

Scientist in Residence aboard *Pelican of London*

Report by Esther Bancroft - October 2022

My Experience Onboard *The Pelican*



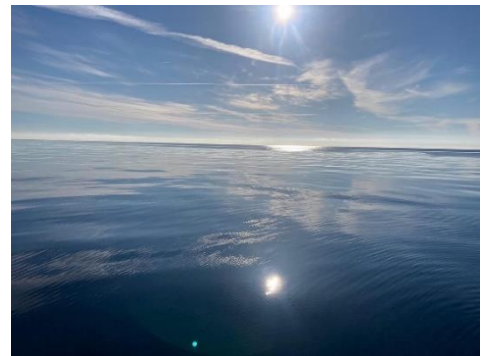
My father kept a speckled conch
By two bronze bookends of ships in sail,
And as I listened its cold teeth seethed
With voices of that ambiguous sea
Old Böcklin missed, who held a shell
To hear the sea he could not hear.
What the seashell...

Sylvia Plath, 'On the Decline of Oracles'

In Sylvia Plath's poem the shell becomes a symbol of the attempt to access the ocean from the land. However, when attempting to describe the 'voices of that ambiguous sea', she seems unable to find the words. 'What the seashell' provides access to is uncertain. Plath's poem is a striking literary example of the way in which the sea is beyond language. In my research, I am interested in our interactions with the sea and the way in which they shape, and are shaped by, the language we use to describe it. In her work *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater* (2020), Melody Jue advocates the importance of 'thinking through' the sea. She uses the perspectives of the ocean she gained through scuba-diving as a means of exploring new avenues in the blue humanities. My perspective encourages interdisciplinary conversations: science and literature are both rooted in communication. It is through this communication – through the environmental humanities – that we can increase awareness of the importance of conserving ocean spaces.

I boarded *The Pelican* in June 2022 as a resident scientist. However, I was involved in another kind of data collection, which turned into gathering the experience of those who sailed on board. I kept a diary for the two-week period during which I was, at first, a resident scientist and then a mentor for the volunteer crew. I encouraged the other volunteer crew to do the same; many of the observations I made over the two weeks are here in this article.

My research into sea-literature has always been concerned with the way in which the ocean has been seen historically as a frontier: something that is travelled across and fought over. Our understanding of shipboard culture is filtered through the idea of the ocean's function as a resource and, at the same time, its impenetrability. This notion suggests that the sea is beyond the influence of humans due to the language used when describing the 'deep' and the 'unknown' of the ocean floor. This is a very troubling stance to take when we are directly destroying ecological systems.



In his work *Space and Place* (1977), Yi-Fu Tuan grapples with the idea that humans make space comprehensible, or manageable, by mediating it through their individual perspectives.¹ Without humans, there would be no sense of margins, edges or boundaries, because the concept of borders - and the desire to overcome them – is entirely man-made.

This idea of the ship existing on the periphery of civilisation leans into the idea that it is a 'blank' space which is receptive to the people it houses. Will Morton, engineer to *The Pelican* during the voyage I was

¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), pp. 54-59.

part of, confirmed this idea, stating that, ‘a ship is a living expression of everyone on board’. With resources scarce, the ship becomes self-contained and is itself entirely reliant on the crew. As Will explained, the crew are eminently reliable and capable, which they have to be, as *The Pelican* is essentially a lifeboat. Sailing on it, one has to be highly attuned to its connection to and interaction with the environment.

Shipboard ‘space’ is a topic of considerable interest within the work of Marcus Rediker, Greg Dening and Hester Blum, who have all embarked upon explorations of the tension created between the expansiveness of the sea and the claustrophobic nature of ship space. After having berth on *The Pelican* for two weeks, I experienced for myself the enclosed feeling of being onboard – not least due to the lack of internet signal which compounds this sense of being ‘in-between’.



If you have no experience of map-reading, the feeling of being in deep-sea can be tricky to navigate at times. However, the permanent crew encourage the volunteers to trace the passage of the ship themselves using the maps on board. Having the opportunity to be at the helm also makes you feel like an inherent part of life on the ship.

My experience of being on board taught me that the language generated on the ship takes many forms: nautical terms, sea-shanties – even tattoos create a code between sailors. After a week on board *The Pelican*, this language becomes part of your own. Sails have names, port and starboard become part of your

lexicon and you know what to do when you are told to ‘make fast!’ Sea-shanties also become an essential part of staying awake and in good spirits during a 4am watch! As Dening argues, ‘the language to describe [the space *also*] make[s] a ship’.²

Language becomes a currency at sea: it enables communication between the crew who control it who would often be from all over the globe. It is therefore a means of survival. The ship also harbours, in Dening’s words, ‘an even more complex language, and a recognizable system of signs – of ocean swells, seasonal currents, star risings and settings’.³ In the nineteenth century, and today, tattoos are important indicators of experience for sailors. The captain would go in search for crew in ports and would be able to identify the experience of each sailor just by looking at their tattoos. To name just a few examples, a coiled rope on the forearm would show that the person had been a deckhand and a swallow would show that the sailor had been at sea for over 5000 miles. Men would tattoo a North Star on their chests for a sign of good luck and, in a similar vein, crosses on the soles of the feet were thought to ward off sharks.



In my archival research into the relationship between the sea and language, I examined the hermetic shipboard space of nineteenth-century European vessels in general, and the importance of language in demarcating that space. In my research at Brunel Institute of the SS Great Britain, I read a diary written by Sister Mary Paul Mulquin who describes learning German for diversion on the 41st voyage of the SS Great Britain to Melbourne, Australia in 1873. In an entry dated Nov 20th 1873, she describes: ‘A copy of the letters or rather signs were given to me [...] the language seems almost a mystery at first but like every other of its kind is unravelled by practice’.⁴ That Mulquin suggests that language is formed from

² Greg Dening, ‘Deep Times, Deep Spaces’, in Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun, *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 19.

³ Dening, p. 16.

⁴ This reference to Sister Mary Mulquin’s 1873 diary is taken from the paginated transcript held in the Brunel Institute, Bristol, UK, Shelf mark: Voyage 41.

‘signs’ which must be ‘unravelling’ indicates that language is a code, with its own system of signifiers which have to be deciphered to be understood.

The language of the sea is full of life, and of change. John Kucich argues that ‘language is above all an activity, not a static kind of knowledge or a description of things as they are’: it is a process in that it is constantly changing.⁵ This certainly reflects life on board, which is exciting and charged, although it can, at times, feel somewhat relentless! As part of the watch, you have to be up at all hours supporting your group, and on hand to help others when the ship is sailing. However, this constant interaction with the life of the ship leads to precious moments. Some highlights of my voyage include seeing the International Space station and bioluminescent lichen at night. I saw the sun rise and sun set when it felt as if we had the whole ocean to ourselves. Going aloft I was often reminded of Peter Lanyon’s abstract paintings of the British coast. A glider pilot post WW2, Lanyon painted his view of the ocean from above, which accounts for the emotive blend of colours and brushstrokes which capture the energy of his flight. Stowing the sail, however, whilst the ship was moving was a much less calming experience than Lanyon’s paintings suggest.



In his work *The Physical Geography of the Sea* (1885) Maury states, the ocean ‘[is] a sealed volume, abounding in knowledge and instruction that might be both useful and profitable to man [...] [can] it not be broken?’.⁶ Naval captain himself, twentieth-century novelist William Golding thought that ‘the voyage is always a convenient metaphor for a life. Human nature is tested and [...] we recreate the world again, the familiar world, out of the bone globe of our own skull’.⁷ Golding suggests that language is a vital part of being attuned to the sea and the way in which we ‘create’ our experience of it.



On board, in between their watches, I showed the volunteers poems and pictures which were all related to the sea. I read Golding’s *Pincher Martin* (1956) aloud during a particularly rainy watch. Fog had surrounded the ship; we were soaked; the book I was reading from was also drenched. But there was something about reading a novel, itself a ‘salty sea text’, whilst being on the ocean which felt like an essential part of understanding the medium we were sailing upon. At that moment, the descriptions of the sea in *Pincher Martin* really resounded; in a scene describing the storm, Golding states, ‘beyond [...] there was nothing but the blackness of deep water going down to the bottom of the deep sea’.⁸

Even after only two weeks, life back on land felt like an adjustment. Post-pandemic, everyone is familiar with the uneasiness of suddenly being in a space full of people. This is feeling is especially acute when your home has been in the middle of an ocean. Denning proposes that ‘it is the mark of such institutions as a ship to be temporary. A voyage begun is a voyage to be ended’.⁹ However, this impression of a voyage seems at odds with the experience of being on board *The Pelican*. The memory of places you travel to, the skills you learn and, most of all, the friendships you create, are things which do not ‘end’ when you reach the shore.

⁵ John Kucich, ‘Action in the Dickens Ending’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33 (1978), p. 94.

⁶ Matthew F. Maury, *The Physical Geography of the Sea* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), p. 201.

⁷ Baker, James R. and William Golding, ‘An Interview with William Golding’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 28 (1982), pp. 130-170.

⁸ Golding, William, *Pincher Martin* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 65.

⁹ Denning, p. 96.

Storytelling is such an important part of sustaining connections with the environment, and is a mission shared by organisations such as Seas Your Future and Ocean Culture Life. In interview with Peter Newington, Golding stated that, instead of the title 'novelist', he '[preferred] the words craftsman, like one of the old fashioned ship builders who conceived the build of the boat in their mind, and after they had touched every single piece that went into the boat [...] they knew it inch by inch [...]. The novelist is very much like that'.¹⁰ It is an important part of ocean conservation to create conversations, particularly between disciplines. In this way we can give a voice to the ocean and ensure that we are still working to protect the planet and foster a meaningful relationship with our environment.



(I wrote this piece whilst listening to a sea-themed playlist I made whilst studying literature and the sea. If you want to listen whilst reading, [click here](#).)

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¹⁰ -----, and Peter Newington, 'An Interview with William Golding',
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