personal animosity toward him; Lawrence simply had the very bad luck to be a very handy man, an obvious emblem of American achievement, when Melville was beginning his novel, with the pious obituary preachments about his successful life and his charity and his goodness calling Melville's attention to him as worthy material.

There is one further point worth emphasizing. William Thompson (the "original confidence man") first surfaced in New York in 1849, Melville met Lawrence in 1849, he heard Emerson lecture in 1849, and his portrait of Poe fits this time as well. *The Confidence-Man* is much more concerned with Melville's own life in this period than is generally recognized, suggesting that he was turning once again to his own experience for his subject matter—though in a more complex way than ever before.

University of Cincinnati

footnotes

1. Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, Elizabeth Foster, ed. (New York, 1954), Chap. 44. All quotations from the novel are from this edition.

2. Egbert Oliver, "Melville's Goneril and Fanny Kemble," *NEQ* 18 (1945), 489-500, and "Melville's Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in *T C-M*," *CE*, 8 (1946), 61-72; Harrison Hayford, "Poe in *T C-M*," *NCF*, 14 (1959), 207-18; Johannes Bergmann, "The Original Confidence Man," *AQ*, 21 (1969), 560-77; Edwin Fussell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton, 1965), p. 313n.

3. *Our First Men* (Boston, 1846), 29-30.

4. Hayford, 207.

5. In her notes on this chapter, Elizabeth Foster suggests the man with gold sleeve-buttons "is the ideal, the all-good, the sound in both mind and heart," although she recognizes that the goodness stems from the gentleman's lack of involvement in "the conditions of mortal life, the ineluctable damaging" (305). This is a dubious ideal, if one must eschew the mortal life to achieve it. Melville's point is that while the man may appear to be ideal, a closer examination proves otherwise.

6. This, and all subsequent quotations from *The Confidence-Man*, are from Chapter 7, pp. 40-44.

7. George W. Bungay, *Off-Hand Takings* (New York, 1854), 116. Bungay wrote his sketch sometime between 1849 and 1852, since he notes Lawrence was minister to Great Britain. Born in 1792, Lawrence would have been 57 when Melville saw him in 1849, and not more than that when Bungay saw him, so his age fits closely. The point may be raised that Lawrence would have been 62 when he died in 1855, the summer Melville began the novel; however, the portraits of Emerson and Poe are both given as the men appeared in the late 1840s, when

Melville had seen Emerson (and possibly Poe as well). Interestingly, a sketch of Emerson follows Lawrence's in Bungay.

8. "A Letter from Boston," New York *Independent*, August 30, 1855, 1. This item also describes Lawrence as having "a fine, portly figure"; Bungay, 116.

9. Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log* (New York, 1951), I, 335.

10. *The Stewardship of Wealth*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1865), 15.

11. *The Statesmen of America in 1846* (Philadelphia, 1847), 56.

12. "Death of Abbott Lawrence," August 20, 1855, 4.

13. *Memoir of the Honorable Abbott Lawrence* (Boston, Printed for private distribution, 1856), 50, 23.

14. "Memoir of the Honorable Abbott Lawrence," Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 4th Ser., 4(1858), 498.

15. H. Bruce Franklin, in his edition of *TC-M* (New York, 1967), points out that the gentleman "has two kinds of scapegoat: a black servant and a white kid glove" (51 n.). But if we turn to an anecdote in Bungay we can see Melville may have still another meaning for the mention of the glove: "When Mr. Lawrence left his native town of Groton, he came to the capital of Massachusetts with a pair of buckskin gloves on his hands. It was during the Summer season, and some of the city gents laughed at the verdancy of the country lad" (117). Melville suggests Lawrence has overcome his earlier *faux pas*, for white kid gloves were a mark of the aristocracy in the 1840s, according to Meade Minnigerode, *The Fabulous Forties* (New York, 1924), Chap. 7. In addition, Bungay's sketch opens with the remark that the first time he saw him, Lawrence was in conversation with a Negro.

16. *Trials of the Word* (New Haven, 1965), 65.

17. Henry Miles, *Lowell, As It Was, And As It Is* (Lowell, 1845), 55.

18. Hannah Josephson, *The Golden Threads* (New York, 1949), 162; Wendell P. and Francis J. Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison* (New York, 1885), I, 455. Ironically, Lawrence may well have been the first politician to become embroiled in the slavery issue.

19. *The Golden Threads*, 162-63.

20. Arthur Beringause, *Brooks Adams* (New York, 1955), II.

21. M. A. DeWolfe Howe, "Biographer's Bait: A Reminder of Edmund Quincy," Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 68 (1944-47), 381.

22. *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, Bliss Perry, ed. (Boston, 1926), 219-20.

23. R. J. Rayback, *Millard Filmore*, Pub. of the Buffalo Hist. Soc., No. 40 (Buffalo, 1959), 174.

24. *Autobiography of Thurlow Weed*, Harriet Weed, ed. (Boston, 1884), I, 578, 586.

25. *Independent*, August 30, 1855, 1. For Melville's own attitude toward slavery, see Margaret Vanderhaar, "A Re-Examination of 'Benito Cereno,'" *AL*, 40 (1968), 182.

26. Quoted in Josephson, *The Golden Threads*, 177.

27. Josephson, *The Golden Threads*, 149; cf. two letters in *Extracts from the Diary and Correspondence of the Late Amos Lawrence* (Boston, 1855), which are especially illustrative. Both are addressed to one of Amos' partners: "Will you send me two thousand dollars this morning in Mr. Sharp's [a bank teller] clean money?" (204); also, "Tell Brother Sharp his beautiful bills find an exceedingly ready use, [and] I shall be glad of one hundred in ones and twos, two hundred in fives, and three hundred in tens and twenties; say six hundred dollars, just to keep me along till the end of the month" (178).

28. *Off-Hand Takings*, 118; the *Independent* obliquely makes much the same point in contrasting Abbott and Amos (see n. 25).

29. "Abbott Lawrence," *Barnard's American Journal of Education*, I (1856), 207.

30. *Off-Hand Takings*, 117.

31. [Wendell P. Garrison], rev. of *Memoir of Abbott Lawrence*, by Hamilton Hill, *Nation*, 34 (25 Sept. 1884), 271.

32. Bergmann, 563-66.