



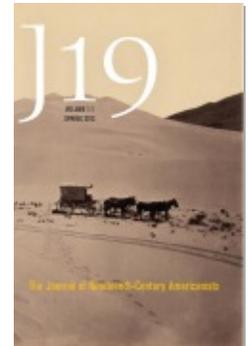
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Hester Blum
Jason R. Rudy

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with other genres, of course, may reveal the varied paths the Americas have taken in producing disenchanted, secular worlds.

Notes

1. Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
2. See chapter 3 of Raúl Coronado, *A World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
3. José María Heredia, "The Hurricane," trans. William Cullen Bryant, in *The Talisman for 1828*, ed. William Cullen Bryant et al. (New York: Elam Bliss, 1827).
4. José María Heredia, "En una tempestad: Oda al huracán," in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature: 1800–1865*, ed. Paul Lauter, vol. B (Stamford, CT: Wadsworth, 2013), 160–161; José María Heredia, "In a Tempest: An Ode to the Hurricane," in *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, trans. Raúl Coronado and Armando García, 162–163.

First Person Nautical: Poetry and Play at Sea

Hester Blum

The Pennsylvania State University

Jason R. Rudy

University of Maryland, College Park

The sea has been a siren for writers meditating on mythic voyages; on dissolution; on the boundaries between different states of being; on spaces of lawlessness and danger, what Hans Blumenberg calls the "immoderate[ness]" of the ocean's vastness.¹ One might lose oneself in such vastness, come undone, experience revolutions within, question established connections and affiliations. And yet for all the vast literature *about* the sea from Homer onward, little attention has been paid to the surprising amount and variety of literature written *at sea*. In this essay we look to poetic production aboard long-voyaging Anglo-American ships in order to think about the place of poetry within nineteenth-century communities whose circuits were at once prosaic and eccentric. Shipboard poetry, produced in an environment uncongenial to most forms of inscription, invites us to imagine archives ungrounded and on the move. The tracklessness of the sea, as well as the indeterminate sense of being in between one's home and a past or future abroad, or perhaps a life of perennial wandering, expands imaginative possibilities for writers at sea. The archive of shipboard

poetry itself may open today a range of possible readings outside the land-based norm: for reconsidering the boundaries of nationality, and how ideas of nation have constructed our canon; for discovering literary coteries at the scene of their labor; for theories of exchange, travel, and community; and for prolific literary traditions that have hitherto gone missing beyond the horizon of our landlocked critical retrospect.

In first-person sailor writing of the nineteenth century we find the constraint and discipline of shipboard life invoked as a narrative hedge against the boundlessness of the sea.² Similarly, poetry—in its generic attention to meter, rhythm, and tone, to a *line* that can be traced—offers a regulatory corrective to the drift and dislocation of nautical travel. Nearly all the formal structures practiced at sea were understood to be rooted in national traditions: ballad stanzas, heroic couplets, hexameters.³ Yet their reproduction on ships outside national boundaries, in transitional cultural spaces, complicates an easy association between aesthetic form and nationalist sentiment. Literary history has most often considered the sea from the vantage point of the land, to which the sea's immoderateness moves in antithesis. The emerging field of oceanic studies seeks instead to reorient our critical perception to the heaving, uncertain surfaces and depths of the sea, to recognize the artificiality and intellectual limitations of national, political, linguistic, and geophysical boundaries. Reading shipboard poetry within the context of oceanic studies, in other words, helps us think more acutely about modes of being and exchange that are necessarily constituted by—and yet can stand in formal counterpoint to—fluidity, contingency, and mutability.⁴

If not precisely national, literary production at sea was necessarily collective, consisting of small bodies of shared interest that in and of themselves constituted, for a set interval, a totality of community. Whether laboring sailors or paying passengers, those aboard ship had little to no space for privacy, no retreat; the circumscribed nature of the built environment meant that maritime community necessarily took the form of a coterie. In what follows we look briefly to two classes of coteries of nautical poets in the long nineteenth century: passengers aboard British emigrant ships, and sailors participating in Anglo-American expeditions to Antarctica and the Arctic. For British emigrants voyaging to Australia—a three-month trip at midcentury—ship newspapers offered both relief from monotony and the comfort of the familiar features one would have found in periodicals at home: weather

reports, birth and death announcements, short stories and word puzzles, opinion pieces, and poetry. Most of the content was written by the passengers themselves, who were solicited for original contributions, and the newspapers were printed by either members of the crew or volunteers. Polar voyagers, on the other hand, produced works for literary exchange only during the long polar winters, when their ships were ice-bound and consigned to darkness and relative oceanic stillness. Their sketches, satires, essays, and poems in shipboard newspapers were not designed to circulate outside the expedition's own reading circles. What, then, can we learn from the circumscription of the literary sphere of shipboard poetry within both the space of the sea and broader Anglo-American print culture?

Ranging widely in style and subject matter, the British emigrant poems address the long journey between Europe and Australia, the trauma of separation from family and friends, and the anxieties accompanying dislocation and the anticipated trials of colonial life. Many shipboard poets rewrite or parody canonical British poems, and some American poems too (Longfellow is a favorite).⁵ Among the striking features of these poems, a queer element often comes into play: a creative reimagining of the self that might be, as it were, called from the deep in response to the sea's vastness, the lawlessness of maritime space, the sense of coming apart. No wonder that, for some sailors and emigrants, what slips, or what falls to the page, is a piece of oneself otherwise kept hidden, unacknowledged, or unrecognized. That Victorian emigrant ships were also spaces of play, of fabricating new identities (in relation to the nation, the family, one's profession), of imagining possible futures, no doubt also encourages a sort of *nautical drag*, a putting-on of alternate selves in the spaces between home and abroad.

Take for instance a poem published in *The Rodney World* during an 1885 voyage from London to Melbourne. "Come down, little Cohn, with your beautiful curls, / And row in the blazing sun" pleads the poem's speaker, inviting a fellow sailor to join a playful excursion and, in so doing, mimicking a lyric from Tennyson's poem *The Princess* (1847): "Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height,"

For Love is of the valley, come thou down
And find him; by the happy threshold, he.⁶

Tennyson's poem locates romantic longing on land: "Love is of the valley." A different set of possibilities awaits those at sea. The *Rodney*

sailors flirt with romance, insofar as one overhears a popular love song in the poem's structure and in its verbal references to Tennyson.⁷ But the queerness of the lyric comes not only in its transposing a heterosexual romance to a homosocial outing, but in its arrangement on the page of the ship journal itself, adjacent to an article describing the midshipmen's berth—the officers' cabin—as a “charmed bower” in which reclines a young officer “whose dimpled cheeks and merry laughing lips betokened a young life to whom the world was as yet un-opened—a sweet young life, so pure, so true, so full of grace and loveliness.”⁸ If desire in the *Rodney* poem moves through a circuit of referentiality, gesturing back nostalgically and playfully to canonical English poetry, in the prose narrative it flaunts and pirouettes with clarity and persuasive-ness. In the “as yet un-opened” potential of the officer's young life we might picture not only the anonymous author's erotic imaginings, but a world of possible futures enabled by the voyage at sea, futures the *Rodney* poem frames as playful departures from canonical literary culture.

The shipboard periodicals of polar expeditions are similarly adroit in registering what we might see as the situational nature of poetry at sea—what went at sea stayed at sea, in social, sexual, and labor practices—even as their forms recalled the terrestrial world. Written and often printed aboard ship by expedition members, polar newspapers and gazettes were broadly comical, focusing on interpersonal or canine affairs (intrigues among the sled dogs were a popular topic) rather than on the scientific and exploratory aims of the mission itself. In many ways we might see newspapers as the social media of polar expeditions. The poetry that appears in Arctic and Antarctic periodicals is droll and playful; it includes special-occasion menus in verse (“The Dessert's much as usual—you'll all know the reason/ 'Tis difficult here to get things out of season”);⁹ complaints about polar problems such as condensation (“And in the middle of the night/ In our sleeping bags there's a riot./ Someone turns and screws about,/ And gets in such a pet,/ Says he cannot sleep any more,/ 'Cause his sleeping bag is wet”);¹⁰ and parodies of well-known literature (“Once more unto the beach, dear friends, once more/ Or live for ever on the legs of crabs”).¹¹

A poem titled “Walt Whitman,” published in the British Antarctic Expedition's *South Polar Times* in 1912, exemplifies the various elements of shipboard poetry we have invoked in this essay: a queer playfulness; a recognition of the outlandishness of the circumstance of shipboard poetry; an emphasis on collective practices; and the use of formal structures associated with national poetic traditions. But in the

poem's invocation of Whitman we see also an arch nod to oceanic registers of landlessness and statelessness: the poem's English author, Apsley Cherry-Garrard, writes from Antarctica, a continent on which territorial claims are banned. The poem takes as its subject an improvised form of billiards played by the men in the Antarctic evenings on a converted dining table. The lowest scorer would temporarily wear a medal of shame named after the biblical figure for nautical ill-luck, as Cherry describes:

Blizz! Blizz! Blizz!
 Blizz up, South Wind, along the Ross Sea shore!
 Thy whip-stings lash not me, not me;
 Behold, am I not snug within?

This is the song of billiards:—
 The tight stretched cloth of green, the serried arches,
 The cue—faking the cue, the protests from the players,
 The pyramid, the British pluck, the Chinese fluke,
 The click of striking balls, the rattle in the ditch, the grin of joy,
 The minus five, the sorry that it brings;
 The interjections of the on-lookers, the marker, and the
 marker's observations—
 Played for, I speakee the true! Champion to Jonah, and Jonah to
 Top Dog!
 Oh! Look at his face!—Camerado, the game is o'er.

Tut! Tut! Tut!
 So I become the Jonah,
 And for a time must wear this medal on my breast!¹²

Attuned to the sharply consonant sounds from within and without its poetic purview, Cherry's exclamatory mode registers as a canny reading of Whitman's own sustained attention to conjunctions of work and leisure—as well as to visions of camarados sharing space, song, and exuberant physicality. And yet here Whitman's expansive, oceanic vision is reimagined within the battened-down confines of an ice-bound ship, thousands of miles from the national spaces from which this poetic mode emerges.

Poetical communities at sea occupied a place of paradox between the exceptional intimacy of production and circulation, and the limitlessness of the surrounding ocean. As such, they offer us new ways to

think about what is situational or occasional within literary collectivities, both in terms of nautical poets' thematic adventurousness and their formal queerness. Isolated from the familiar routes and economies of print circulation and yet global in their transit, ship newspapers could also more readily reconstitute the ungrounded communities whose imaginations produced them. In calling for further attention to a mobile archive that has been little apprehended, we venture to imagine what other forms of exchange might be in the offing.

Notes

1. Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (1979; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 9.

2. See Hester Blum, *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008): 116–18.

3. On the connections between national sentiment and Victorian hexameters, see Yopie Prins, "Nineteenth-Century Homers and the Hexameter Mania," in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 229–56; on ballad poetry and American culture, see Michael Cohen, "Whittier, Ballad Reading, and the Culture of Nineteenth-Century Poetry" (*Arizona Quarterly* 64 [Autumn 2008], 1–29). Meredith Martin's *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860–1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012) traces the important associations between meter and English national identity.

4. See Hester Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," *PMLA* 125.3 (May 2010): 770–79.

5. See Jason R. Rudy, "Manifest Prosoody," *Victorian Poetry* 49 (Summer 2011), 253–66, and "Floating Worlds: Émigré Poetry and British Culture" (forthcoming in *ELH*).

6. "Come into the Boat, My Lads," *Rodney World*, July 25, 1885 (rpt Melborne 1885), 11; Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess*, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, 3 vols., ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 2: 286.

7. Other stanzas in the Rodney poem echo Tennyson's 1856 *Maud*, further establishing the connection between the ship poem and Tennyson's work; see Rudy, "Floating Worlds."

8. "The Mid-Shipmen's Birth—No. 1," *Rodney World*, July 25, 1885, 11.

9. "Menu," British Arctic Expedition 1875–1876, Scott Polar Research Institute, MS 1479; D (Playbills, poems etc, 48 leaves).

10. C. W. Emmerson, "The Arctic Twins," British Arctic Expedition 1875–1876, Scott Polar Research Institute, MS 1479.

11. "King Henry V. (not by Shakespeare)," *South Polar Times Contributions* [not printed], Scott Polar Research Institute, MS 1505/5.

12. [Apsley Cherry-Garrard], "Walt Whitman," *South Polar Times IV*, 1912, Scott Polar Research Institute, MS 505/4; EN.