Paolo Simonetti

Università di Roma "Sapienza"

paolo.simonetti@uniroma1.it

"Something Further May Follow Of This Masquerade": Reading *The Confidence-Man* Through Its Contemporary Adaptations

Let me begin with a quotation. In his introduction to the recently published Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville, Robert Levine states that "in Melville criticism a divide has arisen between […] the 'bookworms' and the 'creative readers'" – namely, "between those critics committed to recovering Melville's intentions by paying close attention to what is known about his biography, reading habits, compositional methods, and so on, and those critics, on the other hand, who explore the cultural discourses, logics, and concerns informing Melville's texts."

Well, I must confess this statement makes me uncomfortable. Though much of a bookworm myself, I am convinced that this is a false divide, and that a synthesis between the two approaches is not only possible, but altogether necessary in order to deeply understand Melville's complex and multilayered works. I think that in order to figure out the implications of his works in his time, a good starting point may be to investigate how and why they still resonate in our present consciousness. The aim of my presentation is to examine how Melville's last finished novel, *The Confidence-Man*, has been adapted and reinterpreted in contemporary America, after the new awareness brought about by postmodernist poetics, in the aftermath of 9/11, and at the beginning of what President Obama (recently regarded by some journalists as a Con Man himself) has saluted as a new age of responsibility and confidence.

Some preliminary remarks on adaptation theory can be useful. Critics such as Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon have recently argued that adaptations are not "parasites" that can be more or less "faithful" to the source text. On the contrary, they are regarded as hybrid constructions that can transform the source text by a complex series of operations that include selection, amplification, actualization, critique, extrapolation, popularization, reaccentuation, and transculturalization. Similarly, the source text itself is no longer regarded as an untouchable piece of art arbitrarily frozen into definitive status, but as a "situated utterance" (in Stam's words) which forms a dense informational network, a series of verbal cues which the adapter can take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform.

When *The Confidence-Man* was first published in 1857, it was famously criticized for its bleak view of humanity, its absence of humor, its irreverent use of the Bible: all in all, it was deemed, by critics and common readers alike, "unreadable." In his recent study on adaptation theory, Stam briefly asks whether some stories may naturally be better suited to certain media rather than others. He wonders whether narratives can possibly 'adapt'—in the Darwinian sense—to more appropriate media. Debatable as such a theory may be, it is interesting to note that many of Melville's complex and seemingly unadaptable works have been variously rewritten and remediated during the last century. *The Confidence-Man*, despite its hybrid, 'dramatic' structure, the modernity of its writing, and the universality of its themes, has inspired a total of five stage adaptations, all but one performed in the last decade.

As we know, Melville's *Confidence-Man* anticipates the turn-of-the-century urban sensibility by representing the demise of 'character' as something legible, reliable and stable, in favor of the shifty, receding modern concept of 'personality.' In stage adaptations, this passage is further complicated. While novels have but a single entity—the character—stage adaptations feature both character and performer. For instance, in the case of Melville's novel, critics have been

endlessly reasoning about whether all the confidence men on board the *Fidele* are avatars of the same person or not; in a stage adaptation, a single actor can play many characters—and this happens quite often—but that doesn't necessarily imply that they are meant to represent the same person in disguise. The resulting masquerade is still more elusive.

As everybody knows, the novel's last lines possibly foresee a future continuation of the story, though, as a bitter irony, the work essentially marked the end of Melville's career as a novelist. Before abruptly ending the book, the elusive narrator states that "something further may follow of this masquerade." One scholar went even so far as to find in Melville's notebooks dubious evidence of his intention to write a sequel of it. Yet Melville's fans had to wait roughly one hundred and twenty years for a reprise of *The Confidence-Man*, when a minor one-month run of a musical loosely based on the novel was staged in 1976, composed by Jim Steinman, with a libretto by Ray Errol Fox. In fact, most adapters have interpreted the novel's last lines in some specific way, as an ominous anticipation of the civil war, as a hint of the rituality and circularity of the performance of evil, as a token of the recurrence of universal themes such as trust and confidence, or simply as a reminder of the performative quality of modern life.

(2)

In the summer of 1982, when George Rochberg's opera adaptation, entitled *The Confidence-Man: A Comic Fable*, premiered in Santa Fe, it was definitely not held to be a success. *New York Magazine* reviewer Peter Davis ferociously criticized the piece, which, according to him, "fails simply as workable music theater." Yet the faults are, according to Davis and other reviewers, inherent in Melville's plotless novel, regarded as (quote) "a satiric allegory, a book crammed with obscure literary allusions to the Bible, Shakespeare, New England Transcendentalists, and heaven knows what else—scholars are still trying to sort them all out."

Though Rochberg's adaptation came out as a failure, it is significant that in the very same year, 1982, Tom Quirk published the first book-length study on *The Confidence-Man*, which testifies to a scholarly renewed and more mature interest in Melville's novel. That same year, two other books on the figure of the confidence man in American literature and culture were published. No longer regarded as an exclusively allegorical work reflecting the disenchantment of an author exhausted by his "quarrel with fiction," during the last decades *The Confidence-Man* has been rediscovered and readapted in several creative ways.

(Let's skip to the most recent and interesting adaptations) **(3)**

In 1998, University of Southern California professor Joseph Boone began writing another libretto based on Melville's novel, entitled: *Con-Man: A Musical Apocalypse*, that was set to music by his brother Benjamin and was first professionally staged by the Riverside Opera Ensemble at the New York University in 2004. The subtitle of Melville's novel characterizes it as a masquerade, but it is not surprising that the first adaptations of it are related to music. According to Boone, Melville's novel (quote) "is a superb vehicle for stage adaptation, and especially for music theater because of its physical setting on a boat that evokes a musical theater tradition ranging from *Showboat* to *Titanic*, just as its temporal evocation of historical America calls to mind musicals from *Oklahoma* to *Ragtime*." **(4)** (For instance, these promotional pictures for two different adaptations of the novel testify to the authors' reliance on the appeal of the famous *Titanic* movie by James Cameron).

(5)

Boone provides a linear plot and a motive to the Con Man's machinations, linking his actions to crucial historical issues of nineteenth-century America. The subplots deal with three fugitive characters who are supported in their escape by the Con Man: a youth who is running away from his uncle, a corrupted senator who used to beat him; a runaway slave who has escaped from the plantation of his cruel master; and a recent bride who is fleeing her husband, a transcendentalist

mystic who used her as the main sexual attraction to win recruits for his commune. It is clear that the author, just as the Con Man, makes fun of these highly stereotyped characters, in order to expose the faults of American society.

Unfortunately, there is not enough time to play the interesting five-minute promo video created for the musical, but please enjoy these snapshots from it. **(6)**

As you can see, the author tries to connect in his darkly satirical work the Biblical theme of apocalypse to nineteenth century American history. The video thrives on symbols linked to the devil, such as fire, rats, and snakes, but most of all it employs material taken from both historical archives and popular movies. The civil war is a constant motif in the play. Distant rumble of artillery is heard at the very end, while the stage fades to black and the Con Man sings: "I can't stop what's coming / The thunder, the noise, the storm that's brewing. / All that I can do is drop the curtain / Then start all over again." Boone's adaptation catches the ambivalence of the Con Man as he is depicted in Melville's novel, since he seems to be at the same time the agent of the looming apocalypse and the helpless victim of it.

In suggesting the cyclic nature of his actions, the Con Man's final song actually emphasizes the already apparent connections to present-day America. **(7)**

The majority of the score was written in 2000, when the promises and the good intentions, which had glimpsed at the beginning of the millennium, were spoiled by the dubious result of the presidential elections, and then were finally destroyed by the 9/11 attacks that marked the end of America's exceptionalism. During the summers of 2001 and 2002 the authors refined the overall libretto and the score, and in their adaptation the characters on board the *Fidele* share the collective experience of imminent disaster typical of contemporary representations of pre-9/11 America. In January 2004, when the work was first professionally staged, the nation was still unsure about the results of the upcoming elections. Finally, a new performance of the work was held in Los Angeles

in 2010, when the “age of responsibility” saluted by President Obama already threatened to become a “game of confidence” as empty as the Con Man’s.

(**8 - pictures**)

We should bear in mind such a historical and political context while considering the altogether different 2004 adaptation produced and directed by James Updike, based on a 1986 version of Fox and Steinman’s musical. Let’s look at some pictures of the show and hear a brief sample of the song called “Confidence,” that may give you an idea of the different atmosphere of this show.

(8 – audio)

It is significant that though employing a mixture of music, folk dance and ballet, double entendre, and vaudeville, Updike tries to convey Melville’s philosophical implications by representing the Con Man as a sort of a ‘moral quester.’ In the author’s optimistic interpretation, the Con Man’s disguises serve him to test men’s faith in humanity by eliciting reactions from those on board the ship; according to the author, the intention is not to mock all members of society but to depict them as historically accurate as they were perceived to be in Melville’s America. So we can see how, though contemporary, Updike’s interpretation is quite the opposite of Boone’s apocalyptic vision.

Let’s quickly skip to the last two adaptations which are not related to music. **(9)** Vaudeville artist Trav SD has recently adapted for the stage what he called a “melodramatic” version of Melville’s novel, which was first performed on April 1, 2007 in the heart of Brooklyn’s very own nineteenth-century home for con men, Coney Island. In his two-hour performance, modeled on the one-man show, he impersonated all the avatars of the Con Man, from the mute to the cosmopolitan. The artist reminds us that vaudeville, by its very name, bears the devil inside. According to him, it is (quote) “a uniquely American brand of theatrical experimentalism, a form simultaneously fragmented, declarative, ambitious, cocky, poetic, scientific, romantic, and

realistic," something like the dramatic equivalent of a newspaper layout. It seems that a vaudeville artist such as Trav SD is well equipped to embody Melville's unpredictable all-American Con Man.

Trav SD's performance enhances the melodramatic spirit and the dialogic, oral structure of the novel, all aspects which were either ignored or roughly criticized when the book was first published. Of course, a lot of conversations and passages have been cut out to make the vessel "seaworthy," as the artist puts it. Yet he manages to do what was reputed an impossible task by virtually all commentators, namely, to adapt Melville's novel into a widely popular show, without sensibly altering its wording or structure. That is because the novel perfectly fits our entertainment-oriented, 'vaudevillian' age, where different songs continuously merge on the radio frequencies, comedians' nonsensical talks merge with political speeches on the news, while TV shows and commercials ask us, with the same endless repetition of words, slogans, and jingles, to put more confidence in a brand-new product or in the last technological gadget that will make our life easier and happier.

(10)

Finally, in September 2009 the Woodshed Collective tried to recapture the novel's complex structure through the most daring and experimental adaptation so far. They staged a play written by Paul Cohen, composed by a series of interwoven vignettes performed on board a decommissioned vessel, docked in the Hudson River, New York. At least a dozen stories about charlatans and mountebanks go on at the same time. Spectators are free to roam as they please and to explore different elements of the play by choosing what to see and which character's story to follow.

(11)

As you can infer from the pictures, the actors are quite undistinguishable from the spectators and the steamship workers, so that one can never be sure where or when a performance is being staged. By allowing audience members to randomly immerse themselves in the experience, the play leaves the lingering impression that no one can escape from the confidence man's charms or frauds.

Maybe, in conceiving the show, playwright Paul Cohen had in mind John Barth's famous description of a "floating opera," a showboat drifting up and down the river on the tide, with a play going continuously on. To fill in the gaps, the spectators would have to use their imagination, or ask more attentive neighbors, or hear the word passed along from upriver or downriver. Most times they wouldn't understand what's going on at all, or they'd think they know, when actually they don't. According to Barth's narrator, "that's how much of life works," and, I'd like to add, that's how much of Melville's novel works as well.

One of the recurrent motives in early criticism is that Melville's novel is apparently plotless. By forcing a plot on it, critics and adapters alike miss its most striking element of modernity, namely, its indeterminacy. In his last finished novel, Melville definitely abandoned all the concessions to consistency, structure, and plot that still anchored *Moby-Dick*, for instance, to the sea-narrative genre. The author himself followed the Cosmopolitan's advice, who, in the middle of the book, asks Charlie Noble: "renounce your story too" (209). The Confidence Man has no manifest aim (just as his real identity remains mysterious). He is the ominous spirit of History (with capital H). He is a modern—a postmodern artist who takes advantage on people by forcing upon them outdated concepts such as character and individuality that no longer stand in the dynamic American society soon to become mass-marketed. He is a master of vaudeville who delights on pranks. Anticipating postmodernist witticisms, he mocks the idea of absolute truth by pretending not to believe in doubt. The difficulty for nineteenth century readers (and, as it seems, for a number of present-day readers too) is to accept that his plots are ultimately meaningless. As a character in the novel argues: "True knowledge comes but by suspicion or revelation."

Now that we have been educated in skeptical, anti-paranoid creative readings by postmodernist narratives such as Pynchon's or Heller's, we can still be alerted to the historical relevance of Melville's masterpiece, while fully appreciating its labyrinthine puzzles and the non-sequitur passages. The fact that we are still shocked (and yet attracted) by this experimentalism

means that even we inveterate ‘bookworms’ can gain through adaptations new and unusual insights into Melville’s art and his time, as well as our own. We can rejoice in the encouraging thought that, after every new reading, something further will always follow.