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Oceanic Studies and the Gothic Deep

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Abstract

In a recent edition of *Atlantic Studies*, Hester Blum outlined the methodological approaches appropriate to the emergent field of ‘oceanic studies’, arguing that such work should prioritise the oceans’ material conditions, its ‘nonhuman scale and depth’ and ‘multi-dimensional flux’. Our aims in this essay are twofold: to consider the implications oceanic studies has for scholars of the Gothic while also considering the ways in which there is already a decidedly Gothic dimension of a critical framework championing ‘nonhuman scale and depth’ and ‘multi-dimensional flux’. The literary analysis for this essay is rooted in a range of Gothic sea poetry. The poems’ explorations of depth, we argue, asserts the prominence and preeminence of the uncanny nonhuman forms inhabiting the ocean, and that the deep is a site haunted by the accumulation of history, in which past blends with present, and where spatiality and temporality become unmoored from and exceed their traditional (or terrestrial) qualities.

Keywords: Gothic, oceanic studies, the deep, Edgar Allan Poe, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, William Hope Hodgson

‘Oh, horror upon horror! –’, writes one of Edgar Allan Poe’s southbound seafarers, ‘we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool – and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering – oh God! And – going down!’¹ Such are the final words inscribed by the narrator of ‘MS. Found in a Bottle’ (1833), a tale which charts a catastrophic voyage aboard a ghostly ship as it sails into a whirlpool in the vicinity of the South Pole. As the ship approaches the whirlpool the narrative begins to break down – signalled by the increasingly fractured utterances separated by dashes – until it becomes impossible for the writer to continue writing: the text cannot follow the subject into the oceanic depths. This ending echoes what much recent scholarship on oceanic culture and literature has drawn attention to: a tendency to elide the depth of the ocean in discussions of its literary, political or cultural significance, treating the ocean primarily as surface.

In recent years, scholars of ‘oceanic studies’ and ‘the New Thalassology’ have sought both to foreground the lived experience of the sea and to place the ocean itself back at the heart of studies of maritime life. Hester Blum has persuasively argued that we ought to take ‘the oceans’ nonhuman scale and depth as a first critical position and principle’, thereby suggesting a critical framework which foregrounds the site-specific qualities of this space and which acknowledges the ways in which human modes of living are fundamentally changed by the oceanic dimensions of life at sea – having to adapt, for instance, to being on water, an unstable medium that has depth as well as breadth.² Philip E. Steinberg argues that there yet remains a tendency to neglect the ocean’s depth, rendering the ocean oddly flat, a surface upon which or over which the work of culture occurs – a feature of maritime studies that may, in part, be compounded by attention to a lived experience of the ocean that is

fundamentally anthropocentric (and so surface-bound) in scope. '[H]uman encounters with the sea', Steinberg argues, 'are, of necessity, distanced and partial'; partial encounters generate epistemological 'gaps', 'as the unrepresentable becomes the unacknowledged and the unacknowledged becomes the unthinkable.'³

The deep, in particular, is a space that exceeds common experience of the ocean and yet remains a fundamental dimension of almost every engagement with this space, for taking to sea involves putting oneself in direct proximity to its depth. As Steinberg implies, the strange absence of the depths from critical thought is a result of a process that makes the deep even deeper, as it slips from that which we can't represent to that which we can't even think about. It is, we argue, foremost through imaginative and literary confrontations with this elusive space that we find efforts to approach an understanding of the depths and, moreover, of why they present such a challenge to the human imagination, seafarer or otherwise.

Gothic Oceanic Studies

Our aims in this current essay are twofold: it is our intention to consider the implications oceanic studies has for Gothic scholarship, while also considering the ways in which there is already a decidedly Gothic dimension to the critical frameworks championed by those scholars working broadly under the banner of oceanic studies. To this end, we read a number of Gothic texts through the lens offered by oceanic studies, focusing specifically on Gothic sea poetry, for the ways in which this writing can respond to the ocean not simply through narrative subject matter but through its form; here, metre, rhythm, and rhyme become efforts to reflect or attempts to inhabit the rhythmic instability and spatial disorientation of the ocean's waves, winds, tides, and storms.⁴ We take for key texts poems which attempt to articulate the unknown or inaccessible depths of the ocean: Edgar Allan Poe's 'The City in the Sea' (1845), Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 'The Kraken' (1830), and a number of William Hope Hodgson's sea poems first published in the 1920s. Finally, we will turn our attention to the ways that a Gothic deep can be seen in poetry that is not traditionally considered Gothic, clarifying our earlier assertion that to think about oceanic depths is to already be thinking in Gothic terms.

It is our contention that these poems assert the prominence and preeminence of the uncanny nonhuman forms that inhabit the oceans' depths while searching for a language in which such things and their oceanic domains might be contained, even as the ocean itself resists such containment. For our poets, the deep is a space in which spatiality and temporality become unmoored from and exceed their traditional (or terrestrial) qualities. Further, they suggest that the deep is the space in which the history of the ocean accumulates: if the ocean is frequently seen as a space whose changeable waters erase the signs of the activity that takes place upon its surface, then this poetry imagines the deep as a space of greater permanence, a – frequently transformative – receptacle for material objects, challenging to the possibility of ever traversing a surface without history.⁵ In its submerged and hidden condition, however, this is a history encountered foremost through its power to haunt, from the suggestions of its presence.

In arguing that there is something Gothic already intrinsic to oceanic studies, we might pick up on the decidedly Gothic register of Blum's suggestion that 'modes of oceanic thought' are 'predicated on relations whose unfixed, ungraspable contours are ever in

multidimensional flux.’⁶ This posits a way of thinking that embraces instability, always in the process of thinking and never resolved. To write and to read the oceanic is to acknowledge that a fixed, final signified is not simply an inadequate vessel for inscribing the sea, but fundamentally misrepresents it. Instead, language most closely approximates the sea when sensitive to such things as the apparent disjunction and invisible boundary between the furious waves of a storm-tossed surface and the seemingly serene depths; when, that is, language embraces the sea’s multiplicity and ‘ungraspable’ qualities – qualities aligning it with ways of speaking about that keystone of Gothic thought, the uncanny. Such attributes are central to the very nature of Gothic writing itself.

‘Gothic writing’, argues Robert Miles, ‘is “disjunctive,” fragmentary, inchoate, so that, as in the case of fantasy, theory is required to sound the Gothic’s deep structure in order to render the surface froth comprehensible.’⁷ We have here a description of ways to comprehend the Gothic, and writing processes more widely, that we might well term oceanic: the tumultuous surface of melodramatic signifiers exists as the visible manifestation of an unseen (perhaps unconscious) realm which gives shape to and drives that surface. We might also return to Steinberg’s terms: ‘unrepresentable’, ‘unacknowledged’, ‘unthinkable’. Of all literary modes, it is the Gothic that is most fundamentally concerned with making visible the unrepresentable, unacknowledged, and unthinkable, of making present what is absent. And if the similarities being identified here between the oceanic and the Gothic are at heart symbolic, it is nonetheless a productive avenue of enquiry if we are considering not simply the way in which Gothic poetry characterises the oceanic deep, and to what end, but also the very Gothic quality of human conceptions of the deep itself. It is to Poe’s intermingling surfaces and deeps that we turn first.

The Rising Deep

Poe’s work is shot through with imaginary sea voyages and the symbolism of the ocean.⁸ In his prose tales, Poe’s seas are often surfaces whose crossing signals a transition between worlds and whose penetration prompts the abrupt expiry of the human, the narrative, the writer, or some fantastic combination of the above, leaving the depths unfathomed. For Tyler Roeger, Poe’s deep is a site that exceeds human comprehension, where meaning can ‘always slip farther into obscurity’.⁹ It is our contention that Poe’s depths are frightening not simply for how they lurk threateningly beneath the surface, but for how they inflect our understanding of surface itself: if the depths are dangerous, the lack of a clear distinction between surface and depth makes the surface dangerous too. This also returns us to the idea that the sea is a space of unease not simply because its own fluid multi-dimensionality is itself unstable and unfixed, thereby rendering one’s own physical position precarious, but because the ocean prompts modes of thought that are also unstable and unfixed, rendering one’s mental processes precarious too.

It is by turning to Poe’s poetry that we move into the deep. ‘The City in the Sea’ offers his most extensive meditation on the spatial disruption caused by the ocean’s depths. The city, presided over by Death, stands ‘alone / Far down within the dim West’; its ‘shrines and palaces and towers [...] / Resemble nothing that is ours’, and it is pervaded by a stillness that renders its sea ‘hideously serene’.¹⁰ Moreover, ‘The City in the Sea’ suggests a further reason

why the oceanic deep might be worth worrying about: things do not necessarily ‘slip farther into obscurity’ in this abyss, rather they stream upwards out of it:

No rays from the holy heaven come down
[...]
But light from out the lurid sea
Streams up the turrets silently[.] (12-15)

And yet the city is not quite properly submerged. The speaker explains that, in this city, ‘open fanes and gaping graves / Yawn level with the luminous waves’ (30-31), but the title announces the city’s presence ‘in’ the sea – rather than the more familiar ‘at sea’ or ‘on the sea’.¹¹ Simultaneously ‘in’ and ‘on’ the sea, the city exists precariously at the ocean’s surface not despite the depths but because of the spatial disorientation the depths invite.

Moreover, Poe’s illuminated, phosphorescent depths offer a way of reading the sea that is not top-down, but rather bottom-up, privileging the seascape’s ‘deep structure’ in order to render the ‘surface froth’ comprehensible. In this instance, in the absence of movement and rippling waves, the vision is of a sea unmarked and ‘hideously serene’, whose architecture sits outside familiar frames of reference (‘Resembl[ing] nothing that is ours’). This, too, is filtered through the process of inversion and blending that makes depths and surfaces inextricable from one another. To reiterate: the phosphorescent light might stream up from the sea, but the ‘gaily-jeweled dead’ (34) who lie in ‘open fanes and gaping graves’ lie not – as may be supposed – on the seafloor, but ‘level with the luminous waves’. Streaming upwards to illuminate the dead, the depths make visible what would otherwise be concealed within them; and what is concealed within them is the sea’s history, the bodies of those who have died at sea. The final stanza announces a countermovement:

But lo, a stir is in the air!
The wave – there is a movement there!
[...]
And when, amid no earthly moans,
Down, down that town shall settle hence,
Hell, rising from a thousand thrones,
Shall do it reverence. (42-53)

This countermovement is twofold: first, in the arrival of oceanic movement; second, in the sinking of the city, itself counterbalanced by the rising of hell. Thus, the restoration of movement restores also a sense of the sea’s place and time. The place, unfortunately, is hell; the time, seemingly, the apocalypse. The return of the sea’s spatial and temporal positioning, then, heralds, simultaneously, the obliteration of such things as time and history.

We would like, finally, to think about this poem’s intertextuality, and it is to Shakespeare that Poe directs us, via his description of the sea, where

[...] not the riches there that lie
In each idol’s diamond eye –

Not the gaily-jeweled dead
Tempt the waters from their bed (32-35)

This recalls Clarence's dream of the deep in *Richard III*, during which he sees '[i]nestimable stones, unvalued jewels':

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[.]¹²

Clarence further explains that 'often did I strive / To yield the ghost; but still the envious flood / Stopped in my soul' (1.4.36-38). The allusion, on the one hand, reiterates the displacement of the human by the nonhuman in the ocean's depths, recalling as it does a Shakespearean 'sea-change' through which the mutable human body is transfigured into the more enduring material of precious stones; the shared insistence on the destruction of the eyes suggests also the illicit nature of a vision of these depths. On the other hand, the connection further complicates the poem's sense of temporality: in the dream-depths, Clarence inhabits a death that is not quite death, entering a period of suspended time wherein, to his distress, he cannot empty his body of his soul. In the historical accumulation of the deep, the present moment is agonisingly extended, in a palimpsestic gathering of present upon present where nothing is ever truly past. Only, as we see in Poe and will see again below, when this historical depth is flattened out upon its rising to the surface does this temporal suspension come to an end, via an unsustainable collapsing of depth and surface, past and present.

An Oceanic Sonnet

Turning to Tennyson's 'The Kraken', we turn from one existence hanging in uneasy balance between endless life and lifeless annihilation to another:

Below the thunders of the upper deep;
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee
About his shadowy sides: above him swell
Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;
And far away into the sickly light,
From many a wondrous grot and secret cell
Unnumbered and enormous polypi
Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.
There hath he lain for ages and will lie
Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep,
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;
Then once by man and angels to be seen,

In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.¹³

The poem shares a number of concerns with Poe's, most overtly in its preoccupation with disoriented spatiality, the eerie lighting of the depths, and its apocalyptic final moments as the deep rises. For our current purposes, however, we wish to explore further the implications of confronting the famously evasive body that slumbers in Tennyson's 'abysmal sea'.

To think about the Kraken's body is to recall the void at the centre of this poem: the Kraken himself remains largely unrepresented, or, recalling Steinberg, 'unrepresentable', in this text. This is due less, however, to a failure of the speaker's descriptive powers and inability to 'think' on the depths, and more precisely to do with the unapproachable quality of the Kraken himself: as he sleeps an 'uninvaded sleep' and 'sunlights flee / About his shadowy sides', the creature's psychic impenetrability prompts a physical impenetrability. Further, Tennyson provides a detailed description of the Kraken's marine environment, encompassing him on all sides, without quite ever reaching the titular creature; the Kraken is what yet remains to be described, he is what is implied in this description while remaining unspoken. The Kraken is excess within the depths, is the epistemological 'gap' glimpsed only partially, and is Christopher Ricks' 'unimaginably alien subject'.¹⁴

And yet, in some sense, we *do* see the Kraken: we are impressed by a sense of the Kraken's form as he is apparently reflected in the other creatures and features of the deep. We see his tentacles in the 'giant arms' of the '[w]innow[ing]' polypi, and as he 'batten[s] upon huge seaworms' it is not simply for their nutritional value, but as a means of lending comprehensible form to the creature; the 'slumbering green', too, incorporates the possibility that the sleep originating with the Kraken in line three has been transposed onto the inanimate matter of the sea by line ten. Even the sonnet itself has a hand in this process, as it oozes beyond its traditional bounds into a fifteenth, alexandrine line, reflecting both the instability of the sea and the amorphous quality of the Kraken: Tennyson's creature exists somewhere in the extra line and additional iamb which shouldn't, properly speaking, be there in the first place. More implication than corporeal body, the Kraken exists primarily as an idea.¹⁵ It is something unembodied *in* the depths but which might be read as a figure *for* these depths, a figure whose existence is revealed by taking in a vision of the deep *in toto*. The 'Kraken' is thus both a singular vision of the deep and the (animate and inanimate) multiplicities that make up this vision.¹⁶ Again, there is ambiguity over whether we are encountering psychic or physical phenomena here – or whether, as seems to be the case, we are mistaken in our efforts to think in these binary terms: the Kraken incorporates and confuses our sense of both, while forms and phenomena remain unfixed, *en proces*.

If Poe has offered a way of reading the ocean, Tennyson offers a way of seeing or thinking about the ocean that is predicated on a recognition of the ocean's 'multidimensionality' (to revisit Blum's term), and on the dissolution of such oppositions as body and soul, surface and interiority. Returning to our comments on writing processes, and acknowledging the Kraken as a figure for the deep, Tennyson replicates, through his seascape, the features of Gothic writing identified by Miles. The image of the deep *par excellence* in this poem is submerged beneath Tennyson's writing, which draws the depths out but never directly addresses them – 'surface froth' gesturing towards a 'deep[er] structure'. Moreover, it is the deep driving this process: the surface – the signifiers – do not delimit the deep; rather, as we suggest above, it

is the thing submerged beneath this text that shapes the poem's language and form – an oceanic sonnet stretching out the length and rhyme scheme of the familiar, terrestrial sonnet. To read these depths otherwise is to ignore the warning latent in the poem's final lines, where the rising of the Kraken signals a destructive flattening out of the depths, to once more foreground surface at the expense of its constitutive opposite with which it yet continually blends.

Voices from the Dead

If William Hope Hodgson is now known at all, it is often as a writer who was also a sailor. His relationship with the sea was deeply ambivalent, veering between fascination and fear, even hatred, of the marine environment and sailing life; further, Jane Frank suggests the sea was both a source of inspiration for Hodgson and a space that complemented and fostered his 'unconventional thinking'.¹⁷ Hodgson's ambivalence comes across particularly in a number of his supernatural prose works, notably *The Ghost Pirates* (1909), *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* (1907) and 'The Mystery of the Derelict' (1907), but it is his poetry with which we are concerned here. The poetry appeared in two small volumes, *The Calling of the Sea* and *The Voice of the Ocean*, both published posthumously and subsequently collected together in *Poems of the Sea* (1977), and provides a singular perspective on the deep.

To take a first example from among the many that might be considered relevant, 'Thou Living Sea' enacts a strange trajectory. Beginning from a kind of conspectus –

Thou broad, great, living sea;
Great in thy boundless Spread;
With many tongues thy voices speak to me,
With voices from the dead.¹⁸

– Hodgson returns at the end to a more or less reassuring picture of a sea that will 'take me in thine arms when I have passed, / And usher me above' (51-52); but in between we are treated to a far more disturbing portrayal of the depths that lurk below the 'golden glory' and the 'wat'ry green' (9, 11):

Yet ever speaks the gloom
That lurks beneath the waves;
And whisperings of mystery and doom
Rise ghostly from thy graves.

The deepness of thy vasts
Fills my poor soul with fright;
Fills me with fearfulness; O dreadful vasts!
O caverns of the night! (13-20)

Always a poet in danger of the repetitive, Hodgson seems here precisely to enact the difficulties faced by language when attempting to encounter and render the frightening possibilities of the vertical. There is here a double movement: the sense of 'deepness' that

afflicts the uncertain mariner, all but overcome with premonitions of the impossibility of conceiving of what lies beneath him, is matched by an equal anxiety as to what may return from those depths.

What may return is, of course, death: here the thanatic and the thalassic are ‘deeply’, one might even say primitively, entwined. The ocean’s depth provides a foretaste of death, before which connected language is always in danger of breaking down; all that is left is the bare exclamation. A Freudian notion of the all-embracing nature of the oceanic is replaced by a fear of the ‘return to the lonesome ocean’, ‘at the bottom of everything’, as though this has always been the promised fate.¹⁹ Later, ‘Thou Living Sea’ turns to a different topology of the depths, one familiar from so much maritime literature, namely the lure and danger of hidden treasure:

At times I’ve heard thee speak
Of unknown shining gold;
Of treasures in thy depths that none shall seek;
And wonderland untold. (33-36)

The problem here is the problem of the secret: it is all very well to have heard the sea speak, but what it speaks nevertheless remains, in a different sense, ‘untold’. The ‘siren voice’ of the ocean is not to be trusted: it may appear to impart knowledge – just as does the voice of the grave in a significant strand of mid-eighteenth-century poetry – but this ‘knowledge’ is simultaneously ‘unknown’. Although we can – and probably must – read this at a symbolic level, nonetheless these ‘depths’ are not merely symbolic; they are also those absolute depths from which no treasure may be recovered, where all knowledge is subject to a dissolution, a rotting away that performs a kind of reverse alchemy whereby apparent gold becomes reduced back to a base metal, rusted and bedecked with all the apparatus of horror that characterises the derelict vessels of so many of Hodgson’s sea stories.

In ‘The Morning Lands’, we encounter a different kind of Gothic phantasmagoria:

I saw the coasts of the unknown world
(Showered with the morning dew)
Rise from the sea of night,
With many a wonder-hue empearled,
With many a gem of light;
And from that shore there grew
A faint and distant cry,
Like a wailing spirit’s sigh
That floated through the dawn,
The call of souls unborn,
Waiting behind the dim array
Of cliffs that gird the day.²⁰

Here something rises from the depths, to be sure; but what rises is a curious travesty, perhaps even a parody, of the coast, of the safe haven for which mariners might yearn. For this coast

which is rising before the unaccustomed eye is not a physical coast. Instead there is a different realm, one composed of 'spirits' and of 'souls unborn', as though the depths of the ocean constitute not merely a grave but also a limbo, a place where the unhoused may find temporary shelter, and where souls might reside before they emerge (perhaps dripping) into the light.

There is a voice, or perhaps many voices, here; and this motif is taken further in 'The Voice of the Ocean', where, aboard a 'great steamer', people 'with much small talk / Skimmed o'er the surface of the Sea of Thought, / Having no thought of drowning in its depths / Through very lack of knowledge that 'twas deep'.²¹ Here the 'small talk' is contrasted with such speech, such language – unavailable to man, and perhaps 'strange speech' at that – that might emanate from the depths. But the 'surface' here is uncertain: is it the surface of the ocean, forever threatened by depth, or is it the surface of thought itself, similarly threatened by a different kind of knowledge which is perhaps 'knowledge's other', a realm that cannot, and should not, be known?

The poem proceeds into a lengthy philosophico-theological conversation, yet Hodgson has set the scene: all of these rivalries for knowledge are trivial compared to the vastness of the deep upon which, unaware, they sit. In the poem there are many voices, and some of them even claim to have seen God; yet all of this is relativised to mere froth upon the surface, for in the end, we might say, there is only one voice, the voice of the ocean, which bids us to a further and deeper understanding that can only be vouchsafed in the form of our death. What the depths seem to promise is not merely a forgetting but a final merging, a change of form into something which is mapless, chartless, immune from the petty attempts of humanity to provide a trajectory through the limitless. The depths know nothing, and they know everything; the voice of the ocean speaks, and what it says is this:

Thou, who dost love me so, I cannot tell,
Save that it seems to me thy very love
Shall show thy soul to me amid the mists:
Then shall I take thee to my heart till thou
Art comforted enough to go to God.
Ah! Then, indeed, thou shalt begin to learn
That love as mine and thine is cold as death,
Beside the passion that god has for souls! (241-249)

The thinking is contorted, but seems to indicate a form of love (of the depths) which provides a counterpart to that of God: not a Satanic shape of desire, but a love as 'cold as death', something which will be revealed as ultimately inhuman when the inevitable comparison with the love of God arises. The depths provide contrast and a kind of testing-ground: the poem suggests it is through the experience of the drowning that we may be able to savour to the utmost the comfort of resurrection, and thus it is the deep that shows us the final limit of what the human can endure, or at least survive.

Later in the poem, the voice of the ocean comes to provide the final corrective to religious terrors of the afterlife; in a sense, in a highly Gothic poem, it is the ocean that gives us, perhaps surprisingly, a non-Gothic perspective. The soul has been screaming and weeping in

the face of the prospect of endless torture, but when eventually, as after indeed a ‘dark night of the soul’, ‘silence reigned’, the ocean speaks again, its ‘low voice’ sounding ‘most solemnly across the dark’,

Rising, wailing, strange, solemn,
Sad, inhuman – yet all loving,
Trailing upward from the deep,
Singing from a cold abyss,
Crying from a clouded gloom [...] (414-419)

What the ocean says at this point is less important than the characterisation of the ‘low voice’ itself, the attempt to produce a speech, a language. In stark contrast to the fractured language which has previously characterised the souls in torment, the voice of the ocean is mellifluous, oratorical yet *sotto voce*, ‘inhuman’ yet ‘loving’, a voice – perhaps an internal voice – that can transcend, through its knowledge of the depths where all humanity runs out or drains away, petty distinctions of morality. Here all is cold, terminally cold; yet it is only in this cold light, where terrible fears are experienced, that fear itself can be excised. This, we may say, constitutes Hodgson’s unique contribution to sea poetry, to the Gothic ‘voice of the sea’.

We would like to conclude this exploration of the Gothic deep by referring to some poems which, although they have not usually been considered as Gothic, demonstrate a conception of the deep that partakes of the Gothic modes of thought outlined above. We will restrict ourselves to a conclusion largely in the company of the great Caribbean poet Derek Walcott.

In ‘Landfall, Grenada’ (1969), written for his friend ‘Robert Head, Mariner’, Walcott writes that the seas’ ‘moods / Held no mythology for you, it was a working place / Of tonnage and ruled stars’, and this may be true; but it does not stop him from addressing the mariner as ‘[d]eep friend’, from whom he has much to learn about ‘ease’ and ‘landfall going’.²² Similarly in ‘The Estranging Sea’ (1973), although the controlling motif is the Middle Passage, ‘the howls / Of all the races that crossed the water’, there are also, perhaps inevitably, moments that remind us of the deep that underlies those terror-stricken surfaces, as when we encounter

[...] the academics crouched like rats
listening to tambourines
jackals and rodents feathering their holes
hoarding the sea-glass of their ancestors’ eyes,
sea-lice, sea-parasites on the ancestral sea-wrack
whose god is history.²³

Or there are moments when we see the history of all those peoples who have put to sea, sometimes of their own volition, more often not, ‘towards the roar of waters’, ignorant of the depths.

‘The Sea is History’ (1979) is, as much as anything else, a catalogue of that which has become, and remains, locked up in the deep. Beside this immense power, all else is trumpery:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.²⁴

What might have seemed clear on land, replete as it is with monuments, memorials, buildings that remind us of a stable past, has no relevance when it comes to the deeps that separate us – and in this case ‘us’ is the enslaved, the transplanted. Here, consummately, the horizontal is replaced by the vertical: the idea that it is possible to plot a simple course across a surface – fatal to many a mariner as this illusion has always been – succumbs to the further truth that all has been buried at sea, that the deep is the receptacle of our longings, the unhoused housing of our past.

Walcott’s deep is perhaps not a Gothic deep in the most obvious sense, but it does have a clear bearing on the notion of the Gothic as a rewriting of history. ‘The Sea is History’ does not quite do what it claims: more accurately this sea is the ‘Death of History’, as it is into the sea that the relics of past civilisations are cast, as are the bodies of the suffering survivors of terrestrial rack and ruin.

What language, what registers of speech, can survive the deep? Perhaps a language that distorts syntax, or which has forgotten to obey the rules, or which has come at a different and estranged relation between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, the language of a lifelong coast-dweller fascinated by the sea, the poet W. S. Graham:

Let me all ways from the deep heart
Drowned under behind my brow so ever
Stormed with other wandering, speak
Up famous fathoms well over strongly
The pacing whitehaired kingdoms of the sea.²⁵

Here, indeed, is the deep; and here too is the Gothic if we are to think of it as a marine supernatural, for what else are these ‘pacing whitehaired kingdoms of the sea’ but amalgams of the sea-goddesses, the ocean kings, the Neptunes and Poseidons who will outlast us all because they are sunk in the depths, for all our continuing attempts to dredge up their relics.

What we might say the Gothic of the deep tells us is this. It is a mistake to anthropomorphise, or ‘terrestrialise’, the ocean; oceanic studies attests to this. But it would also be a mistake – although possibly of unequal proportions – to suppose that we can tell the story of the deep without including our own imaginings – about what might sink, about what might lie below, about what might eventually rise. We need constantly to remind ourselves that the ocean is its own space; it follows that there is a moral imperative on us to bear witness to our centuries-long and ongoing infringements on and pollution and devastation of this space, as our poets have borne witness to a deep that is fundamentally nonhuman and yet transgressed upon and intimately bound up with humanity’s future prospects. We need always to keep in mind that the ocean is already deeply populated, not only by its natural inhabitants, but also by our own ghosts, our ancestors, the residues of our violences – trash, sunken ships, slaves thrown overboard, hidden treasure – and by the age-old Gothic panoply

of feared and desired monsters – sirens, mermaids, the kraken. So as with the dragons and sea-creatures of early maps, the Gothic comes into a kind of synergy with the deep, representative of the unknown, the uncanny, the secret and the secreted, that which is unavailable for description along the axes of terrestrial language as we customarily understand it, but which nevertheless constantly reminds us of the processes of abjection which attend our dealings with the deep.

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, 'MS. Found in a Bottle', in Thomas Ollive Mabbott (ed.), *Tales and Sketches*, vol. 1: 1831-1842 (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 146.

² Hester Blum, 'Introduction: Oceanic Studies', *Atlantic Studies*, 10.2 (2013), 152.

³ Philip E. Steinberg, 'Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions', *Atlantic Studies*, 10.2 (2013), 156-157.

⁴ For further discussion of the notion that poetry, rather than prose, might best respond to the fluidity of the ocean and plumb its depths, see Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London, Continuum, 2009), pp. 6-13; Hester Blum and Jason Rudy, 'First Person Nautical: Poetry and Play at Sea', *J19*, 1.1 (2013), 189-94.

⁵ To sustain the romantic notion of an 'unmarked' ocean involves some notable cognitive dissonance, given the proliferation of plastics and waste materials now to be found throughout the world's oceans. It is, at least in part, the work of oceanic studies to historicise and demythologise human engagements with the ocean. See Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun (eds.), *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (London, Routledge, 2004); John Mack, *The Sea: A Cultural History* (London, Reaktion Books, 2011); Charlotte Mathieson (ed.), *Sea Narratives: Cultural Responses to the Sea, 1600-Present* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁶ Blum, 'Introduction', 151.

⁷ Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing, 1750-1820: A Genealogy*, 2nd edn (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 1.

⁸ For an introduction to Poe and the sea, see David Dowling, 'The sea', in Kevin J. Hayes (ed.), *Edgar Allan Poe in Context* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 32-40.

⁹ Tyler Roeger, 'The ocean and the urban: Poe's "The Oblong Box"', *Atlantic Studies*, 13.2 (2016), 239.

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The City in the Sea', in Thomas Ollive Mabbott (ed.) *Complete Poems* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. 201-02, ll. 2-3, 6-8, 41. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Line numbers will follow in brackets.

¹¹ Betsy Erkkila also traces how Poe's various titles for this poem alter its subject matter. See 'Perverting the American Renaissance: Poe, Democracy, Critical Theory', in J. Gerald Kennedy and Jerome McGann (eds.), *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture* (Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University Press, 2012), pp. 65-100.

¹² We are indebted to Laurence Publicover for suggesting this connection. William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. E. A. J. Honigsmann, intr. Michael Taylor and Gillian Day (London, Penguin, 1968), 1.4.27, 29-32.

¹³ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'The Kraken', in Christopher Ricks (ed.), *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, rev. edn (London, Routledge, 2007), pp. 17-18.

¹⁴ Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1989), p. 42.

¹⁵ Timothy Peltason reads 'The Kraken' as a 'fable' for the emergence from the subconscious of a poetic consciousness: 'Tennyson's Fables of Emergence', *The Bucknell Review*, 29.2 (1985), 143-70.

¹⁶ For an illuminating discussion of the poem's singular-yet-multiple polypi see Richard Maxwell, 'Unnumbered Polypi', *Victorian Poetry*, 47.1 (2009), 7-23.

¹⁷ See Frank's introduction to William Hope Hodgson, *The Wandering Soul: Glimpses of a Life*, ed. Jane Frank (Hornsea, Tartarus Press, 2005), pp. 1-51.

¹⁸ William Hope Hodgson, 'Thou Living Sea', in *Poems of the Sea* (London, Ferret Fantasy, 1977), p. 20, ll. 1-4. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Line numbers will follow in brackets.

¹⁹ The reference is to the Bright Eyes song 'At the Bottom of Everything', on *I'm Wide Awake It's Morning* (2005); for Freud, see *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), in John Strachy et al (eds.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XXI, 64-65.

²⁰ Hodgson, 'The Morning Lands', in *Poems of the Sea*, p. 35, ll. 1-12.

²¹ Hodgson, 'The Voice of the Ocean', in *Poems of the Sea*, p. 43, ll. 3, 7-10. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Line numbers will follow in brackets.

²² Derek Walcott, 'Landfall, Grenada', in *Collected Poems, 1948-1984* (London, Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 125, ll. 9-11, 21-22.

²³ Walcott, 'The Estranging Sea', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 269-70, XIX.1, ll. 20-25,

²⁴ Walcott, 'The Sea is History', in *Collected Poems*, p. 364, ll. 104.

²⁵ W. S. Graham, 'The White Threshold', in *New Collected Poems* (London, Faber & Faber, 2004), p. 92, ll. 1-5.