

Melvin Andringa, The Confidence Man, Thomas More Chapel, Fordham U., <sup>the Bronx</sup> ~~Brooklyn~~

April 1st 76, 11 p.m.

The Bronx as appendage of its name seems paler/grayer than Brooklyn: equally vast, in fact undistinguishable, except, ofcourse, to the millions that live in either place. Low buildings. The U. is RC, I thought it was in the Middle West, still half do: a large campus, the ironic severity of the Jesuit order. This was a relatively small chapel, filled with byrds, for a reason subsequently apparent: not just interest in/friendship for Mel, but that Ann Wilson was running one of her nine or so subsidized; commissioned programs at this temple, dedicating it by means of art to the arts: she had a week long Easter evening program there, byrds in all the niches, feathering their nest, of a feather. (Wilson currently is supposedly as also Cunningham anguishing out their decision to prop up the Shah culturally at the next Shiraz festival: Schchner subsidized by the Rockefellers to show Mother Courage to the Indian masses does not have this Gewissensfrage to deal with, he's only propping up Indhira/.) I arrived on time which in the case proved late: a crowd of individuals had had the time to soak up Mel's lay-out ~~in a~~ ~~longish~~ ~~foyer~~ on the walls of a longish foyer of notes & sketches colorfully distinct from one another, individual, on 7 1/2 by 11 inch paper (as I recollect), of elements having contributed to this - I believe - 2nd performance of this perhaps anguished work on Melville's last (he pointed out) linguistic composition & Washington Atson's Jacob's Dream. As I remember it April 3rd, when one enters a man, representing Jacob is lying on his back "sleeping" on the floor under a picture on the wall (outside the performance space, facing the entrance to it so those seated on both sides inside can see it) of two angels, done in the curiously stiff style affected by Mel for his shows, with the airs of the 19th century & of musty respectability & limited powers of drawing), in black & white, a book next to or under his head, open: passages in it, I seem to remember, lined in red; & inside the room, opposite the entrance & the man & picture, - the room is darkish, no electric lights are on, - something like a stepped up altar arrangement with many slightly flickering colored candle-lights or - flames: inside colored glasses or the like, I would say: red, green & yellow, perhaps, a festive yet slightly mysteriously subdued offering or commemoration: something like a Chinese-seeming ornate box like a house in the center of it,

which colorful arrangement one sat watching a long time: from it, it seemed, issuing a gabble of voices, taped or transmitted-seeming, as tho from some sports event, not harsh exactly, yet contrasting by a certain implicit stridency with the containment of the festive altar: but seeming to issue from within its quietude. Perhaps during this (I believe) opening sequence, the sleeper rose on one elbow or so & made a gesture, seeming out of a larger picture than the detail on the wall with one arm & hand toward the angels: while, I think, two priestly figures, a man & a woman, in white, off-white, yellow, possibly Franciscan garbs approached him or him & the Angels from the left, coming into view in the entrance, standing there: perhaps at this same time a dark, strong, in some sense violent figure, Ann Wilson, I believe came up behind him (all this outside the performance space, at its entrance). ~~The~~

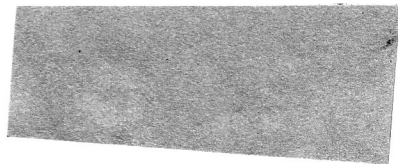
The next thing happened, I think, was Mel came ambling out in the half-dark - I should say that the center of the space was occupied by a platform or dais with 4 columns up to the ceiling in its 4 corners in the middle of which stood a small billiard or pool table under one of the greenshaded lights habitually above pool tables, not lit, - & commenced walking rapidly around 3 sides of this central square obstruction, one way, then back, leaving out the side the altar was on, in a fairly agitated way, acted out, speaking agitatedly, or rather disturbedly, telling of Melville & - even more - Alston: of Coleridge's consolation to Alston that one is responsible only for willed fancies, - Alston~~x~~ having nasty dreams or perhaps nasty daytime fantasies, - of the difficulties these 2 American artists had in completing & selling to their countrymen large allegorical, highly meaningful compositions, verbal or pictorial (the public preferring Alston's portraits, Melville's autobiographical adventure sea-stories), of the abandonment of grand designs, I thought, of timid compromise, & - somehow correlatively, - of an unwillingness, perhaps not really Melville's (after all there is Pierre), to face the DARKER SIDE OF LIFE, of their OWN NATURE. The Confidence Man seems somehow symbolical also, tho perhaps not strictly an allegory? The agitation (stumblings, repetitions, hurried segments, abrupt stops, an over-all jaggedness) patently, even humorously put on reflected those artists', stymied in their creative urge, to the point of unproductivity, by some inconsistency between the purity of grandiose designs, moral but idealistic in conception, & (what in

terms of or relative to ~~them~~ seemed ) a cruel moral imperfection, the baseness, even evil, of their nature, an inconsistency that one might, no doubt falsely, term that of the NEW WORLD: but also Mel's anxious perturbation seemed if not genuine at least truthful in that he himself seems frustrated in a creative urge by an inability, taking the form of artistic unwillingness, to come out with artistic statements or products in finished design (alienation from the producer <sup>or</sup> ~~grounded~~ offness, self-containment, finishedness, the form of product severed from producer) embodying in performed rather than in-process-of-being-put-out performances some commitment of his: frustrated perhaps not by a moral dilemma of naivete ("naive" being a term applied to Americans relative to Europeans in certain discussions of ~~xx~~ the figures in Henry James' novels), but by a repulsion from allegory. Richard Foreman, for instance, seems to share this repulsion, a modern American stance in the arts, or underlying motive & motivation, but ~~in xxx xxxx~~ has succeeded in utilising it for the invention of a dramatic form, rawly autobiographical, and almost shameless, crudely personal statement. With Mel one never knows is one seeing the art product or being addressed by the artist on the topic of his effort to make it, told what it would kind of be ~~xxx~~ like or even just about. Mel spoke of Melville's intentions shifting in the middle of The Confidence Man, & of Melville having grander conceptions of it than became apparent or were, in Melville's view realised by it: of its being from Melville's final point of view unfinished. I don't remember what he said about this shift of intention/conception. The Cosmopolite, a dark, tragic, rich, substantial figure clearly is even if nowise evil in some ways an opposite of the mute simpleton appearing on the boat at the beginning of the book demanding trust, & Melville may have thought of him as not unlike himself. Mel, in his artistic productions does not demand trust & does not create, but destroys it, invites a view of him as a fraud, i.e. as "not even an artist", & of what he is doing as "not art at all". Of course, ipso facto, he makes it impossible for himself to abuse our confidence in him: he prevents us from having any. He seems to lack the confidence in himself that pretty much seems the *conditio sine qua non* of the artist, that which makes what he does art, or at least the show of which in the work of art, in the very gesture of abandoning it to a

public, an implicit claim to rightness, of appropriateness of form to content, say, seems pretty much essential to something's being perceived as a work of art. The Cosmopolite of course is not & does not present himself as an artist (& Melville's book is not a novel & seems an allegorical tract rather than a work of literary art: nevertheless one experiences it as a work of art, the array of clumsy images exercises a stirring power on the reader's imagination, the accumulation of uncertainty in the repetition of fraudulent humans, of figures appearing to other figures other than the reader suspects they are, of figures appearing to the reader other than they appear to him(/her), engenders not so much a moral conviction as an intuitive, arational state of perception in the reader: but I suppose that from a novelist's viewpoint the book is a fraud & its writer the perpetrator of an abuse of confidence on his readers/ ~~xxxx~~: Melville may have felt himself a con artist qua writer of this book, powerless to wrench himself back into the -in Plato's sense - more truly fraudulent fraud<sup>d</sup> of fiction.), but it seems essential to the Cosmopolite's enterprise that he throw doubt on himself & on what that enterprise is. Thus also God-as-Man needs the doubtfulness of his Divine nature in order to demand faith: faith in God were He to appear in his true nature - glory - would surely be more than the easiest thing in the world, viz. would be too easy, namely inescapable. Mel wants to seem qua artist utterly suspect, & may feel that a total uncertainty as to whether what one is attending to is a work of art is a pre-condition for experiencing it as a work of art, rather than merely so to speak (!) suffering from the effects of it. This is in a way the inversion of what the artists in the mid-70s putting on "performances" in Soho are doing: they seem to hold that anything is art if viewed as such.

The show had two other parts: a poolgame, Carl Paler speaking some of Melville's text about the Indian Hater's view of, position among, relation to Indians.

ceived, spoke of getting the play on in March; spoke at length with Melvin Andringa) who as usual was down in the basement reading cubicle off the toilet, showing stage plans of his play (based on or concerning Melville's The Confidence



I14 75  
Man) to Saito, the artist/sculptor & carpenter. Mel looked elegant & tired as always. He had put on this play in Cincinnati, hopes maybe to get back to it after a while (during which working with Bob maybe) to put it on here in NY April Fool's Day. Spoke to him, rather listened to him, - he thanked me for suggesting originally he do a play on this book, gave me a present of a burlap bag with the word "bird-song" on it. (brand of peanuts, bag is at house, I can't check), - reference, as he reminded me, to the word "birdsong" in the poem I sent him, where it characterises Christ. He spoke of Washington Alston, 19th century contemporary of Melville, also acquainted with the older Hawthorne: the Cincinnati production fused Alston with Melville: Alston went mad in England, a dirty old man, working 12 years on a painting The Great Allegory, not finished, after a reasonably successful career as a painter in the US. Backdrop taken from a Bellini allegorical painting said by scholars (Mel consulted one) to relate to the Medieval Theatrum Mundi, in fact whole set: the foreground or downstage marblefloored enclosure on which Bellini's allegorical figures pose/move. Melville/Alston seated downstage stageright watches a pool game upstage stage left - in enclosure - 3 pool players. In act I they play pool, move naturalistically, in act II with a theatrical touch, in act III with a touch of ballet (stylisation of 5 stances of relaxation while standing e.g. as pool player whose turn it is not): the transformation invisible or almost invisible to the audience. Takes place in Melville/

J14195

Alston's mind. An Indian squatting upstage stage right at end of play gets up & walks over to the pool table, I believe. Mel out front talking naturally to audience about Melville &/or Alston. Rock music of three types for 3 acts: "naturalistic" type juke box music in act I (the actual pool hall), music the common denominator of which is that it contains references to angels or the devil in act II, sentimental music in act III. Not clear from Mel's speech whether he had managed to rehearse the stylistic transformation of the pool playing with his Cincinnatti actors. Seemed to be planning for April 1st chiefly work on movements of act II, perhaps only act III. At some point during the play somebody like the Confidence Man comes out upstage center stage & makes a gesture, - or walks at end of play (not the Indian) over to pool table, extends a hand behind a gamester's hand, moves a ball. Light over pool table like cabin light in final scene of The Confidence Man (a scene on which Stuart says he is planning to do a play), like light over pool table in a Van Gogh painting (Mel shows clipping from magazine reproducing it). Mel speaking of being depressed in Cincinnatti, finding a bar with a pool table, going to it almost eveningly, relieved at the gentlemanly order of the rules obeyed, till one evening, he having gradually realised that of course quite another second play took place among the players besides the pool game, they for motivations out of that second game, bent all the rules, bent them right

314195 Mel/Hutchings

around him: not the pool playing rules narrowly, but the etiquette of pool playing, the etiquette's rules, bending them around him qua obstacle to this deformation: to his dismay, anger, has not (I think he said) played pool since, - background is that Mel has always been interested in this etiquette (like Kelly Morris in the illusionism of the rigged wrestling matches on tv), - claims to have systematised it, at least in his head, a set of strict rules, never spoken, invoked as such. But he did not tell this story, I think, relative to the play or as pertaining to it. It now occurs to me, he ought to structure the play so as to embody this event or this event's possibility. Was pleased & moved by his open telling so much of what he had been doing. He feels, he, unemphatically, made clear, uneasy about Wilsonesquisms in his work, charge of imitation, shame of derivativeness, loss of value by this: admirable fight, I think, accepting this & wrestling with it. His head full of ideas. Perhaps some of them re play or re what play is about too thought out, especially for a Wilsonian play, but this perhaps Mel's courtesy toward me, the intellectual: I asked about a figure in a cave in the background landscape in Bellini's painting, Mel said it was me (or: like me) the "detached observer". By his position in the painting, it is not inconceivable to me that Mel also identified him with the confidence man, coming onstage from about there. So that's how they see me. The figure - red? - to me looked seated/bent over in a cave, - like St. Jerome.