# Floating Fragments: Some Uses of Nautical Cliché in *Dombey and Son*

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*In* Dombey and Son*, the sea is often present as a source both of metaphor and of experience. The shuttling between literal and symbolic registers which characterizes Dickens’s use of the sea produces a kind of vagueness that has often been problematic for his critics, who complain that solid features of his nautical scenes continually risk dissolving into literary commonplace or cliché. This essay reconsiders some of Dickens’s nautical clichés, refocusing attention on their constitutive vagueness. I argue that the slippery doubleness of the literary sea is what Dickens finds so appealing, and organize my discussion around two categories of nautical cliché: those related to water, and those related to solidity (especially wood). I challenge influential accounts of the novel, which praise solid aspects of the marine in* Dombey and Son*: “the real sea of ships and tar and tackling” (Carey* *106). I go on to show that Walter Gay’s association with woodenness alludes to nautical clichés and turns of phrase: a set of narrative possibilities Dickens hoped to keep in fluid contact with each other. In this way, I argue that if Dickens’s nautical clichés were a problem, they were also a linguistic and imaginative resource.*

There is something about the way we understand water that makes it possible to think of the repetition of clichés as “a kind of brainwashing” (Zijderveld 13). Christopher Ricks writes that “the feeling lately has been that we live in an unprecedented inescapability from clichés. All around us is a rising tide of them; we shall drown and no one will save us” (357). Ricks’s choice of words is telling: the nautical idiom he adopts lends subtle credibility to his claim that “the only way to speak of a cliché is with a cliché” (356)—a statement that is at once an appraisal and a recommendation. Like Marshall McLuhan, who writes that a cliché may provide “an active, structuring, probing feature of our awareness,” and perform “multiple functions from release of emotion to retrieval of other clichés from both the conscious and unconscious life” (55), Ricks ascribes greater creative potential to the cliché than is typically acknowledged. When Ricks talks of “a rising tide” of clichés, or explains that a clichéd expression is “no sooner floated than sunk,” he directs the reader’s attention to the seam that connects conscious and unconscious forms of writing or thinking. This is because Ricks’s terms encode the possibility of self-critique, or of being used “self-reflexively” (359, 361): “cliché rinsed and restored,” as Geoffrey Hill puts it (48).

As the coasting sailor navigates by landmarks, so, writes Théophile Gautier, when “struggling to render what is most inexpressible in thought, what is vague and most elusive in the outlines of form,” a novelist may work by reflexive borrowing (qtd. in Macfarlane 168). For Gautier, as for Ricks, cliché can be a way of “pushing back the boundaries of speech.” If the sea tends to blur the originating voice into the voices of others, it also offers a figurative vocabulary for speaking about such intermingling. It is this strategy that I trace here, using Dickens’s most nautical novel, *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), as case study. It is well known that, in this novel, the sea fostered Dickens’s first ambitious attempt at fusing the details of a novel to a single symbolic idiom. However, a nagging feeling that Dickens was dabbling ill-advisedly in genre writing, or merely rehashing Romantic cliché, has prevented his marine writing (in this and his other novels) from being rigorously examined.

This essay by contrast reconsiders some of Dickens’s nautical clichés, refocusing attention on their constitutive vagueness. In *Dombey and Son*, the sea is present as a source both of metaphor and of experience. The shuttling between literal and symbolic registers which characterizes Dickens’s use of the sea produces a kind of vagueness that has often been problematic for his critics, who complain that solid features of his nautical scenes continually risk dissolving into literary commonplace or cliché. I contest this view, arguing instead that the slippery doubleness of the literary sea is what Dickens finds so appealing, and organize my discussion around two categories of nautical cliché: those related to water, and those related to solidity (especially wood). I first challenge John Carey’s and Julian Moynahan’s influential accounts of the novel, in which they praise solid aspects of the marine in *Dombey and Son*—what Carey calls “the real sea of ships and tar and tackling” (106)—demonstrating instead the uses to which Dickens put a feature of the novel that frequently troubles critics: Paul Dombey’s indefinite murmurings about “what the waves were always saying.” I go on in the next section to show that Walter Gay’s association with woodenness, which might be thought of as one of the novel’s firmer articles, in fact alludes to nautical clichés and turns of phrase: a set of narrative possibilities Dickens hoped to keep in fluid contact with each other. In this way, I follow McLuhan, arguing that if Dickens’s nautical clichés were a problem, they were also a linguistic and imaginative resource.

Very Untrue

Critics writing about *Dombey and Son* since Kathleen Tillotson’s landmark study *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1954) have tended to position the sea at the literal and figurative center of the novel, taking it as a basis for further arguments about economy, empire, or sexuality, or as a means of revealing Dickens’s new interest in planning and coherence, as seen in his use of intricate number plans. Mr. Dombey’s wife, as she dies at the end of the first chapter is said (echoing Byron) to have “drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world,” with Florence “clinging fast to that slight spar” (10; ch. 1). The death of Mr. Dombey’s son Paul, in keeping with his short life, is similarly attended by “the restless sea” (194; ch. 14). Even the clerks at Dombey’s firm appear “as if they were assembled at the bottom of the sea; while a mouldy little strong room in the obscure perspective, where a shaded lamp was always burning, might have represented the cavern of some ocean monster, looking on with a red eye at these mysteries of the deep” (182; ch. 13). Some, like Michael Slater and Philip Collins have suggested that Dickens’s interest in careful plotting can be traced back earlier, to 1844 and *The Chimes* (see Slater, “*The Chimes*”, passim). However, most critics, including Richard Altick, J. Hillis Miller, the Leavises, and Suvendrini Perera, accept the truth of Tillotson’s thesis. “It is now generally agreed,” William Axton declared in 1963, “that in *Dombey and Son*, ‘the first masterpiece of Dickens’ maturity,’ Dickens solved the structural problems of the serial novel” (“Tonal Unity” 341). Behind or beneath the novel’s profusion of detail “lies the abiding presence of the ocean,” a “keystone” of narrative structure (Axton, “‘Keystone’ Structure” 42).

Among Dickens’s first readers, however, were some who found certain elements of his novel more forced than felicitous. While *Dombey and Son* sold very well—“like the hottest of cakes,” Slater ventures (*Dickens* 262)—the first number besting its predecessor *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44) by more than twelve thousand copies, certain of the novel’s earliest critics were behind in their appreciation of Dickens’s accomplishment (Slater, *Dickens* 262). Specifically, the choice of the sea as a unifying metaphor perhaps seemed a bad one. In May 1848, for example, just after *Dombey and Son* was first published in a single volume, an anonymous reviewer in *Parker’s London Magazine* dismissed Dickens’s sea metaphors on the grounds that they were trite. The novel is, he writes, “full to over-flowing of waves whispering and wandering; of dark rivers rolling to the sea, of winds, and golden ripples, and such like matters, which are sometimes very pretty, generally very untrue, and have become, at all events, excessively stale” (rev. of *Dombey and Son*, 213).

The attack in *Parker’s* is focussed chiefly on Paul Dombey, the novel’s eponymous son, who repeatedly asks “what the waves were always saying,” and whose thoughts return compulsively to the sea during the period he spends as a student (but chiefly an invalid) in Brighton: “A solitary window, gazed through years ago, looked out upon an ocean, miles and miles away; upon its waters, fancies, busy with him only yesterday, were hushed and lulled to rest like broken waves. The same mysterious murmur he had wondered at, when lying on his couch upon the beach, he thought he still heard” (214; ch. 14). When the reviewer calls Dickens “stale,” he may have been thinking of the marine effusions of Byron, Scott, or Frederick Marryat. Or, perhaps, if he had read *Pictures from Italy* (1846), published the year *Dombey and Son* began serialization, he might have felt that Dickens was rehashing material from his travelogue, which contains passages professing faintly unconvincing admiration for Mediterranean sea views (“how blue and bright . . . How picturesque”), and passages in which the writer listens “all night” to the sea’s “murmur beneath the stars” (410). Or perhaps he drew on the spate of unoriginal nautical melodramas flooding the stage at about this time, “come and gone like showers (and not very wholesome showers either),” according to Dickens himself (“Marylebone Theatre” 294). There are many possibilities. However, whatever the trope’s origin, by choosing to focus on the literal and metaphorical sea, our reviewer claims, Dickens burdens his novel with a ponderous and predictable linguistic formula. He has failed to understand something essential about the sea’s status in literature. The susurration of other voices that had previously taken up the same subject in the same way muffles Dickens’s particular voice, its characteristic inimitability: Dickens is unable to redeem the sea’s “staleness.”

The pervasiveness of the sea in *Dombey and Son* (along with Dickens’s other novels and journalism) means that it cannot be ignored altogether, but the investigation of commonplaces can produce criticism that is as worn out as the stock materials it busies itself analyzing. It is not hard to understand the disdain for Paul Dombey’s quasi-mystical muttering in *Parker’s*. By contrast, beyond pointing out the new care Dickens takes to form his novel around a key trope in *Dombey and Son*, few modern critics have found it worthwhile to write about the sea in Dickens at all; perhaps because, as David Trotter points out, in terms reminiscent of *Parker’s*, “no critic or historian of culture likes an ‘almost universal’ meaning” (61). Accordingly, a reader curious about Dickens’s representation of the sea finds him- or herself wading through such unhelpful theses as, “So much of what Dickens says about the sea and sailors is entirely straightforward” (Peck 72), or “The shipwreck metaphor and its function in *Dombey and Son* is quite obvious in its implication” (Palmer 18). Others have taken a different approach, and excused Dickens’s vagaries by turning their attention to his personal love of the ocean: his (not uncritical) enjoyment of nautical melodrama and travel literature, his trips to Brighton or Broadstairs and his later more frequent trips to Boulogne, or his childhood near Chatham. Perhaps the sea in Dickens’s novels represents a “deep and never-quite-extinguished response” to his past—a claim that is in itself the sort of critical vagary that, John Carey writes, can “make liberal intellectuals feel queasy” (41).

According to Carey, the problem is more complex. It concerns not just the badness of Dickens’s metaphor, but the incommensurability of the literal and figurative senses in which he intends the sea to be read. The difficulty is that Dickens fails in *Dombey and Son* to reconcile what Carey considers the novel’s conventional “religiosity,” specifically Paul Dombey’s talk of “the invisible country far away,” and “the real sea of ships and tar and tackling.” Hard features of the text such as “Captain Cuttle with his hook hand and salty language, Sol Gills’ nautical instrument shop (The Wooden Midshipman), and the old sailor in battered oilskins who pushes Paul’s wheelchair and smells like a weedy beach at low tide,” Carey explains, “simply refuse to combine with the shadowy symbolic sea. Their sea is geographic and commercial, solid with detail from Dickens’s childhood memories” (106).[[1]](#endnote-1) Julian Moynahan is more strident than Carey, though essentially in agreement: “the vagaries of [Paul Dombey’s] mental processes resemble the shapeless surgings of the sea,” he writes (128). He characterizes “the essential movement of the book” in comparable terms: it proceeds unhappily “from complexity towards a weltering simplicity” (127). Dickens’s mixing of metaphoric and literal reference to the sea represents to Moynahan a correspondingly confused logic. He wants Dickens to settle on something firmer—be it religious sentiment, or solid social critique—but is faced instead with a sentimentality he finds limply effeminate (Moynahan 129). What ought to have been the most solid part of Dickens’s novel turns out to be its point of greatest fluidity.

The criticisms levelled by Carey and Moynahan are compelling—so much so that more recent criticism implicitly reflects their stance, either setting the sea aside, or treating it as a bit-player in more pressing discussions of gender (Nina Auerbach), the connection of free trade and sexuality (Clark), empire and gender (Perera, Helene Moglen), or mercantilism and modern forms of commerce (Jeremy Tambling). Such an approach has generated many important insights into the novel: for example, Garrett Stewart’s brilliant exposition of the ways in which the “literary-historical capital” circulated by *Dombey*’s sea “is drawn on to reinvest colonial horizons with metaphysical glow”(204). This essay, however, seeks to return focus to the way in which Dickens writes about the sea and associated motifs. As such, I respond most concertedly to these earlier critics, whose claim that the sea in *Dombey and Son* is not worth considering has been so influential.

 Both Moynahan and Carey dwell convincingly on the lack of coherence exhibited by Dickens’s sea, which mingles tears and baptismal water with alluvial outflow, taking one fluid to be more or less interchangeable with any other. However, it is also worth asking in what ways the hardness critics wish for (evident in the implied solidity of Axton’s metaphoric keystones, and Moynahan’s dialectic of firmness/wetness) is countermanded. This seems especially important in light of the fact that, as Dickens protests in “Chatham Dockyard,” childhood memories, even of spanners and spools of rope, might be anything but solid: the reassuringly ponderous things of the dockyard produce “vague mysterious awe,” he admits, before any other feeling (290).

Let us consider one crucial example, reputedly the most banal metaphor of all, and the element that sits most uneasily with Carey: Paul Dombey’s notion of “the invisible country far away.” This cannot be considered a quirk merely of little Paul’s fevered brain; it represents an afterlife of sorts, not least because it is also one of the most firmly settled tropes in Western literature—its banality is inseparable from its inertia. Until Dickens cancelled these paragraphs in proof, this is how the novel ended:

The voices in the waves speak low to him of Florence, day and night—plainest when he, his blooming daughter, and her husband, walk beside them in the evening, or sit at an open window, listening to their roar. They speak to him of Florence and his altered heart; of Florence and their ceaseless murmuring to her of the love, eternal and illimitable, extending still, beyond the sea, beyond the sky, to the invisible country far away.

Never from the mighty sea may voices rise too late, to come between us and the unseen region on the other shore! Better, far better, that they whispered of that region in our childish ears, and the swift river hurried us away! (967)

What Dickens means in such passages is deliberately vague. Even in the chapter entitled “What the Waves Were Always Saying,” a reader hoping for clarification is bound to be disappointed. At the climactic moment Paul exclaims, “I hear the waves! They always said so!,” but what they did say is kept secret (240). The feeling and the general idea Dickens wants to put across is, however, clear enough; Dickens speaks in familiar tones (as do the waves by this point) of misty beatitude.

This becomes explicit in light of some related texts. Consider Tennyson’s use of the word *bourne* in his poem “Crossing the Bar” (1889).

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place

The flood may bear me far,

I hope to see my Pilot face to face

When I have crost the bar.

(Tennyson, *Poems* 254, lines 13–16)

To some the poem’s first hearers, including his nurse, it seemed as if Tennyson had composed his own epitaph (*Tennyson’s Poetry* 578). However, Tennyson’s poem might be thought of as outside “Time and Place” in more ways than one. The “pilot-god trope,” George Monteiro notes, has been “long a commonplace in the literature of many countries and nations of the Western world,” appearing in works by Plato, Melville, Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Stephen Crane, and Walt Whitman, and popular hymns like Edward Hooper’s “Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me” and Rood and Rexford’s “Your Father’s at the Helm” (42, 43). Tennyson’s metaphoric “bourne,” that is, springs not from one place, but several, which is appropriate to his depiction of death as passing from the bounded flow of a stream into a more oceanic mode of existence. The word *bourn* originally denoted a “limit or terminus” (*OED*), and it is used this way in *Hamlet*: “death, / The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (3.1.78–80).[[2]](#endnote-2) In Tennyson’s lines, however, “bourne” is allowed freer play. It quickly yields to “bear,” showing that Tennyson had in mind not only the way that life itself can demand endurance of what might seem unbearable, as Tennyson found the death of Arthur Hallam, but also the way we are borne through time as on a stream (a bourn). The combination of “bear” and “far” to make “bar” offers syntax and rhyme as a model of the continuity through change for which Tennyson hopes. “Bar” returns us to Hamlet’s sense of *bourn* and marks the stream’s end, though these variations demonstrate that what Tennyson imagines is a threshold and not an obstruction.

Though it is odd to think of him keeping company with Hamlet, Paul Dombey’s murmurings could also be considered an aspect of the past of Tennyson’s poem, as might Dickens’s journalism: he used the bar as an image of oblivion several times, as in “Our French Watering-Place” (1854), “Out of the Season” (1856), “Travelling Abroad” (1860), and “The Calais Night Mail” (1863). And, of course, the image has other likely sources. Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”(1807), for example, imagines children who linger near a sea of comparable profundity.[[3]](#endnote-3) And, when Dickens writes that Paul Dombey’s is “a fashion that came in with our first garments and will last unchanged until our race has run its course, and the wide firmament is rolled up like a scroll” (241), for example, he rehearses the visionary apocalyptic metaphors of Isaiah and Revelation (*King James Version*, Isa. 34:4; Rev. 6:14); “the swift river that bears us to the ocean” is the Styx to be crossed in death, as much as it is the Thames, or the Medway of Dickens’s own private mythology (241). Acknowledging such provenance can have contrary effects. If Tennyson’s meaning is firmed up (to the extent that his nurse immediately recognized it), it is also watered down: in other words, if the poem would work well as Tennyson’s epitaph, it would work equally well as someone else’s. In the case of both Tennyson’s poem and Dickens’s novel, however, our recognition of a common linguistic and literary past vouches for a common future, a possibility enabled by the literal and literary fluidity of their central figure.

If fluidity can be established by influence and allusion, it may take effect too within a single text. Matthew Arnold contends that another phrase of Hamlet’s—“To take arms against a sea of troubles” (3.1.58)—demands to be read with much the same sort of half-attention, and can be liked only if it is not thought about too hard: “the figure there is undoubtedly most faulty, it by no means runs on four legs; but the thing is said so freely and idiomatically, that it passes” (Arnold 156). While his own metaphor is not “free,” Carey and Moynahan would understand Arnold’s implied claim that critics should not try to make too much of words like Shakespeare’s or Tennyson’s. The poet’s particular expression turns out to be vaguely idiomatic, a part of speech that escapes critical consideration precisely because it is so readily understood. Shakespeare’s words do and do not demand attention. They could just as easily be seen to look ahead to a more literal to-ing and fro-ing: Hamlet’s departure with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and his return without them “ere we were two days old at sea” (4.6.15). It would, however, take an unusually alert playgoer to notice such subtle linguistic recurrence.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Dickens gives his reader more opportunity to notice a pattern when he writes of Florence Dombey’s “sea of doubt and hope,” Captain Cuttle’s “sea of speculation and conjecture,” and Mr. Dombey’s consuming “sea of pride,” in defiance of “the tides of human chance and change,” expressed over a “dead sea of mahogany on which the fruit dishes and decanters lay at anchor; as if the subjects of his thoughts were rising towards the surface one by one, and plunging down again” (441; ch. 29, 421; ch. 28, 594; ch. 40, 856; ch 58, 455; ch. 30). Dickens’s repetitions urge the reader to give attention to his “sea of” construction, rising in turn to the surface of his prose and dropping out of sight again before too much can be made of the swell. How to read the phrase on each recurrence remains uncertain, and not only because it may briskly unite apparent contraries like “doubt” and “hope.” It is an innocuous figure of speech that calls to mind not just the novel’s central metaphor, but also its key plot points. Language, that is, that would not normally be thought of as figurative—“sea of” is a species of dead metaphor—becomes obtrusively though ambiguously metaphorical because its literal referent is present in the text, and may or may not influence the text’s idiom. The reader is left to guess how thoroughly to parse Dickens’s phrasing: it is firmly established and fluidly ungraspable at once.

From one point of view, this banal language has become poetic. “How does poeticity manifest itself?,” asks Roman Jakobson: “Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality” (378). It is unfair to take such a drastic line as this in Dickens’s case since it is unclear whether or not these utterances about the sea enact *différance* or manifest a form of compositional indifference. Language as such is not exactly what the reader’s attention is drawn to, but the relationship between sign and referent is called into question. Dickens may not, as Hill says, “rinse” his clichés, but they bring together a host of possible associations while avoiding the need to select between them. “Crossing the Bar” is also crossing into cliché: Tennyson’s poem has done more perhaps than any other work of literature to turn this familiar motif into a commonplace verbal formula. *Dombey and Son* is more circumspect. Nevertheless, it is significant that the material features of the story reflexively (and often only partially) provide the vocabulary Dickens needs to make the hard facts mean something.

The material sea is encountered most directly by Walter Gay, who is aboard the *Son and Heir* when it is wrecked. Here, too, the reader meets with a “sea of doubt and hope.” Axton considers the wreck to be the novel’s “keystone”—the moment at which the “identity of [the novel’s] literal and figurative dimensions of meaning” is most visible (“‘Keystone’ Structure,” 42). With the wreck, Dickens connects together the novel’s two key groups of characters—those under Mr. Dombey’s auspices, and the knot of innocents centred on/at The Wooden Midshipman, the nautical instrument-maker—thematically parcelling up young Paul Dombey’s watery end with that of Captain Cuttle, and Sol Gills’s vanished heir, Walter Gay, thus offering shipwreck and salvage as a way of thinking about the fate of the novel’s titular firm and the characters that trail in its wake.

In a sense, this is the sea Carey and Moynahan love best: a sea of wrecks and technical gewgaws. Yet here too Dickens is concerned, above all, with the sea’s capacity to trouble a reader’s firmest convictions. In the middle of the novel—chapter 32 of 62—the wreck is reported. Mr. Toots reads aloud to Captain Cuttle from the *Shipping Intelligence*:

“the look-out observed, half an hour before sunset, some fragments of a wreck, drifting at about the distance of a mile. The weather being clear, and the barque making no way, a boat was hoisted out, with orders to inspect the same, when they were found to consist of sundry large spars, and a part of the main rigging of an English brig, of about five hundred tons burden, together with a portion of the stern on which the words and letters, ‘Son and H—’ were yet plainly legible. No vestige of any dead body was to be seen upon the floating fragments….There can be no doubt that all surmises as to the fate of the missing vessel, the Son and Heir, port of London, bound for Barbados, are now set at rest for ever; that she broke up in the last hurricane; and that every soul on board perished.” (490; ch. 32)

Hans Blumenberg writes, paraphrasing Goethe, that “both progress and sinkings leave behind the same peaceful surface” (59). This is not wholly true for Dickens. Traces remain, and these are an invitation to invent: “debris is precious to him because it represents the best hope of rebuilding” (Rendall 3). We are told that “the words and letters ‘Son and H—’ were yet plainly legible” on the bits and pieces of the wreck found floating by a passing ship. But the *Shipping Intelligence*, Captain Cuttle, and we as readers are all led to misinterpret this scrap of text.[[5]](#endnote-5) There is no “vestige of any dead body” there because the body we are concerned with is not dead. Dickens’s word choice (“vestige,” from Latin *vestigium,* footprint) alerts us that Gay has miraculously walked away, so to speak, Christ-like. The way Captain Cuttle pronounces Walter Gay’s name, “Wal’r!,” stirs something in the memory of Mr. Perch, “who seemed to remember having heard in infancy that there was once a poet of that name” (252; ch. 17). He is thinking of the Royalist poet Edmund Waller whose patriotic verse “Of a War with Spain, and Fight at Sea” (1656) Dickens may also have in the back of his mind:

Others may use the ocean as their road,

Only the ENGLISH make it their abode:

[. . .]

Our oaks secure, as if they there took root:

We tread on billows with a steady foot.

(192)

Like the “Son and H—,” the figure of Walter disappears as we read it; his footprints are miraculously present insofar as they are suggested by the text, and yet they signify equally an absence because there is nothing left on the surface of the water. Dickens reminds us that reading a serial novel is not like reading the shipping news: although the reader is told that there can be no doubt, doubt in this case is precisely the straw Dickens gives his reader to grasp.

When Dickens visited Chatham Dockyard in 1863, he imagined “writing a book” in the cab of one of the great cranes of the dockyard (“Chatham Dockyard” 295). In a sense, *Dombey and Son* anticipates such sentiments: a shipyard occasions thoughts of novelistic construction, while a shipwreck offers opportunities for narrative reconstruction. Paul Dombey, at his bedroom window, observes the sea and feels that “there were crowds of thoughts that mixed with these, and came on, one upon the other, like the rolling waves;” it is perhaps an indication of their otherwise unapparent affinity that Mr. Dombey’s thoughts, as we have seen, follow similar patterns, “rising towards the surface . . ., and plunging down again” (206; ch 14). Dickens’s brainwaves were also susceptible to the motions of actual waves: watching the Medway running into the sea, he ruminates that “everything within the range of the senses will . . . lend itself to everything beyond that range, and work into a drowsy whole, not unlike a kind of tune, but for which there is no exact definition” (“Chatham Dockyard” 289). In *Dombey and Son*, the sea spreads its ripples indistinctly, making it difficult at times to determine with “exact definition” where they begin and end. Solidity is not what Dickens primarily valued about the sea. Although the sea presses the original voice into shopworn patterns, such forms remained appealing to him; their fundamental vagueness cannot be thought of, with Carey, Moynahan, and others, wholly as a mark of authorial unconsciousness, because Dickens thought *with* such vagueness as well.

Wooden Midshipmen

With an uncertain sense of just how long his own text would endure, John Forster notes in his *Life* that one of what he calls Dickens’s “prototypes” exists at the time of writing: “the Little Wooden Midshipman did actually (perhaps does still) occupy his post of observation in Leadenhall Street” (374). Forster’s parenthesis gauges the durability not just of the figurine that served as a basis for the one positioned outside Sol Gills’s shop, but also of his own textual recollection of it. (In fact, the midshipman is no longer in Leadenhall Street, but is now in the Dickens House Museum, where it can be seen, brightly painted, still staring through its sextant.) Its durability was a subject of interest to Dickens, too. On his way to Wapping in 1860—where he went, not “because I believe (for I don’t) in the constancy of the young woman who told her seagoing lover . . . that she had ever continued the same,” but to inspect workhouses—Dickens walked on, “past my little wooden midshipman” which really had “carried on the same,” but only “after affectionately patting him on one leg of his knee-shorts for old acquaintance’ sake” (“Wapping Workhouse” 43). Though it was not unusual for Dickens to feel haunted by his creations, it was rare that he could pat one on the knee. Of all the solid articles that clutter Dickens’s novels, the wooden midshipman proved to be one of the most enduring.

As Dickens’s allusion to the young woman and her seagoing lover of the ballad “Wapping Old Stairs” (ca. 1797) suggests, the kind of plot that the wooden midshipman introduces in the form of Florence and Walter’s picturesque romance had also proved its tenacity. Yet, while Forster implicitly includes the Midshipman among the “vivid and life-like” creations of *Dombey and Son*, Dickens clearly felt by the time he visited Wapping in 1860 that the type of narrative suggested by the figurine could no longer be “believed” wholeheartedly. The novel sits on the cusp of these viewpoints. If a sense of doubt is crucial to the report of the wreck of the *Son and Heir*, it has throughout been important to Walter’s character. Dickens was to settle on a version of the romantic plotting employed in “Wapping Old Stairs”—Walter turns out finally to be as wooden as his association with the figurine suggests—but throughout the novel Dickens makes an attempt to keep other possibilities in play. Moreover, he does so largely, and unexpectedly, by way of Walter’s ties to the wooden midshipman. In particular, the several ways in which the midshipman’s woodenness can be read allowed Dickens simultaneously to think of Walter as a stock figure and to imply a sense of hesitancy and knowingness, holding in reserve until the last moment the possibility that Walter will turn out differently than the reader imagines.

Walter Gay, Solomon Gills, and Captain Cuttle are introduced in their shop, named after the figurine that stands outside the door, whose immovability Dickens finds faintly laughable: “little timber midshipmen in obsolete naval uniforms, eternally employed outside the shop-doors of nautical instrument makers in taking observations of the hackney coaches” (36; ch 4). Still, as G. W. Kennedy points out (27), the shop is an emblem of cozy compactness of the sort Dickens loved, like the Atlantic packet *The Screw* in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which under Mark Tapley’s cheerful eye becomes so like a country pub that he can perceive “no great difference” (245; ch 17), or Bill Barley’s place in *Great Expectations* (1860–61), which is “fitted out ‘like a chandler’s shop’,” complete with a table on which he keeps “his grog ready-mixed in a little tub” (343, 344; ch. 23), or Mr. Tartar’s quarters in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). In Sol Gills’s shop, “everything was jammed into the tightest cases, fitted into the narrowest corners, fenced up behind the most impertinent cushions, and screwed into the acutest angles, to prevent its philosophical composure from being disturbed by the rolling of the sea” (37; ch 4). Dickens tells us that “such extraordinary precautions were taken in every instance to save room, and keep the thing compact,” though they also establish certain narrative expectations in the reader’s mind (37; ch 4). Walter Gay’s name would have suggested to readers that he was snugly recognizable, like one of Captain Marryat’s heroes—Midshipman Easy, Jacob Faithful, and so on, or indeed like Jon Steadiman in *The Wreck of the* Golden Mary, the Christmas book Dickens wrote with Wilkie Collins in 1856. And, while he is not yet a sailor, Sol Gills’s nephew “looked quite enough like a midshipman to carry out the prevailing idea” (37; ch 4).

In spite of Walter’s garden-variety appearance, Dickens was unclear about exactly how solid or realistic to make his character when he began *Dombey and Son*. He wrote to Forster at the end of July 1846:

it would be a good thing to disappoint all the expectations that chapter [4] seems to raise of his happy connection with the story and the heroine, and to show [Walter] gradually and naturally trailing away, from that love of adventure and boyish light-heartedness, into negligence, idleness, dissipation, dishonesty, and ruin. To show, in short, that common, every-day, miserable declension of which we know so much in our ordinary life.

(*Letters* 4: 593)

He wondered, however, if he could follow this course “without making people angry.” By 22 November 1846 he told Forster that he was “far from sure it could be wholesomely done, after the interest he has acquired” (*Letters* 4: 658). In reference to the possibility that Dickens might have ruined Walter, George Gissing writes that “the hand was stayed where the picture would have become too painful alike for author and public.” Gissing goes on to say that “the phrase about ‘making people angry’ signifies much less than it would in a novelist of to-day. It might well have taken the form: ‘Can I bring *myself* to do this thing?’” (69).[[6]](#endnote-6) Even if he finally gave the idea up, Dickens allows himself the option of diverging from the familiar pattern.

The popular literature of the sea that valorizes sailorly hearts of oak fascinated Dickens, and his personal love of this literature, together with a childhood spent around docks reading the *Terrific Register* in which “grisly accounts of the horrors that could occur in the aftermath of wrecks were commonplace” (Thompson 2), is evident in the solid details of *Dombey and Son*. The fascination that, for example, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) held for Dickens has been widely noted.[[7]](#endnote-7) David Copperfield’s childhood reading, based on Dickens’s own, includes “Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe,” half of which contain nautical themes; David also has “a greedy relish for a few volumes of Voyages and Travels,” like Archibald Duncan’s six-volume *The Mariner’s Chronicle*, from1804 (*David Copperfield* 53; ch. 5). The latter, William J. Palmer explains, “became *the* basic source for many of the other shipwreck narrative anthologies of the nineteenth century [. . .] including Cook’s *Voyages* . . . and Hall’s *Voyages*” (48). Walter Gay and his uncle recall shipwrecks, complete with dates and cargoes, as an introduction to their habits of conversation; these are reminiscent of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century accounts of survivors collected in such volumes as Duncan’s *Mariner’s Chronicle*. Dickens also owned and drew readily from Charles Dibdin’s *Songs, Naval and National* (1841) and Sir John Dalyell’s three-volume *Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea* (1812).[[8]](#endnote-8) (Dalyell’s works provided corroborating anecdote for Dickens’s impassioned rebuttal of Dr. Rae’s claim that Franklin’s crew had turned to cannibalism in “The Lost Arctic Voyagers,” published in *Household Words* in two parts on 2 and 9 December 1854.)

Walter and Sol’s interest in shipwreck narratives, then, to some degree reflects Dickens’s own. *The Daily News*, which Dickens briefly edited, and in which he still held an interest, published, along with his tabloid *The Household Narrative of Current Events* (an adjunct to *Household Words*), “regular sections devoted solely to shipping intelligence and disaster reports” (Dickens, *“Gone Astray”* 180–81). *Household Words* itself frequently published either narrative or statistical accounts of shipwrecks. For instance, “Lighthouses and Light-boats” (11 January 1851) and “The Preservation of Life from Shipwreck” (3 August 1850) protest against the shortcomings in training and practice of rescuers located along the coasts. “Life and Luggage” (8 November 1851), “A Sea-Coroner” (13 March 1852), “When the Wind Blows” (24 March 1855), and “Wrecks at Sea” (11 August 1855), all focus on the shocking frequency of shipwrecks. And, just as he had in Sol Gills and Walter’s dialogue in *Dombey and Son*, in “The Long Voyage” (31 December 1853), Dickens’s magazine printed miniaturized versions of the eighteenth-century shipwreck anthology, with true accounts of tropical and Arctic wrecks. News of this sort “was a staple of every London newspaper and most periodicals,” as Palmer points out (55), and it is worth remembering that the fictional *Shipping Intelligence* from which Captain Cuttle hears of the wreck of the *Son and Heir* shares traits with Dickens’s own periodicals.

At the same time, Dickens’s first readers and numerous critics have noted that Walter would be equally at home treading the boards of a theater as the decking of a ship. Walter Gay’s trajectory is highly redolent of the melodramatic portrayals of Jolly Jack Tars which achieved great prominence in the nineteenth century. The pair of boys who form the first glimpse that Nicholas Nickleby has of Crummles’s theatrical troupe, “one of them very tall and the other very short, both dressed as sailors—or at least as theatrical sailors, with belts, buckles, pigtails, and pistols complete—fighting in what is called in play-bills a terrific combat,” have perhaps more in common with Walter than the sturdily realistic survivors depicted in the periodical reports (278). Axton lays out in careful detail the resonances between *Dombey and Son* and various plays: a version of Dick Whittington produced by Dickens’s acquaintance Albert Smith in 1845, and most significantly the enormously popular and influential *Black Ey’d Susan; or, All in the Downs* (1829) by another friend, Douglas Jerrold. The play was frequently performed. In September 1842, “the celebrated Nautical Drama” shared billing with a production of *Oliver Twist* at the Royal Victoria Theatre, where a certain Mr. Seaman first played Monks, before taking a turn as Captain Crosstree later in the evening.[[9]](#endnote-9) The play comes up frequently in Dickens’s journalism (see, for example, “Out of Town,” and “New Year’s Day”), and his assessments of it can be telling. Dickens reviewed a production at the Marylebone Theatre in *The Examiner* the year after he completed *Dombey and Son*, “at which the audience laughed and wept with all their hearts.” He found it to be “a remarkable illustration of what a man of genius may do with a common-enough theme, and how what he does will remain a thing apart from all imitation” (“Marylebone Theatre” 294).

Dickens was right to say that the theme of Jerrold’s play was “common-enough.” The play, based on John Gay’s ballad written almost a century earlier “Sweet William’s Farewell to Black-Ey’d Susan” (1720), set a tight pattern for nautical melodrama throughout the century. J. S. Bratton writes, “In 1875 the Britannia presented the old plot unchanged in *The Sea is England’s Glory* by F. Marchant; and in 1896 the Pavilion Mile End had it all out again in *Jack Tar*, by A. Shirley and B. Landreck, which bristles with nostalgic claptraps about the romantic tar” (52). Dickens himself staged an enthusiastic revival when Jerrold died in 1857. Ostensibly a benefit for the playwright’s family, it may have been motivated by Dickens’s love of the melodrama itself, and his convictions of the probable success of his staging, as much as by disinterested benevolence: Jerrold’s family was in fact left well-provided for, and his widow asked Dickens outright to refrain from producing the play at all.[[10]](#endnote-10) If, as I suggest above, Walter’s Christian name alludes to Edmund Waller, his surname might be traced to the melodramatic convention initiated by John Gay; the minor mystery of Walter’s parentage is partially resolved by these allusions (see Westland 93).

 Axton suggests that Dickens repurposes both the dramatis personae of Jerrold’s play and its structure, which he uses as a skeletal frame to model Walter’s progress:

Jerrold . . . uses a host of melodramatic clichés: the hero’s timely return from the sea to his lover’s arms, the grasping merchant, his hypocritical and libidinous accomplice, the cock-sure sailor hero, the hard-pressed heroine of delicate sensibility, her spunky companion. . ., her idiot-lover. . ., and the hero’s stridently nautical shipmates who repeatedly affirm in song their loyalty to nation and friend.

(“Stereotype” 312)

Yet, even such explicit references are not made with the intent of clarifying Dickens’s narrative aims. Dickens, for example, makes explicit allusion to *Black Ey’d Susan* in the character of Susan Nipper, called “the black-eyed” throughout *Dombey and Son*. There is little similarity, however, between Jerrold’s Susan, a Penelope embattled by suitors while awaiting her husband’s return, and Dickens’s Susan. A comparison to Florence, who waits for Walter, just as Jerrold’s Susan waits for William, would make more sense, but Dickens stops short of allowing such a direct equivalence. Indeed, the association is further loosened by a poster advertising the play, found in the lower left corner of the final illustration in the first volume publication: Phiz’s illustration for the chapter “Chiefly Matrimonial” in which Cuttles’s sailor friend is wed to his former landlady Mrs. Mac Stinger (fig. 1).

Given the midshipman’s status as an agreed-upon type, Walter’s woodenness may have originated as a winking acknowledgment on Dickens’s part that what he appeared to be

introducing was a stock figure of balladic or melodramatic cliché. Sol’s midshipman is, Dickens writes, “familiarly, the woodenest,” his “suavity the least endurable,” his garb the most ostentatiously stagey (36; ch 4). The reader is invited to compare the statue of the wooden midshipman to Walter, who is “firm and cheery” in his own right (729; ch 49). The figure’s wooden face appears hardly “reconcilable to human reason,” and Walter himself is similarly unbothered by thought, “not much given to analysing the nature of his own feelings” (118; ch 9). Repeatedly compared with both the shop’s mascot and the shop itself, Walter may not be much different from the other movables that stock the shelves. The sense of *wooden* meaning “mentally dull; insensitive, inapprehensive; unintelligent, blockish” (*OED*), had been current since the sixteenth century, and Carlyle was fond of using the word as a synonym for *mechanical*. The term may also have had particularly nautical applications. “Would you learn the jargon of a Midshipman,” wonders Hervey Brackbill, an early twentieth-century reporter and telegrapher.[[11]](#endnote-11)

“Catch a skag, settle down, and bone this gauge. You’ll be savvy in a butt—before you have to caulk off—unless you’re wooden.” Which is to say: “Light a cigarette, settle down, and study this vocabulary. You’ll know it in a short time—before you go to bed—unless you’re an absolute blockhead.” (451)

Brackbill goes on to define *wooden* as “unintelligent, stupid, ‘dumb’” (455). While the origin of a usage like this is difficult to determine, it would not be right to assume that it is exclusively American, just because Brackbill is; throughout the nineteenth century, merchant crews were highly international and employed an argot of their own. Perhaps, then, it is no coincidence that the wooden midshipman in *Dombey and Son*, squinting through his “offensively disproportionate piece of machinery,” is also perpetually winking (36; ch 4).

Given Walter’s blockheadedness, another literary model may have helped Dickens to frame his character in light of a comparable marine definition of *woodenness*: Cruikshank’s admonitory *The Progress of a Midshipman, Exemplified in the Career of Master Blockhead* (1820), a collaboration with, and comically fictionalized life of, Captain Marryat, which was nonetheless intended to disclose something about the midshipman as a type. Captain Marryat was arguably the most influential practitioner of naval novel-writing in the nineteenth century. He and Dickens were acquaintances, as, of course, Dickens and Cruikshank had been—Dickens wrote to Marryat, for instance, on 13 October 1842 to acknowledge receipt of *Percival Keene*, “over which I have been chuckling, and grinning, and clenching my fists, and becoming warlike, for three whole days last past” (*Letters* 3: 342–43).[[12]](#endnote-12) It seems possible that Dickens would have been interested in his old illustrator’s work with the Captain. Indeed, where Marryat had transmuted his youthful indiscretions, upon which Master Blockhead’s are based, into a degree of bourgeois respectability, Cruikshank’s midshipman is done in by his vices, as Walter threatens to be (Brantlinger 54).

If Dickens worried that his readers might be made angry, then it was not just because the decline of such a promising young man would be painful to observe, but also because the idea of the midshipman had settled into familiar shapes by this time, some of them heroic. I am not the only critic to consider the role some of these examples play in the novel; Ella Westland in particular carefully links *Dombey and Son* to *Black-Ey’d Susan*, Dibdin’s *Songs*, and Marryat and Cruikshank’s *Progress of a Midshipman*. According to Westland, “early Victorian readers of *Dombey* would. . . have been prepared by the mere mention of midshipmen for a story of youthful adventures and career success,” an expectation Dickens was not at all sure he wished to satisfy (92). Westland goes on persuasively to examine some of the ways in which Walter could have reminded readers of “long-running maritime plots: the Midshipman’s Progress and the Sailor’s Farewell” (91), narrative conventions that sent their protagonists down contrasting tacks toward either salvation or infidelity, ruin or drowning (102). However, her suggestion that Dickens desired “to keep open an escape route for himself from the repressiveness of realism into the comparative freedom of popular culture” represented by “orally mediated traditions of story telling and song” (89) is less convincing. While it is right to say that Dickens evokes the narrative shapes of popular maritime fiction and melodrama, Westland is less clear about how this distinguishes Dickens’s novel from any other since the form of the novel in this period, in spite of its variety, might still best be characterized by heterogeneity and inclusiveness. Nor does Westland explain why the *nautical* aspects of *Dombey and Son* in particular invoke such contradictory meanings.

Consider the term *midshipman*. The entry for the word isstriking among the often terse definitions of nautical equipment and terminology William Falconer provides in his famous *Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (1769), which remained an essential resource for years despite having originated as a set of technical notes to Falconer’s influential poem *The Shipwreck* (1762): by the 1784 edition of his *Dictionary*, Falconer required four pages to do *midshipman* justice. Falconer both implies the conventionality of the midshipman as a type and engages to correct some misapprehensions. He sketches out the duties and situation of a midshipman aboard ship, but also expounds at length upon the character of this species of young man, who “usually comes aboard tinctured with . . . prejudices,” and “blinded by. . . prepossessions” gleaned from popular reading. According to Falconer, such young men come to sea for the first time full of mistaken opinions about “the genius of sailors and their officers. No character, in their opinion, is more excellent than that of the common sailor.” However, every midshipman is eventually disabused of this misapprehension “and very soon surprised to find, amongst those honest sailors, a crew of abandoned miscreants, ripe for any mischief or villainy.”

The sense given by Falconer that a midshipman will immediately upon embarking descend into a world of vice mimics Dickens’s original vision of Walter’s “miserable declension.” Yet, in the end, Dickens and Falconer alike have it both ways because, not only the *ur*-midshipman of the *Dictionary*, but Walter too, embody at the outset a capacity for the kind of heroic innocence which the authors and the reader hold dear, and also the potential for dramatic decline. In this way, Falconer manages to describe a midshipman who is typical, and possibly typically heroic, but also allows the reader to keep in mind the various unpropitious ways in which such a person might change over time. Dickens thrusts onto Sol Gills an anxiety comparable to that he wished his readers to feel: “If I didn’t know that he was too fond of me to make a run of it, and go and enter himself aboard ship against my wishes, I should begin to be fidgetty [*sic*]. . . I really should. All in the Downs, eh!” (38; ch 4). Dickens’s original readers would have found it easy to discern in Sol’s remark “All in the Downs” an allusion to the alternative title of *Black Ey’d Susan*.

If Dickens initially considered a trajectory for Walter something like the one Falconer gives his midshipmen, or Cruikshank gives his Master Blockhead, he finally settled on the kind of heroic myth that Marryat had been fond of depicting in his fiction. We do not know the reasons Forster gave to convince Dickens to maintain the conventionality of Walter’s character. The editors of the Pilgrimedition of his letters suggest that there may have been too close a parallel discernible between an impecunious Walter Gay and Thomas Powell, an acquaintance who had embezzled money from Chapman and Hall and fled to America earlier in 1846 (Dickens, *Letters* 4: 593, 575)—a somewhat unconvincing explanation, given Dickens’s willingness to lampoon even his friends in his novels; Forster himself was to appear as Podsnap in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65; see Slater, *Dickens* 523). Whatever his rationale, Dickens in the end capitulated and allowed Walter the heroic destiny he knew his public wanted, or at least expected (Forster 360). Walter’s woodenness, however, is the pivot on which Dickens turned the two futures he had imagined for his character.

Carey suspects that such woodenness appears in Dickens—he has written engagingly about the proliferation of wooden legs in the novels—for the simpler but no less “pressing reason. . . that Dickens likes wooden men” (88).[[13]](#endnote-13) Indeed, Dickens was at times profligate in his application of the quality, so that, while Walter assumes some aspects of woodenness, Mr. Dombey also appears “like a man of wood, without a hinge or a joint in him,” a likeness that suggests little about their respective characters (401; ch 26). Still, in the Victorian imagination there were good reasons to think that a wooden midshipman might be somewhat different from wooden men in general. Dickens makes the same association elsewhere. In “Some Recollections of Mortality” (1863), an indifferent nurse appears “like the figure-head of a pauper-ship,” for example, and her charge dampens her “wooden shoulder” with tears (226). Lost in London as a boy, a rascal with “a stump of black-lead pencil” writes his mother’s name and address on the young Dickens’s white hat: “Mrs. Blores, Wooden Leg Walk, Tobacco-Stopper Row, Wapping,” the notorious haunt of sailors while ashore (“Gone Astray” 162). Dickens finds he cannot rub off the markings, and he was likewise never to rid himself of his predilection for wooden legs which, like Mr. Gamp’s which leads him “walkin’ into wine vaults, and never comin’ out again ’till fetched by force,” often appear to exhibit a life of their own (*Martin Chuzzlewit* 535). In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), Quilp possesses “the effigy of some famous admiral,” a ship’s figurehead with a “mass of timber on its head, caved into the dim and distant semblance of a cocked hat,” sawn off at that waist so that it resembles “a distinguished merman” (461). A comparable figure appears in “Our Watering Place,” published in *Household Words* on 2 August 1851:

One of those slow heavy fellows sitting down patiently mending a little ship for a mite of a boy, whom he could crush to death by throwing his lightest pair of trousers on him. You will be sensible of the oddest contrast between the smooth little creature, and the rough man who seems to be carved out of hard-grained wood – between the delicate hand expectantly held out, and the immense thumb and finger that can hardly feel the rigging of the thread they mend. . .—and yet there is a natural propriety in the companionship. (16)

If Walter’s woodenness permitted a degree of irony, it could also suggest a sort of solidly English virtue. Two centuries after Edmund Waller made the association, “hard-grained wood” and British national identity remained firmly engrafted. Woodenness of heart was particularly associated with the British at sea who manned the nation’s “wooden walls,” as in the popular lines from “Hearts of Oak”—“heart of oak are our ships, jolly tars are our men”—which encouraged a metonymic cross-identification of the deck with the hands who manned it, and of the human heart with those decks. That “Hearts of Oak,” written by David Garrick for the eighteenth-century opera of the same name, could be plucked from the boards of the West End to become the official march of the British Navy, suggests how central to both military power and a certain version of British identity this kind of hard, knotty virtue was thought to be. Walter’s woodenness is finally keyed to reassuringly solid popular sentiment. A heroic return presented as melodramatic stagecraft is not at all the kind of hardnessMoynahan or Carey have in mind. I have tried to suggest, however, that woodenness proves integral to the procedure by which Dickens connects two sorts of solidity: nautical bric-a-brac and the “miserable declension” Dickens thought characteristic of “ordinary life” are shown miraculously to be commensurate with no less ingrained cultural forms.

In developing his central symbol, Dickens had thought harder than most nautical writers, not just about what the sea might mean, but about what it meant to write about the sea. In an early scene that looks ahead to the wreck of the *Son and Heir*, set in The Wooden Midshipman, Sol and Walter find themselves immersed in familiar tales of shipwrecks, which they have memorized from popular accounts, finishing each other’s sentences: “‘Why, when the Charming Sally went down in the——’ ‘In the Baltic Sea, in the dead of night; five-and-twenty minutes past twelve when the captain’s watch stopped in his pocket’.” Steadiness is called for, however, and Sol urges Walter to maintain a moderate attitude to the sea: “‘As to the Sea,’ he pursued, ‘that’s well enough in fiction, Wally, but it won’t do in fact: it won’t do at all. It’s natural enough that you should think about it, associating it with all these familiar things; but it won’t do, it won’t do’” (43; ch 4). Sol, of course, relishes the thought of the sea as much as Walter does, and looks about his shop with “stealthy enjoyment” even as he exhorts his nephew to caution. The “familiar things” Sol has in mind are the chronometers and sextants in The Wooden Midshipman, but Dickens is more interested in the way the sea shapes their conversation into conventional and familiar patterns.

Dickens admired the sea largely as Sol does, because he finds it at once absorbing and artificial, a fact and a fiction. He stresses this combination of qualities in “Gone Astray” when he recalls a nautical melodrama he had seen as a boy, featuring “a real man-of-war” (that nevertheless appears drastically undersized), which rolls onstage “in a very heavy sea,” along with a “good sailor (and he was very good),” and a “bad sailor (and he was very bad),” who throws himself into the sea “from a summit of a curious rock, presenting something of the appearance of a pair of steps” (163–64). It is Dickens’s point that by the mid-nineteenth century the sea was inseparable from the clichéd fictions Sol and Walter attach to it. Like Gills’s shop, “wanting only good sea-room, in the event of an unexpected launch, to work its way securely, to any desert island in the world” (37), the “familiar things” Walter associates with the sea are not confined to the small circle of his makeshift family. Richard Altick writes that Dickens had picked up “the nautical songs Captain Cuttle quotes in mangled snatches. . . during his childhood among the old salts at Chatham and in the Dibdinesque naval dramas at popular theatres.” “They had,” he goes on to observe, “no intrinsic function in the novel but were merely employed to embellish a certain theme, in this instance Captain Cuttle’s occupation” (84).

Dickens, however, was more interested in mangling than Altick’s interpretation suggests. The reader learns later that the text Walter Gay recalls in his “hour of need” is not the New Testament, but the hodgepodge of popular sea tales he and Sol Gills recite near the beginning of the novel. “When he was a boy,” Cuttle recalls, he loved “to read and talk about brave actions in shipwrecks—I’ve heerd him! I’ve heerd him!—and he remembered of ’em in his hour of need” (729; ch 49). Altick notes that Cuttle himself often makes similar substitutions, which might go some way to explaining Walter’s confusion (84). In chapter 15, for instance, Cuttle recites to Walter a line from a popular song, though he claims it is one of Solomon’s proverbs: “May we never want a friend in need, nor a bottle to give him!” (223).[[14]](#endnote-14) It is, though, I suggest, Dickens’s intention to direct attention to the links between pious reflection and popular recollection. “By the middle of the nineteenth century the good officer was both a good officer and an obvious Christian” in the public mind (Hamilton 386). While Walter Gay’s creed is at the outset rather more obscure, by the end of the novel it has itself become one of The Wooden Midshipman’s familiar things. If Walter’s woodenness had initially allowed Dickens to entertain the possibility that his character might diverge substantially from his starting point in popular figures of ballads and nautical melodrama, he finally settled into those comfortable forms to which that same woodenness could be equally accommodated. The flexible ways in which Walter’s woodenness can be interpreted encourage those alternatives to be read as narrative possibilities.

Hoarse Music

It is “by means of sheer repetition [that] clichés mould people’s minds and souls in specific direction” (Zijderveld 6); perhaps this is why the waves that murmur and roll throughout *Dombey and Son* feel at once pregnant and vacant. Although their script seems, most prevalently, to be, as Garrett Stewart suggests, “a circumlocution for heaven” (198), they deliver their lines in two distinct ways. At one level, they reiterate the concerns of individual hearers. Thus Toots hears them murmuring about Florence’s loveliness and Dr. Blimber hears them muttering about getting back to work. Yet when Paul finally hears the waves clearly, it does not seem to matter much what they are actually saying: “How fast the river runs, between its green banks and the rushes, Floy! But it’s very near the sea. I hear the waves!” (240; ch 16). Such assonant trochees, all open vowels—“what the waves were always saying”—formally echo the unresolvable openness of the waves’ repetitious speech. While the waves could be saying anything, perhaps they are saying nothing. The drone of “what the waves were always saying” threatens on repeated readings (which are inevitable, given the number of times the phrase appears in the novel) to submerge the sense of the passage in favor of its sound. Given how often critics have accused Tennyson of this sort of sacrifice, perhaps it is appropriate that it is Tennyson whom Dickens quotes in “Our Watering Place” when he wishes to give voice to the sea:

The poet’s words are sometimes on its awful lips:

And the stately ships go on

To their haven under the hill;

But O for the touch of a vanish’d hand,

And the sound of a voice that is still!

Break, break, break,

At the foot of thy crags, O sea!

But the tender grace of a day that is dead

Will never come back to me.

(“Our Watering Place” 18).

The repetitions in Tennyson’s poem suggest that a person’s hand might live on in their script, or in a particular trope, or turn of phrase. “What the waves were always saying” turns out to be vague in *Dombey and Son* largely because they were always saying it; the wornness, the woodenness, of this phrase either curtails its metaphysical aspirations or turns it into a kind of prayer. Nevertheless, Dickens returns to such tropes repeatedly and makes something of that very wornness and woodenness.

In this essay, I have concentrated on the extent to which Dickens’s style can both comprehend and control the threats posed by the sea to originality and to the precision of figurative language. I have found that the sea’s clichés do not merely accommodate, but are frequently a necessary precondition to Dickens’s creativity. He liked to write by the sea.[[15]](#endnote-15) Consider the image Dickens gives of himself in a letter to Foster announcing that he had commenced work on *Dombey and Son*: “BEGAN DOMBEY! I performed the feat yesterday—only wrote the first slip—but there it is, it is a plunge straight over head and ears into the story” (*Letters* 4: 574–75). He returned with Catherine to Brighton to finish writing the novel, spending a week there near the end of February 1848, and poured particular care into the conclusion, wanting to see his “one idea” through to the end. In the chapter plans for this final number, he notes his wish to “end with the sea—carrying through, what the waves were always saying” (see Slater, *Dickens* 274). In an 1851 letter he declared that “the freshness of the sea, and the associations of the place” had set him to writing “with great vigor” (*Letters* 6: 405).

However, “freshness” was not necessarily the most important thing about the seaside to Dickens. He again went to the seaside to finish writing *David Copperfield*, this time to Broadstairs. “I am within three pages of the shore,” he wrote to Forster, “and am strangely divided, as usual in such cases, between sorrow and joy. . . . I seem to be sending some part of myself into the Shadowy World” (*Letters* 6: 195). He had already written to Macready in June that he hoped to “go down to that old image of Eternity that I love so much, and finish [*David Copperfield*] to its hoarse music” (*Letters* 6: 113). Dickens chose his words carefully. By combining an allusion to Byron’s *Childe Harold* (185, canto 4, line 1644) with a reference to his own turn of phrase in *Dombey and Son*, where “the waves are hoarse with repetition of their mystery; [and] the dust lies piled on the shore” (611), Dickens suggests that writing about the sea can just as easily form itself into enduring patterns as the waves themselves. At least in this respect, his phrase supplies its own “image of Eternity.” In all Dickens’s novels, the endeavor to revive what at first appears inanimate is a major element of the fictional method. In *Dombey and Son*, the deadness represented by the wooden midshipman, its very linguistic and imaginative non-specificity, is the crucial antecedent of its renewal, and one reason why Dickens makes it his subject.

NOTES

1. I shall capitalize *wooden midshipman* when talking about the shop, but not when talking about the figurine more broadly. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Garrett Stewart also mentions these lines with relation to *Dombey and Son*, though his focus is on the “undiscover’d country” rather than the word *bourn* (199). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I am grateful to Seamus Perry for pointing this out. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a brief but suggestive discussion of *Hamlet*’s marine idiom, see Raban 6–7. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a reading of the shipping intelligence as it appears in *Bleak House* (and other novels), see Rubery 24–46. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gissing uses the same phrase (“too painful”) as Dickens does in his “mems” for the sixth number of *Dombey and Son*, in fact referring to the scene in which Florence is banished by her father to the upstairs room, though it is in this number too that Walter departs aboard the *Son and Heir*. See “Appendix B: The Number Plans,” in Dickens, *Dombey and Son* 932. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Kennedy for more on appearances of *Robinson Crusoe* in Dickens’s novels. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For more on Dickens’s reading of Dalyell and what Forster called the popular “books of African and other travel for which he had insatiable relish”. Forster is quoted in Slater’s editorial remarks to Dickens, *“Gone Astray”* 180–81. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For Dickens and *Black-Ey’d Susan*, see Axton, “Stereotype” 301–17. Axton guessed that Dickens would have seen T. P. Cooke in the role of William during the play’s original run (312). On the nights *Black-Ey’d Susan* was not performed at the Royal Victoria, the slot was filled by Fitzball’s *The Floating Beacon!; or, The Norwegian Wreckers*, another “popular and Romantic Nautical Drama.” This line-up is documented in a playbill from 1 September 1842 in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Library, shelfmark JJ Dickens Playbills. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For more on this zealous but unnecessary “getting up” of *Black Ey’d Susan*, see Slater, *Dickens* 429. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For Brackbill’s biography, see “Hervey Brackbill (1901–1999),” *The Baltimore Sun*, 21 March 1999, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1999-03-21/entertainment/9903220279\_1\_

brack-woodlawn-evening-sun. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For more on their friendship, see Hawes. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For another detailed consideration of uses of wooden legs and other prosthetics in Victorian fiction, see O’Connor 102–47. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Altick claims these lines are from a song by Dibdin, “Friend and Bottle,” but they also circulated anonymously in the form of broadsheet ballads. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Forster’s chapter on Dickens’s “Seaside Holidays, 1848–1851,” 374–90.

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