

The Confidence-Man and Jobs beyond Academe

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LITERATURE PhDs confronting today's job market share the type of existential and vocational crisis that haunted Herman Melville at the time he wrote his 1856 book *The Confidence-Man*. As he was about to wrap up the book, Melville told his family that he "had no confidence in his productions" (qtd. in Cohen x). Nathaniel Hawthorne recalls that at the time Melville could "neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief" (x). Melville's state of mind is surely familiar to any PhD who, after six years of pursuing truth and the life of the mind, has sent a c.v. or manuscript to imaginary employers who will judge it with standards that are mysterious at best, a pro forma sham at worst.

Like many PhDs and PhDs-to-be today, Melville confronted the ambiguities and complexities of self and vocation. He questioned himself, his career choice, his audience, and his God. *The Confidence-Man* is Melville's wrestle with a world where nothing is as it seems, where confidence leads only to disappointment and betrayal, and where the only constant is that nothing can be believed. Yet the book is still very much about finding and maintaining a moral and epistemological compass where optimism and hope would seem to be all but impossible. As a 1995 Boston University literature PhD who has spent four satisfying years working in the software industry, I now see that the hopeful threads binding *The Confidence-Man* also weave a valuable lesson for literature PhDs considering their career options.

Melville's book is structured by a series of confrontations among passengers on a Mississippi riverboat called the *Fidèle* and a confidence man who reappears in each chapter in a new guise. The confidence man defrauds by playing on passengers' charity, sympathy, self-confidence, and faith in humankind. Pitch, a bearskin-garbed Missouri backwoodsman who emerges from a densely forested landing, is one character who remains relatively unscathed by the confidence man. Melville describes Pitch as a "Hoosier gentleman, of Spartan leisure and fortune, and equally Spartan manners and sentiments [. . .] not less acquainted, in a Spartan way of his own, with philosophy and books, than with woodcraft and rifles" (113). When the confidence man appears in the form of an herb doctor and offers Pitch a box of guaranteed-to-heel medicine, Pitch exclaims, "Away with it! Ten to one there is a torpedo in it"

(117). Time among the shifting landscapes, the weather, and the people of the west have sensitized Pitch to the inherently suspicious nature of absolute cures, solutions, or paths. In Pitch's words, "I have confidence in distrust" (116). For the Missouri backwoodsman, the only absolute is that all things are uncertain. Assertions otherwise are suspect at best, bombs in disguise at worst. As we'll see, this lesson is important to PhDs operating under the assertion that there is only one career path available to them.

Frontier experience has also built Pitch's ability to adapt his identity to changing circumstances. Indeed, Pitch's bearskins and his fondness for accenting his speeches with artfully timed clicks of his gunlock are part of his own dramatic performance. Pitch is neither a pessimist nor a nihilist; his faith in change is a wellspring for what is finally guarded optimism. Distrust received wisdom and absolute paths. Keep your identity flexible. These are Pitch's guiding principles, and they are sound guides for job-searching PhDs today.

Pitch offers lessons on how to come out of a wilderness of unknowable motives and changing players with spirit and wallet intact. Instead of blasting him to the level of a soulless, instinctual animal, Pitch's time on the frontier has converted him into a version of Melville's other oceangoing Ishmael: interested in everything, willing to suspend inherited prejudices and beliefs, skeptical yet awed by life's wonders. And just as Pitch's earnest distrust and flexible identity guide him through the badlands of the West and the *Fidèle*, these qualities are vital to a PhD who is considering a career outside the university.

In *Profession 1998*, Lauren Berlant captures the ambiguity of humanities graduate studies when he writes, "Students come more and more to see their task in graduate school as achieving a critical position, a finished

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look, the aura of authorship, and the mastery of an original archive” (113). Berlant notes that the era when graduate students did research for the sole reason of expanding their knowledge has been replaced by research as a performance whose intention and goal is to win the confidence of others. He also notes that “an environment of distrust characterizes many literature departments” (114). Graduate students feel betrayed at the prospect of selling themselves to a nonexistent market. Meanwhile, professors seem to work in an environment where few motives are transparent. As Berlant states, for faculty members, discussion at admissions, promotion, and tenure meetings eventually seems to become a meaningless “performance of professionalism.” “Moreover,” Berlant writes of such promotion discussions, “because few not already intimate colleagues trust one another and no one trusts promises of confidentiality, it is also hard to know how to interpret the evaluations we encounter” (115). While I am not privy to faculty meetings, if Berlant’s descriptions are accurate, a literature department sounds like a place of rhetorical tricksterism, bad faith, and personal trial—a veritable academic *Fidèle*.

This not-so-fun house of unknowable motives and situational ethics is the PhD’s wilderness. And it is ideal for cultivating both a Pitch-like confidence in distrust and a vitalizing store of optimism—companions no vocational traveler should leave home without. Melville dramatizes this concoction of self-reliance and distrust with two other passengers who disembark from the *Fidèle* unscathed by the confidence man: the philosopher Mark Winsome and his disciple, Egbert. Winsome reflects that, with his brand of New England plain dealing, his doctrines lead men “neither to the mad-house nor the poor-house” (216). Winsome embraces the unknowability of things as a natural wonder, yet always anchors his wonderment to the bedrock of self-interest and self-reliance. “Mystery is in the morning, and mystery is in the night, and the beauty of mystery is everywhere,” Winsome observes, “but still the plain truth remains, the mouth and purse must be filled” (216). Rather than despairing at the slipperiness of man, self, and experience, Egbert, Winsome, and Pitch move ahead, confident in their earnest self-reliance and guiding distrust. When the confidence man tries to soak Egbert for a loan by telling him a tale of woe, Egbert scolds him: “Man is no poor drifting seaweed of the universe. Man has a soul; which, if he will, puts him beyond fortune’s finger and the future’s spite. Don’t whine like fortune’s whipped dog, Frank, or by the heart of a true friend, I will cut ye” (225).

Anyone who has entered graduate school during the last fifteen years with the cheerful assumption that training received there automatically leads to a tenured teaching position would do well to heed Egbert’s advice. For graduate students to graduate and then claim they are as

vocationally helpless as a drifting scrap of kelp is to deny the will that, once engaged, can easily put them beyond future’s spite. The decision to pursue a PhD is personal and conscious; no one forces a student to make it. In fact, once you swap whining about the closure of one narrow professorial path for an appreciation of the world’s colossal store of vocations, graduate school becomes less of a confidence game and once again a sanctuary of learning for learning’s sake. For me, this was the greatest irony of opening myself to careers beyond academe; once I did it, graduate school stopped being a nihilistic vaudeville act and became what I originally imagined it to be, a nurturing sanctuary for the life of the mind.

For PhDs about to enter fictional or real job markets, keeping the Emersonian iron string of self-reliance and optimism humming is a challenge. But it is crucial. During my four years in the software industry, I have interviewed dozens of job applicants. Whining like a whipped dog is the fastest route to rejection. Employers want self-directed, optimistic solution makers, not finger pointers.

How do you maintain a distrustful disposition yet simultaneously resurrect optimism and faith in the possibility of transformation? Remember that you have mastered a tremendous body of knowledge and that your PhD can have talismanic powers outside the university. While it is likely that building the new, in the New World, will always make a bigger impression than mastering the old, having conquered the old gives you a psychological advantage over those who have no radiant PhD feather in their caps. For those outside the academe, you with your PhD are likely to be perceived as a sort of oracle. Like Pitch’s ready rifle, gruff voice, and been-there-done-that air, it’s surprising the amount of respect and latitude the degree earns you outside the university. “He has a PhD, you know” is what people will whisper about you in the hallways outside the ivory tower.

Coordinate to distrust in absolutes is a suppleness of mind and identity. Pitch’s personal and vocational adaptability is evident in his parti-colored past, his flair for dramatic flourishes, and his outlandish clothing. Recall that this Missouri bachelor is also described as a Hoosier gentleman who is as handy with woodcraft and rifles as with philosophy and books. One gets the sense that, should circumstances require it, Pitch could easily shed his ursine garb and transmogrify into something else. On one hand, literature teachers spend a considerable amount of time developing in students a Pitch-like ability to think broadly, to envision themselves in roles that clash with the self-image that is imposed by personal history. Yet, when it comes time for teachers to practice that transcendence themselves, they find it difficult to defy the dubious stare of the imagined academic community.

To understand the difficulty a literature PhD has thinking outside a university identity, it is useful to consider

how self-image is like the image of a nation. To a great extent our sense of self is built through contact with printed language. Benedict Anderson discusses this topic in detail in his *Imagined Communities*. According to Anderson, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries brought to feudal Europe a rise of vernacular print languages and print capitalism, along with an explosion of a literate middle and upper bourgeoisie. A sense of community that was previously shared by intermarrying, interinheriting, and interfeuding aristocracies was supplanted by imagined communities. That is, people gained their sense of group solidarity by reading about others. As Anderson explains, the “factory owner in Lille was connected to the factory owner in Lyon only by reverberation. They did not typically marry each other’s daughters or inherit each other’s property. But they did come to visualize in a general way the existence of thousands and thousands like themselves through print language” (77). Print language and the rise of literate middle classes fosters nationalism—your ability to visualize yourself among thousands of like-minded countrymen even though you may never leave your province.

Now, what community is buried in a thicker sedimentation of print than that of the humanities scholar? The bulk of this crust and the way graduate students are slowly baked into it make it difficult for PhDs-to-be to imagine themselves in an alternative community. Hence the importance of flexibility of mind. I refer to the vocational flexibility and gymnastic identity that informs Melville’s New World man—a mysterious passenger who can reinvent himself with the same supple speed and hissing grace of his less honorable shipmate, the confidence man.

Envisioning myself as a person who could play more than the role of a professor was critical to my securing a satisfying career. Other examples illustrate how elasticity of mind and identity can counter PhD pessimism and hopelessness. In 1976, a New York musician was looking for a keyboardist for his just-formed band. He’d heard good things about a Harvard graduate student and keyboard player named Jerry Harrison. The New Yorker phoned to ask—was Harrison interested? No. Harrison was focused on his architectural education and career. Undaunted, the New Yorker arranged for his band to play a gig in Cambridge and invited Harrison to check them out. Harrison did, was intrigued, and agreed to sit in with the band at a show at the infamous Rathskeller in grimy Kenmore Square. Harrison recalls that after the group left the stage, his tie-and-coat-wearing Harvard colleagues “quietly took me aside to tell me I was nuts to join this band.” Despite their counsel, and probably despite his sense that he was betraying his commitment to both his university and his nascent career, Harrison joined the group. A year after crossing Harvard’s cultural frontier,

Harrison was touring Europe with the band. The name of the tiny start-up he’d joined? The Talking Heads.

The president and CEO of my employer, Intuit, is another example of someone who had the malleability and confidence to imagine himself performing in nation-states beyond the one his education had trained him for. When in high school, Bill Harris narrowed his college choices by getting out a map and circling schools closest to ski areas. Vermont’s Middlebury College was the obvious choice. When not skiing, Harris earned a BA in American studies and went on to work in the New York publishing industry. After five years at *US News and World Report*, Harris transformed himself into a software industry worker and has since risen to the head of one of the only software companies to repeatedly beat Microsoft at its own game.

The *Wall Street Journal* recently covered the story of how companies such as Intel, Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, and Xerox are busily hiring psychology and anthropology PhDs to help industry understand how customers use products. While the PhDs are attracted to the challenging work and starting salaries that range from \$45,000 to \$100,000, the companies benefit from the presence of minds that can “focus on ‘big insights’ rather than statistical data” (Takahashi). There are countless other examples of PhDs who stopped seeing themselves as fortune’s whipped dogs and subsequently found challenging careers beyond the professorial slot. To read about them, go to my Web site (<http://ironstring.com/sellout>) and look for the links to other PhD-career sites. The essays at *PhDs Work* (<http://members.aol.com/phdswork/welcome.html>) make it particularly clear that liberal-mindedness (matched by vocational action, not just classroom rhetoric) is a prerequisite to job success beyond the university.

The Talking Heads’ Harrison, Intuit’s Harris, and Intel’s anthropologists are instructive in that all combined past experiences and molted ossified identities to seize the promises of life. For the PhD, looking beyond one’s academic nationality requires the questioning yet forward-looking spirit of Pitch. Indeed, while *The Confidence-Man* offers no pat answers to the conundrums that haunted Melville then and haunt PhDs today, the book does not stall in a cul-de-sac of hopelessness. Process and change are constant, and one gets the sense that Melville takes glee in the shiftiness of identity in the American landscape. The values that are crucial to a teacher, scholar, whaler, or frontiersman are also crucial to those who have a go at working outside the university: willingness to entertain points of view that are not sanctioned by your particular cultural slot and an ability to grow into different vocational identities.

Look beyond the singular academic nationality defined by your department and your readings, cultivate a heightened sensitivity to the promises of life beyond the

university, and you, like Pitch, may begin to appreciate that a mind tuned to uncertainty is also keen to the world's vast reservoir of opportunity.

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