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# PLACE AND TRANSFORMAL MEANING IN NINETEENTH CENTURY SEA SONGS<sup>1</sup>

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Many places in the seafarer's world are steeped in cultural and occupational meaning, and in song they become symbols of group affiliations, experiences, and concerns. The significance of these places, however, rarely surfaces from a straight reading of texts, for spatial imagery in nautical folksong lacks the detailed development necessary to make the total environment or scene immediately apparent, especially to outsiders. A text simply refers to a location—a town, a sea, a bay, a headland, a deck, the fo'c'sle, aloft, or below—or it may only imply setting through activity. But as Anna Caraveli shows, the interpretation of folksong imagery depends heavily on the audience's familiarity with culturally assumed knowledge that is brought to bear in the evaluation of a text. She writes:

Meaning is created . . . in an open-ended process of continuous interaction between the song and the world outside it . . . . This interaction, far from being only aesthetic, is rooted in a common fund of knowledge and shared assumptions drawn upon by both performer and audience, by active and passive participants alike.<sup>2</sup>

Given Caraveli's emphasis on "the song beyond the song," one realizes that the aesthetic function of spatial signifiers in nautical folksongs is linked to an empathetic appreciation of the mariner's environment, an appreciation that sees places not simply as points on a map or parts of a ship, but also in terms of the activities, experiences, values, and beliefs associated with them.

Drawing on texts from Canadian, American, and British collections of sea ballads, songs, and shanties, the present paper explores the

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, at l'Université Laval, in June 1989. The research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and their generous assistance is acknowledged with thanks.

2. Anna Caraveli, "The Song Beyond the Song: Aesthetics and Social Interaction in Greek Folksong," *Journal of American Folklore* 95 (1982), 135.

aesthetic significance of place<sup>3</sup> in the folksongs of the Anglo-American merchant sailors of the last century, with the objective of determining how the cultural connotations of place function dynamically within the songs. It pays particular attention to the relationship between the places mentioned in the songs and their relevance to the occupational existence of mariners. In so doing, it attempts to isolate what Lauri Honko calls "transformal" meanings, which are,

... those extra-textual meanings that influence the communication but do not attain linguistic form. The sphere of transformal meaning will include mental modes, memory pictures, and ideas and concepts as used but not verbalized by the speaker-listener in the communication process...<sup>4</sup>

For present purposes, meaning is determined on a phenomenological basic, that is, through an examination of the experiences most readily associated with the places in question. The necessary contextual data and ethnographic descriptions of the sailing merchant marine are taken from historical, folkloristic, and anthropological studies, and from the autobiographies of former sailors.<sup>5</sup> Emphasis is given to two common spatial elements. First, there is the macrocosm of the seas, channels, and oceans through which vessels sail, and second, there is the microcosm of the vessel itself. In song the former generally present the theme of man versus nature while the latter tends to emphasize social concerns, such as conflict between officers and crew.

Place is potentially rich in transformal meaning, for the regions, environments, locations, and structures that influence our lives are far more than just physical entities. Scholars interested in cultural perceptions of space have long recognized that the activities and experiences we associate with a place, or how we think of one place in relation to others, play key roles in shaping our total image of a given setting. Place, in this light, can be seen as "... the combined effect of physical setting, human experience and culturally based meanings."<sup>6</sup>

3. This paper makes no differentiation between the terms "space" and "place," and in the subsequent discussion they should be considered synonymous.

4. Lauri Honko, "Empty Texts, Full Meanings: On Transformal Meaning in Folklore," *Journal of Folklore Research* 22 (1985), 40.

5. For an appraisal of this literature from an historian's perspective, see David Alexander, "Literacy among Canadian and Foreign Seamen, 1863-1899," *Working Men Who Got Wet*, eds. Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting, Proceedings of the Fourth Atlantic Conference of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project, St. John's, Maritime History Group, 1980, pp. 3-33.

6. Timothy Cochrane, "The Folklife Expressions of Three Isle Royale Fishermen: A Sense of Place Examination"; as cited in Mary Hufford, [One Space, Many Places: Folklife and Land Use in New Jersey's Pinelands National Reserve], Publication of the American Folklife Center, no. 15, Washington, American Folklife Center, 1986, p. 11.

In addition, among members of a cultural group, places attain symbolic and emotional significance as "... records and expressions of the cultural values and experiences of those who create and live in them."<sup>7</sup>

The symbolism of space is especially important among mariners, for spatial criteria play a dominant role in defining them as a folk group. At sea, one's land-based expectations often turn turtle, and in seamen's memoirs, the strongest expressions of the cultural inversion occur in narratives of their initial adaptation to nautical life. In learning to function competently in a world perpetually in motion, the apprentice knows at first the difficulty of even standing upright, or experiences, probably, the misery of seasickness. He moves from a featured and named landscape to an apparently placeless expanse, and his customary way of thinking about topographical markers may be rudely pointed out when asked by superiors, as an initiatory prank, to go aloft to look for the equator, the arctic circle, or some other cartographic abstraction that has no empirical reality.<sup>8</sup> As his career progresses, the sailor's integration into the seafaring community will be marked by his habitation in or passage through places of occupational significance. A berth in the fo'c'sle or half-deck denotes an ordinary or able-bodied seaman, and thus Richard Henry Dana, in spatially defining his time at sea as *Two Years before the Mast*,<sup>9</sup> aligns himself with the social world of the common sailor. Officers berth aft. Similarly, the folk idiom "in through the hawse-pipe, out through the stern" indicates, through spatial metaphor, a sailor who rises from ordinary seaman to captain during his career. Important markers of status are earned as well by the completion of particular voyages that have special meaning within the community, such as crossing the equator or rounding Cape Horn. In the nautical context, then, the way one moves through and works in space, where one lives, and the places one has experienced are key indicators of occupational status, competence and experience.

7. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London, Pion, 1976, p. 61.

8. Harry Miller Lyndenberg, *Crossing the Line: Tales of the Ceremony During Four Centuries*, New York, New York Public Library, 1957, p. 130; for related comments on "the line" as a physical reality, see pp. 105n, 146, 160-161, 178 (fictional account from Mark Twain), and 181. Margaret Baker, *Folklore of the Sea*, Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1979, p. 100, lists "watching for the Equator" among shipboard initiatory pranks.

9. Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years before the Mast*, 1840; rpt. Edinburgh, Adam & Charles Black, 1886.

As W. H. F. Nicolaisen demonstrates,<sup>10</sup> folk poetry feeds on the symbolic and connotative elements of place, and uses them to create textural or perhaps even specific tensions within scenes. In ballads and songs of the sea, the places named belong to the "lived-world;" they are either locatable on a map along noted sailing routes or are part of a vessel's structure or rigging, and it is their empirically-based meanings that find an expressive outlet in song. Most sea-places carry associations of severe weather, navigational dangers, or arduous toil—the Arctic seas, Cape Horn, the English Channel, the Bay of Biscay, and the Banks of Newfoundland. Of these regions, Cape Horn is the one most often encountered in song, particularly in the shanties, which contain a number of formulaic expressions that refer to "the Horn" and its perils.<sup>11</sup>

Situated at the fringe of the southern temperate zone, where sub-polar winds race unchecked by any obstacle, this short stretch of water off the tip of South America is considered the most treacherous in the world according to the writings of most seamen and maritime ethnographers. "Rounding the Horn," particularly the difficult east to west passage against prevailing winds, had almost ritual significance among sailors.<sup>12</sup> In general, the narratives of traversing this body of water are highly dramatic, spectacular, sometimes bordering on the unbelievable, yet they are told with a consistency that would challenge the indifference of even the most sceptical reader.

The range of experience that defines the Horn as "place" may be exemplified through two excerpts from the autobiographies of former seamen. First, there are the less dramatic passages, yet even these have their moments of intense anxiety, as in this account from Dana:

A true specimen of Cape Horn was coming upon us. A great cloud of a dark slate-colour was driving on us from the south-west; and we did our best to take in sail . . . before we were in the midst of it. We had got the light sails furled, the courses hauled up, and the topsail reef-tackles hauled out, and were just mounting the forerigging when the storm struck us. In an instant the sea, which had been comparatively quiet, was running higher and higher; and

10. W. F. H. Nicolaisen, "Place-Names in the Traditional Ballads," *Folklore* 84 (1973), 307-312.

11. James Moreira, "Songs of the Shantymen: Composition and Performance in a Nineteenth Century Tradition," MA Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1984, pp. 165-166, 277-279.

12. Knut Weibust, *Deep-Sea Sailors: A Study in Maritime Ethnology*, Handlingar 71, Stockholm, Nordiska museets, 1969, pp. 8 9 259; for comments on the relative difficulty of the eastward and westward passages, see Alan J. Villiers, *Voyage of the Parma: The Great Grain Race of 1932 from Australia to Falmouth by Way of Cape Horn*, London, Geofrey Bles, 1933, pp. 112-113.

it became almost as dark as night. The hail and sleet were harder than I had yet felt them; seeming almost to pin us down to the rigging. We were longer taking in sail than ever before; for the sails were stiff and wet, the ropes and rigging covered with snow and sleet, and we ourselves cold and nearly blinded with the violence of the storm. By the time we had got down upon deck again, the little brig was plunging madly into a tremendous head sea, which at every dive rushed through the bow-ports and over the bows, and buried all the forward part of the vessel.<sup>13</sup>

Similar descriptions occur repeatedly in narratives of the Horn, and accounts of narrow escapes and heroic efforts are commonplace.

A key factor in the physical setting of the Horn, as in many places at sea, is an inferred meteorological environment. The second narrative sample typifies Cape Horn in the extreme, where weather is of such ferocity that the mariner loses all ability to control his vessel and forfeits his security to the mercy of the waves. A photographic description gives perhaps a hint of the reality. Looking forward from the quarter deck, no horizon is visible; one can see nothing of the vessel beyond the foremast. The only sail set, the fore-lower-topsail, has blown out, and its remnants stretch from the yard and bolt ropes in tatters before what is undeniably a howling gale.<sup>14</sup> The narrative itself recounts a rounding that took over 50 days; in that time the vessel traversed no more than five degrees of longitude. The following incident, telling of a wave that nearly swamps the vessel when it breaks over her decks, is selected from among several others because it demonstrates the tenuousness of human existence in such an environment. As the wave approaches, the crew is ordered into the rigging for protection from being swept overboard:

The foaming crest rose and curled over with a vast sigh, and in the curling seemed to touch the tips of the lower yardarms. My God, what a sea! The ship fell over so far and so deep down that I expected her to turn turtle. There was a terrific roar. Then--chaos! The ship was completely engulfed in the swirling maelstrom fore and aft. Overwhelmed by that depth of water, not a single elevated structure along the whole length of the decks could be seen....

As the ship and her crew recovered from the great shock, I heard the faint cries of a man in dire distress. Not from any one caught and bodily injured on the main deck did those pitiful wails come but, even above the droning of the wind, from out of the darkness far down to leeward....<sup>15</sup>

Cape Horn is a place of inestimable significance in the lore of mariners, yet most songs present the motif in a highly understated

13. Dana, pp. 42-43.

14. James P. Barker, *The Log of a Limejuicer*, New York, Huntington Press, 1933, facing p. 192.

15. Barker, pp. 176-177.

manner, often giving no more than a casual reference to a point passed on a voyage: "Around Cape Horn through frost and snow, / And up the coast to Callao."<sup>16</sup> These undeveloped images, however, feed on and draw meaning from the intensity of the experiential image. That is to say, the aesthetic impact of folk poetry lies not only in the denotative value of "the words" but also in the transformatory meanings that flesh out the image and contribute to the reification of scene and characterization. Thus, any reference to Cape Horn, even without expository detail, has the potential to embody the dramatic constituents of exposure, risk, and death.

When artfully applied, the Cape Horn motif can have even greater meaning. In the shanties of Richard Maitland, songs about conflicts with merchants and prostitutes, or the hierarchy of the merchant marine invariably feature a denouement that portrays a voyage round Cape Horn:

I went down to Cherry Street,  
There Martin Churchill took me in  
And sent Me round Cape Horn

He said he had a job for me,  
'Twas a pierhead jump across  
But when the pilot left the ship  
We were heading for Cape Horn<sup>17</sup>

It was three long months before we got to Callao  
And the ship she was a-called a floating hell.

We filled up there at Callao with saltpetre,  
Then back again around Cape Horn<sup>18</sup>

Around Cape Horn through frost and snow  
An' up the coast to Callao,

To load saltpeter [sic] for Liverpool  
An' back around Cape Horn again<sup>19</sup>

On a strictly compositional level, the motif provides a suitable narrative coda for the preceding action. Beyond that, however, it serves to portray the central character perpetually caught between a rock and a hard place. His life ashore is at the mercy of mercantile

16. William Main Doerflinger, *Shantymen and Shantyboys: Songs of the Sailor and Lumberman*, New York, Macmillan, 1951, p. 57.

17. "Can't They Dance the Polka," Alan Lomax, Interviews with Richard Maitland, Recorded May 1939, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Archive of Folk Culture, AFS 2525a (7 1/2" reel).

18. "Paddy, Get Back," Doerflinger, p. 55.

19. "A-Rovin'," Doerflinger, p. 257.

interests that feed first on his wages and then his advance; at sea, his life is tied to a vessel, sometimes for a number of years, which may carry him anywhere, yet over which he has no control. In one appearance of the formula, all of the factors dominating the mariner's life; the occupational, the environmental, and the mercantile, are brought together in one concluding stanza: "On a red-hot Yank bound around Cape Horn,/My clothes and boots were in the pawn."<sup>20</sup> The abandoning of troubles ashore for a berth on an undesirable vessel stands as a metaphoric leap for the rigging, which reveals the sailor's life to be as subject to the mercy of random elements as is a vessel in a gale.

In contrast to motifs like the Horn, which have the symbolic strength to stand on their own, other images rely on the cumulative effect of a sequence of related places to intensify meaning. "Gay Spanish Ladies," for example, contains a stanza that names a series of headlands, shoals, and other coastal markers to foster the excitement and expectation of the voyage's end:

Now the land where we made it was near to the Lizard,  
We stood up by Bolt Head, Start Point and the Wight,  
We sailed by old Beachy, left Dungeness to leeward,  
Until we came up with the South Foreland Light.<sup>21</sup>

The final days of a voyage are often fraught with anxiety, as expectations of release from the drudgery and privations of ship's life begin to grow.<sup>22</sup> The anticipation of arrival and homecoming is triggered by reference to "The Lizard," the first landfall for a vessel approaching England from the south-west. The stanza builds up the anticipation by plotting a series of points along a course, each one moving farther up the English Channel and bringing the vessel closer to her destination. One might add that the tension between sea and shore is enhanced by an emphasis on land markers.

As stated at the outset, lack of exposition and description often veils the semantic importance of place, and in some songs full meaning comes only with an insider's appreciation of the areas mentioned. A case in point is the song "*The Dreadnought*," which describes a

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20. "A-Rovin'," Lomax, AFS 2518b. The term "red-hot Yank" indicates a vessel whose officers exercised strict discipline to the point of brutality.
  21. Rex Clements, *Manavilins*, London, Heath Cranton, 1928, p. 81. Here, one can notice the use of a cognitive map as a basic structure, which is actually quite common in nautical song.
  22. Tensions surrounding the end of a voyage find expression in many sea songs and ballads: "Leave Her, Johnny, Leave Her," "One More Day," and "Liverpool Judies" are but a few of them.



passage from Liverpool to New York by listing some of the places encountered en route. Within the text, there is no overt dramatic incident, neither among the characters nor between the vessel and the environment. Yet the places noted create a textural tension if their properties are known, and further, the analysis of place can uncover a core conflict in the song which may not be apparent in the words alone. Effectively, two environmental concerns inform the song, wind and manoeuvrability, and central to both are the limitations of voyaging under sail. To begin with, the journey is east to west, against prevailing winds and currents, which to the sailor means a longer passage and more frequent working of the sails. A Nova Scotian variant of "The Banks of Newfoundland" also uses the westward passage to intensify the hardships of the trip: "On the passage to the westward/Those sailors suffered sore."<sup>23</sup> Wind, or rather lack of it, generates further tension when the vessel is becalmed on the Grand Banks. Again, this carries associations of increased work, for calms require constant re-adjustment of the sails to take advantage of every breath of wind. In addition, crews are easily frustrated by calms since the results of their labours are not easily observed. In this instance, becalming is probably not an automatic association of place, for in song, as in reality, the Grand Banks tend to have quite the opposite connotation. Here, the spatial significance of the Banks lies probably in their proximity to the northeastern United States, the vessel's final destination, and the becalming, by delaying the completion of the trip, highlights once again the expectations of the journey's end.

The second concern, manoeuvrability, comes into play at the beginning of the song as the vessel gets under way. For large sailing vessels, coastal waters present several navigational difficulties, ranging from narrow sea-lanes to other, more serious hazards. Rex Clements, for example, writes of

The very proper dislike of sailing-ship men to hug a coast too closely, with the possible danger of finding themselves on a lee shore . . . . Cutting corners is all very well in a vessel that has a perennial fair wind under her counter in the shape of a propeller, but no shipmaster who has had to claw off a dangerous shore under sail wants to repeat the experience gratuitously.<sup>24</sup>

In "The Dreadnought," the sequence of stanzas moving from "the Mersey" to "the Atlantic so wide" presents contrasting images of the vessel in confined and open waters:

23. Helen Creighton, *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*, 1933; rpt. New York, Dover, 1966, p. 221.

24. Rex Clements, *A Gypsy of the Horn*, London, Heath Cranton, 1924, p. 163.

Oh the *Dreadnought* is waiting in the Mersey so free,  
 Waiting for the *Independence* to tow her to sea,  
 For to round that black rock where the Mersey does flow,  
 Bound away in the *Dreadnought* to the westward we'll go.

Oh now the ship's sailing down the long Irish shore  
 Where the pilot he boards us as he's oft done before.  
 Fill away your main topsails, board your foretop also,  
 She's a Liverpool packet, brave boys, let her go.

Oh the *Dreadnought* is howling down the wild Irish Sea  
 Where the passengers are merry with their hearts full of glee,  
 While the sailors like lion's walk the decks to and fro,  
 Bound away in the *Dreadnought* to the westward we'll go.

Oh, the *Dreadnought* is sailing the Atlantic so wide  
 Where the dark heavy seas roll along her black sides.  
 With the sails neatly spread and the red cross to show,  
 Bound away in the *Dreadnought* to the westward we'll go.<sup>25</sup>

The first two stanzas concentrate on coastal imagery: the Mersey river, the "black rock," and the Irish shore. The sense of restriction is enhanced by noting the ship's reliance on a tug and a pilot in the early stages of the voyage. As the ship proceeds, more sail is set, until she finally comes into her own under full sail in the Atlantic. The tensions suggested by space in the sequence are not dramatic; there is no *specific* threat to the safety of the vessel or her crew, in the manner of a Cape Horn gale. Rather, the stanzas dwell on places and conditions where the sailing ship operates under a handicap and where she requires assistance for safe navigation. Many sea miles pass before the gradual transition from "bare poles" to full sail is complete. As in the becalming scene, then, there is a suggestion here of impeded progress, which again fosters anticipation through an eagerness to be under way. Thus, throughout the song tension is generated through the opposition of themes of "progress" and "restraint": the intention to be away under full sail is impeded by the restrictions of coastal navigation; the intention to sail westward is impeded by headwinds and currents; and the desire to reach the final destination is impeded by calms. This central conflict, though not developed through description, does receive "intensity through repetition"<sup>26</sup> in the stanzaic burden, where the idea of progress suggested by "Bound away in the *Dreadnought*"

25. Helen Creighton, and Doreen Senior, *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia*, Toronto, Ryerson, 1950, pp. 227-228.

26. For a discussion of the concept "Intensität durch quantitat" and its implications for folksong aesthetics, see Flemming Andersen, *Commonplace and Creativity: The Role of Formulaic Diction in Anglo-Scottish Traditional Balladry*, Odense University Studies from the Medieval Centre, No. 1, Odense, Odense University Press, 1985, p. 69.

is countered by reference to the difficulty of the windward passage in "to the westward we'll go."

Through their transformal meanings, seaplaces establish a large-scale occupational environment in songs and reveal the rolling oceans in all their moods, from storms to the frustration of calms or the difficulties of coastal sailing. In consequence of their ability to generate images of meteorological extremes or other environmental concerns, places at sea underscore the struggle between sailors and their natural surroundings as a prominent theme in the genre. The acceptance of those hardships, in turn, gives voice to a quality of fatalism which is sometimes remarked upon as a common trait in deep-water sailors.

In some cases, the contrast of places having opposing associations reflects the divergence of competing groups. Often this is achieved through the juxtaposition of hazardous and benign place; the former is invariably an active, onstage area and defines the favoured group, while secure place, in which the exoteric group is located, is normally offstage and passive. Landsmen, naturally, often figure in such contrasts, and are usually located in generalized or abstract space, such as "on land" or "ashore":

Oh, may you bless your happy lot that lies secure on shore,  
Free from the billows and the blast that round poor seamen roar.  
It's little you know the dangers that we were forced to stand  
For fourteen days and fourteen nights on the Banks of Newfoundland.<sup>27</sup>

Here, the actual cares of shore existence are overlooked and the landsman's place functions solely as an external, secure point of reference through which the onstage image is judged, a passive backdrop for the activity occurring at sea.

Contrasts between areas of exposure and those of safety and/or comfort are reflected, as well, in shipboard space. For the most part, dramatic space is normally oriented along the longitudinal and vertical axes of the vessel, for it is from the contrasts of fore-and-aft or aloft-and-below that shipboard space derives meaning. In the vertical plane, "below" is safe while "aloft" is the area of activity that attains a positive value. Both Dana<sup>28</sup> and Weibust<sup>29</sup> describe the ability and ease with which one works aloft as being a source of occupational pride among sailors. Work aloft is often necessitated by the need to take in sail in inclement weather, which may lead one to anticipate connotations of exposure and harsh conditions, but Dana adds emphatically

27. Roy Palmer, ed. *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 192.

28. Dana, p. 35.

29. Weibust, p. 331.

that "reefing is the most exciting part of a sailor's duty." The complete picture, however, goes further. Alan Villiers says of his own experience, "Spiritually, I felt nearer the Creator of things on the high yards and astride the bowsprit-end than I ever had felt ashore." The spirit that gives vent to such inward reflection can be manifest also in outward displays of bravado, for Villiers also tells of sailors balancing on their bellies atop the fore and main masts "like trapeze artists doing an act."<sup>30</sup> Being aloft is a highly positive image, burdened with notions of occupational competence and confidence, and its overtones suggest exhilaration and, to some extent, superiority over others.

As with the contrast of "at sea" and "ashore," aloft/below parallelism is a common signifier of group esteem and cohesion, as in the chorus of "The Mermaid" (Child 289): "While we poor sailors go reefing to the top/And the land lubbers lie down below."<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the shanty "Blood Red Roses" is said to stem from the Crimean troop transports, aboard which the British marines worked halyards and lines from the deck while sailors worked aloft. Its chorus, "Hang down, you blood red roses, hang down," makes reference to the spatial division of labour between sailors and marines.

Place aloft serves, also, as a key agent in character exposition: simply by locating a man in the rigging, the song places him in a position of assurance. Of note is "The Dreadful Ghost," which makes substantial use of movement in a vertical plane to establish a dynamic relationship between the focal characters. The heroine, pregnant by a sailor, hangs herself but leaves a request that she remain unburied as a warning to other girls. Her ghost follows the sailor to sea, and the portrayal of their meeting effectively uses vertical motion to demonstrate the initial secure image of the hero followed by his cowardly response after seeing the revenant:

One morning from our foretop high  
A little boat he chanced to spy,  
A little boat appeared to him  
Just like one woman and two little men.

Down decks, down decks this young man goes  
Straight to our captain in his morning clothes,  
Saying, "Captain, captain, stand by defence  
For there is a spirit coming hence."

On deck, on deck our captain goes  
And there he saw the dreadful ghost,  
She said, "Captain, captain, do stand calm  
Until I speak unto such a man."

30. Villiers, p. 34.

31. Helen Creighton, *Maritime Folk Songs*, Toronto, Ryerson, 1961, p. 26.

"Was in St. Taliens that young man died,  
 It's in St. Taliens his body lies."  
 "Oh captain, captain don't tell me so,  
 He is alive in your ship below."<sup>32</sup>

Reduced from the dignity of the foretop to hiding below, the sailor is brought up on deck and placed with the revenant in a boat which sinks "down in a flame of fire."

The most significant social space on a vessel is defined along the fore-and-aft axis, for it represents the critical distinction between officers, who berth aft, and crew, who berth forward in the fo'c'sle. Between the two is the main deck, which is the primary work area aboard and the meeting ground of the two social groups. These social divisions provide the basis for an understanding of the dramatic function of shipboard place sea ballads, which tend to depict life from the point of view of the foremast hand. The deck, as the common ground between officers and crew, is typically an area for conflicts between the two groups, as in the following scene from Richard Maitland's version of "Paddy, Get Back," which depicts an altercation between a shantyman and the mate. In the scene, the mate's concern over a song underscores the tension between officers and crew, for without the shanty to regulate the work, it would proceed slowly. Refusal to sing shanties was sometimes used as a form of protest against harsh treatment:<sup>33</sup>

Oh, they called us out one night to reef the tops'ls,  
 There was belayin'-pins a-flyin' around the deck.  
 We came on deck and went to set the tops'ls.  
 Not a man among the bunch could sing a song.  
 Oh, the mate he grabbed ahold of me by the collar.  
 "If you don't sing a song I'll break your blasted neck!"<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, bold McCarthy challenges the mate to a fight on deck on the "City of Baltimore":

If you're a man of courage  
 It's you I'll stand before.  
 I'll fight you fair upon the deck  
 Of the *City of Baltimore*.<sup>35</sup>

The fo'c'sle, on the other hand, is a place of refuge on board ship, in spite of its many privations in reality. Of this space, Weibust writes:

32. Creighton & Senior, p. 152.

33. See, for example, Dana, p. 147.

34. Doerflinger, p. 55.

35. Creighton, *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*, p. 118.

"The fo'c'sle was above all reserved for sleep and rest."<sup>36</sup> In song, it is normally an offstage area from which one is drawn away into a dangerous or unpleasant situation or to which one returns afterward. The Nova Scotian song, "Captain Conrod," uses distance from the fo'c'sle to create empathy for a character by depicting him at the wheel on the first night at sea, suffering from *delirium tremens*, and longing to "go forward" into the fo'c'sle where he has a bottle of brandy stowed in his pack.<sup>37</sup>

Sometimes, reference to the fo'c'sle is by implication rather than by direct naming. "Oh, they called us out...."<sup>38</sup>, for instance, implies out of the security of the fo'c'sle. This example begs comparison to Roger Renwick's discussion of a similar construction in English folk song, and the contrast suggests a basic difference in how space is used in songs of shipboard life as opposed to broadsides dealing with those who live and work on land. Renwick states that characters who "rove out" enter liminal regions beyond the conventions of everyday life:

"Out" signifies, in the *spatial* domain, a place beyond the boundaries of one's customary context.... where everyday rules do not apply and where one is free to participate in an unusual adventure—probably an adventure, in fact, that is tabooed by intravillage norms.<sup>39</sup>

Land-based song, then, features a transition from defined to nebulous or liminal space, suggesting escape from stasis as a basic aesthetic function in the genre. By contrast, the onstage, active areas in sea ballads are well-defined places whose risks are known, expected, and in many ways assumed. They are governed by very explicit rules that, in fact, often work against the sailor and force him into unpleasant or dangerous encounters. Nonetheless, these areas of activity have a positive cultural value and the mariner's rightful place is in the midst of them. Thus in nautical songs, spatial imagery tends to highlight the necessity of facing the risks, hazards, and privations inherent in maritime occupations.

The fo'c'sle, in its guise as a metaphor for the common sailor, plays an interesting role in "The Golden Vanity" [Child 285], one of the most widely collected sea ballads and one of a handful of classical ballads that deal with sea themes. The narrative runs as follows: When his vessel is captured by an enemy ship, a cabin boy offers to destroy

36. Weibust, p. 76.

37. Public Archives of Nova Scotia, PANS Micro: Diaries: Samuel Spares.

38. Doerflinger, p. 57.

39. Roger dev. Renwick, *English Folk Poetry: Structure and Meaning*, Publications of the American Folklore Society, New Series 2, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980, p. 19.

the opponent in return for a reward from the captain. So granted, he swims to the other ship and sinks her by boring holes in her hull with an auger. He returns to his ship, but the captain refuses to bring him aboard. Endings vary; either the boy drowns or dies shortly after his shipmates lift him on deck. The overall narrative, in a straightforward manner, elucidates the social conflict between officers and crew. But the central scene—the sinking of the enemy ship—establishes a bond between the crews of the two vessels through the presentation of fo’c’sle:

The boy bored some holes and some of them bored twice;  
Some were playing cards and some more were shaking dice.  
The dice began to jingle and the water it poured in  
Now she’s sinking in the lowlands, lowlands, lowlands,  
Now she’s sinking in the lowlands low.<sup>40</sup>

The image of the opponent is not that of a pirate horde standing menacingly at their guns, but of men at rest in the fo’c’sle. References to game playing are found in practically all versions of this scene, and a Maine version adds that “some were in their hammocks,”<sup>41</sup> a clear reference to the seamen’s living quarters. Sympathy for the drowning crew is enhanced in many versions by an image of water pouring in and “dazzling their eyes,” which suggests, perhaps, the startled, helpless confusion among them as their vessel goes down. Thus, in opposition to the barbarity of the *Golden Vanity*’s captain, the enemy, through the common bond of the fo’c’sle, is seen to have a soul.

A place inseparable from the fo’c’sle is the sailor’s bunk, the common hand’s *sanctum sanctorum* in the eyes of one former mariner<sup>42</sup> and virtually his only private place on board. In “Lady Franklin’s Lament,” the opening image of the seaman at rest, “While homeward bound across the deep/Snug in my hammock I fell asleep,”<sup>43</sup> is all that could be tranquil in a mariner’s mind—in the security of his bed on a vessel heading for home. The remainder of the song, narrating Sir John Franklin’s disastrous attempt to conquer the North West Passage, contrasts this scene of ease and comfort with

40. MacEward Leach, *Folk Ballads and Songs of the Lower Labrador Coast*, National Museum of Canada, Bulletin No. 201, Anthropological Series, No. 68, Ottawa, Queen’s Printer, 1965, p. 44.
41. Phillips Barry, Fanny Hardy Eckstorm, and Mary Winslow Smyth, *British Ballads from Maine*, New Haven, CN, Yale University Press, 1929, p. 340.
42. Stanton H. King, *Dog-Watches at Sea*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1901, p. 94.
43. Joanna C. Colcord, *Roll and Go: Songs of the American Sailormen*, 1924, rpt. *Songs of the American Sailormen*, New York, Bramhall House, 1937, p. 158.

spatial imagery connoting the extremes of seafaring existence: "the frozen ocean," "mountains of ice," "Baffin Bay," "the pole". Nor does the narrator lose sight of the mariner's customary role in hazardous places, for some versions state that polar regions are "Where we poor sailors do sometimes go". Here, the properties of place, coupled with the mariner's ability to empathize with the exposures endured in hostile climates, suggest in the first instance a dramatic juxtaposition of security and danger. At the same time, they spatially align the sufferings of seamen with the tragedy of the Franklin expedition.

Thus, the microcosm of the vessel tends to illuminate social and individual, rather than environmental, concerns. Tensions within the social network of the vessel itself evolve through the contrast of the main or quarter decks, both controlled by the officers, and the relative security of the fo'c'sle, the haven of the common hand. The vertical contrast of aloft-and-below emphasizes rivalries with non-seafaring groups. From this contrastive use of space, two areas, the fo'c'sle and aloft, emerge as having positive meaning in the cultural milieu and they therefore serve as symbols of group cohesion. The basic functions of shipboard space in song, then, are to define intergroup tensions, and to draw affiliations between mariners, especially those who sail before the mast.

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The foregoing analysis has sought to isolate potential meanings in nautical song using one particular cultural construct—place—as a reference point. Through a consideration of the physical setting, experiences, and meanings of place, and the specific implications that it has for a given cultural group, we have attempted to flesh out the vagaries of the folksong image into more concrete realities. Through their transformal meanings, places define environmental and occupational tensions, either through direct semiotic alignment, through the cumulative effect of a sequence of places, or through the contrast of areas having opposing cultural values. Such contrasts are particularly acute where places connoting security and risk are juxtaposed. Within this framework, character status, and by extension group status, is enhanced by one's willingness and ability to enter culturally significant places, whether they connote exposure to severe weather, difficult sailing regions, or work in areas that represent some measure of physical or social jeopardy.

Through the aesthetic emphasis on risk, the mariner's songs validate the acceptance of risk as an occupational necessity, which in



turn fosters pride and personal self-esteem. There are, however, two sides to the coin; the acceptance of risk is one thing, but surrendering control over one's life and the decisions affecting one's life is something else. If nautical song celebrates the mariner's pride in his calling, it also addresses the instability of his lifestyle, and where spatial imagery highlights the transience of seafaring existence, where decisions over departure and destination are beyond the seaman's control, as in Richard Maitland's application of the Cape Horn motif, there is an expression of a deep longing for stasis. Historical research on Atlantic Canadian shipping records suggests that few deep-water sailors continued their careers beyond the age of thirty.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the occupational instabilities illuminated in the mariner's songs provide a partial explanation of why voyaging under sail was by and large a young man's game.

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44. Alexander, p. 9.