



INHABITING THE RIVER

Musings on Boulevards and Arteries

When Herman Melville wrote “A Thought on Book-Binding,” his brief review of a revised edition of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Red Rover*, he resorted to a truly maverick strategy of praise. Instead of elaborating on the contents of the already famous novel, he concentrated solely upon the elegant binding of Putnam’s 1850 edition, which gave him an opportunity to share the following reflection with his readers:¹

Books, gentlemen, are a species of men, and introduced to them you circulate in the “very best society” that this world can furnish, without the intolerable infliction of “dressing” to go into it. In your shabbiest coat and cosiest slippers you may socially chat even with the fastidious Earl of Chesterfield, and lounging under a tree enjoy the divinest intimacy with my late lord of Verulam. Men, then, that they are—living, without vulgarly breathing—never speaking unless spoken to—books should be appropriately apparelled. Their bindings should indicate and distinguish their various characters. A crowd of illustrations press upon us, but we must dismiss them at present with the simple expression of the hope that our suggestion may not entirely be thrown away. (Melville 1984: 1152–1153).

1. The review was first published in *The Literary World*, VI, Number 163 (March 16, 1850), 276–277. The text was brought to critical attention by John Howard Birss in 1932 (Birss 1932:346–348) and since then has been reprinted in many editions of Herman Melville’s works, such as the Library of America—Literary Classics of the United States edition of 1984 (Melville 1984: 1152–1154).

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The “very best society” of the academe, indeed, does not require any particular “dress code” from the books; we are delighted at the fact that they afford us the “divinest intimacy,” irrespective of the nature of the text. Yet, should the book be “appropriately apparelled,” it will grant the reader guidance before he or she even opens it—the cover art, to a sensitive eye, serves as a preface, and may be a magnet far more efficient than the most enthusiastic blurb. Such is the case with two recent collections of essays edited by Mariusz Jochemczyk and Miłosz Piotrowiak: *Urzeczenie. Loce literatury i wyobraźni* (2013) and *Wiersz-rzeka* (2016), both published by the University of Silesia Press in Katowice, Poland. Even before I attempt to explain the untranslatable wordplay in the Polish titles, the images on the covers bring to mind the well-known adage: a picture is worth more than a thousand words:

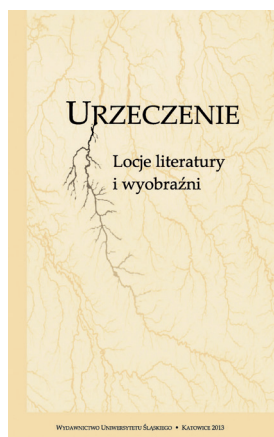


Fig. 1. “Urzeczenie,” cover art by Paulina Dubiel. Image: courtesy of the artist.

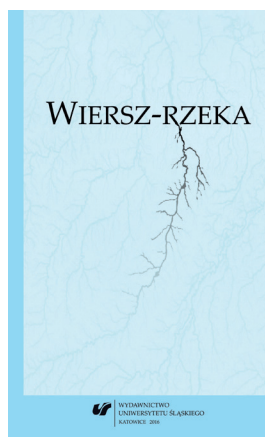


Fig. 2. “Wiersz-rzeka,” cover art by Paulina Dubiel. Image: courtesy of the artist.

Both artistically re-imagined, reversed river charts, devoid of any information save the most obvious, introduce both books as “maps of connections,” intellectual watersheds, or—more specifically—as two significant fragments of it: two rivers with their own tributaries, which somewhere, beyond the frames of the covers, must inevitably contribute to other major rivers and, ultimately, end in oceanic estuaries. Intriguing, each of the covers activates a semiotic interaction between the image and the title. The Polish noun “urzeczenie” literally means “captivation,” “entrancement,” “enthralment,” or “beguilement” by the beauty of speech. Simul-

taneously, the near-homophony of the obsolete Polish noun “rzecz” (“speech,” “oration”) and the noun “rzeka” (river) allows one to understand the title in terms of language spellbound by the river—or, more broadly, in terms of river-inspired literature. The subtitle of the book, *Locje literatury i wyobraźni* makes this connection even more obvious, as it translates directly into: *The Pilot Books of Literature and Imagination*. Importantly, the nautical term “pilot”—referring to a book containing meticulous descriptions of the waters upon which one sails, the characteristics of the shores, the traits of the riverbeds and sea-bottom, the warnings concerning dangerous shoals and rocks, as well as observation and experience-based sailing, anchoring, and docking directions—metaphorically combines the idea of prescriptiveness with the concept of the ever-changing reality. Pilot books must be constantly updated lest a trusting, naïve, navigator should run his or her ship aground, following obsolete advice—and so do interpretations. Equally suggestive is the title of the second book—*Wiersz-rzeka*, which could be translated as *The River-Poem*. It plays upon the Polish phrase “wywiad-rzeka,” an “extended” or “long” interview, in which context the eponymous poem reveals its nature as ‘one that flows,’ contributes to other poems, and is itself a tributary to a global song which combines all into one, endlessly replenishing the ocean of human reflection. At the same time, it also becomes tantamount to the river itself: the river-as-a-poem, overflowing the bounds of language.

Such a reading of the two covers leads to a series of more profound questions: How do the different values—whether discursive or non-discursive—carried by the rivulets, streams, and rivers across vast bodies of land contribute to a living, global, axiological repository? How do they interact? How do their dynamics impact the evolution of physical reality? How do they shape relational epistemologies? The understanding of the mutual interdependency between Self and World?

Rivers, like bloodstreams, feed or poison the bodies of land, carrying both nutrients and pathogens. When they are too strictly regulated, the seemingly “docile” rivers often rupture levees and flood-banks, and much like ruptured blood vessels, wreak havoc. And although the analogy may, at first, seem somewhat risky, it stands to reason to argue that the circulation of liquids

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within an individual organism, whose ‘body wall’ is always incontinent, discontinuous, and penetrable, should be perceived as a part of the same system of which the rivers are an element as well:

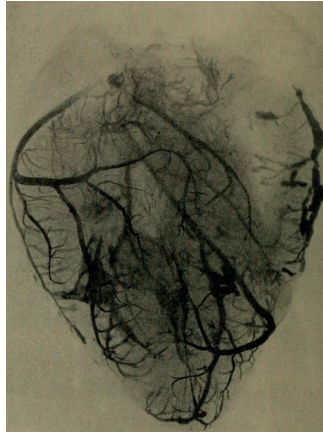


Fig. 3. "The Röntgen rays in medical work," David Walsh, 1899. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 4. "A Butterbur Leaf." Source: <https://pixabay.com/photos/butterbur-leaf-leaf-veins-green-3469942>.

Fractal geometry? Perhaps, perhaps not. Importantly, however, the intricate network of tributaries visible in the angiographic image of the heart and in the complex innervation of the leaf blade scrutinized under a magnifying glass both manifest the traits of the same, river-basin-like, morphology. Should these two pictures have been incorporated into the cover art of the two books instead of the river charts, the outcome would not contradict the books' titles—the similarity would be striking. Therefore, even if we choose to forgo further arrays into the Transcendentalist ecosophy in which “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,”² we still may recognize the power of the metaphor allowing us to intellectually and emotionally relate to Robert Charlebois’s idea of “inhabiting the river,” beautifully expressed in his song “Saint-Laurent” from his 1992 album *Immensément*:

J’habite un fleuve en Haute-Amérique
 Presque océan, presque Atlantique
 Un fleuve bleu vert et Saint-Laurent
 J’habite un grand boulevard mouvant

2. The famous passage comes from Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, <https://poets.org/poem/song-myself-1-i-celebrate-myself> (accessed 1 May 2021).

Une mer du Nord en cristaux de sel
 Agile, fragile, belle et rebelle
 Presque océan, presque Atlantique
 J'habite un fleuve en Haute-Amérique (Charlebois 1992)

“Almost the ocean, almost the Atlantic,” in Charlebois’s vision the Saint Lawrence is a blue-green boulevard in constant motion. Rather than living *on the river*, the lyrical I lives *in it*, in the midst of the bustle of the living promenade. His element—beautiful, rebellious, and shared with other (non-human) subjectivities—teems with life:

Un fleuve tout plein d’animaux brillants
 De capelans, de caps diamants
 De baleines douces et de poissons-volants
 J'habite un estuaire souffrant (Charlebois 1992)

And yet, its beauty notwithstanding, and irrespective of the immense complexity of its rich life, the Saint Lawrence—the old giant—suffers, unable to protect itself against the ignorance of those deaf to arguments proving its importance:

Un vieux géant à court d’arguments
 Il faut vacciner même les marsouins
 Débarbouiller bébé loup-phoque
 Des Grands Lacs jusqu’à Tadoussac
 Il faut laver l’eau, laver l’eau, laver l’eau (Charlebois 1992)

If “even the porpoise” need to be vaccinated and if baby seals need cleaning up, it is obvious that now it is water—the *sine-qua-non* condition of life, which has been treated as the abundant medium of purification for ages—that must be “washed” itself. From the Great Lakes to Tadoussac, throughout the land, water in all tributaries must be *purified*, or else the grand boulevard, inhabited by so many, will die along with the land it nourishes:

Un fleuve par devers Charlevoix
 Bordé de quais, de fermes d’oncles Joseph
 De noms qui chouennent chez les Cajuns
 J'habite une suite de caps tourmentés (Charlebois 1992)

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The river, as troubled as American history, once a highway to sailing ships and an inanimate (albeit always moving) treasury of goods—receives the face of the old giant—and thus, literally, becomes a *subject*. In Charlebois’s song, the Saint Lawrence is a living organism made up of many; it is inseparable from the selves who today might still deem it only ancillary. Life, which the river has been warranting to countless humans, men and women who once felt their organic connection to its vibrant flow, must be celebrated in a gesture of a radical reconnection to the Old Giant, whose name may now be capitalized—not only *in memoriam* of those who are long gone, but also for the sake of the millions who, consciously or not, remain “moored to the tides”:

A la mémoire des marins d’eau salée
 Des voitures d’eau qui l’ont défrichée
 Ils étaient des centaines puis des milliers
 On es des millions amarrés aux marées (Charlebois 1992)

We are all “amarrés aux marées”—like the real characters of Félix Leclerc’s “La Drave,” Mark Twain’s dwellers of the Mississippi, Melville’s passengers of the “Fidèle,” and many, many others, we belong in the river *sensu largo*. More and more perceptibly, the present day water-sovereignty protesters, international eco-activists, or *friluftsliv* fans become important voices in the public space. Awakened to the ‘old’ awareness, many Westerners have started practicing—and often teaching—the very profound connection that the Indigenous Nations have been *living* since the time immemorial.³

3. The transfer of knowledge, late as it is, has become possible owing to the fact that during the past decades Indigenous studies have gained their due recognition, but also because the West, facing an inevitable ecological crisis, has eventually become attentive to Indigenous methodologies, recognizing the importance of landmark First Nations’ philosophies such as that of *Hishuk’ish tsawalk*—“all is one”—which became one of the first theoretical positions to practically impact the shape of Canadian legislature. One of the most important champions of *Tsawalk*, Dr. E. Richard Atleo, the hereditary Chief of the Nuuchahnulth Nation who vitally contributed to the establishment of the First Nations Studies Department at Malaspina University College (now Vancouver Island University), and who authored three books dedicated to the ontology drawn from Nuuchahnulth culture, made the implementation of some

Slowly, we re-learn to appreciate the importance of the non-human subjectivity of Oceanus, the Old Giant river engulfing the Earth, once a primordial deity in the Greek pantheon and the father of three thousand Potamoi, the ancient river gods. The “Ol’ man river,” who “don’t say nothin’, but “must know something’,”⁴ although himself “running out of arguments,” speaks again: a simple JStor query produces an astounding result of 1,316,839 titles for the keyword “river”—and the river-inspired discourse “keeps on rollin’ along.” Globetrotters and poets, but also geologists, botanists, zoologists, climatologists, ethnologists, economists, engineers, chemists, political scientists, musicologists, philosophers, literary and cultural scholars alike—all turn their attention to the river: both a living artery and a principal agent of change. Although humankind has long realized that “no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man,”⁵ it is only now that the whole plethora of existing currents and streams, no matter how small, gains recognition as a system of important tributaries to this ancient knowledge. This issue of the *Review of International American Studies* celebrates the old truth: *Panta rhei*.

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of the principles of Tsawalk in the area of sustainable forestry during his service as Board Member of the Centre for Environmental Resources, a Co-Chair of the Scientific Panel for Sustainable Forest Practices in Clayoquot Sound, and a member of the board of Ecotrust Canada. See Richard E. Atleo’s biographical note available at the Simon Fraser University website: <http://www.sfu.ca/ore/RichardAtleo.html> (10 May 2021).

4. For scholars of the younger generation it might not be obvious that I am making a reference to a song composed by Jerome Kern and written by Oscar Hammerstein II featuring in the 1927 musical *The Boat Show*, which gained fame owing to the stellar performances of two bass singers: Bing Crosby (1928) and Paul Robertson (1936). See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eh9WayN7R-s> (1 May 2021).

5. Scholars usually attribute this famous aphorism to Heraclitus of Ephesus (see, for example, Stern 1991).

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