



“I Have Seen The Sea”

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Für Peter Gente

Abstract. The sea is the measure of space. It makes the fundamental ratios of the world clear. “The unbroken surface of the sea is the largest plane in nature” (Ratzel 2010, 121). As Darwin had said seeing the endless bays of the Strait of Magellan: “as if they were leading beyond the borders of this world” (qtd. in Ratzel 2010, 121). This is the specific singularity of a sea view; the transcendent space factor most obviously present in immanence. Its surrounding the entire substance of the world, its agelessness, its “undefinability,” and at the same time its pervasive, elementary materiality make the sea the widest possible metaphor of existence. The sea may be the indicator, image, carrier of everything: of every type of multitude, and that of the sum of all diversities. This is also why in different texts the sea appears in its metaphorical rather than concrete meaning. The sea has always been a special topic of literature and the arts, among the numerous literary works dedicated to the sea emerging Herman Melville’s novel and Jules Michelet’s essay. They both have a view that is strikingly different from today’s common approach. In the twentieth century the man of European culture gradually prevails over the sea; metaphors of shipping have become metaphors of astronautics. The all-encompassing meaning of the sea was described with unmatched concentration and, at the same time, unrivaled wealth of detail by J. L. Borges in his short story *The Aleph*.

Keywords: measure, metaphor, transcendent in immanence, Borges

*No one who has never seen himself surrounded on all sides by nothing but the sea
can have a true perception of the world and his own relation to it.*

Goethe Italian Journey

“Isn’t it strange, how your thinking and emotions adapt to the horizon when you live near the ocean?”, Brian Eno asks, “When you’re used to space, you need space to be able to think” (Dax 2011, 56). Of course, experiencing the fullness of space does not necessarily require growing up by the sea; it is enough to immerse oneself in the endless space of music – given the fact that, as the composer George Enescu asserts: “Music is itself a sea. The sea itself is a form of music” (1995, 26).

The sea, however, is not simply one of the phenomena, spaces or regions. Much rather, it is something within which the fundamental features of the world are fully present. The sea has always been a special topic of literature and the arts, and for a long period of time it has also constituted the subject of scientific interest and reflection. Among the numerous literary works dedicated to the sea there emerge Herman Melville’s novel and Jules Michelet’s essay. Both these works merge immediate experience with indirect knowledge. Melville served as a sailor for years, while Michelet also cultivated the contemporary subject of natural history, his studies on nature focusing not only on the sea, but also on the flora and fauna of mountains. Their great works were written at the middle of the nineteenth century, in an era when navigation expanded to encompass the entire world – and thus a global vision of the entirety of seas became possible (Mack 2011).

They both have a comprehensive view of the world-sea, a view that is strikingly different from today’s common approach. Melville’s heroes sail across seas and oceans as today’s global travellers cross them flying from one continent to the other. Michelet’s scientific research encompasses almost every aspect of the sea from geological origins to polar seas and the description of the most varied water-phenomena and storm types.

Not slightly dreaded

While travelling between continents took place by ships, it was an indisputable fact that “the ocean [was] a not slightly dreaded thing for us” (Burke 2008, 68). Edmund Burke arrives at this conclusion at the middle of the eighteenth century in his essay on greatness, where he mentions the ocean as the main carrier of features constituting the specificities of this quality (strength, greatness, endlessness, dread, etc.). This very same atmosphere is intoned by the opening sentence of Michelet’s book: “A Dutch sailor, a cool observer impossible to mislead, who has spent his life on the sea, openly confesses that his first impression of the sea is fear” (1987, 16).

Fear has subsided, mainly due to developments in shipbuilding and sailing technology, but it has not disappeared. As late as the middle of the twentieth century W. H. Auden still considers it necessary to mention that the sea “is so little of a friendly symbol that the first thing which the author of the Book of Revelation

notices in his vision of the new heaven and earth at the end of time is that “there was no more sea” (1951, 18).

All this despite the fact that around 1960 air traffic rapidly started to replace shipping as the means of intercontinental passenger transport, which in a European context, in the seventies, completely ceased to exist. The once large population of sailors diminished, due to technological developments the crew of transportation and fishing ships was reduced to a couple of people. Even though three-quarters of the Earth’s surface are still covered by seas, and from time to time we are reminded of their immense powers through shipwrecks and tidal waves, it seems that in this stage of modernity fear has been pushed into the background.

Nothing illustrates better the paradox in this process than the metamorphosis of the metaphor of shipwrecks. In the nineteenth century – as Hans Blumenberg described it in his *Shipwreck with Viewer* (1979) – the viewer’s stable perspective was lost, his formerly certain position ceased to exist, he found himself on the crest of the waves. Compared to this, in the twentieth century the man of European culture gradually prevails over the sea – of course, without having conquered her. This prevailing has happened literally through structures with wheels and wings: first prevailing over the surface of seas and the earth, and then over Earth itself. Metaphors of shipping have become metaphors of astronautics. The image of sailors has been gradually replaced by the travellers of spaceships named Space and Earth. American architect and inventor Buckminster Fuller published a book in 1963 with the title *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*.

Of course, the sea does not cease to be the object of interest and attention; what is more – due to the ever increasing tourism to the seaside started in the nineteenth century – it has become firsthand experience for more and more people. Instead of its fearful and dreaded nature, its other characteristics have come to be defining.

The Perspective of the Horizon

The sea is the measure of space. It makes the fundamental ratios of the world clear. This does not mean that the horizon of the land and the sky arching above does not inform us regarding extension and quantity. Its sight, however, is not as pervasive as the sea’s horizon: “The vast expanse of plains might offer the same great sight as the ocean; but could it ever fill our minds with such large things as the ocean itself?” – Burke asks (2008, 68). Not as if the sky could not offer instructions on height and depth, measures and ratios, but in the case of the sea this is more direct and pervading. “The sea affects our senses with the most direct effects” – Friedrich Ratzel, one of the founding fathers of geography, argues, “as an unbroken plane it makes such a spacious view possible that otherwise is impossible on earth. The circular horizon with its bell arching above the sky may only be found clearly and everywhere only at sea” (2010, 125). In his text Ratzel

also mentions that “whoever studies ‘the sea’s attraction’ in himself or in others captured by it, will always find the perspective of the horizon as having the deepest effect in the image of the sea” (2010, 120).

In Ratzel’s description what deserves special attention is the way he first offers the description of land morphology in describing the sea, and later when the perspective of the sea appears as a border beyond everything, he gives the word to somebody else, to the scientist of another field:

The unbroken surface of the sea is the largest plane in nature. Though large plains offer the same spacious circular view as the sea, they never have the same deep effect as this site lacks the unity of material and color, and perfect planes are anyway really rare on dry land. In monotonous steppes and deserts one rarely has that impression that Darwin had, who – while sailing around the Earth – seeing the endless bays of the Strait of Magellan said: “as if they were leading beyond the borders of this world.” (2010, 120)

This is the specific singularity of a sea view; the transcendent space factor most obviously present in immanence; a not really negligible element of “the attraction of the sea.” The perspective of this horizon keeps raising the existential question that Béla Tábor describes in its spatial relation: it is a question regarding “the meaning, importance, ‘practical’ worth of the final philosophic, ontological, metaphysical questions – that of speculation, of theory” (2010, 15). At the same time: “Orientation, searching for measurement: search for that space that would dissolve our existence’s pressing congestion, that might make offensive reality measurable and thus prevent every petty element’s hypnosis that it would be the absolute measure to which we shall subject ourselves” (Tábor 2010, 15).

For ancient Greek mentality “the invisible measure of cognition” (Solon 1940, 46) is what holds everything together. “The measure, foundation and knowledge of everything are swimming on the surface of the sea,” Hannes Böhringer writes when interpreting Solon; “the experience base of a measure difficult to reach is the silence of the sea” (2009, 13).

This measure of the sea is given as experience not merely to the man of antiquity, but also to the man of any era: “At sea man’s first impression is the gigantic precipice, endlessness, a feeling of his own nothingness” – Michelet quotes the sailor mentioned at the beginning of the book (1987, 217).

Eulogy to the Horizon

The sea and the view from its coast were also defining experiences for the Bask sculptor Eduardo Chillida. Witness to this are first of all his monumental works on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, his *Windcoms* reaching out from the

seaside rocks, and his *Eulogy to the Horizon*, but his other works and his statements also testify to this.¹ The ocean, the “school of vastness” formed his thinking about space that later, after his meeting Heidegger, also affected his philosophical discourse about space.²

In an interview Chillida talks about the fact that “the coast is a place where one can see great distances and the horizon is great. My work, *Eulogy of the Horizon* (1990), is along this coast, in Gijón, and needed that specific great horizon” (Wagner 2012).

His large work reflects on two characteristics of the horizon: its measure and its circularity, the approximately 10x10 meter work surrounds an open space. Thus it creates an opportunity for its visitors to experience their belonging to the land: in ratio and surrounded by the horizon. The horizon surrounds us; it creates a common human bond. “The horizon is very important to me, it always has been – Chillida argues. – All men are equal and at the horizon we are all brothers, the horizon is a common homeland” (Wagner 2012).

Where Endlessness Begins

The eulogy addressed to the horizon shows fundamental features, but beyond all these, the horizon is the place where endlessness begins. Even though the endless obviously does not have a beginning, it paradoxically still appears on the horizon. Its measure compared to us is obviously finite, but beyond it we cannot reach such conclusions. “Wherever one catches a glimpse of the ocean – Michelet writes – it will have a great effect. [...] Its endlessness is invisible, but it can be felt, heard, it seems endless, and this makes the impression even stronger” (1978, 23).

Leibniz also speaks about endlessness in the context of this experience: “Every soul gets to know endlessness, gets to know everything, of course, vaguely, like when I go for a walk on the beach and I can hear the powerful roar of the sea; in the meantime I can hear the buzz of every wave but without being able to set them apart” (1986, 301).

Endlessness, this horizon of the sea that points beyond the borders of this world, is characteristic to it not only in the context of space, but also of time. The rippling of the surface, the raising and falling of waves, the continuous change and the permanence of change are characteristic features of waters. For the observer this endless and elementary event of coming into being and passing away raises the question of the relationship between being thrown into time and timelessness. Even if he is conscious of the relative timelessness of the sea, as its lifetime is linked to the existence of the Earth; thus, ultimately, it is not timeless.

¹ “The sea has been my master and I have learned much from it. When I was young, I would go there instead of going to school” (Wagner 2012).

² This meeting led to Heidegger’s *Art and Space* (Heidegger, 1994).

For man, however, the sea that has existed for billions of years is permanence itself, untouched by time. This recognition led Hiroshi Sugimoto to create his series of *Seascapes* that represents the utmost level of the sea's photographic reproduction. He spent years photographing the sea – from the Japanese sea through the oceans to all sorts of inland seas. The subject of the black-and-white photos is always the same; there are no coasts visible, no islands, ships or people, only water and sky and between these two – always on the central axis, sometimes blurred, sometimes razor-sharp – the line of the horizon. This unique series illustrates the sea always differently and still basically unchanging: the rippling of the water surface is different, the humidity of the air, and the time of day, thus the light conditions are different; sometimes the sky is brighter, other times the water surface because of the moonbeams it reflects. Sugimoto was searching for something that was the same for contemporary as well as for archaic men; and given the fact that the surface of the earth is changeable, and during the hundred thousands of years even the highest mountains have changed, he could find such views only at sea (Brougher and Elliott 2005). And therefore, he eliminated from his photographs any unabiding form, being or formation.

Compared to the changeability and historicity of the world, for Melville the sea's timelessness became the storehouse of some kind of subconscious historicity:

There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath [...] millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned dreams, somnambulism, reveries; all that we call lives and souls, lie dreaming, dreaming, still; tossing like slumberers in their beds; the ever-rolling waves but made so by their restlessness. (1966, 368)

This type of formlessness and inscrutability of the sea, its inaccessibility for man and its past sunk into the subconscious are also discussed by another great artist contemplating the sea, Fernando Pessoa: "I have spent uncountable hours, series of released moments at the lonely sea during my night walks. Every thought that once made people live, every emotion ever felt by people passed through me as *the dark resume of history* during my meditations by the sea" (2006, 108).

The principle of the sea as the dark resume of history originates from the sea-interpretations of Western culture: "The predominant Western view of the sea might be characterized as that of a quintessential wilderness, a void" – says John Mack in his book about the cultural history of the sea,

a deserted space only temporarily populated by sailors. [...] The sea, in this concept, is empty: a space not a place. The sea is not something with a "history," at least without any recorded history. There are no footprints left

upon it; it consumes and secretes those who come to grief on its surface and the vessels in which they have sailed. (2011, 16)

For the sailor Melville, however, all this reveals itself differently; his is not a land-perspective, for him the grand waters of the oceans surround the islands of the continents:

The same waves wash the moles of the new-built Californian towns, but yesterday planted the most recent race of man, and lave the faded but still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham; while all between float milky-ways of coral isles, and loving-lying, endless, unknown Archipelagoes, and impenetrable Japans. Thus this mysterious, divine Pacific zones the world's whole bulk about; makes all coasts one bay to it; seems the tide-beating heart of earth. (1966, 368)

I Have Seen

Its surrounding the entire substance of the world, its agelessness, its “undefinability,” and at the same time its pervasive, elementary materiality make the sea the widest possible metaphor of existence. The sea may be the indicator, image, carrier of everything: of every type of multitude, and that of the sum of all diversities. This is also why in different texts the sea appears in its metaphorical rather than concrete meaning: “Literature and hymnology are replete with such reflection, rendering the sea a symbolic and metaphorical narrative device rather than a real place” (Mack 2011, 17).

This all-encompassing meaning of the sea was described with unmatched concentration and, at the same time, unrivaled wealth of detail by J. L. Borges in his short story *The Aleph*. In this work *Aleph* is that place “where all places are seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending” (1986, 346). Despite the irony that pervades the whole work – familiar from Borges’s entire oeuvre – his description of the world is valid, given the fact that, as he writes about the *Divina Commedia*, “everything that exists in the world is there. Everything, that was, is and will be, that story of the past and that of the future as well, is awaiting us at a certain point of that peaceful labyrinth, every object that I possessed and that I will possess, everything...” (1999, 285).³

The vision of *everything* – shown in the multitude of its details and in its entirety – in Borges’s description develops from the sea: “I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall, I saw...” (1986, 349). Then, after having listed in

³ “I dreamt up a kind of magical image, an illustration that is a microcosm at the same time; well, Dante’s poem is this all-encompassing image” (Borges 1999, 285).

approximately one and a half pages the totality revealed through the multitude of seen objects – perspective –, time-shifts and cuts, he ends the depiction of his vision: “for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon – the unimaginable universe” (1986, 349).

Borges follows his master not merely in describing the universe, where “the author is painting precise details in varied and inventive ways” (1986, 286), but even in his choice of words: “I saw this Earth – Dante writes – I looked at the ugly, tiny nugget laughing.”⁴

Translated by Boróka Prohászka-Rád

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⁴ *Divina Commedia* XXII.

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