

WITH MANY VOICES: THE SEA IN VICTORIAN FICTION

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This thesis considers some of the ways in which the sea was written about and written with in English nineteenth-century prose fiction.

It has become a commonplace of literary criticism that, in the century preceding modernism, prose fiction about the sea was unthinking and uninteresting: indentured to outworn generic codes, tied to certain clichés of national identity, Empire, or slipshod sublimity, and vaguely evoking some or all of them. This thesis does not attempt a general contradiction of this view. What this thesis does suggest is that Victorian fiction is not always naïve about its subject and, at times, displays an awareness of the generic and stylistic hazards attendant upon writing about the sea. To write about the sea was to risk writing vaguely. However, to Victorian novelists who wished to draw on vagueness, the sea offered a subject and a style that could be put to use.

The introduction sets out the terms of my discussion both of vagueness, and of the attitudes of Victorian writers and readers to the sea as a setting and theme for fiction. The terms of philosophical vagueness are compared with the nineteenth century's most influential aesthetics of obscurity: the sublime. The purchase of these theories is then tested, first in relation to Ruskin's lifelong interest in representing the sea in painting and prose, and second with reference to novels by George Eliot, Thackeray, and Gaskell. Prior critical approaches are also considered, as is the topic of empire, which I explain is not my primary focus.

The body of the thesis is devoted primarily to three author studies: Frederick Marryat, Charles Dickens, and Joseph Conrad. Each author wrote vaguely about the sea, though vagueness is shown to be, in all three cases, a resource that can be drawn upon with degrees of self-consciousness; if, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, vague language was considered appropriate to the sea, the linguistic resources that the sea in turn offered began to seem increasingly applicable to experiences characterised by uncertainty. I suggest that the sea establishes conditions that invite a rereading of the many repetitions in Marryat's novels. These repetitions can be viewed, I argue, as traces of Marryat's struggle to find a language appropriate to the ocean. In Dickens's writing, the sea is often present as a source both of metaphor and of experience. I suggest that the slippery doubleness of the literary sea is a means by which both Dickens's characters, and the individuals he encounters as a journalist, can be made to coexist with their ideal or literary doubles. In my chapter on Conrad, I argue that the sea forms a crucial element of the kind of literary impressionism Conrad recommends in his preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) and elsewhere.

Vagueness arises when the border between linguistic concepts becomes blurred. Two short interludes, on the subject of shores and depths respectively, consider such permeable thresholds. These interludes also provide a means of charting changes that occurred across the period, a counterpoint to the more temporally specific focus of the author studies.

I conclude with a brief discussion of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931). Critics have distinguished the high modernist sea from what came before; this coda insists that the sort of vagueness valued by Woolf has an earlier origin.

the deep
Moans round with many voices.

TENNYSON

Table of Contents

Abbreviations	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction: Vagaries	7
<i>Marine stores</i>	7
<i>A cult of vagueness</i>	14
<i>'Difficulty of properly dividing the subject': Ruskin</i>	28
<i>'Etc. etc.': The sea and the novel</i>	40
<i>Keen-eyed critic(s) of the ocean</i>	56
<i>A note on empire</i>	65
<i>No message</i>	73
Chapter 1. Sea Sick: Recurrence in the Early Novels of Captain Marryat	77
<i>Flounder deplorably</i>	77
<i>Sic omnes</i>	82
<i>Myself again</i>	96
<i>Vanderdecken's message home</i>	107
Interlude: Shores	116
Chapter 2. Floating Fragments: Dickens's Wrecks	137
<i>A kind of brainwashing</i>	137
<i>Rope-making</i>	139
<i>Very untrue</i>	145
<i>Wooden midshipmen</i>	158
<i>A shipwreck of papers</i>	172
<i>Hoarse music</i>	188
Interlude: Depths	192
Chapter 3. Committed to the Deep: Conrad's Vision of the Sea	217
<i>Unimportant tale</i>	217
<i>A drop of water</i>	222
<i>Cast a glamour</i>	232
<i>Sea/life</i>	239
<i>Favourable to reflection</i>	255
Coda: The Murmur of <i>The Waves</i>	273
Bibliography	278

Abbreviations

All referencing follows the Chicago Manual of Style, 16th ed. Abbreviations for the titles of the following oft-cited works will be used in the text after the first reference. Full details of editions used can be found in the bibliography.

<i>AF</i>	<i>Almayer's Folly</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>Diary on the Continent</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i>
<i>FM</i>	<i>The Naval Officer; or, Scenes and Adventures in the Life of Frank Mildmay</i>
<i>HD</i>	<i>Heart of Darkness</i>
<i>HE</i>	<i>The Harbours of England</i>
<i>HT</i>	'How to Write a Book of Travels'
<i>KO</i>	<i>The King's Own</i>
<i>LJ</i>	<i>Lord Jim</i>
<i>MB</i>	<i>Mary Barton</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Modern Painters</i>
<i>NF</i>	<i>Newton Forster; or, The Merchant Service</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'</i>
<i>NT</i>	'Notes on Turner'
<i>OB</i>	'The Open Boat'
<i>Ph.S.</i>	<i>The Phantom Ship</i>
<i>PS</i>	<i>Peter Simple</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Suspiria de Profundis</i>
<i>TS</i>	'Tales of the Sea'
<i>VF</i>	<i>Vanity Fair</i>
<i>WB</i>	<i>The Water-Babies</i>

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M. K.

Introduction: Vagaries

Here I am before the sea; it is true that it bears no message.

Roland Barthes

He was scornful and brooding; he looked ahead upon the sea, and no one could tell what was the meaning of that black man sitting apart in a meditative attitude and as motionless as a carving.

Joseph Conrad

Marine stores

After reading Captain Frederick Marryat's new novel *The King's Own* in 1830, Washington Irving wrote to the (nearly) retired Naval officer with his commendations: 'You have a glorious field before you and one in which you cannot have many competitors, as so very few unite the author to the sailor. I think the chivalry of the ocean quite a new region of fiction and romance and, to my taste, one of the most captivating that could be explored'.¹ Marryat, with 'a glorious field' in front of him, looks 'ahead upon the sea' much as James Wait does in Joseph Conrad's *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897). Unlike the crew of the *Narcissus*, however, Irving felt disposed to admit that there might be something there worth gazing at. It was two years since Irving had published his sentimental and imaginative sea-biography *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828), and only a year before its sequel would appear. It was therefore in Irving's interest

My epigraphs are taken from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 112, and from Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 28.

¹ Washington Irving to Captain Frederick Marryat, 25 August 1830, in *Life and Letters of Captain Marryat*, ed. Florence Marryat (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1872), 1:160–61.

to show Marryat looking ahead to a new and fruitful ‘region’ in literature—it was one that he had his own eye fixed upon. In certain respects, Irving would be proven right: in England, Marryat later had imitators, if not necessarily competitors. Marryat’s naval fictions were much emulated in the 1830s by a number of other authors who were also Captains, mostly Marryat’s friends whom he published in his own magazine, *The Metropolitan*.² Captain Frederic Chamier, Captain Walter Glascock, Captain Basil Hall, Edward Howard, Michael Scott, and later writers like R. M. Ballantyne, Charles Kingsley, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad, all drew something from Marryat’s muscular, chaotic, violent naval romances.³

Long before the nineteenth century, the sea had become well-freighted with memory and metaphor, but the Victorian period began with a powerful confluence of historical and literary currents which brought the sea, and the Briton’s relationship to it, to high prominence in the cultural imagination. For many Victorian men and women, the combined imaginative force of Trafalgar and the Romantic poets made the sea worth thinking about in its own right. The cult of Nelson and the cult of Romantic individuality generated a fascination with the sea as a site of heroism and existential striving, values that many found easy to adapt to a specifically British identification with the waves. The increasing emotional and cultural weight borne by the sea meant that Homer and Hakluyt were dredged up, and repurposed as makeshift national myth, ‘the Prose Epic of the modern English nation’.⁴ The same fascination likewise led to the rise of the seaside resort, and the burgeoning of the science of oceanography, while also creating a market for the naval novels of Marryat and others. In 1856, John Ruskin summed up the Spirit of the

² Irving himself had dabbled earlier in the genre in, for example, his short story ‘The Voyage’ (1819).

³ See Tom Pocock, *Captain Marryat: Seaman, Writer, Adventurer* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2000), 104–10; Patrick Brantlinger, ‘Bringing Up the Empire: Captain Marryat’s Midshipmen’, in *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 49.

⁴ J. A. Froude, ‘England’s Forgotten Worthies’, in *Short Studies on Great Subjects* (London: Longmans, Green, 1867), 296.

Age thus: ‘It is not often that I congratulate myself upon the days in which I happen to live; but I do so in this respect, that, compared with every other period of the world, this nineteenth century (or rather, the period between 1750 and 1850) may not improperly be called the Age of Boats.’⁵

Even though Irving’s first intent is to show his admiration for Marryat’s new books, he is unable to articulate what precisely he finds so brave and novel about them. Perceptive as his remarks may be, neither ‘fiction’ nor ‘romance’ were new to the ocean by the 1830s. Throughout the nineteenth century, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) retained greater influence than any of Marryat’s novels, and, although Marryat criticised Smollett’s depictions of the sea in *Roderick Random* (1748) and *Peregrine Pickle* (1751), he was plainly influenced by them.⁶ The timing of Ruskin’s remark about the ‘Age of Boats’, written six years after the ‘period’ he identified had supposedly ended, suggests the way in which many writers of the nineteenth century, especially writers of prose, felt that they were both in the midst of an age defined by the sea, and just past it. As early as 1825, William Hazlitt thought that William Godwin’s originality could be summarised best by noting that, unlike other writers, he had not been ‘pilfering from a dealer in marine stores’.⁷ And earlier still, reviewers derided a precursor of Marryat’s novels, John Davis’s *The Post Captain; or, the Wooden Walls well manned* (ca. 1805), for presenting ‘an indescribable hodgepodge of sublimity and sea-cant’, mingled infelicitously with ‘the

⁵ John Ruskin, *The Harbours of England*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition (London: George Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, 1903–12), vol. 13, *Turner: Harbours of England, Catalogues, and Notes* (1904), 19.

⁶ Sam Pickering Jr. disagrees (partly—he sees Sterne as a more serious influence). See “‘The most ‘harum-scarum’ sort of novel we have ever encountered”: Marryat’s “The King’s Own” and Shandyism’, *English Studies in Africa* 17 (1974): 71–77.

⁷ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1932), 11:25. Robert Macfarlane discusses the ‘considerable stress’ placed by Hazlitt ‘upon the idea that authentic literature flowed from a source within the individual writer’. *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34–35.

sameness of a life at sea'.⁸ Marryat's novels did not escape such problems. While a reviewer in *The Mirror of Literature and Amusement* called Marryat 'entirely original' in 1840, this is not true even within the gamut of his own novels, which are frequently repetitive.⁹ It was certainly clear to another reviewer for the *New Monthly Magazine* by 1836 that 'the framework and basis of a sea novel of mere adventure is extremely limited – one might almost say unique', and that if Marryat had his hands in the stores, they were his own stores: 'Captain Marryat steals from himself'.¹⁰ At the same time as Marryat seemed to some to progress toward a 'new region' for the novel, according to others he charted a familiar course. If Irving found Marryat's novels 'captivating', his very subject seemed to others more like a literary Bermuda Triangle in which originality and reputation alike might be lost. This feeling began about the time Marryat put pen to paper. It is a characteristic of the sea in literary prose throughout the Victorian period, contributing to a sense shared by much current criticism that, contrary to Irving's predictions, 'sea writing in the nineteenth century was aggressively reactionary and backward looking'.¹¹

Victorians like Ruskin found in their relationship to the sea a way of defining both themselves and the age. At the same time, however, the past deeds, the patterns of thought, and particularly the patterns of expression, which the sea entailed had begun to feel not just settled but outworn. As terms of critique, 'sea-cant' and 'sameness' have implications not just about the sea as a subject, but also about the difficulty of finding a way of writing about it that is both precise and appropriate to the sea as an emblem of (among other things) unboundedness. However, what the sea meant was significant to

⁸ Unsigned review of *The Post Captain*, by John Davis, *The Belfast Monthly Magazine* 1 (1 September 1808): 63.

⁹ Unsigned review of *Poor Jack*, by Captain Marryat, *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* 35 (4 January 1840): 12.

¹⁰ 'Captain Marryat, the Sea Novelist', *New Monthly Magazine* 48 (October 1836): 229, 230.

¹¹ Jonathan Raban, ed., introduction to *The Oxford Book of the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.

nineteenth-century writers and readers, even as it became harder to define. This difficulty of definition stemmed not only from the great burden of association the sea carried, but also from the fact that so much had already been written about it. To write about the sea was to risk producing nothing but a vague and ‘indescribable hodgepodge’ of others’ sentiments and turns of phrase. As an object of representation or a stimulus for metaphor, the sea was a risky proposition for nineteenth-century prose, not least because literal and figurative ways of writing about the sea are sometimes (but not always) indistinguishable. It is the underlying argument of my thesis that writers could use a ‘hodgepodge’ like this to probe or contest the boundaries between ideas or individuals, or to come to grips with ideas that were themselves poorly defined. The sea in these cases functions, not as an impediment to thought or expression, but as a source of intellectual and expressive possibilities. The three writers I examine in this thesis exemplify ways in which the difficulties that attended writing about, and writing with, the sea could themselves be turned to account.

I will call the central problem, and the crucial resource, connected with the sea, vagueness. If vagueness characterises both descriptions of the sea itself, and writing that relies on the sea as a component of its figurative vocabulary, it also describes the way in which writing about the sea in the period tends to pass lightly and non-specifically between literal and symbolic registers. Sometimes such vagueness was exactly what was needed—though of course it could be deployed with varying degrees of skill. Marryat’s novels frequently suggest that the narrative voice ought to be regarded as his own,¹² as when he intrudes briefly upon the narration in *The King’s Own* to describe the scene of its composition: a ship’s cabin awash with seawater because of ‘neglect of caulking in the cants’. His small library has broken loose from its ‘battens’, and *Don Juan* is one of the

¹² I discuss this habitual manoeuvre in greater detail below in ‘Myself Again’, page 92.

first volumes he rescues, along with *Burke's Peerage*, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.¹³ Probably these volumes are set afloat as a way of implying some notable literary forbears for the novel at hand. A comparison is suggested between these texts and *The King's Own*, while at the same time Marryat avoids naming the terms by which it could be carried further, or specifying its implications. Marryat's novel swims in the same sea that inspired both Byron's visionary seascapes, and Burton's praise for the health-giving properties of sea air.¹⁴ Marryat claims to have 'rescued' *Don Juan* 'from a second shipwreck', while Burton and Burke are associated on the questionable basis that his cabin has become 'a fashionable watering-place', 'with all the royal family and aristocracy of the kingdom, taking a dip' (*KO*, 161). It is a model of fluid free-association, enjoyed by Marryat because it is preposterous, faintly clever, and suggestive of the miscellaneous intellectual and political context in which he wished to set his book, which one reviewer termed with some justification 'the most "harum-scarum" sort of novel we have ever encountered'.¹⁵ If the sea proves to be the means of initiating a comparison between possibly incongruous texts, it also saves Marryat from bringing it to a close—the books simply float there, coming apart at the edges. Such are the perils and the advantages of what Christopher Butler, Rocco Capozzi, Martin Jay, Jeff Mason and Peter Washington, Jane Somerville, and others have called 'the sea of intertextuality'.¹⁶ When Mason and Washington write that 'it is a commonplace

¹³ Frederick Marryat, *The King's Own*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: J. M. Dent, 1896), 161.

¹⁴ Robert Burton suggests that the inhabitants of the Orkney Islands are 'faire of complexion, long-lived, most healthfull, free from all manner of infirmities of body and minde, by reason of a sharpe purifying aire, which comes from the Sea'. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Nicolas K. Kiessling, Thomas C. Faulkner, and Rhonda L. Blair, vol. 2, *Text: The Second Partition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 58, lines 27–30.

¹⁵ Unsigned review of *The King's Own*, by Captain Marryat, *Monthly Review* 14 (June 1830): 263. Pickering uses this quotation in the title of his essay, and discusses it at some length. Pickering, "Most harum-scarum novel", 72.

¹⁶ Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 24; Rocco Capozzi, *Reading Eco: An Anthology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 391; Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 437; Jeff Mason and Peter Washington, *The Future of Thinking:*

now that texts float in a sea of intertextuality', they mean that the tenets of Barthesian post-structuralism are widely accepted, though perhaps an excess of corroboration suggests a supplementary reading.¹⁷ The phrase 'sea of intertextuality' enacts the process it is attempting to describe: not citation, but imagination spiralling or drifting into familiar patterns.

By the beginning of the Victorian period, a degree of cynicism already inflected some writing about the sea. The authors I consider, however, found something to be said for a less decisive attitude than Barthes's regarding the sea's 'message'. In such cases, the sea's value to an author lay not in its specific meanings, but in the less easily defined uses to which it might be put. If the sea carried an array of hazy unbounded ideas and implications, I argue, it also supplied a means of imaginatively probing the interstices between them. Vagueness, that is, became a way of enhancing, not forgoing, attention to the sometimes porous boundaries between ideas or texts. The 'scornful and brooding' attitude toward the sea assumed by James Wait in my epigraph has meanings, Conrad tells us, though what they may be, and how to distinguish between them, is not disclosed. It is precisely the illegibility of Wait's 'message' that demands scrutiny on the part of the reader and the crew of the *Narcissus*. Wait's posture makes its appeal to interpretation through vagueness, as do the books awash on the floor of Marryat's seawater-swamped cabin. This study focuses attention, not on Byron or Burton, but on the bilge that brings them into vague connection.

Rhetoric and Liberal Arts Teaching (London: Routledge, 1992), 114; Jane Somerville, *Making the Light Come: The Poetry of Gerald Stern* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 84.

¹⁷ Mason and Washington, *Future of Thinking*, 114.

A cult of vagueness

The sea has frequently been thought of in terms of its vagueness, and in this section I shall spend some time outlining the parameters of this term, its specific philosophical, critical, and historical contexts, and how it is distinct from another category of obscurity much associated with the sea: sublimity.

W. H. Auden did not consider the sea as a thing in itself, but a ‘state of barbaric vagueness [...] out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the efforts of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse’, like one of Kingsley’s water-babies, threatened perpetually with regression by Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid.¹⁸ Similarly, Roland Barthes determined that Jules Verne’s *Nautilus* appealed to the imagination because, crammed with intricate numerable objects (like a novel), it could be read as a particularly ‘human’ space, well-equipped to keep the infinite at bay: ‘the enjoyment of being enclosed reaches its paroxysm when, from the bosom of this unbroken inwardness, it is possible to watch, through a large window-pane, the outside vagueness of the waters’.¹⁹ Both authors chose their words carefully.²⁰ The French word *vague*, ‘wave’, shares its Latin root, *vagus*, meaning ‘wandering, inconsistent, uncertain’, with the English word of the same spelling.²¹ The same Latin root crops up in other English words, too, such as *vagrant*, or *extravagant*, which has a subsidiary meaning, now obsolete, but still familiar to Emerson in the mid-nineteenth century: ‘That wanders out of bounds’.²² Such affinities may lie

¹⁸ W. H. Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood; or, The Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), 17.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, ‘The *Nautilus* and the Drunken Boat’, in *Mythologies*, 66–67.

²⁰ The link between vagueness and waves is retained in the original:

Le Nautilus est à cet égard la caverne adorable : la jouissance de l’enfermement atteint son paroxysme lorsque, du sein de cette intériorité sans fissure, il est possible de voir par une grande vitre le vague extérieur des eaux, et de définir ainsi dans un même geste l’intérieur par son contraire.

Roland Barthes, ‘Nautilus et bateau ivre’, in *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), 92.

²¹ *OED*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. ‘vague, adj., adv., and n.2’.

²² *Ibid.*, s.v. ‘extravagant, adj. and n.’, sense 1a. The *OED* cites Emerson’s *Essays* (1841), where he refers to ‘rare, extravagant spirits’.

submerged, too, beneath Galen's claim that the boundaries of things 'such as the wave, the open sea [...], the nation and the crowd' are vague.²³ To describe the sea as 'vague' is, in a sense, to call it by its own name.

Such lexical slips hint at ways in which describing anything, including the sea, as vague has the potential to clarify and to obfuscate in equal measure. Indeed, the word *vague* itself seems to thwart its own definition, exemplifying what it describes—how distinct vagueness is from indistinctness, or obscurity, or even ambiguity, can be hard to tell, not least because more and less technical senses of these terms tend to be used as glosses for each other. For example, when the philosopher Timothy Williamson explains that ambiguity might be resolved 'as one cannot resolve vagueness, by supplying an alternative word', he draws attention to the way in which heaping on more words can just as easily loosen a definition as tighten it—to clarify what is meant by 'vagueness' by juxtaposing it to 'ambiguity' seems to initiate precisely the kind of comparison he thinks unsuitable to the resolution of vagueness.²⁴ An additional problem exists for any consideration of vagueness in nineteenth-century literature. The kind of vagueness to which Williamson refers did not become a discrete object of study until the 1890s, when C. S. Peirce and William James asked 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', and answered that it was impossible to do so because neither thought nor language was susceptible to such 'precisification'.²⁵ Earlier references to vagueness may or may not, therefore, imply the sorts of concerns which occupy current philosophers. And, of course, those concerns may be alluded to using terms other than 'vagueness'.

²³ Galen, 'On Medical Experience 16.117.32', in *Vagueness: A Reader*, ed. Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith (London: MIT Press, 1996), 58.

²⁴ Timothy Williamson, *Vagueness* (London: Routledge, 1994), 73.

²⁵ C. S. Peirce, 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, vol. 1, 1867–1893 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 124–41.

In spite of these reservations, the key tenets of philosophical vagueness had been in circulation, in various forms, long before the nineteenth century. They are particularly germane to a discussion of the sea as a literary subject. This is because philosophical vagueness is principally a linguistic matter. Although the roots of modern philosophical enquiry into the nature of vagueness are in the late nineteenth century, it achieved real prominence when Bertrand Russell delivered his seminal lecture on vagueness before the Jowett Society on 22 November 1922, at Oriel College, Oxford. Russell argued that an ideal logical language, free from vagueness, would not be ‘applicable to this terrestrial life, but only imagined celestial existence’. ‘All language is vague’, he said—all language that is suited ‘for public occasions’, anyway.²⁶ For Russell, to notice vagueness is to notice a point at which a word fails to connect absolutely with its referent.

Russell’s most obvious intellectual forerunner was Gottlob Frege, who believed that vague predicates simply fail to signify, and who had tried in the late nineteenth century to produce a logically perfect language—that is, a language free of the concepts and grammatical forms which allow for vague, ambiguous, and incoherent expressions. This endeavour laid the groundwork for Russell’s more sophisticated attempt to create a language of analytic logic.²⁷ Russell himself first came to appreciate the problem of vagueness while in the process of reviewing John Dewey’s *Essays in Experimental Logic*, and writing his introduction to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921).²⁸ In the latter, Wittgenstein similarly asks what might be spoken of precisely in his ‘picture theory’ of language. ‘Everything that can be put into words can be put clearly’, he

²⁶ Bertrand Russell, ‘Vagueness’, in Keefe and Smith, *Vagueness: A Reader*, 65, 61.

²⁷ See Williamson, *Vagueness*, 37.

²⁸ Williamson points out that ‘family resemblances’, Wittgenstein’s key language game in *Philosophical Investigations*, ‘positively invites’ sorites paradoxes, but Williamson does not discuss the question. *Ibid.*, 87. I examine the sorites paradox, which is the thought experiment classically associated with vagueness, below.

cautions, and ‘[i]t will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said’.²⁹

Wittgenstein later reconsidered this position, choosing instead to emphasise that even vague language (all language, according to Russell) was potentially useful. In his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Wittgenstein rejected rarefied philosophical precision, in favour of a pragmatic appreciation of ‘vague contours’.³⁰ As Megan M. Quigley puts it, for Wittgenstein ‘all language is defined as necessarily vague, but unproblematically so, since vagueness does not undermine a language’s utility’.³¹ Wittgenstein asks what Frege intends when he ‘compares a concept to an area and says that an area with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all’.³² The value of language, according to Wittgenstein’s later view, depends on its functionality, a strategy calculated to undermine Frege’s stance on vagueness: ‘[Frege] presumably means that we cannot do anything with [a vaguely bounded space].—But is it senseless to say: “Stand roughly there”?’.³³ The Ideal Language theory that dreams of sharp boundaries between terms is, from the perspective of later Wittgenstein, William James, or Peirce, mistaken because it disguises the true relations between ideas represented by language, instantiated in the shadowy space between one word and another.

The quintessential expression of vagueness, the sorites paradox, originated, as far as we know, in the fourth century BCE. The idea is a simple one, conceived by Eubulides of Miletus; some time later, Galen states it in a way that dramatises how easily a dialogue about vagueness can become a slightly mean practical joke:

²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 51, § 4.116; p. 49, § 4.115.

³⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), p. 36, § 76.

³¹ Megan M. Quigley, ‘Modern Novels and Vagueness’, *Modernism/modernity* 15 (2007): 106.

³² Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 34, § 71.

³³ *Ibid.*

I say: tell me, do you think that a single grain of wheat is a heap? Thereupon you say: No. Then I say: What do you say about 2 grains? For it is my purpose to ask you questions in succession, and if you do not admit that 2 grains are a heap then I shall ask you about 3 grains. Then I shall proceed to interrogate you further with respect to 4 grains, then 5 and 6 and 7 and 8, and you will assuredly say that none of these makes a heap.³⁴

The key to ‘classical logic and semantics’, the ‘principle of bivalence’ (the thought that any statement must be either true or false), is called into question by the sorites paradox which directs attention to the misty boundary between concepts, where they might be true *and* false. Williamson describes bivalence as ‘the principle most obviously threatened by vagueness’.³⁵ He poses his own sorites paradox to illustrate the issue.

When, for example, did Rembrandt become old? For each second of his life, one can consider the statement that he was old then. Some of those statements are false; others are true. If all of them are true or false, then there was a last second at which it was false to say that Rembrandt was old, immediately followed by a first second at which it was true to say that he was old. Which second was that?³⁶

There is no answer to this question, but asking exposes something about our language that is normally hidden. There is no obvious boundary where a not-heap turns into a heap, and there is no particular second at which Rembrandt became old; words such as ‘heaps’ and ‘old’ are vague because the boundary around the idea they designate is fuzzy. Although philosophers of vagueness might speak about ‘heaps’ and ‘not-heaps’, it is self-evident that at points Rembrandt may be thought of as middle-aged, old or young, in his dotage or his prime, or old *and* in his dotage, since these terms overlap. If we claim it to be false that Rembrandt is old, language rushes in to fill the space. Even ‘Rembrandt’, according to this logic, might be seen as an impossibly vague term, since it would be hard to say (as any pro-life activist could tell you) at what precise time ‘Rembrandt’ either came into being or ceased to be. The philosophy of vagueness has a dual aim, then: it tries to show

³⁴ Galen, ‘On Medical Experience’, in Keefe and Smith, *Vagueness: A Reader*, 12.

³⁵ Williamson, *Vagueness*, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

that language does not work as it has traditionally been thought to, and subsequently it tries to explain how it can work at all, how it can and does *refer* to the real world.

Discourses of vagueness, that is, provide a way of thinking about the sometimes indefinite meeting of language and the world. A ‘heap’, in light of the sorites paradox, demands to be thought of, not as a thing in itself, but as a concept or a matter of linguistic convenience, a method of grouping grains which disguises demanding logical difficulties. To follow the logic of the sorites paradox produces a secondary significance for the word *heap*, transforming it into an emblem of, instead of a means of concealing (like any word), one of the problems faced by language in general (bivalence). In this context, a heap carries, along with its usual sense, a reminder of a particular logical difficulty. The sea—which frequently appears to be at once a material fact and source of experience, and an unsettled and changeable literary idea—has the potential to broach similar questions of referentiality. This is so not least because, like a sorites heap, the sea in literature is a site of accumulation—of metaphor, allusion, and experience, as well as saltwater. Like a heap, the sea is something that can be touched or plunged into, and at other times provides a reminder that objects and the linguistic ideas we associate them with do not always match.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the vagueness of such accumulations was beginning to be essential to an appreciation of the sea. Indeed, while a good way to sharpen one’s idea of the sea was to go there, for some this proved disillusioning—a well-defined sea did not seem properly to be the sea at all. When Coleridge set out to write the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), for example, he had never been to sea. He had, however, grown up less than twenty miles from Lyme Regis, in Ottery St Mary, and was an avid reader of Richard Hakluyt’s *Voyages* (1589–1600), along with other more recent volumes; he would also have been familiar with James Thomson’s *Seasons* (1726–30) and crucially Falconer’s *Shipwreck* (1762). All of these texts prepared the way for the

Romantic vision of the sea which Coleridge's poem would do so much to enshrine.³⁷ A short time after he had completed his poem, Coleridge sailed from Yarmouth to Hamburg:

At four o'clock I observed a wild duck swimming on the waves, a single solitary wild duck. It is not easy to conceive, how interesting a thing it looked in that round objectless desert of waters. I had associated such a feeling of immensity with the ocean, that I felt exceedingly disappointed, when I was out of sight of all land, at the narrowness and *nearness*, as it were, of the circle of the horizon. So little are images capable of satisfying the obscure feelings connected with words.³⁸

Robbed of the obscurity conjured up by words, literally and metaphorically circumscribed, Coleridge's experience of the 'narrow' and near sea proved a disappointment.

Like Coleridge, Charles Darwin had ample time to observe the sea aboard the *Beagle*, and it did not meet his expectation of literal and figurative unboundedness either. 'What are the boasted glories of the illimitable ocean?', he asked.

A tedious waste, a desert of water, as the Arabian calls it. [...] It is well once to behold a squall with its rising arch and coming fury, or the heavy gale of wind and mountainous waves. I confess, however, my imagination had painted something more grand, more terrific in the full-grown storm. [...] On a forlorn and weather-beaten coast, the scene is indeed different, but the feelings partake more of horror than of wild delight.³⁹

Referring to feelings of horror and delight, Darwin alludes to an aesthetic genealogy for his imagined seascape. We can trace Darwin's disappointment as much as Coleridge's back to the theory of the sublime, which relies in part upon an aestheticisation of obscurity. If Darwin had Coleridge's *Rime* in mind, or perhaps J. M. W. Turner's paintings, he was probably also reflecting on Joseph Addison's influential essay in the *Spectator* in 1712 where he declared, 'of all Objects that I have seen, there is none which

³⁷ See Raban, *Oxford Book of Sea*, 13.

³⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols, ed. Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969–2002), vol. 7, bk 2, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions, II* (1983), ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 169, original emphasis.

³⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, ed. and abr. Janet Browne and Michael Neve (London: Penguin, 1989), 373.

affects my Imagination so much as the Sea or Ocean'.⁴⁰ One of the first to adapt the sublime from a principle of classical rhetoric into a way of appreciating natural scenes, Addison emphasises the centrality of the sea to his vision of sublimity on the grounds of its vast size and power in storms, and its resistance to description. Addison is effusive on the subject of the 'agreeable horror' that the sight of the sea produces, and that he finds 'impossible to describe'.⁴¹ It is perhaps no coincidence that the subsidiary sense of *at sea*, meaning 'in a state of uncertainty or perplexity', arose in the mid-eighteenth century, at roughly the same time that the concept of the sublime began to emphasise the sea's obscurity.⁴² Afloat upon Addison's prized 'fluid matter', Darwin finds that such feelings remain largely imaginary, issuing from descriptions like Addison's, unmatched by personal experience. Sublimity, unlike vagueness, includes an emotional expectation. The obscurity of words was to be valued, according to Coleridge, because the feeling of sublimity he sought depended upon it—the actual sight of the sea, like a painting, felt too neatly framed by the 'circle of the horizon'. However, while the sea may have disappointed an expectation of sublime unboundedness, it does not fail in vagueness. Though palpably bounded, both Darwin's and Coleridge's sea performs the function of a sorites heap, showing signs of an accumulated and unwieldy freight of literal and figurative associations (including the sublime), and introducing the chief concern of philosophical vagueness: the suitability of words to experience.

Nevertheless, the nineteenth-century pairing of the sea and obscurity had a great deal to do with the legacy of Romantic depictions of the sea as a locus of sublimity. Christopher Connery has noticed that 'the ocean is a prime activator of the trope of the

⁴⁰ Joseph Addison, 'Letter', *The Spectator*, 20 September 1712, n.p.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² The first recorded usage in the *OED* is 1768. *OED*, 1911, s.v. 'sea, n.', phrase 10, 'at sea'.

sublime: limitless, unfathomably deep, indefinite'.⁴³ Connery is responding, as Coleridge and Darwin were, not only to Addison's thoughts about sublimity, but also to Kant's and Edmund Burke's. According to both Burke and Kant, the sublime arises in a moment of dissonance between the faculty of the senses and the faculty of the mind, or the imagination, 'a feeling of pain brought about by incapacity of imagination' and occasioned by the effort to comprehend sensible objects that are vast, powerful, and obscure.⁴⁴ In Burke's mind, the pleasurable 'terror' of the sublime is characterised by greatness, magnificence, and obscurity. In language similar to Williamson's or Russell's, Burke theorises that nothing can strike us as properly 'great' unless its 'bounds' are to a certain degree indistinct, which is why he considers 'a clear idea' to be 'another name for a little idea', one that fails to be sublime.⁴⁵ As Connery implies, certain objects seemed to Burke and to Kant generally to fulfil the requirements of the sublime: 'bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on'.⁴⁶ The immensity suggested by obscurity is also an important part of Coleridge's approach to the sea, though in his case the experience of the sea failed to equal words in terms of indistinctness. Kant clarifies his statement in a way that gives some insight into Coleridge's difficulty:

[W]hat is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy,

⁴³ Christopher L. Connery, 'Oceanic Feeling and Regional Imaginary', in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 289.

⁴⁴ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), 83.

⁴⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 58.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), p. 120, § 28.

which can be exhibited in sensibility. Thus the vast ocean heaved up by storms cannot be called sublime. The sight of it is horrible; and one must already have filled one's mind with all sorts of ideas if such an intuition is to attune it to a feeling that is itself sublime.⁴⁷

Coleridge agrees that 'no object of Sense is sublime in itself; but only as far as I make it a symbol of some Idea. [...]othing that has a shapeliness can be sublime except by metaphor ab occasione ad rem. So true it is, that those objects whose shape most recedes from Shapeliness are commonly the exciting occasions.'⁴⁸ Coleridge's disappointment, then, can be to a certain degree accounted for by this theory, which advises that the 'sensible' sea, without its surrounding ideas, will not be felt to be sublime.

From another perspective, this seems like an unsatisfying or partial account; both Coleridge and Darwin do come to the sea stocked with 'all sorts of ideas' about what they will find there. David Vallins writes about the sublime in a way that suggests another explanation. He says that the sublime is 'above all [...] the feeling of mental activity—of striving to comprehend and express intuitions which always resist full encapsulation in language'—an intuition about the sea, for instance, brought on by its immensity.⁴⁹ While Vallins is perceptive about the sublime as a concept, his description does not seem accurate to either Coleridge's or Darwin's experience of the sea, even though their feeling for its 'obscurity' certainly has its roots in an understanding and expectation of the sublime. First, neither Darwin nor Coleridge seems to have trouble putting the sea into words; the experience of the sea itself, observed from ships and from the shore, lends itself readily to description by both men. Secondly, and more significantly, the chain of events described by Vallins does not accurately capture what Coleridge in particular underwent. The 'obscure feelings' he connects with words do not reflect a sense of 'striving to

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 99, § 23.

⁴⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Solgar's *Erwin*', in *Collected Works of Coleridge*, vol. 11, bk 1, *Shorter Works and Fragments I* (1995), ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, 596–97.

⁴⁹ David Vallins, ed., introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Sublime*, Coleridge's Writings series (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 2.

comprehend and express intuitions’; they precede them, and may even bring them about. The sea, in Coleridge’s account, sustains and occasions both sublimity and mundanity, and proves to be the medium by which these apparent opposites connect. Certainly, Darwin’s and Coleridge’s examples, taken together, show that the sea could fall short of sublime expectations, but they also show that the sea, as it is written about, demands a particular kind of consideration. The sea as it appears in texts like *Biographia Literaria* and *Voyage of the ‘Beagle’* is vague, not just as the sublime sea is, but more properly because it so easily shades into its own idea—both writers use the sea as a way of measuring real and ideal experience against each other.

Certain aspects of the sea itself may have encouraged a fluent or yielding series of exchanges between the two chief ways that the sea appears in language. Connery, for instance, claims that ‘the ambiguity that inheres in the ocean’s very liquid element renders it uncertain whether it is “another vast metaphor or an indifferent energy flatly separated from human discourse”’.⁵⁰ Burke offers a good description of how a different quality, ‘uniformity’, can be important to the perception of vastness:

The mind in reality hardly ever can attend diligently to more than one thing at a time; if this thing be little, the effect is little, and a number of other little objects cannot engage the attention; the mind is bounded by the bounds of the object; and what is not attended to, and what does not exist, are much the same in the effect; but the eye or the mind (for in this case there is no difference) in great uniform objects does not readily arrive at their bounds; it has no rest, whilst it contemplates them; the image is much the same everywhere.⁵¹

In this passage, Burke does something radical in his parenthesis: he suggests that in some special cases the eye and the mind need not be distinguished. This seems appropriate to the effect he is trying to describe. One part of the sea is indistinguishable from another part both because the sea is literally fluid, and because it is conceptually fluid—each part

⁵⁰ Connery, ‘Oceanic Feeling’, 290. He quotes from Rob Wilson’s *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 56–57.

⁵¹ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 126.

of the sea, that is, can be thought of as The Sea. It would be strange to suggest something similar about a mountain; but the sea is always partly an idea, whether it appears to the eye or to the mind. Something similar might be suggested about the Antarctic pack ice (the sea in another form), or the desert, and indeed the sea and the desert are frequently separated by a distance of metaphor only (see Darwin, above). Nothing but the sea, however, so thoroughly and emblematically resists human interference or differentiation. To claim to be ‘at Mont Blanc’ is one thing, whereas to say that one is ‘at sea’ is several others.

Blackwood’s legendary disgust at Turner’s *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* (1840) and *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth* (1842), two of Ruskin’s favourite paintings, was brought on by a sense that the painter’s hand forced itself upon ‘nature’. Ruskin insisted, however, that their vagueness was perfectly natural:

We invariably, under ordinary circumstances, use the surface focus; and, in consequence, receive nothing more than a vague and confused impression of the reflected colours and lines, however clearly, calmly, and vigorously all may be defined underneath, if we choose to look for them. [...] Hence, the ordinary effect of water is only to be rendered by giving the reflections of the *margin* clear and distinct (so clear they usually are in nature, that it is impossible to tell where the water begins); but the moment we touch the reflection of distant objects, as of high trees or clouds, that instant we must become vague and uncertain in drawing.⁵²

Ruskin’s defence does not separate the subject and object of the painting; it rather thrusts them more fully into collaboration. Turner’s eye is made to seem equivalent to anyone’s eye, an inescapable subjectivity that negates the question of whether the storm at sea he depicts is as it is shown to be. In 1811, Turner wrote of a similar scene, a seascape that

⁵² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters I*, vol. 3 of *Works of Ruskin* (1903), 538–39. *Blackwood’s* singled out this passage in particular for critique, and Ruskin responded with characteristic forthrightness in his introduction to the second edition of *Modern Painters*. Unsigned review of *Modern Painters*, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 54 (October 1843): 498.

strikes the eye first as a ‘vague and confused impression of [...] colours and lines’ interspersed with ‘blanchd spots of canvas’, before it resolves its subject:

the gay occident of saffron hue
 In tenderest medium of distance blue
 While the deep ocean heaves (in) a smooth trance
 Calm foamless far distance
 The beauties and wonders of the deep
 While the blanchd spots of canvas creep
 Upon the dark medium.⁵³

Virginia Woolf wrote, ‘when the artist’s imagination is working at high pressure it leaves very little trace of his effort’.⁵⁴ That is not the case here, and Turner’s crude usage reveals some of the ways in which the idea of the sea might be particularly well supported by the medium of verse. Rhyme, for example, may ‘smooth’ or blend the small, repeated horizons of individual line endings into a seamless larger one, as when ‘saffron hue’ shades into ‘distance blue’. The dislocated rhythm of his lines hints at an underlying order, though they remain choppy on the surface. Indeed, in general, verse may be better suited than prose to depicting the oceanic insofar as it more readily balances change and flux against patterned recurrence.

It is no accident, of course, that the controversy attendant on Turner’s relatively abstract late style achieved special intensity around paintings of the sea. The fact that the sea seemed properly to *be* vague worked to Ruskin’s favour by making the question of whether Turner’s representations of the sea were themselves vague rather a hard one to answer—they could be thought of as accurate representations of vagueness, vague representations of something ‘perfectly definite’, or vague representations of vagueness, and there was little to decide between them.

⁵³ J. M. W. Turner, ‘Foam’s Frail Power’, in Raban, *Oxford Book of Sea*, 168.

⁵⁴ Virginia Woolf, ‘The Captain’s Death Bed’, in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols, ed. Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke (London: Hogarth Press, 1986–2011), vol. 6, 1933–1941 and *Additional Essays, 1906–1924* (2011), ed. Stuart N. Clarke, 68.

In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), William Empson suggests that a ‘cult of vagueness’ arose in the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ Within the cult, he includes the ‘nonsense writers’ Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, and we might add Turner, Ruskin, Darwin, and others. Empson is clear that vague language is by no means necessarily nonsense.⁵⁶ Oscar Wilde’s ‘dowagers’, for instance, manage to keep their insults polite by a trick of delicately managed vagueness, a feat that becomes a compositional principle in Empson’s hands: ‘The strength of vagueness, in fact, is that it allows of secret ambiguity; it seems to have forced itself on nineteenth-century poets when they felt they needed ambiguity, but would have considered its more discoverable forms improper’.⁵⁷ The thought is left tantalisingly unfinished, and the origins of this cultish aesthetic are left unplumbed.

However, the lure of nineteenth-century vagueness was not only poetic, and its uses were more various than Empson allows in his discussion of nonsense and good manners. William James certainly took a broader view when, in 1890, he argued for ‘the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life’. James’s pragmatism makes him press for a system of thought that would rectify ‘the ridiculous theory of Hume and Berkeley that we can have no images but of perfectly definite things’, an ambition to which Coleridge might have been sympathetic.⁵⁸ And like Coleridge, who went to sea with an indefinite image of the sea in mind, when James approaches the topic of vagueness, he clearly comes bearing the sea with him: ‘Each [thought] swims in a felt fringe of relations’, James writes, and ‘it is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook’.⁵⁹ There are several possible answers to questions of how vagueness might be defined, and how it might in turn characterise the way the sea

⁵⁵ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Pimlico, 2004), 187.

⁵⁶ It is possible to imagine that Empson bore in mind a poem by Edward Lear like ‘The Owl and the Pussycat’, which itself concerns the blurring of boundaries, not least between species of animal. This process seems to have been facilitated in Lear’s mind by a voyage at sea.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 246.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 250, 246.

appears in the prose writing of the period. Not only current criticism, but critics since the late eighteenth century, have seen vagueness as a problem faced by writers who wished to depict the sea. This was not always so. For someone like William James, the sea offered a way not just to think about thought, but to write about it too. In this case, and in many others that will be discussed in this thesis, the vagueness associated with the sea proves not to be a problem, but a nexus of verbal and imaginative possibilities.

'Difficulty of properly dividing the subject': Ruskin

Ruskin had a passionate interest in the sea from boyhood. His fascination with its representations was so great, and the ideal concept of it he derived from paintings and books so clear, that he would later claim to have experienced 'no "first sight" of the sea'.⁶⁰ As one of the great theorists of the subject, Ruskin's thoughts clarify how the Victorians came to find representations of the sea to be both problematically and productively vague. Few deliberated as seriously about the best way to represent the sea, and for this reason Ruskin provides a helpful case-study to illustrate some of the concerns that would be echoed in nineteenth-century fiction. Ruskin's professional interest in the sea was first stirred by his wish to explain and defend Turner's paintings. A crucial aspect of his defence, and an element of his rhetorical style in general, is what George P. Landow calls 'word-painting'.⁶¹ For Ruskin, the necessity of making Turner's paintings understood equated to a need to make his readers *see*, not just Turner's paintings, but the sea itself, using words. With this in mind, I begin by outlining Ruskin's thoughts about the problems and possibilities associated with representations of the sea in painting, which are relevant to Victorian representation of the sea in general. I then examine some of Ruskin's

⁶⁰ John Ruskin, *Præterita*, in *Works of Ruskin*, vol. 35, *Præterita and Dilecta* (1908), 106.

⁶¹ See Landow's chapter on 'Ruskin the word-painter' in *Ruskin*, Past Masters series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 21–38.

attempts to represent the sea in his own prose. In Ruskin's attempts to devise an accurate way of writing about waves, he uses vagueness to invest conventional language with renewed significance, and to suggest at once the sea and his struggle to represent it. Thus, my analysis of Ruskin's own attempts to depict the sea ultimately demonstrates that, if vagueness was a problem, it could also be an imaginative resource.

'It is impossible to imitate anything really great', concludes Ruskin in the first volume of *Modern Painters*. 'We can "paint a cat or a fiddle, so that they look as if we could take them up"', he says, 'but we cannot imitate the ocean, or the alps' (*MP I*, 102). For his own part, the sea proved especially difficult to capture. Ruskin had intended to devote part of the first volume of *Modern Painters* to the sea, but found it impossible. The eventual section devoted to the 'Truth of Water' is characterised by inadequacies: describing the insufficiency of any painting of the sea that he could think of, but also his own (and therefore anyone's) inability to say exactly what had gone wrong in those works in spite of a strong feeling that something had. Amid the usual technicalities ('General laws which regulate the phenomena of water', 'Deflection of images on agitated water', and so forth), the 'Truth of Water' catalogues Ruskin's disappointments: the 'Difficulty of properly dividing the subject', the 'Inaccuracy of study of water-effect among all painters', 'Various licenses or errors', and 'The ease with which a common representation of it may be given. The impossibility of a faithful one'.

The challenges that strained Ruskin as a critic were much the same as the problems he felt painters themselves faced—it seemed impossible to arrive at a completely accurate knowledge of the subject. He recalled, when he came to write the preface to the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters* (1860), the difficulty of trying to describe 'The Beauty of Water': 'The section on the sea was wholly unsatisfactory to me: I knew little of ships, nothing of blue open water. Turner's pathetic interest in the sea, and his inexhaustible

knowledge of shipping deserved more complete and accurate illustration than was at all possible to me'.⁶² 'Determined to do this piece well or not at all', the project had grown in his mind into its own book, 'since many persons might be interested in studies of the shipping of the old Nelson time, and of the sea-waves and sailor characters of all times' (*MP V*, 7). Therefore, when a new opportunity to approach the subject arose, he took it, writing a series of essays to accompany engravings of Turner's marine paintings. *The Harbours of England* (1856) pairs the essays and the engravings, which were made by Thomas Lupton with Turner's assistance. As Ruskin points out in his preface to the volume, it was an odd set, which

consisted only of twelve plates, all the less worthy of their high-sounding title in that, while they included illustrations of some of the least important of the watering-places, they did not include any illustration whatever of such harbours of England as Liverpool, Shields, Yarmouth, or Bristol. Such as they were, however, I was requested to undertake their illustration. (10)

Ruskin discusses each of the twelve plates in turn, but he also wrote a long introduction to the volume which functions as a kind of draft repository for some of his theories, and which uses some of his notes about the sea in painting composed for *Modern Painters*. In the resulting essay he ranges widely. Ruskin confidently predicts that the Victorians will be remembered in ages to come, not for beginning the study of natural history ('mainly the art of writing Latin names on white tickets'), but because 'THEY BUILT SHIPS OF THE LINE' (28). He discusses Wordsworth's and Tennyson's interest in boats alongside Dante's, all of whom, he concludes, show a decidedly appropriate reverence, in contrast to Chaucer or Walter Scott, whose 'apathetic recital' from *Marmion*—'The merry seamen laughed to see / Their gallant ship so lustily / Furrow the green sea foam'—he finds unsatisfactory (*HE*, 21). Ruskin's opinion of *Marmion*, however, clearly shares something of the general

⁶² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters V*, vol. 7 of *Works of Ruskin* (1905), 7.

disappointment that shaped his thoughts about his own work on the subject, which he considered perpetually insufficient and incomplete.

If the bow of a ship was a ‘naïvely perfect’ instrument, miraculously well-suited to the sea, paint and prose alike were less favourably adapted to that element (*HE*, 14). For Ruskin, the central trouble with the sea is that conventionality always pokes in at the fringes and spoils the effort to depict it:

I cannot catch a wave, nor daguerreotype it, and so there is no coming to pure demonstration; but the forms and hues of water must always be in some measure a matter of dispute and feeling, and the more so because there is no perfect or even tolerably perfect sea-painting to refer to. The sea never has been, and I fancy never will be nor can be painted; it is only suggested by means of more or less spiritual and intelligent conventionalism: and though Turner has done enough to suggest the sea mightily and gloriously, after all it is by conventionalism still, and there remains so much that is unlike nature, that it is always possible for those who do not feel his power to justify their dislike, on very sufficient and reasonable grounds; and to maintain themselves obstinately unreceptant of the good, by insisting on the deficiency which no mortal hand can supply, and which commonly is most manifest on the one hand, where most has been achieved on the other. (*MP I*, 498–99)

The shortcomings of realist painting and prose, which try to give the illusion of a correspondence between representation and reality, are made particularly evident to Ruskin by observing the sea. Terry Eagleton gives voice to what has become the accepted wisdom regarding realism when he insists that ‘artistic realism [...] does not mean “represents the world as it is”, but rather “represents it in accordance with conventional real-life modes of representing it”’.⁶³ Ruskin would not have sympathised with Eagleton’s view. Indeed, it is important to note that Ruskin feels the ‘conventionalism’ of representative art to be maddeningly evident in sea painting, because he clearly thinks of it as an exceptional case, both in the context of Turner’s other work, and art in general.

Paintings of the sea, which repeat the same tropes and techniques, give Ruskin a sense not

⁶³ Terry Eagleton, ‘Pork Chops and Pineapples’, review of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, by Erich Auerbach, *London Review of Books*, 23 October 2003, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n20/terry-eagleton/pork-chops-and-pineapples>.

of settled precision or reality, but of deepening vagueness followed by an increasingly intrusive and predominant sense of the conventions at work. ‘Those who do not feel [Turner’s] power’ are those for whom the conventionality of his work overwhelms the sense that it responds accurately to the infinite particularity of nature.

In spite of these reservations, Ruskin tried on occasion to defend Turner’s pictures of the sea on the grounds that they were indeed accurate: Ruskin put stock in his own familiarity with the sea, and ascribed the erroneous opinions of Turner’s detractors to want of experience. Such attempts were not always satisfying. He recalls in *Præterita* (1885–89) that, as a child,

before everything [...] came my pleasure in merely watching the sea. I was not allowed to row, far less to sail, or to walk near the harbour alone; so that I learned nothing of shipping or anything else worth learning, but spent four or five hours every day in simply staring and wondering at the sea,—an occupation which never failed me till I was forty. (78)

Like *Blackwood’s* (see above, page 24), Ruskin attributes the public’s misapprehension of paintings like *Snow Storm*, which he considered Turner’s finest painting, to unfamiliarity with the sea.

Snow Storm was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1842. The *Literary Gazette* found the painting ‘unintelligible’, and dismissed it on the grounds that ‘[n]either by land or water was such a scene ever witnessed’.⁶⁴ Ruskin disagreed. In his letters to the *Times* on the Turner bequest, he recalls an anecdote related to him in a letter from the Reverend William Kingsley, who had taken his mother to the gallery. Kingsley wanted his mother, who knew ‘nothing about art’, to have a look at a large picture of Richmond Park which he thought might be a good place to start. Yet, as they walked through the gallery, *Snow Storm* caught her attention and Kingsley ‘could hardly get her to look at any other

⁶⁴ Unsigned review of Turner’s exhibition at Royal Academy, *Literary Gazette*, 14 May 1840, 331.

picture'.⁶⁵ She herself had 'been in such a scene on the coast of Holland during the war' and was able to tell her son more about the painting 'than he had any notion of' though he had seen many storms at sea himself. Her instinctual corroboration of the painting's accuracy gains legitimacy from the fact that it is rooted in an experience of a storm that can be seen by Kingsley and his mother to be at once particular and of a type; while she had not been in the storm, he accepts that she has borne witness to just 'such a scene'.

Kingsley later thanked Turner for the opportunity of seeing his paintings. When he told the painter, however, how much his mother had enjoyed *Snow Storm*, Turner was impassive: 'I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like; I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it; I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did. But no one had any business to like the picture' (NT, 162). Ruskin thinks this such strong evidence of the painting's 'truth' that 'insisting' is unnecessary, though he does so anyway: 'Of course it was not understood; his finest works never are: but there was some apology from the public's not comprehending this, for few people had the opportunity of seeing the sea at such a time, and when they have, cannot face it' (*MP I*, 571). This is Ruskin at his most defensive and least convincing, ascribing his antagonists' supposed want of perceptual ability to a deficiency of moral fibre. These opinions are especially doubtful because he simultaneously allows that the accuracy of Turner's sea paintings could be objected to on reasonable grounds. Indeed, he himself found that 'the sea is [...] not quite right, it is not yeasty enough' in *Snow Storm*, and added that 'the linear wave-action is still too much dwelt upon, and confused with the true foam' (NT, 162–63). Since he cannot seem to keep it out anyway, Ruskin's commentary gains strength when it allows for the sea's vagueness. This is most compellingly done when he speaks about the sea's waves.

⁶⁵ John Ruskin, 'Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House, 1856', in *Works of Ruskin*, 13:162.

Frequently, when Ruskin wished to correct the opinions of his readers on the nature of the sea, he used his powers as a prose craftsman to impress upon them the qualities that he felt required emphasis. These descriptions are worth considering because they show Ruskin struggling against the obstacles to clarity and originality he recognised in paintings like *Snow Storm*. He is particularly keen to avoid commonplaces of sea-description: ‘it is only the basest writer who cannot speak of the sea without talking of “raging waves,” “remorseless floods,” “ravenous billows,” etc.; and it is one of the signs of the highest power in a writer to keep his eyes fixed firmly on the *pure fact*’.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the strain is evident as Ruskin attempts to peel back the layers of ‘conventionalism’ which obscure the view. In his most successful and sustained attempt, Ruskin imagines a storm, not in a teacup, but in an art gallery, the only way that he can see of amending the opinions of those who prefer the amateurish dabbling of Turner’s most frustrating predecessors: the Dutch. He somewhat improbably (though predictably) chalks up the ineptitude of Dutch sea painters to their never having seen the Atlantic, a shortcoming he seeks to correct with prose rather than pictures: ‘The Dutch painters [...] were by nature precluded from ever becoming aware of these common facts; having, in reality, never in all their lives seen the sea, but only a shallow mixture of sea-water and sand’ (*HE*, 37). Ruskin would wash away the vapid conventionality of Backhuysen or Cuyp, and the other ‘Van somethings and Back somethings [...] who have libelled the sea’ with their waves ‘*en papillote*’ (*MP I*, 85; *HE*, 37).⁶⁷

Setting close before their eyes, for once the inevitable truth, what a sea-wave really is; its green mountainous giddiness of wrath, its overwhelming crest—heavy as iron, fitful as flame, clashing against the sky in long cloven edge,—its furrowed flanks, all ghastly clear, deep in transparent death, but all laced across with lurid nets of spume, and tearing open into meshed interstices their churned veil of silver

⁶⁶ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters III*, vol. 5 of *Works of Ruskin* (1904), 211.

⁶⁷ See also the first volume of *Modern Painters* where Cuyp is found to be incapable of ‘any tolerable representation of water in agitation, or under any circumstances that bring out its power and character’. Ruskin, *MP I*, 520.

fury and no voice, but is as a grave always open, which the green sighing mounds do but hide for an instant as they pass. Would they, shuddering back from this wave of true, implacable sea, turn forthwith to the papillotes? It might be so. It is what we are all doing, more or less, continually. (*HE*, 37–38)

The passage has an air of self-correction, similes and metaphors overflowing their boundaries and mixing easily. Where sublimity emphasises the difficulty of finding the right words, an outpouring like Ruskin's seems to suggest that *any* comparison might do. The 'clash' of 'iron' and 'flame' seems at first to suggest that the wave is like an axe that might 'cleave', or jagged like a saw forged in a smithy. The word *cleave*, of course, both describes and provides an example of a double process of combination and division, since 'to cleave' is both to sever and to join (as man and wife 'cleave together'). It is appropriate that the wave joins contrasting qualities: it is both metallic and fiery, fitful and weighty, suggesting a division along which it is cloven. That channel is given another look, this time as a 'furrow', though this turns out to describe the muscularity of a horse's 'flanks', perhaps ploughing the waves into further furrows. (That these might be sea-horses suits the subject—especially since, according to the *OED*, well into the nineteenth century a sea-horse could be a number of different animals, both real and imagined, including walruses and hippos, which might more easily be thought of as possessing 'flanks', or a creature with a horse's 'foreparts' and a fish's tail.)⁶⁸ Again, however, the symbolic vocabulary changes: it is 'lace' that is being laid or woven in 'nets', 'meshes', or, in light of the imagery of the grave that follows, a shroud. Perhaps Ruskin intends a comparison to the patterns of ploughed fields, or to fishing nets, though metaphors of weaving also bring to mind the way a textile or text might be composed—as Ruskin's is—of individual threads of metaphor overlaid. Ruskin's unruly combinations fail so decidedly to specify what the sea is like in '*pure fact*' that it can equally be compared to a

⁶⁸ *OED*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. 'sea-horse, n.'

mountain and a sea-horse. The piling up and blending of similes and metaphors suggests the imprecision of each trope; where several comparisons can be made, what distinguishes individual metaphors becomes harder to define.

Ruskin did, however, prefer one trope above the others: his final figure for the sea, ‘green sighing mounds’, was a favourite that he had used before. This figure captures at once the shape of a wave, and the way in which his own descriptions heap up. In ‘On the Pathetic Fallacy’, he recalls lines describing a man contemplating suicide, ‘desiring that his body may be cast into the sea’, ‘*Whose changing mound, and foam that passed away, / Might mock the eyes that questioned where I lay*’ (*MP III*, 211). These lines seem to Ruskin to express perfectly what the sea is like and, while he claims he cannot remember exactly who said them, they are probably his own.⁶⁹ Whatever their origin, what Ruskin appreciated about the lines is that they measure the changefulness of the sea’s surface against the continuity of its forms. The poet finds the changing but perpetual mounds of waves more appealing than earthly ones because they better capture the character of a life that is transient but, he hopes, still leaves its traces. He explores this idea in lines in which ‘eyes’ easily become ‘I’, using sonic continuity as a foil to change, and in which ‘passed away’ resolves into a model of more permanent repose, ‘where I lay’. Ruskin particularly admires the word ‘mound’: as he says, “‘Mound’ of the sea wave is perfectly simple and true’. When he used the word again in *Harbours of England*, possibly with the lines from ‘the Pathetic Fallacy’ in mind, it was again to compare the appalling ‘always’ of a grave with the temporary shapes of sea waves: ‘as a grave always open, which the green sighing mounds do but hide for an instant’.

⁶⁹ There is no other attribution in any edition I have been able to find, and all my searches have led back invariably to ‘On the Pathetic Fallacy’.

Ruskin may have been encouraged to use *mound* in this way by the word's own complex history. *Mound* can refer to 'any heap or pile';⁷⁰ it is both a grave, as Ruskin's usage suggests, and a world in miniature (*mundus* in Latin, or *monde* in French). If the chime of *mound* and 'mountainous' brings to mind images of sublimity (as in Schopenhauer's description of 'mountainous waves' that 'rise and fall, are dashed violently against steep cliffs, and shoot their spray high into the air'),⁷¹ Ruskin gives it to us in small bites, green mounds, each one a diminutive Mont Blanc.⁷² The word held, moreover, a second sense in the nineteenth century; it could also be taken to mean 'a bank or embankment, or dam, usually forming a boundary or limit'.⁷³ Dickens uses it in this way in *Great Expectations* (1860–61): 'The dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes.'⁷⁴ Ruskin's 'furrows', divided by mounds, and his 'green mountains' are thus captured in a single image, cloven and heaped.

Just where Ruskin's 'mound' begins and ends, and what it contains, is vague. In *Harbours of England*, 'mound' is a synoptic metaphor. It is a way of glancing back at, and accounting for, a series of images that spread promiscuously, one figure running into the next. Beckett's *Endgame* begins with a description of the process by which a play grows, word upon word: 'Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.'⁷⁵ *Mound*, like *heap*, is a way of naming something

⁷⁰ OED, 3rd ed., 2003, s.v. 'mound, n.2', sense 3b.

⁷¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p. 204, §39.

⁷² Compare T. S. Whalley's *Mont Blanc*, where '[m]onstrous mounds of ice and snow / Cover all his rocks below', or the 'sea / Of fire' Shelley imagines forging his own Mont Blanc. Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, *Mont Blanc: An Irregular Lyric Poem....* (Bath: J. Marshall, 1788), 49, Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online (CW3309756951); Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Mont Blanc (Version A)', in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 122, lines 73–74.

⁷³ OED, 3rd ed., 2003, s.v. 'mound, n.2', sense 1c.

⁷⁴ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3–4.

⁷⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 93.

potentially unlimited: the sea itself, but also Ruskin's description of it, where each individual comparison is made to seem partial by the addition of another. If, that is, individual metaphors are unequal to the task of describing the sea, *mound* defines, and thus permits, a degree of verbal unboundedness appropriate to Ruskin's object.

Ruskin's prose was much admired when *Harbours of England* came out; it was applauded for the way in which it reinvigorated an apparently dead subject. *The Athenæum* was of the opinion that 'since Byron's "Address to the Ocean," a more beautiful poem to the sea has not been written'.

To first appreciate, and first to enable others to appreciate, some fresh and unheeded beauty of the universe is a gift second only to that of creation. After this book has been mastered and got by heart—as it will be—the waves that lap and wash our cliffs, that now heap on them rough kisses, and now rush on them like hungry leopards, will speak to Englishmen in a fuller and more articulate voice. A great mind has at last come and almost deciphered the meaning of the surge's moan and the deep sea's shout of madness. [...] Mr. Ruskin, with his earnest, meditative wisdom, teaches us to see in the exhausted theme of poets and painters a beauty as yet untouched and a mystery as insolvable as eternity.⁷⁶

Tonally, there are similarities between Ruskin's storm in the gallery in *Harbours*, and the paean to the sea it has provoked in *The Athenæum*. Ruskin's deliberate turn to archaisms like 'forthwith', and odd word order—'all ghastly clear'—is intentionally poetic. This register is familiar. Compare Dickens's lines in *Dombey and Son* (1846–48): 'The voices of the waves are always whispering to Florence, in their ceaseless murmuring, of love—of love, eternal and illimitable, not bounded by the confines of this world, or by the end of time, but ranging still beyond the sea, beyond the sky, to the invisible country far away!'.⁷⁷ He uses 'still' to mean endless or enduring, though the fixedness of his figure of speech may encourage the reader to recall that the word can also imply a more static form of permanence. In Dickens's conceit, love's boundlessness is felt and understood according

⁷⁶ Unsigned review of *The Harbours of England*, by John Ruskin, *Athenæum*, 26 July 1856, 921.

⁷⁷ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 856.

to an intentionally vague logic: it draws on the seeming physical unboundedness of the sea itself, but it also relates to the ‘ceaselessness’ of its murmuring, which is an appropriate way of reading a phrase that not only comes up in this novel unrelentingly, but also seems to return to earlier commonplaces about the sea, for instance ‘the sound of waters deep / Hoarse murmur’ in *Paradise Lost*, or the ‘Hoarse Murmurs of the Main’ from Dryden’s *Cymon and Iphigenia*, a phrase he also used in his translation of Virgil’s ninth pastoral, ‘Lycidas, Moeris’, where he refers to ‘the tides with their hoarse murmurs’.⁷⁸ Dickens exploits the vagueness of ‘not bounded’ for the way in which it can blend temporal and spatial extension. The sea seems to exert a similarly unfettering influence on the voice of the *Athenæum* reviewer. Perhaps inadvertently, the reviewer’s prose becomes studded with rhyming words—‘see’, ‘beauty’, ‘mystery’, ‘eternity’—once the sea has been mentioned. Taught how to ‘see’ by Ruskin, and by the sea itself, *The Athenæum*’s corrected vision apparently produces a knowing vagueness of language: ‘a mystery’ is characterised by its likeness to ‘eternity’, and therefore not much delimited. Murmuring, moaning, shouting, or voiceless, *The Athenæum* is stuck with a kind of language it sees as both ‘exhausted’ since *Childe Harold* and renewed by Ruskin’s more recent ‘poem’. The conditions of its renewal, as the *Athenæum*’s own Ruskinian turn implies, involve the way in which the vagueness of post-Romantic commonplaces can be turned to account. The vagueness that suggests the insufficiency of individual comparisons, encourages unorthodox and novel mixing of standard metaphors and styles—the ‘oceanic rumble of the ordinary’, as Michel de Certeau puts it.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed., rev., Longman Annotated English Poets (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2007), p. 337, book 5, lines 872–73; John Dryden, ‘Cymon and Iphigenia’, in *The Poems and Fables of John Dryden*, ed. James Kingsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 824, line 331; John Dryden, ‘Virgil’s Ninth Eclogue: Lycidas, Moeris’, in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. Paul Hammond and David Hopkins, Longman Annotated English Poets, vol. 2, 1682–1685, ed. Paul Hammond (London: Longman, 1995), p. 211, line 54.

⁷⁹ Michel de Certeau, ‘A Common Place: Ordinary Language’, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (London: University of California Press, 1984), 5.

In the word *mound*, Ruskin had established his own small convention, and found an image that allowed for, and contained within itself, the possibility of fluid change and symbolic combination. Ruskin's 'mound' returns to and names what he himself thinks of as clichés (wrathful mountains, rather than 'raging waves'): standard metaphors of sublimity, which are vague in their own right. It alerts us to the fact that Ruskin's interest is primarily the combination of such apparently vague metaphors, the skilful way in which each blends into the next, encouraging the reader to return to and read them afresh. *Mound* shares its root with *mundane*. Just as such an etymology transforms an apparent boundary between words into a bond, Ruskin's description of the sea exposes the weakness of the boundaries containing and separating familiar metaphors. He reveals their vagueness, and makes use of it, returning to and renewing commonplaces by addressing the way in which they mount up. I. A. Richards wrote that a good study of a complex word 'would not only display in a convenient form all the chief senses and gestures of a word, but would indicate their connections with one another—the topography of the range—and the history of the chief movements—the geologic history, as it were, of the major summits'.⁸⁰ Ruskin attempts a comparable oceanography.

'Etc. etc.': The sea and the novel

In conversation in 1945, Ivy Compton-Burnett recalled with distaste one of Jane Austen's most detailed scenes, the seaside in Lyme, 'with its green chasms between romantic rocks': 'In the case of Jane Austen, I hurry through her words about Lyme and its

⁸⁰ I. A. Richards, *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2005), 124.

surroundings, in order to return to her people'.⁸¹ Although this opinion arises in the context of a more general dislike for landscapes in fiction, Austen's seaside stood out as precisely and self-evidently the sort of thing that should be kept out of novels. Something like Compton-Burnett's opinion had been voiced by Austen herself: "Come, come," cried Emma, feeling this to be an unsafe subject, "I must beg you not to talk of the sea".⁸² As quickly as the sea had been transformed into an object worth attention in itself (notably by theories of the sublime and the exploits of the navy in the early part of the century), the conventions of representation which attended these new standards of appreciation began to shed their aura of credibility. On one hand, Emma's concern for the predictable shape the sea is likely to give to her father's conversation reflects the sense, voiced by critics like John Peck, that the sea permits only a certain number of plots⁸³—and, sure enough, Mr Woodhouse's talk soon turns to bathing and embrocation, the usual subjects. On the other, the sea is not necessarily associated with mundane topics in the novel (Emma, who has never been to the coast, longs for a glimpse of the sublime seascape). The distaste Emma feels for the sea as a subject relates neither to its dullness nor its inaccessibility. Rather, it marks a place where the novel's plot and vocabulary risk slipping from Emma's grasp, if not from Austen's. Compton-Burnett hints that the sea may be as unsafe for novelists as it is for their characters, and Austen seems partly to agree, at least to the extent that its appearance in her novel is marked by a form of narrative caution and control designed to offset and redeem the sea's unruliness. I have suggested that Ruskin's use of 'mound' provided a way of addressing certain difficulties that complicate attempts to represent the sea, allowing him to repurpose the representational freight of his subject. The sea,

⁸¹ 'A Conversation between I. Compton-Burnett and M. Jourdain', *Orion: A Miscellany* 1 (1945): 23. Though she hurried on in her reading, Compton-Burnett returned to Lyme to live during the Second World War.

⁸² Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Fiona Stafford (London: Penguin, 1996), 97.

⁸³ John Peck, *Maritime Fiction: Sailors and the Sea in British and American Novels, 1719–1917* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 89. I follow up on Peck's point in my chapter on Marryat, below, page 78.

however, presents distinct challenges to novelists whose prose aspires to be more than simply mimetic.

Few of the Victorian period's major novelists found the sea to be worthy of sustained attention. While 'Victorian poets got serious at the beach', as Valentine Cunningham has noted, smaller numbers of 'serious' Victorian novelists could be found there.⁸⁴ This is in part due to the generic associations the sea had taken on early in the period. The sea was the popular site of adventure-romance for novelists following Cooper and Captain Marryat, and melodramatic playwrights after Charles Dibdin and Douglas Jerrold. Heroism at sea continued to fascinate readers whose taste supported the flourishing of popular subgenres like shipwreck narratives and voyage literature, in addition to full-blown naval novels, all of which emphasised gallantry and ingenuity. Though often framed as reportage, shipwreck and voyage literature tended to be highly 'formulaic', as Carl Thompson has argued, and the novels that took up the same themes were likewise predictable.⁸⁵ Margaret Cohen observes that 'overseas voyage narratives were in fact *the* most popular literary works in an international literary field during the rise of the novel', and stresses that 'sea fiction is in continuation with this form'.⁸⁶ Indeed, such narratives were so popular that any novelist who wrote about the sea risked an association with the formulaic idiom and familiar plots of nautical melodrama, naval novels, and shipwreck narratives.

Alongside the threat of unoriginality, there were other difficulties more particularly connected to the representation of the sea. The problem of how to depict the sea properly,

⁸⁴ Valentine Cunningham, *Victorian Poetry Now: Poets, Poems, Poetics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 217.

⁸⁵ See Carl Thompson, ed., introduction to *Romantic-Era Shipwreck Narratives: An Anthology* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2007), 16.

⁸⁶ Margaret Cohen, 'Traveling Genres', *New Literary History* 34 (2003): 495. Cohen is correct to point out the enormous popularity of these genres; the first large anthology of shipwreck tales, Archibald Duncan's *The Mariner's Chronicle, Being a Collection of the Most Interesting Narratives of Shipwrecks, Fires, Famines, and Other Calamities Incident to a Life of Maritime Enterprise* (1804–08), had already gone through three editions by 1810. See Thompson, *Romantic Shipwreck Narratives*, 2.

as explained by Ruskin, also affected Victorian novelists. Of course, description is not the only way in which novelists write about the sea. And, when novelists do describe the sea, they may have purposes in mind in addition to scene-setting. In a novel, the sea can appear as a material thing, a figurative object, or both. The sea can be a component of description, or a purely symbolic part of a novel's idiom. Moreover, these ways of reading the sea can be hard to distinguish. In practice, it often proves difficult to keep the literal sea from being read figuratively, generating currents of meaning which the author may not have foreseen or intended. In the context of realist fiction that 'restricts itself almost entirely to a descriptive and denotative use of language', this can make for unusual reading.⁸⁷ Roman Jakobson has argued that realist prose is characterised by relationships of 'contiguity'—not only are the objects and scenes dwelt on usually grouped and related in this way (like objects on a table), but plots develop according to a logic of temporal proximity (events follow one another in time). Therefore, the relationship between the things and events of a novel is, according to Jakobson, one of metonymy. In contrast, poetry is characterised by metaphor. Poetic meaning depends on 'similarity', an arrangement facilitated by poetic form, 'the metrical parallelism of lines or the phonic equivalence of rhyming'.⁸⁸ If the sea was a problem for Victorian novelists, that was partly because it encouraged realist prose to be read as poetic metaphor.

It is appropriate, then, that nineteenth-century poetry of the sea should not be marked by the same degree of circumspection. Victorian poets did not hesitate to mix their appreciation for a version of post-Romantic sublimity with admiration for sailorly virtues like frankness and a capacity for hard work. Charles Kingsley's 'Three Fishers',

⁸⁷ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Hogarth Press, 1987), 29.

⁸⁸ Roman Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances', in *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 133.

for instance, stresses the arrangement whereby ‘men must work, and women must weep’,⁸⁹ an understanding of life governed by the sea which loosely combines an admiration for Nelsonian heroism with a Victorian work ethic. A late product of the values embraced by Kingsley, John Masefield’s ‘Sea-Fever’, the most famous of his *Salt-Water Ballads* (1902), similarly reflects a longing for a life stripped of its superfluities by the pressing immediacy of the sea’s demands on the sailor:

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel’s kick and the wind’s song and the white sail’s shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea’s face and a grey dawn breaking.⁹⁰

If the ‘lonely sea’ was a site of individual striving—a setting that encouraged purpose and direction—just as frequently the sea gave poets the means of thinking and writing about moral and ideological rootlessness. Such a feeling could also produce loneliness, as in Matthew Arnold’s ‘To Marguerite – Continued’.

YES! in the sea of life enisl’d,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
We mortal millions live *alone*.⁹¹

Arnold’s loneliness is the mirror double of Masefield’s longing. The sea offered something to poets who thought of the time in which they lived as metaphorically adrift, unanchored, or out of sight of harbour: a vocabulary that describes their sense of metaphysical homelessness. That ‘there was no anchor, none, / To hold by’ was a commonplace not only of Victorian opinion, but also of expression—Arnold’s famous lines from ‘Dover Beach’ on the withdrawal of the ‘Sea of Faith’ move in the same

⁸⁹ Charles Kingsley, ‘The Three Fishers’, in *Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1889), 261.

⁹⁰ John Masefield, ‘Sea-Fever’, in *The Collected Poems of John Masefield* (London: William Heinemann, 1923), p. 27, lines 1–4.

⁹¹ Matthew Arnold, ‘To Marguerite – Continued’, in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, Green, 1965), p. 124, lines 1–4.

medium as Hopkins's fretful interrogation of the 'master of the tides' in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'.⁹² In poems like these, a vividly imagined sea could also comfortably be a 'lonely sea', a 'sea of life', or a 'sea of faith'. In novels, such shifting between literal and figurative registers proved less easy to manage. What appears in poetry to be a carefully wrought conceit, in a novel can seem like unresolved and unintended vagueness. While the major chapters of this thesis show instances in which such vagueness could be put to use in novels, this section traces its emergence in some more unlikely places: novels by George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thackeray. In conclusion, I shall briefly consider the centrality of vagueness to novelists and theories of the novel around the turn of the twentieth century, suggesting the point to which my earlier examples tend.

The sea appears in a great number of the novels of the day, but, as in *Emma*, often in off-hand references, unexpected cameos, or casual talk. This is evidence both of the fascination that the sea holds, and of its narrative unwieldiness. For example, in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), which appears to be a straightforwardly inland and riverine novel, we read of 'Salt—that eminently "briny chap"—having been discovered in a cloud of tobacco-smoke at the Anchor tavern', of the 'sinking' of Mr Tulliver, and of Mrs Tulliver's resemblance to an 'amiable fish' running into the 'encircling glass' of an aquarium (itself a recent invention, designed for the collection of marine specimens, as I discuss in my chapter on shores below, page 121), and we are repeatedly reminded that 'for all rivers there is the same final home'. In the novel's first sentence the narrator informs us that the ensuing events take place near a river that 'hurries on between its green banks to the sea'.⁹³

It would be wrong to suggest that *The Mill on the Floss* is a 'sea novel', but as such

⁹² Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Epic [Morte d'Arthur]', in *The Poems of Tennyson: In Three Volumes*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd ed. (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1987), vol. 2, p. 2, lines 20–21; Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', in *Poems of Arnold*, p. 242, line 21; Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', in *The Poetical Works*, ed. Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 127, line 249.

⁹³ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 324, 201, 75, 402, 1.

references pile up, especially in places so improbable as the banks of the Floss, ignoring them also ceases to be practicable. The sea commonly receives such surreptitious treatment. Literary commonplaces of the sea (rivers running to the sea, for instance) cluster in the background, apparently indispensable to the novelist but equally inimical to more direct engagement.

Let us consider in greater detail some comparably oblique appearances of the sea in two other realist novels. *Mary Barton* (1848), Elizabeth Gaskell's tale of working-class discontent, strikes, murder, and improbable reconciliation, also finds its way unexpectedly to the sea.⁹⁴ However, Gaskell manages the sea unskilfully, and the results are jarring and on occasion inadvertently funny. Midway through the novel, Will Wilson, the sailor cousin of Mary's future husband, Jem, returns from voyaging. He is an English Tar: 'How Mary gazed with wondering pleasure at her old playmate; now, a dashing, bronzed-looking, ringleted sailor, frank, and hearty, and affectionate.'⁹⁵ His tales of 'sea-wonders', and his promises to keep his eyes open for a flying fish or a mermaid to add to amateur naturalist Job Legh's collection, ensure that he is well-liked (149). In the latter part of the novel, Will's ability to provide the crucial 'alibi' needed by Mary in order to exonerate Jem from the murder of Harry Carsdoring, renders him essential to the plot. By the time Mary reaches Liverpool, where she expects to find Will in lodgings, he has already shipped and is waiting to proceed with the tide to sea, giving Gaskell the opportunity to stage a dramatic chase by water.

Meanwhile, the reader is invited to compare Mary's plight with a variety of poetic precedents in the chapter epigraphs. As the narrative approaches Liverpool, and Mary's desperate flight downriver, these take a nautical turn. Chapter 23, for example, begins

⁹⁴ Gaskell never states the connection, but the word *strike* has a nautical origin. Merchant sailors would 'strike' the sails of their ships and refuse work as a way of announcing their discontent. For the classic discussion, see Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 110.

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. Shirley Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 143.

with a quotation from ‘The Constant Woman’, probably Gaskell’s own invention, in which it must

then depend on this poor eye
And this unsteady hand, whether the bark
That bears my all my treasured hope and love,
Shall find a passage through these frowning rocks. (*MB*, 246)

Gaskell envisions the scenario as another iteration of the trope whereby life drains into the sea: chapters 26, 27, 28, and 30 all begin with variations on this theme: ‘Like a bark upon the sea / Life is floating over death’ (273).⁹⁶ Mary is rowed within shouting distance of Will’s ship as it passes the bar, but it is unclear whether Will will make it back to his cousin’s trial in time to acquit him—life hangs in the balance in an awkward literalising of the metaphor deployed first in these poetic excerpts. The ‘bark’ bearing ‘treasured hope’ proves similarly mobile as a familiar ‘tr[...]ope’, at home in a variety of contexts and capable of marking more than one kind of literary ‘passage’.

From here, metaphors of the sea proliferate uneasily in the novel. Will hopes to sail back on the pilot boat that leads his larger ship out of harbour. Whether this will be possible depends on certain technicalities of the tide and the wind, leading Gaskell’s characters to spend a great deal of time examining weathercocks and thinking about the tide charts. Chapter 32 begins with some lines from Henry Hart Milman’s ‘Fazio’, which pick up these motifs:

With a violent and untimely steel
Hath set abroach the blood, that should have ebbed
In calm and natural current: to sum all
In one wild name—a name that pale air freezes at,
And every cheek of man sinks in with horror—
Thou art a cold and midnight murderer. (*MB*, 305)

⁹⁶ According to Shirley Foster’s notes, the lines are a ‘loose translation’ of Friedrich Rüchert’s ‘Ich fuhr auf schwankem Kahne’, and may come from an English song version. Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, 433n.

Without intervening in the narrative, this paratext supplies a way of metaphorically reading the literal tides and currents upon which Gaskell has hinged the future happiness of her characters. Having left Mary's attempts to intercept Will in suspense, the narrative returns to her two chapters later. The epigraph to chapter 31 is taken from the opening stanza of John Wilson's 'The Convict'. It ends,

‘O all the dismallest images of death
Did swim before my eyes!’

WILSON (300)

Sanguine readers, bearing another convict in mind, may be inclined to hope that *Will* Wilson may possibly have jumped ship in the interval between chapters, and will be shown swimming to shore before our eyes.

While Gaskell is unlikely to be indulging in such bad puns, a metaphoric vocabulary rife with terms drawn from the sea also heavily inflects the prose of these chapters—the courtroom, for example, appears to Mary as ‘a sea of faces, misty and swimming’, picking up the language of the Wilson epigraph (*MB*, 312). Gaskell is attuned to the literal and figurative potential of nautical language, and is in the habit of using terms like *tide* in both ways, making it harder to ignore potential anomalies like *swim* when they appear in a chapter's epigraph. As the sea becomes a more prominent element of the narrative, otherwise unremarkable parts of the English idiom derived from the sea become conspicuous, whatever Gaskell's intentions. The effect is infelicitous. Gaskell's language draws attention to itself, which may become uncomfortable in the context of the otherwise silent referentiality of realist prose. Indeed, if the reader finds Gaskell's refusal to respect the distinction between literal and figurative language maddening, so does Mary Barton. The same kind of linguistic vagueness signals the onset of brain-fever, a reaction to the stresses of the courtroom. Suddenly, the room is not the only thing swimming: ‘They were

all at sea, sailing away on billowy waves' (316). Her delirium continues for days, during which 'hour after hour, day after day, she started up with passionate cries on her father to save Jem; or rose wildly, imploring the winds and waves, the pitiless winds and waves, to have mercy' (323). A metaphor that appeared to be safely and purely shared between reader and narrator slips, and is awkwardly literalised in the mind of the novel's titular character.

The sea has a similarly shadowy half-life in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847–48). Mid-way through the novel, 'the romantic appearance of the sea' proves irresistible to hopeful, oblivious Jim Bute-Crawley, looking to have a surreptitious smoke, who sticks his head (and pipe) out of the window at his aunt Miss Crawley's, confirming her ill opinion of him, and costing the Bute-Crawleys they 'never knew how many thousand pounds'.⁹⁷ It is, however, a consolation for poor Briggs, crying happy tears into her knitting as Lady Jane sings to Jim's aunt, and looking 'out at the splendid ocean darkling before the windows' (*VF*, 391). Becky herself partakes somewhat of the sea's essence, a 'siren, singing and smiling, coaxing', but 'down under the waves [...] writhing, and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping among bones, or curling around corpses' (747). But the sea appears first when George and Amelia Osborne (née Sedley) go to Brighton for their honeymoon. Becky lures the newly-wed George to gaze at 'the calm ocean' while he smokes (278). That they are at Brighton necessitates some description of the sea that will later in the novel attract the eye of Jim, Briggs, George, and Becky. Here, however, Thackeray can barely bring himself to take the 'nautical turn'.

three young men of our acquaintance were enjoying that beautiful prospect of bow windows on the one side and the blue sea on the other [...] Sometimes it is towards the ocean – smiling with countless dimples, speckled with white sails, with a hundred bathing-machines kissing the skirt of his blue garment – that the

⁹⁷ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 401.

Londoner looks enraptured: sometimes, on the contrary, a lover of human nature rather than of prospects of any kind, it is towards the bow windows that he turns, and that swarm of human life which they exhibit. [...] Yonder are the Misses Leery, who are looking out for the young officers of the Heavies, who are pretty sure to be pacing the cliff; or again it is a City man, with a nautical turn, and a telescope, the size of a six-pounder, who has his instrument pointed seawards, so as to command every pleasure-boat, herring-boat, or bathing-machine that comes to, or quits, the shore, etc. etc. (*VF*, 245–46)

In Thackeray's cursory description, the sea is at once both the face of a riotously dimpled woman and her garment. His comparison draws on the sea's traditional association with femininity, but is conspicuously imprecise about the particulars. Indeed, by the end of the passage, the narrator's boredom with both the view and the task of describing it has become the real subject. Thackeray ventriloquises popular misty encomia to seaside leisure. He trusts his readers to fill in the blanks left by his ellipses ('etc. etc.'), and to sympathise with the ennui that makes them pertinent. The novelist turns his attention to the sea, but the familiar views and habits of expression connected with it are not deployed in earnest.

Still, the terms of Thackeray's description suggest methods of figuratively reading the sea. By contrast, his techniques of ironic distancing are less perfect. Consider, for instance, the passage's conventional pairing of the 'swarm of human life' massed on shore with the 'countless dimples' of countless 'smiling' faces in the waves, which loosely denotes immensity, life, Fortune, etc., etc. Thackeray is intentionally noncommittal, but he does not do without the comparison. Indeed, following the scene at Brighton, sea metaphors multiply in the novel. A few pages after the passage cited above, the narrator muses about Amelia, 'too shy [...] to embark alone on that wide sea, and unfit to navigate it without a guide and protector' (*VF*, 278). The metaphor later appears a second time (though by now slightly unsure whether it refers to a river with a 'bank', or an ocean with a 'shore'): 'Our little Amelia was just on the bank of her new country, and was already

looking anxiously back towards the sad friendly figures waving farewell to her across the stream, from the other distant shore' (297). And a third, where this time Amelia's thwarted mother is 'content to lie on the shore where Fortune had stranded her' (446). In spite of Thackeray's show of embarrassment, the accumulation of these tropes (there are more) cannot be disregarded entirely; taken together they represent a reasonably consistent inflection of the narrative voice.

Thackeray only permits himself to use this vocabulary once he has shown that he does not take it completely seriously. Nevertheless, if, given his reservations, the question of *why* he writes about the sea is difficult to answer, *how* he writes about it is clear. To reiterate, the sea provides a way of describing Becky (as a siren), and a way of describing Amelia (as a voyager), and it offers Briggs a consoling vision of nature's constancy. It is a lure for Jim and George, who share a vague taste for sea views and tobacco, though the sight of the sea is equally an opportunity for phlegmatic irony on the part of the narrator. The sea forms an element of the novel's setting and its vocabulary: it is a pervasive, though irregularly employed, component of its idiom. However, far from being a problem for the novel, the sea's usefulness depends upon its open-endedness as a scene and a symbol. In keeping with Thackeray's all-inclusive irony, the sea literally and figuratively permits multiple views. The intelligibility of Thackeray's 'etc. etc.' both hangs upon and alludes to the reader's preparedness to accept a number of commonplace and potentially conflicting ways of reading and writing about the sea. Though not crucial to *Vanity Fair's* central themes or conceits, the sea forms a verbal undertone or undercurrent in the novel. Thackeray's novel exemplifies the sea's peculiar capacity to carry contrary meanings and to set dissimilar scenes, and at the same time to render the reader inattentive to, or accepting of, those contradictions. Peter Conrad has called the Victorian novel 'a fluid

pudding to tempt the voracious Victorian appetite’,⁹⁸ but Thackeray had an intuition about what might comprise such a ‘fluid’. ‘What would have become of our story and all our friends’, asks Thackeray’s narrator, if Napoleon had returned from Elba at a different time; ‘if all the drops in it were dried up, what would become of the sea?’ (*VF*, 316). It suits my purposes that Thackeray’s reflection on the form of his novel may or may not relate to the drips of sea-writing he has allowed into his text elsewhere. Such drops are to the sea as grains are to a heap—it is difficult to tell when they amount to something.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, *Mary Barton*, and *Vanity Fair*, the sea shuttles fluidly between literal and figurative senses. But, at certain times, as when Eliot speaks of Mr Tulliver’s ‘sinking’, or when Gaskell refers to ‘a sea of faces’, sustained symbolism intermingles with stock turn-of-phrase, making it unclear what degree of readerly attention the text expects. ‘The Victorians’, according to George Levine, ‘surely, did write with the awareness of the possibilities of indeterminate meaning [...], but they wrote *against* the very indeterminacy they tended to reveal’.⁹⁹ While they ‘might be, and often were, uncertain about what theory or what faculty of mind they might rely on’, the Victorians never wholly doubted ‘their capacity to arrive at truth’, says Walter E. Houghton.¹⁰⁰ This conviction has been one of the few qualities that can be safely considered, as Ioan Williams has put it, ‘The Basis of Realism’: ‘a massive confidence as to what the nature of Reality actually was’, and in the novel’s capacity to capture it.¹⁰¹ Such a predisposition probably informs Thackeray’s unease—he once objected to Dickens’s writing on the grounds that it failed to represent ‘Nature duly’, adding that ‘the Art of Novels *is* to

⁹⁸ Peter Conrad, *The Victorian Treasure-House* (London: Collins, 1973), 9.

⁹⁹ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 4.

¹⁰⁰ Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 14.

¹⁰¹ Ioan Williams, *The Realist Novel in England* (London: Macmillan, 1974), x.

represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality'.¹⁰² At times, novelists who wrote about the sea found themselves representing an aspect of nature that, as we have seen, made it hard to trust in art's capacity to capture reality unproblematically. *Realism* is, of course, a notoriously difficult term to define. Most definitions, however, share a belief in the mimetic power of words. As discussed above, the challenge that philosophical vagueness represents directly questions the referentiality of language. Discussions of vagueness, therefore, provoke 'controversy between realists, who think that the notion of truth as correspondence to reality can be saved, and pragmatists, who regard it as hopeless'.¹⁰³ Realist novels bring the problem of representation to the fore by raising 'the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates', as Ian Watt puts it, just as vagueness does.¹⁰⁴ When Conrad wrote to Sir Hugh Clifford in 1899 with his advice on how to write novels, he reflected on the need to manage delicately the power of words to reflect their referents.

[W]ords, groups of words, words standing alone, are symbols of life, have the power in their sound or their aspect to present the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers. The things "as they are" exist in words; therefore words should be handled with care lest the picture, the image of truth abiding in facts, should become distorted—or blurred.¹⁰⁵

Like Ruskin, Conrad believes in the power of words to engage the 'mental vision' of his readers (a theme that will be explored further in my chapter on Conrad). And, as for Ruskin, the introduction of 'vision' to the 'picture', of the subject to the object, converts a

¹⁰² Thackeray to David Masson, 6? May 1851, in *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. Gordon N. Ray, vol. 2, 1841–1851 (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 772.

¹⁰³ Richard Rorty, 'How Many Grains Make a Heap?', review of *Philosophical Analysis in the 20th Century*, 2 vols, by Scott Soames, *London Review of Books*, 20 January 2005, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n02/rort01_.html.

¹⁰⁴ Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Conrad to Hugh Clifford, 9 October 1899, in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, 9 vols, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983–2007), vol. 2, 1898–1902 (1986), ed. Karl and Davies, 200.

speech about ‘the very thing’ itself into a more tentative thesis about the ‘the image of truth’, susceptible to becoming ‘blurred’ and ‘distorted’.

Of course, it is the way in which images and facts might become smudged (especially at sea) that so often fascinates Conrad. Consider the opening of ‘Amy Foster’ (1901) where he describes,

the level sea far below us, like the floor of an immense edifice inlaid with bands of dark ripple, with still trails of glitter, ending in a belt of glassy water at the foot of the sky. The light blurr [*sic*] of smoke, from an invisible steamer, faded on the great clearness of the horizon like the mist of a breath on a mirror.¹⁰⁶

Conrad’s prose pivots nicely around the idea of likeness; the ‘blurr’ is at once the smoke of the steamer (‘the very thing’), and the blear that troubles the eye of the beholder or the novelist, impossibly watching the ‘invisible steamer’, and holding his own fogged mirror up to the world. The sea had become a tool for catching hold of such distortions much earlier, and it shows signs of being used in this way in the work of some distinctly un-nautical novelists.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, writers like Conrad, James, and Woolf began to announce that vagueness was a suitable subject for novels.¹⁰⁷ What E. M. Forster calls the amorphousness of the novel was seen more and more to suit the indefiniteness of the reality the novel sought to represent.¹⁰⁸ In her famous and much-quoted essay ‘Modern Fiction’, Woolf argues for what she considers a new sort of realism. ‘Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged’, she writes,

life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Conrad, ‘Amy Foster’, in *Typhoon and Other Tales*, ed. Cedric Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 153.

¹⁰⁷ See Quigley, ‘Modern Novels’, and also Quigley, ‘Beastly Vagueness in Charles Sanders Peirce and Henry James’, *Philosophy and Literature* 31 (2007): 362–77.

¹⁰⁸ E. M. Forster explains the difficulty of gaining a suitable ‘vantage-post’ on a form ‘so amorphous’ as the novel, in *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 1976), 24.

this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?¹⁰⁹

Though Woolf intended a violent break with the past, certain Victorians would have agreed with her description of the novelist's purpose. Ian Hacking has argued compellingly in *The Taming of Chance* that a key shift in nineteenth-century thought was between the determinist view that 'chance, superstition, vulgarity, [and] unreason were of one piece', and the notion that 'the world might be regular and yet not subject to universal laws of nature' so that 'a space was cleared for chance'.¹¹⁰ This shift anticipates the pragmatic interest in vagueness: Gillian Beer has observed that C. S. Peirce, William James's collaborator on the question of 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', was among the first to postulate a 'universe of chance'.¹¹¹ The novel, in its own attempts to tame the chanciness of the real world, has always been a way of negotiating the messy shapelessness of lived experience and the more deterministic bent of realism, which is to try to represent it—'Life' to Henry James is 'all inclusion and confusion', while art should properly be 'all discrimination and selection'.¹¹² The best novels respond to the Jamesian division by seeking a balance, 'washing us successively with the warm wave of the near and the familiar and the tonic shock, as may be, of the far and the strange', a maternal caress and a curative plunge.¹¹³ One way to parse this remark is in terms of Jakobson's contrast between metonymic contiguity, or nearness, and metaphoric similarity, which disregards distance in its pursuit of original terms of comparison. Frequently in novels, as in James's metaphor, the sea connects these two literary impulses, by not insisting upon their distinction; the seed of such a notion was already present in the 'limitlessness' of the

¹⁰⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *Essays of Woolf*, vol. 4, 1925–1928 (1994), ed. McNeillie, 160.

¹¹⁰ Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.

¹¹¹ Gillian Beer, *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 8.

¹¹² Henry James, preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, ed. Bernard Richards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxxix.

¹¹³ Henry James, preface to *The American*, ed. Adrian Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

Victorian novel's form. In her essay, Woolf assumes a cautious posture by peremptorily 'admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels'.¹¹⁴ But, of course, her paper also contends that such vagueness may be appropriate to the ideal form of the novel which she goes on to discuss. This thesis seeks to follow her example by admitting vagueness to be the proper subject of criticism of novels about the sea.

Keen-eyed critic(s) of the ocean

James Fenimore Cooper prefaces *The Red Rover* (1827) with a disclaimer: 'If any keen-eyed critic of the ocean [...] should happen to detect a rope rove through the wrong leading-block, or a term spelt in such a manner as to destroy its true sound, he is admonished of the duty of ascribing the circumstances, in charity, to any thing but ignorance on the part of a brother'.¹¹⁵ When Cooper speaks of a 'critic of the ocean', he means that the critic, and not his criticism, should be 'of the ocean': he has sailors in mind, not scholars. The sea has, however, a long history of criticism that has not been particularly concerned with the material aspects of life at sea. John Bourke, for instance, took up the task of explaining the sea's role in literature in 1954. His slim book, *The Sea as a Symbol in English Poetry*, displays no enthusiasm for ropes or rigging. Bourke has bigger fish to fry and, in due course, he traces the dawning of interest in the sea to Shakespeare: 'It is first in Shakespeare himself that we find a fuller consciousness of the deeper poetical significance and possibilities of the sea, and the sea appearing not merely as an object to be described and capable of arousing this or that feeling but more and more explicitly as a symbol and a source of imagery to interpret deeper experience'.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', 160.

¹¹⁵ James Fenimore Cooper, preface to *The Red Rover: A Tale*, ed. Thomas and Mary Philbrick (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 5.

¹¹⁶ John Bourke, *The Sea as a Symbol in English Poetry* (Windsor: Alden and Blackwell, 1954), 4.

Shakespeare's perspicacity is the product of a 'profounder insight into nature in general', for 'the sea is, after all, a part of nature'. After Shakespeare, says Bourke, we have to wait until the Romantics—Cowper, Burns, Byron, Wordsworth, and Shelley—for a resurgence of proper interest in the sea's meanings. Their mantle is duly picked up by Tennyson, Arnold, and Swinburne. In poetry at least, Bourke concludes, the sea is associated principally with three ideas: '1. Freedom / 2. Human Life in various aspects / 3. Eternity'.¹¹⁷ Take up any poem about the sea, with Bourke's book in hand, and the critic's task is simple: one only needs to decide whether the poet wishes to convey 1, 2, 3, or some combination thereof.

Difficult as it is to take a method like Bourke's completely seriously, it has proven durable, and its application has not been limited to poetry. More recent studies like Cynthia Fraser Behrman's *Victorian Myths of the Sea* do not stray far from this model. Behrman diligently unpacks the freight of associations and meanings that had accrued to the sea by 'late-Victorian times', when a combination of 'power and policy' gave rise to a 'public enthusiasm', in turn promoting a literature rife with certain 'myths of the sea'.¹¹⁸ According to Behrman, the fascination the sea provoked in men like Kipling, Stevenson, Kingsley, or Froude could be explained in the same way that Tennyson's or Swinburne's could: through a combined emphasis on the power and history of the British Navy and the empire it made possible,¹¹⁹ and through loosely Romantic and/or Biblical notions of the sea's metaphorical significance that had been firmly entrenched in the British psyche by the nineteenth century. For the Victorians, the sea could 'symbolize life' or 'the infinite flow of history' which led inevitably toward the British Empire.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹¹⁸ Cynthia Fraser Behrman, *Victorian Myths of the Sea* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1977), 11.

¹¹⁹ I treat these themes at greater length in the next section of this introduction.

¹²⁰ Behrman, *Victorian Myths*, 27.

In fact, the Bourkian mode of writing and thinking about the sea exemplifies assumptions that have remained basic to much current critical writing about the sea in literature. It comes as no surprise, for example, that an article concerning John Banville's *The Sea* (2005) should begin with a restatement of something like the schematic model favoured by Bourke. Rüdiger Imhof explains,

the sea stands, of course, for a welter of contrary symbols. It has symbolised chaos and the bridge between orderly lands, life and death, time and timelessness, menace and allure, boredom and the sublime [...] the sea stands for memory itself, more than anything else.¹²¹

'Of course' it does, but the assumption that the critic's task is to pick out 'more than anything else' what the sea 'stands for' is resolutely Bourkian. By contrast, I argue in the following chapters that a 'welter' of contraries does not necessarily demand simplification or hierarchical ordering: that such vagueness, when understood as vagueness, can be written with, on its own terms. Simply put, this thesis assumes that an author may intend his or her writing about the sea to be readable in more than one way, and at the same time not require that a decisive choice be made between readings. Victorians writing about the sea routinely convey their awareness of the jumble of possible readings it permits, and just as frequently demonstrate an understanding that choosing the sea as a subject often has the effect of making their writing less rather than more specific. Richard Poirier hypothesises that vagueness 'puts us at rest' in flux or in 'contradictions which, if more precisely drawn, would prove unendurable'.¹²² In a broader literary context, that is, vagueness offers the imaginative means by which multiple readings can be entertained without necessarily settling on one predominant reading. In this regard, vagueness is as pertinent to criticism as it is to composition. Vagueness of this sort is arguably at stake in Imhof's appraisal of

¹²¹ Rüdiger Imhof, 'The Sea: "Was't Well Done?"', in 'John Banville', ed. Derek Hand, special issue, *Irish University Review* 36, no. 1 (2006): 166.

¹²² Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 30. Compare Empson's thoughts about vagueness and politeness cited above, page 26.

Banville's sea, which draws attention to the numerous 'contrary symbols' the sea sustains. However, criticism in the Bourkian model labours against indeterminacy, and assumes that poets and novelists (Victorian poets and novelists included) do the same. Even as the sea in a text like Banville's evokes a sprawl of possible meanings, Bourkian criticism tries to tidy up the mess.

Recent critics have in general judged it best to meet the vagueness that characterises the sea's appearance in literature with bracing self-certainty. Robert Foulke, perhaps the most influential critic of literature concerning the sea, outlines some aspects of the problem as he sees it.¹²³ Foulke begins his oft-cited essay, 'The Literature of Voyaging', by lamenting the multiplicity of the sea's meanings and textual manifestations:

When faced with the rich and varied fare of sea literature in Western culture, I am reminded of two contradictory impulses of the human mind: to know everything, on the one hand, and to control and order what we know, on the other. In the brief compass of this broad survey, I will succumb to the latter impulse and concentrate on the ways in which the experience of sea voyaging is reflected in the literature written about it. That literature is almost impossible to define.¹²⁴

This passage leaves us scarcely any wiser about what Foulke intends to do in his broad but brief survey. What is clear, however, is the difficulty he has in doing it. Foulke starts to feel slightly sick before he has even begun eating, and yet he cannot restrain his plunge into that 'rich and varied fare'.

For Foulke, there are two main obstacles that make defining the literature of voyaging in Western culture so challenging. The first is that (as Foulke puts it) a good deal of it is a 'melange of the superb and the inept', which makes it hard to decide

¹²³ Foulke's authority is attested to by Tony Tanner, who writes, 'Professor Foulke knows more about fiction concerning the sea than anyone I have encountered in person or print'. Tony Tanner, ed., acknowledgments to *The Oxford Book of Sea Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), ix.

¹²⁴ Robert Foulke, 'The Literature of Voyaging', in *Literature and Lore of the Sea*, ed. Patricia Ann Carlson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986), 1.

qualitatively what writing about the sea counts as ‘literature’.¹²⁵ The other obstacle is the sheer range of the subject, which makes it difficult to ‘separate fact from fiction, history or anecdote from literature’: it might include ‘narratives of voyages, tales about seamen afloat and ashore, poems reflecting the impact of the sea on human imagination, and essays on the experience of seafaring’. To add to these problems, ‘writers about the sea’, we are told, ‘seldom feel inclined to limit themselves to one mode of dealing with their subject, whether it be simple recording of facts, technical analysis of events, a straightforward chronicle larded with anecdotes, fictionalized autobiography, or pure invention’.¹²⁶ The literature of voyaging is, he says, ‘unjustifiably prolific’. Insofar as the problems Foulke has defining a canon of sea-writing relate to the boundlessness of the sea as both a subject and symbol, his apprehensiveness is comparable to Imhof’s. Moreover, in this respect, his questions about canonicity are comparable to his concerns about genre—in both cases, he simply cannot be sure where to stop reading. The copiousness of the sea itself is matched by the copiousness of the literature it has generated, which presents impediments to the impulse to ‘control and order’ alike, which Foulke describes as his primary method of working.

Margaret Cohen, who may have replaced Foulke as the preeminent critic in this field with the 2010 publication of *The Novel and the Sea (Translation/Transnation)*,¹²⁷ agrees that the prolificacy of literature concerning the sea is unjustifiable, and concerns herself with finding ways of limiting it. Cohen has maintained a consistent approach since the publication of ‘Traveling Genres’ (which forms the centrepiece of her monograph) in 2003. In her chapter, ‘Chronotopes of the Sea’, which appears in Franco Moretti’s

¹²⁵ Foulke, ‘Literature of Voyaging’, 2.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹²⁷ Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea (Translation/Transnation)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

mammoth study of the novel, she neatly summarises her own taxonomic technique, which is not dissimilar to Bourke's:

There are six waterside chronotopes across the history of the English and French literary traditions that date back to the novel's prehistory in antique forms. These chronotopes are (1) *blue water*, the open sea; (2) *brown water*, the murky depths of the river; (3) *white water*, when bodies of water are riled up into extreme natural danger; (4) *the island*, land entirely surrounded by water; (5) *the shore*, a zone of contact between land and sea; and (6) *the ship*, an unstable piece of terra firma that propels humans across the sea's inhospitable territory.¹²⁸

Chronotope, a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to 'the poetic dimension of the literary representation of space, and specifically its poetic dimension within narrative forms'.¹²⁹ Appropriately enough in relation to Cohen's 'traveling genres', it is a portmanteau of *chronos* and *topos*, which suggests the interdependence of ideas of place and time in certain contexts. That is, the idea of the chronotope seems a good fit for narratives involving the sea for the same reasons that lead Tony Tanner to claim that 'literature and voyaging are arguably coeval, since there is no literature without a departure, a setting out, a setting forth'.¹³⁰ Cohen's six chronotopes of 'waterside' literature offer six different narrative patterns of the sort Tanner describes, which likewise 'prove to be remarkably constant across different subgenres of the novel', and 'stable across each of these subgenre's [*sic*] historical transformations as well'.¹³¹ She is not robotic in her use of the idea of the chronotope and, in fact, insists on the flexibility of the notion. Nevertheless, the remainder of her investigation into the chronotopes of the sea enumerates instances of each of the six types. Such an exercise, though it depends on a great deal of reading and a certain amount of ingenuity, is of limited use when it comes to

¹²⁸ Margaret Cohen, 'The Chronotopes of the Sea', in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 2:649.

¹²⁹ Cohen, 'Chronotopes', 647.

¹³⁰ Tanner, introduction to *Oxford Sea Stories*, xiv. Cohen also quotes Professor Foulke's 'The Sea Voyage Narrative' to this effect. In that essay, Foulke himself cites Tanner. These writers are all in conversation.

¹³¹ Cohen, 'Chronotopes', 649.

understanding any one text in particular: particularity is precisely the quality it seeks to dispel.

George P. Landow exercises comparable diligence in his careful and valuable study of ‘iconologies’ of disaster, the greater part of which is devoted to Carlyle’s fascination with the sea, shipwrecks, and castaways. His approach, too, is similar to Bourke’s at root. He is, for example, a committed chronicler of Carlyle’s preoccupation with tropes of the sea from which he is shown to draw ‘a ready-made interpretation of the human condition’.¹³² Landow is especially interested in the transformation of the familiar iconology of life as a voyage (compare Tanner) from a Christian, into a secular, pattern. Literature that described wrecks before the nineteenth century, Landow argues, could have three potential meanings to convey: ‘(1) punishment, (2) test or trial, or (3) means of spiritual education’.¹³³ Although these categories are somewhat variable over time, Landow aims to recover what is unchanging about them—both in terms of what scenes of shipwrecks mean, and how they are depicted. While it may generally be the case, as Landow contends, that ‘whereas the traditional shipwreck takes place in the *presence* of God, it is precisely the point of the modern one that it occurs in his *absence*’,¹³⁴ his assumption is that there is an underlying unity against which individual differences in attitude, as well as broader cultural ones, can be readily measured. This is because shipwrecks traditional and modern offer, generally speaking, a way of testing God’s presence or absence. This is why Landow can claim that ‘when Dante threatens Florence, all Italy, and the Church with shipwreck, he is using this image to suggest divine

¹³² George P. Landow, *Images of Crisis: Literary Iconology, 1750 to the Present* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 19.

¹³³ George P. Landow, ‘Shipwrecked and Castaway on the Journey of Life: An Essay towards a Modern Iconography’, *Revue de littérature comparée* 46 (1972): 570.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* ‘Traditional’ wrecks seem to come from the Renaissance, while ‘modern’ ones date roughly from the nineteenth century.

punishment, and when Turner paints a typhoon about to destroy the evil vessel depicted in *The Slave Ship* he is doing the same'.¹³⁵

It would be difficult to take issue with the accuracy of Foulke, Cohen, or Landow's accounts of the part played by the sea in the literature that they discuss. Indeed, their work deserves to be appreciated for its scope and ambition: these critics draft sweeping lines through several centuries' worth of what might be called sea-fiction or voyage-literature on a decidedly grand scale. What this sort of criticism sacrifices, however, is close sustained attention to individual texts and authors. The aim of uncovering certain great trends in these types of fiction draws attention away from the particular responses of individual authors to those very rubrics. If, as Cohen insists, 'chronotopes exist at the level of a literary field and tradition rather than a single work', retain some sort of extra-textual 'stability', and are available to any author or any text 'from adventure fiction to domestic and sentimental fiction, from the early-modern to the modernist novel', it seems as fair to ask in what ways an author has attempted to resist such patterns, as it is to ask where he or she conforms to them.¹³⁶ Assuming that chronotopes are something like the literary genres Cohen lists, presumably a writer may pick and choose between chronotopes or disregard them entirely. By the nineteenth century, the conventions of 'sea-writing' were well-established. Any author wishing to write about the sea had to negotiate a complex field of meanings and narrative habits (charting a course between convention and novelty) and even taking the complexities of that negotiation as a subject in itself. Bourke's final claim is that the sea has not survived in contemporary literature because its meanings are worn out, and, in a 'restless and disillusioned' age of 'experiment and exploration, straining after new effects', the idiom of

¹³⁵ Landow, 'Shipwrecked and Castaway', 570.

¹³⁶ Cohen, 'Chronotopes', 649.

the sea necessarily seems ‘largely discredited [...] naive or outworn’.¹³⁷ Bourke was, of course, incorrect in his assessment; the uses made of the sea by modernists like Joyce and Woolf hardly seem ‘outworn’. Indeed, particular patterns of wear are part of the sea’s appeal to more recent poets and novelists such as Derek Walcott, who returns, like Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), to Homer’s mythic sea in *Omeros* (1990), or even Banville, whose title echoes Iris Murdoch’s *The Sea, the Sea* (1978).¹³⁸ Murdoch’s own title translates the cry (*Thálatta! Thálatta!*) of Greek soldiers catching sight of the sea in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, which is presumably also referenced by Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses*. Beginning with the Homeric sea (‘the snotgreen sea. The scrotumtightening sea. *Epi oinopa ponton*’), Mulligan continues, ‘Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks! I must teach you. You must read them in the original. *Thalatta! Thalatta!*’.¹³⁹ Which is to say that Bourke is right to point out that literary and critical writing about the sea needs to consider carefully the particular questions raised by the sea’s long and complex history of use.

The sea often seems to test the boundary between monotony and unpredictability. In fact, it has proven important for both novelists and critics like Bourke to measure the sea’s capacity to induce tedium against what at other times seems like perpetual novelty. Jules Michelet’s typically poetic work of natural history, *La Mer* (1861), attempts to form some solid conclusions about the sea’s imaginative significance, a potentially futile endeavour even in the context of Michelet’s belief that ‘the element which we describe as fluid, mobile, and capricious, does not really change; it is regularity itself’.¹⁴⁰ Critical accounts of writing about the sea, and that writing itself, both labour under the influence of

¹³⁷ Bourke, *Sea as Symbol*, 6.

¹³⁸ In his review of Banville, Imhof cites as likely intertexts: Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*, Iris Murdoch’s *The Sea, the Sea*, the ‘murderous innocence of the sea’ from Yeats’s ‘A Prayer for My Daughter’, Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’, Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, Defoe, Conrad, and *The Iliad*.

¹³⁹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5. Johnson uses the 1922 text. See also Xenophon, *The Persian Expedition*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1949), 211.

¹⁴⁰ Jules Michelet, *The Sea*, [trans. W. H. D. Adams] (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1875), 24. For the characterisation of Michelet’s writing as poetic, see Lionel Gossman, ‘Michelet and Natural History: The Alibi of Nature’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 145 (2001): 332.

this paradox. This is an aesthetic problem as well as a critical one for, just like the thing it describes, literature about the sea may appear prolific in its extent, only to turn out to be one thing everywhere: a stolid meditation, following one well-worn course or another, ‘regularity itself’. Foulke suggests the existence of larger concerns when he asks, ‘given the tedium of much actual voyaging, why has it generated such a spate of books?’.¹⁴¹ One could claim that this question sits at a tangent to critical writing on the sea in literature—it would be just as reasonable, and just as silly, to ask why the Victorian legal system spawned so much literature given that it too was so notably wearisome. However, hidden in Foulke’s query is another more interesting question: given the tedium of so much writing about the sea, on what grounds can novelists possibly justify writing more? In this thesis, I propose that an engagement with the problems surrounding the fictional sea salvages some of what is written about it. It was clear to Victorians that writing about the sea was writing in the context of well-travelled scenes, tropes, and plots, all vaguely mingling with each other. The sea’s capacity to sustain such varied accumulations is what appealed to Conrad, and later Woolf and Joyce, and this thesis contends that Victorian engagements with the vagueness troubling prose writing about the sea underpins and anticipates this modernist appreciation.

A note on empire

In 1796, nearly a decade before Nelson’s victory at Trafalgar, William Cobbett recollected his feelings upon first seeing the sea:

From the top of Portsdown, I, for the first time, beheld the sea, and no sooner did I behold it than I wished to be a sailor. I could never account for this sudden

¹⁴¹ Foulke, ‘Literature of Voyaging’, 3.

impulse, nor can I now. Almost all English boys feel the same inclination: it would seem that, like ducks, instinct leads them to rush on the bosom of the water.

But it was not the sea alone that I saw: the grand fleet was riding at anchor at Spithead. I had heard of the wooden walls of Old England: I had formed my ideas of a ship, and of a fleet; but, what I now beheld, so far surpassed what I had ever been able to form a conception of, that I stood lost between astonishment and admiration. I had heard talk of the glorious deeds of our admirals and sailors, of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and of all those memorable combats, that good and true Englishmen never fail to relate to their children about a hundred times a year.¹⁴²

As I previously suggested, a major reason that the sea found a natural home in the Victorian imagination is that, as a symbol, its meanings became wedded to acts of national identity-building that gained momentum in the nineteenth century.¹⁴³ As J. A. Froude remarks, ‘after their own island, the sea is the natural home of Englishmen’.¹⁴⁴ The nostalgic narrative that underpinned Britain’s expansionist philosophy by linking the Briton to the sea drew heavily on hagiographies of Nelson, such as Southey’s famous *Life* (1813). But it was also reinforced by later individuals like Froude or his brother-in-law, Charles Kingsley, in books like the former’s *Oceana, or, England and Her Colonies* and *English Sea-Men in the Sixteenth Century* (1886), and the latter’s *Westward Ho!* (1855).¹⁴⁵ Even the usually pacifistic John Stuart Mill was of the opinion that ‘naval Powers, both in ancient and modern times, have been the cradle and the home of liberty’, which amounts to high praise from the author of *On Liberty*.¹⁴⁶

It felt natural to Froude and Kingsley, however, in the middle part of the nineteenth century, to reach further back than Southey, to the Elizabethans, in search of congruities

¹⁴² William Cobbett, *Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine* (Philadelphia: printed by author, 1796), 17–18.

¹⁴³ There have been numerous discussions of this truism. See, for example, Susan Bassnett, ‘Cabin’d Yet Unconfined: Heroic Masculinity in English Seafaring Novels’, in *Fictions of the Sea: Critical Perspectives on the Ocean in British Literature and Culture*, ed. Bernhard Klein (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 176–87.

¹⁴⁴ J. A. Froude, *Oceana; or, England and Her Colonies* (London: Longmans, Green, 1886), 18.

¹⁴⁵ See Tobias Dörfling, ‘The Sea Is History’, in Klein, *Fictions of the Sea*, 121–40.

¹⁴⁶ John Stuart Mill, ‘England’s Danger through the Suppression of Her Maritime Power’, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, vol. 28, *Public and Parliamentary Speeches Part I November 1850–November 1868*, ed. Robson and Bruce L. Kinzer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), 223. This is the written record of a speech given by Mill to the House of Commons on 5 August 1867.

that could vouch for racial durability. During the reign of one imperial Queen, the Victorians frequently recalled the reign of another. Froude relished the thought of ‘the England of free thought and commerce and manufacture, which was to plough the ocean with its navies, and sow its colonies’, assuring his readers that ‘the first appearance of these enormous forces and the light of the earliest achievements of the new era shines through the forty years of the reign of Elizabeth’.¹⁴⁷ A review of some recently republished books of Elizabethan voyages printed in the *Westminster Review* in 1853 provided Froude with an opportunity to dilate upon the merits of ‘England’s Forgotten Worthies’. Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* is a fictional imagining of the exploits of those same ‘forgotten worthies’: Drake, Hawkins, Raleigh, and Grenville.¹⁴⁸ Kingsley’s book appeared around the time Froude would have begun the first volume of his vast work of naval nostalgia, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, which appeared between 1856 and 1870 in twelve volumes. As Raymond Chapman says, the defeat of the Armada itself becomes ‘a metaphor of English nationalism’ for Kingsley and Froude, among others.¹⁴⁹ Chapman tells us that there are two more specific reasons the exploits of Elizabethan sea-dogs appealed at this particular time. The war in the Crimea, entered in 1854, caused a ‘surge of patriotic fervour’, and ‘the Spanish provided a ready-made set of villains to take in print the hostility that the Russians were taking in reality’.¹⁵⁰

At the same time, the sixteenth-century Spaniard supplied a ready repository for the powerful anti-Catholic sentiment gripping the popular consciousness in the mid-nineteenth century. Froude had his own well-known tussles with Christianity—famously culminating with the publication of *Nemesis of Faith* (1849), and the loss of his fellowship

¹⁴⁷ Froude, ‘England’s Forgotten Worthies’, 302.

¹⁴⁸ Charles Kingsley, *Westward Ho!* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009), 2.

¹⁴⁹ Raymond Chapman, *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 99.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 87–88.

at Exeter College, Oxford—but Kingsley’s muscular faith revels in violent rebukes to Popery. The defeat of the Armada is recast in his mind as ‘that great sea-fight which was to determine whether Popery and despotism, or Protestantism and freedom, were the law which God had appointed for the half of Europe, and the whole of future America’.¹⁵¹ However, in addition to the specific conditions set by the Crimea and Catholicism, the return to Tudor England appealed because it facilitated a feeling of continuity by seeming to reveal a continuity of feeling: Ruskin records that ‘down to Elizabeth’s time chivalry lasted’, values he hopes to resume, and which he connects to an appreciation for the sea common to the Elizabethans and himself (*HE*, 23).¹⁵² Carlyle preferred Shakespeare to Elizabeth: ‘King-Henrys, Queen-Elizabeths go their way; and Nature too goes hers. [...] Priceless Shakspeare was the free gift of Nature’.¹⁵³ But Shakespeare defines the terms of royal, racial, and imaginative heredity at once when he makes his Richard II speak thus:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
 This other Eden, demi-paradise,
 This fortress built by Nature for herself
 Against infection and the hand of war,
 This happy breed of men, this little world,
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,
 Which serves it in the office of a wall
 Or as a moat defensive to a house
 Against the envy of less happier lands,
 This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
 This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings.¹⁵⁴

Tennyson expresses a comparable sentiment in the conclusion to *The Princess* (1847)

when he asks God to ‘bless the narrow sea’ which keeps France at a distance, ‘And keeps

¹⁵¹ Kingsley, *Westward Ho!*, 621.

¹⁵² Compare Irving’s remark to Marryat concerning the ‘chivalry of the ocean’, which begins this introduction.

¹⁵³ Thomas Carlyle, ‘The Hero as Poet’, in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 30 vols, ed. H. D. Traill, Centenary Edition (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897–1904), vol. 5, *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1897), 102–03.

¹⁵⁴ William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, ed. Charles R. Forker, *The Arden Shakespeare* (London: Methuen Drama, 2002), 2.1.40–51. All references to Shakespeare’s plays are to act, scene, and line.

our Britain, whole within herself, / A nation yet, the rulers and the ruled'.¹⁵⁵ It took only a small leap in logic to reposition the sea as more than a defensive boundary; it became in addition the symbol and means of literal and imaginative national extension, and the proper medium of what Tennyson referred to elsewhere as 'our ocean-empire with her boundless homes / For ever-broadening England'.¹⁵⁶ In the eyes of men like Froude and Kingsley, the fact that England under Victoria (as under Elizabeth) 'was wont to conquer others',¹⁵⁷ could be seen as a historical fact at once guaranteed, and vouched for, by the persistence of a particular kind of relationship to the sea. *Westward Ho!* is dedicated to two men Kingsley had never met, both of whom participated in the sort of 'broadening' Tennyson writes of: George Augustus Selwyn, the progressive 'missionary Bishop' of New Zealand between 1841 and 1858, and Sir James Brooke, the first raja of Sarawak (who figures in Kipling's 'The Man Who Would Be King', and is a possible original for Conrad's Lord Jim).¹⁵⁸ According to Kingsley, Brooke represented 'that type of English virtue, at once manful and godly, practical and enthusiastic, prudent and self-sacrificing [...] depict[ed] in these pages', much like 'the worthies whom Elizabeth, without distinction of rank or age, gathered round her'.¹⁵⁹ Kingsley makes it clear in his dedication that the novel will not only offer a means of binding Kingsley, Selwyn, Brooke, Drake, and Raleigh together by means of their common worth, but also a way of imagining the channels along which the founding premises of empire flowed. The 'type of English virtue' epitomised by Elizabethan sailors offers Kingsley a logic by which the seas that

¹⁵⁵ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Princess*, in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, vol. 2, p. 295, lines 51–53.

¹⁵⁶ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'To the Queen [*Idylls of the King*]', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, vol. 3, p. 562, lines 29–30. Gordon E. Brown makes the link between Tennyson's poems and Richard's prison speech. *Queen Victoria* (London: George G. Harrap, 1915), 147–48.

¹⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 2.1.65.

¹⁵⁸ Rudyard Kipling, 'The Man Who Would Be King', in *The Man Who Would Be King: Selected Stories of Rudyard Kipling*, ed. Jan Montefiore (London: Penguin, 2011), 98–126. For the link to Sir James Brooke, see John D. Gordan, 'The Ranee Brooke and Joseph Conrad', *Studies in Philology* 37 (1940): 130–32.

¹⁵⁹ Kingsley, dedication to *Westward Ho!*, n.p.

divide the distant points of empire instead become a connecting medium, one that is specifically English.¹⁶⁰

A group of books published around the turn of the twentieth century helped to cement our impression of the way the Victorians included the sea in narrative. Such accounts are unambiguous about the role of sea power. First among them is the American historian and naval strategist A. T. Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, published in 1890, which, in the words of political and cultural theorist Christopher Connery, 'quickly became one of the most widely translated and circulated books of the century'. Its impact, together with its sequel *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812* (1892), was so great that, early in the twenty-first century, Connery claims to believe that 'we are still living in the Mahanian period'.¹⁶¹ Mahan possesses the serenity of perfect hindsight; in Connery's words, 'the overriding image in the second volume in the series is of Napoleon's Grand Army ranging over the European continent with impotent bravado, unaware that the navy of Great Britain, unchallenged on the open sea, controlled the world'.¹⁶² It caught the public imagination, and gave rise to many imitations. Frank T. Bullen's *Our Heritage the Sea* (1906), for instance, is a powerfully nationalistic English rehashing of Mahan's thinking. Bullen's title is, nonetheless, well-chosen; it captures his book's larger purpose, which is, as he explains, 'to point out with all the emphasis at my command, [that] we have come to rely entirely upon [...] sea-power for our national existence, our means of living, our daily bread. Not merely as a means of growing more wealthy, although it is the greatest factor in national prosperity, but as the one essential to our continuance as a nation'.¹⁶³ In this passage, as in his title, Bullen seeks to extend the pronoun *our* in both time and space: its

¹⁶⁰ These opinions had a lasting impact; midway through the twentieth century Bourke, discussed above, was clearly still predisposed to think in this way.

¹⁶¹ Christopher Connery, 'Ideologies of Land and Sea', *boundary 2* (2001): 183.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁶³ Frank T. Bullen, *Our Heritage the Sea* (London: Smith, Elder, 1906), ix.

dimensions measure out the concept of Englishness, as boundless and unchanging as the sea with which he associates it. Accordingly, the common (English)man need not think himself a commoner; he can become a full participant in certain enduring myths of national heroism:

The story is so interesting, so full of thrilling romantic interest, that even in the hands of the dullest teacher it could hardly be made dry. Under the proper handling of the subject, the grimmest little tramp steamer that ever lumbered across the Channel, deep laden with the roughest of cargoes, would become glorified, her sordid trade details would glow with a halo of romance that would fire the minds of even the most youthful hearers with a determination to uphold, at all hazards, that supremacy so laboriously gained. [...] It soars above the squabbles of party into the clear serenity of national interest, making all men agree that whatever divergent views they may have upon the means whereby our sea-supremacy shall be upheld, upheld it certainly shall be.¹⁶⁴

Bullen's rhetoric of 'sea-supremacy', which seeks to 'soar above' earthly matters, in an attempt to 'become glorified', would not have been out of place in the nineteenth century. Froude's tone, for instance, becomes beatific as he suggests that Elizabethan sailors, like the Apostles who began as fisherman, had taken up the 'Divine mission, the spiritual authority over mankind': 'the seamen from the banks of the Thames and the Avon, the Plym and the Dart, self-taught and self-directed, with no impulse but what was beating in their own royal hearts, went out across the unknown seas fighting, discovering, colonising, and graded out the channels, paving them at last with their bones'.¹⁶⁵

Bullen took his title from the epigraph to *Westward Ho!*, which is suitable both because his aims do not diverge significantly from Kingsley's, and because the allusion suggests a lineal continuity of the sort he, like Froude, hopes to make 'all men agree' is 'ours'. The sea was a crucial element in the transmission of the ideology of empire: a set of metaphors, a reminder of the glorious victories achieved upon it, and an actual means of

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., x.

¹⁶⁵ Froude, 'England's Forgotten Worthies', 297.

spreading such thoughts abroad. The idea of empire must therefore stand in the background of this thesis.

Although Cobbett, in the passage with which I began this section, clearly considered his first sight of the sea to be significant, in his account it is soon overshadowed by a passion for Englishness stirred by the sight of ships. The role of the sea in his imagination is, as a consequence, less plain than it might otherwise be. Shifting emphasis back to the sea, however, and away from Britain's national might, draws attention to the grain of Cobbett's prose: the sea at once positions his admiration of the fleet in an atmosphere of appropriate magnificence, and gives grounds for his ruminations on the consonance of his own understanding of Englishness with that of Elizabethan Britain's heroes, setting them together at sea, a place each might think of as 'ours'. This kind of thinking has significant bearing on the topic of empire (not to mention race and gender), but the question of what kind of reading the sea (which in Cobbett's prose seems to drift into the background before it can be concentrated on properly) gives rise to has been less studied. My chief emphasis will thus be lexical rather than socio-historical, keyed to moments when themes such as empire and Englishness may become diluted or muddled by ambiguities or alternative readings. This is one reason that I do not focus on writers like Ballantyne, Kipling, or Stevenson in greater detail; added to the concerns of this thesis, the topic of empire, unavoidable in a study of these writers, would become far too great an elephant to ignore, one that has been hunted, moreover, almost to extinction elsewhere.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Along with Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* (cited above), see, for example Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Martin Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Neil Rennie, *Far Fetched Facts: The Literature of Travel and the Idea of the South Seas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); G. V. Scallell, *Ships, Oceans, and Empire: Studies in European Maritime and Colonial History, 1400–1750*, Variorum Collected Studies Series (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995). These critics frequently draw upon the work of another group of broadly cultural-materialist scholars (historians, cultural geographers, literary critics) who have sought to reintroduce the sea in literature to its historical contexts. Foremost among them is Marcus Rediker's

No message

It comes as a shock to hear that, when expert semiotician Roland Barthes found himself before the sea, it seemed to him, as he puts it in my epigraph, to bear ‘no message’.

Barthes intends to startle his audience, and Victorians like Ruskin, Thackeray, and Gaskell would have found the thought that the sea meant nothing equally surprising. For nineteenth-century writers, the sea did not so readily evoke the bivalent extremes of meaning and unmeaning; it more often implied a sense of indeterminacy set somewhere between them. As we have seen, such vagueness could make the sea difficult to write about, or ‘impossible’ in Ruskin’s opinion. At other times, however, as I have been suggesting, the vagueness of writing about the sea could be a resource, a means of probing the interstices between ideas, and a vocabulary with which to speak about boundaries that, on close examination, prove less than precise. Indeed, the sea is made to perform this role even in Barthes’s writing: the shock he elicits stems from the fact that the sea so plainly is and is not amenable to his point. Even if the material sea to which Barthes refers is not a signifying system like a book or an advertisement (Bourke would probably be reluctant to admit even this), the sea one reads about, even in a book like Barthes’s *Mythologies*, is never so distinctly meaningless. Simply put, the sea’s ‘message’ is evoked by Barthes’s dismissal of it, a paradox that his prose depends upon for its effect. The central chapters of this dissertation will discuss in depth three novelists who, in various ways, make their home in the vague region between those poles. In each author study, I argue that

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, which began the trend. Others include Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Margaret Creighton and Lisa Norling’s edited collection *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Studies like Rediker’s are indeed fascinated by the way a rope is rove, or cargo stowed, and what these things might tell us about social and economic conditions left out of books like Kingsley’s or Cooper’s. My primary concern, however, remains the sea itself.

vagueness is at once the characteristic problem faced by writing about the sea, and a solution to this problem.

The sea novels of Frederick Marryat are shy of the element upon which they are set; he rarely describes the craft of sailing, and describes the sea itself even less often. If, however, Marryat's novels are not about the sea, the sea is indirectly about them. I suggest that the sea establishes conditions that invite a rereading of the many repetitions in Marryat's novels. These repetitions can be viewed, I argue, as traces of Marryat's struggle to find a language appropriate to the ocean. Tightly repetitive adherence to generic formulae is often deemed evidence of contrived or artificial writing, but in the context of writing about the sea repetition invites a competing reading: it is perhaps evidence of authenticity. These two ways of reading Marryat's novels are only vaguely distinguishable, a fact which, in the mind of Virginia Woolf and others, accounts for their appeal.

Dickens, a more decidedly land-locked writer, paradoxically makes greater direct use of the sea than Marryat. In Dickens's novels and journalism, the sea is often present as a source both of metaphor and of experience. However, the shuttling between literal and symbolic registers which characterises Dickens's use of the sea produces a kind of vagueness that has often been problematic for his critics, who complain that solid features of his nautical scenes continually risk dissolving into literary commonplace or cliché. However, as I suggest, the slippery doubleness of the literary sea is what Dickens finds so appealing. By involving the sea in his prose, Dickens finds a means by which both his characters, and the individuals he encounters as a journalist, can be made to coexist in his imagination with their ideal or literary doubles.

My chapter on Conrad focuses on the sea's place in his aesthetic theories. Conrad, like Marryat, had been a sailor before he became a writer, and those novels of his which

are set at sea have sometimes been bundled together with nautical boys' fiction. Indeed, Conrad feared that his subject might prevent serious critical reflection on his writing. Though Conrad's work has not lacked critical attention, such criticism has tended to set the sea aside, treating it as a populist container for weightier materials. I argue that the sea forms a crucial element of the particular kind of impressionistic aesthetic theory which Conrad proposes in his preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and elsewhere. Conrad's impressionism, which emphasises the blurring of boundaries between sensations and thoughts, is considered a form of vagueness, explored by Conrad in relation to the sea.

The three authors I discuss span the nineteenth century, and extend into the early twentieth. During this period, cultural perceptions of the sea underwent significant change, not least because the deep sea became both imaginatively and physically accessible. Two smaller interludes move chronologically through the period, in order to chart such changes. Thematically, these chapters match the developing capacity to probe further and deeper, and so are divided into a discussion of shores and depths, two marine locations characterised by the vagueness of their boundaries.

I conclude with a brief discussion of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931). Critics have tended to distinguish the high modernist sea from what came before; this chapter observes that the sort of vagueness valued by Woolf has an earlier origin. Late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers are increasingly sympathetic to the implications of vagueness, but writers like Marryat also sensed that the literary idea of the sea lacked clarity. I do not mean to suggest a linear progression from Marryat to Woolf, rather that literary responses to the sea reveal certain continuities within change, much as the sea itself does. Woolf makes manifest what had been implicit throughout the nineteenth century.

It has become a commonplace of literary criticism that, in the century preceding modernism, prose fiction about the sea was unthinking and uninteresting: indentured to outworn generic codes, tied to certain clichés of national identity, Empire, and slipshod sublimity, and vaguely evoking some or all of them. This thesis does not attempt a general contradiction of this view; a great deal of sea-fiction from the period conforms to something like this model. What this thesis does suggest is that Victorian novels are not always naïve about their subject and, at times, display an awareness of the generic and stylistic hazards attendant upon writing about the sea. To write about the sea was to risk writing vaguely. It follows that, to novelists who wished to draw on vagueness, the sea represented a subject and a style that could be put to use.

Chapter 1. Sea Sick: Recurrence in the Early Novels of Captain Marryat

Flounder deplorably

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) Nietzsche explains the development of the novel—itsself a model of development where origins and ends are threaded onto the same string—with a yarn about the sea:

the Platonic dialogue was the raft as it were on which the earlier poetry rescued itself and all its children from shipwreck: huddled together in a confined space and fearfully subservient to the single helmsman Socrates, they now sailed into a new world which never tired of the fantastic image passing before it. Plato really gave to all posterity the model for a new art-form, the *novel*.¹

Nietzsche's marine rhetoric of narrative is appealing, and yet, the novels that are the subject of this chapter, those written by Captain Marryat in a career that spanned twenty years, exhibit little evidence of such claims for the rational origins of the form. Marryat's novels feel more like a magpie's accumulations than plotted wholes. Critics often found it difficult to discern the ends in the origins. As I mention above (page 12), *The Monthly Review* mused in 1830,

we do not approve much of the word, but we can find no better phrase for shortly describing the "King's Own" than by saying it is the most "harum-scarum" sort of novel we have ever encountered. It is the very picture of a naval officer's mind and memory, through which all sorts of strange scenes, stories, superstitions, and adventures have passed like shadows leaving behind them confused impressions, which sometimes are converted into the food of the imagination, sometimes start up in their original form and assume the appearance of reality.²

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 77–78.

² Unsigned review of *The King's Own*, by Captain Marryat, *Monthly Review* 14 (June 1830): 263.

With similar intent, *The New Monthly* writes of one (and all) of Marryat's novels that 'the events have so little mutual dependence, that the volumes may be read by whatever installment the reader pleases'.³ *Ainsworth's Magazine* suggested that Marryat's technique was closer to assemblage than composition, writing that 'he contrives to be lively even when he has nothing to say'.⁴ Marryat's Victorian editor, David Hannay, surmised that his bizarre later effort, *Snarleyyow; or, The Dog Fiend* (1837), appeared as it did because its author had 'used up [...] the navy of his own time'. It is, Hannay remarks, 'in reality a fantastic tale which Marryat made up partly, no doubt, out of his reminiscences [...], partly, and in much smaller degree, out of books, but most of all, as the children say, out of his own head'.⁵ 'No doubt' Hannay is right, though the same sort of claim could be made for the relationship of most novelists to their work. In Marryat's case, however, readers regularly express the feeling that the materials that make up his novels ('reminiscences', 'books') are familiar properties. Even if some of *Snarleyyow* comes partly from Marryat's 'own head', the contents of that head were not particularly diverse, especially with reminiscences taken out of the equation. The fact is, Marryat's novels are repetitive. At times, however, Marryat writes in awareness of his own repetitiveness. Moreover, repetition seems to be a style particularly well-suited to the subject of Marryat's sea stories.

The most famous summing-up of Marryat's novels comes from Joseph Conrad; it takes the form of a tribute that is also a disavowal.

His naiveties are perpetrated in a lurid light. There is an endless variety of types, all surface, with hard edges, with memorable eccentricities of outline, with a childish

³ 'Captain Marryat, the Sea Novelist', *New Monthly Magazine* 48 (October 1836): 230.

⁴ 'Captain Marryat: Apropos of *Percival Keene*', *Ainsworth's Magazine*, October 1842, 363. Ainsworth himself was a friend of Marryat's and wrote to him a year after this review was published, upon the purchase of a copy of the *New Monthly Magazine* to which Marryat had contributed in 1843, asking him to continue writing copy: 'You will confer the greatest favour upon me, if you will write for me and lend me the weight of your name' (quoted in Florence Marryat, *Life and Letters*, 204–05).

⁵ David Hannay, introduction to Captain Marryat, *Snarleyyow* (London: Macmillan, 1896–97), x.

and heroic effect in the drawing. They do not belong to life; they belong exclusively to the Service. And yet they live; there is a truth in them, the truth of their time; a headlong, reckless audacity, an intimacy with violence, an unthinking fearlessness, and an exuberance of vitality which only years of war and victories can give. His adventures are enthralling; the rapidity of his action fascinates; his method is crude, his sentimentality, obviously incidental, is often factitious. His greatness is undeniable. [...] He loved his country first, the Service next, the sea perhaps not at all.⁶

Although Conrad positions Marryat's attitude toward the sea as the culmination of the claims that precede it, the connection between the sea and Marryat's techniques of characterisation and emplotment is ambiguous. Marryat's novels, thinks Conrad, 'are not the outcome of his art, but of his character'. 'To this writer of the sea the sea was not an element', he concedes, 'it was a stage' (TS, 46). And yet, the novels are 'amphibious': his memories possess 'all the remoteness of an ideal' (46), and while his books 'live on the sea', they 'frequent the shore, where they flounder deplorably' (47). Marryat hardly ever describes the sea in his novels—it is a scene of adventure and a resolutely physical entity to be negotiated and overcome—but, at the same time, this is where they appear to Conrad to 'live'.⁷

Conrad echoes a long-standing opinion of Marryat's work. Compare *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* (January 1840): 'there are few of his admirers who will not frankly confess that they think him most "at home" when he is "at sea," and that he is, out of question, most really and unequivocally "true" in those of his works which [unlike his forays into magazine writing] professedly wear the garb of fiction'.⁸ The contradiction at the heart of Conrad's evaluation of Marryat's novels (whether they 'live' or not) suggests the central vagueness with which this chapter is concerned. I do not mean

⁶ Joseph Conrad, 'Tales of the Sea', in Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, ed. J. H. Stape and Andrew Busza (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 47.

⁷ Tanner calls Conrad's compliments 'a generosity on Conrad's part, perhaps a gesture of solidarity from a fellow seaman [because] he cannot regard Marryat as an artist' on the grounds of the absence of a Romantic love of the sea from Marryat's novels. Introduction to *Oxford Sea Stories*, xvi.

⁸ Unsigned review of *Poor Jack*, by Captain Marryat, *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* 35 (January 1840): 12. This reviewer may, of course, have been making a subtle dig at Marryat.

to imply that questions of the flatness or, to use Forster's well-known antithesis, 'roundness' of Marryat's characters,⁹ scenarios, or plots will be in any way insisted upon. Rather, the conditions that lead Conrad (and others) to feel as though Marryat's books contain at once truth and artifice will be investigated. It will be my suggestion that Conrad's first claim is linked to the other implication of his argument: that Marryat's attitude to the sea is bound up in his fictional method. In short, as Conrad implies, Marryat's novels are characterised by compositional artificiality—that is, by their formulaic and, above all, repetitious properties.

Repetition's potentially negative effects on a text are well known. In 'On Repetition', for example, Edward Said summarizes Marx's thoughts on the subject: 'repetition is debasement'.¹⁰ When the repetitive quality of language appears unintentional it can easily sound inane, and, as Eric Griffiths puts it, 'evince a sense of lack in language'.¹¹ Repetition leads to farce or to satire, or simply to degradation. However, the effect of repetition may also go beyond such disappointments. Wordsworth makes a claim to this effect in the note to his poem 'The Thorn', which seeks to show the marine cast of mind of a retired 'Captain of a small trading vessel' without discussing the sea, instead representing his speech tics and repetitive talk: 'There are also various other reasons why repetition and apparent tautology are frequent beauties of the highest kind.'¹² Wordsworth recasts the subject matter of this chapter—the exhausted register of sea-fiction, its repetitions—through his very language, with the lofty phrase 'beauties of the highest kind'.

The 'beauties' of repetition can be thought of as structural. J. Hillis Miller sees repetition as an essential feature of novel-writing, observing that 'a long work like a novel

⁹ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 73.

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, 'On Repetition', in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1984), 122.

¹¹ Eric Griffiths, 'The Disappointment of Christina G. Rossetti', *Essays in Criticism* 47 (1997): 110.

¹² William Wordsworth, note to 'The Thorn', in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James A. Butler and Karen Green, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 350, 351.

is interpreted, by whatever sort of reader, in part through the identification of recurrences and of meanings generated through recurrences'.¹³ Jerome Hamilton Buckley agrees that such 'devices of interconnectedness, structural repetitions [...] allow us to construct a whole [...] to reconstruct [...] to replot the dream as narrative'.¹⁴ According to Paul Ricoeur, a similar pattern defines the quest narrative: 'repetition tends to become the main issue in narratives in which the quest itself duplicates a travel in space that assumes the shape of a return to origin'—narratives, that is, like a voyage at sea.¹⁵

The sea, therefore, suggests a context whereby particular recurrences may be responses to what has at different times been seen as a model, and an emblem, of repetition. Recall Foulke's bafflement at the 'spate of books' generated by tedious voyaging: a thought redolent of Marryat's own feelings about the weariness which results from the 'unvarying monotony of sky and water' (*KO*, 314).¹⁶ Peck conjectures, with the same tedium in mind, that 'the number of patterns that can be called upon for a maritime tale is limited, and the same patterns inevitably reappear at various times in all seafaring cultures'.¹⁷ It is my claim that, in the context of the sea, the monotony of Marryat's novels begs to be read as a stylistic response to what Foulke calls 'actual voyaging'.¹⁸ Repetition, then, may take on, as *The Monthly Review* says, all the 'appearance of reality'. Indeed, it may be finally unimportant whether Marryat's repetitions are intended to respond to the sea in this way, because the sea introduces a context whereby they *may* be read in this way.

¹³ J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 1.

¹⁴ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 3.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Time', in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 181.

¹⁶ Foulke, 'Literature of Voyaging', 3. See my discussion above, page 63.

¹⁷ Peck, *Maritime Fiction*, 89.

¹⁸ Foulke, 'Literature of Voyaging', 3.

The first section of this chapter will introduce one of Marryat's key repetitions—seasickness—and suggest that his novels share some characteristics with this malady. The second section will discuss Marryat's repeated scenes of resurrection, concluding that because this theme is less plainly associated with the sea, Marryat needs to look elsewhere to obtain the kind of vagueness which will make his resurrections 'live'. Finally, resurrection will be reconsidered in the context of *The Phantom Ship* (1839), where it is signified by, and ambiguously explains, the repeated departures and returns of what Foulke calls a voyage narrative.

Sic omnes

Fleeing in April 1835 from debt, and from the pressures of editing *The Metropolitan Magazine*, Marryat took his family across the channel by steamship.¹⁹

PADDLE, paddle — splash, splash — bump, thump, bump. What a leveller is seasickness—almost as great a radical as death. All grades, all respect, all consideration are lost. The master may summon John to his assistance, but John will see his master hanged before he'll go to him [...] Decorum and modesty, next to maternal tenderness, the strongest feelings in woman, fall before the dire prostration of this malady. A young lady will recline unwittingly in the arms of a perfect stranger, and the bride of three months, deserted by her husband, will offer no resistance to the uncouth seaman, who, in his kindness, would loosen the laces that confine her heaving bosom. As for politeness, even the *ancien regime* of the noblesse of France put it in their pockets as if there were a general chaos—self is the only feeling; not but that I have seen occasional traits of good-will towards others. I once witnessed a young lady smelling to [*sic*] a bottle of Eau de Cologne, as if her existence depended upon it, who handed it over to another whose state was even more pitiable, and I was reminded of Sir Philip Sidney and the cup of water, as he lay wounded on the field of battle, "Thy necessity is greater than mine." And if I might have judged from her trembling lips and pallid countenance, it was almost an equal act of heroism. Paddle, paddle, splash, splash, bump, thump, bump—one would really imagine that the passengers were so many pumps, all worked at once with the vessel by the same hundred horse power, for there were an hundred of them about me, each as sick as a horse. "*Sic omnes*," thought I.²⁰

¹⁹ Pocock, *Captain Marryat*, 120.

²⁰ Frederick Marryat, *Diary on the Continent*, in *Olla Podrida* (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1841), 5–6. Although elsewhere I use the editions of Marryat's works prepared by Brimley Johnson at the end of the

‘Paddle, paddle, splash, splash, bump, thump, bump’: this paragraph from Marryat’s *Diary on the Continent* (some parts of which were published as the ‘Diary of a Blasé’ in the *Metropolitan Magazine* in 1836) introduces several important aspects of Marryat’s writing. Marryat’s characters are frequently sick when they go to sea for the first time. The scene, like the illness, is at times mechanically repetitious. It is an unusual convention in the context of sea narrative, however, because seasickness can be made to seem like a necessary stage in a voyage. That is, the repetitious quality of the illness thematically suits the repetitious quality of the narrative. Here, Marryat’s repetitions, a regular feature of his prose in general, are made to seem like a natural response to the turbulent crossing. Marryat makes a routine out of seasickness, but it is a routine that appears to account for its own redundancy.

The specific details of the passage from the *Diary* are also of note. If one man is now as good as another when ‘all grades [...] are lost’, so language too has become degraded and incontinent: ‘*Sic omnes*’. The sound-effects Marryat begins with change their shape over two pages of fairly unsubtle descriptions of women vomiting—“I do feel such a *sinking* in my stomach.” [...] “I’ve such a *rising*” (*DC*, 5)—and the reader realises uncomfortably that he or she has been sounding out a heaving and splashing that does not only come from the ship’s pumps and pistons. Marryat’s language, which appears to be one thing but turns out to be another when repeated, perhaps resembles the last meal passengers eat before they embark. The utterances of the passengers and the groaners with which Marryat strews his prose operate on the threshold between two functions of repetition: they push difference down in one place, only to have it pop up in a new form

nineteenth century, the *Diary* is not included in his 1896 version of *Olla Podrida*. Thus, I have had to use two version of this particular text.

elsewhere. Most importantly for my purposes, this passage—shot through with circlings and repetitions—imitates what it describes.

Marryat's linguistic repetitions balance two separate meanings of the word *levelling*. Specifically, the Radicalism of civil-war Levellers is compared to nausea in two ways. Radicalism is, of course, indicted by its likeness to seasickness, another means of laying everyone equally low. Marryat is fascinated by the way one 'act of heroism' may be as good as another, with one's senses woozily impaired by the 'steam and effluvia of close cabins' (*DC*, 6), just as outrageous breaches of social or bodily boundaries resulting from an unhealthy eruption of self-concern can blur 'decorum and modesty' into their opposites. Although Marryat claims that 'self is the only feeling' by and large, it may not be as easy to contain one's self at sea as ashore. Yet, nausea also sets Marryat apart. Precisely the same motions can produce opposite effects, strengthening and defining what might have been diluted and dispersed.

Marryat boasts that he has 'long passed the ordeal, and even steam and smoke, and washing basins, and all the various discordant and revolting noises *from those* who suffer, have no effect upon my nervous system' (*DC*, 6). Marryat's nerves are much the same as any other part of a working body, and are better braced by repeated trials and applications. Still, the levelling effects of the steamer assail Marryat. A 'thin, spare man, whose accost I could well have spared' appears: 'a demon', who engages Marryat in a circular conversation about politics until 'he was too ill to spout politics, although, as he progressed, he spouted what was quite as bad' (*DC*, 6–7). 'Doomed to torment', in the end Marryat 'was very sick indeed' (6). The disgust he feels for the thin man's radical politics is as admirable as it is natural and involuntary. Marryat's body, that is, has been fortified, not only against the rocking of the ship, but also against unwholesome political views, which it instinctively rejects. These different versions of disgust, one erasing distinction,

the other emphasising it, pivot on two meanings of *level*. In one sense, to level things is to reduce them to plain uniformity. But levelling can also be thought of as a model of distinction, whereby individual somethings sink or rise until they arrive at their natural grade, or level.²¹ As Marryat puts it in *The King's Own*, 'everything, and everybody, must find their level on board a king's ship' (378), a process he seeks to expedite elsewhere, with typically arbitrary bluster, by 'draw[ing] a line between resistance against oppression, which I admire and respect, and a litigious, uncompromising disposition, which I despise'.²² Levelling, then, also suggests a good metaphorical language with which to speak of Marryat's text. Its repetitions, like those of the passengers described, can be seen as either mechanically unthinking or cautiously discriminating.

The emphasis that Marryat places on mechanical repetition in the *Diary* is repeated in scenes of seasickness in his novels. In its most extreme form, as in *Peter Simple* (1834), the body of the seasick lubber is harshly disciplined: broken down and remade. When Peter first embarks aboard the *Diomedé* he is wretchedly ill, and is treated by 'Doctor O'Brien', the master's mate.²³ 'What occurred for the next six days', says Peter,

I cannot tell. I thought that I should die every moment, and lay in my hammock or on the chests for the whole of that time [...] O'Brien came to me on the seventh morning, and said, that he was very fond of me and had taken me under his protection, and, to prove his regard, he would do for me what he would not take the trouble to do for any other youngster in the ship, which was, to give me a good basting, which was the sovereign remedy for sea-sickness. He suited the action to the word and drubbed me without mercy. (*PS*, 72)

When this beating at first proves unsuccessful, it is repeated, as if a strong stomach might be achieved through regular exercise: 'It's a nasty slow fever, that sea-sickness, my Peter and we must drive it out of you; and then he commenced a repetition of yesterday's

²¹ This kind of levelling may occur in, as well as on, the sea, as I explain below beginning page 100.

²² Frederick Marryat, *Frank Mildmay; or, The Naval Officer*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: J.M. Dent, 1896), 25.

²³ Frederick Marryat, *Peter Simple*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: J. M. Dent, 1896), 67.

remedy until I was almost a jelly' (72). This rite of passage at first dismantles Peter's sense of self, not only by physically turning him into 'a jelly', but also by wedding love to violence. As O'Brien remarks, 'thank Heaven that you've found somebody who loves you well enough to baste you when it's good for your health'. Indeed, Peter feels so much better that he eats a piece of 'fat pork' (73).

Patrick Brantlinger writes that 'character itself in Marryat's world has been prematurely blown to bits; what takes its place is only the noses, fingers, arms, legs, the shreds of selfhood'. For this reason, Marryat's heroes can often appear 'cartoon-like'.²⁴ Indeed, Marryat routinely found the body made mechanical by repetition to be funny. We might think here of Bergson's theory concerning the laughter elicited by a Punch and Judy show: 'No sooner does the policeman put in an appearance on the stage than, naturally enough, he receives a blow which fells him. He springs to his feet, a second blow lays him flat. A repetition of the offence is followed by a repetition of the punishment.' 'Something mechanical' does seem to become 'encrusted' on Peter, a process which is at once nauseating and hilarious.²⁵

Marryat's depiction of seasickness in *Peter Simple* places special emphasis on the repetitive qualities of both the ailment and its remedy. This is an unusual emphasis: while Victorian science produced numerous and varied explanations for seasickness, and suggested several remedies, these did not generally insist, as Marryat does, on the importance of repetition to the course of treatment. James Hamilton-Paterson records that in the nineteenth century, seasickness was explained, with variable plausibility, as follows:

- (i) an 'afflux of blood' to the spinal cord;
- (ii) disorientation caused by the rolling or heaving;
- (iii) 'depression of the circulation';
- (iv) 'displacement of abdominal viscera';

²⁴ Brantlinger, 'Bringing Up the Empire', 53.

²⁵ Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in Wylie Sypher, *Comedy* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 106, 84.

- (v) the influence of ‘changing impressions made upon the vision’ (obviously a fallacy, one writer remarked, since the blind are just as seasick);
- (vi) the influence of a ‘marine miasma’ or ‘miasmatical intoxication’;
- (vii) ‘sanguine congestion in the brain, provoked and entertained by the deranged centre of gravity’; and
- (viii) ‘centrifugal force within the blood vessels’ produced by the oscillation of the ship.²⁶

Experiments mounting ‘cabins, restaurants and entire passenger areas of a ship [...] on gimbals so as to remain steady’ when the ship was in motion were performed.

Unsurprisingly, ‘these were not a success’; they actually proved quite dangerous.²⁷

Nonetheless, the vogue for novel remedies was such that when the young Dickens encountered a group of ‘shabby people sitting under the placards about ships’, he assumed rather nonsensically that they were probably munching ‘dry biscuits’ in an attempt to ‘keep off sea-sickness’.²⁸ Should such pre-emptive measures fail, a sailor or traveller had a perplexity of other options: one well-meaning physician had tried ‘strong tea, brandy, wine’, and other such ‘strong nerve-stimulant[s] or sedative[s]’, but none seemed so efficacious as ‘the injection into the rectum at night of 15 or 20 drops of laudanum’.²⁹ Hamilton-Paterson notes that ‘a medicine of ammonium bromide and chloroform’ might be prescribed, or indeed ‘any or all of the following: chloral hydrate (favoured ingredient of Mickey Finn or “knockout drops”), dilute prussic acid, iodine, amyl nitrate, cocaine in quarter-grain doses, creosote, cerium oxalate, soda bicarbonate, caffeine, eucalyptus and Nepenthe (a proprietary solution of opium in alcohol, dosage as per laudanum)’.³⁰

Compare these formulations to the treatment devised in *Newton Forster; or, The Merchant Service* (1832), where a gaggle of ingénues embarking for Calcutta give Marryat, in the character of ‘Doctor Plausible’, a captive control group on which to test a

²⁶ James Hamilton-Paterson, *Seven-Tenths: The Sea and Its Thresholds* (London: Faber, 2007), 158.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

²⁸ Charles Dickens, ‘Gone Astray’, in Charles Dickens, *Gone Astray and Other Papers from Household Words*, ed. Michael Slater (London: Dent, 1998), 161.

²⁹ J. Henry Bennet, ‘Sea-sickness and Its Prevention’, *British Medical Journal* 2 (1883): 270.

³⁰ Hamilton-Paterson, *Seven-Tenths*, 158.

flash remedy. The Doctor ‘had been summoned to prescribe for Miss Laura Revel, who suffered extremely from the motion of the vessel, and the remedies which she had applied’.³¹ Miss Revel had heard that it might be best to eat ten or twelve squares of gingerbread ‘about one foot by eighteen inches’, which she gamely undertakes to do ‘notwithstanding various interruptions’ (*NF*, 227–28). Plausible recommends that the gingerbread be ‘cut into extremely small dice, and allowed, as it were, to melt away upon the tongue’ (229). Plausible has earlier written, ‘it is well known to most of my readers that woman is a problem; but it may not be as well known that nowadays she is a *mathematical problem*. Yet so it is. As in the latter you have certain known quantities given by which you are to find a quantity unknown, so in a lady you have the hand, the foot, the mouth, &c.’ (226). This illness, reducing women to the level of machines, calls for a remedy that derives its efficacy from the precision with which it is measured out. And, despite the comic potential of automata, Plausible seems serious when he claims that there is something mechanistic about women in general. This fragmented body leads Marryat to think once more about pumps. He recalls that ‘the sovereign remedy prescribed, when I first went to sea, was a piece of fat pork, tied to a string, to be swallowed, and then pulled up again; the dose to be repeated until effective’ (*NF*, 228). ‘This maritime prescription’, Marryat surmises, ‘has been the origin of two modern improvements in the medical catalogue—one is the stomach-pump, evidently borrowed from this simple engine; the other is the very successful prescription now in vogue, to those who are weak in the digestive organs, to eat fat bacon for breakfast’ (228).

Marryat’s remedies for seasickness suggest ways of thinking about a body which are rooted in repetition. An unruly digestive system might be brought under control by a strict imposition of regularity, either by eating many tiny squares of gingerbread, or by

³¹ Frederick Marryat, *Newton Forster; or, The Merchant Service*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: J. M. Dent, 1896), 227.

taking manual control of the vomiting reflex by repeatedly swallowing and drawing out fat pork. At the same time, however, Marryat's patterns of thought can seem as unthinking and robotic as the bodies of his seasick travellers. They seem driven by pre-plotted lines of association which find repetitive form in his texts: the compulsiveness of Marryat's pun about women's bodies, the way one 'problem' seems inevitably to suggest another, is as mechanical as the bodies he finds fascinating. And it is potentially just as worrying, insofar as it implies an unthinking impulse of the imagination. To a degree, then, these patterns of thought and association demonstrate that Marryat, who often wished he could stop writing though his finances prevented it, was chiefly a mechanical writer, churning out copy for the magazines.³² Marryat sometimes claimed to think of novels in similar terms. In 'On Novels and Novel Writing', for instance, he explains that 'as surely as certain data produce certain results in mathematics, so surely will certain causes produce certain effects in morals'.³³ However, while Marryat's repetitions can seem as involuntary and tasteless as those of Miss Revel's gut, they may also tell us something about the kinds of experience permitted by the sea, and about the sort of writing the sea permitted Marryat and other writers.

Seasickness was a standard feature of innumerable other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travellers' tales. The scene of seasickness was a *necessary* scene, the inclusion of which long preceded, and long outlasted, Marryat. Think of Byron's quip in *Don Juan*, 'No doubt he would have been much more pathetic, / But the sea acted as a strong emetic', a malady for which the poet has his own prescription: 'The best of remedies is a beef-steak / Against sea-sickness; try it, sir, before / You sneer'.³⁴ Later,

³² See Florence Marryat, *Life and Letters*, 2:30.

³³ Frederick Marryat, 'On Novels and Novel Writing', *The Metropolitan Magazine* 11 (October 1834): 114.

³⁴ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, 7 vols, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–93), vol. 5 (1986), p. 95, canto 2, stanza 21, lines 167–68; p. 93, canto 2, stanza 131, lines 101–03.

Trollope's account of his experiences aboard a vessel becalmed en route to Cien Fuegos in 1859 duplicates the sound-effects Marryat was fond of:

Motionless, I said: I wish she were. Progressless should have been my word. She rolls about in a nauseous manner, disturbing the two sardines which I have economically eaten, till I begin to fear that my friend's generosity [in giving the fish] will become altogether futile. [...] Flap, flap, flap! roll, roll, roll! The time passes in this way very tediously. [...] There is none of the excitement of danger, for the land is within a mile of us; none of the exhaustion of work, for there is nothing to do. Of pork and biscuits and water there is, I believe, plenty.³⁵

Trollope may have in mind Byron's apostrophe to the ocean from the fourth canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which urges perpetual return by inscribing it in the circling back of a poetic line: 'Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean—roll!'.³⁶ In this case, the heightened emotions of romance return as an image of monotony. Seasickness suits a narrative such as Trollope's, which turns on the spot like his 'progressless' vessel: the ailment matches the rolling circularity of passing time not just to the rolling of the waves beneath the ship, but also to the turning of Trollope's own stomach. The remainder of Byron's stanza denies man's capacity to influence the sea:

Man marks the earth with ruin—his control
Stops with the shore;—upon the watery plain
The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain
A shadow of man's ravage, save his own,
When for a moment, like a drop of rain,
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,
Without a grave, unknell'd, uncoffin'd, and unknown.³⁷

However, such staunch finality is undercut by the way in which parts of a poem may stick in the mind or throat, coming readily to the lips of someone writing about the sea years later in a second sort of 'bubbling groan'.

³⁵ Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (London: Trollope Society, 1994), 1:2–6.

³⁶ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in *Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 2 (1980), p. 184, canto 4, stanza 179, line 1603.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 184, canto 4, stanza 179, lines 1605–11.

Other travellers showed less candid awareness of the convention they adopted. Consider Charlotte Brontë's account of Lucy Snowe's journey to the continent in *Villette* (1853): "'Shall you be sea-sick?' 'Shall you?' 'Oh, immensely! as soon as ever we get in sight of the sea'". Compare, too, Dickens in his *American Notes* (1842): 'Not sea-sick, be it understood, in the ordinary acceptation of the term: I wish I had been: but in a form which I have never seen or heard described, though I have not doubt it is very common'.³⁸ Dickens's remark certainly has more relevance to his exceptional powers of description than it does to what he described, since he would have been able to read accounts of seasickness in almost any travel narrative of the day including, of course, Marryat's *Diary*. (A journalist spotted Marryat's other travelogue, his *Diary in America*, published in 1839, in Dickens's study prior to his journey.)³⁹ Unlike Marryat, however, most writers did not acknowledge the conventionality of their comical scenes of shipboard nausea; it was simply what happened to passengers as soon as the ropes were cast off.

In 1840, Marryat republished his *Diary on the Continent*, along with miscellaneous other stories, plays, and articles taken from his magazine writings, in *Olla Podrida*. (This volume, which takes its name from a highly spiced and miscellaneous Spanish stew, is a fitting representation of Marryat's literary technique as well as the contents of the volume—the *OED* has *olla-podrida-ish* meaning 'heterogeneous, diverse' in the 1820s—and perhaps also an apt name for a book often concerned with nausea.)⁴⁰ Included were a set of satires: 'How to Write a Fashionable Novel', 'How to Write a Romance', and 'How to Write a Book of Travels', in which Marryat emphasises his awareness of the conventions of the how-to genre. In the latter essay, he shows us a fictional travel writer,

³⁸ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56; Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation*, ed. Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 2000), 21.

³⁹ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), 337. Donald Hawes argues that Dickens's book shows too much 'freshness' to have been influenced by Marryat's. 'Marryat and Dickens: A Personal and Literary Relationship', *Dickens Studies Annual* 2 (1972): 44.

⁴⁰ *OED*, 3rd ed., 2003, s.v. 'olla podrida, n.'

Ansard, bumbling his way through ‘Travels up the Rhine in the year 18—’. Ansard has been commissioned to write this account despite the fact that his personal travels ‘have never extended farther than the Lincoln’s Inn Coffee House for my daily food, and a walk to Hampstead on Sunday’.⁴¹ He receives a visit and some advice from Barnstaple, a worldly friend.

B. You arrive at Dovor (mind you spell it Dovor)—go to bed tired and reflective—embark early the next morning—a rough passage —

A. And sea-sick, of course?

B. No, Ansard, there I’ll give you proof of my tact—you sha’n’t be sea-sick.

A. But I’m sure I should be.

B. All travellers are, and all fill up a page or two with complaints, *ad nauseam*—for that reason sick you shall not be. Observe—to your astonishment you are not sea-sick—the other passengers suffer dreadfully; one young dandy puffs furiously at a cigar in bravado, until he sends it over the side, like an arrow from the blow-pipe of a South American Indian. Introduce a husband with a pretty wife—he jealous as a dog, until he is sick as a cat—your attentions—she pillowed on your arms, while he hangs over the lee gunwale—her gratitude—safe arrivals at Calais—sweet smiles of the lady—sullen deportment of the gentleman—a few hints—and draw the veil. Do you understand?

A. Perfectly. I can manage all that.

B. Then when you put your foot on shore, you must, for the first time, *feel sea-sick*.

A. On shore?

B. Yes; reel about, not able to stand—every symptom as if on board. Express your surprise at the strange effect, pretend not to explain it, leave that to medical men, it being sufficient for you to state the *fact* [...]. That will be a great hit for your first chapter. You reverse the order of things. (HT, 205–06)

The conventions of travel writing, the limits of knowledge and mobility, and the hunger for facts from abroad are mocked, but the balance of repetition and reversal (‘all travellers’, ‘you reverse the order of things’) is at the heart of Marryat’s satire. In terms similar to those of Ricoeur, Gillian Beer describes the way in which veracity might be indistinguishable from verisimilitude in a traveller’s tale. Both are founded upon the ‘survival’ of the narrator: ‘the narrator is *here* to tell it in retrospect even as the reader sets

⁴¹ Frederick Marryat, ‘How to Write a Book of Travels’, in *Olla Podrida*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: J. M. Dent, 1896), 200.

out on the journey. That double motion offers reassurance.⁴² Marryat is indeed fascinated by the way that a paradigmatic form like the one Beer describes can seem at once artificial and authentic. Barnstaple assures Ansard that his book will possess ‘all the appearance of reality’, a phrase that blends two opposing categories into near synonymy (HT, 207). It is appropriate, then, that Marryat echoes the 1830 review quoted above, page 78, in which *The King’s Own* was similarly said to generate the ‘appearance of reality’.

The repeated phrase produces both a sense of certainty about how to create such an appearance, and an awareness of the conventions of representation involved. As Barnstaple knows, cases in which convention comes with internal justification heighten this effect of undecidability. Seasickness, he implies, establishes the authenticity of the voyage narrative, paradoxically, because it is a convention of the genre, and therefore exactly what readers expect. If seasickness is an appropriate topic for reiteration, however, it also suggests something about Marryat’s attitude toward repetition—a writer’s reflex that is too easily compared to physical reflux. Bearing this in mind, it becomes hard to escape the conclusion that Marryat was simply being careless when he printed his how-to alongside his *Diary* in *Olla Podrida*. The reader’s queasy double vision brought on by such a pairing leads to the impression that Marryat’s repetitions somehow run counter to authorial intent, overtaking his text rather as a traveller’s body might be overtaken by retching. Nevertheless, the original ambiguity persists. There is a dissonance between Marryat’s mockery of the compositional habits that made descriptions of seasickness inevitable in nineteenth-century travel narrative, and the fact that the compulsion gets the better of him. However, in the context of a channel crossing, authorial carelessness and a need to report the circumstances aboard ship seem like equally viable ways of explaining his repetitions.

⁴² Beer, *Open Fields*, 55.

Some critics have drawn particular attention to the repetitive quality of Marryat's novels. Brantlinger, for instance, writes that 'these stories are alike in their essential features'.⁴³ Not only are Marryat's novels alike, in his opinion, but they are not significantly distinguished from other novels in the genre he helped to inaugurate: 'Marryat's novels', Brantlinger continues, 'set the pattern for the imperialist adventure fiction', so much so that any number of novels including 'Chamier's *Ben Brace* (1836), *Jack Adams* (1838), and *Tom Bowling* (1841) might have been the focus of this chapter' in place of Marryat's. He means to dismiss Marryat on account of the repetitive quality of his work, and in many ways Brantlinger's appraisal is accurate. However, the terms in which Brantlinger expresses his disapproval muddy the waters slightly. The patterning of Marryat's novels, he thinks, swamps individuality: 'character shrinks to a semaphore, a signal code of stereotypic traits [...] the hero is he who can swim with the tide of events, which threatens at every moment to overwhelm selfhood'.⁴⁴ And yet, to 'swim with the tide', as Brantlinger says, is a model of repetitive writing or behaviour that is surely appropriate to writing about the sea.

In fact, Marryat frequently imagines his writing being subjected to comparable forces. Scenes of pelagic writing fill the novel that 'set the pattern' for Marryat's own fiction, his first-written (though second-published) work *The King's Own* (1830).⁴⁵ 'I am seated in the after-cabin of a vessel', Marryat writes, 'endowed with as liberal a share of motion as any in his Majesty's service: whilst I write I am holding on by the table, my legs entwined in the lashings underneath, and I can barely manage to keep my position before my manuscript' (*KO*, 160–61). A few chapters later he resumes the subject: 'Reader, let us look at home. Shall I, now thoughtlessly riding upon the agitated billow, with but one thin plank between me and death, and yet so busy with this futile work, be permitted to

⁴³ Brantlinger, 'Bringing Up the Empire', 49.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 49, 50.

⁴⁵ For an explanation of this chronology, see Brimley Johnson, prefatory note to Marryat, *King's Own*, viii.

bring it to a close? The hand which guides this flowing pen may to-morrow be stiff' (208).

Ruskin's admiration for the ship's form stimulates his remarks on the subject of planks in *Harbours of England*:

It grows under his [the shipwright's] hand into the image of a sea-shell; the seal, as it were, of the flowing of the great tides and streams of ocean stamped on its delicate rounding. [...] It is simple work, but it will keep out water. And every plank thenceforward is a Fate, and has men's lives wreathed in the knots of it, as the cloth-yard that had their deaths in its plumes. (14)

In Marryat's work, however, the craft of shipbuilding is like the craft of novel-writing: 'I have proceeded to write this book', he says near the novel's close, 'as I should do if I had to build a ship. [...] And now that she is afloat, I must candidly acknowledge that I am not exactly pleased with her' (*KO*, 377–78). If Marryat found that the sea's 'motion' interfered with composition, he responded by trying to devise a form of writing that would 'keep water out'. Each page may be a plank to help the book through 'the sea of public opinion' (378) but, as Marryat's metaphor makes clear, it is also a response to the pressures of his subject.

The reader of Marryat's fiction might, therefore, be encouraged to reflect more carefully on the writer's repetitions, considering that Marryat's novels are in many cases defined by their connection to the sea. Frequently the sea, or the form of the sea voyage, is deemed to be a relatively inflexible arbiter not only of a text's symbolism, but also of its narrative structure. As Tanner puts it, 'what you often find [...] is a kind of moody, metaphysical brooding on the obvious analogue of voyage and life'.⁴⁶ The shape of a voyage, which repeatedly structures novels set at sea, is itself a model of repetition which will inform my discussion of *The Phantom Ship* later in this chapter. The voyage narrative could, however, also induce more intimate forms of repetition, like the repeated scenes of

⁴⁶ Tanner, introduction to *Oxford Sea Stories*, xiv.

seasickness discussed in this section. *Newton Forster*, *Peter Simple*, the *Diary on the Continent*, and 'How to Write a Book of Travels', which were all written between 1832 and 1838, circle back on each other, retracing each other's steps. Linking them are severed body parts, vomiting women, doctors with dubious motives and qualifications, and fat pork: a set of repetitions made to seem like a natural response to the sea.

Myself again

Marryat's tendency to repeat is not always, as it is in the case of seasickness, connected to the sea. I have suggested that, while Marryat's repetitions might demonstrate the poverty of his imagination, in certain cases the sea itself offers a rival explanation. In this section I consider a motif more ambiguously connected to the sea than seasickness: resurrection. I argue that in most cases the figure recalled to life in the novels is Marryat himself, and furthermore, that the durability of Marryat as a figure in his own fiction responded to a nineteenth-century wish for myths of enduring heroism. This section concludes by examining a scenario from *The Naval Officer; or, Scenes and Adventures in the Life of Frank Mildmay* (1829), in which the sea seems more directly to bring about a man's return from the dead, supplying an intradiegetic cause distinct from the author's preoccupation with his own life.

We know hardly anything about Marryat apart from what he tells us in his novels; even Marryat's daughter, Florence, in her *Life and Letters of Captain Marryat* (1872), treats his novels as an authoritative record of the events of his life. Marryat does not offer us two versions of himself. Instead, he encourages us to read the events of his novels in two ways: one fictional, one autobiographical. Often he does this by making us read the same thing twice. Like the nausea that levels passengers aboard a channel steamer, the

events of a life, on revisitation, can have a double effect: repeating a memory to yourself can bring the past closer and solidify it, but it is also a way of self-mythologising and distancing the past through selection and emphasis. Beer writes that ‘the romance gives repetitive form to the particular desires of a community’, but the converse might be equally true: repetitive form can give rise to romance.⁴⁷ Repetition is the form of memory, but it is also the form of myth. This duality describes the perturbed relationship every individual has with memories that can seem both to anchor an identity and to be the elusive phantasms of previous lives. The presentation of Marryat’s memories in his novels seemed to Conrad to be defined by the presence of the sea, which marks with apparent clarity a line between fable and fact. Thus far, we have considered Marryat’s repetitions primarily as a narrative strategy reflective of the sea’s particular demands, but the Captain’s personal history has also played an important role in the reception of his books.

Let us examine some examples of the peculiar difficulty involved in separating fiction from personal history in Marryat’s case. In *The King’s Own*, Captain M— looks down upon a calm sea where he sees the moon and the stars reflected: ‘Captain M— [...] continued leaning over the rail of the entering-port, in silent contemplation of the glassy wave’ (160). M— is a cipher for both Marryat himself and for Lord Cochrane, Marryat’s first captain aboard the *Imperieuse*. In his eyes, the surface of the sea is a threshold that marks the boundary between life and death. While the land sees its share of tragedy, the sea is insatiable, and claims men in the ‘prime of life, and joyous heart—high beating pulse, and energy of soul—active bodies, and more active minds’ (*KO*, 160). Observing himself reflected there amidst the stars, Captain M— wonders if he has gained some insight into his own heroic fate. This seriousness is a little much for Marryat, though, and he wrenches the reader out of the scene and back to a cabin aboard another ship, with its

⁴⁷ Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970), 13.

decks submerged. Marryat's unstable state causes him to reflect on his early days at sea, and on his future. He remembers seeing Nelson's funeral and thinking at the time that 'death could have no terrors, if followed by such a funeral', but writes that he is 'not now exactly of the same opinion'. He concludes that he would like to be remembered as 'anything but Captain' (*KO*, 162). The irony and humour of this, to which Marryat is not wholly inattentive, is that he is busy building just such a monument to himself.

Captain Marryat and Captain M— mirror each other because Marryat uses M— as he uses all his heroes: to contemplate his own past and future. As I note above, levelling preoccupied Marryat throughout his literary career, and this trope is visually repeated in Captain M—'s name, which trails off into an image of the still sea, and may also lead us to reflect upon death's levelling effects. A few chapters earlier, Marryat uses a dash in similar fashion: 'a dive into—' (*KO*, 198). This may imply a non-specificity of the kind created by too many reiterations, itself a form of oblivion: such lacunae conventionally denote a memory either too private to print or to articulate, and represent at once the most specific form of naming available, and a refusal to fix on a single subject.

In the prefatory note to *Frank Mildmay*, which readers might assume is partly autobiographical given another play with naming (the protagonist's initials), Marryat addresses the reader and is oddly particular about how true one ought to take his novel to be. 'As we happen to be in the communicative vein', he writes,

it may be well to remark that, being written in the autobiographical style, it was asserted by good-natured friends, and believed in general, that [*Frank Mildmay*] was the history of the author's own life. Now, without pretending to have been better than we should have been in our earlier days, we do most solemnly assure the public, that had we run the career of vice of the hero of *The Naval Officer*, at all events we should have had sufficient sense of shame not to have avowed it. (*FM*, ix)

He goes on: ‘Except the hero and heroine, and those parts of it, as a novel, the work in itself is materially true, especially in the narrative of sea adventure, most of which did (to the best of our recollection) occur to the author’ (ix–x). One of the events he had in mind occurred when he was a midshipman, and is described by Florence in her *Life and Letters*. Once, in the Bay of Arcasson (Arcachon), on the coast of France, Marryat was ordered to accompany a boarding party in an attempt to take a French vessel. ‘The lieutenant in command was shot dead’, Florence tells us, ‘and Marryat, who was close behind him, being knocked down by his corpse and trampled upon by the rest in their eagerness to revenge the death of their leader, was left on the ground insensible’.⁴⁸ Later, after the ship has been captured, the dead and wounded are examined. Marryat is still alive, but barely conscious. One of Marryat’s rivals, probably Mr Midshipman Henry Cobbett (who had fulfilled his famous father’s wish to become a sailor), comes to gloat over his body, sneering: ‘here is a young cock that has done crowing! Well, for a wonder, this chap has cheated the gallows’.⁴⁹ This revives Marryat enough to croak out ‘you’re a liar’, which, in Florence’s retelling, everyone within earshot finds hilarious. The anecdote ends with all laughing at Cobbett’s expense.

To anyone acquainted with Marryat’s writings, this will be a familiar incident, because the account Florence gives us is taken word for word from *Frank Mildmay*. Florence admits that she faced great difficulties in writing the *Life and Letters*. As she says, Marryat’s ‘contemporaries are either dead or scattered, his correspondence (which was voluminous and well worth preserving) is mostly lost or destroyed’ and, as it has been a quarter of a century since he died, the memories themselves have become faint.⁵⁰ We might assume, in this case, that Florence has some external guarantee of this tale’s authenticity. Perhaps Marryat told her outright that what he had written in *Frank Mildmay*

⁴⁸ Florence Marryat, *Life and Letters*, 2:33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:36.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, viii. For the original of this account, see *Frank Mildmay*, 64–65.

was true, or perhaps he simply told the story frequently enough for it to become accepted by his family as the veritable lore of his life.

The reader of Marryat's novels is offered a similar sort of confirmation, because a version of this scene is repeated, not just in the Quid episode of *Frank Mildmay*, which I discuss in detail below, and in *The Phantom Ship*, but in many others. Cain, the Byronic antihero of *The Pirate and the Three Cutters* (1836), 'reappears from the grave' to torment Hawkhurst who 'imagined the appearance of Cain to be supernatural'. Chapter 46 of *Japhet in Search of a Father* (1836) concerns an incident in which Japhet finds himself 'under ground but not yet dead and buried—The prospect anything but pleasant'.⁵¹ The eponymous hero of *Mr Midshipman Easy* (1836) disappears from his ship for weeks at one point, and when he finally returns, he confronts Vigors, this novel's version of Cobbett, who believes him to be a ghost: 'Impressed with the idea that the re-appearance was supernatural, [Vigors] uttered a yell and fell down in a fit'.⁵² *Snarleyyow* interminably reiterates comparable scenes of resurrection. Smallbones, and his canine familiar Snarleyyow are both killed several times and invariably turn out to be 'alive, a'ter being dead and buried'. Even Marryat's own editor is moved to comment that 'the numerous escapes [...] become a little wearisome by repetition' in this case.⁵³ Marryat's returns to such scenes of resurrection in his novels lead us (along with every one of Marryat's biographers) to trust Florence.

Another example is just as rife with resurrections: many of the significant characters in *Peter Simple* are presumed dead at one point, but are then restored to life. A man is 'galvanized' with a battery and his body automatically performs its most habitual action: taking snuff (*PS*, 298). O'Brien is at one point seen 'dead and buried' in the sand,

⁵¹ Frederick Marryat, *The Pirate*, in *Olla Podrida*, ed. Johnson, 498–99; Frederick Marryat, *Japhet in Search of a Father*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: J. M. Dent, 1896), 234.

⁵² Frederick Marryat, *Mr Midshipman Easy* (1836), ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: J. M. Dent, 1896), 145.

⁵³ Frederick Marryat, *Snarleyyow; or, The Dog Fiend*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: J. M. Dent, 1896), 255; Johnson, introduction to Marryat, *Snarleyyow*, vii.

having been run through the body with a sword (96). Fortunately a woman trips over his protruding nose, digs him up, and nurses him back to health. Chucks is apparently killed while wearing the captain's jacket, but is later discovered, resurrected as Count Shuckston by virtue of his mistaken rank. Peter himself experiences several deaths and resurrections. During the extended episode of his escape from a French prison with O'Brien, he dresses in the clothes of a dead girl whom he and O'Brien find frozen in the snow. Then, with an odd glance at Little Red Riding Hood, a wolf appears and frightens Peter into a tree while O'Brien is away in search of provisions. (Peter escapes after some hunters pass by and shoot the wolf.) When O'Brien returns, he mistakes the wolf's blood for Peter's, and weeps for his loss. Later, Peter is presumed drowned, but returns to find Captain Hawkins scurrilously auctioning his trousers at the mast. Marryat often offers a riddling version of these resurrections in chapter headings: 'Mr Chucks is mistaken – He dies like a gentleman' (*PS*, 280); 'O'Brien pathetically mourns my death and finds me alive' (203); 'The dead man attends the auction of his own effects' (472). On one hand, each repetition lessens the tiny burst of suspense that is produced as the reader waits to discover what exactly Marryat means: a law of diminishing returns to counterbalance the multiplication of heroic textual returns. But, on the other hand, the repetitions sharpen and heighten our sense of recall, and we take pleasure and reassurance in a repetitive form, as we do in the familiar form of a riddle or fairy tale.

The fascination Marryat had for old haunts, in literature and in life, is perhaps in keeping with the nostalgic tenor of thought that persisted in various forms throughout the nineteenth century. A life such as Marryat's could be the subject of much more than personal nostalgia. The lives of his protagonists responded to a deep and shared nostalgic longing for individual heroism. Byron declares 'I want a hero' at the opening of *Don Juan*, and Matthew Arnold suggests the persistence of this anxiety some thirty years later

in the preface to his *Poems* (1853), arguing for the solace derived from the ‘contemplation of some noble action of a heroic time’.⁵⁴ At a time when Carlyle, Mill, and Froude, among others, were announcing the worrying dearth of ‘great men’, Marryat offered figures of reassurance who were, oddly for us, but compellingly for Marryat’s contemporaries, ‘at once amusing as caricature and as real as [a] living [person]’.⁵⁵

As Tim Fulford has observed, ‘Marryat’s novels succeeded not least because they developed the techniques that had made Southey’s *Life of Nelson* popular’.⁵⁶ The development and persistence in the nineteenth century of a minor craze for the biographies of naval men such as Marryat attests to Fulford’s point. C. I. Hamilton notes that ‘in the catalogue of the National Maritime Museum there are listed some 135 biographies of British naval men—sailors and officers—plus 28 of Nelson, published in Britain between 1830 and 1914’.⁵⁷ One characteristic of nineteenth-century writing, Buckley asserts, is that it was imbued with a ‘habit of reminiscence’, fuelled by a sense that ‘a recovery of the past [...] might achieve such a faith in the integrity of the self as would prepare [one] to bear the greater burdens of the future’.⁵⁸ Marryat’s repetitions enhance the reader’s sense that a single, real memory or consciousness underwrites his fictions, which can seem like the filigreed representation of the harder, brighter truth of Marryat’s own heroic life—a reassuring certainty for readers who felt themselves drifting in an increasingly atomised age. Woolf writes that ‘often in a shallow book, when we wake, we wake to nothing at all; but here when we wake, we wake to the presence of a personage’.⁵⁹ Houghton observes that ‘if the saving message’ of a heroic life ‘made a supernatural belief, whether orthodox

⁵⁴ Byron, *Don Juan*, p. 9, canto 1, stanza 1, line 1; Matthew Arnold, ‘Preface to First Edition of *Poems* (1853)’, in *On the Classical Tradition*, vol. 1 of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 14.

⁵⁵ James Hannay, ‘Sea Novels: Captain Marryat’, *The Cornhill Magazine* 27 (February 1873): 187.

⁵⁶ Tim Fulford ‘Romanticizing the Empire: The Naval Heroes of Southey, Coleridge, Austen, and Marryat’, *MLQ* 60 (1999): 190.

⁵⁷ C. I. Hamilton, ‘Naval Hagiography and the Victorian Hero’, *The Historical Journal* 23 (1980): 382.

⁵⁸ Buckley, *Triumph of Time*, 95–96.

⁵⁹ Woolf, ‘Captain’s Death Bed’, 70.

or liberal, credible to an anxious Victorian, the gratitude could easily become infinite admiration'.⁶⁰ Indeed, Marryat's novels were often read precisely because of the sense they gave that, in the veins of repetition shot through his work, it was possible to get a glimpse of Marryat himself.

There may of course be a less positive side to such ready investment of an author's personality in his work. The *New Monthly* attributed this to Marryat's repetitions. 'It is [the] uniformity in the *canvas*', the magazine surmised, 'that has probably begotten the idea that Captain Marryat steals from himself'.⁶¹ The language here shows that the reviewer thought that, by translating the events of his life into narrative, Marryat rifled and cheapened his stock of selfhood. Repetition always carries the risk of degradation. However, an alternative still remains behind the magazine's account of Marryat's authorial practices, for it is also possible that Marryat and his readers stole away to sea in novels as a means of steeling themselves, or bracing themselves against the complexities of lived reality. For many, a sense of Marryat's humanity somehow justified the hardness of the varnish that kept his fictions and memories in contact with each other.

Marryat positions his biography between two effects of repetition, and in this way navigates a line between the ideal and the real, just as *Frank Mildmay's* subtitle—*The Naval Officer*—could refer to an individual or a type. Marryat attempts to strike a balance between what might be supernatural, the story of a man brought back from the dead, and what was credible, the story of a life brought back from the sea by a heroic captain. The motif of resurrection, only one of Marryat's repetitive forms, sweeps up many of his major characters within it and binds them to his unique personality. In this way, Marryat tries to hold both self and mythic heroism in suspension. The sea proves an ideal medium for this gesture, offering at once a location and a condition whereby the kinds of repetition that

⁶⁰ Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, 311.

⁶¹ 'Captain Marryat, the Sea Novelist', *New Monthly Magazine* 48 (October 1836): 230.

form the foundation of romance can and should be thought of as absolutely natural. Marryat's repetitious stories weigh autobiography against myth, and discover that they could well be equal. If, however, the levelling effects of Marryat's repetitions could be explained by the fact that, as Conrad remarks, Marryat's books represent 'a shining monument of memories', the outcome of his 'character', rather than his 'art', at other times the sea seemed to offer an equally viable explanation (TS, 46). I shall now consider one final resurrection in which the author is not so plainly in evidence.

The concept that things are subject to their own gravity, especially while at sea, is pervasive in Marryat's novels. 'Why am I no longer ambitious?', Marryat asks; 'Once I was, but t'was when I was young and foolish [...] Now I am old and fat and there is something in fat which chokes or destroys ambition. It would appear that it is requisite for the body to be active and springing as the mind; and if it is not, it weighs the latter down to its own gravity' (NF, 298). Seasickness is not the only leveller in evidence. As Marryat puts it in *Frank Mildmay*, 'everybody and everything finds its level in a man-of-war' (25). Hamilton-Paterson explains Marryat's metaphor.

By the end of the eighteenth century scientists knew perfectly well that water, unlike air, can scarcely be compressed at all. Even under great pressure the density of water changes little, certainly not enough to alter its viscosity much [...] Yet an extraordinary theory survived this knowledge, lasting well into the twentieth century. It held that as pressure increased with depth, seawater grew more and more solid until a point was reached beyond which a sinking object could sink no further. Thus, somewhere in the middle regions of the great abyss, there existed "floors" on which objects gathered according to their weight. Cannon, anchors and barrels of nails would sink lower than wooden ships, which in turn would lie beneath drowned sailors who themselves lay at slightly different levels one from another, depending on their relative stoutness, the clothes they were wearing and, quite possibly, the weight of their sins. This notion was reflected in the old saying "Jack will find his own level".⁶²

⁶² Hamilton-Paterson, *Seven-Tenths*, 169–70.

If nausea and death were prime levellers, the sea could offer a corresponding physics of levelling actually enacted beneath the ship, one that sorted people according to physical and moral weight. The sea allowed concepts of who and what you were to dissolve into each other.

Marryat puts this model of fate into practice in *Frank Mildmay*, where he describes the death of Quid, ‘an old seaman who had destroyed himself by drinking’, who is thrown overboard with shot tied to his feet to help him find his level (113). That evening, as Frank walks the deck contemplating ‘the funeral service which I had heard read over him—“I am the resurrection and the life”’, Quid appears to rise from the dead. Frank looks over the side and sees him ‘perfectly upright and floating with the head and shoulders above water’ (*FM*, 113). Frank at first believes it to be a warning, but soon realises that Quid’s reappearance can be ‘easily accounted for. Bodies decomposing from putridity, generate a quantity of gas, which swells them up to an enormous size, and renders them buoyant’ (114). Some deft work darting a boat-hook into Quid’s abdomen allows the gas to escape ‘with a loud whiz’ (115). ‘Many jokes were passed’ (we probably should not suspect Marryat of punning here), but Frank is overwhelmed and thinks he might like to return home (115). Quid is at once a peculiarity (a man of curious quiddities) and, as the Latin root of his name suggests, anyone or ‘anything’.⁶³ Apparently metaphors of fate, when they are repeated in reality, might just as easily turn out to be bad jokes as warnings. But the current flows both ways: perhaps, as Marryat’s invocation of the funeral service suggests, the tide of matter contained some vestige of fate or intention, too.

Half of Marryat’s interest in Quid’s floating corpse is explained earlier in the novel. Frank ‘liked to judge causes and effects’, and soon becomes emotionally inured to the spectacle of violence that is life aboard ship (*FM*, 44). He loves ‘the deep investigation

⁶³ *OED*, 3rd ed., 2007, s.v. ‘quid, n.1.’

of hidden things', and yearns for a 'clear insight into the anatomy of the human frame' (45). These things are fascinating, but also 'corrupt' Frank's mind because he begins to look on them with a carelessness rooted in 'habit'. Quid's reappearance could be seen in this quotidian light as yet one more insight gained into a body 'emitt[ing] certain effluvia'; it is characteristic that, after the fact, Marryat explains that the occurrence could be 'easily accounted for' (113). But Frank's shock, his urge to leave the ship altogether, indicates that such an account does not amount to the whole story.

Frank's reaction to Quid's reappearance in *Frank Mildmay* could be compared to the child's in Freud's well-known account of the *fort-da* game. At first Freud's child (his grandson) only plays 'gone'. He then discovers a 'wooden reel with some string tied around it' which allows him to retrieve the toy, bringing the game fully into being.⁶⁴ According to Freud, the appeal of the *fort-da* game is associated with its repetition. Eventually the child comes to believe in his own capacity to make *fort* ('gone') produce *da* ('Here!'), a process commensurate with the development of the independent ego. The game's pleasure is connected to the child's feeling that the world is responsive to his wishes, the same sensation experienced by Frank Mildmay. Freud's thread could be seen as a figure of fate or providence or, at the time when Marryat was writing, a set of 'natural laws' or 'minute causes', just beyond the horizon of human optics.⁶⁵ That the putrefaction of the corpse occurred as a result of Quid's sin of drunkenness, a particular bugbear of Marryat's, suggests that, at the same time as the reappearance of Quid's body is easily explained, we should also read judgement back into the minute causes that comprise this explanation. The work of memory, or accounting, that Frank and Marryat engage in together does not explain these coincidences away: it emphasises them by naturalising them.

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (London: Penguin, 2003), 53.

⁶⁵ Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 12, 111.

These repetitions—Quid’s reappearance, Frank’s murmured repetition of the funeral service—duplicate each other and suggest, as Alain Corbin puts it, ‘the fleeting experience of a synchronicity between the world and the self’.⁶⁶ Although Frank casts his mind back across such meaningless causes as an excess of gas in a man’s gut, for the reader nothing need be, or should be, omitted because all details can be and are accommodated to the final effect. Hillis Miller has a narrative theory of repetition comparable to Freud’s psychological one:

This form is the personification, concretely presented in the lives and minds of the characters, of the basic metaphysical beliefs which have been instinctive to mankind for millennia: belief in origin, end, and an underlying ground making similarities identities, belief in the literal truth of the trope of personification or prosopopoeia.⁶⁷

The frisson Frank experiences when he thinks that he has summoned Quid from the dead with the words of the funeral service is an example of this kind of uncanny magic. The various registers of Marryat’s repetitions—religious, textual, gastrointestinal—suggest a system, but also hint that the precise functioning of this system is obscure. While Marryat’s resurrections seem in most cases to signal the return of his narratives to their source in memory, in the case of Quid’s reappearance, the sea interposes itself, permitting Frank momentarily to view the material facts of his life as metaphor.

Vanderdecken’s message home

Marryat wrote in his diary while still a midshipman aboard the *Imperieuse* that ‘the day

⁶⁶ Corbin, *Lure of the Sea*, 141.

⁶⁷ Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*, 15. The *OED* defines *prosopopoeia* as a ‘rhetorical device by which an imaginary, absent, or dead person is represented as speaking or acting’. *OED*, 3rd ed., 2007, s.v. ‘prosopopoeia, n.’, sense 1.

that passed without a shot being fired in anger, was with us a blank day'.⁶⁸ The snatches of Marryat's personal log books reprinted by Florence reproduce this emphasis on action:

1806. Dec 16th. Anchored off Isle Dieu, with a prize.
 — 19th. Engaged a battery, and took two prizes.
 — 25th. Engaged a battery, and received a shot in the counter.
 1807 January 2nd. Stove the cutter and Henry Christian drowned.
 — 6th. Took a galiot; blew up ditto.
 — 8th. Trying to get a prize off that was ashore, lost five men.⁶⁹

Brantlinger says that Marryat's fiction so consistently stresses action that 'all other moments leading up to and away from it are troughs, blank periods',⁷⁰ making his novels as repetitive as his logbook. Time continues in both, but neither Marryat's concerns, nor the structure of his narratives, changes. Occasionally, however, the literal repetitions of Marryat's stories caused him to ruminate on metaphorical and even metaphysical forms of repeating. In the case of Quid's apparent resurrection, the sea's tendency to modulate between figurative and literal significance in a text, between the weight of sins and actual, physical bulk, encouraged Marryat to think in such an uncharacteristic way. In *The Phantom Ship* (1839), Marryat makes extensive use of the return from the dead as a motif and a structuring metaphor. He thus addresses one of the problems of voyage narrative in general (its repetitive structure), by developing a connection between the form of his narrative and its themes.

The protagonist of *The Phantom Ship* is Philip Vanderdecken, a man compelled to seek his father, who has been cursed to sail around the Cape of Good Hope 'UNTIL THE DAY OF JUDGEMENT' because of his blasphemous 'defiance of storm and seas, of lightning, of heaven, or of hell' (12).⁷¹ A letter delivered by the cursed sailor to Philip's mother explains that Philip must seek the *Flying Dutchman*, and return a cross that accompanies

⁶⁸ Florence Marryat, *Life and Letters*, 1:19.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:22.

⁷⁰ Brantlinger, 'Bringing Up the Empire', 52.

⁷¹ Frederick Marryat, *The Phantom Ship*, ed. Brimley Johnson (London: J. M. Dent, 1896), 12.

the letter. What really interests Marryat, however, is not the elder Vanderdecken's sins. Indeed, the curse itself would have seemed quaintly antique to Marryat and his readers—reminiscent of a pre-modern era when, as Auden puts it in *The Enchafèd Flood*, 'the sea [was] no place to be if you [could] help it, and to try to cross it betray[ed] a rashness bordering on hubris'. Auden reminds us that the Dantean or Tennysonian Ulysses who yearns to return to the sea diverges sharply from his classical counterpart, who would have been 'much relieved' if he could have avoided voyaging altogether.⁷²

Instead, the narrative is built around a series of increasingly dire shipwrecks from which Philip escapes and returns to his clairvoyant wife, Amine. When he arrives home for the first time, Philip inadvertently repeats the scene in which his dead father appeared to his mother, climbing through the window into Amine's arms. She believes him to be a ghost and, in order to assure her that this is not so, Philip shares the story of his return with her. Such consolation is integral to an internal dynamics of repetition—departure and return—that Beer calls 'a record of survival'.⁷³ The novel grows by adding up Philip's accounts, where he explains how and why he has managed his return. The thread of narrative drawing the wrecked sailor home is a model of memory, and a type of fate. On one hand, Philip has a splendid destiny—his returns, which the structure of the novel assures, are a blessing. Amine thinks Philip's position an enviable one: 'You are selected to fulfil a great and glorious work—the work of angels, I may say—that of redeeming the soul of a father [...]; you have, indeed, an object of pursuit worthy of all the hardships and dangers of a maritime life [...] Yes, Philip, I envy you!' (*Ph.S.*, 281). On the other hand, the notion that the end of this tale has been foretold (in the ghostly letter), raises familiar concerns about the place of free will. 'Free-will!' Amine exclaims in a moment of doubt, 'why, if it were not destiny it were tyranny' (171).

⁷² Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood*, 19, 17.

⁷³ Beer, *Open Fields*, 55.

Given that the novel, like Philip's fate, develops along pre-plotted lines, Marryat's original readers may have shared something of Amine's exasperation. The motif of the ghost ship was common currency by the time Marryat's book appeared. Indeed, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), and Poe's 'M.S. Found in a Bottle' (1833) are only the most prominent uses of the myth—there were numerous others. Edward Fitzball, who had made a name for himself adapting Cooper's novels, staged the nautical melodrama *The Flying Dutchman; or, The Phantom Ship* at the Adelphi in 1826, in which sailor-turned-actor T. P. Cooke played the ghostly Vanderdecken.⁷⁴ Fitzball acknowledge that he had based his work on the short narrative 'Vanderdecken's Message Home; or, The Tenacity of Natural Affection', published in *Blackwood's* the year before, which Marryat certainly read. (*Blackwood's* republished Fitzball's play more than once, and as late as 1829.) In addition to the names of his central characters, Marryat borrowed much of Philip's climactic final encounter with the *Flying Dutchman* from this magazine piece. In both cases, the crew of the ghost ship beg to be allowed to send three letters home, and are denied. In both cases, too, the *Dutchman's* 'almanack was blown over board' (*Ph.S.*, 399). Both phantom crews are obsessed in their own right with returns: "“We must see our friends again.” When [the stranger] uttered these words, the men who were in the boat below, wrung their hands, and cried in a piercing tone, in Dutch, “Oh that we saw it again! We have been long here beating about: but we must see our friends again.””⁷⁵ Bearing in mind the closeness with which Marryat sticks to his sources, it may not come as a surprise that he does not choose to conceal his novel's unoriginality. Rather,

⁷⁴ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.vv. 'Fitzball, Edward (1793–1873)' and 'Cooke, Thomas Potter (1786–1864)', accessed 22 August 2012, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>. The *DNB* entries differ on the date of *The Flying Dutchman*: the Cooke entry says that the actor first performed the role on 4 April 1826, while the Fitzball entry gives 1827 as the play's date. Cooke became famous for his portrayal of Sweet William in Douglas Jerrold's *Black-Eyed Susan*, starting in 1829, and running for over 300 nights. For two weeks he played the role twice each night, first at the Adelphi, then at Covent Garden. The play is discussed below, page 158.

⁷⁵ 'Vanderdecken's Message Home; or, The Tenacity of Natural Affection', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 9 (May 1821): 129.

The Phantom Ship, which is structured by the repetition of the basic plot structure of ‘Vanderdecken’s Message Home’, reduplicates and emphasises the sense of intertextual repetitiousness.

Ricoeur states that, in a quest narrative, ‘the end of the story is what equates the present with the past, the actual with the potential. The hero *is* who he *was*.’⁷⁶ Woolf, meanwhile, wrote of Marryat’s novels in particular that ‘the same emotion is repeated; we never feel that we are approaching anything; the end is never a consummation’.⁷⁷ In the case of *The Phantom Ship*, Marryat finds himself stranded between Ricoeur’s summation of the quest narrative, and Woolf’s typification of his fiction. Each subsequent wreck enacts the same pattern as the first, a pattern that reinforces Philip’s sense of self, leading to the belief that he has been ‘separated as it were from my brother mortals by my own peculiar destiny’ (103). Yet, while Philip’s ‘peculiar destiny’ is indeed odd, Marryat’s repetitions degrade the reader’s sense of its uniqueness.

Ricoeur further suggests that ‘the character of repetition is still imprinted in time by the circular shape of travel in space’, by which he means that the journey home is, in the model of the *Odyssey*, the archetypal return.⁷⁸ *The Phantom Ship* returns instead to scenes of wreck and fragmentation. Each raft that Philip constructs is eventually ‘separated amidships’ (189). The final wreck is not a return to selfhood, but rather a denial of individuality: the novel ends with a wreck where not only the *Flying Dutchman*, but Philip and his father, too, clasped in each other’s arms, ‘resolve into elements [...] atoms [...] fragments of ragged garments’ and sink into the sea (*Ph.S.*, 403–04). Marryat’s repetitions are, in a way, proleptic of this final wreck, and build up to it insofar as the damage inflicted by each shipwreck is greater than the last. But, because the reader is better able to anticipate each new shipwreck, their cumulative effect is also diminished—

⁷⁶ Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Time’, 182.

⁷⁷ Woolf, ‘Captain’s Death Bed’, 69.

⁷⁸ Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Time’, 182.

meaning that the moments of highest tension for Marryat's characters are potentially the dullest and most predictable for his readers.

The disappointments that beset *The Phantom Ship* are, though, comparable to those affecting any voyage narrative that broods, as Tanner believes they generally do, on the 'obvious analogue of voyage and life'.⁷⁹ The cycle of departure and return that Marryat employs with such concentrated regularity is the characteristic form of the sea story. It is therefore not only Amine, but sea writers in general, including Marryat, who might feel Philip's 'departure[s] to be an imperious duty' (*Ph.S.*, 117). If the sea story is a predictable form, it is Marryat's particular innovation to emphasise and thematise that predictability. He does this primarily through the character of Amine. Scheherazade 'thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop', as Walter Benjamin points out, and achieves a kind of immortality as long as each of her tales reproduces the effect of the last one, which means life for another night.⁸⁰ Similarly, Amine's clairvoyance proves a positive foil to the epistolary curse that initiates the story. 'I know', Amine thinks as Philip departs for the second time, 'that we shall meet again', and so they do (*Ph.S.*, 171). Of course, any reader of sea stories may have been able to predict Philip's return without Amine's help, but her introduction into the story suggests Marryat's intention to reconcile the contents of his story to the more-or-less invariable form of the voyage narrative.

Marryat informs us that Amine's mother was 'from an Arab family, the daughter of a chief', hinting that she may be a descendent of Scheherazade (*Ph.S.*, 53). Marryat was certainly familiar with a translated version of the *Nights*: he mentions them in *Newton Forster* (177), and they are an obvious influence on *The Pacha of Many Tales* (1835). Amine's powers of clairvoyance had, however, more readily discoverable textual provenance. She views the future in a small pool of ink poured into the palm of a young

⁷⁹ See above, page 92.

⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 97.

boy ‘so as to form a black mirror of the size of a half-a-crown’ (*Ph.S.*, 332). She invokes her mother, whom she begs for ‘the word! The word! [...] I have forgotten the art’ (226). When the words are recalled, they prove the key to catching a glimpse of Philip across time and space, revealed in the pool of ink, but they also help us to get a bead on Marryat himself. The words, ‘Turshoon, turyo-shoon—come down, come down. Be present’ (*Ph.S.*, 332), are copied from Edward William Lane’s bestselling *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1836. (Though it is not clear that Marryat read it, Lane published a heavily bowdlerised translation of the *Arabian Nights*, which underwent serialisation at the same time as *The Phantom Ship*.) The words Amine summons are ‘the names of two genii’, called to the aid of the magician Lane meets in Cairo, though they just as effectively invoke one of Marryat’s intertexts—another kind of ‘familiar spirit’.⁸¹ In *Modern Egyptians*, Lane writes that he ‘asked the magician whether objects appeared in the ink as if actually before the eyes, or as if in a glass, which makes the right appear left. He answered that they appear as in a mirror.’⁸² Lane himself prints a copy of the ‘magic square and mirror of ink’ along with the words of invocation. In 1859, George Eliot would employ a similarly occult image of authorship to open *Adam Bede*.

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.⁸³

⁸¹ Lane records the words as: ‘Tarshun! Taryooshun! Come down! / Come down! Be present!’ Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*...., ed. Edward Stanley Poole, 5th ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 268, 269.

⁸² The efficacy of the charm is proved in a way that would have impressed Marryat. Lane asks the mirror to show Lord Nelson, whom the magician and his assistant ‘had evidently never heard of’, and a man who has ‘lost his left arm’, ‘dressed in a [dark blue] suit of European clothes’ appears to them. Nelson had, however, lost his right arm, a deviation explained by the mirroring effect of the pool of ink, as above. *Ibid.*, 272–73.

⁸³ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

In both Marryat's text and Eliot's, the pool of ink balances an image of what is or has been, against the future of the narrative—what has been is what will be described. The shared allusion, however, does not indicate an entirely equivalent purpose. Terry Eagleton thinks that a kind of magic may underlie the conventions of realist writing. 'Realism', Eagleton writes, 'is meant to be a riposte to magic and mystery, but it may well be a prime example of them. Perhaps the roots of our admiration for resemblance, mirroring and doubling lie in some very early ceremony of correspondence between human beings and their recalcitrant surroundings.'⁸⁴ Eliot's invocation, which makes a claim for her text's ability to reproduce the real world, is sorcery of just this sort. However, neither the past nor the future summoned by Marryat exist anywhere other than in writing. Marryat makes no attempt to be realistic; Amine's visions replicate and, in doing so, figure the repetitive form of the voyage narrative. Philip's account of his first meeting with the *Flying Dutchman* looks forward to Amine's conjuring mirror: 'The sea was like a mirror', he notices just before the storm that will destroy Philip's ship and crew blows up (*Ph.S.*, 96). And, of course, the novel ends as almost all novels do, with a small pool of ink following its last words, which are in this case: "'THE PHANTOM SHIP" WAS NO MORE' (404). What, in other circumstances, might be construed as a verbal tic, or evidence of imaginative poverty, is made to seem like a form of magic.

Before Philip's first departure, Amine warns him, 'return you *may*, but not in life' (*Ph.S.*, 71). It is a remark that proves germane to many of Marryat's repetitions, and also to the nature of narrative repetition in general, which risks making a text seem as mechanically lifeless as Amine fears Philip will become. In this text, the line stands out because it represents a notable failure of Amine's powers of augury; it is in fact Philip's death that signals the end of his returns, rather than the other way around. Indeed, a

⁸⁴ Terry Eagleton, 'Pork Chops'.

reconsideration of *The Phantom Ship* shows that returns are paradoxically the vital principle by which the text advances: the very next chapter begins, ‘before we follow Philip Vanderdecken in his venturous career, it will be necessary to refresh the memory of our readers by a succinct recapitulation of the circumstances’ (71). To ‘live at sea’, as Conrad says, may necessitate frequent refreshment of this kind. Indeed, a consideration of Marryat’s returns and repetitions invites speculation about how alive he was to the perplexities attendant upon writing about the sea, and upon the form of the voyage narrative, itself characterised by returns. In *The Phantom Ship*, Marryat thematically addresses the tendency of these narratives to keep to predictable courses. In many respects, this novel is no more successful than others by Marryat—not least because it is excessively repetitive. However, the agreement between the shape of this book and its contents suggests that Marryat tried in this work to find a form of writing appropriate to the sea. Critics have suggested that conditions at sea permit only certain plots, discouraging anything but the most generic forms of narrative. Marryat’s novels at once corroborate this hypothesis, and offer examples of the way in which local or structural repetitions may be read as imaginative responses to the sea.

Interlude: Shores

On the morning of 14 September 1804, Jane Austen bathed in the sea at Lyme. She wrote later in the day to her sister Cassandra, who had gone east down the coast with their other siblings Henry and Eliza to the more fashionable resort at Weymouth in hope of seeing the Royal Family. In her letter Austen wryly disparages her own skills as a housekeeper, and gossips about a ball she had attended ('had I chosen to stay longer [I] might have danced with M^r Granville, M^{rs} Granville's son—whom my dear friend Miss Armstrong offered to introduce to me—or with a new, odd looking Man who had been eyeing me for some time, & at last without any introduction asked me if I meant to dance again').¹ She comments on a new appointment for one of her sailor brothers Charles aboard a sloop, pricking when her Aunt accidentally names it a frigate. She returns twice, however, to the fact that she had swum in the sea, the second in a postscript where she remarks that she had enjoyed the sensation so much that she fears she may have 'staid in rather too long'.² Austen lingers over the sea in her letter, just as she had lingered in the water, an inclination that would resurface years later in *Persuasion* (1817), in which Anne Elliot and the rest of the party from Uppercross find 'themselves on the sea shore, [...] lingering only, as all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea, who ever deserve to look on it at all'.³ While Austen does not explain what caused her to stay immersed 'too long', it is nevertheless plain that, whatever Mr Granville's appeal, the sea possessed still greater attractions. In this, the first of two shorter interlude chapters, I shall examine the seashore in the nineteenth century.

¹ Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 14 September 1804, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 94.

² *Ibid.*, 93, 95.

³ Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. Gillian Beer (London: Penguin, 1998), 90.

Designed to give a synoptic picture to complement the more specifically focussed major chapters, the interlude ranges widely, tracking broader currents of thought.

At the time of Austen's plunge, sea bathing was still a relatively new pastime, as was the thought that the seaside could be visited for pleasure. *OED* usage suggests that the seaside first came to be seen as a place 'resorted to for health or pleasure' in the late eighteenth century.⁴ Until then, the shore had typically been thought of as an unappealing and unwholesome place; the beach was a thin margin separating the threat of untamed nature from civilisation. Some suspected that the sea still contained the rotting residue left over from the deluge, a superstition that Coleridge memorably summoned in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.⁵

In the mid-eighteenth century, however, two related ideas began to change the way people felt about the seashore. It was determined that sea water and sea air could cure almost anything. Dr Richard Frewin made the first report of a 'sea cure' in 1748, and soon others followed suit. Dr Richard Russell advised patients to visit Brighton on these grounds in his 1750 volume on glandular diseases, claiming that its waters were superior even to those of the inland spas. Russell's book was originally published in Latin as *De Tabie Glandulari*, and translated a couple of years later. The English title gives a sense, not only of Russell's remit, but of the range of ailments that sea-water and sea air were thought to relieve: in the fourth edition, from 1760, it is *A Dissertation on the Use of Sea Water in the Diseases of the Glands. Particularly the Scurvy, Jaundice, King's-Evil,*

⁴ The first example given (1782) is from William Cowper's letters. *OED*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. 'sea-side | seaside, n.', sense 2.

⁵ Corbin, *Lure of the Sea*, 16; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in *Collected Works of Coleridge*, vol. 16, bk 1, *Poems (Reading Text)* (2001), ed. J. C. C. Mays, p. 381, lines 123–26.

Leprosy, and the Glandular Consumption: To Which Is Added a Translation of Dr.

Speed's Commentary on Sea Water. In Austen's *Sanditon* (1817), Mr Parker is a late inheritor of the belief in the sea's unfailingly salubrity:

The sea air and sea bathing together were nearly infallible, one or the other of them being a match for every disorder of the stomach, the lungs or the blood. They were anti-spasmodic, anti-pulmonary, anti-septic, anti-billious [*sic*] and anti-rheumatic. Nobody could catch cold by the sea; nobody wanted appetite by the sea; nobody wanted spirits; nobody wanted strength. Sea air was healing, softening, relaxing—fortifying and bracing—seemingly just as was wanted—sometimes one, sometimes the other. If the sea breeze failed, the seabath was the certain corrective; and where bathing disagreed, the sea air alone was evidently designed by nature for the cure.⁶

The promise of health, however, was not enough to bring the holidaymakers in their droves. The aesthetics of the sublime were required to transform the sea's buffeting from an unpleasant medical necessity into the form of spiritual and erotic exhilaration it would later become.⁷ These theories together made it easy to think that what the sea actually felt like was connected to how one felt about it. The sea gave material form to feelings of wonder and awe, vigour and sensuality. If the high-tide line only a few decades earlier had seemed to mark the point where civilisation dissolved into chaos, it now promised other, more inviting forms of contact. A newly sensed confluence of discourses gave significance to the seaside, allowing many Victorians to feel that buffeting waves, or the sea air, or even the sight of the sea, could palpably affect both body and soul: what you were and who you were appeared at the seaside to respond to the same stimuli.

Valentine Cunningham has written that the shore represents 'the most obviously dramatic literalization of inbetweenness that England and Englishness can offer'.⁸ Just what bordered on what in this in-between-ness, however, was open to interpretation in the

⁶ Jane Austen, *Sanditon*, in *Lady Susan, The Watsons and Sanditon*, ed. Margaret Drabble (London: Penguin, 2003), 163.

⁷ For a discussion of Victorian poetry concerning the seaside, see Cunningham, *Victorian Poetry Now*, 215–39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

nineteenth century. In addition, whatever threshold this boundary-line marked, it invited transgression. For many, this meant licence, or simply licentiousness: ‘you can do a lot of things by the seaside that you can’t do in town’ was the refrain of one Victorian song.⁹ A correspondent for *The Observer* noted in 1856 that bathing places at Ramsgate and Margate were so overcrowded that the water appeared ‘black with bathers’, and worse still, that most women were not bathing at all, but lay on their backs waiting for the surf to buffet them: ‘The waves come, and, in the majority of instances, not only cover the fair bathers, but literally carry their dresses up to their neck, so that, as far as decency is concerned, they might as well be without any dresses at all.’ Though our correspondent is outwardly staggered to see groups of men ‘with their opera glasses’ enjoying the spectacle, ‘bandying criticisms as if they were in Fob’s Alley in the Opera House’, one might be inclined to count him among the spectators, even if he has only got his fingers to peep through.¹⁰

Between the beginning and the end of the nineteenth century, largely individual, generally medicalised encounters with the seashore became a mass experience that privileged the pleasures of the shore. And yet the sea continued to give rise to strains of thought that had little to do with the relaxation and diversion sought by the crowds. Charles Sprawson has written brilliantly of the development of seaside swimming resorts in England which, ‘ever since George III had set the mood by swimming off Weymouth to the accompaniment of a chamber orchestra’, had become a unique and characteristic feature of the English coastline.¹¹ Indeed, by 1782 the mindlessness of holidaymakers who ‘agree, / With one consent to rush into the sea’ was already in some measure laughable, with William Cowper’s inexorable rhyming of ‘agree’ and ‘sea’ in itself a

⁹ Charles Sprawson, *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 29.

¹⁰ ‘The Bathing at Ramsgate and Margate: English Decorum’, *The Observer*, 25 August 1856, 5.

¹¹ Sprawson, *Haunts*, 26.

parody of social consensus.¹² The period from 1840 to 1860 saw particularly drastic changes to the way the seashore was enjoyed. The rise of cheap railway transportation in these decades mean that the seaside became increasingly available to all sectors of the population. Steamers had, since the 1820s, been serving the resorts closer to London, but it was only in the 1850s that the seaside begun to be truly accessible to the working classes.¹³ This was cause for a great deal of middle-class hand-wringing. *The Times* for 30 August 1860 fussed that the increased mobility brought about by railway travel ‘had already modified the national character’:

Strangest of all are the revolutions along the coast. Our seaport towns have been turned inside out. So infallible and unchanging are the attractions of the ocean that it is enough for any place to stand on the shore. That one recommendation is sufficient. Down comes the Excursion Train with its thousands—some with a month’s range, others tethered to a six-hours’ limit, but all rushing with one impulse.¹⁴

Class (and the pretension to it) more than poetic sensibility, began to mark out the boundary between those who thought of the sea with seriousness, and those who did not. Hack writer Richard Rowe confesses that the crowded south-coast resorts don’t suit his taste: the ‘white-caparisoned donkeys [...] careering, or ceasing in career, with a suddenness which sends their riders over their heads; little boys and girls, with their shoes and stockings off, and their petticoats kilted, [...] a German band is playing, equestrians are cantering, flys are crawling, donkey and pony chaises are jangling, and goat chaises solemnly parading.’ He would prefer, he says, ‘to have the seaside to myself’.¹⁵

¹² William Cowper, ‘Retirement’, in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 1, 1748–1782 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 391, lines 523–24.

¹³ See John K. Walton, ‘The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays in Victorian England’, *Economic History Review*, n.s., 34 (1981): 249–65.

¹⁴ *The Times*, 30 August 1860, 6.

¹⁵ Charles Camden [Richard Rowe], ‘Longings for the Sea’, *Saint Pauls Magazine* 11 (August 1872): 174. Seaside donkeys seem to have become something of a running joke. Betsey Trotwood’s arch-foes (‘Donkeys!’) probably lurk about Broadstairs for this reason. Even Austen has a good smirk at Lady Denham’s preference for asses’ milk, a subtle variation on the theme. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Nina Burgis, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 193; Austen, *Sanditon*, 181.

The liminality of littoral space invited, however, other kinds of thinking, which make subtler appeals to the symbolism of the threshold. In *Persuasion*, for example, Lyme offers Austen grounds upon which to measure a variety of events and styles of interpretation against each other. It is the scene of Louisa Musgrove's headstrong 'jump' from the Cobb—an opportunity for Anne to show her 'strength and zeal, and thought' (103)—and where Anne first catches Mr Elliot's eye, igniting feelings of jealousy that cause Captain Wentworth to realise that he still admires her, and initiate his own 'glance of brightness' (97). We are told that 'the young people were all wild to see Lyme' (88), but Austen measures out scenes that exhibit her characters in conversation and contemplation, comparing and disagreeing about the sea's meanings and possible uses, arguing about the merits of Byron and Sir Walter Scott. Austen never describes the sea herself, emphasising the centrality of her characters' observations. The seaside in *Persuasion* hosts an accumulating set of thoughts which model how personal experience could be seen in the light of public meanings. Individuals are tested against an object of communal attention and manifold significance—Romantic, medical, military, picturesque.

Individuals could also test out alternative versions of themselves at the shore. Paired with the endlessly cyclical patterns of waves and tides, which Hamilton-Paterson nicely terms 'time's liquid correlative',¹⁶ the beach easily became in the Victorian imagination a point from which to launch thoughts of imagined alternative selves, or to dredge up aspects of the self that were felt to have been sunk deep, whether in the past or in unconsciousness. It seemed as if what Swinburne called 'another form of life' could be literally felt in the body of the swimmer.¹⁷ Crossing the line of the beach felt for many like crossing an ideal threshold that had kept a variety of prior versions of the self, or other selves altogether, at a distance, making them available for contemplation. At times,

¹⁶ Hamilton-Paterson, *Seven-Tenths*, 167.

¹⁷ Algernon Swinburne quoted in Sprawson, *Haunts*, 133.

crossing the surf felt like a return to childhood. The sea came to symbolise ‘innocence and boyhood’ for Clough, and Swinburne sought obsessively to recover the feeling left over from an early memory of being held naked by his father and ‘brandished between his hands, then shot like a stone from a sling through the air, shouting and laughing with delight, head foremost into the coming wave’ by flinging himself into the most hazardous seas he could find at every opportunity.¹⁸ When swimming, Swinburne sought to recover some submerged aspect of himself, an essential self that might be represented by the child, but which was best drawn out by extremes of cold, the pummelling of waves, or by the scarification of sharp stones along the shore or the grit drawn up by the surf. An apprehensive Guy de Maupassant espied Swinburne forging out for such a swim, and promptly set off in a boat to rescue him. The two of them ate lunch later, and Maupassant remarked upon his host’s ‘thrilling, nervous manner, the monkey that swung from the beams, a flayed hand on the dining table that still bore traces of blood and dried skin’.¹⁹ To Swinburne, the ‘naked shingles of the world’ might have appeared inviting, a chance to rasp away unwanted aspects of himself, instead of the indecently exposed materiality of things that they resembled to Arnold in ‘Dover Beach’ (line 28).

The return to origins sought by Swinburne at the shore also took, in other imaginations, the form of a return to cultural origins. The first Swimming Society in England, founded by a clutch of Old Etonians in 1828, ‘was inspired by the classical example’, and Shelley was said to have drowned holding in his hand a volume of Sophocles.²⁰ If what separated one’s superficial self from its profounder counterpart could be partly dissolved by seawater, so the sea might prove a way of connecting the present self and its antecedents. Medical discourses of sea-bathing emphasised that physical

¹⁸ Algernon Swinburne to E. C. Stedman, 20 [21] February 1875, in *The Yale Edition of the Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, vol. 3, 1875–1877 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 12.

¹⁹ Sprawson, *Haunts*, 99.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45, 82–83.

cleansing could also be a form of spiritual purification. This form of ablution was thought particularly suitable to the Anglo-Saxon bather, who mixed ‘Nordic and Roman strains in [his] character’,²¹ and would therefore naturally benefit from being reintroduced to the forces that had racially fitted him to his environment to begin with. Sir John Skelton, J. A. Froude’s friend, was especially prone to thinking of the sea in this way, and he often refers to ‘The Northern Ocean—that Mare Tenebrosum of mists, and icebergs, and snowy storms, out of which to the antique imagination issued the wintry gods of Walhalla’.²² His origins-obsessed 1862 political romance ‘*Thalatta! Thalatta!: A Study at Sea*’ begins: ‘Well,—I think I am fairly started at last. It is the easiest thing in the world to write a book: but it is nearly impossible to begin one’.²³ The difficulty is not, however, ‘confined to the writing of books’, Skelton admits; for him it implies a principle of human nature: ‘most men would be estimable, charitable, religious, successful, if they only knew how to begin’. The reader is likely to agree that Skelton has indeed begun badly; while his title promises a sea story, the book turns out to be a political ‘sketch of a character combining resemblances to both Canning and Disraeli’, and spends very little time aboard ship.²⁴ Indeed, it becomes clear that, for Skelton, the English don’t need to be embarked to be ‘at sea’ in the way he has in mind; from his perspective, England itself should be thought of as already afloat, its inhabitants under the sea’s influence in a sense that explains much more

²¹ Sprawson, *Haunts*, 45.

²² The Author of ‘Catarina in Venice’ [John Skelton], ‘Thalatta! Thalatta!: A Study at Sea’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 65 (January 1862): 4. The phrase *mare tenebrosum* occurs in nearly every bit of fiction and non-fiction associated with Skelton in the Wellesley Index of Victorian Periodicals. Carlyle’s *On Heroes*, where he speaks in his chapter on Odin of what ‘would be lost, had Iceland not been burst up from the sea, not been discovered by the Northmen!’ is plainly somewhere in the background. Carlyle, ‘On Heroes’, 16.

²³ [John Skelton], ‘Thalatta! Thalatta!’, 1.

²⁴ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. ‘Skelton, Sir John (1831–1897)’, accessed 2 September 2012, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>. The title, at least as it appears in serial (it was changed to *Thalatta!; or, The Great Commoner* for volume publication), is somewhat odd since the book concerns the sea hardly at all. The first chapter shows Skelton composing the work aboard a yacht, which is presumably the chief way that the ‘study’ in question is ‘at sea’. Something similar occurs in Skelton’s article ‘Mr. Ruskin at the Sea-Side’ where he explains that he has chosen ‘a somewhat misleading title, if it is taken to mean anything more than this—that the present writer himself is at the sea-side, and that the last volume of *Modern Painters*, “the last, the mightiest, and the best,” lies among the bent at his elbow’. [John Skelton], ‘Mr. Ruskin at the Sea-Side: A Vacation Medley’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 62 (December 1860): 719.

than a mere facility for yachting. The sea bears a vital relationship to the sort of beginning Skelton most wishes to discuss: the origin of Anglo-Saxon character, of which he himself seeks to offer a fine instance. When he writes at the beginning of chapter 2 that ‘there is the great sea in the background, running like a solemn harmony through all the mean details of day and night, and communicating to the people into whose life it insinuates itself a peculiar sobriety of intellect and staidness of demeanour’, one feels that whomever else he means, he bears himself in mind foremost. The threshold between the sea and the beach seemed to Skelton also to be a threshold between the present and past of the English race. Skelton’s sea, which both resembles a painted ‘background’ and is counted out like a piece of music, is a model of permanence within flux. It permits him to suggest that certain things endure across enormous stretches of space and time, rendering the boundary between past and present, and between (select) individuals, inconsequential. Similarly the title itself (translation ‘The Sea! The Sea!’, as I discuss above, page 62) makes, in a fairly strict sense of the word, a claim for a classical kinship: ‘Still it startles you, as it startled the Greeks of old, with a glad surprise.’²⁵ It suits Skelton’s point that his ‘glad surprise’ should be anticipated by the ‘wild surmise’ Keats ascribes to Cortez’s men upon seeing the Pacific in ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’ (1819).²⁶ The shock of immersion is rewritten here, transformed into a moment of racial and cultural anagnorisis.

Skelton’s feeling about the benefits of the sea’s strenuous influence to the formation of the English as a race was not particularly unusual. In 1836, for example, *The Penny Magazine* reprinted a section of an appendix to the first volume of Thomas Arnold’s *Thucydides*, a history of the Peloponnesian War. Anyone hungry for cheap and useful knowledge in January of that year could have read there about the edifying effects of a seaside jaunt in midwinter:

²⁵ [John Skelton], ‘Thalatta! Thalatta!: A Study at Sea’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 65 (January 1862): 9.

²⁶ John Keats, ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970), p. 62, line 13.

In the depth of winter, when the sky is covered with clouds, and the land presents one cold, blank, and lifeless surface of snow, how refreshing is it to the spirits to walk upon the shore, and to enjoy the eternal freshness and liveliness of the ocean! Even so in the deepest winter of the human race, when the earth was but one chilling expanse of inactivity, life was stirring in the waters.²⁷

The Penny Magazine may have been where Rowe read Arnold's remarks, though he is not altogether sure of their merits: 'Perhaps so—no doubt so—at times; but there are sundry times and divers places in which it is by no means "refreshing to the spirits" to be at the seaside in winter.' At this time of year, the shore makes Rowe think about Edgar Allan Poe and shipwrecks 'gone down with all hands on board', and the bathing-machines resemble, he thinks, 'hulks in the Medway or Hamoaze'.²⁸

The pleasures Rowe longs for are definitively summer-time pursuits: bathing unobserved in 'Adamite condition', but chiefly the collection of shells, and the investigation of rock-pools. To a contemporary reader, his admission that he 'never grow[s] tired of looking at sea-weed' suggests that Rowe may have been a slightly strange man.²⁹ For many Victorians, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, it would have seemed perfectly normal. Of all the improving entertainments that could be enjoyed at the shore, none was as popular as marine naturalism. Thomas Henry Huxley was so enamoured of such pursuits that he spent his honeymoon collecting specimens on a 'dredging holiday' in Tenby.³⁰ Philip Gosse's publications on the biology of the seashore, especially *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast* (1853) and its putative sequel *The Aquarium* (1854), began the craze.³¹ Both books, lavishly illustrated by Gosse,

²⁷ Thomas Arnold, 'The Sea', *Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* 5 (16 January 1836): 19.

²⁸ Charles Camden [Richard Rowe], 'Seaside in Winter', *Saint Pauls Magazine* 12 (February 1873): 186, 189.

²⁹ Camden, 'Longings', 176.

³⁰ See Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 108–09.

³¹ By the time these works appeared, Gosse had been publishing on sea life for over a decade.

offered models of edifying recreation that could be undertaken by anyone. Men were encouraged to feel that their collections of dried seaweed and unusual shells amounted to contributions to the growing stock of scientific knowledge, while women were given detailed instruction in the art of creating ‘living flower-gardens’ of *Actiniæ* (sea-anemones) for their drawing-rooms.³² An article for *Fraser’s Magazine* in September 1856 advises that ‘any mind may aid in the cause of science’, even as it smirks at the thought of a women stumbling over the ‘zoological nomenclature’ she has learned from Mr Gosse and Mr Kingsley, ostensibly ‘improving her mind’ under their influence, and spoiling her ‘best bonnet’ in actuality.³³ Skelton was, of course, an enthusiastic collector. He describes his ‘*sanctum*, the inner temple, into which no profane foot of womankind is permitted to enter’, where he keeps his ‘dried sea-weeds and stuffed sea-fish’.³⁴

The shore’s threshold seemed capable of bringing the past more materially into contact with the present, and the passionate intensity of the mid-nineteenth-century seaside naturalist drew on this feeling. The seaside bore witness to the forces of geological time, the extent of which had come to seem impossibly vast. It was a thought that Gosse himself found nearly impossible to accept. Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, published between 1830 and 1833, had made the radical claim that the earth was far older than the Bible suggested. Lyell’s theories depended upon the doctrine of uniformitarianism, which insisted upon the ‘identity of the ancient and modern causes of change’.³⁵ Mountains or coastlines arose or were worn away, not by biblical cataclysm, but as a result of slow accumulation or the leisurely erosion of millennia: ongoing processes that could be seen, and even felt, first-hand. The creatures of the sea could be observed, much like Skelton’s Northmen, in the

³² Charles Kingsley, *Glaucus; or, The Wonders of the Shore* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1855), 145.

³³ [George Tugwell], ‘Science by the Sea-side’, *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country* 54 (September 1856): 258, 254.

³⁴ A Naturalist [John Skelton], ‘Sketches on the North Coast’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 53 (April 1856): 474. This is the first part in a series by Skelton writing as ‘A Naturalist’ for *Fraser’s*.

³⁵ Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, 4th ed. (London: John Murray, 1835), 1:251.

midst of the conditions of their creation. Their origin could be thought of as an ongoing, sensible process, rather than a distant and inscrutable point in the past. Nevertheless, the thrill of making contact with geological time was so captivating that, by the time Edmund Gosse came to write *Father and Son* (1907), he found the seaside where he had grown up had become unrecognisable in the wake of seaside naturalism's immense rise in popularity, undergone largely thanks to his own father's books advocating marine collections:

If any one goes down to those shores now, if man or boy seeks to follow in our traces, let him realise at once, before he takes the trouble to roll up his sleeves, that his zeal will end in labour lost. There is nothing, now, where in our days there was so much. [...] Half a century ago, in many parts of the coast of Devonshire and Cornwall, where the limestone at the water's edge is wrought into crevices and hollows, the tide-line was, like Keats's Grecian vase, "a still unravished bride of quietness".³⁶

Among those drawn to the shore was Charles Kingsley, who was one of Philip Gosse's most public admirers.³⁷ His *Glaucus, or, The Wonders of the Shore* (1855), is at once a paean to Gosse, and a slim primer in which Kingsley explains to the budding enthusiast the practice and significance of marine naturalism. As his title indicates, Kingsley, like Gosse, believed that abundantly stocked tide pools were an occasion for wonder, a term that marks a threshold between the naturalist's investigative approach and the kind of reverence urged upon the believer in psalm 107: 'They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; / These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders of the deep.'³⁸ In *The Aquarium*, a book that promises in its full title 'an unveiling of the

³⁶ Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son*, ed. Michael Newton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 80–81.

³⁷ Kingsley disagreed, however, with Gosse regarding the compatibility of faith and the increasingly urgent ideological tug of evolutionary theory. As I note below, Kingsley was given a signed copy of *On the Origin of Species* before publication; by contrast, Gosse set about his bizarre project of justifying the presence of fossils as a sort of divine prank in *Omphalos* (1857) with devastating effects for his career and credibility. Kingsley takes up the debate gently in *Glaucus*, 72.

³⁸ Ps. 107:23–24 (Authorised [King James] Version).

wonders of the deep sea', Gosse explains the feelings called up when examining a certain specimen of 'Rough Syrinx' (which happens to have been given to him by Kingsley):

When once we have begun to look with curiosity on the strange things that ordinary people pass over without notice, our wonder is continually excited by the variety of phase, and often by the uncouthness of form, under which some of the meaner creatures are presented to us. And this is very specially the case with the inhabitants of the sea. We can scarcely poke and pry for an hour among the rocks at low-water mark, or walk with an observant downcast eye along the beach after a gale, without finding some oddly-fashioned, suspicious-looking being, unlike any form of life that we have seen before. The dark, concealed interior of the sea becomes thus invested with fresh mystery; its vast recesses appear to be stored with all imaginable forms, and we are tempted to think there must be multitudes of living creatures whose very figure and structure have never yet been suspected.

“O Sea! old Sea! who yet knows half
Of thy wonders or thy pride!”³⁹

Gosse's natural theology awkwardly mingles with his interest in natural history, but the feeling of wonder, which both whets the appetite for mystery and marks the place where one must simply stop and marvel, accommodates both. The wonder that is 'continually excited' by the strange specimens that Gosse collects encompasses two states of mind otherwise at odds with each other: an enduring sense that human knowledge is naturally and properly limited, and an unabated desire to pry and poke into things—the 'downcast eye' that is nevertheless 'observant'. This attitude was one Kingsley enthusiastically endorsed. He wrote in 1856 to Gosse to express his admiration for *Tenby: A Sea-Side Holiday*, published that year: 'Your larvae of Echinoderms have thrown me into such a state of astonishment, that if I could make my people understand them, I would preach a sermon on them, and ask them (as I often do on other matters), how men can doubt the mysteries of grace, coming from a God who has created such mysteries of nature?'⁴⁰

³⁹ Philip Gosse, *The Aquarium: An Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea*, 2nd ed. (London: John Van Voorst, 1856), 220–21.

⁴⁰ Charles Kingsley to P. H. Gosse, 13 May 1856, in *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life*, ed. Fanny Kingsley, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1901), 159.

The pairing of these two states of mind proved finally unendurable to Gosse, and the publication of *Omphalos* in 1857, in which he attempted to reconcile science and religion, arguing that the superfluity of Adam's naval signalled by analogy the superfluity of the fossil record, demolished his credibility at a stroke. Kingsley, however, was elated by the thought of the commingling of religion and science. One of the few to receive an advance copy of *On the Origin of Species*, Kingsley wrote to Darwin four days before the book's publication, saying that 'the heap of facts' Darwin presented 'awes me', and that he found it 'just as noble a conception of Deity, to believe that He created primal forms capable of self-development'.⁴¹ Darwin went on to quote these comments in the second edition of his book. The sense initiated by Lyell's theories—the sense that the small changes observable at the shore added up to grand patterns, or as G. H. Lewes states it, 'how the great Whole is indissolubly connected with its minutest parts'—captivated Kingsley's imagination.⁴²

Such obsessions could burst out in unlikely places, producing spasms of textual abiogenesis. The title of *Glaucus* alludes to a fable told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, which in Kingsley's imagination readily combines with a naturalist's curiosity. Midway through his book, Kingsley's prose gets led astray by the thought of plunging into the ocean he is walking beside. It occasions an outburst that continues, with sparse punctuation, for pages:

And the sea bottom, also, has its zones, at different depths, and its peculiar forms in peculiar spots, affected by the currents and the nature of the ground, the riches of which have to be seen, alas! rather by the imagination than the eye; for such

⁴¹ See Denis R. Alexander, 'Creation and Evolution', in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, ed. J. B. Stump and Alan G. Padgett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 234; Charles Kingsley to Charles Darwin, 18 November 1859, in *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt and Sydney Smith, vol. 7, 1858–1859 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 379. Darwin soon after wrote to Lyell, 'Kingsley in a note to me had a capital paragraph, on such notions as mine being *not* opposed to a high conception of the Deity'. Darwin to Charles Lyell, 2 December 1859, in *Correspondence of Darwin*, 7:409.

⁴² G. H. Lewes, *Sea-side Studies at Ilfracombe, Tenby, the Scilly Isles, and Jersey* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1858), 360.

spoonfuls of the treasure as the dredge brings up to us, come too often rolled and battered, torn from their sites and contracted by fear, mere hints to us of what the populous reality below is like. And often, standing on the shore at low tide, has one longed to walk on and in under the waves, as the water-ousel does in the pools of the mountain burn, and see it all but for a moment; and a solemn beauty and meaning has invested the old Greek fable of Glaucus the fisherman, how he ate of the herb which gave his fish strength to leap back into their native element, was seized on the spot with a strange longing to follow them under the waves, and became for ever a companion of the fair semi-human forms with which the Hellenic poets peopled their sunny bays and firths, feeding his “silent flocks” far below on the green *Zostera* beds, or basking with them on the sunny ledges in the summer noon, or wandering in the still bays on sultry nights amid the choir of Amphitrite and her sea-nymphs,

“Joining the bliss of the gods, as they waken the coves
with their laughter,”

In nightly revels, whereof one has sung,—⁴³

Kingsley’s writing overflows its boundaries. His enthusiasm sees him postponing decisive punctuation (the next full-stop comes six lines later, un-elidable, part of the pages of poetry he goes on to quote), and bursting formal and generic limits. Natural history pushes into poetry, swamping in the process the boundaries separating myth from science, past and present. Eruptions like this one are common in Kingsley’s writing: bits of etymology and natural history nestle beside quotations from Coleridge and Wordsworth, while the narrative tone is equally flexible: busy list-making and rote learning are at once indispensable and ridiculous. Kingsley’s texts, which are also compounded of many different tones and registers, might, like Marryat’s, be considered amphibious.⁴⁴ In *Glaucus*, Kingsley continues for another three pages before halting momentarily to ask whether ‘such a rhapsody may be somewhat out of order, even in a popular scientific book’.⁴⁵ He then goes on to insist that it isn’t.

The seashore in the nineteenth century encouraged this kind of writing because it encouraged this kind of thinking. A liminal space, it promoted transition and

⁴³ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 113–14.

⁴⁴ See Conrad’s remark to this effect, quoted in chapter 1, page 76.

⁴⁵ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 116.

transformation. By the seashore, on the night of his twenty-second birthday, Kingsley put an end to years of doubt and self-questioning. He wrote afterward to Fanny, his future wife: ‘I have been for the last hour on the sea shore. Before the sleeping earth and the sleepless sea and stars I devoted myself to God, a vow never to be recalled’.⁴⁶ The lists and catalogues in a book like *Glaucus* are at once an attempt to order and contain the unlimited abundance of the sea, and a way of representing it. A thought about the origin of species easily blurs into a thought about cultural origins, which just as easily seems to bear upon one’s personal origins in childhood or in a state of spiritual stainlessness.

Kingsley’s stylistic habits and his characteristic thematic concerns combine most dramatically in *The Water-Babies* (1862–63), his story about a miserable, dirty chimney-sweep who undergoes a kind of spiritual and bodily metamorphosis, as a prelude to a (mainly) joyous afterlife under the sea. Having heard church bells one Sunday, Tom is overcome with a desire to wash himself, and goes down drowsily to a brook ‘saying continually, “I must be clean, I must be clean. [...] I will be a fish; I will swim in the water; I must be clean, I must be clean”’.⁴⁷ Waking from a dreamless sleep in ‘the most wonderful part of this wonderful story’, it is revealed that Tom has left his child’s body behind because ‘the fairies had turned him into a water-baby’ (*WB*, 37). Tom’s bodily transformation is, however, only the prelude to a spiritual transmutation that will occupy the remainder of the narrative, figured as a journey first downstream and finally to the sea where he has a chance of real purity.

Kingsley’s personal feelings about the sea were intense. He longed for immersion like Swinburne, but his yearning for cold water characteristically took the form of a compulsive desire to cleanse himself (and everyone else). Such personal foibles combine with the popular Victorian seaside preoccupations that I have outlined; the narrator of *The*

⁴⁶ See Susan Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk: A Life of Charles Kingsley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974), 60.

⁴⁷ Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies*, ed. Richard D. Beards (London: Penguin, 2008), 30–31.

Water-Babies frets humorously that he should keep secret the spot where water-babies might be found, lest squads of ladies descend on it ‘and so hunt and howk after them (besides raising the price of lodgings), and keep them in aquariums, as the ladies at Pompeii (as you may see by the paintings) used to keep Cupids in cages’, where he feels they will be forgotten and left to ‘die of dirt and neglect’ like ‘poor sea-beasts’ (83). Chiefly, however, Kingsley is interested in the slippage the sea vouched for and encouraged between physical and moral states. Kingsley’s Professor Ptthmlnsprts, a figure based on Thomas Henry Huxley, is judged harshly when he refuses to admit to the small girl who accompanies him in his rambles along the shore that water-babies exist, in spite of having just fished one out of the ocean. His failure to admit his error makes him not only a poor naturalist, in Kingsley’s opinion, but also in certain respects unchristian. It would have been better if he had simply admitted his mistake, and in the process yielded himself to wonder. What he should have said was, ‘Yes, my darling, it is a water-baby, and a very wonderful thing it is; and it shows how little I know of the wonders of nature’ (*WB*, 89). Kingsley alternates between a desire to see Tom transformed into an angelic emanation of childhood innocence—a kind of muscular Christian Cupid—and a test-case upon whom the changes brought about by diverse forms of moral and spiritual impurity can be wrought.

Kingsley chose for the epigraph to *Glaucus the Ancient Mariner*’s pivotal recognition that the water snakes he had earlier abhorred had earned his unconscious blessing for being ‘happy living things!’ like himself (only less miserable).⁴⁸ The same instinct motivates Kingsley in *The Water-Babies*, where he strives to show that Tom is like one of the ‘poor sea-beasts’, and simultaneously that each of these creatures, like Tom,

⁴⁸ Coleridge, *Rime*, in *Collected Works of Coleridge*, vol. 16, bk 1, p. 393, line 285.

ought properly to be a source of spiritual awe, representatives of a ‘LIVING GOD’.⁴⁹ In his effort to do this, Kingsley makes an even more radical equation of past and present than Skelton. The state of grace Kingsley envisions is so drastic that it seems to require Tom be made inhuman, or perhaps pre-human. He sprouts gills on his neck, and becomes ‘quite amphibious’: ‘Amphibious. Adjective, derived from two Greek words, *amphi*, a fish, and *bios*, a beast’ (*WB*, 46). ‘Water-baby’ is, of course, another such compound, just one in a novel littered with them: ‘water-rats, water-flies, water-cricket, water-crabs, water-tortoises, water-scorpions, water-tigers and water-hogs, water-cats and water-dogs, sea-lions and sea-bears, sea-horses and sea-elephants, sea-mice and sea-urchins, sea-razors and sea-pens, sea-combs and sea-fans [...] and so on, without end’ (40–41). Tom is indeed a kind of hybrid creature, enough of a little boy that he can still have adventures, but so strenuously purified that his memory has been wiped clean along with his face, which suggests that he is also like ‘a beast’. Kingsley is equally obsessed with fantasies of reversion and transcendence. Tom is told of the lazy ‘Doasyoulikes living in the land of Readymade’, feasting on ‘flapdoodle’, and waiting until roasted pigs ‘ran against their mouths’ before they took a bite’ (*WB*, 132).⁵⁰ Kingsley assigns the Doasyoulikes (whose diet turns to ‘nuts and roots’ after the pigs have been eaten and the flapdoodle trees killed by a volcano) an unpleasantly Lamarckian fate: ‘Yes; when people live on poor vegetables instead of roast beef and plum pudding, their jaws grow large, and their lips grow coarse, like the poor Paddies who eat potatoes’ (133). Tom’s immersion is also in some ways a reversion; though he is a child, his return to innocence is figured as the half-literal stripping or scouring away of scum accumulated during a hard life in service to Mr Grimes.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 73.

⁵⁰ Flapdoodle is an invention of Marryat’s: ‘it’s the stuff they *feed fools on*’. *Peter Simple*, 238.

⁵¹ For thoughts on Kingsley’s ambivalent love for waste and margins, see Cunningham’s excellent and wide-ranging discussion. ‘Soiled Fairy: *The Water-Babies* in Its Time’, *Essays in Criticism* 35 (1985): 121–48.

However, Tom's metamorphosis is also a kind of evolution. The power of water has made him better than he had been. Tom's descent 'downward into the water' is as much a baptism as it is a version of Darwinian descent played at high speed (*WB*, 14). While above water, the begrimed Tom appears 'like a small black gorilla', which makes him sound oddly like his own antecedent (17). Similarly, the narrator is anxious to ask, 'Does not each of us, in coming into this world, go through a transformation just as wonderful as that of a sea-egg, or a butterfly? and do not reason and analogy, as well as Scripture, tell us that that transformation is not the last?' (42). Tom might be thought of, then, as at once a kind of cherub and as a living creature who has made an evolutionary leap.

Writing did not generally come easily to Kingsley, but *The Water-Babies* seemed to flow out of him effortlessly. Indeed, the novel comes with its own creation myth. Fanny reminded him, one morning in 1862, of a promise to write a story for their youngest child. She reports that Kingsley dashed from the breakfast table to his study instantly, and returned in half an hour with the first chapter written.⁵² Looking back, it is perhaps unsurprising that it was important to him and his wife to conceive of this particular story as having come so readily to his imagination, while his longer works—*Westward, Ho!*, *Alton Locke* (1849), *Yeast* (1851)—cost him so much effort: the obsessions of *The Water-Babies* are, in many ways, Kingsley's own. He had said himself that he felt as if he were 'running not forwards in life but backwards, "as fast as he could"',⁵³ much as Tom is forced to run to the 'Other-end-of-Nowhere' by Mother Carey, who stipulates that he 'must go the whole way backwards' so that he can learn to appreciate his origins (*WB*, 155). Bathing occasionally made him feel as stirringly inhuman as his water-baby: Kingsley wrote while on holiday in Snowdonia, that the effect of cold water had induced in him a state of 'utter

⁵² See Chitty, *Beast and the Monk*, 216.

⁵³ Sprawson, *Haunts*, 147.

animalism'.⁵⁴ The bath was also an important focus of the peculiar erotic correspondence he carried on with Fanny, both before and after they were married. He often expressed his desire to wash her, especially after sex, and he frequently entreated her to 'kiss herself all over *in the bath* on his behalf'.⁵⁵ But it was the sea in particular that formed the setting for one of his most startling erotic fantasies, captured in a drawing he sent her depicting the two of them mid-coitus, lashed to a cross riding the crest of a foaming wave.

The notion that crossing the shoreline evoked many kinds of figurative transition or transgression was, as I have emphasised, pervasive in the period. For Kingsley, washing not only symbolised, but could actually bring about, spiritual spotlessness. Seawater was particularly effective in this regard, and not only because of the purifying effects of salt that had been emphasised in the preceding century's medical treatises. To immerse Tom in the ocean was to make him undergo several transformations at once: he returns from the dead in a process that combines the temporally blurred boundaries of the evolutionary process with the metaphysical unboundedness of the spirit ascending to heaven. In *The Water-Babies*, Professor PttthmlInsprts's small companion explains her lack of interest in the bugs and crustaceans he loves: 'I don't care about all these things, because they can't play with me, or talk to me. If there were little children now in the water [...] and I could see them, I should like that' (84). Soon, she too is transformed into a water-baby, which for Kingsley is a way of insisting on the kinship of all God's wonders. To peer into a tide pool or into an aquarium was, for him as for many of his contemporaries, a way of imaginatively undergoing such a transformation, by experiencing such wonder for yourself.

On the last pages of *Glaucus*, Charles Kingsley gives directions for building an aquarium, condensed and adapted from those Philip Gosse provides in *The Aquarium*.

⁵⁴ Unpublished letter quoted in Chitty, *Beast and the Monk*, 160.

⁵⁵ Chitty, *Beast and the Monk*, 220–21.

Among his instructions, he tells his readers where, if they cannot get to the seaside themselves, they may purchase a special mixture of ‘salts’ needed to manufacture ‘Mr. Gosse’s artificial sea-water’ which, he is satisfied, ‘will form a perfect substitute’: ‘Mr. W. Bolton, Chemist, of 146, Holborn Bars, London’.⁵⁶ What was in Gosse’s salts is not revealed, but it is possible to imagine that some Londoners may have found alternative uses for them. Rowe, for one, may have been glad of the recommendation. He dreams in his London flat of rock-pools stuffed with hybrid creatures: ‘white acorn-shells, tent-like limpets, damson-like periwinkles, velvet-button-like anemones’.⁵⁷ Like Kingsley, Rowe’s seaside fantasies lead invariably to a wish to place himself amongst these wonders; his reveries about the seashore make him ‘pine so for a whiff of “the briny”’ that he finds he ‘must undress and give myself a second tub, and put some Tidman’s sea-salt in it’.⁵⁸ For the Victorians, the sea was not only ‘estranging’, as Arnold has it in ‘To Marguerite – Continued’ (1852), but equally capable of drawing both thoughts and bodies to it—powerfully enough that at least one man considered that a cheap substitute (salts and a tub) might serve to produce the longed-for feeling.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 157.

⁵⁷ Camden, ‘Longings’, 176.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Arnold, ‘To Marguerite – Continued’, in *Poems of Arnold*, p. 125, line 24: ‘The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea’.

Chapter 2. Floating Fragments: Dickens's Wrecks

A kind of brainwashing

There is something about the way we understand water that makes it possible to think of the repetition of clichés as ‘a kind of brainwashing’.¹ Christopher Ricks writes that ‘the feeling lately has been that we live in an unprecedented inescapability from clichés. All around us is a rising tide of them; we shall drown and no one will save us.’² This is a feeling that, as Robert Macfarlane notes, had become pervasive by the end of the nineteenth century, though it has earlier origins.³ John Stuart Mill captured a particular kind of nineteenth-century malaise when he wrote that ‘mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones’—meaning that mankind often found itself running in the same old grooves, carrying a new sense of outmodedness.⁴ What was true of institutions and doctrines could also be true of language. Macfarlane quotes John Addington Symonds, who commented in 1889, ‘It is impossible for people of the present to be as fresh as the Elizabethans were. Such a mighty stream, *novies Styx interfusa*, in the shape of accumulated erudition [...] divides the men of this time from the men of that.’⁵ Symonds’s absentminded metaphorical vagary—something in the ‘shape’ of an accumulation would probably look more like a sea than a river—itself

¹ Anton Zijderveld, *On Clichés* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 13, quoted in Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 360.

² Ricks, *Force of Poetry*, 357.

³ See Robert Macfarlane’s remarks on the ‘Aesthetics of Salvage’ in *Original Copy*, 158–210.

⁴ John Stuart Mill, ‘The Spirit of the Age’, in *Mill: Texts/Commentaries*, ed. Alan Ryan (New York: Norton, 1997), 5.

⁵ John Addington Symonds, ‘A Comparison of Elizabethan with Victorian Poetry’, in *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1893), 393, quoted in Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, 160.

suggests how dead or dying metaphors can ‘unconsciously work on the mind’.⁶ Ricks is of the opinion that ‘the only way to speak of a cliché is with a cliché’.⁷ Frequently, to speak about the sea involves just this kind of vocabulary. When Ricks talks of ‘a rising tide’ of cliché, for example, or explains that a clichéd expression is ‘no sooner floated than sunk’, he is himself using clichéd terms, but ones that encode the possibility of self-critique, or of being used ‘self-reflexively’: ‘cliché rinsed and restored’, as Geoffrey Hill puts it.⁸

As the coasting sailor navigates by landmarks, so, writes Théophile Gautier, when ‘struggling to render what is most inexpressible in thought, what is vague and most elusive in the outlines of form’, a novelist may work by reflexive borrowing.⁹ For Gautier, as for Ricks, this can be a way of ‘pushing back the boundaries of speech’. In *Water and Dreams*, Gaston Bachelard writes that ‘the sea-oriented unconscious is [...] too dispersed in adventure tales, an unconscious that never sleeps [...] It is less profound than that unconscious which dreams about common experiences’.¹⁰ Yet the kind of unconscious that allows one speaker to finish another’s sentence without thinking about it is as deserving of consideration as the oneiric recesses Bachelard probes: a linguistic experience of the sea that is, indeed, common. Insofar as clichés tend to submerge conscious reflection, as Ricks and Zijderfeld suggest, they comprise just such an unconscious. It is possible that ‘states of consciousness and their linguistic expression’ are not easily ‘identifiable apart from each other’.¹¹

The sea, which is both uniform and unpredictable, and which, as I discuss in chapter 1, draws attention to itself as a way of writing about repetition, offers Charles

⁶ Zijderfeld, *On Clichés*, 6.

⁷ Ricks, *Force of Poetry*, 356.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 359, 361; Geoffrey Hill, “‘The World’s Proportion’”: Jonson’s Dramatic Poetry in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*’, in *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 48.

⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Portraits et souvenirs littéraires* (Paris: Charpentier, 1881), 171, quoted in Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, 168.

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983), 153.

¹¹ Griffiths, ‘Disappointment of Rossetti’, 110.

Dickens, too, an occasion to test the boundary between originality and commonality, between a personal and a shared unconscious. Marshall McLuhan writes that a cliché provides ‘an active, structuring, probing feature of our awareness. It performs multiple functions from release of emotion to retrieval of other clichés from both the conscious and unconscious life’.¹² Schopenhauer was thinking of something similar when he described the reflective mind as a rock upon which a stream of unconscious willing ‘breaks, but which it does not carry away’.¹³ The sea tends to blur the original voice into the voices of others, but it also offers a figurative vocabulary for speaking about such intermingling. The possibility of reflexivity exists, though it can be difficult to determine when an author is aware of it. Whether a reader chooses to view Dickens’s use of nautical cliché as self-assertive or unconscious will vary to a degree largely dependent on the extent to which the text dredges up elements of that particular reader’s stock of allusion. This chapter will treat both the ways in which Dickens’s sea texts participate in this ambiguity, and the ways in which they thematise it.

Rope-making

From the beginning, Dickens’s novels hovered at the water’s edge, and occasionally plunged in to think more seriously about the sea, or simply to rummage gleefully in the flotsam and jetsam of maritime England. His collaborative seagoing Christmas pieces like *The Wreck of the Golden Mary* (1856), and ‘A Message from the Sea’ (1860) explore the genre Marryat had initiated in Britain. In the mid-1850s, sea-fever seems to have gripped Dickens with particular tenacity. He had been down to Dover in 1856, while at work on *Little Dorrit*—a novel crusted with ‘Barnacles’—and stayed in the Ship Hotel, hoping to

¹² Marshall McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 55.

¹³ Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 1:280.

derive some refreshment for himself and for his writing, before crossing the channel to Boulogne with the same goal in mind. A couple of years earlier, he had written about the same crossing as follows:

a worthy Frenchman in a seal-skin cap with a braided hood over it [...] waking up with a pale and crumpled visage, and looking ruefully out at the grim row of breakers enjoying themselves fanatically on an instrument of torture called “the Bar,” inquired of us whether we were ever sick at sea? Both to prepare his mind for the abject creature we were presently to become, and also to afford him consolation, we replied, “Sir, your servant is always sick when it is possible to be so.”¹⁴

While in France, Dickens continued work with Wilkie Collins on their own nautical melodrama *The Frozen Deep*, and advanced far enough that he began giving directions to Clarkson Stanfield and William Telbin on what backdrops ought to be painted in preparation for the performance in which Dickens was to play Richard Wardour. (The play was first staged on 5 January 1857. It quickly grew in reputation, however, and that summer it was performed for Victoria and Albert at her request.) Dickens was also at work with Collins on a frame tale for *The Wreck of the Golden Mary* in *Household Words*, with Dickens writing ‘The Wreck’, to be narrated by Captain Ravender, and Collins ‘The Deliverance’, in which the story is picked up by John Steadiman.¹⁵ The play and the Christmas book followed earlier nautical successes. The previous year, they had mounted *The Lighthouse*, which Collins had composed with Dickens’s help. Dickens took the part of the lighthouse keeper.¹⁶ Years earlier Dickens had described ‘a solitary lighthouse’ in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), glimpsed by Scrooge as he skims past ‘a dismal reef of sunken rocks, some league or so from shore, on which the waters chafed and dashed, the wild year

¹⁴ Charles Dickens, ‘Our French Watering-Place’, in Slater, ‘*Gone Astray*’, 230–31.

¹⁵ Charles Dickens, *The Wreck*, in Melissa Valiska Gregory and Melisa Klimaszewski, eds., *The Wreck of the Golden Mary* (London: Hesperus, 2006), 3–39; Wilkie Collins, *The Deliverance*, in Gregory and Klimaszewski, *Wreck of Golden Mary*, 99–119.

¹⁶ Stanfield’s scene painting for this production is now in the Dickens House Museum in London.

through' with the Ghost of Christmas Present.¹⁷ A playbill for 14 February 1844 advertises productions of *A Christmas Carol* and 'the Favourite Nautical Drama', *The Ocean of Life*, to be played later the same night. Audiences were invited to look eagerly forward to views of 'A DESOLATE & ROCKY COAST', and one imagines that the productions used the same scenery.¹⁸ Now Dickens was to inhabit that seascape for himself. Dickens's son was later to recall that this was 'the first time [...] [Dickens] displayed that extraordinary melodramatic intensity and force with which his readings were afterwards to make the public so familiar'.¹⁹ Dickens had composed a prologue in doggerel: 'A story of those rocks where doomed ships come / To cast their wrecks upon the steps of home'.²⁰ At the conclusion of this recital, the younger Dickens and Marcus Stone were tasked with producing the weather effects Dickens had personally devised, rolling a 'dozen cannon balls on the floor to simulate the shaking of the lighthouse as it was struck by the waves', juddering sheets of iron and operating a 'sort of silk grindstone' for the thunder and the wind, while Stanfield himself threw salt onstage to simulate 'the flying spray': 'I can see now his jolly red sailor face beaming with excitement and delight'.²¹ Charles Jr. describes it as 'nervous work' under his father's zealous direction, but by all accounts the play was an 'astounding success'.

This was a frantic period, during which the sea dominated Dickens's imagination as it did his working life. He wrote to Macready with an explanation of his feelings at the time:

You may faintly imagine, my venerable friend, the occupation of these also-gray hairs, between *Golden Marys*, *Little Dorrits*, and *Household Wordses*, four stage-

¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, ed. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 55.

¹⁸ This playbill can be found in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Library, shelfmark JJ Dickens Playbills.

¹⁹ Charles Dickens [Jr.], 'Glimpses of Charles Dickens', *North American Review* 160 (May 1895): 533.

²⁰ Charles Dickens, preface to Wilkie Collins, *The Lighthouse*, quoted in *ibid.*

²¹ Charles Dickens Jr., 'Glimpses of Dickens', 534.

carpenters entirely boarding on the premises, a carpenter's shop erected in the back-garden, size always boiling over on all the lower fires, Stanfield perpetually elevated on planks and splashing himself from head to foot, Telbin requiring impossibilities of swart gasmen, and a legion of prowling nondescripts forever slinking in and out. Calm amidst the wrack, your aged friend glides away on the Dorrit stream, forgetting the uproar for a stretch of hours—refreshes himself with a ten or twelve miles walk—pitches himself head foremost into foaming rehearsals—placidly emerges for Editorial purposes—smokes over buckets of distemper with Mr. Stanfield aforesaid—again calmly floats on the Dorrit waters.²²

But the sea had been on his mind even earlier. Take the second chapter of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37), where the thrusting momentum of the narrative slows for a moment to peruse ‘Mr. Pickwick’s notes’ on ‘Stroud [*sic*], Rochester, Chatham, and Brompton’: “‘The principal productions of these towns,’” says Mr. Pickwick, “appear to be soldiers, sailors, Jews, chalk, shrimps, officers, and dock-yard men. The commodities chiefly exposed for sale in the public streets, are marine stores, hard-bake, apples, flat fish, and oysters.’” The sight of soldiers and sailors, Pickwick notes, ‘affords a cheap and innocent amusement for the boy population’.²³ Dickens had reason to know these things; he had lived in Chatham between the ages of four and eleven, near to the dockyards where his father was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. The four towns could be visited in the order in which Pickwick mentions them, starting at Strood, and crossing the mouth of the Medway by Rochester Bridge. Passing Brompton and continuing east, one would soon reach Gad’s Hill, and the house Dickens’s father showed him when he was a boy—pointed out as a worthy object of his ambitions—which he would buy thirty-six years later.²⁴ When Dickens writes of ‘Chatham Dockyard’ in 1863, he had been living in Gad’s Hill Place for roughly seven years. ‘Running water is favourable to day-dreams,’ he says, ‘and a strong tidal river is the best of running water for mine. I like to watch the great ships standing out

²² Charles Dickens to William Macready, 13 December 1856, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 12 vols, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey, Pilgrim Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), vol. 8, 1856–1858 (1995), ed. Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, 238.

²³ Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 14.

²⁴ See Ackroyd, *Dickens*, 32.

to sea'.²⁵ As he walks through the dockyard, he salutes 'an old hulk', and admires a new machine making oars at incredible speed.²⁶ Amongst the rope-makers, he finds himself

spun into a state of blissful indolence, wherein my rope of life seems to be so untwisted by the process as that I can see back to very early days indeed, when my bad dreams – they were frightful, though my more mature understanding had never made out why – were of an interminable sort of ropemaking, with long minute filaments for strands, which, when they were spun home together close to my eyes, occasioned screaming.²⁷

Dickens's stories often fix upon ways in which an individual could be said to be tied to his or her past. And, as when Marley's ghost 'raised a cry', shaking the chain he 'forged in life', such bonds could indeed occasion screaming.²⁸ But they could also provoke more measured responses. Dickens imagines 'writing a book' in the cab of one of the great cranes of the dockyard.²⁹ Indeed, if rope-making is a good metaphor for fate, it is fate of a peculiarly novelistic sort: of entwined plots rather than a single thread. Dickens would use a similar metaphor in the postscript to his last completed, and most tidal, novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), where he pictures the serial novelist as a 'story-weaver at his loom'.³⁰ Figured in 'Chatham Dockyard' as chandler's goods, rope-making offers here a clue to the nature of one particular filament that not only binds Dickens to his boyhood self, but also threads his novels together. At the beginning of 'The Wreck', Captain Ravender explains that he has 'encountered a great deal of rough weather, both literal and

²⁵ Charles Dickens, 'Chatham Dockyard', in *The Uncommercial Traveller and Other Papers, 1859–1870*, ed. Michael Slater and John M. L. Drew (London: Dent, 2000), 289. In summer 1863, Dickens's son Sydney, who had enlisted as a midshipman, was in Chatham while his ship HMS *Orlando* underwent repairs, and the editors of the Dent edition inform us that Sydney is probably the original for Dickens's companion on his jaunts through the dockyard. Among the ships built in Chatham was the *Temeraire*, made famous by Turner's painting, of which Dickens had a copy specially made by Stanfield. Dickens had already collaborated with R. H. Horne on a piece about the docks. [Charles Dickens and R. H. Horne], 'One Man in a Dockyard', *Household Words* 3 (6 September 1851): 553–57.

²⁶ Dickens, 'Chatham Dockyard', 294–95.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 295.

²⁸ Dickens, *Christmas Carol*, 22.

²⁹ Dickens, 'Chatham Dockyard', 295.

³⁰ Charles Dickens, postscript to *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Michael Cotsell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 821.

metaphorical', and, as in the letter to Macready describing 'wracks' and 'sinkings', the meeting of these twin aspects of the sea proved equally significant to Dickens.³¹

Among the bits and pieces of ships, Dickens considers the components of narrative that might similarly be borne by the sea. If the sea had shaped Frederick Marryat's novels without his attempting directly to address it, in Dickens's writing it moves in and out of focus, conditioning, as he describes it, his 'vagrant fancy'.³² It floats on the edges of novels like *Barnaby Rudge* (1840–41), where Dickens shows a 'human sea' of rioters, echoing Carlyle in *The French Revolution* (1837) with its luridly drawn 'roaring sea of human heads', or *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44), which reproduced Dickens's own experience of going to America aboard the *Britannia* 'in the lassitude of sea-sickness' when Martin and Mark Tapley make their own jaunt across the Atlantic in the *Screw*.³³ In *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), however, the sea fostered Dickens's first ambitious attempt at fusing the details of a novel to a single symbolic idiom. Dickens's experiments with the sea have been viewed in this light by critics for some time. However, the feeling that Dickens was dabbling ill-advisedly in genre writing, or that he was merely rehashing Romantic cliché—that the sea as Dickens depicts it is so vague that it should not be taken seriously—has prevented his marine writing from being rigorously examined. *Dombey and Son* represents his most sustained, and most maligned, engagement with the sea, and makes therefore a good starting place for an assessment of its place in his fiction.

³¹ Dickens, *The Wreck*, 3.

³² Charles Dickens, 'Aboard Ship', in Slater and Drew, *Uncommercial Traveller*, 352.

³³ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, ed. K. J. Fielding and David Sorensen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 292; Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1999), 244.

Very untrue

Critics writing about *Dombey and Son* since Kathleen Tillotson's landmark study *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1954) have tended to position the sea at the literal and figurative centre of the novel, taking it as a basis for further arguments about economy, empire, or sexuality, or as a means of revealing Dickens's new interest in planning and coherence, as seen in his use of intricate number plans. Mr Dombey's wife, as she dies at the end of the first chapter is said (echoing Byron) to have 'drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world', with Florence 'clinging fast to that slight spar' (*DS*, 10). Both Paul's short life and his death are similarly attended by 'the restless sea' (194), and the clerks at Dombey's firm appear 'as if they were assembled at the bottom of the sea; while a mouldy little strong room in the obscure perspective, where a shaded lamp was always burning, might have represented the cavern of some ocean monster, looking on with a red eye at these mysteries of the deep' (182). While some like Michael Slater have suggested that Dickens's interest in careful plotting can be traced back earlier, to 1844 and *The Chimes*, most critics, including J. Hillis Miller, the Leavises, Robert Clark, and Suvendrini Perera, accept the general truth of Tillotson's thesis.³⁴ 'It is now generally agreed', William Axton declared in 1963, 'that in *Dombey and Son*, "the first masterpiece of Dickens' maturity," Dickens solved the structural problems of the serial novel'.³⁵

³⁴ See J. Hillis Miller, 'Dombey and Son', in *The Dickens Critics*, ed. George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1961), 366–73; F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970); Robert Clark, 'Riddling the Family Firm: The Sexual Economy in *Dombey and Son*', *English Literary History* 51 (1984): 69–84; Suvendrini Perera, 'Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation: Empire and the Family Business in *Dombey and Son*', *Victorian Studies* 33 (1990): 603–20; Michael Slater, 'The Chimes: Its Materials, Making, and Public Reception' (doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1965). Philip Collins takes a similar approach to Slater. 'Dombey and Son—Then and Now', *The Dickensian* 63 (1967): 82–94.

³⁵ William Axton, 'Tonal Unity in *Dombey and Son*', *PMLA* 78 (1963): 341.

Behind or beneath the novel's profusion of detail 'lies the abiding presence of the ocean', a 'keystone' of narrative structure.³⁶

Among Dickens's first readers, however, were some who found that certain elements of his novel felt more frayed than felicitous. While *Dombey and Son* sold very well ('like the hottest of cakes', Michael Slater ventures),³⁷ the first number besting its predecessor *Martin Chuzzlewit* by more than twelve thousand copies, some of the novel's earliest critics were behindhand in their appreciation of Dickens's accomplishment. Specifically, the choice of the sea as a unifying metaphor seemed to some a bad one. In May 1848, for example, just after *Dombey and Son* was first published in a single volume, an anonymous reviewer in *Parker's London Magazine* dismissed Dickens's sea metaphors on the grounds that they were trite. The novel is, he writes, 'full to over-flowing of waves whispering and wandering; of dark rivers rolling to the sea, of winds, and golden ripples, and such like matters, which are sometimes very pretty, generally very untrue, and have become, at all events, excessively stale'.³⁸

Parker's primarily has in mind Paul Dombey, the novel's eponymous son, who famously wonders 'what the waves were always saying', and whose thoughts linger on the sea as he lingers at death's door during the period he spends as a student (but chiefly an invalid) in Brighton: 'A solitary window, gazed through years ago, looked out upon an ocean, miles and miles away; upon its waters, fancies, busy with him only yesterday, were hushed and lulled to rest like broken waves. The same mysterious murmur he had wondered at, when lying on his couch upon the beach, he thought he still heard' (*DS*, 214). Perhaps, if the reviewer had read *Pictures from Italy* (1846), published the year *Dombey and Son* began serialisation, he found Paul's murmurings comparable to the numerous

³⁶ William Axton, "'Keystone' Structure in Dickens' Serial Novels", *University of Toronto Quarterly* 37 (1967): 42.

³⁷ Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 262.

³⁸ Unsigned review of *Dombey and Son* by Charles Dickens, *Parker's London Magazine*, May 1848, 201, in Philip Collins, ed., *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 213.

passages where Dickens exhibits a rather forced admiration for Mediterranean sea views ('how blue and bright [...] How picturesque'), and listens 'all night' to the sea's 'murmur beneath the stars'.³⁹ Or perhaps he had been reflecting on the spate of unoriginal nautical melodramas flooding the stage at about this time, 'come and gone like showers (and not very wholesome showers either)', according to Dickens himself.⁴⁰ Or, like Austen, perhaps the reviewer had been thinking of Byron or Scott, or even reading *Persuasion*, where as we have seen Austen expresses similar sentiments. There are many possibilities. By choosing to focus on the literal and metaphorical sea, our reviewer claims, Dickens burdens his novel with a ponderous and predictable linguistic formula, and thus shows a lapse of artistic sensibility. He has failed to understand something essential about the sea's status in literature. Unable to redeem the sea's 'staleness', Dickens's particular voice, its characteristic inimitability, is muffled by the susurrations of other voices that had previously taken up the same subject in the same way.

The pervasiveness of the sea in *Dombey and Son* (along with Dickens's other novels and journalism) means that it cannot be ignored altogether, but the investigation of commonplaces can produce criticism that is as worn out as the stock materials it busies itself analysing. It is not hard to understand the disdain for Paul Dombey's quasi-mystical muttering in *Parker's*. By contrast, beyond pointing out the new care Dickens takes to form his novel around a key trope in *Dombey and Son*, few modern critics have found it worthwhile to write about the sea in Dickens at all; perhaps because, as David Trotter points out, in terms reminiscent of *Parker's*, 'no critic or historian of culture likes an "almost universal" meaning'.⁴¹ Accordingly, a reader curious about Dickens's representation of the sea finds him- or herself wading through such unhelpful theses as,

³⁹ Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, in *American Notes and Pictures from Italy*, ed. Sacheverell Sitwell (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 410.

⁴⁰ [Charles Dickens], 'Marylebone Theatre', *The Examiner*, 12 May 1849, 294.

⁴¹ David Trotter, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61.

‘So much of what Dickens says about the sea and sailors is entirely straightforward’, or ‘The shipwreck metaphor and its function in *Dombey and Son* is quite obvious in its implication’.⁴² Some critics have taken another approach, and excused Dickens’s vagaries by turning their attention to his personal love of the ocean: his (not uncritical) enjoyment of nautical melodrama and travel literature, his near-yearly trips to Brighton or Broadstairs and his later more frequent trips to Boulogne, or his childhood near Chatham.⁴³ Perhaps the sea in Dickens’s novels represents a ‘deep and never-quite-extinguished response’ to his past—a claim that is in itself the sort of critical vagary that, John Carey writes, can ‘make liberal intellectuals feel queasy’.⁴⁴ According to Carey, the problem is more complex. It concerns not just the badness of Dickens’s metaphor, but the incommensurability of the literal and figurative senses in which he intends the sea to be read.

The difficulty is that Dickens fails in *Dombey and Son* to reconcile what Carey considers the novel’s shabby ‘religiosity’, specifically Paul Dombey’s talk of ‘the invisible country far away’, and ‘the real sea of ships and tar and tackling’, familiar from Chatham Dockyard. Hard features of the text like ‘Captain Cuttle with his hook hand and salty language, Sol Gills’ nautical instrument shop (The Wooden Midshipman), and the old sailor in battered oilskins who pushes Paul’s wheelchair and smells like a weedy beach at low tide’, Carey explains, ‘simply refuse to combine with the shadowy symbolic sea. Their sea is geographic and commercial, solid with detail from Dickens’s childhood

⁴² Peck, *Maritime Fiction*, 72; William J. Palmer, ‘Dickens and Shipwreck’, *Dickens Studies Annual* 18 (1989): 55.

⁴³ Dickens described, for instance, his bathing habits at Broadstairs thus: ‘In a bay-window in a one pair, sits from nine o’clock to one, a gentleman with rather long hair and no neck-cloth who writes and grins as if he thought he were very funny indeed. His name is Boz. At one, he disappears, and presently emerges from a bathing machine, and may be seen—a kind of salmon-coloured porpoise—splashing about in the ocean.’ Charles Dickens to C. C. Felton, 1 September 1843, in *Letters of Dickens*, vol. 3, 1842–1843 (1974), ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, 548.

⁴⁴ John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens’ Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 41.

memories.⁴⁵ Julian Moynahan is more thoroughgoing than Carey, though essentially in agreement: ‘the vagaries of [Paul Dombey’s] mental processes resemble the shapeless surgings of the sea’, he says. The trouble is widespread: ‘The essential movement of the book is from complexity towards a weltering simplicity’.⁴⁶ Dickens’s mixed metaphor represents to Moynahan a correspondingly confused logic. He wants Dickens to settle on something firmer—true religious sentiment, or solid social analysis—but is faced instead with a kind of sentimentality he finds limply feminine.⁴⁷ What ought to have been the most solid part of Dickens’s novel turns out to be its point of greatest flexibility.

The criticisms levelled by Carey and Moynahan are compelling. Both dwell convincingly on the lack of coherence exhibited by Dickens’s sea, which mingles tears and baptismal water with alluvial outflow, taking one fluid to be more or less interchangeable with any other. It would be difficult to disagree that this is precisely what the sea does in Dickens’s novel. However, it is also worth asking in what ways the hardness critics wish for (evident in the implied solidity of Axton’s metaphoric keystones, and Moynahan’s dialectic of firmness/wetness) is countermanded. This seems especially important in light of the fact that, as Dickens protests in ‘Chatham Dockyard’, childhood memories, even of spanners and spools of rope, might be anything but solid: the reassuringly ponderous things of the dockyard produce ‘vague mysterious awe’, he admits, before any other feeling.⁴⁸

There are several reasons why the metaphorical sea in *Dombey and Son* might be thought of as verbally unstable. Fundamentally, however, all are related to the various clichéd uses to which the sea has been put in writing and in ordinary speech—as Jonathan Raban puts it, ‘dead nautical metaphors’ (‘aloof’, ‘aback’, ‘the bitter end’, etc.) turn up

⁴⁵ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁶ Julian Moynahan, ‘Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son’, in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 128, 127.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁸ Dickens, ‘Chatham Dockyard’, 290.

with startling frequency, not just in novels, but in everyday discourse.⁴⁹ Given that clichés verging on figures of speech can hide just out of a reader’s line of sight in a text, an author may use language of this sort when he or she wishes to evoke a general feeling rather than a specific idea, which can come across as ‘rather shuffling’, according to Empson.⁵⁰

Let us consider one crucial example, reputedly the most banal metaphor of all, and the element that sits most uneasily with Carey: Paul Dombey’s notion of ‘the invisible country far away’. This cannot be considered a quirk merely of little Paul’s fevered brain; it is an afterlife of sorts, but it is also one of the most firmly settled tropes in Western literature—its banality is inseparable from its inertia. Until Dickens cancelled these paragraphs in proof, this is how the novel originally ended:

The voices in the waves speak low to him of Florence, day and night—plainest when he, his blooming daughter, and her husband, walk beside them in the evening, or sit at an open window, listening to their roar. They speak to him of Florence and his altered heart; of Florence and their ceaseless murmuring to her of the love, eternal and illimitable, extending still, beyond the sea, beyond the sky, to the invisible country far away.

Never from the mighty sea may voices rise too late, to come between us and the unseen region on the other shore! Better, far better, that they whispered of that region in our childish ears, and the swift river hurried us away! (*DS*, 967n925)

What Dickens means in such passages is often deliberately vague. Even in the chapter entitled ‘What the Waves Were Always Saying’, a reader hoping for clarification is bound to be disappointed. At the climactic moment Paul exclaims, ‘I hear the waves! They always said so!’, but what they did say is frustratingly kept secret (240). The feeling and the general idea Dickens wants to put across is, however, clear enough; Dickens is speaking in familiar tones (as are the waves by this point) of misty beatitude.

⁴⁹ Raban, introduction to *Oxford Book of Sea*, 7.

⁵⁰ I discuss Empson’s remarks on general feelings versus specific ideas in my introduction, page 26. The assessment ‘rather shuffling’ applies to Wordsworth’s ‘something far more deeply interfused’ in *Tintern Abbey*, lines which ‘attempt to be uplifting yet non-denominational, to put across as much pantheism as would not shock his readers’, a criticism akin to Moynahan’s of *Dombey and Son*. Empson, *Seven Types*, 154.

This becomes explicit in light of a related text. When Tennyson asked that the last poem published in future editions of his works be ‘Crossing the Bar’, it was considered that he had composed his own ‘death song’. He wrote this poem while ill, crossing the Solent to the Isle of Wight, and recited it to his nurse who ‘ran from the room’ because it seemed too much like the poet’s own epitaph.⁵¹

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.⁵²

Tennyson’s poem might be thought of as outside ‘Time and Place’ in more ways than one. The pilot-god trope, George Monteiro notes, has been ‘long a commonplace in the literature of many countries and nations of the Western world’, appearing in works by Plato, Melville, Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Stephen Crane, and Walt Whitman, and popular hymns like Edward Hooper’s ‘Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me’ and Rood and Rexford’s ‘Your Father’s at the Helm’.⁵³ Dickens uses the bar as an image of oblivion several times, as in ‘Our French Watering-Place’ (1854), and ‘Out of the Season’ (1856) where he observes a mail packet heading out to sea: ‘The mail-bags (O that I myself had the sea-legs of a mail-bag!) were tumbled aboard; the Packet left off roaring, warped out, and made at the white line upon the bar. One dip, one roll, one break of the sea over her bows, and Moore’s Almanack or the sage Raphael could not have told me more of the state of things aboard, than I knew.’⁵⁴ In ‘Travelling Abroad’ (1860), he elaborates: ‘I was on the deck of the steam-packet, and we were aiming at the bar in the usual intolerable manner, and the

⁵¹ This is Tennyson’s account of the nurse’s response. Alfred Lord Tennyson quoted in *Tennyson’s Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill, Jr. (New York: Norton, 1971), 578.

⁵² Tennyson, ‘Crossing the Bar’, in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, vol. 3, p. 254, lines 13–16.

⁵³ George Monteiro, ‘The Pilot-God Trope in Nineteenth-Century American Texts’, *Modern Language Studies* 7 (1977): 42, 43.

⁵⁴ Charles Dickens, ‘Out of the Season’, in Slater, ‘*Gone Astray*’, 385–86. See also ‘Travelling Abroad’ and ‘The Calais Night Mail’ for descriptions of crossing the bar ‘in the usual intolerable manner’ (miserably seasick). ‘Travelling Abroad’, in Slater and Drew, *Uncommercial Traveller*, 86–87.

bar was aiming at us in the usual intolerable manner, and the bar got by far the best of it.⁵⁵ Similarly, Tennyson's metaphoric 'bourne' springs not from one place, but several, which is appropriate to his depiction of death as passing from the bounded flow of a stream into a more oceanic mode of existence. The word *bound* originally denoted a 'limit or terminus', and it is used this way in *Hamlet*.

The dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of.⁵⁶

In Tennyson's lines, however, 'bourne' is allowed freer play. It quickly morphs into 'bear', showing that Tennyson had in mind not only the way that life itself can demand endurance of what might seem unbearable, as Tennyson found the death of Arthur Hallam, but also the way we are borne through time as on a stream (a bourn), and simultaneously a more literal shared origin in the birth canal or channel. The combination of 'bear' and 'far' to make 'bar' offers syntax and rhyme as a model of the kind of continuity through change Tennyson hopes for. 'Bar' returns us to Hamlet's sense of bourn and marks the stream's end, though these variations seem to demonstrate that what Tennyson has in mind is a threshold and not an obstruction.

Though it is odd to think of him keeping company with Hamlet, Paul Dombey's murmurings could also be considered to be an aspect of the past of Tennyson's poem. And, of course, both have other likely sources. When Dickens writes that Paul Dombey's is 'a fashion that came in with our first garments and will last unchanged until our race has run its course, and the wide firmament is rolled up like a scroll' (*DS*, 241), he is rehearsing

⁵⁵ Dickens, 'Travelling Abroad', 86–87.

⁵⁶ *OED*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. 'bourne | bourn, n.2', sense 3a; William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 3.1.78–82.

the visionary apocalyptic metaphors of Isaiah and Revelation,⁵⁷ while ‘the swift river that bears us to the ocean’ is, of course, also the Styx to be crossed in death, as much as it is the Thames, or the Medway of Dickens’s own private mythology. Admittedly, such provenance can have contrary effects. If Tennyson’s meaning is firmed up (to the extent that his nurse immediately recognised it), it is also watered down: in other words, if the poem would work well as Tennyson’s epitaph, it would work equally well as someone else’s. In the case of both Tennyson’s poem and Dickens’s novel, however, our recognition of a common linguistic and literary past vouches for a common future, a possibility enabled by the literal and literary fluidity of their central figure.

If fluidity can be established by influence and allusion, it may take effect too within a single text. Matthew Arnold contends that another phrase of Hamlet’s—‘To take arms against a sea of troubles’—demands to be read with much the same sort of half-attention, and can be liked only if it is not thought about too hard: ‘the figure there is undoubtedly most faulty, it by no means runs on four legs; but the thing is said so freely and idiomatically, that it passes’.⁵⁸ While his own metaphor is by no means ‘free’, Carey and Moynahan would understand Arnold’s implied claim that critics should not try to make too much of words like Shakespeare’s or Tennyson’s. The poet’s particular expression turns out to be vaguely idiomatic, a part of speech that escapes critical consideration precisely because it is so readily understood. Of course, Shakespeare’s words do and do not demand attention. They could just as easily be seen to look ahead to a more literal to-ing and fro-ing: Hamlet’s departure with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,

⁵⁷ Isa. 34:4; Rev. 6:14 (AV).

⁵⁸ *Hamlet*, 3.1.58; Arnold, ‘On Translating Homer’, in *On the Classical Tradition*, ed. Super, 156.

and his return ‘ere we were two days old at sea’.⁵⁹ It would, however, take an unusually alert playgoer to notice such subtle linguistic recurrence.⁶⁰

Dickens gives his reader more opportunity to notice a pattern, writing of Florence Dombey’s ‘sea of doubt and hope’, Captain Cuttle’s ‘sea of speculation and conjecture’, and Mr Dombey’s consuming ‘sea of pride’, in defiance of ‘the tides of human chance and change’, expressed over a ‘dead sea of mahogany on which the fruit dishes and decanters lay at anchor; as if the subjects of his thoughts were rising towards the surface one by one, and plunging down again’ (*DS*, 441, 421, 594, 856, 455). Dickens’s repetitions urge the reader to give attention to his ‘sea of’ construction, rising in turn to the surface of his prose and dropping out of sight again before too much can be made of them. How to read the phrase on each recurrence remains uncertain, and not only because it may briskly unite apparent contraries like ‘doubt’ and ‘hope’. It is an innocuous figure of speech that repeatedly calls to mind not just the novel’s central metaphor, but also its key plot points. Language, that is, that would not normally be thought of as figurative—‘sea of’ is plainly a species of dead metaphor—becomes obtrusively though ambiguously metaphorical because its literal referent is present in the text, and may or may not be influencing the text’s idiom. The reader is left to guess how thoroughly to parse Dickens’s phrasing: it is firmly established and fluidly ungraspable at once. From one point of view, this banal language has become poetic. ‘How does poeticity manifest itself?’, asks Roman Jakobson: ‘Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of

⁵⁹ *Hamlet*, 4.6.15.

⁶⁰ For a brief but suggestive discussion of *Hamlet*’s marine idiom, see Raban, introduction to *Oxford Book of Sea*, 6–7.

referring indifferently to reality'.⁶¹ It is probably unfair to take such a drastic line as this in Dickens's case since, of course, it is unclear whether or not these utterances about the sea enact *différance* or manifest a form of compositional indifference. Language as such is not exactly what the reader's attention is drawn to, but the relationship between sign and referent is called into question. Dickens may not manage, as Geoffrey Hill put it, to 'rinse' his clichés, but they are unsettled. 'Crossing the Bar', on the other hand, is also crossing into cliché: Tennyson's poem has done more perhaps than any other work of literature to turn this familiar motif into a commonplace verbal formula; *Dombey and Son* is more hesitant and uncertain. Nevertheless, attention is drawn at certain moments to the way in which the material features of a story can reflexively (and often only partially) provide the vocabulary Dickens needs to make the facts mean something.

The material sea is, in fact, encountered most directly by Walter Gay who is aboard the *Son and Heir* when it is wrecked. Here, too, the reader meets with a 'sea of doubt and hope'. Axton considers the wreck to be the novel's 'keystone'—the moment when the 'identity of [the novel's] literal and figurative dimensions of meaning' is most clearly insisted upon.⁶² With the wreck, Dickens cinches together the novel's two key groups of characters—those under Mr Dombey's auspices, and the knot of innocents centred around The Wooden Midshipman, the nautical instrument maker—thematically parcelling up young Paul Dombey's watery end with that of Captain Cuttle and Sol Gills's vanished heir, Walter Gay, thus offering shipwreck and salvage as a way of thinking about the fate of the novel's titular firm and the characters that trail in its wake.

In a sense, this is the sea Carey and Moynahan love best: a sea of wrecks and technical gewgaws. Yet here too Dickens is concerned, above all, with the sea's capacity to trouble a reader's firmest convictions. In the middle of the novel—chapter 32 of sixty-

⁶¹ Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 378.

⁶² Axton, "'Keystone' Structure", 42.

two—the wreck is reported. Mr Toots reads aloud to Captain Cuttle from the *Shipping Intelligence*:

the look-out observed, half an hour before sunset, some fragments of a wreck, drifting at about the distance of a mile. The weather being clear, and the barque making no way, a boat was hoisted out, with orders to inspect the same, when they were found to consist of sundry large spars, and a part of the main rigging of an English brig, of about five hundred tons burden, together with a portion of the stern on which the words and letters, “Son and H—” were yet plainly legible. No vestige of any dead body was to be seen upon the floating fragments. [...] There can be no doubt that all surmises as to the fate of the missing vessel, the Son and Heir, port of London, bound for Barbados, are now set at rest for ever; that she broke up in the last hurricane; and that every soul on board perished. (*DS*, 490)

Hans Blumenberg, paraphrasing Goethe, writes that ‘both progress and sinkings leave behind the same peaceful surface’.⁶³ This is not wholly true for Dickens: traces remain, and these are an invitation to invent: ‘debris is precious to him because it represents the best hope of rebuilding’.⁶⁴ We are told that ‘the words and letters “Son and H—” were yet plainly legible’ on the bits and pieces of the wreck found floating by a passing ship (490). Yet the *Shipping Intelligence*, Captain Cuttle, and we as readers are all led to misinterpret this scrap of text. There is no ‘vestige of any dead body’ there because the body we are concerned with is not dead. Dickens’s word choice (‘vestige’, from Latin *vestigium*, footprint) alerts us that Gay has miraculously walked away, so to speak, Christ-like.⁶⁵ The way Captain Cuttle pronounces Walter Gay’s name, ‘Wal’r!’, stirs something in the memory of Mr Perch, ‘who seemed to remember having heard in infancy that there was once a poet of that name’ (*DS*, 252). He is thinking of the Royalist poet Edmund Waller whose patriotic verse ‘Of a War with Spain, and Fight at Sea’ (1656) Dickens may also have in the back of his mind:

⁶³ Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 59.

⁶⁴ Rendall, introduction to Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 3.

⁶⁵ *OED*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. ‘vestige, n.’

Others may use the ocean as their road,
 Only the ENGLISH make it their abode:
 [...]
 Our oaks secure, as if they there took root:
 We tread on billows with a steady foot.⁶⁶

Like the ‘Son and H—’, the figure of Walter disappears as we read it; his footprints are miraculously present insofar as they are suggested by the text, and yet they signify equally an absence because there is nothing left on the surface of the water. Dickens reminds us that reading a serial novel is not like reading the shipping news, because more remains to be written. Although the reader is told that there can be no doubt, doubt in this case is precisely the straw Dickens gives his reader to cling to.

In a sense, *Dombey and Son* anticipates Dickens’s sentiments at Chatham Dockyard: a shipyard occasions thoughts of novelistic construction, while a shipwreck offers opportunities for narrative reconstruction. Paul Dombey, at his bedroom window, observes the sea and feels that ‘there were crowds of thoughts that mixed with these, and came on, one upon the other, like the rolling waves’; it is perhaps an indication of their otherwise unapparent affinity that Mr Dombey’s thoughts, as we have seen, followed similar patterns, ‘rising towards the surface [...], and plunging down again’ (206). Dickens’s brainwaves, however, were also susceptible to the motions of actual waves: watching the Medway running into the sea, he ruminates that ‘everything within the range of the senses will [...] lend itself to everything beyond that range, and work into a drowsy whole, not unlike a kind of tune, but for which there is no exact definition’.⁶⁷ In *Dombey and Son*, the sea also spreads its ripples indistinctly, making it difficult at times to determine with ‘exact definition’ where they begin and end. Solidity is not what Dickens primarily valued about the sea. Although the sea presses the original voice into shop-worn

⁶⁶ Edmund Waller, ‘Of a War with Spain, and Fight at Sea’, in *The Works of Edmund Waller Esqr. in Verse and Prose....* (London: printed for I. Tonson, 1729), 192, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (CW115263685).

⁶⁷ Dickens, ‘Chatham Dockyard’, 289.

patterns, such forms remained appealing to Dickens; their fundamental vagueness cannot be thought of, with Carey, Moynahan, and others, wholly as a mark of authorial unconsciousness, because such vagueness is also something Dickens thought *with*.

Wooden midshipmen

With an uncertain sense of just how long his own text would endure, John Forster notes that one of what he calls Dickens's 'prototypes', 'the Little Wooden Midshipman[,] did actually (perhaps does still) occupy his post of observation in Leadenhall Street'.⁶⁸

Forster's parenthesis gauges the durability not just of the figurine that served as a basis for the one Dickens positioned outside Sol Gills's shop, but also of his own textual recollection of it. (In fact, the midshipman is no longer in Leadenhall Street, but is now in the Dickens House Museum where it can be seen, brightly painted, still staring through its sextant.) Its durability was a subject of interest to Dickens, too. On his way to Wapping in 1860—not, as he says, 'because I believe (for I don't) in the constancy of the young woman who told her seagoing lover [...] that she had ever continued the same', but to investigate workhouses—Dickens walked on, 'past my little wooden midshipman' which really had 'carried on the same', but only 'after affectionately patting him on one leg of his knee-shorts for old acquaintance' sake'.⁶⁹ Though it was common for Dickens to feel haunted by his creations, it was rare that he could pat one on the knee. Of all the solid articles that clutter Dickens's novels, the wooden midshipman had proved to be one of the most enduring.

As Dickens's allusion to the young woman and her seagoing lover of the ballad 'Wapping Old Stairs' (*ca.* 1797) suggests, the kind of plot that the wooden midshipman

⁶⁸ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1893), 374. I shall capitalise *wooden midshipman* when talking about the shop, but not when talking about the figurine more broadly.

⁶⁹ Dickens, 'Wapping Workhouse', in *Uncommercial Traveller*, ed. Slater and Drew, 43.

introduces in the form of Florence and Walter's picturesque romance had also proved its tenacity. Yet, while Forster implicitly includes the Midshipman among the 'vivid and life-like' creations of *Dombey and Son*, Dickens clearly felt by the time he visited Wapping in 1860 that the kind of narrative suggested by the figurine could no longer be 'believed' wholeheartedly. The novel sits on the cusp of these viewpoints. If a sense of doubt is crucial to the report of the wreck of the *Son and Heir*, it has been important to Walter's character throughout. Dickens was to settle on a version of the romantic plotting in 'Wapping Old Stairs'—Walter turns out finally to be as wooden as his association with the figurine, which gives the shop its name, suggests—but throughout the novel he makes an attempt to keep other possibilities in play, largely, and unexpectedly, by way of Walter's ties to the Wooden Midshipman. In particular, the several ways in which the midshipman's woodenness can be read allowed Dickens simultaneously to think of Walter as a stock figure and to imply a sense of hesitancy and knowingness, holding in reserve until the last moment the possibility that Walter will turn out differently than the reader imagines. So, although Dickens does not successfully avoid clichéd plotting and characterisation, he makes use of vagueness to suggest the possibility that he could.

Walter Gay, Gills, and Captain Cuttle are introduced in their shop, named after the figurine that stands outside the door, whose immovability Dickens finds faintly laughable: 'little timber midshipmen in obsolete naval uniforms, eternally employed outside the shop-doors of nautical instrument makers in taking observations of the hackney coaches' (*DS*, 36). Still, as G. W. Kennedy points out, the shop is an emblem of cosy compactness of the sort Dickens loved, like Mr Tartar's quarters in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), the Atlantic packet *The Screw* in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which under Mark Tapley's cheerful eye becomes so like a country pub that he can perceive 'no great difference' (245), or like Bill Barley's in *Great Expectations*, which is 'fitted out "like a chandler's shop"', complete

with a table on which he keeps ‘his grog ready-mixed in a little tub’ (343, 344).⁷⁰ In Sol Gills’s shop, ‘everything was jammed into the tightest cases, fitted into the narrowest corners, fenced up behind the most impertinent cushions, and screwed into the acutest angles, to prevent its philosophical composure from being disturbed by the rolling of the sea’ (*DS*, 37). Dickens tells us that ‘such extraordinary precautions were taken in every instance to save room, and keep the thing compact’, though they also establish certain narrative expectations in the reader’s mind (37). Walter Gay’s name likewise would have suggested to readers that he was snugly recognisable, like Marryat’s heroes—Midshipman Easy, Jacob Faithful, and so on, or indeed like Jon Steadiman in *The Wreck of the Golden Mary*. And, while he is not yet a sailor, Solomon Gills’s nephew ‘looked quite enough like a midshipman to carry out the prevailing idea’ (*DS*, 37). In spite of Walter’s garden-variety appearance, however, Dickens was unclear about exactly how solid or realistic to make his character when he began *Dombey and Son*. He wrote to Forster at the end of July 1846,

it would be a good thing to disappoint all the expectations that chapter [IV] seems to raise of his happy connection with the story and the heroine, and to show [Walter] gradually and naturally trailing away, from that love of adventure and boyish light-heartedness, into negligence, idleness, dissipation, dishonesty, and ruin. To show, in short, that common, every-day, miserable declension of which we know so much in our ordinary life.⁷¹

He wondered, however, if he could follow this course ‘without making people angry’. By 22 November 1846 he was telling Forster that he was ‘far from sure it could be wholesomely done, after the interest he has acquired’.⁷² In reference to the possibility that Dickens might have ruined Walter, George Gissing writes that ‘the hand was stayed where

⁷⁰ See G. W. Kennedy, ‘The Uses of Solitude: Dickens and *Robinson Crusoe*’, *Victorian Newsletter* 52 (1977): 27.

⁷¹ Charles Dickens to John Forster, July 1846, in *Letters of Dickens*, vol. 4, 1844–1846 (1977), ed. Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis, 593.

⁷² Dickens to Forster, 22 November 1846, in *ibid.*, 658.

the picture would have become too painful alike for author and public'. Gissing goes on to say that 'the phrase about "making people angry" signifies much less than it would in a novelist of to-day. It might well have taken the form: "Can I bring *myself* to do this thing?"'⁷³ Even if he finally gave it up, Dickens allows himself the option of diverging from the familiar pattern.

The popular literature of the sea that emphasises the centrality of sailorly hearts of oak fascinated Dickens, and his personal love of this literature, together with a childhood spent around docks reading the *Terrific Register* in which 'grisly accounts of the horrors that could occur in the aftermath of wrecks were commonplace', is evident in the solid details of *Dombey and Son*.⁷⁴ The fascination that, for example, *Robinson Crusoe* held for Dickens has been widely noted.⁷⁵ David Copperfield's childhood reading, based on Dickens's own, includes 'Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe', half of which contain nautical themes; David also has 'a greedy relish for a few volumes of Voyages and Travels' (*David Copperfield*, 53), like Archibald Duncan's six-volume *The Mariner's Chronicle* (1804) which, Palmer explains, 'became *the* basic source for many of the other shipwreck narrative anthologies of the nineteenth century [...] including Cook's *Voyages* [...] and Hall's *Voyages*'.⁷⁶ Walter Gay and his uncle recall shipwrecks, complete with dates and cargoes, as an introduction to their habits of conversation; these are reminiscent of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century accounts of survivors collected in volumes like Duncan's *Chronicle*. Dickens also owned and drew readily from Charles

⁷³ George Gissing, *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, ed. Simon J. James, vol. 2 (Grayswood, UK: Grayswood Press, 2004), 69. Gissing borrowed his phrase ('too painful') from Dickens's 'mems' for the sixth number of *Dombey and Son*, in fact referring to the scene in which Florence is banished by her father to the upstairs room, though it is in this number too that Walter departs aboard the *Son and Heir*. See 'Appendix B: The Number Plans', in Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 932.

⁷⁴ Thompson, *Romantic-Era Shipwreck Narratives*, 2.

⁷⁵ For a comprehensive look at instances where *Robinson Crusoe* turns up in Dickens's novels, see Kennedy, 'Uses of Solitude'.

⁷⁶ Palmer, 'Dickens and Shipwreck', 48.

Dibdin's *Songs, Naval and National* (1841) and Sir John Dalyell's three-volume *Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea* (1812).⁷⁷ Dalyell was the chief source of corroborating anecdote for Dickens's impassioned rebuttal of Dr Rae's claim that Franklin's crew had turned to cannibalism in 'The Lost Arctic Voyagers', published in *Household Words* in two parts on 2 and 9 December 1854. Walter and Sol's interest in shipwreck narratives, then, to some degree reflects Dickens's own. *The Daily News*, which Dickens briefly edited, and in which he still held an interest, published, along with his tabloid *The Household Narrative of Current Events* (an adjunct to *Household Words*), 'regular sections devoted solely to shipping intelligence and disaster reports'.⁷⁸ *Household Words* itself frequently published either narrative or statistical accounts of shipwrecks. For instance, 'Lighthouses and Light-boats' (11 January 1851) and 'The Preservation of Life from Shipwreck' (3 August 1850) militate against the shortcomings in training and practice of rescuers located along the coasts. 'Life and Luggage' (8 November 1851), 'A Sea-Coroner' (13 March 1852), 'When the Wind Blows' (24 March 1855), and 'Wrecks at Sea' (11 August 1855), all focus on the shocking frequency of shipwrecks. And, just as he had in Sol Gills and Walter's dialogue in *Dombey and Son*, in 'The Long Voyage' (31 December 1853), Dickens's magazine printed miniaturised versions of the eighteenth-century shipwreck anthology, with true accounts of tropical and Arctic wrecks. News of this sort 'was a staple of every London newspaper and most periodicals', as Palmer points out;⁷⁹ the fictional *Shipping Intelligence* from which Captain Cuttle hears of the wreck of the *Son and Heir* shares traits with Dickens's own periodicals.

At the same time, Dickens's first readers and numerous critics have noted that Walter would be equally at home treading the boards of a theatre as the decking of a ship.

⁷⁷ For more on Dickens's reading of Dalyell and what Forster called the popular 'books of African and other travel for which he had insatiable relish', see Slater, 'Gone Astray', 180–81.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Palmer, 'Dickens and Shipwreck', 55.

Walter Gay's trajectory is highly redolent of the melodramatic portrayals of Jolly Jack Tars that achieved great prominence in the nineteenth century. The pair of boys, 'one of them very tall and the other very short, both dressed as sailors—or at least as theatrical sailors, with belts, buckles, pigtails, and pistols complete—fighting in what is called in play-bills a terrific combat', who form the first glimpse that Nicholas Nickleby has of Crummles's theatrical troupe, have more in common with Walter than the sturdily realistic survivors depicted in the periodical reports.⁸⁰ Axton lays out in careful detail the resonances of various plays: *Dick Whittington and His Cat* (1845), by Dickens's friend Albert Smith, and most significantly the enormously popular and influential *Black Ey'd Susan; or, All in the Downs* (1829) by his friend Douglas Jerrold.⁸¹ The play was frequently performed. In September 1842, 'the celebrated Nautical Drama' shared billing with a production of *Oliver Twist* at the Royal Victoria Theatre, where a certain Mr Seaman first played Monks, before taking a turn as Captain Crosstree later in the evening.⁸² Dickens reviewed a production at the Marylebone Theatre in *The Examiner* the year after he completed *Dombey and Son*, 'at which the audience laughed and wept with all their hearts', considered by Dickens to be 'a remarkable illustration of what a man of genius may do with a common-enough theme, and how what he does will remain a thing apart from all imitation'.⁸³ Jerrold's play already had a 'common-enough theme': it is based on John Gay's ballad 'Sweet William's Farewell to Black-Ey'd Susan' (1720). It also set the pattern for nautical melodrama until the end of the century. J. S. Bratton

⁸⁰ Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 278.

⁸¹ William Axton, 'Dombey and Son: From Stereotype to Archetype', *ELH* 31 (1964): 301–17. Axton guessed that Dickens would have seen T. P. Cooke in the role of William during the play's original run (312).

⁸² On the nights *Black-Ey'd Susan* was not performed, the slot was filled by Fitzball's *The Floating Beacon!; or, The Norwegian Wreckers*, another 'popular and Romantic Nautical Drama'. This lineup is documented in a playbill, 1 September 1842, in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Library, shelfmark JJ Dickens Playbills.

⁸³ [Charles Dickens], 'Marylebone Theatre', *The Examiner*, 12 May 1849, 294. The play comes up frequently in Dickens's journalism. See, for example, [Charles Dickens], 'Out of Town', *Household Words* 12 (29 September 1855): 193–96; [Charles Dickens], 'New Year's Day', *Household Words* 19 (1 January 1859): 98–102.

writes, ‘In 1875 the Britannia presented the old plot unchanged in *The Sea is England’s Glory* by F. Marchant; and in 1896 the Pavilion Mile End had it all out again in *Jack Tar*, by A. Shirley and B. Landreck, which bristles with nostalgic claptraps about the romantic tar’.⁸⁴ Dickens himself staged an enthusiastic revival when Jerrold died in 1857.

Ostensibly a benefit for the playwright’s family, Dickens may have been motivated by his love of the melodrama itself, and his convictions of the probable success of his staging, as much as by disinterested benevolence: Jerrold’s family was in fact left well-provided for, and his widow asked Dickens outright to refrain from producing the play at all.⁸⁵

Of course, Dickens makes explicit allusion to *Black Ey’d Susan* in the character of Susan Nipper, called ‘the black-eyed’ throughout *Dombey and Son*. A poster advertising the play is to be found in Phiz’s illustration for the chapter ‘Chiefly Matrimonial’, in which Susan Nipper’s marriage to Toots is announced and in which Cuttles’s sailor friend is wed to his former landlady Mrs Mac Stinger, reinforces the association. As Axton notes, Dickens repurposes both the dramatis personae of Jerrold’s play and its structure, which he uses as a skeletal frame to model Walter’s progress:

Jerrold [...] uses a host of melodramatic clichés: the hero’s timely return from the sea to his lover’s arms, the grasping merchant, his hypocritical and libidinous accomplice, the cock-sure sailor hero, the hard-pressed heroine of delicate sensibility, her spunky companion [...], her idiot-lover [...], and the hero’s stridently nautical shipmates who repeatedly affirm in song their loyalty to nation and friend.⁸⁶

If Walter’s Christian name alludes to Edmund Waller, as mentioned above, his surname might be traced to the melodramatic convention initiated by John Gay; the minor mystery of Walter’s parentage is partially resolved by these allusions.

⁸⁴ J. S. Bratton, ‘British Heroism and the Structure of Melodrama’, in *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790–1930*, ed. Bratton et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 52.

⁸⁵ For more on this zealous but unnecessary ‘getting up’ of *Black Ey’d Susan*, see Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 429.

⁸⁶ Axton, ‘*Dombey and Son*’, 312.

Given the midshipman's status as an agreed-upon type, Walter's woodenness may have originated as a winking acknowledgement on Dickens's part that what he appeared to be introducing was a stock figure of balladic or melodramatic cliché. Sol's midshipman is, Dickens writes, 'familiarily, the woodenest', his 'suavity the least endurable', his garb the most ostentatiously stagey (*DS*, 36). The reader is invited to compare the statue of the wooden midshipman to Walter, who is 'firm and cheery' in his own right (729). The figure's wooden face appears hardly 'reconcilable to human reason', and Walter himself is similarly unbothered by thought, plainly 'not much given to analysing the nature of his own feelings' (118). Repeatedly compared with both the shop's mascot and the shop itself, Walter may not be substantially different from the other movables that stock the shelves. The sense of *wooden* meaning 'mentally dull; insensitive, inapprehensive; unintelligent, blockish', had been current since the sixteenth century, and Carlyle was fond of using the word as a synonym for *mechanical*.⁸⁷ The term may also have had particularly nautical applications. 'Would you learn the jargon of a Midshipman', wonders Hervey Brackbill, an early twentieth-century reporter and telegrapher.

"Catch a skag, settle down, and bone this gauge. You'll be savvy in a butt—before you have to caulk off—unless you're wooden." Which is to say: "Light a cigarette, settle down, and study this vocabulary. You'll know it in a short time—before you go to bed—unless you're an absolute blockhead."⁸⁸

Brackbill goes on to define *wooden* to mean 'unintelligent, stupid, "dumb"'.⁸⁹

Given Walter's blockheadedness, another literary model may have helped Dickens to frame his character in light of a comparable marine definition of *woodenness*:

⁸⁷ *OED*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. 'wooden, adj.', sense 2b.

⁸⁸ Hervey Brackbill, 'Midshipman Jargon', *American Speech* 3 (1928): 451. For Brackbill's biography, see 'Hervey Brackbill (1901–1999)', *The Baltimore Sun*, 21 March 1999, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1999-03-21/entertainment/9903220279_1_brack-woodlawn-evening-sun. While the origin of a phrase like this is difficult to determine, it would not be right to assume that the phrase is American, just because Brackbill is. Throughout the nineteenth century, merchant crews were highly international and employed an argot of their own. Compare the crew of Conrad's *Narcissus*, an English vessel, which nevertheless includes, along with Wait who is from St Kitts, a Finn, two Scandinavians, and an Irishman.

⁸⁹ Brackbill, 'Midshipman Jargon', 455.

Cruikshank's admonitory *The Progress of a Midshipman, Exemplified in the Career of Master Blockhead* (1820), a collaboration with, and comically fictionalised life of, Captain Marryat, which was nonetheless intended to disclose something about the midshipman as a type. Dickens and Marryat were acquaintances, as of course Dickens and Cruikshank had been—Dickens wrote to Marryat, for instance, on 13 October 1842 to acknowledge receipt of *Percival Keene*, 'over which I have been chuckling, and grinning, and clenching my fists, and becoming warlike, for three whole days last past'.⁹⁰ It seems possible that Dickens would have been interested in his old illustrator's work with the Captain. Indeed, where Marryat had transmuted his youthful indiscretions, upon which Master Blockhead's are based, into a degree of bourgeois respectability, Cruikshank's midshipman is done in by his vices, as Walter threatens to be.⁹¹ Perhaps it is no coincidence that the wooden midshipman in *Dombey and Son*, squinting through his 'offensively disproportionate piece of machinery', is also perpetually winking (*DS*, 36).

If Dickens worried that his readers might be made angry, then, it was not just because the decline of such a promising young man would be painful to observe, but also because the idea of the midshipman had largely settled into its familiar heroic shape by this time. According to Ella Westland, 'early Victorian readers of *Dombey* would [...] have been prepared by the mere mention of midshipmen for a story of youthful adventures and career success', an expectation Dickens was not at all sure he wished to satisfy.⁹² Westland's claim is something of an oversimplification. Striking among the often terse definitions of nautical equipment and terminology William Falconer provides in his famous *Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (1769) is the entry for *midshipman*, which

⁹⁰ Dickens goes on to explain that he had heard from Stanfield that Marryat enjoyed drinking cold water in the mornings, a practice he had also adopted. Charles Dickens to Frederick Marryat, 13 October 1842, in *Letters of Dickens*, 3:342–43.

⁹¹ Brantlinger, 'Bringing Up the Empire', 54. See also Ella Westland, 'Dickens's *Dombey* and the Storied Sea', *Dickens Studies Annual* 35 (2005): 87–108.

⁹² Westland, 'Dickens's *Dombey*', 92.

stretched to four pages by the 1784 edition.⁹³ Falconer both implies the conventionality of the midshipman as a type, and engages to correct some misapprehensions. He sketches out the duties and situation of a midshipman aboard ship, but also expounds at length upon the character of this species of young man, who ‘usually comes aboard tinctured with [...] prejudices’, and ‘blinded by [...] prepossessions’ gleaned from popular reading.⁹⁴ According to Falconer, such young men come to sea for the first time full of mistaken opinions about ‘the genius of sailors and their officers. No character, in their opinion, is more excellent than that of the common sailor’. However, every midshipman is eventually disabused of this misapprehension ‘and very soon surprised to find, amongst those honest sailors, a crew of abandoned miscreants, ripe for any mischief or villainy’.⁹⁵ The sense given by Falconer that a midshipman will immediately upon embarking descend into a world of vice mimics Dickens’s original vision of Walter’s ‘miserable declension’. Yet, in the end, Dickens and Falconer alike have it both ways because, not only the *ur*-midshipman of the *Dictionary*, but Walter too, embody at the outset a capacity for the kind of heroic innocence which the authors and the reader hold dear, and also the potential for dramatic decline. In this way, Falconer manages to describe a midshipman who is typical, and possibly typically heroic, but also allows the reader to keep in mind the various unpropitious ways in which such a person might change over time as well. Dickens thrusts onto Sol Gills an anxiety comparable to what he wished his readers to feel: ‘If I didn’t know that he was too fond of me to make a run of it, and go and enter himself aboard ship against my wishes, I should begin to be fidgetty [...] I really should. All in the Downs, eh!’ (*DS*, 38). Dickens’s original readers would have found it easy to discern in Sol’s remark an allusion to *Black Ey’d Susan; or, All in the Downs*.

⁹³ The dictionary remained an essential resource for years, though it had originated as a set of technical notes to Falconer’s influential poem *The Shipwreck*. See above, page 19.

⁹⁴ William Falconer, ‘Midshipman’, in *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine*...., new corr. ed. (London: printed for T. Cadell, 1784), n.p., Eighteenth Century Collections Online (CW109378953).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

If Dickens initially considered a trajectory for Walter something like the one Falconer gives his midshipmen, or Cruikshank gives his Master Blockhead, he finally settled on the kind of heroic myth which Marryat had been fond of depicting in his fiction. We do not know the reasons Forster gave to convince Dickens to maintain the conventionality of Walter's character. The editors of the Pilgrim edition of his letters suggest that there may have been too close a parallel discernible between an impecunious Walter Gay and Thomas Powell, an acquaintance who had embezzled money from Chapman and Hall and fled to America earlier in 1846.⁹⁶ Whatever his rationale, Dickens in the end capitulated and allowed Walter the heroic destiny he knew his public wanted, or at least expected.⁹⁷ Walter's woodenness is the pivot on which Dickens turned the two futures he had imagined for the midshipman.

Carey suspects that such woodenness appears in Dickens—he has written astutely, for instance, about the proliferation of wooden legs in Dickens's novels—for the simpler but no less 'pressing reason [...] that Dickens likes wooden men'.⁹⁸ Indeed, Dickens was at times profligate in his application of the quality, such that, while Walter assumes some aspects of woodenness, Mr Dombey also appears 'like a man of wood, without a hinge or a joint in him', a likeness that suggests little about their respective characters (*DS*, 401). Still, in the Victorian imagination there were good reasons to think that a wooden midshipman might be somewhat different from wooden men in general. Dickens makes the same association elsewhere. In 'Some Recollections of Mortality' (1863), an indifferent nurse appears 'like the figure-head of a pauper-ship', for example, and her charge dampens her 'wooden shoulder' with tears.⁹⁹ Lost in London as a boy, a rascal

⁹⁶ *Letters of Dickens*, 4:593, 575. This explanation isn't necessarily convincing given Dickens's willingness to lampoon even his friends in his novels: Forster himself was to appear as Podsnap in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65). Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 523.

⁹⁷ Forster, *Life of Dickens*, 360.

⁹⁸ Carey, *Violent Effigy*, 88.

⁹⁹ Charles Dickens, 'Some Recollections of Mortality', in Slater and Drew, *Uncommercial Traveller*, 226.

with ‘a stump of black-lead pencil’ writes his mother’s name and address on the young Dickens’s white hat: ‘MRS. BLORES, WOODEN LEG WALK, TOBACCO-STOPPER ROW, WAPPING’, the notorious haunt of sailors while ashore.¹⁰⁰ Dickens finds he cannot rub off the markings, and he was likewise never to rid himself of his predilection for wooden legs which, like Mr Gamp’s which leads him ‘walkin’ into wine vaults, and never comin’ out again ’till fetched by force’, often appear to exhibit a life of their own (*Martin Chuzzlewit*, 535). In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), Quilp possesses ‘the effigy of some famous admiral’, a ship’s figurehead with a ‘mass of timber on its head, caved into the dim and distant semblance of a cocked hat’, sawn off at that waist so that it resembles ‘a distinguished merman’.¹⁰¹ A comparable figure appears in ‘Our Watering Place’, published in *Household Words* on 2 August 1851:

One of those slow heavy fellows sitting down patiently mending a little ship for a mite of a boy, whom he could crush to death by throwing his lightest pair of trousers on him. You will be sensible of the oddest contrast between the smooth little creature, and the rough man who seems to be carved out of hard-grained wood – between the delicate hand expectantly held out, and the immense thumb and finger that can hardly feel the rigging of the thread they mend [...] – and yet there is a natural propriety in the companionship.¹⁰²

If Walter’s woodenness permitted a degree of irony, it could also suggest a sort of solidly English virtue. The association of a ‘hard-grained wood’ and British national identity was a common one at this time. The power of this association of woodenness and Englishness is perhaps what led Hopkins to wish for death when he witnessed the felling of an ash in his garden, that he might not ‘see the inscapes of the world destroyed any

¹⁰⁰ Charles Dickens, ‘Gone Astray’, 162.

¹⁰¹ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 461.

¹⁰² Charles Dickens, ‘Our Watering Place’, in Slater, ‘*Gone Astray*’, 16.

more'.¹⁰³ Woodenness of heart was particularly associated with the British at sea who manned the nation's 'wooden walls', as in the popular lines from 'Hearts of Oak'—'heart of oak are our ships, jolly tars are our men'—which encouraged a metonymic cross-identification of the deck with the hands who manned it, and of the human heart with those decks. That 'Hearts of Oak', written by David Garrick for the eighteenth-century opera of the same name, could be plucked from the boards of the West End to become the official march of the British Navy, suggests how central to both military power and a certain version of British identity this kind of hard, knotty virtue was thought to be. Walter's woodenness finally partakes of such reassuringly solid popular sentiment.

In developing his central symbol, Dickens had thought harder than Marryat, not just about what the sea might mean, but about what it meant to write about the sea. In an early scene that looks ahead to the wreck of the *Son and Heir*, set in Sol Gills's chandler's shop, Sol and his nephew find themselves immersed in familiar tales of shipwrecks, which they have memorised from popular accounts, finishing each other's sentences: "'Why, when the Charming Sally went down in the——'" "In the Baltic Sea, in the dead of night; five-and-twenty minutes past twelve when the captain's watch stopped in his pocket". Steadiness is called for, however, and Sol urges Walter to maintain a moderate attitude to the sea: "'As to the Sea," he pursued, "that's well enough in fiction, Wally, but it won't do in fact: it won't do at all. It's natural enough that you should think about it, associating it with all these familiar things; but it won't do, it won't do"' (DS, 43). Sol, of course, enjoys the thought of the sea as much as Walter does, and looks about his shop with 'stealthy enjoyment' even as he exhorts his nephew to caution. The 'familiar things' Sol has in mind are the chronometers and sextants in *The Wooden Midshipman*, but Dickens is

¹⁰³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 24 February 1873, in *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Humphry House (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 230. The more famous iteration of this emotion is in 'Binsey Poplars' (1879).

more interested in the way the sea shapes their conversation into conventional and familiar patterns.

Dickens admired the sea largely as Sol does, because he finds it at once absorbing and artificial, a fact and a fiction. He stresses this combination of qualities in ‘Gone Astray’ when he recalls a nautical melodrama he had seen as a boy, featuring ‘a real man-of-war’ (that nevertheless appears drastically undersized), which rolls onstage ‘in a very heavy sea’, along with a ‘good sailor (and he was very good)’, and a ‘bad sailor (and he was very bad)’ who throws himself into the sea ‘from a summit of a curious rock, presenting something of the appearance of a pair of steps’.¹⁰⁴ It is, of course, Dickens’s point that by the mid-nineteenth century the sea was inseparable from the fictions Sol and Walter attach to it. Like Gills’s shop, ‘wanting only good sea-room, in the event of an unexpected launch, to work its way securely, to any desert island in the world’ (*DS*, 37), the ‘familiar things’ Walter associates with it are not confined to the small circle of his makeshift family. Richard Altick writes that Dickens had picked up ‘the nautical songs Captain Cuttle quotes in mangled snatches [...] during his childhood among the old salts at Chatham and in the Dibdinesque naval dramas at popular theatres’. ‘They had’, he goes on to say, ‘no intrinsic function in the novel but were merely employed to embellish a certain theme, in this instance Captain Cuttle’s occupation’.¹⁰⁵ Dickens, however, was more interested in mangling than Altick’s interpretation suggests. The reader learns later that the text Walter Gay recalls in his ‘hour of need’ is not the New Testament, but the hodgepodge of popular sea tales he and Sol Gills recite near the beginning of the novel. ‘When he was a boy’, Cuttle recalls, he loved ‘to read and talk about brave actions in shipwrecks—I’ve heard him! I’ve heard him!—and he remembered of ’em in his hour of need’ (*DS*, 729). ‘By the middle of the nineteenth century the good officer was both a

¹⁰⁴ Dickens, ‘Gone Astray’, 163–64.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Altick, ‘Varieties of Readers’ Response: The Case of *Dombey and Son*’, *Yearbook of English Studies* 10 (1980): 84.

good officer and an obvious Christian' in the public mind.¹⁰⁶ While Walter Gay's creed is at the outset rather more obscure, by the end of the novel it has itself become one of The Wooden Midshipman's familiar things. If Walter's woodenness had initially allowed Dickens to entertain the possibility that his character might diverge substantially from his starting point in popular figures of ballads and nautical melodrama, he finally settled into those comfortable forms to which that same woodenness could be equally accommodated. It is Walter's woodenness, however, that encourages those alternatives to be read as narrative possibilities.

A shipwreck of papers

On 26 October 1859, the *Royal Charter* went down in Muffa Redwarf Bay on the northwest coast of Wales.¹⁰⁷ The ship itself had been carrying 498 passengers from Melbourne to Liverpool, along with a cargo of specie (coins) worth £500,000.¹⁰⁸ Ten passengers disembarked in Queenstown, but otherwise only twenty-nine escaped the wreck. Wrecks were common in the nineteenth century. Lloyd's register records that 10,000 ships were lost at sea worldwide between 1864 and 1869, while 'in 1856 alone 1153 ships were lost round the British coast'. With numbers like these in mind, R. H. Thornton calls 'the fast-sailing, full-rigged ship [...] about the most dangerous vehicle ever invented by man'.¹⁰⁹ Despite the fact that there might be two or three wrecks on average every day along British shores, the *Royal Charter* still drew unusual attention: in part because of the number drowned and the value of her cargo, in part because it was felt

¹⁰⁶ Hamilton, 'Naval Hagiography', 386.

¹⁰⁷ See Jack Shaw, 'The Wreck of the "Royal Charter," 1859', *The Dickensian* 3 (1907): 185–86; Ackroyd, *Dickens*, 872–73.

¹⁰⁸ Salvage operations were ongoing until at least 1906. Shaw, 'Wreck', 186.

¹⁰⁹ All information in this sentence and the preceding one is given in Palmer, 'Dickens and Shipwreck', 40–41.

that the wreck could have been avoided.¹¹⁰ Captain Taylor, who had brought the ship from Australia, was said to have been drunk and to have taken an unnecessary risk by bringing the ship close to shore, eager to pick up a pilot. Three days after the disaster, the *Illustrated London News* printed an account with pictures, and the *Saturday Review* and *Morning Chronicle* followed suit in the New Year. We might imagine that Dickens read these reports by his fireside, as he describes himself doing in ‘The Long Voyage’, which appeared in *Household Words* on 31 December 1853, and opens with an image of the author remembering narratives of shipwreck and survival:

When the wind is blowing and the sleet or rain is driving against the dark windows, I love to sit by the fire, thinking of what I have read in books of voyage and travel. [...] A shadow on the wall in which my mind’s eye can discern some traces of a rocky sea-coast, recalls [*sic*] to me a fearful story of travel derived from that unpromising narrator of such stories, a parliamentary blue-book. A convict is its chief figure.¹¹¹

Dickens had, however, a personal interest in this wreck; four of his cousins by marriage, Robert and Peter Hogarth, Peter’s wife Georgina, and their child Robert had all been killed in the accident. So, at the end of December 1859, Dickens travelled to Llanallgo, a village in Anglesey near the site of the wreck, to inspect the remains of the ship and its passengers.

The account of the Uncommercial Traveller begins with something submerged being uncovered: a fragment of debris.

So settled and orderly was everything seaward, in the bright light of the sun and under the transparent shadows of the clouds, that it was hard to imagine the bay otherwise, for years past or to come, than it was that very day. The Tug-steamer lying a little off the shore, the Lighter lying still nearer to the shore, the boat alongside the Lighter, the regularly turning windlass aboard the Lighter, the methodical figures at work, all slowly and regularly heaving up and down with the

¹¹⁰ Citing an average is a bit misleading, because wrecks would have been collected together in large numbers, grouped according to the size and strength of storms in a given year. For instance, 195 ships went down in one day the winter before the *Royal Charter* sank. Palmer, ‘Dickens and Shipwreck’, 40.

¹¹¹ Dickens, ‘The Long Voyage’, in Slater, ‘*Gone Astray*’, 181–82.

breathing of the sea, all seemed as much part of the nature of the place as the tide itself. The tide was on the flow, and had been for some two hours and a half; there was a slight obstruction in the sea within a few yards of my feet: as if the stump of a tree, with earth enough about it to keep it from lying horizontally on the water, had slipped a little from the land – and as I stood upon the beach, and observed it dimpling the light swell that was coming in, I cast a stone over it. [...] O reader, haply turning this page by the fireside at Home and hearing the night wind rumble in the chimney, that slight obstruction was the uppermost fragment of the Wreck of the *Royal Charter*, Australian trader and passenger ship.¹¹²

Consider the words Dickens capitalises in this passage. It is not necessarily unusual for nouns like ‘Lighter’ and ‘Tug-steamer’ to get capitals; it is a typographical archaism Dickens sometimes employs. Likewise, ‘Home’ is occasionally capitalised in Dickens’s writing, and his decision to do so here gives domesticity special emphasis, needed to counter-balance the destabilising influence of shipwreck. The capital letter he assigns to ‘Wreck’ has a somewhat different effect. In Dickens’s mind, the scene in Llanallgo has already become a shipwreck narrative, transformed from *a* wreck into ‘the Wreck of the *Royal Charter*’. The reporter’s objective eye assumes for an instant the overwrought sensibility of the fireside reader—both undergo the same shock of recognition—crucially, both are invited to attach a narrative to this ‘slight obstruction’. In his preface to *The Ambassadors* (1903), Henry James describes the germ of his novel’s inspiration in similar terms. ‘There it stands’, he writes, ‘full in the tideway; driven in, with hard taps, the current roundabout it’.¹¹³ Dickens’s ‘obstruction’ appears at first to be different, merely a blemish on a picturesque seascape, something that interferes with the flow of his prose rather than the source of narrative it would become. It is only when the reader reaches the end of this passage and rereads from the beginning that its significance is made clear. The ‘breathing’ of the sea, for example, is what Empson might call a ‘subdued metaphor’, which has a subsidiary meaning that becomes discernible only once its particular place in

¹¹² Charles Dickens, ‘The Shipwreck’, in Slater, *Uncommercial Traveller*, 29.

¹¹³ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Christopher Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), xxx.

the text is understood.¹¹⁴ Once revisited, a morbid additional irony attaches to the ‘breathing’ of the sea. If this metaphor had been subdued, on rereading it comes gasping up from the depths. The practice of ascribing meaning to this ‘slight obstruction’ turns it from a bit of mess into a key to the whole situation.

After Toots has finished reading to Cuttle of the sinking of the *Son and Heir*, Cuttle recommends that Florence be told the news directly: ‘you must tell the young woman honestly that this here fatal news is too correct. They don't romance, you see, on such pints. It's entered on the ship's log, and that's the truest book as a man can write’ (*DS*, 491–92). Dickens's own book takes up the challenge. By the end of the novel he has shown that ‘the waters of stern practical experience’ need not fatally dilute ‘that spice of romance and love of the marvellous, of which there was a pretty strong infusion in the nature of young Walter Gay’ (118). Walter reappears near the novel's end, first as a shadow thrown on the wall, as if gradually being reconstituted from the survivor's tale that Cuttle tells Florence to prepare her for his reappearance, and collapsing romance and truth into each other (*DS*, 730). In *Dombey and Son*, the sea supplies the grounds for the mingling of two modes of writing that are at first upheld as contraries, a blending of discourses signalled by the subsumption of the *Shipping Intelligence* in Dickens's novel. A decade later, Dickens found himself with the opportunity to engage once more in the merging of truth and romance in the context of shipwreck. Matthew Rubery has described the way in which, during the nineteenth century, ‘what began as brief dispatches in the trade papers eventually grew into detailed narratives spanning several columns in the popular papers’.¹¹⁵ Dickens's piece on the *Royal Charter* as the Uncommercial Traveller pushes the genre of wreck-reportage even further in this direction. If the *Shipping Intelligence*'s report of the wreck of the *Son and Heir* gave Dickens a way of introducing

¹¹⁴ Empson, *Seven Types*, 25.

¹¹⁵ Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27.

truth into romance, his own report on the Wreck of the *Royal Charter* is characterised by his attempts to match fictional convention to the facts as he found them. This section will suggest, furthermore, that, as with the broken spar that begins Dickens's article, fragments prove most readily susceptible to the kind of narrative manipulation Dickens favours.

Piled-up sea garbage is everywhere in Dickens's novels, and it is not always so plainly available to interpretation. We find marine messes in his novels in part because they were widespread in Victorian London. Henry Mayhew, in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861–62), takes pains to determine the number of oysters sold in London in one year during the 1840s: 495,896,000 in Billingsgate alone, and an additional 124,000,000 in the streets of London. (By comparison, only 4,950,000 whelks, 1,000,000 quarts of mussels, 50,000 crabs, and 750,000 quarts of cockles were sold.) Such profusion encouraged an association between seafood and waste, a link that underlies, for instance, Mayhew's assumption that those who eat fish regularly are likely to become weakened or 'wasted'. 'If the diet of a people be a criterion', he supposes,

it may be feared that the present extensive fish-diet of the working-people of London, is as indicative of a degeneracy of character, as Cobbett insisted must result from the consumption of tea and "the cursed root," the potato. "The flesh of fish," says Pereira on Diet, "is less satisfying than the flesh of either quadrupeds or birds. As it contains a larger proportion of water (about 80 percent.), it is obviously less nourishing." [...] Jockeys, who *waste themselves* in order to reduce their weight live principally on fish.¹¹⁶

The association is continued in Dickens's novels. The quantity of waste produced by oyster consumption was immense, and the shells were recycled into materials for building roads and house foundations. Staggs Gardens, torn up in *Dombey and Son* for the construction of the new railway, is strewn with 'little tumuli of oyster shells in the oyster season and of lobster shells in the lobster season' (69). Many pages of Briggsian

¹¹⁶ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 1 (London: Griffin, Bohn, 1861), 78, original emphasis.

historiography could be written about the hundreds of oysters consumed in Dickens's books, not to mention their discarded shells. A number of his characters find the profusion of oysters to be worth commenting on. Sam Weller finds it to be 'a wery remarkable circumstance, Sir, [...] that poverty and oysters always seem to go together. [...] the poorer a place is, the greater all there seems to be for oysters. Look here, Sir; here's a oyster stall to every half-dozen houses—the street's lined with 'em' (*Pickwick Papers*, 270). It is judged unlikely that Nicholas Nickleby should get a place as a deckhand because, as Crummles says, 'there's not a skipper or mate that would think you worth your salt, when he could get a practised hand, [...] they as plentiful there, as the oysters in the streets' (283).

At times, Dickens intends simply to elicit disgust from his readers with his images of sea creatures. In *Dombey and Son*, Good Mrs Brown appears 'munching like that sailor's wife of yore [...] and going backwards, like a crab, or like a heap of crabs: for her alternately expanding and contracting hands might have represented two of that species, and her creeping face, some half a dozen more' (404–05). A 'Shoal of Barnacles' crowds the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*, eating 'heaps of dirt' and seeing Mr Meagles 'hove down'.¹¹⁷ Major Bagstock sells and rolls his 'purple face about, and wink[s] his lobster eye', while Mr Dombey's offices look 'as if they were assembled at the bottom of the sea' (*DS*, 389, 182–83). Uriah Heep's hand is 'like a fish in the dark' (*David Copperfield*, 230).

Sometimes, however, the unsettling power of sea stuff could be put to narrative use. Consider its role in one of Dickens's most famous images of domesticity, the home of the Peggottys in Yarmouth, in *David Copperfield* (1849–50). Early in the eighteenth century, on his *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–27), Defoe records

¹¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 403, 404. The page heading Dickens inscribed in the 1867 Charles Dickens Edition was 'The Great and Wonderful finds his level'. Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 560. See my chapter on Marryat for a discussion of this phrase.

that he came upon a house just north of Yarmouth, ‘built of old planks, beams, wales, and timbers etc. the wrecks of ships and ruins of mariners’ and merchants’ fortunes’.¹¹⁸

Dickens may have seen something like the Peggottys’ when he visited Yarmouth in 1849 with his friends John Leech and Mark Lemon. Like Defoe, Dickens is interested in the narrative promise of a home that seems perpetually poised to become mobile.¹¹⁹ The Yarmouth landscape in Dickens’s novel is undermined by its proximity to the sea. David finds it ‘rather spongy and soppy’, and wonders if it would not have been better if ‘the land had been a little more separated from the sea, and the town and the tide had not been quite so much mixed up, like toast-and-water’ (*David Copperfield*, 27). The grounded ship in which Mr Peggotty and his family make their home is likewise a more equivocal place than is generally acknowledged. David finds it hard to define precisely what the Peggottys’ home is; that it is a ‘ship-looking thing’ is about the best he can do (28). Mr Peggotty’s house, like Sol Gills’s shop, is defined not only by its bright compactness but also by the pervasive sense that it might set out on a voyage at any moment. Both are at once wrecks and arks.

Initially, Dickens establishes an atmosphere of homely cheer by focusing on the details of the Peggottys’ houseboat:

Peggotty opened a little door and showed me my bedroom. It was the completest and most desirable bedroom ever seen – in the stern of the vessel; with a little window, where the rudder used to go through; a little looking-glass, just the right height for me, nailed against the wall, and framed with oyster-shells; a little bed, which there was just room enough to get into; and a nosegay of seaweed in a blue mug in the table. The walls were whitewashed as white as milk, and the patchwork counterpane made my eyes quite ache with its brightness. One thing I particularly noticed in this delightful house, was the smell of fish; which was so searching, that when I took out my pocket-handkerchief to wipe my nose, I found it smelt exactly as if it had wrapped up a lobster. On my imparting this discovery in confidence to

¹¹⁸ Daniel Defoe quoted in John G. Rule, ‘Wrecking and Coastal Plunder’, in *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Douglas Hay et al. (London: Penguin, 1975), 171.

¹¹⁹ Kennedy writes, ‘Dickens is perhaps as much indebted to Captain Marryat as to Defoe for these eccentric sailors—Crusoe, after all, is a merchant-adventurer and not, strictly speaking, a sailor’. Kennedy, ‘Uses of Solitude’, 27.

Peggotty, she informed me that her brother dealt in lobsters, crabs, and crawfish; and I afterwards found that a heap of these creatures, in a state of wonderful conglomeration with one another, and never leaving off pinching whatever they laid hold of, were usually to be found in a little wooden outhouse where the pots and kettles were kept. (*David Copperfield*, 29)

David seems to have entered a fairy-tale world. If Dickens's manipulation of scale, and the walls 'white as milk', seem folkloric,¹²⁰ Dickens's invocation of 'The Story of the Three Bears' is quite explicit. In Mr Peggotty's house, as at the three bears' place, everything is 'just [...] right'. The smell of the sea, however, unsettles both David Copperfield and Dickens. David is prepared by the looking-glass, precisely and preternaturally suited to him, to view himself in the context of a larger 'community of feeling' (*David Copperfield*, 297). The probing of the sea's smell, however, instantly reduces his sphere of 'confidence' to Peggotty alone. Peggotty is 'proud to call herself a Yarmouth Bloater' (a variety of herring whose status has been elevated by another slightly odd capitalisation); the nickname, like the house, is at once comforting and vaguely disgusting (27). 'Smells', William Ian Miller writes, 'are pervasive and invisible, capable of threatening like poison; smells are the very vehicle of contagion. Odors are thus especially contaminating and much more dangerous than localising substances one may or may not put in the mouth.'¹²¹ The 'searching' quality of the sea's odour contaminates more than David's handkerchief: it is also the means by which the nascent fairy tale mixes with realism. In this early scene, the sea that forces itself upon David's notice prefigures the cataclysmic effect the sea finally has on the Peggottys' apparently inviolable domestic sphere: the shipwreck that kills Steerforth and Ham. Forster recognised that Richard Carstone exhibits the 'common, every-day, miserable declension' that Walter Gay had

¹²⁰ 'White as milk' is an epithet in some versions of the Scottish ballad 'The Two Magicians' (Roud 1350), for example, and the 'white as' construction is of course the same as the one used in 'Snow White'.

¹²¹ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 66.

earlier escaped.¹²² Steerforth, however, who appears in the novel directly following *Dombey and Son*, and who is similarly defined by his boyish exuberance and his fondness for ships, is plainly the nearer relation. Like the small obstruction Dickens examines at the wreck of the *Royal Charter*, so the significance of the fishy smell that permeates the Peggotys' home can only be fully understood retrospectively. In the passage quoted above, it has as yet no meaning for the reader, even while David as narrator ruefully looks ahead to the wreck to come. The merest infiltration of the sea's odour transforms a snug home into a wreck for a moment, complete with 'heaps' of litter. Dickens is fascinated by nautical spaces like Sol Gills's or the Peggottys' because of their neatness and their capacity for untidiness equally. In this case, litter proves to be both a mess and a narrative tactic.

At the wreck of the *Royal Charter*, Dickens finds ample opportunity to applaud the return of such waste matter to usefulness. On the beach, he describes 'a rough tent made of fragments of wreck', which he admires because of the attempts that have been made to make meaningful use of the remains of the ship. This is where

divers and workmen sheltered themselves, and where they had kept Christmas-day with rum and roast beef, to the destruction of their frail chimney. Cast up among the stones and boulders of the beach were great spars of the lost vessel, and masses of iron twisted by the fury of the sea into the strangest forms. The timber was already bleached, and iron rusted; and even these objects did no violence to the prevailing air the whole scene wore, of having been exactly the same for years and years. ('Shipwreck', 30)

The timelessness and naturalness of the first scene on the beach is given a second reading by Dickens, who is enabled by this creative recycling to see the wreckage in terms of the values of mutuality and friendship he associated with a Christmas meal.¹²³ It is perhaps

¹²² See Forster, *Life of Dickens*, 360.

¹²³ Dickens, *Blackwood's* sniffed, was 'the first to find out the immense spiritual power of the Christmas turkey'. [Margaret Oliphant], 'Charles Dickens', *Blackwood's Magazine* 109 (June 1871), 677, quoted in Philip Collins, 'Carol Philosophy, Cheerful Views', *Etudes anglaises* 23 (1970): 158.

unsurprising, then, that in the year about to begin Dickens would fasten upon a seashore, a graveyard, thoughts of antipodean travel, and a (still colder) Christmas feast as the raw materials from which to craft the early numbers of a new novel. At the end of Pip's first encounter with Magwitch in *Great Expectations* he, 'a small bundle of shivers', watches the convict limp away through the churchyard, 'clasping himself, as if to hold himself together' (4, 6). Already the connection between Pip and his future benefactor is apparent. Oddly enough they are first bound together by their common readiness to fall to bits, many years before Pip becomes sensible of the 'long chain' of shame and compassion which will link them by the novel's end like the ropes he dreamt of as a child 'spun home together close to my eyes' (66).

As Magwitch departs, picking his way cautiously between the graves, he looks to Pip as if he is 'eluding the hands of the dead people' (*Great Expectations*, 6). The dead are, if anything, even more aggressive in 'The Shipwreck'. Here the congregation have been forced out of their chapel, 'having deserted it for the neighbouring schoolroom, and yielded it up to the dead. The very Commandments had been shouldered out of their places' (32). In this reversal of Revelation the sea has indeed given up its dead, but they have turned out to be needier than anticipated.¹²⁴ The subject of Dickens's article, and his chief fascination, is the ministrations of the Reverend Stephen Roose Hughes, who took matters in hand once the bodies of the drowned passengers began washing up on shore. In all, he buried 145 corpses in the small parish cemetery. By the time Dickens arrives, the villagers have become understandably anxious to know 'whether they themselves could lie in their own ground' when the time came ('The Shipwreck' 34). The drowned had mostly been buried by then; but still they take up space in Dickens's thoughts altogether as greedily as they do in the cemetery. He observes that it takes 'little or no aid from the

¹²⁴ Rev. 20:13 (AV). For another instance of the sea giving up its dead, see Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, 29.

imagination' to give meaning to the damp 'marks and stains' left on the paving stones in the church 'where the head had been and where the feet' (32). Like Pip's parents, whose curls and freckles can be deciphered from the dots and curlicues on their gravestones, the dead of the *Royal Charter* prove amenable to interpretation.

The great readiness with which these hieroglyphs operate on the imagination is a problem, however, for the families who want to identify the bodies of their loved ones. (Dickens makes no mention of his personal involvement in the scene.) Their individual features have become blurred and smudged in death, and other means must be used to separate one corpse from another.

Here, with weeping and wailing in every room of his house, my companion worked alone for hours, solemnly surrounded by eyes that could not see him, and by lips that could not speak to him, patiently examining the tattered clothing, cutting off buttons, hair, marks from linen, anything that might lead to subsequent identification, studying faces, looking for a scar, a bent finger, a crooked toe, comparing letters sent to him with the ruin about him. ('Shipwreck', 32–33)

Dickens is quick to see that, 'in some cases of women', their haste to dress themselves had caused problems with 'the identification of persons', which, 'though complete, was quite at variance with the marks upon the linen' (33). This leads Dickens 'to notice that even the marks upon the linen were sometimes inconsistent with one another; and thus [the clergyman] came to understand that they had dressed in great haste and agitation, and that their clothes had become mixed together'. Many of the drowned were buried four to a grave, numbered but unnamed. Their identities became contested ground as easily as the graveyard itself did.

This imprecision, however, appeals to Dickens. This is because both the tragedy and the moral lesson to be drawn from it depend upon ideals, generalisations that Dickens finds it easier to attach to anonymous victims or heroic sufferers than to individuals. Or, rather, these individuals engage Dickens's imagination because their death by shipwreck

makes them inherently sympathetic. Dickens, that is, can think of those drowned aboard the *Royal Charter* as simultaneously being true to type and true to themselves. Dickens's characters notoriously partake in the nature of 'things', and vice versa, something which critics have alternately applauded and decried.¹²⁵ Here, at the 'line of contact that reveals another animate world', Dickens could fully indulge in the imposition of meaning upon surfaces.¹²⁶

He does this regularly in novels, and often, as alongside the *Royal Charter*, by substituting clothing for personality. Captain Cuttle's attire is so closely associated in Walter's mind with its wearer that, when Walter first visits the Captain at his lodgings in Brig Place and sees his clothes hanging out the window, he considers it 'incredible that the coat and waistcoat could be seen by mortal eyes without the Captain' (*DS*, 221). Mrs Skewton likewise is defined by her 'false curls, false eyebrows, false teeth and a false complexion [...] just a corpse and some old clothes'.¹²⁷ In life, clothes could be filled with imagined bodies that fitted them more perfectly than any real wearer could. In 'Meditations in Monmouth Street' (11 October 1836), Dickens becomes rapt when speculating on the identities of the former owners of the used clothes at 'the burial place of the fashions', 'now fitting a deceased coat, then a dead pair of trousers, and anon the mortal remains of a gaudy waistcoat'.¹²⁸ When he sees a dead man's wardrobe displayed all together in one shop, it is as if 'the man's whole life [was] written as legibly on those clothes, as if we had his autobiography engrossed on parchment before us' (78). 'We could imagine that coat –', he exclaims, 'imagine! we could see it; we *had* seen it a hundred times' (79). He pursues this man's Hogarthian narrative from his 'much soiled

¹²⁵ For two classic treatments of the subject, see Northrop Frye, 'Dickens and the Comedy of Humors', in *Experience in the Novel*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 49–81; Dorothy Van Ghent, 'The Dickens World: The View from Todgers's', *Sewanee Review* 58 (1950): 419–38.

¹²⁶ Corbin, *Lure of the Sea*, 117.

¹²⁷ Carey, *Violent Effigy*, 91.

¹²⁸ Dickens, 'Meditations in Monmouth Street', in *Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers, 1833–39*, ed. Michael Slater (London: Dent, 1994), 77–78.

skeleton suit' (78) right through the 'corduroys with the round jacket' in which he learned to write 'if the place where he used to wipe his pen might be taken as evidence' (79), then past the growth of 'the vices of the boy' written legibly in 'that broad-skirted green coat, with the large metal buttons' (80). The man is fated for the gallows, as Dickens originally meant Walter Gay to be. But, real as Dickens imagined this narrative spelled out in suits to be, it separates easily at the seams. Occasionally he finds himself 'endeavouring to fit a pair of lace-up half-boots on an ideal person, for whom, to say the truth, they were full a couple of sizes too small' (78). The bodies he finds at the wreck of the *Royal Charter* are a different matter: there, certain facts about the wreck, about the way the drowned behaved during it, and about the way English people might be expected to behave in general, can be seen clearly in tertiary signs, scraps of cloth and bits of hair. The fantasy can, for once, be made to fit.

Standing beside the church, Dickens peers into graves and sees a 'type of Death', which is followed in his mind by a 'type of Resurrection' ('Shipwreck, 35), generalisations that, though they sit uncomfortably alongside his exploration of the way drowning compromises individuality, illustrate what he found most fascinating about the scene of the wreck. The quiet typographical pun in 'type of Death' is echoed further down the page when Dickens finds himself 'seated before a shipwreck of papers, all bordered with black', as if they sit at the bottom of a grave and are being read by a mourner looking down upon them. These papers are the letters sent by the loved ones of the drowned to Reverend Hughes. What is remarkable about the letters Dickens chooses to reprint is their imprecision. Confronting at once the problem of understanding the deaths of their loved ones and sorting them from the heap, the relations of the drowned base their descriptions on what came most readily to hand: the commonplaces of shipwreck narratives that they and Dickens were already so familiar with. The letters themselves are connected by a

shared tendency to employ punning cliché. One correspondent worries that his mind will ‘go astray’, while a ‘Jewish gentleman’ writes of his hopes ‘washed away’. A widow’s gratitude is in full ‘flow’, and she quotes Psalm 90 in which ‘time may roll on, and bear all its sons away’—which amounts to a discomfiting literalisation of a simile in this context (‘Shipwreck’, 36–39).¹²⁹ The letters also resort frequently to stock tableaux as a way of contextualising loss. One woman quotes, for example, from the last letter she received from her son: “‘Pray for a fair breeze, mamma, and I’ll not forget to whistle for it! and, God permitting, I shall see you and all my little pets again. Good-by, dear mother—good-by, dearest parents. Good-by, dear brother.’” Oh, it was indeed an eternal farewell’ (35). Bereaved mothers and husbands focus their grief upon what they consider to be the most distinctive features of their lost relation: a child’s ‘obedience’ (35), a brother’s ‘pleasant smile’ (33). There is a homogeneity of voice and emotion that is uncomfortable to read in these records of personal sentiment.

Their predictability suggests how familiar things are sometimes clutched at in an effort to comprehend death. Dickens’s interest in them, however, comes from the way in which stock phrases suddenly seem, both to the letter-writers and, he hopes, to his readers, to be precisely appropriate. One parent writes of her dead son, ‘we fondly hoped that as a British seaman he might be an ornament to his profession’ (‘Shipwreck’, 35). She feels ‘assured’ that her ‘dear boy is now with the redeemed’, she says, and of course Dickens expects his readers to agree. A British seaman is certainly an admirable type, and the carefully included note that this one was born on Christmas Day makes us think he might even be intended to represent a ‘type of Resurrection’, as Dickens says. Dickens also dwells on scenes where individual identity can be measured against the significance of a mass tragedy. He describes, for instance, the minister’s techniques of burial and reburial,

¹²⁹ ‘Thou carriest them away as with a flood’. Ps. 90:5 (AV).

noting the way in which those buried in mass graves might still be identified, exhumed, and reburied ‘in private graves, so that the mourners might erect separate headstones over the remains. In all such cases he had performed the funeral service a second time’ (‘Shipwreck’, 34). Some are less separable from the mass. One of the first things he learns on arrival is that ‘a great number of passengers, and particularly the second-class women-passengers, were known to have been in the middle of the ship when she parted, and thus the collapsing wreck would have fallen upon them after yawning open, and would keep them down’ (31). A diver had found one of these passengers, a man, ‘and had sought to release it from a great superincumbent weight; but [...], finding he could not do so without mutilating the remains, he had left it where it was’ (31). Figures like this inhabit a boundary space between private mourning and public sympathy, just as Dickens’s magazine piece does. If Dickens was moved to visit this particular wreck by the facts of his private involvement, he immediately busied himself moulding personal tragedy into a form that could resonate more broadly.

At the end of his sojourn at the wreck, Dickens comes across the bodies of two sailors, both tattooed. On the ‘mutilated arm’ of one he can still make out ‘below the discoloured outer surface’, which he scrapes away with a knife, ‘the device of a sailor and a female; the man holding the Union Jack with a streamer, the folds of which waved over her head, and the end of it was held in her hand. [...] On the left arm, a flag, a true lovers’ knot, a face, and initials’ (‘Shipwreck’, 39). Instead of being sick, he thinks about how ‘the perpetuation of this marking custom among seamen, may be referred back to their desire to be identified, if drowned and flung ashore’ (40). How these sailors wanted to be identified, and how Dickens wants to identify them, however, are not necessarily the same thing; although the initials ‘I.H.S.’ are tattooed on the first one’s right arm, he remains nameless in Dickens’s report (39). And yet, no other corpse is so specifically identified.

The arm of the first, with its flag and ‘the device of a sailor and a female’ tattooed on it, is carefully described (‘Shipwreck’, 39). Such pictures were common, and Dickens would have known the illustrations in his books of shipwreck narratives, one of which showed a ‘Heart of Oak and Charming Sally’, a Jolly Tar clasping his beloved around the waist, allusions that Dickens knew well.¹³⁰ The sailor, then, identifies himself and is identified by Dickens both by his initials and as the representative of a type of British seaman, and in this way provides a fitting climax to Dickens’s investigation of the relationship between individuals and types. At the wreck of the *Royal Charter*, Dickens finds himself engaged in two forms of identification. He is both reading the tags on the sodden clothes of the drowned and discovering ways in which the identification of individuals with one another and with an ideal type might be equally significant. Carlyle channelled a common sentiment when he wrote, ‘All work of man is as the swimmer’s: a waste ocean threatens to devour him; if he front it not bravely, it will keep its word’.¹³¹ Dickens is fascinated by the body of the dead sailor because this emblematic understanding of the sea’s function seems literally to be inscribed upon it—the man himself is in tension with our inclination to read him. The import of bodies is tallied against the signs they choose to adorn themselves with, and the signs their loved ones allot them, allowing the narrative to emphasise the qualities that made them human at the same time as it explores what it takes to turn them into anonymous litter.

¹³⁰ Westland, ‘Dickens’s *Dombey*’, 93. Readers may recall that the *Charming Sally* is the name of the ship wrecked in Walter and Sol’s recitation early in *Dombey and Son*. See above, page 65.

¹³¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, vol. 10 of *Works of Thomas Carlyle* (1896), 199, quoted in George P. Landow, ‘“Swim or Drown”: Carlyle’s World of Shipwrecks, Castaways, and Stranded Voyagers’, *Studies in English Literature* 15 (1975): 652.

Hoarse music

Dickens liked to write by the sea.¹³² In an 1851 letter he confessed that ‘the freshness of the sea, and the associations of the place’ had set him to writing ‘with great vigor [*sic*]’.¹³³ Compare the image Dickens gives of himself in a letter to Foster announcing that he had commenced work on *Dombey and Son*: ‘BEGAN DOMBEY! I performed the feat yesterday—only wrote the first slip—but there it is, it is a plunge straight over head and ears into the story’.¹³⁴ ‘To restrain myself from launching into extravagances’, as he wrote to Forster, seems to have required an almost physical effort.¹³⁵ He returned with Catherine to Brighton to finish writing the novel, spending a week there near the end of February 1848,¹³⁶ and poured particular care into the conclusion, wanting to carry his ‘one idea’ through to the end. In the chapter plans for this final number, he notes his wish to ‘end with the sea—carrying through, what the waves were always saying’. This novelistic return to the sea was cut (‘happily’, Carey thinks) because the number was too long.¹³⁷

Dickens again went to the seaside to finish writing *David Copperfield*, this time to Broadstairs. ‘I am within three pages of the shore’, he wrote to Forster, ‘and am strangely divided, as usual in such cases, between sorrow and joy. [...] I seem to be sending some part of myself into the Shadowy World’.¹³⁸ He had already written to Macready in June that he hoped to ‘go down to that old image of Eternity that I love so much, and finish [*David Copperfield*] to its hoarse music’, phrasing that combines an allusion to Byron’s ‘image of Eternity’ with a reference to his own in *Dombey and Son*, where ‘the waves are

¹³² See Forster’s chapter on Dickens’s ‘Seaside Holidays, 1848–1851’. *Life of Dickens*, 374–90.

¹³³ Charles Dickens to the Duke of Devonshire, 1 June 1851, in *Letters of Dickens*, vol. 6, 1850–1852 (1988), ed. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Nina Burgis, 405.

¹³⁴ Charles Dickens to John Forster, [?28 June 1846], *Letters of Dickens*, 4:574–75.

¹³⁵ Charles Dickens to John Forster, 30 August 1846, in *ibid.*, 612.

¹³⁶ See Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 274. Dickens’s positive associations in 1851 were partly to do with the circumstances of finishing *David Copperfield*; these are further detailed below.

¹³⁷ Carey, *Violent Effigy*, 105.

¹³⁸ Charles Dickens to John Forster, 21 October 1850, in *Letters of Dickens*, 6:195.

hoarse with repetition of their mystery; [and] the dust lies piled on the shore' (611).¹³⁹ It is 'by means of sheer repetition [that] clichés mould people's minds and souls in specific direction';¹⁴⁰ perhaps this is why the waves that murmur and roll throughout *Dombey and Son* feel at once pregnant and vacant. Although their script seems, most prevalently, to be, as Garrett Stewart suggests, 'a circumlocution for heaven', they deliver their lines in two distinct ways.¹⁴¹ At one level, they reiterate the concerns of individual hearers; thus Toots hears them murmuring about Florence's loveliness and Dr Blimber hears them muttering about getting back to work. Yet when Paul finally hears the waves clearly, it doesn't seem to matter much what they are actually saying: 'How fast the river runs, between its green banks and the rushes, Floy! But it's very near the sea. I hear the waves!' (*DS*, 240). Such assonant trochees, all open vowels—'what the waves were always saying'—formally echo the unresolvable openness of the waves' repetitious speech. While the waves could be saying anything, perhaps they are saying nothing. The drone of 'what the waves were always saying' threatens on repeated readings (which are inevitable, given the number of times the phrase appears in the novel) to submerge the sense of the passage in favour of its sound. Given how often critics have accused Tennyson of this sort of sacrifice, perhaps it is appropriate that it is Tennyson whom Dickens quotes in 'Our Watering Place' when he wishes to give voice to the sea:

The poet's words are sometimes on its awful lips:

And the stately ships go on
 To their haven under the hill;
 But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
 And the sound of a voice that is still!

Break, break, break,

¹³⁹ Charles Dickens to William Macready, 11 June 1850, in *Letters of Dickens*, 6:113; Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1980), p. 185, canto 4, line 1644.

¹⁴⁰ Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 6.

¹⁴¹ Garrett Stewart, 'The Foreign Offices of British Fiction', *MLQ* 61 (2000): 198.

At the foot of thy crags, O sea!
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me.

‘Yet it is not always so,’ he concludes, ‘for the speech of the sea is various’.¹⁴² The repetitions in Tennyson’s poem suggest that a person’s hand might live on in their script, or in a particular trope, or turn of phrase. It is not easy, when within earshot of the sea, to elude the hands of the dead. To what extent is any character’s choice of metaphors influenced by what they find to hand? This is a difficult question to answer because what is to hand is often in equal parts the actual materials about the writer—the beach and the breakers in Dover or Brighton—and too-familiar linguistic matter. From this point of view, to be at sea is already to be irrevocably in a state of vagueness.

‘What the waves were always saying’ turns out to be vague in *Dombey and Son* largely because they were always saying it; the wornness, the woodenness, of this phrase curtails its metaphysical aspirations. Nevertheless, Dickens returns to such tropes repeatedly and makes something of that very wornness and woodenness. The two shipwrecks I have examined, one fictional and one non-fictional, demonstrate the extent to which Dickens’s style can both comprehend and master the threats posed by the sea to originality and to the precision of figurative language; the sea’s affinity with levelling or flattening is not merely accommodated, but is frequently a necessary precondition to Dickens’s creativity. As with the clothes in Monmouth Street, the endeavour to restore what at first appears inanimate is a major element of Dickens’s fictional method. The deadness of the wooden midshipman, its very non-specificity, is the crucial antecedent of its imaginative renewal, which is one reason why Dickens makes it his subject. He demonstrates an awareness of the places at which wear accrues to such metaphors, in popular literature, true accounts of wrecks, melodrama, and popular balladry. This

¹⁴² Dickens, “Our Watering Place”, in Slater, “*Gone Astray*”, 18.

knowledge, it appears, is a precondition of his fascination. The wreck of the *Royal Charter* is finally an opportunity to see clichés come to life.

Interlude: Depths

As I noted at the end of my first interlude chapter, *Glaucus*, Charles Kingsley's breezy study of the seashore, climaxes in a passage of somewhat incongruous intensity. Pottering along the beach is all to the good, but Kingsley finds himself truly stirred by the thought of getting beneath the waves. To walk on the sand or pebbles, and among the seaweeds and small creatures left along the shoreline by the retreating tide, or to examine the 'spoonfuls' brought up by amateur dredging by rowboat, gives a weak version of the thrill he feels when imagining himself exploring the depths themselves: 'And [how] often, standing on the shore at low tide, has one longed to walk on and in under the waves [...] and see it all but for a moment'.¹ In fact, he could have. Kingsley's fantasy of striding into the waves is stirred by Ovidian myth, as discussed above (page 125), but it also draws upon accounts of the first diving suits. Although the basic design, comprising a metal helmet connected to a leather jacket and trousers, had been around since the seventeenth century, it was in the late 1830s that Augustus Siebe came up with a working closed diving costume (an improvement on his earlier open version), consisting of a helmet sealed to a 'continuous airtight dress'.² A year after Kingsley published *Glaucus*, Philip Gosse noted, in the preface to the second edition of *The Aquarium*, that 'an eminent French zoologist, in order to prosecute his studies on the marine animals of the Mediterranean, had provided himself with a water-tight dress, suitable spectacles, and a breathing-tube; so that he might walk on the bottom in a considerable depth of water, and mark the habits of the various creatures

¹ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 113.

² See Robert H. Davis, *Deep Diving and Submarine Operations: A Manual for Deep Sea Divers and Compressed Air Workers*, 4th ed. (Tolworth: Siebe, Gorman, 1935), 433.

pursuing their avocations.’³ Kingsley and Gosse wrote at a time when the way the deep sea could be explored—in fact as in imagination—had begun to change. While the shore’s appeal depended largely upon the fact that it could be thought of simultaneously as a literal and a figurative margin, in the middle of the century the deep sea too became for the first time a place that could be probed in both practice and imagination. This chapter traces the reciprocal influence that the idea of depth and the science of the deep sea exerted upon each other.

Kingsley was not the only Victorian to imagine himself undergoing a transformation similar to the one experienced by Tom, his water-baby. The trope could take bizarre forms, as when Robert Stephen Hawker, ‘The Vicar of Morwenstow’, swam or rowed at midnight to a rock a little way off the coast of Bude in 1825 or 1826, donned a wig he had made of ‘plaited seaweed’, ‘so that it hung in lank streamers half-way down his back’, placed an ‘oilskin wrap’ over his legs, and sat flashing ‘moonbeams’ back at the shore, singing or ‘screaming’ until a crowd gathered to watch. The vicar carried on for several nights, thoroughly bamboozling a growing throng of villagers (many from neighbouring towns), despite examination by telescope. The performances ceased when Hawker, feeling that he had grown too hoarse to continue warbling, gave a final rendition of ‘God Save the King’, and plunged beneath the waves.⁴ The notion that people might imitate marine life took on a popular and very literal air by the beginning of the century when it became common for would-be swimmers to keep a frog to hand, the motions of which could be emulated; the *Boy’s Own Paper* in 1879 still thought this a worthwhile

³ Gosse, *The Aquarium*, v–vi. *The Aquarium* was first published in 1854. The Frenchman Gosse has in mind may have been Joseph-Martin Cabirol, who in 1855 presented a new model of the standard diving dress at the Exposition Universelle in Paris.

⁴ S. Baring-Gould, *The Vicar of Morwenstow: A Life of Robert Stephen Hawker, M.A.* (London: King, 1876), 21.

pursuit, and gave detailed instruction as to how it might be undertaken.⁵ Such mer-fantasies ranged from a desire to be able to swim like a fish, to a wish to be able to see clearly everything that lay hidden beneath the sea's surface. Pater was of the opinion that, had he not been born a man, he might have liked to be 'a carp swimming forever'.⁶ Edmund Gosse found it preferable to explore the depths from a vantage point on the surface: 'My great desire was to walk out over the sea as far as I could, and then lie flat on it, face downwards, and peer into the depths.'⁷ The thought had pedigree. Years earlier, his father had written in his journal that he too found it 'very pleasing to peer down into the depths below [...] and look at the many-coloured bottom'.⁸ In Shelley, the desire to drown and the desire to become a marine creature were combined: to Edward Trelawney, it seemed as if Shelley 'behaved as if he were a merman or a fish'. In spite of Trelawney's esteem, Shelley was an indifferent swimmer who frequently appeared reluctant to keep himself above water: he was often to be seen sinking with his arms tight to his sides. In Baiae, Shelley would gaze intently over the edge of the gunwales at the 'hollow caverns clothed with the glaucous sea-moss, and the leaves and branches of those delicate weeds that paved the unequal bottom of the water'.⁹

The Victorians had inherited from Shelley and other Romantics a sublime aesthetics that prized the vastness of the abyss. It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that the most significant retelling of the Glaucus myth, in which the fisherman magically

⁵ See Sprawson, *Haunts*, 24. This practice had enduring appeal: as early as the Renaissance, there are descriptions of swimmers learning their strokes by holding 'between [the] teeth a thread attached to the belly of a frog paddling in a bowl of water', and like strategies were still being recommended in the 1920s. The frog-on-a-string approach was mocked in Thomas Shadwell's satiric *The Virtuoso* (1676), and is discussed at greater length along with other varieties of swimming pedagogy in Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker, *The Beach: The History of Paradise on Earth* (New York: Viking, 1998), 172–95.

⁶ Quoted in Sprawson, *Haunts*, 164.

⁷ Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son*, 60.

⁸ Philip Gosse quoted in Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse, F.R.S.* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trüber, 1890), 118. Catherine Raine emphasises the similar diction of father and son, 'The Secret Debts of Imagination in the *Life of Philip Henry Gosse, F.R.S.*', *Literature and Theology* 11 (1997): 73.

⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley to T. L. Peacock, 17 or 18 December 1818, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 2:61. Sprawson calls this 'probably the first realistic description of an underwater scene'. *Haunts*, 80.

acquires the ability to breathe underwater after eating an enchanted herb, prior to Kingsley's was Keats's in *Endymion* (1818). Book 3 of *Endymion* describes (in terms Kingsley would have understood) the fascination excited by the 'ceaseless wonders of this ocean-bed'.¹⁰

Old rusted anchors, helmets, breast-plates large
Of gone sea-warriors; brazen beaks and targe;
Rudders that for a hundred years had lost
The sway of human hand; gold vase embossed
With long-forgotten story, and wherein
No reveller had ever dipped a chin
But those of Saturn's vintage; mouldering scrolls
Writ in the tongue of heaven by those souls
Who first were on the earth; and sculptures rude
In ponderous stone, developing the mood
Of ancient Nox; then skeletons of man,
Of beast, behemoth, and leviathan,
And elephant, and eagle, and huge jaw
Of nameless monster.¹¹

The subject matter of Keats's poem matches his sense of the process of its composition. 'In *Endymion*', he says, 'I leaped headlong into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, & the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea & comfortable advice'¹²—an image that captured the sense Keats had of the poem as an artistic risk. *Endymion* pressed Keats into what were, for him, uncharted waters. For Keats, a plunge into the sea meant entering mythic space, a way of thinking that the unknowability of the deep encouraged and enabled.

If the shore was a threshold that invited literal and figurative traversal, a comparable border between shallowness and depth had always prohibited it. The entry under *sea* in the 1823 *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that 'through want of instruments,

¹⁰ John Keats, *Endymion*, in *Poems of Keats*, p. 222, line 394.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 211–12, lines 125–138.

¹² John Keats to J. A. Hesse, 8 October 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, vol. 1, 1814–1821 (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 374.

the sea beyond a certain depth has been found unfathomable'.¹³ This encouraged easy slippages, like Keats's, between the sense of what depth meant and beliefs about what the deep sea might actually be like. Deep and unfathomable were, until a certain point, appropriate synonyms: the sea became deep exactly when it became unfathomable. Somewhere beneath the surface, however, shallow became deep and as thought and the plumb line alike encountered this barrier, they seemed to free themselves from the requirements of reasoning and common sense attending the known world. Extravagant theories of what went on in the abyss developed. In 1757, for instance, Joseph Mead published *An Essay on Currents at Sea*, where he developed a theory of ocean circulation taken from the ancient Greeks which held that a great torrent passed through the centre of the earth, driving oceanic currents.¹⁴ It was impossible to know more about the depths of the sea than what was suggested by tidewrack, and by the sliver of sea-floor exposed at low tide. The Bible's claims that the sea was divided from the air and the land at the beginning of Creation suggested to catastrophist scholars like Thomas Burnet and William Whiston that the sea was in some sense unfinished by God, populated by sea-monsters that would rise to the surface at the second coming. Alexander Cattcott's *Treatise on the Deluge* (1768) suggested that the sea could be seen as lingering evidence of the Flood, a reminder of human sinfulness, and Richard Kirwan argued in his *Geological Essays* (1799) that the deep was likely to be loaded with the rotting corpses of animals killed in that disaster (see above, page 113).¹⁵ Eighteenth-century writers had little to decide between the belief that waves were caused by explosive fermentation in the depths, causing literal swells of seawater, and the belief that waves were evidence of steam massing beneath the surface of the earth which made the sea-floor bulge and bubble like a

¹³ See Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean*, 5.

¹⁴ This theory influenced Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838). See Margaret Deacon, *Scientists and the Sea, 1650–1900*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 5.

¹⁵ For an excellent account of these early ideas of the deep, see Corbin, *Lure of the Sea*, 1–18.

blister. Symbolically and literally, the deep sea was inaccessible to mankind, unknowable and inscrutable.

In the nineteenth century, however, what defined depth shifted as the means of probing it accurately developed. These fluctuations happened rapidly, in the middle years of the century. Literal and figurative senses of depth remained, however, contingent upon each other. Repeatedly in the Victorian period, scientific understanding of the deep ocean twisted and contorted under the pressure of its figurative complement. Equally, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, fantasies of immersion like Kingsley's responded to knowledge gleaned from the new science of oceanography. It would be a mistake to see the meaning attached to depth primarily as an impediment to understanding. The promise that the deep might be stocked with the literalisation of its metaphors was as appealing to scientists as it was to poets, and it was precisely this promise that drove oceanographic exploration in the period—for the first time it seemed as though all these thoughts might be literally plumbed.

However, from about 1850, as more and more reliable soundings began to be made, what Victorian hydrographers meant when they referred to the deep sea changed.¹⁶ Prior to mid-century investigations, the inaccessibility of the deep sea meant that degrees of uncertainty dogged all knowledge about it. To Matthew Fontaine Maury, who composed the first bathymetric charts of the sea in the year *Glaucus* first appeared, so little of the seabed had been mapped that the deep seemed, even after he had published his findings, like 'a sealed volume'; while it was becoming apparent that that seal could be broken, it was far from apparent what the volume would contain, though Maury confidently expected it to 'abound in knowledge and instruction that might be both useful

¹⁶ See Susan Schlee, *A History of Oceanography: The Edge of an Unfamiliar World* (London: Robert Hale, 1973), 81.

and profitable to man'.¹⁷ In order to secure the copyright on previously published charts of winds and currents, Maury swiftly produced *Physical Geography of the Sea*, the first book to take marine science as its exclusive subject since 1725, when Count Marsigli's *Histoire physique de la mer* (the first book, bar none, on the subject) appeared.¹⁸ The book made a great impact in science and upon the popular imagination; fifteen years later, Jules Verne based the route of the *Nautilus* in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* on the pattern of soundings printed in Maury's *Physical Geography*. Marsigli had managed soundings of up to 150 fathoms in the Gulf of Lyons, but Maury was working within a scientific establishment that still entertained the idea that the sea might be eight or even nine miles, or about 8,000 fathoms, deep (though Maury himself concluded that the greatest depth of what he farsightedly called the Telegraphic Plateau was around 3,000 fathoms). In reality, the sea is about two and a half miles deep, on average.

The discrepancy indicates nothing about real variations of depth, rather it speaks to the practical difficulties attendant upon the job of taking soundings at great depths.

Around the time of Maury's *Physical Geography*, it was becoming increasingly common for ships' captains to take routine depth measurements. For years, however, these proved unreliable. Sounding seemed, to the novice, like a simple undertaking: a weight would be lowered on a rope until it touched the sea-floor, at which point the length of line that had been paid out could be calculated. In reality, this was no easy task. First, at great depths, with a huge length of line paid out, it became very difficult to tell whether the line of the apparatus was being drawn out by the plummet or by its own weight; the line would simply continue unspooling, drawn out by its own weight. This led to some improbably deep measurements. In 1851, Captain Samuel Barron of the *John Adams* reported 5,500

¹⁷ Matthew Fontaine Maury, *The Physical Geography of the Sea* (London: Sampson Low, Son, 1855), 201. See Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean*, 67.

¹⁸ See Deacon, *Scientists and the Sea*, 294, 176. Deacon's volume is still authoritative.

fathoms in the mid-Atlantic, and Captain Henry Denham recorded a depth of 7,706 fathoms a year later.¹⁹

Such difficulties were compounded by the fact that, due to oceanic currents, the motion of the ship attempting the sounding, and the buoyancy of the devices themselves, it was hard to be certain that the line sank straight. As an attempt to compensate, extremely heavy plummets were used. However, when it came time to retract the sounder, the combined weight of the plummet and the line itself frequently proved too great. In such cases, the line could break before it was brought in, making it hard to gauge whether the probe at the end had in fact made contact with the sea-floor. Pioneering naturalist Charles Wyville Thomson describes a line used aboard the *Porcupine* in 1869 for dredging at 2,435 fathoms: ‘The rope itself, “hawser-laid,” of the best Italian hemp, 2½ inches in circumference, with a breaking strain of 2¼ tons, looked frayed out and worn, as if it could not have been trusted to stand this extraordinary ordeal much longer.’²⁰ Enormously thick hemp lines and thin metal wires were tried, and a variety of hieratic devices for releasing the weight once it had touched down miles below were devised. Men became experts at sensing with their fingertips the moment when the line touched bottom, an undertaking that could take a very long time: ‘Each haul occupied seven or eight hours; and during the whole of that time it demanded and received the most anxious care on the part of our commander, who stood with his hand on the pulse of the accumulator ready at any moment, by a turn of the paddles, to ease any undue strain.’²¹

Over time, these problems were overcome, and as accurate soundings became possible at greater depths, it became harder to define exactly what ought to be thought of as ‘deep’. Some definitions bordered on tautology. In 1861, for example, John Gwyn Jefferys proposed a new scheme for naturalists that suggested calling anything above fifty

¹⁹ Ibid.; Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean*, 33.

²⁰ Charles Wyville Thomson, *The Depths of the Sea* (London: Macmillan, 1873), 3.

²¹ Ibid.

fathoms *deep*, distances from 100 to 1,000 fathoms below the surface *abyssal*, and anything beyond that *benthic*, from the Greek *benthos* meaning ‘depth of the sea’.²² Men of science could not be sure whether the term *deep* ought to refer to a particular extension below the surface, or whether the definition ought to depend on some characteristic of the sea itself. Depth had always been both a quantity and a quality, and as the quantitative barriers to its exploration were gradually overcome, qualitative ones arose in their place, maintaining in the imagination the threshold dividing the deep sea from everything above it.

In particular, two related misperceptions proved remarkably tenacious in the imagination. The first was the notion that, at great depths, seawater reached correspondingly enormous density, creating several floors or levels (as discussed in chapter 1). This idea both gave the sea a bottom, a lower limit in the imagination, and took the bottom out altogether, because it also seemed possible that the density of seawater might be so great that no sounding device could penetrate it. Using language that shifts loosely between literal and metaphorical senses of depth, the anonymous author of *The Ocean: A Description of the Wonders and Important Products of the Sea* (1833), for one, claimed the following:

Heavy bodies, which will sink rapidly from the surface, do at length apparently cease to descend long before they have reached the bottom; the pressure of the water being such as to cause them to remain at certain depths, varying in proportion to their weights. Thus it is that the plumb-line will not act beyond a certain length, and we have no means, of course, of extending our inquiries deeper. We know not, indeed, *how many miles* the Ocean may be in depth at those parts which are thus unfathomable!²³

Wyville Thomson, too, recollected a scene from his youth that echoes Keats’s depiction of the sea-floor in *Endymion*.

²² OED, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. ‘benthos, n.’

²³ *The Ocean: A Description of the Wonders and Important Products of the Sea* (London: John Harris, 1833), 20.

There was a curious popular notion, in which I well remember sharing when a boy, that, in going down, the sea-water became gradually under the pressure heavier and heavier, and that all the loose things in the sea floated at different levels, according to their specific weight: skeletons of men, anchors and shot and cannon, and last of all the broad gold pieces wrecked in the loss of many a galleon of the Spanish Main; the whole forming a kind of “false bottom” to the ocean, beneath which there lay all the depth of clear still water, which was heavier than molten gold.²⁴

In spite of Wyville Thomson’s scepticism, this notion proved curiously stubborn. Shortly after the crew of the *Challenger* had taken the deepest sounding thus far accurately managed—nearly four miles—a dredge caught as it was being lowered from the deck. A block and tackle tore loose and sent young William Stokes into the hammock fittings across deck. He was knocked unconscious and died the next day. His shipmates were nervous enough that Bill would fail to reach the seafloor that they dispatched a representative to ask Wyville Thomson himself whether the weights they had sunk him with would suffice.²⁵ Although Wyville Thomson was confident that Bill would find the bottom, he and his colleagues still found it necessary later in the voyage to lower a live rabbit to 500 fathoms, to observe the effects of enormous pressure on a body.²⁶ ‘At 2,000 fathoms a man would bear upon his body a weight equal to twenty locomotive engines, each with a long goods train loaded with pig iron’, Wyville Thomson had noted some years earlier—but apparently he needed to see the phenomenon for himself.²⁷

The second misunderstanding was that the deep sea had a uniform temperature of four degrees Celsius, the freshwater temperature of maximum density. It was well known by the beginning of the nineteenth century that water, unlike air, is hardly compressible at all, and that seawater has a much lower temperature of maximum density than fresh. The persistence of this mistake was aided by an unfortunate coincidence. It so happened that

²⁴ Wyville Thomson, *Depths of the Sea*, 31–32.

²⁵ See Schlee, *History of Oceanography*, 116.

²⁶ Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean*, 33.

²⁷ Wyville Thomson, *Depths of the Sea*, 35.

the increasing pressure brought to bear upon an unprotected thermometer as it descends exactly counterbalances the decrease in temperature, causing it to register a uniform four degrees. Corrected temperature readings had been taken early in the nineteenth century, by Sir John Ross for example, but these were written off as equipment error, in spite of the fact that the effects of pressure on a thermometer were well understood. Without the effect of convection currents caused by a temperature differential, it was thought, below a certain threshold seawater would simply settle statically at the bottom of the sea's deepest abysses.

In light of these theories, naturalists were reluctant to concern themselves with the greater depths. The obstacles ranged against life in the deep seemed insurmountable. It seemed probable that creatures would either be crushed by the enormous pressures, or simply find themselves unable to penetrate the sea's dense floor. And, should the sea's density be somehow mastered, the deep would be a stagnant, lightless place, unfriendly to life. Even in the teeth of evidence to the contrary, before the late 1860s when Wyville Thomson set off on the pioneering voyages aboard the *Porcupine* and the *Lightning*, scientists were not at all certain that life existed at all in the deep sea. Edward Forbes, who had sailed with a young Wyville Thomson in 1842 aboard the *Beacon*, found that animals in the eastern Mediterranean tended to be grouped according to the depth at which they were found, and that they became scarce below about 300 fathoms. He too was led to propose a system of classification wherein the sea was divided into eight zones, the last being the so-called azoic zone, which marked the limit of life. In the azoic zone, he thought, still water lying in basins of enormous depth would never be refreshed by organic matter that might serve as food for other animals or plants, and any salubrious gases were surely driven out by the great pressure. Therefore, while hydrographers were lowering their definitions of *deep* from the 1840s onward—from tens, to hundreds or thousands of

fathoms—naturalists held on to finer definitions: before 1860, hydrographers were happy to allow that *deep* might refer to anything greater than 3,000 fathoms, while naturalists thought ten fathoms seemed quite far down.

Forbes devised his theory in spite of evidence, available even then, that life existed in deep water. His observations in the Mediterranean (where, in fact, life is quite scarce on the sea-floor), the conviction that animals were likely to attach themselves to dredges or sounding lines as they were drawn upward through the water-column, and above all the feeling that the deep must be imaginatively distinguished from other parts of the sea, meant that the theory of an azoic zone proved amazingly hard to eradicate. When a telegraph cable was brought up from the sea-floor in 1860 encrusted with sponges and sea stars, it seemed that the debate would finally be put to rest; however, ten years later, in 1870, Wyville Thomson was still anxiously insisting that it was finally time to ‘give up all idea of a zero of animal life’ at any depth, and felt that the primary contribution of *The Depths of the Sea*, the book in which he wrote up his findings from the *Porcupine* and *Lightning*, would be to finally dispel the belief in an azoic zone.²⁸

James Hamilton-Paterson has written that ‘there was something in the very concept of the abyss which paralysed thought’.²⁹ Yet the various boundaries and limits established by men like Forbes and Jeffreys exchanged the threat of mental paralysis for imaginative over-activity. Beyond a certain ‘unknown lower limit’, thought freed itself from its usual constraints, and the imagination extended ideas in ways that would never have seemed tolerable nearer the surface.³⁰

The supersession of the azoic theory of the deep sea, and its attendant misconceptions, happened roughly to coincide with the advent of new geological and evolutionary theories of time. Even if there was no azoic zone, it was felt that increasing

²⁸ Wyville Thomson, *Depths of the Sea*, 17.

²⁹ Hamilton-Paterson, *Seven-Tenths*, 169.

³⁰ Wyville Thomson’s summing up of Forbes’s theory. *Depths of the Sea*, 17.

depth probably had some effect on the workings of evolution, such that a marine descent tracked the path of evolutionary descent backwards. Given the harsh conditions near the sea-floor, it seemed logical to conclude that life developed with greater ease as it rose, until finally humans stepped out onto dry land. The opinions of William Beebe, inventor of the Bathysphere, developed this idea. He considered that the point at which humans (as a species) had emerged from the sea might plausibly be gauged by the salinity of the blood, which was, as Hamilton-Paterson puts it, ‘strangely similar to that of sea water’.³¹ Beebe believed that the salinity of seawater had gradually increased as minerals dissolved into it. Accordingly, only one calculation remained to be made: ‘So all we have to do is calculate back and find the time when the ocean was only one-third as salt as the present, and then [...] we will know exactly when to celebrate the anniversary of our marine emancipation.’³² The same thought also lent itself to less literal interpretation. Swinburne, for instance, suggested that the ‘*truth* of my endless passionate returns to the sea in all my verse’ could be similarly explained: ‘As for the sea, its salt *must* have been in my blood before I was born’.³³

Given that the sea might be more or less literally in the blood of someone like Swinburne or Beebe, it made an equivalent kind of sense to some Victorians to look for versions of themselves in the sea. If humans had emerged from the sea as they developed, and the deep sea was stocked with the vestiges of earlier stages of that development, the course of human evolution could conceivably be followed back to its origins in the deepest parts of the ocean. T. H. Huxley, who had sailed aboard the H.M.S. *Cyclops* in 1857, came back with samples of a ‘primordial ooze’ scraped from the sea floor, the earliest and lowest form of life imaginable, which he called ‘Bathybius’.³⁴ ‘The pairing of individual

³¹ Hamilton-Paterson, *Seven-Tenths*, 204.

³² William Beebe, *Half Mile Down* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, ca. 1934), 15.

³³ Swinburne to Stedman, 20 [21] February 1875, in *Yale Swinburne Letters*, ed. Lang, 3:12.

³⁴ See Deacon, *Scientists and the Sea*, 352–53.

and species development was what excited mid-nineteenth-century people', argues Gillian Beer.³⁵ And, in this case, the thrill came not from imagining an ocean world utterly distinct from the familiar one, but from the potential permeability of the threshold that separated us from our marine ancestors; Bathybius marked the starting point for all life, even human life. It was not clear where the implications of this thought ended, but they extended as far as the general idea that going *deeper* meant getting further into the *past*, whether of the species or the individual.

Vestiges of earlier forms of life came ashore in other ways, too. Between 1830 and 1833 Lyell published the four volumes of his *Principles of Geology* and Tennyson, like many of his contemporaries, was gripped by Lyell's theory that 'many flourishing inland towns, and a still greater number of ports, now stand where the sea rolled its waves'.³⁶ Writing *In Memoriam*, he drew on what Lyell called the 'constant interchange of land and sea':³⁷

There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
O earth, what changes hast thou seen!
There where the long street roars, hath been
The stillness of the central sea.³⁸

The evidence of fossils, especially those found embedded in chalk cliffs, gave rise not only to the enduring notion that the ground we tread upon (or bury the dead in) had been formed in the distant past, but also that the processes that had formed it were ongoing and might even be observed—especially if the deep sea itself could be accessed. If the bracing maritime atmosphere had formed and influenced the character of the 'Anglo-Saxon race',

³⁵ Beer, *Open Fields*, 123.

³⁶ Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, 1:375. See also Hamilton-Paterson, *Seven-Tenths*, 167–68.

³⁷ Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, 1:375.

³⁸ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, vol. 2, p. 442, canto 123, lines 1–4.

the depths offered insight into the much more distant origins of humans as a species.³⁹ Layers upon layers of chalk built up over time—accumulations of ‘globigerina ooze’ along with the corpses of minute sea-creatures—signified the truly staggering age of the globe, but that distance of time could be dived into and brought near.⁴⁰ The very thought of a ‘continuity of chalk’ led Wyville Thomson to exclaim that ‘we are still living in the cretaceous epoch’.⁴¹ Accordingly, when Louis Agassiz set out aboard the *Hassler* in 1871 he expected to find ancient forms of urchins and starfish, odd mutations of the Chambered Nautilus, and even ‘near-Trilobites’ lurking on the ocean bottom.⁴²

Like Agassiz, Wyville Thomson was particularly keen on the idea that he might find ‘missing links’ at great depths, organisms halted in their development, at once a symbol and a product of the unchangeability of the deep sea: ‘every haul of the dredge brings to light new and unfamiliar forms—forms which link themselves strangely with the inhabitants of past periods in the earth’s history’.⁴³ His imagination had been engaged by the discovery of the sea lily or ‘stalked crinoid’, which had been abundant 100 million years earlier, as the fossil record showed. He came back empty-handed, as Agassiz had before him. Nevertheless, Wyville Thomson never completely abandoned his hope that a missing link might be found. As Beer has noted, the link may be missing because it was never there to begin with, because ‘there are no gaps to be found’, only seamless connections.⁴⁴ Yet the idea of depth was compelling precisely because it seemed to mark the spatial and historical coordinates of one such joint, a threshold and link in its own right.

³⁹ Edward A. Freeman, ‘The Latest Theories on the Origin of the English’, *Contemporary Review* 57 (1890): 36. Compare Skelton’s theories, page 119.

⁴⁰ See Deacon, *Scientists and the Sea*, 297, 342.

⁴¹ Wyville Thomson, *Depths of the Sea*, 471.

⁴² See Schlee, *History of Oceanography*, 122.

⁴³ Wyville Thomson, *Depths of the Sea*, 280.

⁴⁴ Beer, *Open Fields*, 119.

Indeed, at times the metaphorical seam binding humanity to its marine ancestors took on a more tangible form. Throughout the nineteenth century, mermaids fabricated in Japan from stitched-together monkeys and haddock, sold well to Europeans.⁴⁵ One can only assume that such creations, shoddy as they were, proved compelling in part because they made tangible something that many people already felt in light of Lyell's geology and Darwinian evolutionary theory: that they too were or had been part-fish, or perhaps part-Bathybius. The example of the merman or the primordial ooze made it vividly clear that the link was there, even if it had temporarily gone missing. Unfortunately, such links were just as likely to have been created by well-meaning scientists as discovered by them. In the end, probably the most promising living fossil ever found, Bathybius, turned out to be only a precipitate of calcium sulphate resulting from the preservation of chalky samples of the sea-floor in alcohol.

If metaphors of the deep had influenced oceanographers, others found that the shifting understanding of actual oceanic depths offered new ways of grasping depth's metaphors. To submerge oneself, in reality or in the imagination, provided many Victorians with a way of examining other forms of profundity. It is perhaps no coincidence that William Carpenter, the most significant figure in acquiring funding for mid-century oceanographic expeditions (apart from Wyville Thomson) was foremost a theorist of the mind. In Carpenter's opinion, the mind could be divided between the Will and a deeper part which he termed unconscious cerebration in his influential *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874).⁴⁶ Indeed, the insistent sense that metaphors of depth and literal

⁴⁵ Wyville Thomson warned, 'The Japanese are wonderfully ingenious, and one favourite aim of their misdirected industry is the fabrication of impossible monsters by the curious combination of the parts of different animals'. Richard Carrington also suggests that the Japanese produced mermaids in this way. Wyville Thomson, *Depths of the Sea*, 423–24; Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), 14.

⁴⁶ Carpenter cites as an influence articles by Miss Cobbe in *Macmillan's Magazine* for 1870 and 1871 on the topic, including 'Dreams as Illustrations of Unconscious Cerebration'. 'The Physiology of the Will', *Contemporary Review* 17 (1871): 211n.

depth met on something like equal terms in the sea meant that, for many Victorians, the descent of man and the depths of the mind were linked concerns that might be explored in the context of an imagined plunge—both worked to strip away layers of accreted natural or personal history to get at a shared point of origin, be it a missing link, a living fossil, or the innermost kernel of the mind.⁴⁷

If dredging the sea-floor could be a way of feeling for the past of the human species, drowning promised a more intimate version of natural history. Drowning, like dredging, sounded the threshold between literal and figurative forms of profundity. When one drowns, as Marryat writes in *Newton Forster*, ‘the memory becomes most horribly perfect’ (135). In 1894 the *British Medical Journal* published an account of ‘What Drowning Feels Like’. It begins by relating sections of Clarence’s portentous monologue from *Richard III*, where he recounts a dream of drowning:

Lord, Lord, methought what pain it was to drown!
 What dreadful noise of waters in mine ears!
 What ugly sights of death within mine eyes!
 and often did I strive
 To yield the ghost, but still the envious flood
 Kept in my soul and would not let it forth.⁴⁸

Although the journal is quick to remind its readers that ‘this is poetical’, and not therefore an altogether scientific description, it admits that Shakespeare was remarkably perceptive in his intuitions about the sensation of drowning, especially in his claim that as a person went under, he had ‘leisure in the time of death / To gaze upon [the] secrets of the deep’. Part of what that ellipsis hides is a detailed description of what he might see:

Methought I saw a thousand fearful wracks,
 A thousand men that fishes gnawed upon,

⁴⁷ See Beebe, *Half Mile Down*.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, quoted in ‘What Drowning Feels Like’, *The British Medical Journal* 2 (1894): 823–24. These lines are taken from act 1, scene 4, lines 21–38, and vary slightly from the Arden edition that I use throughout; see next note.

Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
 Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
 All scattered in the bottom of the sea.
 Some lay in dead men's skulls, and in the holes
 Where eyes did once inhabit there were crept –
 As 'twere in scorn of eyes – reflecting gems,
 That wooed the slimy bottom of the deep,
 And mocked the dead bones that lay scattered by.⁴⁹

The vision of 'ten thousand men that fishes gnaw'd' echoes the 'horrible theory' still extant in the latter parts of the nineteenth century that 'all the dead men who have been thrown overboard in their shotted hammocks, are standing bold upright and perfectly fresh at the bottom of the sea, like an army waiting for the order to march'—an idea that resembles the notion that sailors should find their level (see above, page 100).⁵⁰ But what caught the attention of the *BMJ* was the way in which drowning at once put Clarence in touch with the past, archived in what Russell calls the 'natural pickle of the sea', and gave him visionary insight into his future (since he would soon be sleeping with the fishes, metaphorically speaking).⁵¹

Compare Mr C. A. Hartly's 'interesting account' of drowning: 'All the events of his life, from infancy upwards, passed slowly before his mental vision; he felt that he was drowning, and remembers, unlike Clarence, that it was not pain to drown. He was able to speculate whether his body would be found, and he pictured his own funeral, and fancied he could hear the earth thrown on his coffin.'⁵² Several such reports taken together lead the journal to conclude that 'it will be noted that all these accounts agree in two points, namely, the apocalypse of the past life even in its minute details, and the absence of any unpleasant sensation'.⁵³ The sense lingers on the edge of this scientific account of

⁴⁹ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. James R. Siemon, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen Drama, 2009), 1.4.24–33.

⁵⁰ W. H. Russell, 'De Profundis', *Fortnightly Review* 2 (1865): 336.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² 'What Drowning Feels Like', 824.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

drowning that a half-memory of Clarence, or at least ‘the popular idea’ of drowning (‘which in such matters is never wholly wrong’), may actually be behind experiences like Hartly’s. Yet, the feeling that deep water suits the depths of the mind (‘mental vision’), and the depths of one’s personal past (infancy is something one moves ‘upwards’ from), is enough to convince the author of this article that both Shakespeare and Hartly are describing an experience that is, at least in certain respects, unmediated. This thought draws on the same sources as those imaginative scientific theories that stock the abyss with missing links, or envision the chalky floor as a stratified archive of the past covered with some primordial ooze. The metaphors of depth which lent credence to those theories return through the conduit of scientific thought to give weight to the pseudoscientific interest in the sensation of drowning, which might otherwise have remained unfathomable.

For many nineteenth-century readers (including the one who penned ‘What Drowning Feels Like’), Thomas De Quincey was a key authority on the experience of drowning. In *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), he relates a story told to him by his mother (though he does not attribute it openly) who had nearly drowned in a river when she was a child: ‘she saw in a moment her whole life, in its minutest incidents, arrayed before her simultaneously, as in a mirror; and she had a faculty developed as suddenly for comprehending the whole and every part.’⁵⁴ Marryat, as we have seen, held this to be the way drowning worked on the mind. And when Conrad writes in *Typhoon* (1902) of ‘the ‘hallucination of swift visions’ that overcomes Jukes in the extremity of strain and exhaustion brought on by the storm, he explains that ‘it is said that a drowning man thus reviews all his life’.⁵⁵ For De Quincey, his mother’s experience offered not only metaphorical possibilities, but a key to his own experiences under the influence of opium.

⁵⁴ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, and Other Writings*, ed. Grevel Lindop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 69.

⁵⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Typhoon*, in *Typhoon and Other Tales*, 37–38.

This is because drowning and opium both revealed something fundamental about the structure of mind.

Though his mother nearly drowns in a river, De Quincey found the experience better adapted to thoughts of the sea. In *Glaucus*, Kingsley appropriates Ophelia's muddy drowning in a brook, which Gertrude represents as her 'native [...] element', to his own fantasies of immersion in the sea, his 'native element' (see above, page 125).⁵⁶ Similarly, what began as a riverine scene in De Quincey's *Confessions* became, in his *Suspiria De Profundis* (1845), an explicitly marine one. The depths of the mind could now be compared to the depths of the sea, stocked with 'mimicries of earth-born flowers that for the eye raise phantoms of gaiety, as oftentimes for the ear they raise echoes of fugitive laughter, mixing with the ravings and choir-voices of an angry sea'.⁵⁷ For De Quincey, the mind was a 'palimpsest' composed of 'everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings', that have 'fallen upon your brain softly as light', much like the falling corpses of the foraminifera, accumulating into the 'globigerina ooze' that the scientists of the *Challenger* expedition would examine in the coming decades, drawn up from the sea floor.

The crucial thing demonstrated by drowning or opium was that a person's past could be recovered in the mind: the simultaneity of the experience 'was but a secondary phenomenon; the deeper lay in the resurrection itself' (*SP*, 144–45). This proved to De Quincey that nothing at all was lost, as the psychoanalysts would later insist—the 'deep deep tragedies of infancy, as when the child's hands were unlinked for ever from his mother's neck' lurked beneath the surface of the mind, 'below all' (146). De Quincey's comparison of the mind to a text in palimpsest is appropriate, since his own text works to recover such links—to his mother, and to prior accounts, 'experiences essentially the same, reported by other parties in the same circumstances who had never heard of each

⁵⁶ *Hamlet*, 4.7.177–78; Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 114.

⁵⁷ Thomas De Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis*, in *Confessions*, 144.

other’—while keeping them submerged. In *The Water-Babies*, Kingsley remarks that ‘everything on earth had its double in the water’ (40). De Quincey thought this was probably true of the mind, too. To speak of the mind in such terms, in the context of an anecdote about drowning, renders the limits of the metaphor almost entirely permeable, since a descent into the deep sea is really, for De Quincey, a descent into the deepest parts of the mind. While Wyville Thomson, Agassiz, and Kingsley all treated, in various ways, the deep as a place where one’s past might be mingled in various ways with one’s present, few broach that seal as decisively as De Quincey.

Near the end of the nineteenth century a passion for the lost city of Atlantis developed, especially after the publication of American Congressman Ignatius Donnelly’s *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882). De Quincey, however, anticipated the fascination this new kind of missing link would inspire. The ‘Finale to Part I’ of *Suspiria De Profundis*, ‘Savannah-La-Mar’, concerns a city destroyed by a tidal wave in 1780, about which De Quincey crafts a visionary prose-poem. He imagines it preserved on the seafloor: ‘The city [...] like a mighty galleon with all her apparel mounted, streamers flying, and tackling perfect, seems floating along the noiseless depths of ocean’ (158). ‘She is one ample cemetery’, he writes, and ‘mariners from every clime look down into her courts and terraces’, just as De Quincey, who became an opium-eater gradually—‘as one goes down a shelving beach into a deepening sea’—gazes down at his im/personal past.⁵⁸

Later in the century, in 1858, the depths of the sea and the depths of the mind would simultaneously open to the public with the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable along the plateau discovered by Maury. *Scientific American* in 1858 declared the telegraph to be an ‘instantaneous highway of thought between the Old and New Worlds’;

⁵⁸ De Quincey added this description in the version of *Confessions* revised in 1856. The equivalent passage, which makes no mention of the sea, occurs on page 6 of the edition I have otherwise cited. *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1862), 1.

while Henry Field, the brother of Cyrus, who had helped fund the laying of the second cable, had even stronger words:

[An] ocean cable is not an iron chain, lying cold and dead in the icy depths of the atlantic [*sic*]. It is a living, fleshy bond between severed portions of the human family, along which pulses of love and tenderness will run backward and forward for ever. By such strong ties does it tend to bind the human race in unity, peace and concord ... it seems as if this sea-nymph, rising out of waves, was born to be the herald of peace.⁵⁹

The deep sea had been persistently defined by its inaccessibility. As the capacity to fathom it developed, it invited scientists and writers to think about the possibility of fathoming the analogous depths of the mind or the past. The laying of the transatlantic cable seemed to enable these varieties of depth to be sounded with one wire. Field might be disappointed in his optimistic predictions, but his vision is in keeping with broader habits of Victorian thought on the subject of depth.

By 1869, inspired by the ‘3,000 miles of Atlantic wire’ that had been laid along the sea-bed, James Knowles had founded the Metaphysical Society, along with Tennyson and Browning, a forum for, among other things, a new theory of ‘brain-waves’.⁶⁰ The electric telegraph had long served as a metaphor for brain functioning for scientists like Field, but further developments encouraged individuals like Knowles to push the metaphor further. By 1899, the possibilities seemed limitless—Marconi had invented the wireless telegraph, demonstrating the omnipresence of electricity, an ‘imponderable fluid’, which suggested to

⁵⁹ Both *Scientific American* and Henry Field are quoted in Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's Online Pioneers* (London: Phoenix, 1999), 72, 98.

⁶⁰ See Richard Menke's excellent *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 242. Tennyson wrote to Emily Selwood Tennyson to report that Browning and Knowles had joined him to try to move a table mesmerically. (The pair listened to Tennyson read the ‘Grail’ aloud on the same occasion.) Tennyson to Emily Selwood Tennyson, 20 November 1868, *Letters of Tennyson*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon Jr., vol. 2, 1851–1870 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 508.

Knowles that we all lived at the bottom of ‘an etheric ocean’.⁶¹ Knowles thought that the brains of individuals ‘of extreme, perhaps morbid, susceptibility’ would be most likely to receive ‘an undulation or wave in the circumambient, all-embracing ether’:

Now, if a small electric battery can send out tremors or waves of energy which are propagated through space for thirty miles or more, and can then be caught and manifested by a sensitive mechanical receiver, why may not such a mechanism as the human brain—which is perpetually, while in action, decomposing its own material, and which is in this respect analogous to an electric battery—generate and emit tremors or waves of energy which such sensitive “receivers” as other human brains might catch and feel, although not conveyed to them through the usual channels of sensation?⁶²

That ‘the last brain-waves of life’ were likely to be of greatest intensity, was attested to by the ‘extreme and marvelously intense action of the brain’ experienced by individuals like Admiral Beaufort, who had fallen overboard in Portsmouth Harbour when he was a boy and nearly drowned. Like De Quincey’s mother, as Beaufort sank, he felt as if he were ‘travelling backward’ into regions of unconscious memory, as ‘many trifling events which had long been forgotten then crowded into my imagination’.⁶³ The depths of the mind and the depths of the sea are twinned; Knowles merely reverses the usual order of the comparison. The known fact that the mind has inner recesses is enough to suggest to Knowles the presence of complementary forms of circumambient depth. Just as his analogy of the electric battery and the brain gradually acquires the evidentiary qualities of true equivalence (‘a brain is *like* a battery’ becomes ‘a brain *is* a battery’), in Knowles’s thinking, an ocean of ether is ambivalently connected to the real sea. It is at once *an* ocean and *the* ocean, poised somewhere between metaphor and actuality. Above all, the vague character of depth itself, which is at once a quality and a quantity, enables Knowles to

⁶¹ Menke, *Telegraphic Realism*, 75, 242. See also Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 63; James Knowles, ‘Wireless Telegraphy and “Brain-Waves”’, *The Nineteenth Century* 45 (1899): 857–64.

⁶² Knowles, ‘Wireless Telegraphy’, 857–58.

⁶³ Admiral Beaufort quoted in *ibid.*, 863n. Beaufort’s experience is also reported in ‘What Drowning Feels Like’, 823.

ignore distinctions that would, in the context of another vocabulary, seem pressing. Depth was everywhere, and what overcoming it meant was fuzzier than ever; the boundary between life and death resembled the threshold between the ordinarily sensible world and the depths of a hidden etheric sea, from which sensitive minds like Browning's or Tennyson's might derive 'an intolerable sort of vague consciousness' of lost friends. It is not clear whether Knowles punned intentionally when he wrote of this 'vague, dim way [...] of communicating thought' by brain-wave.⁶⁴ His idea, however, produced its own ripples.

The notion proved irresistible to Rudyard Kipling. His short story "Wireless" (1902) depicts an attempt to send Marconi signals between a chemist's shop in a seaside town and Poole. Mr Cashell and his consumptive assistant Mr Shaynor prepare the equipment, while the narrator watches. They have boosted the strength of their signalling apparatus with an improved battery and by electrifying all the water in the shop's plumbing. At first, all that can be heard are signals from two men of war in the bay, but then, as 'the noise of the sea on the beach began to make itself heard', Mr Shaynor begins to channel 'an induced Keats' (371), the poet whose name was writ in water.⁶⁵ Under the influence of 'Herzian waves', in a trance, he speaks garbled lines, not of *Endymion* as we might have expected, but of 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. The narrator's attention had earlier been caught by the name of Shaynor's girlfriend, Fanny Brand: 'the name struck an obscurely familiar chord in my brain – something connected with a stained handkerchief, and the word "arterial"' (368). His brain tuned by the similarity of his circumstances to those of Keats, Mr Shaynor 'coheres' signals thrown up by 'the main-stream of subconscious thought common to all mankind' (371). When he regains consciousness,

⁶⁴ Knowles, 'Wireless Telegraphy', 861–62, 860, 863.

⁶⁵ Rudyard Kipling, "Wireless", in *The Man Who Would Be King*, ed. Jan Montefiore (London: Penguin, 2011), 364, 371. 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water' are the famous lines Keats had put on his tombstone.

stunned by the news that he has been speaking the verses of a poet he has never read, he replies, 'Indeed. I must dip into him', without realising that he has already been immersed (375).

Like Kipling, Tennyson was attuned to the way in which words might strike 'an obscurely familiar chord' and so be transmitted without the use of Marconi signals. Knowles reports that, when he first disclosed his theories to Tennyson, the poet made a measured response, saying he 'thought there was a great deal very plausible in it', and with greater assurance 'that I had at any rate made a good word in "brain-waves," and a word which would live'.⁶⁶ Tennyson's prediction that the coinage would be Knowles's greatest brain-wave of all has, of course, been borne out. The word draws upon the currents of thought which I have discussed in this section, blending the action of the sea and the depths of the mind in a way that became intuitive to the Victorians. It also brings together tradition and innovation in a way that would become characteristic of novelists toward the end of the century, particularly Joseph Conrad, who forms the focus of my final chapter.

⁶⁶ Knowles, 'Wireless Telegraphy', 858.

Chapter 3. Committed to the Deep: Conrad's Vision of the Sea

Unimportant tale

In his 1914 note 'To My Readers in America', Conrad recalls finishing *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897): 'almost without laying down the pen I wrote a preface'.¹ (This was in fact published as an afterword to the last number of the serial edition in December 1897.)² The preface did more than explain elements of the novel he had just finished; it established an aesthetic philosophy that he would never deviate from or expound with comparable directness. Before he published this signal statement of literary purpose, however, he revised it extensively. Midway through the earlier version, Conrad introduces an apologia, which he adjusted repeatedly before deleting it altogether. These amendments show Conrad refining the terms of his rather courtly embarrassment:

if not downright
~~somewhat~~
 It may seem strange ~~and even~~ suspicious that
 so much should be said in introduction to the
 of the sea
 unimportant tale √ which follows.³

¹ Joseph Conrad, 'To My Readers in America', in Conrad, *The Nigger*, ed. Kimbrough, 168. Conrad's title presents an obvious challenge to abbreviation—W. L. Courtney remarks in his review of 1897 that Conrad has given his book 'the ugliest conceivable title'. I have, however, followed convention (and Conrad himself) in shortening the title as *The Nigger*. W. L. Courtney, review of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, by Joseph Conrad, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 1897, 4, in Norman Sherry, ed., *Conrad: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 85–88. All parenthetical references to *The Nigger* in this chapter come from the Norton Critical Edition.

² For further information on the afterword, see Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), 76.

³ The holograph is reprinted in facsimile in David R. Smith, *Conrad's Manifesto: Preface to a Career* (Philadelphia: Gehenna Press, 1966), n.p. (leaf 7).

In these revisions, it is unclear whether ‘unimportant’ or ‘of the sea’ was added first. Each has roughly the same function: to intensify a reader’s sense of the incongruity of the preface and the text that follows. The tension on display here—between Conrad’s desire to be taken seriously and his reservations about the relative un-seriousness of the genre of the sea tale—suggests a broader dissonance. Conrad frequently worries that his sea stories will be seen as so-called light literature, even though many of his most successful novels concern the sea. Some early reviews of *The Nigger* captured what would prove to be an abiding strain: ‘There may be better tales of the sea than this’, concluded the *Daily Chronicle*, ‘but we have never read anything in the least like it. [...] The story is simply an account of an ordinary voyage’.⁴ Conrad later described his feelings upon finishing the novel: ‘After writing the last words of that book, in the revulsion of feeling before the accomplished task, I understood that I had done with the sea, and henceforth had to be a writer’.⁵ This is a perplexing claim, not only because Conrad seems to be thinking of himself as both having finished writing and about to begin, but also because he had certainly not finished with the sea. He means foremost that he shall no longer be a ship’s captain, but the phrase’s ambiguity hints at deeper currents of ambivalence.

In a great deal of his writing, as in his revisions to the preface, Conrad found himself caught between two attitudes to the sea. He pretends, on one hand, that it is fundamentally unimportant; on the other, he deems it indispensable (at least insofar as it remains central to the events of his novels until the end of his career). Consider what he says in a letter from 1924. Writing to Henry Canby, Conrad insists on the irrelevance of the sea to the situation aboard the *Narcissus*, while at the same time making it seem vital both to the novel’s plot and to his literary style. The ‘problem that faces [the crew of the *Narcissus*] is not a problem of the sea,’ Conrad explains, ‘it is merely a problem that has

⁴ Unsigned review of *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, by Joseph Conrad, *Daily Chronicle*, 22 December 1897, in Sherry, ed., *Conrad: Critical Heritage*, 89.

⁵ Conrad, ‘To My Readers’, 168.

arisen on board a ship where the conditions of complete isolation from all land entanglements make it stand out with particular force and colouring'.⁶ At a stretch, one could imagine a novel set on board a ship, out of sight of land, and yet not at sea—in the centre of Lake Superior, perhaps, or even, by the time Conrad wrote this letter, aboard a spaceship.⁷ The point is that Conrad does not do this, and sees no reason to.

Critics have concentrated on the sentiments of the first part of Conrad's claim to Canby. Ian Watt, for instance, cites Conrad's comment on the unimportance of his 'tale of the sea' with which I began this section, as though it described Conrad's definitive attitude, a difficult position to maintain in view of the fact that it was eventually cut.⁸ Conrad's writing about the sea has been represented as a concession to populism, a shuddering back from the implications of pessimism and solipsism, which form some of the other conspicuous preoccupations of his work. Foulke writes that the sea serves in Conrad's novels chiefly as a way of illuminating 'the creed implicit in the traditions of the British Merchant Service'.⁹ Watt agrees, concluding that 'the essence of Conrad's literary use of the sea is reverence for the heroism of man's "continuous defiance of what [the sea] can do"', as if Conrad were Marryat or Dibdin.¹⁰ These commentators argue that such reverencing of heroic masculinity is decidedly unlike Conrad's stated intentions elsewhere in the preface, particularly his interest in observing 'the light of magic suggestiveness' that 'may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of

⁶ Joseph Conrad to Henry S. Canby, 7 April 1924, in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983–2007), vol. 8, 1923–1924 (2007), ed. Davies and Gene M. Moore, 339.

⁷ H. G. Wells published *The First Men in the Moon* in 1901. The spherical vessel he writes of there bears striking resemblance to the one that he imagines would be suitable for explorations 'In the Abyss' (1896). And, of course, the bathysphere used by William Beebe in the 1930s had the same shape. See page 197 for more on Beebe.

⁸ Watt, *Conrad*, 84.

⁹ Robert Foulke, 'Sea', in *Joseph Conrad in Context*, ed. Allan H. Simmons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 247.

¹⁰ Watt, *Conrad*, 97. The phrase quoted by Watt appears in Conrad, "Well Done!", in *Notes on Life*, 146.

words'.¹¹ The parts of Conrad's novels which concern the sea are habitually deemed extraneous to his artistic credo.

In this chapter, I argue the opposite case. The sea, I suggest, is not inimical to the artistic programme Conrad lays out in the preface. Indeed, it provides precisely the sort of 'commonplace surface' he views as his central focus. Criticism that focuses exclusively on the material sea in Conrad's fiction, describing it as a site of heroic toil, misses half of what I have insisted upon throughout this thesis: that the sea operates on the threshold between literal and figurative use, and that, as such, it permits both private experience and collective understanding. Conrad hoped his sea novels might escape purely literal readings. 'Surely', he says, 'those stories of mine where the sea enters can be looked at from another angle'.¹² His writing often encourages readers to look again at the sea using techniques of revision. He goes on, for instance, in the published version of his preface, to compare writing to shipwreck. The writer's responsibility is to hold up a 'rescued fragment before all eyes', he declares (Conrad, 'Preface', 147). This procedure involves a meticulous attitude to language, since the fragments to be rescued are 'the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage', words which embody what they describe like the 'old, old fashion' of Paul Dombey (*DS*, 241). 'Through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences', however, such words can reacquire 'plasticity', and 'colour' (Conrad, 'Preface', 146). Conrad's diction is carefully managed; it exhibits the kind of plasticity it recommends by converting the 'old, old' props of a sea story into constitutive elements of his aesthetic manifesto. The sea story he most obviously revises, however, is his own, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. He ends the preface by again affirming that a careful look at commonplaces of experience and expression is required before a more penetrating kind of vision can be attained:

¹¹ Joseph Conrad, 'Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*', in Conrad, *The Nigger*, ed. Kimbrough, 146.

¹² Conrad to Canby, 7 April 1924, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 8:339.

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile—such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished—behold!—all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest. (148)

It would be clear to anyone who had read *The Nigger* that Conrad describes a marine vista here. At the end of the *Narcissus*'s voyage, the reader is told, 'the immortal sea stretched away immense and hazy, like the image of life, with a glittering surface and lightless depths' (*NN*, 96). The vocabulary of Conrad's preface was tested first in his tale of the sea.

While Marryat and Dickens found that the sea gave them a way of talking vaguely, in Conrad's opinion there was no other way of talking. Yet, the central preoccupation of his preface and his fiction is, as the passage cited above suggests, how to make the 'evanescent' materials of art refer to something more permanent, an 'image of life'. He would return to the notion of 'rescue work' introduced by the preface in his finest essay, 'Henry James: An Appreciation' (1905).¹³ The essay, an elaborate and formal paean, does not concern itself with the text of James's novels, but rather sets out to capture, in Carlylean fashion, the heroism ('in the modern sense') of the writer of fiction.

Action in its essence, the creative art of a writer of fiction, may be compared to rescue work carried out in darkness against cross gusts of wind swaying the action of a great multitude. It is rescue-work this snatching of vanishing phases of turbulence disguised in fair words, out of its native obscurity into a light where the struggling forms may be seen, seized upon, endowed with the only possible form of permanence in this world of relative values—the permanence of memory. And the multitude feels it obscurely too; since the demand of the individual to the artist is, in effect, the cry "take me out of myself!" meaning really out of my perishable activity into the light of imperishable consciousness. But everything is relative and

¹³ As I have discussed in relation to Dickens, James presented his own 'aesthetics of salvage' in his preface to the New York edition of *The Ambassadors* in 1908. See page 169. The phrase is Robert Macfarlane's.

the light of consciousness is only enduring, merely the most enduring of the things of this earth, imperishable only against the short lived work of our industrious hands.¹⁴

Conrad's fiction is, above all, concerned with the movement described above, where a certain kind of vision stills busy hands and minds. It will be my suggestion that the sea supplied Conrad with a vocabulary with which to present simultaneously private, 'perishable' experience, and the more permanent forms of collective understanding; a medium that at once compels and permits rescue work.

A drop of water

Before going further, it is necessary to consider in greater detail the particular kind of vision Conrad proposes in his preface to *The Nigger*. A great deal has been written about his visual aesthetic as presented in this piece, and it is worth considering first how the preface is to be understood.¹⁵ The preface remains the fundamental expression of Conrad's aesthetic credo, such as it is. Michael Levenson affirms that 'the preface has been taken – rightly, I think – as the central statement of Conrad's artistic position'.¹⁶ The opinions Conrad expresses there have become basic to critical discussions of the novels, not least because he seems never to have departed significantly from them. In 1919, he still maintained that, in spite of some regrets about diction, his 'convictions in the main remain the same'.¹⁷ In the preface, Conrad sets out the central importance of the senses, especially sight, to his literary programme:

¹⁴ Joseph Conrad, 'Henry James: An Appreciation', in Conrad, *Notes on Life*, 17, 16.

¹⁵ For the most famous discussion, see Watt, *Conrad*, 76–88. But see also Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1–10.

¹⁶ Levenson, *Genealogy of Modernism*, 2.

¹⁷ Joseph Conrad to Rollo Walter Brown, 9 September 1919, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, vol. 6, 1917–1919 (2002), ed. Laurence Davies, Frederick R. Karl, and Owen Knowles, 486.

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see!* [...]

To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task. The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes and in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its colour, its form; and through its movement, its form, and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth—disclose its inspiring secret. (Conrad, ‘Preface’, 147)

Conrad depicts his rescue as a kind of quixotic striving. This is because he is painfully attuned to the ontological problem posed by a literary theory developed from what he takes to be a fact: that all experience begins with the senses, and is therefore primarily private. Experience is also fleeting, as he suggests, because it can exist nowhere and at no time other than the instant it first impacts the senses, and to a lesser extent in memory. Nevertheless, it is the task of the artist in particular to confront that interiority. The artist ‘descends within himself’, where he discovers a ‘lonely region of stress and strife’—and also ‘finds the terms of his appeal’ (Conrad, ‘Preface’, 145). Simultaneously, however, fiction, like any other kind of experience, must engage the senses of its readers. ‘Like painting, like music, like all art’, fiction ‘appeals to temperament’ by attempting to create ‘an impression conveyed through the senses’ (146). This leaves Conrad’s artist stranded between two equally perilous alternatives; as Edward Said notes, ‘either one loses one’s sense of identity and thereby seems to vanish into the chaotic, undifferentiated, and anonymous flux of passing time, or one asserts oneself so strongly as to become a hard and monstrous egoist’. (From another angle, Said observes that ‘the real adventure of Conrad’s life is the effort to rescue significance and value in their “struggling forms” from within his own existence’.)¹⁸ In short, it is the effort to make *you* see what Conrad sees.

¹⁸ Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 12–13, 10.

Frequently, however, it is simply the desire to make you *see* that critics emphasise. It is well-known that Conrad's method probably derived in part from his admiration for Guy de Maupassant. In a 1904 review of *Yvette*, newly translated by Ada Galsworthy (the wife of Conrad's friend, the novelist John Galsworthy), Conrad admired the way in which Maupassant's 'vision by a more scrupulous, prolonged and devoted attention to the aspects of the visible world discovered at last the right words as if miraculously impressed for him upon the face of things and events'.¹⁹ Owen Knowles and others have connected this statement to what Conrad called in a letter to Ford Madox Ford the 'picturesqueness' of language, 'the picture-producing power of arranged words'.²⁰ Allan Ingram suggests that 'whether the judgement of Maupassant is just or not is not the issue. What is valuable in the essay is the extent to which we can clearly see Conrad himself in the features he chooses to emphasise in Maupassant'.²¹ In particular, the language of impressions, used here and in the preface to *The Nigger*, has led John G. Peters, among others, to suggest that all Conrad's novels might be thought of as essentially impressionistic in their 'literary technique, philosophical presuppositions, and sociopolitical views'.²² The 'strong visual sense' of novels like *The Nigger* is, according to this theory, indicative of a more general philosophical concern, derived from Walter Pater and Schopenhauer, with the primacy of the individual.²³ Pater foresees profound isolation as the endpoint of the incessant 'fining down' of 'what is real in our life'. 'Every one of those impressions', he writes, 'is the

¹⁹ Joseph Conrad, 'Guy de Maupassant', in Conrad, *Notes on Life*, 27

²⁰ Joseph Conrad to Ford Madox Ford, [19 July? 1902], in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, vol. 2, 1898–1902 (1986), ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, 435.

²¹ Allan Ingram, 'Critical Commentary', in *Joseph Conrad: Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow-Line*, ed. Ingram (London: Methuen, 1986), 220. See also Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (London: Penguin, 1986), 183–84. Smith draws convincing links between Conrad's preface and Maupassant's preface to *Pierre et Jean* (1888). *Conrad's Manifesto*, 62.

²² John G. Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

²³ Watt, *Conrad*, 174.

impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of the world'.²⁴

Conrad, like Pater, is devoted to the apprehension of 'a single sharp impression, with a sense in it'.²⁵ Yet, Conrad also attempts to balance the demands of this Paterian aesthetic against what he calls 'solidarity', or 'the appeal of one temperament' to others ('Preface', 147). He intends any pessimistic focus on human isolation to be relieved by the way in which an 'appeal' may work to create a sense of 'that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate—which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world' (147). Yet, the difficulty of this position is severe, since it depends upon an aesthetic philosophy that tends toward Cartesian subtraction to provide a basis for communal feeling. An intense focus on the appearance, the 'vibration', 'colour' and 'form', of 'a passing phase of life', must somehow become a means of gaining access to its depths, 'the substance of its truth' ('Preface', 147). 'An impression conveyed through the senses' of the poet and into his inner, 'lonely region' must be converted into something that 'all eyes' may apprehend (146, 145, 147). This is why the end of the preface shows Conrad modifying Paterian ideas that seem unequal to the proper task of the novelist as he sees it: 'In that uneasy solitude the cry of Art for Art itself, loses the exciting ring of its apparent immortality' (147).

Ford Madox Ford, Conrad's friend, literary collaborator, and sponsor, attempted to think through the same paradox. In doing so, Ford stressed what he felt was impressionism's capacity to capture reality. Although his interest had begun earlier, between 1912 and 1914 Ford developed his theories in essays like 'The Poet's Eye' and 'On Impressionism'. Throughout, he bore Conrad in mind. He writes, 'I have a certain number of maxims, gained mostly in conversation with Mr Conrad, which form my

²⁴ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 119.

²⁵ *Ibid.* For a useful discussion of this passage, see Levenson, *Genealogy of Modernism*, 16–17.

working stock-in-trade'.²⁶ According to Ford, while impressionism may be thought of as 'a frank expression of personality', it can also be conceived of as producing an 'illusion of reality'.²⁷ This is because it aims to 'attain to the sort of odd vibration that scenes in real life really have; you would give your reader the impression that he was witnessing something real, that he was passing through an experience'. In this way, Ford's impressionism seeks to capture objective reality. Meanwhile, Ford distinguishes impressionism 'from other schools' by the fact that 'it recognises frankly, that all art must be the expression of an ego, and that if impressionism is to do anything, it must, as the phrase is, go the whole hog'.²⁸ Impressionist literary technique, then, seeks to render reality, but in a way that mimics as closely as possible the effect it produces on an individual consciousness. This involves a number of techniques, all of which Ford summarised with a characteristically imprecise motto: '*Never state: present.*'²⁹ He explains further:

Supposing your name is John, and you have a friend called James, and for private reasons of his own James takes you into his billiard room and tries to shoot you with a rifle.

Now when that happens to you nothing in the outside world says to you, in so many words, "*That man is going to shoot me.*" What happens to you roughly is this. You are taken by your friend into a room. You perceive the greenish light thrown upwards from the billiard table by the shaded lamps. You perceive the billiard table. Your friend talks. You answer. You are thinking of what he says; of what you are to answer. You perceive other objects; you perceive that some of the cues are not in the rack, and that the last game marked ended at 100 to 64. James says something else. You notice that his voice is rather high. You answer. You notice that you are saying to yourself, "I must keep my temper!" You also notice that the clock has stopped at 3.17...so it goes on, the whole way through the incident – it is a mixture of things that appear insignificant and of real action.

And the problem of a writer of the school of Conrad is to present to his readers' senses exactly that train of events. To say that James took John into the

²⁶ Ford Madox Hueffer, 'On Impressionism', pt. 1, *Poetry and Drama* 5 (1914): 172.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 169; Ford Madox Hueffer, 'On Impressionism', pt. 2, *Poetry and Drama* 8 (1914): 323.

²⁸ Ford, 'On Impressionism', pt. 1, 175, 167.

²⁹ Ford Madox Ford, 'Joseph Conrad', in *Ford Madox Ford: Critical Essays*, ed. Max Saunders and Richard Stang (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 84.

billiard room would be statement for such a writer; to present the train of action would be art.³⁰

The clipped dialogue, emphasis on the senses, and wandering time scale are characteristic of Fordian impressionistic narration, as is the sense of divided attention. Crucially, all contribute to giving the reader a sense of ‘passing through an experience’, the same experience the narrating presence is having. And shared experience is, according to Ford, as close as it is possible to come to real experience. In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Marlow remarks famously that ‘we live, as we dream—alone...’, before reconsidering: ‘He paused again as if reflecting’, the narrator tells us, ‘then added— “Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know. . . .”’.³¹ It is habitually pointed out that, on board the ship where the tale is being told, ‘it had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another’, making it unlikely that Marlow’s listeners perceive him as he suggests they do: ‘For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice’ (*HD*, 130). It is a strength of the text that the matter remains unsettled, for it is precisely Conrad’s hope that a ‘voice’ could, in fact, make you *see*.

It has been generally agreed that the ‘surface truth’ of non-Fordian impressionism is finally deemed by Conrad to be ‘insufficient’, even as it contributes a crucial justification to his style.³² How Conrad sought to offset its troubling implications has been, however, more debated. Although there have been dissenters from this position, *The Nigger* has usually been seen as a novel in which, in denial of the divided and solipsistic implications of the modern spirit, seamanly virtues are more unproblematically invoked as

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

³¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, in *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, ed. Cedric Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 130.

³² Andrea White, ‘Conrad and Modernism’, in *A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad*, ed. John G. Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 167.

a palliative measure.³³ In particular, as Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan claims, the character of Singleton, Conrad's most emblematic ancient mariner, has been thought of as a 'prototype of epic virtue', and hence the cornerstone of a 'fellowship of the sea'. Allon White writes that 'the usual source of clarity and refuge in Conrad is physical work', and it is Singleton who, the narrator notes, 'steered with care' (*NN*, 55).³⁴ Levenson agrees that 'Singleton is an exemplar of Conradian "Fidelity"'.³⁵ A saving demurrer from the 'revolutionary' trends in his writing and thought, Fidelity—the 'simple idea' Conrad advocates in the 'familiar preface' to *A Personal Record* (1912)—is rightly seen by critics like Erdinast-Vulcan as an attempt on Conrad's part to re-establish solidity amid the 'doubting, self-destructive consciousness' that characterises 'the modern temper'.³⁶ For such reasons, Mark Larabee has called the novel an instrument of the 'romanticization of the maritime tradition', first among Conrad's 'elegiac appreciations of the sailor's daily life'.³⁷ But Conrad's response is more deeply ambivalent than these critics allow.

Throughout *The Nigger*, Singleton is likened to an unreadable text. In this respect, Singleton resembles Towson's (or Tower's, or Towser's—Marlow cannot recall) *Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*, which Marlow comes upon in *Heart of Darkness*. Both Towson and Singleton seem at first to offer forms of consolation, and both appear to represent a challenge to the chaos of subjective surfaces that beset Conrad's narrators: 'not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light'. The

³³ For one such protest, see William Deresiewicz, 'Conrad's Impasse: *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and the Invention of Marlow', *Conradiana* 38 (2006): 205–27.

³⁴ Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 25; Allon White, *The Uses of Obscurity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 127. Other Conradian ancient mariner figures include Captain Whalley from *The End of the Tether* (1902), and Lingard who appears in *Almayer's Folly* (1895), *The Outcast of the Islands* (1896), and *The Rescue* (1920).

³⁵ Levenson, *Genealogy of Modernism*, 3.

³⁶ Conrad, *Personal Record*, 17; Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad*, 26.

³⁷ Mark D. Larabee, 'Joseph Conrad and the Maritime Tradition', in Peters, *Historical Guide to Conrad*, 55.

independent and self-contained system of signification proffered by ‘the simple old sailor [Towson]’, Marlow indicates, ‘made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real’ (*HD*, 141). The book seems to offer a kind of respite. However, the refreshing presence of something unmistakably real is also unmistakably unlike what Marlow is actually seeing. And, of course, *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship* turns out to be less reassuringly intelligible, and more like Marlow’s own narrative than is initially apparent; its margins are strewn with scrawls that Marlow cannot make out, a ‘cipher’ he thinks (actually the notes of the Russian harlequin), though ‘plainly referring to the text’ (141). Both books, *Heart of Darkness* and Towson’s manual, Conrad insists, are finally inscrutable. The facts of Marlow’s journey upriver appear to him ‘dazzling’, ‘like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma’ (146); Towson’s manual is an ‘extravagant mystery’ (141).

Similar scenes of reading in *The Nigger* prefigure Marlow’s discovery of Towson’s book—in neither work does sailorly simplicity appear to offer a viable basis for solidarity. Singleton has famously engaged on his own course of light reading aboard the *Narcissus*; ‘he was reading *Pelham*’ (3), we are told, as Conrad claimed he had during his own early voyages.³⁸ But ‘what meaning’ Singleton draws from the book is beyond the narrator’s understanding—‘Is it the fascination of the incomprehensible? is it the charm of the impossible?’—and as Towson’s manual does to Marlow, Singleton gives the impression of an unresolvable ‘Mystery!’ (*NN*, 3). While *Pelham* bears no marginalia (Singleton cannot write), the old sailor himself is inscribed with tattoos ‘like a cannibal chief all over his powerful chest and enormous biceps’ (2). These atavistic signs look forward to the patterning of light and dark that goes on to characterise the symbolic vocabulary of the

³⁸ ‘He used to say’, writes Ford Madox Ford, ‘that he had acquired English by reading in the fore-castle the works of Miss Braddon, the *Family Herald* and Bulwer-Lytton’s *Pelham*’. ‘On Conrad’s Vocabulary’, in Saunders and Stang, *Ford: Critical Essays*, 289.

novel as a whole. ‘Between the blue and red patterns his white skin gleamed like satin; his bare back was propped against the heel of the bowsprit, and he held a book at arm’s length before his big, sunburnt face’ (*NN*, 2–3), a reminder of Singleton’s habit of standing ‘with his face to the light and his back to the darkness’, a silhouette to the men within the cabin in spite of his symbolic whiteness (14). And, comparable to Kurtz, who is ‘hollow at the core’ (*HD*, 165), or James Wait whose cough both sounds ‘hollow’ and is ‘hollow’ the way a promise might be, Singleton is at once ‘vast’ and ‘empty’ (*NN*, 11, 15).

Neither Singleton, then, nor *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship* can be exempt from the implications of Conrad’s impressionist aesthetic. Singleton the steadfast sailor may represent the kind of uncomplicated heroism that provides grounds for a degree of solidarity in the context of numerous tales of the sea, but this is not Conradian solidarity which, as I have said, ‘arrest[s] [...] the hands busy about the work of the earth’ (‘Preface’, 148). Solidarity, as Conrad imagines it in the preface, is not arrived at by setting certain aspects of life apart as a preserve of objectivity to counteract the creeping subjectivity of perception and representation. Conrad intended to ‘bring to light the truth’, the basis of solidarity, not by ignoring surfaces, but by representing them more vividly. This he defined in the first words of the novel’s preface in terms that bring the old sailor to mind, as ‘a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe’ (‘Preface’, 145).

Indeed, he saw Singleton as directly implicated in this procedure. He had met Cunninghame Graham in the summer of 1897, and quickly recognised him as ‘a fellow-spirit’.³⁹ *The Nigger* was published in January, and Cunninghame Graham had written to express his admiration. By December he felt comfortable offering Conrad his opinions,

³⁹ John Batchelor, *The Life of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 70.

and he wrote to suggest that Singleton, ‘the oldest able seaman in the ship’ (*NN*, 2), might have been made more heroic still if he had been given an education. Conrad disagreed:

I think Singleton with an education is impossible. But first of all—what education? If it is the knowledge how to live my man essentially possessed it. He was in perfect accord with his life. [...] Would you seriously, of malice prepense, cultivate in that unconscious man the power to think. Then he would become conscious—and much smaller—and very unhappy. Now he is simple and great like an elemental force. Nothing can touch him but the curse of decay—the eternal decree that will extinguish the sun, the stars one by one, and in another instant shall spread a frozen darkness over the whole universe. Nothing else can touch him—he does not think. Would you seriously wish to tell such a man: “Know thyself. Understand that thou art nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than a dream.” Would you?⁴⁰

Conrad clarified a month later:

What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. [...] There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about in a world that whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror is always but a vain and floating appearance.⁴¹

If this is the expression of a pessimistic frame of mind, it also provides some grounds for hope. Conrad seems to imply that Singleton is less and more ‘than a drop of water in the ocean’; he is apparently a ‘shadow’, too, and more conspicuously ‘an elemental force’.

The mingling of Conrad’s metaphors—shadows become droplets—suggests that, if individuals are tragically and consciously alone, some consolation may be taken from the capacity of words to communicate that predicament correctly and flexibly. If a drop of sea-water falls worryingly short of justifying solidarity, the larger element may not. In the following section I investigate briefly, with reference primarily to *Lord Jim* (1899–1900), Conrad’s use of the sea to generate the kind of solidarity discussed above. At his most pessimistic, Conrad viewed fiction as a mirror that refocused impressions either inward or

⁴⁰ Joseph Conrad to Cunninghame Graham, 14 December 1897, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, vol. 1, 1861–1897 (1983), ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, 423.

⁴¹ Joseph Conrad to Cunninghame Graham, 31 Jan 1898, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 2:30.

outward (concave or convex), resulting in a vision of the ego, or of a world of impermanent surfaces which leaves no room for the self. The sea, however, proves to be a different kind of mirror, one which offered Conrad both inward and outward vision, a way to 'see and reflect' at once,⁴² and thereby fulfils his wish to 'bind [...] men to each other and [...] to the visible world' ('Preface', 147).

Cast a glamour

One reason that *Heart of Darkness*, rather than *Almayer's Folly* (1895) or *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), has proven so endlessly interpretable is that it repeatedly questions the sufficiency of its own vocabulary. It is not just that one theme of the novel is the difficulty of interpretation (though, of course, it is): this had been one of Conrad's themes from the beginning, and indeed he had used similar language to capture it. So, in the second paragraph of his first novel, we see Almayer, whose folly haunts not only this story but *Outcast*, too, observing an uprooted tree floating downstream. The scene is described in terms that, though concrete, easily obtain a wider significance: 'he envied the lot of that inanimate thing now growing small and indistinct in the deepening darkness. As he lost sight of it altogether he began to wonder how far out to sea it would drift'.⁴³ The romance and elopement of Almayer's daughter Nina is conducted in comparable terms. She also spends time contemplating the view: 'Yes, when the next day broke, they would be together on the great blue sea that was like life—away from the forests that were like death' (*AF*, 169). It is not only that Conrad seems in some way to break the rules of realist fiction by spelling out his similes; he compounds the problem by leaving so little doubt about the directness or simplicity of the comparison, since not only Dain, whose thoughts

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Joseph Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*, ed. Floyd Eugene Eddleman and David Leon Higdon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6.

are being focalised, and Almayer, on whose misprision of Dain's motives the plot hangs, but also the anonymous narrator too, see the sea in similar ways—leaving little doubt of the rather embarrassing earnestness of the figure. An effect of this broadly shared symbolic language is that the landscape moves too far from the expectations set by the realist form of the novel. The river and the sea take on the dimensions of allegory, a transformation that Conrad would seek to frustrate in his later fiction.⁴⁴ Thus, when we read that 'the brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress; and Kurtz's life was running swiftly too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time', Conrad means the reader to see Marlow groping for a metaphor amongst the objects of experience, taking up what he finds to hand in an effort to make sense of what he has witnessed (*HD*, 176). Affinities that already exist in Marlow's language are in the process of being brought to light; the latent metaphoric potential of his situation seems to occur to Marlow in mid-sentence. Conrad goes to some lengths to make this clear. Not only are Marlow and Kurtz actually moving downstream to the sea at the time Kurtz dies, but the reader is constantly reminded that the story is being told aboard the *Nellie*, while waiting 'for the turn of the tide' (103). This technique is developed more fully in *Lord Jim*, where it becomes grounds for solidarity between Jim and Marlow.

Near the end of the first part of *Lord Jim*, Marlow looks back to Jim, whom he has left on the shore: 'I saw him aft detached upon the light of the westering sun, raising his cap high above his head. I heard an indistinct shout, "You—shall—hear—of—me." Of me, or from me, I don't know which. I think it must have been of me. My eyes were too

⁴⁴ The famous example of Conrad raising and frustrating this style of reading is the missing third Fate in the Company offices in *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow finds 'two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool'. *Heart of Darkness*, 111. For a classic assertion of the parabolic (as opposed to allegoric) nature of Marlow's narrative, see J. Hillis Miller, 'Heart of Darkness Revisited', in *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, ed. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, Routledge Guides to Literature (New York: Routledge, 2007), 101–12.

dazzled by the glitter of the sea below his feet to see him clearly; I am fated never to see him clearly.⁴⁵ Marlow lives out, or hears out, the hazy aesthetics of impressionism; Jim's indistinct cry, through a bit of deft synaesthesia, prompts Marlow to remark that he cannot 'see' Jim clearly, a remark that is itself suspended between meanings. But for Conrad, as for Ford, the lack of clarity imparted to the reader is precisely the point, since the reader is forced thereby to hear and see just what Marlow does or does not.

Shortly after Marlow first meets Jim, he perceives that, like himself, Jim had gone to sea under the influence of its glamour. 'Hadn't we all', he says, 'commenced with the same desire, ended with the same knowledge, carried the memory of the same cherished glamour through the sordid days of imprecation?' (*LJ*, 93–94). *Glamour* here implies, in addition to the more familiar sense of dazzling charm, a type of magic, enchantment, or spell, literally an enchanting 'grammar', associations that are much clearer in French, Conrad's second language.⁴⁶ After the incident aboard the *Patna*, Jim (and the text) is haunted by the absence of that 'last spark of [...] glamour', which seems to have fled, 'gone with the ship in the night' (*LJ*, 95, 94). 'A spark of glamour' (108), 'that light of glamour created in the shock of trifles, as amazing as the glow of sparks struck from a cold stone' (163), is repeatedly announced as an absence until this moment. To see Jim through a haze of sparks is in fact to learn something about his hopes and their disappointment; it is to see something essential about him.⁴⁷

Jim is suspended between two versions of himself, which are nevertheless welded inseparably. He explains himself to Marlow, but it is as though, Marlow thinks, 'he was not speaking to me, he was only speaking before me, in a dispute with an invisible personality, an antagonistic and inseparable partner of his existence' (*LJ*, 67). What Jacques Berthoud, one of Conrad's most influential critics, calls 'the collision of subjective

⁴⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, ed. Jacques Berthoud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 175.

⁴⁶ *OED*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. 'glamour | glamor, n.', sense 1.

⁴⁷ The latter example is the last use of the word in the novel.

fantasy against brute fact' divides Jim against himself.⁴⁸ It is a common occurrence in Conrad's novels, certainly, but here, unlike in 'The Secret Sharer' (1910) for example, the second self cannot be jettisoned in a rite of initiation. Instead, because both versions of Jim are ideal, the product either of his conviction that he is heroic, though this aspect of himself is still unexpressed, or of the disproportionate extremity of his self-loathing, they cannot be meaningfully distinguished. 'By Jove! he was amazing', Marlow recalls, 'there he sat telling me that just as I saw him before my eyes he wouldn't be afraid to face anything—and believing it too' (*LJ*, 69). This disjunction is enough to cause Marlow to feel as though he has been 'made to look at the convention that lurks in all truth' (68). Jim's flight east, just ahead of the rumours of his cowardice, is itself seen indistinctly: 'What I could never make up my mind about was whether his line of conduct amounted to shirking his ghost or to facing him out. I strained my mental eyesight only to discover that, as with the complexion of all our actions, the shade of difference was so delicate that it was impossible to say' (142). Sea-life loses, for Jim, its glamour in the face of 'the exactions of the sea, and the prosaic severity of the daily task that gives bread' (*LJ*, 8). Yet, Jim himself takes on an aspect of that fascination for the reader, as he does for Marlow who is perpetually looking at him 'on the brink of a vast obscurity, like a lonely figure by the shore' (125), 'as if standing on the shore of a somber and hopeless sea' (128), or 'planted solidly upon the shores of a sea of light' (129), even if Marlow is perpetually 'too dazzled by the glitter of the sea below his feet to see him clearly' (175). Both versions of Jim are hosted by, and symbolised by, the sea, 'merged into one indefinite immensity' (83).

Conrad makes it clear, however, that when Marlow looks at the sea and at Jim, he also sees something of himself. 'He was a youngster of the sort you like to see about you',

⁴⁸ Berthoud, introduction to Conrad, *Lord Jim*, xxii.

he says, ‘of the sort you like to imagine yourself to have been’ (*LJ*, 93). In ‘Youth’ (1898), Marlow recollects more clearly the sort of youngster he was. Having taken his ‘first command’, a small open boat, away from the burning wreckage of the *Judea*, he comes into port and catches his first glimpse of the East. It is the sea, however, that occupies his gaze, a recollected ‘moment of strength, of romance, of glamour—of youth! ... A flick of sunshine upon a strange shore’ that establishes in his eye the pairing of ‘glamour and the sea!’⁴⁹ to which he returns in *Heart of Darkness* and *Chance* (1912).

If impressionist technique insists on the inviolability of the individual, Conrad’s syntax insists on the way in which a thought can drift between minds in the garnering of an understanding. Such textual echoes show a phrase and an idea in the process of becoming a habit of thought or expression. ‘Surely’, says Marlow, ‘in no other craft as in that of the sea do the hearts of those already launched to sink or swim go out so much to the youth on the brink, looking with shining eyes upon that glitter of the vast surface which is only a reflection of his own glances full of fire’ (*LJ*, 93). Marlow has been speaking of himself, and Conrad delays the pronoun to correspond with ‘looking’ until the end of the sentence, making the reader consider, for the time it takes to read the phrase, the possibility that Marlow and Jim are equally implicated. Even then, while ‘him’ is most likely to be Jim, it could equally refer back to any possessor of the kind of ‘heart’ or ‘youth’ that are the phrase’s established actors. Just as Marryat’s title *Frank Mildmay; or, The Naval Officer* describes both an individual and a type, so Conrad’s phrase could be read as referring both to Marlow and Jim specifically, and to the classes that define them in general. The ‘reflecting’ medium of the sea turns out to be a mirror in which Jim and Marlow may view each other’s faces as versions of themselves. ‘You don’t know what it is’, Jim confides, ‘for a fellow in my position to be believed—make a clean breast of it to an elder man’;

⁴⁹ Joseph Conrad, ‘Youth’, in *Heart of Darkness*, 98–99.

‘Yes’, Marlow thinks, ‘I had a glimpse of him then’, and his ‘heart’ is like Marlow’s (*LJ*, 93).

Marlow famously states that Jim is ‘one of us’ (*LJ*, 236), and in doing so he initiates an understanding that there is an ‘us’ in which Jim can participate. Conrad’s impressionist prose seeks to engender such an understanding between text and reader by apportioning out or, as above, withholding sensations in a way that can be counted on to affect the reader along with the consciousness he or she reads about. The sense of commonality is made possible by what is called the ‘fellowship of the craft’ (*LJ*, 94; ‘Youth’, 71).⁵⁰ What this might be is, as I have suggested, usually put down to some combination of ‘tradition, professional competence, shipmates, and the ship’.⁵¹ The concrete components of work are grounds for Conradian solidarity. Here, however, this is not what Marlow has in mind. Instead, what is most insubstantial enables his feeling of fellowship: ‘There is such magnificent vagueness in the expectations that had driven each of us to sea, such a glorious indefiniteness’; what Jim thinks of as the ‘charm of vagueness’ (*LJ*, 93, 15). He goes on to say that, in spite of there being ‘no other kind of life’ in which ‘the illusion [is] more wide of reality’, it is a shared illusion that forms a solid bond between Jim (whose ‘being’ is a ‘mist’), Marlow, and Marlow’s listeners: ‘in no other [kind of life] is the beginning *all* illusion’ (93). Conrad draws out, then, other potential meanings of *craft*, which could refer to a small ship or to the work and skill required to sail it, but also, like glamour, to ‘a magical device; spell or enchantment’, a metaphor that is also a useful tool or ‘device’.⁵² It is thus a good way of describing a work of literature.

⁵⁰ See C. F. Burgess, *The Fellowship of the Craft: Conrad on Ships and Seamen and the Sea* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1976).

⁵¹ Larabee, ‘Joseph Conrad’, 62.

⁵² *OED*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. ‘craft, n.’, senses 9, 5, 3a, and 3b.

Richard Curle, one of Conrad's later acolytes, had strained to discover the actual location of Marlow's landfall in 'Youth' (which repeats loosely Conrad's experiences aboard his ship the *Palestine* in 1882) while preparing an article for *The Blue Peter: The Magazine of the Sea*.⁵³ He sent Conrad the proofs, and in April 1922 Conrad irritably wrote back, stressing the importance of preserving his vagueness:

It is a strange fate that everything that I have, of set artistic purpose, laboured to leave indefinite, suggestive, in the penumbra of initial inspiration, should have that light turned on to it and its insignificance (as compared with, I might say without megalomania, the ampleness of my conceptions) exposed for any fool to comment upon or even for average minds to be disappointed with.⁵⁴

Such 'penumbral' reading, like the fellowship Conrad seeks to fashion, depends on the 'magnificent vagueness' of impressionism, rather than seeking to pound it into more familiarly realist forms. A comparison might be drawn to the way in which Byron apostrophises the sea in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: '—boundless, endless and sublime— / The image of Eternity—the throne / Of the invisible'.⁵⁵ Conrad feels similarly about the sea, but the process of writing about it is, for him, quite different:

In my early days, starting out on a voyage was like being launched into Eternity. I say advisedly Eternity instead of Space, because of the boundless silence which swallowed up one for eighty days—for one hundred days—for even yet more days of an existence without echoes or whispers. Like Eternity itself! For one can't conceive a vocal Eternity.⁵⁶

Whereas Byron's 'image of Eternity' is itself outside of time, an act of metaphorical naming that does not invite revision, Conrad laboriously builds up to it, resting his

⁵³ See Baines, *Joseph Conrad*, 94–99.

⁵⁴ Joseph Conrad to Richard Curle, 24 April 1922, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, vol. 7, 1920–1922 (2005), ed. Laurence Davies and J. H. Stape, 456–57.

⁵⁵ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in *Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 2, p. 185, lines 1643–45.

⁵⁶ Joseph Conrad, "'Well Done!'", in *Notes on Life*, 144. Conrad may have had Plato's account of the cosmos, along with Byron's, in mind: Plato asserts that God 'resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving, according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity; and this image we call Time'. This passage is quoted by Bertrand Russell, whom Conrad knew well, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), 143.

description on what spending months at sea felt like to him. Like Byron's, Conrad's text is strewn with dashes, each a typographical image of eternity. But, unlike Byron, Conrad also aims at giving eternity a voice: if the number eighty seems specific, and one hundred edges towards the symbolic, Conrad adds to it 'even yet more days', modelling time's endless extension by sympathetically extending his sentence. Similarly, in the scene of Marlow's parting from Jim, the reader's eye skims Conrad's prose as Marlow's skims the scene before him. In both cases a precise meaning fails to emerge, though the eye cannot help returning to the deliberately spaced 'You—shall—hear—of—me', levelled out like the still sea that separates the ship and the shore, and equally inconclusive. The 'glitter' that blurs Marlow's sight prepares and educates the reader's eye.

Sea/life

Much of Conrad's writing about the sea is germane to his artistic intentions. He repeatedly affirms that, in his 'sea books', he has 'tried with filial regard to render the vibration of life in the great world of waters'.⁵⁷ Given that he describes the artist's all-important task in identical terms—as an attempt to capture life's 'vibration'⁵⁸—it would seem reasonable to assume that Conrad means that he had tried in his sea books to summon what he called truth from the world of waters, and not simply that he had endeavoured there to depict the shaking of a schooner's sails with accuracy. Nevertheless, it is rare that critics treat the nautical elements of Conrad's novels with seriousness. I have suggested that the sea in Conrad's novels frequently renders the threshold between individuals and between ideas and material things hazy and indefinite. This opens the way for Conradian solidarity, which depends for its fleeting manifestation on the dissolution of apparently firm

⁵⁷ Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*, ed. Zdzislaw Najder and J. H. Stape (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 13.

⁵⁸ See above, page 216, page 218.

boundaries into ‘mists’ (Conrad, ‘Preface’, 148). Critics have, however, in general tasked themselves with policing divisions in Conrad’s writing—divisions between romance and realism, or impressionism and realism, or even between Conrad the writer and Conrad the seaman.

There are two reasons this has been the case, both of which Conrad himself explicitly addresses. The first has to do with Conrad’s background. As a retired sea captain, he was in a position alternately to court and to dispel as it suited him the opinion that his sea stories were best read as nostalgic yarns. Dismissing at once his captain’s persona and the sea itself from his writing became, for Conrad, a way of dismissing the charge that his novels were simple, a line of thinking numerous critics have retraced. The second reason has already briefly been discussed: the fact that ‘tales of the sea’ had by the end of the nineteenth century become an established genre. When *The Nigger* first appeared, for example, the *Daily Mail* thought it had discovered something like a new Richard Henry Dana, the American author of *Two Years before the Mast* (1840). ‘The only female in the book’, remarked the *Daily Mail* approvingly, ‘is the ship herself, which Mr. Conrad describes lovingly and with an intimate knowledge of seamanship unrivalled even by Dana or Clark Russell’.⁵⁹ By 1907, the year Conrad published *The Secret Agent*, William Clark Russell (to whom the *Mail* refers) had written more than forty novels with titles like *Romance of a Transport* (1893), *The Yarn of Old Harbour Town* (1905), and *The Wreck of the Grosvenor* (1877), according to John Sutherland ‘the most popular mid-Victorian melodrama of adventure and heroism at sea’.⁶⁰ Though Conrad was, in general,

⁵⁹ Unsigned notice of *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, by Joseph Conrad, *Daily Mail*, 7 December 1897, 3, in Sherry, *Conrad: Critical Heritage*, 83.

⁶⁰ John Sutherland, *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009), 690.

compared favourably to Russell,⁶¹ it was a comparison he would have preferred to avoid altogether. Critics, like Conrad himself, have generally been of the opinion that saving Conrad's novels for serious consideration has meant saving them from the gravitational pull of the genre begun by Marryat and Cooper. I have sketched the terms of Conrad's impressionism as he lays them out in his preface to *The Nigger*; in this section I extend the discussion by examining the ways in which critics have approached Conrad's sea writing in particular. Specifically, I analyse the habitual critical insistence that the sea's primary function in Conrad's fiction is one of division.

When Conrad writes that he has 'been a seaman', with the intention of separating this aspect of himself from his life as 'a writer of prose', he defies a certain strain of criticism that views the novelist and the seaman as necessary complements. It has been claimed, for instance, that Conrad's life in the Merchant Marine gives a particular flavour or bias to his novels; particularly that 'he finds it easier to dramatize relationships between men than relationships between the sexes because throughout his experience of human interaction had been largely restricted to the society of men on a ship'.⁶² Henry James, for example, wrote admiringly to Conrad on receipt of *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) that 'no one has *known*—for intellectual use—the things you know, and you have as artist of the whole matter, an authority that no one has approached. I find you in it all'.⁶³ For Virginia Woolf, however, looking back, the janiform aspect of Conrad's self is cause for some critical perturbation.⁶⁴ 'Still', she writes, 'though it is the habit of death to quicken the

⁶¹ See unsigned review of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, by Joseph Conrad, *Glasgow Herald*, 9 December 1897, 10, in Sherry, *Conrad: Critical Heritage*, 88. *The Standard* reviewer claimed, 'the volume is above the level of Mr. Clark Russell'. Unsigned review, 'Some New Novels', *The Standard*, 24 December 1897, 6.

⁶² Batchelor, *Life of Conrad*, 21. See also Graham Hough, *Image and Experience* (London: Duckworth, 1960); Bernard Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

⁶³ Henry James to Joseph Conrad, 1 November 1906, in *Twenty Letters to Joseph Conrad*, ed. G. Jean-Aubry (London: First Edition Club, 1926), n.p.

⁶⁴ *Janiformity* is the term by which Cedric Watts conveys a combination of Conrad's love of doppelgängers and his sense that he was 'homo duplex'. Conrad's uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski, for example, expressed a nagging worry that his nephew's epistles tended to misdirection. Watts, *A Preface to Conrad* (London:

focus of our memories, there clings to the genius of Conrad something essentially, and not accidentally, difficult to approach'.⁶⁵ It is this aspect of Conrad's literary character that accounts for the wildly divergent readership he attracts.

Schoolboys of fourteen, driving their way through Marryat, Scott, Henty, and Dickens, swallowed him down with the rest; while the seasoned and the fastidious, who in process of time have eaten their way to the heart of literature and there turn over and over a few precious crumbs, set Conrad scrupulously upon their banqueting table.⁶⁶

Both methods of reading Conrad distress Woolf in different ways. The first is dangerously ill-attuned to the essential oddness of Conrad—'a strange language', 'his mistress, his style'. The other, 'cold and lusterless', is dulled to the pleasures of adventure that adorn the surface of his stories, in favour of an eviscerating interest in the guts of his work, mimicking the cannibalistic appetites of Falk or Kurtz, which finally exposes a possible lack not only at the heart of the literature but at the heart of the critic as well.

Conrad himself was in two minds about how he wanted his sea-life to be thought of. Repeatedly, as I have said, he insists on a split. At other times, however, he emphasises that his stories are, as he says of *The Shadow-Line* (1916–17), more-or-less 'exact autobiography', affectionate recollections of the 'period of my sea-life'.⁶⁷ It can prove difficult in these instances to disentangle the stuff of the novelist's early career from the literature he was busy making out of those same biographical materials. This has meant that his early years as a sailor have been the object of considerable fascination.⁶⁸ Ships' manifests have been unearthed and examined alongside the more-or-less factual

Longman, 1982), 21, 115; Joseph Conrad to Kazimierz Waliszewski, 5 December 1903, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, vol. 3, 1903–1907 (1988), ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, 89.

⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Joseph Conrad', in *Essays of Woolf*, 4:227.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Joseph Conrad to Sidney Colvin, 27 February 1917, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 6:37.

⁶⁸ See especially Jerry Allen's *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad* (London: Methuen, 1965), and Norman Sherry's *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), which helpfully arranges the known facts of Conrad's voyages according to their bearing on his novels and stories.

accounts in his novels and stories, and the more-or-less factual accounts of *The Mirror of the Sea* and *A Personal Record*, and have been further tested against the letters Conrad wrote home from sea to his uncle Tadeusz, and old copies of the shipping news from the ports Conrad visited. Batchelor summarises his time at sea:

[In 1874 Conrad] left Poland for Marseille to become a trainee seaman with the French merchant navy. In 1876 he served as a “steward” on the *Saint-Antoine* and in 1877 he was possibly involved in smuggling arms from Marseille to the “Carlists” (the Spanish royalists). In 1878 in Marseille he shot himself in the chest but was not seriously injured. As a direct result of this apparent suicide attempt his Uncle Tadeusz cleared his (very substantial) debts. In April 1878 he joined his first British ship, the *Mavis*, and later in the year joined the *Skimmer of the Sea*. In August 1886 he became a British citizen. In November he passed the examination for the master’s certificate. In 1887 he was hospitalized in Singapore with an injury sustained on the *Highland Forest*. In 1887–8 he got to know the Malay Archipelago as an officer of the *Vidar*. In 1888 he was appointed master of the *Otago*, his only command. In 1889 he resigned from the *Otago*, settled briefly in London, began to write *Almayer’s Folly* and began a lasting friendship with his ‘Aunt’ Marguerite Poradowska. In 1890 he worked in the Belgian Congo for the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo. In 1891–3 he served as an officer of the *Torrens*, his last ship.⁶⁹

Conrad’s stories and novels set in ships or at sea all borrow elements of the events of his early life. Some episodes, such as the events surrounding Conrad’s first and only command at sea, the *Otago*, he returns to over and over again: *The End of the Tether* (1902), ‘Falk’ (1903), ‘The Secret Sharer’, ‘A Smile of Fortune’ (1911), and *The Shadow-Line*, are all built upon the same biographical foundations. Works like ‘Youth’, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, *Nostramo* (1904), and *Chance* also rework portions of Conrad’s experiences as a sailor. Conrad was, on the one hand, curious about the way in which, as Marlow remarks in *Chance*, ‘we are the creatures of our light literature much more than is generally suspected’, especially ‘in a world which prides itself on being scientific and practical’.⁷⁰ A number of critics have, accordingly, seen Conrad’s decision to go to sea as

⁶⁹ Batchelor, *Life of Conrad*, 22–23.

⁷⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Chance*, ed. Martin Ray, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 215.

the outcome of his early reading.⁷¹ Conrad, however, found himself oddly positioned: he was as much the creature of his own literature as anyone else's.

As I have said, Woolf sees this as the key to understanding Conrad's writing. She proposes to develop James's implication that the secret of Conrad's style lies in the combination of what he knows with the particular use to which he puts that knowledge—a strategy that involves the introduction of a division at the heart of Conrad's character and his writing: 'Mr Conrad's selves are particularly opposite. He is composed of two people who have nothing whatever in common. He is your sea captain, simple, faithful, obscure; and he is Marlow, subtle, psychological.'⁷² Unlike the tales of boys' adventure from which his novels borrow, Conrad's 'reach this height [of classics] by means of qualities which the simple story of adventure, as Marryat told it, or Fenimore Cooper, has not claim to possess'.

For it is clear that to admire and celebrate such men and such deeds, romantically, whole-heartedly and with the fervour of a lover, one must be possessed of the double vision; one must be at once inside and out. To praise their silence one must possess a voice. To appreciate their endurance one must be sensitive to fatigue. One must be able to live on equal terms with the Whalleys and the Singletons and yet hide from their suspicious eyes the very qualities which enable one to understand them. Conrad alone was able to live that double life.⁷³

Woolf's appraisal is astute and sensitive, but it is also susceptible to misinterpretation of the sort that Conrad attempted to stave off when he insisted upon the separation between his writer's life and his 'sea-life', a phrase that both yokes and distinguishes sea and life, putting them into a relationship that it is at once sequential and reciprocal. The literary

⁷¹ Norman Sherry writes, 'behind this desire to leave Poland and to join the merchant navy was the inspiration of Conrad's reading of adventure and travel literature and his interest in geography', while Ian Watt also suggests that this is the case: the romantic literature of adventure at sea is the cause 'which had impelled Jim and Conrad to become seamen'. Sherry, *Conrad and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), 17; Watt, *Conrad*, 323.

⁷² Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Conrad: A Conversation', in *Essays of Woolf*, vol. 3, 1919–1924 (1988), ed. Andrew McNeillie, 377.

⁷³ Woolf, 'Joseph Conrad', 229.

character of that prior life meant that memory and romance were easily mixed. He used the phrase often. When, for example, Marlow and Powell begin their reminiscences on youthful glamour at the beginning of *Chance*, the narrator remarks that ‘the conversation took a special turn relating exclusively to sea-life’ (7–8). Occasionally, he dropped the hyphen when the division between sea and life seemed especially definitive, as when he wrote to H. G. Wells that ‘formerly in my sea life, a difficulty nerved me to the effort; now I perceive it is not so [...] there is an uncomfortable sense of losing my footing in deep waters’,⁷⁴ an apprehension out of keeping with the bluff mien of a retired sea captain. He also uses the phrase to capture the perilous quality of Jim’s reveries, which combine sea and life with dangerous unreserve: ‘On the lower deck in the babel of two hundred voices he would forget himself, and beforehand live in his mind the sea-life of light literature’ (*LJ*, 5).

Walter Benjamin has claimed that the storyteller’s ‘real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death’.⁷⁵ By contrast, Conrad develops a formula, a charm, in his author’s notes whereby he repeatedly kills off an aspect of his own personal and literary past as means of ensuring that his tales might coalesce around different materials. The very repetition of this gesture, however, suggests the difficulty Conrad faced in his attempts to rid himself of the sea, which continued to haunt and inflect his narrative voice, regardless of how far inland his novels wandered. After James Wait dies in *The Nigger*, he ‘shows no sign of going’ even after the last words of the funeral service are said: ““Stand by,” mutter the boatswain. Mr. Baker read out: “To the deep,” and paused. [...] In death and swathed up for all eternity, [Wait] yet seemed to cling to the ships with the grip of undying fear’ (*NN*, 98–99). The series of pauses are rich with narrative possibility, easily seen in the light of a fear that

⁷⁴ Joseph Conrad to H. G. Wells, 30 November 1903, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 3:85.

⁷⁵ He adds that the kind of storytelling he has in mind ‘finds a last refuge in Kipling in the life of British seamen’. Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, 93, 100.

refuses to die even after James Wait has become ‘an horror’ at which Belfast seems to peer (99). But chiefly, Wait’s lingering death is the precondition for the novel itself, which takes as its theme the ‘the latent egoism of tenderness to suffering’ that comes about ‘in the developing anxiety not to see him die’—the diffuse, creeping narcissism with which the novel is centrally concerned (*NN*, 85).⁷⁶ Benjamin’s formula nicely captures the way in which, for Conrad as a novelist, a subject that seemed dead could refuse to be buried, or to stay buried.

That his life at sea afforded Conrad a great deal of practical inspiration is beyond question. And yet his habitual repudiation, especially later in life, of the idea that the sea has much to do with the true matter of his novels and stories has led critics either to consider the sea as a sort of biographical residuum that must be read through in order to get to the meat of Conrad’s themes or arguments (thus, certain critics maintain that *Heart of Darkness* is not specifically about the Congo or Belgian imperialist practices, which are never explicitly named), or the sea is seen as the froth of a sort of stylistic excess, a farrago of assorted scraps left over from the literary extravagance of Romanticism or romance, or perhaps from somewhere on the continent.⁷⁷ Cedric Watts notes that, ‘as is common in French writing, [Conrad’s] adjectives are [often] arranged in pairs and triplets after the noun (“the sea, blue and profound.viscous, stagnant, dead”): one of the parody-inviting signs of “Conradese”’.⁷⁸ Woolf addresses the charge that Conrad merely ‘goes on singing the same song about sea captains and the sea, beautiful, noble, and monotonous’.⁷⁹ And those critics who profess themselves keen to preserve Conrad’s critical reputation feel, likewise, that to treat the sea as a central element of his work is to risk the generic tug of sea fiction, and thus to risk him being seen as an old salt yarning monotonously.

⁷⁶ For more on Conrad’s delaying tactics see Said, *Joseph Conrad*, 94.

⁷⁷ See Virginia Woolf’s remarks on Conrad’s ‘strange language wooed characteristically for its Latin qualities rather than its Saxon’. ‘Joseph Conrad’, 227.

⁷⁸ Watts, *Preface to Conrad*, 103.

⁷⁹ Woolf, ‘Mr Conrad’, 377.

The popularity of Conrad's unlikely first best-seller, *Chance*, is usually explained with reference to forms of popular sea fiction. Conrad himself 'was pessimistic about it from the literary point of view'.⁸⁰ Yet, the novel has a more than usually romantic plot (a woman at its centre, and Conrad's only putative happy ending). If the novel's subject was populist by Conrad's standards, it is structurally one of his most complex works. The novel stages an elaborately nested series of voices, accounts, and reports, collected chiefly by Marlow, and recounted by a nameless external narrator. In the original serial, the frame narrator was characterised as a novelist, though this designation was dropped by Conrad in his revisions for volume publication. In the face of such complexity, critics often turn to the novel's allegiances to popular genre fiction, including maritime fiction, in order to explain its appeal to a wider public. *Chance* was the first novel that could be considered a sea story since *Lord Jim*, fourteen years earlier, and some reviewers rejoiced that the 'Kipling of the Malay Archipelago' had returned to the well-spring of his first tales.⁸¹ As Martin Ray says, 'reviewers of *Chance* once more knew what to make of Conrad, and they quickly branded him again as a "writer of the sea", a fatuity which pursued him throughout his writing career'.⁸² Ray takes his cues from Conrad himself, who clearly had become uncomfortable with the idea that both he and his work might be summed up so tersely and definitively.

This had been an enduring concern for Conrad, at least since the publication of *The Secret Agent*, the first of his novels to turn almost wholly away from the sea as a setting or subject. In 1907 Conrad wrote to J. B. Pinker, his agent since the publication of *Typhoon* (1902), to express these feelings. He was in the midst of preparing *The Secret Agent* in proof and (ostensibly) getting on with the writing of *Chance*, and he explained that he was

⁸⁰ Batchelor, *Life of Conrad*, 214.

⁸¹ Unsigned review of *Chance*, by Joseph Conrad, *Spectator*, 19 October 1895, 530, in Sherry, *Conrad: Critical Heritage*, 61.

⁸² Martin Ray, introduction to Conrad, *Chance*, xi.

concerned about the likelihood of the novel being received unfavourably, since it departed from the pattern set by his prior work: ‘Preconceived notions of Conrad as a sea writer will stand in the way of its acceptance.’⁸³ Similarly, a disagreement with his publisher, Methuen, over his contract was blown up (spuriously) by Conrad into a disagreement over the extent to which *Chance* could be considered to be a sea novel, Conrad hoping to withdraw it from Methuen’s auspices on the grounds that it had ‘no more sea in it than the ordinary citizen can enjoy from the end of Brighton pier’: ‘There aren’t ten thousand words of what you want of “sea” in the hundred and forty thousand of *Chance*, nor nearly enough to slake that thirst for salt from which it appears you have been suffering so long.’⁸⁴

Similarly, in the author’s note for his second novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*, which Conrad wrote in 1920 as one of a series to accompany the new Sun-Dial editions of his books, he remembered the publication of that novel as decisive insofar as it affirmed that he might take up a course in life ‘unconnected with the sea’.⁸⁵ It was, however, only with the publication of *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent* that Conrad could claim retrospectively to see himself moving away from the sea in his writing: *Nostromo*, he observed, signalled a break from *Typhoon* (‘a bit of a sea yarn after all’) though ‘the product of twenty years of life. My own life’,⁸⁶ which represented likewise the culmination of a certain phase of his artistic life, after which ‘it seemed somehow that there was nothing more in the world to write about’.⁸⁷ Berthoud has claimed that ‘*Nostromo* acts as a bridge between the first part of Conrad’s career as one of the greatest

⁸³ Joseph Conrad to J. B. Pinker, 6 May 1907, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 3:434.

⁸⁴ Joseph Conrad to Messrs Methuen and Co., 28 March 1913, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, vol. 5, 1912–1916 (1996), ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, 201. The latter part of this quotation appears in draft manuscript and typescript only.

⁸⁵ Joseph Conrad, ‘Author’s Note’, in *An Outcast of the Islands*, ed. J. H. Stape (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 281.

⁸⁶ Joseph Conrad, ‘Extract from the “Author’s Note” (1919)’, in *Typhoon*, 218.

⁸⁷ Joseph Conrad, ‘Author’s Note’, in *Nostromo*, ed. Jacques Berthoud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 407.

maritime novelists and the second part in which he was to show himself pre-eminent as an astute political critic in the masterworks that were to come'.⁸⁸ If Conrad had referred romantically to 'the immortal sea' in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, by the time he came to write 'Falk', included in the *Typhoon* volume, its longevity had taken on a different character: 'He who hath known the bitterness of the Ocean shall have its taste for ever in his mouth'.⁸⁹ After *Nostramo*, which still carried *A Tale of the Seaboard* as its subtitle, and the 'profoundly personal *Mirror of the Sea*' (the memoir and rumination on his sea years that Conrad was writing and dictating as he wrote 'that remote novel' *Nostramo*), he felt that he could finally shrug off 'the vast expanse of salt waters, the mirror of heaven's frowns and smiles, the reflector of the world's light' in favour of 'Dickensian' London, 'a cruel devourer of the world's light', and a place with 'room enough [...], depth enough [...] to bury five millions of lives'.⁹⁰ Yet, as suggested by Conrad's choice of words, even if the city of *The Secret Agent* stands for a rejection of maritime subject matter, it does so on the sea's terms, echoing the words of the funeral service at sea, and offering a second deep, ready for a batch of burials one cannot but feel are likely to be impermanent.

F. R. Leavis set the terms of critical engagement with the sea and Conrad in 1948. His positioning of Conrad as an inheritor of a great tradition explicitly aims to refute E. M. Forster's famous claim that Conrad's novels had no 'philosophy' to them: 'Only opinions, and the right to throw them overboard when facts make them look absurd. Opinions held under the semblance of eternity, girt with the sea, crowned with stars, and therefore easily

⁸⁸ Berthoud, introduction to Conrad, *Nostramo*, xx. To position *Nostramo* as a precursor to a period of mastery is somewhat strange since, according to Berthoud himself, Conrad's 'major phase' is already almost over; it ends with *Chance*—his seminal book begins with *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and ends with *Under Western Eyes* (1911). See Jacques Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

⁸⁹ Joseph Conrad, 'Falk: A Reminiscence', in *Typhoon*, 77.

⁹⁰ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, ed. John Lyon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 229–31.

mistaken for a creed.’⁹¹ For Leavis, the way to undermine Forster’s critique was to point out that Conrad’s novels were not (at least, not the good ones) about the sea to begin with: his ‘great novels, if they deal with the sea, deal with it only incidentally’.⁹² Watt goes further in this direction when he writes that ‘Conrad’s own general attitude’ toward the sea is essentially boredom or hostility, while ‘the main focus is on the imperative power which the sea, like other forces of nature, exercises on the lives of men’.⁹³ For Leavis, sticking to such an argument is awkward, since the critic is forced to maintain that it is only when Conrad’s books are bad that they concern the sea in some crucial way (he is not speaking exclusively of the ‘shockingly bad magazine stuff’ to be found in compilations like *Within the Tides* published in 1915, but also of *Lord Jim*, which he deems ‘hardly one of the most considerable’ of Conrad’s works). These he classes, with Marryat’s novels, as ‘insidious temptations to complacent confusions of judgment and to critical indolence’.⁹⁴ Leavis prefers works like *The Shadow-Line*, or *Typhoon*, ironically a text that Conrad calls one of his ‘exclusively sea books’ along with *The Nigger*, *Mirror of the Sea*, and ‘Youth’.⁹⁵ How these texts, both set on ships, might be said to concern the sea in a way that is ‘only incidental’ is a question Leavis never addresses.

Since Leavis, two critical perspectives on Conrad’s use of the sea have become prominent. Both follow Leavis in treating the sea as if it is something that can be abstracted from the other elements of Conrad’s fiction. They are divided, however, on the question of whether Conrad’s sea is in keeping with a realist, or a less exacting romantic or impressionist aesthetic. Most critics tend to favour one or the other side of this debate, claiming either that the sea ought properly to be thought of as ‘the space of the degraded

⁹¹ E. M. Forster, ‘Joseph Conrad: A Note’, in *Abinger Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), 160. There is some confusion as to whether the original date of Forster’s essay, a review of the *Notes on Life and Letters*, was 1920 or 1921.

⁹² F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Penguin, 1962), 27.

⁹³ Watt, *Conrad*, 97, 96.

⁹⁴ Leavis, *Great Tradition*, 209, 10.

⁹⁵ *A Personal Record*, 13.

language of romance and daydream, of narrative commodity and the sheer distraction of “light literature”, or that it offers an avenue by which an aesthetics of labour and the material conditions of the modern world may seep into fictional forms that had traditionally sought to keep them out.⁹⁶ Berthoud and Frederic Jameson have defined the poles of the argument. In certain ways, both recognise that the sea does more than one thing in Conrad’s texts. Jameson opines that ‘the sea is both a strategy of containment and a place of real business’, and Berthoud thinks that ‘technical’ and ‘symbolic’ ways of reading the sea ‘are not merely antagonists; they can be regarded as entering into a kind of dialogue with each other’.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, both ultimately privilege one interpretation over the other: Jameson writes of the overriding ‘impulse of Conrad’s sentences to transform [...] realities into impressions’, while Berthoud simply notes that ‘to develop this suggestion [of a dialogic reading] would not be appropriate here’, and refers the reader to Bakhtin. Of course, Berthoud is writing primarily to correct Jameson’s post-Marxist approach, by insisting that ‘the sea does not serve to block “history” out but on the contrary is the means by which it is let in’.⁹⁸ In order to make this point, Berthoud notes ways in which Conrad’s texts, *The Nigger* in particular, incorporate the realities of seafaring. Singleton, who, we recall, ‘steered with care’ (*NN*, 55), need not be thought of as symbolic, we are told, since the phrase ‘carries an unrhetorical precision of reference’: ‘to steer a sailing ship in a high following wind requires concentration and courage, for as the ship dips forward in response to an overtaking wave, it will start a yaw (or swing) which, if not instantly corrected, will go out of control, turn the ship broadside, and expose it once again to the full weight of wind and water’.⁹⁹ Berthoud recalls our attention to

⁹⁶ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 213.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 210; Jacques Berthoud, ed., ‘Conrad and the Sea’, introduction to Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), xxv.

⁹⁸ Berthoud, ‘Conrad and Sea’, ix.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

Conrad's apparent admiration for Cooper's Long Tom Coffin, the embodiment of seafaring acumen from *The Pilot* (1825), and the perennial example of the centrality of know-how to the genre. The trick of discovering how accurate a text is to the realities of seafaring is common in the criticism of sea writing. Indeed, it gives crucial attention to the heroism of the proletariat. With Long Tom in mind, Margaret Cohen has dubbed this form the 'romance of practice'.¹⁰⁰ However, the difficulty with this approach, at least in this case, is that it attempts to save a certain kind of sea fiction at the expense of attentiveness to Conrad's fiction in particular. The elaboration required to transform Singleton's emblematic moment of assiduity into something unrhetorical is, of course, precisely what Conrad does not give us. Nor is the materialism of this kind of criticism a sure way of keeping romance out. As Cohen's phrase suggests, it may simply provide a new form for the same fictional patterns. Finally, then, Berthoud's approach does not do enough to distinguish Conrad's writing about the sea from that of his predecessors.

This is unfortunate, since Conrad's debt to the genre arguably created by Cooper is Jameson's jumping-off point.¹⁰¹ His strategy is to put pressure on Leavis's claim that *Lord Jim* ought to be divided at its midpoint, the fault-line where 'two narrative paradigms' meet: realism and romance. While the presence of 'mass culture' is most strongly felt after the 'break', in the Patusan episode, it is Jameson's claim that the distancing effects of romance also inform the style of the earlier episodes at sea, by way of what he calls 'the impressionistic strategy of modernism whose function is to derealize the content and make it available for consumption'.¹⁰² The sea contains or brackets off the ship as a world unto itself, he argues, and proves to be part of an ideologically conservative strategy, redolent of the economic imperative to circumvent the fundamentally unaesthetic qualities of

¹⁰⁰ Cohen, 'Traveling Genres', 493.

¹⁰¹ See Luis Iglesias, 'The "keen-eyed critic of the ocean": James Fenimore Cooper's Invention of the Sea Novel', *James Fenimore Cooper Society Miscellaneous Papers* 23 (2006): 1-7, <http://external.oneonta.edu/cooper/articles/ala/2006ala-iglesias.html>.

¹⁰² Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 207, 214.

labour, in order to fit them for the literary marketplace: ‘The paradox lies in the relationship between the peculiarly unpleasant raw materials of the sea—not only that of isolation, sexual privation, and the like—and the daydreaming fantasies of the mass public, for whom such “diversions” are destined.’ The sea participates in a strategy that allows Conrad to displace the ‘unwanted realities’ of material production onto a narrative that finally and unproblematically is told in terms of the ‘feudal’ values of honour and courage; material relations are recast as moral ones.¹⁰³ Jameson’s analysis is forceful and perceptive, though he risks, as Marxist accounts perhaps often do, importing his own totalising ideology as a substitute for Conrad’s. Eloise Knapp Hay summarises the problem:

Even in Conrad’s idealization of shipboard life (which one would think has something to do with earning one’s bread), Jameson finds Conrad escaping into a fantasy world, divorced from material reality. [...] Jameson seems, however, to posit a Utopia of his own, a Marxist Utopia where physically satisfied lives flourish without illusions concerning non-physical needs.¹⁰⁴

But beyond that, Jim is presented early on as a reader of the sort of romance he hopes to live out and, indeed, from the novel’s opening pages, *Lord Jim* itself is concerned with the way in which material conditions and immaterial ones determine each other. Conrad does not seek to disguise the fraught connection between physical and psychological life: it is the central subject of his novel. The sea, precisely because it slips so readily between these categories, encourages the reader to measure their influence upon each other. To claim, as Conrad does, that ‘we are the creatures of our light literature’ is not to dispel suspicion, but to introduce it (*Chance*, 215). Jameson’s ideas depend upon the notion that the sea institutes a division between landed life and its nautical counterpart, ‘a border and a decorative limit’, yet very often, as I have claimed throughout this thesis, the sea appears

¹⁰³ Ibid., 217.

¹⁰⁴ Eloise Knapp Hay, ‘*Nostramo*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 96.

to blur boundaries rather than reinforce them.¹⁰⁵ Coming upon Jim, whom he had left at De Jongh to work, Marlow sees him ‘standing on the quay; the water of the roadstead and the sea in the offing made one smooth ascending plane, and the outermost ships at anchor seemed to ride motionless in the sky’ (*LJ*, 145). Similarly, in the eyes of the narrator in *Heart of Darkness*, ‘the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint’, while ‘a haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness’ (103). Descriptions like this support Marlow’s observation that ‘this also [...] has been one of the dark places of the earth’ (105), and offer a visual corroboration of the narrator’s claim that ‘between us there was [...] the bond of the sea’: ‘Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation, it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other’s yarns—and even convictions’ (103). The *OED* reminds us that the word *convict* can mean ‘To overcome, vanquish, conquer’, although it is also related by its Latin root *convinc-ĕre* to the style of Marlow’s yarn, which seeks to convince at the same time as it convicts.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps, besides carrying ships from one place to another, the sea also transports ideas, convictions that bridge the gaps between one mind and another, at least in part by convicting all equally.¹⁰⁷

Jameson’s conviction is unconvincing not least because Conrad anticipated the main terms of its criticism. On 14 July 1923, Conrad wrote to Curle to object to the depiction of his work in a new article. He took particular issue with Curle’s attitude to his writing about the sea, which he had expressed succinctly a few years earlier in *Joseph Conrad: A Study* (1914). Curle claimed that Conrad’s characters could only fully be understood by appreciating the ‘vague and secret murmur’ of their romantic aspect. ‘The sea’, he explained, ‘has been the most powerful, the most urgent influence in Conrad’s life.

¹⁰⁵ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 210.

¹⁰⁶ *OED*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. ‘convict, v.’, sense 7.

¹⁰⁷ Compare Marlow’s claim that ‘all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz’. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 154.

It has tinged his art with the brilliance, with the sombre glory of its moods, it has fired his imagination with its fickle repose and mighty upheavals. And Conrad's chief faith in humanity seems to have arisen from his contact with the sea.'¹⁰⁸ Conrad had hoped that Curle's broad account of his life would offer 'an opportunity for me to get freed from that infernal tale of ships [...] After all, I may have been a seaman, but I am a writer of prose. Indeed, the nature of my writing runs the risk of being obscured by the nature of my material'. Conrad goes on: 'Of course, there are a good many seamen in a good many of my books. That doesn't make them sea stories, any more than the existence of de Barral in "Chance" (and he occupies as much space as Captain Anthony) makes that novel a story about the financial world. I do wish that all those ships of mine were given a rest.'¹⁰⁹ Conrad, however, never stopped writing about the sea—his last, unfinished novel *Suspense*, published posthumously in 1925, takes place largely in the Mediterranean during the Napoleonic Wars. And, in spite of his wish to divide his own work from the kind of popular sea writing most often written by retired captains, he at times cautiously allowed that the sea did have a purpose in his writing: 'Undue prominence has been given to it [in Curle's book] since, and yet you know yourself very well that in the body of my work barely one-tenth is what may be called sea stuff, and even of that, the bulk, that is "Nigger" and "Mirror", has a very special purpose which I emphasise myself in my Prefaces'.¹¹⁰ The following section will consider the 'special purpose' he alludes to here.

Favourable to reflection

In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* Conrad attempted to practice the impressionist techniques he went on to recommend in his preface. Though this novel is not as experimental as

¹⁰⁸ Richard Curle, *Joseph Conrad: A Study* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1914), 110, 20.

¹⁰⁹ Joseph Conrad to Richard Curle, 14 July 1923, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 8:130.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Nostramo or *The Secret Agent*, the hallmarks of impressionist style, as described by Conrad and later by Ford, are in evidence: dialogue is generally spare, and focalisation shifts unpredictably. Above all, the role of the senses is emphasised. Sight is particularly important. The novel begins when the chief mate, Mr Baker, steps ‘in one stride out of his lighted cabin into the darkness of the quarter-deck’, a motion that is plotted according to visual and spatial difference equally (*NN*, 1). As the senses come to predominate, the world of the *Narcissus* becomes paradoxically less substantial. At first, the crew wonder, of the malingering James Wait, ‘was he a reality—or was he a sham’ (22). Soon, however, a more general distrust of appearances begins to spread. Floating on ‘the black disc of the sea’, ‘the ship appeared pure like a vision of ideal beauty [...] And nothing in her was real, nothing was distinct and solid’ (89). From these insubstantial materials Conrad tries, nevertheless, to conjure solidarity, the other crucial component of his thinking about the function of impressionist narrative. For solidarity, critics usually turn to the novel’s final pages, where the narrator asks, ‘haven’t we, together and upon the immortal sea, wrung out a meaning from our sinful lives?’ (*NN*, 107). Gail Fraser points to ‘the deliberate juxtaposition of committed action [...] with narcissistic reflection’, which ‘underlines the effective worth of group responsibility’.¹¹¹ This point of view, as I have suggested, is fundamentally inconsistent with Conrad’s claim in the preface that reflection, a posture assumed within impressionism’s idealist framework, can itself provide the grounds for solidarity. Conrad was cognisant of the risks inherent in his chosen style, and criticised Stephen Crane for his failure to attend to them in ‘The Open Boat’, published in the same year as Conrad’s novel. In *The Nigger*, Conrad means to demonstrate that solidarity can occur on other terms. The narrator may make claims such as, ‘we didn’t at the time see

¹¹¹ Gail Fraser, introduction to Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, ed. J. H. Stape and Allan H. Simmons (London: Penguin, 2007), xv.

anything' (*NN*, 25), but through the sea, which Conrad called 'a sheet of water like plate-glass, reflecting', Singleton sees James Wait.¹¹²

After reading *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Arnold Bennett found himself moved 'to enthusiasm' by the new style Conrad had developed. He wrote to H. G. Wells on 8 December 1897 to say that, unlike Kipling, Conrad was an artist: 'Kipling doesn't know what art is—I mean the art of words; *il ne se préoccupe que de la chose racontée* [He occupies himself with nothing but what is to be told]'. Words themselves were, however, exactly what mattered to Bennett about Conrad: 'Where did the man pick up that style, & that *synthetic* way of gathering up a general impression & flinging it at you?'.¹¹³ It seemed at the time that Conrad could have learned it from Stephen Crane, who had made his literary reputation with *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). While it is not certain that he read any of Crane's work until after *The Nigger* was published, some early reviewers noted certain similarities between Crane's and Conrad's methods.¹¹⁴ Above all, Conrad's opinions of Crane prove an important foil for Conrad's own opinions of impressionism: Conrad believes that Crane fails because he deploys impressionism solely as a set of visual practices. However, his writing about Crane suggests a more promising template for his own version of impressionism, one that is inseparable from Conradian solidarity.

Near the end of the year, W. L. Courtney scrambled to describe Conrad's taxing new aesthetic in his review for the *Daily Telegraph*. He explains, 'I believe that some excellent persons have objected to Captain Marryat's stories of the sea, because his heroes and his heroines use somewhat rough and explicit language, and swear a good deal. Captain Marryat's realism, however, is not a patch upon Mr. Joseph Conrad's for various

¹¹² Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea: Memories and Impressions* (London: Methuen, 1935), 114.

¹¹³ Arnold Bennett to H. G. Wells, 8 December 1897, in Sherry, *Conrad: Critical Heritage*, 82.

¹¹⁴ Batchelor suggests that Conrad read *The Red Badge of Courage* 'probably shortly after he had finished *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*'. *Life of Conrad*, 72–73.

reasons'.¹¹⁵ Conrad is, Courtney believes, uncompromising: 'A man who is going to delineate an incident, a scene, or the cruise of a merchantship as it actually occurs, will not care for his story so much as for his technique'. He is, however, not quite a realist in the traditional sense; Courtney first calls Conrad a 'naturalist', but reflects approvingly on the 'picturesque' way in which he 'paints' the sea, showing himself to be 'aware of all its changing aspects and beautiful metamorphoses'. He observes, as most reviewers did, that Conrad's method of telling predominates, whilst the events of the story are given only minimal attention. Another notice in the *Daily Mail*, printed the day before, 'regrets' for comparable reasons that 'the tale is no tale, but merely an account of the uneventful voyage of the *Narcissus*'—an assessment Conrad purported to find laughable.¹¹⁶ While the crew of the *Narcissus* appear to Courtney to be 'vivid and lifelike', overall he finds that the novella gives 'a picture of indecision and vagueness'. Finally, the best he can do is compare Conrad to Crane. 'Everyone will remember what a singular effect Mr. Stephen Crane produced some little time ago by his *Red Badge of Courage*', he writes,

Mr. Joseph Conrad has chosen Mr. Stephen Crane for his example, and has determined to do for the sea and the sailor what his predecessor had done for war and warriors. The style, though a good deal better than Mr. Crane's, has the same jerky and spasmodic quality; while a spirit of faithful and minute description—even to the verge of the wearisome—is common to both.¹¹⁷

Conrad and Crane met in October 1897. Conrad wrote to Garnett beforehand to say, 'I *do* admire him. I shan't have to pretend'.¹¹⁸ Indeed, years later Conrad would connect what he had attempted in *The Nigger* to Crane's method in *Red Badge*: 'Stephen Crane dealt in his book with the psychology of the mass – the army; while I – in mine –

¹¹⁵ W. L. Courtney, review of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, by Joseph Conrad, *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 1897, 4, in Sherry, *Conrad: Critical Heritage*, 85–88.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83–84; Conrad to Cunninghame Graham, 6 December 1897, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, vol. 1, 1861–1897 (1983), ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, 418.

¹¹⁷ W. L. Courtney, review of *The Nigger*, in Sherry, *Conrad: Critical Heritage*, 86.

¹¹⁸ Joseph Conrad to Edward Garnett, 14 October 1897, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 1:396.

had been dealing with the same subject on a much smaller scale and in more specialized conditions – the crew of a merchant ship'.¹¹⁹ Crane had, however, used the techniques of impressionism on a smaller scale still, and in comparably specialised conditions. The year the pair met began for Crane in a distinctly Conradian fashion. In January, the same month that Conrad finished his book, the *Commodore*, on which Crane had booked a passage to Cuba where he intended to report on the Spanish-American war, went down off the coast of Florida. Crane's first account of the sinking appeared in the *New York Press* on 7 January, only a few days after the wreck. The ship had sunk in sight of the lighthouse of Mosquito Inlet, which 'stuck up above the horizon like the point of a pin', and the four men (including Crane) who escaped in the ship's dinghy make it there in the space of two sentences:

The history of life in an open boat for thirty hours would no doubt be very instructive for the young, but none is to be told here now. For my part I would prefer to tell the story at once, because from it would shine the splendid manhood of Captain Edward Murphy and of William Higgins, the oiler, but let it suffice at this time to say that when we were swamped in the surf and making the best of our way toward the shore the captain gave orders amid the wildness of the breakers as clearly as if he had been on the quarterdeck of a battleship.¹²⁰

Crane worked for a month to write the account, not 'to be told here now', developing in detail the hours he omits, and in March he agreed that 'The Open Boat' should appear in *Scribner's Magazine*, which it did in June.

Conrad wrote to Crane on 1 December 1897, shortly after the story appeared in book form, with effusive praise:

I am envious of you—horribly. Confound you—you fill the blamed landscape—you—by all the devils—fill the sea-scape. The boat thing is immensely interesting. I don't use the word in the common sense. It is fundamentally interesting to me.

¹¹⁹ Joseph Conrad, preface to Thomas Beer, *Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters* (London: Heinemann, 1924), 3, quoted in Batchelor, *Life of Conrad*, 73.

¹²⁰ Stephen Crane, 'Stephen Crane's Own Story', in *Prose and Poetry* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States; Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1984), 883–84.

Your temperament makes old things new and new things amazing. I want to swear at you, to bless you—perhaps to shoot you—but I prefer to be your friend.

You are an everlasting surprise to one. You shock—and the next moment you give the perfect artistic satisfaction. Your method is fascinating. You are a complete impressionist. The illusions of life come out of your hand without a flaw. It is not life—which nobody wants—it is art—art for which everyone—the abject and the great hanker—mostly without knowing it'.¹²¹

In private, however, his opinions were less purely positive. He wrote to Garnett with certain criticisms four days after his letter to Crane:

The two stories are excellent. Of course *A Man and Some Others* is the best of the two but the boat thing interested me more. His eye is very individual and his expression satisfies me artistically. He certainly is *the* impressionist and his temperament is curiously unique. His thought is concise, connected, never very deep—yet often startling. He is *the only* impressionist and *only* an impressionist. Why is he not immensely popular? With his strength, with his rapidity of action, with that amazing faculty of vision—why is he not? [...] I could not explain why he disappoints me—why my enthusiasm withers as soon as I close the book.¹²²

While Conrad makes some claim for the similarity of Crane's and his own method, when Crane turned to a Conradian subject the result was a disappointment.¹²³ Something about his 'impressionism' did not satisfy Conrad, who later wrote to Cunninghame Graham, whom he had also met that year, to say that Crane 'sees the outside of many things and the inside of some'—a sniffy critique, but a telling one.¹²⁴ As Conrad explains in the preface to *The Nigger*, 'a moment of vision' is also a moment of insight insofar as art can make it a shared experience (148). When Conrad writes that Crane is '*only* an impressionist', he means that Crane's writing, though visually brilliant, does not test the saving implications of his own technique. It offers a vivid glimpse of a seascape and a landscape, but no 'glimpse of truth' ('Preface', 147)—it is 'entranced by the sight of distant goals' and no more, while Conrad hopes to create an 'effect [that] endures forever' (148, 145). This

¹²¹ Joseph Conrad to Stephen Crane, 1 December 1897, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 1:415.

¹²² Joseph Conrad to Edward Garnett, 5 December 1897, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 1:416.

¹²³ Conrad also mentions Crane's book in *A Personal Record*, where he compares its author to Billie, 'one of the men in his "Open Boat"', who dies before reaching the shore (95).

¹²⁴ Joseph Conrad to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 7 January 1898, in *Collected Letters of Conrad*, 2:4.

makes Conrad sound more like a priest than a writer of prose; in fact his text veers toward the supernatural, as I shall discuss. Hieratic as they may seem, Conrad's faith in his own techniques is in earnest. His adherence to the claims put forward in his preface explains his dissatisfaction with Crane's text, and the special purpose to which he put the sea in his own.

The term Impressionism had from the beginning been associated with depictions of the sea. It was given currency by Louis Leroy in a sneering review of an 1874 exhibition at the Salon des Indépendents. This included Claude Monet's *Impression, soleil levant* ('Impression, Sunrise') from 1872, which shows the sun low over a harbour, with barely visible ships in the background and a small open boat containing two figures, which are more clearly defined, progressing toward the viewer. Leroy was of the opinion that 'wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape'.¹²⁵ No horizon line is visible, and the painting focuses on how coloured light smoothes the separation between the water and the sky, which both take on the tint of the rising sun.

Crane employs similar visual techniques in 'The Open Boat', concentrating the reader's eye on planes of unbroken colour. The crew have had to focus intently on the sea in order to stop the boat from capsizing, and consequently 'none of them knew the color of the sky'.¹²⁶ They do, however, observe minute changes in the hue of the sea. 'The sun swung steadily up the sky', Crane writes, 'and they knew it was broad day because the color of the sea changed from slate to emerald-green, streaked with amber lights, and the foam was like tumbling snow', a palette Monet would have understood (OB, 124). The text tries to reproduce the effect on the crew's senses as the horizon becomes gradually more definite. Though they do not observe the sunrise, they do notice when 'slowly the

¹²⁵ 'The Exhibition of the Impressionists', *Le Charivari*, 25 April 1874, in John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, 4th rev. ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973), 323.

¹²⁶ Stephen Crane, 'The Open Boat', in *The Red Badge of Courage and Other Stories*, ed. Anthony Mellors and Fiona Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 123.

land arose from the sea. From a black line it became a line of black and a line of white, trees and sand' (129). A typically impressionist confusion over what exactly can be seen on shore—a rescue station or a hotel, a windmill or a lighthouse, a man waving or a man signalling—occupies the narrative until the end.¹²⁷ Crane found his eye drawn back to a single point of connection between the magazine piece and 'The Open Boat': 'At the top of another wave, the correspondent did as he was bid, and this time his eyes chanced on a small still thing on the edge of the swaying horizon. It was precisely like the point of a pin. It took an anxious eye to find a lighthouse so tiny' (128). In another page, the lighthouse has grown slightly: 'It had now almost assumed color, and appeared like a little gray shadow on the sky. The man at the oars could not be prevented from turning his head rather often to try for a glimpse of this little gray shadow' (128).

Conrad, like Crane, finds himself attracted to horizons, which function in his novels as emblems of isolation. Allon White confirms that Conrad's 'stories are full of boundaries, limits and threshold which, like horizons, recede as one approaches'.¹²⁸ The horizon occasionally appears as a form of suggestive decoration, as in 'Youth', where Marlow recalls 'nights and days of calm when we pulled, we pulled, and the boat seemed to stand still, as if bewitched within the circle of the sea horizon' (95). Or in *Outcast of the Islands*, where Willems is confronted with 'a terrible vision of shadowless horizons where the blue sky and the blue sea met; the circular and blazing emptiness where a dead tree and a dead man drifted together, endlessly, up and down, upon the brilliant undulations of the straits'.¹²⁹ In *Chance*, Powell notices that 'the solitude of the sea intensifies the thoughts and the facts of one's experience which seems to lie at the very centre of the world, as the ship which carries one always remains the centre figure of the round horizon' (223).

¹²⁷ See Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism*, 16.

¹²⁸ White, *Uses of Obscurity*, 111.

¹²⁹ Conrad, *Outcast*, 253.

Conrad's horizons, unlike Crane's, are frequently suggestive of immobility and, by their circularity, the inescapably bounded nature of perception. Crane's horizon invites the gaze, just as the shore that it promises to reveal, and that rises from it, is the only goal of the shipwrecked crew. For all its mutability—it appears to sway, an effect of the boat's rocking motion—Crane's horizon is something to be 'scoured' and parsed by the captain. The shore gradually acquires 'a certain immovable quality': 'The shore was set before him like a bit of scenery on a stage, and he looked at it and understood with his eyes each detail of it' (OB, 144). Crane's subjectivist postures are finally relinquished, then, in favour of the familiar pattern of a voyage narrative, where departure and landfall correspond to a dawning clarity of understanding, and the acquisition of new knowledge. So, when Crane writes that 'it would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas', the reader is not perhaps inclined to agree. Indeed, Crane has already described it. He promised in 'Stephen Crane's Own Story' (1897) that from the narrative of his salvation should 'shine the splendid manhood of Captain Edward Murphy and of William Higgins, the oiler', and here they are: 'they were a captain, an oiler, a cook, and a correspondent, and they were friends'.¹³⁰ If Monet's 'Impression, Sunrise' suggests an impenetrable, seamless sensory surface, Crane finally manages what Tennyson's Ulysses only proposes to do: he gets 'beyond the sunset'.¹³¹ The sea in 'The Open Boat' serves primarily to pave a brightly coloured path toward the advancing horizon. Another dawning sees 'a new light' to accompany the lighthouse's lamp on 'the northern horizon', 'a small bluish gleam on the edge of the waters' (136).

The horizon in Conrad's novel, by contrast, encroaches as the crew's disorientation increases. When the ship leaves port, the narrator notices that 'a slight haze blurred the

¹³⁰ Crane, 'Stephen Crane's Own Story', 883–84

¹³¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Ulysses', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, vol. 1, p. 619, line 60. For a discussion of horizons to which I am indebted, see Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 285–312. She mentions 'Ulysses' in a different connection on page 287.

horizon' (*NN*, 16). As the novel moves on, this haziness begins to envelop the crew. Rounding the Cape, huddled against the weather-rail, the men appear indistinctly silhouetted 'above the grey line of a clouded horizon in motionless attitudes' (30). Once uncertainty has reached its apex, 'The horizon seemed to have come on all sides within arm's length of the ship' (34). Wait, who at first feigns illness (though he is healthy), and then pretends to be healthy (though he is ill) is at the heart of this darkness. The crew's increasing sense of isolation is rooted in Wait's inscrutability; that they should be incapable of discerning whether he is healthy or sick generates larger questions about the possibility of knowing anything apart from one's own thoughts. When he first emerges from the darkness for roll-call, his body comes into the light though 'the face was indistinguishable' (*NN*, 10). Likewise, his name is immediately mistaken by Baker for a command, 'Wait!'. What begins as a problem specific to Wait—'You couldn't see that there was anything wrong with him: a nigger does not show' (27)—becomes a more general one. This is true in the broadest possible sense, as the narrator begins to feel, in accord with Jimmy's unknowability, that 'the problem of life seemed too voluminous for the narrow limits of human speech, and by common consent it was abandoned to the great sea' (*NN*, 85), as well as in a narrow practical one. Following a cataclysmic gale, the *Narcissus* is becalmed. With Singleton to guide them, the crew come to understand that the ship is cursed by Wait's presence—the ship's immobility reproducing the imperative of Wait's name.

The supernatural element of the plot can be quickly explained. Singleton's seaman's superstition is as follows:

He said:—"You can't help him; die he must." He made another pause. His moustache and beard stirred. He chewed words, mumbled behind tangled white hairs; incomprehensible and exciting, like an oracle behind a veil. . . .—"Stop ashore—sick.—Instead—bringing all this head wind. Afraid. The sea will have her own.—Die in sight of land. Always so. They know it—long passage—more days,

more dollars.—You keep quiet.—What do you want? Can't help him.” He seemed to wake up from a dream. “You can't help yourselves,” he said austere-ly. “Skipper's no fool.” (*NN*, 80)

And, indeed, James Wait dies in sight of land, as promised. Jimmy, wrapped in a white blanket, is hoisted onto planks to be slid into the sea. He lingers on the plank, however, caught by a protruding nail, and seems to refuse to go. Finally, ‘the grey package started reluctantly to whizz off the lifted planks all at once’, a grudging departure though it recalls the ‘whizz’ of the souls that ‘from their bodies fly’, past the head of the Ancient Mariner.¹³² The ship seems to respond, ‘as if relieved of an unfair burden’, and a breeze sets the sails flapping (*NN*, 99).¹³³ Singleton also responds: ‘I knowed it—he's gone, and here it comes’ (99). The murmur of the sea replicates the ‘faint humming noise’ of the crew's disquiet at Wait's refusal to leave the ship, just as their collective sigh is taken up by the wind; the connection between them is apparent not just to the reader, but to the crew itself, of which the narrator is a member.

It is important to recognise that the narrative does nothing to discourage the reader's belief in the truth of the curse. It is the starting point for what Cedric Watts calls a covert plot.¹³⁴ It offers, that is, a parallel series of causes that possess explanatory powers equal to the more obvious ones offered by the narrative. In *The Nigger*, it may be a coincidence that the calm breaks at the moment Jimmy plunges overboard, or it may be because, as Singleton says, ‘the sea will have its own’—there is no way, given the evidence presented in the novel itself, to decide between them. What Watts does not note is the significance of the efficacy of the superstition for Singleton and, more importantly,

¹³² Coleridge, *Rime*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 16, bk 1, p. 389, lines 220–23. The marginal note to this stanza, ‘Life-in-Death begins her work on the ancient Mariner’, is both a good description of Wait's condition, and something like the realisation Singleton finally comes to. See Coleridge, *Rime*, 389, and my discussion, page 113.

¹³³ Cedric Watts traces the punning significance of James Wait's surname, which serves frequently to emphasise his burdensome nature. *The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984), 64–66.

¹³⁴ See *ibid.*

the crew. The presence of this covert plot, Singleton's seamanly superstition, is I think necessary to Conrad's novel, in light of the preface, because it suggests the permeability of Wait's enigmatic exterior. It is grounds for Conradian solidarity.

Conrad's novel bears certain similarities to the fable of Narcissus as Ovid relates it. The young man, after peering into the fountain where he sees his reflection, 'fell in love with an empty hope, / a shadow mistaken for substance'. 'Stretched on the grass', Ovid writes, 'he saw twin stars, his own two eyes'.¹³⁵ By the time he came to write *The Nigger*, Conrad could have read Ovid in a variety of translations. Zdzislaw Najder, however, suggests that Conrad's Latin would have been 'tolerably good' when he left school, and J. H. Stape conjectures that Conrad would have read the *Metamorphoses* as a boy.¹³⁶ Regardless, Conrad draws on the central paradox generated by the story, which is that a rift in a personality is the precondition for perfect self-love and self-identification: 'My wealth has made me a pauper. Oh, how I wish that I and my body could now be parted!'.¹³⁷ Few characters in Conrad's novel gain knowledge of themselves—the concept that there is a self to have knowledge of is itself doubtful—but Singleton does, a development habitually ignored by commentators and critics, and he does so by way of profound identification with Wait, his mirror double.

Repeatedly, the novel returns to the image of the *Narcissus* floating on a reflective sea. The ship departs into 'the measureless expanse of smooth water', which 'lay sparkling like a floor of jewels, and as empty as the sky' (*NN*, 16), and after night falls the stars appear above, and are reflected beneath the hull: 'they glittered, as if alive above the sea; they surrounded the running ship on all sides; more intense than the eyes of a staring

¹³⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), 112–13. While Raeburn translates the Latin 'corpus putat esse, quod unda est' as 'a shadow mistaken for substance', *unda* can mean water as well as shadows, as in the undulant motion of the waves. This seems apposite to Conrad's frequent pairing of shadows and waves.

¹³⁶ Zdzislaw Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, trans. Halina Najder (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), 46; J. H. Stape, *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad* (London: Random House, 2007), 19.

¹³⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 115.

crowd, and as inscrutable as the souls of men' (17). The mirroring sea has a dual symbolic function. More obviously its superficiality reflects the growing egoism of the crew, which arises in response to James Wait's opacity. The crew's '[t]wenty-six pairs of eyes' (*NN*, 16), straining to catch at the truth of Wait's situation, are reflected in the sea; the eye—'tender eyes' (12), 'restless eyes' (13), 'heavy eyes' (21), and so on—functions as a mobile and various synecdoche, changing to reflect the crew's character and mood. Donkin has 'little beady eyes' (7), while Jimmy's 'appeared rather startlingly prominent' (21). The hands as a group look with 'exasperated eyes', asking 'Was he a reality—or was he a sham', and vacillating 'between pity and mistrust', while 'he [Wait] shook before our eyes' (22). 'He would not let doubt die', the narrator says of Wait, 'he overshadowed the ship' (29).

The sea, then, acts as a model for sceptical and uncertain vision. Wait engages 'the latent egoism of tenderness to suffering' in the crew (*NN*, 85), something similar to what Freud calls 'the libidinal correlative to the egoism of the self-preservation instinct' in 'On Narcissism' (1914), whereby Jimmy's survival is made metaphorically to stand for the crew's.¹³⁸ Yet, the symbolic importance given to the sea implies a context of inevitability, because Jimmy's inscrutability, like the sea's, forces the crew's gaze back upon itself. Narcissism can be the only motive, since no member of the crew can know whether their ministrations have any effect, or even whether Jimmy suffers at all. Belfast, who appears 'for ever on the verge of assault or the verge of tears' as a consequence of the moral uncertainty Jimmy has introduced onto the ship, steals the officers' Sunday fruit pie from the galley as an offering to the invalid. Wait shows no gratitude: 'Did I ask you to bone the dratted thing? Blow your blamed pie.' 'It has made me worse', he says, and there is no way to know if he is telling the truth (*NN*, 23–24). When the ship is blown over in a gale,

¹³⁸ Freud, 'On the Introduction of Narcissism', in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 3.

the crew risk their lives to break Jimmy out of his cabin. Of course, Jimmy is unmoved, and reproaches the crew ‘for their carelessness in letting him run such risks: “Now, after I got myself out from there,” he breathed out weakly. “There” was his cabin. And he had got himself out. We had nothing to do with it apparently!’ (44). Still, they continue tending him, ‘because we could not help it’, because ‘it had become a personal matter between us and the sea’ (44). The sea also suggests the right way to look at Jimmy: ‘the stars, coming out, gleamed over an inky sea that, speckled with foam, flashed back at them the evanescent and pale light of a dazzling whiteness born from the black turmoil’ (47).

Singleton’s eyes, gazing ‘fixedly from behind the glitter of black-rimmed glasses’ (*NN*, 3), are particularly suited to looking at Jimmy and at the sea, which appears alternately to glitter (88, 96, 100), and to take the form of a ‘black disc’ (89). Wait and Singleton, Conrad insists, are symbolic opposites. While Wait malingers, Singleton works tirelessly; while Singleton faces the light, Wait is identified (not least, of course, by the colour of his skin) with shadows. And yet, Singleton understands Wait. He asks Jimmy what no one else has, ‘Are you dying?’, to which Jimmy replies, ‘Why? Can’t you see I am?’ (*NN*, 26). For the crew, this settles nothing, though for Singleton it is enough. After the dinner-tins have been stowed, Wamibo and one of the Scandinavians go together to see whether Singleton has been convinced. When they ask whether he thinks Wait will die, Singleton replies, ‘Why, of course he will die’ (26). The reader has been told that until this voyage the thoughts of Singleton’s ‘lifetime could have been expressed in six words’, and he seems to think Jimmy’s life merits the same degree of loquacity (16).¹³⁹ The crew, momentarily soothed, are quick to realise that ‘after all Singleton’s answer meant nothing’ because they realise that everyone dies sooner or later. This is felt to be appalling, and represents the further dissolution of their ‘certitudes’, since they have discovered Singleton

¹³⁹ Levenson remarks, ‘we are not told which six’, but these seem like good candidates. *Genealogy of Modernism*, 3.

to be as impenetrable as Jimmy (*NN*, 26). The crew identifies them both as users of misleading language. ‘We began to hate him’, the narrator admits, expressing a passion hitherto reserved for Wait.

However, Singleton’s six words of prophecy are unequivocally realised. This acts as a kind of redemption for the crew. Conrad keeps the source of Singleton’s ‘completed wisdom’ obscure (*NN*, 84), but it emerges as the old sailor contemplates the sea. He takes his remark about Wait’s imminent death to heart, and imagines his own death and a burial at sea:

He looked upon the immortal sea with the awakened and groping perception of its heartless might; he saw it unchanged, black and foaming under the eternal scrutiny of the stars; he heard its impatient voice calling for him out of a pitiless vastness full of unrest, of turmoil, and of terror. He looked afar upon it, and he saw an immensity tormented and blind, moaning and furious, that claimed all the days of his tenacious life, and, when life was over, would claim the worn-out body of its slave.... (60–61)

The sea, figured as ‘a sheet of ground glass’ (*NN*, 63), or transforming the side of the cabin into ‘a wall of green glass’ (35), offers Singleton a way of reflecting on his own life in terms of another man’s fate. Speech often fails the crew of the *Narcissus*, above all, because Jimmy’s claims about his health are at once false and irrefutable (he is not ill when he says he is, and he is ill when he says he’s not). Conrad introduces this feature of his novel with the misunderstanding of Wait’s name, and thereafter experiments in various ways, by breaking up the speech of his sailors. Belfast makes a ‘blabbing noise’ in his sleep, ‘Ba—ba—ba—brrr—brr—ba—ba—ba’ (48), and Mr Baker has a persistent cough, ‘Ough! surely now ... Ough! ... confidence in us ... nothing more to do ... she must lay it out or go. Ough! Ough!’ (34–35), the onomatopoeia being just one letter short of a moral imperative. The speech of the crew caught in the storm is more conventionally interrupted: ‘Drowned—is he? ... No! In his cabin! ... Good Lord!’ (39). By contrast,

Singleton's speech is eminently effectual. His deep affinity with the sea, which is both superstitious and practical, together with his visionary speech, provide a way for character and reader to consider the meeting point of material and immaterial worlds. By his final hours, James Wait has become 'immaterial', the narrator says, unwilling or unable to move, 'as if distrustful of his own solidity' (85–86), recalling the crew's attempts to shift him from his cabin, handling him 'tenderly as though he had been made of glass' (45). And, when his corpse is tipped overboard, it simply vanishes. Charley is 'anxious to see Jimmy's last dive', but he leaps to the rail 'too late to see anything but the faint circle of a vanishing ripple' (99). Insubstantial as James Wait is in the end, his death gives Singleton's words substance. The reader is prepared to accept the presence of a kind of second sight thanks to Conrad's marine vocabulary, which he has used to imply a relationship between material and immaterial vision.

In an attempt to capture the way in which impressionism can be at once an intense expression of artistic interiority, and a technique for capturing reality, Ford develops a striking image that can be compared to the dynamics of mirroring evident in *The Nigger*:

Indeed, I suppose that Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass—through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you.¹⁴⁰

At first, what Ford means appears quite clear. Indeed, his emphasis reflects a concern with the pellucidity realist prose is traditionally thought to exhibit, where art aspires to the quality of a 'bright glass' that permits 'real life' to seem unmediated to the viewer or reader.¹⁴¹ George Eliot, as I have said, uses a similar image in *Adam Bede*, when she vows 'to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my

¹⁴⁰ Ford, 'On Impressionism', pt. 1, 174.

¹⁴¹ See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960). Abrams lists three 'mimetic theories', the last of which 'comprises such things as shadows, images in water and mirrors, and the fine arts' (8).

mind' (see above, page 109).¹⁴² And Conrad offers a comparable figure in a letter to Sir Hugh Clifford: 'Things "as they are" exist in words; therefore words should be handled with care lest the picture, the image of truth abiding in facts, should become distorted—or blurred'.¹⁴³ Glossing Conrad's remarks requires some care. Like Ford, he is not convinced that 'facts' are sufficient; instead, the 'image of truth' resides somewhere within appearances. This is consistent with the view Conrad expresses in the preface that the artist's task should be to 'render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth' (145). 'It is', as Ford says, 'the duty of the poet to reflect his own day as it appears to him, as it has impressed itself upon him'.¹⁴⁴ This endeavour balances the solipsistic implications of inviolate interiority by claiming that the writer may successfully engender his own impressions in the minds of his readers. This is why Conrad insists upon the need for an undistorted image, because 'words, groups of words, words standing alone, are symbols of life, have the power in their sound or in their aspect to present the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers'.¹⁴⁵ One 'temperament' in this way impresses itself upon others, which Conrad views as the basis for solidarity, and which makes a space for a common sense of value by the careful arrangement of the clashing surfaces registered by the senses. The limpid view offered by prose fiction in Ford's figuration is, for this reason, shadowed by a temperament other than the reader's—a second face, the face of the artist, is reflected in a glass that appears at first to be entirely transparent. In Conrad's text, it is above all the mirror of the sea itself that enables Wait to be seen accurately, both in Singleton's eyes, and in terms of his relation to the world he inhabits. It is a connection that is at once natural and supernatural, and these

¹⁴² Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 5.

¹⁴³ Joseph Conrad to Hugh Clifford, 9 October 1899, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Frederick R. Karl, vol. 2, *1898-1902*, eds. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 200.

¹⁴⁴ Ford Madox Hueffer, quoted in Levenson, *Genealogy of Modernism*, 115.

¹⁴⁵ Conrad to Clifford, 9 October 1899, 200.

two alternatives are only vaguely distinguished, hosted as they are by the same reflecting medium. It is perhaps an indication of the increasingly doubtful understanding of art's representational powers that, whereas Tennyson uses mirrored shadows to suggest the possible insufficiency of representation in 'The Lady of Shalott' (1842), Conrad turns to just this set of metaphors for solace.¹⁴⁶ Conrad's contrivance of 'Marlow' in *Lord Jim* makes the presence of such complex reflection easier to detect, since he is at once narrating Jim's story and perceiving first-hand.¹⁴⁷ Charlie Marlow is said to like 'sea-life because on the whole it is favourable to reflection' (*Chance*, 22).

¹⁴⁶ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, vol. 1, p. 391, line 71.

¹⁴⁷ The most literal exponent of this view is Cohen. *Novel and Sea*, 208–13.

Coda: The Murmur of *The Waves*

The shape of *The Waves* (1931) seemed as new to Virginia Woolf as it did to her first readers; she wrote in her diary on 11 October 1929: ‘never, in my life, did I attack such a vague yet elaborate design; whenever I make a mark I have to think of its relation to a dozen others’.¹ In a letter to Ethel Smyth in August 1930, however, Woolf put her feelings about what set *The Waves* apart in terms that anyone could grasp.

What question in particular was it about the Waves that delicacy forbade? I think—but what’s the use of thinking when I must correct Hazlitt and cant [*sic*] call an idea my own—they flaunt and fly like the shadows over the downs [...] I think then that my difficulty is that I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot. Does this convey anything? And thus though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction and I am casting about all the time for rope to throw to the reader.²

A number of readers have wished for the same thing. Early reviews drew attention to the novel’s ‘difficulty’.³ After reading *The Waves*, Louis Kronenberger came to believe that Woolf’s ‘break with traditional fiction of the Arnold Bennett school, a break due equally to her temperament and her talent, came early; and with each successive novel it has become more pronounced’.⁴ ‘Enter, here, the Spirit of the Age’, wrote M. E. Kelsey in the *Sewanee Review* in 1931, ‘bringing in its train whole barges full of Stream of Consciousness Novelists, of Impressionists and Expressionists and Vorticists and

¹ Virginia Woolf, 11 October 1929, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, vol. 3, 1925–1930 (London: Penguin, 1982), 259.

² Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smyth, 28 August 1930, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1975–1980), vol. 4, 1929–1931, *A Reflection of the Other Person* (1978), 204.

³ See Gerald Bullett, ‘Virginia Woolf Soliloquises’, review of *The Waves*, by Virginia Woolf, *Statesman and Nation*, Literary Supplement, 10 October 1931, x, in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 266; Harold Nicolson, review of *The Waves*, by Virginia Woolf, *Action*, 8 October 1931, 8, in Majumdar and McLaurin, *Woolf: Critical Heritage*, 268.

⁴ Louis Kronenberger, review of *The Waves*, by Virginia Woolf, *New York Times Book Review*, 25 October 1931, 5, in Majumdar and McLaurin, *Woolf: Critical Heritage*, 273.

Fantastists and Painters of Abstractions, all endeavouring to express the inexpressible, to give form to the formless'.⁵ Of course, as we have seen, the effort to find a form to suit the formless sea in particular had begun long before. In his enthusiastic review, Edwin Muir refers to 'the great step forward that Mrs. Woolf made in *The Waves*'. Muir felt, however, that what seems at first to be a plunge was in fact a slow immersion; he finds an appropriate lifeline in the sea, which he sees as a useful thematic thread to bind Woolf's corpus together—a continuity against which to measure her progress: 'Mrs. Woolf's first novel was *The Voyage Out*; *The Waves* is her latest. There is little in common between those two books, one is tempted to say, except the sea. The sea indeed is in all Mrs. Woolf's books, either as a background or a memory'.⁶ Muir's remarks, like Woolf's own, are attentive to the possibility that the 'rhythm' to which Woolf tunes her prose has distant origins. This is fitting since the rhythm to which she is most attentive is, of course, that of the waves themselves. *The Waves*, like the waves, measures continuity against perpetual flux.

The waves Woolf has in mind are not necessarily oceanic. Victorian science had conjectured that 'the propagation of a wave is the propagation of a *form*, and not the transference of the substance which constitutes the wave'.⁷ A form of thinking, like this one, could propagate itself in a similar way. Theories of brain-waves, discussed above (page 206), drew on this notion, and W. B. Yeats considered that they also set *The Waves* in motion, explaining that the book expressed 'the idea of pulsations of energy throughout

⁵ M. E. Kelsey, 'Virginia Woolf and the She-Condition', in *Woolf: Critical Heritage*, ed. Majumdar and McLaurin, 260-2 (261).

⁶ Edwin Muir, review of *The Waves*, by Virginia Woolf, *Bookman*, December 1931, 362-67, in Majumdar and McLaurin, *Woolf: Critical Heritage*, 293, 286. Roger Poole agrees that 'water is Virginia's central symbol. Water, the sea, the waves'. *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 259.

⁷ John Tyndall, *Six Lectures on Light*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1875), 53.

the universe'.⁸ Indeed, Woolf's book entertains the Paterian notion that 'our physical life is a perpetual motion [...] Like the elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces extends beyond us [...] broadcast, driven in many currents [...] That clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, under which we group them—a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it'.⁹ Desire 'must waver', the reader is told, and Bernard notes that he and the other children 'melt into each other with phrases'; 'we shall sink', he thinks, and Jinny feels herself 'ripple'; the light on Bernard's eyes reminds him of 'a film of water drawn over [his] eyes by a wave'.¹⁰ Woolf's book is attuned to the most timely scientific thinking about the nature of abstract waves: 'by the late 1920s,' Gillian Beer explains, scientists had come to believe that 'waves in motion are all the universe consists in'.¹¹ This kind of theory implies a way of connecting individuals. While Bernard hypothesizes that 'outside the undifferentiated forces roar; inside we are very private' (213), he also wonders 'how to measure and name and count out the grains that make me what I am' (67).¹² But it suggests, too, ways of writing to patterns or 'rhythms' of thought and expression that had begun much earlier. In Woolf's novel, words themselves begin to seem 'like stones one picks up by the seashore', bearing evidence of wear (*Waves*, 14).

In Woolf's metaphor, the waves beat language into familiar forms. While Woolf means to break with tradition, as she says in her letter to Smyth, it has been the task of this thesis to trace earlier origins of the currents of thought and expression that carry texts such as her novel along. If, that is, Woolf's waves model change within continuity, her novel is

⁸ This is Stephen Spender's version of events, as told in *World within World* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951), 164. Michael Whitworth suggests that this was probably 25 October 1834. Whitworth, *Authors in Context: Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 280n44, 246.

⁹ Pater, *The Renaissance*, 118.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 10, 11, 8, 20.

¹¹ Beer, *Open Fields*, 295.

¹² Woolf was also responding to contemporary trends in philosophical thought—Bergson's theory of duration, for example—but this image has an earlier origin in the sorites paradox, discussed above, page 17.

itself continuous with the patterns that sea writing assumed throughout the nineteenth century. She had remarked of Conrad that, in his novels, ‘personal relations are never final’, something his marine metaphors continually model.¹³ Her thoughts about the sea, like his, may have originated earlier. She may, for instance, have had Ruskin in mind when she began to think about waves. ‘Most people think of waves rising and falling’, he says in *Modern Painters*,

But if they look at the sea carefully, they will perceive that the waves do not rise and fall. They change. Change both place and form, but they do not fall; one wave goes on, and on, and still on; now lower, now higher, now tossing its mane like a horse, now building itself together like a wall, now shaking, now steady, but still the same wave till at last it seems struck by something; changes, one knows not how, becomes another wave. (*MP III*, 211–12)¹⁴

The Waves begins as it ends, with a description of the sea: ‘The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky’ (3); ‘Now the sun had sunk. Sky and sea were indistinguishable’ (197). As the sea and sky are, first and last, indistinguishable, so Woolf asks her reader to consider the changes wrought over the course of the novel in terms of the repeated forms, the progress of a day, or the uninterrupted sound of waves breaking: ‘Tuesday follows Monday; Wednesday Tuesday. Each spreads the same ripple of well-being, repeats the same curve of rhythm’ (218–19). The sea has often been the instrument of such vague blurring, as I have suggested. Thus the sea provides, among other things, a model of literary history that emphasises shifting and changeable interconnection in place of influence as linear flow.¹⁵ Trying to find a voice of his own, Bernard, who ‘sees everyone with blurred edges’ (39), casts about for a voice suitable to the blur of his own writing.

¹³ Woolf, ‘Mr. Conrad’, 311.

¹⁴ Recall Ruskin’s description of the sea as a ‘changing mound’, discussed above, page 35. Gillian Beer also suggests Ruskin as a likely forebear for Woolf. *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London: Routledge, 1989), 144–47.

¹⁵ See my discussion of the ‘sea of intertextuality’, page 12.

It is the speed, the hot molten effect, the laval flow of sentence into sentence that I need. Who am I thinking of? Byron of course. I am, in some ways, like Byron. Perhaps a sip of Byron will help to put me in the vein. Let me read a page. No; this is dull; this is scrappy. This is rather too formal. Now I am getting the hang of it. now I am getting his beat into my brain (the rhythm is the main thing in writing). (*Waves*, 63)

Just as Bernard's voice blurs into Byron's, the cadence of Woolf's writing smooths Bernard's unfavourable view of the poet into a more positive one, a blending that is wave-like in that it happens 'one knows not how'. Perhaps this is why the cadence of Woolf's voice is not always easy to distinguish from that of others who have spoken of the sea. 'The deep / Moans round with many voices' says Tennyson,¹⁶ and Woolf answers, 'that is only the murmur of the waves in the air' (*Waves*, 12).

¹⁶ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Ulysses', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, vol. 1, p. 619, lines 55–56.

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