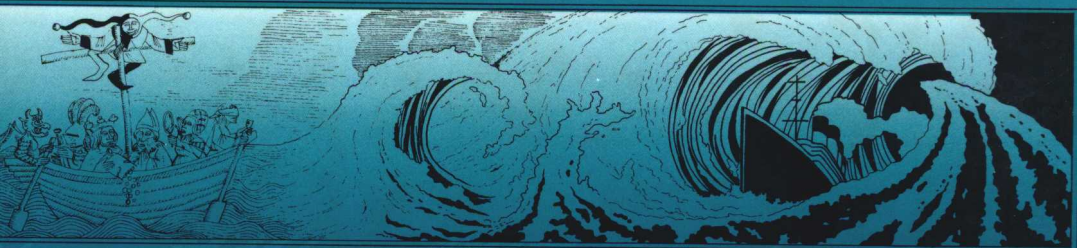


Fictions of the Sea



Critical perspectives on the ocean in
British literature and culture

Edited by
Bernhard Klein

Fictions of the Sea: Critical Perspectives on the Ocean in British Literature and Culture

Edited by Bernhard Klein
University of Dortmund



ASHGATE

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FICTIONS OF THE SEA

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction: Britain and the Sea

BERNHARD KLEIN

In Barry Unsworth's recent novel *Losing Nelson* (1999), the radiant British naval commander whose victory at Trafalgar 'gave [Britain] supremacy at sea into the twentieth century',¹ is 'a figure of unrivalled heroic authority in the eyes of the novel's protagonist, the amateur historian Charles Cleasby. Convinced of Nelson's angelic virtues and his status as the 'quintessential hero and quintessential national representative',² Cleasby structures his entire life around the rituals of hero worship: moving replica ships across a glass table in his basement, he re-enacts Nelson's major sea battles, always in real time and on the precise date on which they happened; he accumulates what must be the most impressive 'gallery of Nelsoniana'³ outside the National Maritime Museum; he regularly visits Nelson's 'shrine',⁴ the flagship HMS *Victory* at Portsmouth, where he is dismayed by the irreverence of the local guides; and he spends his days writing a biography of the Admiral that will 'revolutionize Nelson studies'⁵ and set the record straight on the one incident in his life which has always cast a shadow on an otherwise unblemished career, a dubious act of political scheming at Naples in 1799. Thinking of himself as 'Horatio's other self',⁶ a dark shadow to the bright angel, Cleasby's obsession with Nelson grows more and more pathological until he can no longer maintain the pretence of sanity. His occasional typist unwittingly inflicts the first wounds on his fragile psyche when she openly doubts Nelson's heroism and asks impertinent questions about his attitudes to women, but the final blow is dealt by a rival Nelson scholar who confirms Nelson's part in the fraud at Naples and confronts Cleasby with the unwelcome insight that "[h]eroes are fabricated in the national dream factory. Heroes are not people. ... There are no heroes out there, Mr Cleasby, only fears and dreams and the process of fabrication."⁷

In this 'tarnished'⁸ and cynical age, as Cleasby habitually describes the present from which he feels so entirely alienated, his delusions of heroic

2 Introduction

grandeur are likely to cause more derision than pity, if they are taken seriously at all. The idea of the spotless hero, or rather the alleged need for this incarnation of national glory, no longer finds much support in the Western world, and has ceased to serve as a viable example of moral rectitude. It is, however, no accident that Cleasby chooses Nelson as his ultimate icon of a bygone age of honour, heroism and national greatness. Nelson was not just a superior military brain and a model patriot, he was first and foremost a sea captain, and the ocean was both his heroic habitat and the foundational site of a vast and evolving political space - the British Empire - that was, to all intents and purposes, an empire of the seas. 'The originating agents of empire', David Armitage contends, 'were the Elizabethan sea-dogs, Gloriana's sailor-heroes who had circumnavigated the globe, singed the King of Spain's beard, swept the oceans of pirates and Catholics, and thereby opened up the sea-routes across which English migrants would travel, and English trade would flow, until Britannia majestically ruled the waves.'⁹ Nelson is perhaps the most shining star that ever rose above that sea-borne empire first envisaged in Elizabethan times, and Cleasby's devotion to the greatest of British naval heroes is a sign both of the deep historical affinity between Britain and the sea, and of the ocean's continuing power to evoke fantasies of national and moral supremacy. In the words of Cleasby's antagonist, the sea is indeed a 'national dream factory'.

As a historical topic, the conjunction 'Britain and the Sea' might not stand much in need of explanation. An island people poised just beyond the edge of the European mainland - *toto divisos orbe*, 'wholly cut off from the world', as Virgil thought¹⁰ - would be expected to entertain not only an economic but a deeply affectionate bond with the surrounding sea. Indeed, Cleasby could take comfort in any number of openly nationalist accounts of Britain's patriotic pact with the ocean. Shakespeare famously had John of Gaunt reminisce about a 'sceptred isle' that was 'bound in with the triumphant sea', protected by nature 'Against infection and the hand of war';¹¹ in this triumphalism he was seconded a few decades later by Edmund Waller, who, speaking in the Long Parliament early in the Civil War, thought that 'God and nature have given us the sea as our best guard against our enemies; and our ships, as our greatest glory above other nations'.¹² In the 18th century, James Thomson elevated the sentiment into the hyperbole that Britannia has been ruling the waves ever since 'Britain first, at Heaven's command, / Arose from out the azure main',¹³ and yet a century later, Robert Louis Stevenson added that Britain's relation to the ocean is the natural stuff of literature: 'The sea is our approach and bulwark; it has been the scene of our greatest triumphs and dangers, and we are accustomed in lyrical strains to claim it as our own.'¹⁴ No doubt the Tory historian James

Anthony Froude would have agreed wholeheartedly: 'After their own island, the sea is the natural home of Englishmen'.¹⁵

Anybody in search of memorable quotations about the sea in British writing over the last few hundred years is confronted with an embarrassment of riches. Even a cursory glance at the many anthologies of British sea fiction confirms the wide imaginative range of the literary engagement with matters maritime,¹⁶ and there can be little doubt that the attempt to offer a complete coverage of Britain's literature of the sea is bound to fail in the same manner that Cleasby's Nelson hagiography is eventually abandoned: for his devoted disciple, the Admiral simply stands for so much more than what could possibly be contained between the covers of a single book. In calling this collection *Fictions of the Sea*, my intention is thus not to pretend that it offers a comprehensive survey of British sea fiction.¹⁷ Knowing that the topic - much as the ocean itself - is boundless, this is a more modest project: it aims to bring together a series of critical and historically informed readings which encompass a wide but necessarily selective range of imaginative uses of the sea in British literature and culture. The term 'fiction' is applied broadly to include not only what is conventionally classified as sea fiction (for instance, novels by Captain Marryat, Joseph Conrad, Daphne du Maurier, C.S. Forester, Patrick O'Brian), but also writings which respond to important topics in maritime history (the rise of the Empire as reflected in 18th-century Milton studies, for instance, or its decline as echoed in later writers), ideological constructs projected onto the ocean (for instance, the varying legal conceptions of the sea as a space either open or closed, or the re-modelling of the public image of the sailor under the impetus of 19th-century industrialization), as well as texts that engage with wider issues relevant to the historical experience of seafaring: problems of navigation and orientation, piracy, slavery, multi-ethnic shipboard communities, masculinity, gender relations.

The book covers the period from early modern times to the present, and literature offers perhaps the best yardstick to assess the changing cultural conceptions of the sea across the centuries. Alain Corbin's history of the meaning of the seaside in Western civilization has been among the most compelling of studies that explore the semantic metamorphoses of an ancient cultural topos,¹⁸ and the shift he traces from a demonic space that was reviled for its 'barbarity', its chaotic lack of structure (a reminder of unfinished creation) and its imposition of natural and moral limits on the human world,¹⁹ to a pleasure circuit that signified refined taste, leisure and the expansiveness of modernity, is reflected in the changing literary representation of the ocean. The negative image of the evil sea and its many associated dangers is traditionally seen to be replaced in the 18th century with an

emerging conception of the ocean - in the contexts of colonization, economic modernization and global trade - as a technically manageable but socially sensitive space, epitomized by the *cause célèbre* of the *Bounty* mutiny.²⁰ Thus 18th-century accounts present the ocean voyage as a largely pragmatic enterprise,²¹ and contemporary nautical drama foregrounds realistic elements of life and work at sea.²² The Romantic counter-image would re-invent the sea as a realm of unspoiled nature and a refuge from the perceived threats of civilization,²³ yet any actual foray into the timeless maritime expanse of deep cultural longing was to confront man with the extremes of experience - witness Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or Poe's hyperbolic *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. 19th-century representations of the sea frequently turn the ocean into a reflector of subjective consciousness or a metaphor of cultural *rites de passage*, often equating the sea-voyage with psychological catharsis or taking the form of a 'moody, metaphysical brooding on the obvious analogue of voyage and life'.²⁴ The romantic sea adventure tale with its focus on the effects of the ocean on the individual or national psyche properly belongs to the century after the great naval battles of the Napoleonic Wars.

Such generalizations might be crying out for historical contexts but research on sea fiction is still too often conducted in narrowly conceived critical or generic frameworks.²⁵ This criticism, while often impressively attentive to the textual subtleties of 'writing the ocean', runs the danger not only of losing out of sight the wider cultural contexts of the modern maritime experience, but also of remaining within the imaginative confines of the popular sea adventure tale. In *Lord Jim*, Conrad ridiculed the pretensions of much that is classified under this rubric:

[Jim] would forget himself, and beforehand live in his mind the sea-life of light literature. He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line; or as a lonely castaway, barefooted and half naked, walking on uncovered reefs in search of shellfish to stave off starvation. He confronted savages on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men - always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book.²⁶

There are, of course, many other ways of writing about the sea, and many other ways of reading the fictions it has generated. Jonathan Raban suggests that '[t]he sea in literature is not a verifiable object, to be described, with varying degrees of success and shades of emphasis, by writers of different periods; it is, rather, the supremely liquid and volatile element, shaping itself newly for every writer and every generation.'²⁷ There is an

element of circularity in this statement but the important point is that fictions of the sea are never limited to any one frame of reference or historically specific perspectival arrangement. The adventure genre that Conrad mimics in his brief ironic sketch has perhaps been a dominant mode in the textual representation of the sea, but it is by no means the only or even the most influential way in which it has been imagined in literature and culture. One aim of the essays in this volume is to foreground the diversity, as well as the politics, of the many different maritime fictions that have shaped ways of thinking about the ocean since the 16th century.

In doing so, this volume follows to some extent the lead of recent innovative studies in maritime history. A number of maritime historians have for some time been involved in re-conceptualizing their field of research as a social and cultural history of seafaring, and a few studies have also begun to bridge the gap between the disciplines of history and literature.²⁸ In such projects, the sea is no longer discussed merely as an empirical, socio-economic fact or as the imaginative setting for heroic and romantic adventure stories but as a social and cultural space that has been the site of radical changes in human lives and national histories. These insights have also given rise to a number of historical studies on crews and passengers that have both highlighted the ethnically diverse character of many historical shipboard communities²⁹ and significantly revised our image of the traditional masculine world of the ship.³⁰ These shifts of focus and emphasis in maritime history have all influenced shape and content of the present volume. Although it is principally concerned with literature, it is decidedly interdisciplinary in approach and method, and considers a broad range of historical evidence: among the textual and visual artefacts examined are early modern legal treatises on marine boundaries, Renaissance and Romantic poetry, 19th and 20th-century novels, paintings, sea songs, recent Hollywood films, as well as a diverse range of historical, critical and philosophical writings. The overall aim of the volume is perhaps best described as the attempt to chart metaphorical and material links between the idea of the sea in the cultural imagination and its significance for the social and political history of Britain, thus offering what I hope is a fresh analysis of the impact of the sea on the formation of British cultural identities.

The twelve essays are arranged in roughly chronological order. The two opening contributions examine significant legal and spatial shifts in the European attitude to the ocean at the beginning of our time frame. In his analysis of the early 17th-century legal debate about the freedom of the oceans, James Muldoon considers the extent to which a contemporary thinking that seemingly responded to the new global context of worldwide travel and trade was in fact still indebted to a legal tradition stretching back

to the European Middle Ages. Depending on their national interests, those who engaged in this debate - principally the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the British - defended either the *mare liberum* or the *mare clausum*, but these legal positions were all formulated within a shared intellectual frame of reference, inherited from medieval times. And although, as Muldoon shows, the new international order that emerged from this debate was based on the right of free access to the oceans, ideas similar to those used in the 17th century against the idea of the ocean as a space open to all, and in favour of the papal right to close a sea, resurface in the modern-day demands for sharing the wealth of the sea with all the nations of the world. Conceptual shifts in spatial awareness accompanied such legal reorientations, as Ulrich Kinzel argues in the next essay. The practicalities of oceanic navigation, as opposed to Mediterranean 'coasting', demanded not only a whole new set of technological innovations in seafaring but also resulted in a new moral understanding of the relation between the self and the world. The key word here is 'orientation', a concept that applies equally to a ship transgressing the ancient limits of the world and to the moral economy of the self faced with new forms of contingency. By historicizing the 'oceanic turn' of the 16th century with reference to three discursive aspects of deep-sea voyaging - the art of navigation, the allegory of fortune and the practice of systematic travel observation - Kinzel shows how contemporaries found in the image of the voyager on the open sea a model for the existential condition of modernity.

The following two essays analyse the historical experience of seafaring and long-distance trade as crucial referential frameworks in the literary works of, respectively, Milton and Coleridge. Anne-Julia Zwierlein shows how the poetic ocean in *Paradise Lost* is still largely a symbolic entity, replete with warnings about the material and spiritual dangers of oceanic travel and the luxury goods imported from overseas, even though Milton clearly draws on recent travel accounts and the latest findings of contemporary geographers. In his capacity as a seafarer, Milton's Satan capitalizes on this ambiguity of description: as the prototype of all subsequent human ocean voyagers, he can be recognized as a merchant, an East India Company official, an explorer, and even, perhaps, a slave trader, but ultimately, his epistemological function in the symbolic Christian universe of Milton's poem foregrounds the status of the ocean as the inherently repulsive realm of unformed matter and primeval 'chaos'. It is only in 18th-century readings of *Paradise Lost* that the sea is divested of these meanings and Satan's poetic ocean voyage transformed into a sublime comment on British naval achievements, celebrating the global flow of trade and the glory of empire. The realities of 18th-century seafaring enter Coleridge's *Rime of*