

**WATERWAYS AND AIR LANES: SPACES OF TRANSITION  
IN JOSEPH CONRAD, ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY,  
AND SALMAN RUSHDIE**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to explore two samples of space that are well-established cultural symbols of dislocation, transition and liminality – water and air. They have been shaped by a variety of mythological, religious, political and technological discourses and have also been charted by maps of real and imagined journeys. In spite of all the attempts that have been made to delimit them and render them as comprehensible as possible, they continue to leak through the frames of maps and disperse the traces of the various routes that seek to explain and order them. I have chosen to focus on selected works by three writers – Joseph Conrad, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and Salman Rushdie – who stand at a significant distance from one another, but share an intensity of commitment to water and air.

**Keywords:** aerial and aquatic maps of the world, boundary crossing, boundless space, migration, migrant writing

*Wind tugging at my sleeve  
feet sinking into the sand  
I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean  
where the two overlap  
a gentle coming together  
at other times and places a violent crash.*

*Gloria Anzaldúa*

Currently we live in a world in which space and time are more eagerly articulated by figures of movement than by tropes of stasis. A number of conventionally static topoi – family, home, city, nation, as well as the private space of human identity and the conditions of belonging they engender – are now convincingly re-imagined as places of transition with crumbling boundaries. The purpose of this study is to explore two samples of space that are well-established cultural symbols of dislocation, transition and liminality – water and air. They have been shaped by a variety of mythological, religious, political and technological discourses and have also been charted by maps of real and imagined journeys. In spite of all the attempts that have been

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I have chosen to focus on selected works by three writers – Joseph Conrad, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Salman Rushdie – who stand at a significant distance from one another, but share an intensity of commitment to water and air. This commitment is more palpable in the case of Conrad and Saint-Exupéry, since for these two authors it is not simply a matter of artistic choice, but stands out as a defining biographical feature. Rushdie is necessary for this study as he gives a unique voice to the postcolonial migrant's experience and perception of space that has so often been silenced by dominant imperial narratives. All three writers also stand in a symbolic kinship owing to the migrant aspect of their lives – Conrad and Saint-Exupéry spent a significant part of their lifetimes at sea or in the air. Saint-Exupéry had a brush with exile in America on the eve of the Second World War, while Conrad and Rushdie are emblematic figures of the migrant experience. A further subtle but vibrant link binds the latter two writers in a specific and meaningful pair. This link, which a discussion at the Joseph Conrad Research Centre in Cracow helped me to see, is Rushdie's self-identification in his latest biography-styled novel, in which he adopts the fictitious identity of Joseph Anton (a combination of the names of Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov, his favourite writers). The name is part of the legacy of his post-fatwa years, when he had to find a strategy that would enable him to be an "invisible" writer (see his eponymous biographical novel *Joseph Anton*).

The sea occupied a significant amount of time and space in Conrad's life and writing. His maritime experience lasted for roughly twenty years after his Polish childhood and adolescence – a time when he experienced the loss of his parents – and spanned his new life in England, where he settled and married. His literary sea experience, however, abounds in imaginary and fictional encounters with the sea. One of them is a fictionally reconstructed version of the young Conrad's trip to Switzerland, where he and his tutor Pulman spent the night at a boat-like mountain boarding house occupied by English engineers and met a fleet-like caravan composed of three mules and some English tourists. The story forms part of his fictionalised recollections entitled *a Personal Record* (1912). By the time Conrad visited Switzerland, he had already read extensively about the sea (mostly Hugo's *Travailleurs de la Mer*, the tales of Fenimore Cooper and Captain Marryat, along with travel books such as Mungo Park's and Livingstone's travels) and had made up his mind to become a mariner. However, as Zdzisław Najder suggests in his seminal study on Conrad's life and writing, we should treat the young Conrad's departure for Marseilles and the sea with greater biographical precision, taking into account other, more practical reasons for his migration – his poor health (he was at risk of contracting tuberculosis), his uncle and guardian Tadeusz Bobrowski's hopes of him becoming a merchant seaman, the fact that he had been denied Austrian citizenship and that he wished to liberate himself from the unhealthy and depressing memories of his disrupted childhood.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad: a Life*. Transl. H. Najder. New York: Camden House, 1983, 2007.

Decades later, when – after spending many years in the specular world of the sea – Conrad eventually quit sailing and took up a literary career, he revisited this early decisive period of his life in the autobiographical, though intensely fictional narratives of *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) and *a Personal Record*. The aforementioned Swiss trip, reported in *a Personal Record*, opens up a heterotopic space in which the alpine landscape is haunted by premonitions of sea journeys. Conrad and his tutor spend the night in a hostel that “in its severe style resembled the house which surmounts the unseaworthy-looking hulls of the toy Noah’s Arks” and the next day they meet a group of English tourists: “A stir on the road made me look up – and then I saw my unforgettable Englishman [...] Two ladies rode past, one behind the other, but from the way they sat I saw only their calm, uniform backs, and the long ends of blue veils hanging behind far down over their identical hat-brims” (*A Personal Record*).<sup>2</sup> Both experiences are rendered by tropes of transition that produce hybrid figures of land and sea: in the first case, Noah’s Ark is a mighty symbol of the lapsarian mythological journey and the Ark-shaped building in the mountains may signify Conrad’s sea-dream; in the second case, the blue veils of the riding ladies are reminiscent of the “shimmering veil of silvery blue gauze” on the ocean at dawn (*The Mirror of the Sea*). Instead of a solid and well-grounded alpine landscape, Conrad’s recollections configure a place with uncertain and eroding boundaries where the sea leaks through his dreams and washes the mountains in anticipation of a future oceanic expanse. This liquification of dry land is, of course, an invention of the later Conrad, whose literary recollections operate as fictional maps that redraw his real maritime routes and establish new ones.

We can detect numerous other instances of transition between land and sea in Conrad’s writing – the descriptions of dockyards on sea coasts or river branches and estuaries, the dreams of solidity in the middle of a stormy sea, the awareness that ships are robust and ephemeral at the same time. The estuary of the Thames occupies a particular place in the topology of Conrad’s real and literary journeys, being one of the mighty symbols of extreme openness in his works. Although he retains the significance of its geographical, cultural and historical location as the hub of a national waterscape, Conrad constantly displaces it by means of centrifugal movements in which the river seems to originate from or lead elsewhere, beyond the confines of its national identification. In *The Mirror of the Sea*, the Thames is accessed from the outside and takes shape as the narrator navigates his way inland from the open sea. The narrator then observes how ships arrive and depart along its lanes by ebbs and tides, taking them towards or away from land, and how their movements seem to configure new, imaginary contours of the river banks:

The sea-reach of the Thames is straight, and, once Sheerness is left behind, its banks seem very uninhabited, except for the cluster of houses which is Southend, [...] as it were a village of Central African huts imitated in iron [...] a conspicuous church spire, the first seen distinctly coming from the sea, has a thoughtful grace [...] But on the other side, on the flat Essex side,

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Conrad are referred to pageless Gutenberg editions of his works.

a shapeless and desolate red edifice, a vast pile of bricks with many windows and a slate roof more inaccessible than an Alpine slope [...] (*The Mirror*).

The estuary of the Thames is thus depicted as a far-reaching spatio-temporal water web that shapes and is shaped by transnational and transcontinental movements – parts of it resemble a Central African village, while other parts are wild and overgrown with bushes; however, these traces of a colonial landscape mingle with signs of European culture and a European landscape – a church spire and an Alpine slope. The latter brings us back to Conrad's childhood memories and establishes even further links with his past across space and time.

Conrad not only writes about the sea, but writes by means of the sea, writing "aquatic" prose. His work, as he himself confesses, is an example of a peculiar symbiosis of writing and sailing: "I dare say I am compelled – unconsciously compelled – now to write volume after volume, as in past years I was compelled to go to sea voyage after voyage. Leaves must follow upon one another as leagues used to follow in the days gone by ..." (*A Personal Record*). This exceptional integration of activity and contemplation – the external route of self-accomplishment and the itinerary of the inward journey – is one of the defining features of another batch of literary works that shape and are shaped by journeys across vast expanses of space – the fiction of Saint-Exupéry. John Harris, whose in-depth analysis of Saint-Exupéry's writing investigates the transition from aesthetic description to ethically sensitive action in the author's creative endeavours observes that "[t]he text was his life in each instance – not a reminiscence or encapsulation of it, but a living struggle with an obstacle. The reality of these struggles was at least equal to that of his aeronautic adventures, and could just as well serve to explain why he flew as his flying might explain the content of his books."<sup>3</sup>

It is also significant that Conrad seems to have exerted a palpable influence on the way Saint-Exupéry structures his fictional flights (both Conrad and Saint-Exupéry started their literary careers when they quit sailing and flying respectively) and the manner in which he describes his protagonists' struggles with storms. In the latter case, he produces a revised version of the dynamics of Conrad's critical encounters with the sea. Piero Boitani suggests that "[i]n his account of a Patagonia flight and the cyclone he flew into, [the flight in question is described at the beginning of *Terre des hommes* (*Wind, Sand and Stars*)] he personalises the Conrad of *Typhoon*. What he is forced to take on single-handed is the Peak of Salamanca [...] an indescribable struggle with an alien world, like Jacob's with the angel."<sup>4</sup> At night, the Exupérian pilot visualises aerial space as a dark ocean: "Fabien, the pilot who was flying the Patagonia mail from the extreme south to Buenos Aires, could note the onset of night by the same telltale signs as a harbor: by the calm expanse before him, faintly rippled by

<sup>3</sup> J. Harris. *Chaos, Cosmos and Saint-Exupéry's Pilot-Hero: a Study of Mythopoeia*. Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1999, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> P. Boitani. *Winged Words. Flight in Poetry and History*. Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 185.

lazy clouds. He was entering a vast and happy anchorage.”<sup>5</sup> The lonely lamp of a house appears “from fifty miles away” as a beacon light “from a deserted island, at the dark immensity of the sea.”<sup>6</sup> Here the aerial perspective operates as a visual angle that registers the obscurity of aerial vastness both as hazardous aquatic immensity and as a space of tranquillity that enables the pilot to disconnect himself from the concerns of life on the ground.

In daylight, the airplane becomes a peculiar platform of observation from where distant lands appear to be bound within an organic hybrid whole. For instance, after explaining that the aircraft is “machine sans doute, mais ... instrument d’analyse [qui] nous a fait découvrir le vrai visage de la terre”<sup>7</sup> – i.e. an instrument of scientific analysis and discovery – the narrator of *Wind, Sand and Stars* (one of Saint-Exupéry’s most retrospective and memoir-like books) proceeds with an account of his flight over a volcanic area in Patagonia:

Just to the South of Rio Gallegos, the pilot on course for the Magellan Strait flies over an ancient lava-flow, lying seventy feet deep on the plain. Then he encounters a second, and a third, and now every rise in the ground, every seven-hundred-foot hummock has its crater within its slopes. No proud Vesuvius here: cannon mouths in the surface of the plain.

But today there is peace. It is a surprising experience in this derelict landscape, where a thousand volcanoes once answered each other with the music of their subterranean organs as they spat out their fire. Now you fly over a land for ever mute, adorned with black glaciers.<sup>8</sup>

The volcanic landscape is described in quasi-scientific and quasi-poetic language: we are provided with the precise geographical location of the area: the Strait of Magellan, south of Río Gallegos; the height of the lava heaps – seven hundred feet; the positions of the craters. These facts, however, are interpreted from a poetic perspective: the gaping craters are like cannon muzzles and silent subterranean organ pipes; they decorate the mute earth and used to talk to one another. The Patagonian volcanoes are likewise found wanting in greatness and cannot compare with “proud Vesuvius”. Located on a plain close to the sea, they are more likely to represent the subaltern forces that disturb the earth than to allude to the menacing superiority of the emblematic European volcano. The use of familiar European topoi as references in the aerial description of the Patagonian landscape signals the assimilating and possessive power of the pilot’s elevated perspective. This visual angle of narration amalgamates elements of European and Patagonian landscape and projects a third, hybrid, extraterritorial space whose position in the text is not stable and takes shape in the constant transition between different geographical and / or geopolitical areas.

The final part of this study focuses on a relatively overlooked, yet seminal fictional instance of aerial space acting as a prism that refracts and diverts migrant itin-

<sup>5</sup> A. de Saint-Exupéry. *Vol de Nuit* [*Night Flight*]. In: *Southern Mail / Night Flight*. Transl. C. Cate. London: Penguin Books, 1971, p. 109. The novel was first published in 1931 by Éditions Gallimard.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> A. de Saint-Exupéry. *Terre des hommes*. Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1939, 1973, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> A. de Saint-Exupéry. *Wind, Sand and Stars*. Transl. W. Rees. London: Penguin Books, 1995, 2000, p. 34. This is the English translation of *Terre des hommes*.

eraries. I will observe how this happens in brief overviews of some of Rushdie's novels. His life and writing have contributed in great measure to the conceptualisation of the postcolonial migrant processes. Rushdie's attempts at self-location in the metropolitan and wider public world seem to have pushed to its extreme (and quite literal) limits the allegorical figure of the satanic wanderer whom the migrant is often imagined to represent. The event which was largely seen as having been the cause of Rushdie's demonisation was the publication of his second major novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which led Ayatollah Khomeini to pass a death sentence on him for having written a "demonic" text. In an essay entitled "In Good Faith" (1990), Rushdie muses on his experience in the aftermath of the fatwa and argues that the novel was actually intended to represent "the devil's version of the world, [...] the version written from the experience of those who have been demonized by virtue of their otherness."<sup>9</sup> Nowadays, as Rushdie's popularity transcends his victim status, the *Satanic Verses* affair is more and more readily passed over as an over-debated and trivialised issue. Nevertheless, I believe that its effects on Rushdie's life and writing were formative and should not be ignored.

*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) is a novel that came out when the turmoil caused by the earlier "satanic" book was gradually subsiding. It tells the stories of complexly interrelated couples of ethnically hybrid migrants who travel vast distances between continents in a desperate quest for self-revelation. The photographic perspective of the narrator Rai provides the central narrative prism of the novel, while the protagonists' aerial journeys operate as an expanded photographic lens that opens and closes before different versions of reality. Air is the space in which the protagonists cross the distances between far-flung geographical locations and between themselves and their personal imagined versions of home. In this process, the supposedly firmly fixed positions of places change. Distances melt, lines disappear and new lines and measures emerge that divert the travelling subject's itinerary from their intended destinations towards new versions of them. I suggest that these aerial movements serve to enhance the effect of seismic instability which the novel registers at the ground level of its worlds and are an essential component of the geo-aerial interactions in *The Ground*.

At the same time, here – as in *The Satanic Verses* and the more nostalgic and poised novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* – air seems to operate as a subtle reference to the diabolical looking-glass in Andersen's tale of "The Snow Queen", which breaks into thousands of pieces in the air and causes deformation of human perception of the world when it enters people's eyes or hearts. In a much similar way, air enters Rushdie's fiction as a specular surface that heightens the confusion of his migrant protagonists as they pursue their quests for home. Traversing the aerial space between India and England (in *The Satanic Verses*) and between India, England, America and Mexico (in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*), they become acutely aware of the specular lines of division that both mark and undo the perpetuated dichotomous oppositions between the places which they leave and the destinations of their

<sup>9</sup> S. Rushdie. "In Good Faith". *Newsweek* 1990, 12<sup>th</sup> February, p. 403.

home quests. As Vassilena Parashkevova observes in her illuminating essay on catoptric transformations in *The Satanic Verses*, the protagonists' aerial journeys critique "the colonial uni-directionality of travel; [...] cross and subvert a number of looking-glass frontiers, which in turn have the 'home' and the destination city reflect each other in new ways [...] highlight alternative routes [...] point [...] to the fracturing of identity and the city by colonialism."<sup>10</sup> The protagonists move in the specular regimes of the "self"–"other" paradigm, but as they advance into otherness, they experience transformations, identity crises and self-difference, which make them aware that in reality no such rigid demarcations can be established. Rather, both "self" and "other", "home" and "elsewhere" are invented concepts which can frequently change their positions and even more frequently fuse and intermingle, depending on the way in which they are experienced and the visual angle from which they are described.

The purpose of this comparative study has been to see how sea and air take shape in the work of three writers whose lives and writing are synchronous with the heightened intensity of migration over the last two centuries. While aquatic and aerial spaces have long been experienced and represented as gaps that both separate and connect places, lands and continents, i.e. as zones of mobility and fluidity that spread in between relatively firmly set segments of the earth; the increased density of recent and contemporary migratory routes appears to have reshaped this earlier simple division. It becomes evident that the processes of transition not only connect/separate, but that they also displace the places, times and identities that form part of the migrant itinerary, transferring them to other places, times and identities. The coasts and borders of territories that are well delineated on political and geographical maps are subtly and gradually eroded by mightier processes of movement (cosmic and human). of course, this does not mean that boundaries have ceased to exist. On the contrary, this increased mobility more and more often generates an impulse for their reinforcement. Thus, when Rushdie daringly crossed the boundary between religious and secular discourses in his stigmatized novel *The Satanic Verses*, a repaired and even deeper division resulted in the death of many protesters and intellectuals who supported the author's cause. My point is that migrant writers like Conrad, Saint-Exupéry and Rushdie are particularly sensitive to the traumatic, though necessary condition of boundary crossing, which is an indispensable prerequisite for self-location in the increasingly unstable environment of today's world. Their works reconsider the stability and fixity of boundaries and expose them to the erosive action of boundless space such as sea or air, producing new, aerial and aquatic maps of the world.

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<sup>10</sup> V. Parashkevova. "'Turn Your Watch Upside Down in Bombay and You See the Time in London': Catoptric Urban Configurations in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*". *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2007, Vol. 42, № 5, pp. 8-9.



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