Invisible rivers, evanescent ships: American society and the erasure of space in Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*

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The invisible river

The topic of this essay is not a ship or a river, but the absence of ships and rivers (and, in general, of space) in Herman Malville's last novel, *The Confidence-Man* (1857). The events take place on a steamboat, the *Fidèle*, that sails down the Mississippi, from St. Louis to New Orleans, on Fool's Day, April, 1st. The tale starts with the arrival of the ship at the docks of St. Louis and ends abruptly at the end of the same day near Cairo, with the announcement that "something further may follow of this Masquerade" (*CM* 217)[1].

Melville chose the Mississippi as a setting for his fiction nearly twenty years after his first and only journey to its shores, in 1840[2] – when the Mississippi embodied *the* frontier, and the towns along the river were the most remote outposts of western expansion. Despite the unquestionable appeal those regions had to American imaginary, Melville avoids any realistic representation of the setting throughout all the novel. This absence is even more striking if we think not only of the importance that space has always hold in Melville's narrative, but also of *the* space, *the* river (and *the* ship) Melville decides to remove from the scene: that is, the Mississippi, the very core of the national space Melville finally reached at the end of his literary journey, moving from the South Sea islands where his first three travelogues (*Typee, Omoo* e *Mardi*) were set, to the European scenario of *Redburn,* to the American landscapes of *Pierre* (and, in part, *Israel Potter* too).

In the past very few critics paid attention to *The Confidence-Man*[3], since this novel has long been seen as a sort of professional suicide by an author who decided to end his novelistic career when he was only thirty-seven[4]. Recently, however, thanks to deconstructionism, some critics have rediscovered and re-evaluated the novel, and they have focused in particular on the relation between form and content in the novel: Henry Sussman, Clark Davis, Jonathan Cook and Elisabeth Renker, among the others, have underlined Melville's attempt to create a literary structure and a language that reflected his disillusionment toward United States society[5]. It is precisely this confluence of form and content that this paper explores, in the attempt to explain the invisibility of geography within the novel as a sign of Melville's lack of confidence towards the future of his mother-country.

The Confidence-Man opens *in medias res* with the appearance of a mysterious stranger on the docks of St. Louis:

> At sunrise on a first of April, there appeared, suddenly as Manco Capac at the lake Titicaca, a man in creamcolors, at the water-side in the city of St. Louis. […] In the same moment with his advent, he stepped aboard the favorite steamer Fidèle, on the point of starting for New Orleans. Stared at, but unsaluted, with the air of one neither courting nor shunning regard, but evenly pursuing the the path of duty, lead it though solitudes or cities, he held on his way along the lower deck until he chanced to come to a placard nigh the captain's office, offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East…(*CM* 1)

The novel's main character is (or better, should be) the Confidence Man, an impostor whose extraordinary dialectical virtues allow him to cheat on many passengers on the ship. Apparently relying on a unity of time (Fool's Day), place (the steamer) and plot (the con-man's frauds), *The Confidence-Man* betrays all its premises: in the most diegetic novel he ever wrote, Melville de-constructs the whole realistic/mimetic frame of reference. In the timeless, carnivalesque atmosphere of Fool's Day, the protagonist is an evanescent presence beneath his many masques, and his identity remains ungraspable throughout all the novel.

The diegetic structure of the novel is so extreme and uncommon in American belles-lettres that *The Confidence-Man* has always reminded the readers rather of Eighteenth Century European tradition, as an anony-

mous reviewer wrote on the pages of the *Spectator*: “The spirit of satire seems drawn from the European writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with some of Mr. Melville’s own Old World observations superadded. It sometimes becomes a question how much belongs to the New World, how much to the Old, and how much to exaggerated representation, impressing a received truth in the form of fiction.” (*Spectator* 398-9). It is undoubtable that Melville’s stylistic shift marks an increasing distance between the author and his readers, who are constantly required to decipher the author’s message, and, in *The Confidence-Man*, more than ever before.

In order to understand the disappearance of geography in this last novel, it is useful to start with a remark made by Bernard Rosenthal:

> An author wishing to reconcile the conflicting assumptions about America’s West would have a formidabile task, especially if he sought to comprehend the archetypal rather than simply the geographical West. Melville, among American writers, had the interest and the capacity to use America’s promised land for an exploration of meaning. (Rosenthal 80-81)

The Confidence-Man is precisely Melville’s attempt to explore that space and its meaning – that of the archetypical, symbolic core of the nation, rather than merely the geographical one. And the archetypical significance of the ship and the river is precisely what will be explored in this analysis of *The Confidence-Man* – starting from their scarce remnants within the novel.

The ship as the *summa* of American society is a common denominator in Melville’s narrative, from *Typee* to *Moby-Dick* to “Benito Cereno” and “Billy Budd”. The author’s aim at representing American society through the *Fidèle* is made explicit right at the beginning of the novel, when Melville re-unites aboard the steamboat nearly all the characters of American iconography: the poor crippled slave (Guinea), the frontiersman (Moredock), the preacher, the student, the charitable lady, the traveller (the Cosmopolitan)… A similar intent can be found in the glance at the setting which the author traces in the first lines: in the Mississippean scenario Melville manages here to merge nearly all American geographies: the Midwest (St. Louis, where the journey starts), New Orleans and the South (the arrival), and the East (the impostor comes from there). Only the West is missing; but instead of depicting the river and the Territories in the following pages, Melville subverts western iconography and transforms this world into a blank space. The

only two fragments of the scenario the author unveils seem filtered through trick mirrors. The first image depicts the arrival of the *Fidèle* at a deserted landing, while the second is a fleeting vision of Cairo:

…a houseless landing, scooped, as by a land-slide, out of sombre forests; back through which led a road, the sole one, which, from its narrowess, and its being walled up with story on story of dusk, matted foliage, presented the vista of some cavernous old gorge in a city, like haunted Cock Lane in London[6]. (*CM* 72)

At Cairo, the old established firm of Fever & Ague is still settling up its unfinished business; that Creole grave-digger, Yellow Jack – his hand at the mattock and spade has not lost its cunning; while Don Saturninus Typhus taking his constitutional with Death, Calvin Edson and three undertakers, in the morass, snuffs up the mephitic breeze with zest. (*CM* 112).

These infernal images are the only remnants of space in the novel: an urban, desolate landscape and a *danse macabre* ruled by Fever, Ague and Typhus. Here the Mississippi reminds of a wasteland more than of a wilderness, and there seems to be no clue of what caused this transformation in the text… at least, not in the text that Melville choses to hand in to the reader.

The purloined key

As regars the significance of the Mississippi, in *The Confidence-Man* Melville closely resembles his protagonist: he betrays the reader (like the con-man does with the passengers) and in the end he steals something important from him – that is, a fragment of the text that explicitly talks about the Mississippi and gives some clues as to the absence of the river from the textual space.

"The River" is a fragment of *The Confidence Man* left out by the author from the final version of the novel; it was found in 1938 and then included as an appendix to the novel in the edition edited by Elisabeth Foster in 1954[7]. The importance of the fragment in relation to the symbolic geographical pattern is unquestionable: "The River" syncretically encloses the multiple significance that the Mississippi embodies in American history and culture. According to Melville, the Great River is the geographical, anthropological and (last but not least), economic backbone of the nation:

As the word Abraham means the father of a great multitude of men so the word Mississippee means the father of a great multitude of waters. His tribes stream in from east & west, exceeding fruitful the lands they enrich. In this granary of a continent this basin of Mississippee must not the nations be greatly multiplied & blest? (*CM* 222)

The Mississippi becomes then the "granary of a continent": this definition does not only refer to the Great Plains, but reminds of the prosperity and abundance of an Arcadian world, whose myth has long moulded American imagination.

Moreover, the river is the lifeblood of the land, and it is represented by Melville as the synthesis of the virgin territories.

Above the Falls of St. Anthony for the most part he winds evenly in between banks of flags or straight tracts of pine over marbley sands in waters so clear that the deepest fish have the visable flight of the bird. Undisturbed as the lowly life in its bosom feeds the lordy life on its shores, the coronetted elk & the deer, while in the watery forms of some couched rock in the channel, furred over with moss, the furred bear on the marge seems to eye his amphibious brothers. Wood & wave wed, man is remote. The Unsung tune, the Golden Age of the billow.
By his Fall, though he Rise not again, the unhumbled river ennobles himself, now deepens now purely expands, now first forms his character & begins that career whose majestic serenity if not overborne by fierce onsets of torrents shall end only with ocean. (*CM* 222)

The Mississippi as the symbol of the West is not a Melvillian novelty. The river has long been perceived and represented in American culture as the synecdoche of the West, and the West has been seen and represented as the synecdoche of the whole nation; as Edwin Fussell remarks:

Melville's election of the Mississippi River is once again a sardonic inversion of the values his culture conventionally attributed to the frontier. For a generation or more, that mighty and mythical river had been a synedoche for the West, as had the frontier; Melville was neither the first nor the last to use them interchargeably. The West was in turn metonymous for America, as America (the New World) indirectly meant the Humanity of the Future". (Fussell 304-305).

Melville plays on the Mississippi *is/as* the West to stage a river that do not only stands as a gate to the unknown territories, but identifies with them: so its tributaries are called "tribes" (a word that generally refers to

Native Americans); it is a place where "man is remote" – or at least, the *white* man. The equation between the Mississippi and the western territories is so complete that the river is compared to the archetypal symbol of the frontier – the buffalo:

> Like a larger Susquehanah like a long-drawn bison herd he hurries on through the prairie, here & there expansing into archipelagoes cycladean in beauty, while fissured & verdant, a long China Wall, the bluffs sweep bluly away. Glad & content the sacred river glides on. (*CM* 222-223)

Melville's river does not cross only geography, but time as well, metaphorically incorporating in its flow all American history. This Mississippi turns into the *summa* of different historical eras: it starts in an Edenic past and it mouths into a violent, obscure future. The first part of the fragment shows clearly how the pastoral, mythic dimension of time dominates the beginning of its course: it is a time outside western history ("The Unsung tune, the Golden age of the billow"), when the shores of the river were inhabited by Native Americans ("tribes", "nations"). The Mississippi is "The Father of Waters", a definition that evokes both a religious background (Abraham and the river as sacred entities), and the pagan fertile deity that feeds the earth with its tributaries ("fruitful the land they enrich"). The two explicit references to Abraham and the Golden Age once again underline how the religious and the pagan backgrounds converge in the representation of the river (and of American space in general).

The scene changes abruptly with the irruption of the Missouri, an embodyment of the wilderness and of its violence:

> But at St. Louis the course of this dream is run. Down on it like a Pawnee from ambush foams the yellow-jacked Missouri. The calmness is gone, the grouped isles disappear, the shores are jagged & rent, the hue of the water is clayed, the before moderate current is rapid & vexed. The peace of the Upper River seems broken in the Lower, nor is it ever renewed.
>
> The Missouri sends rather a hostile element than a filial flow. Longer, stronger than the father of waters like Jupiter he dethrones his sire & reigns in his stead. Under the benign name Mississippi it is in short the Missouri that now rolls to the Gulf, The Missouri that with the snows from his solitudes freezes the warmth of the genial zones, the Missouri that by open assault of artful sap sweeps away fruit & field grass-yard & barn, the Missouri that not a tributary but an invader enters the sea, long disdaining to yield his white wave to the blue. (*CM* 223)

A "yellow-jacked" Missouri (a definition associated not only to the color of the waters, but often to Native Americans as well)[8] assaults the Mississippi "like a Pawnee from Ambush", destroys its placid flow and metaphorically kills the father of the waters. In order to underline once more the opposition between the Missouri and the Mississippi, the former is defined more as an invader than as the heir of the Great River. Whereas the Mississippi brings and sustains life with its water, the Missouri brings destruction and death: its cold waters and its overflows destroy "fruit & field grass-yard & barn".

The irruption of the Missouri provokes not only a geographical devastation, but it also foresees a historical one. As John P. Williams has argued, the erosion caused by the Missouri represents a powerful metaphor of the contrast between past and present in US history:

> "The Father of Waters" thus serves as Melville's metaphor for the leveling, muddying, and erosion that have entered national history. Its corruption is apparent to none of the passengers, who prefer to regard the river as the conventional symbol of American unity and strenght. (McWilliams 192).

The "parricide" perpetrated by the Missouri may have multiple symbolic meanings: western history of colonization that breaks into the history of Native American tribes; the parricide of the New Nation towards the Old World, or even the betrayal of the principles of the Founding Fathers, replaced by the new, mercantilistic spirit that dominated society at the half of the 19th century. It is unquestionable that, with its aggression, the Missouri represents quite well the new West, the *boosterism* that considered the western territories as an immense economic resource to exploit – exactly as the Con-Man does aboard the *Fidele*[9]. Oriented as it is toward the overcoming of its borders, this new western spirit, like the river, "… enters the sea, long disdaining to yeld his white wave to the blue" (*CM* 223). The white wave of the Mississippi (a color often associated with American identity in Melville's novels, from *White Jacket* to *Moby Dick*) can be interpreted as another reference to the United States" imperialistic politics of the time[10]. The irruption of the Missouri/Mississippi into the sea brings together and overlays two "frontiers" the US were dealing with in the second half of the Nineteenth century: the Western frontier but also the economic / transnational one, in that shift from isolationism to imperialism that took place in the second half of the century.

Last but not least, a third frontier hides in the Melvillean geography, and in particular in that "peace… broken… nor is it ever renewed" that may refer to a political fracture as well. The confluence between the Missouri and the Mississippi is in fact close to that Mason-Dixon Line that marks the border between Northern and Southern states[11] – two different social and economic systems that will finally collide with the Civil War (only four years after the release of *The Confidence-Man*)[12].

"The River" depicts the Mississippi as a geographical, political and cultural chronotope: the river is both a centripetal force that attracts and unite different people, times, cultures; and the center of confluence of the fractures and contradictions that menace to tear apart the unity of the new nation[13]. And these tensions are precisely those which radiating from "The River" to the novel, which ultimately makes the Con-Man's world collapse in an entropic process whose results is the disappearance of space.

American apocalypse

"The River" then emerges more as the textual premise of the novel than a part of it, since it tries to explain the significance of the Mississippi in Melville's symbolic geography. "The River" stages the multiple meanings of this space: the core that centripetally attracts and reflects the varieties and contradictions of the United States at the middle of the 19th Century.

In its complexity, the Mississippi is both East and West, both North and South; it embodies the past, the present and the future of the whole continent. It is a space that is in the end torn apart by its many contradictions, in the reality as well as in the text. And it is precisely this violent outbreak that divides "The River" and *The Confidence-Man*. In *The Confidence-Man* Melville portrays the rubble of the myth: very little is left, just brief glimpses: a *danse macabre* and a urban nightmare set in the Old World. American space turns into a *wasteland*: deprived of its borders and definitions, the river reminds of the definition Alessandro Serpieri gave of Joseph Conrad's apocalyptic geography:

… una visione apocalittica fa perdere allo spazio le sue frontiere interne e quindi le sue contrapposizioni, presentando un unico spazio che assume significazioni

allegoriche (come appunto in Conrad o in autori successivi anche più marcatamente apocalittici). Lo spazio unico è sempre, infatti, in qualche modo apocalittico e allegorico: nella chiave fideistica del cristianesimo, è lo spazio transitorio di tutti gli uomini, la "valle di lacrime" che separa dallo spazio metafisico; in chiave nichilistica, è lo spazio vano di un tempo vano, lo spazio dell'assurdo, dove il sublime non può essere che grottesco. (Serpieri 208-209).

Melville deconstructs space as he deconstructs the Con-Man: both are the sign of an American identity that is definetely lost, the signs of a broken confidence in American future. But while "The River" gives voice to the contradictions and fractures of American society, the novel *stages* them, it gives shape to the absence, and in so doing it expresses his distrust not only of his mother country, but of language itself.

In the end, the only space that remains is the semantic one, the textual space: reality becomes only a linguistic construction. But language is deceiving: and like the Con-Man deceives the passengers through his dialectical virtues, the author himself takes leave of the reader with the promise of a continuation of the story that will never be written.

1 Melville, Herman. *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). New York: Norton, 1971.
2 In 1840 Melville visited an uncle at Galena, Illinois, on the Mississippi shores. See John W. Nichol (1970); Bercaw (1987).
3 See Lombardo (1957; 1974); Perosa (1961); Sumner (1968); Karcher (1980) and Adler (1981).
4 After *The Confidence-Man,* Melville published only poetry: *Battle Pieces and Aspect of the War* (1866); *Clarel* (1876); *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888); *Timoleon* (1891).
5 See Sussman (1978); Davis (1995); Cook (1996); Levine (1998).
6 Cock Lane was a London alley that was believed to be haunted by ghosts.
7 See *The Confidence-Man* 221.
8 Some critics have interpreted "yellow jacked" as a misspelling for "yellow jacket". This second interpretation would reinforce the reference to the Native Americans, since "yellow jacket" was a definition used by 19th century explorers to define the Natives. See *The Confidence-Man,* 223.
9 See Sumner, "The American West in Melville's *Mardi* and *The Confidence-Man*" 37-49.
10 As McWilliams underlines in his analysis of *Moby-Dick*, "The persistency with which Melville applies images of the American prairies to the whale and the sea reflects the important cultural fact that the American of 1850 saw his nation taking possession of two frontiers simultaneously." McWilliams, cit. 157.
11 Slavery is a recurrent topic in Melville's works, from *Mardi,*to *Israel Potter* and "Benito Cereno" (and, obviously, in *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War*). Signs of the forthcoming conflict were already evident during Melville's writing of *The Confidence-Man* in the "Bleeding Kansas" violences. See C. Karcher (1980).
12 The links between the West and the Civil War in American imagination are well explained by Fussell: "In sober fact, little of the Civil War was fought in the West. But to dwell on this fact is utterly to miss the much more important point that the Civil War destroyed the final vestiges of the American frontier, and thus brought to an end the first great period of American histo-

ry and literature. Ironically, the mediatorial West was in this sense the instrument of its own undoing…" Fussel 301.

13 According to Fussell, Melville overlaps, in the textual and geographical space of the *Confidence-Man* two different frontiers: "His frontiers are realistically enough both East-West and North-South, as if he had in mind a metaphorical model of what Faraday called diamagnetism, where the official frontier was split into two lines, lying at right angles to each other, self-neutralizing". Ibidem 302.

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