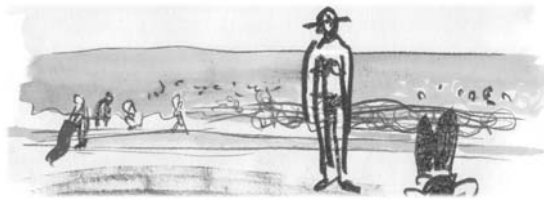


The Cultural Poetics of Water



Kurt Brereton

for Susie Maroney and Lucky Oceans

Hydrotaxis

Only with crying does vision begin.

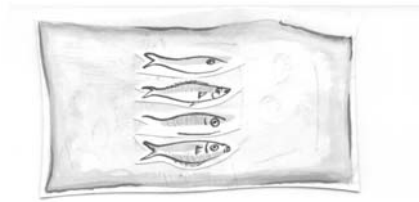
David Levin, *The Opening of Vision*.

It is the liquidity in our eyes that causes us to dream.

Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*.

The sage who wants to change the world will have to look towards the water.

Taoist saying—Tchouang-Tsu.

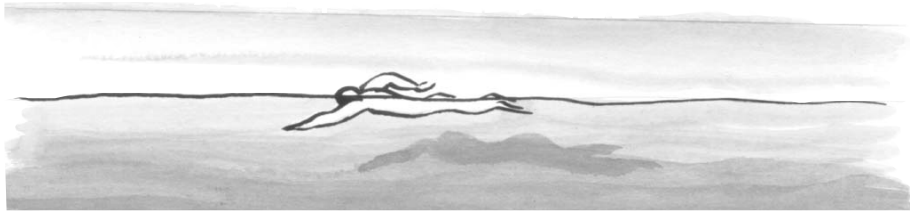


The fish stopped crying just before Christmas. Around the world, fishermen reported large numbers of fish with a milky, distant look in their eyes. Scientific tests proved inconclusive. The Catholic Church set up an appeal. Ocean Watch pointed to the sudden disappearance of the Giant Albatross as a possible trigger. New Age guru Robert Davidada saw a vision of the oceans brimfull of tears. One thing is certain, humans are now the only species capable of crying the eye's libation. Changes are already evident. *Tears from Heaven*, the CD of raindrops falling on banana leaves is in the World Music Top 10. Aquariums are the fastest growing indoor attraction. And *Crying Fish* is the latest trendy restaurant dish. Tears "mark the disappearance, the sudden destruction of the known universe in which we belong," says Bataille. Well...when I was four I caught a little silver fish. He slept under my pillow for two nights until mummy let him go. Now whenever I'm in the supermarket I can't pass aisle four without buying a can of sardines. Ballard noted that all fish are images of ourselves seen in the sea's mirror. The sea serves to make my narcissistic image more natural—to touch and mobilise my fleeting expressions. Reflecting waters lure me from the shores of reason into murky uncanny depths. Neither out far nor in deep...the last stanza...four little lines swimming under the text.

*They can not look out far
They can not look in deep
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?* Robert Frost

Hydrotropy

Like all purgatories, the beach was a waiting ground, the endless stretches of wet salt sucking away from them all but the hardest core of themselves. J.G. Ballard, *The Drought*.



There is no substitute for getting in. Swimming with my head above the water, still in history, body in haptic heaven. Behind me the waves metronomically mark out my existence—swelling, bursting, expiring. A shore stripped bare of semiotic debris. The sound and movement of waves upon the unbroken sand is regular and unchanging. Flat blue sea meets deep cloudless sky, windless above an empty beach. Sun illuminates white sand with a violent vertical light that casts no shadows. Consciousness is a headland, an outcrop of being-in-water. Rotating my head in and out of deep water, in and out of time. Regular cathartic movements—rolling arms, kicking legs and relaxed breathing lull my mind into a hydrotropic sensorium. Every inhalation an inspiration to forget breathing altogether. Time is not absent in water, it is immobilised, suspended in an endless interval enduring and remorseless as pounding waves. The destiny of swimming may be fatigue, yet the further and longer I swim the easier it seems. Swimming is a habit-forming pleasure. My body anticipates weightlessness—happy to feel hugged all over by velvet cool.

Horizon—lines

Ecstasy is a blue cry opening onto the ocean reunited with sky, with no horizon in between. Catherine Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*.

It is fine to gaze out upon distant seas from the midst of superfluity.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.



Every horizontality retraces, and is reassured by, nature's horizon. Standing on the beach my gaze replays the echo of the mirror stage. My gaze is firstly absorbed and constrained by the pull of Alberti's unilinear geometric perspective, then returned afresh by the open refusal of the horizon to lie still in space. The triangular diagram of optical vision collapses in on itself like a concertina—a little concert of vision. Significance is simultaneously assigned and denied by the immaterial incommensurable horizon—line. An indeterminant intimacy is felt then lost. The horizon has no referent. I squint into an invisible chiasm, and feel sandwiched or suspended between material sea and immaterial sky. Scanning the horizon my eye is always sliding from the littoral edge into a nostalgic desire to reconcile physical and metaphysical differences. I long to sail out and drop anchor at that exact point where the sea meets the sky. An impossible voyage, in which Being sails back from an intimate distance of presence towards that infinite nowhere of absence. Every breaking wave plays out a theatre of becoming—from the birth of Venus to the death of Adonis. Cyclones always seem to strike at night just after everyone has put their tents up. At first light holiday makers wander aimlessly and exhausted across the beach. Black dots staggered into infinity.

Sublime waters

Endless rapture awaits whoever trusts the sea.

Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*.

Fourteen leagues of liquid in movement are enough to convey the highest expression of beauty which can be encountered in a transient mode. Charles Baudelaire, *Mon Coeur Mis a Na*.



The sublime fascinates by escaping or exhausting my gaze. Born in that subtle juncture of nature and culture, the sublime forms the extreme high and low tide marks of doubt, and megalomaniac rapids of certainty. The sublime waterlogs my field of vision while sublimation dams, then syphons off, wells of libido. Holiday sublime! Win a round-the-world ocean cruise. Fairstar stops in Tahiti, Honolulu and Sydney. Edmund Burke mapped out the features of the sublime within nature in 1757, the year Brighton became a popular bathing hole and the germ of *Terra Australis Nodum Cogito* was taking root. Burke's vision did not really arrive at its bounds since it had no rest whilst it fed on excess. For those convicts and migrants steeped in melancholy (left behind or forced to leave) the sublime moment lay always just over the horizon. Standing on the docks of Plymouth or Botany Bay, bloodshot eyes were presented with an "accumulation of simultaneous emotions. The infinite view, the emptiness of the horizon, and the proximity of the abyss all emphasise the horror of the void, and lay the foundations for fantasies of being swallowed up." Away from city harbour confines lovers of sublime vistas searched for straight rather than crescent shaped beaches. Along there colonial eyes could leap effortlessly to a Pacific solitude. To experience the sublimity of water, to be swept away, dissolved in the raptures of a bottomless memory, beyond what was routinely observed along the metered tollways of the mundane.

Abject Waters

When water freezes, all the excrement rises to the surface.

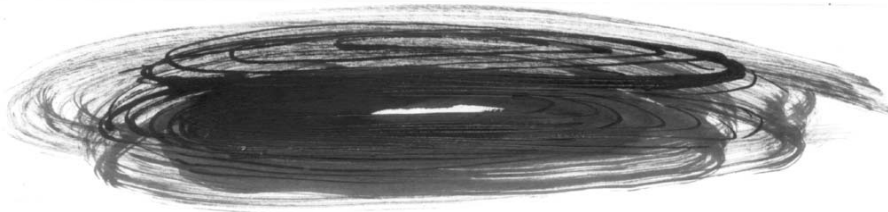
Jean Baudrillard, Cool Memories.

I heard the old, old men say,

'All that's beautiful drifts away

Like the waters.'

W.B. Yeats, The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water.



Storytellers in search of primordial terrors can do no better than drink from abject waters. Nothing strikes fear into the listener more than tales of being slowly eaten by indifferent liquids. Abject waters suck bodies down into the stasis of putrid mud then exhale excremental burbs as receipts of gratitude. Helpless and hapless, the victim slips feet first into Edgar Allan Poe's cesspools or is cast adrift on J. G. Ballard's chemical lakes of futuristic paranoia. Bitter waters seep rather than pour. Abjectness creeps up on you from behind silently as a six foot Bondi dumper. For Cook, Melville or Conrad, the oceans were infinite and eternal gardens of plenty. Today all bodies of water are mortal. Mitchener's South Pacific dreams of paradise have been washed right out of our hair by the El Nino (bad boy) effect. Perth nervously sucks on its artesian life-support system. A million garden sprinklers singing up the salt. T-shirt theory... "Eco-apocalypse now before it's too late!" Driftnet philosophy, longline economics, and blokes bonding together with fish that can't talk back. As the numbers of wild fish decline, so interest in killing them, by hand, swells. At dawn on Bondi beach, excesses of pleasure jostle with mortal processions of decay. Along the water's edge, joggers air-brushed and free as advertising. Up the beach sticky thongs, fried thighs, golden signs, happy fits and broken faces set an obstacle course for sleep-deprived Japanese eyes.

Lapis Lazuli

We have moist imaginations. In them, water is the eye of the earth. Lyall Watson, *The Water Planet*.

To paint water in all its perfection is as impossible as to paint the soul. John Ruskin.



The sea undoes all perspective in its blue vastness. Water is never without its own tint yet it reflects and transmits all colours. A different colour from moment to moment depending on lighting and atmospheric conditions, temperature and context. Every aquatic colour has its unique semiotic tenor, its rhetorical home. Cultures appear to draw something of their natures from the colour of their seas: jade green Gulf of Thailand or cobalt blue Tasman. Ultramarine—that happy paradox of powered gemstone (lapis lazuli) gives its voice “to fresh transfigurings of freshest blue.” The character of water is blue: long wave prismatic of contradiction, excitement and repose. We love to contemplate blueness, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it. Aquamarine sea-greens of the littoral highlight the filigree, etching an excitement of endings and beginnings. It is the mobility of water that lies at the bottom of all its aesthetic qualities. In painting, it is the fluidity of paint that captures imagination; the sensitive touch of a thousand tiny fingers loaded with coloured mud smeared, dribbled and daubed. I don't see this submerged figure despite water. I see it because of water, in and through liquid colour. I tap into aqueous atoms, vibrations of the visible. In the place where psyche and aqua meet. I remember watching Jack the Dripper action painting over plate glass for a documentary film. Point of view from below, holding my breath under water. Arcs of colour curved into my eyes, threading a symphony of traces @&#~ extinguishing the sky to reveal the artist.

Sexual Hydroponics

The most amazing wonder of the deep is its unfathomable cruelty Joseph Conrad
The Mirror of the Sea
I could be your lover
chained up in the water
I could be standing on a ladder
to make it easier...

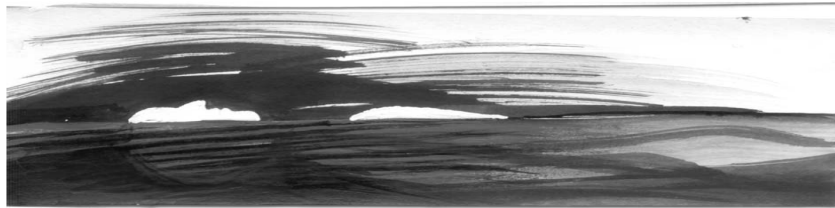


Swinburne craved to be whipped by the sea into a single blush. Flagellation by nature's maternal hand seemed to ease his Oedipal tensions. Bathing machines, artificial supports and mechanical devices developed with a passion during those steamy years. Hydro-medicinal taking of waters in cast iron casseroles, on operating tables, down vacuum cleaners and through chemical drenches. Vile smelling and bile tasting waters were scooped in doses proportionate to levels of boredom suffered by the rich. Thalassoculture cruising, from the Titanic to Love Boat, honed the sophistication of idleness. Interrupted briefly by the futuristic fascination with the speed of Jumbos (1950s-1980s), floating pleasure palaces are booming again as nostalgia for slow motion travel takes on a perverse fin-de-siecle appeal. Gazing over gunwales is tempting Hart Crane. At first sailors see only bubbles, eddies and foam. Then dim pictures of themselves. At last they see monsters who lure them to their death. Liquids concentrate, precipitate and distillate tendencies. In Vienna, home of psychoanalysis, style conscious lovers paint on liquid condoms then set 'em with a hair drier. Blue Lagoon, that most modern of cocktails, now sits in the shade of cool postmodern icy Orgasm. All fluvial forms of eroticism are now reified under the morality of sexually transmitted acronyms. Jouissance by Calvin Klein, is that oceanic feeling of restored narcissism without bounds. Thousands of tiny bubbles in a masturbating sea caress the sensual shores of naked bodies in 30 seconds of grainy b&w slo-mo.

Hydrotherapy

Poets long to immerse in the sea of nature, to enjoy its endless mystery and novelty: on the other hand, they long to come to port in some transcendental eternal and enchanting reality from which the unexpected is excluded. W.H. Auden, *The Enchafed Flood*

Meditation and water are wedded forever. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*



Waterbeds are back. Float tanks too. Acid meets Crystal in an underground water bar. By the end of the week I have been exposed to dangerous levels of committee resolutions in the Faculty. My old orange lover Diva-anna prescribes float tank therapy. I pay by credit card, strip, shower and submerge inside the Timothy Leary Mark VII heaven—piped new age SFX of amniotic bliss mixed with Long Life Salts of the Pharaohs. After a million years I teleport back to Bondi Junction wearing an ecstasy-button smile...“feed me more academia-nuts...It really works!” Immersion in warm water has reduced my levels of Unitonin, inducing a state of existential nihilism —perfect for days like these. Floating, I’m warned, must be counterbalanced by plunging. Might lead to involuntary separation. In the late 1700s plunging was used for treating young girls, convalescents and pasty poets. The diaphragm was the seat of sensibility. Arresting it by immersion shock treatment in freezing water caused suffocation. With ex-army bathing attendants on hand to revive the patient with ‘vigorous massages.’ Plunging towed menstruation flows in line with the moon. Hydrophobes, atheists and effeminate boys were whipped off to a winter beach for a stiff round of aquamanhandling. Nowadays, floating out the back of Bondi, arms outstretched, eyes to the sky, poets resolve the gravity of the day the easy way. An infinite blueness in the sky empties my mind...of sharky thoughts. Ecstasy at last...back in the big tank—in the water—bed—off—shore—snore—smore—sor—re—m~m~~e~~~e~~~~

The Boomerang Dive

The crowd gasped when he jumped off and hovered motionless above the water. He survived, but the three costumes he wore as protection for the dive were ripped off by the impact. For a week he lay in a coma, and if anyone talked to him he would cry out with pain. Charles Sprawson, speaking of Solomon Islander, Alick Wickham's 1918 world record dive of 206 feet (still unbroken) into the Yarra river. Haunts of the Black Masseur.



Diving into water is a flight from finite repetition to infinite novelty. The trauma of hitting the water head first, at speed, is an ecstatic form of deathplay. In that shocking death d(r)ive Orphic instant of cleaving the water, consciousness is freeze framed by the coenesthetic violence of immersion. For a brief tragi-comic instant, a pisci-metamorphosis possesses consciousness. Every dive is also a new beginning, a chance to extend yourself, to kick back off the pool tiles, at the bottom of things. Myths of diving nurture our ideas of love and sacrifice. Apollo's Festival of Leaping off the island of Leucadia is a symbolic sacrifice (a lover's-leap for Sappho who plunged to her death) and therapeutic cure for unrequited love. Diving is also a swallowing. Fate claims the diver. The waters of Lethe condemns to oblivion those who enter the underworld. Psychoanalytically, water symbolises, in its unformed fluid state, the potential for new outcomes, of appearances revealed. Washed clean, awakened, resurrected, reborn, miracle to be held aloft. The baby Achilles held by his ankles then dunked head first into the river by his mother. Excalibur returned to view is the advertising model for all toiletries (eau d' colognes), beverages and tourist holidays. The *Avalon effect* is always caught in extreme closeup, stressing the delirious pleasure of expectation rather than any pleasure of consumption which, like a holiday, is always a disappointment.

Walking on Water

Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. John 3:5

Of all the elements, the earth's the worst
Because for Adam's sinne it was accurst
Therefore no parcel of it will I buy
But on the waters for relief relie John Taylor (1630)



Christ's burial should have been at sea. Water is a universal cleaning agent. It cleans and softens at the same time. Lemon Harpic for the soul! Cool water tempers my perverse sinful thoughts, it mitigates my lather of the foams. The transparency of water also readies the medium as a sacrament of Faith. Water symbolises the mysteries of Christ: "when we dip our heads under the water as in a kind of tomb our old man is buried, and being submerged is hidden below, and thence he rises again renewed." Christ's waters issued from the cross as proof he was composed of the four elements, his blood symbolic of the four humors. Cleansing the body with the laver of water reaffirms life. Keats spoke of "the moving waters at their priest-like task of pure ablution." The sea is the infinite dumping ground for social debris, it purifies as it penetrates. Official Catholic baptismal liquids come in three degrees of purity: *valid liquids*—from rivers, lakes, oceans, hot springs, melted snow, mineral water, dew, slightly muddy water (as long as water predominates); *doubtful liquids*—mixtures such as beer, whisky, coffee, soup, and scented waters; and *invalid liquids*—milk, oil, urine, grease, phlegm and shoe polish. Current church doctrine makes no mention of the great scatological Aussie breakfast icon, vegemite—'brain food of a nation' which students religiously eat before the HSC. Purity and viscosity don't go together. Baptoemite might but! The market is really crying out for a soteriological product that heals the body, cures the soul, and clears the head.

Nausea

"I came to Casablanca for the waters."

"What waters? We're in the desert."

"I was misinformed." Humphrey Bogart and Claude Rains in Casablanca.

A bucket of water still maintains a shadow of attachment to the world. Catherine Clément, *Syncopé: The Philosophy of Rapture*.



The true colour of nostalgia (loss) is ultramarine. Nostalgia is felt in waves. Tossed upon memory the horizon of the present folds in on itself. To feel nostalgic is to long for an image of the past with the pain leached from it. A nasty side effect of any nostalgic cruise into the past, as with many sea journeys, is a bout of sea sickness. Nostalgia, in its military and medical connotations, is etymologically linked to the word nausea. That sick feeling brought on by the rocking motion of a boat. Hence the word nausea is also linked to nautical. The relatively recent (18th century) concept of nostalgia grew from the analogy of leaving the solid turf of home for uncertain foreign lands, usually by sea. Swiss mercenaries fighting far from home grew physically sick and useless in battle and had to be repatriated. The phenomenon became a medical condition. Nostalgia from *nostos* (home) and *algia* (pain of longing) can nowadays be suffered for anything consigned to the past. We now feel nostalgic for things that haven't even happened yet. The experience of *noso* (disease of historical origins), of feeling sick of the present and caught up in the past, inevitably leads to *nostology*: the sensation of a second childhood coming on. I want to swim in the black hole behind the mangroves all day till it's dark and we have go home for tea. Nostalgic waters appear as imaginary ports, for childhoods that can never be relived. Nostalgic waters surround a sadness without an object: a half-forgotten face, inexorably slipping from memory. They don't make nostalgia like they used to. No, they burnt old nostalgia down.

Mystic-writing-sand

The sea preserves no footprints.
Frances Opper, Speaking of Immemorial Waters.

Waves are vibrations, shifting borderlines inscribed on the plane of consistency as
so many abstractions.
Deleuze & Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus.



Beachcombers and hunters of the littoral soon discover that the intertidal zone is a mystic-writing-plage. A pad of wet sandy wax covered by transparent waves. Only the faintest traces of impressions are discernible before erasure. To the untrained eye the wet tablet is a tabula-rasa one minute, a mass of organo-graffiti the next. For the expert eye, however, these traces betray a universe of tiny authors scratching, mapping and madly reproducing to a cosmic score. Freudian theory is at home on the beach. Mystic-writing-pads and psychic sands both receive sense impressions from the external world. Walking the shores moves me to a deeper layer where crab scratchings are recorded as unconscious memory. The appearance and disappearance of writing is similar to the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of taking in the surf. Our sense of what is beyond ourselves is the product of memories, past writings, past walks. Writing or reading the surf *supplements* perception, comes before the surf even appears to the surfer. The littoral edge is a model for the primacy of beachcombing, of the way in which we can only ever experience the world after the wave. That is, through the flotsam and jetsam of previous experiences — through the bricolage of scavenged objects brought home in our wet towels. Taking points, memory tokens, metaphors for our state of mind as much as the external world.

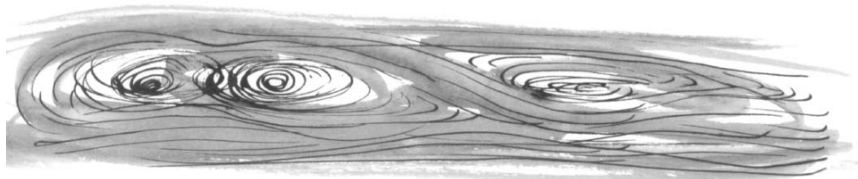
Aquapoesis

More than any other element, water is a complete poetic reality.
Human language has a liquid quality, a flow in its overall effect, water in its consonants.

Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

And from that time I bathed in the Poem of the Sea.

Arthur Rimbaud, *The Drunken Boat*

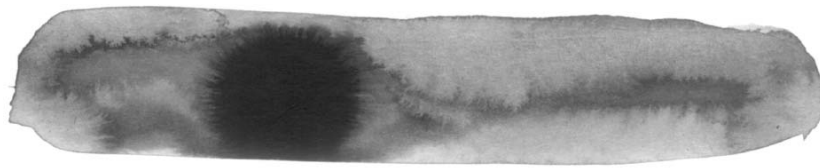


When the song of the sea calls before dawn, sleepwalking grommets can be seen religiously entering the water, eyes still shut. At the other end of Bondi beach, a solitary poet plunges into the “escalator” rip, enjoying a reverse perspective on the economy of Campbell Parade. Aquapoesis begins at the flippers and works its way up. To truly speak the water, poets should be fully immersed at all times. Bath girls, fountain boys, pool jocks and water babies should all be prepared to sleep in wetsuits and booties, ankles velcroed to technology. Dead-to-the-world poets are reborn every day under water. The intimacy of water is their cause, their fluvial philosophy, their only hope. Morose poets should remember that Artaud was a bodysurfer of pain. He once said, while sitting in a bath during the filming of Abel Gance’s *Napoleon* (1927) in which he played Marat, that “the adaptation of my body fluids to the virtuality of a discourse of no duration at all is a state much more precious to me than the gratification of my activity.” This poetic aesthetic floats well in the waters off Sydney’s beaches. Perhaps this is a factor in the resurgence of interest in Artaud’s work amongst young poets. Funding-sperm, media-saliva, critical ‘Bardo’ sparks, style-piss and fashion-shit; all ooze, seep, gush, spurt and flow from every orifice of Sydney’s pool-barbie scene, and that’s ‘filthy’ because, “the ebb and flow of my soul are in perfect harmony with the absolute reality of my mind.” Liquidity is felt, not as metaphor, but as lived experience.

Streams of Consciousness

The fountain of wisdom is a flowing stream (Prov: 18.4)

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses—past the headlands
Into deep Eternity
Emily Dickinson



After dinner, Wittgenstein swam in Byron's pool. He always insisted on using a full bath of boiling water to wash up the dishes at a friend's house. Above the clatter of flying dishes, he would say that "just as one's body has a natural tendency towards the surface and one has to make an exertion to get to the bottom— so it is with thinking!" A good starting point for writing anything; the realisation that all is in flux. For Wittgenstein, talent was a spring of fresh water constantly in motion. His thoughts used to rise to the surface slowly, like bubbles. Ideas would start way up river as indistinct images then approach the conceptual bank with astonishing swiftness. Western philosophy and water have enjoyed a long association. For Michelet all scholarly activity was like swimming flat out through history. Descartes, in relay, shaped his vortex theory of planetary revolutions while watching whirlpools. The term stream of consciousness was launched by William James, the teacher of Gertrude Stein, George Santayana and Wallace Stevens. James thought his brain was a mass of tiny buckets constantly filling up with fluxing sensations. Language was his thumbs in the dyke defence against the sea of wild emotions and chaotic images flooding his mind. Stein (fluid attackers v dry resisters), Santayana (ocean v land reclaimed) and Stevens (voyage v beach house) all cut their own tacks on James' fluid "genius" versus dry "old fog" model of navigating the symbolic high seas. As Barthes said once while sailing off Nice, "all dialectics are possible between water and man."

Bodies of water

A hot-spring bath can cure anything but love. Kusatsu folk song.

If you want to understand the teaching of water, drink. Zen saying.

I drank the thought of water. Richard Jefferies.



The nightly bath prepares me for the horizontal death of sleep. My body is a loose hylomorphic unity of saline and minerals—a lifeboat of organs fitted out with billabongs, hoses, fountains, pumps and syphons. Gently, the bath water displaces ninety percent of the day's weight. I add green salts to marine(ate) my terrestrial self. Floating in a private sea full of organs without bodies. Day-glow stomachs, medusa valves, bundles of nerves and iridescent lips drifting. The sea is deep inside us all said thalassotherapist Claude Bernard, who coined the term milieu interior for his biomorphic theory of evolution: sea water into sap, lymph and blood. From under the water I can just make out the sound of a dog barking outside the window—"mawf mawf..." I'm reminded of Rene Quinton's experiments on dogs; replacing their blood with sea water, to prove we are all really fish at evolutionary heart. Quinton made a fortune at the sharp end of thalassoeconomics, selling tiny ampoules of Quinton's Plasma (sea water) over the counter as a tonic for reviving dehydrated babies. After too long in the bath my fingers and toes start to morph into wrinkled white cunjevoi. Pulling the plug the bath screams out to be let out for the night, back to the sea—"freeeeeeemeeeee." This nightly performance of bath poetry fascinates my eighteen month old son who always has a look on his face as though he still remembers a few words of Aqua from his last holiday in the womb. He stands waving at the plug hole, repeating to himself sadly but acceptingly... "byewarta ...byewarta...byewarta..."

Swallowing the anchor

To contemplate water is to slip away, dissolve, and die.
Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*.

No one can step in the same river twice. Heraclitus.

Never throw a brick to a drowning man in a grocery store.
Old Irish Proverb.



Drowning is a romantic death. An Orphic descent into haptic surrender. Death was the first navigator. Charon, the flying Dutchman and every sailor, pushing up coral five fathoms full, knows that each new drowning adds a little more weight to the entropy of the sea. Osiris remembered the Nile with his piecemeal offering. He gave it his fertile seal of immortal authority over all life born of the waters. Venice, the city of water and perfume ads, is drowning gracefully. Sappho, Shelley, Webb, Crane and Woolf went willingly. Icarus, Arnold, and poor Ian Burn, tragically. Death, said John Foulcher, may not be noticed by those who die: "perhaps the image of life continues in its ideal, like a mirror that catches the sun." Rippling and radiating as shadowy absences and veiled presences like a school of whitebait flashing silver for an instant as they turn against the sun. There is always a hidden presence in (against the infinite absence of) any body of water. In the wash of memory, of a life remembered in surges, of time drowning out images between the tolling of Slessor's *Five Bells*. Echoing Eliot's *Wasteland* and before that, Shakespeare's *Tempest* where "sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell", Slessor water-thoughts appeal to acoustic images. Walt Whitman too found his voice returned from the deep: "Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-waves?/Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?"/Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death/And again death, death, death death." A watery death is a voyage of no return borne on a current freed forever from the weight of dumb earth.

Seashell Ebb Music

Water, which in itself is silent, is just waiting to make a noise. Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*.

Drip, Drip, Drip — title of Spike Jones song.

I hear the lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore; I hear it in the deep heart's core



Those acoustic gurglings heard by Sophocles beside the Aegean promised a secret that frustratingly came close to speech. The liquid lingo spoke in a murmur of harmony that embraced life, truth, and beauty. Waters speak in running consonants and looping vowels. In written form Joyce's wave speech rings true with a "seesoo, hrss, rsseiss, oos" that plays the plastic pluralities of "seashell ebb music wayriver she flows." Joyce's liquified narrative structure releases an "undertow effect" (Lyotard's term), creating eddies and whirlpools of meaning, distorted and reshaped, as they are sucked over the rocks of syntax. The impossible language of waves, waterfalls, taps or internal organs calls siren-like to the Sophocles in us all. Hydrolepsy: constantly treading water in a thalassic dream. Following Ferenczi back to the amniotic depths of preterm rhythms; of acoustic drives, muffled conversations and soundtracks heard beyond the amniotic studio via the umbilical cable network. The foetus is a fish with ears gulping briny nutrients in its weightless tropical aquarium. There must be a market for a New Age CD called *Sounds from the Womb*—for expecting parents. By the rivers of Babylon down Red Segue ...murmuring waters taught birds how to sing, and in turn, people how to talk. Songs of Thalassa underscoring house-mix Eros with Thanatos blues. Back here, at home, the art of circular breathing on the didgeridoo is best learnt with one end in a billabong—singing up the tree underwater.

The Australian Splosh

“Wet, she was a star”— Joe Pasternak on pool idol, Esther Williams.

All good writing is like swimming under water and holding your breath. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Crackup*.

Undressing underwater is particularly difficult—practice on dry land is a great help. H.R. Austin, *How To Swim*.



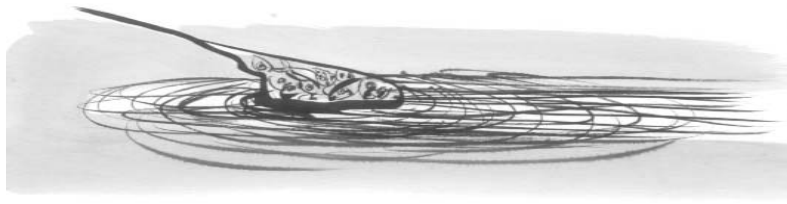
There are two sorts of people on this beach: those who wade out to meet the waves and those who wait for the sea to come to them. All swimming styles: freestyle crawl, butterfly, breast and backstrokes begin with the dog paddle—egg-beating the water in a frenzied attempt to keep the head from going down on the anchor. Swimming reminds the psyche of its body-surfing origins: one half as a spermatozoa frantically fighting against froth n’ bubble while the other half floats in difference. The poetics of swimming is symbolically ockie-strapped to the instinctual memory of escaping the primordial dangers of shrinking seas. We are all immigrants from the sea. Australians, doubly so, since they went overseas for good, to a desert island of eternal nostalgias. This is why we persist with playing out water rituals with such solemnity. Hugging blocks of ice on a Sunday morning up at Bondi Baths, the Icebergs pathetically and heroically play out the Pindar Olympian ode of *ariston men hudor* or water is the best medicine. Fun is laughing in the blue face of pain. Jumping in the deep end when the body says no is a recognition that periodically the mind must go to sea to in order to recover a knowledge of its actualities and limitations. Massed along summer beaches like colonies of walruses and seals, Australians still play out rituals of re-entry and return. Now that the ozone hole has killed off the bronzed Aussie, libidinal desires have been aqueduced from carnal displays of coppertanned hide to erotic multicoloured day-glo neck-to-knee Lyrca body skins.

Backwash

Water is the universal glue. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*.

Water engenders skin, it is actually and ultimately the same surface. Roland Barthes, *Michelet*.

The libido behaves like a stream whose main bed has become blocked. Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality*.

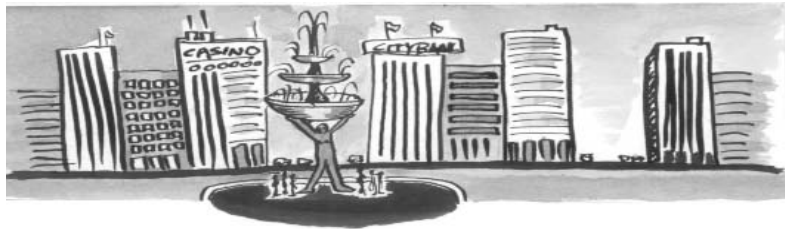


Littoral zones are striated by gutters, holes, rips and rocks—water washing over bars—punctuated by moments of stasis. The littoral is the beach's body without organs. In these zones of radical indeterminacy sudden deterritorialisation there are no straight lines, no obvious outcomes. Experienced toes dig into wet sand in search of bivalves or calling up king worms. Against the wave worms 'thick as your finger' respond to a liquid language of olfactory signs described with a pantyhose burley stuffed with stinking fish heads. Every wormer knows that desire flows. Seducing the shy creatures from their comfort is a sensitive and difficult art. Exhibitionism leads to despair. Finger and thumb must gently yet firmly grip and pull the worm's humping neck in that nascent climax when the worm is in stasis, relaxed, before disappearing like Eurydice down into the underworld. This delicate operation is usually performed under water, against the fierce drag of a wave, waiting for that moment of turning between advancing and retreating surges. Worming under waves is a good tutorial exercise for students of the libido. Psychoanalysis on the beach pumps up Freud's hydraulic theory of blocked libidinal drives, dammed tensions and drained childhood repressions. Symptoms move horizontally, causes run vertically. Dream waters refloat mundane images in all their grotesqueness and shocking banality. It's disturbing how many times we watch the repeats. Then again, water images in dreams can simply mean you need to be relieved...or reborn...again.

Hydromania

Powdered water: just add water to get water.
Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*.

Water so pure, there's nothing in it.
Advertising slogan for a sewerage treatment works.



As empires decline, displays of hydromania increase as compensation. Wealth, capital, and power all flow like money along cultural and political chases. Charles Sprawson noted that the more degenerate the Roman Emperor, the more sumptuous tended to be his baths. Excesses of power (dictators, multinational corporations or entertainment casino complexes) always choose gushing, spurting, overflowing water as the ideal symbol of potency—pissing in the eye of God. Titus, Nero, Ludwig, Louis XIV and Kennett all lavished obscene fortunes on artificial lakes, fountains, aqueducts and memorials. Marking the height of their golden arcs on the walls of history. Lolly water light-shows dance seductive spectacles luring the tourist, gambler or late night shopper. The desire to own the oceans, fountains of eternal youth, waters of life, and wells of knowledge, flows in miniature form through every suburban backyard as pool, bird or spa bath (fairy-lights optional). At the other end of the hydromantic spectrum, not even the excesses of today's hyper-real Las Vegas or Disneyland hold a hose up to the Roman Emperors. Nero staged naval battles; ritualised reruns of *Jaws*, for real, using slaves on a mass scale. Tiberius trained teams of young boys to perform erotic synchronised swimming with him and friends in his private baths at Capri. On the other hand, everyone can now buy a Pool Barbie Doll with long blond hair that changes from hot pink in cold water to sparkling gold in warm. A lesson in the alchemy of style.

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