Roving 'twixt land and sea: Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, and the maritime world-system'

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ROVING ’TWIXT LAND AND SEA:
HERMAN MELVILLE, JOSEPH CONRAD,
AND THE MARITIME WORLD-SYSTEM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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in

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by
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I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.

It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning. That made the first American story (Parkman’s): exploration.

Something else than a stretch of earth—seas on both sides, no barriers to contain as restless a thing as Western man was becoming in Columbus’ day. That made Melville’s story (part of it).

--Charles Olson, *Call me Ishmael*

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!

--Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 58
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT..............................................................................................................................................iv

CHAPTER

1 The World-System’s Importance in Melville and Conrad:
The Distinct Spaces of Land and Sea.................................................................1

2 Toward a Conception of Space:
The Spaces of Land and Sea Interpenetrated.................................................23

3 The Men Who Loved Islands:
Island Hopping as a Form of Spatial Exploration.............................................38

4 The Possible Worlds of *Mardi* and *Nostromo*:
Two Brief Case Studies in the Exploration of Space........................................45

5 The Orphans of Shipwreck:
A Paradigm for Roving ’Twixt Land and Sea......................................................55

WORKS CITED.......................................................................................................................................62

VITA.......................................................................................................................................................68
ABSTRACT

Although Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad are generally regarded as sea writers, both wrote numerous works concerned primarily with events on land. But critical approaches to both writers display a tendency to prioritize one set of environments. A result of such approaches is to overlook the manner in which Melville and Conrad explore the relationship between land and sea. This paper argues that one way to analyze how both writers examine that relationship is by locating it within the space of the modern world-system. Immanuel Wallerstein defines the modern world-system as the capitalist world-economy that qualifies as the only historical system on the globe—a role it has occupied since the sixteenth century. Thus, the modern world-system provides a global frame within which to position Melville and Conrad. Works such as Melville’s Mardi (1849) and Conrad’s Nostromo (1904) provide a unique approach to the world-system by employing a distinct process of spatial exploration as a means of examining geographic areas of the world that are at least partially imaginary. In the end, both Melville and Conrad are not merely sea writers, but rather world-system writers.
The World-System’s Importance in Melville and Conrad: The Distinct Spaces of Land and Sea

Critical discussions of both Herman Melville’s and Joseph Conrad’s works display a tendency to focus primarily on one series of environments. Whether interpreting the two writers individually (as is most often the case) or in relation to each other (a connection that appears in literary criticism less often than one would expect1), critics generally examine their respective bodies of work in terms of one group of geographical settings. Works such as Wyn Kelley’s Melville’s City and the collection of essays Conrad’s Cities, edited by Gene M. Moore, indicate criticism’s tendency to approach both writers by focusing almost exclusively on a specific type of place or environment.2 The fact that both Melville and Conrad traveled the world extensively before beginning to write, experiences that critics and biographers argue provided both with source material, suggests why geographical setting plays such a crucial role in their works—and thus is an apt topic for literary criticism. But nevertheless, too often that criticism focuses on one set of environments while completely ignoring the others.

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Seltzer provides a helpful summary of some of the thematic elements that the two share. He argues that both explore “the problems of egoism, self-delusion, and betrayal; the universality of evil; the inevitability of failure; the perils of isolation and withdrawal; the need for peace and the urge toward suicide; the danger of truth and the need of illusions; the hindrances to accurate perception; the confrontation with a hostile or indifferent world; and the dilemma of moral conduct” (xxiii).

The reductive stereotype, still evident in critical discourse, of both Melville and Conrad as “sea” writers undoubtedly figures into this tendency as well. (In fact, it seems fair to propose that when most readers think of either Melville or Conrad, they think of the sea.) For instance, John Peck observes that “while the majority of tellers of sea stories are content just to relate maritime adventures, more ambitious writers are alert to the potential within a maritime story to consider fundamental questions about imposing a shape, and, as such, an interpretation upon life. It is Melville and Conrad who exploit this potential to the full” (108). Associating Melville and Conrad with the sea is a logical connection. After all, both were former sailors who used their experiences on the sea as source material for their fiction (or, at least that’s what their biographers tell us). But to reduce both writers to the status of only sea writers ignores the fact that each published numerous works concerned exclusively with events on land, in which the sea figures only tangentially, if at all.3

For instance, Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853) and Conrad’s The Secret Agent (1907) focus entirely on urban environments—specifically cities. Critical readings of Melville’s and Conrad’s treatment of the city, examples of which are cited above, address this aspect of their works, but do so while suggesting that still, in the end, both are ultimately sea writers with an at best only marginal interest in events set on land.4 Such claims, however, often overlook relevant evidence, including the fact that most of Melville’s short fiction, written between 1853 and 1856, the year when the collection The Piazza Tales was published, are not sea tales. Instead,

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3 Ian Watt, for instance, provides a reading of Conrad that acknowledges both land and sea environments as equally important elements worthy of critical attention: “It is in one sense typical of Conrad that having been a seaman he wrote a good deal about life on board ship; but in another sense his sea fiction is not essentially different from his other tales. The Nigger of the “Narcissus”, say, is not unlike Nostromo, because both, whether ship or country, attempt to reveal a whole social process in action; or, to put it a little differently, to show the fate of many individual people of varying ages facing the real world” (Nostromo 81). Here Watt identifies a consistent aspect of Conrad’s work that applies to both land and sea environments: the “social process” of people “facing the real world.”

4 A particularly unsettling example of such a critical approach comes from Geoffrey Galt Harpham, who claims that “Conrad is a ‘seaman writer’ even in much of the work that is not ‘sea stuff’; and…that when he is not a seaman writer, he is no writer at all” (72).
his works from this period address such topics as “A Story of Wall Street” (the subtitle of “Bartleby”), class divisions in industrial environments (“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”), the experience of living in America’s countryside (“The Piazza”; “The Lightning-Rod Man”), and numerous other non-sea-related settings. Even his final novel, The Confidence Man, set on a steamboat traveling up the Mississippi river, provides a setting distinct from the South Seas environments and whaling voyages for which Melville is famous.

Conrad’s works, and particularly his later novels, provide a series of settings just as diverse. Thus, in addition to the remote islands, idiosyncratic sailing vessels, and riverboats up the Congo for which he is famous, his settings include such locales as nineteenth-century imperial Russia (Under Western Eyes), his native country of Poland (“Prince Roman”), and England’s domestic drawing rooms (“The Return”; Chance). Like Melville, then, Conrad chronicles more environments than just the ships and sailors with which he is so often associated. In fact, Conrad himself expressed a desire to be known as more than just a writer of sea fiction, explaining that he wished to “get freed from that infernal tail of ships, and that obsession with my sea life which has as much bearing on my literary existence, on my quality as a writer, as the enumeration of drawing-rooms which Thackeray frequented could have had on his gift as a great novelist” (qtd. in Allen 32). One critic proposes that one of the reasons Conrad dismissed suggestions that he was influenced by Melville’s works, even declining the invitation to write a preface to an edition of Melville’s writings, was his desire to separate himself from his predecessor’s status as a writer of sea fiction (Messenger 54).

The letter from January 15, 1907, in which Conrad declines to write the preface contains what is perhaps his most explicit commentary on Melville: “I am greatly flattered by your proposal; but the writing of my own stuff is a matter of so much toil and difficulty that I am only too glad to leave other people’s books alone. Years ago I looked into Typee and Omoo, but as I didn’t find there what I am looking for when I open a book I did go no further. Lately I had in my hand Moby-Dick. It struck me as a rather strained rhapsody with whaling for a subject and not a single sincere line in the 3 vols of it” (Collected Letters III: 408).
Now, it is absurd to suggest that all criticism that considers only one of the environmental settings utilized by either Melville or Conrad is inadequate—and I am making no such claim. Specific studies of individual places and settings in their works have been (and will no doubt continue to be) very useful for gaining an understanding of both writers’ respective contributions to world literature. Instead, however, I would like to suggest (and will spend the rest of this paper arguing for) the importance of examining both Melville’s and Conrad’s works within a larger framework than the one offered by separating their works according to specific settings. Such a region-specific approach to both writers, in which, for instance, the presence of the sea or the city is the primary topic of study, poses the dangerous suggestion that the predominant mode of narrative discourse utilized by both is to limit their fiction to one geographical setting. But in both Melville’s and Conrad’s texts, the exact opposite is true.

Instead of limiting themselves to one setting, say a ship or a city, both writers frequently present works that juxtapose land and sea environments. For instance, consider their tendency to use island settings, which are areas where land and sea interpenetrate. As a body of land that is surrounded on all sides by the sea, the island represents a setting that is neither predominantly land nor sea, but a combination thereof. Works like Melville’s *Typee* (1846) and Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (1900), then, which help solidify their authors’ reputations as sea writers, indicate why that designation is inadequate as a means of classification. Both novels feature prominent islands, Nukuheva in *Typee* and Patusan in *Lord Jim*. These islands function in their respective novels as places somewhat adversarial to the sea itself. The narrator of Melville’s novel abandons his ship, the *Dolly*, for the island partially because he no longer wants to remain on the sea: “Oh! for a refreshing glimpse of one blade of grass—for a snuff at the fragrance of a handful of the loamy earth! Is there nothing fresh around us? Is there no green thing to be seen? Yes, the inside of our
bulwarks is painted green; but what a vile and sickly hue it is, as if nothing bearing even the semblance of verdure could flourish this weary way from land” (4). Similarly, Conrad’s Jim finds in Patusan a place where he can finally escape the stigma he received due to an earlier event on the sea.

In both cases, however, the sea itself is not solely to blame for the main character’s embrace of the land. Instead, each character is urged toward the land partially because of an unpleasant experience on a ship. Just as the *Dolly*’s long voyage encourages *Typee*’s narrator to consider running away, the *Patna* facilitates Jim’s fate through its dejected condition: “The *Patna* was a local steamer as old as the hills, lean like a greyhound, and eaten up with rust worse than a condemned watertank” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 10). Such examples illustrate the importance of avoiding the tendency to define each novel’s events solely in terms of the sea or the land, or even a ship or village. Instead, examining the manner in which these diverse factors work together—just as an island is a place where land and sea interpenetrate—provides a fuller perspective on the events than that which is offered by limiting the perspective to one primary environment that supposedly dominates a specific area.

Rather than qualifying as merely sea writers, Melville and Conrad instead embrace a series of geographical settings that chart the diverse relationship between land and sea. Melville’s and Conrad’s presentation of this relationship recalls Fernand Braudel’s approach to the Mediterranean, which he described as an area where the land and the sea are inseparable:

> The Mediterranean is not even a single sea, it is a complex of seas; and these seas are broken up by islands, interrupted by peninsulas, ringed by interior coastlines. Its life is linked to the land, its poetry more than half-rural, its sailors may turn peasant with the seasons; it is the sea of vineyards and olive trees just as much as the sea of long-oared galleys and the roundships of merchants and its history can no more be separated from that of the lands surrounding it than the clay can be separated from the hands of the potter who shapes it. (emphasis original; Braudel, *Mediterranean* 17)
Braudel’s claim that the Mediterranean sea is intimately related to “the lands surrounding it” relates to the works of Melville and Conrad because both chronicle environments effected as much by the land as the sea. The manner in which both authors examine the way the elements of land and sea interpenetrate is suggested by the title of Conrad’s 1912 collection of short fiction, *'Twixt Land and Sea*. Conrad’s title reveals an element of both writers’ works by indicating a movement *between* (i.e., ’twixt) land and sea. While both Melville’s and Conrad’s works feature settings located primarily on either land or sea, they also include those where the two environments are inextricably bound together. In the end, Melville and Conrad explore this land-sea relationship because they are interested in both areas as distinct “spaces” that occupy unique positions within the modern world-system. Both Melville and Conrad, then, are not merely sea writers, but rather world-system writers.

“The modern world-system” is a term developed by Immanuel Wallerstein to describe the “capitalist world economy” that emerged around 1500. He argues that “by its inner logic, this capitalist world economy then expanded to cover the entire globe, absorbing in the process all existing mini-systems and world empires. Hence by the late nineteenth century, for the first time ever, there existed only one historical system on the globe. We are still in that situation today” (emphasis original; “World-Systems Analysis” 140). That historical system is what Wallerstein describes as “the modern world-system.” Examining the works of Melville and Conrad within the context of this world-system provides a realm that clarifies the impact of the areas of both land and sea. In the end, both writers’ works challenge the limitations of region-specific approaches by incorporating a global perspective. Melville and Conrad aim for such a perspective through their examination of the “spaces” of land and sea, which they present as central components of the modern world-system. Franco Moretti, one of the few literary critics to
employ Wallerstein’s work, uses the notion of a world-system to examine literary works that he describes as “world texts, whose geographical frame of reference is no longer the nation-state, but a broader entity—a continent, or the world-system as a whole” (emphasis original; Modern Epic 50). Melville’s and Conrad’s texts employ exactly such a global “frame of reference.”

But Moretti argues that in Moby-Dick (1851), Melville’s Captain Ahab lacks a realization of his role in the world-system because of a limited perspective: “No digressions on this sea journey, no curiosity or memorable encounter: Ahab is truly the opposite of Odysseus, and for him the whole universe is merely a backdrop. His world is a closed and narrow one: made up of a single creature, in whose whiteness all the colors of the universe are concentrated—and vanish” (Modern Epic 61). Such a reading acknowledges the limited perspective created by Ahab’s monomaniacal quest for the white whale, but overlooks the moments when he doubts that quest’s validity. In the following passage, for instance, Ahab laments the confining nature of the sea environments he has restricted himself to for most of his life. This passage is rather long, but the beauty of Melville’s language demands extended quotation:

It is a mild, mild wind, and a mild-looking sky. On such a day—very much such a sweetness as this—I struck my first whale—a boy harpooner of eighteen! Forty—forty—forty years ago!—ago! Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and stormtime! forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep! Aye and yes, Starbuck, out of those forty years I have not spent three ashore. When I think of this life I have led; the desolation of the solitude it has been; the masoned, walled-town of a Captain’s exclusiveness, which admits but small entrance to any sympathy from the green country without—oh, weariness! heaviness! Guinea-coast slavery of solitary command!—when I think of all this; only half-suspected, not so keenly known to me before—and how for forty years I have fed upon dry salted fare—fit emblem of the dry nourishment of my soul!—when the poorest landsmen has had fresh fruit to his daily hand, and broken the world’s fresh bread, to my mouldy crusts—away, whole oceans away, from that young girl-wife I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow—wife? wife?—rather a widow with her husband alive! Aye, I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck; and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with
which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey—more a demon than a man!—aye, aye! what a forty years’ fool—fool—old fool, has old Ahab been! (*Moby-Dick* 590–1)

Here Ahab idealizes the land as an area where he can possibly escape “the masoned, walled-town” of his sea environment. This land-sea dichotomy, however, indicates clearly that Ahab is positioning himself within the larger realm of the world-system. Rather than limiting himself to exploring only the sea, Ahab considers here the possibility of spending more time on land. Thus, for Ahab “the whole universe” is more than “merely a backdrop” (Moretti’s argument), but instead the larger space that contains the realms of land and sea that he hopes to negotiate.

In the end, though, the global perspective endorsed by the world-system proves difficult to obtain. Wallerstein’s own approach is to cite Braudel’s argument for viewing history in terms of the long *durée*. For this reason, Wallerstein claims that “what world-systems analysis calls for is an evaluation of the centrality of [all] purportedly key ‘events’ in terms of the long *durée* of the historical system in which they occurred” (“World-Systems Analysis” 145). But Braudel himself cautioned that such a view often proves difficult to achieve, since it is easy to fall into the trap of “eventism” that prioritizes one event over another. Instead, he explained that history should be conceived as “the sum of all possible histories, a collection of occupational skills and points of view—those of yesterday, today, and tomorrow” (“History and the Social Sciences” 20–2). In *Moby-Dick*, Melville acknowledges the difficulty of achieving such a global perspective: “With a frigate’s anchors for my bridle-bitts and fasces of harpoons for spurs, would I could mount that whale and leap the topmost skies, to see whether the fabled heavens with all their countless tents really lie encamped beyond my mortal sight!” (*Moby-Dick* 296). The vision Melville longs to achieve is in fact a view of the world-system itself, in which land and sea are both clearly visible.
But the possibility remains that the world investigated by Melville and Conrad is primarily a maritime world. In such a conception, even the land masses are part of a world that is intimately connected with the sea. Although Conrad was born and raised in Poland, a landlocked country, he decided to leave that environment to become a sailor. Thus, during his years as both a French and English sailor, he was incorporating himself into the maritime world-system. In his essay “Poland Revisited” (1915), for instance, Conrad describes the Polish city of Krakow as an area from his youth that influenced his earlier years before he went to sea:

Cracow [sic] is the town where I spent with my father the last eighteen months of his life. It was in that old royal and academical city that I ceased to be a child, became a boy, had known the friendships, the admirations, the thoughts and the indignations of that age. It was within those historical walls that I began to understand things, form affections, lay up a store of memories and a fund of sensations with which I was to break violently by throwing myself into an unrelated existence. It was like the experience of another world. (emphasis added; Notes 124)

That “unrelated existence” is what Conrad experienced once he became a sailor. On specifically why Conrad decided to leave Poland for the sea, however, even his biographers are unable to provide a clear explanation. 6 Conrad’s own statements on the matter, including the above passage, are decidedly vague. What is clear from this passage—and some of Conrad’s related statements, such as his claim that “what [he] had in view was not a naval career, but the sea”—is that his departure for the sea represented for him a paradigm shift wherein his previous world view, focused on his family’s experiences in Poland and Russia, was exchanged for one (i.e., “another world”) that incorporated the space of the sea that had so long fascinated him as a young man (Personal Record 113).

6 Frederick R. Karl lists numerous elements that presumably influenced Conrad’s decision, but concludes ultimately that Conrad decided to go to sea with no clear idea of what it meant for his future: “His decision to depart lacked future definition; it was simply the decision itself” (112). Zdzislaw Najder observes that this decision was not only “the turning point in [Conrad’s] life,” but also the event that “provokes the most heated arguments” among scholars (36). But Najder does go on to argue that Conrad’s “mind was set on the sea—not on becoming a sailor. He wanted to take a life of adventure and voyage without the hardships and rigors demanded by the calling” (36). In the end, both Karl’s and Najder’s explanations stress that Conrad experienced a distinct cultural shift by leaving Poland.
The geographic shift involved in his departure for the sea, in which the sea eventually became as crucial an environment for Conrad as the land, ultimately became his dominant worldview. Notice, for instance, that only late in his career did he return to writing about events in his native Poland—and even then, his perspective is one of a former sailor examining the realms he inhabited before going to the sea. “Poland Revisited” reflects on the influence a specific body of water, the North Sea, had on assisting his transition to a sailor’s life:

That sea was to me something unforgettable, something much more than a name. It had been for some time the school-room of my trade. On it, I may safely say, I had learned, too, my first words of English. A wild and stormy abode, sometimes, was that confined, shallow-water academy of seamanship from which I launched myself on the wide oceans. My teachers had been the sailors of the Norfolk shore; coast men, with steady eyes, mighty limbs, and gentle voice; men of very few words, which at least were never bare of meaning. Honest, strong, steady men, sobered by domestic ties, one and all, as far as I can remember. (Notes 132)

As this passage suggests, Conrad’s shift to the sea provided him with a background (as well as a language) that he would eventually use in his fiction. When critics describe Conrad as a sea writer, then, they are acknowledging the prominent change that going to sea sparked in his consciousness. But describing him as simply a sea writer ignores the central role that the land plays in his fiction. Such an obstacle is avoided, however, by the notion of the maritime world-system, which includes the realms of both land and sea.

Like Melville’s, Conrad’s fiction explores the realms of both land and sea, discovering each area’s indelible qualities. Unlike Conrad, however, Melville was born into an environment permeated by the sea. That sea-based environment was in fact America itself, part of the continent whose existence in the vast ocean Europe was unaware of until the fifteenth century. The twentieth-century German philosopher Carl Schmitt described America’s discovery as the emergence of a new “nomos [i.e., order] of the earth”:
The nomos of the earth in the first stage [was] when men as yet had no global concept of their planet and the great oceans of the world were inaccessible to human power. This first nomos of the earth was destroyed about 500 years ago, when the great oceans of the world were opened up. The earth was circumnavigated; America, a completely new, unknown, not even suspected continent was discovered. A second nomos of the earth arose from such discoveries of land and sea. (Nomos 352)

Schmitt’s concept of the nomos of the earth reveals another perspective on Wallerstein’s formulation of the modern world-system. Both Schmitt and Wallerstein provide global conceptions of the modern world’s structure. Thus, they are participating in what Reinhart Koselleck describes as “conceptual history,” the process by which historical data is used to construct an image of the present world (“Social History” 21).

Koselleck emphasizes that the historical process includes a distinct spatial dimension by observing that “experience based on the past is spatial since it is assembled in a totality, within which many layers of earlier times are simultaneously present, without, however, providing any indication of the before and after” (Futures Past 260). Thus, as a means of defining the process by which people conceive history, Koselleck argues that “experience and expectation are two categories appropriate for the treatment of historical time because of the way that they embody past and future” (Futures Past 258). In the end, Koselleck extends his argument for a spatial conception of history by further elaborating the two categories as “the space of experience” and “the horizon of expectation” (Futures Past 260). Here “experience” constitutes a “space”

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7 Schmitt’s book was first published in German in 1950; an English translation did not appear until 2003.
8 While describing the emergence of what he terms the “second nomos of the earth,” however, Schmitt emphasizes that this “world order” was a “Eurocentric” one that ignored the relevance of any country outside of Europe: “The discoveries [of land and sea] were not invited. They were made without visas issued by the discovered peoples. The discoverers were Europeans, who appropriated, divided, and utilized the planet. Thus, the second nomos of the earth became Eurocentric” (Nomos 352). Schmitt’s discussion of these Eurocentric elements foreshadows much of the postcolonial criticism that would appear over the next few decades. A benefit of Schmitt’s approach, however, is that it avoids prioritizing (i.e., demonizing) one environment over the other, opting instead for a broader understanding of a specific sequence of historical change.
9 Another helpful passage from Koselleck states that “hope and memory, or expressed more generally, expectation and experience—for expectation comprehends more than hope, and experience goes deeper than memory—simultaneously constitute history and its cognition. They do so by demonstrating and producing the inner relation between past and future or yesterday, today, or tomorrow” (Futures Past 258).
because it consists of events that people already witnessed in the past, whereas “expectation” allows people to construct their own “horizon” of the events they hope will occur in the future.

As explained by Schmitt, however, the nomos of the earth displays a similar spatial dynamic through its explanation of the manner in which a specific spatial order, or understanding, of the world was replaced by a newly altered one. At the same time, Schmitt’s emphasis on the importance of both land and sea in his concept of the nomos of the earth indicates the central roles both environments occupy in the world-system. Here Melville and Conrad emerge as crucial figures in world literature because they similarly chart the various relationships of land and sea. In their works, both environments are neither simply positive nor negative, but instead display a complex (and sometimes shifting) position.

Ignoring the space of the world-system produces readings of Melville and Conrad that overemphasize the centrality of a specific environment. For instance, in his book Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis, Cesare Casarino focuses exclusively on the ship as the writers’ means of examining the modern world. Using Michel Foucault’s concept of the “heterotopia,” typically defined as a space that is distinct from all other spaces in the world, Casarino approaches “the sea voyage and the world of the ship, which in [the modernist sea narrative] are…constructed as autarchic and self-enclosed narrative units and detailed as multifaceted and tension-ridden universes” (9). The notions here of “self-enclosed narrative units” and “tension-ridden universes” stress the exclusionary aims of Casarino’s study, which suggests that only the ship itself can provide such spaces. A central premise of his argument is based on Foucault’s statement that “the ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates” (“Of Other Spaces” 236). From this claim, Casarino reads Melville’s White-
Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War (1850) and Conrad’s The Nigger of the “Narcissus” (1897) as examples of “the modernist sea narrative” that illustrate Foucault’s concept of heterotopia as it is applied to the space of the ship.

But the ultimate effect of such an approach is to suggest that in both novels, the ship is the only distinct space constructed by the narrative itself. With Melville’s White-Jacket, for instance, Casarino describes the ship as an isolated space or world (which he views as a heterotopia) that is unique from all others. Following a general trend in criticism on the novel, he argues that the ship functions as a microcosm of the larger world of America, in which a naval Man-of-War is a representative cultural institution.10 This reading, he claims, is supported by the novel’s subtitle, “The World in a Man-of-War,” a description that suggests Melville’s interest in presenting a panorama of American life on board the ship itself, the USS Neversink. The ship’s environment, then, according to Casarino, qualifies as a realm or separate space that Melville positions on the sea—that is, away from the land and the notion of empire displayed there, which are represented in the novel entirely within the space of the ship’s environment.

Reading the ship as a microcosm, however, indicates that it is more than merely the unique space of a heterotopia. Instead, it occupies a role within the larger social framework depicted by Melville. Although the Neversink qualifies as its own separate environment, Melville repeatedly stresses the fact that the ship is also a representative—or, in some cases, a non-representative example—of larger socio-cultural elements in nineteenth-century America. Consider, for instance, what is perhaps the most famous section of the novel: the narrator’s criticism of the naval practice of flogging, which is interpreted as a perversion of America’s own legal system. Melville presents the Neversink as an illustration of the wretched environments of

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10 F. O. Matthiessen, for instance, argues that “the subtitle of White-Jacket set forth Melville’s deliberate intention to picture ‘the world in a man-of-war,’ to examine the nature of life in such a microcosm” (402). Another helpful critical approach to the issue comes from Priscilla Allen Zirker’s essay “Melville and the Man-of-War Microcosm.”
naval Man-of-Wars, but stresses that these ships do not necessarily follow the principles advocated by the larger cultural institution that is America itself. Here the country (i.e., America) provides the environment compared to which the ship, as a supposed heterotopia, qualifies as a unique space.

Melville’s criticism of the navy’s flogging practices forms part of a larger argument he makes against the abusive nature of maritime law. For Melville, maritime law represents a harsh contradiction of the American ethos. Sea captains, he claims, have a tendency to become abusive tyrants because of the power they receive through the maritime legal system. Melville attacks the practice because he believes that “flogging in the Navy is opposed to the essential dignity of man, which no legislator has a right to violate; that it is oppressive, and glaringly unequal in its operations; that it is utterly repugnant to the spirit of our democratic institutions; indeed, that it involves a lingering trait of the worst times of a barbarous feudal aristocracy; in a word, we denounce it as religiously, morally, and immutably wrong” (emphasis original; White-Jacket 148). The passion of Melville’s criticism here suggests that he believes such laws are perverting the nature of a space previously depicted as the so-called “free sea.” That designation, “free sea,” finds a particularly developed treatment in Hugo Grotius’s 1609 work of that title, which claims that the “ocean wherewith God hath compassed the Earth is navigable on every side round about, and the settled or extraordinary blasts of wind, not always blowing from the same quarter, and sometimes from every quarter, do they not sufficiently signify that nature hath granted a passage

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11 Here Melville provides a speculative answer for why sea captains are often portrayed as authoritarian tyrants. Although Conrad’s fiction is filled with noble captains, Melville’s features predominantly those who torment their crews. See, for instance, the captain in Redburn, who strictly enforces the status associated with his post by refusing to allow the novel’s title character, a young boy on his first voyage, to speak to him. In Moby-Dick, Ahab has numerous poignant moments that reveal his humanity, but he remains an obsessed madman throughout. Similarly, when the main characters of Typee and Omoo decide to abandon their ships, one rationalization they provide is that their respective captains are both vicious and incompetent. Melville’s bleak portraits of sea captains contrast sharply with Conrad’s. Although there are exceptions, such as the Patna’s cruel skipper in Lord Jim, most of Conrad’s captains are noble figures who display a dedication to their chosen profession. Representative examples include, but are by no means limited to: The End of the Tether, Typhoon, and The Shadow-Line.
from all nations unto all?" (11). Maritime law itself, then, constitutes an attempt at imposing an order on the space of the world-system with the intention of benefiting a select group. Such attempts anger a rover like Melville, who repeatedly constructs characters that qualify as outcasts—including the most famous of his outcasts, *Moby-Dick*’s Ishmael. If maritime law favors the ship’s officers, including the captain, then it inevitably harms the common sailors, a group that Melville describes repeatedly throughout *White-Jacket* as “the people.”

But remember that Melville himself is somewhat of an outcast. Thus, his objection to the navy’s flogging practices on the grounds that these acts contradict America’s founding ideology qualifies as somewhat of a contradiction for Melville, who elsewhere criticizes the country’s institutions. At times, as here in *White-Jacket*, Melville appears to endorse nineteenth-century America’s nationalist perspectives, even following the period’s common trope of viewing the country as “the Israel of [its] time” (153). Just as often, though, Melville’s works explicitly challenge the American ethos. Consider, for instance, readings of “Bartleby” as a rejection of the American work ethic. C. L. R. James begins his study of Melville by describing Ahab’s pursuit of Moby-Dick as an explicit rejection of “the very foundation of American civilization”—the country’s doctrine advocating the constant pursuit of wealth (5). Whereas Starbuck repeatedly stresses the whaling voyage’s financial goals, asking how chasing the whale will benefit the investors, Ahab explicitly rejects such concerns to pursue his own maniacal obsession. Even

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12 Marxists have (perhaps expectedly) latched onto Melville’s usage of the term “the people” to support readings of the crew as the embodiment of the proletariat. Readings such as Michael Rogin’s provide interesting approaches to this aspect of Melville’s work, but at the same time, it is important to remember that *White-Jacket* also depicts its hero, Jack Chase, as an almost superhuman entity able to challenge the villainous officers. Chase’s superior nature here indicates a contradiction in Melville’s text—if we accept the Marxist reading of the crew—since it implies that the proletariat is incapable of defending itself, thus it must rely on a person of higher social status (i.e., the well-read Chase displays traits that separate him from the bulk of the crew’s uneducated masses) to challenge the oppressors. Myra Jehlen offers an interesting opposite approach to “Melville’s treatment of class” by observing that “the central issue...[is] how to reconcile the romance of self-creation with the political narrative of class” (88). Rogin’s Marxist-inspired reading of the novel’s political elements is found in his *Subversive Genealogy*, pages 80–101.

13 Wai-chee Dimock addresses these issues at some length in her *Empire for Liberty*; see the discussion of *White-Jacket* on pages 92–107, particularly 100–103.
more pronounced, however, are Melville’s much discussed attitudes toward race. Critics have explored the sometimes contradictory nature of Melville’s views, but instead of attempting to rationalize why one version of Melville is the true Melville, it is important to remember his propensity to view events and topics from multiple angles.

Nevertheless, as the flogging discussion indicates, Melville repeatedly insists on viewing the ship in terms of its position in the larger world-system—in other words, he returns the ship to the world-system. Even if Casarino is correct in characterizing the ship as an example of a heterotopia, the possibility emerges that the mere concept of a heterotopia itself is meaningless outside of the context of the world-system. Ultimately, the world-system provides the larger environment which the ship (as a supposed heterotopia) separates itself from to qualify as a unique space. Heterotopias, then, gain their significance only from inhabiting a distinct space within the world-system itself.

Although the ship may qualify as a heterotopia, its identity consists of more than just that because it is simultaneously part of the world-system that houses countless other environments. Rather than suggesting that ships are the only “other spaces” housed in the world-system, however, we should also consider the spaces of the land and the sea, as well as those spaces where the two interpenetrate, as they so often do in Melville and Conrad. As Marlow observes in Conrad’s “Youth” (1898), in a passage that Casarino uses as an epigraph to his introduction, “This [i.e., the series of events that Marlow is about to narrate] could have occurred nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak—the sea entering into the life of most men, and the men knowing something or everything about the sea, in the way of amusement, of travel, or of bread-winning” (Conrad, “Youth” 71). Marlow’s implied claim here that “nowhere but in England” do “men and sea interpenetrate” is contrasted not only by Conrad’s other works,
but also by Melville, who similarly chronicles land communities that are intimately bound with the sea. In that passage, if the word “England” was replaced with “Nantucket,” the revised statement could just as easily have originated from a character in Melville’s fiction.

The world of *White-Jacket*, however, is solely that of the naval Man-of-War, since Melville limits the novel’s events to those that occur on the ship, avoiding the temptation to discuss the voyage’s land-based activities. For instance, when the crew receives a liberty while docked in the port of Rio de Janeiro, the narrator explains that *this* narrative—that is, this particular novel—is concerned only with the ship:

> Our own little party had a charming time [ashore]; we saw many sights; fell in—as all sailors must—with dashing adventures. But, though not a few good chapters might be written on this head, I must again forbear; for *in this book* I have nothing to do with the shore further than to glance at it, now and then, from the water; my man-of-war world alone must supply me with the staple of my matter; I have taken an oath to keep afloat to the last letter of my narrative. (emphasis added, 229)

Casarino reads this passage as evidence that the ship represents a heterotopia: “With this oath the space of the ship and the whole narrative are revealed to be synonymous. This oath articulates the world of the ship as a self-sufficient narrative ecosystem, which in order to function…needs to be sealed off and shut onto itself” (29). But note that in the passage, Melville stresses that this limited focus on the ship is only true for “this book.” In other works, such as *Redburn* (1849), he embraces the opportunity to expound on the sailors’ adventures ashore. *Redburn* is particularly relevant here because a crucial element of that novel is the title character’s first visit to London. What he experiences ashore is not only London’s seedy metropolitan nature, but also the squalor of Liverpool, England’s major port city of the nineteenth century: “Of all sea-ports in the world, Liverpool, perhaps, most abounds in all the variety of land-sharks, land-rats, and other vermin, which make the hapless mariner their prey” (*Redburn* 160). Ultimately, just as *White-Jacket*
represents Melville’s depiction of “the world” found aboard a naval Man-of-War, Redburn qualifies as his extended examination of the experience of sailing on a merchant vessel as it crosses the Atlantic.

A condition stressed repeatedly by both Melville and Conrad is that ships inhabit the world-system just as they inhabit the sea. Conrad’s Narcissus provides an illustration of the manner in which, contrary to Casarino’s argument, the ship cannot be viewed outside the context of the sea. Casarino tends to read the ship, particularly in his approach to The Nigger of the “Narcissus” and the ship of that novel’s title, as an isolated entity, ignoring the fact that it is positioned in the sea—and by extension, the world-system. For Casarino, any influence that the sea might have on the ship’s spatial identity is extraneous because of the ship’s status as a localized heterotopia: “The ship embodies the desire that produces heterotopias, that calls the space of heterotopia into being: the desire to escape the social while simultaneously representing it, contesting it, inverting it—the desire to exceed the social while simultaneously transforming it” (28). Such a claim implies that Conrad presents the ship as an isolated entity able to separate itself from the events of either land or sea. But this position is questioned by the novel’s revelation of the manner in which the crew witnesses the death of James Wait, the black man of the novel’s title who is suspected of being lax in his duties.

Nevertheless, as Wait gradually dies of tuberculosis during the ship’s journey from Bombay to London, it becomes clear that as Singleton, the crew’s most experienced sailor, explains, “The sea will have her own.—Die in sight of land” (96). Assigning a degree of will to the sea here indicates that it exerts an influence on the sailors that goes beyond mere environmental factors: “Mortally sick men…linger till the first sight of land, and then die; and Jimmy knew that the land would draw his life from him” (Conrad, “Narcissus” 105). The
possibility that Wait will only die once land is sighted stresses that the ship is not isolated, but still exists in a broader social context. If the land will “draw [Wait’s] life from him,” then it assumes an almost adversarial position for the crew, even though they spend portions of the novel irritated by Wait’s unwillingness to work. Thus, suggesting that the ship occupies an isolated space in the novel that separates it from the rest of the world ignores the fact that the ship and its crew, as in so many of Conrad’s texts, are distinctly affected by the sea itself.

Conrad’s Typhoon (1902), for instance, provides a clear indication of the dangerous nature of sea voyages through its detailed account of how a captain and his crew deal with a violent storm while at sea. By that novella’s end, however, when Conrad shifts the focus to the crew’s families in England, the sea’s violent nature is overlooked in favor of domestic observations about the experience of having the crew away from home. Such a contrast allows Conrad to illustrate the ship’s unique communal atmosphere, as well as how it differs from England’s home environment that is relatively unfamiliar with the dangers of life at sea. But he still stresses that England’s alternate environment exists in relation to that of the ship, which it interprets according to its own knowledge. In fact, the family members ashore in England display as many different interpretations of the captain’s actions as the crew members themselves, a situation that emphasizes Conrad’s focus on the impossibility of achieving a “true” perspective on the events.

Conrad’s own statements about The Nigger of the “Narcissus” stress that its concerns extend beyond simply the sea or the ships that sail there. Thus, in 1924, Conrad wrote that “the problem that faces [the crew of the Narcissus] is not a problem of the sea, it is merely a problem that has arisen on board a ship where the conditions of complete isolation from all land
entanglements make it stand out with a particular force and coloring” (Jean-Aubry II: 342). Concerning this letter, which critics often cite when discussing the novel, Ian Watt observes that its “assertion is conspicuously inapplicable to the [novel’s] last few pages,” which employ “nautical terms” to associate the ship with England in an attempt to perpetuate the country’s authority (Conrad 120). Casarino agrees with Watt by claiming that “England itself is here constructed as a ship” (26). Other critics, however, use Conrad’s claim to shift the novel’s events from the maritime environment into the broader arena of metaphysical considerations. Thus, in these readings, the crew’s responses to Wait’s approaching death provide the basis for an examination of “the mechanisms people employ to avoid direct awareness of their own mortality and the errors into which this self-deception leads them” (Hampson, Betrayal 103). Mortality is clearly one of the themes that concerns Conrad in this novel (as it does in Lord Jim, The End of the Tether, Victory, et cetera), but exploring it need not entail ignoring topics of space.

For instance, Conrad reveals that the captain of the Narcissus “wanted to end his days in a little house, with a plot of ground attached—far in the country—out of sight of the sea” (22). Similarly, in The End of the Tether (1902), Captain Whalley, another experienced sailor who has “formally declared himself tired of the sea,” hopes to be buried on land, away from the sea: “When he grew too old to be trusted with a ship, he would lay her up and go ashore to be buried, leaving directions in his will to have the barque towed out and scuttled decently in deep water on

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15 Another critic who discusses the novel’s examination of mortality references the “problem of the sea” comment directly: “It is clear why Conrad insisted that the problem confronting these men was not a problem of the sea, for it was indeed one which he himself had faced as a child in witnessing the slow dying of his mother and later his father” (Meyer 121).
the day of the funeral” (46). But Whalley’s ultimate fate, in which he goes down with his ship after being forced to continue sailing for several more years, implies that he can never fully separate himself from the sea. Instead, Whalley’s death, which definitely places him alongside Conrad’s other tragic heroes, suggests that for him, the sea is his only real home. What suggests the sea as his home is that it is a more tangible destination than the boarding house his daughter owns in England, an allusive place until Conrad’s shifts the action there at the story’s end.

Placing the Narcissus in a larger context can, in fact, provide an additional suggestion of the sea’s global role. One of Conrad’s earlier letters, written shortly after the novel’s publication in 1897, provides an alternative view of the various “worlds” he associated with the ship’s situation: “I…wanted to connect the small world of the ship with that larger world carrying perplexities, fears, affections, rebellions, in a loneliness greater than that of the ship at sea” (Collected Letters I: 421). That connection of those two worlds indicates Conrad’s sense that the ship possesses a distinct relationship with the larger social environment it exists within. The fact that Conrad mentions the sea here further suggests that the “larger world” in question encompasses the land as well.

But Conrad’s novel still insists on a dichotomy between land and sea, arguing that each environment maintains possession of those people more suited for its circumstances. This characteristic emerges in the narrator’s consideration of the various fates encountered by the ship’s crew in the years following its return to port: “The sea took some, the steamers took others, the graveyards of the earth will account for the rest…. Let the earth and the sea each have its own” (Conrad, “Narcissus” 128). That last sentence provides a summation of the novel’s

16 Conrad literalizes the sea-as-home metaphor in his short story “Falk: A Reminiscence” (1903), which features a family that lives entirely onboard a ship. In that story, the narrator reveals that the father chose the ship as his family’s home because it created a congenial environment, “She was a home” (80).
land-sea dichotomy, which posits a dangerous interaction between the two realms that is particularly relevant for the sailors who occupy both. Like Captain Whalley in *The End of the Tether*, they are ultimately claimed by either one realm or the other—the land or the sea.
Toward a Conception of Space:
The Spaces of Land and Sea Interpenetrated

Both *White-Jacket* and *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*—as well as the other works discussed above—illustrate the sea’s central presence in Melville’s and Conrad’s writing. Rather than labeling these texts as simply examples of the sea’s vital role in literature, positioning them within the modern world-system’s larger framework identifies them as examinations of the sea’s role within that system. As a space in the world-system, the sea qualifies as a dominant element influencing the trajectory of human societies. The world-system’s spatial role is represented on the other extreme by Melville’s and Conrad’s “urban” works that are set away from the sea. As stated earlier, Melville’s *Pierre, or The Ambiguities* (1852) and Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* are both urban novels depicting the condition of modern cities. Whereas *Pierre* considers the relationship between what Raymond Williams described as “The Country and the City,” *The Secret Agent* restricts itself entirely to the urban terrain of nineteenth-century London.

Examining these so-called “urban” works will indicate what they share with not only Melville’s and Conrad’s sea tales, but also those works that chronicle the interpenetration of land and sea. In the end, these settings establish the perspective of a larger world-system that all three categories of works actually negotiate. At the same time, though, charting the world-system introduces the difficult question of “space”—not only space itself, that is, but how you define the very concept of “space,” since it is an element that characterizes the world-system explored by Melville and Conrad.

Melville’s *Pierre*, for instance, lives his life away from the sea. For him, unlike some of Melville’s other characters, the world’s suitable living locations are either the country or the city. The novel chronicles the distinct nature of each environment, depicting them as conflicting
spheres of movement and influence. At the beginning of the novel, however, Melville emphasizes that Pierre has grown up in the country, away from the city. Described as Pierre’s “choice fate,” this situation introduces the novel’s country-city opposition:

Do not blame me if I here make repetition, and do verbally quote my own words in saying that *it had been the choice fate of Pierre to have been born and bred in the country*. For to a noble American youth this indeed—more than in any other land—this indeed is a most rare and choice lot. For it is to be observed, that while in other countries, the finest families boast of the country as their home; the more prominent among us, proudly cite the city as their seat. Too often the American that himself makes his fortune, builds him a great metropolitan house, in the most metropolitan street of the most metropolitan town. Whereas a European of the same sort would thereupon migrate into the country. That herein the European hath the better of it, no poet, no philosopher, and no aristocrat will deny. For the country is not only the most poetical and philosophical, but it is the most aristocratic part of this earth, for it is the most venerable, and numerous bards have ennobled it by many fine titles. (emphasis original; Melville, *Pierre* 13)

Here Melville’s interest in the country-city opposition focuses not on the nature of urban life, but on what the two regions indicate about America’s social structure. Thus, Pierre emerges as an outcast because of his “noble” status in an area separate from the “metropolitan” regions frequented by America’s “finest families.” Once again, Melville focuses a novel on an outcast from respected society, who thus occupies an exterior position that provides a unique perspective on the larger framework occupied by the country and the city.

Melville’s subject in *Pierre*, then, is not merely the country or the city, or even the opposing nature thereof, but rather the larger national system that they exist in. The national orientation of Melville’s aim is evident in the Europe-America opposition established in the above passage. That opposition—in which Europe’s nobility is associated with the country and America’s with metropolitan realms—suggests a geographic division that Pierre avoids by growing up in the country with only minimal exposure to the metropolitan city. Thus, Pierre’s “noble” personality is due partially to his limited access to the hostile nature of the city’s urban
environment. Later, in fact, Melville stresses his nation’s nobility by claiming that “the Americans, and not the French, are the world’s models of chivalry” (25). But the novel also suggests that if Pierre qualifies as one of those “models,” it is only because he had “the choice fate” of growing up away from an urban city.

In a way, Melville’s presentation of New York’s urban landscape in Pierre perpetuates what can be described as “the myth of the monstrous town” in which the city is “anthropomorphized as willfully oppressive or given a totalizing, apparently unqualified, negativity” (Watts 18). If he avoids depicting what some critics have described as “the social labyrinth of New York,” however, Melville relies instead on portraying the city’s frightening nature in an abstract sense (Kelley, Melville’s City 146). Thus, the country-city opposition experienced by Pierre is reinforced by his fiancée, Lucy. Although Lucy lives “in a very fine house in the city,” she much prefers the country’s atmosphere: “But though her home was in the city, her heart was twice a year in the country. She did not at all love the city and its empty, heartless, ceremonial ways. It was very strange, but most eloquently significant of her own natural angelhood that, though born among brick and mortar in a sea-port, she still pined for unbaked earth and inland grass” (25–6). Lucy’s perception of the city as “empty, heartless, [and] ceremonial” depicts it as an emotionless place that contrasts with her personal orientation toward the heart. In a sense, then, throughout

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17 Although Watts refers specifically to Conrad in this essay—discussing the fact that in Conrad’s works, “London can be termed monstrous not only because it is immense but also because it may appear unnatural, voracious, actively oppressive”—his description of “a ‘myth’ of the monstrous town” is intended not as a Conrad-specific definition, but as a general description of a literary trope (18). Watts uses the phrase “monstrous town,” by the way, as a reference to Heart of Darkness.

18 This passage’s focus on Lucy’s “heart” as the controlling factor behind her experience of the country and the city relates to Samuel Otter’s reading of the novel in Melville’s Anatomies: “Pierre is not, as many critics would have it, a parody of the sentimental novel. Instead, it is a sentimental text taken to the nth degree, elevating to revealing and disturbing portions the ‘heart of a man’” (209). Otter argues that Melville performs an analysis of the heart’s (i.e., sentiment’s) role in nineteenth-century American society (see his chapter “Inscribed Hearts in Pierre,” 208–54). For a political reading of the novel’s focus on the influence of landscape, see Otter’s chapter “Penetrating Eyes in Pierre” (172–207). In line with Otter’s focus on the novel’s sentimental elements, Michael Rogin argues that “Pierre [is] a declaration of war against domesticity” (160). Similarly, Wyn Kelley focuses on the novel’s use of
Pierre, Melville is in fact charting the “space” of the domestic world, embodied in the suffocating nature of urban New York.

Lucy’s preference for the country indicates a desire to escape from the city. The opening of Moby-Dick embodies a similar trajectory through the fact that the novel begins in Manhattan, where Ishmael expresses his desire to leave the city and go to sea. He subsequently relocates to Nantucket, where he eventually sails on the infamous Pequod. At the beginning of the novel, however, Ishmael presents his desire to go to sea as a direct response to his developing restlessness toward living in the city:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately knocking people’s hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. (Melville, Moby-Dick 3)

Here Ishmael’s catalog of actions, particularly his urge to “deliberately knock people’s hats off,” represents a desire to challenge the period’s social conventions, another indication of his unhappy position in the city’s urban environment. Thus, the opening of Melville’s novel includes an explicit disavowal of living in an urban city, followed by a retreat to a smaller town-based environment, which is then abandoned for a life at sea. Moby-Dick’s opening chapters, then, trace a movement through three distinct realms of space that form part of the novel’s world.

The restlessness that Ishmael feels while living in Manhattan provides an unpleasant portrait of urban life, but not nearly as bleak a one as is found in Melville’s short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” By charting the title character’s odd situation, Melville presents a portrait of urban life’s isolating, destructive nature. Ishmael rebels against urban life by escaping to the sea,

domestic elements, but argues that Melville approached some of “the themes of domestic fiction…in a parodic way, but others with thought and care” (“Pierre’s Domestic Ambiguities” 93).
a move that indicates larger spatial areas are available to him. For Bartleby, however, the world is essentially a closed-off space from which escape is impossible. The view from his office window, for instance, is only a brick wall—an image that embodies the suffocating nature of Bartleby’s life in the city. Thus, the narrator explains that he “placed [Bartleby’s] desk close up to a small side-window…which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome” (Piazza 19). Leo Marx describes the confining nature of the story’s urban environment by observing that the story’s subtitle, “A Story of Wall Street,” eventually takes on added meaning due to the fact that “as Melville describes the street it literally becomes a walled street. The walls are the controlling symbols of the story, and in fact it may be said that this is a parable of walls, the walls which hem in the meditative artist and for that matter every reflective man” (241). Those walls are a concrete example of the city’s closed-in environment, which is far more evident in “Bartleby” than in Pierre.

As an urban novel, the form made famous by such writers as Balzac and Dickens, Melville’s Pierre lacks the obsessive focus toward chronicling the city’s supposedly destructive nature. Instead, most of the novel occurs in the rooms of the characters’ country houses. Thus, critics like Otter and Kelley indicate that Melville’s novel is ultimately more domestic than urban. Conrad’s The Secret Agent (1907), however, provides a clear instance of a novel focused on chronicling the conditions of a specific urban environment—the city of London. In fact, one critic suggests that London itself is the novel’s main protagonist (Gurko 170). As numerous critics note, however, the city provides a stark contrast to Conrad’s previous shipboard
environments. Con Coroneos uses the term “closed space” to describe the novel’s depiction of London. He emphasizes this quality’s contrast with some of Conrad’s other environments by observing that “closed space marks a shift away from the space of adventure, in which the ship is supreme emblem, to a new experience of a space which is controlled and surveilled” (62). This notion of “control and surveillance” associates Coroneos’s approach with those critics who have focused on the novel’s political dimensions. Political elements are explicit in Conrad’s novel, which concerns an anarchist conspiracy to bomb a London landmark.

Rather than limiting *The Secret Agent* to a political novel, however, Conrad clearly aims at extending his examination to encompass a broader view of the city’s social and physical atmosphere. Here political factors, such as anarchism and socialism, coexist with such other elements as family dynamics, the specifics of a police investigation, and what several critics have described as an “ironic” authorial tone. Thus, Conrad is interested less in the overt political dimensions of the anarchists’ actions than he is in what they indicate about the city’s larger social structure. Political anarchism, then, is only one element of the city’s society that interests Conrad. Rather than providing a case study of the destruction caused by one form of political action, he constructs London as a microcosm of the modern city: “Conrad’s micro-society, his *polis*, is the city of London” (Erdinast-Vulcan 212). The anarchists might assume the most visible—and violent—role, but Conrad also comments on such elements of urban life as petty theft (which the police inspector is willing to tolerate as a “noble” undertaking), working class wages, the difficulty of finding sufficient housing, and other aspects of an industrial city.

19 Critical approaches to the novel’s politics stem back to Irving Howe, who discussed *The Secret Agent* in his work *Politics and the Novel*. A major early approach to the novel, Howe’s argument still surfaces as one cited by critics, although many have disputed his claims about the novel’s depressingly dark nature. Najder, for instance, reads the novel’s “melodramatic” elements as a means by which Conrad makes the novel even more “mysterious” (“The Secret Agent” 113). A more summative approach to the novel’s political dimensions comes from Jacques Berthoud, who claims that “so far as conservatism in *The Secret Agent* finds political expression at all, it is in the form of a national policy of moderation. Such a policy must not be taken as a symptom of the weakness of the body politic; on the contrary, it is a mark of its stability, its cohesiveness, and its confidence in itself” (Joseph Conrad 133).
Although all these elements can be read “politically” in one way or another, Conrad questions the validity of such a reading by incorporating an explicit critique of such approaches. Just as *Lord Jim* includes a discourse on the validity of romantic and sentimental views, *The Secret Agent* examines the question of whether or not impassioned politics provide a viable solution to the modern world’s problems. Conrad’s own position here appears somewhat contradictory. He is clearly upset at aspects of urban life, yet skeptical toward most of the available solutions. It is partially in this sense that the novel’s world is that of a “closed space.”

At the same time, though, Conrad’s characters explore the city of London—that is, they explore its “space”—to discover an environment where they can separate themselves from the elements they find threatening. This is even true for the novel’s anarchists, who aim at frightening the city’s mass populace partially out of a desire to soothe their own fears of social unrest. Just as the terrorist attack fails, however, all the novel’s characters are unable to locate a “space” in the city where they can escape the city’s dehumanizing nature. Mr. Verloc, the novel’s protagonist and one of the planners of the attack, experiences at one point the feeling that the city does not contain the situation he desires: “It was no earthly good going out. He could not find anywhere in London what he wanted. But he went out. He led a cortege of dismal thoughts along dark streets, through lighted streets, in and out of two flash bars, as if in a half-hearted attempt to make a night of it, and finally back again to his menaced home” (Conrad, *Secret Agent* 130). Here London’s closed-in nature is emphasized by the fact that Verloc explores the city despite his realization that nowhere in it will he find what he wants. His trajectory through London, dutifully followed by Conrad, suggests that his movement through the city’s space serves as the true impetus for his actions. Since Verloc is essentially trapped in London—just as

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20 Conrad’s short story “An Outpost of Progress,” from the collection *Tales of Unrest* (1898), assigns a similar position to European imperialists. In that story, the staff of a colonial outpost goes insane because of their fear of the native inhabitants. Conrad indicates that these fears are entirely of their own making.
he is trapped in the terrorist plot due to his connections with a foreign embassy—the only action available to him is to explore the very confines of the space that traps him.

Verloc’s movement occurs even though that space is a city previously described as an accumulation of monstrous “things” that constitute “the enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man” (Conrad, *Secret Agent* 42). By functioning as a closed space, the city becomes almost a prison for Verloc, a structure from which he cannot escape. Conrad literalizes that city-as-prison perspective in the situation of Michaelis, one of Verloc’s fellow anarchists. Michaelis voices his anger at London’s social environment by performing verbal rants against the elements he finds unsatisfactory. These rants, however, are a product of the years he spent in prison: “He talked to himself…from the habit he had acquired of thinking aloud hopefully in the solitude of the four whitewashed walls of his cell, in the sepulchral silence of the great blind pile of bricks near a river, sinister and ugly like a colossal mortuary for the socially drowned” (Conrad, *Secret Agent* 33). Michaelis’s “cell” parallels his current situation in London, another structure that fits Conrad’s description of “a colossal mortuary.”

London serves a similarly bleak function for Verloc’s wife, Winnie. She kills Verloc after discovering that her younger brother, Stevie, was killed in the failed terrorist attack. Realizing that she must escape London before being arrested, she eventually finds that impossible: “The vast world created for the glory of man was only a vast blank to Mrs. Verloc…. She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman would hope to scramble out” (Conrad, *Secret Agent* 198). This passage’s evocation of the city’s consuming nature is supported by the fact that Winnie eventually commits suicide. But
Conrad’s novel claims that escape is actually impossible for all the characters, who find themselves similarly trapped in the black hole of the city’s “closed space.”

Although Coroneos provides a definition of “closed space,” the notion of “space” itself is difficult to define. Nevertheless, examining various attempts to define “space” indicates that it functions as a crucial concept for both Melville and Conrad. In the end, the concept of space is often directly related to the process of history. To discuss the space of the world-system, then, is to engage in a historical consideration of the forces and events that created the modern world. Wallerstein’s method of world-systems analysis provides one such approach by suggesting the presence of a “modern world-system” that was created by capitalism.

Wallerstein argues that the modern world-system emerged during the sixteenth century, at which point the world economy embraced a capitalist model that subsequently altered the world’s structure. This shift is what Schmitt describes as the emergence of “a new nomos of the earth.” “Every basic order is a spatial order,” writes Schmitt. “To talk of the constitution of a country or a continent is to talk of its fundamental order, of its nomos” (Land 37). Schmitt’s concept here indicates that what Wallerstein describes as the world-system qualifies as the constitution of a new “spatial order”—that is, the emergence of a new system of cultural ideas, trends, practices, and laws that will define this new way of looking at the world.

With their exploration of the manner in which the spaces of land and sea interpenetrate, Melville’s and Conrad’s works prove especially relevant to Schmitt’s argument. In his book Land and Sea (1954), Schmitt describes the relationship between land and sea as a product of the various historical shifts that have defined what he elsewhere calls “the nomos of the earth”:

Each time the forces of history cause a new breach, the surge of new energies brings new lands and new seas in the visual field of human awareness, the spaces of historical existence undergo a corresponding change. Hence, new criteria
appear, alongside of new dimensions of political and historical activity, new sciences, new social systems; nations are born and reborn.

This redeployment may be so profound and so sudden that it alters not only man’s outlook, standards and criteria, but also the very contents of the notion of space. It is in that context that one may talk of a spatial revolution. Actually, all important changes in history more often than not imply a new perception of space. The true core of the global mutation, political, economic and cultural, lies in it. (29)

Here Schmitt identifies the “spatial revolution” and resulting “new perception of space” as the central factor involved in defining the changes of the modern world. For Schmitt, space qualifies as “the true core” of the changing global structures that Wallerstein eventually terms the modern world-system.

As the geographer David Harvey observes, however, critical discourse in the social sciences often ignores the concept of space21: “Marx, Marshall, Weber, and Durkheim all have this in common: they prioritize time and history over space and geography and, where they treat of the latter at all, tend to view them unproblematically as the stable context or site for historical action…. The way in which the space-relations and the geographical configurations are produced in the first place passes, for the most part, unremarked, ignored” (“Geopolitics” 325). A similar oversight appears in the growing amount of literary criticism that addresses “space,” much of which rigorously avoids defining what the concept means. Consider Franco Moretti, who claims his *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* addresses two types of space, “a literary geography…may indicate the study of space in literature; or else, of literature in space” (emphasis original 3). He views the first of these as a “fictional” space, the other as a “historical” one. After making this statement, however, Moretti at no point attempts to define exactly what he means by “space.” On the other hand, Schmitt indicates that “space” qualifies as a fundamental concept for understanding our position in the world because our experience of the world consists

21 Fernand Braudel makes a similar claim in his essay “History and the Social Sciences” (40).
partially of moving through its space. As a concept, then, “space” functions as an organizing principle behind the manner in which people experience the material world. What irritates Harvey, though, is the fact that he believes few contemporary social thinkers adequately consider space’s central role.22

Casarino’s critical work on Melville and Conrad illustrates the type of approach that irritates Harvey. Even though Harvey is a geographer and Casarino a literary critic, the latter relies on an approach to space (i.e., Foucault’s concept of heterotopia) that is too narrow to deal adequately with the “worlds” created by Melville and Conrad. But Casarino is not the only critic to use Foucault’s heterotopia as a theoretical foundation for a reading of Conrad. Similar approaches are utilized by Coroneos and Robert Hampson. As I have argued previously, however, readings of Conrad (as well as Melville) that utilize Foucault’s concept of heterotopia risk ignoring the role of the world-system. In the end, heterotopias as critical spaces are far too narrow to encompass the scope of not only Conrad’s writings, but also Melville’s.

Foucault describes heterotopias as “spaces of alternate ordering” that are both utopian and real. It is in this sense that “Heterotopias organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That alternate ordering marks them out as Other and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things…. Heterotopias, therefore, reveal the process of social ordering to be just that, a process rather than a thing” (Hetherington viii). On the other hand, according to Foucault, “Utopias…have no real locality, there is nevertheless a fantastic untroubled region in which they are able to unfold” (Order xviii). But heterotopias

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22 Geographers such as Derek Gregory and John Pickles provide explorations of the meaning of space within social theory. Similarly, Marc Augé chronicles the abstract nature of the term “space” by separating it from the more precise “place”: “The term ‘space’ is more abstract in itself than the term ‘place,’ whose usage at least refers to an event (which has taken place), a myth (said to have taken place) or a history (high places). [The term ‘space’] is applied in much the same way to an area, a distance between two things or points (a two-meter ‘space’ is left between the posts of a fence) or to a temporal expanse (‘in the space of a week’). It is thus eminently abstract, and it is significant that it should be in systematic if still somewhat differentiated use today, in current speech and in the specific language of various institutions representative of our time” (82–3).
supposedly exist in the real world as places offering a degree of escape from the terror of everyday life.

Harvey critiques Foucault’s concept of heterotopia for its assumption that such places are inherently positive:

[Foucault] presumes that whatever happens in such places of “Otherness” is of interest and even in some sense “acceptable,” or “appropriate.” The cemetery and the concentration camp, the factory, the shopping malls and Disneylands, Jonestown, the militia camps…are all sites of alternate ways of doing things and therefore in some sense “heterotopic.” What appears at first sight as so open by virtue of its multiplicity suddenly appears either as banal….or as a more sinister fragmentation of spaces that are closed, exclusionary, and even threatening within a more comprehensive dialectics of historical and geographical transformation. (*Spaces of Hope* 185)

Harvey’s argument indicates that Foucault’s approach aims at limiting the possible actions capable of occurring in such spaces, which indicates why his notion of heterotopia cannot account for the entire space of the world-system. In the end, Foucault’s concept of heterotopia fall prey to what Harvey describes as “the freight of utopias more generally…. It presumes that connections to the dominant social order are or can be severed, attenuated or…totally inverted” (*Spaces of Hope* 184–5). From a more general perspective, though, Harvey’s criticism of Foucault, like the latter’s heterotopias, indicates space’s connection with utopian concepts.

Similarly, Henri Lefebvre develops his notion of “the production of space” as “a privileged means to explore alternative and emancipatory strategies” (Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* 182). Lefebvre argues that conceptions of space must be open, since areas of “closed space” are dominated by capitalism’s destructive principles. As Harvey explains, “For [Lefebvre], the production of space must always remain as an endlessly open possibility. The effect, unfortunately, is to leave the actual spaces of any alternative frustratingly undefined” (*Spaces of Hope* 182–3). Both Lefebvre and Foucault, then, indicate the difficulty of translating utopian
dreams into material worlds. Space here becomes a difficulty in that it reveals the often unrealistic aspects of utopian thought.23

Harvey argues that a possible solution to this problematic aspect of utopianism is offered by the work of social theorist Roberto Unger: “Unger avoids utopianism by insisting that alternatives should emerge out of critical and practical engagements with the institutions, personal behaviors, and practices that now exist…. He is, therefore, only interested in ‘the next step in a trajectory’ rather than in some universal principles of transformation or the description of some millenarian vision” (Spaces of Hope 186). Thus, Unger avoids placing utopian visions within a totality, relying instead on addressing particular problems individually. At the same time, though, he stresses the need to remember that such actions, which he describes as “visionary thought,” occur with the goal of reshaping the world itself:

> Our thinking about ideals becomes visionary or external to the extent that it holds up a picture, however partial or fragmentary, of a radically altered scheme of social life…. Notice that visionary thought is not inherently millenarian, perfectionist, or utopian (in the vulgar sense of the term). It need not and does not ordinarily present the picture of a perfected society. But it does require that we be conscious of redrawing the map of possible and desirable forms of human association, of inventing new models of human association and designing new practical arrangements to embody them. (Social 359–60)

Unger’s desire to facilitate change surfaces in that last sentence, where he elaborates on the possibility of replacing the current social system. Such words as “redrawing,” “inventing,” and “designing” emphasize that this is a creative process with the expressed goal of constructing new social institutions.

23 Harvey’s own argument is that in critical discourse, one specific conception of utopia is always connected with that of “space.” He argues that “all these forms of Utopia can be characterized as ‘Utopias of spatial form’ since the temporality of the social process, the dialectics of social change—real history—are excluded, while social stability is assured by a fixed spatial form” (Spaces of Hope 160). Harvey argues that there are two dominant forms of utopianism: one of “spatial form,” the other of “temporal process.” Ultimately, Harvey’s own view is that these two forms should be reconciled into what he describes as “dialectical utopianism,” which would account for both space and time (Spaces of Hope 182).
Harvey’s main criticism of Unger is that he “has no particular spatial model for social ordering in mind—his whole presentation abstracts from spatial considerations throughout” (Spaces of Hope 187). If Unger has a spatial model in mind, it is presumably that of the world-system itself, the larger structure within which all attempts at reorganization must occur. Harvey ultimately summarizes Unger’s approach to utopia as a desire for the concept to remain “a pure signifier of hope destined never to acquire a material referent.” The importance of space, then, is that “without a vision of Utopia there is no way to define that port to which we might want to sail” (Harvey, Spaces of Hope 189). A specific “vision of Utopia” would inevitably indicate which place or space its followers should pursue as their paradise. Interpreted through Melville’s and Conrad’s works, however, the sea-going image in the above passage proves deceptive. Not only are utopian principles largely absent from their works—and those that are there appear only briefly as unacceptable solutions—but Melville and Conrad also question the value of pursuing as desired goals specific visions, ports, et cetera. Instead, both endorse navigating the world-system by means of an exploratory process.

That process leads their characters on voyages that not only explore the world, but also challenge the viability of utopian solutions. Even idealistic societies encountered by the characters often prove destructive. Wallerstein observes that “we design our utopias in terms of what we know now. We exaggerate the novelty of what we advocate. We act in the end, and at best, as prisoners of our present reality who permit ourselves to daydream” (“Culture” 285). Grounding utopias in the potentially dangerous environment of present social misconceptions suggests that they will prove unsuccessful. Instead, moving beyond “what we know now”

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24 In this sentence’s end, Harvey is referring to Unger’s citation of Montaigne. Unger states that people suggesting “alternative” social arrangements “will be accused—sometimes by the very people who told him a moment before they wanted alternatives—of dogmatically anticipating the future and trying to steal a march on unpredictable circumstance, as if there were no force to Montaigne’s warning that ‘no wind helps him who does not know to what port he sails’” (False 443).
implies considering the larger trajectory of human history, an acknowledgement of Koselleck’s “horizon of expectation,” as an indication of where society is moving. In the end, Melville’s and Conrad’s reluctance to associate themselves with a particular utopian vision indicates their capacity to look beyond the specific regions of land and sea to the larger framework of the modern world-system.
Conrad’s *Lord Jim* presents a spatial environment in which the land provides a realm to recover from an indignity experienced at sea. That spatial environment is an island. For Jim, the ship on which he has his famous “crisis of conscience,” the *Patna*, functions as a space from which he must spend the rest of his life trying to escape. Although jumping off the ship during the storm frees him from its physical presence, its specter remains an emotionally resonant space until Jim’s death. Jim finds relief from his disgrace on the *Patna* in another space, the island of Patusan, where he distinguishes himself as the noble figure of the novel’s title. Once again, numerous critics have labeled Patusan as a heterotopia. Thus, Robert Hampson claims that Patusan functions as a heterotopia because “it provides the conditions in which Jim can live a heroic life and live up to his image of himself. In doing so, it also subtly implies a criticism of the rest of the world that does not provide such opportunities” (“Conrad’s Heterotopic” 128). Hampson’s argument provides a clear exposition of Patusan’s role, but overlooks the novel’s own ambiguity concerning the legitimacy of Jim’s action.

Even at the novel’s end, characters are still unclear as to exactly why Jim decided to sacrifice himself. Jim’s sacrifice proves especially problematic because although it does allow him to prove that he is a hero, it also casts a negative connotation toward Patusan in the minds of the novel’s other characters. For this reason, Patusan qualifies not as a general heterotopic space, but rather as a distinctly personal one that allowed Jim—and only Jim—to construct a new identity. Such characters as Marlow, Stein, and Jim’s wife are all perplexed by Jim’s actions, which they partially blame Patusan for causing. Conrad’s own approach to this question is not to

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25 Coroneos also identifies Patusan as a heterotopia; see particularly pages 144–6.
provide a clear answer, but rather to chart the shifting perspectives embodied in each character’s response to the question of Jim’s sacrifice. As a result, then, even if Patusan appears to function as a heterotopia for Jim, its role within the novel’s larger world is decidedly ambiguous.

The fact that Patusan is an island marks it as a space where land and sea interpenetrate, and thus makes it a particularly apt place for Jim to overcome his disgrace on the *Patna*. Another individual who seeks out an island as a refuge from the outside world is Axel Heyst, the main character in Conrad’s novel *Victory* (1915):

> He was out of everybody’s way, as if he were perched on the highest peak of the Himalayas, and in a sense as conspicuous. Every one in that part of the world knew of him, dwelling on his little island. An island is but the top of a mountain. Axel Heyst, perched on it immovably, was surrounded, instead of the imponderable stormy and transparent ocean of air merging into infinity, by a tepid, shallow sea; a passionless offshoot of the great waters which embrace the continents of this globe. (7)

As this passage indicates, Heyst lives alone on the island of Samburan. Eventually, he is joined by a young woman named Lena, with whom he falls in love. When Heyst’s island is invaded by a group of villains—much as the cruel Gentleman Brown and his crew appear in Patusan—a deadly situation soon develops. She is killed in a sacrificial action that signals an end to Heyst’s isolated environment by indicating that he should not have expected to live on the island free from outside interference. Like Jim, Heyst moves to an island from another environment in the hope of entering a new space where he can escape from the unpleasant circumstances of his previous situation.

Islands perform a similar function in Melville’s first two novels, *Typee* and *Omoo* (1847). There Melville depicts the various islands visited by the characters as refuges from such unpleasant environments as ships and governments. Both novels display a basic pattern in which the characters begin in one environment that they become dissatisfied with, which prompts them
to abandon it for another one. Thus, *Typee* opens with the narrator on a ship that he hates, so he and a shipmate, Toby, “jump ship” to live on an island. By *Typee*’s end, however, the narrator’s dissatisfaction with his life on the island prompts him to leave it for a whaling ship. *Omoo* opens with the narrator on that same ship, which he soon abandons for another island. Admittedly, this is an oversimplified explanation of why each environment is abandoned. On the initial island of *Typee*, for instance, the narrator is so happy that his decision to leave produces moments of regret. *Omoo*’s opening finds him mourning his lost situation: “Safe aboard of a ship—so long my earnest prayer—with home and friends once more in prospect, I nevertheless felt weighed down by a melancholy that could not be shaken off. It was the thought of never more seeing those, who, notwithstanding their desire to retain me a captive, had, upon the whole, treated me so kindly. I was leaving them forever” (7). Nevertheless, though, the fact remains that Melville’s first two novels—as well as his third, *Mardi* (1849), which I consider at length in the next section—display a constant element of movement.

In fact, the approach that Melville’s characters take to their process of “island hopping” involves far more movement than many of Conrad’s characters. Although Heyst settles on his island relatively quickly, Jim must move through numerous locations, in each of which his identity is eventually discovered, before finding the island of Patusan where he is happy. But both Jim and Heyst ultimately settle on their respective islands with the intention of staying there permanently, a decision absent from Melville’s characters. The narrators of *Typee* and *Omoo* are ultimately defined by the meaning of the latter novel’s title, which Melville identifies as the Marquesan word for “rover, or rather, a person wandering from one island to another” (xiv). As a representative figure, the rover suggests a common bond between Melville and Conrad.

Remember that Conrad’s final completed novel, published in 1923, was entitled *The Rover*. Such
a figure embodies the idea of moving from one place to another, an action common to characters
in both Melville’s and Conrad’s works.

An answer for why that roving movement occurs is often difficult to ascertain, but
frequently involves the notion of seeking. For instance, in not only *Lord Jim* and *Victory*, but
also *Typee* and *Omoo*, the protagonists are clearly seeking a particular type of environment. Each
novel, then, concerns an exploratory process through which the characters try to locate a suitable
space for themselves. As the critical addiction to citing Foucault’s heterotopias suggests,
however, many social theorists and literary critics tend to associate this “space” or
“environment” with a utopian impulse. But Melville’s and Conrad’s characters are *not* searching
for utopias. They might display brief utopian hopes, perhaps even visions of paradise, but their
ultimate goals avoid the features of utopian thought.

D. H. Lawrence describes Melville’s first two novels by claiming that “Melville hated the
world: was born hating it. But he was looking for heaven. That is, choosing. Choosing, he
was looking for paradise” (125). In Lawrence’s view, Melville pursues this “paradise” as a realm
separate from civilized society. Such a goal displays clear utopian implications. But Lawrence is
also quick to point out that Melville never locates this utopian paradise, which suggests that the
great American writer is always restless in the environments he discovers. It is strange that
Lawrence never refers to *Mardi*, since that Melville novel provides an explicit evocation of this
trend. Near the end of *Mardi*, the characters discover a utopian paradise, called Serenia, where
most of them decide to remain—all, that is, except for Melville’s narrator, who abandons that
paradise to continue his quest. Melville’s constant sense of movement here, in which he is
always “looking” (to use Lawrence’s word) or searching, indicates that what he values is not the
possibility of discovering a utopia, but rather the process of movement itself. Thus, for Melville, the desired goal is the exploratory process.

When compared to a utopian thinker like Ernst Bloch, Melville’s and Conrad’s incongruity with utopian (or even heterotopian) principles becomes evident. Bloch argues that utopian urges emerge from visions of what individuals hope society will become. As such, he identifies people who daydream as possible utopians. Both Melville and Conrad create characters who indulge in daydreams, but the results suggested by their works contrast with Bloch’s visions. Here’s a relevant passage from Bloch:

*The All in the identifying sense is the Absolute of that which people basically want.* Thus this identity lies in the dark ground of all waking dreams, hopes, utopias themselves and is also the gold ground on to which the concrete utopias are applied. Every solid daydream intends this double ground as homeland; it is the still unfound, the experienced Not-Yet-Experience in every experience that has previously become. (emphasis original, 315–6)

That last sentence embodies the notion of seeking, even positing it with a utopian end, but both Melville and Conrad question the legitimacy of that end. Utopian quests in both writers lead only to death, not utopia. For instance, Jim and Heyst find realms where they are happy, but outside forces ultimately destroy their worlds.

Similarly, Melville’s characters reject the notion of finding those utopias (see Taji in *Mardi*, who leaves one behind) by continuing to search. Here the notion of orphans provides the suggestion that such quests are inevitably in vain. When at the end of *Moby-Dick*, “the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only [finds] another orphan,” it also discovers the possibility that quests like Taji’s—who ends *Mardi* still searching for the elusive Yillah—are similarly destined to discover only other orphans as well (625).

In *Lord Jim*, characters remain somewhat puzzled as to why Jim sacrifices himself, since they don’t understand why he would willingly give up his life when he has finally found
happiness. For Jim, however, the brief happiness he experiences on Patusan is all that he hopes to achieve from the world. Jim is not a utopian—he has no hope that Patusan will function as a paradise for him for years to come. Thus, he dies in an acknowledgement of the absurdity of wanting any more from the world-system than what he has already received. It is this conclusion that Conrad constructs for the reader extraneous of any of the perspectives voiced by the various narrators, all of whom are puzzled by Jim’s final act. Even Marlow lacks a complete understanding of Jim’s situation—at the beginning of the novel’s final paragraph, he describes his view of Jim’s personal sacrifice by saying, “Who knows?” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 304). Edward Said summarizes this trend in the novel by arguing that “having everywhere conceded that one can neither completely realize one’s own nor fully grasp someone else’s life experience, Jim, Marlow, and Conrad are left with a desire to fashion verbally and approximately their individual experience in the terms unique to each one” (456). By the end, the novel’s narrative structure establishes a unique perspective extraneous of the views voiced by the various narrators.

Like Marlow, Stein does not understand the nature of Jim’s personal sacrifice. The novel’s final sentence emphasizes Stein’s obliviousness by the fact that “he waves his hand sadly at his butterflies” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 304). Stein’s butterfly collecting represents an attempt to order the universe to an extent beyond his grasp. A comprehension of Jim’s situation is similarly beyond Stein’s understanding, so he merely returns to collecting butterflies. Conrad includes another example of Jim’s capacity to perplex his peers earlier in the novel, when Captain Brierly, a highly respected sailor who participates in Jim’s trial, commits suicide partially because of what Jim’s actions reveal about the world—that is, the world of the sea—as well as the officers who project a noble image onboard their ships.

26 “Big Brierly—the captain of the crack ship of the Blue Star Line…. He had never in his life made a mistake, never had an accident, never a mishap, never a check in his steady rise, and he seemed to be one of these lucky fellows who know nothing of indecision, much less of self-mistrust” (41–2).
**Lord Jim** and *Victory*, like *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, are texts that indicate the absurdity of limiting Melville’s and Conrad’s respective horizons to merely the land or the sea, since the characters in these works are engaged in a process of exploration (i.e., seeking) through which they hope to discover a space for themselves. Even when these spaces are located, however, as in *Lord Jim* and *Victory*, as well as the utopian island in *Mardi*, the characters are ultimately pulled away from their environments. Jim is killed, as is Lena, Heyst’s ideal companion. Taji decides not to stay on the utopian island, returning to the sea in a final image that recalls the end of *Moby-Dick*, where the *Rachel*, while searching for her own lost children, finds only “another orphan.” If Ishmael—the bastard outcast of the universe—is an orphan, so too are Taji, Jim, and Heyst, all of whom are characters seemingly adrift amid larger social structures than the mere islands or boats that they inhabit. The area they are exploring, then, in their “chartless voyages” (to use Merrell Davis’s description of *Mardi*), is no mere utopia or heterotopia, but rather the modern world-system itself.

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27 A further connection between Jim and Lena is the fact that they both die while performing “noble” gestures of self-sacrifice. Conrad could just as easily have been describing Jim’s fate when he explicated the meaning of *Victory*’s title by explaining that “the victory of the title is related directly to Lena’s feeling of victory—the triumphant state of mind in which she dies” (*Collected Letters* V: 691).
The Possible Worlds of *Mardi* and *Nostromo*:
Two Brief Case Studies in the Exploration of Space

When considering Melville’s and Conrad’s respective approaches to the modern world-system, as well as the notion of space, the implication emerges that what both writers are undertaking is the exploration of possible worlds. Literary critics such as Lubomír Doležel and Thomas Pavel have argued that the nature of fiction itself allows writers to construct various “possible worlds” in which to position their characters: “Fictional worlds of literature…are a special kind of possible world; they are aesthetic artifacts constructed, preserved, and circulating in the medium of fictional texts” (Doležel 16). The act of creating such worlds inevitably suggests, though, that they have a direct bearing on the real world, if only as an alternate universe in which contemporary social problems are absent. Such “possible worlds” facilitate utopian elements since they provide an “alternative” to contemporary society. On this note, David Harvey argues that “the novel, as an exploration of possible worlds, has now become the primary site for the exploration of utopian sentiments and sensibilities” (*Spaces of Hope* 189).

Melville’s and Conrad’s works clearly engage in an “exploration of possible worlds,” but as suggested in the previous section, they rarely display any “utopian sentiments.” Although utopian elements might occasionally emerge, they are *not* the sole aim of either Melville’s or Conrad’s writing. Instead, both writers construct these possible worlds as part of a larger interest in spatial exploration.

Each writer’s body of work includes numerous instances of this process of spatial exploration. Examples include Melville’s “The Encantadas” (1855) which explores the Galapagos Islands, as well as Conrad’s examination of colonial outposts in the Belgian Congo in *Heart of Darkness* (1892). In both works, however, the primary local environment under
examination is established in relation to a larger social environment that influences it. Conrad’s novel, for instance, is framed by descriptions of London, which Marlow describes as a place that was once “one of the dark places of the earth” (Heart 105). Melville’s story opens with an invocation that conjures the space of the islands out of the debris of a city alley:

Take five-and-twenty heaps of cinders dumped here and there in an outside city lot; imagine some of them magnified into mountains, and the vacant lot the sea; and you will have a fit idea of the general aspect of the Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles. A group rather of extinct volcanoes than of isles; looking much as the world at large might, after a penal conflagration. (Piazza 126)

Here Melville provides an explicit land-sea interaction by describing an island in the sea by using elements from an urban environment. An inevitable suggestion, then, is that part of the islands’ appeal is that they are a decidedly different—perhaps even more pleasant—environment than the one in which Melville finds the “cinders” he uses to describe the volcanoes. The island group of the title, after all, is called “The Enchanted Isles.”

Melville’s story reads, in some sense, like a continuation of his novel Mardi, published six years before “The Encantadas.” (In fact, early in the novel, a ship’s destination is changed to “The Enchanted Islands,” a fact that establishes a precedent in Melville’s work for such evocative areas.) The novel’s full title, Mardi and a Voyage Thither, references the fact that over half of the novel is devoted to a series of visits that the narrator—who many critics refer to as Taji, the name of the local deity whose identity he usurps—makes to a chain of islands. In the end, Mardi provides what is perhaps Melville’s fullest exploration of a possible world, which one critic describes as the novel’s “imaginary voyage” (Sten 64). But that exploration simultaneously enacts questions of space in its movement through the modern world-system.

In Mardi, the manner in which the characters explore the island group of the novel’s title functions as a means of charting the world-system itself. For Melville, the trip around the area’s
various islands—each of which is utterly unique—provides a microcosm of exploring the world. During one moment of departure, the narrator indicates the novel’s global implications by proclaiming that he and his companions are leaving with “the universe again before us; our quest, as wide” (555). Throughout their voyage, the characters are comparing the islands, examining the various boundaries that construct the system a civilization’s inhabitants are compelled to live inside. By doing so, Melville is in fact exploring the constructed nature of nineteenth-century America, while simultaneously searching for a space in which he can exist free from industrialism’s consumptive tendencies. Like the Encantadas, which Melville describes as a realm away from an alley’s ash bins, the Mardian islands provide a spectrum of possible living communities. Here Melville is attempting to construct a “space” that he believes is a suitable environment for living in the world. In the end, however, the “space” he constructs for himself is an indeterminate one—it is always shifting, always in flux. The novel’s end indicates that fluctuating space through Taji’s assertion that he shall be “the unreturning wanderer,” abandoning an apparent utopian paradise in favor of sailing away “over an endless sea” (654). Taji’s decision to designate himself as “the unreturning wanderer” connects him with Melville’s other rovers, who similarly find themselves exploring the world-system with no fixed locality to which they hope to return.

Some critics read the novel’s end as an indication that Taji is about to commit suicide. Not only is this possibility absent from Melville’s prose, but it also represents a direct contradiction of Taji’s role in the novel. Throughout Mardi, Taji explores a possible world that he is ultimately unable to find a completely satisfactory place inside. At the novel’s end, then, he continues searching by leaving the island chain behind. This is not suicide, but rather another step in an exploratory process. The suggestion of Taji’s suicide implies a symbolic end to his
quest that Melville’s novel avoids. When Taji sails away “over an endless sea,” he is continuing his search for the elusive Yillah. Melville’s conclusion might not be necessarily hopeful—in the end, Taji’s situation recalls Ishmael’s, cast adrift amid other orphans—but it does imply additional movement, indicating that Taji will continue searching, even if his quest is doomed, like the Rachel’s in Moby-Dick, to find only other orphans.

Taji’s continual search emphasizes the importance of spatial exploration, a means by which Melville allows his characters to learn about the world-system. Melville’s interest in exploring the world-system is evident in the fact that “Mardi” is the Polynesian word for “world.” For Melville, then, Mardi represents the world itself, an area that his characters hope to explore. The novel stresses the importance of this exploratory process not only through Taji’s voyage, but also in his experiences on the island of Juam. On that island, Taji learns about its king, Donjalolo, who was faced with a decision before he ascended to the throne. Juam’s royal family is cursed with a tradition that prevents the king from leaving the island. Thus, once Donjalolo becomes king, he is no longer allowed to explore Mardi’s other islands. Melville reveals that when Donjalolo was a child, his father, the then-king, sought to assure that his son would accept the throne by preventing him from leaving Juam to explore Mardi. On the day that the eighteen-year-old Donjalolo was scheduled to leave for a trip around Mardi, his father committed suicide to prevent his son from going. At that moment, Donjalolo faced a decision: he could either become king, or give up the throne for the opportunity to explore Mardi—and by extension, the world.

Merrell R. Davis, in his incomparable study of the novel, Melville’s Mardi: A Chartless Voyage, claims that Melville’s depiction of Juam and Donjalolo occupies an unclear position in the text: “Into the description of this island and its monarch have gone many diverse elements
whose inclusion for the purpose of satire or whose relationship to the Narrator’s quest is not always clear” (147). If considered within the context of an examination of the world-system, however, Donjalolo’s moment of crisis concerning whether or not to accept the throne has a direct relationship to Melville’s own exploratory process in *Mardi*. The question Donjalolo is faced with is in fact whether Mardi (i.e., the world) is worth exploring:

> My fate converges to a point. If I but cross that shadow, my kingdom is lost. One lifting of my foot, and the girdle [i.e., the rule of the kingdom] goes to my proud uncle Darfi, who would so joy to be my master. Haughty Darfi! Oh Oro! would that I had ere this passed thee, fatal cavern; and seen for myself, what outer Mardi is. Say ye true, comrades, that Willamilla [the royal home] is less lovely than the valleys without?...that it is pleasant to tread the green earth where you will; and breathe the free ocean air? Would, oh would, that I were but the least of yonder sun-clouds, that look down alike on Willamilla and all places besides, that I might determine aright…. Oh Mardi! Mardi! art thou then so fair to see? Is liberty a thing so glorious? Yet I can be no king, and behold thee! Too late, too late, to view thy charms and then return…. Tell me, comrades,—for ye have seen it,—is Mardi sweeter to behold, than it is royal to reign over Juam? Silent, are ye? Knowing what ye do, were ye me, would ye be kings?... A king, and my voice may be heard in farthest Mardi, though I abide in narrow Willamilla. (222)

Donjalolo’s moment of crisis here represents a key indication of Melville’s emphasis on the importance of exploring the world-system. Whereas Donjalolo decides to forfeit exploring Mardi in exchange for ruling Juam, Melville clearly believes that the opportunity to move throughout the world outweighs any position of power.

Taji’s self-proclaimed status as “the unreturning wanderer” illustrates Melville’s view. As such a figure, Taji joins the ranks of Melville’s other rovers, including not only the narrators of *Typee* and *Omoo*, but also Ishmael. Even Pierre at one point describes himself as an Ishmael cast out of his domestic environment. Oddly enough, several of Donjalolo’s ancestors opted to abdicate their position as heir in order to maintain the opportunity to explore Mardi. Melville explains that “in the history of the island, three instances were recorded; wherein, upon the vacation of the sovereignty, the immediate heir had voluntarily renounced all claim to the
succession, *rather than surrender the privilege of roving*, to which he had been entitled, as a prince of the blood” (emphasis added, *Mardi* 221). That phrase, “the privilege of roving,” represents an apt summary of Melville’s views in *Mardi*, as well as elsewhere in his fiction, concerning the value of moving between environments.

For Melville, as *Mardi* indicates, exploring the world-system involves a process by which space itself functions as an entity connecting the realms of land and sea. Since both environments are essential to his worldview, he consistently moves between the two, creating a roving pattern that charts the realms of the world-system. In the end, Melville’s view of the world-system is suggested by a chapter heading in *Mardi*, “The Center of Many Circumferences.” The world-system itself provides such a “center” because it is the area that all voyages explore, “the insphered sphere of spheres” (Melville, *Mardi* 240). As an exploration of possible worlds, *Mardi* continues the trend visible in such works as *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Lord Jim*, and *Victory*. In each of these works, the possible worlds explored are islands, which prove particularly apt locations because they are remote land areas surrounded by the sea. Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904), however, indicates that such worlds are by no means limited only to islands.

Instead, Conrad’s novel constructs as a possible world the fictional South American country of Costaguana. Once again, this world is one in which land and sea interpenetrate, as indicated by the novel’s subtitle, “A Tale of the Seaboard.” But Costaguana is a country that is described as being somewhat isolated from the outside world. In the novel’s opening, for instance, Conrad emphasizes the area’s geographical features that mark it as a separate place. On this note, the novel’s first paragraph describes the town of Sulaco as a space where geography produces a land area isolated from the specifics of a maritime economy. This famous opening
paragraph bears quoting in its entirety, not only for the beauty of its language, but also for its insistence on positioning Conrad’s fictional world within a specific geo-historical environment:

In the time of Spanish rule, and for many years afterwards, the town of Sulaco—the luxuriant beauty of the orange gardens bears witness to its antiquity—had never been commercially anything more important than a coasting port with a fairly large local trade in ox-hides and indigo. The clumsy deep-sea galleons of the conquers that, needing a brisk gale to move at all, would lie becalmed, where your modern ship built on clipper lines forges ahead by a mere flapping of her sails, had been barred out of Sulaco by the prevailing calms of its vast gulf. Some harbors of the earth are made difficult of access by the treachery of sunken rocks and the tempests of their shores. Sulaco had found an inviolable sanctuary from the temptations of the trading world in the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido as within an enormous semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud. (Conrad, Nostromo 39)

In this paragraph, Conrad effectively charts a realm of the modern world-system. Evident in his prose here are not only historical references such as “the time of Spanish rule” and the “galleons of the conquistadors,” but also a sense of the manner in which such geographical factors as “the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido” prevented “the trading world” from entering Sulaco for many years. For Conrad, then, factors such as history and geography combine to define Sulaco’s unique position in the modern world-system. And by opening his novel with such a precise act of positioning, Conrad forecasts the rest of the novel, which charts the various changes that occur in specific environments over the course of a historical period.

The novel includes three main areas or “spaces,” each one more specific than the previous: the country of Costaguana, the city of Sulaco, and the Gould silver mine that is the country’s (and also the city’s) most valuable resource. In fact, the country’s sheltered location, described in the opening paragraph, soon evaporates due to the mine’s increased prominence.28

28 The fact that Conrad explicitly describes the manner in which the country’s isolated status disappears provides a challenge to those critics who (once again) suggest reading Sulaco as a heterotopia. Hampson provides such a reading in his essay “Conrad’s Heterotopic Fiction” (see 129–34), as does Coroneos (see 67–76).
As early as the second paragraph of the novel’s second chapter, Conrad reveals that the advent of nineteenth-century industrial technology allowed “the trading world” to enter Sulaco:

Perhaps the very atmospheric conditions which had kept away the merchant fleets of bygone ages induced the O.S.N. [Ocean Steam Navigation] Company to violate the sanctuary of peace sheltering the calm existence of Sulaco. The variable airs sporting lightly with the vast semicircle of waters within the head of Azuera could not baffle the steam power of their excellent fleet. Year after year the black hulls of their ships had gone up and down the coast, in and out, past Azuera, past the Isabels, past Punta Mala—disregarding everything but the tyranny of time. (43)

Conrad’s images here emphasize a spatial environment invaded by specific historical elements that alter the town’s nature. “The black hulls” of the company’s ships emphasize the town’s invasion by industrial and economic elements. Thus, Sulaco becomes a space permeated by diverse factors altering its social structure. On this note, Jacques Berthoud notes that “since a city preserves a far larger and longer past than an individual biography, its story inevitably becomes a multidimensional reality” (“Modernization” 142). Sulaco’s “multidimensional reality” consists of the various socio-economic changes that result from the silver mine’s increased activity. By the novel’s end, the city has shifted from “the calm existence” quoted above to an extension of the San Francisco finance houses that profit from the mine’s output.

The above description of Sulaco’s invasion by the company includes a central element of Conrad’s spatial exploration. That final phrase, “disregarding everything but the tyranny of time,” stresses an aspect missing from my previous discussions of space—the notion of time. Wallerstein, for instance, claims that “space can never be separated analytically from time,” and thus critical discussions should focus on a “kind of TimeSpace” (“Hold the Tiller Firm” 150). Time’s relationship to space is a topic worthy of extended study, and it demands more room than I can devote to it here. But notice that Conrad’s phrase “the tyranny of time” inevitably refers to the specific social, cultural, and geographic changes perpetuated by the company’s presence.
Thus, the passage questions the very notion that the company was oblivious to “everything but the tyranny of time” since it was involved in a process of producing specific spatial revolutions. Schmitt’s term “space revolution,” referring to the historical moments in which “the spaces of historical existence undergo a corresponding change,” applies here because Conrad records a socio-cultural shift of exactly this nature. Sulaco’s invasion by the company constitutes one such revolution because the space that was the city’s previously “calm existence” has been destroyed by the company’s entrance. The existence of these aspects of space, however, indicates that there is more present in Sulaco’s changing situation than merely “the tyranny of time.” Instead, Conrad’s approach to Sulaco is distinctly spatial, creating a town and country that are both specific and abstract, as evidenced by the numerous critics who have attempted to map both environments.

A similar complexity emerges in the novel’s handling of time through the fact that Conrad uses time frames and narrative perspectives that are constantly overlapping and shifting. An end result of these approaches is to indicate that his temporal focus in *Nostromo* is far from linear. Instead, he stresses the extent to which the space of Sulaco is altered over a period of time. On its own terms, time appears as a crucial element in the narrative, since the novel charts the events in Sulaco over several decades. But ultimately, time also registers as somewhat irrelevant because several elements occupying the same space meet identical fates despite the passage of several years. For instance, the numerous revolutions glimpsed in the novel all fail. Also, the two people assigned to save the silver by removing it during one such revolution both die because of their involvement. Martin Decoud commits suicide after Nostromo abandons him with the silver. Similarly, Nostromo is killed ten years later while in the process of removing the silver for his own purposes. In the end, Conrad suggests, somewhat deterministically, that the
same fates await these people and events despite the passage of time. What remains constant, however, is the shifting spatial environment of Sulaco itself.

In *Nostromo*, then, Conrad constructs Sulaco, along with Costaguana and the Gould silver mine, as distinct spaces within a historical trajectory that spans from the late-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century. Rather than moving in a strictly linear development, Conrad’s novel presents overlapping layers that chart the area’s establishment as a distinct space in the world-system. For instance, the silver mine’s high productivity not only sparks the interest of a San Francisco financial corporation, but also the establishment of a telegraph line to transmit news concerning the mine faster. That telegraph line indicates how Conrad’s focus extends beyond the mere local regions of Costaguana, Sulaco, and the Goulds’ silver mine to the larger space of the modern world-system itself. Finally, Conrad positions himself, like Melville, as no mere writer of the sea who occasionally journeys to the land, but instead as a world-system writer concerned with spaces charting the earth’s global boundaries.
The Orphans of Shipwreck:  
A Paradigm for Roving 'Twixt Land and Sea

One of the central events near the end of Melville’s novel *White-Jacket* concerns the captain’s order that the crew trim their beards according to navy regulations. A mutiny nearly results. Ultimately, most of the crew eventually relents to have their beards trimmed, with the exception of an older sailor. Since his stint in the navy is almost over, he accepts the punishment of imprisonment onboard, only to leave the ship at the end of his service, beard intact. In the midst of diagramming the details surrounding this situation, Melville inserts an authorial commentary that establishes his relationship to the events:

As I now deviously hover and lingeringly skirmish about the frontiers of this melancholy recital, a feeling of sadness comes over me that I cannot withstand. Such a heartless massacre of hair! Such a Bartholomew’s Day and Sicilian Vespers of assassinated beards! Ah! who would believe it! With intuitive sympathy I feel of my own brown beard while I write, and thank my stars that each precious hair is forever beyond the reach of the ruthless barbers of a man-of-war! (Melville, *White-Jacket* 357–8)

Here Melville positions himself in relation to the events as *a spectator* who feels an intuitive sympathy with the characters’ situation. The action of feeling his own beard embodies Melville’s connection with the sailors who are asked to trim theirs. By doing so, Melville stresses his bond with the sailors, even though he is now reduced to the role of a spectator.

Hans Blumenberg investigates the notion of such spectatorship in relation to the event of shipwreck, whether actual or metaphorical. As a moment of crisis, shipwreck qualifies as an event that often connects the realms of land and sea. Blumenberg approaches the notion of shipwreck as a metaphor for human existence. The event of shipwreck, he argues, is analogous to the experience of living in the world (8). Braudel makes a similar argument concerning the process of using conjectural models to interpret aspects of history. After comparing these models
to ships, he explains that “for [him], once the ship has been made, the whole interest lies in launching it, seeing whether it floats and then sending it out on the waters of time. Shipwreck is always the most significant moment” (Braudel, “History” 32). That significance stems from the fact that shipwreck represents a collision between two specific spaces: one conceptual space constructed with the goal of negotiating the second space that is the world itself. Thus, the conceptual space aims at achieving a degree of functionality within the world that it hopes to negotiate. Returning to Koselleck, then, these two spaces correspond to his “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation.”

But the event of shipwreck complicates the situation as an announcement that the conceptual space of the “horizon of expectation” is inadequate for negotiating the modern world-system. As such, the world’s metaphorical sailors—whether on land or sea—are forced to build another conceptual space. These shipwrecked sailors are essentially orphans cast adrift amid a chaotic situation. When shipwrecks occur in Melville’s and Conrad’s works, they take the form of cataclysmic events that reshape a character’s perception of the world.

Conrad’s most developed meditation on the notion of shipwreck occurs in his short story “Amy Foster” (1901). That story concerns a Polish immigrant named Yanko Goorall who is sailing to America, where he plans to work in a factory to earn enough money to support his relatives, when his ship sinks off the English coast. The lone survivor, Yanko washes ashore and eventually assumes an outcast position in an English coastal town. Even though he marries a local girl, Yanko never becomes fully incorporated into the town’s environment. Instead, he dies a mysterious figure disliked by most of the residents. The story’s narrator, however, views Yanko as a victim of the nature of shipwreck—here a metaphor for English society’s harsh treatment of foreigners. This particular shipwreck qualifies as an event in which Yanko was “cast
out mysteriously by the sea to perish in the supreme disaster of loneliness and despair” (Conrad, “Amy Foster” 175). Thus, his shipwreck establishes Yanko as an orphan who is manipulated by his foster society.

Although Conrad uses a literal shipwreck in “Amy Foster,” metaphorical ones are just as prevalent. After learning that he has a sister, Melville’s Pierre uses a shipwreck metaphor to characterize her outcast position: “Oh! thou poor castaway girl, that in loneliness and anguish must have long breathed that same air, which I have only inhaled for delight; thou who must even now be weeping, and weeping, cast into an ocean of uncertainty as to thy fate, which heaven hath placed in my hands” (emphasis added; Pierre 66). By confronting the knowledge of his previously unknown sibling, however, Pierre is in fact constructing a new space in which to live his life. This includes redesigning his environment, as when he moves his father’s portrait to another location. But Pierre himself is also described as a victim of shipwreck due to the fact that “as the mariner, shipwrecked and cast on the beach, has much ado to escape the recoil of the wave that hurled him there; so Pierre long struggled, and struggled, to escape the recoil of that anguish, which had dashed him out of itself, upon the beach of his swoon” (65). Here the metaphor of shipwreck emphasizes the drastic shift that the knowledge of Isabel’s existence performs on Pierre.

Although Moby-Dick’s end is probably the most famous moment of shipwreck in Melville’s work, the novel also contains other ruminations on the event, such as the following: “The first boat we read of, floated on an ocean, that with Portuguese vengeance had whelmed a whole world without leaving so much as a widow. That same ocean rolls now; that same ocean destroyed the wrecked ships of last year. Yea, foolish mortals, Noah’s flood is not yet subsided; two thirds of the fair world it yet covers” (Moby-Dick 298–9). Here Melville singles out the
ocean itself as the domineering force producing shipwreck, describing it as a natural force people should fear. After the *Pequod*’s destruction, however, Melville provides an image that is frightening only for the fact that it shows no evidence of the disaster that just occurred. Thus, he reveals that only moments after the ship’s sinking, “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (*Moby-Dick* 624). This image’s peaceful, yet disturbing, nature recalls Blumenberg’s observation that “vessels passing through the sea leave no trace on it; thus total events there cannot be surveyed and grasped and, for that very reason, cannot be translated into the reliability of irreversibility. Both progress and sinkings leave behind them the same peaceful surface” (59). What this situation means is that spectators may ultimately lose their position because of the fact that the sea swallows the evidence of its destructive shipwrecks.

Spectatorship, then, ultimately assumes not only a temporal, but also a spatial role within the modern world-system. Paul Carter introduces a concept of “spatial history” in which he describes the historian as a spectator: “It is not the historian who stages events, weaving them together to form a plot, but History itself. History is the playwright, coordinating facts into a coherent sequence: the historian narrating what happened is merely a copyist or amanuensis” (375). The presence of the spectator here recalls Blumenberg’s approach to the notion of shipwreck. Perhaps, then, history itself can be read as a form of shipwreck, with the various world views and ideologies crashing into people, countries, and other elements of the modern world-system.

Spectators appear throughout both Melville and Conrad. In *Mardi*, for instance, the narrator’s perspective in the figure of Taji is a somewhat distant one that doesn’t offer any reflection on the fact that his perceptions are somewhat limited. Much of the remainder of Melville’s works, however, are devoted to exploring exactly that possibility. Consider not only
Ishmael’s self-reflections in *Moby-Dick*, but also the narrators of such works as “Bartleby” and “Benito Cereno.” Throughout all these works, Melville aims at destabilizing the authority of the narrative voice. Each work, then, becomes in a way a story about narrative structure, in which the narrator’s perspective clashes with other details in the text. This degree of distortion or prioritizing is embodied in *Moby-Dick* when Ishmael links his departure for the sea with events of worldwide importance, placing his voyage between a “contested election for the presidency of the United States” and a “bloody battle in Afghanistan” (7). Such a connection indicates the aims of not only Melville, but also Conrad. Here Ishmael positions himself within the space of the world-system by stressing that just as global events are occurring, another one occurs with his own departure. What such a contrast indicates is Melville’s point that the experiences of someone like Ishmael are in fact important enough to be considered on a global level.

Conrad performs a similar act of narrative construction in his short story “Falk,” in which the narrator’s “reminiscence” of the title character reveals not only the history of his attitude toward that character, but also the surrounding elements that influenced those perceptions. By the story’s end, Conrad has in fact examined the entire structure of the port city where the events occur, revealing the hidden interests that determine various characters’ actions. Falk is depicted simply as a person in love with a woman he is having trouble seducing, but the narrator reveals that there are multiple other interests working themselves out in the port city’s space. These include not only the various businesses that thrive off the ships in port, but also the larger (perhaps even imperial) concerns embodied in those practices. The narrator is in fact the captain of a ship that transports goods for a foreign company—and Falk is the only person who runs the local boat capable of getting the narrator’s ship out of the harbor.
Carter approaches such imperial business ventures by reemphasizing the spectator’s role in the historical process. In fact, he attacks the notion that the historian is merely a spectator recording the events of a larger force known as “History”: “Such history is a fabric woven of self-reinforcing illusions. But above all, one illusion sustains it. This is the illusion of the theatre, and, more exactly, the unquestioned convention of the all-seeing spectator…. This kind of history, which reduces space to a stage, that pays attention to events unfolding in time alone, might be called imperial history” (375). Introducing the notion of “imperial history” here provides the suggestion that colonial powers wish to perpetuate such a view of history for their own ends. Once again, though, he points out that the notion of an impartial, “all-seeing spectator” contains the possibility of producing a version of history that misrepresents events to suit a particular goal. Carter’s image here of history that “reduces space to a stage” indicates a problem inherent in refusing to confront the notion of space. Thinkers who place too much importance in the role of a spectator risk flattening history to a substance that ignores space in favor of a more comprehendible solution. Such arguments perhaps include prioritizing utopias, heterotopias, and other similarly reductive approaches, since they are described as isolated areas rather than as distinct regions of a larger space of the world-system.

Carter’s notion of spatial history becomes particularly relevant for discussions of Melville and Conrad because it concerns a global perspective on world events:

What is evoked here are the spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declares its presence. It is spatiality as a form of non-linear writing; as a form of history. That cultural space has such a history is evident from the historical documents themselves. For the literature of spatial history—the letters home, the explorer’s journals, the unfinished maps—are written traces which, but for their spatial occasion, would not have come into being. They are not like novels: their narratives do not conform to the rules of cause-and-effect empirical history. Rather they are analogous to unfinished maps and should be read accordingly as records of traveling. (emphasis original, 376)
Melville and Conrad both provide “records of traveling” that chart specific spaces without quantifying them into totalities. Instead, both engage in a “chartless voyage” that aims at exploring the spaces themselves, even when those spaces are in fact closed traps from which escape is impossible. That voyage “must be”—as Carter says concerning “spatial history”—“like a journey, exploratory” (377). And what both writers ultimately produce is a picture of the world-system itself. Neither utopian nor heterotopian, that picture is instead a record of the process of exploring space—that is, a spatial history that charts the world-system, including the areas of both land and sea.
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VITA

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