

THE 'OCEANIC FEELING'

in Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat*
and S. T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat* (1897) gives a fictionalized account of his shipwreck and subsequent rescue after the steamboat *Commodore*, on which he was heading to Cuba to act as a correspondent in the Cuban War, ran into bad weather off the coast of Florida. The story focuses on the hours during which four men (the captain, a cook, an oiler, and the correspondent) struggle to reach shore in a ten-foot dinghy. Crane also wrote a journalistic account of the same event (*Stephen Crane's Own Story*), which focuses on the events leading up to the four men's abandonment of the *Commodore*, and announces that the struggle for survival after the shipwreck will be dealt with separately (Crane, 1984a).

Claudia Ioana
Doroholschi
West University
of Timișoara
Romania

At several points in the story, *The Open Boat* seems to reference Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Although we have no direct account of Crane reading Coleridge (as indeed we have little direct information on Crane's life and thought in general), literary references and allusions in *The Open Boat* have been noticed before—including references to Coleridge (e.g. Dendinger, 1968, who reads *The Open Boat* as a parody of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, or Hoyle, 1969, addressing the issue in the [unpublished] master's thesis). Indeed, in the short story under study there are several striking scenes which seem to offer direct hints at *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Some of the common elements (such as the lighthouse) are elements which quite naturally occur in the context of nautical discourse. Some similarities, however, are harder to pin down, yet they may

arguably be demonstrated in the parallelism of certain traits of style and imagery (e.g.: the use of color in depicting the sea). There also are several instances which suggest *intended* allusions to Coleridge, and which will be discussed in greater detail in following sections of this article. One of these cases occurs in the beginning of Crane's narrative, where not an albatross, but a gull lands on the captain's head, and is described as 'somehow grewsome and ominous' (Crane, 1984b: 888). The latter part of the story finds the sailors in 'dead sleep' (Crane, 1984b: 899), which once again resonates with Coleridge in a way that suggests a direct reference. So does the scene towards the end, in which the correspondent finds himself contemplating a shark, and which bears similarities in both description and functionality to the scene where the Mariner 'blesses' the water snakes 'unaware' (Coleridge, 1970: 40). *The Open Boat* is divided into seven parts, just like the *Mariner*, and although no exact section-by-section parallel can be drawn between the two texts, it is tempting to see this as yet another intertextual allusion. In the present paper I will look at the two texts in relation to what Freud and Romain Rolland define as 'the oceanic feeling', in an attempt to illuminate the way the texts 'read' the relationship between man and sea / nature, and to elucidate what Crane might have intended by referencing the *Ancient Mariner*.

The term 'oceanic feeling' was developed in a dialogue between Freud and Romain Rolland, in an exchange of letters initiated after Freud had sent Rolland a copy of his *The Future of an Illusion*. In his reply to Freud, Rolland argues that he has not accurately tracked down the source of religious feeling, and that this sensation should be viewed in terms of what he calls an 'oceanic' feeling. In Rolland's view, the oceanic feeling represents a feeling of connectedness with the universe, of mystical oneness with everything, which lies at the root of all mystical experience, regardless of religion (at the time, Rolland was immersed in the study of Asian writers):

'What I mean is: totally independent of all dogma, all credo, all Church organization, all Sacred Books, all hope in a personal survival, etc., the simple and direct fact of *the feeling of the "eternal"* (which can very

well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were).

This sensation, admittedly, is of a subjective character. But as it is common to thousands (millions) of men actually existing, with its thousands (millions) of individual nuances, it is possible to subject it to analysis, with an approximate exactitude.

I think that you will classify it also under the *Zwangsneurosen*. But I have often had occasion to observe its rich and beneficent power, be it among the religious souls of the West, Christians or non-Christians, or among those great minds of Asia who have become familiar to me and some of whom I count as friends'. (Rolland, 1927: 173)

Freud subsequently develops the idea in *Civilization and its Discontents*, where he argues that, while he cannot detect any trace of the 'oceanic feeling' within himself, it is probably there in others, and tracks it down to the initial stages of life, where the newborn's ego has not yet differentiated itself from the surrounding world (1962: 15). The 'oceanic feeling' is, in Freud's view, a residue of the primal confusion between ego and world, and 'might seek something like the restoration of limitless narcissism' (therefore it is insufficient, he argues, to explain the religious feeling) (1962: 19).

The concept of 'oceanic feeling', as developed in the correspondence between Freud and Rolland, does not refer to the ocean or the sea as such. Rolland calls it 'oceanic' because of its 'lack of perceptible limits' (1927: 173). However, the metaphor does speak for itself, and the motif of man alone at sea has often been used as a way to speak of man's encounter with limits—the limit between life and death, between human and nature, between the self engaged in contemplation of the world and the self-engaged in introspection. The sea has long functioned as the 'most appropriate, if not exemplary, metaphor' of the sublime (Freeman, 2010: 11). For Kant, for instance, the contemplation of the 'boundless ocean' and other similar awe-inspiring elements from a safe vantage point arouse a sentiment of the sublime, since 'they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature' (Kant, 2007:91). In what follows, I will try to establish whether the representation of the ocean in Coleridge and Crane resonates in any way

with the idea of the 'oceanic feeling' understood in such a context. If yes, I will endeavor to determine whether it can be read as a mystical (Rollandian) union between the human being and the world, or, in the Freudian sense, as nostalgia for a primitive communion with the universe. Ultimately, such a reflection may provide a conceptual fundament upon which it would be possible to argue for a more profound relationship between the two texts.

Canonical readings of the *Ancient Mariner*, especially in relationship with glosses to the text, have interpreted the poem as one reinforcing the Romantic unity between man and nature. The Mariner somehow disturbs this unity, by arbitrarily killing the Albatross, which, over the course of the poem, acquires a whole range of mystical connotations—some Christian, some of a more obscure and primitive nature. Order seems to be restored when the Mariner 'blesses' the water snakes 'unawares', in what seems to be a gesture of unpremeditated reconciliation with God's creation; at the end, we encounter the Mariner re-telling his story to the wedding guest, and reasserting his bond with 'both man and bird and beast' (Coleridge, 1970:73). Although the Mariner fails to maintain this connection, it seems to be positively valorized in the poem. The nature of this bond seems rather close to Roland's understanding of it as a mystical feeling of connectedness with the universe. It is not merely a Christian feeling, but one that encompasses nature in a wider sense—in which man feels consubstantiality with nature ('bird and beast')—an attitude in which it is easy to read echoes of Asian thought (Stokes, 2011: 137–138), one further point of convergence with Rolland.

In Crane's story, the sea appears as a hostile element from the very outset of the narrative. From the very opening scene, Crane's imagery seems to render the sea an object of contemplation, but there is an insistence on its cold, insensitive beauty. The imagery also emphasizes its 'unnaturalness' by resorting to concrete, non-liquid objects: water is not the limitless, permissive medium it 'ought to be', but has 'points like rocks'; the waves of the sea are 'most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall' (Crane, 1984b: 885), a wall into which one may

crash: rather than that of limitlessness, these are the tropes of limitedness reified. The effect is one of alienation, certainly not an 'oceanic' experience in the Rollandian sense.

In the early stages of the story, the motif of flying gulls is employed to build an image that simultaneously suggests the proximity of the shore and, ironically, renders the protagonists' inability to reach it almost palpable. The men are angry at the birds' apparent ease on the water, and, when one of the gulls lands on the captain's head, he refrains from knocking it off only because he is afraid that a sudden gesture would capsize the boat, so 'he gently and carefully wave[s] it away' (Crane, 1984b: 888). The scene reminds one of that of the arrival of the Albatross from the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but the sense of guilt awoken by the severing of the bond with nature, so pervasive in the poem, is absent here. In Crane's story, there seems to be no bond to break. The gull is there merely to highlight the very absence of the connection (a function it shares with other elements of the sea imagery in the beginning of the text), to open one's eyes to the ocean's inhuman indifference to human frailty.

As the story progresses, the sea becomes more and more hostile. The life-saving station scene (Crane, 1984b: 895–898), in which the men on the boat struggle to read the gestures of the people on shore, who run and wave, yet ultimately fail to communicate, increases the overall sense of alienation. It is at this stage, when night falls, finding the men asleep, extremely tired, rowing in turn to prevent the boat from capsizing, that an interesting shift in point of view occurs. While up to this point in the narrative focalization has been a fairly detached third person, it is now, as the other characters are asleep and we are only witnessing the workings of the correspondent's mind (Crane, 1984b: 901), that it becomes clear that the story's focalizer is in fact the correspondent. It becomes clear that the events are filtered through his perception, and that the refrain 'If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?' (Crane, 1984b: 898), initially unattributed, is his own interrogation of the absurdity of Fate. While the scene is remi-

niscent of the 'life in death' scene in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, here once again there is no suggestion of a broken order to restore. At least to the mind of the struggling correspondent, the sea is ruled by 'seven mad gods', a site of chaos.

However, the correspondent does discover a deeper feeling of connectedness—not with nature, but with his fellow humans. From early on, they are bound by a 'subtle brotherhood', a 'comradeship', they are 'friends in a more curiously iron-bound degree than may be common' (Crane, 1984b: 890), and the bond only deepens in the face of adversity. There is indeed a sense of transcending the self and perceiving it as one with the universe inherent in the oceanic feeling, but not in the mystical sense in which Rolland is reading it. Instead, it seems to be a primordial bond with other humans, disillusioned and simple, closer perhaps to Freud's non-religious version of the concept. The use of focalization seems to underscore this idea: the story is told not as the experience of an assertive autobiographical 'I', but by focusing on a group of people, who are initially all nameless. When the focalization shifts, becoming more clearly concentrated on the correspondent, this is simultaneous to the moment when the only person who is individualized during the story, the oiler, Billy, begins to be named. Therefore we get not one character who is individualized by focalization, but two characters who are individualized simultaneously and become interchangeable: not only do they literally exchange roles while they are rowing, but we also get an increasing sense of the correspondent's relation with the oiler, and his fraught sense of identification with him. The only one who dies, the oiler, becomes, in a sense, the correspondent's double: the mirror in which he can see and question the arbitrariness of his own survival.

Another interesting Coleridgean echo is the moment when the correspondent, alone at night, contemplates a shark. The initial description of the shark is that of a terrifyingly beautiful creature, and reminiscent of the Mariner's contemplation of the water-snakes (Coleridge, 1970: 40). In Coleridge's poem, the Mariner, seeing the beauty of the snakes, blesses them 'unawares', is once again able to pray, and subsequently the dead albatross falls from his neck. In *The Open Boat*, the correspondent

looks at the shark, and has an acute perception of his being alone, wishing that one of his companions were awake with him (Crane, 1984b: 901). This triggers a revelation of the indifference of nature, which somehow brings to his mind a verse on the soldiers of Algiers: 'The correspondent plying the oars and dreaming of the slow and slower movements of the lips of the soldier, was moved by a profound and perfectly impersonal comprehension. He was sorry for the soldier of the Legion who lay dying in Algiers' (Crane, 1984b: 903). Thus, his experience of limit, danger and isolation has led him to discover empathy, an empathy which is 'impersonal' because it transcends the boundaries of his own self, and which interestingly occurs immediately after the correspondent challenges the indifference of nature with a plea of 'Yes, but I love myself' (Crane, 1984b: 902), in an echo (and partial reversal) of one of Crane's more or less contemporary poems from *War is Kind*:

'A man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,
The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."'
(Crane, 1984c:1335)

Where the Mariner discovers a unity with all living things, the correspondent first cries out his own existence, and demands a recognition of his own individuality, only to then transcend his sense of self by discovering a link with humanity—not a mystical link with nature, but a psychological unity with others, more consistent with the Freudian than the Rollandian reading of the oceanic feeling.

Although I will not go so far as to undertake an exhaustive psychoanalytical reading of the story, it is tempting to read the correspondent's rescue after the shipwreck as a metaphorical rebirth, consistent with Freud's account of individuation. As the correspondent slowly comes back to himself among the protective rescuers (the 'parents' of his second, post-shipwreck delivery into the world), all he perceives seems to be the connection with the others—perhaps an oceanic feeling in the Freudian sense, generated by the safety of the original bond with other humans.

The very end, however, presents us with a moment of contemplation of the sea which at first sight might suggest a shift towards an almost Rollandian, mystical version of the oceanic feeling: 'When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters' (Crane, 1984b: 909). The suggestion seems to be that of a connection with the sea, which the men seem to have understood in some deeper way. Recent criticism (cited in Wolford, 2007: 61-62) is wondering, however, if the ending is to be read literally or in an ironic key. As Wolford notes, Crane's 'lyrical' endings are most often ironic, and the last paragraph can be understood both as a return to a quasi-mystical oneness with the universe, and as an ironic statement of the men's incapacity of realizing any connection with the sea.

Examining the purpose of Crane's allusions to the *Ancient Mariner* can help shed some light on the matter. If these allusions are conscious, one of the reasons why Crane might have wanted to employ them is their Gothic effect. The *fin-de-siècle's* affinity with Romantic Gothicism is well documented, and so is Crane's interest for Gothic writers such as Edgar Allan Poe (Fusco, 2003:34). Moreover, the early readers and reviewers of Coleridge's poem (Jackson, 2002) perceived it as being fragmentary and obscure. While we can only speculate what Crane's own reading of the poem may have been, we can hypothesize that he might have shared in his contemporaries' perception to some extent, and that he may have alluded to Coleridge to conjure up a sense of fragmentariness, obscurity, Gothic terror, and absurd. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* itself is perhaps not as simple as we have got used to thinking. Christopher Stokes' reading (2011: 85-107) emphasizes that the poem does not end with the Mariner's blessing of the water snakes and the fall of the Albatross from around his neck, nor does the ending of the poem suggest full reconciliation and restoration of order, particularly if we look at the text without Coleridge's ulterior glosses. Stokes shows that the text has its own indecisiveness, a 'divided tone' which he ascribes to 'Coleridge's difficult passage between Unitarianism and Anglicanism', particularly in what the attitudes towards sin

and irrationality are concerned (Stokes, 2011: 95). It is perhaps precisely this indecisiveness that serves Crane and helps him open up his realistic text to a sense of Gothic anxiety.

Most importantly, however, what the allusions to Coleridge seem to achieve is a systematic undermining of any sense of mystic connection with the world. Each of the points of convergence between Crane's short story and Coleridge's poem (the gull, the 'death sleep', the shark) seems to call to the foreground a moment of potential connection with the supernatural, since it relates to the very moments where in Coleridge's text the human subject connects with the supernatural world. The allusions to Coleridge manage to simultaneously create a sort of metaphysical resonance in the text and to show the Universe 'refusing itself' to human consciousness, thus underscoring the absence of any supernatural element, and indeed any sense of the universe's 'obligation' or accountability for the fate of humans, in what is practically a deconstruction of the Rollandian oceanic feeling.

In this context, it is interesting to notice that in the last paragraphs of the story Crane uses religious imagery. The wave that brings the correspondent to shore is a 'true miracle of the sea' (Crane, 1984b: 908–909), while the man who comes to his rescue has 'a halo [...] about his head, and he shone like a saint'. (Crane, 1984b: 909). However, if there is a miracle at work, it is the miracle of a very capricious deity, since the correspondent's relief at being rescued has a sinister counterpoint in the revelation of the death of his symbolic double, the oiler. In both examples above, the religious terminology is linked to human actions and perceptions and is presented not in the account of the omniscient narrator, but as the correspondent's perception of the fact, or, indeed, his projection. Like earlier in the story, when the correspondent asserts his existence and holds Fate accountable for its meaningless treatment of humans, here too we get the impression that coherent meaning is a human projection. Making sense is a demand that humans place on the Universe, but the Universe fails to comply. This enhances, rather than resolves, the sense of indecisiveness and fragmentariness created, among other things, by the Coleridge allusions.

As for the last paragraph, if there is a resolution or harmonization, a sense in which the self transcends its own boundaries, it is within the bond of the group of men. It is perhaps not by chance that the ending returns to the collective focalization of 'the men', once again dissolving the individuality of the correspondent into the mass of his companions, and that the moment of understanding is thus a collective one, not one that belongs to the individual. Also, it is significant that the moment of their perceived ability of interpreting the voice of the sea, whether it is to be read as a true moment of understanding, a calming projection now that they have returned to the safety of the shore, or a declaration of solidarity in a liminal experience, can only occur from a distance. The human subject only achieves some type of understanding of nature once it becomes separated from it—and from itself.

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Claudia Ioana
Doroholschi
West University
of Timișoara
Romania

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