Challenging Categories at Sea in Cooper's *Red Rover*

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The ship as heterotopia *par excellence*

James Fenimore Cooper wrote a number of novels set at sea which marked the emergence of a new genre in the nineteenth century: the American sea novel. In *The Pilot* (1823), *The Red Rover* (1827) and *The Water-Witch* (1830), Cooper intertwined his own experience of the element as a midshipman in the Navy with his national aspirations to weave stories that explore the ideals of American democracy and shape the figure of the American sailor. His American ships are captained and manned by rebellious or revolutionary pirates who resist oppression from the representatives of a far-away monarch depriving the American from his right to freedom and equality. They provide a democratic space where all accepted forms of classification are reassessed in the light of the sailors' living conditions at sea. The American ship is thus this "other space" that Michel Foucault calls "heterotopia," as opposed to utopia. In Foucault's view, utopias are locations with no real space: "Arrangements which have a general relationship of direct or inverse analogy with the real space of society. They represent society itself brought to perfection, or its reverse, and in any case, utopias are spaces that are by their very essence fundamentally unreal." Heterotopias, on the other hand, are "a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable" (Foucault 332). Foucault subsequently identifies a certain form of heterotopia that he describes as "heterotopias of crisis." These are "privileged or sacred or forbidden places that are reserved for the individual who finds himself in a state of crisis with respect to the society or the environment in which he lives" (Foucault 332). He mentions the example of boarding schools for adolescents or care homes for the elderly. In short, they encompass everything that takes place or should take place "elsewhere" than in the family, with no geographic reference points.

Heterotopias are also heterochronisms in which "men find themselves in a sort of total breach of their traditional time" (Foucault 334). The cemetery, for example, is a place where death and eternity, absence and presence, coexist. Finally, both isolated and penetrable, heterotopias presuppose an opening and a closing (Foucault 335). Foucault therefore considers that the ship "is the heterotopia *par excellence*:"

> Think of the ship: it is a floating part of space, a placeless place, that lives by itself, closed in on itself and at the same time poised in the infinite ocean, and yet, from port to port, tack by tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies, looking for the most precious things hidden in their Gardens. Then you will understand why it has been not only and obviously the main means of economic growth (which I do not intend to go into

> here), but at the same time the greatest reserve of imagination for our civilization from the sixteenth century down to the present day. (Foucault 336)

As a piece of land in motion on the sea, the ship is both a self-contained space and an opening onto the infinite ocean on which it depends entirely. In contrast, the heterotopia of the train is based on the notion of a network, a "bundle of relations" (Foucault 331). On a train, one goes from one point to another, but the path is all mapped out and the journey takes on a different meaning, since the railway creates connections whereas the sea implies disconnection. Cesare Casarino argues that, in literature, the ship is a heterotopia because it represents the desire to escape society while representing, contesting and inverting the framework of that same society (Casarino 27). In other words, Foucault's heterotopia both challenges and deconstructs an established order.

Sébastien Roman brings Foucauldian heterotopia closer to Ricoeur's practical utopia in the sense that it materializes an "extraterritoriality" that gives a different view of an established order to not only challenge it but also open up new possibilities outside of it (Roman 74). Ricœurian utopia goes further by coming into conflict with ideology, which is the political discourse that constructs and sustains collective identity (Roman 77). Considering its characteristics, the ship in Cooper's nautical fiction is as much a Foucauldian heterotopia, a different space, as it is a Ricœurian utopia, a space of tension and conflict with the norm, and it is precisely its heterotopian nature that makes it a space of revolution. Casarino takes the ship *Neversink*, in Melville's *White-Jacket* (1850) as a prime example of heterotopia, at once a fragment of land and independent at sea: "For a ship is a bit of terra firma cut off from the main; it is a state in itself; and the captain is its king" (Melville 23). In a way, the ship benefits from its own sovereignty and is therefore not directly subject to any higher authority until it goes back ashore. He also refers to the subtitle of the novel, *The World in a Man-of-War*, which in itself illustrates the paradox raised by Foucault of the ship as a world apart, with its own specific rules and organization, which in turn question society's contradictions from a distance.

The deconstruction of categories at sea

In Cooper's *Red Rover*, the presence of a black sailor on board raises the question of the marginalization of an entire population, despite the nation's values of freedom and equality. Even though most of the story takes place before independence, the pirate ship *Dolphin* challenges the social and racial order of early-nineteenth-century America. It is manned by a diverse crew of sailors who are united by a shared vision of individual freedom. The captain, who is the Red Rover himself, teaches the protagonist, a Royal Navy officer named Wilder, how to become a free-spirited American sailor. On board, Wilder sails with two companions, Fid, a white sailor, and Scipio, his black messmate. When the characters are first introduced, the three men are divided into two social groups: Wilder being "The one," while Fid and Scipio are

"the rest of the party" or "the remaining two" (*Red Rover* 31-32). Then, the focus shifts to the pair formed by the two companions, which is divided into two racial categories: "One [...] was a white-man and the other a negro" (*Red Rover* 32). Not only does the narrative relegate Scipio to the secondary status of a racial other, but the hyphen placed between *white* and *man* to identify Fid reinforces this process of otherization. From a linguistic perspective, *a white-man* does not exactly equate *a white man*, the hyphen pointing to an additional meaning in this specific situation. According to Antoine Culioli's theory of enunciative operations, language links syntax, semantics and pragmatics, meaning that an utterance must be interpreted by taking into account not only the choice and order of words, but also the situation of utterance, the context in which it is produced. Analysing the text in the light of linguistics can only expand a literary reading of race, an idea largely constructed by language and discourse.

Regarding the identification of Fid and Scipio, two distinct noun phrases that initially appear synonymous ultimately refer to the same character in different ways. In the case of Fid, the two noun phrases are "a white-man" (32, 70) and "a white man" (50, 290, 416). On the other hand, Scipio is referred to by various names intended to differentiate him from his companion–"a negro" (32), "a nigger" (50, 70, 416), "a black" (290)–but refers to himself once in a completely different way, as "a black man" (426). With the determiner *a*, the speaker points to a single element from a category of elements sharing the same characteristics. Linguistically, a white man and a black man both belong to the category of *men*, itself divided into the subcategories *white* and *black*. On the other hand, linking the adjective and the noun with a hyphen forms a compound noun in which the two terms are inseparable and therefore have the same linguistic weight. As such, the compound noun refers to another category in and of itself. "[A] white-man" is the antonym of "a negro," "a nigger" or "a black," and further emphasizes racial difference since the characters now belong to exclusive categories, either the category of *white-men* or the category of *black-men*, but no longer to a shared category of *men*. This linguistic construction of two separate categories reduces individuals to a racial difference that characterizes and distinguishes them entirely.

However, once this racial categorization is established, the two companions are integrated into another category, the category of sailors. As the story unfolds, the narrator insists more on the characters' occupation than on their race or their social class: "Both had passed the middle age, and both, in their appearances, furnished the strongest proofs of long exposure to the severity of many climates, and to numberless tempests" (*Red Rover* 32). Here, the two characters share certain characteristics, including their age and occupation: they are both older, experienced sailors. Unlike the category of *men*, the category of *sailors* is never divided into racial subcategories. Instead, it functions with subcategories based on age and, by extension, professional experience, with designations such as "the young seaman" (*Red Rover* 38, 131, 250) or "the old seaman" (*Red Rover* 125, 130, 371). The narrator eventually constructs a new set of opposite categories which do not share characteristics: *seamen* and *landsmen* (*Red*

Rover 75, 193, 397), which do not admit of any racial division. When Fid and Scipio are identified as seamen, they are systematically referred to as a pair, with no distinction of color: "the two seamen" (*Red Rover* 39, 345, 385). This focus on occupation indirectly challenges the social and racial orders established on land, implying that in this other place that is the American ship, the importance of racial difference and social class is at least reconsidered, at most altogether undermined.

Geoffrey Sanborn notes that the respect accorded to Scipio in *The Red Rover* or to Neb in *Afloat and Ashore* does not benefit the other colored characters in Cooper's works (Sanborn 7). These two characters share exceptional maritime skills and their experience at sea makes them valuable sailors in Cooper's maritime settings. This consideration for black seamen was not specific to Cooper's works at that time. As early as 1796, the federal government issued seamen with certificates of protection in order to prove their nationality by qualifying them as American citizens regardless of their skin colour (Bolster 5). These official documents identified the sailor by vaguely recording his civil status and physical appearance. The certificate of a black sailor named Jonathan Miller clearly indicates his skin colour ("Black") as well as his American identity: "I do, therefore, further certify, that he is a freeman and a citizen of the United States of America, and entitled to be respected accordingly in person and property, at all times and places, both by sea and land, in the due prosecution of his lawful concerns" (Stein). This document was intended to protect the sailor from forced enlistment by the British Royal Navy at sea and from abduction by American slave traders on land. The many possible entries for the category "complexion" on protection certificates reveal that race was plastic and adjustable: "Negro," "Darkish," "Dark," "Black," "Brown," "Colored," "Light," or "Fair" are some of the adjectives used to define the skin colour of seafarers (Mystic Seaport Museum database). By moving away from the black/white binarism, this range of racial designations did not seek to place these sailors in a precise racial category, but rather aimed to describe the holder of the document as realistically as possible so that he could easily be recognised as such and enjoy the same rights as any other American citizen. The choice of the word "complexion" is consistent with this since it indicates skin colour without attributing any specific racial characteristics to it–white and black sailors enjoyed the same protection on paper.

On Cooper's heterotopic ships, men are first and foremost seamen. Racial and social categorizations, which separate and distinguish men in nineteenth-century American society, are acknowledged but deemed secondary to experience at sea and occupational skills, the true measures of a seaman's worth at sea. Fid and Scipio undergo a categorical shift: their racial difference is established, underlined by the separation of the categories *white-man*/*negro*, only to be deconstructed by the prevalence of another system of categorization with no distinction of race or even class. The Red Rover does note the difference in social status and

hierarchical position between the two ordinary sailors and Wilder, captain of the *Caroline* and later Lieutenant of the *Dolphin*: "It is a singular tie, that unites two men so oddly constituted to one so different by habits and education from themselves." To which Wilder replies: "But as we are all seamen, the difference is not so great, as one would, at first imagine" (*Red Rover* 103). Social classes are therefore deconstructed in the same way as racial categories, by the parallel construction of the overarching category of sailors.

Wilder only becomes Henry De Lacey, heir to Rear Admiral De Lacey, after becoming a romantic pirate in his own right, earning his true letters of nobility through the patriotic piracy of the Rover rather than from the English aristocracy. The rise of the common man begins at sea, where the pirate's heritage and social origins are dismissed in favor of his belonging to the sea. Wilder unsuccessfully expresses this to Bignall, the British captain of the *Dart* determined to capture or suppress the Rover: "[The Rover] is almost a native of the seas; for more than thirty years he has passed his time on them" (*Red Rover* 391). His enduring connection to the sea takes precedence over his reputation as a ruthless pirate; as Thomas Philbrick points out, the noblest sailors in Cooper's romances share the quality of landlessness (Philbrick 79). They are either born at sea, like Long Tom Coffin in *The Pilot*, or raised within it, like Wilder, who was saved from a shipwreck by Fid and Scipio as a child: "My earliest recollections are blended with the sight of the ocean, and I can hardly say that I am a creature of the land at all" (*Red Rover* 192). Wilder believes he was born at sea and even defines himself as a native of the sea. Fid, in turn, is described as "a son of the ocean" regardless of his humble origins (*Red Rover* 436). Cooper's entire maritime trilogy converges on a correspondence between nobility of spirit at sea and social nobility on land. Captain Tom Tiller in *The Water-Witch*, known as the "Skimmer of the Seas," claims to belong to a particular form of aristocracy: "the aristocracy of nature" (*Water-Witch* 323). A man's worth at sea is not simply a matter of where he comes from and what land he owns; it is built up over the course of his life at sea, and rests largely on his ability to be a valuable member of his crew. Within the democratic space of the American ship, the inner nobility of the sailor, as evidenced by his courage and robustness, prevails over outward signs of nobility and even the hereditary nobility abolished by the Republic. As John Paul Jones, the Scottish pirate of humble origin turned revolutionary hero, states in *The Pilot*: "It is but of little moment where a man is born, or how he speaks [...] so that he does his duty bravely, and in good faith" (*Pilot* 30). Russell T. Newman effectively interprets the sea in Cooper's novels as a space, akin to the wilderness, where it is impossible for the characters to achieve any social status, in contrast with the American "Garden" in which every gentleman can come into being (Newman 91). The American ship thus provides a space for all sailors, regardless of their race, their social class, or even their country of origin.

The crews of the British *Caroline* and the American *Dolphin* reveal a difference of tolerance towards both the foreigner and the racial other. The men of the *Caroline* are suspicious of

Wilder, whose status as a colonist born in America sets him apart from the rest of the English crew: "We are all of us, to a man, native born islanders without a drop of foreign blood among us; not so much as a Scotchman or an Irishman in the ship" (*Red Rover* 208). No national or racial mixing is accepted on board the British ship, unlike the revolutionary pirate ship which is described as a melting pot:

> The crew of the Dolphin had been chosen by one who thoroughly understood the character of a seaman, from among all the different people of the Christian world. There was not a maritime nation in Europe which had not its representative among that band of turbulent and desperate spirits. Even the descendant of the aboriginal possessors of America had been made to abandon the habits and opinions of his progenitors, to become a wanderer on that element [...]. (*Red Rover* 352)

The pirate recruited Native Americans and Europeans from a number of different nations indiscriminately. He goes so far as to set aside his visceral hatred of Great Britain in order to assemble a crew of experts in navigation: "Here you see a brace of Englishmen, and though they come from the island that I love so little, better men at need, will not often be found" (*Red Rover* 353). Unlike the English, the American pirate chose his men not on the basis of their national or racial origin, but according to their value at sea and their ability not only to become professional sailors, but also to embrace an all-American way of life.

The construction of a community of the sea

In Cooper's time, the nature of the work at sea meant there was no time to dwell on concerns relating to race, class, or nationality. The solitude and danger inherent in this occupation encourage Cooper's sailors to be at one with the rest of the crew. The narrator in *The Red Rover* makes this explicit: "It would seem that man, when he finds himself in the solitude of the ocean, most feels his dependency on others for happiness. He yields to sentiments with which he trifled, in the wantonness of security, and is glad to seek relief in the sympathies of his kind. A community of hazard makes a community of interest, whether person or property composes the stake" (*Red Rover* 191). The sailors' difficult living conditions set them apart as a community. The weight of racial ideology comes into direct conflict with Fid's experience at sea, which tends to make him adopt a more pragmatic approach to racial difference: "Here is Guinea, who is no better than a nigger, and therein far from being a fitting messmate to a white-man, but being used to look at his black face four and twenty years, d'ye see, the colour has got into my eye, and now it suits as well as another. Then at sea, in a dark night, it is not so easy a matter to tell the difference" (*Red Rover* 70). Fid, who spent long years at sea, no longer distinguishes black from white. His view of racial difference inadvertently deconstructs the racial discourse of the time by blurring the difference between literal and figurative meaning. While he sticks to an apparently superficial discourse on skin colour and physical difference, it is in fact the whole ideology associated with it that his comments undermine. He has become so accustomed to his partner's physical difference that he no longer considers it a significant

difference. He knows and acknowledges that a black man and a white man should not associate: here, he uses the compound noun "white-man," intended to clearly separate the two racial categories. Yet, the restricted space of the ship compels the sailor to spend most of his life in close proximity to crewmates who belong to different racial, social, or national categories. This imposed closeness familiarizes them with difference and provides empirical proof that a sailor–black or white, rich or poor, English or American–is above all a sailor; his occupation defines him and constitutes his identity. All the more so as the trials of the sea push them to the very limits of their humanity, with both men having faced death and survived shipwreck, starvation, and dehydration together (*Red Rover* 332). In short, Fid, who was saved from drowning by his brave companion, comes to the conclusion that at sea, on the ship, racial difference is utterly insignificant compared to the strong bonds that unite individuals who are clinging on to life together.

Collective exposure to an unforgiving environment constructs a community of seamen, or in the words of the narrator: "a race of hardy and expert seamen" (*Red Rover* 15). The hardships of the sea–illnesses, accidents, battles, storms–forge the lasting bonds that hold this community together. Cooper's text illustrates this when, on board the *Caroline*, the men are no more than shadows in the service of the ship: "The conscious seamen took their impulses from the tones of their commander. In a moment twenty dark forms were leaping up the rigging with the activity of so many quadrupeds" (*Red Rover* 221). The narrator highlights the sailors' agentivity–"impulses", "leaping up", "activity"–to the point where they no longer belong to any category, or even to the human species. They become "quadrupeds" destined to be nothing more than the driving force of the ship. On board both the *Caroline* and the *Dolphin*, the commander, like an orchestra conductor, calls on each individual on board to work towards the collective effort: "The labour was of a nature to exhibit their individual powers, as well as their collective force to the greatest advantage. Their motion was simultaneous, quick and full of muscle. The cry was clear and cheerful" (*Red Rover* 162). The sailors become one body, they act with one movement and speak with one voice, so that they become an amalgam of voices and bodies dedicated to the common task of moving the ship forward in the most efficient and safest way. The sailor's individuality then only matters in relation to the group, to what he can contribute to this common work, which is supposed to guarantee everyone's safety. The text particularly emphasizes the frailty of human life at sea and the danger sailors face on a daily basis. In that respect, Scipio's navigation skills are unmatched and make him an invaluable member of the crew. Fid's acknowledgement of his companion's skills at sea restores his reputation and places him at the centre of the seafaring community: "[H]e is somewhat steady […]. Then as for seamanship, there are few men who are his betters" (*Red Rover* 290). By shifting the focus from race and class to the importance of individual contribution to the collective effort, the novel portrays the American sailor as the

representative of a community governed by the principles of equality and freedom that gave birth to the American nation.

The American Garden, an elusive utopia

The end of *The Red Rover*, however, partially reestablishes nineteenth-century categories and hierarchies once the mariners go back to the land to settle in the American Garden. The American Garden remains the place where the gentleman finally comes into being after undergoing a series of trials at sea (Newman 75, 91). The novel starts and ends in Newport, Rhode Island, a utopian image of what independent America was intended to be:

> [T]he island itself was never more enticing and lovely. Its swelling crests were the crowned with the wood of centuries, its little vales were covered with the living verdure of the north, and its unpretending but neat and comfortable villas lay sheltered in groves and embedded flowers. The beauty and fertility of the place gained for it a name [...] the 'Garden of America.' (*Red Rover* 16)

This is indeed where Wilder eventually becomes Captain Henry de Lacey and the owner of one of these estates surrounded by profuse greenery at the close of the novel. His life as a sailor is now, more than twenty years later, behind him, and with the Revolution successfully concluded, Wilder has completed his apprenticeship and can enjoy his idyllic life in the American Garden with his wife and children. As for Fid, he becomes Wilder's domestic servant according to his lower social status. The Garden encapsulates the American values inherent in the Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian republic that would define America and allow the new democracy to take root (Newman 2). In a nutshell, the ideal American is a farmer who is free to cultivate his land without fear of governmental oppression. The Cooperian Garden and the Jeffersonian Garden also share another trait: the absence of black individuals in this bucolic landscape, either for fear of the violence that would result from supposedly impossible cohabitation, or simply out of political compromise.

Jefferson envisaged an all-white republic and an "empire of liberty" without racial mixing. As he explained in his *Notes*, he encouraged the abolition of slavery while expressing his fears of racial conflict and miscegenation:

> Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expense of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections by the blacks of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which Nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race. (Jefferson 149)

In his vision of an all-white American society, Jefferson proposed to keep the black population outside the confines of the Garden, which he imagined as a peaceful expansion of American territory. Likewise, in Cooper's novel, the text offers the reader the image of the American

Garden, the utopian, unreal and unrealized, America, except Scipio is not part of the final family portrait. The black sailor, who perishes at sea, is therefore excluded from the domestic sphere and the democratic ideal finally achieved by Wilder. The absence of Scipio from the idyllic picture painted at the novel's conclusion suggests an America free of the peculiar institution, yet it circumvents the question of the place of a free black population on American soil.

Even though the novel ends with an uncomplicated, albeit elusive, image of the American Garden, the American ship provides a heterotopic space for categorical challenges that put this final American utopia and its peaceful compromise into question. In Cooper's nautical fiction, classifications are transcended by the occupational category of sailors. The characters are either identified as landsmen or as seamen whose value can only be graded according to their experience and skills at sea. The dangers inherent in sailing partly justify this new binarism: at sea, safety and survival are the utmost priorities, thus discarding racial and social categories as unimportant distinctions among the community of the sea. Cooper's depiction of the American ship as a heterotopic space of shared experience at sea not only challenges nineteenth-century systems of categorization, but also provides alternative categorizations which in turn give perspective to the implications of the utopia that is the American democratic ideal.

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