Wonders in the Deep: Sailors and the Imagination in the Poetry of William Wordsworth

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Introduction: With Ships the Poems are Sprinkled Far and Nigh

> They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;
> These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep.
> For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves
> thereof.
> They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is
> melted because of trouble.
> They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end.
>
> Psalm 107:23-27, King James Version

The 107th Psalm famously describes the fate of sailors: "they that go down to the sea in ships" are graced with sublime visions of the ocean and of the "wonders in the deep." Yet this awesome spectacle proves too much, and each sailor's "soul is melted because of trouble." William Wordsworth was certainly familiar with this psalm—indeed, in his own poem "The Blind Highland Boy," the titular hero listens to tales of "wonders of the deep" (line 75). But the psalm has a deeper relevance to Wordsworth's poetry: his work is haunted by mariners brought to their "wit's end." Though their sublime experiences upon the waves have elevated their imaginations, they have been left troubled, rootless, and driven endlessly to repeat their gothic tales. While this ability to craft compelling narratives links sailors to poets, the latter are ultimately unable to articulate their experiences. Much as they wander across land and sea, they drift across the surface of language itself, never settling upon a solid meaning. In the psalm, the Lord takes mercy on the sailors, and "bringeth them out of their distresses" (Psalm 107:28). Wordsworth's sailors will also be redeemed—but by the lyrical powers of those who translate their tales into poetry, as Wordsworth did for his mariner brother John. Poets essentially reconnect sailors' words to that fundamental fount of inspiration, the ocean itself.

The sea was of enormous significance to Wordsworth's England—militarily, economically, and culturally. As Samuel Baker argues, the ocean was the arena for the era's most pressing practical challenges, including maintaining a growing empire and defending Britain from France. At the same time, the sea stirred the English imagination, seeming to surround their island with "an unliveable chaos," and possessing a "numinous, phantasmic quality." Similarly, for both pragmatic and more ethereal reasons, Wordsworth himself was strongly invested in maritime affairs. The Lake District's proximity to the coast meant that naval life and naval figures were never far away,[1] and John's career at sea was of enormous emotional (and financial) significance

[1] Dorothy's *Grasmere Journal* describes two encounters with wandering sailors (22 December 1801 and 15 March 1802; Dorothy Wordsworth 50-51, 78-79).

to the Wordsworth family. Baker further argues that like his contemporaries, Wordsworth regarded the sea as the cultural and social limit to Britain and that the maritime horizon framed the literary world that he sought to create. ("Wordsworth, Arnold" 24-25, and *Written on the Water* 3, 25, 33, 113). This interest is evident in his masterpiece, as *The Prelude* includes a water-borne adventure at its outset and concludes with an awesome vision of the sea (lines I.373 ff. and XIII.43 ff.). Sailors and sailing also frequently appear elsewhere throughout Wordsworth's poetry, in both the early and the later works.

His maritime poems may be grouped into four categories: those in which a sailor or sailing features prominently throughout the poem (e.g., "The Thorn" and "Adventures on Salisbury Plain"); those in which they feature in just one part of the poem (e.g., "The Excursion" and *The Borderers*); those in which a sailor is missed by his family and friends (e.g., "The Old Man Traveling"), with the poems about John forming a subclass here (e.g., "When to the attractions of the busy World"[2]); and those in which ships are observed from the shore (e.g., "With Ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh" and the "Fleet of Britain" passage in *The Prelude* [lines X.290-306]). A related group of poems features characters who have voyaged by sea but which do not describe their maritime experiences (e.g., "The Mad Mother" and "Ruth"). This paper will explore poems in each of these classes, focusing on "The Thorn" as a particularly rich depiction of an overly imaginative sailor.

The Tide of Imagination

Wordsworth repeatedly depicts the sea in sublime terms, as a region of chaos, danger, and inspiration. For example, in the "Ode," he likens the ocean to the source of life, writing "Though inland far we be, / Our souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither," (lines 165-67). Taking up this same theme in the two-part *Prelude* of 1798-1799, Wordsworth writes

> Ye Powers of earth! Ye Genii of the springs!...
> …thus did make
> The surface of the universal earth
> With meanings of delight, of hope and fear,
> Work like a sea (lines I.186, 195-98)

Thought and experience flow through human consciousness like a primordial sea that encompasses both the physical and the spiritual. This image is explored at greater length at the climax of the thirteen-book *Prelude*, where Wordsworth directly links the ocean to the imagination, presenting it as the primal source of inspiration:

> …but in that breach
> Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
> That dark deep thorough-fare, had Nature lodg'd
> The Soul, the Imagination of the whole (lines XIII.62-65)

[2] This poem sometimes appears as "When first I journey'd hither."

These lines present the most direct link yet between the sea and the soul: the lyrical imagination and the ocean itself seem to flow with a single current, out of which rises poetry. Again, in "The world is too much with us," the narrator watches "Proteus coming from the sea" (line 13). The shape-shifting god personifies the poet's imagination, which similarly can create forms at will from the true source of artistic inspiration—the sea.[3]

Poetic fancy can even be instilled by the sight of ships from land—or even just the image thereof: Wordsworth chose Sir George Beaumont's *Peele Castle in a Storm*, which depicts a ship on a stormy sea, as the frontispiece of the 1815 edition of *Poems, in Two Volumes*.[4] In terms of literary examples, in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's view of the Fleet of Britain "from the still sea-shore" provokes "a deep / Imagination, a thought of woes to come." The poet's mind is set to work, and in the following lines he describes the excess of the French Revolution and its "domestic carnage" (lines X.290-306, 329). In **"**With Ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh," when the narrator observes a vessel that is "nought to [him], nor [he] to her," it nevertheless fascinates him. He admits "I pursued her with a Lover's look," wondering whither it might sail, his imagination stirred (lines 9-10). Wordsworth would also tell one of this poem's contemporary readers that departing vessels "come upon a mission of the poetic spirit" as they "rouse the creative faculty of the mind…to exertions" (Baker, *Written on the Water* 86). Confirming this process, in the related poem, "Where lies the Land to which yon Ship must go?," the narrator again observes an unknown ship and is filled with "doubt, and something dark, / Of the old Sea some reverential fear" (lines 12-13). Here again, oceanic sublimity generates both fanciful thoughts (of distant lands and exploration) as well as intense emotion.

If such is the effect of the sea on a mere landlubber and observer, it is unsurprising that sailors—those who go down to the sea in those very ships—should experience it more intensely. While the narrator of the whimsical "Peter Bell" declares, "Fast through the clouds my boat can sail" (line 8), associating sailing with literal flights of fancy, maritime life generally instils more profound imaginings. In this regard, the inchoate ocean stands in stark contrast to the land. Throughout *Lyrical Ballads*, nature serves to ground poets and to instil genuine emotional responses. This sentiment is directly expressed in the narrator's cry "Let Nature be your teacher" in "The Tables turned" (line 16), as well as at the climax of "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey" when Wordsworth declares that nature is "The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being" (lines 110-12). The sea is too chaotic and primal to serve this grounding function.

For example, in the late poem, "Composed by the Sea-shore," the sailors confront "the relentless sea" and "a waste of foam" as they contend with what Wordsworth calls "Nature's elemental strife" (lines 6, 12, 22). Decades earlier, in "The Female Vagrant,"[5] the heroine sombrely says of her westward crossing, "The equinoctial deep / Ran mountains-high before the howling blast. / We gazed with terror" (lines 110-12). Here the emotional impact of the sea is more clearly depicted, and Wordsworth's presentation of a sight at once great and terrible evokes classical

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[3] The association even extends to rivers: in "Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening," he writes of the river, "in thy waters may be seen / The image of a poet's heart" (lines 26-27).

[4] A reproduction is available online: Wordsworth, William. "Poems by William Wordsworth," Internet Archive, January 2013, https://archive.org/details/poemsbywilliamwo01word/page/n5/mode/2up , page 6.

[5] Note that "The Female Vagrant" appears both as a poem in *Lyrical Ballads* and as a section of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* (stanzas 30-44, 48-62).

theories of the sublime. A similar episode appears at the outset of *The Prelude*, when the young Wordsworth sets out by boat in the darkness. So overpowering is his experience upon the water that he is haunted long thereafter, lamenting, "after I had seen / That spectacle, for many days, my brain / Work'd with a dim and undetermin'd sense" (lines I.417-19). In each case, the primal ocean (or lake, in *The Prelude*) activates the mind in a similar manner to that which Wordsworth describes in "Tintern Abbey"—but, in these cases, to a more intense degree, the human figures risk being overwhelmed by both the sea itself and its effect upon their imaginations.

This danger is illustrated in "The Blind Highland Boy" when the titular hero is so enchanted by sailors' tales that he sets out alone in "a household tub," intending to float down a tidal inlet from a lake to the ocean (lines 96 ff.). This geography is heavy with symbolism, as Wordsworth writes that "the great Sea-water" often surges into the lake, "drinks up all the pretty rills," and then returns to the sea (lines 56-61); in the same way, tales of the ocean have overflooded the boy's imagination, deluding him and driving him to danger. The Blind Highland Boy is ultimately saved before he reaches the sea's primal chaos; he is brought back to land and he outgrows his "fancies…wild," thus preserving both his life and his peace of mind (line 203). Yet in most of Wordsworth's other sailor poems, mariners will discover a darker undertow.

"The Joyless Ocean"

In "When to the attractions of the busy World," Wordsworth speaks of "the joyless ocean," alluding to its melancholy effect upon his brother and sailors more generally (line 92). Much of this sorrow arises from nostalgia: "Composed by the Sea-shore" describes sailors' "unsubdued regret" as they "ruminate on that delightful home;" and Wordsworth laments, "O sad it is, in sight of foreign shores / Daily to think on old familiar doors" (lines 1, 9-13). So too, in *The Excursion*, a mariner is described pacing "a stately deck" and "haply thinking of far-distant friends" (lines IV.247, 249). In "The Brothers," Leonard likewise gazes on the waves and sees "verdant hills," "dwellings," and "shepherds" that remind him of his home (lines 52-62)—visions so overpowering that he returns to his village.[6] But beyond mere homesickness, the boundless sea can induce despair. For example, in *The Borderers*, Rivers (he of a watery name) admits that during his ill-fated journey to Syria, "For many days / Beneath the burning sky on the dead sea / I brooded o'er my injuries" (lines IV.ii.15-17); in this state of mind, he is duped into joining a mutiny. In *The Excursion*, the Solitary warns,

> Oh, never let the Wretched, if a choice
> Be left him, trust the freight of his distress
> To a long voyage on the silent deep!
> For, like a plague, will memory break out (lines III.852-855).

Here again, the sea exerts an ominous force, instilling dark emotions and darker thoughts. While the ocean is still a source of inspiration as in *The Prelude*, cast upon its formless surface, sailors are overwhelmed by a tide of the sublime. In consequence, they will undergo a permanent expansion in their capacity for imagination—albeit to excess.

[6] These visions are symptoms of "calenture," a contemporary name for tropical fever (Bewell 58-62, *Lyrical Ballads* 381, paragraph 62n).

This internal change manifests in several ways, most obviously as continued imaginative overactivity while ashore. This symptom is played to comic effect in "The Waggoner," when the Sailor describes a model ship as if it were a man-of-war. Importing his maritime mentality into the English countryside, he declares "Tis there, the quarter-deck / On which brave Admiral Nelson stood" (lines II.404-05). Other signs of an overactive imagination are not so benign: affected by the darkness that the sea induces, many sailors are afflicted with fear and anxiety long after the ends of their voyages. This trait is central to the drama of "Adventures on Salisbury Plain": both the Sailor and the Female Vagrant have voyaged by sea, and both are easily agitated. The Female Vagrant is terrified by the mere sight of the Sailor, as on seeing him she reacts "From fear by instant recollection bred" (line 23.205). The Sailor is even more skittish: as Karen Swann notes, each time he meets strangers on the road or witnesses something unusual, he reacts with a violent start (Swann 812). On first seeing the gibbet, he is thrown into "a terrific dream;" the tale of the Female Vagrant provokes a "fit" that makes "his bones with horror quake;" and at the appearance of the coachman, his face goes "pale with momentary fear" (lines 15.130, 28.251, 67.603). While both the Sailor and the Female Vagrant have much to trouble them, their common experiences upon the waters have amplified their imaginations, making their trauma even more difficult to overcome.

The link between the sea, distress, and inspiration is explored in a particularly complex fashion in the "Elegiac Stanzas," written while Wordsworth was grieving his brother's death in a shipwreck (Bewell 64-65). The text is haunted by John's absence, from Wordsworth's explicit mention of "Him whom I deplore" to the castle itself, which, like John, was Wordsworth's onetime "Neighbour" of whom he "dwelt in sight" (lines 42, 1-2). Even the image of the castle's "Form sleeping on a glassy sea" evokes John dreaming aboard his ship (line 4). Wordsworth's distress is mirrored in the sea itself: whereas he first regards "the mighty deep" as "perfect" and "calm," after the catastrophe comes, he laments, "Not for a moment could I now behold / A smiling sea and be what I have been: / The feeling of my loss will ne'er be old" (lines 9-11, 37-39). Like a sailor, confronted with a scene he calls "sublime" (line 49), Wordsworth seems at risk of complete despair and succumbing to oceanic excess—and yet, by the poem's final lines, he discovers reasons for hope (line 60). As in "Tintern Abbey" and the climax of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth here stands at a distance from the ocean, and at an even further remove: in "Elegiac Stanzas," the distressing waves are not real, but depicted in Beaumont's canvas. Whereas Wordsworth is spared the fate of a true sailor like the traumatized protagonist of "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," the "Elegiac Stanzas" nevertheless explore the link between the sea, lyrical inspiration, and the dangers of excessive imagination. These same concerns are explored in a more detached yet sustained fashion in Wordsworth's longest sailor poem, "The Thorn."

"Adhesive" Imagination in "The Thorn"

"The Thorn" is intriguing both for its sustained depiction of a single maritime character and for the note that Wordsworth appended to the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, explicitly charging the maritime narrator with imaginative excess. Regarding the latter's career, the note specifies that he is a retired "Captain of a small trading vessel," which Wordsworth presents as a familiar type (*Lyrical Ballads* 350, lines 5-6). Strictly speaking, this information is superfluous: a

fleeting reference to the narrator's telescope ("The Thorn," line 181) reveals his status as a former sailor. While Wordsworth could have revealed his narrator's naval past in other ways, the telescope is particularly revealing: as Thomas Ashton observes, this tool is a crucial symbol linking sailing with the imagination, as it renders distant objects impressive and striking (173). Significantly, in "The Thorn," the narrator uses his telescope immediately before the eruption of a storm, his flight to shelter, and his encounter with the mysterious Martha Ray. After these events, he is left mute with fear ("I did not speak"), as if his perceptions—and his interpretations thereof—have been magnified (lines 181-99). The telescope thus not only signifies his previous occupation, but also reveals an essential feature of his personality.

Wordsworth further characterizes the narrator as possessing "a reasonable share of imagination," which he defines as "the faculty which produces impressive effects out of simple elements" (*Lyrical Ballads* 351, lines 15-16). Throughout the poem, the Retired Captain telescopically draws out details from his own impressions. Appropriately enough, he begins his narration with a detailed visual description of the titular thorn tree, situating it upon the mountain ridge and then focusing on the even smaller hill of moss, as if surveying the scene with a spyglass (lines 23-37). In parallel, he comes to fixate on the figure of Martha Ray. But despite his dedication to his subject, Wordsworth's note warns us that the lengthy narrative that follows is fatally flawed. Whereas Wordsworth defines "fancy" as the ability to excite "pleasure and surprise … by sudden varieties of situation and by accumulated imagery," he deems his narrator to be "utterly destitute" of this faculty (*Lyrical Ballads* 351, lines 16-18). Rather, the Retired Captain manifests another important characteristic of Wordsworth's sailors: superstitiousness (*Lyrical Ballads* 351, lines 10-14).

The note explains that "The Thorn" will "[exhibit] some of the general laws by which superstition acts upon the mind." Even so, Wordsworth does not explain why the narrator should be so superstitious: though he mentions "other predisposing causes by which it is probable that such men may have been affected," he does not specify what these are, save to remark, "superstitious men are almost always men of slow faculties and deep feeling" (ibid). It may be that even as the sea increases sailors' melancholy and nostalgia, it likewise works upon an underlying credulousness.[7] Regardless of its genealogy, the Retired Captain is unmistakably superstitious. From the outset, "The Thorn" is steeped in fantastic speculation: as he describes the tree, the narrator supposes of the mosses, "you'd say that they were bent / With plain and manifest intent" and that, "As if by hand of lady fair / The work had woven been" (lines 18-19, 41-42). His superstitiousness becomes more pronounced in the following stanzas, as he imagines a heap of earth to be "an infant's grave" and describes "the voices of the dead" calling out by night (lines 52, 171-74). Though he also admits, "And if a child was born or no / There's no one that could ever tell" and that he cannot say if the ghostly voices "had to do with Martha Ray," the lack of evidence does not dissuade him from his lurid narration (lines 159-60, 175-76). W. J. B. Owen regards the narrator as struggling between the rational conclusion that the rumours surrounding Martha Ray cannot be true and the excesses of his imagination, which entice him with a gothic tale (14). For his part, Richard Gravil regards superstition as central to the entire poem, deeming "The Thorn" to be "one of Romanticism's major confessions of the dangers of

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[7] Superstitiousness is common in the *Lyrical Ballads*: consider the panicked landowner in "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" and the wary shepherd in "Hart-leap Well.""

'imagination unconfirmed'" (18). The barren tree has become a site of supernatural and ghostly agency, as the fantastical overwhelms the real. The telescope is out of focus, as it were.

Wordsworth further specifies in his note that the superstitious mind is not satisfied with simply generating a narrative: it becomes obsessed with what it has seen, demonstrating an "adhesive" quality (*Lyrical Ballads* 351, lines 13-15). Extending this analogy, Gravil remarks that such a mind "inundates what it is conscious of like a kind of treacle" (15). Undoubtedly, the Retired Captain is fixated monomaniacally on Martha Ray and her alleged sexual indiscretion. His lengthy narrative reflects an even longer period of research and rumination; as he admits, "Last Christmas when we talked of this" (line 148). But this portion too of Wordsworth's note may also apply to his other sea-going characters: in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," the Female Vagrant gives an extended account of her troubling experiences (expansive enough to constitute a poem in itself), admitting "I will relate the rest, 'twill ease my burden'd mind," (line 47.423). In *The Borderers*, Rivers likewise gives a lengthy account of his ill-fated journey by sea (lines IV.ii.3-78). The Blind Highland Boy is consumed by the desire to go to sea, as "Yet more it pleased him, more it stir'd" (line 76); and in *The Prelude*, following his sublime trip upon the lake, the young Wordsworth can think of little else for days thereafter (lines I.417-419). Like tides towards the moon, sailors' minds are pulled in the same obsessive direction: whether to tales of the sea itself or to gothic mysteries, their thoughts adhere to that which fascinates their imaginations.

The Retired Captain In "The Thorn" thus embodies the most baleful traits of Wordsworth's sailors: he generates compelling narratives that he feels compelled to recount, he is superstitious, he fixates on the grim and the dramatic, and—most important—he is exceptionally imaginative, to an unhealthy degree. Yet for all the Retired Captain's obsessive loquaciousness and interest in the macabre, there is a maritime mind perhaps even more adhesive than his own elsewhere in the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Aside: An Imaginative Mariner

The most prominent sailor in the *Lyrical Ballads* is the Ancient Mariner, in the first poem to appear in the collection's first edition. Though written by Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" shares numerous traits with Wordsworth's sailor poems: the titular figure is imaginative yet traumatized, garrulous and superstitious, and compulsively recounts his experiences. As many critics have noted, he seems to be a Doppelgänger for the Retired Captain (Bentley 17-20, Gravil 1-3). These similarities are hardly surprising, as Wordsworth played an important role in the poem's creation: he claimed to have suggested the slaying of the albatross, the mariner's persecution by a spirit, and the navigation of the ship by dead men (Bewell 108, Bentley 17, Gravil 10).

Despite these parallels, Coleridge's presentation of an overimaginative mariner differs in important respects from Wordsworth's, as the latter himself explained in a note to the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Wordsworth remarks, "The principal person has no distinct character" and "He does not act, but is continually acted

upon" (*Lyrical Ballads* 791, lines 7-11).[8] As with much criticism, these comments may reveal more of Wordsworth's own thinking than Coleridge's. In the view of the former, because "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" features dramatic actions and imagery, the hero seems to recede to the background. In contrast, Wordsworth's sailors inhabit a far more grounded and familiar world, and their inner lives are of central literary concern, as is seen most clearly in character-driven poems like "The Brothers" and "When to the attractions of the busy World." Even when Wordsworth gestures towards ghosts and phantoms, as in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" and "The Thorn," none ever appear. Sharing Wordsworth's concerns, Paul Bentley remarks that though Coleridge's outward effects such as serpents and skeletons may be striking, if they are disconnected from human feeling and character, they serve no serious purpose (Bentley 21). On similar lines, though Baker regards "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" favourably, he concedes that the episodes within the Mariner's tale are "so vivid that they threaten to overwhelm its systematizing conclusion" (*Written on the Water* 29). By implication, this more sensational approach may prevent Coleridge from effectively depicting the features of the naval imagination: whereas in "The Thorn" we must guess as to the narrator's character—seeking clues such as the brief mention of his telescope—the reader is hardly surprised that the Ancient Mariner is traumatized from having been at sea or that he is superstitious.

But if "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" lacks the subtle characterization of Wordsworth's sailor poems (at least on its surface), it nevertheless explores the theme of overactive imagination in a remarkably creative way. Coleridge's 1817 *Sibylline Leaves* version of the poem introduces the editor's gloss, a paratext that manifests the workings of an overimaginative mind (Bentley 26). In the margins, a fictional editor purports to explicate the poem, yet cannot resist adding gothic flourishes of his own (Gravil 13). For example, the editor refers to "the skeleton of a ship," while the narrator more subtly describes the sun as being "flecked with bars" as a vessel approaches (line 177). This excessive imagination is paired with Wordsworthian adhesiveness and superstition, as is seen in the editor's lengthy excursions on heavenly bodies (line 263) and spirits (line 131). Perhaps this prolixity led Wordsworth to dismiss Coleridge's gloss as "a gratuitous afterthought" (Gravil 11). Nevertheless, this inventive addition to the poem introduces another overly imaginative mind much like that of the Ancient Mariner himself—as well as Wordsworth's sailors. Indeed, given the editor's ability to explain the ship's movements and his use of the nautical term "the line" (lines 25, 103, 377), perhaps he was a mariner himself.

Even without the gloss, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" evokes the strangeness and excess that Wordsworth finds in the naval imagination—regardless of the poem's debated merits as a psychological portrait. Furthermore, Coleridge's poem affiliates itself with works like *The Prelude* and the "Ode," in that it stresses a fundamental connection between the imagination and the sea. Baker argues that even though he has returned to land, the Mariner is impelled to repeat his tale, and hence the experience of being at sea extends from his past into the present, for himself and for others (*Written on the Water* 27).

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[8] Wordsworth also criticizes Coleridge's plot and his use of language, writing that "the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other" and "the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated" (*Lyrical Ballads* 791, lines 11-14)

Naval Narratives

The Ancient Mariner's sensational adventure and the Retired Captain's gothic mystery are riveting tales, demonstrating that both sailors have a facility with narration. While time at sea may give cause for much suffering, it also bestows a great gift: Wordsworth's sailors are haunted not just by their memories, but by the spirit of poetry itself. Numerous critics have noted this parallel: Gravil holds that "The Thorn" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" alike explore the narrative process, as in both poems elderly sailors engage our passions and affections, generating new forms of consciousness in the minds of their auditors with their vivid narratives (1, 10).[9] Geoffrey Jackson concurs, remarking on the "destructive power" of the narrator of "The Thorn": the Retired Captain uses his story to lure his listeners into sharing his superstitions and suspicions of Martha Ray (95). Owen is more explicit still, maintaining that "[the Retired Captain's] uncertainty reflects the inevitable uncertainty of the poet" and that his persistence "reflect[s] the obsession of the poet who insists on pursuing a question which is ultimately unanswerable" (14-15). Bentley agrees that the Retired Captain has poetic gifts, arguing that "The Thorn" depicts a creative mind struggling to interpret what it has seen and, furthermore, that the sublime imagination of poetry is "part of the same spectrum" as the superstitious imagination (23).

But much can differ between different portions of a spectrum: sailors' narratives may resemble poetry but do not rise to it. Recall that Wordsworth charges the Retired Captain with a lack of fancy and with mental "adhesiveness." Whereas poets excite "pleasure and surprize…by sudden varieties of situation and by accumulated imagery," the narratives of Wordsworth's sailors are long and unrelenting (*Lyrical Ballads* 351, lines 17-18). Indeed, they are so caught up in their need to narrate that they will brook no interruptions. For example, in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," the Female Vagrant pauses her prolonged narration only when caught by her own emotion (line 45.397).[10] In *The Borderers*, Rivers largely ignores Mortimer's comments and questions, simply replying "Hear me further" or continuing as before (lines IV.ii.22, 37). In "The Thorn," so loquacious is the Retired Captain that it is not until the sixth stanza that we perceive that he is addressing another person, announcing "Now would you see," and the eighth until the other speaks, asking "'Now wherefore thus…'" (lines 56, 78). But the Retired Captain will pass over these questions, never really answering them (lines 78, 100, 210).[11]

Admittedly, not all of Wordsworth's sailors are so selfishly prolix: in "The Brothers," it is the Priest who interrupts and speaks over the returned sailor (for example, line 135). Others almost attain the status of poets. In the light-hearted "The Waggoner," the Sailor entertains the patrons of the pub, as the narrator declares "His speech with uncouth terms of art, / Accomplished in the showman's part" (lines II.401-02). R. C. Townsend deems the Blind Highland Boy to be a "pseudo-poet" (Townsend 78). Indeed, Wordsworth describes him as having "fancies…wild" (line 243), employing a term he associates with poets in the note to "The Thorn." But

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[9] This is described explicitly at the end of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," when the wedding guest goes forth "a sadder and a wiser man" (line 624). Intriguingly, Gravil reveals that Wordsworth had suggested this line should read, "a wiser, better and happier [man]" (Gravil 10-11).
[10] In "The Female Vagrant," this pause does not appear; see lines 135-36.
[11] Similarly, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner refuses to stop speaking, declaring "And till my ghastly tale is told / This heart within me burns" (lines 584-85).

Wordsworth's most positive depiction of a sailor-poet is his portrait of John in "When to the attractions of the busy World," where he declares of his brother, "even so thou didst become / A silent Poet!" (lines 87-88). John paces the deck while reciting his brother's verses, bringing poetry directly into the maritime world (lines 105-08). The poem's concluding lines present numerous parallels between the two separated brothers, in the shared verses, the rhythm of their steps on the deck and the forest path, and their common sympathies (Baker, *Written on the Water* 113). Nature itself reflects the fraternal link, as the Lake District "murmurs with a sea-like sound" as if drawn back to the sea by the power of imagination (line 111).

Through this pairing of the brothers, John's poetic qualities are brought to light; but by the same relation, so too is Wordsworth's resemblance to sailors. In "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," Swann notes that Wordsworth too had been a solitary adventurer upon the same plain as the Sailor and the Female Vagrant (831). Another personal resemblance occurs in "The Blind Highland Boy," where the hero's setting out on a British lake recalls Wordsworth's own terrifying childhood experience in *The Prelude* (lines I.373 ff). Similarly, in "The Thorn," Owen remarks that Wordsworth's personal circumstances resemble those of the Retired Captain: both men enjoy independent incomes in a mountainous environment that fascinates them and that they describe lyrically. But more than common experiences connect Wordsworth to his sailors: like them, he wields a capacious imagination that draws its fundamental inspiration from the sea. Hence Owen concludes that the superstitious Retired Captain "is an image of Wordsworth's own questioning imagination" (13-14). Geoffrey Hartman agrees that the autobiographical elements in "The Thorn" extend to the psychological realm, calling the poem "a caricature of Wordsworth's own imagination-in-process" and noting that the parody is "courageous" but "not wise" (148). An even earlier critic also notes Wordsworth's similarities to sailors: in "To William Wordsworth," Coleridge compares his fellow poet to "some becalmed bark beneath the burst / Of Heaven's immediate thunder" (lines 30-31). Yet despite these similarities, Wordsworth more than demonstrates his own skill with poetic fancy, and as was noted above, he ever keeps himself at a safe remove from the sea.

Though sailors may have great capacity for drawing out vivid narratives, the same experiences that furnish their source material also exact considerable costs and not simply in terms of imaginative excess. In "When to the attractions of the busy World," while Wordsworth reminisces from "Grasmere's happy vale" with Dorothy nearby, John sails at midnight through "some far region" (lines 117, 107-109). To traverse "the joyless ocean" is to cast oneself off from homeland, family, and community.

The Lonely Sea

Wordsworth repeatedly explores the sorrowful effects of sailors' departures on others. "The Sailor's Mother," "The Old Man Traveling," and "We Are Seven," respectively depict a mother, father, and sister who each grieve the absence of sailor relatives. So alarmed are the townsfolk in "The Blind Highland Boy" by the hero's would-be voyage that they sail out to stop him—despite his demands to "Keep away" (lines 201-05). An extended absence is central to "The Brothers" as Leonard's wandering disposition first distresses James and then seems to infect him supernaturally: James dies while sleepwalking, a form of involuntary wandering that evokes his brother's movement across the waves (lines 335, 395-98). At a personal level, "When to the

attractions of the busy World" describes Wordsworth's grief at John's extended absences even prior to his death (lines 40 ff). This restlessness does not diminish when sailors return to shore. In "Where lies the Land to which yon Ship must go?" Wordsworth describes the titular vessel as having "Neither friend nor foe" and "travel[ling] where she may" (lines 5-6)—characteristics that apparently also apply to her crew. Indeed, in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," the Sailor cannot suppress his own movement (Swann 815). As the poem's title reveals, in "The Female Vagrant," the narrator also fails to find a home, and she lamentingly describes herself, "Three years a wanderer," (line 262). In addition, "The Brothers" concludes with Leonard returning to "shipboard," where he ultimately becomes "a grey-headed Mariner" (lines 430-31), a choice that Baker sees as uniting "archaic nomadism" with "the modern maritime sphere" (*Written on the Water* 143). Wordsworth notes the same migratory sentiment in his own brother, describing him in "When to the attractions of the busy World," as having "that habitual restlessness of foot / Wherewith the Sailor measures o'er and o'er / His short domain upon the Vessel's deck" (lines 70-72).

Though Leonard and the real-life John remain devoted to their families even while they wander, other mariners are not so faithful. In keeping "one foot in sea, and one on shore,"[12] sailors can also be aloof and selfish, their physical meanderings corresponding to a lack of interest in relationships and community. Ashton accuses the narrator of "The Thorn" of lacking sympathy for Martha Ray, pointing to the Retired Captain's failure to assist her and arguing that the telescope symbolizes his manner of distant and dispassionate observation (173-74). Owen concurs, noting that throughout the poem, the Retired Captain remains largely blind to the depth of Martha Ray's suffering (4). In *The Borderers*, Rivers boasts of his own aloofness and contempt for others—attitudes, he notes, that he adopted only after his traumatic sea journey (lines IV.ii.115 ff.). Indeed, Hartman notes that Rivers and Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, both survivors of bloody sea voyages, have severed themselves from nature and human society; wandering companionless, both face the world and their own selves alone (131-32).[13]

In sailors' defence, this resistance to social bonds may reflect the necessities and culture of naval life, an ethos that Wordsworth at times seems to praise. In "Composed by the Sea-Shore," the sailors manifest "the virtues which that perilous life / Extracts from Nature's elemental strife," notably bravery and stoicism (lines 21-22). In "Grace Darling," the heroine is described as drawing strength from "the tumult" of the sea itself, essentially triumphing over external sublimity with the resources in her own soul (lines 56-58). Though Wordsworth composed both these stoic poems several decades after John's death, this same attitude is evident even in "To the Daisy" ("Sweet Flower!"). While lamenting John's relatively recent passing, this poem also extolls his brother's stoicism and commitment to "all claims of duty" (line 40). Townsend further contends that the final lines of the "Elegiac Stanzas" betray the same admiration of the "traditional naval ethic." Rejecting the standard view that the poem comes to terms with grief and mourning, Townsend argues that Wordsworth instead affirms a stoic emotional distance from others (76). After all, at the poem's conclusion, the ruined castle still stands alone by the shore.

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[12] *Much Ado About Nothing*, II.iii.66

[13] The Ancient Mariner is also uninterested in others, showing no regard for the wishes of the wedding guest: as the narrator declares, "The Mariner hath his will" (line 16).

Regardless of the potential valour of the stiff upper lip, some sailors' resistance to social bonds and penchant for isolation may not reflect mere professionalism. So changed have they been by their time at sea that others find them uncanny and reject them. The Sailor in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" and the Soldier in *The Prelude* (lines IV.400-504) both return from sea as dread and haunting figures, inspiring fear in those whom they meet. The Mad Mother fits this category as well: when Wordsworth writes, "Her eye-brows have a rusty stain / And she came over from the main," the rhyme links her fearsome aspect and her status as a sea-voyager (lines 3-4).[14] As their appearances betray, such sailors are deeply damaged, having left their homes to contend with the ocean, an expanse that is not simply the incubator of the creative spirit, but also the uninhabitable limit of human civilization (Baker, "Wordsworth, Arnold" 25). As it were, they battle a surging tide within themselves, which rages long after they have returned to land. For example, in "The Brothers," Alan Bewell argues that Leonard's failure to identify himself to the village priest may reflect not subterfuge, but the returned sailor's "no longer really knowing who he is" (56). Returning home ultimately proves too difficult, and Leonard retreats to the sea, whose elemental chaos matches his own inner turmoil. On similar lines, in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," Swann points to the Sailor's admission "I have been / I know not where" (lines 419-20) as alluding to more than his confusion after the Female Vagrant's tale: he rather indicates his dislocation as an individual (813). Baker concludes that for Wordsworth, maritime scenes and the sublimity of the sea symbolize the struggle of the self against the forces that might overwhelm it; Baker terms this "an ethics of insularity" ("Wordsworth, Arnold" 24, 27). Social isolation therefore may not be willed, but rather the inescapable effect of having faced the sublime ocean; the great waters without match a torrent within.

Wordsworth repeatedly likens spirits that are solitary, resolute, and imaginative (all traits of his sailors) to structures or landforms battered by the sea. Perhaps the clearest example appears in the "Elegiac Stanzas" where Peele Castle is described as "That Hulk which labours in the deadly swell" (line 47). A similar image appears in *The Borderers*, when Rivers lionizes Mortimer: "Upon these savage confines we have seen you / Stand like an isthmus 'twixt two stormy seas / That checked their fury at your bidding" (lines II.i.61-63). "Grace Darling" incorporates this same symbolism, as Wordsworth links the titular heroine's courage to the isolated lighthouse that she inhabits, describing her as "Firm and unflinching, as the Lighthouse" and "like the invincible Rock itself that braves, / Age after age, the hostile elements" (lines 22, 25-26). In each case, Wordsworth connects a strong and autonomous personality with a point that confronts the ocean; at the same time, each figure faces a profound test of his or her inner resolve. Admittedly, neither the narrator of the "Elegiac Stanzas," nor Mortimer, nor Grace Darling are themselves sailors. Rather, all maintain grounded relationships to their loved ones or communities, consistent with Wordsworth's cry, "farewell the Heart that lives alone" ("Elegiac Stanzas," line 53). It is therefore hardly coincidental that these three characters are associated with landforms instead of ships, as they are steadfast in a way that the mariners whom they encounter (as brother, conspirator, and shipwreck victims) are not.

[14] Similarly, Baker remarks that Coleridge's Ancient Mariner has a "preternatural intensity" and a "spectral air;" he thus inspires terror in the Wedding Guest (*Written on the Water* 30).

In this sense, Wordsworth's sailors—adrift upon the very waves that threaten castles and lighthouses—are the ultimate individualists. At the same time, they are unable to maintain social relationships or to stabilize their own wounded natures. Overimaginative, superstitious, and obsessive, they cannot even ground their own language.

Adrift on an Ocean of Words

Inasmuch as sailors' selves are unstable, so too is their language: their capacious imaginations overwhelm both the content and the form of their narratives. As Wordsworth remarks in his note to "The Thorn," narrators like the Retired Captain (and by extension other sailors) "follow the turns of passion, always different yet not palpably different, by which their conversation is swayed" (*Lyrical Ballads* 351, lines 20-21). Shaped by their experiences on the sublime sea, mariners are driven by fear, dread, and superstition rather than artistic intent or poetic fancy. Consider the Sailor in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," who spends most of the poem hesitating and uncertain. He is never able to discover solid meaning in the world or his experiences, which overwhelm him. Although the Female Vagrant is at least able to develop a narrative, it ends with a literal whimper rather than a formal conclusion; she even loses her voice as the nameless narrator announces, "She wept;—because she had no more to say" ("The Female Vagrant," line 269 / "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," line 62.557). In "The Thorn," Owen observes that despite the Retired Captain's verbosity and enthusiasm, he never achieves a satisfactory explanation of Martha Ray's situation (4). Instead, driven by excitement and confusion, he merely speculates and recounts what he has already heard, never moving past mere rumour.[15] Not only are he and his fellow sailors incapable of developing the content of their narratives, but they also struggle with the form that these will take.

For Wordsworth, narrators of this sort—seized more with passion than poetic talent—have "a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied, the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character" (*Lyrical Ballads* 351, lines 44-46). Though this likely refers to the repeated phrase "Oh misery! Oh misery!" in "The Thorn" (line 65), the observation is also true of his other sailors. Their minds adhere not merely to what they recall, but to how they relate it: they seem unable to resist the gothic mode. While "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" luridly ushers in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, "The Thorn" is also clearly steeped in the gothic, as the narrator transforms the sad fate of a local woman into a supernatural tale involving haunted trees, bleeding mosses, and ghostly voices. Swann finds a similar pattern in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" (813-814). Although the Female Vagrant initially resists telling the Sailor of a corpse she has discovered (reasoning that this would make "his bones with horror quake") she nevertheless will emphasize the most harrowing details of her own past—and the Sailor collapses with fear in any event (lines 28.249-251, 45.404). A readymade narrative form overwhelms her own story in the same way as does her grief, both forces leaving her unable to speak for herself. (Even Wordsworth himself may fall prey to this temptation, expressing grief for John's death by means of that most gothic of symbols, a ruined castle amidst "the lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves" ("Elegiac Stanzas," line 52).) By impeding the

[15] Bentley argues that the same issue arises in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," finding that the final exhortation to pray seems too simplistic a solution, which suggests that "the Mariner hasn't really understood" the nature of his experiences (27).

construction of stable narratives and discouraging the use of an unpretentious and natural style, too much imagination overpowers their narratives, and sailors seem to drown in the tide of their own words.

Diagnosing the issue in his note to "The Thorn," Wordsworth contends that the mind attaches itself to words, "not only as symbols of the passion, but as things, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion" (*Lyrical Ballads* 351, lines 48-50). Appropriate words successfully communicate feeling, inciting new emotions and thoughts in the reader; bad poetry cannot achieve this. Here, at last, we discover the true failure of Wordsworth's sailors. In the extended and hypnotic rhythms of "The Thorn" (as well as in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner") and in the gripping accounts of the sea journeys of Rivers and the Female Vagrant, we witness creative minds that ultimately cannot get past language itself. Even the more light-hearted examples reveal this problem: in "The Waggoner," the Sailor describes the toy ship as if it really were "A sight that would have roused your blood!" (line II.406); and the Blind Highland Boy is drawn to sea—and nearly to his death—based on "tales of distant lands" (line 70). Though both figures fare well, a shared fixation on words prevents them from understanding the true nature of what they experience. During his sea voyage in *The Excursion*, the Solitary calls himself "One by storms annoyed and adverse winds, / Perplexed with currents" (lines III.874-75). For Wordsworth's other sailors, these complications may be both physical and linguistic.

The Prelude, "Tintern Abbey" and the "Ode" link the imagination to the flow of the ocean; in some sense, Wordsworth's sailors are unable to get past the sublimity of the surfaces they encounter, whether in the vastness of the waves, the trauma that feeds their imagination, or in the dark possibilities of language itself. Their attempts at poetry thus fail to express anything beyond their words: they can only sail across the surface of meaning, never penetrating the lower fathoms or the true "wonders in the deep." Their approach thus contrasts strikingly with the principles that Wordsworth and Coleridge espouse in the *Advertisement* to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Decrying "the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers," the two poet-revolutionaries aspire to express in verse the language of the common people (*Lyrical Ballads* 738, lines 7-8). For Wordsworth, true poetry must be communal, direct, and grounded—a goal that is unattainable for those who view the world with telescopes and seek out ghosts; whose passion drives their imagination to excess and their narratives to the gothic mode; and who endlessly ramble alone across the waves and in their words.

Conclusion: The Brothers, Poet and Sailor

Though Wordsworth's sailors possess numerous poetic gifts, their expressive and artistic potential is stymied by the very qualities that lead them to sea in the first place, and they end up drifting on currents of meaning. Nevertheless, their fates may not be entirely tragic: fired by raw oceanic imagination, sailors' eerie adventures and dramatic narrations can inspire poets. With their faculty of "fancy," the latter can transform sailors' lurid and rambling tales, introducing structure and drawing out deeper meaning. This process occurs in the background of "The Thorn," as the Retired Captain's interlocutor attempts to discover the true story, asking several times why Martha Ray ascends the mountain-top and, more to the point, "But what's the thorn?" (lines 78, 100, 210). Wordsworth's discussion with the Soldier in *The Prelude* echoes this pattern, as the poet draws out the tale of a man who has returned from sea and who has difficulty

communicating. Wordsworth remarks, "From his lips, meanwhile, / There issued murmuring sounds, as if of pain / Or of uneasy thought," his own words attempting to describe what the Soldier cannot (lines IV.421-23). As Wordsworth does at the peak of Snowdon, poets draw from the fount of oceanic inspiration, and the tales of sailors bring them even closer to the sublime sea.

The finest example of a sailor providing material for a poet occurs within Wordsworth's own family. John's journeys fed his brother's imagination, as is best described in the final lines of "When to the attractions of the busy World," when the Lake District becomes "sea-like" as Wordsworth thinks of John (line 111). Together with the many poems explicitly about him, John clearly inspired Leonard in "The Brothers," and Townsend further contends that the captivating vessels in "With Ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh" are stand-ins for John (75, 77). Yet though John was undeniably a member of the maritime world, Wordsworth stresses that his brother was more than a mere sailor, as he possessed a poet's appreciation for nature. In "To the Daisy" ("Sweet Flower!"), as Wordsworth mourns John's death, he calls sailing "a way of life unmeet / For such a gentle Soul and sweet" (lines 46-47). He stresses John's love of nature, remarking that "when called ashore" his brother "oft would steal" to the abodes of flowers (lines 5, 22). This theme is taken up again in "When to the attractions of the busy World," where John remains connected to the Lake District by filial affection, by his "undying recollections" of nature (line 85), and by his reciting of Wordsworth's poems—which unite both sincere emotion and the natural world. (This appreciation for nature is indeed "unmeet" for a sailor. Scarred by their time upon the dangerous waves, other mariners seem to regard the entire natural world with dread: the Sailor and the Female Vagrant are both terrified by Salisbury Plain and the Retired Captain fears the thorn, the moss, and the mountains alike.)

Although spared from the full effects of the naval imagination, John nevertheless does not reach the status of a full poet—a fact he well knew, identifying William as the family genius. Rather, John aspired to use his naval career to provide for his siblings financially; he specifically wished to help Wordsworth devote himself to writing (*Written on the Water* 112). As the latter wrote, "[John] encouraged me to persist in the plan of life which I had adopted; I will work for you was his language and you shall attempt to do something for the world" (Bewell 62). Even this sacrifice would inspire his poet sibling, who in "The Brothers" writes, "Leonard chiefly for his brother's sake, / Resolved to try his fortune on the seas" (lines 301-02).

Though this atypical sailor—lover of nature and reciter of poetry—would fail both to return to his family and to provide them with riches, his death was not entirely in vain. Much as the drowned Edward King moved Milton to write "Lycidas," so too the death of John inspired some of the finest poems in the English language; Wordsworth would transmute his grief into sublime verses, enjoyed by generations of readers. As Baker concludes, "William gives voice to his brother's sailor experience, articulates it with more native forms, and circulates it through posterity in his own literary medium" (*Written on the Water* 113). In Wordsworth's poetry, the sea overwhelms sailors' imaginations, happiness, relationships, and even capacity for linguistic expression; in Wordsworth's experience, it claimed his brother's life. The same ocean that Wordsworth saw from the peak of Snowdon would take John into its watery embrace, even as it emanated the primal source of poetic inspiration. To compensate and console for the former, Wordsworth drew richly from the latter, his own imagination depicting the "wonders in the deep" in the way only a poet's fancy could. But this, of course, John already knew, while

"Muttering the verses which [Wordsworth] muttered first /… pacing to and fro' the Vessel's deck / In some far region" ("When to the attractions of the busy World, lines 106-08).

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