

Charity

By Adnan Mahmutovic

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Herman Melville's novel *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* posits charity as the primary issue at stake. The character that attempts to bring charity into presence does that by putting it into five different contexts. The problem of charity arises when it as such enters into a discourse in which it has to have a firm, stable meaning, definition. This demand seems to dissolve charity into the paradox of gift (as usury). In the other instance, charity's relation to trust is pursued throughout the whole novel. Nevertheless, I believe that the first chapter solely offers the ground of and an intriguing solution to this problematic.

Confidence Man shows at the same time the free play, i.e. the impossibility of charity, and its possibility through silence and overt emphasis on its singularity. Silence is the means of liberation from pure materialist worldliness, i.e. everything that bring charity into free play. Therefore, silence is the ultimate condition for the possibility of charity. Further, I seek to show how, in the text, charity is problematic only in what Kierkegaard calls "the realm of the universal" whereas its paradoxical nature makes it possible "on the strength of the absurd". In other words, the very impossibility of charity what makes it possible. I will try to corroborate this reading by connecting the text to the Bible.

Chapter I, entitled "A Mute Goes Aboard a Boat on the Mississippi", is at surface about a character who goes aboard a river steamer *Fidele*. It is in fact about the advent 1 of this man, this particular and peculiar man, the man who brings the question of charity onto the boat. Therefore, it is also the advent of "charity" as well. Peculiarly enough, this character is enshrouded in mystery from the beginning to the end of the chapter. Although it can be claimed that there are descriptions of him in the text, no real picture of him is given. He has no name, which, we may assume, would reveal something about him: birthplace, nationality, his status in society and other things a name traditionally conveys.

The mystery is further increased by Melville's use of negative descriptions. For instance, the man is "of a mildly inoffensive sort" (2). Does this mean strongly offensive? Maybe, but nevertheless it perplexes and conceals more than it reveals. It is significant that he manages to remain a *carte blanche* throughout the extreme pressure exerted upon him to reveal himself. *Carte blanche* is of course the mode of temptation. People around such a person cannot stand the blankness and have to "read" him in a certain way, have to "write" their opinions on him. He seems to be indefinite and infinitely interpretable. Speaking of blankness, the man has with him a tablet on which he writes. He is silent, but he does communicate through writing.

Moreover, he seems to be a man of spirit. He has no worldly necessities, no "trunk, valise, carpet bag, nor parcel". He is a person who at the beginning cannot be defined by means of binary oppositions. He is "stared at but unsaluted, with the air of neither courting nor shunning regard" (1). However, shortly afterwards, he enters into

the structure of opposites by being posited as the antithesis to the character of the Barber.

So far in the narrative, the question of charity is merely intriguing. It is first when the barber comes out with his clear-cut and opposing message "NO TRUST" (1) that the question of charity becomes more intricate. It is important to notice that those people who are described as the most immediate spectators of this play of notions have ready made minds concerning the introduced idea. They immediately classify the charity man as "some strange kind of simpleton" (1), unreasonable, lunatic, strange, singular. They seem to have a premeditated conception, of the two poles of this binary opposition and can easily, as if naturally, decide which one is preferable or perhaps even true. In fact, they see charity and the man as an "apparent intrusion", a "singularly innocent" one, but "inappropriate to the time and place" (2). Already here it is obvious that "the mute" and charity are one and the same. They are equaled by the narrative voice: "his writing was of much the same sort". The fact that charity/mute is seen as an intruder suggests that the characters who resent it/him already know about its paradoxical nature. Their response is that it is lunacy and stupidity, "harmless enough, would it keep to himself, but not wholly unobnoxious" (3, my italics). In fact, they understand the barber's "NO TRUST" as reasonable and normal, a matter of fact, and "in a sense not less intrusive than the contrasted ones of the stranger", yet it "did not, as it seemed, provoke any corresponding derision or surprise, much less indignation; and still less, to all appearances, did it gain for the inscriber the repute of being a simpleton" (3).

The question of charity posed by a "deaf" and "mute" singular person, a stranger, is tricky. The mute introduces it in five phases. He never erases the word charity from his board but constantly alters its connotations, the contexts in which it can be used, the way in which it can be perceived as if he is building up its meaning or explaining it, whereas the barbers "NO TRUST" appears simple, clear-cut, rational, graspable, with only one true meaning, with no strings attached, straight forward, a matter of course, in short, given. It is indeed "skillfully executed by [the barber] himself, gilt with the likeness of a razor elbowed in readiness to shave", it "graces" his shop (3). Even the person who hangs up the sign, the barber, seems to be simple and acceptable to the crowd. Everybody knows him, who and what he is. Although he never reveals his name either, he nevertheless has the demystifying title "barber", which implies certain stereotypical characteristics. Moreover, it is his stereotypicality and being-taken-for-granted that the silent, mysterious stranger brings to question by his indeterminable, intimidating and intrusive notion of charity. What happens is that as soon as charity is put into the opposition to "NO TRUST" the latter reveals its ambivalence. "NO TRUST" too is an ideologically loaded concept. Further, the instability of the one notion in a binary (charity) reveals the hidden instability of its counterpart. "NO TRUST" reflects barber's faith. That is, he has to believe it and later he even has to defend it just as the mute stands for trust and charity. The inner paradox of the barber's reliance on "NO TRUST" is following: he must have trust that the money he receives as payment for his work is not counterfeit money, that its monetary value is granted. Therefore, "NO TRUST" is in fact constituted in "trust", which is furthermore the basis of charity as well. The barber claims he does not trust yet quite naturally he is forced to. Wittgenstein pointed out if everybody was always lying there would be no such thing as communication. In similar terms, in order to say you do not trust you necessarily depend on a great deal trust.

In *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, Jacques Derrida maintains that charity is an institution that should never have been institutionalized, and this is in a sense precisely what the mute shows. As a religious or secular-social form or duty, charity will always be tainted by politics and exchange, rather than being an altruistic gift. In other words, if charity is a duty it is not a free gift from the heart.

I will now demonstrate how the text shows the possibility of charity. In order to find the possibility of charity, we have to take a closer look at the five phases that charity undergoes in the mute's writing on his slate. For the sake of clarity I will once again emphasize that the man and charity are equaled in the text.

As I suggested, the mute is a total mystery. He is a stranger with no "badge of authority about him...quite the contrary...of an aspect so singularly innocent" (3), which disturbs the people on the boat. Even the narrator interprets him by means of other characters' reactions to his sudden appearance (is there any other kind?). The narrator claims that it was "from the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wanderings of the crowd" that it was plain that he was a stranger. So even the narrator distances himself from the supposed omniscient knowledge of the man in cream-colours. What we get to know is that he pursues "the path of duty" (3), which is the core of the problem with charity according to Derrida. No altruistic gift can be based on demand. It must not be a part of the law or a social norm. Let us now look at the five phases that the mute leads charity through:

- "Charity thinketh no evil"
- "Charity suffereth long, and is kind"
- "Charity endureth all things"
- "Charity believeth all things"
- "Charity never faileth"

The first claim is, in fact, taken from the Bible. The fact that the passengers immediately react strongly against charity shows its free play. The mute confirms this play of meaning by his next move. He in fact, alters the context thus altering and questioning the holy text. By this "blasphemy" the mute ignores/questions the universality of the first claim thus betraying his duty (if we, assuming the origin of the statement, believe that his duty is the one to God or perhaps charity itself). Thus charity really "suffereth" and it seems that this suffering is its essential quality. It cannot cease to suffer just as Orpheus cannot refrain from looking back if he is to be Orpheic.

One other thing is interesting, in fact the idea of kindness. Charity suffers "and 2 is kind". This second sentence comes after the attack on the mute. He turns (the other cheek?), and writes the second statement. It seems that his implied suffering is equaled to that of charity itself. Moreover, it is possible to claim that charity suffers because as soon as it enters a socially determined context, it vanishes as such. Therefore it is kind and turns the other cheek, i.e. it "endureth all things". By putting it

into yet another context, the man thus both appropriates it and betrays it. He describes charity in positive terms rather than the "negative theology" style of the narrator. Yet charity is kind and does not retaliate. It "endureth all things". Of course, if it suffers it must endure, otherwise it would disappear. The paradox in the above statement is that it both confirms and destroys charity. Destroys by revealing its free play though the claim is that it endures all things, yet it survives because it "endureth" even this Derridean free play as well. It endures all things, all things that there are.

The next crucial statement is that "charity believeth all things". Its condition is trust, faith, so that it has to believe all things with no exception, unconditionally, with no judgment. This would mean that the passengers were right to turn their backs onto it. There can be no such thing. It is, as they said, lunacy.

The final claim is that "charity never faileth". After the first four examples it is clear that it does fail, in fact it fails to "be". It never comes givenness. However, the fact is that no matter how many contexts are changed, if it is done ad infinitum, what remains on the slate after the mute's gesture of erasure is "charity". It never really changes. It stands there, "suffereth" and "endureth" all contexts that show its paradoxicality. It endures by believing all things because it "thinketh no evil" and "is kind". Therefore it "never faileth". It cannot fail because it is always there alone, silent and "singularly innocent", in constant withdrawal. It suffers the attempts to bring it out of its solitude, its secret dwelling, by putting it into fixed social contexts and the realms of economy and duty. The possibility of the erasure of all the contexts every time leaves charity singular, solitary, and silent. If charity could speak at all it should be only in contexts, but then it enters into play. But if silence is its essence, or rather condition, then it cannot speak at all, not even in contexts. It speaks saying nothing. When solitary, it is silent and says everything while still remaining secret. It is hidden in the contexts, its true nature withdraws beyond the text.

The muteness makes charity and the man singular. The claim that it is "singularly innocent" speaks in favour of this reading. Innocence is a part of the universal, and thus the paradoxical, but in the text this kind of reasoning is invalid. The text detaches innocence from universality, ness-ness and gives it a singular character. As long as it is singular it will remain pure. When it enters the field of duty, it appears as "an intrusion", and vanishes. That is why it itself has to be believed and trusted with no ultimate logos at all. Ultimate belief, no reason, no judgment is required and that is why it unconditionally "believeth all things". Trust and faith are its conditions. It has to be believed and itself has to believe. Charity is madness beyond reason of the universal, because it is in the realm of faith, on the strength of the absurd.

Furthermore, the very fact that all the people refuse the stranger (charity), leaves charity (the mute) in the realm of singularity and silence. The people see the man as a simpleton who foolishly believes that there is such a thing as charity. They attack him as if he were evil, as if he wanted to persuade them into evil, whereas "NO TRUST" which is a negative notion, an idea to be shunned, they consider normal: "not infrequently seen", "gracing other shops beside barber's" (3) marked bay good judgment which it is not.

Adnan Mahmutovic
www.adnanmahmutovic.com