

Moby-Dick

ECL 522: American Lit 1800-1860
Professor Jessica Pressman
Fall 2025

Day 5: Prefatory—Philip Hoare “What ‘Moby-Dick’ Means to Me” (2011)

ADMIN

- BLOGS: use a quote, show WHERE and HOW you are thinking what you are thinking Add categories and tags to posts
- You should be blogging each week— SUNDAY at midnight deadline
- New password added to Wordpress
- More extra credit: 5 questions for Steve Mentz's visit to our class
- Go over Writerly Handouts

ADMIN — good comments!

Moby-Dick was definitely the novel of novels at its time, and reading about how the book had such an impact on a person's life clued me in as to what to expect from a novel that's split into many chapters and pages. The book *is* difficult, yes, but it's a good way to challenge oneself especially after not reading for so long. Maybe when we start diving into the novel (no pun intended), we'll see what *Moby-Dick* means to *us*.

This entry was posted in [Week 3: Prefatory and Framing--Hoare and Gillis](#) and tagged [week 3](#) by [Jesmond Phimmachack](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

2 THOUGHTS ON "WEEK 3: MOBY-DICK STILL INTIMIDATES ME"



Adria Lopez on [September 8, 2025 at 12:15 am](#) said:

Edit

Hello, Jesmond! I also find myself to be intimidated by this book up until now. I agree with you that the article eased my mind at least a little bit. I always like understanding what other people find meaningful about a work of art because it means that it is human enough to cause an impact on a human being. This calms me because it means I can also find something of value in the book once I read it. I like your last sentence: "we'll see what *Moby-Dick* means to us." I think this is the whole point and even if we're kind of scared, thinking like this can help us be more patient with ourselves and Melville's work.

Reply ↓

What does this text offer?

From your blogs— what to look for

- ADRIA: “Few books are so filled with neologisms; it’s as if Melville were frustrated by language itself, and strove to burst out of its confines” ...
Language shapes the way we think, but it has limits; and even as someone who is bilingual, sometimes not even two languages are enough to express everything I think and feel.

From your blogs- political relevance and resonance

- DIEGO: “A century and a half after it first played out, Ahab’s wanton chase was evoked in the ‘war on terror,’ and the attempts to pursue an apparently uncatchable foe, even as it sourced an epic designed to reflect America’s first imperial venture – the getting of the oil that lit and lubricated the Western world.” This quote from Hoare’s “What ‘Moby-Dick’ Means to Me” **immediately put into perspective the cultural relevance this novel will have on us today.**

From your blogs— readers change readings

- LIZ: In Philip Hoare's article, "What 'Moby-Dick' Means to Me", he reflects on how his relationship with "Moby-Dick" has transformed over time and explains how a "difficult" text can transform into different meanings when approached at various periods of your life; he suggests that classic literature has less of a fixed meaning but instead has an evolving relationship between the text and reader. He admits, "I didn't know then what I do now: that 'Moby-Dick' can be whatever you want it to be. It took me thirty years to discover what the book was – or what it was not." (Para. 2) ..As long as we constantly evolving as individuals, we will continue to gain new experiences and inspiration. This can be from nature or from the different forms of media that we are consuming. Like him, I see that great works are not static texts but companions that grow alongside us.

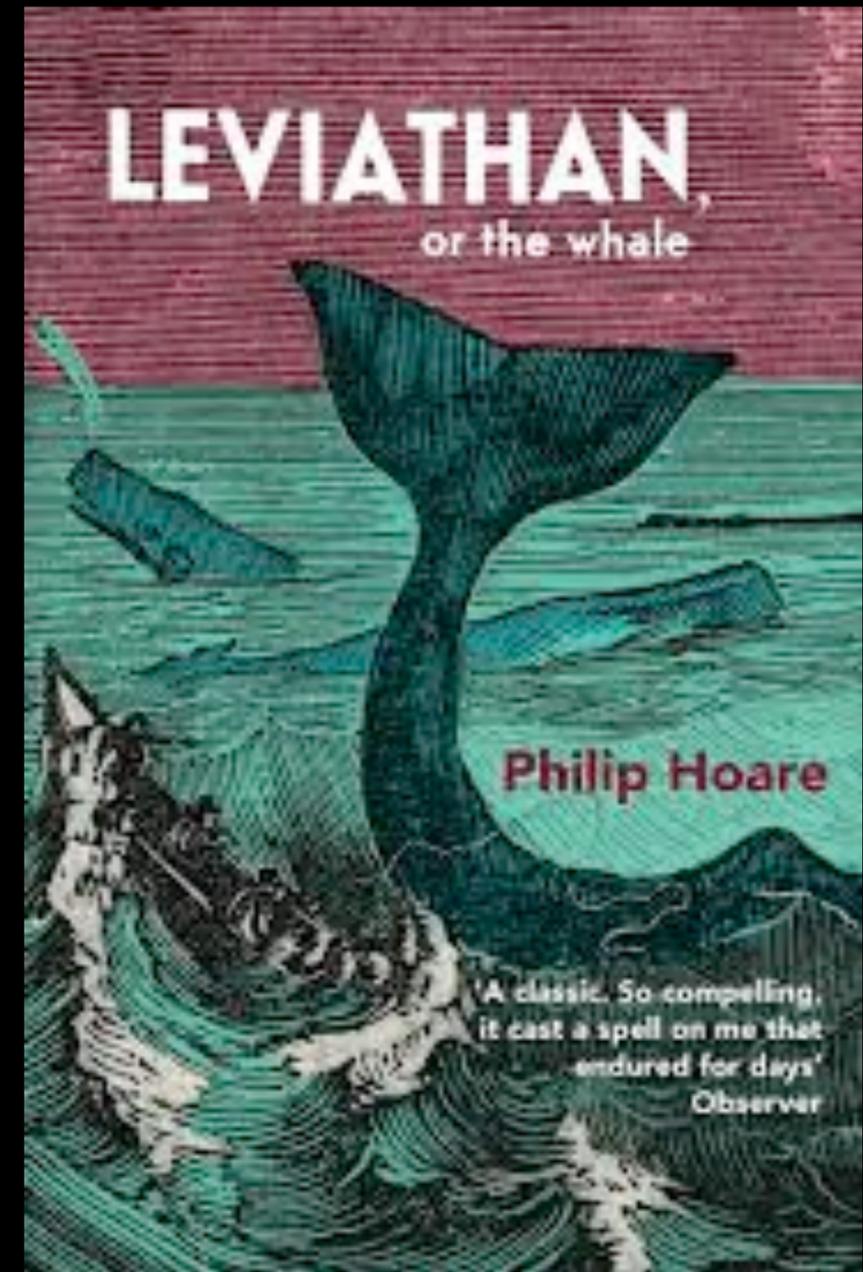
From your blogs- getting more comfortable

- ALYSSA N: While reading through the article “What Moby-Dick Means to Me” it **created a more comfortable space to start diving into this reading.** Much like Hoare this book has been one that I have pushed to the side for years. For Hoare it was his watching of the 1956 John Huston film and feeling as though the intense adventure story that he imagined was replaced with a more dense and wordy story that he was unable to connect to. For me *Moby-Dick* always seemed intimidating, after hearing many people over the years explain what a life changing read it was I felt that I would never have the same experience. However, I began to feel a comfortability in the uncomfortable when Hoare stated “I didn’t know then what I do now: that “Moby-Dick” can be whatever you want it to be. It took me thirty years to discover what the book was—or what it was not” (Hoare).

From your blogs-

- SOPHIA F: What I found interesting in the reading this week was from *What Moby Dick Means To Me*. The concept of it being whatever you want it to be opens **the door for projection and transference**, in my opinion....**As a psychology major**, I find this interesting. Projection has such negative connotations around it nowadays, yet it is such an insightful tool and can have a positive impact when used the right way.
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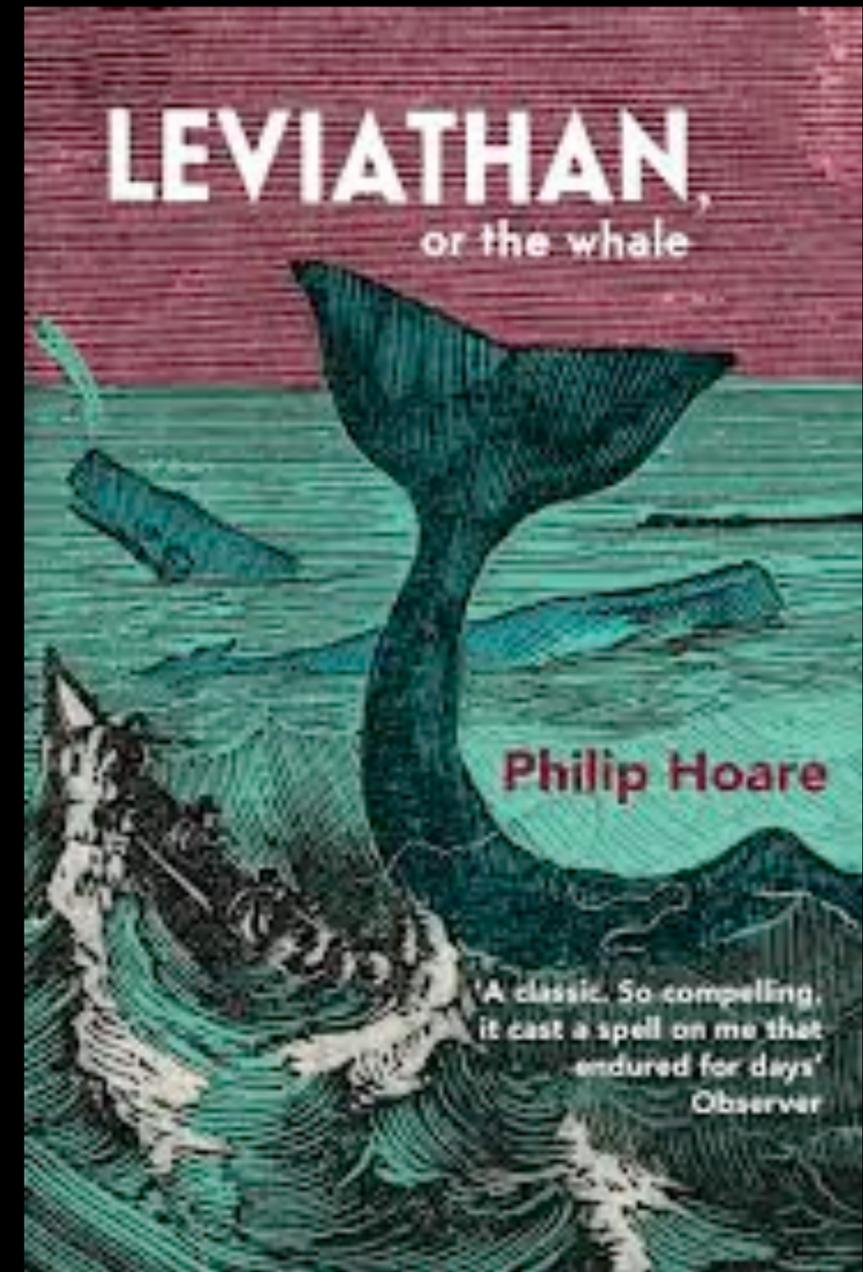
“But “Moby-Dick” is not a novel. It’s barely a book at all. It’s more an act of transference, of ideas and evocations hung around the vast and unknowable shape of the whale, an extended musing on the strange meeting of human history and natural history.”



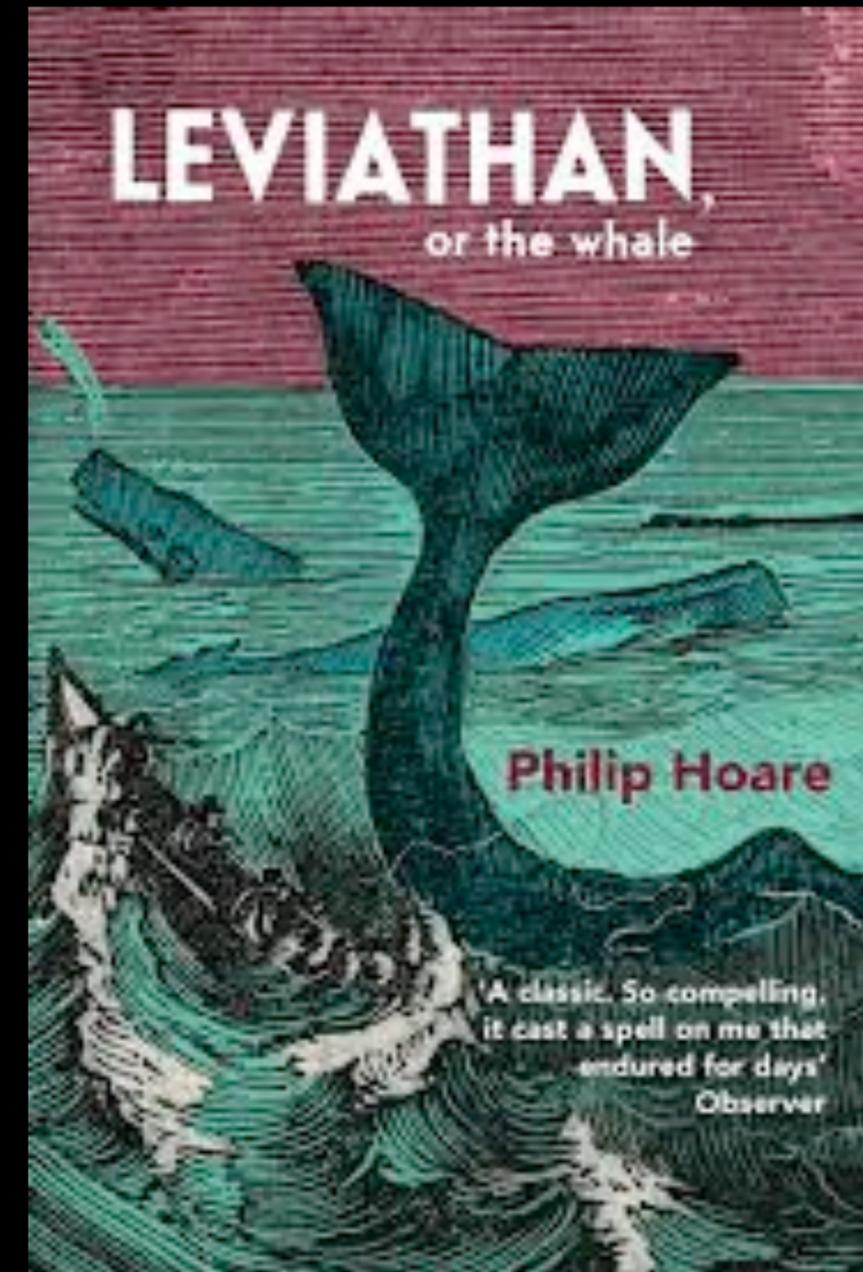
To my mind, there are only two other works with which it bears comparison: Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" (1818), and Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights" (1847).

...

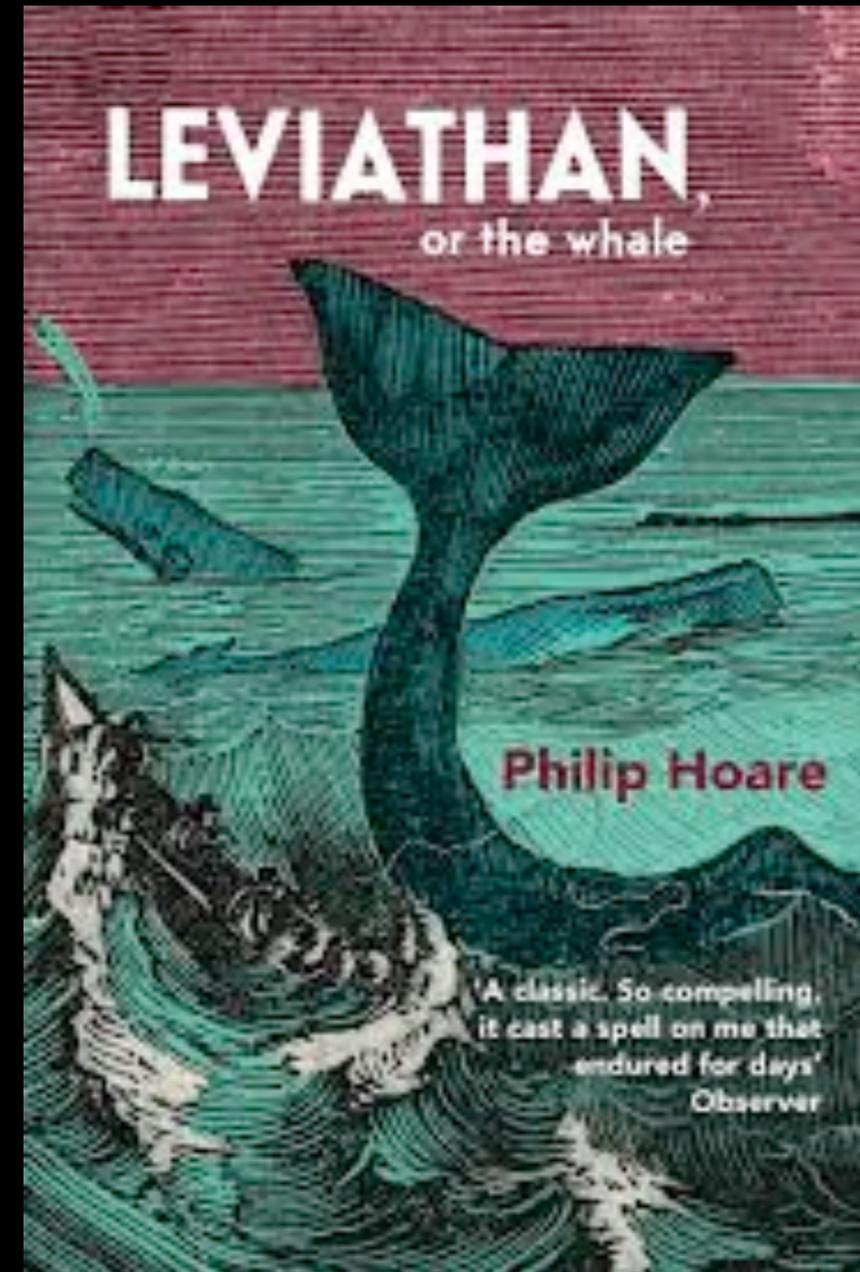
"All three books are caught between the primeval old and the impossibly new, between an abiding sense of certitude and the dissembling future."



- “Sometimes I read it and I feel like I’m going backward, fast. It reads like something that was written before books were invented, yet it is utterly modern — pre-postmodern, perhaps.”
- “Indeed, **part of the power of “Moby-Dick” lies in its latency, its delayed, time-bomb quality.** It was virtually ignored in the author’s lifetime — its first edition never sold out, and the remaining copies went up in flames in a fire in the publisher’s downtown Manhattan warehouse in 1853.”



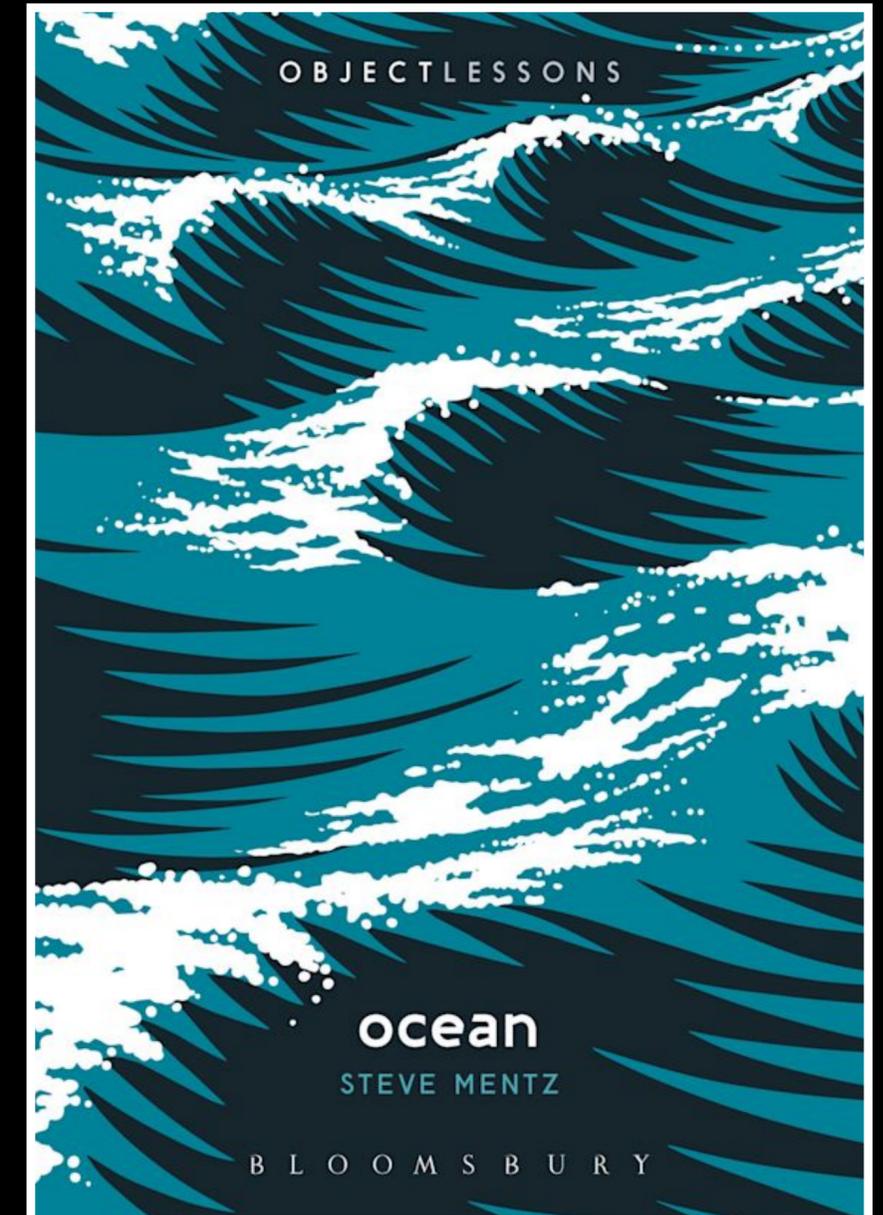
- “In the nineteen-twenties, this lost book was rediscovered by the Lost Generation.”
- “In 1923, D. H. Lawrence published his idiosyncratic, if not faintly crazy, “Studies in Classic American Literature.” Lawrence proclaimed Melville to be “a futurist long before futurism found paint,” the author of “one of the strangest and most wonderful books in the world.””



Blue Humanities

“The Blue Humanities name an ocean-infused way to reframe our shared cultural history” (xviii)

- Steve Mentz, *OCEAN* (Bloomsbury, 2020)



Language matters

1) -current—formerly *field*

“What if instead we redescribe the adventures of thinking (xiii) as currents, as rates of flow and change? Why not emphasize movements and connections between or through difference?.. Currents flow. We need flow to know Ocean”(xvi)

2) water— formerly *ground*

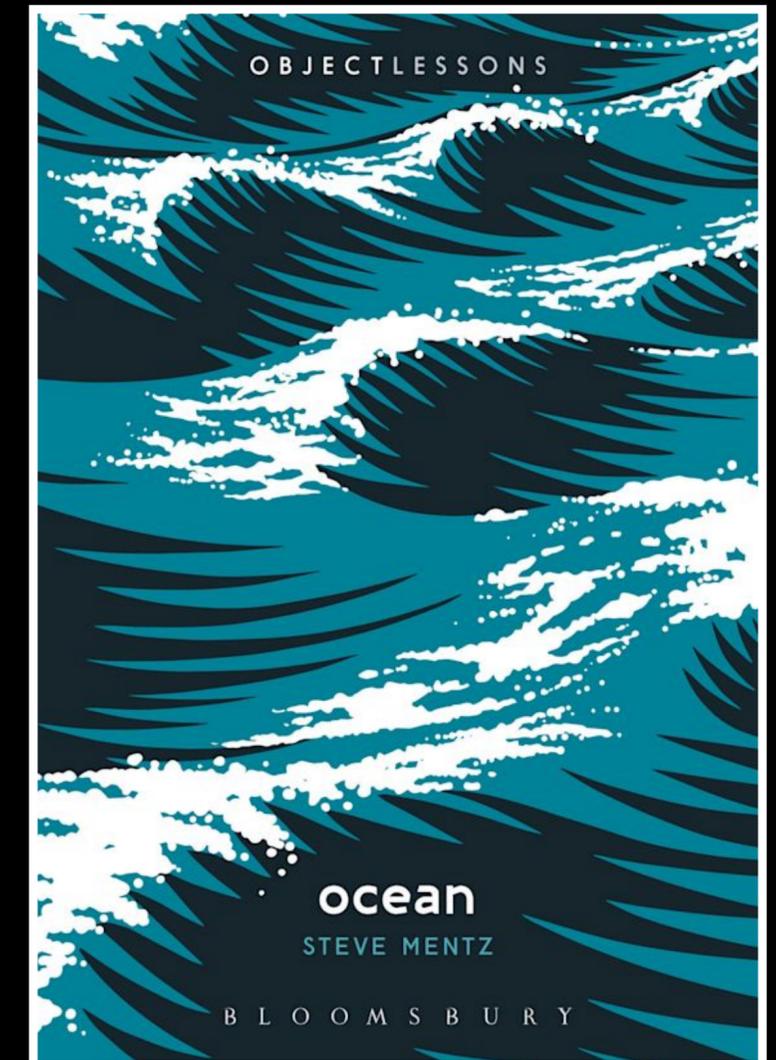
3) flow—formerly *progress*

4) Ship—formerly *state*

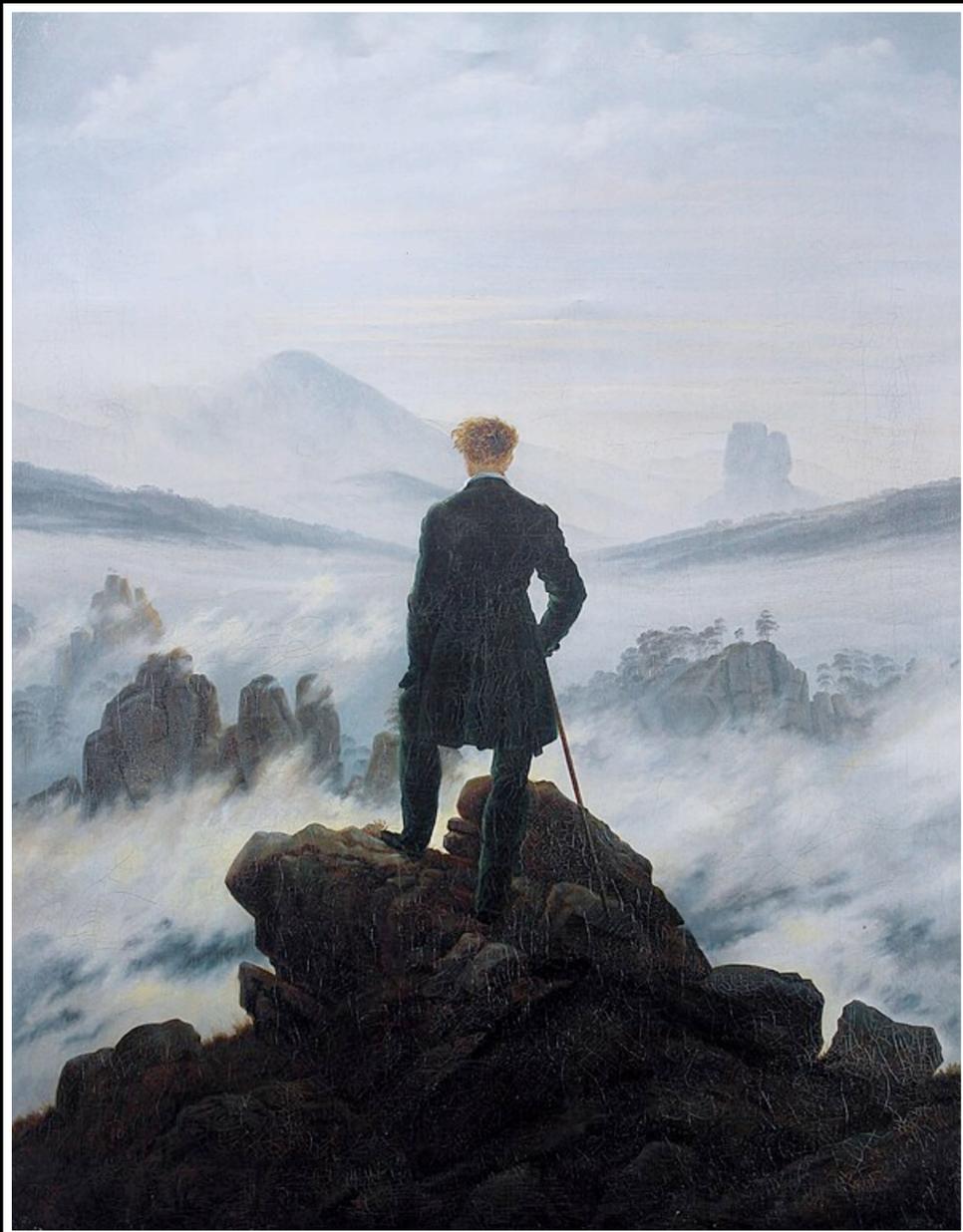
5) seascape— formerly *landscape*

6) distortion— formerly *clarity*

- Steve Mentz, *OCEAN* (Bloomsbury, 2020)



Romanticism

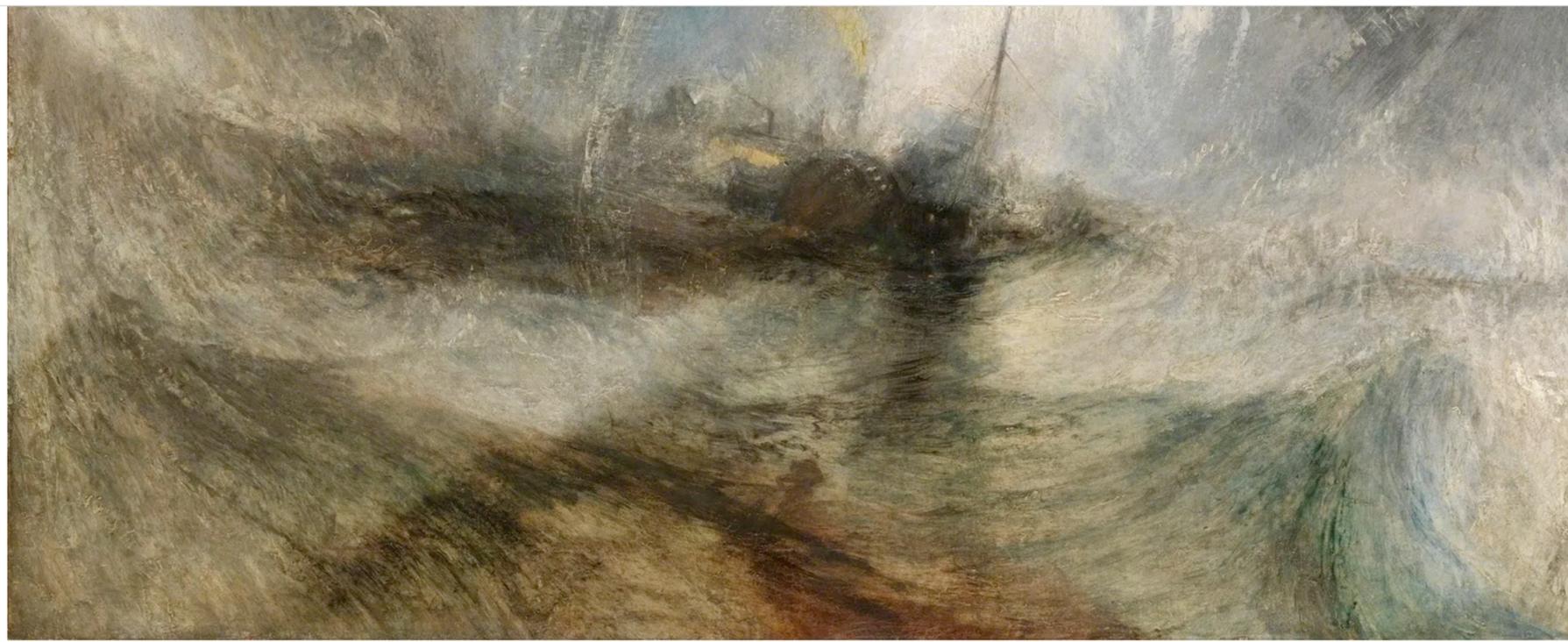


Caspar Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818)



 *Fishermen upon a Lee-Shore, in Squally Weather*. Credit: Southampton City Art Gallery

JMW Turner



J. M. W. Turner
Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth, 1842



- JMW Turner, *The Storm* 1840-45

Inventing the Ocean as playground

“In the modern era, the Ocean has become a recreational space, which it never really was for most of human history. In less than two centuries, many areas of the sea have turned into playgrounds” (377)

-Eric Paul Roorda, ed. *The Ocean Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Duke UP, 2020)



Inventing the Beach

- “Wilderness”
- Medical cure
- Social and class-related
- Swimming: gender and race



"On the Beach at Trouville" by Claude Monet

History of Oceans

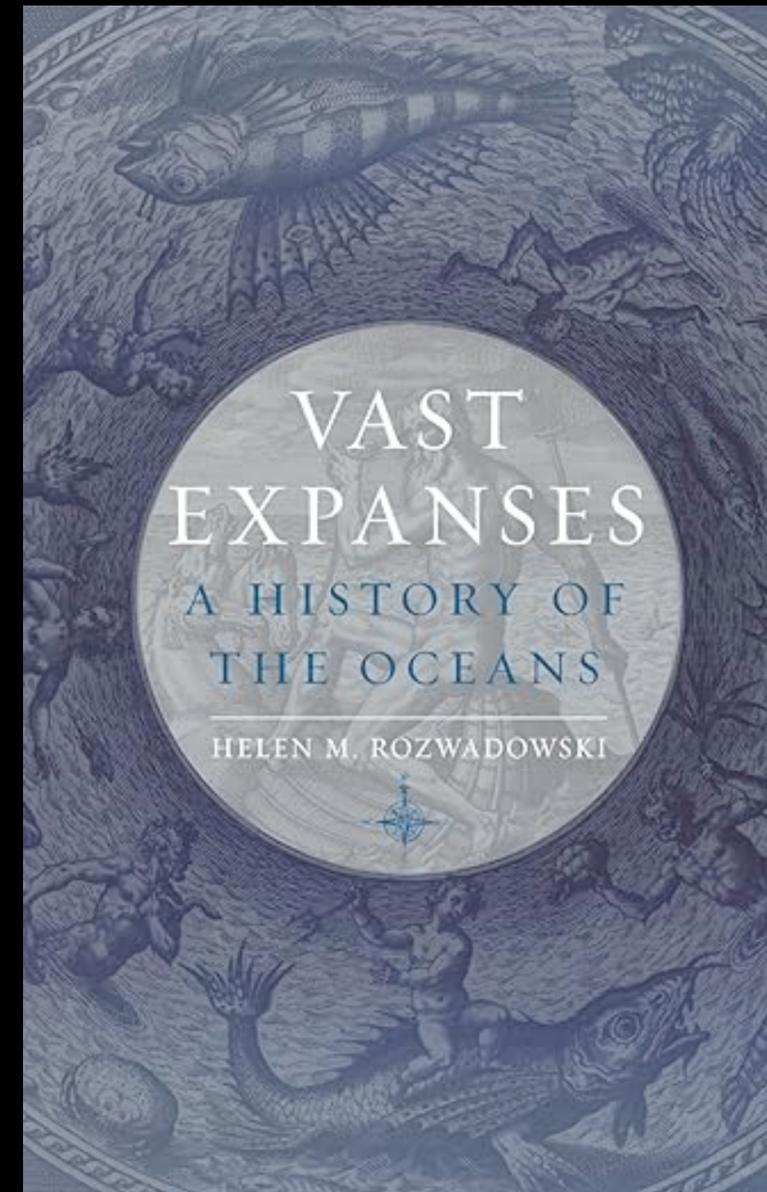
Dark to Middle Ages (500-15th C)=

“The sea existed externally to society, constructed as a space devoted to trade. It represented a distance to be crossed rather than territory belonging to the state.” (47)

15th-18th C= Age of Discovery, Slavery, Navy and State building, capitalism

“By the end of the 18th century, conceptions of land and sea had shifted. New worlds had once been imagined as islands..... Discovery of the sea reorganized geographic understanding of the globe, so that continents rather than islands become the primary unit of land territory.” (98)

—Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans* (Reaktion Books, 2018)

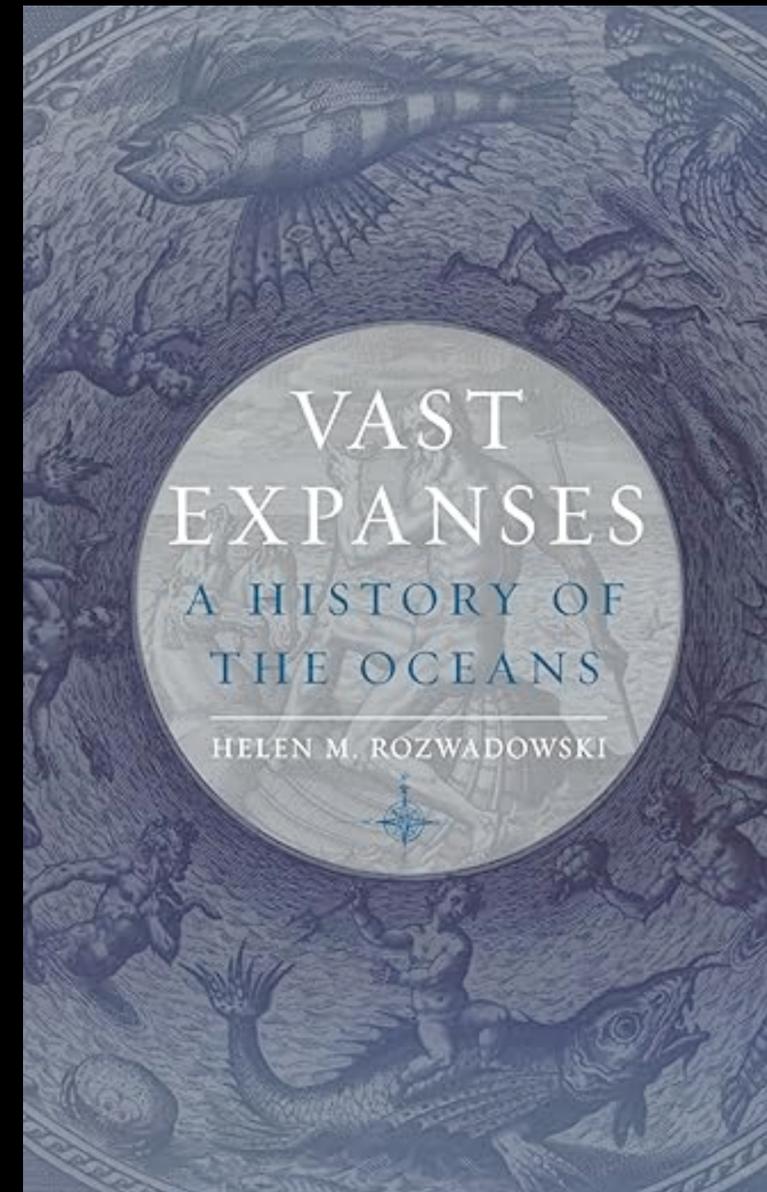


Changing views of the Ocean

18th- 19th C: “Before its cultural discovery, the seashore was associated with cannibals, mutineers, and shipwreck victims.”

“Romantic artists turned to the shore as an ideal place for reflection, where the correspondence between marine and psychological depths might lead to self-knowledge.” (114)

—Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans* (Reaktion Books, 2018)

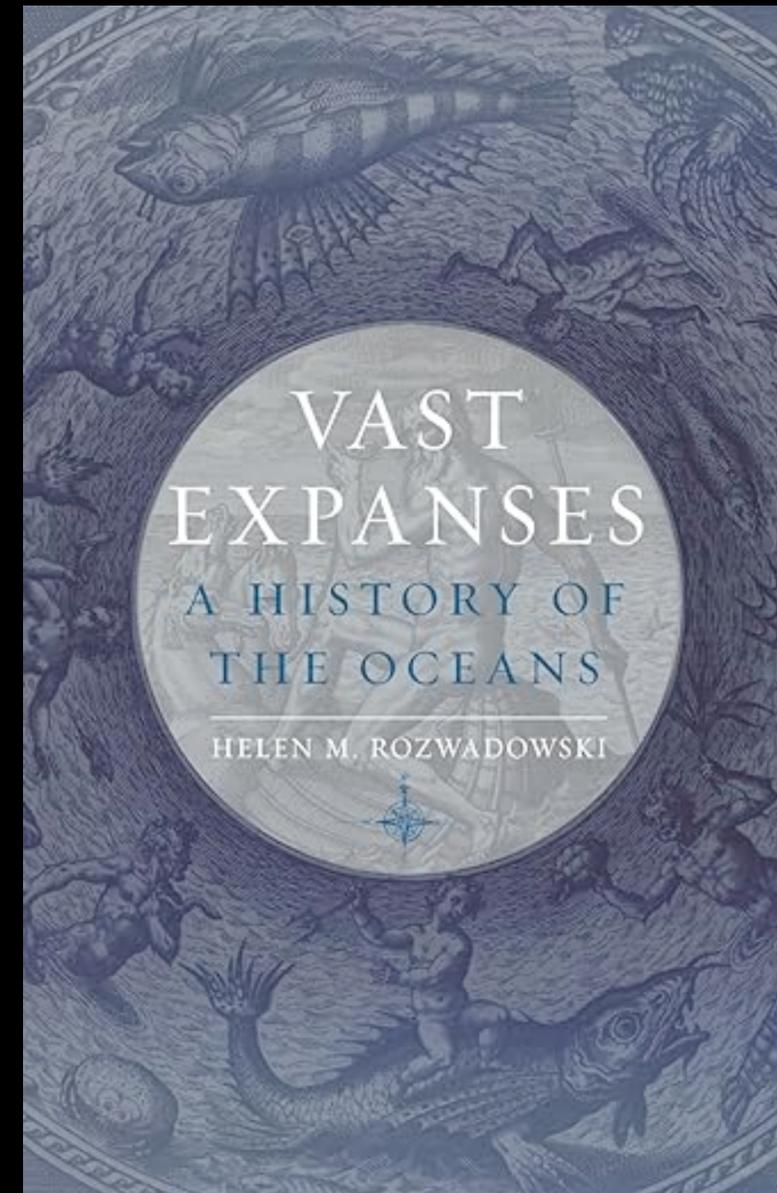


History of Oceans

19th C: “Traditional uses of the sea, especially fishing, trade, emigration, and travel, intensified during the nineteenth century as industrialization transformed the blue water into a workplace on an entirely new scale.” (104)

“More revolutionary than the increased scale of work at sea was the innovation of playing by and on the ocean.” (105)

—Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans* (Reaktion Books, 2018)



Maritime fiction and increased literary

“maritime fiction helped transform the sea into the site of heroism and adventure, and rendered ships into microcosms of society” (122)

Sir Walter Scott's *The Pirate* 1822

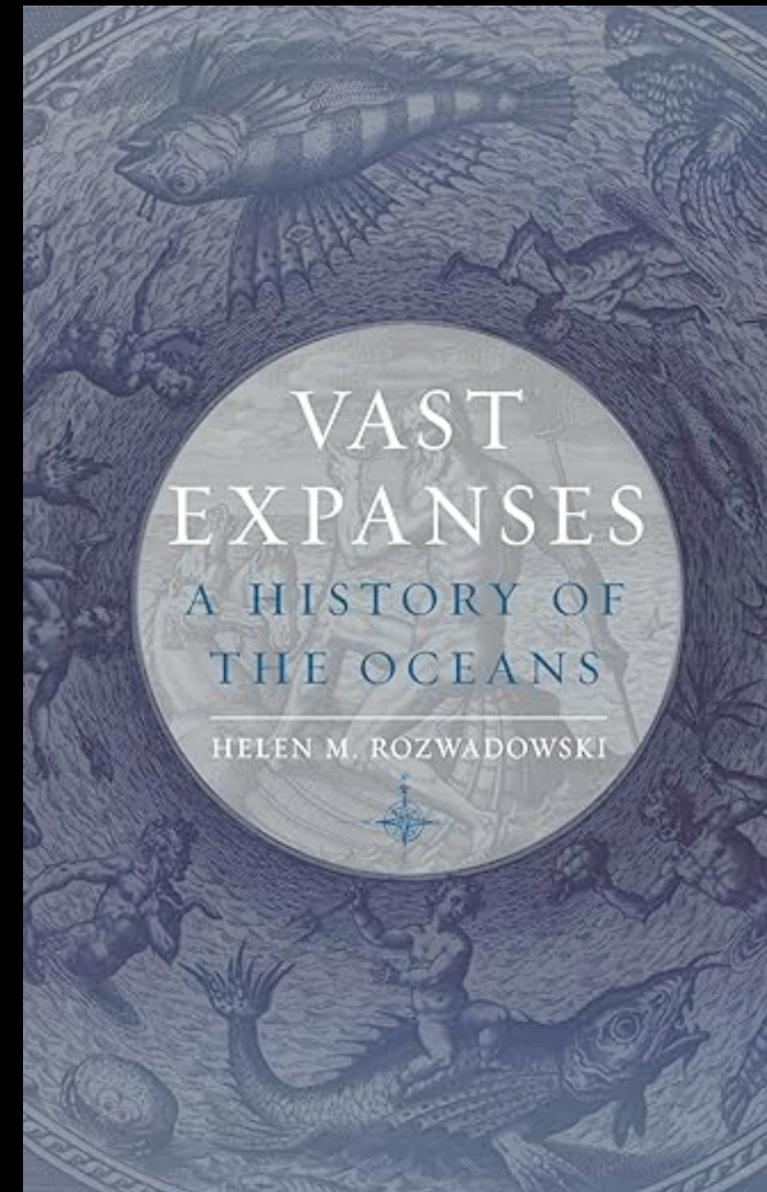
Richard Henry Dana Jr

Herman Melville

Jame Fenimore Cooper

Jules Verne

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* 1882



Role of art in inventing the Sea & Seashore

-up to the 18th C, the sea itself was largely invisible; rarely appearing in the foreground of art of literature until the romantic movement of 18th-19th C (132)

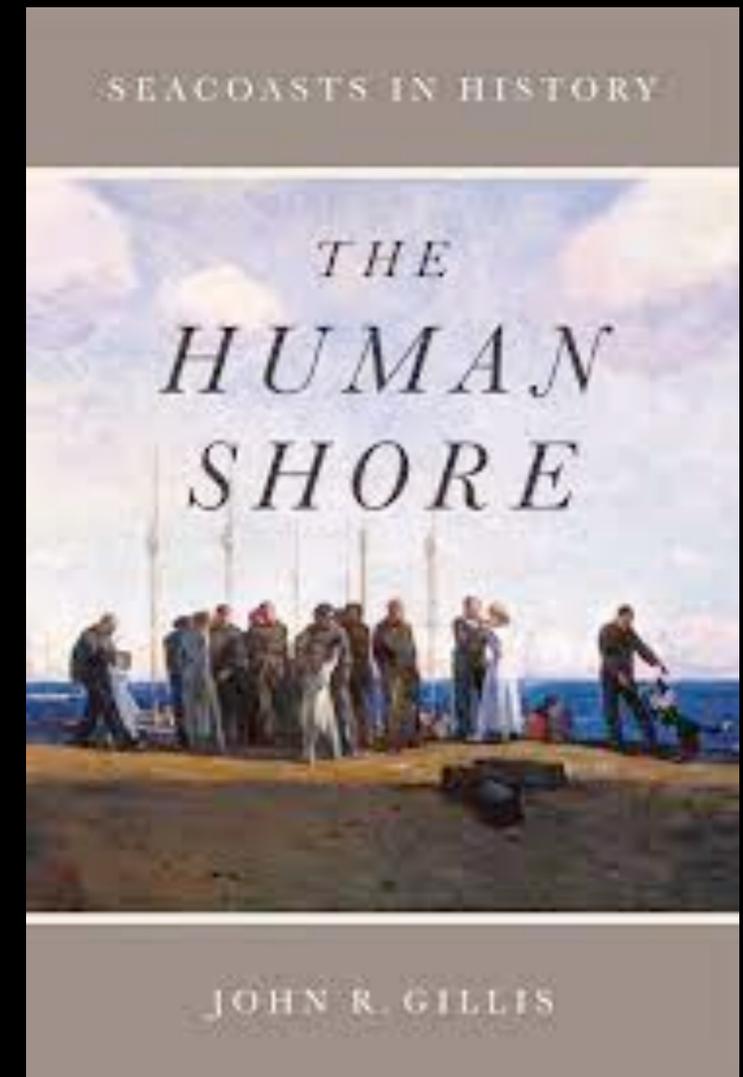
-“Once marginal to Western culture, the sea has now gravitated to the center of its collective consciousness” (133)

“The seascape, once a minor artistic genre, became a major one in the course of the nineteenth century, bringing images of marine life into the parlors of those who had never been near a coast, much less at sea” (134)

-“The sea became the new wilderness and the new frontier” (136)

“In the course of the nineteenth century, wilderness cases to be something feared and avoided to become a place to be enjoyed and protected” (137)

-John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (University of Chicago Press, 2012)



Take Aways?