

The Roots of Fear and Repulsion

With few exceptions,¹ the classical period knew nothing of the attraction of seaside beaches, the emotion of a bather plunging into the waves, or the pleasures of a stay at the seaside. A veil of repulsive images prevented the seaside from exercising its appeal. Blindness, as well as horror, was built into an overall system of appreciation of natural landscapes, meteorological phenomena, and coenaesthetic² impressions (those which created a sense of existence on the basis of a collection of bodily sensations), whose outline had gradually taken shape since the Renaissance.³ To understand properly the origins of the way in which coastal landscapes were 'read' and the new practices that emerge surrounding them around 1750, it is first necessary to grasp how coherent the cluster of representations were that formed the basis of the repulsion.⁴

THE ABYSS CONTAINING THE DEBRIS FROM THE GREAT FLOOD

The interpretation of the Bible, especially the book of Genesis, the Psalms, and the book of Job, exerted a deep influence on the ways in which the sea was portrayed.⁵ Both the story of the Creation and that of the Flood coloured the world of collective imagination with their own specific features. Genesis imposed the vision of the 'great abyss', a place of unfathomable mysteries,⁶ an uncharted liquid mass, the image of the infinite and the

unimaginable over which the Spirit of God moved at the dawn of Creation.⁷ This quivering expanse, which symbolized, and actually was, the unknowable, was frightful in itself. There is no sea in the Garden of Eden. There is no place within the enclosed landscape of Paradise for the watery horizon whose surface extends as far as the eye can see. To attempt to fathom the mysteries of the ocean bordered on sacrilege, like an attempt to penetrate the impenetrable nature of God, as St Augustine, St Ambrose, and St Basil repeatedly pointed out.⁸

This unconquerable element was evidence that Creation remained unfinished. The ocean was the remnant of that undifferentiated primordial substance on which form had to be imposed so that it might become part of Creation. This realm of the unfinished, a vibrating, vague extension of chaos, symbolized the disorder that preceded civilization. A firm belief began to appear which held that already in antediluvian times, it was only with difficulty that the raging ocean could be contained within its bounds.⁹ Consequently, the ocean inspired a deep sense of repulsion; for the classical age was apparently unaware of the desire to return to the womb of the Creator and the longing to be swallowed up that were to haunt the Romantics.

Since Creation was organized around the appearance of man, who was both its goal and its focus,¹⁰ this vestige without form remained alien to him. A creature fashioned in the image of God would never make his abode outside the garden or the city.¹¹ Besides, the Mosaic text mentions only the creatures of the air and the field; marine species, hidden in the mysterious darkness of the deep, could not be named by man, and consequently were outside his dominion.

Even more telling is the story of the Flood. According to the authors, the ocean was an instrument of punishment, and in its actual configuration was the remnant of the disaster. According to Mosaic cosmogony, there are two great expanses of water: that which fills the oceans and that which is held within the vaults of heaven. In separating them, the Creator drew two dividing lines: the coast, which delineates the respective domains of the sea and the earth, and the clouds, that shifting *limes*¹² established between the waters of heaven and the atmosphere breathed by man. Opinions were divided as to which of the two watery bodies had submerged the earth during the Flood.¹³

In any case, the ocean spoke to pious souls. Its roaring, its moaning, its sudden bursts of anger were perceived as so many reminders of the sins of the first humans, doomed to be engulfed

by the waves; its sound alone was a permanent appeal to repent and an incitement to follow the straight and narrow path.

The Flood marked a temporary return to chaos; this return of the boundless waves haunted the cultured minds of the Renaissance. The invasion of the waters was a major pictorial theme, whose evolution can be traced from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to Nicolas Poussin's evocation of the ocean in winter.¹⁴ French poets at the end of the sixteenth century, especially du Bartas in his *Sepmaine*, were fond of dwelling at length on the story of this disaster.¹⁵ A hundred years later, the Flood stood at the heart of the debate provoked by the great theories regarding the origins of the earth. After all, without the Flood, the history of our globe and its relief seemed completely incomprehensible.

It is worth dwelling for a while on these cosmogonical theories,¹⁶ which have been analysed up to now primarily from the sole point of view of the history of science; they create a vivid picture of the link that developed between the scholarly evocation of the great catastrophe of the past and the contemporary assessment of landscapes. In this respect, Thomas Burnet's *Theory of the Earth* assumes a special significance. This book, to which constant reference was made throughout the eighteenth century, is both backward-looking and premonitory. It was contemporary with the rise of natural theology, which was to transform images of the sea and its shores; moreover, it foreshadowed the great changes in the field of aesthetics which were eventually to lead people to sample this hideous beauty.

According to the British theorist, there was no sea in Paradise, nor later in the antediluvian earth inhabited by Adam and his descendants after the Fall; all men lived on the same continent. The surface of this primitive globe was as gentle as a beach. 'The face of the Earth before the Deluge was smooth, regular and uniform, without mountains, and without a Sea ... it had the beauty of Youth and blooming Nature, fresh and fruitful, and not a wrinkle, scar or fracture in all its body; no rocks or mountains, no hollow Caves, nor gaping Channels ... The Air was calm and serene.'¹⁷ There were no hurricanes on the antediluvian earth. An eternal spring prevailed, as in the golden age evoked by Virgil.

The Flood occurred when God opened up the great abyss of the waters; universal chaos then spread a second time over the darkness and the mists of the earth. Even the stormy sea cannot provide an adequate image of this cosmic turmoil; the recession

of the waters, ordained by God, went on for a long time; for a long time the flooding ocean continued to sweep into subterranean caverns. The present sea is merely this great abyss once again restrained by God; its basins, its shores, and the mountains that fix its boundaries date from the Flood; they comprise 'the most frightful sight that Nature can offer'.¹⁸

As a result, it seemed very likely that the bottom of the sea was terribly chaotic, as one might suspect from the anarchic distribution of islands. If that horrible, monstrous ground ever became visible, men would see the most misshapen cavity on earth stretch out before their eyes. 'So deep, and hollow, and vast; so broken and confus'd, so every way deform'd and monstrous. This would effectually waken our imagination, and make us enquire and wonder how such a thing came in Nature.'¹⁹

In fact, the coastline was nothing but ruins. This accounted for its irregularity and the incomprehensible pattern of the reefs which border it; there was no order to be found there. Because they were so unaesthetic, the sea and its shores could not, according to sound theology, date from Creation; they could not be the result of Nature's original work. The ocean was nothing but an abyss full of debris; at best, it might be conceded that it formed the least unsightly landscape which could have resulted from the temporary return of chaos.²⁰

William Whiston's *New Theory of the Earth* also aroused considerable interest. It relates to a system of appreciation that is fairly close to Burnet's, although the interpretation of the unfolding of the planet's history is quite different from one book to the other. According to Whiston, the primitive Earth looked very much like the Earth today; it too included an ocean that was salty and whose tides were gentle; however, this ocean did not keep men apart, as they were all gathered together on a single continent. Its shape was different from, and its volume less than, that of the present seas; moreover, it was not afflicted by storms.

In the sixteenth or seventeenth century of Creation, the fountains of heaven opened up and caused a world-wide flood that completely upset the structure of the globe. Whiston, however, presents a calmer picture of the disaster than Burnet. Throughout the forty days, the waters that submerged the land remained fairly calm, in order to avoid overwhelming the Ark. As the waters of the Flood receded, the coastlines of continents, which from then on were separated from one another, took on their complex outline. The waters, deeper in their centre than before,

continued to be rocked by terrible storms. For Whiston, as for Burnet, the oceans are indeed remnants of the Flood; but according to the former, the catastrophe merely modified the shape, appearance, and outline of the primitive ocean.²¹

Until about 1840, marine disasters remained central to the natural history of the earth, and then to geology; we shall return to this. Even very late on, a number of scholars endeavoured to vindicate the Genesis narrative; as late as 1768, Alexander Cattcott in his *Treatise on the Deluge* gives a step-by-step commentary on the Old Testament story, which he considers perfectly satisfactory.²² Like most defenders of the biblical text writing in the eighteenth century, he backs up his argument by making use of accounts of the Flood recently collected from ancient peoples such as the Assyrians, the Persians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Latins. He even refers to Indian and Chinese traditions. In his opinion, the sand on the sea-shore, the erratic boulders to be found on certain beaches, and natural chasms cannot be explained without reference to the Flood.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, when the theories of Burnet, Woodward, and Whiston were discarded as obsolete, a new generation of 'catastrophist' scholars appeared: with different arguments and in a different scientific context they continued to uphold the accuracy of the sacred text.²³ For example, according to Richard Kirwan,²⁴ the abruptness of the coasts of Ireland, Scotland, and the islands on their fringes was a result of the onslaught of the great southern ocean, whose incursion caused the inundation. In his opinion, the air that poisoned the Earth was also a by-product of the Flood; it was the evil-smelling vestige of the mephitism²⁵ that prevailed as the waters receded, when the Earth remained covered with the dead and rotting flesh of drowned animals. In order to escape from these emanations, Kirwan asserted, men went on dwelling in the mountains for a long time. This interesting belief arose out of the obsession with infection which was part and parcel of the neo-Hippocratic tradition, and it reinforced the repulsive image of the seaside.²⁶

For our purpose it is fundamental to grasp the huge importance accorded the Flood by scholars writing in the watershed period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All of them placed the disaster at the centre of their cosmogonies; all reasoned within the framework of a restricted temporality; and all believed that the histories of mankind and the Earth were one and the same, composed as they were of simultaneous episodes.

It is clear how the ocean, a threatening remnant of the Flood, came to inspire horror, as did the mountains,²⁷ that other chaotic vestige of the disaster, which were 'pudenda of Nature',²⁸ ugly, aggressive warts that grew on the surface of the new continents. This repulsive interpretation was in keeping with the certainty that the world was in decline. No matter how zealously they worked, men would never be able to re-create the antediluvian Earth, on whose surface the traces of earthly paradise could still be seen.

The endless movement of the seas suggested the possibility of a new flood;²⁹ it was part of the vague threat that hung heavily over the sanctuaries of happiness. Of course, caution is necessary on this point. The description of the apocalypse in the book of Revelation makes it clear that the final 'conflagration' will not come from water, that vestige of the chaotic, diluvial past, but from fire sent by God. The universal blaze was to ensure the victory of the purifying agent.³⁰ When Christ returns, the sea will have disappeared.

However, the ocean's anger was expected to play a part at the beginning of the series of cataclysms. Among the fifteen signs heralding 'the advent of Our Lord', the *artes moriendi*, widely circulated from the fifteenth century, assigned water a devastating role.³¹ The sea would submerge the mountains before tumbling into the bowels of the earth; the fish and the ocean monsters would rise to the surface, uttering their cries; and the waters would howl at the fire coming from heaven.

This religious cosmogony, summarized all too briefly here, sets forth certain stereotypes for understanding the sea and the creatures dwelling in it, and endows them with a rich symbolic significance. In the figure of Leviathan, 'the dragon that is in the sea',³² the Bible established the monstrous nature of fish, which also follows logically from the Creation story. The dragon that is rent asunder by the archangel St Michael first rose out of the sea.³³ The peregrinations of the Irish monks in the Middle Ages, especially of St Brendan,³⁴ later reinforced this interpretation. According to Benedeit's account, it took all the hero's saintliness to appease the horrible beasts that crawled out of the depths of the abyss. Beowulf had to dive into the sombre loch to kill the nameless female who begat the monster Grendel in another legend that testifies to the terror inspired by the marine creatures that appeared on the shores of the northern ocean. In the sixteenth century, the Swedish bishop Olaus Magnus believed firmly in sea monsters. Even in 1751, following a thorough

investigation conducted among sailors, Erich Pontoppidan devoted a long chapter of his *Natural History of Norway*³⁵ to the sea serpent that fishermen called the Kraken. The poets of the seventeenth century also turned their attention to the theme of horrifying viscous contact with these nightmarish creatures born out of black waters³⁶ and risen from the chaotic world of gloomy caverns. Spenser, who settled in Ireland, tells how the holy pilgrim who accompanied Sir Guyon on his way to the Bower of Bliss was able, by touching the waves with his rod, to subdue the threatening beasts and compel them to return to the depths of the ocean.³⁷ Milton, in a striking image, makes the sea monsters huddle together and copulate in palaces submerged by the waters of the Flood.³⁸

The ocean, that watery monsters' den, was a damned world in whose darkness the accursed creatures devoured one another. Gaston Bachelard and Gilbert Durand have emphasized the fascination that a child experiences when seeing for the first time a little fish swallowed up by a bigger one.³⁹ The cruel world of this food-chain in which the swallower is promptly swallowed, represents the realm of Satan and the powers of Hell. Consequently, there was nothing fortuitous about great storms; sailors saw in them the Devil's hand, or they imagined the roughness of the sea to be caused by the souls of the damned who haunted the atmosphere's intermediate zone.⁴⁰ The same image reappears in erudite culture: the description of the first circle of Hell in the *Divine Comedy* combines the ancient pattern of repulsion towards the infernal rivers' black waters with the unleashing of the diabolical storm. According to Françoise Joukovsky,⁴¹ the image of the Satanic sea becomes more evocative in France at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. It then gradually loses its force until it becomes a mere device intended to renew the hackneyed stereotypes of the Virgilian tempest.⁴²

The demonic nature of the angry sea provided a justification for exorcism.⁴³ Sixteenth-century Portuguese and Spanish sailors occasionally immersed relics in the waves. These sailors were convinced that storms would not abate by themselves, but that the intervention of the Holy Virgin or St Nicholas was required. This gives an added dimension to the figure of Christ stilling the waves on the lake of Tiberias and chiding his frightened apostles for their little faith.⁴⁴

The chaotic ocean, that unruly dark side of the world which was an abode of monsters stirred up by diabolical powers, emerges as one of the persistent figures of madness; the unforeseeable

violence of its winter storms was proof of its insanity. Jean Delumeau stresses the frequent association established between the sea and madness; in this connection he evokes the image of Tristan abandoned by the mariners on the coast of Cornwall and that of the Ship of Fools, a floating body used to seclude lunatics, who were thus committed to the element that was in keeping with their unpredictable temperament.⁴⁵

The shifting immensity of the sea is also a bearer of misfortune. In both Shakespeare's early and later plays, the tempest at sea, wild beasts, comets, illness, and vice all weave a network of associations, evoking a world in conflict, dominated by disorder. The grey winter ocean, dismal and cold, generates various kinds of fear; it fosters the haunting dread of being caught by sudden death and deprived of extreme unction, far from the home fires; of being delivered, body and soul, unburied, to these endless waves that know no rest.⁴⁶ The desire to ward off the brutal advent of death explains why the practice of propitiatory rites persisted here and there.

Pious literature had long devoted considerable space to the symbolism of the sea and its shores; a sermon by pseudo-Ambrose and, even more surely, a long excerpt from St Augustine's *De Beata Vita* could in this respect be regarded as foundation texts. In the opinion of the Fathers of the Church, the immensity of the waters represented both the source of life and a vision of death;⁴⁷ the Mediterranean was both angelic and diabolical, of theological as well as geographical importance; for in spite of the violence of its storms, it made possible Paul's missionary travels, thereby facilitating the spread of the divine Word and the establishment of the Christian diaspora. Life, which was perceived as a passage and a journey strewn with perils, unfolds in the midst of a world as unstable as the sea, the intangible domain of vanity, in the midst of which loved ones and objects are rolled along in a moving space without a 'petrified shell'.⁴⁸ The evocation of this 'very bitter sea'⁴⁹ becomes a stereotype in French poetry during the last thirty years of the sixteenth century. This is how poets, often Huguenots fond of hyperbole and violent images, discovered the ocean, which had been almost totally absent from the smiling landscapes of the Renaissance. One Sieur de Valagre perceived the world as an edifice sinking into 'the waves of the sea' on which it was erected and as an 'ocean of desires, appetites, jealousies, designs and projects'. Siméon de la Rocque saw it as a 'seething, deep Sea/Which has neither shore nor rest'. The world was also modelled on the image of

the maelstrom, the spiral abyss that fascinated Leonardo da Vinci,⁵⁰ and whose depths threaten to suck in the soul.

Flemish and later Dutch seascape painting was established on this symbolism;⁵¹ the waves represent the fragility of life and the precariousness of human institutions. They demonstrate why it is necessary to have faith in God. Roman painting of the seventeenth century, especially that of Claude Lorrain, was also very open to the religious symbolism of the sea.⁵²

The Church came to be considered as a ship, with the Holy Spirit at the helm guiding it to the eternal haven which was the object of Christian longing; sin, by contrast, made mortals stray far from the path to salvation.⁵³

The sea was also sometimes interpreted as a symbol of Purgatory,⁵⁴ like a crossing that provides the sinner assailed by the punitive storm with an opportunity to repent and return to the straight and narrow path. What was beginning to appear here was the image of the redeeming sea that fosters the sailor's faith. For the ageing author of *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, passionate beings who have been caught up in the chaos of the world experience a deep moral crisis in the course of a sea voyage and shipwreck. It is through disaster or apparent loss and separation that the heroes recover their sense of meaning and the possibility returns of a world full of music and harmony among human beings;⁵⁵ but this concept has made us stray from the negative images. We shall return to it.

The sea-shores and the people dwelling there were constituents of the repulsive images evoked above. The line of contact between the world's constituent elements was also a front along which they oppose one another and reveal their madness; this was where the precarious balance established among them was in danger of being destroyed. This boundary was where the Flood would mark its return and the chain of cataclysms be triggered. It was on this shore, more than anywhere else, that Christians could come and contemplate the traces of the Flood, meditate upon that ancient punishment, and experience the signs of divine wrath. Only the harbour, that scene of desire, nostalgia, and collective rejoicing, escapes this repulsive pattern.

The burning sands of the desert and the beach, together with the swamp and the craggy mountain, form one of the images of Gehenna; they line the third circle of Dante's *Inferno*; it would be interesting to reflect on what the sight of the strand and the 'horrible' desolation of the sea bottom laid bare by the ebbing tide suggested to the men of that time.

ANTIQUITY'S CODIFICATION OF THE SEA'S ANGER

The reading of ancient texts reinterpreted by the humanists, like the quest for and contemplation of ancient art, produced other images of the sea and its shores. These combined with images derived from Judaeo-Christian tradition.⁵⁶

The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors whose works constitute our sources turn only very rarely to the ancients in describing the spectacle offered by the waves and the beach;⁵⁷ they seem indifferent to the emotion that emerges from the seascapes of the *Georgics* and to the subtlety of the Alexandrian poets. Thus French Renaissance poets are almost entirely ignorant of the stillness of the sea, which gets barely a passing mention from them; the few pieces about the sea that can be found in their works are nothing but processions of mythological deities, usually inspired by texts celebrating Venus or Neptune in book 5 of the *Aeneid*. On the other hand, because their emotional reactions are so strong, as Lucien Febvre and Robert Mandrou have emphasized, these poets are very sensitive to everything in ancient texts that evokes fear and horror.

In the sixteenth century, the wrath of the sea in the *Aeneid* already stood out as a stereotype intended to give new impetus to the descriptions of storms that marked medieval accounts of travels to the Holy Land. These accounts were haunted by the fear of the void and the presumed proximity of monsters.⁵⁸ Virgilian stereotypes were borrowed partly from Homer, and were adapted by Ennius and Pacuvius and somewhat enriched by Ovid, and Seneca and then Lucian,⁵⁹ who were also widely read. They inspired novels, epics, and lyrical poems, as well as travel accounts. This model shapes the way the storm is depicted in Rabelais's *Fourth Book* of Pantagruel's adventures, as well as in *The Lusiads*. It continued to command the attention of tragic writers throughout the eighteenth century,⁶⁰ and left its mark on Thomson's vision of the tempest.⁶¹ Monique Brosse shows how deep an impact it was to make on western Romantic literature about the sea.⁶²

The sea storm in antiquity, as codified and described by second-century rhetoricians inspired by the stories in the *Aeneid* and Ovid's five descriptions, comprises a series of specific stereotypes that endow it with the appearance, albeit inaccurate, of a cyclone. At first, winds come rushing from the four corners of the horizon and fight noisily with one another; the sailors' cries, the whistling

in the ropes, the din of the waves, and thunder comprise the sounds that help set the scene. The waters, laden with sand, silt, and foam, rise up like mountains, laying bare the earth at the bottom of the abyss. The clash of the waves makes the flanks of the boat tremble; at the heart of the darkness streaked with lightning, blinding rains make the sky appear to collapse. With the tenth wave, the most terrible of all, death is unavoidable, unless the sailor at prayer is saved by divine intervention.

As this well-known model was reiterated, it reinforced the image of the terrible sea: a road without a road, on which man drifts in the hands of the gods, under the permanent threat of hostile water, which is a symbol of hatred that extinguishes the passion of love as it does fire.

Horace, like Tibullus, Propertius, Ovid, and later Seneca,⁶³ detests the 'unsociable' ocean that keeps men apart. He condemns navigation, which he sees as a challenge to divine forces. The Adriatic terrifies him; the sea for Horace is stormy and hungry for ships in distress. A scene of bloody battles, it abounds with beasts and traps. In this respect the poet is not representative of the majority of his contemporaries, but this is not important here; the main point is that he remained widely read as long as classical culture maintained its ascendancy.⁶⁴

Ancient literature presents the sea – and later the Atlantic Ocean – as a supreme enigma. It makes of them the primary source of scholars' grief; the seventeenth century repeatedly asserts, albeit without great conviction, that Aristotle committed suicide because he failed to elucidate the complexity of the Euripus currents.⁶⁵ Of course, oceanographic science had evolved profoundly since antiquity; however, it remained troubled by three major problems, which had already been raised by the Greeks. The first concerns the distribution and the outline of the lands and the seas; their locations seem without order, contrary to the natural arrangement of the elements according to Aristotle's *Physics*;⁶⁶ and water should in fact cover the whole of the earth.⁶⁷

The way that water circulated over the globe also remained a partial enigma. Admittedly, even before its accuracy was demonstrated by Halley, people were quite familiar with the theory of the cycle of evaporation and precipitation which is thought to date from Aristotle;⁶⁸ but this idea of an exchange of water between the sea, the atmosphere, and the Earth was considered insufficient. Plato's model, which suggested that water passed through the centre of the earth, continued to be widely accepted. This belief in a subterranean connection between the earth and

the ocean lent credence to the idea of the existence of horrible caverns at the bottom of the seas.⁶⁹ Cultural imagery was haunted by the idea of waters moving deep below, and this inspired Father Kircher's *Mundus subterraneus*, explains the appeal of the *Submarine Voyage*,⁷⁰ and supports the earth science theories developed by Burnet and Woodward. Observers were certain that there was beneath the surface of the earth a vast reservoir with a complex network of canals that swelled the tides and distributed water to the rivers and the sea. This made the shoreline seem less important, and drove the quest for another voyage, an in-depth one, so to speak.

This fascinating subterranean connection was often mentioned when attempting to account for currents and tides. On the issue of tides there were a great number of opposing theories. Of course, the role of the moon had been detected since Pytheas; and in 1687, Newton was to provide a definitive explanation of the phenomenon. Before him, Galileo and Descartes had also put forward dazzling explanations, the former attributing a major role to the rotation of the earth, the latter suggesting that the moon exerted pressure on the atmosphere. However, credence continued to be given to other theses that relied on astrology and an animal vision of the sea. It is important to bear them in mind in order to recreate the mental universe of Descartes' contemporaries in all its complexity.

Ancient culture, heedful of the images of boundaries,⁷¹ focuses more strongly on appreciating coastlines than on the sea itself. This is not surprising. Paul Pedech shows how the experience of navigation for the Greeks granted a paramount role to the profile of coasts in geographical consciousness. 'It is mainly the sea', writes Strabo, 'that gives the earth its outline and its shape, fashioning gulfs, the high seas, straits, and equally isthmuses, peninsulas and capes.'⁷² Greek travellers describe their coastal peregrinations and itineraries.⁷³ The first ambition of Avienus's poetic geography in his *Ora Maritima* was to provide a continuous description of the shoreline, to map out a trail of sandy or barren beaches, of ponds, sea-shores, and rocky headlands.⁷⁴ Nowhere does Homer say that Ulysses really loves the sea; it is, symbolically, the longing for the shores of Ithaca that leads him to set sail. This same feeling is what prompts the hero of Fénelon's *Télémaque* to climb the cliff in order to gaze at the sight of the sea.⁷⁵ In ancient epics, the shore keeps alive the dream of a fixed abode prescribed by the gods or provides the focus for the hope of return.

At the same time, there is no lack of episodes in classical mythology and literature to strengthen the negative vision of the shore. The site of hope and success can also become a cold land of exile and a sojourn of misfortune. On the beach of Naxos, as she is pursuing Theseus, Ariadne plunges into the sea and lets her tears mingle with the seething water of the waves; Racine's *Phèdre*, ignoring Dionysus, asks, 'Wounded by what love did you die deserted on a barren shore?'⁷⁶ It is with blackness in his soul that Ovid in his loneliness paces up and down the gloomy shore of Tomes. In *Télémaque*, which is nothing but a succession of seaside scenes, the beach – site of escape, shipwrecks, and nostalgic tears – also becomes the privileged backdrop to farewells and heart-rending complaints.⁷⁷

On the sea-shore monsters lurk: Scylla surrounded by her barking dogs and the sly Charybdis who gulps down and vomits her victims. When the Greek Poseidon or the Etruscan Nethuns, originally chthonic forces, gods of earthquakes and tidal waves, became the gods of the sea, they inherited sovereignty over the monsters with which the Aegean world had filled the waters. Poseidon's sons were mostly maleficent giants, such as Polyphemus the Cyclops or the bandit Sciro.⁷⁸ Every late eighteenth-century tourist dreamed of visiting the straits of Sicily and confronting the terrifying Homeric creatures to be found there. For the neoclassical traveller, discovering the abyss would soon become a compulsory stage in a voyage experienced as an initiatory rite. Once on site, visitors laughed at how slight the danger actually was, while at the same time relishing their memories of child-like fright.

The shore in antiquity was also the receptacle of the sea's rejections; it is along the beach that the ocean purges itself and throws up its monsters. Seneca illustrates this: 'It is in the nature of the sea to cast back on its shore every secretion and every impurity ... and this purging occurs not only when the storm is stirring the waves, but when the deepest calm prevails.'⁷⁹

Strabo also speaks of 'the repulsive' or 'purgative movement of the sea'.⁸⁰ According to Pliny the Elder,⁸¹ the Fortunate Islands, situated off the African continent, were 'infected with the putrefaction of the animals that the sea continually throws back on their coasts'. In the seventeenth century, amber was still considered the richest and most spectacular product of these marine excretions. According to Fournier and Bouhours, coastal people still regarded the stinking matter that was cast back on the shores of Venice and Messina as excreta of the sea;⁸² they believed that

the salty foam was the ocean's sweat. The Venetians called the rhythm of the tide 'il viva dell'aqua'. This same perspective explains why the tides were thought of as so many bouts of fever affecting the sea. In 1712, the English poet Diaper used these very terms to describe the pollution on nauseating shores where dolphins chose to die in order not to contaminate the purity of the high sea's air and the clarity of its waters.⁸³

In Greek literature, every boundary zone is a dangerous area in which the activities of deities, human beings, and animals, living in confused, dangerous proximity, threaten to interfere with one another.⁸⁴ The sea-shore of antiquity, as imagined in the classical period, remains haunted by the possibility of a monster bursting forth or of the sudden incursion of foreigners, who are comparable to monsters; as a natural setting for unexpected violence, it is the privileged scene for abductions. It would take too long to mention all the episodes, continually rehashed in painting and literature, that reflect this perspective and confirm the link established by antiquity between landscapes and the way in which wars unfold.⁸⁵ The abduction of Europa and the installation of the Danaeans' camp on the banks of the Tiber and their landing, weapons in hand, to face Turnus's companions are the most obvious examples. The monster springing up out of the sea ready to devour its prey in Corneille's *Andromède*⁸⁶ and the Theramenes narrative [in Racine's *Phèdre*] that relates the unhappy fate of Hippolytus are also part of this long chain of stereotypes.

The outline of the ancient shore, when evoked in the modern period, was often imagined as a hesitant boundary threatened with the possibility of being broken down. Such a rupture would in turn violate the harmonious peace of laborious, hard-working lives. This image was strengthened by recollections of the numerous scourges that have come from the sea since the early Middle Ages.⁸⁷ The traces left by the Norman and Saracen invasions, the spreading of the Black Death via the sea, and the misdeeds of pirates, wreckers, smugglers, and port bandits, all left a damaging mark on the image of the seaside; later, the great naval battles at the ends of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would make the Channel coasts bristle with parallel walls of stone. For the eighteenth-century traveller, the key to appreciating a shoreline, a harbour, or a port lay in evaluating its defences.

For outsiders, the sea-shore was also the place where they made the disturbing discovery of the folk who inhabited it; it was the dangerous setting in which a choice had to be made

between the joys of savouring hospitality and the fear of encountering monsters, between the vision of Nausicaa and an invasion by Polyphemus.

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe summarized and reworked these evil images of the sea-shore. Robinson Crusoe's island features all the characteristics of the Garden of Eden after the Fall: there is a prospect of serene happiness provided man does not spare his sweat, organizes his time, and carefully orders his labour. Throughout its pages, the novel [*Robinson Crusoe*] adopts a widely recognized Promethean perspective, and symbolically retraces the stages of civilization: food gathering and fishing, agriculture, and stock raising. But this Garden of Eden is situated inland, in the midst of meadows and groves. The solitary individual has at his disposal a series of interconnected havens that run into the underworld, that ultimate safeguard against threats to his privacy.

Here the beach is the scene only of the disasters whose marks it still bears: the ship ripped apart and smashed against the coastal reefs. The shore is where its *useful* remains were cast up. Above all, the sand bears the imprint of the wild threatening forces that symbolize desire. This is where cannibals indulge in their orgies, as Robinson watches, fascinated, a voyeur threatened by the animality of collective rejoicing. It is from the shore that danger menaces the womb-like shelter which the hero has lovingly built for himself; it is also from the sea that mutineers disembark. Robinson does not linger on the sand that bears the marks of these incursions and on which he observes the savages in their nakedness; he does not play or bathe; his only bold act is to take Friday away from the group of savages, thereby endowing him with an identity that turns him into a companion and inaugurates a relationship that borders on homosexuality.⁸⁸

This novel is the forefather of all castaway stories, on which the negative appreciation of the sea-shore long continued to exercise its influence. It contains an echo of the tales told by sailors who, since the end of the fifteenth century, expanded mankind's knowledge of this planet. The image of the savage is just one more element in the age-old catalogue of the threats coming from the sea and its shores.

The images of the ocean and its shores were obviously influenced by the experiences of modern navigation; but this impact should not be exaggerated. Until at least around 1770, the recollections drawn from ancient literature and the reading of the Bible exerted a greater influence on the collective imagination

than did the accounts of exotic travels. To understand why, it is enough to bear in mind the number of hours that a cultured person devoted to edifying reading and to Greek and especially Latin works; their number far exceeds the hours that he could spend on travel accounts; and in fact, the cultural contribution of the latter was integrated within these more ancient, deeply rooted patterns. Paradoxically, the history of seafarers and navigation, however prestigious it might be, is not the best way to understand and analyse images of the sea and its shores; it nevertheless remains indispensable.

The appalling fate of sailors in modern times gave rise to an abundant scientific and medical literature which reinforced the negative images of the ocean. Elsewhere I have described at some length⁸⁹ the way in which the ship comes to be seen as a pre-eminently maleficent place. Between its damp wooden flanks, sources of fermentation and putrefaction are at work; at the bottom of the black, stinking void which is its hold, all possible miasmas are concentrated in the bilge. It was from the ships, so people believed, that infection often spread and epidemics started. The ship in the harbour threatened the health of the city. At sea, it sapped sailors' strength. The crossing provoked scurvy, a disease that carried the symbolism of rotting the flesh of its victims. The decay of the food taken aboard and the discovery of exotic diseases provided conclusive evidence that the ship was a place of putrefaction.

The sea itself seemed to be rotting. One of the most firmly held beliefs of neo-Hippocratic medicine in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that its emanations were unhealthy. Salt, which in great quantities retards decay, hastens it in small doses. The mephitic vapours that rose from the sea made the coasts stink. This smell of the shores, comprising emanations that eighteenth-century chemists later endeavoured to analyse, was thought to be caused by decaying matter deposited by the sea. Seaweed, excreta, and organic debris tossed up on the beaches played a part, so it was thought, in producing the bad air that often prevailed on the sea-shores. Paradoxically, as we shall see, this disgust with the unhealthy, overheated beach was increasing at a time when people were beginning to admire the salubrity of the open, wind-blown northern strands.

Furthermore, well before Coleridge's famous text⁹⁰ – indeed, as early as Pytheas – the fantasy existed of a coagulated ocean and a thick, rotting sea teeming with creatures born out of decay. This mass would delay the ship's advance. The imagery

for this fantasy drew a wealth of material from the descriptions of the Sargasso Sea.

In view of this, it comes as no surprise that seasickness was such an acutely awful experience. This scourge seemed to blight all those who chose to travel by sea, with the exception of the captain and the sailors. It is impossible to analyse the images of the sea and its shores without taking into account the horror of this malady. Dizziness and the smell of vomit added to the distress of sensitive tourists who were already disgusted by the physical surroundings and the appearance of the crew. The system of appreciation was not merely the result of an individual's point of view and cultural baggage; it began with coenaesthetic experiences, especially when they made themselves felt with as much force as the nausea provoked by the ship's pitching and rolling.

It should be noted here in passing, once and for all, that the horrors of seasickness, described as early as the Middle Ages by pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land,⁹¹ seem to have increased in the eighteenth century, particularly among women. This raises the problem of the historical reality of these coenaesthetic experiences. The 'tourists'⁹² who set down their travel recollections did not have the sturdy, resistant endowment that characterized the indefatigable sailors of the past. A range of factors – the vogue of the sensitive soul, erudite discourses on the role of the diaphragm, vapours and psychological troubles affecting women and amply described by doctors, a heightened fear of the miasmatic effluvia, and an increasing awareness of the health risks posed by the proximity of this putrescence, which in turn quickened voyagers' sensitivity to smells, and also no doubt the misguided dietary recommendations made to these victims – all contribute to explain the growing anxiety at the thought of setting sail, as well as the increasing disgust provoked by the sight of others vomiting repeatedly.

Montesquieu complained of a 'frightful bout of seasickness' which he suffered in 1726 between Genoa and Porto Venere.⁹³ In 1739, the President de Brosses left Antibes aboard a felucca bound for Genoa. 'In my opinion', he later wrote, 'the least painful discomfort caused by the sea is vomiting; what is hardest to bear is the mental dejection, so great that one would not bother to turn one's head to save one's life, and the horrible smell that the sea wafts to one's nose.'⁹⁴ Once he debarked at Speretti, a tiny village, he shunned the sea-shore: 'I had developed such a loathing of the sea that I could not even think about it.'

This did not stop him from gazing at it with pleasure a few days later, in calm weather, before describing it once again as 'impertinent' and 'a malignant beast'.⁹⁵

Travellers at the beginning of the following century also enjoyed recalling this torture that took on something of an initiatory import. Adolphe Blanqui⁹⁶ [a French economist and brother of the socialist and revolutionary Louis-Auguste Blanqui] expressed surprise that seasickness was not included by the ancients in their repertory of human afflictions. This suggested to him that human sensibilities had changed:

It is a serious [disability] for us, who are not as simple as our forefathers, and it certainly has an important place in the history of the traveller's tribulations. As soon as land is out of sight, joy and movement vanish from the ship; all conversations are suddenly broken off, and the rosiest faces abruptly lose colour and take on a ghastly greenish complexion. One often sees women stretched out on the deck in a state of total dejection, unaware of everything that goes on around them ... Everyone seems to withdraw into himself.⁹⁷

It should be added that in this period, when steamship navigation first began (1824), the smoke from coal fires further increased passengers' discomfort

For sensitive Romantics, the experience could become quite dramatic. Storm-tossed by the tempestuous waves beating against the Scottish shores, the Marquis de Custine was convinced that his final hour had arrived; in spite of his very earnest wish to visit the Hebrides, he had to give up and return by a land route.⁹⁸

This brings to a close to this too brief catalogue of repulsive images of the sea and its coasts. These images are rooted in a framework of perception that precedes a growing sensitivity to the lure of the seaside. Yet the changing attitude that made a new outlook possible began as early as the seventeenth century. Between 1660 and 1675, the mysteries of the ocean began to fade with the progress made in England by oceanography.⁹⁹ In the same period, Satan began to disappear from the Western intellect.¹⁰⁰ Above all, after the ephemeral attention paid by a group of baroque poets to marine enchantment, three phenomena began to pave the way for a transformation of the system of appreciation: the idyllic vision of the prophets of natural theology; an exaltation of the fruitful shores of Holland, a land blessed by God; and the fashion for the classical voyage along the luminous shores of the Bay of Naples.

2

The First Steps towards Admiration

THE ENCHANTMENT OF THE WATERY MIRROR AND THE SOURCE OF PROFOUND CERTAINTY

It would be wrong to imagine that total blindness and a general insensitivity to nature preceded the genesis of the system of appreciation that developed during the Age of the Enlightenment. But the ways of reading the landscape and the types of desire and enjoyment to which it gave rise before 1720 conform to a discourse and a configuration of feelings that were in keeping with classical epistemology.

At the dawn of the seventeenth century, a group of French poets often described as baroque spoke of the joy they experienced in the presence of the sea-shore. Théophile, Tristan, and above all Saint-Amant,¹ who had been accustomed since childhood to walking along the coastline of the Caux region of France, proclaimed the pleasure of standing on a cliff, strolling along the strands, and gazing at the ever changing sea. Not only does this expanse provide the poets with a metaphor to describe man's fate as he confronts the dark forces that surround him² or the initiatory trials through which lovers must go,³ but within the network of ancient stereotypes governing the evocation of the Virgilian tempest, the procession of deities, or sea gods' revels, specific ways of enjoying a given setting were beginning to take shape. As Tristan, a lover of the beaches near La Rochelle, writes: