



## “STRANGERS STILL MORE STRANGE”

### The Meaning of Rivers Bedeviled

*The volume of a strange, eventful, and ever-changing life is before you, on the pages of which are impressed phases of original character such as are nowhere else exhibited, nowhere seen, but on the Mississippi.*

–T.B. Thorpe

*The rocks appear broken up in odd fantastic shapes, taking the name of devil's tea table, backbone, oven, grand tower, etc.*

–Eliza Steele

*Though her voyage of twelve hundred miles extends from apple to orange, from clime to clime, yet, like any small ferry-boat, to right and left, at every landing, the huge Fidèle still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange; like Rio Janeiro fountain, fed from the Corcovado mountains, which is ever overflowing with strange waters, but never with the same strange particles in every part.*

–Herman Melville

Few topics could be better suited to multi-disciplinary areas of inquiry than “The River.” At once connecting and separating bioregions, nations, and cultures of the Americas, their meanings changing throughout history as readily as their waters, rivers run through time and space bearing richly diverse and significant

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contents, best approached from numerous and varied scholarly perspectives. Due to this inherent complexity, the case of rivers evidences the potential importance of literature and literary thinking within inter- or transdisciplinary studies. While each discipline-specific approach has unique contributions to make, in this essay I argue for the special value of literature, particularly when the subject under discussion is “The River.” Literature can contribute to the meaning of rivers not because it brings clarity to our understanding, but precisely because it does not. To explore this bold and peculiar claim, I will consider early nineteenth-century literature of the United States, giving special attention to the rise of the steamboat and its effect on the Mississippi River.

Steamboats transformed rivers in the 1800s, representing what seemed to be a kind of mastery over nature. In literature from the period, while many writers marveled at or exulted in that perceived mastery, some questioned the origins of technological conquest. Did it result from human ingenuity? divine inspiration? a deal with the devil? Looking at writings from the perspective of twenty-first century scholarship, other questions take shape: Did steamboats alter the *nature* of American rivers? How did they affect the *meaning* of rivers? With all the fog, smoke, and various other vapors associated with the steamboat, and with rivers’ own intricacies, clarity proves elusive; nor does literature necessarily shed light on the matter. Literature and literary study, however, do afford an opportunity to think differently about steamboats and rivers and related phenomena. Oddly enough, literature does this less by elucidation than by what at first may seem a species of obfuscation. With elements of imagination, critical insight, and language, literary texts can propose connections, reveal complexity, and assist us in navigating uncertainty.

In what follows, I explore the dynamic interrelations among rivers, steamboats, and literature, first by considering some of the earliest writing about American steamboats, their strangeness as watercraft and their role in the supposed technological conquest of Nature. Next, I briefly survey types of steamboat literature from the period before the Civil War, concluding with a study of Herman Melville’s last novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*

(1857). No literary work captured the tensions, ambiguity, and some of the potential implications of steamboat travel as powerfully as *The Confidence-Man*, which develops Melville's notion that "books of fiction" can perhaps give readers more truth, "more reality, than real life itself can show" (217). Literature, for Melville, was an opportunity to reconsider the nature of things and our means of understanding that nature. In *The Confidence-Man*, he presented readers with a different view of the Mississippi River and the curious vessels working its waters. The novel imagined The Devil himself to be on board a riverboat, wearing the different guises of a huckster and imperiling the soul of America.

UNBERUFEN (THE DEVIL UNSUMMONED)

If rivers by themselves are, in most circumstances, difficult to fathom, when rivers and literature come together clarity goes by the wayside. Add steamboats to the mix and things get downright diabolically difficult to sort out. So diabolical, in fact, that in order to explore this confusing fusion, I have adopted a phrase from Mark Twain to guide the investigation. After a family sojourn in Europe, Twain brought back many souvenirs, including the German word *unberufen*, which he frequently used in conversation and correspondence (Besalke 2007: 111). Roughly equivalent to "knock on wood," the word means unbidden or unsummoned (as in, "May the devil be unbidden") to ward off evil meddling in their affairs. For this study, *unberufen* signals an interest in how the steamboat radically altered the way people looked at waterways, bedeviling the meaning of rivers.

The bedeviling occurred in various ways. Steamboats enabled nineteenth-century Americans to control space by moving upriver as readily as down. Given enough water in which to run and enough firewood to drive the engines, riverboats could triumph over natural forces such as gravity and current. Just as significantly, steamboats revised American rivers by affording us the means of superimposing human time on the river. Robert Fulton's *Clermont*, steaming from New York City to Albany in thirty-two hours in 1807, led the way to increasingly faster runs—eighteen hours in 1817, under eight hours by 1849—and ever more regular timetables for scheduled stops (Buckman 1907: 66). This imposition

wasn't fool-proof, as pilots like Sam Clemens knew well. A snag or a sawyer, a shifty sandbar or low water-levels could leave a steamboat grounded and tear a hole in a captain's schedule, setting him back hours, even days.

Writing from Cairo, Illinois to a St. Louis newspaper during a period of low water in December 1860, a pilot believed to be Clemens, having found himself with "the opportunity of having nothing else to do but to drop you a line," recorded a recent series of navigational mishaps. Heading downriver from St. Louis, the writer noted that his boat (the *Sunshine*) "Passed E.M. Ryland aground at the head of Cahokia bend; found the Dan. G. Taylor and the C.E. Hillman in the same predicament, at Cairo cliffs; spent the night assisting the Hillman." The ensuing report recorded day after day of similar steamboat misfortunes: "the diminutive side wheel *Colona* high and dry at the mouth of the Meramec"; the *Hillman* (again!) stuck at Plateau Rock; the *D.G. Taylor* (again!) "hard and fast aground" at Sheep island, the *Anglo Saxon* and the *Lebanon* "in the same delightful position" (Marleau 2016: 139).

The litany of woe winds up with the correspondent's own boat at "the Tea Table cooling our bottom on the sand bars, in company with the following boats [...] viz: The J.D. Perry, C.E. Hillman, D.G. Taylor, J.H. Dickey, Champion, Carrier, Lebanon, Lehigh, Saxon, Wood, Sam Gaty, South Wester, Hannibal, and E.M. Ryland bound down; John Warner and Arizona bound up" (Marleau 2016: 139).<sup>1</sup> Whoever the author was (and Michael H. Marleau makes a strong argument that it was Sam Clemens), his correspondence, written "in these stirring times of secession, no money and low water," provides a humorous glimpse into some of the perils of steamboating, the notoriously ever-shifting "state of the lower (one might almost say the lowest) Mississippi" (139), and the liveliness of literary efforts to reckon with the uncertainties of their intersection. The above-mentioned "Tea Table," by the way, on which the *Sunshine* "cooled its bottom"? It was more formally known as the *Devil's Tea Table*, on the Missouri side of the Mississippi. *Unberufen, reader, unberufen.*

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1. Marleau quotes a "FRIEND REPORTER" signing himself "SAM," in a "SPECIAL RIVER CORRESPONDENCE" to the *St. Louis Missouri Republican* of 15 December 1860.

Early writings feature the peculiarity of the steamboat, its uniqueness among water craft, and its apparent victory over Nature. Speaking in Congress in 1824, Henry Clay trumpeted the triumph of Culture as represented by the steamboat, “laden with the riches of all quarters of the world, with a crowd of gay, cheerful, and protected passengers, now dashing into the midst of the current, or gliding through eddies near the shore!” Clay personified Nature, who is awed by Man’s ingenuity (as embodied in the figure of the steamboat’s putative inventor): “Nature herself seems to survey, with astonishment, the passing wonder, and, in silent submission, reluctantly to own the magnificent triumphs, in her own vast dominion, of Fulton’s immortal genius!” (Seelye 1991: 241). Astonishment, wonder, submission—such qualities surface frequently in the writings pertaining to the development of “the beautiful machine,” an engineering marvel that overcame the “obduracy” of American rivers and “made a more perfect Union possible” (8–9).

The steamboat entered the waters of early American literature decades before the first fire was stoked in Fulton’s *Clermont*, as the subject of a colonial and provincial controversy involving rival inventors James Rumsey and John Fitch. Their writings, from the 1780s, attempt to achieve a certain clarity on two main matters by (1) proving that steam navigation is more than a pipe-dream; and (2) establishing proprietorship of the dream’s origin. A veil of uncertainty surrounded the steamboat at the outset of its literary career, as can be seen in the title of Rumsey’s contribution to the fray: *A Short Treatise on the Application of Steam, Whereby Is Clearly Shewn, from Actual Experiments, That Steam May Be Applied to Propel Boats or Vessels of Any Burthen Against Rapid Currents with Great Velocity. Great Velocity* (1788). The publication consists of an anthology of letters, depositions, certifications, and the certification of certifications, all of which, taken together, are intended to “deprive even the sceptic of his doubt” that the “wonderful force of steam, issuing in incredible quantities” could drive a boat. Rumsey’s lengthy pamphlet essays to wipe away all doubts regarding the steamboat’s viability and establish primacy of his creation (Rumsey 1788: 4, 9).

Fitch fought back with his own publication, *The Original Steam-Boat Supported; Or, A Reply to Mr. James Rumsey's Pamphlet. Shewing the True Priority of John Fitch, and the False Datings, &c. of James Rumsey*. Fitch's discourse began with a biting jibe regarding his opponent's literary output. Coyly proposing that Rumsey may have greater "skill in the mechanism of the Steam Engine," Fitch added that "in the article of CONDENSATION I freely acknowledge he is my superior, having acquired the art of *condensing* (with the dash of his pen) one *whole year* in the compass of *six days*" (Fitch 1788). In a literary cut worthy of Twain or Melville, Fitch played with dual senses of a word to depict the calumny of one who had labeled him calumnious. He went on to state that "the thought of a Steam Boat" first occurred to him in April 1785, though "some [including Thomas Paine] had *conceived* the thought before, yet I was the first that ever exhibited a plan to the public..." (1788: 3). He claimed to have spoken with George Washington himself about the concept, and that the General mentioned Rumsey's idea but did not discourage Fitch from pursuing his own course.

Fitch's own certificates were appended (from the American Philosophical Society, Patrick Henry, and the like), and, accentuating the literariness of the controversy, Fitch even included "Mr. Rumsey's invidious pamphlets" (1788: 7). This appendix added substance to the careful reading Fitch displayed in his pamphlet, a literary analysis that yielded significant observations, among them the fact that Rumsey omitted the word "Steam" from his dealings with Gen. Washington and various legislatures. Fitch used a piece of Washington's writing, as well as Rumsey's own petition to the "Honourable Representatives of the State of Pennsylvania," in order to prove the point that Rumsey's approach involved "the art of working Boats by mechanism and small manual assistance against rapid currents," the word "steam" failing to appear in either work. According to Fitch, Rumsey may perhaps be inventive but his invention was not a steamboat, his plans containing "nothing but water wheels, cranks and setting poles" (7-9). By paying great attention to the text of Rumsey's anthology, by looking for the occurrence and meaning of specific key terms, and by juxtaposing the contexts of various documents,

Fitch's writing sought to correct misinformation and clarify the historical origins of the steamboat once and for all.

Taken as a whole, the literary dispute of Rumsey versus Fitch serves as a preface to a larger story about other tensions in the early United States: steamboats vs. rivers, North vs. South, science vs. superstition, Truth vs. uncertainty. These tensions further connect with the perceived battle in Enlightenment thought between concepts of 'Culture' and concepts of 'Nature,' as well as with issues of patriotism and the developing US nation-state. As Henry Clay's 1824 Congressional speech suggests, officials understood the steamboat to represent the victorious campaign of American Culture, at the head of which campaign had once marched George Washington himself, "a patron saint of civil engineering" in the young nation (Seelye 1991: 6). Rumsey had written to Washington as early as March 1785, admitting that steamboats will strike many as "strange and improbable" but assuring his reader that, due to the "immense" power of steam, "boats of passage may be made to go against the current of the *Mississippi* or *Ohio* rivers" (Rumsey 1788: 26). Rivers were depicted as antagonists to be bested, arenas in which to prove a Culture's superiority, routes of national progress. The earliest steamboat literature attempted to expel doubts, certify certain truths, and use those newly minted truths to build bright prospects for the future.

"LIKE SOME HUGE DEMON OF THE WILDERNESS" (DEAL WITH THE DEVIL)

Nevertheless, when Fulton's *Clermont* chugged up the Hudson River in 1807, the steamboat was still something of a chimera, fantastic at best and maybe monstrous. Washington Irving called the steamboat an "unwelcome agent of change," and many in the US were positively terrified by such signs of technological progress. Even in the latter half of the nineteenth century, writers were still describing profound misgivings. In "The Power of Prayer; or The First Steamboat up the Alabama" (1875), one of their "dialect poems" written after the Civil War, brothers Clifford and Sidney Lanier, both veterans of the Confederate army, imagined the perspective of "Jim," an old and nearly blind African American, and his encounter with the strange and improbable steamboat. Acknowledging that "present-day readers will take

issue” with the poem’s racism and degrading stereotypes, literary historian Bert Hitchcock observed that, “in its time the poem was a popular dramatic public-performance piece for professional ‘readers’ both inside and outside the South” (2009).

The poem described Jim’s reaction as he sits in a cabin and hears something coming down the Alabama River, alternately bellowing like a bull and squealing like a sow. Almost immediately, Jim senses the diabolical nature of so unnatural a tumult: “De Debble’s comin’ round dat bend, he’s comin’ shuh enuff, / A-splashin’ up de water wid his tail and wid his hoof!” (Lanier and Lanier 1875: 240). Scared off, perhaps, by Jim’s prayer, The Devil passes on by and heads upstream, perceptible now only as a “snort way off, likOe in a dream!” (240). Think of the river on a quiet afternoon, softly sloshing at your nineteenth-century feet as you listen to birdsong and catch something of the faint rustle of cottonwood leaves. Suddenly: an unknown cacophony! a massive object rapidly and fiercely stemming the current! Something so strange, so big, so loud, belching smoke, must be a dragon, as some supposed, or worse. And that’s only the perspective from the shore; little wonder then that Lydia Latrobe Roosevelt, on board the *New Orleans* in 1811, referred to the voyage as the “days of horror” (Seelye 1991: 240). For many, when “The Devil” rounded the bend, rivers, the world they watered, and the truths by which one made sense of that world were changed irrevocably.

Fulton’s innovation and the iterations developed by his successors were “the means by which the United States would become a beautiful machine” (Seelye 1991: 231), and that machine drastically remade American rivers. The steamboat figured prominently in assorted literary types in the nineteenth century, often in first-hand accounts written by diverse passengers on board the floating palaces. These narratives can be sorted into several categories, dependent upon the writer’s reason for being on the river, the reason for writing, and the readership targeted by the writer. The body of literature suggests the effect of new technology on the meaning of rivers at the time, especially the Ohio and the Mississippi. Often the steamboat was portrayed as an emblem of the nation itself: all sorts of things going on, all kinds of people brought together by all kinds of causes, united only by the fact that they’re collected



in one place and on the move, going *somewhere* [...] though God knows where.

Much of this literature revolved around and reinforced the perceived battle between Nature and Culture. As Joseph Cowell, a passenger on the *Helen McGregor* in 1829, put it, only the “peculiar navigation” of the steamboat could “combat with the unceasing, serpentine, tempestuous current of the *I-will-have-my-own-way*, glorious Mississippi” (1998: 67). Observing that among Americans, “OLD-BIG-STRONG” (as he translated the word “Mississippi”) “ranks first in importance,” the popular Thomas Bangs Thorpe told his readers that the river teaches “terrible lessons of strength and sublimity” (1989: 101–02). To properly learn those lessons, according to Thorpe, one must respect the river’s power but contest it, and must see that the value of the river lies not in its beauty but its commercial potential. After proposing that the real interest in the Mississippi “consists not in attractive scenery visible to the eye at any given point, but in the thoughts it suggests,” Thorpe explained that those thoughts invariably tend toward the “value of the commerce carried on in Western steamboats” (1855: 27). As the number of boats increased and their potential uses were recognized, “the means for the glorious triumph of Western commerce was complete,” a clear result of the “mighty triumphs of steam in the Valley of the Mississippi” (Thorpe 1855: 33–34). In this view, shared by many, American civilization had won the war with Nature, a victory manifested by the shining machine as it progressed up and down the river.

An alternative view of the situation appeared in Timothy Flint’s *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley* (1828). Flint characterized the relation between Culture and Nature as less of a war and more of “contrast,” evident to any passenger “descending the Mississippi for the first time in one of these steam boats.” After admitting that a “stranger to this mode of travelling would find it difficult to describe” the experience, Flint carefully detailed “the prodigious construction” and “commodious arrangements” of the vessel, “the splendor of the cabin, its beautiful finishings of the richest woods, its rich carpeting, its mirrors and fine furniture, its sliding

tables, its bar room,” and emphasized the steamboat’s “order, quiet and regularity” (1998: 11).

Having established the controlled and comfortable situation of the traveler on board, Flint turned to the enchanting riverine environment: “The varied and verdant scenery shifts about you. The trees, the green islands, the houses on the shore, every thing has an appearance, as by enchantment, of moving past you” (1828: 241). For Flint, steamboat passage presented a “moving pageant,” gliding along between islands “so even, so beautiful, and regular, that they seem to have been planted for a pleasure ground,” and the mainland, where one might spy “a plantation, with all its busy and cheerful accompaniments” (241). Note how the “enchanting” vista provided by the deck of the steamboat turns everything into a charming “moving pageant” or motion picture, predicting the panorama craze that would soon follow. Note also that even a plantation, from the floating perspective, appears “cheerful” and charming. In his depiction of river-travel, Flint connects the opulence and order on board the steamboat to a pastoral beauty surrounding its passage. The river here serves as a vehicle connecting Culture and Nature.

That connection, however, is not stable. Although the steamboat traveler might cruise along enjoying the “splendor and comfort, the cheerfulness of a floating hotel,” the wild and its dangers never really go away: “At other times you are sweeping along for many leagues together, where either shore is a boundless and pathless wilderness. A contrast is thus strongly forced upon the mind, of the highest improvement and the latest pre-eminent invention of art with the most lonely aspect of a grand but desolate nature....” Flint’s contrast describes a river under the control of Culture and affording Americans safe passage through “a wild and uninhabited forest, it may be an hundred miles in width, the abode only of bears, owls and noxious animals” (1998: 11–12). The well-lighted displays of gaiety and leisure on board the steamboat appear all the more bright against the dark backdrop beyond the river’s banks. This Nature-Culture tension lies at the heart of the Mississippi’s status as *the* national river in antebellum America, a representative of the nation’s steady progress on its “errand in the wilderness” but also of continuing vicissitudes.

For other writers of the period, neither was the river so safe nor the steamboat so comfortable. The Mississippi posed any number of perils, with its fluctuations and fogs and obstacles. Little wonder that boatmen often conferred supernatural titles on a variety of natural phenomena. Eliza Steele, on board the *Monsoon* for an 1840 voyage to Cincinnati, recalled that “The rocks appear broken up in odd fantastic shapes, taking the name of devil’s tea table, [devil’s] backbone, [devil’s] oven, [devil’s] grand tower, etc.” (1998: 72). Travelers of the day seemed to delight in these figures of speech, relying on them to add color to their narratives. T. B. Thorpe recalled a woodyard situated at “a place so infested with ‘snags’” that it had been “christened ... the ‘Devil’s Promenade’” (1855: 40). (The Devil’s Promenade, readers were told, in case they wished to find it, “lies at the mouth of ‘Dead Man’s Bend,’ just at the foot of ‘Gouge-your-eye-out Island.’”) Charles Augustus Murray wrote of “a place called Devil’s Island,” where the pilot of the steamboat seemed demonically possessed, running “our boat right on a sand-bank” (1998: 157).

Such sinister sites contributed to the dread experienced by many a steamboat passenger. Thomas Hamilton, voyaging downriver from Louisville to New Orleans in 1831, felt that a grim darkness emanated from the river: “the prevailing character of the Mississippi is that of solemn gloom. I have trodden the passes of Alp and Appenine, yet never felt how awful a thing is nature, til I was borne on its waters, through regions desolate and uninhabitable” (1998: 54). If Nature were evil, Culture offered little relief: Hamilton likened the boat itself to “some huge demon of the wilderness, bearing fire in her bosom, and canopying the eternal forest with the smoke of her nostrils” (54). After four or five thousand miles on the “Western waters” in the early 1830s, Charles Joseph Latrobe remarked that “there are few voyages of more evident peril in the world than that from St. Louis or Louisville to New Orleans, or vice versa...” (1998: 29). Human technology may have conquered the river’s current, but in doing so it ushered in a host of horrors: “casualties incident to the navigation arising from snags, ice, rocks, fire”; “the peril which impends over you from a tremendous power like that of steam”; “being left under the direction of incompetent or careless men,” all of which caused “numbers”

of people to “perish” (1998: 29). To justify his lament, Latrobe appended a list of steamboat disasters from July 1831 to July 1833, including sixteen vessels “burnt,” twenty-two “snagged,” fourteen “sunk,” and fifteen “abandoned as unfit” (29). Though oppressed by the river and its atmosphere, Thomas Hamilton tried to make light of the danger, writing that “one or two” steamboats “generally blow up every season,” tossing their “parboiled passengers to an inconvenient altitude in the atmosphere” (1998: 48).

To many writers of the period, the dangers of the steamboat itself were less of a threat than the damning behavior of those on board. An English geologist, G. W. Feathersonhaugh, complained in 1834 about the “incontrovertible evidences of a fallen nature” and the “wretches” who, “maddened with the inflaming and impure liquors they swallowed, filled the cabin with an infernal vociferation of curses, and a perfect pestilence of smoking and spitting in every direction” (1998: 109–10). Charles Latrobe testified that, based on his experience, “The mass of the society met with upon the Western boats is ... to be designated by the single term, bad” (1998: 34). Although the more jovial Hamilton seemed unfazed by all the “gambling and drinking, and wrangling and swearing,” he could not tolerate another form of evil. “But there were some things to which I had not become accustomed, and one of these was slavery”—especially sharing a steamboat with a slave-dealer. The page nearly shudders beneath Hamilton’s hand as he concludes, “But I will not enlarge on a subject so revolting. I remember, however, that no one on board talked about freedom so loudly or so long as this slave-dealer. He at length left us, and the sky seemed brighter, and the earth greener, after his departure” (1998: 52–53). It was as if the Devil himself had darkened the decks of the craft, and only his going ashore let life and light back on the boat.

William Wells Brown did enlarge on the subject of slavery, precisely because it was so revolting. His and other narratives by formerly enslaved persons further elucidate the ambiguous nature of steamboats, the evil and the good, and the consequences of that ambiguity on North American rivers. Born in Kentucky around 1814, Brown served various masters for twenty years, and a large portion of that time he worked on steamboats plying the Western waters of the upper and lower Mississippi, the Mis-

souri, and the Ohio (Buchanan 2004: 19). In recounting his bondage, Brown described his work as a waiter on board the *Enterprize*, out of St. Louis, “then running on the upper Mississippi.” He found river work to be relatively “pleasant” compared to other conditions for the enslaved, but even so, “in passing from place to place, and seeing new faces every day, and knowing that they could go where they pleased, I soon became unhappy, and several times thought of leaving the boat at some landing place, and trying to make my escape to Canada...” (Brown 1847: 31).

As one of the many thousands of people in servitude within the steamboat industry, William Wells Brown knew the river well, the world surrounding that river, and the slave-dealers of that world who traded him and his relatives. He recalled landing at Hannibal, Missouri (Mark Twain’s hometown), where “the boat took on board ... a drove of slaves, bound for the New Orleans market. They numbered from fifty to sixty, consisting of men and women from eighteen to forty years of age. A drove of slaves on a southern steamboat, bound for the cotton or sugar regions, is an occurrence so common, that no one, not even the passengers, appear to notice it, though they clank their chains at every step” (1847: 33–34). Brown wrote of steamboats as floating exhibitions of the institution of slavery, of being rented to a slave-driver or “soul-driver,” of the agonies he witnessed and those he personally endured. And he wrote as well of the steamboat as the means of escaping those agonies. Thomas C. Buchanan notes, in *Black Life on the Mississippi*, how “the steamboats that moved up and down the Mississippi River carried the tentacles of slavery and racism, but they also carried liberating ideas and pathways to freedom” (2004: 5). Brown’s account makes clear that steamboats went both ways: up and down the river, against and with the flow, deeper into territory of nightmarish servitude and northwards toward liberty.

Vehicles of servitude and vehicles of freedom—William Wells Brown’s narrative elucidates the conflicting meanings of steamboats and rivers in the nineteenth century. Another aspect of that conflict appeared in one of the more popular forms of literature in that period: humorous sketches of life along the Mississippi and other rivers, published in sporting magazines such as *Spirit of the Times*. One of the best known writers of the day, Thomas

Bangs Thorpe, customarily teased forth comedic aspects from the backwoods and backwaters of the southwest, though he occasionally wrote about more somber matters (including an anti-slavery novel). “Scenes of the Mississippi,” one of his many articles in the *Spirit of the Times*, began, “It has been the policy of the United States Government to remove the Indians west of the Mississippi.” Thorpe, adopting a tone in sympathy with the Seminoles, observes that “these ‘removals’ are always melancholy exhibitions,” and describes the affected indigenous peoples as always “dispirited and heart-broken.” He goes on to discuss one such removal of “near four hundred Seminoles” that he witnessed while taking passage on board a steamboat bound from New Orleans upriver to St. Louis in the late 1830s (1989: 129).

Though similar in form to other, more comedic accounts of the exploits of frontiersmen, the tone of “Scenes of the Mississippi” is mostly solemn. As the trip gets under way, Thorpe’s narrator registers his dismay regarding the “numerous and novel passengers,” a nod to the increasing “influx of settlers” that was transforming the “natural scenery” of the western US, eliminating a “genuine source of its national identity” (Estes 1989: 9). The narrator expresses pity for the Seminoles, who mostly float alongside the steamboat in an attached “tender.” Contrasted with the mighty vessel roaring against the river current, the “Indians” represent the past and the waning glory of the wild. The Seminoles, observes the narrator, were “consum[ed] with slow fever” and had little to look forward to but “funeral rites and the obscurity of the grave” (Thorpe 1989: 129–30).

A key event occurs early in the sketch and underscores the Seminoles’ physical and spiritual wasting away due to the forced removal from their homelands: an old man, bearing the marks of a chief, utters “a faint chant.” The narrator notes that the man’s chanting, “as it continued to swell on the evening breeze,” affects the “slumbering warriors that lay about,” and their eyes “open and flash with unearthly fires, sometimes exhibiting pleasure, but oftener ferocity and hatred.” As “the old man sang on,” others sway in a kind of trance or qui-

etly sing along, until the old man “ceased, turned his face full to the setting sun, and fell back a corpse” (Thorpe 1989: 131). Although Thorpe here, as elsewhere in his writings, used this event to lament the passing of a way of life, he also infused the atmosphere surrounding the Seminoles with otherworldliness. The narrator reports that as the chief passes away, his countrymen look back “in the direction of their homes” in sorrow (131), and as the river journey continues, the people perish one by one: “at every landing where the boat stopped some poor Indian was taken ashore and hastily buried,” their remains left behind as the steamboat, emblematic of progress, rumbles on (132–33). Instead of dwelling on the tragic nature of these deaths, however, the narrator introduces the views of a fellow white passenger, who refers to the Seminoles as “red skinned devils” and interprets the chief’s dying words as boasting about his “infernal deeds” (131). The narrator himself refrains from demonic terminology in reference to the Seminoles; but he never corrects other white characters when they do, letting their words linger in the air and mix with the mechanical workings of the steamboat as it chugs on inexorably.

“Scenes of the Mississippi,” like other such sketches, blended racism and curiosity, remorse for the passing of the “old ways” and acceptance of “progress.” At issue here is the seeming triumph of Culture over Nature. Near the end of the story, on the morning after the chief’s death, “A deep, damp, opaque Mississippi river fog, had swallowed us up.” Abruptly, the steamboat runs aground on a sand-bar. After hours of monotony relieved briefly by the confusion of an impromptu bear-hunt, the narrator gladly reports, “the bell sounded; *we moved*; and the steamer pursued its way” (Thorpe 1989: 134). The ship lurches forth, the past is left behind, and civilization rolls on. Scholar David C. Estes has asserted that “Thorpe did not agree with the predominant feeling that the region needed to become civilized. Its greatness did not lie in the future, he believed, but in what was rapidly becoming its past” (1989). Even so, in the end, as was apparently inevitable, “*we moved*”—forward, borne on the decks of shining technology, off of the blasted sand-bar and toward a new national identity.

“STRANGERS STILL MORE STRANGE”(THE DEVIL’S JOKE)

The advent of the steamboat allowed writers of the period to couple their curiosity about the new world they were entering with concerns about the world being left behind. Estes, drawing on other American scholars, believes that Thorpe understood American culture to typify “an irreconcilable opposition between Nature and civilization” (Estes 1989: 9). While in the widely held view of the day, the steamboat symbolized mastery over the river, Thorpe and others offered a different view, using the page to explore a more complex relation between boats and rivers, Nature and Culture. Steamboat literature helped give shape to the US in the nineteenth century by offering readers a different view of the strange new world in the making, with particular attention paid to American contributions to that world.

Thorpe, for example, underscored the diversity of the steamboat cabin, which “strangely mingled every phase of social life.” One of the most significant features of the Mississippi River in the middle nineteenth century was the rich assortment of passengers being moved up and down its waters: “The crowd of passengers ordinarily witnessed on our Mississippi steamers present more than is any where else observable in a small space, the cosmopolitanism of our extraordinary population” (Thorpe 1855: 34). Writers depicted the steamboat as an American microcosm, a diverse mixture of people from various regions and nationalities representing a brand of American exceptionalism. In this larger historical context, rife with concerns about nature, technology, the nation, and cosmopolitanism, Herman Melville’s steamer novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857) takes on special significance.

Melville’s last novel, *The Confidence-Man* was written a few years after the publication of *Moby-Dick* (1851), and comes out of the author’s state of literary frustration. He had enjoyed success with travel narratives and adventure tales but had higher aspirations, believing that there was more to literature than information and amusement. “Books of fiction,” he wrote, can perhaps give readers “more reality, than real life can show”; literature provided an opportunity to reconsider and even remake the nature of reality, by applying imagination and thoughtful inquiry to the stuff of life,



in the process creating a “nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed” (1990: 217–218). This transformation, which involved tackling difficult political and philosophical questions with an open mind, required responsible action by writers and interpreters alike in making the most of literature’s potential.

Accordingly, *The Confidence-Man* challenges readers on numerous levels. Although the plot is straight-forward enough, the novel is difficult to summarize. The story encompasses a single day of a downriver steamboat voyage on the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans, beginning with pre-dawn preparations for departure and ending late that night at an indefinite point under way, and most of the “action” entails a series of conversations between passengers. This simple sketch, however, does not adequately represent the novel’s complexity, signaled by several subtle features of the journey. The not quite twenty-four hours of the trip unfold on April Fool’s Day, on board “the favourite steamer *Fidèle*” as it works the waters of the Mississippi River, the nation’s central artery (1990: 7). The meaningful contrast between the boat’s name (connoting faithfulness, loyalty, fidelity) and the timing of its trip (a day of deception, hoax, and dupery) is increased on the first page by a placard on the lower deck of the boat “nigh the captain’s office” warning of the possible presence on board of “a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East; quite an original genius in his vocation, as would appear” (7).

As the simple plot thickens, readers begin to see that this “original genius” in the vocation of trickery and the art of deception has indeed taken passage on the ship of faith. Melville updates the résumé of The Devil by posing him as the consummate Confidence-Man and providing him with a series of shifting-shapes—the “masquerade” of the title—under the guise of which he tempts fellow steamboat travelers with sundry hooks and ruses. Both The Devil’s appearance and his mode of operations vary considerably, taking on over half a dozen different get-ups, and an inattentive reader might well miss the connections. Services are offered, charity solicited, philanthropy preached, potions purveyed. No two of these incarnations appear together simultaneously; instead they follow each other in seriation, a parade “the most extraordinary metaphysical scamps” (164).

Melville's multifaceted Mississippi River sharper "manifests the traditional behavior of the devil," as Kevin J. Hayes explains. "Though the Confidence Man exemplifies centuries-old devil lore, he also reflects a new development in modern American culture" (Hayes 2007: 83). The passengers on board a riverboat, Hayes argues, are more susceptible to "the Confidence Man's spiel" because they are "rootless," but also because of the close quarters of the ship itself; they have nowhere else to go. Furthermore, writes Nathaniel Lewis, "The setting—the Mississippi River—is an unfixed, liminal space, both West and not West" (2007: 30). The passengers of the good ship are in-between and in transit, acutely subject to The Devil's devious disguises and all the more likely "to sign their names in his book" (Hayes 2007: 83).

Melville's third-person narrator playfully tracks the comings and goings with wry asides and sly double-meanings. Each manifestation of the archfiend attempts to enlarge his fellow traveler's sense of trust, optimism, faith—in a word, Confidence. The Confidence-Man, in whatever garb and role, traffics in confidence; all of the elixirs, stock-shares, and services tendered in his various incarnations boil down to confidence. After swindling a passenger from Missouri, the smooth-tongued Philosophical Intelligence Officer explains the importance of this key term. "Confidence is the indispensable basis of all sorts of business transactions. Without it, commerce between man and man, as between country and country, would, like a watch, run down and stop" (1990: 155). Here, Melville directly connects "confidence" with business "of all sorts," concluding his economic lesson with diabolical associations, as the Philosophical Intelligence Officer, "glancing shoreward, towards a grotesquely-shaped bluff," takes his leave: "there's the Devil's joke, as they call it; the bell for landing will shortly ring." Ashore he goes, soon to be replaced by another version of "the stranger" (a word used with great frequency). As he does throughout the novel, Melville insinuates something devilish into this doctrine of confidence. Here it is a landform bearing the name, a common enough occurrence along the Mississippi; elsewhere it is explicit reference to Satan, or allusions to snakes, or other hints to put readers in mind of the Original Tempter.

In his most sustained incarnation, a portion that occupies roughly half the book, *The Devil* takes the form of a philanthropic “Cosmopolitan.” Whereas Thorpe used that term to celebrate the wide array of human types brought together on a Mississippi riverboat, Melville’s use of cosmopolitan also signifies the worldly Man about Town, someone familiar with and comfortable in all countries and climes. The Cosmopolitan Confidence-Man is a peculiar philanthropist, one who does indeed “love” mankind—but as a predator loves its prey. And on board the *Fidèle* he has a cross-section of Americans for his pursuits. Here again the steamboat represents the nation in microcosm. Just as the Mississippi, “uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide,” the steamboat assembles “a piebald parliament [...] of that multiform pilgrim species, man” (1990: 14). What does it mean that *The Devil* appears among these pilgrims as *the* Cosmopolitan, preaching Confidence aboard a steamboat named after Faith, consisting of an incongruous “congress” (14) of men and women, on a river the narrator has described as bearing its own confident cosmopolitanism?

*Possible* responses to this question—and I emphasize “possible” here, for the novel is awash in “perhaps,” “maybe,” and ambiguity—involve Melville’s association of the riverboat with the state of the nation, his concern with ways of knowing, and his approach to literature. He artfully utilizes the physical nature of the steamboat, with its ample carrying-capacity and many different subsections, allowing for scenes both private and public. We never see the captain, pilot, or engineer, as if the *Fidèle* were controlled by mysterious forces. Melville also avails himself of the physical nature of the voyage, its great length, which connects one distinct part of the country with another, and its frequent and often chaotic stops at landings: “Though her voyage of twelve hundred miles extends from apple to orange, from clime to clime, yet, like any small ferry-boat, to right and left, at every landing, the huge *Fidèle* still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark”; the faithful steamboat, “always full of strangers,” continuously “adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange” (1990: 13). Like the nation, the steamboat functions

as a vessel of unwonted juxtapositions; Melville's antebellum US consists of strangers in a strange nutshell. His narrator tells readers a little about where the passengers are from but nothing about where they're going—forward for sure, south in general, and New Orleans perhaps, "into the heart of democracy's darkness in the late 1850s" (Lewis 2007: 31).

The conditions under which they travel make it difficult for passengers to know what's what. At its most basic level, the confidence solicited by the Confidence-Man is a form of unquestioning acceptance. The Devil, always "softly sliding nearer," sibilantly seeks the victim's trust, whispering seductively, "simply have confidence in *me*" (1990: 36). Since few, however, would knowingly put their faith in Satan, the Confidence-Man fixes his victim's focus on other facets of fidelity: faith in human nature, in progress, in commerce, in Charity—faith, most of all, in faith. All of these customarily benign beliefs are manipulated into fundamental fidelity to The Devil, which ultimately entails faith in a limited system of viewing the world. Confidence, as purveyed by Melville's Confidence-Man, means foregoing any and all doubt. The pact with this devil requires that Americans trade away uncertainties, suspicions, and questions; in return, they receive clarity, satisfaction, and firm answers about which we no longer have to think. The "knowledge" to be gained, however, is but "The Devil's Joke" in another form, for victims find themselves subject to their own pliable drives. Writing recently in *The Nation* about the novel as a primer for the current political climate, Ariel Dorfman understands *The Confidence-Man* as Melville's "bitter indictment" of 1850s greed and gullibility: "The author saw the United States, diseased with false innocence and a ravenous desire for getting rich, heading toward Apocalypse [...]" (Dorfman 2017). The devious demon accomplishes his designs if his patsies only *believe*: In \_\_\_\_\_ we trust.

Melville's river-trip portrays different responses to these malevolent machinations, ultimately encouraging readers to assume a different attitude towards apparent opposites and seemingly clear-cut choices such as confidence and distrust, evil and good, "looks" and "facts" (1990: 20). Some passengers offer no resistance, others try to resist but fail; and while a few passengers manage to fend off The Devil successfully, the narrator depicts their

ways and means in a not altogether favorable light. The victims may be gullible dupes, but those who withstand temptation are described as unsatisfied skeptics. A backwoods philosopher, a mystical Transcendentalist, a pragmatic barber all expose vagaries in the Confidence-Man's discourse and occasionally link him directly to The Devil, but they only seem to believe in unbelief and trust in distrust. Neither the cheerful and charming villains nor the comically cold knights-errant offer appealing positions. The foggy and muddy Mississippi, the cosmopolitan and chaotic *Fidèle*, the multiple guises and wily ways of the titular character, the negating negations and parade of "perhaps" employed by the narrator—the unaccounted ambiguities of *The Confidence-Man* prevent readers from adopting a firm and unquestioning stance about the book's general meaning.

The challenging obscurity of the novel belongs to Melville's larger philosophy of literature and interpretation, a subject as integral to the book as steamboats, the river, or the nation. With numerous references to and even extended commentary on other literary works and figures (especially Shakespeare), the novel makes writing and reading crucial topics of discussion. There are many faulty readers aboard the *Fidèle*, chief among them being the Confidence-Man, who in his various guises often excoriates literature; and though he appropriates Biblical passages for his machinations, he proves (perhaps unsurprisingly) to have not read the Good Book as a whole very carefully. The literariness of the novel is enhanced by the story's steamboat setting; the incomplete voyage of a multi-chambered vessel gives readers the sense of an on-going affair while focusing our attention on the peculiar doings of each section of the boat, the various rooms and passages offering a strategic location for the Confidence-Man's ministrations and multivalent discussions of literary endeavors. On deck, "slowly sliding along the rail," the arch-conniver decries the "moral poison" of Tacitus and the classics (1990: 34); on the floor of the cabin unread copies of a Wordsworthian ode pile up like dust bunnies; in the bar, over port wine, a lengthy debate ensues over the upshot of Shakespeare's shady Polonius; in the dimly lit "gentlemen's cabin" (284), the Cosmopolitan and a pious old man ruminate on the Books of Apocrypha, amid catcalls from a disembodied, hidden voice,

as “the waning light expired” (298). On the last page, *The Devil* leads the old man away, into the darkness, and the *Fidèle* sails on down the river, the final line hinting at a sequel: “Something further may follow of this Masquerade” (298).

Melville leaves the question of what might ensue to the reader’s imagination, a subtle reminder of the responsibilities of interpretation. More emphatic reminders occur throughout the novel, moments in which Melville’s narrator turns directly to the reader, commenting on the novel itself and its possible reception. Three chapters in particular highlight the necessity of responsible interpretation, evident in their very titles. The last of these, Chapter 44, combines literary self-referentiality with a dry observation on the interpreter’s role: “IN WHICH THE LAST THREE WORDS OF THE LAST CHAPTER ARE MADE THE TEXT OF DISCOURSE, WHICH WILL BE SURE OF RECEIVING MORE OR LESS ATTENTION FROM THOSE READERS WHO DO NOT SKIP IT.” Here, Melville refers to and comments on the previous chapter, stepping out of the flow of the story and drawing attention to a particular phrase—“QUITE AN ORIGINAL,” a repeated reference to the devilish *Cosmopolitan*. In this example of meta-fictional self-reference, the writer jokingly challenges readers to pay better attention, at least for one moment, than they might customarily do. The narrator stands at a remove from the narrative flow and gives readers instead “a dissertation bordering upon the prosy, perhaps upon the smoky.” The smoke here, the narrator suggests, comes not from the steamer’s stacks but from the abstruse nature of meta-fictional commentary. The two sources of smoke mingle, however, significantly obscuring this particular moment. The narrator concludes that “the best use the smoke can be turned to, will be, by retiring under cover of it, in good trim as may be, to the story” (1990: 283)—that is, returning to the narrative, which is, as we have seen, sufficiently obscure in its own right. The chapter directs readers’ attention once more to the nature of literature and their own role in making it worth the while.

Literary “worth” comes to the fore in the other two self-referential chapters. The second of these, Chapter 33, refers directly to the first, a double self-reference that reinforces literary (or even meta-literary) commentary as an important thread

in the fabric of the text. "WHICH MAY PASS FOR WHATEVER IT MAY PROVE WORTH" links the working of fiction to the function of religion, and proposes that literature allows us to "turn, for a time, to something different" by "present[ing] another world" (1990: 216), providing imaginative readers with alternative ways of thinking about their circumstances. In the first of these meta-literary moments, "WORTH THE CONSIDERATION OF THOSE TO WHOM IT MAY PROVE WORTH CONSIDERING," Melville chastises his reader for expecting consistency of character in story-telling; such expectations, "though at first blush, seeming reasonable enough, may, upon a closer view, prove not much so" (84). The world is perplexingly inconsistent, he explains, and proposes that both writers and readers attend more to truth than to clarity: the complex ways of "human nature," for example, cannot simply be represented "in a clear light" (85).

The drift of this passage (and others like it), expressed by a narrator who has removed himself momentarily from the steamboat as it floats down the river, calls into question those cut-and-dried worldviews and master narratives that purport to offer clarity on "nature" (understood variously). With this dubious tack and other elements of the fictional voyage of the ship of faith, Melville presents literature as a "tangled web" that has "worth" because it more faithfully represents the tangled web of a world that we inhabit. The steamboat is a well-chosen setting for such a presentation: no one is at home, in a technical sense; all are under way. All aboard are strangers, representative of the human condition on a larger scale: "'indeed, where in this strange universe is not one a stranger?'" observes a character parenthetically (1990: 232). The Devil's Joke, in *The Confidence-Man*, is not only a riverside landmark but a dark and diabolical twisting of the limits of human nature. The more firmly we believe, the more in danger we are of being led astray. The greater clarity with which we believe we see, the likelier we're not looking very carefully. Literature, for Melville, can estrange us from received dogma and prevailing views, encouraging us to think again.

Decades before Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, Melville used the steamboats on the river to explore the part that literature might play in improving the intellectual climate of the day. While Twain

would take interest in the mud churned up by steamboats, as well as the problems of reading the river posed by overly scientific or romantic views of it, Melville reveled in the billowing steam and smoke that envelopes the *Fidèle*, obscuring ways of knowing. More recently, the philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore, in her own writing about rivers and obscurity, asserts that there are at least two kinds of clarity: the modern and the ancient. Whereas modern clarity is “transparent, free of dimness or blurring that can obscure vision, free of confusion or doubt that can cloud thought,” the ancient form carries the sense of the ringing of a bell, and meant “lustrous, splendid, radiating light” (Moore 1996: 174). My theory is that the frequent appearance of devils in US steamboat writing of the nineteenth century comes from the nation’s acceptance of, striving for, and lingering doubts concerning the modern sense of clarity, even regarding such matters as progress and faith. Writers such as Herman Melville, however, resonated with the bell of the steamboat, peered through the smoke, and tried to connect readers with the rich (if often disturbing) significance of the decks and cabins, the landings and the river. Literature allows us to consider the ambiguity of clarity, to face up to uncertainty, and to confront our devils, unsummoned or no.



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