Destroyer of *Confidence*: James Gordon Bennett, Jacksonian Paranoia, and the Original Confidence Man

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Zachary Taylor's 1849 inaugural address began, "The confidence and respect shown by my countrymen in calling me to be the Chief Magistrate of a Republic holding a high rank among the nations of the earth have inspired me with feelings of the most profound gratitude." With his opening invocation of *confidence*, Taylor echoes two tropes characteristic of Jacksonian presidential rhetoric. First, *confidence* signifies the democratic mandate that empowers the executive branch. William Henry Harrison ended his marathon address by emphasizing the "entire confidence" he shared with "a just and generous people" in his ability to "discharge the high duties of [his] exalted station." This latter phrase, like Taylor's "high rank among the nations of the earth," shows that *confidence* also alludes to the assurance and ambition that justifies manifest destiny. Franklin Pierce would make this the crux of his address, speaking of a "hopeful confidence" that assured him that even "if your past is limited, your future is boundless" and the "unexplored pathway of advancement . . . will be limitless as duration."

Preceding the epochal election of Abraham Lincoln, eight consecutive president-elects made *confidence* a centerpiece of their inaugurations. The twin implications of *confidence* in these speeches—executive power emanating from electoral populism and urgent imperialism driven by nationalism—are, of course, both substantially embodied by the president who named the era. However ineffectual his successors were, all emulated Andrew Jackson's campaign tactics, including his exceptionalist rhetoric of confidence. Jackson spoke of

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confidence in nearly every public address, as appreciation for the public's faith and as the reason for America's political, economic, and military resiliency. His fabled populism is on display even in his private correspondence, as when he tells James Hamilton Jr., in a letter anticipating tariff disputes that would climax in the 1832 nullification crisis, that he has "great confidence in the virtue of the great majority of the people."[1]

But even for Jackson, *confidence* also contained specific cynical connotations, usually associated with finance. The first populist debate over America's economic infrastructure—Jackson's campaign to revoke the charter of the Second Bank of the United States—was replete with appeals to confidence. Jackson would accuse the Second Bank of having "destroyed the confidence of the public" and having the potential "to destroy the confidence of mankind in popular governments."[2] A letter to a protégé makes clear that Jackson recognized the rhetoric of confidence as potentially duplicitous, even though he relied heavily on it. He writes, "The advice I give to all my young friends . . . as they pass through life *have apparent confidence in all, real confidence* in none."[3] More than two decades before the term *confidence man* would be coined, Jackson gives voice to the archetype's paradigmatic paradox, what Kathleen De Grave, in her study of nineteenth-century con artists, calls "the mixture of cynicism and idealism [which] is as essential to the American tradition as are Franklin and Paine."[4] The character De Grave identifies as a literary antecedent to the con-man archetype is, appropriately, an allegorical incarnation of President Jackson, J. J. Hooper's Simon Suggs.[5]

As Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857) dramatizes, the word *confidence* was, hauntingly, a lexical nexus for many distinguishing traits of Jacksonian America. Depending on context, it could describe or promote not only the growth of executive power, exceptionalism, and populism but also the rapid and largely organic development of sprawling economic and legal infrastructures. As Stephen Mihm demonstrates in *A Nation of Counterfeiters* (2007), confidence, both rhetorical and psychological, was the central force sustaining commerce and finance. When Mihm says "at its core, capitalism was little more than a confidence game," he is echoing Melville's officer of the Philosophical Intelligence Office who, on extracting his fee from one of the novel's most stubborn skeptics, says, "Confidence is the indispensible basis of all sorts of business transactions. Without it, commerce between man and man, as between country and country, would, like a watch, run down and stop."[6] Nascent antebellum markets for currency, securities, and other forms of credit were largely unregulated, frequently prone to corruption and fraud, and liable to collapse under minimal public scrutiny. But, despite apparent imperfections, these markets were essential to supporting an economy of goods and services that was growing much more rapidly than its stock of liquid capital. Stock waterers, coin clippers, note shavers, wildcat bankers, and other forms of counterfeiters and con artists, many of whom are passengers aboard Melville's steamboat microcosm, were frequently performing, as Mihm puts it, "a public service

by increasing the amount of money in circulation in a part of the world where the demand for money invariably outstripped the supply."[7] Both on the frontier and in overpopulated metropolises, the line between legitimate and criminal enterprise was not clearly drawn, and the former often depended on the latter, which may be one reason that the con-artist archetype adapted very easily to portrayals of both petty villains and romantic heroes. As Melville's friend Evert Duyckinck put it in his *New York World*, "It is not the worst thing that can be said of a country that it gives birth to a confidence man."[8]

As Duyckinck's quote suggests, because the con, at least in sobriquet, is uniquely American, many took patriotic pride even in its pejorative implications. As Daniel Williams writes, "All instances of fraud [were] presented as ingenious acts of self-creation and [were] ironically justified as demonstrations of 'his country's genius.'"[9] The con man would evolve rather quickly into the antiheroic protagonist who remains well represented in U.S. literature and cinema. This essay, however, examines efforts by the popular newspaper editor who introduced the confidence man to the public to use the figure to expose the fragility of the antebellum economy and discredit the rhetoric of confidence used by politicians, financiers, and rival pundits to protect it. James Gordon Bennett, owner, editor, and primary correspondent for the *New York Herald*, spent the 1850s programmatically dismantling public confidence in Wall Street and the broader system of political economy with which it was increasingly intertwined. Although Bennett characterized himself as a champion of Jacksonian Democracy, the Union, and free trade, he would see all three endangered by the widespread political discord and economic anxiety that he was substantially responsible for provoking in his large and diverse readership. The story of the origin of the confidence man is also the story of the culture of disunion and of the mutual anxiety of influence between organized finance and mass media that persists into the twenty-first century.

Perhaps because they recognized to some degree the ambivalent ubiquity of the financial innovation and chicanery that Mihm documents, Jacksonian American readers had a rapacious appetite for stories of deviance. As Bruce Franklin shows, "By the early nineteenth century the lives of criminals were becoming an especially popular American literary form."[10] Bennett, a veteran reporter for the "six-penny" mercantile papers that catered to bourgeois New York, recognized that a "penny paper" marketed to the Jacksonian proletariat would be wise to covet erotic, violent, and other sensational content reminiscent of adventure novels, melodramatic theater, pornographic pamphlets, and other forms of inexpensive urban entertainment. The front page of the first issue of Bennett's *New York Herald* was dedicated to the murder trial of Robert Matthews, a religious imposter, extortionist, and Don Juan who cofounded a cult in New Jersey, was suspected of murdering his partner, and attempted, unsuccessfully, to usurp Joseph Smith in the Mormon communes of Ohio.[11] If Matthews had been tried two decades later, Bennett would undoubtedly have labeled him a "confidence man."

The *Herald* catered to the public's peculiar taste for criminality by introducing its idioms into every aspect of publication. Headlines and ledes for all variety of articles favored an increasingly vast vocabulary of deception. Words like *swindle*, *scam*, *dupe*, *rope*, *hoodwink*, *mark*, *fixer*, *quack*, *sucker*, *diddler*, and *humbug*—many of which, like *con man*, were invented or popularized by Jacksonian Americans—gravitated from the crime and court pages to coverage of politics, sports, society, diplomacy, and commerce.[12] This expanding lexicon of malfeasance is evidence that innovative criminality was indeed prevalent in antebellum America, but the energy and eagerness with which Jacksonian readers consumed and perpetuated stories of sensational crime also explains how they became increasingly predisposed to believe that ingenious criminal masterminds were lurking everywhere.

During the same month Bennett launched the *Herald*, Virgil Stewart and Augustus Walton began circulating the pamphlet that would become the best-selling *History of Virgil Stewart* (1836). In this masterpiece of conspiracy theory and synthesized prejudice, Stewart alleges that John Murrell, a professional horse thief against whom Stewart had testified in Tennessee the previous year, was in league with a "mystic clan" of abolitionists, free blacks, land speculators, Jews, and Whigs to instigate a Christmas Day slave uprising as a diversion for a series of carefully orchestrated bank robberies in New Orleans and other southern metropolises. The *Arkansas Gazette* hailed Stewart as "the Jackson Truth Teller," both for his stated affinity for the president and because he hailed from the very town that had been named after the hero of the Battle of New Orleans. Allusions to Murrell and his Mystic Clan would be common to the penny papers that flourished in the coming decade, including the *Herald*. A "versatile chevalier" hawks pamphlets about Murrell and other mythic frontier criminals in the opening scene of *The Confidence-Man*.[13] But, while Murrell's trial was real enough, Stewart's *History* is obviously a work of propagandistic fiction written in the aforementioned paranoid style, which erects a false coherence around recent traumatic events and marshals the fear and bigotry of aggrieved constituencies to a partisan cause.[14]

Apparent efforts to enfranchise, educate, and innovate helped associate Jackson with the imaginative optimism of Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman.[15] But Jackson is also complicit in the growth of the paranoid canon in both size and stature. Jackson's reputation for patriotism and populism disguised the deep insecurity bred by childhood trauma, abandonment, libel, and betrayal. This suspicious temperament, which provoked him to recommend "apparent confidence in all, real confidence in none," is as representative of the era as Whitman's mania. Jackson's Janus faces, manic neophilia, and reactionary paranoia were emulated by many of his constituents, including Bennett, who presented his paper as an explicit instrument of manifest destiny. In a characteristically fiery 1836 editorial, Bennett promised that by increasing the *Herald*'s cover price by one cent, he could "bring about more

rapidly my great New Testament schemes of reform in business, in politics, in morals, in social life, and in religious feelings and practices." He concluded,

> I am determined to make the *Herald* the greatest paper that ever appeared in the world. . . . Books have had their day—the theatres have had their day—the temple of religion has had its day. A newspaper can send more souls to Heaven, and save more from Hell, than all the churches and chapels in New York—besides making money at the same time. Let it be tried.[16]

Based on such declarations, Bennett would seem to share Emerson's and Whitman's faith in the ameliorative powers of democratic governance, entrepreneurship, and individualism, but in the coming decades, while never abandoning the exceptionalist rhetoric, Bennett would frequently use the *Herald* to foster luddism, xenophobia, and other reactionary politics.

In 1969, Johannes Bergmann identified the first appearance of the term *confidence man* in Bennett's *Herald* in the summer of 1849. Bergmann's discovery prompted a fleeting interest in tracing the term's proliferation in print over the next decade, concerned primarily with anticipating the publication of Melville's novel on April Fool's Day 1857.[17] This limited investigation into the origin of the term coincided with a brief trend in American literature and American studies scholarship dedicated to analyzing the archetype of the confidence man and the trope of the confidence game in U.S. culture, climaxing with Karen Halttunen's *Confidence Men & Painted Women* (1982).[18] Most of these studies assumed one of two things: either that both the term *confidence man* and the mythic figure associated with it were already established in colonial folklore (it was therefore mere coincidence that the *Herald* was the first to make that tradition a part of the historical record) or that it was a self-referential moniker invented by the petty criminal who was the focus of the *Herald* articles. Most previous scholarship on the con man treats the *Herald* as merely Melville's window to the antebellum world, a vehicle through which he received and organized the cultural detritus of the metropolis and the nation. This obscures the fact that the *Herald* was itself a revolutionary, persuasive, and imaginative shaper of that culture, dominated by an autocratic editor in chief. As I shall demonstrate, the con-man mythos was conspicuously convenient to the designs of the *Herald*'s editor, who used the associated terms with greater frequency than any of his peers throughout the coming decade. Whether or not Bennett invented the con man, he ensured the permanent popularity of both the epithet and many of the tropes associated with it.

My interest goes beyond establishing the *Herald* as one of the Melville's primary sources, though it certainly was.[19] Melville's novel—subtle, haunting, and prophetic as it proves to be—is a misleading place to begin a study of the confidence man in American language and literature. For one thing, the abun-

dance of punning and riffing on *confidence* within the novel suggests that Melville believed that the duplicitous rhetoric of confidence was already familiar and even transparent to at least some portion of his imagined readership. Edwin Fussell states that "every word is ironic," as Melville's novel sought to demonstrate that invocations of *confidence* "served primarily to conceal the basest ends with the emptiest rhetoric." Fussell's reading of *The Confidence-Man* as a satire of "tireless publicists" invites the question, Whose "empty rhetoric" was Melville parroting?[20]

Also, while *The Confidence-Man* marked the nadir of Melville's commercial career, the most poorly received novel of his lifetime and the last, the *New York Herald* was the most widely distributed and most popular daily newspaper in America, read or at least purchased by 60,000 to 80,000 people every day during the 1850s.[21] Bennett leaned heavily on the term *confidence man* and its derivations, dramatically expanding their descriptive, figurative, and polemical utility over the course of the decade. By the time Lincoln was elected, Bennett's obsessive invocations ensured that *conning* expressions were a permanent part of the American vocabulary, and the associated tropes could be readily marshaled in critiques of public figures, particularly those whom Bennett viewed as complicit in creating financial oligopoly. The intertwined evolution of the philology of *confidence* and the mythology of the con embodies the paradoxical progressivism of the Jacksonian era. As the United States moved toward the Civil War, *confidence*, an established presidential shorthand for the promise of the nation, also described the cultivation and practice of deception and insincerity, which, when exposed, generated distrust and destroyed democratic sympathies.

Let It Be Tried

On most days during the 1850s, the *Herald* outsold the combined efforts of its three nearest competitors: Horace Greeley's *Tribune*, William Cullen Bryant's *Post*, and Henry Raymond's *New York Times*.[22] Its market dominance extended beyond the metropolis, as it was the most read national newspaper in the South and the West and the only U.S. newspaper with an established European edition. From the moment of its introduction, Bennett's *Herald* was on the "cutting edge" of every advancement in "the newspaper revolution" in both the style and the substance of its contents, the technology of its production, and its marketing and advertising.[23]

The *Herald* was the first "penny paper" to both cultivate a populist readership *and* cut into the market of the more expensive (and elitist) mercantile publications, like James Watson Webb's *Courier and Enquirer*. Bennett had a noteworthy career working for Webb and other mercantile editors as a political correspondent, market analyst, court reporter, and junior editor. He understood what would be required to appropriate their readership, namely, shipping news, stock quotes, legislative and judicial proceedings, and dispatches from Europe.

He believed he could provide the information essential to bourgeois business while also supplementing it with material that appealed to the increasingly literate proletariat. To the latter, larger, and underserved constituency, he offered a heaping portion of crime, gossip, and scandal but hoped they would also come to view his newspaper as an inexpensive educational tool both for reading instruction and for engagement with politics, economics, and law. To this effect, Bennett's editorials often took on a quasi-pedagogical tone.

The *Herald* achieved enormous overnight popularity by actively seeking controversy in both content and presentation. By the middle of 1836, Bennett reported a daily readership of more than 20,000. The ensuing windfall, though it put him firmly among New York's nouveau riche, taught him only to be more persistent in mocking elites. Factions as disparate as stockbrokers, Methodists, and English aristocracy came together in their vehemence toward the "snake of newspapers."[24] Bennett is the most notable publishing tycoon to be publicly beaten on the streets of Manhattan—thrice.[25] Each time, taking great pride in his journalistic objectivity, Bennett printed an account of his assault in the *Herald*'s morning edition. His intransigence and outright mania in the face of boycott, injury, and humiliation suggests that Bennett was a firm believer in that familiar credo: no publicity is bad publicity.

Bennett was similarly obstinate in the face of political and legal authorities. He was something of a First Amendment crusader. While working as a freelance reporter covering the trial for the murder of Captain Joseph White in Salem in 1830, Bennett argued that the gag order from the Massachusetts judge should have no bearing on the publication of his coverage in a neighboring state, writing,

> It is an old worm-eaten dogma of the courts to consider the publicity given to every event by the press as destructive to the interests of law and justice. The honesty—the purity—the integrity of legal practice and legal decisions throughout the country are more indebted to the American press than the whole tribe of lawyers and judges who issue their decrees. The press is the *living jury* of the nation.[26]

It should be no surprise that the paper founded by this cocksure court reporter covered criminal proceedings with unprecedented verve. The *Herald* followed its favorite defendants for weeks and even months through their arrests, the exposition of their supposed exploits, and their trials, transcripts of which were often published in full.

The paper's first big "scoop" came in 1836 when Bennett snuck into Ellen Jewett's boudoir after the New York courtesan had been gruesomely murdered and, while the body still lay on the floor, wrote a detailed description not only of the deceased but also of the ribald contents of her closets and drawers. Based on his investigations, Bennett became convinced that the man charged with the

murder was framed. He published his suspicions, and a few weeks later, the jurors in the case concurred.[27] Such coverage was, certainly, a concession to the profitability of sensationalism, but in many cases, the attention brought on by Bennett's meticulous reporting forced police, attorneys, and judges to be more thorough and inscrutable. If there was anything Bennett and his readership liked more than sex and violence it was the exposure of corruption and graft. Whether his primary goal was to offer the "living jury of the nation" access to the proceedings of their courts or merely to provide his plebian readership with a plethora of titillating material, the *Herald* took a conspicuous interest in criminal oddities from the moment Bennett brought it into circulation. As Richard O'Connor puts it, "He made the newspaper readable by ordinary people by 'discovering and encouraging the popular taste for vicarious vice and crime.'"[28]

Bennett demonstrated a special fondness for stories of impersonation, seduction, extortion, counterfeit, and fraud, in other words, cons. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Bennett would regularly characterize perpetrators of a wide variety of alleged frauds as "Jeremy Diddlers" or "Peter Funks," characters from early American fiction who have since been identified as predecessors to the con-man archetype, but the *Herald* had been circulating for more than two decades before Bennett discovered (or invented) the character that would have the most lasting impression on both his contemporary readers and the U.S. literary tradition.[29]

The Original Confidence Man on Wall Street

In 1840, an anonymous satirical epistolary memoir by David Theodosius Hines detailed the narrator's effort to become South Carolina's greatest "gentleman of the road" by virtue of quackery, larceny, and seduction. Hines addresses the bulk of his letters to James Gordon Bennett, assuming the *Herald* eager to publish the autobiography of a self-described "humbug."[30] Hines declares, "If there ever was an era especially favorable to the exercise of my particular talents, it is this."[31] Although it predates the term, Hans Bergmann asserts that Hines's *Life* "is a 'confidence book' about a confidence man," which seeks, by making Bennett an accomplice of the fictional deviant, to aid in the "moral war" against Bennett, which reached its height the same year.[32] Like Stewart's *History* and other dubious criminal memoirs of the era, the *Life* paints Jacksonians as corrupt, irreligious, and vulgar but also possessed of a rapacious appetite for editorializing on all variety of topics. As such, the penny press seems, as David Mindich puts it, to "[spring] out of 'Jacksonian democracy' in much the same way as Athena was born from Zeus's head."[33]

The "Original Confidence Man," as he would come to be known, appeared first on July 8, 1849, as William Thompson (and later as Samuel Williams, William Davis, and Samuel Willis). He was a regular in the *Herald* until his death, as he was arrested, tried, and imprisoned several times in several states.[34] The moniker with which he would be permanently associated arose out of the scam

that resulted in his first arrest. Thompson would gregariously strike up conversations with strangers on the streets of Manhattan, proceeding, after some time, to the subject of man's lack of *confidence* in his fellow man. If his new compatriot took the bait and defended the magnanimity of his race, Thompson would ask, as a demonstration of that faith, to borrow his watch or his wallet, with which he would, of course, abscond.[35] Bennett immediately recognized that the con had the potential to become part of a devastating polemic. In the weekend edition of the *Herald*, immediately following Thompson's arrest, the editor was already sculpting an intrepid analogy between the charismatic street hustler and what he viewed as a Wall Street cabal.

In "The Confidence Man' on a Large Scale," Bennett frames William Thompson as a skilled rhetorician and salesman who could, were he but a little more ambitious, live in one of the "lordly dwellings" of "the possessors of suddenly acquired wealth" on Wall Street. Bennett describes the "Confidence Man" as "a certain financial genius" and "a distinguished 'operator' from the active business of 'the street.'" As the editorial unfolds, the comparison grows progressively more overt: "His genius has been employed on the small scale in Broadway. Theirs has been employed in Wall Street. That's all the difference." He enflames his audience with descriptions of the wealth and arrogance of New York's financial oligarchs while satirically bemoaning Thompson's shortsightedness. Had the con man only directed his "genius, address, tact, and skill" toward founding a railroad, he could have "retired to a life of virtuous ease, the possessor of a clear conscience, and one million of dollars." It is the Wall Street speculators, he posits, who are most "occupied by the process of 'confidence'" and therefore the "true," "genuine," and "real" confidence men.[36]

In the midst of this virulently sarcastic display, Bennett performs a deadly serious dissection of that signature nineteenth-century institution, the railroad bubble. In concise steps, he describes the method by which a devious speculator could take over a company, manipulate its stock price to attract investors and government subsidies without building any meaningful infrastructure, and then purposefully drive it into the ground, ruining collaborators along the way and walking away with obscene profits. It was not until the 1870s that the ethically dubious practices of "Robber Barons" like Jay Gould and Cornelius Vanderbilt became an accepted part of American business lore, but Bennett described and lambasted such schemes as early as the 1840s and firmly believed that such innovative capitalists were no better than any other kind of "original" criminal. He recognized that both—criminals and capitalists—were good for selling papers. Bennett never shrank from an opportunity to draw comparisons between plutocrats and petty thieves, an analogy with apparent appeal to his proletarian readership.

The attention Bennett paid to the stock market and to commerce generally was uncharacteristic of the "penny papers." This was part of his strategic appropriation of the mercantile audience of his previous employers, but Bennett also had genuine interest and expertise in finance and economics. He was educated

at Blair's College in Scotland from 1810 to 1814. There was naturally a heavy emphasis on David Hume, Adam Smith, and other classical Scottish political economists. Via this training, as Michael Schudson points out, Bennett became partial to the "the language and morality of laissez faire."[37]

The *Herald* distinguished itself by being motivated by market demands rather than ideological prescriptions and identifying the market rationales behind legislation and political rhetoric. But Bennett also, as James Crouthamel puts it, "had a tendency to explain economic happenings by a theory of conspiracy."[38] He abhorred credit and, as such, viewed securities as a dangerous and dishonest illusion.[39] He had covered finance exclusively early in his career as a freelancer and in that capacity had witnessed firsthand the fallout of the commercial crisis of 1825. His coverage of the fraud trials that followed gained him a promotion but also got him expelled from the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. He had been the bane of "stock-jobbers" ever since.[40] He saw it as his duty to make the public aware of the dire macroeconomic consequences implicit in the growth of the securities economy. Bennett aimed not only to expose "operators" but also to instruct his upwardly mobile readers in sound and frugal investing practice. Not long after the *Herald*'s founding, Bennett's "Money Market" column became a mainstay of the editorial page. It was designed "to tell what Wall Street really is and what is done there" and advise "his readers on the effects of interest rates, the money supply, the chicanery of manipulators, and a dozen other factors largely shrouded from the general public and often poorly understood by market players and plungers themselves."[41] Bennett's personal and business ambitions frequently ran at cross-purposes, as is evidenced by the fact that his rants against Wall Street were often printed right alongside the most reliable commodities and securities quotes in the newspaper industry.

In the "Money Market" column, as in all things, Bennett aspired to be read and tended toward the sensational, the sententious, and the prejudicial. But the inveterate bear has an excellent record as an economic forecaster, predicting the booms and busts of the mid-nineteenth century with almost preternatural accuracy. Crouthamel goes so far as to assert that "thanks to the *Herald*'s warnings and its teachings for two decades of the perils of honest traders and bankers becoming involved with speculators, the depression would be less severe [in 1857] than that of 1837."[42] This record is overlooked by those who wish to cast Bennett purely as a misanthrope and a conspiracy theorist. There were occasions, during an era when politicians and financiers were increasingly corrupt and conspiratorial, that Bennett's extravagant allegations proved right on the money. There were also, especially as the prospect of secession grew more palpable, instances when Bennett assumed the worst, without any strong evidence, and urged his readers to do the same.

For Bennett, the implications of *confidence* were never far removed from the market, where the word was repeatedly invoked, especially in times of crisis. Bennett believed that the duplicitous rhetoric of confidence was used to

delude the public and disguise the temerity of those responsible for fiscal catastrophes, as had been the case during the Panic of 1837. On the morning of May 10, 1837, the day that banks suspended payments, the *United States Gazette*, mouthpiece for the Van Buren administration, reassured the public, "Let confidence and cheerfulness only prevail." The next day, Bennett wrote,

> The great struggle which causes this explosion began in 1828, '29, between Martin Van Buren and Nicholas Biddle. . . . Each of these patriots *outbid each other for the confidence of their community, but, like other Peter Funks at auction, they have both bid a bit beyond their capital* and their resources.[43]

As the fallout persisted through the coming months, Bennett framed his competitor's invocations of *confidence* as part of a sentimental and opportunistic propaganda campaign. Recognizing that Van Buren and his allies, including Jackson, had actively fostered distrust of the Hamiltonian banking system without constructing anything stable in its place, Bennett asked, "Who *first* originated, in this state, the want of 'confidence' in the banking system?"[44]

Bennett felt that the Panic of 1837 justified the characteristic Jacksonian suspicion of all banks and financial institutions. He took an increasingly aggressive and anarchic stance against any and all ascendant financial institutions, particularly if they demonstrated any lobbying power. Bennett's position on finance was, quite simply, burn it all down. During the Panic of 1847, a minor crisis originating in Britain, he wrote, "The whole system of free banks in this State, is not but an organised, legalised, chartered system of cheating and swindling. . . . We trust we shall yet see the banking system purified of this corruption and villainy—There is much yet to lop off." He warned the public "to place no confidence in the Wall street organs or Wall street brokers, for they are all engaged in the same system of roguery and plunder on the great mass of the community, and have always been so."[45] The fraudulent infrastructure of the stock market stood exposed, he believed, when "the minds of capitalists [were] very much unsettled," thus "compelling a partial suspension of operations" that "created a great deal of distrust; tending to the destruction of public confidence," despite the fact that the nation's "internal affairs [were] in a very sound and prosperous condition" and lacked any of the "financial difficulties which have caused so many failures in [Europe]."[46]

Bennett's analysis of economic crises, born of close attention to the notorious market volatility of nineteenth-century America, suggests that he understood the function of the "state of confidence" in finance, even though this would not become an articulated part of economic theory until John Maynard Keynes's *General Theory* (1935). Securities markets are more susceptible to dramatic fluctuations in the state of confidence—that is, "what average opinion expects the average opinion to be"—because of the immediacy and the negotiability of the transactions regulated therein. Keynes argues that Americans

are "unduly interested" in market trends and that "this national weakness finds its nemesis in the stock market."[47] The emotional whims of buyers and sellers influenced by contagious groupthink are efficiently translated into frenzied activity in an environment where liquidizing large asset positions is relatively quick and easy. Therefore, the potential speed and scale of an economic crisis is correlated to the proportion, centralization, and integration of organized financial markets relative to the larger economy. "The development of organised investment markets," Keynes observes, "sometimes facilitates investment but sometimes adds greatly to the instability of the system."[48] Rapid erasures of wealth happen when many economic agents have the opportunity to act on fleeting sentiments like fear and panic, more or less in unison. Preaching confidence in moments of crisis is simply an effort, by means of persuasion, to force market participants to hesitate, allowing irrational feelings to dissipate naturally and buying time to identify and address their underlying causes.

Bennett saw the effects of a sudden disruption of the state of confidence in 1837 and 1847 as well as efforts by politicians and financiers to protect the larger economy by employing Jackson's rhetoric of confidence. Two decades later, when another crisis seemed inevitable, confidence was, predictably, offered as a solution. After the suspension of specie payments by New York banks at the outset of the Panic of 1857, there was a meeting of influential bankers and merchants. Moses Grinnell, president of the New York Chamber of Commerce, stated that he "felt it to be the imperative duty of the merchants at this juncture to unite in this declaration of confidence in the banks."[49]

But Bennett comprehended something that eluded even Keynes. In moments of crisis, when "everything depends on waves of irrational psychology," the orator who reaches the largest crowd of panicked and pliable auditors has the greatest capacity to affect the state of confidence.[50] When instability and uncertainty reign, the media is the market. Bennett gleefully wielded the largest platform for restoring confidence and reveled in the relative incapacity of his competitors. By 1857, the once-proud *Courier and Enquirer*, the preferred paper of wealthy Whigs, was spiraling toward bankruptcy, further aided by the financial crisis. Webb, whom Bennett had long accused of being a shill for the "shinners, skinners and sinners of Wall street," was among those trying to calm the markets, but nobody was reading him. Bennett mocked Webb's increasingly desperate calls for confidence. "Will nobody help the Chevalier out of his distress?" Bennett pleaded ironically, "Confidence—confidence—can't he get a little confidence somewhere at half price?"[51] Contrary to Webb and, indeed, most commentators on the panic, Bennett did not support relief for failing banks and businesses or for efforts to calm the market in any fashion. He advocated not only strict laissez-faire but might even be accused of leveraging his bully pulpit to encourage his readers to applaud and exacerbate the extend of economic carnage. "This may lead to many failures, but it is the only remedy," he argued, "Banking houses, railroad companies and individual firms, which are really insolvent and past hope, should at once bend to the storm and place

themselves in a state of liquidation . . . they will hereafter be entitled to no sympathy, and will be sure to receive very little."[52]

In November, at the peak of the crisis, William Thompson, now operating under the name of William Burch, was again arrested. In February, he pled guilty to passing false checks. While his recent exploits were not as remarkable as those that originally brought him to Bennett's attention, his reappearance amidst the pleas for confidence provoked by the Panic of 1857 seems to have inspired Bennett to a new appreciation of the rhetorical utility of his moniker. Between July 1849 and October 1857, according to Gale's *Nineteenth Century Newspapers* database, the phrases "confidence man" or "confidence game" appeared in the *Herald* on twenty-six occasions, well more than any other newspaper in the database, but over the next three years, leading up to the election of Lincoln, the same phrases would appear more than three times as often: seventy-eight total invocations. A confluence of events in the middle of the decade helped Bennett recognize he could use the con-man archetype as a polemical broadax. Speculators bore the brunt of his spite, but Bennett also began applying it more loosely to politicians, diplomats, and rival journalists. The term that other American writers, if they used it at all, applied exclusively to counterfeiters, quacks, seducers, and larcenists Bennett directed most frequently at individuals outside the overtly criminal sphere. In these metaphorical invocations, *confidence* described not only a species of legal transgression but also any charismatic performance that *might* disguise duplicity and covetousness. In other words, *confidence* in the *Herald* meant the opposite of what it meant most everywhere else. But, to paraphrase the implicit presumption of Melville's novel, more people read the *Herald* than anything else.

Confidentiality and the Morally Insane

John Kenneth Galbraith argues that every era of "speculative euphoria" in America has been associated with a financial wizard whose genius is not in the realm of investment but rather in the arena of fraud.[53] The 1850s were no exception. In 1854, George Schuyler, the president of the New York and New Haven Railroad Company, engineered a scam that might as well have used Bennett's "Confidence Man on a Large Scale" column as an instruction manual. Schuyler defrauded his stockholders, including the federal government, of around $2 million via watered stock, counterfeit issues, and insider trading. Bennett recognized the Schuyler case as an opportunity to position two opposing notions of *confidence* in direct conflict with each other. On July 8, five years to the day after the term *confidence man* first appeared in print, Bennett wrote, in a characteristically hyperbolic declaration, "Confidence has been more shaken by these disclosures than by any event which has previously occurred within the history of the country." He warned that the nation was "proceeding faster in the road of speculation than our resources actually warrant" and that "the mania for railroad investment was in fact carrying us to extremes that could

not fail to prove ruinous in the end to all the interests connected with them." Considering the lack of caution and oversight represented in the Schuyler case, he concluded, "it is not to be wondered at that the 'confidence men' have not hesitated to avail themselves of the opportunities thrown in their way. It remains to be seen whether the public will continue to supply them with willing dupes and victims, or will insist upon reforms." Bennett hoped, "deplorable as is this event, in the destruction of confidence to which it must lead . . . it will not be unproductive of some compensating result."[54] Unfortunately, the public neither demanded greater oversight nor displayed increased caution and Bennett's Schuyler column presciently describes several of the factors that brought about the Panic of 1857.[55] It also marked the beginning of a period in Bennett's editorial career that lasted until the Civil War. While Jackson's rhetoric of confidence was designed for attacking interests, like the Second Bank of the United States, which threatened to compromise citizens' faith in federal government, Bennett increasingly advocated the "destruction of confidence" in government and finance as a necessary development in the public consciousness.

For James Gordon Bennett, 1857 was defined by his most concerted attack on *confidence* to date, beginning on New Year's Day, when he joyously reported on the conviction of Charles B. Huntington. Huntington's crimes had provoked Bennett to repeat the warnings of his Schuyler columns:

> If these developments do not open the eyes of our citizens to the impure state of the social atmosphere in the neighborhood of Wall Street and of the fashionable quarters where mushroom capitalists reside, then they are willfully blind and deserve to be periodically made the victims of Jeremy Diddlers of every grade.[56]

Huntington was convicted of forgery, but, as Bennett put it, "the forgeries complained of were not in reality perfected, and were not forgeries in the ordinary legal sense of the word, but financial experiments of a 'confidence man.'"[57]

Bennett had been waiting for Huntington, an individual who made literal the analogy between uptown street hustler and downtown financier he had laid out in 1849. Whereas Thompson possessed only "the spirit" of Wall Street, Huntington actually kept an office there. Whereas Schuyler was of elite birth and high position, his willingness to defraud resulting as much from entitlement as anything, Huntington came from nothing and nowhere, created his firm from thin air, and pilfered the coffers of the most established and supposedly secure banks and brokerages in the financial district. Bennett marveled, "It is difficult to comprehend how he, who was unknown in financial circles a year or two ago, could have succeeded in victimizing the note-shavers of Wall Street to the amount of some half a million dollars."[58] A kind of Wall Street Robin Hood, Huntington seemed a fitting successor to mythic deviants like Diddler, Funk, Suggs, and Oily Gammon.[59]

Huntington was the first in a long line of financial criminals who had a genius for exploiting the idiosyncratic inefficiencies in rapidly expanding corporate bureaucracies. In the initial phase of his relationship with a new firm, his dealings were completely aboveboard. His banknotes and bonds were genuine, and he possessed the funds to back his transactions. His documents were neat, legible, and impeccably organized. He cultivated a friendly, casual relationship with brokers, clerks, and secretaries. After a number of legitimate trades, he "gradually gained the confidence of those with whom he had dealings," such that he was "above suspicion." At this point, understanding that harried employees would not bother with due diligence for the transactions of a client they had come to trust, he started passing counterfeit documents that were accepted without hesitation. Through merely his affect—"perfectly cool and *nonchalant*"—Huntington had convinced his "marks" he belonged among them.[60]

As if the crimes were not enough to interest Bennett and his readership, Huntington's trial tread into even more extraordinary territory, as his lawyer experimented with a new trend in U.S. criminal law, the "insanity" defense.[61] While the insanity defense had been employed in desperate circumstances in U.S. courts for the past two decades, the defendants in such cases were expected to wear their psychosis on their sleeves. Juries needed to be able to imagine the apparent antisocial malady provoking the defendant to unpremeditated acts of lust and violence. Huntington's criminal exploits were, contrarily, defined by competence, foresight, and self-awareness. His lawyer argued that he was not physiologically insane but "morally insane." The jury proved quite unsympathetic to the pathology, which *improved* the sufferer's social capacity.

Some commentators wondered what could have inspired such a cockamamie defense. Bennett knew exactly. Barely a year earlier, the Original Confidence Man, this time arrested while operating as William Davis, had attempted a similar defense. Although he pleaded guilty to grand larceny, his sentencing hearing included testimony from physicians and family members who vouched that he was "the victim of partial insanity, which induced so great a despondency and depression of spirits, that he had on several occasions attempted to commit suicide." This testimony was persuasive enough that Davis was sentenced to "the lightest penalty that the law would permit."[62] His incarceration was short enough that he could be arrested again less than fourteen months later.

"Moral insanity" was something with which James Gordon Bennett could make the proverbial hay. In the wake of the Huntington trial, he eagerly parodied the classification, much as he did *confidence man*, and often applied it to the very same subjects. In his "Money Market" column, he proclaimed that "all the bulls and bears in Wall Street are morally insane" and that "the same species of insanity that is given as an excuse for Huntington's forgeries, prevails in Wall Street at this moment to the great extent Purchasers of railroad stocks at current prices are inflicted with a kind of moral insanity."[63] In response to a new flurry of land grants, Bennett declared, "It is a matter of serious pain and regret

to all the rightminded citizens of the United States that the Huntingtonian form of moral insanity should prevail to such an alarming extent in Washington."[64]

In late January, another scandal involving the railroad industry dominated the New York papers. On this occasion, Bennett had been scooped. James Simonton, D.C. correspondent for the *New York Times* and future head of the Associated Press, uncovered a scheme, orchestrated by lobbyists, to pass a bill that would cede lands from the Minnesota Territory to the Pacific Railroad. Such bills were relatively common during the era, intended to encourage the development of infrastructure between the coasts. What made this one scandalous was that it granted not only the property necessary for laying tracks and building stations but *all* of the federally possessed land in the territory as well, most of which, presumably, would have been sold off by Pacific for a profit. Simonton alleged that some members in the House of Representatives had been paid as much as $1,000 for their votes.

The public's outrage prompted the formation of a House Lobby Investigating Committee, the first act of which was to subpoena Simonton (his editor), Henry Raymond, and Horace Greeley (whose paper also broke aspects of the story). The committee demanded that the journalists reveal their sources and name the specific lobbyists and representatives who participated in the bribery. What happened next was unprecedented. Each journalist, in turn, refused to cooperate, citing the First Amendment and the so-called confidentiality of their sources. This term and the circumstance of its invocation have since been permanently associated with the proceedings of the Fourth Estate. In 1857, no such convention existed. It is somewhat unclear what inspired this act of defiance. *Times* historian Augustus Maverick claims that Simonton had filed his story based on unsubstantiated rumors and would not have had anything to reveal had he been willing (a suspicion Bennett also voiced).[65] Whatever the case, Simonton was held in contempt, briefly incarcerated, and permanently barred from the Capitol building.

Bennett, at one time a champion of First Amendment rights, did not rush to the defense of his colleagues. The upstart *Times*, founded in 1851, was on its way to becoming, along with Greeley's *Tribune*, the *Herald*'s nearest competitor.[66] Bennett seized on the House Lobby debacle as an opportunity to embarrass and discredit a potential usurper. Not surprisingly, he fixated on the repeated use of the word *confidence*. When Simonton or Raymond said "in confidence" or "confidential," Bennett heard "secret," and secrecy belied conspiracy. Bennett made the bold assumption that Simonton's unwillingness to reveal his sources meant either that he had made the whole thing up (several congressmen testified to the contrary) or that he himself was embroiled in the racket. Simonton was referred to as "the little confidence man of the Washington lobby," and Bennett made a convenient analogy between him and the "morally insane" Huntington:

> As the defense of Huntington was thrown back upon the plea of "moral insanity," so do these zealous guardians of the pub-

> lic treasury fall back upon the excuse of "moral conviction." . . . In spite of the "moral convictions" and the excuses of "confidence" of this or that confidence man, we hope yet that the labors of the committee will result in breaking the machinery of the lobby confidence men.[67]

A few days later, he suggested that the *Times* had fabricated the whole ordeal, evidence of the paper's habit of "gulling the public, in the 'confidence' game in favor of this or against that particular stock."[68] Bennett would continue to refer to Simonton and Raymond as "confidence men" for years to come. Misleadingly, he conflated those who exposed the corruption with those who were party to it, suggesting, as was increasingly his habit in the 1850s, that nobody was innocent and that no party could be trusted.

Confidence Cassidy

From 1857 to 1861, Bennett used the term *confidence man* more loosely than ever before. The front pages of the *Herald* coveted crimes of confidence, which they began to define more broadly, affixing the moniker not only to counterfeiters, street hustlers, and quacks but also to safecrackers, pickpockets, pimps, and racketeers. Similarly, in the editorial pages, Bennett was increasing its figurative utility. He would fasten his distinctive derogatory epithet to politicians and public figures as disparate as Greeley, Thurlow Weed, Erastus Corning, John Brown, Wendell Phillips, Samuel Tilden, William Seward, and John Hopkins Harney.[69]

In the buildup to the critical election of 1860, there was one final, essential development in Bennett's evolving assault on *confidence*, emanating from a bilious editorial battle with the *Albany Atlas & Argus*. The *Atlas*, edited by William Cassidy, absorbed Weed's *Argus* in 1856, leaving the famed New York power broker free to devote his energy to the "Albany Regency," Weed's nickname for the loose affiliation of wealthy Whigs turned Know-Nothing Democrats turned Lincoln Republicans who had dominated the state's political machine since the 1820s. Bennett was in the habit of calling the Regency "the Albany confidence men."[70]

Bennett and Weed had feuded throughout their careers, rivals in business and politics.[71] But in 1859, the *Atlas & Argus*'s coverage of a scandal that rocked the Democratic Party pushed Bennett to new polemical extremes. On August 4, Cassidy published a letter from Virginia Governor Henry Wise, one of the leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination. The letter offended a number of Democratic factions and revealed rifts within the party. The letter made Wise look Machiavellian, as he declared himself "confident of success" only if he undermined the candidacies of several of his supposed allies.[72] It is not clear how the private correspondence got to Cassidy, but Jerome Mushkat reports that Bennett himself purchased a copy for $20 to pass

along to Democratic Committee Chairman Dean Richmond.[73] Bennett had not intended to publish the letter, so he was outraged when it was leaked to a rival who used it to ruin Wise. Although there were clearly several copies in circulation, the *Herald* editor chose to level all blame on Cassidy, accusing him of an "outrageous breach of confidence."[74] Now it was Bennett who wanted his fellow journalists to foster a more chivalrous sense of "confidentiality." Cassidy fired back at Bennett, calling him "the chief of the *Herald*'s secret police," and pointed out that he was guilty of the same breach, as he published the letter in full later the same day, having clearly held onto a copy for that express purpose.[75] Although it is unclear what, if anything, was at stake for either Cassidy or Bennett, the editorial pages of both papers were dominated for weeks by bickering over who had committed the first "violation of confidence connected with the affair."[76] Bennett labeled Cassidy "the Albany confidence man," which he then shortened to "Confidence Cassidy," an epithet that he continued to apply to the editor for the next several years. In no uncertain terms, he called for a hanging of Cassidy for "treachery" and described him trembling before the gallows, having his windpipe crushed, and wailing in agony.[77] This nickname, Confidence Cassidy, represents the most egregious instance of Bennett turning the word *confidence* and all its potentially positive connotations into a powerful expression of derision. No longer was it necessary for Bennett to remind his readers of the "confidence man" association. *Confidence* alone was enough to elicit suspicion and spite.

Bennett characterized himself as a political moderate. The first issue of the *Herald* had claimed, "We shall support no party, be organ of no faction or coterie, and care nothing for the election of any candidate from President down to Constable. . . . We commit ourselves and our cause to the public, with perfect confidence."[78] It was thanks in large part to Bennett that the pretense to "objectivity" became a distinguishing characteristic of the penny press and American journalism thereafter.[79] While it was true that he endorsed a wide variety of candidates in state, local, and national elections; never adhered to a strict party line; and never considered himself a partisan, Bennett did not exactly abstain from politics either. The ferocity of his endorsements, combined with their inconsistency, was a source of ridicule for rivals. Some pointed out that, conveniently, from 1832 until 1860, Bennett never backed a presidential loser. Others characterized him as unreliable and capricious and even parodied the fact that he was cross-eyed. Bennett himself, in response to the charge of inconsistency, said simply, "I print my paper every day," a statement that Carl Sandburg calls "his version of Lincoln's 'My policy is to have no policy.'"[80] What Bennett meant by moderation was not necessarily that he supported altruism and compromise but rather that his paper was an ambivalent executioner. He printed blistering attacks against all parties. Whoever was left standing was therefore best qualified.

As the prospect of secession grew, Bennett sided more and more often with southern Democrats, for which he has been called "the most notorious of the

doughface editors."[81] While it is accurate to describe Bennett as a bigot, that hardly distinguishes him from his contemporaries. Accounts focusing on his southern sympathizing overlook the fact that he was also an avowed pacifist. Although he was infamous for his reversals on a number of issues, his foremost priority in the 1850s was utterly consistent: the avoidance of disunion and Civil War. He never overtly defended the sanctity of slavery but felt strongly that it was not as mortal a sin as war. Those who resorted to violence on either side, the "escalators," be it John Brown, Preston Brooks, or the thugs of "bleeding Kansas," got the full wrath of Bennett's legendarily spiteful pen. He railed against what he saw as extremist factions in both parties—Abolitionist Republicans and the Democratic "fire-eaters," whom he profanely labeled "the nigger drivers" and "the nigger worshippers"—but he felt, even in the aftermath of the war, that it was Abolitionists who were more stubbornly bent on dissolution, more politically powerful, and therefore most responsible for the bloody blemish on the nation.

In recent decades, the ongoing debate among historians regarding the causes of the Civil War has been reframed. No longer is the question whether slavery was the primary cause; rather, it is why the sectional controversy reached critical mass in 1861.[82] Slavery was the most divisive issue in American politics as early as 1787. It had inspired at least half a dozen episodes of extreme antagonism and violence in the intervening decades, and the prospect of secession had been part of the political landscape since at least 1832, when South Carolina made its first threat to that effect. On every previous occasion when hostilities reached a boiling point, political compromise preempted military engagement, just as Bennett, the pacifist, would have hoped.

But the increasing influence of the paranoid style on antebellum culture made amelioration increasingly difficult, as rumors spread that various politicians were forming more devious alliances, even representing rival nations. Michael Holt calls it, coincidently, "a crisis of confidence in the normal political process" characterized by "malignant distrust of politicians as self-centered and corrupt wirepullers out of touch with the people" and the belief "that powerful conspiracies, contemptuous of the law and abetted by corrupt politicians, had usurped government from the people and were menacing the most cherished values of Americans."[83] Sectional factions were reluctant to consider concessionary measures because they believed their opponents to be duplicitous or incompetent and were increasingly convinced that only violent revolution could fix the broken system.

The sad irony of Bennett's career is that his systematic attacks on *confidence*—the word and the temperament it described—were incompatible with the peaceful diplomacy he advocated. As the most popular pedagogue of the penny press, Bennett appealed to a large, literate, and politically disenfranchised proletariat. He aimed to persuade them, as much as anything, that nobody, least of all those in power, were worthy of their trust: not politicians, not brokers and bankers, not even newspaper publishers. No single publication had

a greater hand in facilitating the "destruction of confidence" than the *Herald*. Bennett's wildly popular newspaper was both a reflection of the public's pervasive mistrust and also the most effective vehicle for its transmission. Bennett became one of the first and most effective purveyors of the paranoid style, a rhetorical mode that flourishes in eras of impending catastrophe. Bennett's editorials are entertaining in large part because of his willingness to, as Hofstadter puts it, "regard a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events."[84] Bennett imagined all his various antagonists, from rival editors like Cassidy and Raymond to members of the political opposition like Weed to affronters in his personal life like Dan Sickles, as in league with one another, conspiring to destroy him and all he stood for, including his nation. Bennett portrayed all varieties of coalition, whether in the form of the Albany Regency or an imagined Wall Street cabal, as capable of occasioning catastrophe and therefore deserving of his readers' full capacity for distrust and retribution.

By the end of the decade, Bennett was frequently arguing, in a fashion that can be read only as hyperbolic, for the incarceration and even execution of men like Cassidy who were peaceful and law-abiding citizens regardless of their politics. Hofstadter explains, "A fundamental paradox of the paranoid is the imitation of the enemy."[85] As Bennett became possessed by his fear of violent outbreaks and eventual war, his rhetoric became, counterintuitively, *more* violent and inflammatory, thus provoking the same stubborn and futile impulses he was bent on discrediting. The fact that he suspected deviousness and demagoguery at every turn made it difficult for him to endorse any party. As Sandburg puts it, he was the "laughing Ishmael" of the 1860 election, whom Abraham Lincoln viewed as "one of the powers to be kept on the Union side as far as possible" but also recognized that "in politics [Bennett] had yoked himself to varied flickering interests," which made him an unreliable ally.[86] Indeed, the spite that Bennett levied on the Abolitionist elements in the Republican Party may have done as much harm as his praise of Lincoln did good.

Hofstadter's profile of the paranoid style provides one explanation for why Bennett was such a successful and innovative figure in American journalism. He writes, "One of the impressive things about paranoid literature is precisely the elaborate concern with demonstration it almost invariably shows. . . . The paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities."[87] Bennett cultivated a massive readership that applauded the *Herald*'s clarity and seeming comprehensiveness.

Elmer Davis wrote, "Bennett was the inventor of almost everything, good and bad, in modern journalism."[88] At his best, he was a vigilant investigative journalist who gave wielders of power a reason to pause before resorting to cheating, bribery, blackmail, or exploitation. At his worst, he believed in earnest, something that the Original Confidence Man had only affected, that human nature was uncompromising, self-serving, and utterly without sympathy—solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. He convinced his massive readership to see crooks lurking within every public figure, costly frauds beneath every prof-

itable enterprise, and greasy handshakes behind every political compromise. He proved *confidence* to be what it *now* most certainly is: a propagandistic buzzword, favored by political campaigns and corporate promoters, that endorses blind faith and irrational exuberance. James Gordon Bennett was among the first to recognize and lament this development in American rhetoric. His publication helped make it possible.

Notes

1. Andrew Jackson, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, vol. 3, ed. John S. Bassett (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution Press, 1926), 412.

2. Andrew Jackson, *Annual Messages, Veto Messages, Protest, etc. of Andrew Jackson* (Baltimore: Edward J. Cole, 1835), 216, 266.

3. Andrew Jackson, *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, vol. 6, ed. Sam B. Smith and Harriet C. Owsley (Chattanooga: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 190–91.

4. Kathleen De Grave, *Swindler, Spy, Rebel: The Confidence Woman in 19th-Century America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 2.

5. See J. J. Hooper, *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993). I undertake unpacking this allegory in detail elsewhere, but for these purposes, it suffices to say that Suggs, like Jackson, has a suspicious early career, a strong intolerance toward Native Americans, a convenient Christian conversion, and a perpetual war with banks. He is also leader of the Tallapoosy Voluntares, an obvious parody of Jackson's Tennessee Volunteers. In *Adventures of Simon Suggs* (1845), Hooper promises that "future generations of naughty children" will be "frightened to their cribs" by the popular lithographs of General Jackson that circulated during his 1820s campaigns. His visage will be likened to that of Satan, though, according to Hooper, this is "atrocious slander" since "the prince of the infernal world" is "comparatively well-favored"(9). Referring to Amos Kendall, the newspaper editor and Jackson publicist, Hooper argues that the only difference between "the nation's Jackson" and "the country's Suggs" is that "Not to Suggs was Amos given!"(82).

6. Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con-Men, and The Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 11; Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: A Masquerade*, ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer (New York: Norton, 2006), 133.

7. Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters*, 34.

8. Evert Duyckinck, "What Is Talked About," *Literary World* 5, no. 133 (August 18, 1849): 133.

9. Daniel Williams, "Mastering the Arts of Appropriation: The Rhetoric of Nullification in the Narrative of David Theodosius Hines," in *Early America Re-Explored: New Readings in Colonial, Early National, and Antebellum Culture*, ed. Klaus Schmidt and Fritz Fleischmann (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 480.

10. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 126.

11. See Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

12. Examples are too numerous to catalog, but a few particularly grievous instances from sources not featured in the body of this essay paint a picture of the trend. When unpopular former Union general George McClellan resigned in November 1864, the *Bangor Whig and Courier* titled the item "The Last Con." On February 2, 1857, accounting mistakes by an Indiana state auditor were labeled the "Indiana Bank Diddle" by the *Scioto Gazette* of Chillicothe, Ohio. And, on October 8, 1856, a Whig mouthpiece, the *Boston Daily Atlas*, opened its election coverage with this promise: "During the next four weeks, Democrats and Fillmouthers will vie with each other in the invention of lies, falsehoods, scandals, mendacities, misrepresentations, libels, roorbacks, and other written and spoken scoundrelisms, intended to bamboozle the voters."

13. Melville, *The Confidence Man*, 10.

14. My account of the paranoid style in Jacksonian culture draws not only on Richard Hofstadter's seminal essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964) from *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1952), but also on David B. Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Michael W. Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005); and Mark W. Summers, *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

15. See Neil Schmitz, "Mark Twain, Henry James, and Jacksonian Dreaming," *Criticism* 27, no. 2 (1985): 155–173.

16. *New York Herald*, August 18, 1836, 2.

17. See Johannes Bergmann, "The Original Confidence Man," *American Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (October 1969): 560–77; Michael Reynolds, "The Prototype for Melville's Confidence-Man," *PMLA* 86 (1971); and Watson Branch, "The Genesis, Composition, and Structure of *The Confidence-Man*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 27, no. 4 (March 1973): 424–48.

18. See also Susan Kuhlmann, *Knave, Fool, and Genius: The Confidence-Man as He Appears in 19th-Century American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973); Warwick Wadlington, *The Confidence Game in American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); William Lenz, *Fast Talk and Flush Times: The Confidence Man as a Literary Convention* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985); and Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).

19. Further discussions of Melville's ongoing relationship with the *Herald*, which variously amused, inspired, and enraged him, exist in Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, vols. 1 and 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 2002). Melville was a subscriber to the *Herald*, and advertisements for Melville's works (including *The Confidence-Man*) occasionally appeared in the *Herald*'s classified section despite the fact that the author had a rather antagonistic relationship with one of the *Herald*'s reviewers, Thomas Powell, as outlined by Parker, *The Powell Papers: A Confidence Man Amok among the Anglo-American Literati* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011). A long poem by Powell, "The Tenth Muse," appears in the same issue of *Literary World* as Duyckinck's discussion of the confidence man.

20. Edwin Fussell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 307.

21. Although there is some disagreement over exactly how popular it was and for how long, historians unanimously put the *Herald* atop circulation charts from the mid-1840s until after the Civil War. Some, including Richard Kluger, *The Paper* (New York: Knopf, 1986), argue that it rivaled the circulation of the *London Times* as early as 1839. Bennett claimed to be averaging over a 100,000 daily sales in the late 1850s, but several of his competitors balked at his figures. Incomplete in-house accounting has been published as an appendix to Douglas Fermer, *James Gordon Bennett and the New York Herald: A Study of Editorial Opinion in the Civil War Era, 1854–1867* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1986).

22. The best-selling newspaper in America was the Saturday edition of Greeley's *Tribune*, which had a significant audience in the plains states as well as along the eastern seaboard. However, the attention that Greeley paid to his weekly probably came at a detriment to the *Tribune*'s daily sales, as he was prone to "break" stories and editorials over the weekend.

23. Bennett's innovations are detailed in James Crouthamel, *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989). He argues that there are "two interacting parts to the newspaper revolution," technological advancement and populist appeal, and that "together they made the Herald the best and most popular newspaper in America" (24). I am concerned mainly with content, but a few words on production are warranted. Bennett was quick to invest in the machinery of printing, cutting, and folding. He was the first editor to send clipper ships out to intercept correspondence from ocean liners returning from Europe and South America, thus giving his paper a few hours' advance on its competition in publishing international news. And his was the first paper to feature an in-house telegraph office.

24. During the Moral War of 1840, it became especially popular to associate Bennett with Devilish or Satanic characteristics, both as parody and in earnest. This practice would endure throughout his career (e.g., in the cartoons of Thomas Nast, who always portrayed him with horns). Bennett learned to embrace it, calling himself the "head devil" at the *Herald*.

25. Twice at the hands of his former boss Webb and once by the Tammany Hall lawyer John Graham. The last incident came in 1847 while Bennett was taking a walk with his wife and precipitated his family's prolonged expatriation to Paris. Bennett was also once delivered a mail bomb, an incident Melville alludes to in *The Confidence-Man*.

26. James Gordon Bennett, *New York Courier*, June 30, 1830, 1.

27. Critics have debated the earnestness of Bennett's interest in the Jewett case and have even accused him of facilitating the acquittal of the actual murderer. See Andie Tucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), and "PrinceOfDarkness@NYHerald.com: How the Penny Press Caused the Decline of the West," *American Journalism* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 121–27, and Patricia Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in 19th-Century New York* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

28. Richard O'Connor, *The Scandalous Mr. Bennett* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 16.

29. "Peter Funk" referred particularly (but not exclusively) to the practice of "decoy bidding" at auctions in order to drive up prices. Funk was a character in Asa Green's *The Perils of Pearl*

Street (1834) and appeared again in an essay by Walt Whitman in 1848. See Louise Pound, "Peter Funk: The Pedigree of Westernism," *American Speech* 4, no. 3 (February 1929): 183–86. "Diddling" referred mainly to charismatically charged borrowing and petty thieving, as discussed by Burton Pollin, "Poe's 'Diddling,'" *Southern Literary Journal* 2, no. 1 (October 1969): 106–11.

30. Although the letters are addressed Bennett, Hines indicts the press at large by describing editors from the *Mirror*, *Star*, and *Sun* clamoring for his manuscripts.

31. David Theodosius Hines, *The Life, Adventures, and Opinions of David Theodosius Hines of South Carolina* (New York: Bradley & Clark, 1840), 19.

32. Hans Bergmann, *God in the Street: New York Writing from the Penny Press to Melville* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 188.

33. David Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 16.

34. The *Herald* first called him "The Original Confidence Man" on July 16, 1856. Melville makes light of the assertion of "originality" throughout *The Confidence-Man*.

35. One of the great achievements of Melville's novel is his masterful re-creation of several versions of this seemingly preposterous conversation.

36. *Weekly Herald*, July 14, 1849, 220.

37. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 21.

38. Crouthamel, *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press*, 80.

39. During Bennett's tenure as editor, the *Herald* never asked for or received credit and would not accept it from advertisers, distributors, or subscribers. Bennett proudly printed his "cash" demands right in the paper's header.

40. In 1843, the *Foreign Quarterly Review* reported, remorsefully, "The New York *Herald* has been one of the most powerful instruments in the United States in exposing frauds, bubbles, and stock-gambling machinery, which our fund-mongers had organized in America for robbing the land and labor in that country, as they have robbed since the days of Walpole."

41. O'Connor, *The Scandalous Mr. Bennett*, 18; Kluger, *The Paper*, 35.

42. Crouthamel, *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press*, 90.

43. *New York Herald*, May 11, 1937, 2 (emphasis added).

44. *Morning Herald*, June 30, 1837, 1A.

45. *New York Herald*, January 3, 1848, 4.

46. *New York Herald*, October 15, 1847, 2.

47. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1964), 156–59.

48. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, 150–51.

49. *New York Herald*, October 15, 1857, 1.

50. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, 162.

51. *New York Herald*, October 9, 1857, 4.

52. *New York Herald*, August 31, 1857, 5

53. John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Short History of Financial Euphoria* (New York: Whittle, 1990).

54. *Weekly Herald*, July 8, 1854, 4.

55. Antebellum financial journalist David Morier Evans recognized that "railway management involving fraud and speculation" contributed to the panic, as he argued in *The History of the Commercial Crisis 1857–1858* (London: Groombridge & Sons, 1859), 92. See also George W. Van Vleck, *The Panic of 1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), and James L. Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

56. *Daily Evening Bulletin*, December 9, 1856, 1 (reprinted from the *New York Herald*).

57. *New York Herald*, January 1, 1857, 4.

58. *Weekly Herald*, October 25, 1857, 343.

59. Diddler, Funk, Suggs, and Gammon were all fictional characters, but their names became so familiar to antebellum newspaper readers that we can safely assume that many who understood what theses allusions implied had no knowledge of the works from which they originated.

60. *New York Herald*, October 25, 1857, 4.

61. The first application of the insanity defense in the United States was *Ohio v. Thompson* in 1834. After Huntington, the "moral insanity" defense continued to gain ground, peaking in 1880 when it was used to defend Charles Guiteau, the assassin of President McKinley. An excellent history of "moral insanity" can be found in Charles Rosenberg, *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). Huntington's trial, by publicizing the insanity defense, may have been of assistance to Dan Sickles, who was acquitted three years later of the murder of a friend who had slept with his wife on the grounds of "temporary insanity," the first such case in American history.

62. *New York Herald*, September 11, 1856, 8.

63. *New York Herald*, December 20, 1856, 4; *New York Herald*, December 28, 1856, 5.

64. *New York Herald*, December 31, 1856, 4.

65. See Augustus Maverick, *Henry J. Raymond and the New York Press, for Thirty Years: Progress of American Journalism from 1840 to 1870* (Hartford, CT: A. S. Hale, 1870).

66. See also Francis Brown, *Raymond of the Times* (New York: Norton, 1951).

67. *New York Herald*, January 18, 1857, 4.

68. *New York Herald*, January 23, 1857, 4.

69. See *New York Herald*, February 20 and 24, 1857; August 2, 1857; September 25 and 28, 1857; October 2, 1858; November 2, 1859; January 29, 1860; October 31, 1861.

70. See *New York Herald*, September 7 and 17, 1859; January 19, 1860.

71. Weed was a Whig until it was no longer viable to be one. He was among Van Buren's primary advisers and was entrusted in a similar capacity by Seward, whom Bennett also despised. There is evidence, however, that despite their differences Weed and Bennett shared a mutual respect. As Weed described in his autobiography *Life of Thurlow Weed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), 616–19, with war imminent, Lincoln instructed Weed to bury the hatchet with Bennett, hoping that a performance of humility from one of his oldest antagonists could keep Bennett and the *Herald* from further "endangering the government and the Union." Weed believed that he was appointed the task because he had "considerable experience belling cats." Bennett was consoled enough to throw his full support behind Lincoln as commander in chief, although he continued to blame Abolitionists for starting the conflict.

72. Wise's statements turned out to be prophetic, although perhaps they would not have been had he not ruined his own prospects. Stephen Douglas and John Breckenridge split the Democratic electorate along sectional lines in the 1860 election.

73. Jerome Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), 90.

74. *New York Herald*, August 7, 1859, 4.

75. *Albany Atlas and Argus*, August 12, 1859, 2.

76. *Albany Atlas and Argus*, August 17, 1859, 2.

77. *New York Herald*, August 13, 17, 18, and 25, 1859; September 5, 1859.

78. O'Connor, *The Scandalous Mr. Bennett*, 19.

79. See Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News*, and David Mindich, *Just the Facts*.

80. Carl Sandburg, *Storm over the Land: A Profile of the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942), 86.

81. Crouthamel, *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press*, 69.

82. The first chapter of Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), features an excellent account of this debate.

83. Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Norton, 1983), 4-5.

84. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, 29.

85. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, 32.

86. Sandburg, *Storm over the Land*, 86–87.

87. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, 36.

88. Elmer Davis, *History of the New York Times*, *1851–1921* (New York: New York Times, 1921), 8.