

«these heavy sands are language»: the beach as a cultural signifier from *Dover Beach* to *On Chesil Beach*

ROBERTA GEFTER WONDRICH

It is only fitting that what is perhaps the most famous footprint in the Western literary imaginary should appear on the sand of a sea-shore, in the eleventh chapter of *Robinson Crusoe*, the seminal modern novel. Robinson ponders over that uncanny mark in dismay, that spatial imprint of alterity which he goes so far as to ascribe to the Devil, only to conclude, with his famous problem-solving skills, that it would be absurd to think of such a thing, since the trace would have been defaced entirely by the first surge of the sea. Although Defoe represents the sea-shore along the lines of a negative appreciation of the beach as a place of danger inherited from antiquity, and significantly locates Robinson's new home of safety and prosperity inland, this reference serves its purpose in that it highlights two constitutive aspects of the beach – shore-coastline – which figure prominently in the literary representations of this essential sea-chronotope: its inherent instability as a boundary zone, and its capacity to both register and efface traces, as the locus of a potential encounter with alterity and the essential mystery of existence. The shore, in other words, has long been a paramount cultural signifier, though an inherently unstable one.

I refer to the beach as a cronotope borrowing the use of this bachtinian concept from Margaret Cohen, one of the leading «maritime» critics who have contributed to a recent rise of multi-disciplinary critical investigations and reappraisals of the cultural meaning of the sea, no longer examined merely in its

metaphoric significance but in its foundational role as a geo-political spatial entity in the history of nations and in the formation of cultural identities¹. Cohen classifies the beach among the six waterside chronotopes in French and English literature, which comprise the blue water, the open sea, the brown water, white water, the island, the shore and the ship², which all delimit and define one another³, to the extent that is almost impossible to extricate a consideration of the sea-shore from a wider marine frame. These related marine topographies all enter a cultural construction of the sea and the shore which has radically evolved over the centuries, as Alain Corbin demonstrated in his remarkable and groundbreaking *Le Territoire du Vide* (1988), from the ancient dimension of a demonic space, repulsive, fearful, and unaesthetic, conceived as a reminder of primeval chaos in its lack of order and structure, with the sea and the Ocean as a supreme enigma, the incommensurable limit assigned to human action (Blumenberg), and the shore as the receptacle of the sea's rejections, to a conception of the sea as the privileged space not only of self knowledge, but of the epistemological drive, the *libido sciendi*, and of the aesthetic impulse. From the 18th century on, this process sees the «invention» of the sea-shore as the ideal space for the social practice of physical and emotional regeneration as against a growing aversion to urban life, in the footsteps of the Romantic rediscovery of the sea as the most forceful expression of Nature, a shelter against the evils of civilization and a means whereby to discover oneself. As Alain Corbin writes, «The irresistible awakening of a collective desire for the shore arises in the period from 1750 to 1840 [...]. This was when the coasts of the ocean began to appear as a recourse against the misdeeds of civilization, as the place where it was easiest to grasp the new sense of time proposed by scientists, and experience the dissociation of mankind's history from that of the earth»⁴.

Corbin's book is a seminal study for all the subsequent maritime studies that have been flourishing over the past decades, and proves a fruitful point of departure for a consideration of the semantic complexity of the shore, starting from the translations of its title: the original oxymoronic «*Le Territoire du Vide*» becomes *The Lure of the Sea. The discovery of the seaside 1750-1840* in the English version and *L'invenzione del mare: l'Occidente e il Fascino della spiaggia* in the Italian translation⁵. These three different versions reveal the constitutive coexistence of the dimension of the void, the liquid and the terrestrial elements, and of the evolving fascination exerted by this unstable, ever-changing space. The sea-shore is in fact an indeterminate space, a space of liminality between *terra firma* and the sea, which cannot but be shifting, precarious, and evocatively dangerous. In its amphibious quality, subject as it is to movement and alteration under the effect of the natural rhythms of tides and geological erosion, the shore stands as a geographical and spatial correlative for the awareness of the fragility of the human condition. A «territory of the void», defined by subtraction and negation from a terrestrial perspective, but also sharing in the lure of the sea as the greatest mystery and source of human life, the shore is the locus of the coexistence of op-

posites, conceptually structured from a set of binary oppositions (which are confuted by the physical actuality of its existence): nature and culture, cosmos and chaos, historical and ancestral time; a repository of ancient times and a natural effacer of traces, memory and the void.

In its constitutive morphological mutability, the shore is thus connoted in cultural imagination by the recurrent paradigms of discovery, encounter, transformation (the Shakespearian sea change with its innumerable literary echoes), the contamination between life and death, the confrontation with alterity.

The presence of the sea and its related chronotopes has always been very rich in English literature; as Bernhard Klein puts it, «as a historical topic, ‘Britain and the Sea’ might not stand much in need of an explanation», to the point that the sea and the Ocean are an essential source of inspiration and historical source, with a «wide imaginative range of the literary engagement with matters maritime»⁶.

This essay will now focus on some literary texts – indicative, though certainly not exhaustive – which foreground the figurative power of the sea-shore in the representation of conflict, loss and cultural anxiety. My point of departure, arbitrary as it may seem, in the context of this disorienting wealth of literary instances in English culture, is a quintessentially canonical text, which is often considered as one of the first acknowledged expressions of the cultural and political anxiety and of the growing epistemological crisis which permeates the mid and late Victorian age, Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach*, composed in 1851 though published in 1867. Told in the form of a monologue by a first person speaker who ostensibly addresses a beloved, the poem opens with a pseudo Romantic setting, which features the sea, the tide, and the element of the coastline in its contiguity of sea and land, the beacon’s glimmering lights announcing the whiteness of cliffs, with «the French coast» and «the cliffs of England» facing each other in the gleaming light of the night, and the white foam touching the moonlight on the horizon.

The primacy of the visual component of the opening modulates into an auditory phase, in which the speaking voice urges his addressee to listen to the sound coming from the shoreline, the boundary zone between land and sea:

the grating roar/
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,/At their return, up the high strand.

The pebbles are, semantically, a remarkable detail, in that they identify the explicit dynamism of the conflicting contiguity of land and sea, and appear as a first iconic motif of the erosion of the certainties of the past and the loss of faith of present times.

In the second stanza the comparison with the «The eternal note of sadness» in the ancient Sophoclean tragedy⁸ also points to the parallel between the Nordic sea – as an open sea – and the Mediterranean world of Greek tragedy, where havoc strikes the members of a family one generation after another, while «the turbid ebb and flow/Of human misery» is for him and his contemporaries the

common plight of human kind. This is achieved through a conceptual synaesthesia, as the sound of the sea on the shore conveys «a thought»:

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

In the third stanza the marine imagery contains the most famous metaphor of the poem, «the sea of faith», once full like a rising tide, amniotically connoted and feminine, according to the general acceptance of the sea as maternal; the metaphor is employed to censure «the intellectual, moral and spiritual chaos of the modern world»⁹, as announced by the political conflicts and the revolutionary turmoil that agitated Europe around 1848 and which gave rise to the political subtext of the poem.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

The earth itself is metonymically represented by the *shore* enveloped by the maternal sea of faith, now turned into a sea of doubt, with a sad undertow withdrawing to the desolate edges of the world, again metonymically reaffirmed through another image, that of the «naked shingles», which epitomizes the barrenness, the solitude and the common lot of humankind.

In the final stanza the spatial symbolism coalesces in the comparison of the historical *hic et nunc* to «a darkling plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/Where ignorant armies clash by night». The Dover shore and its pebbled strand from where the lyric voice utters its «disturbed worldview»¹⁰, is thus the locus where a fantasy of conflict unfolds, where the awareness of the rupture of a world order is dramatized through a set of marine and liminal images and metaphors that embrace the common lot of mankind as well as «the variety of antisocial solipsism that is embraced by the self-marginalised»¹¹ attitude of the speaking voice.

Dover Beach is certainly not the first literary example in English culture which foregrounds the sea-shore as an archetypal space for the representation of a civilization suddenly adrift, of an awareness suddenly – not gradually – emerging like organic matter from the depth. The trope of the primeval chaos traditionally associated with the sea is evoked not through primeval physical forms, but

rather through the conceptual synaesthesia, to express the self's displacement and sense of loss «in limine». Yet this poem is certainly one of the most important and paradigmatic treatments of the shore as a complex cultural signifier, one of the most deeply embedded ones in subsequent cultural memory, and one which establishes its position in the cultural imagination also by means of an intertextual allusion to a memorable occurrence at Dover, in *King Lear*, act IV, scene 4, where Edgar leads Gloucester «within a foot/ Of the extreme verge» of the steep cliff and makes him imagine in his mind's eye the spectacle of the beach far below, from where the «murmuring surge/ that on th' unnumbered idle pebble chafes /cannot be heard so high»¹².

Moving away from Arnold's mid-Victorian *angst*, let me briefly point out that the growing prominence of the sea-shore and the coastline in the cultural imagination of the whole 18th and 19th century is a complex and fascinating topic which inevitably exceeds the limits of the present study. While by the middle of the 18th century the shore once more became the «focal point for the world's enigmas», with the increasing geological evidence of coastal landscapes «the pedagogical aim» became merged «with the prevailing aesthetic codes»¹³. The decisive turning point was to be the Romantics' «invention» of the sea-shore as the favourite spot for self-knowledge in what was to become the first «coherent discourse about the sea»¹⁴; but it was since the 1820s that, again in Corbin's words, «the growing complexity of the social spectacle», whereby the beach was institutionalised as a place of leisure, health care and socializing, became a widespread phenomenon in Europe, with the sea-shore as an increasingly significant social space of interaction. As Margaret Cohen remarks, much like the chronotope of the road, the beach became a site of encounter for otherwise separate social classes, a contact zone – in M.L. Pratt's terminology –, a boundary space where confines are challenged and reassessed and where danger and desire constantly intertwine¹⁵. The sea-shore in fact is by definition the assigned locus of the first approach and encounter between different civilizations, of maritime landings and early conquests, of the inception of the colonizing act; but it is precisely from its socially connoted spatial quality that I would like to depart in order to introduce a late Victorian fiction, R.L. Stevenson's short story *The Beach of Falesá* (1893), as the second literary specimen of this analysis. This well-known novella foregrounds the semantic relevance of the beach trope in the title itself, which nonetheless turns out to be interestingly ambiguous: in spite of the exotic suggestion of a typical adventure tale, such as those written by Stevenson in the 1880s – when he was living with his family in Samoa, having left Edinburgh and England for good – in fact it points to a socially connoted meaning of the beach as spatial construction.

It is narrated in the first person by the protagonist, John Wiltshire, an English copra trader who, upon arriving on the fictional island of Falesá is tricked into a fake marriage with a local girl, Uma, by the scheming rival trader, Chase. Uma has a taboo attached to her, so that the natives refuse to do business with

Wiltshire, who meanwhile becomes truly fond of the girl and decides to marry her legally. Having discovered how his rival controls the natives by pretending to have demonic powers, Wiltshire exposes his tricks first by confronting him in his retreat (his «temple» cave not far from the shore) and finally killing him, thus freeing the natives and himself. The «beach» of the title is actually «the settlement of houses where the white men and half-castes have their stores, and where the ships touch»¹⁶; it refers, thus, to a specific social community, recognizably hybrid, bred out of the encounter of different races and cultures. It is, therefore, a semantic transposition of the place – a «plural» place – where these people would establish their gathering and coexistence. What is more, the *beach la mar* is a sort of lingua franca, a *patois* used in the South Sea ports, and the expression *to be on the beach* meant (and still does) to be without financial means, «a phrase used to describe destitute whites in the South Seas»¹⁷.

The beach which features in the title of this story then has not so much a denotative, evocative value as a geographical/physical location as much as it is a relational space, a complex and unstable microcosm which returns in the dénouement as a proper locus of the final confrontation between the two enemies who embody two conflicting moral attitudes to the colonial environment in which they operate. The two meet, unexpectedly, on the volcanic beach from where Case's den will later be accessed and destroyed by Wiltshire, and confront each other knowing that «this open beach» would not be the proper setting for a shooting duel. The physical space of the beach thus allows for a final showdown, a laying bare of Case's mystifications and ethical abuses upon the natives to control and exploit them, which infringed the shared ethical code of the island. The story has rightly been analyzed as a «generic hybrid» by Roslyn Jolly, and it is interesting to regard it as a reworking of some of the Imperial Gothic tropes and a subversion of the Imperial romance and colonial exoticism into a tale «the most consistent affiliations» of which are «with the feminine realm of domestic fiction»¹⁸. Jolly identifies the transgression of boundaries (racial, cultural, religious and, more interestingly, generic, i.e. those between romance and realism) as constitutive of this text: once again, then, the beach trope functions as a cultural signifier at several levels, in a foregrounded semantic polysemy, and in relation to the theme of the confrontation between the self and a human environment which reveals itself in its instability and precariousness. It is, once more, a signifier of cultural and racial anxiety in its metaphoric evocation of boundary crossing and in its status as a boundary zone. Finally, as a debunked example of Imperial romance, the novella also resumes the Romantic (and Odyssean) topos of the fateful encounter, recounted by Uma, the narrator's polynesian wife, of an episode, appropriately set on a beach, in which six young native men are seduced by six beautiful girls and all (but one) mysteriously die after the event. It thus re-enacts the trope of the fatal seduction exerted by the female-gendered island as an enchanted place, inevitably leading man to self-loss and death¹⁹. *The Beach of Falesá* thus offers an interesting textualization of a cultural construction of

the sea-shore as «incorporated in the rich phantasmagoria of borderlands from which perils and magic spring»²⁰.

While it is the ocean which – more than any other marine element, represents the quintessential existential challenge/ adventure and therefore the paramount heroic metaphoric field, the whole gamut of the marine geographical imagination partakes of this ideal (and cultural) engagement with the heroic ideal, which informs «the ocean's continuing power to evoke fantasies of national and moral supremacy»²¹. As Margaret Cohen reminds us, in fact, «across the lineage of sea adventure novels, novelists modeled the heroism of their fictional protagonists after the historical seamen of Western modernity», and even when, with the «routinization of seafaring», the great age of the glorious «craft» of seamanship and «the mariner's cultural prestige» were declining, «the poetics of sea fiction» evolved towards new and more complex forms of exploration and existential challenge, «including the frontiers of exploration and art»²². Just keeping to works in the English language, one only has to think of authors such as Melville, Stevenson and, above all, Conrad, to realize how the sea narrative ventures through the troubled waters of the epistemological quest and the ethical implications of an increasingly complex understanding of sea adventure and of marine geography as a whole. Thus, the presence of the sea in contemporary, 20th (and 21st) fiction written at a time when the great era of seamanship and the economic primacy of maritime commerce was definitively over, still continued to evoke notions of moral and ethical intervention that, in their turn, problematized that specific idea of heroism and related cultural legacy.

It is not irrelevant, therefore, that one of the most iconic images of the Modernist denunciation of the impossibility of heroism in the aftermath of the psychological and moral devastation of Western civilization brought about by World War I, the downsized, ineffectual Everyman J. Alfred Prufrock, should be pictured as wading through the water on the beach, wearing the bottoms of his trousers rolled. An iconic image which announces the resounding helplessness of the *The Waste Land* 's voice at the end of «The Fire Sermon»: «on Margate sands/ I can connect/ Nothing with nothing». In Eliot's masterpiece the marine chronotope of the shore which by definition connects land and sea, restless and rhythmic motion with the stability of terra firma becomes the locus of a collapsed, impossible act of union between mind and body, self and community, self and history, in conjunction with the trope of the unredeeming, destructive sea change. This cursory but inevitable reference to *The Waste Land* is also meant to point to how the lexeme «shore» returns in a verbal morphing of its semantic function at the end of the poem in the memorable line «These fragments I have shored against my ruins», which epitomizes the crumbling fragility of an entire civilization.

When it comes to evoking the heroic strain, then, the beach or strand or shore are subject to and not as prominent as floods and storms, as they have traditionally been either the vantage point for the observation of the mighty power of the sea and of the ocean, of the shipwreck as «the most evocative figure of catas-

trophe»²³ and as a metaphor for the precariousness of existence²⁴. Yet very often the presence of the beach or strand appears to be associated with a tension and a cultural anxiety that implicates the im/possibility of replicating heroic modes, or, indeed, exposes the limitations of intervention in the wider arena of culture and society beyond the safety border of the domestic environment and private life. This is the case, on closer scrutiny, in all the fictions here considered, from Stevenson's to Mc Ewan's, but it certainly comes across in a rather allegorical fashion in a famous short story by Virginia Woolf, originally published in 1920, *Solid Objects*.

As David Bradshaw points out, «no modernist writer, with the possible exceptions of Joseph Conrad and James Joyce, was so deeply inspired by the sea or spent so much of his or her imaginative life beside or beneath its figurative depths, and in the work of no other author from the modernist epoch is the sea invested with such rich symbolic value as it is in Woolf's oeuvre»²⁵. *The Voyage Out*, *Jacob's Room*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* all resonate with the sea and its related topography in different ways, but the beach is a ubiquitous presence. More specifically, Bradshaw points to the fact that «the beach symbolises a deep emotional fault-line in Woolf's fiction, a charged locus of joy, yearning, loss and grief.»²⁶. In *Solid Objects* the beach is the opening scenario of a serendipitous moment that will change the course of a life: two men are described with a camera-steady, zoom-like technique, walking along a sandy beach; one of them finds a large lump of green glass, smoothed by the sea, shapeless, «so thick as to be almost opaque», «nothing but glass»²⁷: «It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore.»²⁸. The object soon becomes the focus of a total fixation, and initiates a collecting obsession which will soon lead John, the protagonist, to neglect all his private and public commitments and to relinquish a promising political career. From the moment he burrows his hand into the sand to get hold of the «full drop of solid matter», the world of this man who is introduced as «solid», «living» and «virile» in the opening lines, and totally unconcerned with the mystery and immensity of the sea, begins to undergo an irreversible process of disintegration.

Thus the paradoxical rationale of the story puts into opposition the ultimate opaqueness of objective, material «reality» and the vagueness and fragility of social, regulated life, the illusory soundness of the material which releases a destabilizing potential, the ultimate otherness of the «real», as the story charts the metamorphoses of the banal object into «thing»²⁹.

This oppositional pattern in the story is also matched by the symbolic gendering of the contrasted elements of the marine space (the «vague sea and the hazy shore») and the virile sturdiness of the two male bodies («Nothing was so solid, so living, so hard, red, hirsute and virile as these two bodies for miles and miles of sea and sand hill»³⁰). Significantly, John's seizing the lump of glass is described as a profound penetration into the depths of that secret, mobile space connecting land and sea, and as an act that, while overtly alluding to a sexual possession of the traditionally feminine island/shore, reminds him of the wonder of

childhood: «He remembered that, after digging for a little, the water oozes round your finger-tips; the hole then becomes a moat, a well, a spring; a secret channel to the sea»³¹. Masculine intervention and material solidity are thus visually and thematically associated in the story in a debunking, deflationary strategy, which ultimately (and implicitly) reasserts the multiplicity and polysemy of the sea-shore. As D. Bradshaw goes on,

if the undersea lies beyond the pale of patriarchy, beyond the control of the fathers, the masculine focus on solidity and tangibility, both in «Solid Objects» and *Jacob's Room*, shows the outdatedness of such a view of the world: by the 1920s, the whole notion of solidity has been exposed as illusory. Indeed, it had become increasingly clear that even the most solid objects were really as vague as the sea³².

Furthermore, the notion of the tangible and “objectual” finding also works in this story as an implicit inversion of a conventional motif associated with the sea-shore since the mid-18th century, namely the scientific and naturalistic interest in collecting and the taxonomic impulse with which it was charged³³. Here the presumed «solidity» and soundness of the materialistic, taxonomic attitude, aimed at mapping and controlling the geographical space and within it the submerged «territory of the void», becomes invalidated by a contrary dynamic, by another «possession» exerted by a find, an *objet trouvé* – *débris* from that unstable, ever-changing realm. Thus it happens that the object adrift unexpectedly and irrevocably puts a man's life adrift too.

In Woolf's fascinating, quasi-allegorical narrative of the prevailing of contemplation over action, of the aesthetic fixation over social intervention, of the solipsistic obsession with collecting over social commitment, the beach is, significantly, the locus of an inverted epiphany that will trigger a personal crisis, or, alternatively, a «deviant» phenomenology of the self, initiated by the discovery of the resilient opacity of matter. It is also interesting to notice how the protagonist, in his collecting fixation, keeps searching for marine-looking objects such as a piece of china resembling a starfish and starts haunting «pieces of waste land», so that the beach as the original repository is associated by contiguity to the very notion of Eliot's contemporary *Waste Land*.

Any consideration of the prominence of the sea-shore in the literary imaginary of Anglophone Modernism cannot eschew the third episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Proteus*, the most explicitly marine of all, entirely set on the liminal stage of Sandymount strand, and connoted by the symbol of the tide according to the Linati schemata. The contiguity of the water and land which was already so prominent in the imagery of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is here further expanded into a continuous and dynamic coexistence, under the aegis of the perennial transformation of all things and beings, where the marine flux is the natural equivalent to the mental flux.

The beach as chronotope is seldom more eloquently foregrounded as in the incipit of Stephen Dedalus' peripatetic musings, when, eyes closed, he immerses

himself in the meandering expansion of that conceptualized mobile space: «Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount strand?»³⁴. The episode is thematically concerned with mutability, with the changing nature of the visible, sensory world, and semantically foregrounds flux and change, the protean tidal transformation of all living organic forms, as – according to the Homeric framework – Stephen is engaged in a struggle against the Proteus of the intellect, musing on the problem of the revelation of the reality of the sensible world behind its limited outward semblances of the visible and the audible:

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot³⁵.

Stephen's physical and intellectual progress in the episode hinges on a conceptualized synaesthesia of the beach, moving from an obstruction of the primary sense of sight by closing his eyes to the foregrounding of the equally «ineluctable» auditory sense («modality») of the palpable world: «Stephen closed his eyes to hear his feet crush crackling wrack and shells»³⁶. Later in the chapter the auditory onomatopoeia becomes even more absorbing:

In long lassoes from the Cock lake the water flowed full, covering greengoldenly lagoons of sand, rising, flowing. My ashplant will float away. I shall wait. No, they will pass on, passing, chafing against the low rocks, swirling, passing. Better get this job over quick. Listen: a fourworded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, oos. Vehement breath of waters amid seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks. In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. And, spent, its speech ceases. It flows purling, widely flowing, floating foampool, flower unfurling.³⁷

Maud Ellmann highlights the opposition between voice and writing, sight and sound in both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* and points to how «Joyce draws our attention to the noises of language, the acoustic detritus that cannot be assimilated into meaning or intention»³⁸. I would argue that this acoustic resistance, the «unassimilability» of one perceptual component of sensory experience which refutes complete conversion into intellectual apprehension is in fact metonymic of the frustrated attempt at controlling, classifying and assimilating a space – the shore – which inherently refutes the taxonomic impulse, in that it is anomic, constantly changing, defined by oppositional entities and partaking of both.

The episode also foregrounds the association or nexus between mutability and creativity when Stephen, absorbed in his contemplation of the tide and the moon, thinks of some rhythmic phrases he tries to fix on paper, sitting on a rock. The inscription of the sign, the *signature*, returns, likewise, in relation to the uncertain future of his creative act, to the remnants of the living matter around him: «Endless, would it be mine, form of my form? Who watches me here? Who ever anywhere will read these written words? Sign on a white field?»³⁹.

But the nexus between artistic creativity and intellectual probing and the natural flow and cycle of life is also underscored by Stephen's relieving himself in the water, in a typically Joycean oscillation between pathos and bathos. The artist is thus merging with the sea-shore and the liquid element, while his concern with the feminine/maternal connotation of the marine element (signaled by Stephen's quotation of Swinburne's name of «mighty mother» for the sea) has already been announced in the opening pages by the two midwives he sees coming down from Leahy's Terrace, who make him think of the mystery of creation linking all mankind. The sea is in fact a simultaneous symbol of generation and destruction: the symbolic and metaphoric texture of the episode argues for both polarities, and points to the necessity for change, destruction and ensuing generation, so that the artist's creative power may actually find fulfillment. Both Stephen, who in *Ithaca* is defined as a «hydrophobe (...) distrusting acuities of thought and language»⁴⁰, and the «waterlover» Bloom share a fascination with the coexistence of life and death in water and with the metamorphic agency of the waters, but Stephen is actually terrified by the uncontrollably annihilating power of the sea. The semi-parody of Stephen's creative act marks the climactic moment of the Telemachia, and it is significant that it should be preceded by the motif of death by water, first with the image of the «bloated carcass of a dog» with a gunwale of a boat, sunk in sand nearby, then by the thought of the dead man and the helpless anguish he feels at his death which merges with the guilty memory of his dead mother and evokes Milton's *Lycidas* and Ophelia's death in *Hamlet*. The sea change in the death by water imagery is thus an important trope in the episode, which figures among the correspondences with Eliot's *Waste Land*, and announces the brooding tone of the closing image, a three-master, silent off the coast, «her sails brailed up on the crosstrees» as though to evoke a Christian symbolism⁴¹, with the sea and the horizon silent and ominous.

Hence, some of the images and motifs which appear in the episode also incorporate a number of *topoi* in the traditional iconography of the beach since the mid 18th century onwards: the cockle pickers as labourers of the sea, the drowned man, the ship far off on the horizon contemplated from the coast, the shipwreck with its evocative connotations, and, above all, Stephen's *libido sciendi* as a skeptical 20th century heir to that «figure of the scholarly travelling gentleman» which emerged at the beginning of the 18th century⁴².

By means of the debunked conversion of Ulysses' epic journey into Bloom and Stephen's day-long urban wanderings, *Proteus* also displays an intellectualized version of that interpenetration of space and time which Robert Foulke points out as being always more close and natural in life at sea than in many other fields of human experience⁴³. But in this whole episode the strand is the chronotope of a cultural geography in which the theme of mutability becomes the epitome of a confrontation with the protean, displaced identity of a culture and a nation, Ireland, and of European civilization at large, which is alluded to when Stephen dwells on the colonial history of Ireland: «Famine, plague and slaughters. Their

blood is in me, their lusts my waves»⁴⁴. Such displaced, violated identity is thus metaphorically foregrounded by the sea-shore inscribed with signatures that are findings, rejections, floating organic matter, debris. So that the shore is – once again – also the locus where Stephen strives to take control of a space that is as widely and mysteriously inscribed with traces of the history and the life of the world he comes from, as an archive of the earth. Imagining himself to be treading on «Human shells»⁴⁵ Stephen utters the wonderful, poetic line «These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here»⁴⁶. But, in staging Dedalus' fight with the Proteus of the intellect, Joyce sets the beach as a paradigmatic stage of the coexistence of a natural and a historical time, since, «a site that cannot be altered by force preserves no trace of human history: sand and water erase any sign, just as they frustrate any design.»⁴⁷. Traditionally, this self-effacing nature of the morphology of the shore also pertains to the sea, barren and boundless, and bearing no permanent trace of human activities upon it⁴⁸. And *Ulysses* can be said to chart two contrasting configurations of the sea as a symbol of historical entrapment and a mythical/natural conception of it as a the originating principle of life, respectively associated with Stephen and the cold, «wine-dark» Irish sea, and to Bloom's more benign Mediterranean one⁴⁹.

Incidentally, Joyce's valorization of the beach or strand as a site of immense conceptual resonance was taken up by many writers in 20th century Irish fiction and poetry. Suffice it to mention titles such as Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, Neil Jordan's *Sunrise with Seamonster*, Bernard MacLaverty's *Gracenames*, John Banville's *The Sea* to realize how the sea-shore trope, with the motifs of the harshness and the progressive erosion of the coastline, and the transformative and restorative power of the sea, has continued to permeate Irish fictional imagery in its metaphoric figurations of family ties, the fight for freedom and creativity, traumatic family histories and the weight of the historical past.

To conclude with a very recent text, I will go back to the English Sea, once more departing from the concept of the beach as a chronotope or productive standpoint from which to explore the literary trope of *Dover Beach* in *On Chesil Beach* by Ian McEwan (2007). As Cohen reminds us, in fact, chronotopes are not effective in the single work, but rather within a tradition or a literary field, with changing degrees of intensity⁵⁰. And, speaking of tradition, it is widely acknowledged that, of all contemporary British novelists, Ian McEwan is probably the most sophisticated practitioner of a post/modernist structural intertextuality, aimed at an uninterrupted interrogation and reviving of the Canon. Thus, even though his use of Arnold's famous poem differs significantly in *Saturday* (2005) and in *On Chesil Beach*, it reasserts the renewed centrality of this ubiquitously anthologized text in the cultural imagery of late 20th, early 21st century English literature especially after the events of 9/11, and the inherent semantic relevance of the sea-shore trope. *Dover Beach* features in *Saturday* (2005) as the element that triggers off an unexpected turn in the plot⁵¹, and as the metaphoric

catalyst of a cultural critique, rather than as an allusion to cultural geography. Conversely, in *On Chesil Beach* (2007) Matthew Arnold's text (which is considered to have been written during Arnold's honeymoon) is directly and doubly alluded to in its spatial and cultural topography, in the brooding suggestiveness of the imagery, and, finally, in the implicit acknowledgement of the failed bond of love and loyalty in the final address. *On Chesil Beach* tells the story of the disastrous wedding night of a young, educated and inexperienced English couple in 1962, on the eve of a «revolution» which would deeply affect social mores. Despite their being truly in love, their great expectations miserably flounder on their honeymoon night in Dorset, by the famous Chesil Beach, when their first attempt at sexual intercourse ends in disaster, due to Edward's eager inexperience and Florence's deep-rooted sexual anxieties. The (modernist) structural device of the biographical shrinking of a life into a one-day narrative is sidelined by the use of prolepsis and flashbacks on the part of an omniscient narrator, in what reads like a perfectly devised – but existentially botched – interweaving of History and histories, which, once again, resorts to the sea-shore as a powerful symbolic construction.

Mc Ewan skillfully weaves a story which envelopes the characters within a thwarted romance whose ultimate, «gleaming» suggestiveness is that of a discovery of the inadequacy of the self, in which the beach is the intertextually resonant stage for the abortive attempt to seek shelter from the precariousness and fragility of identity in a changing world, one in which the young, inexperienced protagonists do not yet fully belong, even though they neither of them feel at home in the old world of repressed, respectable England.

Mc Ewan's valorization of the shore imagery and trope, built-in as it is in his instrumental use of the intertextuality of *Dover Beach*, can be approached as a specific aspect of an increasing tendency in contemporary Anglophone fiction of recent years to figure the sea as a narrative constituent and, above all, as fulfilling «a vital function which is directly related to contemporaneous concerns»⁵². In the novella, the beach setting provides the semantics for what reads as a negative epiphany, a painful awareness of the unachievable harmony between personal histories and History as such, an opposition, in fact, which is expanded by «a third natural dimension, namely that of “natural” time»⁵³, which is supremely indifferent to the plight of the individual.

Thus Edward, «troubled by the call of the beach»⁵⁴, becomes aware of the impossibility of an expanded empathy with the world he is inhabiting in that crucial contingency:

The sound of waves collapsing onto the shore at regular intervals broke in on his thoughts, as though suddenly switched on, and filled him with weariness; the relentless laws and processes of the physical world, of moon and tides, in which he generally took little interest, were not remotely altered by his situation. This over-obvious fact was too harsh. How could he get by, alone and unsupported? And how could he go down and face her on the beach, where he guessed she must be?⁵⁵

The beach in *On Chesil Beach* is the setting of both the climactic scene and of the closing image: in the former, Florence flees their botched lovemaking to reach the beach for shelter, and in the latter, evoked in melancholy retrospect by Edward forty years later, she is seen walking away for ever, into the distance along the shore, into the resonant, emotional closure which conflates images of singleness and uniformity:

This is how the course of an entire life can be changed – by doing nothing. On Chesil Beach he could have called out to Florence, he could have gone after her (...) Instead, he stood in cold and righteous silence in the summer's dusk, watching her hurry along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves, until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light.⁵⁶

The whole course of a life, of two lives, in fact, is thus retrospectively figured as displaced on the indifferent, effacing space of that famous shore which echoes and replicates Arnold's «darkling plain». Individual histories, History and the progress of Nature coalesce, once again, within the culturally inscribed space of the beach, where shingle forms an endless road, though with no ends and without an aim.

- J. ROSTECK, who fits in well in this research with her recent *Sealing through the Past. Postmodern Histories and the Maritime Metaphor in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2011, refers to Steve Mentz's identification of the outset of a "maritime turn" with the publication of Alain Corbin's celebrated *Le Territoire du Vide* in 1988 (p.25). Mentz also defines the characteristics of a "Blue Cultural Studies" (and of another form of maritime studies called "New Thalassology") informed by the modern discourses of globalization, postcolonialism, environmentalism, ecocriticism etc. which can change our interpretation of early modern English literature. S. Mentz, *Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature*, in "Literature Compass", vol 6, Issue 5, pp. 997-1013, p.997.
- 2 M. COHEN, "The Chronotopes of the Sea". In *The Novel*, ed. F. Moretti. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, 1:2, p. 647-666, p. 649.
- 3 Ivi, p. 680
- 4 A. CORBIN, *The Lure of the Sea. The discovery of the seaside 1750-1840*, translated by J. Phelps, London, Polity Press, 1994, repr. London, Penguin, 1995, p. 53.
- 5 ("The Invention of the Sea: the Western World and the lure of the shore"), Venezia, Marsilio, 1990.
- 6 B. KLEIN, *Introduction: Britain and the Sea*, in *Fictions of the Sea: critical perspectives on the Ocean in British literature and culture*, London, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 1-12; pp.2-3.
- 7 A similar transition from the visual primacy of the "ineluctable modality of the visible" to the acoustic command of the sensory experience of the shore can be remarked in "Proteus", see further reference.
- 8 The identification of the source has long been contentious, and is mostly referred to *Antigone*.
- 9 A. H. HARRISON, *The cultural production of Matthew Arnold*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2009, p.27.
- 10 HARRISON, *op.cit.*, p. 2.
- 11 HARRISON, *op.cit.*, p. 27.
- 12 W. SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*, Act IV, sc. 4, 20-22.
- 13 A. CORBIN, *op.cit.*, p. 107-8.
- 14 A. CORBIN, *op.cit.*, p. 163-4.
- 15 M. COHEN, "The Chronotopes of the sea", *cit.*, p. 661.
- 16 M. Fraser, *In Stevenson's Samoa*, London, 1895, p. 124, quoted in R. Jolly, *Stevenson's 'Sterling Domesticating Fiction': "The Beach of Falesá"*, "The Review of English Studies", New Series, vol. 50, No.200 (Nov. 1999), pp. 463-482, note n. 4, p. 465.
- 17 Note n.1 (p.303) to Stevenson's germane short story *The Ebb Tide* (1893): «in the telling South Sea phrase, these three men were on the beach. Common calamity had brought them acquainted». In Stevenson R.L., *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories*, London, Penguin, 1979, p. 174.
- 18 R. Jolly, *op. cit.*, p. 463 and *passim*.
- 19 «About six miles up the coast there is a sheltered cove they call Fanga-anaana – 'the haven full of caves' I've seen it from the sea myself, as near as I could get my boys to venture in; and it's a little strip of yellow and, black cliffs overhang it, full of the black mouths of caves.» Stevenson, *The beach, of Falesá*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
- 20 A. CORBIN, *op. cit.*, p. 168.
- 21 B. KLEIN, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- 22 M. Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 3; p. 10.
- 23 A. CORBIN, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

- 24 See H. BLUMENBERG, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1997 (1979).
- 25 See D. BRADSHAW, 'The Purest Ecstasy'. Virginia Woolf and the Sea", in *Modernism on Sea*, ed. Lara FEIGEL and Alexandra HARRIS, Oxford, Peter Lang 2010, pp. 101-115, p.101.
- 26 *Ibidem*.
- 27 V. WOOLF, *Solid Objects*, in *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, ed. by D. BRADSHAW, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 55.
- 28 *Ibidem*.
- 29 Generally speaking, we refer to *things* as objects with which we engage affectively and intellectually. As B. Brown states, "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us (...) The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object that a particular subject-object relation"; *Thing Theory*, "Critical Inquiry" vol.28, n.1 (Autumn 2001), pp. 1-22 p.4.
- 30 V. WOOLF, *Solid Objects*, *op. cit.*, p.54.
- 31 Ivi, p. 55.
- 32 D. BRADSHAW, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
- 33 A motif that also figures prominently in the third chapter of *Ulysses*, as will be pointed out.
- 34 J. JOYCE, *Ulysses*, ed. by H.W. GABLER with W. STEPPE and C. MELCHIOR, New York, Random House, 1986, p. 31, 18-19.
- 35 *Ibidem*, p. 1-3.
- 36 *Ibidem*, p. 10-11
- 37 J. JOYCE, *op. cit.*, p.41, 456-461.
- 38 M. ELLMANN, *Joyce's Noises*, in "Modernism/Modernity" vol. 16, n. 2, April 2009, pp. 383-390, p. 383.
- 39 J. JOYCE, *op. cit.*, p. 40, 413-5.
- 40 Ivi, p. 550, 237-240.
- 41 Of a dual kind, sacred and lay, for it points to both the crucifixion and forecasts the unholy trinity of which Stephen is a member with Bloom, see W.Y. TYNDALL, *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce*, London, Thames and Hudson, (1959) 1970, p. 147.
- 42 A. CORBIN, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- 43 R. FOULKE, *The Sea Voyage Narrative*, New York-London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 9-10.
- 44 J. JOYCE, *op. cit.*, p.38, 306-7.
- 45 Ivi, p. 34, 157.
- 46 J. JOYCE, *op. cit.*, p. 37 288-9.
- 47 Ivi, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
- 48 Ivi, p. 125.
- 49 See R. GEFTER WONDRIK, *The Marine and Watery Element from Dubliners to Ulysses*, in *Anglo-American Modernity and the Mediterranean*, ed. by C. PATEY, G. CIANCI and F. CUOJATI, Milano, Cisalpina, 2006, p. 242.
- 50 M. COHEN, *The Chronotopes of the Sea*, *op. cit.*, p. 660.
- 51 The story centers on one day in the life of a London's neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, whose pleasant Saturday routine is brutally interrupted on a February 2003 morning, while an anti-Iraqi war protest is taking place, when he collides with a violent and disturbed man who then goes away only to return to intrude upon the Perowne family in the evening, when he and threatens his wife and daughter, but is eventually assuaged and emotionally calmed by the pregnant daughter's recitation of *Dover Beach*.
- 52 J. ROSTEK, *op. cit.*, p. 13. Rostek's interesting study focusses on a phenomenon she identifies as distinctive of the 1990s and 2000s, but recalls earlier examples of the tendency to connect postmodern histories with the maritime metaphor in Spark's *The Sea the Sea*, Coetzee's *Foe* and Barnes' *History of the World in 10⁶ Chapters*.
- 53 Ivi, p. 104.
- 54 I. McEWAN, *On Chesil Beach*, London, Vintage, (2007) 2008, p. 19.
- 55 Ivi, p. 131.
- 56 Ivi, p. 166.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ARNOLD, M. *Dover Beach*, in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* vol. II, eds F.KERMODE and J.HOLLANDER, 19, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973 (repr.) p. 1379-80.
- H.BLUMENBERG, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1997 (1979).
- D.BRADSHAW, 'The Purest Ecstasy'. *Virginia Woolf and the Sea*, in *Modernism on Sea*, ed. Lara FEIGEL and Alexandra HARRIS, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 101-115.
- B.BROWN, *Thing Theory*, "Critical Inquiry" vol. 28, n.1 (Autumn 2001), pp. 1-22.
- A.CORBIN, *Le Territoire du Vide*, Paris, Aubier, 1988; English translation: *The Lure of the Sea*. The discovery of the seaside 1750-1840, transl. by J. Phelps, London, Penguin, 1995.
- R.FOULKE, *The Sea Voyage Narrative*, New York-London, Routledge, 2002.
- M. COHEN, "The Chronotopes of the Sea". In *The Novel*, ed. Franco MORETTI. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006, 1:2, pp. 678-688.
- , *The Novel and the Sea*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010.
- T.S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, London, Faber, 2002.
- M.ELLMANN, *Joyce's Noises*, in "Modernism/Modernity" vol. 16, n. 2, April 2009, pp. 383-390.
- A. H. HARRISON, *The cultural production of Matthew Arnold*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2009.
- J.JOYCE, *Ulysses*, ed. by H.W.GABLER with W.STEPPE and C.MELCHIOR, New York, Random House, 1986
- B.KLEIN, "Introduction: Britain and the Sea", in *Fictions of the Sea: critical perspectives on the Ocean in British literature and culture*, London, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 1-12.
- R.JOLLY, *Stevenson's 'Sterling Domesticating Fiction': 'The Beach of Falesá'*, "The Review of English Studies", New Series, vol. 50, No.200 (Nov. 1999), pp. 463-482.
- I. McEWAN, *On Chesil Beach*, London, J. Cape, 2007.
- , *Saturday*, London, J. Cape, 2005.
- S. MENTZ, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature", in *Literature Compass*, vol 6, Issue 5, pp. 997-1013.
- PECK, John, *Maritime Fictions*, London-New York, Routledge 2002.
- J. ROSTECK, *Sealing through the Past. Postmodern Histories and the Maritime Metaphor in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2011.
- R. L. STEVENSON, *The Beach of Falesá*, in: STEVENSON R. L., *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories*, London, Penguin, 1979.
- , "The Ebb Tide", in: STEVENSON R. L., *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories*, London, Penguin, 1979.
- W.Y. TYNDALL, *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce*, London, Tames and Hudson, (1959) 1970.
- V. WOOLF, "Solid Objects", in *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, ed. by D.BRADSHAW, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.