



Selections
Spring 2010
Sea Marks

THE
DRAWING
CENTER



Drawn from the Sea

D. Graham Burnett

Alcyonaria is a good-sized subclass of marine invertebrates comprised of some 3,000 individual species most of which would be loosely called “soft corals”—fan-like gorgonians, whip-tailed sea pens, and a mess of sponge-like things that are not sponges at all. The category as a whole is distinguished by the eight-fold symmetry of the individual mini-organisms (“polyps”) out of which the larger colonial structures are composed (not to be confused with the six-fold polyp symmetry of the cousin subclass *Hexacoralia*).

If you were to get interested in these matters, you would very likely find your way to Volume XXXI of one of the truly stupefying scholarly publishing projects of the nineteenth century, Sir C. Wyville Thomson and John Murray’s *Reports of the Scientific Results of the Voyage of the HMS Challenger during the Years 1873–1876*, since that book contains nearly four hundred pages on the anatomy, distribution, and taxonomy of the *Alcyonaria*, including more than fifty elegant illustrations.¹

For historians of science, this voyage and its truckload of publications are usually taken to mark the origins of modern oceanography.

¹ The *Alcyonaria* monograph, authored by E. Percival Wright, is Zoology Part LXIV of the *Challenger Reports* and is bound in Volume XXXI of the series, dated 1889.

For those of a poetic disposition, however, Volume XXXI in particular possesses talismanic power, since it offers something considerably grander than another feeble set of diligent paper representations of the ocean-world. Rather, this slightly yellowed, notably crinkled, large-format tome stands as a magnificently fragile and oblique monument to the perilous business of making pictures of the sea.

How? One need only consult the small notice bound into the volume, which reads like a message in a bottle drafted by a Borgesian castaway:

The publication of the reports, by no means all of which, as your Lordships will recollect, were prepared in Great Britain or Ireland, has gone on without any mishap until a few months ago, when, unfortunately, a steamer carrying from Leith to London 306 copies of a volume then lately issued, was run into and sunk off the Lincolnshire coast. Among the damaged cargo afterwards recovered from the wreck and sold by auction...were 13 cases containing about 190 of the lost 'Challenger' volumes, in a more or less spongy state. These have since been taken out of the covers and dried, and it seems probable that from them...about 100 copies may be made up, stained, but for all practical purposes perfect.

The whimsy of the affair was not lost on the Victorian functionary known as the "Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office," who was responsible for the work, and took it upon himself to add a closing note to his Parliamentary report on the progress of the publishing endeavor as a whole:

It is not impossible that in the eyes of future owners the imperfections of the recovered volumes may be compensated for by the knowledge that the books, like the "Alcyonaria" and "Polyzoa," which are beautifully figured in them, have been drawn from the bottom of the sea.²

There is in that self-satisfied pun—in fact, in the whole tale and the book-relics it gave to posterity—a palpable air of conquest, as if the sea, ever the devourer of the works of humanity, has in this one precious instance been doubly foiled: in the very act of trying to consume knowledge of herself, her actual substance has fallen into our

² Both this quote and the one above can be found in the volume cited *supra* n. 1.

hands; what was to be a drowning has become, in effect, a baptism, sealing this set of images in their element, and giving us the ocean "on paper" in the most literal way. Volume XXXI, by these lights, is less sea-semiosis than sea-sacrament, less oceanic *mimesis* than oceanic *methexis*, and the recovery of the hard-won learning inscribed on those spongy pages amounts to a veritable redemption, even a *resurrection*. Those inky smudges and faint, washy smears spell out a secret legend: *knowledge triumphs over the abyss!* Seldom has the etymological link between "salvage" and "salvation" seemed so close to the surface.

Holding the old book, one is tempted to lick the page and taste the salt: drawn from the sea, indeed.

• • •

The stained leaves that document Peter Matthews' meditative exercises in submersion convey a similar sense of *communion* with that vast negation that the poet Wallace Stevens called "the obese machine / Of ocean."³ Much of the power of Matthews' images derives from a tension between their poignant gestures at formal, even mathematical, rigor (the numbers, the notational conventions borrowed from meteorology and hydrography) and their simultaneous general air of shattered unraveling. What we have here in a most palpable form is the age-old aspiration to sea-knowledge—the idea that there must be a mathesis of the abyss—visibly foundering in the experience of *ex-stasis*, the experience of being moved outside of oneself. In different ways the work of the other two artists in this show, Jerome Marshak and Agnes Barley, similarly engages the promise of geometrically studious graphic mastery of the "obese machine." The mathesis is in each case private, but no less manifest for that. And if there is a sense of contingency in each image, there remains an aspiration in the direction of the absolute. For what is the sea, if not, as Stevens puts it elsewhere, "the veritable ding an sich"?⁴

3 See Canto IV of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."

4 The line appears late in Canto I in his great mini-epic of oceanic undoing, "The Comedian as the Letter C."

Knowledge that transcends us—objectivity, angelology, the “view from nowhere”—has always rocked unsteadily between mathematics and madness, and Matthews’ sheets of paper in particular seem to me a powerful sort of flotsam from the wreck of that whole project: they look for all the world like the scrawlings of a Pip who jumped the ship of transcendence: one feels the wheeling workings of the great loom, but it is unclear whose foot, if any, is on the treadle.⁵

But this reading is perhaps excessively metaphysical and apocalyptic. After all, the brilliant French cultural historian Alain Corbin, in his invaluable essay on the sea (*Le territoire du vide*), has argued that the tactile experience of sea-bathing—a novelty in the early nineteenth century in Europe—gave rise to a new encounter with the body, and thereby nothing less than a new species of subjectivity: the “coen-aesthetic” awareness cultivated by those who plunged in the waves marks, for Corbin, the discovery of the modern self, which coupled bourgeois composure with a therapeutically heightened attention to *sensation*.⁶ On this account, it was in releasing the body to the raptures of the engulfing surf that the modern subject was born. We are left, then, with a paradox: those who are pulled from the deep have either been *blown away*, or they have, to coin a phrase, “found themselves.” In the end, the difference has always been a little murky.

•••

There is, thank heaven, a proper science of murk, born of those who stared into the depths, and it fittingly literalizes—and spiritualizes—the dialectics of ocean-loss and ocean-recovery that have been my subject.

At two o’clock in the afternoon on the 20th of April 1865, the well-armed corvette *L’Immacolata Concezione*, the flagship of the Papal Navy, set sail from the Italian town of Civitavecchia, bear-

5 Of Pip’s unhinging experience of drifting in the Pacific, Melville wrote: “He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad.” *Moby-Dick*, chapter XCII, “The Castaway.”

6 *Le territoire du vide* is available in English as *The Lure of the Sea: Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750–1840* (New York: Penguin, 1995). I am here rehearsing the argument of Chapter 3.

ing a delegation of clerical dignitaries and learned Jesuits intent on conducting scientific investigations into the currents and physical characteristics of the Mediterranean. The somewhat bombastic captain, Commendatore Alessandro Cialdi, was particularly interested in studying the physics of wave motion, but his eventual monograph on this topic is remembered exclusively because it includes a brief memorandum by one Father Pietro Angelo Secchi, then director of the Observatory of the Collegio Romano and in effect the Pope's personal astronomer. Secchi's memo details a set of experiments he performed on the voyage, experiments aimed at quantifying the transparency of the sea.

For hours on end the patient padre and his boatmen lowered an array of painted disks (primed canvas stretched on hoops) down into the depths by means of system of graduated lines dangled into the darkness. Secchi watched intently as the shimmering white form gradually dissolved from view. Then it was drawn a bit back up, until he could spot again the faintest ghost—then released down again until it was lost. Then up again, then down—all this careful winching and unspooling to zero-in on the *exact point of disappearance*, the precise threshold of the abyss. Up and down, up and down—until the smallest turns on the crank enabled one to enact and reenact the whole drama of loss and recovery.

In this manner, with patient metrical exertions, the point of erasure was finally specified: a white disk of 3.73 meters diameter was found to hover at the extremist verge of the visible at 42.5 meters depth, with a full sun at elevation $60^{\circ} 17'$. Polarizing filters appeared to have no effect on this benchmark, and the spectroscopic profile of the light reflected from the descending target confirmed the progressive absorption of the shorter wavelengths. Secchi noted that it seemed to make no difference whether one worked in the shadow of the vessel or on the bright side, but he recorded that it helped to keep the eye “as near to the water as possible.”⁷

There is something simultaneously majestic and, somehow, tragic

⁷ For an English translation of Secchi's report, see “On the Transparency of the Sea,” *Limnology and Oceanography* 13, no. 2 (April 1968): 391–394.

about this image: the cassocked papal stargazer leaning out in the shadow of the S.S. *Immaculate Conception* (a vexatious doctrine declared *ex cathedra* just a few years before), his eye a veritable fraction of an inch above the chopless sea, as he labored to put an exact measure on the depth of loss and the failure of light. He was, of course, conceiving and re-conceiving a perfectly immaculate sea, even as he repeatedly eclipsed the divine radiation from above. Seldom has the etymological link between “salvage” and “salvation” seemed so deeply submerged. But the water is pretty clear.

• • •

The Secchi disk remains the fundamental low-tech tool of hydrological and oceanographic research. I myself have dangled one over the edge of a small boat in a tropical gulf, and watched as the little circle of radiance slipped into the green nothing. Then back up, just a bit, then down. Interestingly, the measurement today functions as an index of the “trophic status” of a body of water. In other words, the point of erasure is a proxy for the *vitality* of the sea itself. In this, we might say that the lowering of a Secchi disk amounts to a ritual by which the modern priesthood of scientific believers converts the measure of loss into a measure of life; a shimmer from the deep announces that knowledge can be made to triumph over the abyss. Drawn from the sea? Indeed.