

WHERE LANDSCAPE ENDS, THE SEA BEGINS: UNDERSTANDING SEASCAPE

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In his study of how a certain blindness as well as fear was built into the appreciation of a natural landscape, Alain Corbin has named the incomprehensible vastness of the earth's oceans "the territory of the void." The interpretation of biblical and classical sources provides material for its "reading" as an emotionally charged system, a place of "unfathomable mysteries, an uncharted liquid mass"¹. Yet the focus of his study is not the sea as such but the shore, the strand, ports, harbors, and finally the beach; for it was at the sea's edge that these apprehensions developed into a range of pleasures. The emergence of these sensibilities in the mid-eighteenth-century was synonymous with an effort to tame the shore by making it first an object of knowledge and then one of enjoyment. The present paper will chart a narrative incursion into the void; our chosen vehicle will allow us to scan its depths and to examine the meeting (and limits) of image and of text amid this fluid repository of things most strange.

Let us first reassess the legibility of this "uncharted liquid mass" by looking at one well-known illustration of it (fig. 1). I refer here to the "Ocean Chart" from Lewis Carroll's ballad, *The Hunting of the Snark* (1874). The chart is formed of a simple rectangle, its enclosed white surface hallucinatory in the absence of any figuration. The frame is bordered by words designating projection lines and terrestrial division, which correspond to nothing inside the frame and are themselves mis-ordered. The Tropics, Zones, and Equators, explains the Captain "are merely conventional signs!" Indeed, this is not a chart in any conventional sense:

Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!
But we've got our brave Captain to thank.
(So the crew would protest) that he's brought us the best—
*A perfect and absolute blank!*²

The chart is a representation of being utterly out of place; and the crew was very much pleased, the ballad goes, finding it something "they could all understand." Yet on this chart the ocean is not seen as a troubling void, but rather has been voided of the mass of meanings which ride below its surface, sometimes troubling it but sometimes not. With land nowhere in sight, the sea loses its shape and becomes

1. Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, p. 1.

2. Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*, Los Altos, California, William Kaufmann, Inc, 1981, p. 29.



merely (and entirely) a form of experience; Carroll's chart is the log on which to plot a journey between non-places and non-sense.

We can, of course, add important additional examples from the nineteenth century, our present period of concern, which give accounts of the history, the science, and the history of science of the seascape³. Literature, too, is awash in descriptions of the sea and seafaring as significant forms of experience. Indeed, Hans Blumenberg has argued that the experience of shipwreck and the position of the spectator along shore are essential and enduring metaphors adopted to describe existence⁴. But these subject positions and modes of being must ultimately be reconfigured if the world that lies beneath the sea's surface is ever to be properly read. The sea, seen from the shore, as it is presented in Michelet's *La Mer* (1861), is a "world of shadows." The ancient notion resurfaces in his writing of an "abyss", the bottom of which – if one existed – is blackness. It is a space of disappearance and loss. In its depths, as on the perfectly rendered white plain of Carroll's "Ocean Chart", things lose their visual bearing. This paper will track the progress of a shadowy figure which inhabits the depths, one which is initially known by the unnatural light it casts into these nether regions. To be more precise, a fictional ship which reordered the possibilities of perception by moving beneath the sea's surface.

Notably, Jules Verne inserts the first of the two charts which serve as illustrations for his extraordinary voyage, *20,000 Leagues Beneath the Sea* (1871), in the chapter entitled "The Black Stream"⁵. This "Black Stream" referred to an ocean current which ran through the sea like a river on land, with its own distinct color and temperature. By contrast to the "Ocean Chart", the cartographic conventions of parallels and meridians are restored, as are the continental land masses. A dotted line indicates a ship's course through the blank space that we understand to be the sea. But it is not a port, harbor, or shore which provides the ship's heading. The protagonist, Professor Arronax, points to the vessel's position on the map and recognizes that it is traveling along one such current, a fluid stream within a liquid mass. Appropriately, the motto of the infamous vessel on which he is a passenger, the *Nautilus*, is *Mobilis in Mobile*, mobile in a mobile element. The movement of the submarine, like the narrative trajectory of the novel, flows like a distinct channel through what might appear on the surface to be an undifferentiated sea. In what follows, *20,000 Leagues Beneath the Sea* will be regarded as a foundational text for the project of charting the landscape of the sea, insofar as it highlights the manner in which words become attached to visions and meanings of a world which was experienced in fiction before

3. I adopt this formulation from Michel Serres's description of Jules Michelet's *La Mer*, see "Michelet: The Soup". In: Josué Harari, David Bell [eds.], *Hermes, Literature, Science, Philosophy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1982, p. 29.

4. Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, trans. Steven Rendall, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997.

5. All references are to Jules Verne, *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les Mers*, Paris, Bibliothèque d'Éducation et de Récréation, 1871. All translations are by the author.



in fact. The *Nautilus*, whose own identity crosses conventional boundaries of the real and the known, serves as a means of access to the territory of the void.

"The year 1866 was marked by a strange event, an unexplained and unexplainable phenomenon which no doubt no one has forgotten". With these words, the protagonist, M. Arronax, sets the scene even as he reminds the reader of the chronic faultiness of description. Arronax, assistant professor at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, and author of the well-regarded *Mysteries of the Great Ocean Depths* (as well as the student of the historically real Henri Milne-Edwards), would seem highly qualified to come to terms with the troubling phenomenon; however, his report conveys a basic ambiguity as to its very nature. "For some time now several ships have met at sea 'an enormous thing', a long fusiform object which was sometimes phosphorescent, and which was infinitely larger and more rapid than a whale". Arronax advances our understanding little, except to suggest that the phenomenon is related to a "thing" of some sort or another.

Arronax goes on to inventory the incommensurate reports of sightings and the disputes, both in scholarly journals, and in the popular press, concerning what the thing is and, more importantly, what to name it.

Thus broke out the interminable polemic of the credulous and the incredulous. Clever writers, parodying a saying of Linnaeus which had been quoted by the adversaries of the monster, held in effect that "nature does not make fools", and admonished their contemporaries not to contradict nature by admitting the existence of Krakens, sea serpents, "Moby Dicks" and other lucubrations of delirious sailors⁶.

In this passage we hear, with the help of Arronax's keen ear, how the newspapers interpreted the scattered signs and traces left by the "object" as confirmation of apocryphal accounts of monsters which literature and lore had made both fearsome and irresistible. Indeed, this riot of reports is complimentary to the opening sections of *Moby-Dick*, the "Etymology" and "Extracts" in which the leviathanic volume is reduced to its sources in language, its very name connected to the act of rolling. Arronax's passage exposes several possibilities of seeing and saying, which include states of delirium, the perforation of the self-enclosed language of aphorism, as well as dark acts of lucubration. Yet the object upon which all this linguistic ingenuity has been trained was still evolving before the speakers' eyes.

Yet Arronax, dismayed that "wit has overcome the spirit of science", seeks to determine the true nature of the thing by referring to those scientists who, like himself, make a method of comparing the unknown to the well-known. The very force of their authority would ostensibly put the debate to rest. In a characteristic extra-textual reference, to a list of great naturalists, Arronax declares: "neither Cuvier, Lacépède, Duméril nor Quatrefages would not have admitted the existence of such a monster –

6. *Idem*, pp. 3-4. Here Verne makes a pun on the French "saut" ("jump") of Linnaeus's "nature does not make jumps", which means that there is a continuum of natural kinds, and "sot" ("fool").



unless they had seen it, that is, seen it with their own eyes of a savant"⁷. Seeing, or having something before one's eyes, was the essential corrective to the potentially misleading knowledge offered by texts. As Melville warned in the section of *Moby-Dick* "Of Monstrous Pictures of Whales", these same authors were, in fact, guilty of the "heinousness of mistake" which followed from describing things without actually having seen them⁸. Though conceived in a conscientious effort, these monstrous images were composites of fact and fiction. The crux of the dilemma for the interlocutors drawing on the available vocabulary of naturalists, however, was that this elusive, unnamable "thing" was not of nature at all, but an artifact – namely, Captain Nemo's submarine the *Nautilus*.

Once this fact is known, there is no longer any risk of "contradicting nature." When Arronax has seen the *Nautilus* with his own eyes, the ship ceases to be the object of speculation and rather becomes the site of contradictory forms of experience which it mediates. The *Nautilus* becomes a new optic with which to view the obscure milieu which has hidden its very nature. As the narrative develops, the surrounding sea is seen by Arronax from within the vessel's confines.

The title of the first chapter, "A Shifting Reef", suggests a topographic feature – neither land nor water – which cannot be fixed upon a map and threatens safe passage. Verne's novel, interweaving fantasy with science, history, and literature, is itself a shifting reef of fact and fiction, the known and the unknowable⁹. The elliptical language of its opening chapter ultimately gives shape to something more difficult to describe and comprehend than a white whale or Kraken; specifically, the instruments used to observe phenomena, be they natural or of man's making. If by instruments we tend to mean tools crafted to translate the real, then the fictional *Nautilus* is certainly one for encountering the undersea world. The *Nautilus*'s most striking mechanism – and part of what makes it such a compelling literary vehicle – is its "window opened to an unexplored abyss." How does the narrator come to view this unprecedented undersea panorama? Or perhaps more importantly, how is this window constructed and what kind of spaces does it mutually separate and visually connect? As to the first question, Arronax was aboard the American frigate *Abraham Lincoln*, which was dispatched to rid the seas of the menace, presumed by the naturalist to be an unusually large whale. Suddenly, however, the creature seemed to disappear and there were no sightings at all for two months. Had the creature intercepted a telegram transmitted over a transatlantic cable, making use of the information it conveyed to conceal itself? This thing was possibly all the more sinister for possessing its own strategy of invisibility. It was a case of an entity in the order of things which knowingly defied attempts to be known by assessing what was already known about it.

7. *Idem*, p. 2.

8. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* [1851], New York, W. W. Norton, 1967, p. 226.

9. Roland Barthes writes in this regard, "the basic activity in Jules Verne, then, is unquestionably that of appropriation, 'The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat'. In: *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Annette Lavers, New York, Hill and Wang, 1972, p. 66.



The immediate consequence of Arronax's search for answers was that he was deprived of vision. Fending off its pursuers, the monster rammed the *Abraham Lincoln*, casting Arronax, his assistant Conseil (literally "advice"), and the Canadian harpooner Ned Land overboard. Having lost sight of their ship during the night, and with it the hope of being rescued, they washed up on the "shifting reef", the steel topside of what they discover is a submarine. Anxiously awaiting a sign of "hospitality", they are finally whisked "at the speed of lightening" into a completely dark chamber. At first, they grope blindly to gain a sense of the extent and contents of their prison. Arronax surveys the room with his arms outstretched before him, toppling the furniture in his path. Ned, his knife drawn, is ready to stab anything that approaches him in the darkness. The floor of the room is covered with a thick linen which muffled the noise of their steps. No trace can be found of a door or window. Theirs is an experience of pure interiority: Arronax and his companions are deprived of sight and sound; their transit into Nemo's world is experienced as a black-out. The interlude in the ship's dungeon animates both their curiosity and their indignation, but it also marks a threshold into a new order of experience for which neither memory nor custom could have prepared them.

The restoration of their vision comes with the arrival of Nemo, who invites them to inspect the ship in which they are now held captive. By keeping them, Nemo guards not them but himself; they have come upon a secret which no one in the world may know. For Arronax at least, knowledge of the ship – and yielded by the ship – is tantamount to the completion of his work as a naturalist which began at the museum. Nemo explains that the professor's work on the ocean depths was among his favorite books, but its limits were soon to be overcome. "You have pushed your knowledge as far as earthbound science will permit. But you do not know everything; you have not seen everything"¹⁰. The first new thing the naturalist is offered to inspect is the ship itself. In the chapter "Some Figures", a veritable litany of vital statistics, the captain gives full measure of the size and capacity of the vessel; a vessel which so far has exhausted the reserves of language of those who tried to limn it from the traces it scattered on the sea's surface. Nemo not only informs Arronax about every aspect of the vessel, but discloses the "secret" of its construction. Every component was sent from a different part of the globe to "a disguised address." The manufactures each received plans under different names. The very construction of this narrative vehicle constituted a conspiratorial plot: the parts were assembled on a desert island, after which a fire destroyed "all vestiges" of the construction crew's stay there. Nemo is literally at home in this assembly of purposefully mis-addressed elements; the ship's motto was engraved on the captain's table settings. Even his name is an echo of an active disguise: Latin for "no man", Nemo, like Odysseus in the cave of the Cyclops, is a clever outwiter whose very name renders him invisible and untouchable.

10. Cf. Jules Verne, *op. cit.*, p. 70.



The professor is then shown the suite of rooms furnished with the captain's extensive library of works in every language and every topic except politics and economy – Nemo had cut himself off from the affairs of the terrestrial nations, the commerce of which his ship threatened. Arronax is astounded that such a library should travel with the captain into the depths. "Where could one find greater solitude or silence, Professor", asks Nemo. "Can you boast of greater tranquillity in your office in the museum?" To these spaces are connected a painting gallery and a curiosity cabinet befitting a palace on dry land. But the marvelous library and the collections which the *Nautilus* carried into the depths were but a prelude to the opening of its encapsulated interior to those depths. As Ned and Conseil joined Arronax in the vessel's richly appointed lounge, the lights suddenly went out, again plunging them into complete darkness. The sound of sliding panels was heard, and suddenly light entered the room from two oblong openings. They saw the sea brilliantly lit by the electric light emitted by the vessel itself; the *Nautilus* was the source of illumination for the undersea world. Arronax describes his first impression of these windows, the vessel's eyes, in terms which quickly turn from the sublime to the reassurance of calculation: "Two plates of crystal separated us from the sea. At first I trembled at the thought that this fragile partition would shatter; but the strong copper framework held it in place, and gave to it an almost infinite resistance"¹¹. The structure of the *Nautilus* literally resolves itself in its great lens.

Verne stages a dialogue before this composite lens, in which Arronax, Conseil, and Ned Land employ different terms for describing the equally diverse nature of things they glimpse outside (fig. 2). Ultimately, language is as necessary an accessory to the lens's seeming transparency as the frame which reassuringly holds it in place. "You wanted to see something, and now you've got it", Conseil says as he and Ned look through the glass with astonishment. But in response to Ned's complaint that he could not at first see any fish, the assistant-naturalist chastises him, "what difference does it make to you, my friend, since you couldn't recognize them anyway"¹². For Conseil, to recognize means to make distinctions, to classify. Thus he begins to elaborate for the able harpooner the two major groups of fish, continuing on to finer gradations. Yet Ned has his own method of classifying fish: those you can eat and those you can not. For each sub-division of fish Conseil points out with its characteristic anatomy, Ned offers sauces with which they are cooked. While both of them define groups, Ned has a gastronomic and Conseil a seemingly scientific understanding of their composition. As Arronax explains, while classification was "his whole life", Conseil was not a naturalist as such; he is simply well versed in the ranks and orders, having picked up terms second-hand which he overheard during his rambles through the Museum's collections. Ned, with his sensitivity to the traits of fish sharpened by practical necessity can properly name any individual but is gleefully ignorant of their

11. *Idem*, p. 103.

12. *Idem*, p. 106.



taxonomic rank. Arronax gives expression to a third, synthetic manner of seeing and speaking. "Ned named the fish, Conseil classed them, me, I went into raptures before the vivacity of their allure and the beauty of their form"¹³.

Arronax coalesces the distinct perceptions of the classifier and fisherman in his own manner of speaking. He sees freely what is alternately shuttered or indistinct to Ned and Conseil. Arronax's remarkable description of a meal at captain Nemo's table exemplifies this well:

It was made up of various fish and slices of sea cucumber seasoned with very appetizing varieties of seaweed, such as *Porphyria laciniata* and *Laurentia primafetida*. The drink consisted of a liquid of limpid water to which, following the captain's example, I added several drops of a fermented liqueur extracted, according to the Kamchatkian method, from an alga called *Rhodomenia palmata*.¹⁴

Arronax unselfconsciously mixes vocabularies, using the Linnaean binomial to describe a savory seasoning while adducing a proto-anthropological recipe of his beverage. Arronax's description is all the more remarkable as the *Nautilus's* dining room is ensconced in the very element from which the flora and fauna upon his plate are taken. Verne relies on Arronax's insight as a reliable means of narrating the unreal scenes which unfold in the *Nautilus's* wake.

Arronax's rapture at the charming scene before the glass, experienced only after the terrifying threat of its fracture had been overcome, is, in essence, aesthetic. He admires the allure and formal beauty of the objects without consciously having "recognized" them. Through his state of rapture, or transport, he is placed in contact with things, but only through the intermediary of the glass. Arronax can look through the glass only after looking *at* the glass, calculating the resistance of its chassis and touring the rooms to which it is adjacent and which constitute its frame of internal reference: the library, the gallery, the study. When Arronax looks through the window, he sees a reflection of his own status as an observer. "We looked out as if this clear crystal were the window of an immense aquarium"¹⁵. Indeed, it was a picture window onto a *tableau vivante*. The comparison acknowledges that the *Nautilus* is a perceptual container beyond whose confines the fish are "as free as birds in the air." In fact, the window is two-faced, one side protecting its passengers from the surrounding milieu, the other giving them unprecedented access to it.

Allan Sekula has remarked on the curiously contained and aquarium-like appearance of the panoramic underwater space which is suggested by the novel's frontispiece. Submarine space, he argues, was initially imaged to be amenable to the geographically encompassing form of the panoramic representation. The image is split between the sea's surface and ocean depths, intersected by the sounding body of a whale. "In the pictorial imagination, the undersea world offers a verticalization of a panoramic space,

13. *Idem*, p. 109.

14. *Idem*, p. 115.

15. *Idem*, p. 103.



a submerged neo-gothic ninety-degree reorientation of the floating eye"¹⁶. Indeed, this manner of depiction has important precedents in the illustrations accompanying encyclopedic works such as Duhamel du Monceau's *Traité Général des Pesches et Histoire des Poissons*¹⁷. The water line which divides the picture plane in half allows the reader to cross the "impenetrable barrier" of the sea's surface which made it foreign even to the fishermen who derive their livelihood from it. The point here, however, is not to examine the novel's illustrations. To be sure, they are not merely complimentary to the text but extend its imaginary realm. But it is the experience of standing in front of outside an unfolding scene, not a static representation of it, which the reference to the aquarium evokes. Having discussed the scene which took place before the glass, let us thus look at the adventures of Arronax and his party outside of the *Nautilus's* self-referential enclosure.

In the scenes in which Arronax and his companions are invited to explore the underwater landscape, the vessel itself can be seen as the objective correlative for the cultural apparatus which accompanies them as assuredly as their diving suits. The ship is the very essence of an encapsulated (encapsulating) vision. Not incidentally, their immersion into the surrounding realm follows a series of events similar to their original imprisonment. Taken into a "cell" where they don their suits, the level of water in the cell slowly rises as the inside become the outside. They now are free to walk through and take possession of the underwater landscape. Yet they are at a lack of words to describe it:

And now, how can I recount the impressions this walk beneath the surface of the ocean left on me? Words are powerless to describe such marvels. When the painter's brush cannot even render the effects particular to this liquid element, how can the pen hope to reproduce it?¹⁸

His underwater promenade begins with a period of visual as well as bodily acclimatization. Arronax states repeatedly that he forgets his suit, all things having a different specific weight than they do on the land. But once he becomes accustomed to this new order of things, he is still unable to comprehend it. Neither image nor text could give a proper account of what was suddenly put before his eyes. Yet was this not the very condition of having certain knowledge of things? Indeed, in making his way through the ocean's depths, his understanding of things must somehow be restored. Where before the window, amid the "bosom of [the ship's] unbroken inwardness",

16. Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Düsseldorf, Richter Verlag, 1996, p. 111.

17. Duhamel du Monceau, *Traité Général des Pesches et Histoire des Poissons, qu'elles fournissent, tant pour la substinence des hommes, que pour plusieurs autres usages qui ont rapport au arts et commerce*, Paris, Saillant & Nyon, 1769, I, p. 8. For the appearance of submarine vessels in such works, including the *Nautilus* designed by Robert Fulton, see Jean-Claude Pujol, "L'Intervention Sous-Marine au Temps de l'Encyclopédie". In: Jean Balcou [ed.], *La Mer au Siècle des Encyclopédies*, Paris, Champion-Slatkine, 1987, pp. 243-252.

18. Cf. Jules Verne, *op. cit.*, p. 121.



words flowed from each member of the party, once cast into the "exterior vagueness of the waters", all words are lost to Arronax.

The unexpected sighting of ruins in subsequent scenes points to a human past harbored by the sea. In fact, the phantasmagoria of the underwater landscape suggests that it is precisely here that lost worlds might be found again, perhaps in the way Arcadian visions flourish in the garden tradition. Such is the case in the most dramatic of the underwater promenades Arronax is led on by Nemo. After a long and arduous hike, he is taken to a plateau where he sees picturesque ruins which, in contrast to the bizarre and luminescent animals he saw along the way, were the work of man and not the Creator. He sees vast heaps of stone which are covered not with ivy, but with a mantle of seaweed. With the entire scene lit by incandescent lava spewing forth from a nearby volcano, he makes out the remains of a town. Here he sees the remains of an aqueduct, though the water it was meant to convey now intermixes with that of the sea, no longer forming a distinct current. There lie the vestiges of a quay, where a port once sheltered ships at some extinct shore. These passages contain numerous reversals of visual logic and of reference brought about with the submergence of the terrestrial world. The structures survive like Pompeii, but rather than being excavated, all that is required is to travel these unexplored depths. All this, Arronax exclaims, "Captain Nemo revived before my eyes!"¹⁹ But even as Nemo (re)animated the scene, something still more was required to make it comprehensible to Arronax.

The topography of the phantom city is at first a mystery. In fact, its identity as well as the profound chasm he had just crossed between fact and speculation, history and myth, must literally be inscribed for Arronax by Nemo.

Where was I? Where was I? I had to know at any price. I wanted to speak —
I wanted to tear off the copper helmet that imprisoned my head.

But Captain Nemo came over and stopped me with a gesture. Then, picking up a piece of chalky stone, he went over to a rock of black basalt, where he wrote this single word: Atlantis

*What clarity shot into my mind!*²⁰

The word, connecting the scene to passages from Plato's *Timaeus*, is brought back in a flash by Nemo's inscription. The word Atlantis becomes magically evocative when Arronax is given access, through the brute efficacy of technology, to the lost city. *In situ*, the imagination is free to ponder the sea change which it has undergone.

Returning to the "shifting reef", we see how language is used to identify the vessel that at first travels beneath the surface of signification. It could only be known by what it is called, by the things to which it is compared in the scholarly journals and newspapers which give accounts of its sightings. Yet with Arronax, Ned, and Conseil aboard we are allowed to peer into the medium which once disguised the *Nautilus*

19. *Idem*, pp. 297-298.

20. *Idem*, p. 298.



from view. As an instrument, the submarine disturbs the very boundaries and arrangement of time and space which was seen to be overturned in the discovery of Atlantis²¹. By extending vision into a place where scientists questioned the possibility of vision even for undersea inhabitants, the ship, with its fugitive eye, ceases to figure as a camera-like instrument, and emerges instead as a particular kind of space for the accumulation of knowledge.

How does this voyage into a new world of vision end? During a great whirlpool, Arronax is cast from the ship along with his companions, losing consciousness and with it his memory of how he was set free. Regaining consciousness in a fishing cottage, he is left to wonder whether Nemo still inhabits the sea. Thus, to the question posed in Ecclesiastics, "That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out?" only two men had the answer: Nemo and Arronax, one as the manufacture of a vehicle of experience, the other confined to it. This work of fiction invented a landscape which only subsequently would be mapped by scientists and others venturing into "the territory of the void." The seascape lies there, where the painter's brush and the pen still fail to capture the scene; the *Nautilus* was a powerful agent in making this obscure landscape of the sea known.



21. Louis Blanquart-Évard, *La Photographie, ses origines, ses progrès, ses transformations*, Lille, Imprimerie Danel, 1870, p. 62.