

The Sea and the American Imagination: An Introduction

Klaus Benesch

*Before America existed on the map, it existed in the imagination.*¹

Among scholars of American literature and culture, the lasting influence of the sea on the American imagination is well recognized. If America, as critics repeatedly claim, was more invented than discovered, then the narratives and rhetoric that Europeans have used to recreate their initial encounter with the "New World" are heavily indebted to their seagoing experience, an experience that preceded the actual "landings" or "arrivals" in America.² From Christopher Columbus' report of his first voyage to the West Indies (1493) to Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Discovery of Guiana* (1595), Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598-1600) and John Winthrop's programmatic *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630), which was drawn up in the midst of the hazardous passage itself, the sea and its perils, promises, and traditional mythical connotations figured prominently in the writings of early explorers of America.³

Although later generations appeared to have been preoccupied with conquering and settling the "wilderness" that stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, the imagery of the sea never actually lost its hold on the American mind. The most important mode of transportation during the early national period—the one that actually became the symbol of westward migration—was the so-called "prairie schooner" or Conestoga wagon (a reference to the town in Pennsylvania where they were originally built). Named because their white-covered tops seemed to float like graceful sails through the prairie grass, prairie schooners rhetorically invoked the perilous passage to the New World.⁴ By linking the hazards of

¹ Robert Lawson-Peebles, *Landscape and Written Expression in Revolutionary America: The Worlds Turned Upside Down* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 7.

² Among the first to argue that America, long before its actual discovery, was invented by utopian rhetorical practices is Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1961).

³ For the mythical connotations of liquid matter, see Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith A. Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1983).

⁴ In his late experimental text "John Marr and Other Sailors" Melville actually adopts the image of "prairie-schooners" to articulate the (semi-autobiographical) longing for the sea of an old salt who, putting an end to his roving, finally married and removed to a log-house on the Western frontier:

westward expansion with the earlier crossing of the Atlantic they both reinforced and added to the cultural heritage that ties America to the sea. More significantly, seascapes continued to provide a foil for various national, political, and philosophical projections. Just consider the numerous seafaring stories that were written during the time of the so-called "American Renaissance," when Americans were struggling to define their own idea of a national literature, thereby slowly weaning themselves from the ongoing cultural dominance of Europe. "Because the sea was central to their identity," as one critic put it, "Americans turned to the sea to understand themselves."⁵ Ishmael, the principle narrator of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), takes thus to the sea as an antidote to impending "hypochondria," an ailment particularly reminiscent of the Old World. By the same token, he does not mean "ever to go to sea as a passenger." Nor does he imply to embark on a career "as a Commodore, or a Captain, or a Cook." A true American, he deliberately abandons the "distinction of such offices" for the community and solidarity of the common sailor:

No, when I go to sea, I go as a simple sailor, right before the mast, plumb down into the forecabin, aloft there to the royal mast-head. [. . .] I always go to sea as a sailor because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecabin deck. For as in this world, head winds are far more prevalent than winds from astern [. . .], so for the most part the Commodore on the quarter-deck gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecabin. He thinks he breathes it first; but not so. In much the same way do the commonality lead their leaders in many other things, at the same time that the leaders little suspect it.⁶

From Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* to Crane's "The Open Boat," London's *The Sea-Wolf*, O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, John Barth's *The Floating Opera* or Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* ships have served well the purpose of

"With some of his former shipmates [...] he had contrived, prior to this last and more remote removal, to keep up a little correspondence at odd intervals. But from tidings of anybody or any sort he [...] was now cut off; quite cut off, except from such news as might be conveyed over the grassy billows by the last-arrived prairie-schooners—the vernacular term, in those parts and times, for the emigrant-wagon arched high over with sail-cloth, and voyaging across the vast champaign. [...] To the long-distance traveler [...] recent settlements offered some landmarks; but otherwise he steered by the sun. In early midsummer, even going but from one log-encampment to the next [...] travel was much like navigation." *The Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Douglas Robillard (Kent, OH: The Kent State UP, 2000) 265-66.

⁵ John Peck, *Maritime Fiction: Sailors and the Sea in British and American Novels, 1719-1917* (Houndmills/New York: Palgrave, 2001) 94.

⁶ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York/London: Norton, 1967) 14-15.

articulating concern about the course of American society. In a similar vein, Melville, the experienced salt-turned-writer, often depicts the world-as-ship or, as in *Moby-Dick*, the ship-as-world. The Pequod is indeed a human microcosm of its own, a floating world replete with sailors from all walks of life. The economic nature and physical hardships of the whaling business notwithstanding, theirs is a community of equals that cuts across the boundaries of both class and race. As the doomed journey of the vessel reveals, the communitarian ideal of the simple sailor is eventually threatened. Yet as a powerful democratic myth, Melville's idealized treatment of maritime life nevertheless helped to establish the sea as "a world elsewhere," to use Richard Poirier's famous term, as a utopian counter-space to the increasing rigidity and social divisiveness of modern capitalist society.⁷

Moreover, if we look at the economic conditions from which seafaring parables such as Cooper's *The Pilot*, Melville's *Moby-Dick* or Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* sprang, we find that 19th century America—its rapid industrialization notwithstanding—was still a nation that depended heavily on the sea and its allegedly unlimited resources. This is especially true of those Americans who lived near the Eastern shore and participated in one the first truly global businesses, the bloody harvesting of the sperm whale. In the early nineteenth century, according to historian Nathaniel Philbrick, "people didn't invest in bonds or the stock market, but rather in whale ships."⁸ As we can readily glean from *Moby-Dick*, sperm oil lubricated the machines of the industrial age. If transforming a gigantic sperm whale into oil entailed a quasi-industrial form of work, the hunting of the whale—especially, as whalers pushed farther and farther into as yet uncharted regions of the Pacific—remained a hazardous, myth-laden enterprise. Whalemen, as Philbrick points out, were not merely seagoing hunters and factory workers but also explorers whose wondrous seafaring adventures continued to haunt the imagination of Americans well into the twentieth century.

While taking to the sea appeared to be the natural inclination and symbolic focus of New Englanders, the land-bound, aristocratic planter society of the South was no less predicated on seafaring goods and tropes. As William Carlos Williams aptly put it, "poised against the Mayflower is the slave ship."⁹ Though the slave trade had been legally banned

⁷ Cf. Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere. The Place of Style in American Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966).

⁸ Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (New York: Viking, 2000) 20.

⁹ Williams Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (1925; New York: New Directions, 1956) 208-11.

since 1808, the entire system of plantation slavery could not have thrived without the triangular pattern of the transatlantic trafficking in know-how (such as West African rice planting technology in the Carolinas), human cargo (slaves), and, finally, the products of enforced labor (sugar, molasses, rum, cotton, etc.). As the postcolonial concepts of the "Black Atlantic" and the "African Diaspora" suggest, images of the sea also had a firm grip on people of color in the Americas, even if their understanding of the "New World" was never one of mythical homecoming but rather of rejection, disaster, and catastrophe.¹⁰ To use Malcolm X's sardonic phrase, "we didn't land on Plymouth Rock, my brothers and sisters, Plymouth Rock landed on us."¹¹ Compared to the utopian interpretations of the sea in early colonial discourse, the seafaring experience of enslaved Africans differs considerably from that of their masters. "Whereas Columbus conquered 'new' lands for Europeans, thus increasing their mobility and freedom and providing them with new perspectives, the African diaspora," Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich argue in *The Black Columbiad*, "stands for the end of freedom, for the loss of perspective; [. . .] whites celebrated the New World as their potential paradise, while the African drifted in a world of evil spirits which threatened them with social and physical annihilation."¹²

The physical confinement of the middle passage notwithstanding, ships equally figured as a symbol of hope and liberation among African Americans. From Olaudah Equiano, who worked as an enslaved servant on a merchant ship and, in order to buy his freedom, operated a small-scale trading business of his own, to Frederick Douglass, who pours out of his soul "an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships" on the Chesapeake

¹⁰ In his path-breaking study *The Black Atlantic* the British critic Paul Gilroy employs the "ship" as a Bakhtinian "chronotope," a heuristic, symbolic tool to analyze the forces at work in the cultural system of African diasporas: "The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons [It] immediately focuses attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs." *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993) 4. On the concept of Diaspora in African American and Postcolonial Studies, see the essays in Klaus Benesch and Geneviève Fabre (eds.), *African Diasporas in the Old and the New World* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003).

¹¹ *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965) 201.

¹² Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich (eds.), "Introduction," *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994) 5.

Bay, the seagoing vessel paradoxically may also signify a way out of bondage.¹³ What is more, for the descendants of close to ten million Africans who had been abducted from their homeland and transplanted to the New World, the infamous "middle passage" now often represents an imaginary journey into a common past. Thus West Indian writer Caryl Phillips encodes in his autobiography the sound of waves that break against the slave ship with the mythic ramifications of the African Diaspora. Long after the abominable traffic has ceased, the throbbing, threatening sound of the waves still holds sway, according to this sensitive traveler into our racial past, over the imagination of Africans and Europeans alike.¹⁴

Today, scholars examining the role of the sea in American cultural and literary history are themselves confronted with a wave of recently published texts that stand in need to be charted and explored. Although, in the broadest sense, the topic may well include Native American water myths or contemporary politics of seashore environmentalism, we decided that in our approach we rather concentrate on a number of classic American writers and the ways in which they created, questioned or reinforced connections (whether imagined or real) between America and the sea. Contrary to encyclopedic publications such as Haskell Springer's (ed.), *America and the Sea: A Literary History* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995), and Jill B. Gidmark's et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of American Literature of the Sea and Great Lakes* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001), the present collection highlights only a handful of authors and themes. The following essays range from Cotton Mather's biblically encoded narratives of "Wonderful Sea Deliverances" to the more profane yet no less symbolic shipwrecks in the works of Norris, London and Crane, from Anne Bradstreet's contemplations of the sea to seaward visions in American women's writing of the nineteenth and twentieth century, from Sarah Josepha Hale's utopian rewriting of the crossing to the

¹³ Equiano is pleased with his captain's choice of a larger boat, because "from his having a larger vessel, I had more room, and, could carry a larger quantity of goods with me." *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 1995) 131. After contemplating the multitude of ships on the Chesapeake Bay, Douglass decided to follow in their wake and eventually attempt the hazardous escape to the north. As he writes in his *Narrative*: "Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it [...] I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom. The steamboats steered in a north-east course from North point; and when I get to the head of the bay, I will turn my canoe adrift and walk straight through Delaware into Pennsylvania." *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, ed. David Blight (Boston/New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) 74-75. Douglass, who worked as a ship caulker in Baltimore, actually escaped by dressing up as a black sailor and—with the help of forged "seaman's protection" papers—embarked on a ferry to cross the Susquehanna River.

¹⁴ Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).

New World in her 1853 novel *Liberia* to the re-imagining of the first encounter for the 1992 Columbiad, from Hawthorne's and Melville's critical assessment of modern naval warfare to a reassessment—one hundred years later—of Slocum's low-tech, single-handed voyage around the world, and from Thoreau's meditations by the sea to the use of sea metaphors in postmodern fiction. All of these contributions clearly attest to the ubiquity and importance of the sea in American literature and culture. Rather than merely stating the obvious, however, the 16 authors of this collection—each within her or his own field—take a fresh look by putting the tangled relations of the sea and the American imagination in a new, transatlantic perspective.

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The editors want to thank Stanley Koehler, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and author of several collections of poems, for providing annotations and a brief introduction to selected autobiographical poems from *The Perfect Destroyers* (1995), a poetic memoir of his service in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Originally published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the ending of the war, these poems also suggest that despite the bombing and the constant threat of torpedoes the challenges, beauty and mythical connotations of the sea are never entirely absent from the mind of the true sailor. While the sea is often considered a dividing force between continents, the urge to contemplate its unfathomable ways and lasting cultural significance unites generations of poets and philosophers. If Stan Koehler is not the first to pry into its secrets, the poems in this volume prove that his are certainly among the finest, most subtle and sensitive imaginings of the sea.