THE DROWNED MAN IN ENGLISH POETRY

There are innumerable well-known associations between the sea and love, the sea and the mother, the sea and the idea of death and renewal. Aphrodite arose out of the sea, we call the sea our mother (an association expressed in the French *mer-mère),* holidays by the sea are thought to renew and refresh and death is often thought of as a journey out to sea. This is explained by the psychologists as the unconscious memory of the amniotic fluid in which we swam in our pre-natal days and the associations have been traced through religion, myth, legend and dream. Failing the sea, a stream or any inland water will release this deep and universal association, but since we in Britain live in an island it is not surprising that English poetry should record it in a more insistent and probing way than the literature of most other countries.

Most people prefer coves to long open beaches and a friend of mine, whilst we were swimming in a little bay, bounded on each side by rocky arms jutting out into the sea, once remarked on how happy and safe he felt there. The finest statement of our national feeling of security in our sea-girt land, John of Gaunt's speech in Shakespeare's *Richard II,*[1] is full of the symbolism which arises out of this association.

> This fortress built by nature for herself...
> This precious stone set in the silver sea,
> Which serves it in the office of a wall,
> Or as a moat defensive to a house...

Here is the memory of the safety of the womb, to which our minds unconsciously hark back. The association is so strong here that it rises almost into full consciousness.

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[1] II i 11.40 ff.

This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings.

The association of the sea with normal adult love, the Venus association, is often seen in myth in the supposed love-making of the sun at night in what is significantly known as the bed of the ocean. There is in Milton's *Comus* a fine phallic image of sunset.

And the gilded car of Day
His glowing Axle doth allay
In the steep Atlantick stream... 11. 94-6

In the ode *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* Milton speaks of the sun as resting in the sea.

So when the Sun in bed,
Curtain'd with cloudy red,
Pillows his chin upon an Orient wave... stanza 26

And again in *Lycidas* gives us an image of renewal.

So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head... 11. 168-9

Jung, speaking of the mythological statements about the ancient Egyptian Ogyges, says, «It is a typical fragment of the sun myth that the hero, when united with the woman attained with difficulty, is exposed in a cask and thrown into the sea, and then lands for a new life on a distant shore... The meaning of the cycle of myths mentioned here is clear; it is the longing to attain rebirth through the return to the mother's womb, that is to say, to become as immortal as the sun.»[2] According to Frazer, effigies of Adonis and Aphrodite were annually thrown into the sea at Alexandria on the occasion of the midsummer festival.[3] Icarus, having failed to reach the sun, plunges into the sea.

The fish, which lives in this mother-element, is the symbol of the renewal of the libido according to Jung[4] and was the early Christian symbol of rebirth. The dolphin, which springs so boldly out of the sea and which, as Cleopatra tells us, raises a man's back above the element it lives in,[5] by rescuing the drowning sailor symbolises the way in which normal sexual satisfaction rescues the maturing man from mother-fixation.

Baptism, the total or partial immersion in water, is notably

[2] *Psychology of the Unconscious* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, p. 132.
[3] *The Golden Bough Adonis* chap. IX
[4] *Psychology of the Unconscious* chap. IV
[5] *Antony and Cleopatra* V ii 94-5

linked with the idea of rebirth. The following conversation between Christ and Nicodemus is interesting. «Jesus answered, 'In truth, in very truth I tell you, unless a man has been born over again he cannot see the kingdom of God.' 'But how is it possible,' said Nicodemus, 'for a man to be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?' Jesus answered, 'In truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from water and spirit.'»[6]

With these ancient and continually recurring associations in mind, and I have only given specimens of an infinity of variations on this theme, I propose to consider how poets writing in English have dealt with love of the sea, entry into the sea or passage over it, death and suicide in the sea. My intention is not to lessen the mystery and magic of sea poetry by plucking up this drowned beauty by the locks but rather to raise our vague apprehension of important meaning and terrible beauty into a clearer awareness; nor in fear of exposing hidden associations and thereby reducing and drying up springs of beauty, for the mind will always retire into further undiscovered communications through which to convey undertones in art.

One of the first English poets, the unknown author of *The Seafarer,* is frankly puzzled by this strange hold the sea has on our imagination. Here the problem is faced with vigour and honesty, for there are centuries of hard voyaging yet to pass before ease of travel induces the softer sentimentality of more recent sea poetry. The problem for him is this. He knows the horrors of the sea and there is no better description of the grimness of northern waters, the bitter cold, the harsh cries of sea birds, the danger.

> Nothing heard I there save the howling of the sea,
> And the ice-chilled billow, whiles the crying of the swan!
>
> All the glee I got me was the gannet's scream,
>
> And the swoughing of the seal, 'stead of mirth of men;
>
> 'Stead of the mead-drinking, moaning of the sea-mew.
>
> There the storms smote on the crags, there the swallow of the sea

[6] *John* III 4. New English Bible OUP & CUP, 1961

Answered to them, icy-plumed...[7]

And yet when spring comes to the land and the villages are gay there comes once more this mad impulse in the blood towards seafaring. It is irresistible and, for him, not to be explained by old or young.

For the harp he has no heart, nor for having of the rings,
Nor in woman is his weal, in the world he's no delight,
Nor in anything whatever save the tossing o'er the waves!
O for ever he has longing who is urged towards the sea.

This poem may be a dialogue between a young man and an old man. The old man has been to sea, the young man is setting out, but neither can understand this impulse, for each regards it as unreasonable.

For behold, my thought hovers now above my heart;
O'er the surging flood of the sea now my spirit flies,
O'er the homeland of the whale hovers then afar
O'er the foldings of the earth! Now again it flies to me
Full of yearning, greedy! Yells that lonely flier;
Whets upon the Whale-way irresistibly my heart,
O'er the storming of the seas!

So in the very beginnings of English poetry this question, which has only recently been answered by the psychologists, is put almost as clearly as it can be, and poetry asserts its close concern with this mysterious passion. Approached in this way, *The Seafarer*, always remarkable for a lyrical quality rare in its day and for its fine descriptions, acquires a new interest, meaning and importance.

The more normal, integrated attitude towards seafaring is epitomised in a brief lyrical fragment of the Middle Ages.

Western wind, when wilt thou blow?
The small rain down can rain.
Christ, thay my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again.[8]

Shakespeare had curious ideas about the sea, perhaps because

[7] Translations by Stopford Brooke, *Cambridge Book of Prose and Verse*, 1924, pp. 5-6.

[8] British Museum MS, Royal Appendix 58.

he had never seen more of it than the tidal reaches of the Thames. The accuracy of the storm scene in *The Tempest* could have come from a tavern conversation and the behaviour of the wrecked ship in *The Winter's Tale* suggests rather the memory of a scene from tapestry or a woodcut than an actual experience. (Many of Shakespeare's images arise from the Geneva Bible he must have seen as a boy and from the paintings on church walls.) One interesting idea he has is that precious stones take the place of eyes in the skulls of drowned men. It occurs in the song *Full Fathom Five.*

Those are pearls that were his eyes.[9]

The sea-change is not only to «something rich and strange» but to something more durable than the delicate, easily plucked out human organ. The idea had occurred to him in an early play, *Richard III,* in the strange dream of the Duke of Clarence.

Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
All scatter'd in the bottom of the sea :
Some lay in dead men's skulls; and in those holes
Where eyes did once inhabit there were crept,
As twere in scorn of eyes, reflecting gems
That woo'd the slimy bottom of the deep,
And mock'd the dead bones that lay scatter'd by.[10]

Mortaliy is mocked by these new sea-given eyes, and that is explicable on a rational plane, but that these eyes should express love, should woo, springs from deeper associations. The psychoanlysts have had a good deal to say on eyes and precious stones as symbols.

The journey over the sea, coupled with the idea of rebirth and a new life on another shore, is one of the dominant themes in Shakespeare's last plays, *Pericles, The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest,* and carries with it a familiar element of the myth, the casting of persons into the sea in a box or a little boat. When Prospero, with some reluctance, leaves his island with its dual womb-symbolism of island and cave, he makes the dual gesture of burying the symbols of his power, his staff and his book, in the earth and the sea. In that dream world he had had absolute power, over servants and a docile daughter. Now he must make the effort

[9] *Tempest* I ii 398
[10] *Richard III* I iv 27-33

of re-adjustment to the requirements of ordinary life.

Ophelia drowns herself. The tragedy of Ophelia is one of Shakespeare's most interesting additions to the Hamlet story. The kind of mental torment into which this simple, spirited girl has been thrown by her lover's incomprehensible behaviour reveals itself in the songs she sings in her madness. They are bawdy songs and in them Hamlet and her father become confused, for the sudden cruel change in her lover induces an unhingeing recurrence of earlier father-love. And she goes to death by water, making the ultimate return to the mother-element, as to a bridal, decked with flowers, unresisting,

> like to a creature native and indued
> Unto that element.[11]

It is a bitter, ironical parody of a marriage, for she carries nettles in her garland and a rural phallic symbol,

> long purples
> That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
> But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.[12]

So the emotional life of Ophelia suffers a sudden jolt which sends her «mermaid-like... to muddy death». There is an ultimate etymological link between the words *mud* and *mother* and the «slimy bottom of the deep» of Clarence's dream and the slime of the sea in *The Ancient Mariner* record the same association.[13]

I have already referred to some of the images which in the earlier work of Milton show the strength of the sea-sex association in his mind at a time when he was involved in the struggle between inclinations which he deliberately opposes in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. *Comus* is full of sea material which has no logical connection with the theme. The Attendant Spirit who introduces the action has in his charge the western quarter of Britain, the greatest of

> the sea-girt Iles

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[11] *Hamlet* IV vii 178-9

[12] *Hamlet* IV vii 169-171

[13] The words *slime*, *ooze* and *mud* are used by Antony and Lepidus when they discuss the fertility of Nile mud and the spontaneous generation of creatures that was thought to take place in it. *Antony and Cleopatra* II vii 18 ff.

That like to rich and various gemms inlay
The unadorned bosom of the Deep.[14]

Comus is the son of Circe and that other island of the daughter of the sun is remembered. Islands have a wicked enchantment and the sea is full of strange increase[15] to the mind of Comus, who represents the shameful sensual pleasure and who is trying to seduce the chaste Lady. According to him, if men do not indulge their senses in the beauty of the world

The Sea o'erfraught would swel, and th'unsought diamonds
Would so emblaze the forhead of the Deep,
And so bestudd with Stars, that they below
Would grow inur'd to light, and com at last
To gaze upon the Sun with shameles brows.

But if there are shameful sexual associations with the sea, purity arises from the fresh waters of the «smooth Severn stream» where the drowning Sabrina, another Ophelia, who

flying the mad pursuit
Of her enraged stepdam, Guendolen,
Commended her fair innocence to the flood,

has had her lank head raised by Nereus and has been immortalised. Even the chaste Sabrina, protectress of virginity, cannot be invoked without reference to the sweetness of the sirens' song and a whole tangle of sensually symbolical imagery.

... fair Ligea's golden comb,
Wherewith she sits on diamond rocks
Sleeking her soft alluring locks,
By all the nymphs that nightly dance
Upon the streams with wily glance,
Rise, rise, and heave thy rosie head
From thy coral-pav'n bed.

The Attendant Spirit, having done his work, returns to the Ocean and to the Gardens of the Hesperides,

There eternal Summer dwells,
And West wind, with musky wing
About the cedar'n alleys fling

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[14] 11. 21-23.

[15] «Thronging the Seas with spawn innumerable».

Nard, and Cassia's balmy smells...
Where young Adonis oft reposes,
Waxing well of his deep wound
In slumber soft, and on the ground
Sadly sits th'Assyrian Queen.

So this strange poem, where the poetry is all in the defeated sexual impulses and is everywhere linked with the sea, ends with a vision of Ishtar, the eastern Aphrodite.[16]

After all this it is not surprising that that the theme of a drowned poet should have especially interested Milton, but his treatment of it turns out to be complex and undecided. King's death at sea, the sea which in all myth immortalises, brings up considerations of fame and literary immortality. Then, like the poet of *The Seafarer,* he is horrified that when spring makes beautiful the countryside anyone should be swept out to sea.

... Whilst thee the shores, and sounding Sea
Wash far away, where ere thy bows are hurl'd,
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides
Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide
Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world. (ll. 154-8)

But once more the restoring, immortalising function of the sea presents itself in the daily sinking and new rising of the day-star. The idea of renewal by drowning is here christianised.

Through the dear might of him that walked the waves.

Christ, in not being submerged, triumphs over the pagan myth but, in spite of himself, Milton allows the whole conception to slip back once more to the pagan, sensual associations.

Where other groves, and other streams along,
With Nectar pure his oozy Locks he laves,
And hears the unexpressive nuptial song. (ll. 174-6)

Yet another marriage, another immortality, in this womb of the sea.

After Milton reason and good sense for many years kept too

[16] It is difficult to consider *Comus* without thinking back to one of its sources, Peele's *Old Wives Tale*, with its well of regeneration and its heavily sexual lyric *Gently dip but not too deep.*

tight a hold on poetic expression for the associations I have been trying to trace to be released, but lines do occasionally occur whose power can only be explained in one way. Sedley's poem *Love still has Something of the Sea* is a clear case. The first two lines have an unforgettable magic which completely dwindles as their logical meaning is developed in the rest of the poem, which is dull and difficult to remember. It is therefore the deeper, illogical meaning that gives the lines their power and that springs from the balanced juxtaposition of the words love, sea, mother.

The Romantic movement allowed the unconscious mind more freedom to provide its impulses of obscure association. Blake heralds it. Liberty is born when

The fiery limbs, the flaming hair, shot like the sinking sun into the western sea.[17]

For Blake, however, the earth was a more constant symbol than the sea and he associates the grave and the womb in conscious metaphor.

The sea has little to say to Wordsworth, so little that he sometimes makes it masculine; and when he does think of mythological associations it is of Proteus and Triton that he speaks, not of Venus. But he seems to be aware of a deficiency here in his reaction to nature and in the sonnet *The World is too much with us,* where the sea is feminine enough, he expresses this lack.

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon...
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.

He feels that he has lost something which was implied in the old mythologies.

Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn...

The degree of his forlornness is indicated by the unsatisfying conclusion to the sonnet.

Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

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[17] *A Song of Liberty,* 13, from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*

Wordsworth is utterly puzzled by these obscure intimations of a significance. In his sonnet on ships at sea,[18] having described a ship as striding "lustily along the bay", he says,

> This Ship was nought to me, nor I to her,
> Yet I pursued her with a Lover's look.

He is as baffled by his own emotion as Hamlet was once by another's.

In Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* it is the great depth in the unconscious mind from which the sea associations spring that gives the poem its otherwise unexplainable qualities of horror and shame and which renders the rationalising attempt in the last moralising stanzas so ludicrously unsatisfactory. *Kubla Khan* is the least rational of all womb dreams in literature. It has elements which are close to the final passage of *Comus,* from which I quoted, the fresh green landscape of the Garden of Hesperus, aromatic plants and even the same tree, the cedar. (It was the occurrence in both poems of the unusual adjective *cedarn* which directed my attention to the similarity between them.) But the pleasuredome, the sacred river, the sunless sea, the deep romantic chasm, the honey-dew and the milk of paradise are more unmistakable symbols, and the heightened beauty of the vision and its more unfettered upspringing from the "caverns measureless to man" of our emotional life are matched with the greater horror and shame with which the vision is broken off.

Shelley, who, of course, was himself drowned in the sea, must be considered at some length. His *Lines Written among the Euganean Hills* begin with a fine statement of the night journey over the sea to the imagined happy isle of quiet, security and rebirth. The horrors of the journey recall *The Seafarer,* but Shelley is much closer to awareness of the meaning of this set of associations which we are following. The poem ends with a description of "the calm and blooming cove" which awaits him. The image of the sunny island merges into the idea of an Utopian society and into the basic image of the secure womb.

> And the love which heals all strife
> Circling, like the breath of life,
> All things in that sweet abode

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[18] *Miscellaneous Sonnets,* XXXII.

With its own mild brotherhood...
Then the final rebirth.
Every sprite under the moon
Would repent its envy vain
And the earth grow young again.

In *Adonais* the death of Keats is linked with the death and rebirth of Adonis and it is not surprising that the poem should end with another night journey over the sea.

My spirit's bark is driven
Far from the shore...
I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
The soul of Adonais, like a star,
Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

In the light of this stanza it becomes more than an accident that when Shelley was drowned he carried in his pocket a volume of Keats.

In *Epipsychidion* the island to which the poet wishes to carry his Emily, though he claims that it has a geographical location, is far too lovely and of another world even for the Ionian Sea. Shelley knows this well enough, and here the unconscious association rises as close as is posible to full awareness, for, having described the enchanting qualities of the island, he says,

they seem
Like echoes of an antenatal dream.

This womb-dream is expressed in the most erotic imagery.

The mossy mountains, where the blue heavens bend,
With lightest winds, to touch their paramour;[19]
Or linger, where the pebble-paven shore,
Under the quick, faint kisses of the sea
Trembles and sparkles as with ecstasy...

The island is

like a naked bride

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[19] Paramour is a key word which sends us back to Spenser's Garden of Adonis (*Faerie Queene*, Book III, canto vi, stanzas xxxii-xxxvi) where Spenser talks of "the wide womb of the world" from which all forms derive. The elements are all there, natural beauty, spices, annihilation of the seasons, physical love and eternal rebirth.

Glowing at once with love and loveliness.

It is in this sweet security, he says to her, that

Our breath shall intermix, our bosoms bound,
And our veins beat together...

in

... one immortality
And one annihilation.

I find it pleasant to consider *Epipsychidion* without relating the poem to Platonism;[20] for it emerges as the most subtle and balanced interweaving of the three main groups of sea-association, the straight erotic, the womb-longing and the rebirth in a better land. *Alastor* had been constructed on similar lines, the night journey over the sea to a dark cavern, but the earlier poem, though its symbolism is clearer, is much more like a dream, uncertain and inconclusive. The idea of rebirth is lacking and nothing is left

But pale despair and cold tranquillity.

Byron is a very different affair, and here it may be possible to adumbrate a conclusion. The sea is everywhere in Byron's poetry, he loved it and was a great swimmer, and the reader who has followed my approach to his favourite poems, whether with interest or horror, may be bracing himself for the plunge into the "deep and dark blue Ocean" of Byron's verse. But it is possible that frequent resort to the sea-mother associations is the sign of some serious unbalance or violent change in the emotional life of the poet. Byron, whatever one may think of his morals, was essentially mature, intellectually and emotionally, and although he has always loved the sea, especially in its wildest moods, nothing could be healthier and saner than the way he records his love.

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[20] This may of course imply that the Platonic notion of love and of ideal forms, for that matter, may derive from the very impulses we are tracing. Otto Rank, in his *Trauma of Birth* (Chapter V, Symbolical Adaptation), says that water, because of the memories it evokes of our uterine pre-natal life, figures as the primitive maternal source. Mountains with grottoes and caves became gigantic protective mothers, and when these ceased to satisfy, more abstract compensatory notions (compensating for the loss of pre-natal security) were evolved by the human imagination, the idea of paradise and of survival in heaven, Lands of Cockayne and Utopias where everything is order and beauty.

O. Rank, *Le Traumatisme de la Naissance*. Payot, Paris, (1928). *The Trauma of Birth*. Routledge and Kegan Paul (International Library of Psychology Philosophy and Scientific Method)

It is a love he can joke about. He rhymes Euxine with pukes in. At same time he is not unaware of the connection between suicide in the sea and sexual dislocation, for in *Don Juan* he refers sardonically to

> Sappho the sage blue-stocking, in whose grave
> All those may leap who rather would be neuter —
> (Leucadia's rock still overlooks the wave)...[21]

The emotional development of Keats too was normal and complete enough and his imagery correspondingly free from morbidity. It is possible that middle age, with more savage attacks from the critics and more fruitless pursuit of Fanny Brawne, might have altered this by inducing the *refoulement* which tends to encourage womb imagery. In his last sonnet, in fact, the sea becomes the pure, cleansing element and death is associated with infant memories of the mother's breast.

> No - yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
> Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
> To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
> Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
> Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
> And so live ever - or else swoon to death.

The word *still* is clearly of great importance in this sonnet (as it is in the *Ode to a Grecian Urn* where, in the first line, it asserts a mood with haunting ambiguity), for it here carries the two meanings of peaceful security and everlastingness, suggesting the link which exists in the poet's unconscious mind between the sleeping girl, the mother, the sea, death and immortality.

The poetry of some of the minor and later Romantics, particularly those whose emotional life is known to have suffered frustration, is much more full of these associations, but since my purpose has been to enrich my interpretation of poems I like rather than to provide a theory with case histories, I limit myself to the suggestion that a reading of Darley's work in the light of this approach might bring new interest to the verse of this tormented, shy, misanthropic writer under pseudonyms. In his sea-drenched poem *Nepenthe* he shows an especial interest in drown-

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[21] Canto II stanza XXV.

ed Icarus and, soon after a well-contrived lament for the sun-seeker, the poet too pines for the eternal calm of death in the sea.

Into the River of Bliss, Elysium-wide;
And all annoy
Lie drowned with it for ever there,
And never-ebbing Life's soft stream with confluent wave
My floating spirit bear
Among those calm Beatitudes and fair,
That lave
Their angel forms, with pure luxuriance free,
In thy rich ooze and amber-molten sea,
Slow-flooding to the one deep choral stave -
Eterne Tranquillity!
All-blessing, blest, eterne Tranquillity!

One now appreciates the deep meaning of the sea for this stammering, emotion-starved, ailing poet, who was so eager for any sympathetic understanding that he wrote an embarrassingly long letter to Miss Mitford in response to her praise of his *Nepenthe*. The cave in a song from *The Sea Bride* is an indubitable womb image. In this cave under the water is security, love and power. Power is an important element in womb dreams, for one of the painful experiences for the man beaten by life is the growing realisation that he is not as important as he appeared to be in his ante-natal days. Here are two stanzas from the song *The Temptress of the Cave*.

'Neath the wave there is no sorrow,
Love the only pain we know
Jocund night brings joyful morrow
To the bowers below.
At the green foot of this well
Lies my glassy bower and cell.
Will the mortal go?
O'er the wave-blue waters sliding,
What proud pleasure it will be,
Thy wild ocean-coursers guiding
To belord the sea.
Down the rocky ladder steep,
Winding to the wondrous deep,
Come, O come with me!

In Darley's lovely *Siren Chorus* the poet envies the lovers in the river coverts and the dark abysses of the sea.

> In his green den the murmuring seal
> Close by his sleek companion lies,
> While singly we to bedward steal,
> And close in fruitless sleep our eyes.

Yet he seems to know, in all this turning to the sea for power, passion, consolation, rest, that it is a way that leads to suicide; and in his best known poem, *It is not Beauty I demand*, Darley sees things clearly enough to say

> He who the Siren's hair would win
> Is mostly strangled in the tide.

Tennyson, developing more normally, faced this retrospective appeal and mastered it quite early in his work, in *The Lotos Eaters*. Here is an enchanted isle where, after a painful journey over the sea, men who have escaped from wife and family and all social responsibility dream away their lives in drugged, unproductive security. With all its beauty, and, like Spenser and Milton, Tennyson gives the sensual delight he disapproves of all his art, the island in this poem is felt to be morally bad and he never again permits erotic associations with the sea or with islands. The sensual associations of the sea having thus been allowed expression and exorcised or purged, not being in fact very powerful, the sea in future will have for Tennyson the safer and more normal link with death. His first approach to Arthurian legend was through the death of Arthur, thehero's night journey over the water to the island-valley of peace and regeneration. Ulysses, growing old, longs for a last sea journey at night, a voyage to the Happy Isles from which he will never return. Old Tithonus, cursed with immortality, longs for death as a journey westwards, and his end to is linked to his beginning.

> A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes
> A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.
> Once more the old mysterious glimmer steals
> From thy pure brows, and from thy shoulders pure,
> And bosom beating with a heart renew'd.

"The old mysterious glimmer". It reminds me forcibly of the female smile which echoes so strangely through Leonardo's pic-

tures and of which Freud has given the only satisfactory explanation. And it is as such a night journey over the sea that Tennyson faces his own death in *Crossing the Bar*. There is comfort in the idea which makes sadness unnecessary.

> But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
> Too full for sound and foam;
> When that which drew from out the boundless deep
> Turns again home.

I have already suggested that persistent erotic associations with the sea are to be observed in people whose emotional life has suffered dislocation or abnormal development. No English poet was more abnormal in his life than Swinburne, nor has any English poet shown a greater love of the sea. Although in the ways of the intellect he was more mature than most, in other ways he never grew up and for his last thirty years was looked after like a child. His one courtship of a girl and his grief at being rejected strike one as being a piece of play-acting, which the girl must have seen through, rather than evidence of normal development. Until Watts-Dunton saved him from killing himself by his irregular way of living he spent all the time he could near the sea. He says in a letter to Stedman, "As for the sea, its salt must have been in my blood before I was born. I can remember no earlier enjoyment than being held up naked in my father's arms and brandished between his hands then shot like a stone from a sling through the air, shouting and laughing with delight, head foremost into the coming wave. I remember being afraid of other things, but never of the sea."[22] (Swinburne's father was an admiral, which may explain this unusual parental behaviour.) It was to the sea that he turned when his proposal of marriage was turned down and he was very nearly drowned in the sea, for he was being carried away by the current and had given up hope of getting back when he was picked up by some French fishermen. Almost a frustrated suicide.

Swinburne's poetry abounds in all the associations we have been following. The sea for him is always alive, has passionate significance. It is the quick sea, the sweet dark sea, it has sacred

[22] P. 12 vol. *III The Swinburne* Letters ed. C. Y. Lang. O.U.P. and Yale Univ Press, 1960.

spaces, a slow passionate pulse, sometimes a panting mouth of dry desire. The imagery is sometimes of a straightforward erotic kind, as in Meleager's account of his journey in *Atalanta in Claydon.*

> And the first furrow in the virginal green sea
> Followed the plunging ploughshare of hewn pine
> And closed, as when deep sleep subdues man's breath,
> Lips close and heart subsides.

There are echoes too of the ante-natal dream. In *Hesperia* the birth of Venus recalls to him

> One warm dream clad about with a fire
> as of life that endures.

And the *Prelude* to *Songs before Sunrise* speaks of life in these terms : -

> Across birth's hidden harbour bar,
> Past youth where shoreward shallows are,
> Through age that drives on toward the red
> Vast void of sunset hailed from far,
> To the equal waters of the dead...

In the disappointment of his love, Swinburne turns to the sea,

> The sweet sea, mother of loves and hours.

Life has become an exile from the sea and men are

> Weeds of the wave, without fruit upon earth.

He longs to be mixed with his love in the oblivion of the sea's clasp. Since that is a myth difficult these days to enact, the idea of suicide comes, suicide in the mother element.

> I will go back to the great sweet mother,
> Mother and lover of men, the sea.
> I will go down to her, I and none other,
> Close with her, kiss her and mix her with me;
> Cling to her, strive with her, hold her fast:
> O fair white mother, in days long past
> Born without sister, born without brother,
> Set free my soul as thy soul is free.
>
> O fair green-girdled mother of mine,
> Sea, that art clothed with the sun and the rain,
> Thy sweet hard kisses are strong like wine,
> Thy large embraces are keen like pain.
> Save me and hide me with all thy waves,
> Find me one grave of thy thousand graves,

Those pure cold populous graves of thine
Wrought without hand in a world without stain.

I shall sleep, and move with the moving ships,
Change as the winds change, veer in the tide;
My lips will feast on the foam of thy lips,
I shall rise with thy rising, with thee subside;
Sleep, and not know if she be, if she were,
Filled full with life to the eyes and hair,
As a rose is fulfilled to the roseleaf tips
With splendid summer and perfume and pride.[23]
His wish is to become
A pulse of the life of thy straits and bays,
A vein in the heart of the streams of the sea.

This is the most complete memory of happy abandonment to the rhythm of the mother's blood, of pre-natal peace and security, but it never loses the erotic feeling, for his lips continue to kiss. In *Les Noyades,* the poem which follows *The Triumph of Time,* the idea of drowning with the loved girl recurs, the old myth of Adonis and Aphrodite cast into the sea for rebirth and immortality. But Sappho in *Anactoria* is made to wish for an eternity of forgetfulness attained by drowning.

Lotus and Lethe on my lips like dew,
And shed around and over and under me
Thick darkness and the insuperable sea.

In *The Ship of Death* D. H. Lawrence too makes of death a night journey over the sea to a place of regeneration, for, after "the dark flight down oblivion" with

only the deepening darkness darkening still
blacker upon the soundless, ungurgling flood...

there comes

A flush of rose, and the whole thing starts again.
The flood subsides, and the body, like a worn sea-shell,
emerges strange and lovely.
And the little ship wings home, faltering and lapsing
on the pink flood,
and the frail soul steps out, into the house again,

[23] *The Triumph of Time.* The only awkvard line in this poem refers to the girl - Sleep, and not Know...

filling the heart with peace
even of oblivion.

Lawrence was fully aware of the mythological and symbolical meaning of fish and sea, for in his poem *Fish* he asks,

Who is it ejects his sperm to the naked flood?
In the wave-mother?
Who swims enwombed?
Who lies with the waters of his silent passion,
womb-element?

But in his poetry, perhaps because he was so aware of their meaning, the sea-sex-womb associations so explicit in the *Fish* poem are rarely to be found. Lawrence was far from being a defeated person. He looked for emotional fulfilment, with only some early lapses, in other women than his mother. He cried out for the sun, for maleness and positive assertion. He was a sun-bather rather than a swimmer.

The best known of recent drowned men in English poetry is Phlebas the Phoenician in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It is true that he has been bereft of much of the meaning of the Adonis myth. Eliot depends on the reader's reconstruction of associations and helps him only with a directive note at the end of the poem, but Phoenicia is a sufficient pointer to the myth and the eyes of the drowned sailor recur as echoes of immortality in the waterless desert of the waste land.

The idea of regeneration linked with water and with the mother occurs in *Ash Wednesday*. The poem ends : -

Even among these rocks,
Our peace in his will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee.

Again in *East Coker* death is

..... moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters

Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

In *The Dry Salvages* the sea becomes still more important and is linked with conception and gestation, for, like the sea, women are moved by the moon.

The tolling bell
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometres, older
Than time counted by anxious worried women
Lying awake, calculating the future...

Again at the end of *Little Gidding* the end appears as the beginning and is linked once wore with water.

At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea...

Dream children in the Gardens of the Hesperides under the sea.

Yeats seemed to fear the sea. Its salt is bitter on his lips, it has a "murderous innocence", it is dolphin-torn and gong-tormented, but that of course is in a very special case. He is "haunted by numberless islands", Avalon, Atlantis, the Joyous Isle, and in *The Collar-bone of a Hare* there is a momentary surrender to the lotos-eating appeal of the irresponsible dream island. *The Wanderings of Oisin* is a series of variations on the theme of the journey over the sea to strange caverns. Oisin speaks of his youth : -

If I were as I once was, the strong hoofs crushing
the sand and the shells,
Coming out of the sea as the dawn comes, a chaunt
of love on my lips,
Not coughing, my head on my knees, and praying
and wroth with the bells...[24]

In Yeats's poetry the sea often has horses, the ancient symbol which, like the dolphin, bears the sailor out of the drowning mother-element. But in *The Shadowy Waters* Forgael sails to his

[24] *Collected Poems* (1955) Macmillan. p. 442.

death over the sea. At the beginning of the poem the theme is parodied in the Second Sailor's normal, healthy reaction.

> Can no bewitchment
> Transform these rascal billows into women
> That I may drown myself?[25]

Forgael's men go home in a jewel-laden ship they have captured but he goes on with a queen, for whom he was destined, to

> ... a place in the world's core
> Where passion grows to be a changeless thing,
> Like charmed apples made of chrysoprase...[26]

Forgael and Dectora sail on through the foam to their immortality and at the end she crowns him.

> Bend lower, O King, that I may crown you with it.
> O flower of the branch, O bird among the leaves,
> O silver fish that my two hands have taken
> Out of the running stream, O morning star,
> Trembling in the blue heavens like a white fawn
> Upon the misty border of the wood,
> Bend lower, that I may cover you with my hair,
> For we will gaze upon this world no longer.[27]

Once more Adonis goes on his dangerous journey over the sea, with all the old associations of love, immortality and the abandoning of the responsibilities of the normal way of life. In the gesture of the woman at the end of the poem I sense more of the mother than of the mistress. If Oisin is Yeats in successful strife against excessive mother association, then Forgael is Yeats in defeat. There are no dolphins or horses in these shadowy waters.

I began this brief enquiry into the meaning of the sea in English poetry with the work of men who, having been impelled to journey westwards over the sea, had not long been settled in England. I cannot end without reference to poetry which has come into existence as a result of another, and this time, so far as our civilisation is concerned, the final journey westwards, for the discovery of America killed the Atlantis myth. All the associations I have attempted to trace, except that of regeneration, are present in Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself.*

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[25] op. cit. p. 473
[26] op. cit. p. 482.
[27] op. cit. pp. 499-500.

You sea! I resign myself to you also - I guess what you mean,
I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me,
We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me out of sight of the land.
Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.
Sea of stretch'd ground-swells,
Sea breathing broad and convulsive breaths,
Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell'd yet always-ready graves,
Howler and scooper of storms, capricious and dainty sea,
I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and of all phases.

Pre-natal comfort and security, the trauma of birth, physical love and death, the sea means all this to Whitman.

And then, of course, Hart Crane, who cannot be passed over with one quotation. Not only does he appear to clinch the matter in as convincing a way as is possible but sea symbolism in his work is so distributed, so pervasive and so difficult to quote in a manner that will give any sort of line on the meaning of the poems that all I can do (short of requiring a reading of all he wrote) is to touch here and there on his work and suggest a relation between it and his life and death. A poem called *The Tunnel* is headed with a quotation from Blake.

To find the Western path
Right thro' the Gates of wrath.

After the torment of the great city with its individualised faces the poet has plunged through the tunnel to the harbour shore.

Here at the waters' edge the hands drop memory;
Shadowless in that abyss they unaccounting lie.
How far away the star has pooled the sea -
Or shall the hands be drawn away, to die?[28]

This volume, called *The Bridge*, itself a hopeful title, ends with an Atlantis poem in which Cathay momentarily becomes the

[28] All quotations from *Collected Poems of Hart Crane*, edited Waldo Frank (1933)

longed-for land. The use of Cathay for China indicates the fantasy quality of the wish. This is escape from the fact of the circumnavigation of the earth which has nullified Atlantis, but Crane is never to use the idea again. In *At Melville's Tomb* the peace enjoyed by drowned men begins to exert its appeal.

> There in the circuit calm of one vast coil,
> Its lashings charmed and malice reconciled,
> Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars;
> And silent answers crept across the stars.

But Crane knows that the sea is cruel too and in the first poem of the *Voyages* sequence he warns the boys he sees playing on the shore.

> You must not cross or ever trust beyond it
> Spry cordage of your bodies to caresses
> Too lichen-faithful from too wide a breast.
> The bottom of the sea is cruel.

Here, with the cruelty, is a clearly erotic association, and in the next poem, *Voyages II,* an image of pregnancy occurs. In this poem, which is full of the idea of drowning, the sea

> Her undinal vast belly moonward bends,
> Laughing the rapt inflections of our loves.

The poet asks,

> Bequeath to us no earthly shore until
> Is answered in the vortex of our grave
> The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise.

In *Voyages III,* death in the sea

> Presumes no carnage but this single change -
> Upon the steep floor flung from dawn to dawn
> The silken skilled transmemberment of song...

The Venus association of normal love, too, is strong in Hart Crane.

> I had come all the way here from the sea,
> Yet met the wave again between your arms.

Like Lawrence he has made his ship of death, which he apostrophises thus in *The Phantom Bark,* one of his last poems.

> So dream thy sails, O phantom bark,
> That I thy drowned man may speak again.

Finally, a fragment from among his last papers, as though spoken before he actually threw himself to his death in the sea. It is called *The Return,* again a significant title.

> The sea raised up a campanile.. The wind I heard
> Of brine partaking, whirling spout in shower
> Of column kiss - that breakers spouted, sheared
> Back into bosom - me - her, into natal power...

It is only here, in this final broken utterance, which the poet, had he lived, might never have published, that the basic association becomes explicit.

Hart Crane's life is by now well enough known.[29] His father and mother separated when he was a child and he went for a long holiday with his mother to the Isle of Pines. He always took his mother's side in the parental quarrel but some admiration for his father may be implied in his going into the family business. There, however, he strove hard to identify himself with the workers. The father was bitterly opposed to his son's writing of poetry and tried, with all the sanctions he could marshal, to knock the nonsense out of him. The balance of Hart Crane's life was completely shattered, he escaped from his father, plunged into wild dissipations and at last committed suicide from a ship which was carrying him back to America. Love of the sea and suicide in the sea are thus clearly associated with an indubitable Oedipus situation, with bitter frustration and with a failure on the poet's part to cope with the problems of living with which he was faced. The death wish grew more and more perceptible in his poetry and in his interests. Waldo Frank points out that in Mexico, during the year before his death, it was not the new revolutionary Mexico that interested him but the ancient death-cult of the primitive religion of that country. His last fragmentary cry shows that Crane was fully aware of the symbolic meaning of the death he chose and towards which his poetry shows him to have been moving from the beginning.

To return to our island poets, let me almost haphazardly take passages of recent writing to indicate the continuing, though not so conspicuous, validity of the set of associations we have been following. Since psychology has brought them into the forefront

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[29] Waldo Frank *op. cit.* and P. Horton *Hart Crane: The Life of an American Poet* (1937)

of the conscious mind these sea-mother-death links tend to be presented in either a more elusive or a more voluntary and conscious form. But if there are no complete allegories, like *Alastor* and *The Wanderings of Oisin*, to state these ancient significances, echoes of them are constantly recurring with the old mysterious appeal. W. H. Auden, well-up in psychoanalytical theory, is able to resist the dangerous attraction of the myth in his light-hearted *Song of the Master and the Boatswain.*[30] Here is the final stanza.

> The nightingales are sobbing in
> The orchards of our mothers,
> And hearts that we broke long ago
> Have long been breaking others;
> Tears are round, the sea is deep :
> Roll them overboard and sleep.

Dylan Thomas loved the sea and lived near it whenever he could, but he too knew its dangerous meaning. An early poem of his, *I dreamed my genesis,* ends with this stanza : -

> I dreamed my genesis in sweat of death, fallen
> Twice in the feeding sea, grown
> Stale of Adam's brine until, vision
> Of new man strength, I seek the sun.[31]

His drowned men in *Under Milk Wood*[32] regret the ordinary pleasures of life. Captain Cat has the healthiest associations with the sea and has no intention of being drowned in it.

> I'll tell you no lies.
> The only sea I saw
> Was the seesaw sea
> With you riding on it.
> Lie down, lie easy,
> Let me be shipwrecked in your thighs.[33]

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[30] From *For the Time Being*, Faber & Faber (1945). This volume consists of a set of variations on the themes of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Cf. also Dylan Thomas : —

> In deathbeds of orchards the boat dies down
> And the bait is drowned among hayricks.

These lines from *Ballad of the Long-legged Bait (Collected Poems 1934-52*, Dent 1952) P. 157, provide another Hesperidean clue. Also glancing reference to Eliot's *Sweeney Among the Nightingales.*

[31] op. cit. p. 29

[32] *Under Milk Wood*, Dent (1954) pp. 4-6.

[33] *Under Milk Wood*, p. 70

In a more despairing mood, in *Poem on his Birthday* (his thirty-fifth), death is once more thought of in terms of the sea and the links between death, love and the sea weave through the poem.

In a cavernous, swung
Wave's silence, wept white angelus knells.
Thirty-five bells sing struck
On skull and scar where his loves lie wrecked...[34]

Oh, let me midlife mourn by the shrined
And druid herons' vows
The voyage to ruin I must run,
Dawn ships clouted aground...[35]

And the sea that hides his secret selves
Deep in its black, base bones,
Lulling of spheres in the seashell flesh,
And this last blessing most,

That the closer I move
To death, one man through his sundered hulks,
The louder the sun blooms
And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults...[36]

W. S. Graham in his *Letter III* has two lovers making the night journey over the sea to security and an immortality.

Who shall we perish to?
Here it's endlessly us
Face to face across
The nine-waved and the berry-
Stained kiss of the moved sea
And not one word we merge in
Here shall we unmarvel
From its true home...[37]

The associations run once more through a fine poem by Ted Hughes called *An Otter*. This amphibious creature is described as

... Seeking
Some world lost when he first dived, that he cannot
come at since,

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[34] *Collected Poems*, p. 171.
[35] ibid p. 172
[36] ibid p. 173
[37] *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* (1962) pp. 311-2

Takes his changed body into the holes of lakes;
As if blind, cleaves the stream's push till he licks
The pebbles of the source; from sea
To sea crosses in three nights
Like a king in hiding...[38]

The lost world which we blindly seek, the change of element, the pebbles of the source (the old jewels under the sea), the kingly power, the night journey over the sea, these motifs which we have met before are here successfully fused in an entirely new way in a poem which is as much about man as the otter.

Since these associations belong to the more romantic kind of English poetry they can be irreverently treated by such a writer as John Wain. In a poem called *Time Was* there is no reference to the sea in connection with death, only the earth and the human body.

Time was I thought the dead lay down to rest
As snug as shiny pebbles in the earth,
Their stories ended and their bones undressed.
I knew that pebbles had no second birth.
Tonight my breath acknowledges its hosts -
The living man is cradled by his ghosts.[39]

But the earth has water upon it and this allows the poet to joke : -

When I'm a ghost, I'll caper through a wall.
I'll loll at ease beneath a waterfall.

But the terror and mystery of these associations still inform new poem after poem, and John Holloway's sensitive poem, *Warning to a Guest,* ends thus.

I have watched you, as you have visited at this house,
And know, from knowing myself, that you will be
Quick to people the shore, the fog, the sea,
With all the fabulous
Things of the moon's dark side. No, stay with us.
Do not demand a walk tonight
Down to the sea. It makes no place for those
Like you and me who, to sustain our pose,
Need wine and conversation, colour and light.[40]

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[38] ibid. p. 381.

[39] and iv. ibid. p. 356.

[40] *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse*, p. 314.

Lawrence Durrell loves islands and the sea but he is aware of the symbolic dangers and warns against them in his lyric-incantation *Water Music*. The same poet's autobiographical poem, *Cities, Plains and People*, ends with this stanza.

> For Prospero remains the evergreen
> Cell by the margin of the sea and land,
> When the wind blows the water white and black.
> Yet by his open door
> In sunlight fell asleep
> One summer with the Apple in his hand.[11]

Let us return to T. S. Eliot for a final statement of the dangers. Here are the last lines of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

> I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
> I do not think that they will sing to me.
> I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the ind blows the water white and black.
> We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
> By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
> Till human voices wake us, and we drown.[12]

It has been a far cry from Sappho to Hart Crane but in lyrical poetry, as in other important things, "our end is our beginning". I have no doubt that the song the Sirens sang was a lullaby.

Gwyn Williams

Additional Note

The notion of the ship of death is one of the oldest in the literature of the world. It occurs in the *Gilgamesh* cycle, which dates from the third millennium B.C. and the following quotation is taken from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, translated by N. K. Sandars (Penguin Classics, 1962, p. 79).

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[11] *Cities, Plains and People* Faber & Faber 1946, p. 72

[12] *Poems 1909-1925* Faber & Faber (1932), p. 19.

"All living creatures born of the flesh shall sit at last in the boat of the West, and when it sinks... they are gone." There appears to be little sign of the idea of regeneration in the gloomy, realistic Sumerian view of death. This is the description of the underworld that lies beyond the waters of death given in a dream to Gilgamesh by the dead friend he vainly sought.

> Death is not so terrible as it is sad.
> In the House of Ereshkigal, the House of Darkness,
> The dead sit huddled like flocks of wandering birds;
> But their wanderings are ended.
> Dust is their nourishment, clay their meat;
> On all things in the House of Ereshkigal
> Thick lies the dust.

(Version of F. L. Lucas, *Gilgamesh,* Golden Cockerel Press, 1948, pp. 53, 55.)

The Sumerian Thammuz, the earlier Adonis, was each year released with the greatest reluctance by the goddess of the underworld so that Ishtar could take him back to revive nature.