The Flows and Tides of Memory: Reconfiguring Trans-Atlantic Imagery in the Waterscapes of Jonathan Raban's *Old Glory* and *Passage to Juneau*

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Abstract
The essay focuses on the reconfiguration of waterscapes and their symbolic meaning within the arena of Anglo-American relations in two travelogues by Jonathan Raban: *Old Glory* (1981), a descent by boat along the Mississippi in search of the myths and dreams of his youth, and *Passage to Juneau: a Sea and Its Meanings* (1999), the chronicle of his sailing through the Inside Passage, a journey which becomes more and more intertwined with the exploration of his relationship with his past and with his dying father. Through these two travelogues, the essay explores the indistinct, shifting and liminal nature of waterscapes, be they "centres" (the Mississippi) or "borders" (the Pacific North-West), as powerful metaphors and settings for the overlapping realms of life and literature, Old and New World. The watery core of the country and its sea peripheries turn into dialectical spaces of encounter between different times and visions – a geographic and symbolic terrain where the questions posed by the author's journeys are not confined to his own life, but call into question personal and national identities, the relation between art and life, and the meanings of belonging and displacement in contemporary English and American culture.

1. Jonathan Raban and Anglo-American sea-writing

If, as Maurice Halbwachs (1925) wrote, the world is an ocean where all partial stories merge, the waters that either surround or flow through the United States have always represented a fruitful reservoir of geographical and cultural discoveries. From the trans-Atlantic search for fatherhood in Herman Melville's *Redburn*, the watery prairies of *Moby-Dick* and the mystifying world of the river in *The Confidence Man,* to *Huckleberry Finn*'s escapes down the Mississippi and Mark Twain's many travels around the world (not to mention Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* and

Jack London's *The Cruise of the Shark*), rivers and oceans have been central tropes in the spatial imagination of the United States, nurturing its founding myths. Oceans are the fluid membrane that has long allowed the United States to be circumfused with the glittering fiction of the *New World*, while at the same time operating as bridges that connect the *here* and the *elsewhere*, the national and the foreign.

As a huge corpus of trans-Atlantic studies has demonstrated, seascapes are crossroads of places and cultures, chronotopes dense with stories and histories which have, nevertheless, escaped from the constraints of myth thanks to their intrinsic instability, showing the inadequacy of any configuration and interpretation of landscapes as distinct cultural, social and political entities. As Antonis Balasopulos writes:

> If 'history' is 'written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus' (Deleuze and Guattari), the historicity of the ocean remains 'subtle and submarine,' as Derek Walcott eloquently puts it. Despite the undeniable geographical, economic, and political significance of its eruption in the early modern world picture, the sea remains unassimilable to the mainstream historiographical topography of nation and state, capital and province, or metropolis and periphery, just as it persists in defying the striations of borders and boundaries, the furrows of cultivation and civility, the marks of ownership and sovereignty, or the inscriptions of *graphe* and *mimesis.* (Balasopulos 2006: 13)

Rivers and oceans, perceived not as elements of separation, but as paths and connections between spaces as well as times, are key elements in the prolific literary career of the British traveller and travel writer Jonathan Raban, whose life and (largely autobiographical) works have been nurtured by the fertile soil of transnational geographies and cultural hybridity, and to whom *home* and *abroad* have become increasingly blurred entities. A professor of English and American Literature at the University of East Anglia in the late Sixties, Raban decided to free himself from the asphyxiating world of the academy and to make a living out of his qualities as an acute observer, insightful researcher and talented narrator. His love of US literature and culture and his interest in transatlantic exchanges led him to his first exploration of the fluid core of the country in a journey along the Mississippi (*Old Glory: An American Voyage*, 1981),

and since his permanent move to the United States at the beginning of the Nineties, his travel writing has revolved nearly exclusively around the United States: first with *Hunting Mister Heartbreak: A Discovery of America* (1991), a picaresque travelogue on Hector St. John de Crèvecœur's steps; then with *Bad Land: An American Romance* (1996), a book devoted to European immigration to the Western Great Plains at the beginning of the century; and finally with *Passage to Juneau: A Sea and Its Meanings* (1999), a journey by sailboat along the Inside Passage, from his home in Seattle to Alaska, in the good company of the explorers of the past and the ghosts of the present[1].

Whereas Raban's American paths can be read as a spiral movement, roaming to the four corners of the nation and gradually converging towards the centre of his new life as *alien resident* in Seattle, it is worth noticing how both in the first and the most recent of his travelogues he decided to resurrect the tradition of boat journeys. The latter are rare, although not exceptional, in contemporary literature. Besides posing several technical, financial and organisational difficulties, boat travel writing entails isolation and detachment – human contact being reduced to encounters in occasional landing places – as opposed to the emphasis on investigating alternative geographies and mutual exchanges between observer and observed which most contemporary travel writing relies on.

Long fascinated by rivers, the sea, sea reading and sea writing, Raban shows how waterscapes are deeply engrained in both English and American culture, but with different meanings and declensions. As he explains, "the literature of the English Renaissance is crammed with ships, voyages, quadrants, compasses, and nautical clang. The surprising thing is that there is so little sea in it" (Raban 1992: 3). Whereas English writers traditionally equated the sea with tragedies or perilous journeys, American ones, from the Nineteenth century onwards, conceived of it as the alternative frontier to the Western epic, once the latter had become too travelled. Where crossing the sea was an inescapable necessity for every Englishman willing to travel abroad, and the long voyage "was more often endured than

[1] Raban's latest travelogue, *Driving Home. An American Journey*, the last part of the triptych devoted to the Pacific North-West, was released in September 2011.

enjoyed" (Raban 1992: 2), American authors equated the redemptive power of the waters with those of forests and prairies, thus making sea writing contiguous with nature writing. By rooting his own experience in both the English and the American tradition, Raban is one of the very few writers capable of restoring to these fluctuating geographies their primeval function as places of encounter between different cultures and visions, between Old and New World and, as we shall see, between literature and life.

2. *Old Glory* and the fictions of the river

Deep in the American grain, and at the same time dense with literary and symbolic echoes from the English tradition, is Raban's encounter with the American Father of Waters in *Old Glory*, the chronicle of his sailing trip down the Mississippi river from Saint Paul/Minneapolis to the Gulf of Mexico. Ratan's fascination with the Mississippi is deep-rooted: a solitary and often sick child, with an antagonistic relationship to paternal authority and uneasy with his mother's protection, Raban's imagination was nurtured by Twain's rebellious outcasts, whose deeds he tried to emulate on the shores of a small stream close to his home in Norfolk. With his knowledge of the river enriched during his youth and early professorship by George Caleb Bingham's paintings, Zadok Cramer's guide *The Navigator* (1801), Francis Parkman's *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* (1879) and Timothy Flint's *Recollections of the Last Ten Years Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of Mississippi* (1826), Raban's encounter with the New World was mainly filtered through the cultural imagery of previous centuries, nurturing the author's longing for an escape from the constraints of English society, and establishing the Great River in his mind as the essence of travel itself.

Raban's two impulses – the backward glance and the lust for a fresh start – are, to a certain extent, bidirectional in this text: still a traveller and not yet an immigrant, his investigation of the "Old Glory" (a reference to both the U.S. flag and his own, internationally debilitated mother-country) moves along the border between ideal and real, between fantasies and hard-edged reality. Similarly to what had happened a century earlier to Raban's spiritual guide, Mark Twain, who had faced analogous contradictions (and

analogous threats) once he had decided to become a pilot, the new "life on the Mississippi"[2] requires the author to get rid of his longing for aesthetic pleasures in order to survive. Despite Raban's good intentions (aptly paralleled by a meaningful forgetfulness: the author accidentally leaves his beloved copy of *Huckleberry Finn* in the hotel where he spends his last night before leaving), the author's first steps are so faulty that, once near the Mississippi shores in Minneapolis, the romanticised image of the "imaginary river" (Raban 1981: 18) prevents him from even seeing the real one. Getting to know and faithfully representing the authentic Mississippi is not an easy task. As Raban soon finds out, his search for deep connections with the places he visits and their inhabitants is obstructed by his role as narrator, a paradox which becomes self-evident as soon as he leaves the docks of Minneapolis: his departure is filmed six times by a TV crew (save for the last attempt – the only authentic one) in a comic re-enactment that becomes real only in being visible and known to others.

The *fictions* of the river are not only intrinsic to the author's double persona, as traveller and writer (with the inevitable alterations that recounting the experience implies), but are also deeply embedded in the landscape and its commodification. During the journey, the Mississippi of Raban's dreams merges with the Mississippi of the tourist industry – an inauthentic, artificial cluster of luxurious steamboats, restored or even brand new hotels and alleged historical landmarks. This was so widespread that

> The Mississippi was two rivers. They lay right beside each other, but flowed in opposite directions. The steamboats, the historical markets, the fancy Golden Age hotels, the scenic bluffs and gift shops were all going one way, while the river on charts, with its tows, grain elevators, slaughterhouses, factories, water towers and gantries, was going in quite another. I had done my share of travelling on the first river, but it was a cute irrelevance compared with the deep, dangerous, epic power of the real Mississippi. (Raban 1981: 229)

The apex of Disneyfication can be found at Hannibal, Missouri, Mark Twain's hometown and the setting of many of his novels, now a place ruthlessly exploited by the tourist industry, which has

[2] As Twain entitled his 1883 travelogue.

twisted "Twain's angry masterpiece and civilised it into a nice, profit-making chunk of sentimental kitch" (Raban 1981: 233). Although Hannibal is nowadays an important agricultural and commercial centre, its everyday activities are ignored by tourists and even by the government, as testified by the fact that President Jimmy Carter's visit during his electoral campaign was strictly limited to the Mark Twain Museum.

Besides the presence of overt tourist traps, Raban's search for authenticity is impeded by the disconnect between European and American conceptions of the past. To Europeans (and Raban in particular), *authenticity* is equated only with the original version of the real, authenticated by the flow of time, whereas all copies are misrepresentations. As Terry Caesar underlines, "to each European, America is taken to represent a certain absence, whether of society or history" (Caesar 1994: 69). On the other hand, to Americans, simulacra can be repositories of the historical truth because the "authority of history" is located in space (Caesar 1994: 69). So, when Raban spends the night at the luxuriously restored St. James Hotel, he dislikes it precisely because *authentic* is to him something that is faithful to its past in the acceptance of the flow of time, something that is both "unlocked" and "unrestored" (Raban 1981: 109), and not decked out and adorned to satisfy visitors' nostalgic desires.

The question of authenticity becomes crucial at the end of the journey. Once in New Orleans, Raban realises that the city is another stopover along the inauthentic river set up for tourists – an enormous theme park, whose artificiality overwhelms the traveller:

> New Orleans was telling me plainly that I was laughably deluded: I wasn't a traveller at all; I was just another rubberneck in a city that made its living out of credulous rubbernecks. Go buy a guidebook! Take a buggy ride! Get your picture painted! Eat *beignets*! Listen to the sound of Old Dixie! Have yourself a relief massage; then *go home*, shmuck! (Raban 1981: 389)

Whereas New Orleans is ceaselessly on sale to tourists' appetites, some miles further on, in the labyrinthine geography of the bayous, another Mississippi is represented, one whose depths are not merely geographical, and whose role will be pivotal in the author's investigation of the trans-Atlantic exchange.

3. Under the surface, against the current

The Mississippi that Raban holds as the real one is the river of everyday life activities, with its routine, its commerce, and even its waste. From St. Paul's shores, "solidly blocked in with cranes, derricks, huge steel drums, gantries, chutes, silos and brick warehouses" (Raban 1981: 40), to the small fishing boats and the illicit trades of the bayous, this Mississippi becomes one of the gateways to exploring America's front- and back-yard. The author's journey along the Father of Waters soon turns into both a social investigation of the American character and the American way of life from the perspective of a foreigner and a way to test that foreignness in the New World *milieu.* Raban's river is, as for many of his predecessors, the microcosm of the whole nation; a conflicting, rhizomatic space whose history is dense with conflicts and contradictions.

As the traveller soon finds out, the relationship between the nation and the river has always been a troubled one. Forever linked in the American imagination to the period of the great commercial and industrial explosion, the river is nowadays inextricably associated with the past. Save for tourist purposes, few are the towns that still see the river as a resource; rather, it has become nearly everywhere "the skeleton in the city's family closet" (Raban 1981: 27), and for more than one reason. Despite the river being an economic pillar for many towns located on its banks, the communities living near its shores generally equate it with dirt and corruption, both physical and moral: the river is alleged to bring vice, lax morals, and (perhaps even more dangerous for Southern society) radical ideas. To those communities, it evokes bad memories of floods, cholera, and, especially in the South, the spectre of slavery – related as the river was to cotton plantations and the cotton trade (Raban 1981: 447). One hundred years later, the river is still a realm of the outcasts: the misfits of small town society or apathetic youths with no prospects are Raban's most common encounters. It is not surprising, then, to find out that children are taught to fear and keep a distance from the river (Raban 1981: 167), that in their eyes it has no more allure than a big, wet highway.

The architecture itself of many towns and cities reveals how the latter have turned their back on the Mississippi, from Minneapolis, where the river flows between the poorest and most dangerous

neighbourhoods, to Cape Girardeau, Missouri, a village that even erected a wall to defend itself from the waters. As the author suggests, the communities' attitude toward the river mirrors their attitude toward the Other – a phobic closure towards everything that comes from outside. The detachment of everyday life from the Mississippi becomes here both the cause and consequence of the towns' implosion: Lansing, Iowa, Caruthersville, Tennessee, Galena, Wisconsin, Morgan City, Louisiana, are villages whose "crude small-town xenophobia" (Raban 1981: 191) originates from their refusal to accept the hybrid and complex nature of the river, its powerful vital force, as well as from their attempt to preserve a pastoral idyll that belongs exclusively to the realm of imagination (as Ross Flick's miniature Eden shows – Raban 1981: 179-80).

Although the traveller could be, to a certain extent, a subversive element amongst people who "love foreigners and hate strangers" (Raban 1981: 159), the author turns out to be no more than an exotic intruder whose journey in America's backyard generates curiosity and, to Americans who had visited Europe, even nostalgia. It is not Englishness that prevents Raban from being perceived as a menace; rather, it is his status as a tourist, with its transience, that allows him to preserve and sometimes even glory in his being Other. The ambivalence embedded in an acceptance of the Other according to citizenship becomes evident when Raban meets two fellow countrywomen who migrated to the United States after the Second World War. The first, Everett Asquith, who married an American soldier, "was determined to turn herself into an American. She got a job as a night-nurse at the local hospital […] She dressed herself from the Sears catalogue and drove to the supermarket in the station wagon" (Raban 1981: 312)[3]. The second, Jeannie, left by her lover after her arrival in the United States, had been dreaming for thirty years of going back to England and in the meantime lived alone in a dirty shack, assisted only by a caring, slightly retarded friend. The ironic fact that, despite living only a few miles from one another, they ignore each other's existence, further underlines how different attitudes towards Americanisation are crucial to the definition of the foreigner's status and position.

[3] For an analysis of Raban's linguistic strategies see Michael Cronin 2000: 9-38.

More than home countries or hometowns, what really unites people and contributes to the creation of cohesive communities is their love for the river. Whereas, for most of the inhabitants, the Mississippi is only a place for a temporary transgression or weekend excursions, to Raban as well as to some Americans it becomes a refuge from the horrors of provincial life. In a nation where even the word *territory*, long associated with openness, freedom and expanse, has so radically reconfigured its meaning that it now refers to a closed property or plot of ground (Raban 1981: 253), the Mississippi is the only open frontier for the dreamers and the would-be runaways. The whole of Raban's journey is dotted with encounters with men who, like him, have allowed the river to become their private obsession: Herb Heichert, who is to Raban what Bixby was to Twain; Mr. Oakman, the "collector" who retrieves everything from the Mississippi's shores, including an amazed narrator (Raban 1981: 283); and the communities living aboard the tows (Raban 1981: 450), to whom life on the land is more an illusion than true life. It is precisely aboard the huge ships carrying goods down the river that Raban's dreams of an alternative community come true, his membership sanctioned by the formal acceptance of Bob Kelley's "written certificate" (Raban 1981: 384).

While the changeability and permeability of the river clash with the conservative/reactionary attitude of the shores, they also pose Raban some problems at the end of his route. Where exactly should his journey – and the narrative – stop? Disappointed by the Disneyfication of New Orleans, Raban's journey proceeds first to the bayous and then to a foretaste of the salt water of the Gulf of Mexico. Incapable of locating a geographical ending for his quest[4], Raban chooses an arbitrary (but deeply symbolic) line at which to

[4] The flaws in the finale of the book were underlined by the *New York Times* critic Noel Perrin, who compares Raban's faults with *Huckeberry Finn*'s unsatisfactory ending, and are mainly due to the structure of the journey itself, merging travel and life, and, perhaps even more, to the geographical setting – that is, the shifting and permeable nature of a waterscape. See Perrin N., "*Old Glory*" (review) – http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/06/books/old-glory-american-voyage-jonathan-raban-409-pp-new-york-simon-schuster-16.95.html?pagewanted=all, last accessed August 20, 2012. Raban himself anticipated the criticism, explaining how "The journey would turn into a complete narrative, where life – one's own life – could only be an unfinished story with an inconclusive plot" (Raban 1981: 502-503).

point "the bow back, in the […] dumb, urban direction" (Raban 1981: 408): a strip between fresh and salt water in the Gulf of Mexico, an indistinct membrane separating the river and the sea. Rather than a point of arrival, this invisible mark in the water becomes for Raban a new beginning: following the route of the armadillos, which struggle and often die on their journey north towards the United States (an undisguised metaphor for many illegal aliens who risk their life daily by crossing the Rio Grande), Raban starts his quest for a new life across the ocean, as many fellow travellers and immigrants before him. Once the sea is reached, the muddy waters of the Mississippi mouth turn into an entrance, though uninspiring and too close to a *cloaca*[5] - an epilogue "not in fantasies of purity, but embracing America's body in all its dirt and complexity" (Dix 2001: 78).

Raban's experience along the Mississippi turns into a maieutic force, pivotal to the transition between the author's two "trans-Atlantic identities" (English and American, "traveller" and "immigrant") represented in his subsequent work, *Hunting Mr Heartbreak* (1991). Mostly set on the mainland, the opening and closing of this travelogue (with a trans-Atlantic passage as a rebirth at the beginning, and fantasies over death and dissolution in the Gulf of Mexico at the end) enforce the perception of the sea as both the repository of new identities born through a rite of passage (Raban 1991: 2), and the permeable membrane of a "national body"[6] that first absorbs and then expels the migrants, whose sea-routes, from South America to the Caribbean and the Pacific, are all crossed by Raban during his own wanderings[7].

4. Northward and forward, in search of the past

After nearly twenty years spent in Seattle, the last three of which with his second wife and his daughter, the author returns to waterscapes in a twofold exploration of the geographical present and the spiritual

[5] This is an indirect reference to Fanny Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832). See Dix 2001: 78.

[6] "National body" is the definition of the Mississippi given by Twain. See Dix 2001: 82.

[7] For an analysis of this travelogue and the role of waterscapes in the immigrant experience, see Schiavini 2011: 33-50.

past, and ventures out again by sea aboard his ship (prophetically named *Penelope*), northward bound. His destination is Juneau, Alaska, to be reached by sailing across the Inside Passage – a series of straits and inlets mapped between 1791 and 1795 by the English captain George Vancouver. The purpose of Raban's journey is simple and, at the same time, ambitious: "I hoped to lay some ghosts to rest and to come to terms, somehow, with the peculiar attraction that draws people to put themselves afloat on the deep, dark, indifferent, cold, and frightening sea. 'Meditation and water are wedded for ever', wrote Melville. So, for the term of a fishing season, I meant to meditate on the sea, at sea" (Raban 1999: 6). However, the adventures and difficulties he has to face are far from being circumscribed to the dangers of the waters: his father's cancer and death force Raban to interrupt his journey and to fly back to England; and the request for divorce made by his wife at the end of the journey proves that the rougher sea is the one waiting for him on land.

Contrary to the common representation of the Pacific Northwest as the Last Frontier where young men out of college go to make their fortune, Raban depicts his journey along that coast as one last step across an over-written and over-travelled landscape, dense with stories and meanings, contested two centuries before by Spanish and English explorers, and nowadays by the fishing and tourist industry (with the native inhabitants as an inconvenience to get rid of). In an only apparent movement from civilisation to wilderness, "Raban's work manages to be both deeply personal and brimming with other people's writing," writes Peter Hulme. "Baudelaire and Conrad provide his epigraphs; Vancouver and Cook are constant companions along with a host of lesser known travellers and writers who have had something to say about the inside passage" (Hulme 2002: 96). Again waters become a repository of the past, authenticity, and a sense of community. It is not by chance that Raban's journey backward in time starts precisely when the author comes close to the seashores and the traces left there by the immigrants. In Seattle, the place of virtual realities, the author finds the "bastion of old fashioned work" (Raban 1999: 5) only in the city's maritime harbour, with the "ghostly presences of European fishing communities of the fjords, bays and sounds of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Scotland and Ireland, from where most of the families had come" (Raban 1999: 5).

The good company of explorers, anthropologists and missionaries (including Vancouver, James Cook, Peter Puget, Archibald McKenzies, Alessandro Malaspina, Alcalà Galiano and many others), whose books occupy the shelves of the boat, is more than ever essential to remind Raban how, despite the faint traces of human presence in the natural environment, "to put oneself afloat on a sea-route as old and heavily travelled as the Inside Passage was to join the epic cavalcade of all those, present and past, who'd found some meaning in these waters" (Raban 1999: 35). As he learned on his previous travels, the author is aware that every perspective on space is moulded by the visions of one's predecessors, and a huge part of his narrative deals with how Europeans and Natives conceived of and depicted seascapes. From the Medieval vision of the ocean as a disruptive force to the Renaissance image of it as a "*tabula rasa* on which to inscribe new routes of trade, exploration, and imperial conquest" (Raban 1999: 34), Europeans have long equated power with motion, sea with chaos. As for the Pacific Northwest, antithetical perspectives have shaped its image since its discovery: whereas to Vancouver's enlightened and rational perspective those coasts appeared desolate and unattractive, to the aristocratic youth aboard the same ship, nurtured by reading Burke, they looked like unsurpassed wonders worth celebrating in drawings and letters home; a *gusto* later shared by John Muir and Thomas Moran, who painted the Pacific Northwest as an exotic, uncontaminated paradise, able to satisfy the escapist desires of Europeans back home[8].

On the contrary, Pacific tribes saw the ocean as the *locus* of community and belonging, order and stability. The paths of the sea were as familiar to these tribes as the ones on dry land were to the Europeans. They regarded the seawaters as a workplace, an open market, a battleground – "the front doorstep in which visitors were formally greeted" (Raban 1999: 105), the social arena which the land,

[8] Clear dichotomies and borders between cultures are nevertheless difficult to draw: if European visions of the Pacific Northwest spring from the dream-fantasies of a stylish natural paradise, according to Raban, the heritage of classical myths can be found in Indian cultures as well. "For Odysseus, as for the Polynesian navigators in the books of Lewis and Feinberg, the ocean is a place, not a space; its mobile surface full of portents, clues, and meanings" (Raban 1999: 95).

with its thick forests and natural perils, could not be. To Natives, the ocean looked like a dense, intricate pattern of routes and rules, the repository of traditions and social order necessary to preserve community bonds; it was "a place, not a space" (Raban 1999: 95), whose mutability and permeability was opposed to the fixity of the terrestrial element on which Old World societies were founded. Thus,

> The ship-of-state metaphor, usually rather a fancy notion, applied with peculiar literalness to the culture of the North-west Indians, for whom the imperiled canoe was both a daily fact and, in their myths and stories, a figurative means of defining their society. The great protective web of customs, rules, and rituals that the coastal Indians spun around themselves was a navigational system, designed to keep the canoe of the family and village from drifting over the lip of the maelstrom. (Raban 1999: 37)

Like the Natives, for whom the ocean is a safe refuge, the symbol of eternity linking the past and the present, the here and the elsewhere, Raban too conceives of the sea as the centre where the different fragments of his life and identity converge and coalesce, in a ceaseless dialogue that questions (to the point of subverting) the meanings of *home* and *abroad*.

Whereas in *Old Glory* Raban occupies a liminal position between affiliation to England and to the United States, and his Mississippi "attempts at what Henry James calls 'dispatriation' – the effort to shed all conceivable fathers and fatherlands" (Dix 2001: 65), in *Passage to Juneau* home and abroad are even more fragmented and indistinct. While the United States remain largely the centre of Raban's investigation, their meaning has been radically reconfigured. From the *elsewhere* the author dreamt of from English shores, the United States have now become the safe harbour he is willing to return to – save that, as he will realise at the end of the journey, there is no longer a *home* for him to go back to. An Odysseus wishing to rejoin his (unfaithful) Penelope, the traveller is snared in the real and metaphorical circularity that inextricably links both Seattle and Alaska, and, as we will see, Europe and America. "Though I had travelled 1,000 miles to reach Juneau, it sometimes seemed that I'd only come full circle" (Raban 1999:

412), the author realises upon his arrival in Alaska. The tangential route of the journey along the Pacific coast metaphorically bends into a circular movement, mainly because Juneau looks more and more like an appendix of Seattle: once in Alaska, he notices how "almost every car on the road wore the plates of dealerships in the Seattle suburbs – Auburn, Bellevue, Redmond…" (Raban 1999: 412). Despite their geographical distance, the two cities are drawn close by their mutual dependency: where Juneau depends on Seattle for everything, from hospitals to the disposal of its waste, it reciprocates with escapist fantasies. Alaska is conceived by Seattle inhabitants as their own personal backyard – the embodiment of a national fantasy the author himself has long pursued: "Alaska travelled light […] It answered to the thick streak of nomadism in my own makeup. It mirrored all my slovenliness, my taste for the temporary and the makeshift, my weakness for crazes, discarded almost as soon as embarked on" (Raban 1999: 394).

Although the geographical distance between Seattle and Juneau is metaphorically blurred by the deep cultural, social and economic convergences linking these two extremes (which end up being only different moments in the ceaseless individual and national longing for escape), the space that sets Seattle and Juneau apart in Raban's journey is nevertheless significant in the reconfiguration of the trans-Atlantic imagination and of the relationship between the past and the present. Contrary to the United States, in fact, Canada becomes for Raban more a middle-ground than an elsewhere, a place which sets the relation between nature and culture, between the Old and the New World, on an entirely new basis. Full of edenic inlets where frontier life looks like a real possibility rather than just a dream, but at the same time dense with the history of its native past, Canada is initially opposed to American Disneyfication; "differential more as absence than presence, it was a Canadian fate to wish, forlornly, that America lay elsewhere, across a palpable vacancy, a *cordon sanitaire*" (Raban 1999: 114). More permeable to *otherness*, be it the forces of nature or the ethnic communities' attempts to preserve their cultural heritage, Canadian cultural fissures are to Raban "ambiguous and indistinct" (Raban 1999: 113) precisely because of their pliability: "After hard-edged America, Canada seemed out of focus. As it resisted ideology and national myth-making, so did it resist definition. In this land of chronic translation, there

was no national translation for the American Dream – an idea too grandiose for a country that has inherited the English tradition of pooh-poohing empiricism" (Raban 1999: 121). Paradoxically, it is this cultural blurring that makes Raban feel in a *foreign land*, precisely because Canada does not require any rite of passage, any metaphorical death and rebirth; on the contrary, it embraces his Englishness (an identity that he has tried to erase with the status of "US resident alien") and thus reminds him of his distance from his former homecountry. Like the sea, Canada's indistinctness works as a *limbo* that symbolically ferries the author backward in space and time towards the Old World, where the death of his father will be coupled with another even more perilous journey – through the inside passage of the author's life.

5. Memory, sailing and writing

Both a neutral interstice that separates inversely related worlds and the risky path that connects them, the sea is also pivotal to Raban's interior quest – a parallel exploration that goes hand in glove with his movement in space. In a world where no place is remote any more, Raban follows Captain Vancouver, an explorer sent to the Pacific Northwest by the British government to map a coast already known to sailors and fur traders, to "ensure that there was no discovery to be made" (Raban 1999: 312). In *Passage to Juneau* too, the true realm for discovery is the self: "When we gaze down, searching for some shadowy profundity below the surface, what usually comes back to us is merely *us*" (Raban 1999: 33). As Robin Jarvis underlines, "Raban employs the fluid mechanics of the voyage to test the limits of his solid, agnostic Englishness, and uses the narrative of his self-discovery – that exemplary Romantic conceit – as a means of opening up a more generous conversation of minds and identities than was possible for the pioneers whose progress he shadows" (Jarvis 2005: 201). Whereas, in previous texts, self-discovery functioned either to measure the cultural distance between the two Atlantic shores (*Old Glory*) or to parody the permeability and mutability of the self (*Hunting Mr Heartbreak*), in *Passage to Juneau* the wild and solitary landscapes of the Northwest, inhabited mainly by the ghosts of the past, constitute the perfect setting for the author's introspective speculations and attempts at reconciliation.

As the author proceeds along his route, the sea turns into a symbol of the uncertainties of existence. Here the currents, the whirlpools, the dangers of the water are metaphors for the ones hidden in everyday life. As Raban later admitted, "I knew from the beginning it was going to be a book about turbulence. I wanted to use that Indian sense of navigation of a boat as metaphor for the navigation of a soul through life" (Raban 2000). This is why the focal points that give shape to the narrative are not events related to the journey, but to his life: his father's illness and death, and his wife's request for divorce. While the second climax enters the frame only at the end of the journey, his father's illness and death become the backbone of the author's meditations during the sailing. Interior and real landscapes progressively blur in *Passage to Juneau*: past, present and future, stability and flux, old and new identities come to be represented by the various geographies the author intersects.

Raban notes how American and Canadian cultures epitomise two distinct, even opposing attitudes, in particular as far as relationships to the past and to fatherhood are concerned. While the United States celebrate the runaway son, Oedipus, in Canada it is the loyalty of another son, Telemachus, searching for his lost father that is to be praised. But

> I was Oedipus, not Telemachus – an escapee, a new lifer, a rainbow-chaser. An immigrant, not an *émigré*. Leaving Britain for the United States was an attempt to make a clean break with my past, as going to Canada could never have been. In Seattle, I thought, I could shake off the dust of England and make a fresh start […] Canada was for realists, and I was no realist. When I took my seat on the plane at Heathrow, I was an ageing Huck Finn in search of a territory to light out for. (Raban 1999: 119)

However, clear lines in life are not as easy to draw as state borders, especially when his father's illness forces the author to go back to his home country for the last, and saddest, time.

Death is deeply related to the sea, writing and fatherhood: as Balasopulos writes about the significance of seascapes in Western cultures, "utopian desire grows out of precisely that which makes the admiral anxious – a spatial vacuum that is taken to signal an enabling, if temporary, vacuum of authority" (Balasopoulos 2006: 21). Where, in *Old Glory*, fantasies of journey by water were

the antidote to his father's repression and control, in *Passage to Juneau* the relationship between the two is ambivalent. On the one hand, the idyllic world of boats and bays is again the symbol of the freedom from paternal authority Raban had longed for: "Potts Lagoon!" (Raban 1999: 288), the placid bay in which the author found refuge for his boat before leaving for England, is the imperative his brother reminds him of during the funeral. On the other hand, the sea turns into a realm of death: from the very beginning of his narrative, where echoes from Melville's *Moby Dick* reverberate, Raban reminds us of the high tribute of lives the sea claimed from the communities living along its shores: the fishermen's funerals, the memorial in Seattle harbour, the funerary habits of Native tribes are all signs of the dark side of the ocean. After his return from England, the relationship between the sea and death transcends the contingency of lives lost at sea and acquires a far more complex and symbolic value. Despite Raban's assertion that "thinking of my father's voyage made me forget my own" (Raban 1999: 385), his father's voyage into the realm of death ends up becoming, to a certain extent, his own[9].

Death and the sea are inextricably related in the author's recollections of his father and his last days, and his father's death turns into a phantom haunting the emptiness of the ocean. When he boards her again, *Penelope*, which he had previously described as "a working vessel – my narrative vehicle" (Raban 1999: 14), now looks to him like a coffin (Raban, 1999: 293), or a bridge to the afterlife – exactly as it was for Native tribes, who used canoes for burials. To them death was a voyage by water, the body given back to the sea; to Raban death is "a wilderness in which everyone is lost for words" (Raban 1999: 258) – a wilderness always associated with water. What the author tries to give back to the sea is not the body but the spirit and memory of his lost father. Thus, in the weeks following his death, while Raban resumes his journey northward, his father comes back to life, "lively and paradoxical" (Raban 1999: 304), as a

[9] As Jarvis notes, "Some of the most memorable discoveries Raban makes on his journey have to do not with places or local culture but with death, or with insights into his relationship with his father that assume special prominence in the context of his death" (Jarvis 2005: 197).

haunting presence, seen by the author "aboard half of the boats in the Alaskan fishing fleet" (Raban 1999: 310).

Besides being a *memento* of the transience of life, the sea also becomes the metaphorical terrain of a dialogue between father and son which the author regrets having been so occasional in real life; what now emerges is an *afterlife exchange*, continually mediated by the waterscape. When Raban compares the sea to the dying man's wasted body, both subject to the same unruly and disorderly changes, his father answers him back through one of his favourite readings, a page from Marcus Aurelius that "sometimes [...] seemed to speak to me in my father's own voice" (Raban 1999: 432):

> In the life of a man, his time is but a moment, his being an incessant flux, his senses a dim rushlight, his body a prey of worms, his soul an unquiet eddy, his fortune dark, and his fame doubtful. In short, all that is of the body is as coursing waters, all that is of the soul as dreams and vapours; life a warfare, a brief sojourning in an alien land; and after repute, oblivion. (quoted in Raban 1999: 421)

What further contributes to binding the sea journey and the search for rapprochement with the past, making the father figure the pillar and the driving force of most of Raban's quest, are the similarities between his father and Raban's predecessor, Vancouver. Both shared a love of science and exactitude – be it in mathematics, in army life (his father), or in lunar distance (Vancouver) –, a distaste for the sublime and the irrational, and an authoritarian and repressive attitude towards the son (the first) or the aristocratic youth aboard his ship (the latter). In the light of these similarities, Raban's journey appears to be first an act of unconscious exorcism of his father's presence and then a conscious reconciliation with his memory.

This introspective journey requires the use of both of Raban's work tools – "the journey and the book" (Raban 1989: 231-238)[10], as the author titles an important part of his literary autobiography. Although the chronicle of his sailing trip and of the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest are highly evocative, the complex and rich mosaic of reading and writing about the sea, about death, and

[10] The essay was originally published in *The New York Times* in 1981.

in particular about death by sea are the true epiphanies of the travelogue. The author uses art to mediate his subjectivity in such dramatic moments, when irony, detachment and the use of fictional selves and third-person narration (Raban's favourite subterfuge used in his previous work to protect himself) would be useless. Lost for words when facing death, Raban borrows them from poets and writers of the past as well as the present.

Since his beloved American nature writers (like Gary Snider, Barry Lopez, Richard Nelson) and their sanctification of life cycles are unable to suture the deep scar of loss (not sharing their pantheistic faith in nature, he admits feeling "an agnostic in their church: embarrassed, half-admiring, unable to genuflect in the right place", Raban 1999: 191), Raban's quest brings him back again to his former home country. The author turns his mind to English culture, and to that Romanticism which so intensely fascinated the young aristocrats aboard Vancouver's vessel, echoing the late Eighteenth- and early Nineteenth-century writers who were able to encapsulate death in both the arts and nature. Thus, the true climax of the book, intertwined with the account of his father's death ("a deposition scene, a *pietà*", Raban 1999: 274), is the long description of Shelley's death by water aboard his beloved schooner *Don Juan*, and of his pagan funeral on the shores of Viareggio. Once again, lives and words are deeply interwoven, and death refracted between past and present, land and water, life and literature: Shelley's cremation is a further cross-reference to his father's last will, as is Raban's chronicle of the dry response to Shelley's prediction of his own death "on the drear ocean's waste" (cit. in Raban 1999: 266) in the poem *Alastor*[11]. As the author tries to exorcise death through literature, so he tries to cope with the end of his marriage through another predecessor's autobiographical work, Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*, a book able to transform, according to Raban, "the humiliating disaster of his first marriage into triumphant, grave comedy" (Raban 1999: 426). Not by chance, water realms converge in Waugh's novel as the synthesis of Raban's own fluid landscapes with the protagonist Tony Last drowning in the Amazon basin.

[11] Besides Shelley, Raban references William Cowper's "The Cast-Away" (1798) and Lord Anson's *A Voyage Around the World* (1748) , where parallels between the sea and death are further stressed.

Whereas in *Old Glory* the author imagines his narrative as an erratic flow moving alongside the forces of the river and of destiny[12], in *Passage to Juneau* sea and death have to be tamed and given shape through the tight knots of reading and writing. And, since "memory, not the notebook, holds the key" (Raban 1989: 225), on his return journey to Seattle Raban leaves his notebook to one side and learns pages of his most-loved authors by heart. Reading and keeping watch at the same time allow him to superimpose the "moving picture of another world" (Raban 1999: 426) onto the primeval landscape of sea and forests. Novels, poems, recollections and essays are now the only maps capable of giving him directions. While crossing the "post-romantic world" (Jarvis, 2005) of the Inner Strait, where the emptiness of the sea both echoes and engenders the author's sense of loss and fear, books cannot be left behind in a motel room any more. In his navigation across the pains of life, they provide the anchor and the compass, as well as the safe harbour the author can find shelter in. Raban's journey leaves the sea and enters the book well before his arrival home, the pages of the travelogue turning into a sea of texts, quotes and memories, which gradually replace the depth of the real ocean. By bringing forward the threshold that separates travel from reading and writing, and incorporating the latter in the journey's narrative, Raban artfully portrays "the sea and its meaning", the diegetic process and the process of self-discovery as entwined, infinite quests that transcend territorial belonging and national identities to reach a fluid, hybrid trans-Atlantic self, nurtured by multiple imageries and kept afloat by the tides of memory and the power of storytelling.

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[12] "The book and the journey would be all of a piece. The plot would be written by the current of the river itself. It would carry one into deep pools of solitude, and into brushes with society on the shore. Where the river meandered, so would the book... one would try to be as much like a piece of human driftwood as one could manage. Cast off, let the Mississippi take hold, and trust to whatever adventures or longueurs the river might throw one's way" (Raban 1981: 18).

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