

Richard Jefferies and the Sea

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Caspar David Friedrich, 'On the Sailing Boat'. c. 1819.
Oil on canvas, 71 x 56 cm. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

The sea played an important part in both Jefferies' life and writings. Here we survey its role in his work.

In the juvenile 'Ben Tubbs Adventures' the eponymous hero and his friend Ned run away from school and make their way to the Bristol docks, where they

board a ship that founders in mid-ocean, and, sole survivors of the wreck, are picked up by a slaver in which they cross the Atlantic to New Orleans.

The early chapters of Jefferies' début novel *The Scarlet Shawl* (1874) are set by the sea at St Leonard's in Sussex and a significant episode describes the heroine Nora taking part in a regatta. Later in the novel her true feelings about her impending marriage to a man she does not in her heart love are roused one night of full moon and spring tide when the thunder of the surf enters her bedroom.

In *Restless Human Hearts* (1875) Neville has the idea of trawling the bottom of the sea for traces of ancient civilisations. At the end of the novel he builds a Temple of Nature where he can be alone and meditate. The temple is enclosed on three sides by fir trees but is open to the south with a view across the downs to the sea.

The wicked Carlotta, who has thrown herself out of a train carriage after a close encounter with a cobra, retires to Torquay. Jefferies compares her mind to 'the dark and stormy winter sea—tossing, restless, gloomy, yet full of fierce and untameable vigour'.¹

The restlessness in the novel's title is directly related to that of the sea, which acts as its objective correlative: 'O restless, restless ocean! O restless human heart!'²

The hunter-explorer hero Noel Brandon takes a house in the New Forest that affords a prospect of the distant sea. He is happily married to Heloise but not fully contented; there is a restlessness in him; he is like a caged animal, he longs for new adventure, for new worlds to explore. He spends his time gazing at the sea from the upper window of his house or pacing a ridge on the hills from which it can be seen. Like Tennyson's Ulysses, he dreams of finding a new ocean across which he can sail into the unknown. The woman, by contrast, is content in her marriage and with nursing her baby.

At the beginning of *Wild Life in a Southern County* (1878) Jefferies reclines on the slope of an earthwork on the downs (unnamed, but Liddington Castle in actuality). In a suggestive image he compares the hissing of the wind in the grass to the faint sound of the sea:

A faint sound as of a sea heard in a dream—a sibilant 'sish, sish'—passes along outside, dying away and coming again as a fresh wave of the wind rushes through the bennets and the dry grass.³

¹ *Restless Human Hearts*, A Novel [1875] (Swindon: Petton Books, 2008), p.440.

² *ibid.*, p.445.

³ *Wild Life in a Southern County* [1879] (London, Edinburgh, Dublin and New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, n.d.), p.13.



E.H. Shepard's illustration 'The Mast Fitted,' for the Jonathan Cape edition of *Bevis* (1932), p.145.

In *Bevis* (1883) the Longpond, as Coate reservoir is called, is not only the chief setting but plays a central rôle in the story. Bevis and his friend Mark pretend it is a New Sea they have discovered. They decide to circumambulate it, which they have never done before. When they try to think of a name for the new sea

Bevis decides it is not one but several: the Blue Sea in the bay, the Yellow Sea in the muddy shallows, the Golden Sea where the open water ripples in the sunshine, and beyond, the Indian Ocean. They name the island Serendib (the old name for Ceylon) and the one adjacent, the Unknown Island.

Bevis's father teaches the boys how to swim in a calm shallow corner of the Longpond they call Fir-Tree Gulf. Only then are they allowed to rig up the blue boat in which they plan to circumnavigate the New Sea. In the swimming chapter Jefferies addresses his lady readers in an authorial aside and dilates on the pleasure of floating in water:

The sea is so buoyant, so beautiful, that let them only once feel the sense of floating, and they will never rest till they have learned.⁴

The boys rig the boat with mast, bowsprit and sails, stitched and hemmed by Mark's sister Frances.

During the mock battle of Pharsalia which Bevis and Mark fight with the local boys Bevis hides in a quarryman's punt that drifts out to sea during a gale. The leaky punt fills with bilgewater. The waves seem immense, crested with foam whipped off by the wind. Now he is really out on the New Sea a wild delight fills Bevis and he sings his favourite ballad of King Estmere, his spirit lifted by the fury of the storm. He is shipwrecked on the Unknown Island, whence he is rescued by Mark, who bravely rows out through the raging waters, guided by Bevis on the cliff top waving a firebrand.

After the battle the sailing theme is resumed. The boys step the mast, lash the bowsprit, run up the sails and rigging, and load the ship with ballast. A light but steady summer breeze blows from the north-west as Bevis steers up the New Sea. There is a smacking as the ripples kiss the bow, and sometimes a rush of bubbles; the sun shines on the swollen sails. The mast-top traces a circle against the sky. The boys sing verses from Longfellow's 'The Secret of the Sea'. Passing between Serendib and the Unknown Island they pretend they are Ulysses and his men sailing between the twin hazards of the she-monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. As they cross the head of Fir-Tree Gulf the wavelets increase in size: 'not large enough to make the boat dance, but they caused more splashing at the bow, and she heeled a little to the wind'.⁵ However, when they try to tack, they get into difficulties and run aground. They row out and try again but the same thing happens. The boat won't come round. Unbeknown to them the boat is drifting to the leeward, away from the wind.

⁴ *Bevis* [1882], Edited with an Introduction by Peter Hunt, The World's Classics (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1989), p.77.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.186.

Ignominiously they have to use the sculls. When it happens a third time, Bevis proposes trying without the jib, but still the boat won't come round. Bevis's next idea is to turn the other way, with the wind, but yet again it is no good, they lose more than ever.

When next day the same thing happens the boys are forced to own defeat and go home, where Bevis consults his encyclopaedia and reads up on ships and navigation. But though informative on the history of ships the book gives no instructions on how to sail. Comments Jefferies:

What you really want to know is never in a book, and no one can tell you. By-and-by, if you keep it steadily in memory and ever have your eyes open, you hit on it by accident. Some mere casual incident throws the solution right into your hands at an unexpected moment.⁶

So it proves. But first another false start: Mark rushes into the blue summer-house with an idea: they do not have enough ballast. So they ask Bevis's father (called 'the governor'⁷) for a bag of shot and scraps of iron. Next day they try again, but again without success. The day after that there is no wind, so they occupy themselves making an anchor.

The following day they sail again. 'Away from the trees the boat began to sail fast, and every now and then the bubbles rushed from under the bow.'⁸ Soon they are in the widest part of the lake. They recline, the boat sails itself. 'They could feel the breeze pulling at the sails, and the boat drawn along.'⁹ The boys' imagination takes wing, they are six thousand miles from land. They decide to land on the Unknown Island and find the magician with long white robes who keeps a serpent a hundred feet long in his cave.

As they near the island they drop the mainsail and run ashore some way below where Bevis had leapt off the punt during the storm. Mark explores the island while Bevis ponders the problem of tacking. He hoists the sails and steps back to survey the vessel, then goes off and draws a sailing-boat in his pocket book, returns to the shore and sketches the boat, and compares the two. Instantly he sees the difference. The mast of the boat sketched from memory is much higher, the sails are larger, the bowsprit longer, the gaff rises at a sharper angle, and the mainsail reaches right to the tiller.

That evening Mark shaves another and longer pole for the mast, and Bevis takes the sails and more canvas to Frances, who promises to do the work

⁶ *ibid.*, p.193.

⁷ From the Latin *gubernator*, meaning pilot or steersman. Jefferies refers to his father as 'the governor' in his (adult) letters to his mother.

⁸ *Bevis, op. cit.*, p.195.

⁹ *ibid.*

immediately. Next day all is finished and ready. The governor, who has been secretly watching their sailing, offers some hints. He is delighted that they have learned by themselves what they were doing wrong. The boys carry the completed sails and rigging to the boat, and fit them the same evening.

In the morning a steady south wind brings the largest waves they have yet sailed in. 'It's a proper sea,'¹⁰ says Mark, who is splashed with water breaking over the bow. The sails are wet, the tiller vibrates under Bevis's hand. Behind 'a wake of opening bubbles and foam, and the waves for a moment were smoothed by their swift progress'.¹¹ They tack easily. Bevis's skill increases. He steers between Scylla and Charybdis, and they land on the Unknown Island. They name the boat 'Pinta' after Columbus's ship, and the island New Formosa or the Magic Land.

The sailing theme then somewhat recedes, as the boys decide to build a hut with palisade by a cave they excavate in the cliff and to live on the island like savages for a fortnight. They make a matchlock that they may live off the land, by shooting and trapping. But water remains an important element, conjoined with the light, in a remarkable passage as, about to take a swim, the boys stop to look out across the New Sea one morning from New Formosa. There is not a breath of wind; the water is utterly still and mirror-like, perfectly transparent to the stones on the bottom; the atmosphere clear. Everything stands out in high definition, down to each separate grass-blade:

Southwards, looking seawards, instead of the long path of gold which wavelets strew before him, the sun beamed in the water, throwing a stream of light on their faces, not to be looked at any more than the fire which Archimedes cast from his mirrors, melting the ships.¹² All the light of summer fell on the water, from the glowing sky, from the clear air, from the sun. The island floated in light, they stood in light, light was in the shadow of the trees, and under the thick brambles; light was deep down in the water, light surrounded them as a mist might; they could see far up into the illumined sky as down into the water.

The leaves with light under them as well as above became films of transparent green, the delicate branches were delineated with finest camel's hair point, all the grass blades heaped together were apart, and their edges apparent in the thick confusion; every atom of sand upon the shore was sought out by the beams, and given an individual existence amid the inconceivable multitude which the sibyl alone counted. Nothing was lost, not a grain of sand, not the least needle of fir. The

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.204.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.205.

¹² Peter Hunt's note (p.430) reads: 'There is an apocryphal story that the Greek mathematician and inventor used a large array of mirrors to burn Roman ships during the siege of Syracuse (214-212 BC).'

light touched all things, and gave them to be.

The tip of the shimmering poplar had no more of it than the moss in the covert of the bulging roots. The swallows flew in light, the fish swam in light, the trees stood in light. Upon the shore they breathed light, and were silent till a white butterfly came fluttering over, and another white butterfly came under it in the water, when looking at it the articular released them from the power of the general.

‘Magic,’ said Bevis. ‘It’s magic.’

‘Enchantment,’ said Mark; ‘who is it does it—the old magician?’

‘I think the book says it’s Circe,’ said Bevis; ‘in the Ulysses book, I mean. It’s deep enough to dive here.’¹³

The boys swim out to Serendib. The water seems not to resist them. Bevis is filled with ‘the joy of life itself’ and lost in a veritable ‘ecstasy of motion’.¹⁴

The novel ends on a visionary note. The sky to the south ‘burned with stars,’ the north wind roars in the great oak ‘like the thunder of the sea’.

Large Sirius flashed; vast Orion strode the sky, lording the heavens with his sword.¹⁵

Listening to the wind’s oceanic roar the boys determine to go to ‘the real great sea’:

‘I should like to go to the real great sea like the wind,’ said Mark.

‘We *must* go to the great sea,’ said Bevis. ‘Look at Orion!’

The wind went seawards, and the stars are always over the ocean.¹⁶

The sea plays a major part in ‘The Breeze on Beachy Head,’ the final essay in *Nature Near London* (1883). The essay was almost certainly written during a seven-week holiday Jefferies, then resident in Surbiton, took with his wife and young son at Eastbourne in and about September 1880. The opening paragraphs associate the sea with ideas of timelessness; infinite possibility; mystery and the unknown; hope; and expansion of the soul and mind. The widening of physical space elicits a corresponding increase in the level of consciousness. There is a sense of freedom, of release.

The opening sentence refers to the Greek idea of the sea as the god Okeanos, an endlessly flowing stream encircling the earth.

¹³ *Bevis*, pp.265-6.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.267.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.424.

¹⁶ *ibid.* Hunt’s note (p.432) cites the final stanza of Longfellow’s ‘The Secret of the Sea’:

Till my soul is full of longing
For the secret of the sea,
And the heart of the great ocean
Sends a thrilling pulse through me.

The waves coming round the promontory before the west wind still give the idea of a flowing stream, as they did in Homer's days.¹⁷

Jefferies stands on the shore beneath the massive chalk cliff and looks directly out to sea, which appears as a green wall or raised mound

higher than the spot where I stand... as if it could burst in and occupy the space up to the foot of the cliff in a moment. It will not do so, I know; but there is an infinite possibility about the sea; it may do what it is not recorded to have done. It is not to be ordered, it may overleap the bounds human observation has fixed for it. It has a potency unfathomable. There is still something in it not quite grasped and understood—something still to be discovered—a mystery.¹⁷

The passage merits reflection, for it relates the sea to the mystery of existence itself, and to the infinite depth and potential of the mind. It is a commonplace to say that the human mind is finite, God infinite, which is why the former cannot embrace the latter, but with the mental expansion engendered by the spectacle of open sea and sky union is possible. The sea stands for the Absolute in its breadth and depth. The untrammelled eye shoots like an arrow across it to the horizon, the rim of the globe, and thence into the infinite space beyond.

Jefferies is lulled by the rhythmic motion of the waves. There follows one of the most remarkable and suggestive passages in all his work. The echo of the Allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic* is discernible but unobtrusive. Jefferies gives new life to the allegory, which, with the reference to 'a great stone' closing the cave entrance, is allied to another story, that of Christ's burial in the tomb. The distinction between inner and outer worlds dissolves. The physical world becomes a giant symbol of mental process: here of liberation, of stepping out from the shadow of the prison-house into the brilliant light of sea, shore and sky. The effect is one of revelation, literally of a curtain or veil being swept aside or drawn back. The language has a religious solemnity and simplicity:

A faith of expectancy, a sense that something may drift up from the unknown, a large belief in the unseen resources of the endless space out yonder, soothes the mind with dreamy hope.

The little rules and little experiences, all the petty ways of narrow life, are shut off behind by the ponderous and impassable cliff; as if we had dwelt in the dim light of a cave, but coming out at last to look at the sun, a great stone had fallen and closed the entrance, so that there was no return to the shadow. The impassable precipice shuts off our former selves of yesterday, forcing us to look out over the sea only, or up to the deeper heaven.

These breadths draw out the soul; we feel that we have wider thoughts than we knew; the soul has been living, as it were, in a nutshell, all unaware of its own

¹⁷ *Nature Near London* [1883] (London: Chatto & Windus, 1901), p.232.

power, and now suddenly finds freedom in the sun and the sky. Straight, as if sawn down from turf to beach, the cliff shuts off the human world, for the sea knows no time and no era; you cannot tell what century it is from the face of the sea. A Roman trireme suddenly rounding the white edge-line of chalk, borne on wind and oar from the Isle of Wight towards the gray castle at Pevensey (already old in olden days), would not seem strange. What wonder could surprise us coming from the wonderful sea?¹⁸

The phrase on the timelessness of the sea recalls the oft-quoted passage in Thomas Hardy's description of Egdon Heath in the opening chapter of *The Return of the Native* (1878): Hardy takes the heath as a symbol of permanence in a fast-changing world and as such contrasts it with the ever-changing sea:

The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim. Who can say of a particular sea that it is old? Distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year, in a day, or in an hour. The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained.¹⁹

It is not clear whether Jefferies had read Hardy's novel, or had the passage in mind when he wrote his description of the sea in 'The Breeze on Beachy Head'. But the two passages are not finally contradictory: each writer has merely taken a different symbol of timelessness from nature to contrast with the world of humanity, of civilization. For Jefferies the sea also and more importantly becomes a symbol of spiritual liberation. There is a similar sense of release from prison, of moving out from a small constricting house into one much larger, at the beginning of *The Story of My Heart*. In both cases the reader cannot but be reminded of the opening lines of 'The Prelude,' where Wordsworth records his joyous sense of escape from bondage, of the opening up of horizons, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.

O there is blessing in this gentle breeze
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky: it beats against my cheek,
And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.
O welcome messenger! O welcome friend!
A captive greets thee, coming from a house
Of bondage, from yon city's walls set free,
A prison where he has been long immured.
Now I am free, enfranchised and at large,
May fix my habitation where I will...
The earth is all before me. With a heart

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.233.

¹⁹ Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* [1878] (London: Pocket Edition, Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1914), p.7.

Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about; and should the guide I choose
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way.²⁰

The poet does not merely escape from the city: he recovers his own true self:

I breathe again!
Trances of thought and mountings of the mind
Come fast upon me: it is shaken off,
That burden of my own unnatural self,
The heavy weight of many a weary day
Not mine, and such as were not made for me.²¹

There is a similar sense of a return to the writer's true self at the beginning of both 'The Breeze on Beachy Head' and *The Story of My Heart*. The sea acts as the catalyst in the essay; the climbing of a green hill in the autobiography. It was near the sea, by Pevensey castle, that Jefferies made the first notes for the latter, and in several places, as well as by its heightened language, 'The Breeze on Beachy Head' foreshadows that cornerstone work, in which the sea again plays a key role, acting as leitmotif for the silent waves of passion animating the whole.

In the autobiography the sea, together with earth, sun, sky and air, was one of the elements to which in his 'whirlwind of passion'²² on Liddington Hill Jefferies 'spoke in his soul'.²³ Wiltshire is a landlocked county yet he prayed to 'the distant sea far beyond sight':

though so far, in my mind I saw it, green at the rim of the earth and blue in deeper ocean; I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory.²⁴

The sea, sixty miles away, seemed 'but just yonder at the edge' and inspired a vision of the tropics:

Travelling in an instant across the distant sea, I saw as if with actual vision the palms and coconut trees, the bamboos of India, and the cedars of the extreme south. Like a lake with islands the ocean lay before me, as clear and vivid as the plain beneath in the midst of the amphitheatre of hills.²⁵

²⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, A Parallel Text, Edited by J.C. Maxwell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 1805–6 version, p.34, lines 1–10, 15–19.

²¹ *ibid.*, lines 19–25.

²² *The Story of My Heart*, *My Autobiography* [1883] (London: Quartet Books, 1979), p.33. In his 'Notes on *The Story of My Heart*' (April 1982) W.J. Keith finds in the phrase 'an echo of *Hamlet*, III, ii, 8' ('for in the very torrent, tempest, and—as I may say—whirlwind of passion': *Hamlet* to the Players).

²³ *ibid.*, p.30.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.31.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.33.

The sea is one of the elements that help him lose his sense of separateness and become 'absorbed into the being or existence of the universe,' so that he 'came to seem to be a part of the whole'.²⁵

All this carries the more force and conviction in that Jefferies, in plain language of great freshness and clarity, is describing union with the divine, the goal of mystics through the ages, without apparently being aware that he is part of a great tradition of such seekers.

In a secluded valley in the hills 'silent and solitary'²⁶ Jefferies saw back through space to prehistoric time.

The immense time lifted me like a wave rolling under a boat; my mind seemed to raise itself as the swell of the cycles came; it felt strong with the power of the ages.²⁷

When life brought intense suffering there came the bitter question: 'Is it not better to leap into the sea?'²⁸

Later he came to the coast (probably a reference to the aforementioned holiday at Eastbourne in the summer of 1880) where (again, probably at Beachy Head)

I found a deep hollow on the side of a great hill, a green concave opening to the sea, where I could rest and think in perfect quiet. Behind me were furze bushes dried by the heat; immediately in front dropped the steep descent of the bowl-like hollow which received and brought up to me the faint sound of the summer waves. Yonder lay the immense plain of sea, the palest green under the continued sunshine, as though the heat had evaporated the colour from it; there was no distinct horizon, a heat-mist inclosed it and looked farther away than the horizon would have done. Silence and sunshine, sea and hill gradually brought my mind into the condition of intense prayer. Day after day, for hours at a time, I came there, my soul-desire always the same.²⁹

Here one evening Jefferies formulated what he called his Lyra prayer, because 'the bright white star'²⁹ in the constellation was then shining almost at the zenith over him. The prayer fell into three parts. He wished to 'do or find something to exalt the soul, something to enable it to live its own life, a more powerful existence now':³⁰

Of the mind, the inner consciousness, the soul, my prayer desired that I might discover a mode of life for it, so that it might not only conceive of such a life, but

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.38.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.39.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p.42.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p.43.

³⁰ *ibid.*, pp.43-4.

actually enjoy it on the earth. I wished to search out a new and higher set of ideas on which the mind should work. The simile of a new book of the soul is the nearest to convey the meaning—a book drawn from the present and future, not the past. Instead of a set of ideas based on tradition, let me give the mind a new thought, drawn straight from the wondrous present, direct this very hour.³¹

The other two parts of the prayer were the desire to enable the body to ‘enjoy more pleasure, longer life, and suffer less pain’.³² The last was ‘to furnish the soul with the means of executing its will, of carrying thought into action’.³³

Soon afterwards he came to Pevensey, where the ancient stone wall swept him back 1700 years to the world of ancient Rome:

The grey stones, the thin red bricks laid by those whose eyes had seen Caesar’s Rome, lifted me out of the grasp of house-life, of modern civilization, of those minutiae which occupy the moment. The grey stone made me feel as if I had existed from then till now, so strongly did I enter into and see my own life as if reflected. My own existence was focussed back on me; I saw its joy, its unhappiness, its birth, its death, its possibilities among the infinite, above all its yearning Question. Why? Seeing it thus clearly, and lifted out of the moment by the force of seventeen centuries, I recognized the full mystery and the depth of things in the roots of the dry grass on the wall, in the green sea flowing near. Is there anything I can do? The mystery and the possibilities are not in the roots of the grass, nor is the depth of things in the sea; they are in my existence, in my soul. The marvel of existence, almost the terror of it, was flung on me with crushing force by the sea, the sun shining, the distant hills. With all their ponderous weight they made me feel myself: all the time, all the centuries made me feel myself this moment a hundred-fold.³³

There is little or no mention of the sea in the following chapter but the ideas there expressed are so important they must be rehearsed to feel the full impact of the sea metaphor when resumed. Recalling how he was able to slip back in an instant through two thousand years and feel the spirit of a prehistoric warrior buried in a tumulus on the Wiltshire downs as something real, existent, alive, Jefferies states his belief in the immortality of the soul, while admitting there is no knowing ‘in the sense of written reasons’ whether the soul lives on or not. Immortality is natural, extinction ‘supernatural, requiring a miracle’.³⁴ He declares his disbelief in time: ‘It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp.45–6.

³² *ibid.*, p.44.

³³ *ibid.*, p.46.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p.49.

Nothing has to come; it is now.’³⁵ Time is agreed on for artificial purposes, for convenience, but in reality there is no such thing. We live in an eternal present, a continuous Now:

Now is eternity, now is the immortal life. Here this moment, by this tumult, on earth, now; I exist in it. The years, the centuries, the cycles are absolutely nothing; it is only a moment since this tumult was raised; in a thousand years more it will still be only a moment. To the soul there is no past and no future; all is and will be ever, in now.³⁵

He dips his hand in the waters of a brook and feels the press of water streaming against his hand: the waters run past but his hand remains still. Similarly his soul cannot be dipped in time. ‘Time has never existed, and never will.’³⁶ Matter is what is beyond understanding, matter the impenetrable mystery. Soul, mind, thought understands itself and is conscious. Miracles, which he defines as ‘soul-work’,³⁷ in principle are natural, because of the soul’s limitless power, and he wonders they do not happen more often.

He concentrates his thought on himself, shuts out all outward appearances, and directs his mind inwards on himself. Recognizing his ‘I’ he feels

on the margin of a life unknown, very near, almost touching it: on the verge of powers which if I could grasp would give me an immense breadth of existence, an ability to execute what I now only conceive; most probably of far more than that.³⁸

From the time of the Caveman when he stood at the mouth of his cavern face to face with nature and the unknown, man in the twelve thousand years of his history has discovered only three things concerning the inner consciousness: the existence of the soul, immortality, and deity. Jefferies wishes to wrest a Fourth Idea from the unknown. He is certain there are more ideas yet to be found. His Fourth Idea is just that, the idea that there exists a nexus of ideas of which nothing is yet known, a whole cosmos of thought:

There is an immense ocean over which the mind can sail, upon which the vessel of thought has not yet been launched. I hope to launch it. The mind of so many thousand years has worked round and round inside the circle of these three ideas as a boat on an inland lake. Let us haul it over the belt of land, launch of the ocean, and sail outwards.

There is so much beyond all that has ever been imagined. As I write these words, in the very moment, I feel that the whole air, the sunshine out yonder lighting up the ploughed earth, the distant sky, the circumambient ether, and that

³⁵ *ibid.*, p.51.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.52.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p.53.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p.54.

far space, is full of soul-secrets, soul-life, things outside the experience of all the ages. The fact of my own existence as I write, as I exist at this second, is so marvellous, so miracle-like, strange, and supernatural to me, that I unhesitatingly conclude I am always on the margin of life illimitable, and that there are higher conditions than existence. Everything around is supernatural; everything so full of unexplained meaning.³⁹

Jefferies here directly links the sea to his illumination; it is the figure by which he illustrates the vast number of ideas as yet beyond the ken of man. He sees the mind as a ship or boat that he, like a new Odysseus, proposes to launch on the limitless sea of the unknown.

Why was the sea so important to Jefferies? Because it was the objective correlative of his highly emotional, feeling nature. Most things came to Jefferies through his feelings. He was exquisitely sensitive, intensely intuitive, with the capacity to see beneath the surface. The state he describes in the second paragraph is what Gurdjieff and Ouspensky termed *self-remembrance*. For the majority of the time most of us live in a waking sleep. We think we are fully conscious but in fact we are not, we are sleepwalking. We resemble the prisoners in Plato's cave, who mistake shadows for reality. Occasionally someone escapes from the cave, beholds the sun and realises the true state of affairs, the real source of light. Such a person was Jefferies. He had realised the fact of his own existence: what it meant to be alive, to be conscious, in the full sense of the word. He had realised himself. He had felt the miracle of existence, the mystery of consciousness. What is even more remarkable, however, was his ability to communicate that feeling to the reader through the medium of words. Allied to Jefferies' extreme sensitivity was the clarity of his mind, of his thought. Such a combination is extremely rare.

The book is replete with sea imagery. In a figure recalling that at the beginning of *Wild Life in a Southern County* Jefferies likens the sound of the air rippling in the grass to 'the faint ripple of the summer sea sounding in the hollow of the ear'.⁴⁰ He presents the sea in its terrible aspect as well as benign. 'It offers us salt water which we cannot drink.'⁴¹ He observes that those who have been in an open boat at sea without water have died in misery. Again,

The sea and the fresh water alike make no effort to uphold him [man] if his vessel founders; he casts up his arms in vain, they come to their level over his head, filling the spot his body occupied.⁴¹

In a powerful passage Jefferies illustrates the absolute indifference of nature to

³⁹ *ibid.*, pp.56-7.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.59.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.61.

man, its positively anti-human character, by the grotesque creatures dredged up from the abyssal depths of the sea:

How extraordinary, strange, and incomprehensible are the creatures captured out of the depths of the sea! The distorted fishes; the ghastly cuttles; the hideous eel-like shapes; the crawling shell-encrusted things; the centipede-like beings; monstrous forms, to see which gives a shock to the brain. They shock the mind because they exhibit an absence of design. There is no idea in them.

They have no shape, form, grace, or purpose; they call up a vague sense of chaos, chaos which the mind revolts from. It would be a relief to the thought if they ceased to be, and utterly disappeared from the sea. They are not inimical of intent towards man, not even the shark; but there the shark is, and that is enough. These miserably hideous things of the sea are not anti-human in the sense of persecution, they are outside, they are ultra and beyond. It is like looking into chaos, and it is vivid because these creatures, interred alive a hundred fathoms deep, are seldom seen; so that the mind sees them as if only that moment they had come into existence. Use has not habituated it to them, so that their anti-human character is at once apparent, and stares at us with glassy eye.⁴²

Even in London he was not to be distracted and thought his old thoughts. The city indeed intensified them by force of contrast. 'Nature was deepened by the crowds and foot-worn stones.' Standing on London Bridge amid the dust and jostling crowds, he had a moment of illumination directly connected with sun and sea:

I was much in London, and engagements completed, I wandered about in the same way as in the woods of former days. From the stone bridges I looked down on the river; the gritty dust, the straws that lie on the bridges, flew up and whirled round with every gust from the flowing tide; gritty dust that settles in the nostrils and on the lips, the very residuum of all that is repulsive in the greatest city of the world. The noise of the traffic and the constant pressure from the crowds passing, their incessant and disjointed talk, could not distract me. One moment at least I had, a moment when I thought of the push of the great sea forcing the water to flow under the feet of these crowds, the distant sea strong and splendid; when I saw the sunlight gleam on the tidal wavelets; when I felt the wind, and was conscious of the earth, the sea, the sun, the air, the immense forces working on, while the city hummed by the river. Nature was deepened by the crowds and foot-worn stones. If the tide had ebbed, and the masts of the vessels were tilted as the hulls rested on the shelving mud, still even the blackened mud did not prevent me seeing the water as water flowing to the sea. The sea had drawn down, and the wavelets washing the strand here as they hastened were running the faster to it. Eastwards from London Bridge the river raced to the ocean.

The bright morning sun of summer heated the eastern parapet of London

⁴² *ibid.*, pp.62-3.

Bridge; I stayed in the recess to acknowledge it. The smooth water was a broad sheen of light, the built-up river flowed calm and silent by a thousand doors, rippling only where the stream chafed against a chain. Red pennants drooped, gilded vanes gleamed on polished masts, black-pitched hulls glistened like a black rook's feathers in sunlight; the clear air cut out the forward angles of the warehouses, the shadowed wharves were quiet in shadows that carried light; far down the ships that were hauling out moved in repose, and with the stream floated away into the summer mist. There was a faint blue colour in the air hovering between the built-up banks, against the lit walls, in the hollows of the houses. The swallows wheeled and climbed, twittered and glided downwards. Burning on, the great sun stood in the sky, heating the parapet glowing steadfastly upon me as when I rested in the narrow valley grooved out in prehistoric times. Burning on steadfast, and ever present as my thought. Lighting the broad river, the broad walls; lighting the least speck of dust; lighting the great heaven; gleaming on my finger-nail. The fixed point of day—the sun. I was intensely conscious of it; I felt it; I felt the presence of the immense powers of the universe; I felt out into the depths of the ether. So intensely conscious of the sun, the sky, the limitless space, I felt too in the midst of eternity then, in the midst of the supernatural, among the immortal, and the greatness of the material realized the spirit. By these I saw my soul; by these I knew the supernatural to be more intensely real than the sun. I touched the supernatural, the immortal, there that moment.⁴³

Jefferies speaks of having 'a sea-thirst' for beauty that is 'momentarily gratified' by a picture in the National Gallery:

For I thirst with all the thirst of the salt sea, and the sun-heated sands dry for the tide, with all the sea I thirst for beauty. And I know full well that one lifetime, however long, cannot fill my heart. My throat and tongue and whole body have often been parched and feverish dry with this measureless thirst, and again moist to the fingers' ends like a sappy bough. It burns in me as the sun burns in the sky.⁴⁴

In the heart of the City of London Jefferies stands on the apex of the triangle of pavement outside the Royal Exchange (between Threadneedle Street and Cornhill) and watches the hurrying crowds and traffic. Here stand the Bank of England and the Mansion House, here several streets converge: it is like the hub of a wheel with the streets so many spokes radiating from it. In Jefferies' day the spot was in effect the centre of the world, London then the world capital, and the space its nub. Jefferies calls it the 'vortex and whirlpool, the centre of human life today on the earth'.⁴⁵ He describes the spectacle in imagery drawn from river and sea:

⁴³ *ibid.*, pp.73–4.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp.74–5.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p.79.

Now the tide rises and now it sinks, but the flow of these rivers always continues. Here it seethes and whirls, not for an hour only, but for all present time, hour by hour, day by day, year by year.⁴⁵

Jefferies remarks the blindness with which each particle in the mass pursues its own end, 'indifferent to all else but itself'. This is naked humanity. He likens the dynamic force animating the press of people to 'the force that lifts the tides and sends the clouds onwards'.⁴⁵ He says they have no alternative, they are driven by the force of accumulated circumstances:

they cannot stay, they must go, their necks are in the slave's ring, they are beaten like seaweed against the solid wall of fact.⁴⁶

He ponders the futility, the vanity, of their labours, the absence of sunshine and a flower in their lives, for they are blind to the sun. He asks if there is any creed or philosophy that will give each separate person sunshine and a flower, not in some spirit-land but in its own existence here and now. On the evidence of the past he concludes there is none. Yet he states his unquenchable belief that there is something to be found 'to shape this million-handed labour to an end and outcome, leaving accumulated sunshine and flowers to those who shall succeed'.⁴⁷ This something 'must be dragged forth by might from the immense forces of the universe'.⁴⁷ However, to do that, the mind must acknowledge its ignorance, give up the conceit that it is wiser than past ages, erase all past and present knowledge, and start anew:

Go straight to the sun, the immense forces of the universe, to the Entity unknown; go higher than a god; deeper than prayer; and open a new day.⁴⁷

Jefferies goes on to relate how he made a daily pilgrimage from his home near London to an aspen by a brook, a walk of a mile and a quarter that enabled him to escape the narrowness of outlook bred by the routine of work and house-life. 'By my daily pilgrimage, I escaped from it back to the sun'.⁴⁸ There fell away from his mind, like autumn leaves, 'the last traces and relics of superstitions and traditions acquired compulsorily in childhood'.⁴⁸ There fell away, too, personal bias and prejudice; modern science and its discoveries lost their glamour. At the same time his belief increased. 'My thought widened to receive the idea of something beyond all previous ideas'.⁴⁹

After recalling a moment of exaltation, of 'ecstasy of soul',⁴⁹ experienced one midsummer day in a wheatfield, and stating that his memories 'cannot be

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p.80.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.83.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p.84.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.85.

placed in exact chronological order,' ⁵⁰ Jefferies records a time when he suffered a sense of 'moral drought,' of which his account recalls the almost identical condition described in the opening pages. 'Some instinctive feeling uncontrollable drove me to the sea'. Jefferies relates the journey he made, and the overwhelming feelings that came to him as he opened his heart and prayed on the sea-shore. The passage is one of the high-water marks of the book, on a par with the initial description of the ascent of Liddington Hill and that of the sunrise witnessed from London Bridge; it deserves to be quoted in full, so moving is it.

The precise date of the journey is not certain, but on the basis of an earlier draft of the autobiography, which he dates to 1882, S.J. Looker⁵¹ says that the pilgrimage was to Worthing and took place when Jefferies was living at Surbiton. The 'too-long- continued labour' may refer to the remarkable sustained outpouring of creative energy during the years 1877-1880 that resulted in the writing of *The Gamekeeper at Home* and its successors.

There was a time when a weary restlessness came upon me, perhaps from too-long-continued labour. It was like a drought—a moral drought—as if I had been absent for many years from the sources of life and hope. The inner nature was faint, all was dry and tasteless; I was weary for the pure, fresh springs of thought. Some instinctive feeling uncontrollable drove me to the sea; I was so under its influence that I could not arrange the journey so as to get the longest day. I merely started, and of course had to wait and endure much inconvenience. To get to the sea at some quiet spot was my one thought; to do so I had to travel farther, and from want of prearrangement it was between two and three in the afternoon before I reached the end of my journey. Even then, being too much preoccupied to inquire the way, I missed the road and had to walk a long distance before coming to the shore. But I found the sea at last; I walked beside it in a trance away from the houses out into the wheat. The ripe corn stood up to the beach, the waves on one side of the shingle, and the yellow wheat on the other.

There, alone, I went down to the sea. I stood where the foam came to my feet, and looked out over the sunlit waters. The great earth bearing the richness of the harvest, and its hills golden with corn, was at my back; its strength and firmness under me. The great sun shone above, the wide sea was before me, the wind came sweet and strong from the waves. The life of the earth and the sea, the glow of the sun filled me; I touched the surge with my hand, I lifted my face to the sun, I opened my lips to the wind. I prayed aloud in the roar of the waves—my soul was as strong as the sea and prayed with the sea's might. Give me fullness of life like to

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.86.

⁵¹ *The Story of My Heart*, Edited with the first draft of the Author's Manuscript and an Introduction and Notes by Samuel J. Looker (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1947), p.135. The pilgrimage to the sea is related on pp.168-9.

the sea and the sun, to the earth and the air; give me fullness of physical life, mind equal and beyond their fullness; give me a greatness and perfection of soul higher than all things; give me my inexpressible desire which swells in me like a tide—give it to me with all the force of the sea.

Then I rested, sitting by the wheat; the bank of beach was between me and the sea, but the waves beat against it; the sea was there, the sea was present and at hand. By the dry wheat I rested, I did not think, I was inhaling the richness of the sea, all the strength and depth of meaning of the sea and earth came to me again. I rubbed out some of the wheat in my hands, I took up a piece of clod and crumbled it in my fingers—it was a joy to touch it—I held my hand so that I could see the sunlight gleam on the slightly moist surface of the skin. The earth and sun were to me like my flesh and blood, and the air of the sea life.

With all the greater existence I drew from them I prayed for a bodily life equal to it, for a soul-life beyond my thought, for my inexpressible desire of more than I could shape even into idea. There was something higher than idea, invisible to thought as air to the eye; give me bodily life equal in fullness to the strength of earth, and sun, and sea; give me the soul-life of my desire. Once more I went down to the sea, touched it, and said farewell. So deep was the inhalation of this life that day, that it seemed to remain in me for years. This was a real pilgrimage.⁵²

The passage has an elemental, universal quality. Every reader will recognize Jefferies' desire to be by the sea. Every summer millions across the globe experience a similar urge and there is a mass migration to the coast. Why the sea, what is the reason for its magnetic power? Because it is the source, the *fons et origo*; and man, *homo sapiens*, is so constituted that he feels a periodic need to return to the source of his being, to go back to where he came from.

The sea is the primeval soup where life began on planet Earth, from where man's ancestors in remotest time first emerged and crawled upon the land. Traces of our marine origin survive in the gills of the foetus swimming in the amniotic sea of the womb, in the vestigial webs between the fingers of our hands and the toes of our feet, in the salt tears we shed. We seem to need, for some deep psychological reason, periodically to return to the source. The sea is perhaps the best manifestation of the Absolute here on earth.⁵³

In the passage quoted Jefferies speaks of feeling 'absent for many years from the sources of life and hope,' of feeling 'weary for the pure, fresh springs of thought'. The same instinct that drove him, when living in Wiltshire, to the hills, to drink the pure water of a secluded spring in the cup of his hand, now drives him to another, more universal source or spring: the sea. He touches it in

⁵² *The Story of My Heart*, op. cit., pp.86-7.

⁵³ 'I am the source of all. From Me everything evolves. Thus thinking, the wise worship Me with unchanging devotion.' (*Bhagavad Gītā*, Chapter 10, verse 8)

reverent token of greeting and farewell. The important thing is not what Jefferies worships: it is the purity of his heart, the strength and sincerity of his prayer, his feeling, his aspiration.

The reader cannot but remark the prevalence of water imagery in Jefferies' work. Water acts as a leitmotif, a continuous thread running through both *oeuvre* and life. He wrote, 'As the brook ran winding through the meadow, so one thought ran winding through my days'.⁵⁴ In the words of a later writer, 'The river is within us, the sea is all about us'.⁵⁵ The river runs towards the sea and debouches into it. There was a river inside Jefferies' veins that flowed strongly, imperiously, towards the sea. Water, as said before, represents his feeling, sensitive nature, and explains his fascination with the past, with memory, and the symbolic mother figures (Mother Earth, Demeter goddess of the corn, the sea (*mer, mère*)) at the heart of his work. 'He who goes to the hills searches for the mother' (Hindu proverb).

Immediately after the account of the pilgrimage to the sea Jefferies says that in course of time he came to live by it. Although in the autobiography he generally avoids naming places or giving details of his personal life, we know this refers to his leaving Surbiton and moving to West Brighton after his illness of 1882 and the series of four painful operations he underwent at the end of that year for an anal fistula tubercular in origin. The circumstances, he says, were different, and he no longer cared whether he was alone or not. Nothing could disturb his inner vision:

By the sea, aware of the sun overhead, and the blue heaven, I feel that there is nothing between me and space. This is the verge of a gulf, and a tangent from my feet goes straight unchecked into the unknown. It is the edge of the abyss as much as if the earth were cut away in a sheer fall of eight thousand miles to the sky beneath, thence a hollow to the stars. Looking straight out is looking straight down; the eye-glance gradually departs from the sea-level, and, rising as that falls, enters the hollow of heaven. It is gazing along the face of a vast precipice into the hollow space which is nameless.⁵⁶

This leads into the climax of the chapter:

There mystery has been placed, but realizing the vast hollow yonder makes me feel that the mystery is here. I, who am here on the verge, standing on the margin of the sky, am in the mystery itself. If I let my eye look back upon me from the extreme opposite of heaven, then this spot where I stand is in the centre of the

⁵⁴ *The Story of My Heart*, *op. cit.*, p.40.

⁵⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages,' line 16, in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1959 paperback edition).

⁵⁶ *The Story of My Heart*, *op. cit.*, p.88.

hollow. Alone with the sea and sky, I presently feel all the depth and wonder of the unknown come back surging up around, and touching me as the foam runs to my feet. I am in it now, not tomorrow, this moment; I cannot escape from it. Though I may deceive myself with labour, yet still I am in it; in sleep too. There is no escape from this immensity.

Feeling this by the sea, under the sun, my life enlarges and quickens, striving to take to itself the largeness of the heaven. The frame cannot expand, but the soul is able to stand before it. No giant's body could be in proportion to the earth, but a little spirit is equal to the entire cosmos, to earth and ocean, sun and star-hollow. These are but a few acres to it. Were the cosmos twice as wide, the soul could run over it, and return to itself in a time so small, no measure exists to mete it. Therefore, I think the soul may sometimes find out an existence as superior as my mind is to the dead chalk cliff.

With the great sun burning over the foam-flaked sea, roofed with heaven—aware of myself, a consciousness forced on me by these things—I feel that thought must yet grow larger and correspond in magnitude of conception to these. But these cannot content me, these Titanic things of sea, and sun, and profundity; I feel that my thought is stronger than they are. I burn life like a torch. The hot light shot back from the sea scorches my cheek—my life is burning in me. The soul throbs like the sea for a larger life. No thought which I have ever had has satisfied my soul.⁵⁷

Turning from thought and soul to body, Jefferies descants among other physical pleasures on those of swimming, rowing and sailing:

Splendid it is to feel the boat rise to the roller, or forced through by the sail to shear the foam aside like a share; splendid to undulate as the chest lies on the wave, swimming, the brimming ocean round: then I know and feel its deep strong tide, its immense fullness, and the sun glowing over.⁵⁸

Sun, sea, earth, and stars are his 'natural companions'; he wants to be always by these. House-life, useless labour, wealth, power, place, are nothing to him. He wishes to be in himself himself fully.

Sun and sea are the twin presiding deities of the book, which closes with them. The sea stands both for the infinity of ideas unknown and for the boundless potential of man. Jefferies feels he has only begun 'to realize the immensity of thought which lies outside the knowledge of the senses' ⁵⁹:

Still, on the hills and by the seashore, I seek and pray deeper than ever. The sun burns southwards over the sea and before the wave runs its shadow, constantly slipping on the advancing slope till it curls and covers its dark image at the shore.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, pp.88-9.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.93.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p.134.

Over the rim of the horizon waves are flowing as high and wide as those that break upon the beach. These that come to me and beat the trembling shore are like the thoughts that have been known so long; like the ancient, iterated, and reiterated thoughts that have broken on the strand of mind for thousands of years. Beyond and over the horizon I feel that there are other waves of ideas unknown to me, flowing as the stream of ocean flows. Knowledge of facts is limitless: they lie at my feet innumerable like the countless pebbles; knowledge of thought so circumscribed! Ever the same thoughts come that have been written down centuries and centuries.

Let me launch forth and sail over the rim of the sea yonder, and when another rim arises over that, and again and onwards into an ever-widening ocean of idea and life. For with all the strength of the wave, and its succeeding wave, the depth and race of the tide, the clear definition of the sky; with all the subtle power of the great sea, there rises an equal desire. Give me life strong and full as the brimming ocean; give me thoughts wide as its plain; give me a soul beyond these. Sweet is the bitter sea by the shore where the faint blue pebbles are lapped by the green-grey wave, where the wind-quivering foam is loth to leave the lashed stone. Sweet is the bitter sea, and the clear green in which the gaze seeks the soul, looking through the glass into itself. The sea thinks for me as I listen and ponder; the sea thinks, and every boom of the wave repeats my prayer.

Sometimes I stay on the wet sands as the tide rises, listening to the rush of the lines of foam in layer upon layer; the wash swells and circles about my feet, I lave my hands in it, I lift a little in my hollowed palm, I take the life of the sea to me. My soul rising to the immensity utters its desire-prayer with all the strength of the sea. Or, again, the full stream of ocean beats upon the shore, and the rich wind feeds the heart, the sun burns brightly; the sense of soul-life burns in me like a torch.⁶⁰

The sea does not play a prominent role in *The Dewy Morn* (1884). In Chapter XLI, which Thomas calls ‘one of the richest pastoral pictures in English,’⁶¹ the August thunder—‘the boom of an immense breaker on the shore of heaven’⁶²—booms far out at sea while the reapers, backs bowed, labour under the sun at the corn in a field, and the lovers Felise and Martial lie in the shadow of a beech and look out upon the land. Felise’s love has made the earth divine. The invisible becomes visible both to her senses and to her heart, which opens to ‘the deeper knowledge shut and closed except to love’.⁶³ For Martial Felise personifies the ideal beauty he has found in Greek sculpture and the works of Plato. Asks Jefferies:

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, pp.134-6.

⁶¹ Thomas, *op cit.*, p.222.

⁶² *The Dewy Morn, A Novel* [1884] (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1900), p.286.

⁶³ *ibid.*, p.291.

You have seen the ships upon the sea; they sail hither and thither thousands of miles. Do they find aught equal to love? Can they bring back precious gems to rival it from the rich south? ⁶⁴

To call *After London* (1885) a futurist or science fiction novel is somewhat misleading because although set in the future it presents an England which has returned to a state of barbarism. The subtitle is 'Wild England'. Nature in all her rankness has taken over the countryside; society reverted to a semi-feudal state of petty kingdoms and local warlords.

After London is in many ways a reprise of *Bevis*, and in it the sea plays a similarly central role. Once again Coate Reservoir is imaginatively transformed into a sea. Central southern England has been inundated by a great lake, an inland freshwater sea caused by a damming of the Severn and Thames estuaries. The eastern extremity narrows to form a vast stagnant swamp covering the site of London, from which exhales a noxious vapour, fatal to anyone who comes into contact with it.

Jefferies stresses the beauty of the sea, and contrasts it with the swamp, which is equated with death:

A beautiful sea it is, clear as crystal, exquisite to drink, abounding with fishes of every kind, and adorned with green islands. There is nothing more lovely in the world than when, upon a calm evening, the sun goes down across the level and gleaming water, where it is so wide that the eye can but just distinguish a low and dark cloud, as it were, resting upon the horizon, or perhaps, looking lengthways, cannot distinguish any ending to the expanse. Sometimes it is blue, reflecting the noonday sky; sometimes white from the clouds; again green and dark as the wind rises and the waves roll. ⁶⁵

He returns to the idea adumbrated in *Restless Human Hearts*, of lost cities buried beneath the sea:

sometimes the anchors bring up even now fragments of rusty iron and old metal, or black beams of timber. ⁶⁵

However, the narrator sorrowfully observes that the beautiful expanse of water has so often 'proved only the easiest mode of bringing the miseries of war to the doors of the unoffending!' ⁶⁶

Yet men are never weary of sailing to and fro upon it, and most of the cities of the present time are upon its shore. And in the evening we walk by the beach, and from the rising grounds look over the waters, as if to gaze upon their loveliness

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p.294.

⁶⁵ *After London* [1885] and *Amaryllis at the Fair* [1887], with an Introduction by David Garnett, Everyman's Library (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1948), p.37.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, pp.37-8.

were reward to us for the labour of the day.⁶⁷

The novel recounts a voyage of exploration the hero, Sir Felix Aquila, makes on the Great Lake. Scholarly Felix is in love with Aurora, beautiful daughter of Baron Thyra of Thyra Castle. However, though his love is requited, and he is of noble birth, proud Felix feels unworthy of Aurora as a portionless and despised young man. At a feast held at Thyra Castle he occupies the lowest seat. Aurora's father Baron Thyra does not actively discourage his suit but tacitly disapproves: he would have preferred a nobler suitor, even Felix's more manly and athletic brother Oliver.

Felix determines to accomplish some great deed to prove himself worthy of Aurora's love. He builds a canoe, which he fits with sail and outrigger, and embarks on a solo voyage of exploration, a circumnavigation of the lake, (much as Bevis and Mark circumnavigated the New Sea in *Bevis*). He leaves without looking behind, without saying goodbye to his parents. The symbolic nature of Felix's voyage becomes clear once he is out upon the water:

He now felt that he was alone. He had parted from the shore, and from all the old associations; he was fast passing not only out upon the water, but out into the unknown future. But his spirit no longer vacillated; now that he was really in the beginning of his long contemplated enterprise his natural strength of mind returned. The weakness and irresolution, the hesitation, left him. He became full of his adventure, and thought of nothing else.⁶⁸

Felix has severed some sort of umbilical cord. From the biographical point of view it is tempting to see his voyage as an imaginative recreation of the time, lasting almost a year, in 1876–7, when Jefferies left his wife and young son behind in Swindon while he stayed with his Aunt Ellen at Sydenham in order to look for a house near London and strengthen his editorial contacts in Fleet Street and Paternoster Row. This is the period to which he refers in his autobiography as the 'bitterer time still' when he had to be separated from those he loved.⁶⁹ It is a mysterious period in Jefferies' life but also significant because it marks the transition between the works of his long apprenticeship and those of his maturity. Whether estrangement from Jessie was wholly or in part the cause of the separation is not known but possible. What seems certain is that, to judge by the note-book for 1876, Jefferies was at this time in a overwrought, often depressed and perhaps even suicidal state.

Felix sails to the eastward 'not for any specific reason, but because there the

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p.38.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p.110–11.

⁶⁹ *The Story of My Heart*, *op. cit.*, p.72.

sun rose, and that was the quarter of life and hope'.⁷⁰

When he reaches the city of Aisi, Felix swallows his pride and enlists as a common soldier in the army of King Isembard, hoping to receive recognition for his talents. However, when, appalled by the incompetence with which the siege of an enemy town is carried out, he is heard criticising the king, he is arrested on a charge of treason and imprisoned. His case is heard before Isembard himself. He impresses the king by his invention of a new trigger for the crossbow but when he tries to explain his idea for a machine for hurling large stones against the walls of a city under siege (a form of catapult like the Roman *onager*) he is met with incredulity, thrown out of the king's camp in disgrace and severely beaten. Returning to the spot where he has hidden his canoe he continues his voyage.

The beauty of the Great Lake is iterated in a passage that recalls the visionary description of the New Sea in *Bevis* where everything is bathed in the brilliant sunlight of a summer morning, and the island seems to float in the light.⁷¹ So now, after his travails at Aisi, Felix, alone once more upon the pure waters of the Great Lake, has a moment of transcendence:

The sun was up when Felix awoke, and as he raised himself the beauty of the Lake before him filled him with pleasure. By the shore it was so calm that the trees were perfectly reflected, and the few willow leaves that had fallen floated without drifting one way or the other. Farther out the islands were lit up with the sunlight, and the swallows skimmed the water, following the outline of their shores. In the Lake beyond them, glimpses of which he could see through the channel or passage between, there was a ripple where the faint south-western breeze touched the surface. His mind went out to the beauty of it. He did not question or analyse his feelings; he launched his vessel, and left that hard and tyrannical land for the loveliness of the water.⁷²

Felix sails out into open water and loses sight of the land. The breeze drops, the sail hangs limp, the oppressive stillness recalls that becalming the Ancient Mariner's ship: 'as idle as a painted ship/ upon a painted ocean'. There are blue notes from the mist on the horizon and from a blue butterfly, like an emblem of hope, for it is the only living thing, that settles on the mast. Felix is forced to paddle but 'still the blue land seemed as far off as ever'.⁷³

Felix's is a voyage different from *Bevis*'s, one more symbolic, abstract, and

⁷⁰ *After London*, *op. cit.*, p.110.

⁷¹ *Bevis* [1882], Edited with an Introduction by Peter Hunt, *The World's Classics* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1989), pp.265-6.

⁷² *After London*, *op. cit.*, p.154.

⁷³ *ibid.*, p.157.

dream-like. That it is undertaken in order to be worthy of Aurora Thyma suggests that Felix-Jefferies is in quest of purity, associated with the dawn and the scent of wild thyme. In wider terms, Felix is in search of the infinite, the absolute: practically, his aim is to circumnavigate the Great Lake. 'If he succeeded in nothing else, that at least would be something to relate to Aurora.'⁷⁴

After winding his way through a maze of islets Felix approaches the east end of the Lake. He notices that the birds are all flying or swimming in the same direction, west against the wind, and wonders what can have caused this mass migration.

The plants on the islets appear withered; the water is coated in scum; a thick yellow mist looms ahead. The water turns black and has a foul odour. When Felix lands on a reef his feet sink into what appeared solid rock. The rim of the sun is faint blue. A furious gale is succeeded by perfect calm. The heat is oppressive. The sinking sun becomes a billow of blood reflected in the black waters. Felix's senses are deadened; he sees things as if far off. His footprints shine with phosphoric light. He is hot and feverish, his head feels enlarged, his eyes light.

The white walls of the buildings are as if made of salt. The luminous yellow vapour rises to a height of ten to fifteen feet, forming a roof above him. The water is a red viscous liquid.

Felix finds a hoard of gold coins and a diamond necklace, which he keeps for Aurora. His mind is stupefied by the poisonous vapour he has inhaled.

The deserted and utterly extinct city of London lies under his feet. He is in the midst of an apocalyptic landscape such as John Martin might have painted⁷⁵.

Felix returns to his canoe. Serpent flames play over the surface of the black water. The luminous vapour is succeeded by the natural gloom of night. Felix

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p.159.

⁷⁵ A detail from *The Last Man*, a watercolour by John Martin (1789-1854) from the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, was used as cover illustration for the paperback edition of *After London* published in 1980 by Oxford University Press in their World's Classics series, with introduction by John Fowles. There is no evidence that Jefferies was directly influenced by Martin's large-scale paintings of biblical catastrophes and cosmic cataclysms, but he may well have seen them, for they were popular in mid-Victorian Britain, while Martin's mezzotints illustrating Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the Bible reached an even larger public.

Martin's apocalyptic visions have inspired many science, fantasy and horror fiction writers (e.g. H.P. Lovecraft), as well as artists, musicians, animators, comic-book illustrators, and film-makers (D.W. Griffith's epic *Intolerance*, George Lucas's *Star Wars* films, and countless Hollywood spectacular disaster movies show his influence).

The Last Man was included in the exhibition of Martin's work, entitled *Apocalypse*, mounted by Tate Britain between 21 September 2011 and 15 January 2012.

sees the first star and thinks of Aurora. He enters 'the clear and beautiful water'⁷⁶ of the Lake. The sky becomes 'a lovely azure'.⁷⁶ He sleeps, to wake refreshed, 'like awaking in Paradise'.⁷⁷ However, when he stands up, 'he found that his limbs were almost powerless,'⁷⁷ and he totters like a child. The passage seems to have been written out of a memory of his illness. Felix is able again to delight in the beauty of nature: the birdsong gives him 'inexpressible pleasure'.⁷⁷

He has been saved (living up to his name of Felix, i.e. 'lucky' or 'fortunate') by the gale blowing from the west and driving the poisonous clouds before it.

Great explosions followed by rollers are, he surmises, caused by gas in the conduits, sewers and tunnels under the city. Were such imaginings related to the suffering of Jefferies' body?

The canoe splits in two after Felix inadvertently drives it at full speed onto a reef. He meets a tribe of friendly shepherds. They are respectful when they hear his story. They treat him with ceremony and deference (in contrast to his earlier lowly despised state) because he has entered the realm of the miasma but miraculously, it seems to them, escaped alive. Thinking Felix divine, they ask him to become leader of their tribe, but he declines.

In a battle with the gipsies he distinguishes himself by his prowess with the bow and puts the enemy to flight. He becomes a hero. He instructs the shepherds how to fortify a camp (called Wolfstead) in the hills.

Jefferies lays stress on Felix's 'intensely nervous organisation, strung up to its highest pitch',⁷⁸ such that in the battle with the gipsies his arrows at first land harmlessly short. The episode relates to a notorious passage in *The Story of My Heart*⁷⁹ in which Jefferies voices a desire to hunt wild beasts and hammer them down with an iron mace. It does not show the author at his best: the effect is that of a childish wish-fulfilment fantasy.

Felix discovers a beautiful inland lake connected by a river to the Great Lake. The entrance is commanded by a steep cliff, making it an ideal spot for founding a city and building a tower where he could live with Aurora.

He is attacked by gipsies, from whom he escapes only by swimming across the lake. His accidental discovery of a spring is taken by the shepherds as further proof of his divine powers. Distant tribes wish him to be their king but he refuses the title and will only be called Leader of the Confederacy in time of war. He determines to return to Aurora and Thyra Castle.

He comes to the sea, the beauty of which blends with his love for Aurora. 'His

⁷⁶ *After London*, op. cit., p.172.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.173.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p.183.

⁷⁹ *The Story of My Heart*, op. cit., p.91.

old and highest thoughts returned to him in all their strength.⁸⁰ Summoning an assembly of the shepherds, he explains his plan of fortification and the necessity of his absence for two months. He then secretly sets off westwards.

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W.J. Keith interprets *After London* as crypto-autobiography. He notes that Jefferies' ambition, his determination to achieve success, 'is almost invariably expressed in [his] writings by the image of a voyage'.<sup>81</sup> He points to the boys' voyage in *Bevis* and its many references to the *Odyssey*. He cites passages in 'Red Roofs of London':

In the hearts of most of us, there is always a desire for something beyond experience. Hardly any of us but have thought, Some day I will go on a long voyage; but the years go by, and still we have not sailed.<sup>82</sup>

and *The Story of My Heart*:

There is an immense ocean over which the mind can sail, upon which the vessel of thought has not yet been launched. I hope to launch it.<sup>83</sup>

that have already been quoted. He sees Felix's voyage as an imaginary, romantic one in which Jefferies achieves the success denied him in real life—as a compensatory wish-fulfilment fantasy in short.

There is some truth in this view but it is far from being the whole story. In the first place Jefferies can hardly be said to have failed in his writing career. His early country books achieved considerable success. True, in his later years he did not enjoy quite the same measure of acclaim but his reputation had already been made. Secondly, Jefferies *did* go on a long voyage but it was an internal one, into the subtle realm of mind, emotion and spirit. It was a long and prosperous voyage: the originality and quality of his work are testimony to that.

Again, Keith sees *After London* as 'basically... a story of intelligence against ignorance, of brain power against brute force'.<sup>84</sup> Yes, but it is also a story of adventure sought in part for its own sake, a quest above all for purity and for a sense of self-worth, a symbolic voyage in which Jefferies assumes the hero role of old, a modern *Odyssey* in which he confronts dangers and adversity and triumphs over them, a journey that includes a descent into the underworld, the world of death (the miasma over London), from which he returns reborn, a more mature and realized man. A leitmotif of *After London* is the purity of the

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<sup>80</sup> *After London*, op. cit., p.194.

<sup>81</sup> W.J. Keith, *Richard Jefferies, A Critical Study* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, Oxford University Press, 1965), p.122.

<sup>82</sup> *The Open Air*, op. cit., p.228.

<sup>83</sup> *The Story of My Heart*, op. cit., p.56.

<sup>84</sup> Keith, op. cit., p.120.

waters of the Great Lake. Felix-Jefferies was purified by the internal voyage he had made.

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In his last book *Amaryllis at the Fair* Jefferies returned to the world of his adolescence and early manhood—to Coate farmhouse, called in the novel Coombe Oaks, at the time when it was being besieged by creditors; to memories of his parents, vignettes of domestic life, portraits of his father and mother, and of his grandfather in his bakehouse, their quarrels like a curse laid on the family through the generations; the author's own earlier struggles to establish himself as a writer reflected in Amaryllis drawing with numbed fingers in her freezing attic room; and a detour to the other cardinal point of his world, Fleet Street. Naturally the sea has no part here.

We have thus concluded our survey of the part played by the sea in Jefferies' writings. It stood for the unknown, the beyond, the absolute, the 'something beyond experience,' of which he was always in search. The voyage became the central metaphor for his journey through life. The *Odyssey* was from his earliest years his favourite book. Life for Jefferies as for D.H. Lawrence was 'an adventure in consciousness,' an inner voyage of mind and spirit rather than a physical. The bark he launched was frail, and liable to wreck, but though his voyage was cut short prematurely, he sailed farther than most in the time allotted him. Indeed he was witness to the fact that time is elastic and to be judged and measured by quality not quantity.



J.M.W. Turner, 'A First Rate Taking in Stores'. 1818. Watercolour and pencil, 28.6 x 39.7 cm. Bedford, the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery.