

## THE YOUNG MEN AND THE SEA:

### Sea/Ocean as a Space of Maturation?

The sea (or ocean) in American literature and culture is marked by a distinctive ambiguity. On the one hand, and quite expectedly, the sea voyage can be a maturation experience: such is the case of Humphrey Van Weyden, the protagonist of Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf*. However, the sea is also a space of the opposite experience: one that accommodates remarkably immature characters. Be it in the person of Captain Delano in Melville's 'Benito Cereno' or the eponymous Billy Budd, it is a site welcoming naïve and escapist heroes who do not want to or cannot adapt to the demands of land society.

London's Humphrey Van Weyden is an effeminate scholar who, because of a shipwreck, finds himself on board the ship *Ghost*, headed by the ruthless captain Wolf Larsen. During the first half of the book, Van Weyden is confronted with a world radically different from the one he was used to: one in which no pity (or self-pity) is shown, in which hard physical work applies equally to everyone, and a value is given to 'standing on one's own legs' (London, 2000: 127). Thus, in order to survive, Humphrey must change physically, which he does, acquiring more stamina and losing his scholarly sensitivity. However, the process of physical adaptation is only part of the change that takes place in the protagonist. Besides working as a cook's help and a cabin boy, Humphrey takes part in long theoretical discussions with Wolf Larsen. Captain Larsen, being self-schooled and interested in philosophy, enjoys in Humphrey a partner for disputes about possible immortality of the soul. He claims that

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[...] life is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength. The lucky eat the most and move the longest, that is all. (33)

Expressing these views, Larsen challenges Van Weyden's metaphysical and idealistic approach. Van Weyden never fully gives in to Larsen's materialism, but he does seem to have a shadow of a doubt. Van Weyden undergoes a slow change, and the first stage of his transformation is connected to becoming more self-reliant, to finally being able to stand up to the bullying cook Mugridge, but also to a partial loss of his humanity. Humphrey starts to forget who he used to be, for better and for worse, developing muscles but also finding it increasingly difficult to argue against Larsen's philosophical views.

The second half of the novel, and of Humphrey's development, is marked by the appearance of another shipwrecked passenger, Miss Maud Brewster. Being a writer, she quickly finds common language with Van Weyden while resisting Larsen's advances. She shares Humphrey's idealism, thus reminding him of who he used to be and pushing his change of character in another direction. Van Weyden retains Larsen's lessons of physical self-reliance but without renouncing his former views on the nature of human beings. Moreover, he finds the courage to escape the *Ghost* in order to save his own and Maud's lives. The two find themselves on Endeavor Island—a desert place where they can rely only on their own ingenuity to survive. Finally, the *Ghost*, occupied only by the dying Larsen, moors at the island. The captain has been defeated by his own brother Death Larsen and suffers from what looks like a brain tumor, experiencing horrible headaches, then going blind and finally losing control of his limbs. Humphrey and Maud witness the captain's death, feeling free and safe only after the brute is gone.

Van Weyden's maturation is a mixture of self-reliance gained through physical work in adverse conditions, opposing the violence of Larsen who threatens and at the same time fascinates him, and getting the woman both protagonists desire. The two components necessary for Humphrey's development are confrontations

with the sea and with his own sexuality. Until Maud Brewster appears on the ship, Humphrey eroticizes Larsen, describing the captain's body with fascination and in detail, and 'enact[ing] a scene of sheer submissiveness in which manly beauty reduces him to a passive, feminized, utterly dependent status' (Mitchell, 1998: 332). The coming of Maud not only makes Humphrey transfer his desire onto a heterosexual object but also contributes to his victory over Larsen through escaping the *Ghost*. For Eric Carl Link, the novel's ending 'defies reader expectations', because there is no physical fight between Humphrey and Wolf resulting in winning the woman's heart. Instead, 'Larsen undergo[es] a protracted deterioration that eventually leads to sensory deprivation, the severing of human consciousness from the body, and a death which becomes little more than a blinking out of some interior spark of life rooted in mental awareness' (Link, 2010: 152). However, the fact that Humphrey does not defeat Larsen in a physical fight is not as surprising as it may first seem; after all, the main conflict between the two heroes is a philosophical one. Larsen's death, or rather the way he dies, is what constitutes Humphrey's victory. It is true that 'the plot [of *The Sea Wolf* - J.F.] traces the pallid idealist Humphrey Van Weyden's acquisition of figurative "sea legs"—indeed of an entire physical body—as counterpoint to the fiercely materialist Wolf Larsen's gradual loss of bodily functions' (Mitchell, 1998: 318). Yet, the more important development that takes place in Humphrey is the internal one. There is no need of Humphrey's physically challenging Larsen, since this is not the core of their difference.

It is interesting that Humphrey's change is mirrored by an opposite process in Wolf Larsen; the two seem to be trading places. In the words of Mitchell, 'It is not simply that hard knocks at sea transform an effete idealist into a tough-minded materialist, but that a man who essentially lacks a body gains one, while a consummately physical figure is stripped of his' (Mitchell, 1998: 323). Mitchell goes as far as to claim that 'Van Weyden and Wolf gradually exchange both bodies and selves' (325). While it is easy to prove this statement in its first part, with Humphrey becoming stronger and Larsen being debilitated by his illness, the idea of the exchange of selves seems to be rather far-fetched.

In what is most important to the constitution of both characters, their moral and philosophical views, they never alter. Humphrey till the end believes in the immortal soul, while Larsen even when dying utters the last word 'bosh', testifying to how little he thinks of the meaning of human life. The only difference is that the turn of events seems to confirm Humphrey's views: while for Mitchell Larsen's death reveals that 'the construction of the self depends on a physical body' (325) and 'selfhood exists only as a principle of action, not of contemplation' (324), the opposite view can be defended as well. Of course, Wolf's self is indeed limited by his inability to use his body, but it is not annihilated. Rather, when he is no longer able to see, move, or speak, he still replies positively to Humphrey's question, 'Are you all there?' (London, 2000: 238). It seems that, contrary to Mitchell's point, the key issue in Wolf's death is precisely the fact that, much as his body is damaged, his spirit remains unchanged, trapped in the immobility of his body. It is both a torture to Larsen, who remains fully conscious of his deteriorating condition until the very end, and a confirmation of Van Weyden's belief that human soul is not simply a function of the physical organism.

Not surprisingly, the confrontation with the adverse conditions at sea and the necessity of fight for survival make Humphrey more self-reliant. Combined with Maud Brewster's love that keeps reminding him of the 'civilized' world he comes from, it results in his becoming a full man. From an unpractical intellectual who was happy that on board the *Martinez* (the ferry that sank in the beginning of the novel) all work was delegated to specialized seamen and that he did not need to worry about anything, Van Weyden becomes a man who does not depend on others to provide for him. However, he gains more than physical strength—if it were strength that mattered, Wolf Larsen would be the one to win the sexual competition for Maud's interest. In the words of Link, 'Hump may start as an effeminate aesthete, but his ability to reshape himself in order to meet the challenges of a new environment gives him "mastery" over his situation' (Link, 2010: 155). Van Weyden's strength is an advantage in the Darwinian fight for survival, and it lies in his ability to adapt, his newly gained flexibility. Mitchell believes the novel makes a full circle, ending with the same Hum-

phrey it started with: 'perhaps less effete now but little different from his earlier self, writing a novel of escape that only reaffirms his stake in his culture and its deep self-divisions' (Mitchell 1998: 333). However, it seems that Humphrey has changed considerably on the psychological level: he becomes not only braver, more self-reliant, and independent but also completes his life through love, which is a clear sign of reaching maturity. His journey is a classic example of the transforming power of the sea, still Romantically understood as the wilderness developing one's true self.

What makes London grow out of Romanticism, however, is the fact that Humphrey needs to marry both self-reliance and the values of the culture he comes from, impersonated by Maud. Moreover, Humphrey's 'self-reliance' can no longer be the Emersonian self-reliance of an individualist seeking spiritual self-fulfillment. Rather, it pertains only to the physical skill of survival, psychological independence, and will to fight. Given London's naturalist background, *The Sea-Wolf* may be read as a novel about a man being shaped by his conditions and adapting in order to survive, that is, more deterministically than this paper has so far proposed. If naturalism is interested in depicting the human being 'manipulated as in an experiment in the scientific laboratory' (Furst and Skrine, 1971: 47), London's novel as well takes a weak intellectual, places him in adverse conditions, and reports on the outcome of the experiment. However, the extent to which *The Sea-Wolf* presents a purely naturalistic vision of the world is debatable. After all, it is Wolf Larsen who professes the 'survival of the fittest' version of Darwinian philosophy, while Humphrey sticks to his idealist belief in the immortal soul. Since Larsen dies and Van Weyden survives, the novel seems to prove the latter right. Perhaps, as Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine phrase it, 'Naturalism succeeded best where it seemed to fail, i.e. where it departed from, or rather outstripped its own intentions' (71). One may believe that Humphrey Van Weyden not only 'survives' but also matures, which is a far more psychological angle than pure naturalism would allow.

If the sea can be a space within which maturation happens, it can also, more surprisingly, be one which welcomes markedly immature characters. Melville's 'Benito Cereno' is a story

of Captain Amasa Delano, who encounters a Spanish slave ship, apparently led by Captain Benito Cereno. Delano visits the vessel and intuitively feels that there is something strange about it, but, until the very last moment, he fails to understand that the ship's crew fell victim to a slave revolt, that Don Benito is only a puppet in the hands of his servant Babo and that the blacks are putting on an almost theatrical show in order to mislead Delano into believing that the few white men on board are still in control of the situation. The whole story is about human perception, or how Delano's character and presuppositions make him blind to the horrific truth on board *San Dominick*.

From the very outset of the story, when the strange ship shows itself to Amasa Delano, the captain is described in a telling way. His 'surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, and way involving the imputation of malign evil in man' (Melville, 1964: 3). This kind of innocence is what will tint Delano's vision throughout his stay on *San Dominick* among the mutinous slaves—the innocence called by Jason Richards simply 'stupidity' (Richards, 2007: 74). Whenever he starts to suspect something peculiar about the behavior of *San Dominick's* crew, he dismisses the thought quickly: 'At last he began to laugh at his former forebodings; and laugh at the strange ship for, in its aspect, someway siding with them, as it were; and laugh, too, at the odd-looking blacks' (Melville, 1964: 31). Delano even feels remorseful when he realizes that he has doubted Divine Providence: 'Once again he smiled at the phantoms which had mocked him, and felt something like a tinge of remorse, that, by harboring them even for a moment, he should, by implication, have betrayed an atheist doubt of the ever-watchful Providence' (Melville, 1964: 65). His belief in Providence is 'his notion of order, which allows him to dismiss his initial misreading' (Barrett, 2011: 412). In other words, Delano feels exempt from thinking independently as he delegates all power to God's plan.

A large part of Delano's problem with perceiving what is really happening on *San Dominick* are his convictions about blacks: his 'romantic racialism'—'the largely northern, sentimental belief

that blacks were childlike and good-natured' (Richards, 2007: 73)—a conviction used by the rebellion's leader Babo, who is 'playing to the Yankee's racial fantasies' (74). When Delano sees black mothers with children, he watches them with fascination, picturing them as noble savages: 'There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love, thought Captian Delano, well pleased' (Melville, 1964: 36). He sees blacks as harmless, because to him they are almost part of the fauna; after all, Delano 'took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs' (50). He also thinks of them as 'natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction' (49). At the same time, when he deliberates whether Cereno is not plotting against his life together with his black slaves, his phrasing is blunter: 'could then Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguin in against it with negroes?' (39). Delano is unable to suspect a mutiny, since he refuses humanity to blacks; within his fantasy, they would be unable to organize and manage such an event, not to mention that their dog-like faithfulness would keep them from wishing to do so.

Thus, Delano's faults amount to his 'ignorance of blacks, a superiority complex, and optimism' (Justman, 1978: 301). He is too good-natured to suspect man of being capable of such deception, and, at the same time, too racist to suspect blacks of such a degree of intelligence. For Laura Barrett, the captain's problem is logocentrism: 'perceiving a literal correspondence between words and things', whereas many signs he misreads 'arrive via symbols' (Barrett, 2011: 412). In this way, Delano's character would reflect a larger cultural formation that relies upon a distinct understanding of language. In Barrett's words, Melville 'creates in Delano the worst kind of reader, one who fancies himself a detective, someone who prides his ability to discern clues and subtle signs, which ultimately do nothing but bolster his entrenched world view' (421). Amasa Delano believes he knows what he sees, whereas in fact he could not be further from the truth. 'Whatever Delano attributes to blacks boomerangs back on him, so that he quickly

resembles the stereotypes that inform his racist ideology' (Richards, 2007: 81): he believes blacks to be good-natured, whereas this very word is used to describe also him; he fancies them similar to faithful Newfoundland dogs, while it is he who resembles one in his simple-minded insistence on the truthfulness of what he sees.

Being unable to understand the real situation on *San Dominick*, Delano is 'dragged into the play, removed from his strictly spectatorial position' and becomes Babo's puppet just like Cereno (80). If Benito Cereno is 'played' by Babo thanks to physical threat, it is truly Delano who integrates with the theatre of the revolting slaves, as he believes the reality of their enactment. Justman sees Delano's position in more pragmatic terms, as an 'agreement to be deceived' (Justman, 1978: 302). He believes that Delano 'shows not innocence but willed ignorance' because believing in the blacks' performance is what guarantees his safety on the ship. However, although the captain's ignorance does indeed work in his favor, it is hard to claim that he is aware of this state of affairs. Rather, the story's poignancy depends on his portrayal as genuinely naïve; a man unaware of evil and thus not allowing for it in the situation he finds himself in. The fact that he is an American, as opposed to the Spaniard Benito Cereno, according to the Romantic belief in America being 'purer' than Europe, only highlights his purity and innocence.

Delano's naivety is shown in the story as synonymous with immaturity. Barrett stresses the fact that the Captain has an extraordinary inclination to fantasy, imagining himself in different surroundings while at sea, which 'mak[es] him a suitable victim for a masquerade' (Barrett, 2011: 422). It also reveals his childlike quality, his being seduced by the playful or fanciful aspect of what he witnesses. The strongest evidence of the Captain's infantilism is his musing when he starts to suspect that Cereno and his slaves might be willing to take his life:

What, I, Amasa Delano—Jack of the Beach, as they called me when a lad—I, Amasa; the same that, duck-satchel in hand, used to paddle along the water-side to the schoolhouse made from the old hulk—I, little Jack of the Beach, that used to go berrying with cousin Nat and the rest; I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard? Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder

Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean. There is some one above. Fie, fie, Jack of the Beach! You are a child indeed. (Melville, 1964: 41)

In this short passage Delano betrays not one but several proofs that show him as a grown-up child. He is indeed still the 'little Jack of the Beach' with whom he identifies; he believes that nothing bad can happen to him, as he is an innocent boy. Moreover, 'His conscience is clean', says Delano revealing his magical thinking typical of children; as he is a good man no harm may come to him. The soliloquy sounds as if the captain was rebuking himself for even admitting an adult thought of possible danger.

Delano does not change even at the end of the story; he is a character for whom there is no maturation taking place. After Benito Cereno is saved, for the rest of his days the Spanish captain is unable to regain his peace of spirit, having witnessed the rebellion, discovered what humans are capable of, and, most importantly, what blacks are capable of when desperate. His view of order and natural hierarchy has been shaken, which makes it impossible for him to continue with his life normally. This, however, does not apply to Delano, who seems not to have understood anything from the Spaniard's ordeal. Delano thinks that the rebellion should remain in the past and that Cereno should enjoy the fact that he is alive. In his naivety he cannot grasp the core of Don Benito's experience.

Delano shares a lot of characteristics with Melville's another famous childlike sailor, Billy Budd. Called by the crew of his ship 'Baby Budd', Billy is presented as an innocent boy requiring protection against the corrupt world: the other sailors 'do his washing, darn old trousers for him; the carpenter is at odd times making a pretty little chest of drawers for him. Anybody will do anything for Billy Budd; and it's the happy family here' (Melville, 1962: 47). He evokes natural feelings of compassion and care. Even by the end of the story, when he awaits to be executed, he resembles 'a slumbering child in the cradle' (119). It is an innocence of the first man before the Fall, lacking self-consciousness, failing to understand irony, which poses him in one line with faithful Saint Bernard's dogs (Goldman, 2005: 434). Interestingly, in 'Benito Cereno' Captain Delano compares blacks to Newfoundland dogs while it is clear that this comparison applies rather to him; here, Billy's

naivety is described by similar means. For Richard Chase, Billy lacks the tragic dimension of existence, never becoming a 'fully knowing man' (Chase, 1949: 266). The same can be said of Delano and his inability to understand Benito Cereno's horror of 'the negro' even after he is saved from *San Dominick*.

Both Delano's and Billy Budd's innocence seems to border on ignorance; they are not Romantically related characters, unspoiled by society and reaching at some transcendental truth. Rather, Melville seems to differ from the mainstream Romantic tendencies, while at the same time being fascinated by those childlike figures. The sea provides escape for those who are not tainted by the understanding of humans' darker side. Also in *Moby Dick* the sea sets one free from the demands of the land; it frees Ishmael from depression, even though at the same time it conveys a death-like element: a threat of drowning (Hamilton, 1979: 420). In its naturalness and ahistoricity it is a metonymic America (420–421), a space of permanent immaturity, outside social norms and forces. While the optimistic interpretation would be to see the sea as another frontier, allowing men for pursuing self-reliance and undergoing maturation (a version of which is Humphrey Van Weyden's story), it accommodates also individualism gone mad, like in the case of Ahab, or childlike simplicity, as it is with Captain Amasa Delano or Billy Budd. Like the American wilderness, it can be a sphere where maladjusted individuals can escape from the demands of society and refuse to grow up.

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