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The Self without Character: Melville's *The Confidence-Man* and Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*

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Abstract: This essay explores the gap between character, that is, the habitual persona or mask that can be consistently recognized and represented, and the underlying self. If the self is conflated with the persona, the latter rings hollow. If the self emerges in the gap between itself and its persona, it is no longer hollow but rather empty in the positive Mahāyāna Buddha Dharma sense of *śūnyatā* (lack of a self-same self or identity). This essay disambiguates the hollowness of character from the emptiness of the self through a study of Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857) and Murakami's contemporary classic, *Kafka on the Shore* (2002). Bringing Murakami into proximity with Melville not only highlights the originality of both but also affords a co-illuminating confrontation that brings Buddhist and Shinto insights to bear upon the problem of the self.

Keywords: Herman Melville; Haruki Murakami; *The Confidence-Man*; *Kafka on the Shore*; relationship of self and character; imagination

1. Introduction

The Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera claimed, "All novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self" (Kundera 1988, p. 23). Although it is not always clear how every novel does this, I would like to examine two conspicuously striking testimonies to Kundera's contention, namely, the last novel that Herman Melville was able to publish in his lifetime, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857) and, more briefly, Haruki Murakami's contemporary Japanese classic, *Kafka on the Shore* (海辺のカフカ, *Umibe no Kafuka*, 2002; English translation, 2005). Both deploy the considerable powers of the novel, "marshaling all intellectual means and all poetic forms to illuminate 'what only the novel can discover': man's being" (Kundera 1988, p. 64).

2. On the *Fidèle*

With the exception of the last chapter, which transpires after the midnight hour, Melville's novel both transpires on April Fools' Day and was tellingly published on the same day. Although recognition of this day is fairly widespread, its origins, perhaps appropriately, are obscure. From the thickness of the past emerges a day in which actions and actors are intentionally not what they seem. One can reasonably surmise that its roots extend to the Medieval Feast of Fools—Festum Fatuorum (Feast of the Fatuous and Foolish) and Festum Stultorum (Feast of the Stupid and Foolish)—in which the public personas of the clergy and laity were inverted. As the New Year replaced the old one, a kind of Catholic saturnalia prevailed. The subtitle of Melville's novel, *His Masquerade*, evokes this by suggesting the conscious adoption of mask wearing.

The etymology of *fool* itself can be traced back to the French *fou*, mad, but its underlying Latin roots are more telling: *follis* is something hollow that is filled with air, as in bellows, or a windbag, or an air-filled playing ball, or puffed cheeks, or even a money bag filled with at best tiny and near worthless coins. A fool is therefore empty-headed or, more precisely, there is nothing substantial or essential supporting or propping up his actions or countenance. Fools are *hollow* and hence, derivatively, we

assume that they are not fundamentally governed by reason. Melville and Murakami complicate this derivative inference and take seriously the gap between the *emptiness* of the self and the *hollowness* of character. The masks or personas are not mere disguises, covering one's true identity. The masks are an inflation of the self in the sense of the self coming into image or imagining itself. If one confuses oneself with one's mask and identifies one's self with it, however, the mask rings hollow with nothing behind it. Those who confuse their selves with their characters or masks are *hollow* fools, but there is also a positive manner of appreciating selfhood. From the perspective of the self, the mask attests to the *emptiness* of selfhood in the Mahāyāna Buddha Dharma sense of *śūnyatā* (lack of a self-same self or identity). This is, after all, All Fools' Day, the day when emptiness and hollowness are disambiguated. It is the task of this essay to render this disambiguation intelligible.

2.1. Emptiness of Water (the Sea)

Beginning with his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale* (1851), the problem of the self emerged as one of Melville's most persistent and profound concerns. The great sea undoes the illusion that the self is on terra firma, propped up on reliable and orienting ground. "Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists" (chp. 35, The Mast-Head)![1] The Cartesian self-contained self presupposes that it is grounded in itself and that it can consequently take itself as its own object. The sea interrupts this fancy, exposing the self as it hovers over a vortex over which it has no control. "No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe" (chp. 58, Brit). The sea is sovereign ("masterless"), the ungrounding freedom that contests our terrestrial habits of being and acting.

Melville's next novel, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (Melville 1852), despite being his only landlocked narrative, does not reverse the vortex and ground the self on terra firma, but rather demonstrates that the sea is as much within as it is without: "with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and nobody is there!—appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man!" (Melville 1971, p. 285).[2]

Although *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* largely ruined Melville's career, his thinking remained bold and unapologetic. In the fourteenth chapter of the *Confidence-Man*, the problematic nature of the self returns. The novel's narrative is simple: the confidence man, whose identity—if she or he even has one—is never unmasked, periodically yet radically changes "his" character on a Mississippi steamship journey from Saint Louis to New Orleans. "His" masquerade enables "him" to shift character in order to appeal to the various capacities and commitments of his audience. At one point, Melville's authorial persona interrupts the action and reflects on the problem of character, arguing against the prevailing prejudice that when a novel depicts a character, "its consistency should be preserved" (Melville 1990, p. 84). Not only does this arbitrarily curtail the creative powers of the novel, it ironically has little to do with "real life," where "a consistent character is a *rara avis*" or rare bird (Melville 1990, p. 84). Indeed, "no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature has" (Melville 1990, p. 85). Which writer has developed characters as strange and mysterious as the duckbilled platypus? "Lesser authors" populate the novelistic terrain with easily recognizable character types, as if the self were somehow obvious and character were a settled affair. This widespread but contrived practice implies that authors "have no business to be perplexing readers with duck-billed characters. Always they should represent human nature not in obscurity, but transparency." Such a view and practice ignores what "is said of the divine nature, that it is past finding out" and hence it cannot be represented "in a clear light" (Melville 1990, p. 85).

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[1] Since there are innumerable editions of this classic, I cite it by chapter number. For the purposes of this essay, I have relied on Melville (1988). For more on this novel, see chapter six of Wirth (2015).

[2] For more on *Pierre*, see Wirth (2017b).

In aligning the self with its divine nature, Melville is alluding to the biblical teaching that the self is made in the image of God. The self does not therefore reduce to its manifestation as character and, moreover, to reduce the self to its character rings hollow. This is not to say that character, an image of the self that in itself has no image, implies that the depths of the self are themselves simply hollow, the vapid nihilism of a mere lack. At its ground the self is a "divine nature" and as such ineluctably obscure. As the biblical tradition holds, the self is somehow *like God*—ὁμοίωσις θεοῦ—as in James 3:9, where humans are spoken of as τοὺς καθ' ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ γεγονότας, those made in the image of God, the ones made like God. This is *not to speak of image as a picture that copies the form of an original*. There are no representations of God, hence the prescription against idols or graven images.[3] The Hebrew *pesel* (פֶּסֶל) is a carved or graven copy, and this resonance can also be detected within the roots of the word "image," *imago*, originally naming a copy, statue, or picture (as does the German *Bild*). To copy or represent God as if God were a form to reproduce is idolatry. The confidence man plays at least seven characters, and his masquerade prompts one of his marks to recall the words of Shakespeare: "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exists and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts" (Melville 1990, p. 264). The stage is the public exhibition of the divine self's many characters.

If all the world's a stage, there is no representable self. This gap between the divine self and its public manifestation means that no "character" can, "by reason of its consistency, be comprehended at a glance" (Melville 1990, p. 84). If the incomprehensible depths of the self defy recognition, however, what makes the illusion of such a glance possible? This is the problem at the heart of *confidence*.

2.2. Confidence

In Brazil, April Fools' Day is called Dia da Mentira or Day of the Lie, which points to the problem of confidence at the heart of selfhood. In the summer of 1849, almost eight years before the appearance of Melville's novel, a man calling himself "Samuel Willis"—the masquerade of Samuel Thompson (1821–1856)—visited a jewelry store on Broadway Street in Manhattan and convinced its proprietor, Mr. Meyers, that they knew each other, having met several times before. "Willis" eventually won the jeweler's trust, borrowed a tidy sum of money, and subsequently absconded with it. After serving time, "Willis" was at it again and Melville read in the 28 April 1855 edition of the Albany *Evening Journal* an article curiously titled "The Original Confidence Man in Town—A Short Chapter on Misplaced Confidence" (Parker 2002, pp. 255–56). The mysterious "Willis" used a series of interrelated techniques that struck such a chord in American culture that the phrase *confidence man* became a widely accepted term in American English and is the root of the widely used verb and noun *con*. To con someone is to rob or swindle them, but one does not use a weapon or force. Rather the *grifter*—another gift of American English, dating to early-twentieth-century carnival slang—wins the trust of the mark or sucker; this misplaced confidence allows the confidence man to work her or his angle and execute the flim-flam (to use a much older European term).

The great Melville scholar Hershel Parker characterized Melville's novel, in which the confidence man, switching from character to character, bamboozles passenger after passenger, as a satire on the American propensity for hucksterism in which the Prince of Lies himself wins the confidence of his trusting victims. The debacle of both the White House and Congressional politics is certainly an indication that the hucksterism in which politicians, snake-handlers, televangelists, and rightwing talk show hosts and their ilk, take us for a ride is a deep-seated part of the American karma and alive and well. Phineas T. Barnum exemplifies this great American archetype.[4] In this respect it is fitting that the name of the sixth and final episode of the documentary series *Dirty Money*, a takedown of the lifelong

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[3] This is most famously proclaimed in Exodus 20:4, but can also be found in Leviticus 26:1, Deuteronomy 4:16–19, and Isaiah 42:8.

[4] "Melville saw Americans as cheerily confident. The book turns on the American willingness to accept satanic reassurance that all is well—amid such signs to the contrary as Bleeding Kansas" (Parker 2002, p. 260).

smoke-and-mirrors act of Donald Trump, the great contemporary P. T. Barnum, is called *The Confidence Man* (2018, dir. Fisher Stevens). Yes, never give a sucker an even break, as the 1941 W. C. Fields film of the same name counsels.[5] Politicians and preachers have long known that suckers are ubiquitous and can be easily persuaded to fight against their interests as if they were fighting for them.

As true and alarming and depressing as this all is, Melville pursued a subtler problem, one that makes the confidence man's equation with Satan more ambiguous. If the confidence man is the grifter or huckster or salesman who tricks one into misplacing one's confidence, where is one to properly place one's confidence? Satires are too knowing, as if the folly of the marks and suckers can be calibrated against a proper measure of confidence. The passengers are *all* on a steamer called the *Fidèle*—the "congress of all of that multiform pilgrim species, man" (Melville 1990, p. 14). Just like the *Pequod* in *Moby-Dick*, it is a mournful image of the broken promise of the new country. Everyone is with (*con*) the *Fidèle*, con-fidèle, the confidence game of the new democracy. The problem of confidence recalls, prior to its appropriation by Christianity as *faith*, its origins in Roman law. *Fides* named the reliability or trust necessary to establish a relationship between people. "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" (Melville 1990, p. 155), says one of the confidence man's characters. Without *fides*, shared life is impossible, but in what or whom should we place our confidence? Upon what and whom do we consent to rely?

In his wonderful dialogue with the historian D. Graham Burnett, Cornel West agrees with his interlocutor that Melville struggled with confidence in an "existential mode," departing from Cartesian epistemology and embracing what H. Richard Niebuhr called "pistology," "this business of trying to find some kind of meaning in a world of overwhelming chaos . . . Pistology means imposing some order on *the mess*" (West and Burnett 2007, p. 104). This is not to say that West maintains that Melville had figured out what merits our confidence. He concedes, "I am pushed to the wall by Melville's Saturday-sensibility" (West and Burnett 2007, p. 111). The Man of Sorrows who experiences the agony of mortality is not an image of the self-evidence of the objects that command our confidence. "Melville is wrestling with the angel of meaning, he's wrestling with the angel of death the way Jacob did—but he can't get a new name" (West and Burnett 2007, p. 111).

Rather than a knowing and satanic satire on the follies of American gullibility, Melville's confidence man operates in the shadows of the ambiguity of being. He exploits the pistological dilemma. If the objects of a proper confidence were clear, the confidence man could not ply his trade. He takes advantage not of the clear and distinct, but rather the murkiness—the contingency of beings as both their ultimate indeterminacy and the possibility that they could be otherwise—of what Plato in the *Sophist* called the μὴ ὄν [*mē on*]. This does designate the negation of being (the lack of a particular being), but rather that which *is* as not having being. As FWJ Schelling argued in the 1815 draft of *Die Weltalter* (*The Ages of the World*):

> This extremity can itself be called only a shadow of the being, a minimum of reality, only to some extent still having being, but not really. This is the meaning of non-being according to the Neo-Platonists, who no longer understood Plato's real meaning of it. We, following the opposite direction, also recognize an extremity, below which there is nothing, but it is for us not something ultimate, but something primary, out of which all things begin, an eternal beginning, not a mere feebleness or lack in the being, but active negation.[6] (Schelling 2000, pp. 31–32)

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[5] *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (1941), dir. Edward F. Cline. In *You Can't Cheat an Honest Man* (1939), Fields recounts his grandfather's sage counsel: "You can't cheat an honest man; never give a sucker an even break, or smarten up a chump."

[6] The negation or complete denial of being is οὐκ όν, while μη όν denotes, to use Schelling's language, that which in being is not of being.

In his *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze argued that this μη [*mē*], the "'non' in the phrase 'non-being,' expresses *something other than the negative*" (Deleuze 1994, p. 63). The μὴ ὄν is "the being of the problematic, the being of problem and question" and Deleuze suggests translating it as "?-being" (Deleuze 1994, p. 267).[7] Since the forms of beings are not copies of an underlying original and as such are either empty or, if taken at face value, ring hollow, the confidence man works the mē-ontological ambiguities of existence that make confidence both necessary (without trust human life together is impossible) and contingent (it does not follow that we know what or whom is worthy of our confidence). "To what vicissitudes of light and shade is man subject!" (Melville 1990, p. 156).

Although the confidence man relies on the emptiness of being and the obscurities of confidence, this does not fully explain the skill of knowing how to work a particular mark. What wins the confidence of one person makes another suspicious. The art of the confidence game, conducted in the pistological shadows of the μὴ ὄν, also requires the capacity to recognize the *character* of the mark. Yet how are we to understand character? Since in the parade of masks that is the voyage of the *Fidèle* there is nothing behind one's character, what accounts for the conflation of the self with one's mask (character or persona)? As the cosmopolitan Frank Goodman demonstrates in the cases of Winsome and Egbert (personas for Emerson and Thoreau, respectively), the confidence game exposes the self's fundamental attachments and commitments, even though they may be operating beneath one's awareness. As the passage from Ecclesiastes (13:4–13) attests at the end of the novel: "he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou" (Melville 1990, p. 286)? The confidence man palpates the mark's character, discerning its fundamental investments. Character is the qualities in which the self habitually places its confidence. "For to every philosophy," the cosmopolitan explains, "are certain rear parts, very important parts, and these, like the rear of one's head, are best seen by reflection" (Melville 1990, p. 233). The confidence man acts like a kind of mirror that allows one to glimpse the back of one's head. That is, he dramatizes what is at stake in one's character, giving it shape, despite one not necessarily being fully aware of it. Character is not who one really is, but rather the role that one plays, the mask that one wears, and the confidence man discerns the shape of the mask more readily than its host.

This is evident in the masquerade of the confidence man and his parade of seven characters. They say more about the marks than they do about the confidence man, who remains utterly obscure. The parade begins when the *Fidèle* departs from Saint Louis, where slavery had been legal since the 1820 Missouri Compromise and where Dred Scott resided. Weeks before Melville's novel appeared, the notorious Dred Scott Decision had come down, determining that all people of African descent, whether free or slave, were not citizens. The first character to appear is Black Guinea, "a grotesque negro cripple" with a tambourine and the stature of Newfoundland dog (Melville 1990, p. 15). Onlookers respond to his begging with "a strange sort of pitch-penny game, the cripple's mouth being at once target and purse" (Melville 1990, p. 16). This cruel charity continues until someone suspects that Black Guinea's "deformity was "a sham, got up for financial purposes" (Melville 1990, p. 17) and that he was "some white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy" (Melville 1990, p. 19). Black Guinea attempts to win the "confidence" of his skeptics, telling them that there are people on the *Fidèle* who can vouchsafe his identity and need. He then briefly describes the confidence man's parade of characters to come.

Despite the Christians who no longer trust Black Guinea, he does win the trust of a country merchant who gives him a half dollar. It is a strange and poignant scene. With the shore of a slaveholding state just to the east of the *Fidèle*, Black Guinea attempts to convince white Christians that he is human. The marks are those whose pity—or perhaps guilt—can be aroused, but not enough that they would have been moved to oppose the slavery practiced in the state from which

[7] Deleuze plays with three strategies to articulate the μὴ ὄν. One could write it: "(non)-being" or better: "?-being." Or mark it with the French particle *ne*: "an expletive NE rather than a negative 'not.' This μὴ ὄν is so called because it precedes all affirmation, but is none the less completely positive" (Deleuze 1994, p. 267).

they had just embarked. As the *Fidèle* makes it way down the river to New Orleans, the shores are home to slavery as well as the ongoing genocide of the Indigenous to the West as the murderous rage of the Backwoodsman attests: "An intenser Hannibal, he makes a vow, the hate of which is a vortex from whose suction scarce the remotest chip of the guilty race may reasonably feel secure" (Melville 1990, p. 180). Cleaving between the worlds of Daniel Boone and a Supreme Court that enshrines the non-humanity of those of African descent, the *Fidèle* and her passengers reveal the great store of confidence that this country has placed in two of its greatest idols. The first is the racism that shores up confidence in white supremacy—"race is the child of racism, not the father" as Ta-Nehisi Coates has recently argued (Coates 2015, p. 7). The second is money. Although our currency proclaims "In God We Trust," money cannot circulate unless we collectively grant it and each other our confidence. This enables both a great convenience—units of exchange—and a runaway confidence game. Although Mammonism rings hollow, it rules the roost. Does Black Guinea really deserve the precious coins I toss in his mouth?

The confidence man's parade exploits things without which life would be impossible. When Black Guinea disappears at the next port of call, the man with the weed appears, going by the ironic name of John Ringman. (A ringer was a counterfeit substitute, as in fraudulently passing off a fast horse for a slow one.) Borrowing one of the confidence games of the original confidence man (Samuel Thompson), Ringman exploits the shaky confidence we have in our own memories. Ringman persuades Henry Roberts and his "faithless memory" (Melville 1990, p. 26) that they are actually old friends and that consequently Roberts should lend him a nice bit of money. Ringman yields at the next port of call to the Man in Gray who is collecting charitable donations to the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum and dreaming of a grand World's Charity, all the while "strangling the least symptom of distrust" (Melville 1990, p. 43) in his marks. What causes really merit our confidence and how do we discern who their representatives are?

The Man in Gray gives way to Mr. Truman—who is he truly?—who is selling shares in the Black Rapids Coal Company and they are presently a bargain, having been greatly devalued by the "hypocritical growling of the bears" (Melville 1990, p. 60). The harbingers of a bear market are not driven by knowledge but rather by pessimistic speculative fictions about the trustworthiness of a particular stock. They are "hypocrites in the simulation of things dark instead of bright; souls that thrive, less upon depression, than the fiction of depression" (Melville 1990, p. 60). These "gloomy philosophers of the stock-market" are "destroyers of confidence" (Melville 1990, p. 61). The bears have confidence in a lack of confidence.

In trying to arouse confidence in his stock, Truman does not apply this principle to the bulls who inversely put their confidence in confidence. When capitalist economies attempt to resurrect themselves from their bust cycles, they are driven to restore confidence in the stock market as such. If we all have confidence that the economic recovery is working, then it might work. John Maynard Keynes's *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936) famously likened "professional investment" to a newspaper beauty contest. If the contestants had to pick the six most beautiful women out of hundreds of photographs that best corresponded to "the average preference to the competitors as a whole," a naïve contestant would attempt to discern the six most beautiful women. A savvy contestant, however, would try to figure out who the other contestants thought the most beautiful women was, and an even savvier contestant would try to figure who the other contestants thought the other contestants thought were the six most beautiful women, and this step back would take another step back each time contestants played the game more skillfully. Keynes:

> It is not a case of choosing those that, to the best of one's judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those that average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be. And there are some, I believe, who practice the fourth, fifth and higher degrees. (Keynes 1958, p. 156)

The complex confidence game of stocks gives way to the confidence game of medicine as the herb-doctor plies miracle cures like his Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator and his Samaritan Pain Dissuader. When asked about the ingredients, the herb-doctor dismisses the question as the symptom of a sick philosopher because it lacks confidence in the medicine. "I am no materialist; but the mind so acts upon the body, that if the one have no confidence, neither has the other" (Melville 1990, p. 98). As more contemporary experiments with placebos and the "placebo effect" have confirmed, confidence in a cure can be part of the cure. If I think that I am taking the appropriate medicine (even though I have been administered a placebo), my confidence in the medicine can lead to improvements. "Hope is proportioned to confidence" (Melville 1990, p. 99), explains the herb-doctor. On the other hand, Big Pharma or the wildly unregulated confidence game in vitamins and supplements are the latest chapters in a long history of snake oil sales games and other panacea schemes. This includes our blind faith in the *all-natural*—"Trust me, nature is health; for health is good, and nature cannot work ill. As little as she can work error. Get nature, and you get well" (Melville 1990, p. 99). Disease and death, alas, are also perfectly natural.

The herb-doctor's confident optimism is finally defeated by the brooding misanthropy of Pitch, and soon the Philosophical Intelligence Officer emerges to attempt to restore his confidence in humanity. Although he is an abolitionist, Pitch despises and exploits his child laborers. In retort, the Philosophical Intelligence Officer puts his confidence where many philosophical intelligence officers put it: in reason itself (Melville 1990, p. 150). He argues quite strikingly that human character is not trapped in a fixed template or subject to the vice grip of destiny. One cannot write off humanity because even if it starts off poorly and without promise, it is subject to radical non-sequiturs. Just as the caterpillar becomes a butterfly, the vainglorious Ignatius became the founder of the Jesuits, the sinful rhetorician became Augustine the saint, and the worldly Armand Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé became the founder of the Trappist Cistercians. How strange of the confidence man to be evincing confidence in humanity! He does not have confidence in humanity's essence, but precisely in the unprethinkability of the self!

That the confidence man is at ground neither good nor evil becomes even clearer in the final mask in the parade, Frank Goodman, the cosmopolitan and "ambassador from the human race" (Melville 1990, p. 166), who continues to attempt to convert the misanthrope by making the case for the philanthrope. Alas, after winning the confidence of the misanthrope and converting him to the side of humanity, he admits that he, like Black Guinea before him, is in "urgent want of money" (Melville 1990, p. 213). When Goodman later confronts Winsome and Egbert, personas for Emerson and Thoreau, respectively, he appreciates that the New England Transcendentalists have a deep sense of life's mystery—"Mystery in the morning, and mystery in the night, and the beauty of mystery everywhere" (Melville 1990, p. 234). This did not, however, make them generous. Befriending Winsome and asking him for a loan, Winsome refuses, countering that loaning a friend money is degrading, turning it into a "pecuniary make-shift" (Melville 1990, p. 238) and treating them like the "soulless corporation of a bank" (Melville 1990, p. 239). Well why not then just donate a friend some money with "the helping hand and the feeling heart" (Melville 1990, p. 241)? That too degrades friendship. Help and philanthropy imply that the one in need is beneath one and unworthy of friendship—"there is something wrong about the man who wants help" (Melville 1990, p. 243). If one asks for help, one presents oneself as undeserving of help. The vagaries of transcendentalism give cover to their New England thrift and "self-reliance" and the supposed "condescension" of philanthropy allows one to hide one's indifference to the suffering of others in the profundity of ontology. The cosmopolitan exposed their character.

Finally Goodman tries to win the confidence of the barber. Although this too goes awry, the barber and his friends remembered him as "quite an original" (Melville 1990, p. 280). The authorial persona contemplates this nomination. What is it to be an original? It is not to be a novel character, for character is derivative, emerging from origin. To say that one imagines a new character is to originate a character, but from where does the character come when it comes into the imagination? It "cannot be born in the author's imagination—it being as true in literature as in zoology, that all life

is from the egg" (Melville 1990, p. 282). An original character is like "a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all around it" (Melville 1990, p. 282). The Drummond light is the limelight, an early form of light used in theaters and lighthouses. The electrically powered searchlight or spotlight technologically updates Melville's metaphor: the dark origin that transforms itself into mobile and eccentric illumination, as if its origin were the dark origin of the imagination as it transforms itself into character and form. The imagination is the coming into image from an origin that in itself is without image. (This is also suggested in the German *Einbildungskraft*, the power of coming into image or *Bild*.) Such manifestations—the confidence man—are "akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things" (Melville 1990, p. 282). As we know from the beginning of Genesis, "the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep" and things came to light—came to be as the shining forth of light from original darkness—when God said, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:2–3, NIV).

In the final chapter, All Fools' Day comes to an end as the novel descends back into the darkness from which it characters shone forth, exposing the shining forth of all characters. A solar light hangs from the ceiling "with an image of a horned altar" (Melville 1990, p. 284), symbolizing the Old and New Testaments. As the cosmopolitan and the old man talk about the Apocrypha and the apocryphal, the works of concealed origin, from ἀπόκρυφος (*apokryphos*), "obscure" and "hidden away," someone mistakenly hears Apocalypse, ἀποκάλυψις, uncovering, disclosing, and hence revealing. The originality of the confidence man's many apocryphal characters is revealed in its ambiguity. After a vain discussion of matters like counterfeit detection, the light illuminating the horned altar eventually goes out and the cosmopolitan leads the old man into the darkness. Our characters are revealed to be apocryphal, suspended over a dark vortex as vast and disorienting as the sea.

3. Ghost Selves

In conclusion, we look briefly at Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* to further refine our analysis of the problem of the self in Melville. This is not to suggest that Murakami derived this problem from Melville, although he is exceptionally well read in American literature. Murakami's novel, which he described as "a way of descending deep into my own consciousness,"[8] explores the problem of the self on its own terms. It "contains several riddles, but there aren't any solutions provided"; rather, "the riddles function as part of the solution."[9]

The novel interlaces two separate narrative threads. The odd-numbered chapters explore the Oedipal travails of the teenage Kafka Tamura, who runs away from home in Tokyo to the seaport city of Takamatsu on the island of Shikoku, full of anger toward his father. Avoiding Freudian clichés, Kafka nonetheless confronts his character, which was traumatized enough that it could kill his father and enjoy sex with his mother and even his sister. He will eventually unofficially reenact some form of the Yamabushi Way of Shugendō[10] as he attempts to come to term with the depths of his self and break through the trap of his character.

While in Takamatsu, Kafka spends much of his time in the Komura Memorial Library, where he befriends the librarian, a young hemophiliac named Oshima. In his wild rage and confusion, Kafka still feels "safe inside this container called *me* . . . I'm where I belong" (Murakami 2006, p. 55). This is an ancient and widespread illusion: that our bodies are mere vehicles for our real, essential self: "The essence of me, surrounded by the shell that's me" (Murakami 2006, p. 267). It is the violence and

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8 http://www.harukimurakami.com/resource_category/q_and_a/questions-for-haruki-murakami-about-kafka-on-the-shore (accessed on 12 December 2017).

9 http://www.harukimurakami.com/resource_category/q_and_a/questions-for-haruki-murakami-about-kafka-on-the-shore (accessed on 12 December 2017).

10 The Yamabushi are literally those who take refuge in the mountains. These Shinto–Buddhist adepts still undergo the severe mountain practice of *Shugendō* (and hence they are also called *Shugenja*). For more on these kinds of practices, see Wirth (2017a).

rage of this purportedly essential self that Kafka eventually confronts in his Shugendō journey into the forest of ghosts, of selves frozen in their essential selves, long after their bodies have gone. Oshima, who intimates that he had already undergone this encounter, thinks that Kafka has it backwards. Born with the sex of a woman, Oshima is transgender and confesses that "I'm not crazy about the container I'm in, that's for sure. How could I be—this crummy piece of work? . . . If we reverse the outer shell and the essence—in other words, consider the outer shell the essence and the essence only the shell—our lives might be a whole lot easier to understand" (Murakami 2006, p. 267). The body is how the empty—in the Mahāyāna Buddha Dharma sense of emptiness, śūnyatā or lack of intrinsic self-same being—self takes form. It is not how an a priori form or essence embodies or instantiates itself. The body shapes the formless self in new ways, but when the body is traumatized, it can congeal into the wound of an unchanging self. When nothing can change, imagination is impossible—there will be no new forms. As Oshima writes in his notes on Hannah Arendt's famous study of the banality of evil, "where there's no power to imagine, no responsibility can arise. Just like we see with Eichmann" (Murakami 2006, p. 132).

One morning two women arrive at the library, "investigating public cultural facilities in the entire country from a woman's point of view" (Murakami 2006, p. 174). They scold Oshima and the library for not having a restroom "set aside for women" (Murakami 2006, p. 175) and for violating "the principle of sexual equality" by listing male authors before female authors. When Oshima pushes back, they go on the attack, calling him "a totally pathetic, historical example of the phallocentric" (Murakami 2006, p. 177), a "patriarchal male" who employs "the status quo and the cheap phallocentric logic that supports it to reduce the entire female gender to second-class citizens" (Murakami 2006, p. 178). Oshima takes umbrage, explaining that while his body "is physically female," his mind is "completely male" (Murakami 2006, p. 179). Since he is legally female and does not have a penis, it is hard for him to be phallocentric. His mind imagined that it was male and took responsibility for it and gave form to it. His female sex was empty and her mind was imaginative. In contrast, he upbraids the feminist police for being what T. S. Eliot called "*hollow men*. People who fill up that lack of imagination with heartless bits of straw . . . Narrow minds devoid of imagination" (Murakami 2006, p. 181). The hollow men are not empty, but rather fixed forms of selves, and, as such, hollow windbags.

The even chapters tell the remarkable and deeply moving narrative of Nakata Satoru. At the end of the Second World War on Rice Bowl Hill, a group of children on a field trip mysteriously collapsed as if they were dead, their selves abandoning their bodies. All of the children eventually recovered as if nothing had happened except for one, Nakata, who from that point on lives as a body without a fixed character, as if his soul had fled but never returned. He became the "proverbial blank slate" without memory, without history, and could not "even fathom the concept of Japan or the Earth" (Murakami 2006, p. 68). He worked quietly as a furniture maker for decades, enjoyed his morning defecation, liked to eat *unagi* but could rarely afford it, and was unperturbed when his brother stole his life savings because, being unable to conceive of a number greater than 20, he could not comprehend what he had lost. He had no recollection of ever being bored. And he could talk to cats. In his retirement, he would help distraught cat owners recover their lost cats and, since he could interview other cats about the whereabouts of the missing ones, he slowly but surely located them. He gratefully lived off a small "sub city" that he imagined that the governor of Japan personally gave him. In a sense, he was a Buddha:

> Nakata let his body relax, switched of his mind, allowing things to flow through him. This was natural for him, something he'd done ever since he was a child, without a second thought. Before long the borders of his consciousness fluttered around, just like butterflies. Occasionally his consciousness would fly over the border and hover over that dizzying, black crevasse. But Nakata wasn't afraid of the darkness or how deep it was. And why should he be? That bottomless world of darkness, that weighty silence and chaos, was an old friend, a part of him already. (Murakami 2006, p. 85)

The Rice Bowl Hill incident relies on a subtle distinction in the literary history of Japanese ghosts. In addition to the ghosts of the dead, the *shiryō*, there is a history, going back at least to the early 11th century and *Genji Monogatari*, of *ikiryō*, living ghosts. In the *Genji* tale, the *ikisudama*, an older term for *ikiryō*, of Genji's enraged and insanely jealous lover visits Genji's pregnant wife, so horrifying her that she dies shortly after giving birth. In the early Edo period, one could be diagnosed with *rikon-byō*, soul separation sickness. This was also known as *kage no yamai*, shadow sickness, and, tellingly, both Nakata and Miss Saeki, head of the library, but destroyed by the death of her teenage lover, only cast faint half-shadows. Nakata is empty, his soul having vanished. Miss Saeki's soul—her character or fixed self—is frozen at 20, when his fellow students mindlessly murdered her boyfriend during a university protest. "Since then it's been merely a series of endless reminiscences, a dark winding corridor leading nowhere . . . I felt like I was living at the bottom of a deep well, completely shut up inside myself, cursing my fate, hating everything outside" (Murakami 2006, p. 392).

So driven to hold onto this happy character (her soul) before inassimilable trauma, Miss Saeki kept the entrance stone to the world of bodiless souls open—"to prevent our perfect, private world from collapsing . . . so I wouldn't lose him, so things outside wouldn't destroy our world" (Murakami 2006, p. 392). Nakata somehow comes to realize that he must close it. A cat had led to him to a mysterious self-force that had borrowed the "appearance and name" of Johnnie Walker (Murakami 2006, p. 126) in order to appear at all. He has been beheading cats and eating their hearts to collect their souls "to create a special kind of flute. And when I blow that flute it'll let me collect even larger souls. Then I collect larger souls and make an even bigger flute. Perhaps in the end I'll be able to make a flute so large it'll rival the universe" (Murakami 2006, p. 140). Akin to how Schelling understood evil, the vast emptiness of the self cathects into a single point and begins to absorb everyone and everything into it. There is no outside, only a vortex absorbing everything into its inside. He finally drives Nakata to kill Johnnie Walker and consequently Nakata realizes that he must rid himself of this new life dwelling within him and close the entrance stone.

As Nakata makes his way to Takamatsu, he befriends Hoshino, a poorly educated but kind-hearted truck driver who comes more and more under the sway of Nakata's simple but powerful emptiness. His gruff character begins to yield, exposing him to previously unimaginable pleasures. Soon he goes to see some Truffaut films, listens to Beethoven, and, in a great transformation, realizes the meaning of the story his grandfather had told him about Buddha's disciple Myoga, who "was a complete moron and couldn't memorize even the simplest sutra." The Buddha told him to polish everyone's shoes, which he did for two decades until he had a profound awakening and became one of the Buddha's greatest followers (Murakami 2006, p. 326). Hoshino's tale is a variation of the story of Culapanthaka, whose devotion to a simple task—"take away the dirt, sweep away the dust"—allowed him to break through to the formless self (Unno 2002, p. 13). When Nakata dies—"meaningful sounds all ended up as silence. And the silence grew, deeper and deeper, like silt on the bottom of the sea" (Murakami 2006, p. 408)—Hoshino takes it upon himself to kill the awful self-force that had smuggled itself into Nakata.

Kafka for his part finds a way through the wrath of his Oedipal character—the trauma of having been abandoned as a child by his mother. He confronts his own hollowness, "a void inside me, a blank that's slowly expanding, devouring what's left of who I am" (Murakami 2006, p. 387). Entering the mountain forest, he becomes "totally defenseless" and "empty-handed" (Murakami 2006, p. 396). As he begins to overcome his anger that there something wrong with him that made his mother abandon him—"Was I born just so everyone could turn their faces away from me? (Murakami 2006, p. 397)—he is able to journey "inside of himself." Taking leave of his character (soul), he is able to embrace his mother's pain and realizes that the past is a "broken plate" that one can never put back together again (Murakami 2006, p. 399).

Kafka is able to empty himself of the vengeful rage of his character. He is, of course, no Nakata. He does not even have the Culapanthaka-like simplicity of Hoshino, the Truffaut-loving truck driver. The self remains a source of turmoil and trouble and no one completely escapes time and its hold on the forms and masks of the empty self. Our characters remain an ongoing riddle and challenge, "even if you go to the ends of the earth." Although we do not answer the *kōan* once and for all, we endeavor to dwell within it by letting it take us to the edge. "Still, you have to go there—to the edge of the world. There's something that you can't do unless you get there" (Murakami 2006, p. 467).

4. Concluding Thoughts

Melville's daring exploration takes us to the edge of the darkness of the self. In the apocalypse of the apocryphal, the illusory Cartesian ego-characters that we mistake for our selves are revealed to be hovering over the vortices of the great destabilizing, abyssal, and obscure seas from which they originally emerged. Whither the self? West worried that his comrade Melville's questioning and agnosticism meant that he saw too much and the consequent "danger is not just the darkness but *the inability to get out of the darkness*" (West and Burnett 2007, p. 110). Indeed, Melville's great sea is fraught with risk and without guarantees. Nonetheless, the imagination remains productive and in its own way *original* and mysteriously divine.

Murakami, who is well read in both Western and Japanese literary traditions, enables us to see that this edge—precariously practiced, always risky—is the source of mindful self-awareness. While Melville allows us to see the hollowness of character, Murakami allows us to distinguish the traumatized hollow character from the healing emptiness of the self. Character is empty, but to see it as such is a revelation, one that allows it to awaken not only to the productivity and impermanence of the self, but also to begin to heal the traumas that harden the self into the trap of a hollow character. Emptiness loosens the vise grip of character so that it is no longer a hollow buttress against time, but rather a mindful awakening to the unfolding miracle of time. Emptiness allows us to appreciate Melville's ambiguous but generous opening more precisely and radically. "Like an anchorless ship, time floats aimlessly across the broad sea" (Murakami 2006, p. 366).

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