

SEA, IDENTITY AND LITERATURE

Mar, identidad y literatura

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Recibido: Abril de 2012; Aceptado: Junio de 2012; Publicado: Julio de 2012
BIBLID [0210-7287 (2012) 2; 171-188]

Ref. Bibl. SVEND ERIK LARSEN. SEA, IDENTITY AND LITERATURE. 1616: *Anuario de Literatura Comparada*, 2 (2012), 171-188

RESUMEN: El mar es mucho más que agua y horizontes remotos. Desde el inicio de las literaturas, el mar ha enviado sus olas de desafío a la existencia humana a través de numerosas historias y poemas, y lo sigue haciendo en los diversos medios comunicativos. En todas partes, el mar marca los límites de la identidad humana individual y colectiva tanto en un nivel social, como cuestión de supervivencia, como en un nivel antropológico en cuanto espacio no humano al que estamos ligados y en nivel ontológico como la frontera entre la vida y la muerte. El papel del mar en la literatura va más allá de las novelas marítimas y los poemas épicos que se alimentan de las aventuras en el mar. En contextos culturales que varían constantemente, plantea la cuestión básica de la identidad humana en toda su complejidad a través del tiempo y el espacio.

Palabras clave: Jorge Amado, Isak Dinesen, Ernest Hemingway, identidad, mar, Derek Walcott.

ABSTRACT: The sea is more than water and remote horizons. Since the beginning of literatures, the sea has sent waves of challenges to human existence through numerous stories and poems and continues to do so in all media. Everywhere the sea marks the limits of collective and individual human identity

both on a social level as a question of survival, on an anthropological level as a non-human space we are bound to and on an ontological level as the boundary between life and death. The role of the sea in literature reaches far beyond maritime novels and heroic epics feeding on adventures at sea. In constantly changing cultural contexts it releases the basic question of human identity in all its complexity across time and space.

Key words: Jorge Amado, Isak Dinesen, Ernest Hemingway, identity, sea, Derek Walcott.

My heart's longings always urge me
to undertake a journey, to visit the country
of a foreign people far across the sea.

(Anglo-Saxon: *The Seafarer*, 10th Century)

Vom Wasser haben wir's gelernt,
Vom Wasser!
Das hat nicht Rast bei Tag und Nacht,
Ist stets auf Wanderschaft bedacht,
Das Wasser.

W. MÜLLER, *Die Schöne Müllerin* (1820)

1. A CULTURAL BOUNDARY MARKER

Whether people live near the coast or in the heartland of continents, the sea has captivated human imagination and left its traces across the globe in texts, symbols and myths for millennia. Here the destructive and also life-giving nature of the sea, its capacity to evoke human longing and inter-cultural dynamics and its refusal to satisfy this longing by its quasi-limitless dimensions are represented over and over again in an equally unlimited series of forms and strategies. Of course, water as a natural element carries a host of complex meanings that are absorbed in the cultural semantics of the sea. But at the same time, the sea turns this complexity into a vexatious paradox: we name it as if it were a delimited phenomenon –the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea, the Red Sea, etc.– but at the same time we perceive it as untameable and borderless. If water is infinitely changeable and limitless, then the sea persistently and uncontrollably transgresses its boundaries and thereby exposes the limits of human power and imagination.

The general semiotic process by which we grasp the material world by transforming it into form and meaning is stretched to its limits when it

comes to the sea. On the one hand, its cultural pervasiveness and its apparent universal sameness should make the sea a transcultural identifiable entity beyond interpretational and historical differences. On the other hand, this fact actually produces the opposite effect. The sheer enormity of the sea can only be observed and interpreted from particular points of view that are either established through comparisons, analogies and metaphors or derived from empirical analysis. As a transhuman challenge the sea is universal, but the complex interpretational strategies it activates develop differentiated and even contradictory clusters of meanings showing profound cultural and historical differences across time and space.

In this perspective we are never confronted with the sea as such or with any other global dimension of nature for that matter, but only with the various meanings it provokes. The sea marks the direct line from Aristotle quoting Empedocles in the 5th century BC by saying «nature is but a name given them [the mixing and parting of elements] by men» to Kate Soper's reminder that there is «no attempt to explore "what nature is" that is not centrally concerned with what it has been said to be» (Aristotle 2001, 1014a24; Soper 1995, 20). Consequently, in his *Physics* and *Metaphysics* Aristotle defines nature as a cluster of different objects that requires different approaches (Aristotle 2001, 192b1-193b23; 1014b17-1015a19).

In the context of the cultural interpretations of the sea, I think it is an acceptable simplification to say that we approach the sea as at least three different types of object which, in turn, generate different types of discourses and human actions: 1) First, we look upon the sea as a *natural* object. On the basis of its composition and movements we look upon the sea as a resource in a practical perspective or as a complex object in a scientific perspective and it is embedded in discourses that articulate its natural complexity; 2) Second, we approach the sea in a *religious* perspective as the creation of divine origin, whatever deity we might worship, and therefore its various appearances are to be read as signs of divine will, as when the sea appears in stories, myths and images in holy books or other religious writings; 3) Third, we look at the sea as a *cultural* phenomenon. This approach may be dressed up in hardcore constructivist garments: it is a cultural or scientific construction (which is, of course, not to be understood as a denial of reality). Or, alternatively, we may see it, as I intend to do in this paper, as the ultimate boundary marker of the powers and identities defined by humans in the unfolding of human history (*cfr.* Larsen 2007; Larsen & Johansen 2002, Ch. 7).

Despite the difference between the various cultural perceptions of the sea they all share the view that the sea confronts us with a decisive cultural boundary we cannot escape, although different cultures interpret it

differently. In certain places and epochs the first and the last of the three types of object, the natural and the cultural, are completely subsumed by a religious paradigm. In others the picture may look different, as it does in modern Western thought, which holds the scientific and practical approaches to be the most important, clearly separated from the imaginative uses of the sea.

Nevertheless, a third position has also established itself since the 18th century, beginning with Giambattista Vico. In his *New Science* (1725/1744) culture is, for the first time in European history, singled out as an independent phenomenon to be considered by particular theories and methods. This was an audacious move that paved the way for the modern study of history from the 18th century and onwards. This reflection on the relation between the human and the non-human located inside the world of human experience does not provide the sea with a metaphysical dimension, as in religion, nor does it emphasize its status as a particular natural object, as in the practical-utilitarian or scientific approach. This move makes human imagination and identity formation an integral part of a culturally invested understanding of our relation to nature comprehended as an experience of the boundary of the human life world.

Let me briefly illustrate my point with a quote from the French 19th century historian Jules Michelet, who was deeply influenced by Giambattista Vico, whose *New Science* he translated into French. Michelet became the preminent French historian of the 19th century, seeing history as the study of human action, intention and responsibility, also in relation to nature.

In his book *La mer* (1861) he writes:

A gallant Dutch seaman, a cool and stern observer, who has passed his whole life at sea, frankly admits that his feeling on first seeing the ocean was *fear*. For all terrestrial beings water is the non-respirable element, the ever heaving but inevitably asphyxiating enemy; *the fatal and eternal barrier between the two worlds*. We need not, all things being considered, be at all surprised, if this immense mass of waters which we call the sea, dark and inscrutable in its immense depths, ever and always impresses the human imagination with a vague and resistless awe (Michelet 1875, 3, ital. Mine/Engl. transl. p. 11)¹.

Here the sea is looked upon, purely and exclusively, in its capacity to mark the boundary of human culture, of our identity and of our practical and imaginative capacities. No glimpse of religion, natural science or utilitarian

1. Quotations refer throughout to editions in the original languages. Translations have been made in consultation with published English translations, listed in the bibliography.

considerations, only the role of the sea as a medium for cultural self-reflection. In this perspective, the literary interpretation of the sea as a cultural boundary marker offers, simultaneously and inseparably, a synchronic and diachronic view on our collective efforts to define the boundaries of our cultural potentials and identities in all their paradoxical heterogeneity.

Therefore, the experiential paradox related to the sea –it is only a paradox to us, the humans, of course, and hence experiential– is that the apprehension of the boundlessness of the sea is at the same time a radical experience of the limits of humans. This is the basic problem dealt with in literature and other art forms concerned with the sea, across the globe and throughout human history: the sea challenges our very capacity to imagine a life outside of our cultural confinement. Confronted with the sea we must, in an inverted analogy to fish, imagine a world outside our aquarium.

Moreover, we are confronted with more than our cultural boundaries or the limits of our imagination and control. We are brought face to face with ontological boundaries of the human species. A well in our backyard and the Pacific Ocean are of dramatically different dimensions. But throw a child in either of them and it will drown. Therefore, cultures with different experiences of waterholes, lakes and oceans may shape their conceptions and images differently when it comes to natural and place specific occurrences of water, but they do so in relation to the same basic boundary experience, most radically staged when the ocean challenges our imagination, through direct experience or in texts and images. This has been the case in European cultures since Homer, in the Icelandic sagas, in the stories of the seagoing explorers of the Renaissance, in the travelogues of the 18th century and in Darwin's diaries, and parallel examples can be found in non-European cultures as well.

Creative writing is the privileged place to see our relation to nature as an imagined totality, in a paradoxical structure that triggers our imagination and our sense of history, as exemplified by Derek Walcott's poem «The Sea is History» from *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1980):

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History. [...]
... that was just Lamentations –
That was just Lamentations,
it was not History (Walcott 1986, 364, 366).

Here, the boundary we are exposed to via the sea as a challenge to the human capacity to create history is involved in a transformative process in

which humans, in imagination or material reality, turn the non-human into a realm of human life. But the sea also shows the limits of that endeavour: 'it was not History'. The encounter with the sea sets the most radical example of that generative and fundamental process, on the brink of annihilation. Walcott is a literary echo of Michelet.

2. RELIGION AND RESCUE

As with other natural elements we confront the sea as a cultural boundary marker through three interdependent strategies: 1) one has to do with *practical* action –sailing, fishing, diving, exploring and exploiting the resources of the waters etc.–; 2) another concerns *institutional* actions –turning the sea into national territories or international marine thoroughfares, setting up international conventions for ships and seagoing traffic, international laws concerning protection of coastlines and marine life–; and 3) a third strategy relates to *imagination* –our images of the sea are used to interpret both the limits of culture, of human force, of ethics, of human experience and of the transgressions of such boundaries–. My focus is the last strategy: strategies of literary *imagination*.

One of those is intertwined with a religiously invested approach, which is probably the most long lived and culturally most widespread approach. One instance is the travelogue of the German soldier and adventurer Hans Staden, who in 1557 published his *Wahrhaftig' Historia und Beschreibung eyner Landschafft der Wilden/Nacketen/Grimmigen Menschfressen Leuthen/in der Newenwelt America gelegen...* [*The true story and description of a country situated in the new world of America and populated by wild, naked and savage man-munching peoples...*]. Staden was a German mercenary soldier serving from about 1545 to 1555 in the Portuguese army in present-day northern Brazil. He was taken prisoner by the local people, the Tupinambas among others, who were ritual cannibals. He was later liberated and made a European bestseller out of his experiences.

What happened to him on two trips to Brazil by ship he interprets as the will of God. He represents himself as a kind of martyr, turning himself from an individual with a random and marginal life into a cultural type expressing the cultural boundary between humans and God made visible by his sea-faring adventures separating the Christian world from the New World, but not –as he points out– God from his followers.

The opening part frames the book in order to trigger this reading. The sea is a volatile place: the sailors wait for wind, they are blown off their course by storm, they face mutiny and meet enemy ships. Finally, they are shipwrecked and thrown on shore by a storm, but eventually they are

saved: «Als wir nun an landt kommen waren / danckten wir Got das er vns lebendig sur lande kommen lassen» [-Having now safely landed, we thanked God that he had let us reach land alive-] (Staden 1978, Ch. 13, no page/Engl. transl., 42). But they did not know where they were or how to get to their destination, the Portuguese outpost of San Vicente. But, lo and behold, it turns out that they are just two miles away from the right place. And now on firm land, *terra firma*, they can find their own way and walk right to San Vicente. All is a result of God's invisible hand.

The final praise of God (Staden 1978, Epilogue after Ch. 54, no page) underlines that the wild and violent people on the very edge of human culture and humanity are of the same unpredictable category as the sea, and therefore he was only saved from them by the mercy of God. Nevertheless, in the final and separate part of the book, comprising about the last third of it, we find Staden's account of the cultural habits of the Tupinambas, easily subsumed under the three strategies of actions, institutions and imaginations, precisely in the same way as the activities in the Portuguese settlements. Both sites are at the same time inside and outside human culture. Like the sea which brought him to their land, the Tupinambas are not entirely excluded from human culture, but mark the very border of it. Over the next 200 years this tribe, now extinct, became a permanent platform for European self-reflection, from Michel de Montaigne via William Shakespeare to Jonathan Swift, reiterated by Claude Lévi-Strauss during his field studies before World War Two and resurfacing as part of the foundation of modern anthropology by Jean de Leiris, a contemporary of Hans Staden travelling in the same region a few decades later (Lévi-Strauss 2005).

Thus, the limits of human culture are shown in an amalgamation of human barbarity and the unpredictability of sea, both of which are luckily superseded by the will of God. This construction is put in place already in the first illustration of the book (Engl. transl. p. 18). It shows a picture of a vessel under the following text: «Was hilft der wechter in der statt / Dem geweltigen Schiff im meer sein fart / So sie Gott beyde nicht bewart» [-What's the use of the watchman in the town and the mighty ship navigating the seas, if God does not protect them both-].

Moreover, the opening lines of Staden's account consist of a quote from David's Psalm 107, v. 23-32. The first and omitted part of the psalm describes God's guidance of men on land, advising them, punishing them and saving them: «Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, *and* he saveth them out of their distress» (v. 19). The verses quoted by Staden repeat the same idea, but now concerning life at sea (here in King James' version):

23. They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters.

24. These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep.
25. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof.
26. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. [...]
30. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven. [...] (Psalm 107).

Staden not only describes the actual workings of God in his own life and lifetime, synchronically if you like, but he also adds from the very beginning of his account a diachronic dimension that inscribes his extraordinary adventures in the collective history and memory of Christianity.

Staden exploits a constantly reappearing maritime theme in various literary, artistic and mythological forms: the rescue –of individual life, of humanity, and of human power in the relation to the non-human–. Here the rescue occurs on transcendental conditions –humans saved by God, where the sea plays the allegorical role of illustrating the dangers of life–: life as a precarious sea journey, a well known *topos* in literary history.

This allegory was put into practice by the Vikings in a different religious context. In one of the Old Norse sagas, the so-called *Laksdoela Saga* from around 1250, we hear the story of how the Vikings took possession of Iceland between 800 and 900, until then an island without permanent human settlements, a *terra nullius*. Some of the powerful warriors and landlords felt cramped back home in Norway and were in conflict with King Harald the Fair-Haired. The saga is based on the older so-called *Landnamabok* [*The Book of the Conquest of Land*] from around 1150.

The sea defines the border they have to cross to settle in another place completely their own. Rumors of Iceland have reached them, plenty of fertile land owned by nobody and with an abundance of whales and salmon along the coast. It is up for grabs, just like that, not even to be conquered like England or Ireland. Of one of the men, Bjorn, son of Ketil, the saga briefly tells:

Bjorn Ketilsson steered his ship round to the west and up into Broad Fjord, sailing along the southern shore to a place where the fjord cut further into the land. [...] There was a narrow strip of land between the mountain and the shore, and Bjorn thought it a good place to settle. There he found the pillars of his high-seat washed ashore, and it seemed to them all that this spot was indeed meant to be their dwelling place. Thereupon he took possession of all land between Staf River and Hraun Fjord, and the place where he lived was ever since called Bjorn Harbour. [...] In the spring she [Unn, Bjorn's sister] crossed Broad Fjord and reached a foreland where they had their breakfast. That place has been called Cape Breakfast ever

since. [...] Next Unn sailed in along Hvamms Fjord and came to another foreland where she [...] lost her comb, so ever since this foreland has been called Cape Comb. [...] Finally Unn sailed her ship up to the bottom of the fjord. There the pillars of her high-seat had drifted ashore; so now it seemed plain to her where she was to take up her abode. [...] Thereafter Unn portioned out sectors of her land claim to one and another of her men (*Laxdæla*, 5-6, 9, 10/Engl.transl. pp. 5, 8, 9).

The open and indefinite sea is where the will of the gods reigns. According to custom, the pillars of Bjorn's and Unn's thrones have been thrown into the water, and where they are eventually washed ashore will be your place, the gods tell you. Also here, the divine powers rescue the believers from the unpredictability of human life as a sea-faring adventure.

But once on the coast, the cultural strategies begin to unfold. In practical terms, they fence in their land, cut out of the wilderness; in institutional terms they declare it their possession and distribute it among themselves; and in symbolic terms they name the land as it pleases them, projecting their own activities and names on the land in an imaginary gesture: Cape Breakfast, Cape Comb. Thereby they ultimately confirm the will of the gods, first manifested at sea but now echoed by the human activities on land.

The challenge of cultural boundaries by the sea brings the entire culture to life and most clearly when the sea is part of the action. This is the fundamental structure, which extends beyond any particular religious framing of it, be it the Nordic gods of the Vikings, the early Christian God or Staden's well-institutionalized Christian God. The dangers of the sea are defined by and also overcome by *divine intervention*.

3. INDIVIDUALITY AND PASSION

Also outside a religious context rescue is a powerful maritime theme in literature. In modern texts, that is to say after Vico, rescues carried out on human conditions are more prominent, the proof of human strength, stubbornness, inventiveness and the will to survive. That is why the sea continues to spurn our imagination and to translate it into fiction, poetry and mythology with the problem of individual or social human identity as the heart of the matter without metaphysical references.

The Anglo-Saxon poem «The Seafarer» from the 10th century marks an early example of inexplicable individual adventurousness, but framed by early Christianity. The «I» uses a comparison with placid urban dwellers to make his urge for the sea understandable. They «will scarcely believe how I, weary/ have had to make the ocean paths my home» (Crossley-Holland 2009, 54). But he does not even understand it himself. He does not want

to settle or become a landowner like the Vikings on Iceland. He is just captivated by an urge to go beyond the comfortable confinement of life on land where «my mind roams with the waves» (Crossley-Holland 2009, 54). This inexplicable passion is now interpreted by an apparently Christian paradigm, but is rather a reiteration of the old Norse claim for eternal fame among men. On the one hand, his seafaring passion is said to be compatible with the Christian neglect of «This dead life, / ephemeral on earth» (Crossley-Holland 2009, 55) in favor of eternity above. But on the other hand and in more detail, it is motivated by the urge to achieve everlasting praise of his courage by generations to come, expressed in an indissoluble blend of Christian and heathen rhetoric:

Wherefore each man should strive, before he leaves
this world, to win the praise of those living
after him, the greatest fame after death,
with daring deeds on earth against the malice
of the fiends, against the devil, so that
the children of men may later honour him
and his fame live afterwards with angels
for ever and ever, in the joy of life eternal,
amongst the heavenly host (Crossley-Holland 2009, 55).

The Anglo-Saxon is an early kin of old Santiago in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Santiago, who catches the biggest fish ever, reaches the brink of total exhaustion and death, but overpowers both the fish and the sea, until sharks eat his kill and leave him only a huge skeleton to land late at night. In the morning it lies in the harbor for locals and tourists to admire as a symbol of transhuman powers. From being *salao* Santiago becomes a hero.

We can follow the process in a series of seven quotations (page numbers from the book):

But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky (5).

But the old man always thought of her [the sea] as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favours, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them (23).

What I will do if he decides to go down, I don't know. [...] I wish I could feed the fish, he thought. He is my brother (37).

«How do you feel, hand?» he asked the cramped hand that was almost as stiff as rigor mortis (49).

I must hold my pain where it is, he thought. Mine does not matter. I can control mine. But his [the fish's] pain could drive him mad (75).

«But man is not meant for defeat», he said. «A man can be destroyed but not defeated» (89).

Then he shouldered the mast and started to climb. It was then he knew the depth of his tiredness (104).

Here we follow old Santiago, a black man, a nobody, although in the beginning with a name, an identity and memories of his African childhood. He moves through various stages of his existence during the long and almost surreal fishing adventure. He becomes one with the sea and the fish on the border of physical annihilation and through a nameless reduction to a pure bodily existence where his body is fragmented in autonomous parts like his stiff hand. But from this low point he gradually surpasses a stage of madness and death, regains his will to fight and his self-consciousness, and with this he regains his humanity, identity and name. In line with the poem by Walcott, quoted earlier, he has recreated history beyond lamentation and dead maritime memories of bygone awesome events. Once back on the coast he has lost his fish, which has been eaten by sharks, but by the enormity of the skeleton, although left on the shore as a piece of garbage, he is recognized as a symbolic representative of human power and endurance.

With an allusion to Hemingway, the story in New Zealand author Kirsty Gunn's novel *The Boy and the Sea* (2006) is told from the point of view of a shy boy, Ward, through interior monologue and some dialogues with his parents and friends, but also blended with a dangerous I-narrator, the Sea, feminized, as in Hemingway, as a she: a powerful luring, a craving subject, whose utterances are rendered in italics. The novel is written in captivating lyrical prose. Ward's father is a he-man, a courageous macho surfer, and his friends are party-going beach boys. Ward is attracted to Allison, but does not dare approach her. But first of all, Ward is a naturalized surfer, so to speak, with an acute instinct for what is happening in the sea. In an almost mythological *katabasis* and *rite de passage* Ward rescues his dad from drowning and brings him back to the coast, Ward himself now a transformed, mature being. The coast marks both the ontological boundary of human life and the place of departure to and from the unknown:

An the sea had them both

One

Two

And she rises up, getting ready [...]

And Ward's under. [...] The swirl of the board's up there somewhere through the water, then his head's pulled down further, and there's nothing but water, the sea's charge, Ward being pulled down, down, his legs are up above him somewhere, but his body's spiralling, turning over, *mine, mine*, then he sees the board, the green, the white, catches it, spinning coming up, and there's air. He's gulping air. The he smashes it under him [his father] again [...] he's up again, he's up, it's okay... [...] On this darkened beach, this evening when he came back there, arrived dripping out of the water and alone in the dark, like on an unfamiliar shore (Gunn 2006, 112, 116, 128).

The turning point is the italicized *mine, mine*. It is the triumphant words of the sea, making her point just like the point when Hemingway's old man was about to be swallowed up by the water, but survived. But now the boy shows that the board is *his* board, *his* tool, and also that *he* is in control of the boundary between man and sea. He returns with his father to the well-known coast, now appearing as a new unfamiliar territory to be conquered by the no longer shy and insecure Ward, who has developed into a quietly self-secure person by way of his own capacities alone. «The sea is *mine*», he might have said.

When the experience of the sea as a cultural boundary marker no longer confirms the power of a divinity, we are left with the boundary transcending power of humans themselves –skill, experience and intuitive knowledge in the case of Hemingway and Gunn, and passion as in the case of Tereza, the protagonist of Jorge Amado's *Tereza Batista* (1972). *Tereza Batista* is a story from the *certao* [the hinterland] of a wild girl who lives in the vibrant city of Salvador da Bahia and has a passion and exuberance larger than life. Tereza is madly in love with a sailor who is absent most of the time, but always reminds her of a love beyond what is customary for the local practices of marriage, prostitution or sexual slavery, all of which *are* customary practices. The only image to carry this love is the sea, beyond the sandy coast, not a river, which is too restricted by its riverbed to carry her image of love.

She looks impatiently for her lost sailor and imagines what they will do and what he will say to her:

Then they would go to watch the sea, its waves and its excitement, on the other side of the barrier, the real sea, not this river arm. A nice river, Cotinguiba, he did not deny it, large, encircling the Isle of Cocotiers, calm

compared to the city, protecting sailing ships and small barks; but the sea, you will see, that's something else, without comparison, oh, the sea is a road without end, it contains an uncontrollable force, a stormy power, a sweetness of love when it becomes foam on the sand. He has not come, why? (Amado 1991, 63; my transl. from French)

Shortly afterwards, he does show up, briefly but passionately as a wave and a storm from the sea before he disappears again –unpredictable as the sea, uncontrollable as their love «on the other side of the barrier», as Amado says, almost citing my initial quote from Jules Michelet–.

The sea is a sign of nothing but the transcending potential of their own individual lives. And the sea does not only express the transcending imagination of Tereza, but later also their actual love. She makes love to her sailor while the reference to her rebirth evokes the rescue theme:

Tereza Batista wet from the sea, her mouth, her smooth hair, her firm breasts, the star of her navel, the shell of her secret, a flower of seaweed, a black octopus shaped turf –oh, my love, I die in the foam of the sea, in your sea of black seaweed, [...] one day I shall die in your sea in Bahia, at the stern of your vessel. Your mouth of salt, your hull of a breast, at your mast a swelling sail, under the coat of waves I am born a second time, a virgin of the sea [...] oh, my love of the sea (Amado 1991, 78; my transl.).

The boundary between land and sea, between the human and the non-human is transcended through the force of human love and passion, which creates new individual identities for the lovers outside the order of their surrounding culture and with no other finality and duration than the intensity of the moment itself and their individual perseverance in the years to come. The two lovers are depersonalized in being identified interchangeably with the sea, its plants and animals and with the boat: all categorical boundaries between things, natural phenomena, human and non-human entities, male and female, life and death evaporate in a kind of material mysticism.

Together with Hemingway and Gunn, Amado represents the sea as an existential symbol for an irresistible quest for transcendence and identity based on *individual power and passion*.

4. NARRATIVE AND CONNECTIVITY

In many texts, two discursive lines thus run parallel to each other when the sea is used to articulate the imaginative work. First, there is a description of a particular cultural boundary transgression on human conditions and, second, the role of literature to re-integrate this vision as a shared cultural

interpretation of human identity formation. In Staden's case and in the saga the divine power gave the exceptional individual fate an exemplary status while the protagonists in «The Seafarer», Hemingway, Gunn and Amado, by their own power and passion, elevated themselves to embody humanity. In my next examples from Isak Dinesen and Derek Walcott it is the text and the meta-text that in conjunction perform this collective interpretational synthesis. It is thus an arbitrary synthesis, itself a work of culture and therefore an invitation to permanently re-open a reflection on our condition as cultural beings and on natural conditions through the imagination of the sea and its literary forms.

Isak Dinesen, who is known mainly for her autobiography *Out of Africa* (1937), often used sailors, ships and the sea to express the human capacity to transcend given cultural conditions. She is also a late child of the Anglo-Saxon seafarer. For her the sea evokes the imagination and the urge to go beyond the restraints of a land based culture, and is also the true place to realize it. One of the mottos of her life was «navigare necesse est»: «it is necessary to sail», namely to sail *on*. An embedded story in one of her *Winter's Tales* (1942), «The young man with the carnation», is called «A blue story» (27-29). The use of embedded stories is in itself a meta-textual strategy that has always given storytelling a particular cultural power.

A rich young English woman, Lady Helena, is shipwrecked in the Chinese Sea because of a fire, but is rescued by a sailor. Her father believes she is dead, but after nine days in a lifeboat with the sailor, she is brought back to England. She is hopelessly lost to the sailor who disappears, his identity still unknown, carrying her hopes, her passion and her identity with him. She cannot make a good match at home and tells why: the sea has no bottom, she has learned. It stretches, wonderfully blue and boundless, right through the globe so that entities on opposite sides never meet, but keep each other in mutually interdependent balance and movement. So, after her rescue she has to sail and find a jar of the right blue color, because only by sailing can she keep the ship on the opposite hemisphere moving. Lady Helena tells her old aunts that

the water, which is the noblest of elements, does of course, go all through the earth, so that our planet really floats in the ether, like a soap-bubble. And there, on the other hemisphere, a ship sails, with which I have got to keep pace. We two are like the reflection of one another, in the deep sea, and the ship of which I speak is always exactly beneath my own ship, on the opposite of the globe (Dinesen 1986, 29).

The sea is the dynamic union of the mutually excluded dimensions of our lives, which, in their complementarity, keep us alive and connect us

with everything beyond ourselves. But we never confront our counterpart except imaginarily, just as we never see our own death when alive. However, experience tells us unequivocally that our life does depend on such complementary relations. This experience, mediated by the sea, requires imagination to be formed. As it does in literature: Helena tells a blue story and talks of a blue jar.

When Helena finally finds a jar of the right blue color, she stops sailing and dies, and so does the imagined ship with its sailors on the other side. Her heart must be kept in the blue jar as if it were in the center of the ocean and thus in the center of the Earth, the «soap bubble». The story does not tell the ways of nature and god or of individual lives or passions but offers a reflection on the conditions of human life and its limits, mediated by the sea as one of its paradoxical counterpoints. The story is the proper medium for this paradoxical experience set in motion by the encounter with the sea. The experience of the sea sparks a vision of *global human interconnectedness* that keeps every individual afloat.

The importance of imaginative storytelling becomes more evident and more complex in Derek Walcott's modern verse epic, *Omeros* (1990). The book rightfully earned him the Nobel Prize in 1992. On the level of theme and plot we meet both the practical and institutional strategies at work in our relation with nature: Achilles and Philoctetes are black Caribbean fishermen, who live from the sea on a practical, daily basis in a coastal village on Saint Lucia. The institutional actions are embodied in Major Plunkett in particular, who exercises a decisive power over the small community and regulates the conditions and the outcome of their work. He also changes the local Afro-Caribbean names of people to Greek names in the manner of the old slave owners. Thus, Helen is a girl from the village, who serves in the house of Major Plunkett, the rich emigrant pig farmer, and is courted by young impatient Hector and befriended by Achilles and Philoctetes. Elements of classical mythology, loaded with the maritime adventures, and the colonial background of Major Plunkett's family, which includes involvement in the slave trade and seaborne colonial activities, are mixed in a permanent synchronic and diachronic cross-over with the down-to-earth local story of everyday life with hurricanes, poverty, fishing, bar crawling and love.

In his epic representation of the sea, Walcott, like Dinesen, exhibits a global human interconnectedness, but now enlarged as a multidimensional multicultural network. The sea is the all-pervasive element embracing all details of life from perceptions, images, plot and identities to language. Everybody and everything has a watery existence in this migrant community with the sea as its historical origin and as the expression of its

contemporary hybridized life: «They had a common bond between them: the sea» some of the men say to each other» (Walcott 1990, 47).

The imagination of the global relationship between humans and their life world, crossing temporal and spatial boundaries, is embedded in the way the story is told. It is characterized by unrhymed stanzas with three verses each, in analogy with Dante's *Commedia*, and by many references to classical Greek narratives plus references to local habits and African inspired religious practices, *cadomblé*. Everything is rendered in a mix of the local French-English hybrid dialect plus the lyrical prose of an «I», a first person narrator who communicates with Homer, re-occurring throughout the text as a talking marble head.

I will offer just two examples to illustrate the double structure of text and meta-text, which creates the textual complexity as an articulation of a seaborne globalized cultural complexity. The poem opens with Achilles cutting down laurel trees so tourists can see how canoes are built. The sea penetrates everything of the activities *in* the text:

Achilles looked up at the hole the laurel had left.
He saw the hole silently healing with the foam
of a cloud like a breaker. The he saw the swift

crossing the cloud-surf, a small thing, far from its home,
confused by the waves of the blue hills. A thorn vine gripped
his heel, He tugged it free. Around him other ships

were shaping from the saw. With his cutlass he made
a swift sign of the cross [...] as he prayed:
«Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!»
(Walcott 1990, 6).

The narrative self-reflection, the meta-textual activity *of* the text, which makes the story responsible for the generalizing cohesiveness of the events, is present throughout the text, but most clearly in Book 7, the last book. Here the narrator, the «I», discusses the whole narrative enterprise with Homer, the talking marble head. Another character, Seven Seas, reminds the «I» in watery terms what storytelling is about:

Mind you, *be* [Homer] does not go; he sends his narrator;
he plays tricks with time because there are two journeys
in every odyssey, one on worried waters,

the other crouched and motionless, without noise.
For both, the «I» is a mast; a desk is a raft
for one, foaming with paper, and dipping the beak

of a pen in its foam, while an actual craft
carries the other to cities where people speak
a different language [...] as the sea moves round an island

that appears to be moving, love moves round the heart –
with encircling salt, and the slowly travelling hand
knows its returns to the port from which it must start
(Walcott 1990, 291)

Does the boundlessness of the sea, in various forms and cultural contexts, constitute a proper image to evoke a relevant reflection of the human-nature relationship? Do we get back «to the port from which it must start», our paradoxical experience of boundaries and boundlessness? By inviting the reader to ask such questions, Walcott, in both his great narrative and the poem I have quoted above, keeps the challenge open: confronting fundamental cultural boundary markers, such as the sea, is precisely a challenge that can never be overcome in one model or with one answer. We must confront ourselves with it over and over again in new cultural contexts to suggest and to experiment with new reactions, interpretations and representations.

5. NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE BOUNDLESS

The sea is difficult to map. Where are the stable points of orientation like hills, rivers or mountains? At sea a sense of place is almost impossible and any sense of location or direction has to be anchored, as it were, outside the sea: the solid bottom under the surface, a coastline, hills in the hinterland, stars, the sun or the moon. Navigation requires signs from elsewhere. Therefore the sea has always been a place to be lost, and rescue has never been assured without extraordinary efforts, close to being miraculous. The sea marks the limits of human powers, identity and survival and is met with attempts to find material or imaginary footholds outside the sea from where we can approach, transcend or negotiate these boundaries. The sea is boundless in the sense that it forces us, possibly in the most radical way, to reflect on our own limitations.

Literature has, incessantly and strenuously, being part of this reflection aimed at defining imaginary fixed points from which we can approach our own limits. In this article I have presented the three most prominent ones with the sea as the ultimate boundary marker of human culture: *religious* interpretations of our relation to the sea based on divine intervention, which remain abundant around the world; an inherent *individualized human power and passion for life* and, finally, the sea as a carrier of *global*

human interconnectedness beyond the individual human being in a world of migrant cultures and their peoples.

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