# The Sea

**Last remaining lair of unparalleled wildness. Too big to fail?**

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The whole world is being objectified, but Melville reminds us of all that remains. “There you stand, lost in the infinite series of the sea.” What could be more tangible, more of a contrast with being lost in the digital world, where we feel we can never properly come to grips with anything?

Oceans are about time more than space, “as if there were a correlation between going deep and going back,” he writes. The Deep is solemn; linking, in some way, all that has come before. Last things and first things. “Heaven,” by comparison, is thin and faintly unserious.

“Over All the Face of Earth Main Ocean Flowed,” announced the poem by John Milton. Given its 71 percent predominance on this planet, why is our world called Earth instead of Sea? Much of the land, in fact, could be defined as littoral areas where land and sea meet. The sea is a textured place, infinite in its moods, forms, energies–and not so easily de-textured.

But we see what happens when culture is privileged over place. The sea, where all life began just this side of four billion years ago, must still sustain us. Not only are its waters the original source of life, it also shapes the climate, weather, and temperature of the planet, and therefore the status of terrestrial species.

Kant saw truth as akin to an island surrounded by a stormy sea; water might “run wildly” and drown reason. Chaos, disorder were always to be feared and brought under control. In Milton’s paradise, the ocean is chafing under restraint, suggesting that it can yield truth when freed.

The power of nature is to be respected, not domesticated.

We come to life in water, in the amniotic fluid. Blood–and tears–are salty like the sea, menstrual cycles like the tides of the maternal sea, our mother. The sea is mountains rolling, sometimes calm and tempered.

For Swinburne, “the storm sounds only/More notes of more delight…” So many qualities; even phosphorescent at times, as I have seen on the Sea of Cortez. The seascape shows a magnificent array of fluctuating aspects and energies.

John Ruskin found therein “to all human minds the best emblem of unwearied unconquerable power, the wild, various, fantastic, tameless unity of the sea.”

If the earth is alive, the oceans are its most living parts. The sea whispers, croons, bellows in its unnumbered moods, always the “ground note of the planet’s undersong,” as California poet George Sterling put it.

The very pulse of the sea, not only its perpetual motion, has us imagining that it is drawing breath. Inspirations and exhalations of a living, if unimaginably vast animal; many have written of the sea as a fellow creature. English poet and novelist Malcolm Lowry recorded this meditation: “Each drop into the sea is like a life, I thought, each producing a circle in the ocean, or the medium of life itself, and widening into infinity.”

In the deep, there is beauty and music, the sweeping surge of it is a matchless strength, a tireless spirit of freedom. Writing in his journal in 1952, Thomas Merton noted that every wave of the sea is free. We might seek a heart like the sea: ever open and at liberty.

American anthropologist and philosopher Loren Eiseley decided that “if there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.” Why does running water, even a fountain or an aquarium, soothe or even heal? Far more potent, incomparable, is the spell of the ocean.

“I was born in the breezes, and I had studied the sea as perhaps few men have studied it, neglecting all else,” Joshua Slocum revealed in his late 19th century account, Sailing Alone Around the World. For many, the sea demands a deep loyalty, prompted by sheer wonder and the promise of peak experiences.

A sense of being fully animal and fully alive. Ocean-hearted? The sea’s staggering presence, its pure openness, brings on very powerful sensations. Rimbaud perhaps went furthest in trying to capture it in words:

I have recovered it.

What? Eternity.

It is the sea

Matched with the sun.

As the young James Joyce evoked the sea: “The clouds were drifting above him silently and silently the seatangle was drifting below him: and the grey warm air was still: and a wild new life was singing in his veins…On and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him.”

The sea, our deepest origin, calls to us. Sea-born, we are drawn seaward. Alain Corbin, discussing the work of Adolphe de Custine, recounts the latter’s orientation toward that which “instinctively relates to our origins…” Namely, that the “sight of the open sea…contributes to the discovery of the deep inner self.”

There is an exalting and revelatory experience possible in such a confrontation with the elements. We are humbled at the shore, on the waves, our presence a question. “The completeness and certainty of nature makes life bearable, less anguished,” as American anthropologist Richard Nelson has written.

When I was a small child at mid-century, our family sometimes drove west about sixty miles to visit my Dad’s brother Ed on the central Oregon coast. My brother and I competed to be the first to see the ocean and cry “I see it!” It was a thrill to catch that first glimpse, every time. About thirty years later, I came back to Oregon from California and worked in Newport at a shrimp cannery, near places called Boiler Bay and Devil’s Punchbowl.

I don’t think it’s surprising that one can feel giddy at the massive sight. The Pacific encompasses fully one-third of the globe, 64 million square miles. Twice the size of the Atlantic. The absolute, (anti-)monumental There of it.

Is it not true that we are all somehow called to the sea by its lure, persuasion, gravity? Until he was forty, John Ruskin was drawn to have “merely stared all day long at the tumbling and creaming strength of the sea.” A century later, Robert Frost wrote: “The people along the sand/All turn and look one way./They turn their back on the land. They look at the sea all day.” Where every wave is different, and the heart and soul expand.

Loren Eiseley felt the Gulf of Mexico pulling him southward as he lazed in Nebraska’s Platte River. And more than that: “I was water…” In 1826, Heinrich Heine had expressed a similar union: “I love the sea as my soul. Often, it even seems to me that the sea really is my soul.” Swimming in the ocean involves an “intimate immensity,” to borrow a term from French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. It connects with vastness and is inward, yet also a vigorous and robust experience. There can be challenges and perils, of course.

Robert Louis Stevenson described a Hawai’ian woman who swam for nine hours “in a high sea,” carrying the body of her husband home. Albert Camus confided, “I have always felt I lived on the high seas, threatened, at the heart of a royal happiness.”

According to a 2006 American Historical Review article, the maritime dimension has become a subject in its own right. “No longer outside time, the sea is being given a history, even as the history of the world is being retold from the perspective of the sea,” it says. Unfortunately, its arrival on the stage has occurred on the heels and in the context of another inauguration, heralded by German essayist Gottfried Benn: “Now the series of great insoluble disasters itself is beginning.”

The fate of the once freshening sea is now that of crashing fish numbers, accelerated loss of marine and coastal habitats on a global scale, garbage gyres hundreds of miles across, dying coral reefs, growing dead zones (e.g., hypoxic zones in the northern Gulf of Mexico), to cite a few disastrous developments long in the making.

Water is "the most mythological of the elements," wrote historian Charles Kerenyi, and the literature of the sea arguably began with Homer in the early Iron Age, 8th century B.P. He wrote of its lonely austerity, "the sterile sea," a perspective that is certainly already that of civilization, poised against the natural world.

The sea was by now merely a means, a passageway to increased domination, new conquests; large war fleets were well-established. Aphrodite, goddess of love, arose from sea foam, but somehow failed to carry the day.

Seafaring is far older than history; it predates domestication/civilization by hundreds of thousands of years. Humans were navigating the oceans vastly earlier than we were riding horses, for instance. Homo erectus, about 800,000 years ago, crossed scores of miles of ocean to inhabit the island of Flores in the Indonesian archipelago.

And even today, long voyages on the open sea are made by people with no use for metals. The explorer David Lewis marveled at a Pacific native who found his way "by means of a slight swell that probably had its origins thousands of miles away…He had made a perfect landfall in the half-mile gap [between two islands], having navigated for between 45 and 48 miles without a single glimpse of the sky."

Thor Heyerdahl of late 1940s Kon-Tiki expedition fame made use of the "Incas' simple and ingenious way of steering a raft" on his impressive South Pacific odyssey. Interestingly, while the Incas revered the sea, the Mayas made scant mention of it—-possibly because the Mayas had a written language and the Incas did not.

Joshua Slocum's account of his solo sail around the globe notes how the South Pacific islanders "take what nature has provided for them," and "have great reason to love their country and fear the white man's yoke, for once harnessed to the plow their life would no longer be a poem." And, his further South Pacific observation: "As I sailed further from the center of civilization I heard less and less of what would and what would not pay."

Meanwhile, cannon-armed sailing ships had "heralded a fundamental advance in Europe's place in the world" in terms of control of oceanic trade routes. In the late 1400s, Portugal and Spain, the first global naval powers, competed for vast stretches of the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific oceans. The world-wide commons of the seas was rather rapidly disenchanted and instrumentalized as the era of modern history dawned. Its relative solitude, silence, spiritual wealth and intimacy gave way to the onslaught of globalization, and then industrial globalization.

The quiet gracefulness of sailing ships, and the seamanship skills of their crews, were ushered out in the 19th century in favor of graceless vessels, noisy and forced, like moving factories. How much globalized industrial existence is possible under simple sail?

Voyages with time enough to know oceans and heavens, taking what wind and wave have to offer. Adventures, not timetables and technological disasters.

A sentiment opposed to the Machine was the sea as archetype and key source of the sublime in the Romantic era. The powerful sea paintings of Winslow Homer and J.M.W. Turner certainly come to mind. But celebrated or not, the oceans were being targeted for domestication. In Childe Harold, Byron wrote: "Man marks the earth with ruin–his control / Stops with the shore."

Later in the century his words no longer rang true. Joseph Conrad dated the end of the old sea from 1869, when the Suez Canal was completed. In 1912, an iceberg quickly dispatched the largest moving object on the planet. Titanic's demise was a blow to confidence in the complete mastery of nature, as well as the opening act of chronic contemporary disasters.

Peter Matthiessen's novel, Far Tortuga, is a troubled meditation on the sea, with its background of a Caribbean region stripped of sea turtles, fish, timber, etc. by the 1970s. In fact, John Steinbeck described Japanese fishing dredges at work off the coast of Mexico in 1941, "literally scraping the bottom clean" with a ravening, wasteful industrial process.

The assault on the sea and its inhabitants is nothing new, but is always being intensified by advancing technology. An IBM SmartCloud ad of 2012 boasts of "smarter" computing systems that enable fishermen "to auction their catch while still at sea," to speed up the decimation of the oceans.

Long ago we had few things, on the water especially. Now, we take our profusion of possessions with us. Mass society comes along on the voyage of industrial tourism. "Voyage" comes from via: away. But there is no more away. It is no coincidence that the survival struggles of indigenous peoples and aquatic life have reached a generally similar level of extremity.

"All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full," But Ecclesiastes 1:7 is no longer accurate. Rising sea levels, perceptible since 1930, are an alarming fact. "Other sea-cities have faltered,/ and striven with the tide,/ other sea-

cities have struggled/ and died," observed the American poet H.D. Trillions of tons of water are now a steady flow of polar ice cap melting.

Many studies and new books recount what is starkly clear. Rising temperatures, acidification levels and pollution; the North Sea has warmed to the point where tropical fish and birds live in the fjords of Norway. Thermohaline circulation (vertical current movement) in the North Atlantic is weakening markedly.

Damaged, clearly, but not domesticated yet. A couple of lines from two anonymous poets: indicating the ocean, "Give me fields that no man plows/ The farm that pays no fee," and "The ocean's fields are fair and free,/ There are no rent days on the sea!"

To watch a fine surf for hours, to recall direct sensory experience–and ponder its severe diminution. Many have called the sea the finest university of life, free from the never-satisfied network of speech and the symbolic. Paul Valéry felt that "the quickening sea/ Gives back my soul...O salty potency!/ I'll run to the wave and from it be reborn!"

There is a kind of purification motif that many writers have touched on vis-a-vis the sea. Rimbaud, for example, referred to the sea "which I loved as though it should cleanse me of a stain." Jack Kerouac's first novel mentions "the way this Protean ocean extended its cleansing forces up, down, and in a cyclorama to all directions."

The once-scrubbed seas, soaking up the crime of civilization. John Steinbeck saw that "a breakwater is usually a dirty place, as though tampering with the shoreline is obscene and impractical to the cleansing action of the sea." For Heyerdahl, the Pacific "had washed and cleansed both body and soul," echoing Euripedes' words: "The sea washes away and cleanses every human stain."

Its own denizens show us so very much. The porpoises that always prefer sailboats; the singing humpback whales; dolphins, with their extraordinary brain size and intelligence. Did not whales and dolphins return to the oceans, having found land life unsatisfactory? There is some kind of open telepathic connection among all dolphins in the sea, according to New Zealand environmentalist Wade Doak.

"I will go back to the great sweet mother,/ Mother and love of men, the sea," wrote Swinburne. The sea has many voices. "Deep calleth unto deep," to quote Psalms 52:7. All of life is connected, and the "oceanic feeling" aptly expresses a sense of deep bonds, a oneness.

Not accidentally is "oceanic" the term employed to denote a profound connectedness. Robinson Jeffers told us that "mere use," meaning the technological, the fabricated world, "won't cover up the glory." The glory of the sea, the glory of the non-fabricated world. He celebrated the wholeness of life and the universe, counseling "Love that, not man/ Apart from that." Also remember, from the French May days of 1968, "Sous les pavés, la plage." ("Under the cobblestones, the beach.") to mark their desire.

On his Inca-inspired raft, Thor Heyerdahl discovered a deep truth. "Whether it was 1947 B.C. or A.D. suddenly became of no significance. We lived, and that we felt with alert intensity. We realized that life had been full for men before the technical age also—-indeed, fuller and richer in many ways than the life of modern man."

And, we still have the sea, just possibly too big to fail. "Cease not your moaning you fierce old mother," wrote Walt Whitman, whose truest poetry so often evoked the sea.

Let's join with Byron: "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean–roll!"

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