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Oulton, C.

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‘”Why were you silent when I spoke tonight?”: coming to terms in Tennyson’s “Sea Dreams” and Swinburne’s *A Midsummer Holiday and Other Poems*.’

Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK.

To dream of the sea is to engage in a quintessentially nineteenth-century form of rapture. While Tennyson’s 1860 ‘Sea Dreams’, and Swinburne’s ‘The Cliffside Path’ and ‘A Sea Mark’ (from *A Midsummer Holiday and Other Poems*, 1884) offer disparate perspectives on their shared subject matter, both poets subtly explore religious questions in the context of the nineteenth century’s continuing investment in the seaside sublime. Since the mid-eighteenth century seaside resorts had been able to compete with the inland health spas such as Bath, as sea bathing cures became increasingly fashionable. But with the railway network bringing the sea ever closer to a largely urban population and so putting a coastal summer holiday within the reach of middle-class workers, the decision to write about the coast also forces both poets to situate themselves in relation to modernity and popular culture. In the process they engage with various forms of intellectual and emotional exchange, complicating the image of a ‘timeless’ sea through an investigation of place-based temporalities.

The seashore itself has a biblical history, its miraculous status being registered in both Old and New Testaments.[1] Nonetheless it was often considered a hostile environment inimical to human life, until its capacity to epitomise inner states associated with individual isolation, was captured by the Romantic poets two millennia later.[2] In John Gillis’s words,

[1] Examples include the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus 14: 19-31and Jesus walking on the water in Matthew 14:22-33.

[2] Both Mary Robinson’s ‘The Haunted Beach’ (1800) and S. T. Coleridge’s ‘On Revisiting the Sea-Shore, after Long Absence’ (1801) complicate the assumed link between the sea and death in the early nineteenth century.

‘The romantic imagination of the early nineteenth century, initially focused on the sublimity of mountains, eventually turned to the wild shore, a place previously avoided by all but those who made their living there.’ (Gillis 131)

Victorian poetry both draws on, and occludes, these earlier models for its own ambivalence about the sea. Christiana Payne has shown that Romantic and religious images pervaded nineteenth-century reading culture in unexpected ways. Not only is there a ‘great abundance of nineteenth-century English verse that considers the sea and the shore in terms of profound symbolic meaning’, but ‘Poetry was frequently quoted, both in the naturalist handbooks and in Royal Academy catalogues.’ (‘Seaside Visitors’ 98) George Dekker makes the pertinent point that in fact the coast had already become readable in the populist form of the tour book during the Romantic period itself. Diverging from the tradition of the authoritative narrator, ‘the digestive system of Romantic tour books’ allows for reflection on politics, local custom and crucially, imaginative set pieces (83). But the Victorian curation of what Ruth Livesey terms ‘the just past’ depends for its effects on a suspension of modernity, which in turn creates a possibly false sense of distance from the present moment. Tom Mole has reconstructed some of the ways in which the Romantic legacy had to be repackaged to make it suitable for a later generation of writers and readers, as ‘cultural memory increasingly took mediated forms and required self-conscious interventions’ (14) to sustain its ostensible ‘timelessness’.

If allegorical seascapes are embedded in particular – sometimes conflicted - ways of seeing, this very tradition makes them the ideal vehicle for exploring difficult religious questions. As J. R. Watson reminds us, ‘Religion in Victorian times was political’ (206) and the literature of faith and doubt offers a vision of increasingly populated seascapes as a symbol of modernity, inflected by the past. Tennyson’s late poem ‘Crossing the Bar’ (written in 1889, just three years before his death) depicts the short passage across the Solent that

connects the Isle of Wight with the mainland. But it is most often read as a Christian allegory, with its imagined arrival in the final line governing the 'hope to see my pilot face to face' (line 15). Tennyson's own instruction that it should appear in every edition of his work surely substantiates this reading. Like Tennyson, Swinburne is strongly associated with the Isle of Wight (as well as the Suffolk coast), and also wrote a number of poems about the sea, viewed variously from clifftops, beaches and by swimmers in the water itself. But unlike Tennyson, he posits an instability that is not 'about to be', or even likely to be resolved.

One reason for studying the revered laureate and the wilfully provocative Swinburne together, is precisely because they seem to have little in common. Where Tennyson's magisterial *In Memoriam* (1850) stands as perhaps the most nuanced and complex exploration of religious doubt in nineteenth-century poetry, some of Swinburne's poems still make difficult reading for the most liberal Christian in the twenty first century.[3] Indeed Sara Lyons identifies Swinburne's anti-Christian polemic as 'a career-long endeavour to argue with and rewrite the confession of religious doubt that the Victorian reading public had embraced as a kind of epochal scripture' (Lyons 82) in Tennyson's famous work. Where Tennyson negotiated doubt as a channel for renewed religious commitment, and Matthew Arnold lamented the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' ('Dover Beach' line 25) of faith in 'Dover Beach' (published in 1867 although written much earlier), Swinburne 'sought to exorcise the sense of regret and tenderness that many Victorian doubters and unbelievers felt' (Lyons 78) for their lost faith. Significantly Lyons has identified the 1880 'By the North Sea' as Swinburne's attempt to construct an 'atheistic sublime' (95) as a challenge to Tennyson's 'honest doubt'. Importantly Swinburne's almost obsessive focus on coastal erosion in the slightly later *Midsummer Holiday* poems also marks these settings as tangibly geological,

[3] Declaration: when teaching Marie Corelli's 1895 *Sorrows of Satan*, I invariably gloss over the inset poem 'Before a Crucifix' for this reason.

while linking them to the threat of disintegration. If 'Swinburne never sought an intellectual warrant for his art in modern science, Darwinian or otherwise', (Lyons 104) his motifs of shifting sand and chalk are clearly inflected by its concerns.

The inevitable tension between nineteenth-century representations of the sea as both inspiring and dangerous, and the function of the seaside as a socially liminal but also widely accessible space, certainly offered unique opportunities for writers and publishers. Both popular science (including the mid-century craze for the marine aquarium) and the poetic sublime undoubtedly continued to provide urban Victorians in particular with imaginative access to the coast. But there is a further implied context in which the sublime *itself* has to be read in the nineteenth century: the seaside holiday. As increasing numbers of city dwellers made use of the railway to fit in a week's holiday in the summer weather, they continued to enjoy accounts of turbulent waves and even shipwreck; John Hassan confirms that the purveyors of seaside guides began to offer a conveniently packaged experience of the Romantic sublime, as 'the vision and imagery of the Romantics was transmuted into the extravagant hyperbole that became an enduring feature of publicity literature.' (Hassan 28). From this period the coast could also be presented as a morally indeterminate space, where the rules governing social behaviour might be transgressed or break down altogether. From the mid-nineteenth century, the constantly shifting boundaries along the cliffs revealed the disruptive presence of fossils and geological formations to holiday visitors with an interest in popular science.

The particular challenge this suggests, all the more so given the increasing popularity of seaside tourism from the 1860s, is that readers would almost certainly have been engaging with a range of literary modes at the same time. The promotion of light fiction became more than ever commercially attractive as the railway network expanded; at the same time, reading in the context of the seaside holiday was defined as an inherently populist practice. The

demand for entertainment during the holiday interlude was not necessarily confined to fiction, although periodical articles, book recommendations and cartoons show a strong bias towards the novel. Jim Cheshire argues that in general, 'plenty of people wanted poetry, but it had to be the right verse packaged for the right people' (245). Dickens wrote to John Forster from Broadstairs in 1842 that 'I have been reading Tennyson all this morning on the seashore' (Pilgrim Letters 3. 306), and to the American poet Lydia Sigourney from the same resort in 1851, 'The thoughtful voice upon the beach sets music to your verses. I could scarcely read them in a better place.' (Pilgrim Letters 6. 400) As both author and visitor, Dickens is the apogee of the 'right' reader; fully engaged with both the poetry and the setting, he aligns the metre of the verse with the sound of the sea. But the very distinctiveness of his experience – he is away from his London home, seeking distraction from his usual avocations – is potentially problematic. As his letters remind us, the value of these books lies in their capacity for leisurely enjoyment divorced from intellectual strain.

The expansion of the railway, the demand for cheap seaside holidays and the naming of 'seaside reading' as both a genre and a practice were interdependent[4], as 'the sea rapidly became embedded in popular culture' (Gillis 133). The challenge for poetry was the need to compete with the lure of seaside fiction, while also maintaining its own status as a respectable genre. As literary pilgrimage started to grow into an industry, becoming 'a significant trend in cultural tourism' (Mathieson 3), the places associated with popular writers attracted increasing attention. Fletcher argues that 'What Emily Brontë did for the Yorkshire moors, Swinburne did for the North Sea coast and the Isle of Wight' (226). By the 1880s, as Nicola Watson has shown, the relationship between reader and literary text was increasingly mediated through a new kind of guide book that included detailed itineraries, 'their titles

[4] I discuss this development at greater length in *Down From London: Seaside Reading in the Railway Age* (Liverpool University press, 2022).

betraying the dilettante joys of penetrating places where otherwise the tourist had no business' (10). This place-based response to literature inevitably created further tension for the writer, and Cheshire notes that by the late 1850s 'Tennyson was recognised in public, pursued by tourists and found his physical appearance, personal habits and financial success scrutinised in ways that made him very uncomfortable.' (197)

Both Tennyson and Swinburne were therefore confronted with a new dilemma: how to marketise their work through their own response to the sea during a period of intense tourism, while still being taken seriously as literary figures. As a commercially successful poet, Tennyson was doubly at risk of debasing his currency, if his work came to be associated with the construction of a 'holiday sublime'. And to anyone unacquainted with the poet's reputation, the title of Swinburne's 1884 collection *A Midsummer Holiday and Other Poems* might make it sound suspiciously like just such a money spinner. Ironically his aggressive stance on religious questions was open to further misunderstanding in this context, through the popular association of the seaside holiday with licentious abandon or at least a sense of carefree 'naughtiness'. Tennyson had long since made doubt respectable. But if 'apparently minor tricks of style' could position religious scepticism as 'either scandalous or conventional', (Lyons 38) it was important to attract the right kind of scandal. And late-Victorian writing about the resorts was already inflected with the more gossipy connotations of the word.[5]

[5] See *Down from London*. See also: Corbin, Alain. *The Lure of the Sea: the Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750-1840.* Translated by Jocelyn Phelps. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994. Gillis, John R. *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Walton, John K. *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History 1750-1914.* Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983.

If there was a great deal at stake for both poets, they would also have been aware of the traditional options for positioning the narrative voice. One strategy was for the poetic speaker to ignore the visitor audience altogether. This is the approach adopted by Tennyson in 'Crossing the Bar', which notably obscures any sense of a tourist presence on the channel ferries. An alternative approach is to signal cognisance of the tourist population, while refusing to identify with it. While regional poets may be satirised for 'lauding the beauties of the dearly loved town' ('Five Weeks Abroad for £12') along their own unfashionable seascape, the residents of literary hotspots in turn deride the absurdity of visitor behaviour. Paradoxically literary tourists are able to reverse the terms of this challenge, by identifying themselves as privileged insiders with a greater appreciation of a given setting's literary associations than the less educated locals. Similarly for Victorian artists, fishermen who depended on the sea might become objects of study and creative inspiration, but were assumed to experience the sea 'as a place of work rather than pleasure or contemplation' (Payne, 'Visions of the Beach' 16).

Pauline Fletcher notes a general 'tendency in Victorian poetry to eliminate the gap between observer and landscape' (251); certainly literary responses to the sea often insist on the materiality of the setting, demanding not only close observation, but immersion, from the reader. To give a famous example, Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' ensures that the reader will 'Listen!' with the addressee to the 'grating roar / Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling' (lines 9-10). This sensory experience may be reproducible at a later date, as when 'a kind of synaesthesia emerges in retrospective accounts' of visits to Tennyson's home at Freshwater in the 1860s and 1870s and 'The memories of those who lived and stayed there are typically tied to a range of sights, sounds and smells' (Boyce, Finnerty and Millim 8). This strategy both involves readers in an act of exchange – I give sensory prompts, you pay attention – and apparently collapses time itself, through the invocation of evanescent sounds

and smells. This negotiation of how we experience time can be at once affirming and potentially destabilising. In Tennyson's own poetics the future sometimes appears to be almost touchable, about to be known. The mythical 'Ulysses' sends the protagonist back into unknown waters, registered by the speaker as a place where experience will become the elusive pursuit of knowledge:

> Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
> Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
> For ever and forever when I move. (lines 19-21)

But for Fletcher, Swinburne's immersion in the cosmos is 'a means of defeating time' (151). Tennyson's 'Sea Dreams' and Swinburne's 'The Sea-Mark' and 'A Cliffside Path' from *A Midsummer Holiday* all map religious questioning onto the temporal frame of the holiday seascape. 'Holiday time' as a designated period of freedom is inflected in these poems by the alternative timescales it is designed to suspend: moments of realisation show transformation effected too late, a future that must be faced 'tomorrow', and a future state that can never be fully realised.

Sea Dreams

The clerk of Tennyson's 'Sea Dreams' has failed financially after being led into a false speculation, and is able to offer only a temporary respite to his wife and child through the provision of a holiday he struggles to afford. The restorative properties of the sea are negated by a brimstone preacher, leading the clerk to a further dream of abjection.

More than just 'another spleenful Tennyson poem about a man whose mind and emotions are darkened by crooked speculation' (Cunningham 192), 'Sea Dreams' uses the seaside holiday to provide a framework in which religion, the natural world and commerce intersect. Richard Sylvia notes that in the late 1850s and 1860s Tennyson was writing

predominantly narrative poems, with 'Sea Dreams' contributing to the 'persistent revaluation of the place narrative should occupy in his art.' (50) While fiction of the period often suggests that place only becomes meaningful when a significant event happens there, poetry has much to tell us about the purposeful narration of place itself. 'Sea Dreams' deploys contemporary understanding of the tension between seascape and the built environment to offer an abortive transformation of its central character. While the dramatic focus is on the storm that infiltrates the visitors' lodgings, the final meaning of the poem is determined by the revelation of an encounter between the wife and an acquaintance on the beach, that 'contested site, claimed both by land and sea and as we have seen, symbolically constructed by various, often contradictory, interests, practices, and desires.' (Kluwick and Richter 2)

In the early nineteenth century, the invalid propensities and understood sensibility of Jane Austen's coast-bound characters might still mark these seaside towns as 'genteel'. But as the railway network expanded, so the mid-Victorian resorts, 'subtly rebranded themselves' to attract health tourists of a possibly lower social class. (Hassan 40) The protagonist of 'Sea Dreams' has a liminal status as '[A] city clerk, but gently born and bred' (line 1), married to 'an unknown artist's orphan child' (line 2). Echoing Tennyson's own disastrous loss with the collapse of a wood-carving venture in 1843, the clerk has been persuaded to speculate in a ruinous bubble, by a false city friend. The plot also aligns with fictional examples of the finance plot such as Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857), but diverges from them in removing the hapless clerk from the city itself to seek greater understanding in a romanticised seascape. In Roger Ebbatson's words, 'The poetic representation of the sea-coast in this text … rejects the Victorian discourse of progress in favour of atavistic retreat and fantasy' (139). This emphasis diverts the poetic focus from the commercial context, to stake out a more attractive identity for the clerk himself; while he is not registered in the terms of Romantic

responsiveness, he is set apart from the imperatives of gain and exploitation associated with the city. But in practice this distinction breaks down at every turn.

The couple's class credentials are sustained firstly by their possibly unnecessary concern for their young child, 'thinking that her clear germander eye / Droopt in the giant-factoried city-gloom' (lines 4-5); secondly by the 'month's leave' (line 6) for which 'his gains were dock'd, however small' (line 7). The poem itself does not specify a location, but Ebbatson makes a convincing case for the Isle of Wight, one of the more difficult coasts to access for someone in this income bracket. For this reason a lower middle-class tourist might be more likely to take his family to Margate, working in London during the week and using the so-called husband's boat (the steam packet from town) to join them at weekends.

The child's health cure offers the chance of moral redemption for the father, through solitary reflection on the seascape. But his implied desire for solitude is thwarted by the other seaside figures who interact with the clerk's wife and infiltrate their shared consciousness. Not only do such visitors disrupt the clerk's ability to separate himself from the city; their very presence undermines the status of the wanderer along the shore. For Christopher Keirstead, the ambivalent tensions of littoral space become fully recognisable as Tennyson's poetry 'transitions from mostly solitary, individually oriented seaside poems to a more recognizably Victorian beachscape, where the poet laureate compels himself to apply the healing power of the beach to a wider audience.' (74) But as Patricia Davis insightfully notes, the poem's 'provocative anomalies' (85) arrest the reader's impulse to interpret it as a simple morality tale.

The holiday is presented in a series of transactional and monetary images, as 'for health they gain'd a coast' (line 16), and the language of the city infiltrates the coastline itself in the invocation of 'sea-smoke' (line 52) and 'wasteful' foam (line 53). The quest for health became an industry in the nineteenth century and was rendered in transactional terms in much

advice of the time. The title of S. Thomson's popular *Health Resorts of Britain and How to Profit From Them* (1860) speaks to this concern, as when Margate 'is admirably *calculated* for its London visitors, who come down at the *rate* of 100,000 per annum' (70, emphasis added). In the clerk's case, the healing seascape is in any case deceptive: Peter Robinson draws attention to the instability of Tennyson's images, 'those dangerous orifices, the unctuous mouth and the Peruvian mine, bottomless pits which, rather than giving out value, suck thriftiness in.' (125)

The couple's visit to a local chapel proves disastrous when the minister turns out to be a populist hellfire preacher who, it is implied, vaunts his own religious status rather than teaching the word of Christ. This 'heated pulpiteer' (line 20) inspires despair rather than imparting comfort, as the wife 'sat shuddering at the ruin of a world' (line 30) and the husband 'at his own' (31). The preacher's alignment with geological forces in a 'wordy storm' (line 31) would have been a familiar feature of seaside evangelism – as late as 1917, novelist Marcus Reed asked satirically, 'why seaside resorts offer such a field for conversion. If the wickedness of all enjoyment is taken for granted, why is the coast so exceptionally lost?' (*A Girl of Thanet*, 107). If the sermon signals a missed opportunity to direct the husband's response to the sea as a healing force, the storm later that night leads him to suffer nightmares. As city dwellers, the couple experience the sound of the waves crashing on the rocks as a sound that is alien to their usual domestic environment; for this reason alone such a sound heard at night can plausibly be presented as both magnified and potentially threatening. But the clerk's dreams of the seascape are inflected by the cash nexus, and as he wakes up he is crying, 'A wreck, a wreck!' (line 59) in which the sea 'roars / Ruin' (lines 80-81).

These images of 'wreck' and 'ruin' of course link natural forces and speculation through the familiar literary trope of the shipwreck. If 'In the Romantic tradition of the seaside, the ultimate goal is to get off the beach, to make it the staging ground for more

transcendent or ennobling journeys' rather than being trapped in this liminal space, it is hardly surprising that 'This is much easier said than done in Tennyson' (Keirstead 77). If the sublime itself has been commercialised, engagement with the sea cure is registered as a failed speculation, through the man's linked dreams. In the first he is carried from 'out the boundless outer deep' (line 88) into a cave, emerging by a 'landward exit' (line 96) that is itself '[b]right with the sun', (line 97) to find an earth-covered 'giant woman' (line 98) holding an axe. The man is so preoccupied by his enjoyment of this dream that he consciously prolongs it, 'drifting up the stream / In fancy' (lines 108-9) until he lapses back into sleep. This time he asks the woman about her prodigious strength, and is told that it came through 'working in the mines'. (line 114) But he is slow to identify the threat to a 'fleet of jewels' (line 123) that are sailing into harbour 'before a gloomy cloud' (line 124) towards 'a reef of gold'. (line 127) Waking in distress he is told by his wife that he has knocked over his daughter's medicine glass (a reminder of why they are there, as well as the immediate cause of his dream). As Ebbatson argues, the poem itself can be placed 'within a significant nineteenth-century vogue for the literary exploration of financial fraud' (137), as it 'gestures towards the terms of the aesthetic sublime as embodying possibilities of financial ruination' (138).

Within this framework, the greater religious sensibility of the wife ostensibly serves as the vehicle of her husband's redemption, as following her own dream on the same night, she urges forgiveness of the man who has ruined them. Her specific motive is that the day after the man's own encounter with the capitalist who has swindled him, she has learned from a newly-arrived holiday maker 'of our town' (line 263), that the fraudster has died suddenly of heart disease. While this moral imperative is often seen as a sentimental weakness in the poem, her own attempt to see the good in their enemy actually registers instability, as she enjoins her husband to believe that 'he meant, he said he meant, / Perhaps he meant, or partly

meant, you well.' (line 179) More damagingly, she makes only limited attempts to counsel him (still bewildered as he presumably is from his recent dream) before foreclosing on her own deal:

> Why were you silent when I spoke tonight?
> I had set my heart on your forgiving him
> Before you knew. We MUST forgive the dead. (lines 268-70)

At this point all bets are off, as the clerk has lost his chance to forgive his enemy while believing him to be still alive. The poem now shifts the reader's attention to the lullaby the mother sings the child; in the context of the conversation between the couple that immediately precedes it, this interaction too is perhaps less sentimental than it seems. The analogy of the nest-bound bird with its unready wings is suspiciously clumsy, as there is no comparable reason for a child to 'sleep a little longer, Till the little limbs are stronger' (lines 306). Indeed sleep itself has already proved ineffectual, disrupted by 'dead claps of thunder' (line 55). The woman's words tell the reader at least, that she is deferring the metaphorical storms ahead, having no way of preparing her child to combat them. Keirstead argues that 'Ultimately, Tennyson pushes Victorian faith in the promise of littoral space to a point where it seems barely able to hold up against the heavy spiritual, aesthetic, and social demands placed on it.' (74) But what he describes as 'a jarringly optimistic conclusion' (84) to 'Sea Dreams' also makes space for the 'jarring ambivalence' (87) identified by Davis as a feature of the poem's experimentalism.

The clerk ultimately tells his wife that he will forgive his enemy, and so 'let your sleep for this one night be sound' (line 315), much as the child's sleep will last 'a little longer' before the inevitable confrontation with reality. In the final line, 'they slept', but the husband's forgiveness is less convincing than his warning that 'the worst is yet to come' (line 314). In Robinson's analysis, 'A poem may figure the renewal and restoration of trust even

when demonstrating its absence, by having a structure from those same unreliable words, and the volatile and evanescent responses they deceitfully engendered.' (120) Both figures seem to register this need for structure as a means of communicating and trying to address their situation. But the ending of the poem offers little solid consolation. Perhaps surprisingly it is the avowed atheist Swinburne who seemingly finds a greater hope by the sea.

A Sea-Mark

The main title of Swinburne's collection, *A Midsummer Holiday*, positions him in the wider context of Londoners who travel to the sea during the summer months. But unlike Tennyson's nervously aural clerk, the speaker in these poems engages fully with the visual (he is imaginatively equipped at one point to see into the heart of the earth) and the haptic.

'A Sea-Mark' opens on a scene of coastal disintegration, directing the reader's gaze to its natural features. Sylvia Granta argues that aquarium manuals of the mid-nineteenth century had constructed a reader who was both adventurous and sensitive to marine life. These writers 'maintained that curiosity and observational skills make good tourists' (Granata 95), attributes also associated with good poetry. Interestingly these marine texts based their imaginative appeal to readers on a 'multi-sensorial experience' (Granata 105); this might include a vicarious journey underwater, 'often aided by quotations from poetry or drama' (Granata 106). But as Granata also notes, the aquarium craze had become a source of increasing anxiety as early as the 1860s, as amateur collectors threatened to strip the rockpools of their abundant life.

Later in the century the central figure in 'A Sea Mark' is neither a permanent resident nor a tourist, but a visitor sensitively attuned to the seascape. What the poem offers is the perspective of an informed observer who is neither enjoying leisure nor collecting, despite the provocative admission in the volume title that this is a 'holiday'. The poem's correspondingly

destabilising metre can be rendered in either of two ways: as a disrupted iambic pentameter in which an unstressed beat is left out at the start of each line, with the effect of intensifying the stressed first syllable; or otherwise as a pattern of three trochees followed by an anapaest. The opening line, 'Rains have left the sea-banks ill to climb', can be read with a sense of determination as:

[missing unstressed beat] **Rains** / have **left** / the **sea**-/ banks **ill** / to **climb**

But with a slight shift in vocal pattern, it can also suggest stertorous, more laboured breathing in this harsh weather:

Rains have / **left** the / **sea**-banks / ill to **climb**

In the next lines the 'loosening' coastal 'floor' sinks '[W]avewards' (line 2), while '[H]alf the sliding cliffs' turn to 'mire and slime' (line 3). This is a sodden, almost apocalyptic landscape, in which Earth itself becomes 'a fruit rain-rotted to the core' (line 4). Like Tennyson's 'Sea Dreams' the poem allows the city to infiltrate the seascape in unexpected ways. Here the speaker links coastal erosion to familiar images of urban pollution, bringing the city to the sea as the earth 'flakes' (line 5), pouring '[D]ense as gouts from eaves grown foul with grime' (6). Cliffs, earth and by implication human habitation, are all susceptible to decay, as the symbolically 'eternal' seascape becomes unstable, and ultimately even illusory.

This is a bodily disconcerting experience for the reader, who is compelled to look up at a collapsing cliff-face from a coastline that gives way beneath the feet. Like Tennyson's hapless clerk in Robinson's formulation, the visitor to this unstable seascape is liable to be bodily sucked in.

The rock which withstands these assaults is a 'sea-mark in the tides of time' (line 8). Swinburne's response to Christian iconography is notoriously complex; the speaker invokes

the parable of the house built on a rock (Matthew 7:24-27), but not to directly religious ends. Rather the poem argues that ‘Time’ (line 9) and ‘Life’ (line 10) would be subject to the same disintegration as the ‘lapsing shore’ (line 10) were it not for the capacity to ‘outlive their trustless prime’ (10). The speaker registers the loss of trust, or possibly youth’s untrustworthiness, as catastrophic in its effects; but also suggests a quasi-religious consolation derived in the present from the anticipation of solace at some future time, ‘one comfort held in store’ (line 15).

The separation of the speaker and an unnamed other prompts a somewhat contorted meditation on past sorrow and ultimate hope:

> Each apart, our burdens each we bore;
> Heard, in monotones like bells that chime,
> Chime the sounds of sorrows, float and soar
> Joy’s full carols, near or far before
> Heard not yet across the alternate rhyme
> Time's tongue tell what sign set fast of yore (lines 18-23)

The sense of loss is expressed in the subordinate clauses ‘in monotones like bells that chime, / Chime the sounds of sorrows’ (lines 19-20); but this sadness is governed by the interrupted clause ‘[heard] float and soar Joy’s full carols’. This carolling then is what the two listeners have actually heard in the imagined future. What they ‘[H]eard not yet’, although by implication it was always there, was the ‘alternate rhyme’ (line 22) of time itself. The new perspective offered by the lapse of time establishes an alternative way of seeing, allowing the speaker to gesture back to the present and steadfast ‘sea-mark’ that is ‘[F]aith in faith established evermore’ (line 27). If the religious connotations of ‘faith’ subtly infiltrate this line, the meaning remains elusive, as does the trust that can be placed in it. The ambiguous

ending lends itself to a double interpretation: either reciprocal good faith will withstand the shock of loss, or the speaker's own faithfulness can be trusted to stand against the tide.

'The Cliffside Path'

'The Cliffside Path' uses the form of the ballad supreme to create an apparent sense of closure, even imprisonment, through the use of only four rhymes across its thirty five lines. In the first three lines the sea creates an intersecting line across two distinct arcs: the trajectory traced by the setting sun and the gradient of the down directly opposite. The reader's gaze is first directed to fall in the direction of the sea itself, 'Seaward goes the sun' (line 1), before being allowed to linger on the cliff path as the protracted vowel sound of the corresponding 'down' leads the speaker and his companion away 'homeward' (line 1). The movement of the figures at the start of line 2 strikes a valedictory note; they move away from the sea before night is 'sealed' on its 'grave' (line 2).

The tension increases as the field above is characterised as 'steep rough silent', and 'heaves' (line 4) what turn out to be the cliffs themselves, as they 'collapsing yield' (line 5) to erosion. The ground on which the speaker is standing is already unsafe, '[H]alf the path is broken' (line 6), and the 'furrows' (line 9) are ploughed not in the earth, but more precariously in the 'wrinkled waste' (line 8) below.

The 'bright steep murmuring town' (line 3) invokes both the lights and bustle of a resort at night and the sound of the waves nearby. But if the town's ostensible function in the poem is to hold the earth and sea apart, its presence between the two is largely disregarded by the poetic speaker, as 'half the banks' (line 6) give way onto the beach below. While the cliff-absorbing sand is characterised by age and decay (it is both 'ridged' and 'wrinkled'), the final line of each stanza attributes power or lordship to air, the only intangible element. If 'Wind is

lord', human control is further destabilised through a pun on the mechanisms of fiscal exchange, 'and change is sovereign of the strand.'

The second stanza offers an untrustworthy respite from a wind that is itself 'waking' and also 'awakes the weald' (line 5); a deceptive '[S]ilence, uttering love' (line 8) encourages forgetfulness of the changeful elements 'hard beside' the 'quiet fields' (line 9). Sure enough, the third stanza begins with a monitory 'Yet', as the wind infiltrates unseen 'rifts and rents' (line 2) in the cliffs, driving them down 'as if with stroke of swords' (line 4). The 'flowers of autumn-tide' with which the cliffs are 'crowned' (line 6) are redolent of the sea-tide that will break on the cliffs themselves, 'Soon the blasts shall break them, soon the waters hide' (line 7). The exceptionalism apparently enjoyed by the speaker and his companion, 'Soon, where late we stood, shall no man ever stand' (line 8) is immediately overtaken by a sense of enforced retreat. In a reversal of Tennyson's implicitly religious 'crossing the bar' motif, in which the sea crossing registers both a conscious choice and an act of faith, 'Life and love seek harbourage on the landward side' (line 9), only to be reminded once again that 'Wind is lord and change is sovereign of the strand' (line 10).

The envoi offers an ambivalent but surprisingly determined response to the threat of dissolution, as the speaker locates hope as the one constant element within this perpetually declining landscape. While wind and change may be powerful, they 'can wreck but life and waste but land' (line 3), while 'Truth and trust are sure'(line 4). In a final elision between the erosion of the cliffside and the extinction of life itself, the impact of wind and change will be felt 'till all subside' (line 4). But embedded in this acceptance of ultimate loss is the declaration that '[T]ruth and trust are sure' (line 4), even without a solid foundation on which to rest.

Poetry's close relationship to hymnody and music creates opportunities for poets to allegorise both topical themes and the sounds of the natural world. Both Tennyson and

Swinburne identify considerable symbolic power in the sea, and both poets register loss against the potential of the seaside interlude to affirm some kind of faith in a force beyond the self. But Swinburne's aesthetic 'strategy of appropriating and transvaluing standard tropes within the Victorian literature of doubt' offered a means of avoiding a recognised position along the faith / doubt spectrum; rather than identify himself with any one group, 'he rejected the terms of the debate'. (Lyons112) Tennyson, like Dickens, is more straightforwardly concerned with exposing religious hypocrisy from an assumed position of faith; but if the swindler in 'Sea Dreams' is irredeemable, his victim is likewise warned against the self-entrapment implied by transactional models of religious exchange.

The often polarised responses produced by Tennyson and Swinburne to the religious uncertainty of their time, and the poetic opportunities it offered, point to the tensions and ambiguities within what we would now term 'literature of doubt'. But despite their radical difference, both poets offer a subtle redeployment of biblical messaging, these poems prompt the reader to ask difficult questions – and offer the sea as the ideal setting in which to ask them.

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