

## Vonnegut and Melville on the Great American Con Game

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I can imagine Herman Melville, some considerable time after *The Confidence-Man* was published, shaking his head forlornly and, quoting Kurt Vonnegut, announcing to no one in particular, “This should have been a great country” (McCartan 161). The failure to accomplish the country that should have been galled Melville and Vonnegut into writing their darkly humorous, accusatory novels, *The Confidence-Man* and *Breakfast of Champions*. Their shared premise is that the promise of America as a land of social mobility and meritocracy is thwarted by the malicious confidence games that taint American economics and policy. *The Confidence-Man* and *Breakfast of Champions* read like the cautionary tales of immanent destruction told by mad prophets just in from the desert. No wonder Vonnegut describes himself as “a bearer of bad tidings” (McCartan 71). He and Melville identify our national *modus operandi* as the confidence game. Showing a sense of humor Vonnegut would appreciate, Melville has his title character board the Mississippi riverboat *Fidèle* one April Fool’s Day to spend the next 24 hours morphing from one guise to another, duping his fellow passengers. The bad tidings, as Tony Tanner describes them in his introduction to Melville’s novel, are that we liv[e] in, and on, and indeed off the future” (Melville *xviii*), and *Breakfast of*

*Champions* is the sequel after decades of self-predatory behavior. About problems such as the financial crash of 2008, the gap between the 1 and the 99 percent, or sequestration, they might well say, "I told you so and worse."

Vonnegut's America is downriver of Melville's just as Melville predicted it would be, and the river is much worse. Midland City's Sugar Creek is a "concrete trough" (223) contaminated with a "plastic substance ... coming from the Barrytron plant [which is] manufacturing a new anti-personnel bomb for the Air Force" (224). The confidence game is exponentially worse. Melville's characters are conned, but Dwayne Hoover is conned into conning. Furthermore, Melville's "ship of fools" (17) were conned face-to-face by a person, but Dwayne has been conned by something maddeningly faceless and ubiquitous, and he is much more dangerous as a result. Dwayne Hoover has invested everything in the story that "everybody in America was supposed to grab whatever he could and hold onto it" and now he is "a Pontiac dealer who was going insane" (13). Melville's passengers take their losses, but Dwayne explodes into uncontrolled violence.

Vonnegut prided himself on not having studied his "literary ancestors ... systematically ... for academic credit" (McCartan 26), but he knew his Melville and played on it. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim and his fellow prisoners of war flow "through the valley" like a "Mississippi of humiliated Americans" (64) in an eerie echo of Melville's humiliated passengers floating downriver. Vonnegut once likened himself to "Melville's whalers, who didn't talk anymore because they'd said all they had to say" (Wakefield 369). Will Kaufman writes in *The Comedian as*

*Confidence Man*, Vonnegut “echoes” Melville in “his own defeat as a comedian” (149). In Todd Davis’s view

Vonnegut furthers the transcendental and romantic tradition of Emerson and Melville in his disdain for static, definitive meaning; for Vonnegut, as for Emerson and Melville, there can never be singular truth, only the shifting, changing, and developing truths (62).

Over drinks before Dwayne erupts, Rabo Karabekian tells Beatrice Keedsler, “you know what truth is? ... it’s some crazy thing my neighbor believes. If I want to make friends with him, I ask him what he believes. He tells me, and I say, ‘yeah, yeah—ain’t it the truth?’” (209). To a far greater and darker extent than Emerson did, Melville and Vonnegut see the shifting, changing, developing truth of America as providing cover to a host of shifty characters and practices. They ruthlessly chronicle an American commerce in which, as P.T. Barnum freely admitted, “each party expect[s] to be cheated, if ... possible” (99). We have taken Melville’s steamship all the way downriver to Vonnegut’s world where a guy who “has it all” succumbs to his own toxic overload and tries to kill it all.

Melville and Vonnegut share many literary moves in writing about the swindles so central to American life and commerce, but one of their most gutsy moves is risking fiction itself for the sake of exposing the hoax at the heart of American experience. In his recent study *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel*, Robert Tally, Jr., sees Vonnegut as “attempt[ing] to establish *Breakfast of Champions* as a kind of anti-novel” (91) and composing it by “non-storytelling” (92).

Vonnegut’s rejection of novel-writing is a key event in the novel. After writing

himself into *Breakfast*, he denounces story books as “a reason Americans shot each other so often” (210). Putting fiction on the table is a high stakes game for Melville and Vonnegut, writers who, in Vonnegut’s words, were “hoping to build a country and add to its literature” (McCartan 161), though Melville would have agreed with Vonnegut’s statement that “this isn’t the country I’d hoped it could be” (McCartan 142). Both had serious concerns about these books finding an audience, Melville’s popularity having waned since he published *Moby Dick* in 1851 and Vonnegut, nearing 50, “suspecting” he was “out of business” (Allen 73), and noting that “writers of fiction have usually done their best work by the time they’re 45” (McCartan 160-61). Both challenge the normative limits of fiction by breaking character as authors when they jarringly insert themselves into their narratives to address their readers directly, and in Vonnegut’s case to free one of his characters to step out of the pages and write his own, as if that were some sort of schizophrenic possibility. Melville uses authorial asides as if to reassure and orient his readers. Turning from explicating the truth in *Moby Dick* to obfuscating it in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville interrupts his story three times to say, in essence, “I’m not making this stuff up; we really are a ship of fools heading downriver!”

Equally gutsy is their candor about the incredibility of fiction itself. They appreciate and enjoy that a story is a con. A novelist asks the reader the same question the confidence-man asks of all his marks: “could you put confidence in *me*” that this tale isn’t simply a “wild good chase?” (Melville, 57, 15). Melville and Vonnegut are willing to play the joke of fiction. In fact, Vonnegut reminded his creative writing students they were learning to play practical jokes for “if you make

people laugh or cry about little black marks on sheets of white paper, what is that but a practical joke?" (McCartan 49). Melville grimly calls his novel "our comedy" (92), and Vonnegut describes his books as "mosaics of jokes" (McCartan 57). The joke is on us, but neither author is kidding.

Despite their pessimism, Melville and Vonnegut put their money on fiction as comic con and cosmic truth, banking on the class of readers Melville describes in one of his authorial asides who turn to fiction "even for more reality, than real life itself can show" (244). As writer Ursula Le Guin notes, we have access to certain truths only through "lying," that is, through fictional narrative (40). A footnote on the fictional con: Their dilemma and calling as novelists translates to ours as professors with the declining stock of the humanities on the academic market. As Emerson noted, literature "afford(s) us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it" (2:185), but selling seats on that platform is certainly challenging. As literature professors we are in the business of selling stories as sure as General Mills is in the business of selling cereal. According to its website, Wheaties is "firmly associated with sporting excellence" and "helping its fans perform like champions since 1924." The websites of university English Departments boast similarly about majoring in English.

Vonnegut mines General Mills' sound bite to feed the rich irony of his prefatory claim that his "use of the identical expression as the title ... is not intended ... to disparage ... [the] fine products" of General Mills (1) and to feed the sadness with which he recalls that Phoebe Hurty, the ad writer, "believed what so many Americans [who lived through the Great Depression] believed...: that the nation

would be happy and just and rational when prosperity came" (2). In his hands the breakfast of champions is a bitter bowl of broken promises, tricks, and treachery. For example, he cites the "piece of evil nonsense which children were taught" that the so-called discoverers of the new world "eventually created a government which became a beacon of freedom to human beings everywhere else" when in fact they were "sea pirates" who, in 1492, "began to cheat and rob and kill" the "millions of human beings ... already living full and imaginative lives on the continent" (10). Kilgore Trout graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School, "named after a slave owner who was also one of the world's greatest theoreticians on the subject of human liberty" (34). In an interview with Jon Stewart, Vonnegut noted with disdain how long democracy takes to unfold – "after 100 years you have to let your slaves go, and after 150 years you have to let your women vote, and at the beginning of democracy is quite a bit of genocide" (Stewart).

The absurdity of the con, which includes self-deception as well as deceiving others, only seems to strengthen its hold on people. Vonnegut writes, "almost all the messages which were sent and received in [Dwayne's] country, even the telepathic ones, had to do with buying or selling some damn thing" (53-54). Dwayne listens to the radio ads in his car, and the ads are "like lullabies" to him, some poisonous charm sung by anti-mothers in the business of anti-nurturing (54). "Sounds good to me," says Dwayne (53). While Dwayne listens to the radio, Kilgore Trout sits in a dirty movie theater dreaming up a new novel about an astronaut who lands on a planet where all the food is made from petroleum and coal because the inhabitants have killed all the animal and plant life. What the inhabitants really want to talk

about is the dirty movies shown on their planet. The movies are food porn. The movie characters eat an obscene amount of food and then dump “about thirty pounds of leftovers into a garbage can” (60-61). After the movie the astronaut and his new friends are “accosted by humanoid whores” who offer to cook them “a meal of petroleum and coal products” and “talk dirty about how fresh and full of natural juices” the fake food is ... for a hefty price (61). Grotesquely supersized. Like Melville, Vonnegut hates that “everybody in America was supposed to grab whatever he could and hold onto it” (*Breakfast* 13) because it is such a destructive strategy.

The swindles work because, in Melville’s and Vonnegut’s view, enough people are greedy enough to be easily deceived by any number of greedy, but cleverer, cons. As philosopher Alan Watts writes, in contemporary society “most of us would rather have money than tangible wealth ... we are so tied up in our minds that we have lost our senses” (1). In Vonnegut’s view, even good people lose because they simply cannot “believe, until it was much too late, how heartless and greedy” the perpetrators are (12). Milo tells Kilgore Trout, “we’ve tried to survive so long on money and sex and envy and real estate and football and basketball and automobiles and television and alcohol—on sawdust and broken glass” (233). There’s something rotten in a state where “everybody” is “supposed to grab whatever he can,” just as there is something rotten in Dwayne Hoover’s charm as a businessman. The charm is only mesmerizing cover for the strike; it is morally suspect. Melville’s “worthy barber” (316) describes the confidence-man as a “man-charmer” (316). “Charm,” Vonnegut writes in connection with Kilgore Trout’s lack

of it, “was a scheme for making strangers like and trust a person immediately, no matter what the charmer had in mind” (20). Kilgore Trout has a weirdly moral disconnect from “the sales end of the business” precisely “because he has no *charm*” (20).

For Melville and Vonnegut, Americans don’t live a charmed life. In the preface to *Breakfast*, Vonnegut writes “nobody believes anymore in a new American paradise” (2). Instead we have been charmed out of the promise of America, a promise that Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell has written “drives you mad” by its failure to obtain, by your failure to obtain it (95). In a 2007 interview, Vonnegut said, “I’m mostly just heartsick about this. There should have been hope” (McCartan 161). Dwayne Hoover owns “the Pontiac agency and a piece of the new Holiday Inn ... three Burger Chefs ... and five coin-operated car washes, and pieces of the sugar Creek Drive-In Theater, Radio Station WMCY, the Three Maples Par-Three Golf Course, and seventeen hundred shares of common stock in ... a local electronics firm” not to mention “dozens of vacant lots” awaiting development, but he’s lost: “Where am I?” he asks (65). Kilgore Trout hitches a ride from a trucker who laments “seems like the only kind of job an American can get these days is committing suicide in some way” (86). Unlike Thomas Wolfe, you can go home in America now because home is “just a motel” (196). Inserting himself into the novel, Vonnegut describes America as a “dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life,” a place where people are “treated by their government as though their lives were as disposable as paper facial tissues” (210).



The last line of *The Confidence-Man* is “something further may follow of this Masquerade” (336), and Vonnegut wrote that something. Vonnegut agrees with Melville that something further will follow: he says “the proper ending for any story about people ... should be ... ETC” (228) which is indeed the last word of the novel (295). He shares Melville’s pessimism and is enraged, and “heartsick” by the forms the *et cetera* will take. For Melville the game ends just before midnight on April Fool’s day as the confidence-man, having duped an old man into taking a commode for a life preserver, leads him into “the darkness which ensued” (336). In a PBS 2005 interview, Vonnegut cried, “Look, the game is over! The game is over. We’ve killed the planet, the life support system. And, it’s so damaged that there’s no recovery ... it was very shallow people who imagined that we could keep this up indefinitely” (PBS). We should have considered the moral hazard earlier, but deferring that assessment is endemic in American practice, leaving the way clear for fast cons. In November 2008, *The New York Times* reported Ben Bernanke, Federal Reserve Chairman, suggested “concerns about ‘moral hazard’ stemming from the bailouts should be addressed after the initial shocks from the crisis had begun to fade” (Grynbaum). As *New Yorker* columnist James Surowiecki wrote in 2009, “[Bernie] Madoff is just the latest in a long line of fraudsters who took advantage of investor euphoria” (21). Melville’s America was full of such fraudsters taking advantage of manifest destiny euphoria.

In his wonderful study *The Confidence Man in American Literature*, Gary Lindberg described America as a “confidence culture” (184) in which “the confidence man is a covert cultural hero” (3) who “clarifies the uneasy relations

between our stated ethics [of self-reliance] and our tolerated practices [of swindling]" (4). From its earliest form, the American dream entails confidence that we can realize our dreams of limitless expansion with a fast turnaround on minimal investment. But any idealistic potential of the dream is thwarted by our game culture in which winners take all and cheating is expected. Experimental economists Charles Plott (Caltech) and Charles Noussair (Tilburg University in the Netherlands) hypothesized that under very clearly defined conditions, price would stick close to value, but instead found in study after study that the first thing people do is to "try to buy low and sell high" no matter what the fundamental value actually is (Postrel 42). The dream is to get something for nothing, to find the goose that lays golden eggs. As real life con man Simon Lovell has pointed out, that goose is a "really unlikely" creature, but the "adrenalin burn of pulling something off and getting away with it" is so compelling that it is "almost sexual in its pleasure" (Lovell). So much Anglo-American humor revolves around this sort of diddling that Edgar Allan Poe was able to capitalize on it in his 1843 essay "Diddling considered as one of the exact sciences."

American morality is a complex and inconsistent construct. There are strong cultural narratives of natural morality and of morality being at odds with wealth and power; Huckleberry Finn, Hester Prynne, and Thoreau come to mind. However, we persist in trumping moral value with economic value, saving our assessment of any moral hazard for later. Melville and Vonnegut have slim confidence in our ability to resist the desire to "get it right now, no payments for 12 months" and even less in our capacity to know a trap when we see one. Think of the overly-mortgaged and

leveraged homeowners whose retirement accounts have evaporated, of the students whose substantial loans come due as quickly as jobs disappear, of the municipalities declaring bankruptcy, of Dwayne Hoover pitching his idea for a health club to Cyprian Ukwende. Dwayne schemes aloud: “the thing to do with a health club was to open it and then sell it as soon as possible for a profit” because people “lose interest in about a year, and they stop coming” (279-80). But Vonnegut sees Dwayne’s logical fate. Dwayne “wasn’t going to open anything ever again” because “the people he had injured so unjustly would sue him so vengefully that he would be rendered destitute” (280). I think *Breakfast of Champions* and *The Confidence-Man* are both alive and kicking us. *The Confidence-Man* is the obvious book about Americans, but it wasn’t widely read, in part because it is an unflattering story that delivered us our nonfictional selves. That’s why Kurt Vonnegut still had to write that truth. They both teach us that we succumb to lies and hollow language and why, why we embark on the wild goose chases that rob us of both our sense and cents. How much longer can we afford to take that joke? Melville was disgusted and stopped writing novels. But for all that Vonnegut declared “Human beings are obviously a terrible idea” (McCartan 149), his parting shot in his last interview was “I gotta go ... Good luck” (McCartan 168). It’s certainly worth trying to turn the tables.

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